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ЖУРНАЛ СОЦИАЛЬНЫХ ИССЛЕДОВАНИЙ | JOURNAL OF SOCIAL STUDIES

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IMPROVING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF ANTI-CORRUPTION EFFORTS IN THE SOCIAL SPHERE OF UZBEKISTAN

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ABSTRACT

This article examines corruption within Uzbekistan's social protection system and proposes measures to enhance the effectiveness of anti-corruption policy in the social sphere. It reviews the theoretical and legal foundations (Law on Combating Corruption, key Presidential decrees, State programs), analyzes digital innovations (Unified Social Protection Register, proactive pension assignment), and explores sociological aspects (public perception, vulnerable groups). Drawing on empirical data and case studies, the main corruption schemes are identified: bribery in benefit allocation, fraud in concessional lending, misuse of in-kind assistance, extortion in disability certification, and embezzlement of public funds.

Key words: corruption; social protection; sociology of law; anti-corruption policy; digitalization; transparency; social justice.

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O‘ZBEKISTON IJTIMOY SOHASIDA KORRUPSIYAGA QARSHI KURASHISH SAMARADORLIGINI OSHIRISH

ANNOTATSIYA

Ushbu maqolada O‘zbekiston Respublikasida ijtimoiy himoya tizimidagi korrupsiya muammolari tahlil qilinib, unga qarshi kurash samaradorligini oshirish bo‘yicha takliflar ishlab chiqilgan. Maqolada nazariy-huquqiy asoslar (“Korrupsiyaga qarshi kurash” to‘g‘risidagi Qonun, Prezident farmonlari, Davlat dasturlari), raqamli yangilanishlar (Ijtimoiy himoya yagona reyestri, pensiyalarni avtomatik tayinlash) va sotsiologik jihatlar (jamiyatning qarashi, noqulay vaziyatdagi guruhlar) ko‘rib chiqildi. Empirik ma‘lumotlar va case-study asosida asosiy korrupsiya sxemalari

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Kalit so'zlar: korrupsiya; ijtimoiy himoya; huquqshunoslik sotsiologiyasi; anti-korrupsiya siyosati; raqamlashtirish; shaffoflik; ijtimoiy adolat.

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ПОВЫШЕНИЕ ЭФФЕКТИВНОСТИ ПРОТИВОДЕЙСТВИЯ КОРРУПЦИИ В СОЦИАЛЬНОЙ СФЕРЕ УЗБЕКИСТАНА

АННОТАЦИЯ

Настоящая статья посвящена анализу проблем коррупции в системе социального обеспечения Республики Узбекистан и выработке мер по повышению эффективности антикоррупционной политики именно в «социальной сфере». В ней рассмотрены теоретико-правовые основы (Закон «О противодействии коррупции», ключевые указы Президента, Государственные программы), проанализированы цифровые новации (Единый реестр социальной защиты, автоматическое назначение пенсий) и социологические аспекты (общественное восприятие, уязвимые группы). На основе эмпирических данных и кейс-стади выявлены характерные коррупционные схемы: взяточничество при назначении пособий, мошенничество в системе льготных кредитов, нецелевое распределение натуральной помощи, вымогательство при оформлении инвалидности, хищения бюджетных средств.

Ключевые слова: коррупция; социальное обеспечение; социология права; антикоррупционная политика; цифровизация; прозрачность; социальная справедливость.

INTRODUCTION

Corruption in the social security system undermines the foundations of social justice and trust in the state [1]. In the sphere of pensions, allowances, subsidies and benefits, corrupt practices are particularly painful, as they affect the most vulnerable segments of the population - pensioners, the poor and the disabled. Globally, corruption is recognized as a serious obstacle to development, and the Republic of Uzbekistan is no exception. The President of the Republic of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev openly called corruption "the most serious obstacle to reform" in the country, emphasizing the need to resolutely fight this "ulcer on the body of society" [2]. In recent years, the Republic of Uzbekistan has been taking comprehensive measures to counter corruption, which is already reflected in the gradual improvement of the country's position in international rankings: for example, in Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index, the Republic of Uzbekistan rose from 158th place in 2016 to 121st place in 2024 [3]. Nevertheless, significant challenges remain in the social sphere, where corruption directly threatens the realization of social rights of citizens and effective budget spending.

Social security (pensions, social benefits, targeted assistance, benefits, etc.) is a sphere designed to provide state support to those in need. Corruption in this sphere leads to misuse of funds, unequal access of citizens to social services and undermining public confidence in the institutions of power [4; – P.3]. For the Republic of Uzbekistan, which has taken a course to strengthen social protection and reduce poverty, the problem of combating corruption in the sphere of social security of the population is of particular importance. This article aims to analyze the current challenges and forms of corruption in the sphere of social security in the Republic of Uzbekistan, assess the current anti-corruption legislation and state programs, and develop proposals to improve the effectiveness of

anti-corruption policy in this area. The study contains legal and sociological analysis, reliance on empirical data and case studies, which allows for a comprehensive review of the problem.

METHODOLOGY

The methodological basis of the study was formed by modern approaches of sociology of law, providing a comprehensive analysis of legal norms and social factors. The following methods were applied in the work:

- Legal analysis - study of the legal framework of Uzbekistan on combating corruption, including the Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan “On Combating Corruption” (2017 with the latest amendments) [5], decrees and resolutions of the President [6-10], normative acts of the Agency for Combating Corruption [11], as well as sectoral legislation in the field of social security. This method made it possible to identify the theoretical and legal framework of the fight against corruption and assess the compliance of legislation with international standards (e.g., the UN Convention against Corruption [12], to which the Republic of Uzbekistan has acceded).

- Sociological analysis - study of public opinion and social practices related to corruption in the social sphere. Data from sociological surveys and studies of public perception of corruption, including surveys of the Republican Center for Public Opinion Research “Ijtimoiy fikr” and data from the Anti-Corruption Agency were used. For example, the results of the 2018 nationwide survey were analyzed, which showed that more than half of citizens (56.8%) consider corruption to be a widespread phenomenon, especially in the spheres of health care and education, and also note its presence in the employment and social security system [13]. The sociological approach also includes the analysis of informal practices (such as domestic bribery, nepotism (“tanish-bilish”)) that affect the distribution of social benefits [14].

- Analysis of empirical data and case study. We collected and analyzed actual data on corruption offenses in the social sphere of the Republic of Uzbekistan. As an empirical base, official data of the Anti-Corruption Agency and law enforcement agencies on the number of registered corruption offenses, their structure and damage caused to the state were used. For example, according to the Agency, only in 2024 in Uzbekistan more than five thousand corruption offenses were committed, and a significant part of them occurred in socially important areas [15]. Special attention is paid to case studies of corruption in the social security system described in the media and official sources. These cases - detention of officials of mahallas for bribes when assigning benefits, detection of fraud with soft loans for the poor, facts of inappropriate distribution of aid - allow illustrating typical corruption schemes and vulnerabilities of the system [16].

- Comparative approach - in developing proposals, foreign experience in combating corruption in the social sphere and general recommendations of international organizations (UN, OECD) are taken into account [17]. For example, the measures to increase transparency and accountability of social services implemented in a number of countries and the possibility of their adaptation in the Republic of Uzbekistan are analyzed. The findings of monitoring reports of the OECD Istanbul Action Plan to Combat Corruption, in which Uzbekistan participates, are also taken into account.

The use of these methods in combination provided a holistic understanding of the problem at the intersection of law and society. Legal analysis revealed the merits and gaps of legislation, sociological analysis revealed the social causes and consequences of corruption, and empirical cases gave the study practical validity.

Let us now consider the theoretical and legal framework for analyzing corruption in the social sphere.

Scientific literature traditionally defines corruption as the abuse of official position in personal interests, accompanied by the receipt of illegal benefits. In the context of the social sphere, corruption manifests itself mainly in forms of “domestic” (administrative) corruption - bribery, extortion and nepotism in the provision of social services and payments to citizens [18]. The specificity of the social sphere is that it directly concerns socially vulnerable segments of the population - pensioners, disabled people, poor families. Corrupt practices in this area lead to the fact that assistance is received not by those who objectively need it, but by those who are willing to pay or have connections. From the

point of view of the sociology of law, this undermines the principle of social justice and equality before the law enshrined in the Constitution. It also distorts the very purpose of the state's social policy - to support the most vulnerable - as resources in this case may flow into the hands of corrupt officials.

The Republic of Uzbekistan, being a party to the UN Convention against Corruption, has harmonized the national definition of corruption with international standards. The Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan “On Combating Corruption” (Law No. 419 of 03.01.2017) [19] contains the basic concepts, principles and directions of state policy in this area. Analyzing this provision, it is important to note that the legislation understands corruption as not only bribery, but also any unlawful use by an official of his or her authority in order to benefit himself or herself or other persons, as well as the unlawful provision of such benefit to this person. The law includes among the main forms of corruption: bribery (receiving and giving a bribe), commercial bribery, abuse of power, conflict of interest, embezzlement and embezzlement committed through official position. Hence, it can be concluded that the normative definition covers both active and passive corruption. In addition, mediation in bribery and concealment of such acts are also considered illegal.

Theoretical and legal analysis of corruption in the social sphere is impossible without considering the national approaches to counteracting this phenomenon. The Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan “On Combating Corruption” outlines the key principles: legality, inevitability of punishment, priority of preventive measures, cooperation between the state and civil society, publicity and transparency [20]. The main directions of state policy include: raising the legal awareness of the population and creating an atmosphere of intolerance to corruption in society; implementation of a set of preventive measures in all spheres of state and social construction; detection and suppression of corruption offenses, ensuring the responsibility of guilty persons [21]. Here it is fundamental that we are talking about all spheres - that is, anti-corruption efforts should cover social security, along with the economy, judicial proceedings, education, health care, etc.

Institutionally, anti-corruption policy is based on the model of “anti-corruption actors”, which include special bodies and civil society. According to the principal-agent theory used in corruption studies, the main cause of corruption is the divergence of interests of society (principal) and officials (agents) with weak control mechanisms. To bridge this gap, states create specialized anti-corruption bodies with the function of supervising the activities of officials. In the Republic of Uzbekistan, such a body is the Anti-Corruption Agency, established by Presidential Decree in June 2020 as a specially authorized state body [22]. The Agency coordinates anti-corruption policy, monitors the implementation of state programs, considers citizens' appeals about corruption and makes proposals to eliminate corruption factors. From the point of view of sociology of law, the creation of a separate agency reflects the institutionalization of the anti-corruption norm in society - the formation of a new entity responsible for maintaining the integrity of the state apparatus.

The theoretical framework of the analysis implies taking into account not only legal norms, but also social norms and values that influence corruption. Social sciences distinguish the concept of “informal institutions” - established practices and customs that can both stimulate and deter corruption. The social security sector is characterized by paternalistic relations and strong horizontal ties at the level of local communities (mahallas). On the one hand, traditions of mutual assistance in the mahalla may contribute to more targeted support for those in need. On the other hand, family and kinship ties and circular trust sometimes lead to nepotism and favoritism: lower-level leaders distribute benefits mainly to “their” people. Sociological studies of Central Asia note that in post-Soviet Uzbekistan the practice of informal services (so-called “blat”) has taken root - an exchange of favors and patronage, which, if lacking transparency, turns into a corruption mechanism. In addition, the low salaries of social sector officials have in the past created preconditions for extorting “gratitude” from recipients of services. As noted by the Director of the Anti-Corruption Agency, where salaries are low, corruption risks are higher. Thus, the theoretical and legal framework should take into account these socio-economic factors as well.

To summarize: social corruption is a complex socio-legal phenomenon that requires an interdisciplinary approach. Legal theory gives us tools to define the concept of corruption and

measures of responsibility, sociology allows us to understand the reasons for tolerance or rejection of corruption by society, as well as to identify vulnerabilities in social institutions.

Next, we will analyze the legislation and practice of Uzbekistan: social security and anti-corruption.

In recent years, Uzbekistan has developed an extensive regulatory framework for combating corruption, which serves as a basis for cleansing the social sphere from corrupt practices. The key act is the Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan “On Combating Corruption” No. LRU-419, which entered into force on January 4, 2017. This act for the first time in the history of the country comprehensively regulated the issues of combating corruption, outlining the principles, tasks and mechanisms of counteraction. It has been repeatedly amended and supplemented (in 2019, 2021, 2023), which indicates the actualization of the legislation. The law explicitly provides for the development and implementation of state and other anti-corruption programs aimed at eliminating corruption factors in various areas, including socio-economic development and social support of citizens.

The current legislation on social security is also being developed taking into account anti-corruption requirements. One of the notable achievements in recent years has been the introduction of digital technologies to automate the processes of assignment and payment of social benefits. Since 2021, the information system “Unified Register of Social Security” has been introduced throughout the country, through which the automatic assignment of benefits to citizens is carried out. Previously, the process of receiving benefits was burdened with the collection of many paper certificates (on income, family composition, registration, etc.), which created a ground for red tape and extortion. Now 53 types of necessary information are automatically requested by the system from the databases of 16 ministries and departments, without the applicant's participation. As a result, the number of citizens' appeals to government agencies has been reduced, direct contacts with government officials have been eliminated, and a number of “windows of opportunity” for bribery have been eliminated. According to the electronic publication Kun.uz, previously, when appointing social benefits “people had to collect a pile of documents, which led to cases of corruption”, whereas the introduction of the Unified Register and automation has prevented these situations. Thus, the legislative initiative on digitalization of the social sphere has already shown an anti-corruption effect.

Similar changes are taking place in the pension system. At the end of 2023 and beginning of 2024, a decision was made to move to proactive assignment of pensions by age, i.e., automatically upon reaching the retirement age of a citizen, without the need to submit an application. Corresponding amendments to the Law “On State Pension Provision of Citizens” were approved by the Parliament of the Republic of Uzbekistan in early 2025. From March 1, 2025, men upon reaching 60 years of age and women 55 years of age will receive a pension automatically, based on data on length of service and earnings collected through electronic interaction of agencies. A citizen will receive an SMS-notification of pension assignment and its amount, without the need to visit the Pension Fund in person. This innovative step is designed not only to simplify the lives of the elderly, but also to eliminate the last loopholes for corruption in the pension authorities. Previously, there were periodic problems when employees demanded “remuneration” for timely registration of pension or for taking into account additional periods of seniority. Now the human factor is minimized - the pension is automatically issued if the necessary information is available, and the intervention of an official is not required.

In addition to digitalization, measures are being implemented to centralize and reform the structure of social security bodies, aimed at reducing corruption risks. In 2022, the Ministry of Mahalla and Family Support was established, later reorganized into the Ministry of Employment and Poverty Reduction, with the functions of targeted social assistance transferred to it. By 2023, the National Agency for Social Protection was established on the basis of this Ministry, consolidating the authority to assign and pay all types of social benefits. This centralization makes it possible to unify rules, eliminate duplicative bureaucratic procedures and better control the process of assigning payments. Previously, most decisions were made at the level of mahallas and district khokimiyats, where the influence of local informal ties is higher. Now, according to the reformers, a single body

will be able to ensure a more transparent and fair approach. However, these changes have also given rise to new challenges, as evidenced by practice.

Despite the efforts of the state, practice shows that the social sphere still faces significant corruption risks. The analysis of criminal cases and media reports allows us to identify typical forms of corruption in the social security system of Uzbekistan:

- Bribery in the assignment of social benefits. There are widespread cases of local officials demanding remuneration from citizens for inclusion in the list of beneficiaries or for accelerating payments. A typical example is the case of the chairman of a mahalla in Khorezm province, who was detained while accepting a bribe for assistance in awarding child allowances. In August 2020, the 58-year-old chairman of the citizens' assembly demanded 400,000 soums from a local resident for the issuance of child allowance; the official was caught red-handed by the Ministry of Internal Affairs while receiving part of the agreed amount. A case was opened under Article 210 of the Criminal Code (bribery). Unfortunately, this case covered in the press is not an isolated one - similar episodes of extortion in the provision of social benefits have been recorded in a number of regions. Corruption of this kind mainly affects low-income families, for whom even a few hundred thousand sums “per paw” is a significant sum. As a result, those families who are unable or do not agree to pay may be illegally deprived of the support they are entitled to.

- Fraud and extortion in granting soft loans and subsidies. In recent years, the government has been implementing programs of preferential loans for low-income families to start businesses, providing subsidies to improve housing conditions and other needs. These initiatives have also come under the attack of corrupt officials. A case in Surkhandarya province is illustrative: in 2025, an assistant to the khokim (district head) of the Yakkaterak mahalla promised a citizen assistance in obtaining two soft loans totaling 33,000,000 soums, demanding a kickback of 4,500,000 soums. The official was detained while receiving this bribe and subsequently convicted under the article on fraud with the use of official position. The court sentenced him to 2 years of correctional labor with withholding of part of his earnings and prohibition to hold materially responsible positions. This case highlighted a problem: assistant khokims in mahallas, introduced as a new position to work with the population (including poverty reduction), have themselves become involved in corruption schemes. According to official data, only for the incomplete period of work of this institution in 2022-2023, 309 corruption offenses related to the activities of assistant khokims in mahallas were registered. Moreover, the largest number of violations occurred in Samarkand oblast and Tashkent city - regions with large populations and, apparently, large volumes of distributed resources. This is a serious signal: the new system of targeted assistance needs stricter control, otherwise good intentions (to bring social support to each makhalla) turn into new corruption risks.

- Informal distribution of in-kind assistance and benefits. In addition to cash payments, the state provides in-kind support to those in need - issuing food packages, means of production (e.g., sewing machines for organizing household labor), distribution of preferential housing and others. Abuses, often related to nepotism, have also been identified here. An example from a recent qualitative study: in a rural mahalla in Bukhara Province in 2020, a poor woman was promised a free sewing machine by local authorities to organize a home-based business. However, in reality, the machines received by the makhalla were distributed among relatives and acquaintances of the makhalla activist, and the remaining two machines went to women who paid USD 100 each as a bribe for this “gratuitous” assistance. Our respondent, having failed to receive the promised equipment, conducted her own investigation and found out this corrupt fact. Such informal appropriation practices flourish when there is no transparent record of distribution. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2020 lockdown, the Republic of Uzbekistan maintained a so-called “iron list” (Temir daftar) of the poorest families for targeted assistance. It was recorded that some officials of mahallas included their relatives in this list or demanded payment for inclusion. These violations were uncovered by both journalists and the Anti-Corruption Agency, after which unscrupulous mahalla chairmen were prosecuted and the lists were reviewed with public participation.

- Extortion when registering disability and other social statuses. Historically, one of the most corrupt areas of social security was considered to be the procedure of medical and social examination to establish a disability group or need status. As early as 2010, observers noted that "even disabled people have to bribe social agencies to get a certificate confirming their disability." This is an extremely cynical form of corruption: people with disabilities, who already find themselves in a difficult life situation, face extortion when trying to register legal benefits. In recent years, the Ministry of Health and the Agency for the Development of Medical and Social Assistance have taken measures to reform the MSE (medical and social examination) system - an electronic register of disabled people is being introduced, commissions are being transferred to electronic document flow, and control over doctors is being tightened. However, stories about demands for money to speed up the examination procedure or establish a higher disability group still surface in the press. This problem is complex, affecting both medical institutions and social protection agencies, and requires coordinated efforts to eradicate it. - Theft and misuse of budget funds. Along with petty bribery, there is also embezzlement of funds in especially large amounts allocated for social needs. The report of the Prosecutor General's Office for 2022 noted that the total damage from official crimes identified in government agencies increased by 2.3 times - from 1.55 trillion soums to 3.61 trillion soums per year. This trend is partly due to the intensification of the work of law enforcement agencies, but also indicates the scale of the problem. In particular, in the field of preschool education and healthcare (included in the concept of the "social sphere"), an increase in the number of corruption crimes was noted. Some high-profile cases of recent years are related to thefts in the Pension Fund, fraud in government procurement of medical equipment, and construction of social facilities. For example, audits have shown cases of pension payments to "dead souls" or benefits for fictitious children, which indicates collusion between individual fund employees and fraudsters. In response to this, financial control is being strengthened: the Accounts Chamber and prosecutorial authorities regularly conduct audits of the targeted use of social insurance funds, and audit materials are transferred to the Anti-Corruption Agency for response.

CONCLUSION

These examples demonstrate that corruption in the social sphere of Uzbekistan is mainly of a grassroots (everyday) nature, but its cumulative effect is quite noticeable for society. On the one hand, these are numerous small bribes that directly affect ordinary citizens, on the other hand, multi-billion-dollar damages from thefts in systems intended for social support. Unfortunately, such facts negatively affect the country's image and undermine public confidence in the reforms being implemented. The state is aware of the severity of the problem: at a meeting of the National Anti-Corruption Council on March 5, 2025, the head of state presented 55 specific initiatives to radically change the situation, including the development of new laws and strengthening local control. Let us move on to consider the public perception of the problem of corruption and its social consequences.

Anti-corruption policy will be effective only when it takes into account social sentiment and changes people's behavior. Let us consider how Uzbek society perceives corruption in general and in the social sphere in particular, which groups of the population suffer most from it, and what are the common informal practices that can both encourage and restrain corruption.

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