

CULTURAL SHOCK or Returning to Russia After the US / Why Russians Don't Smile

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vJCHXnCRgts>

Transcript: <https://dontveter.com/ec/russia2.pdf>

Hi guys! My name is Natasha and this is my channel about Russia and the Russian language.

Today I'll tell you about the topic that foreign people discuss a lot and that is the Russian smile.

~~Why Russian people don't smile?~~[Why don't Russian people smile?]

I hear and see [this topic] a lot in the Internet, and people give different explanations, and now I want to give my own, because I'm a person who lives in Russia, and also I had an opportunity to visit the United States and to see how people behave there.

Because in Russia we don't smile in the street.

I lived in ~~all~~ this ~~environment~~ [country] all ~~the time~~ [my life] and I thought it's something normal, but a year ago I went to the US to study there for a year ~~due~~ [thanks] to ~~some~~ [an] exchange [student] program.

So, during my first days in the US a year ago I had an unexpected cultural shock.

And the first thing that was astonishing for me was that people were smiling to me.

I remember when a bus driver smiled to me when I was going into the bus, and Russian bus drivers 100% [of the time] will never do this.

I was prepared for this, but I knew that it was fake and I didn't smile back and I was confused and after that I regretted that I didn't adopt this ~~rule~~ [custom] and didn't follow it.

But later I corrected myself during my life in the US ~~when~~ [and] I started smiling back and started to ~~be more smiling~~ [smile more] in general.

Also, there were many moments when I was confused, why [were] people ~~were~~ so polite in the United States?

~~I firstly~~ [First I] went to Washington DC where ~~I and other Russian students~~ [other Russian students and I] had a kind of excursion.

And then I lived in Wisconsin with my American host family for two weeks.

And then I spent a year in the University of Minnesota.

During this time I also traveled throughout the States during the breaks.

I'm actually going to make a lot of videos about this experience in the US as a Russian person, but today I will ~~more~~ concentrate on this topic of ~~smile~~ [smiling] and behavior.

In Russia, people don't smile in the streets, like at all, because why would you?

I'm trying to find the reasons for this, and the first reason can be called "sad but true", which means that people don't care about other people.

They don't smile ~~and they just show that~~ [because] they don't care, so at least they are genuine.

It can be even worse: if a person is smiling to you in the street, you will be confused, like "Is this person a freak or crazy or [do] they want something from you?"

I personally had the same attitude to it.

This was continuing when I came to the US and was experiencing all the environment around me.

But when I came to the campus of the University of Minnesota and started to be more engaged into the American lifestyle, I started to smile more, myself.

And we also in Russia don't have this concept of a small talk.

So, if you see a person who you know, and they are passing by, it's normal to say just "Hi" - "Hi", and pass this person by and go.

In the US it always will be like "Hi, what's up?" - "Hi, what's up?".

And at first it was so crazy for me, like you're asking a person "How are you?", but you don't expect a response back.

In Russia, if people do the same, they just say "Hi" and "Hi", because if a person asks "Как дела?" (How are you?), 100% [of the time] they wait ~~from you~~ [for you to] at least something like "Нормально" (Normal). You see, life in Russia is so bad, so people say "normal" instead of "fine" or "good", or... Just kidding.

But there's some truth in this joke.

Anyway, what I wanted to say about ~~the small talks~~ [talk], it [is] that ~~they are~~ [it is] not common [in Russia].

I remember when I went to California with my friend who is also a Russian student, we just traveled together and we ~~lived in a~~ [stayed at the] house of my friend who I met through the Internet.

So it was the 24th of December, Xmas times, and we went out to the city to walk.

It was somewhere in ~~the district~~ [an area], actually not so [very] far from the Hollywood Hills, and we were walking and looking at all these unusual houses because we'd never seen it [houses like these] in Russia.

And I remember when a man, who was just going [getting] out of his car, said to us something like, "Hi girls! Christmas time! ~~You are going out for shopping?~~ [Are you going out shopping?]

And the man was confused because he thought that we were locals, only ~~then, only after this~~ [a little later], we understood that he just wanted to cheer us up and to wish a nice day.

We said, like, "Yeah, we're going [out] for the Xmas shopping"...

Now I don't even remember what we ~~answered~~ [said] to him.

Now [in Russia] it seems so strange if I'd say something like "Have a good day"

But in that time it was so... appropriate for that country.

You see, this case shows that ~~in that time~~ [while I was in the US] I was used to it.

I remember, when I was walking in the campus of the U of M, and I saw my friend in a distance and I realized that I'm starting to become almost American when I said to him just "Hi what's up?", and he answered "Hi, what's up?", and that's it.

And I was like, yeah, I got this.

Okay, small ~~talks~~ [talk] can be embarrassing, but I really like smiles.

I remember, when we went to Hawaii, yes, we even got to Hawaii, it was just [a] perfect, precious time...

~~Just one more moment~~, [there was a case] when ~~I and my friend~~ [my friend and I], who we met through Couchsurfing, we were driving along the island of Oahu, and he ~~stopped~~ [parked] the car near a supermarket.

When we were going back to our car, there was another car that was parked too close to us, and when I was opening the door of our car, there was a risk that I'd touch the car of the other person.

But the driver of that car was going towards his car as well, and he wasn't worried about his or angry at me.

He just smiled to me.

And I smiled back to him.

And.. OMG, now I have goosebumps over my legs.

Because I associate ~~that~~ [those] moments, especially [in] Hawaii, with something happy.

And now, ~~when I~~ [after I've] spent 5 months [back] in Russia, I got used to not smiling, again.

So, after 8 months in the US, I ~~returned to Russia and there was like, It all started not even~~ ~~Russia, but in the US~~, [had to return to Russia and there] in the JFK airport in New York, in the section of the Russian airline called ~~Аэрофлот~~, [Aeroflot], [because it was full of] ~~there I saw~~ Russian people [I started to remember how Russians do not smile].

And they were so different from American people, because they didn't follow the lines, they were more in the crowds, and they were not smiling.

[I even thought,] like, "People! You're returning from America which means that you have money to go to America, maybe you have some job here or connections..."

Or maybe you're just so sad because you have to return to Russia...

And in general, the world was so unstable in that time, it was March of 2020 and [there was] ~~all~~ this Covid thing.

Probably that's why everybody was so stressed.

But in general, there were so many things that just showed that these people were Russian, because when they passed you by too close, they didn't say sorry.

{Maybe they just demand more from you and don't follow your personal space, but it's ok.}

What I also noticed, was the attitude of the flight attendants, they were smiling less, it was noticeable.

In the US, even in some cheap airline, like Frontier or Spirit, I used them all, they would smile to you at any time.

But in Russian airlines, they just don't bother with this.

And they can even be rude to you.

I was used to ~~live~~ [living] in Russia, but I kind of got "unused" [to it while living in America], and returning back to this reality and these people's behavior was so... eye-opening.

I remember, when we finally ~~flew to~~ [landed at] the Moscow airport, a woman guard there was so rude, she said something like: "Exit is not here, go to another place!"

We were like "Ok, but why are you shouting at us?"

"Why are you so rude?"

I mean, I didn't say it to her, [I] just thought this.

In the United States they'll never do this.

Although, I noticed that people in New York airport, they were kind of.. stressed, and probably people in NY and in other big cities are overwhelmed by this hustle and bustle of a big city...

I even heard from Americans themselves that people in the East Coast don't understand if you smile to them.

Like, they ask you, "What's your problem?" or something like this.

I mean, they still follow this rule, they just don't bother with ~~all these small talks~~ [small talk] as people do in the Midwest.

I remember this separation of the Midwest Nice or Minnesota Nice, and the coldness of people in big cities.

I think, it's a thing, actually. So yeah, what I was saying, is that when I returned to Russia, I was really frustrated.

I remember that I had half of a day in Moscow, and my friend, who lives in Moscow, met me, and we took an Uber to a place close to that airport, it's a town near Moscow, it was called Lobnya.

And even though it's a city near Moscow, which means that this city has money, because only Moscow in Russia has money, people in that town were so... really sad.

~~their glance was headed not ahead, but to the ground.~~ [They didn't look ahead, they looked at the ground.] And they were like.. tired and worn out.

This all was really scary... Not scary, but negative.

I think, the following months that I spent in my hometown, Spassk, I was still not used to it.

I was like: "OMG, this man in the store skipped the line and didn't say sorry, he is so rude".

This person passed me by really close and didn't say sorry...

And it's a normal thing that Russian people do, ~~but now I spent 4 or 5 months after the US, and~~ [and after being back in Russia for 4 or 5 months] I am used to it again.

I have to say, that I, myself, ~~not that~~ [am not a] smiling person, even by Russian measures.

Maybe it's just the ~~specificity~~ [shape] of my facial features, my facial muscles, but I just DON'T SMILE.

If I'm calm, if I'm in the normal state of my mind, I'm just like this: And people would often ask me: "Why are you so sad? What happened?"

It was really embarrassing, because I thought: "What's wrong with me? Should I smile more or something?"

But you know, when I visited the US, I realized that I actually can smile, or I can look sad if I want to, I don't have to pretend.

But I just realized how it is to smile when the smile is genuine.

I mean, in the United States, even though we all know that the smile is a part of the politeness, and people don't really care about you, I still... I remember that my smile there was not fake.

I indeed was feeling really good and happy, and you see, when you are content with you life, when you are happy, when you know you have friends, money, health, and you are going along the streets, ~~and~~ why not to smile to a person?

This is what I was feeling in the United States, as a happy and lucky exchange student, who had the opportunity to study there for free for a year and even to travel.

But when I return back to Russia, there were 2 factors that explain why I became Russian again and stopped smiling so much: Russian cities are very ~~depressive~~ [depressing]. Even now, you can see that I'm sitting in an (actually cozy) backyard of this apartment building.

[It is] cozy by Russian ~~measures~~ [standards]: so there are trees, a carpet on the floor, a table, ~~it's like~~ [and there is] a playground for children.

But just behind it you can see trash cans, pigeons, some garages, trees and it's like, well, those places are ok, you just have to ~~see~~ [compare that to] the pictures [of] almost abandoned houses where people have to live.

[If you think about the] destroyed roads, ~~small~~ [low] salaries, no social care, and you'll understand why people in Russia are not so happy.

This is just the factor that influences us all and another ~~thing~~ [reason], why I stopped ~~smile~~ [smiling], because ~~but what~~ I'll never lose is my [Russian] attitude to life.

When I saw the United States, I saw how people should live.

I'm not talking now about some bad things like expensive medical care, racism or homelessness, I mean that there're so many good things in the US that we can adopt in Russia.

And this lightness, this happiness, this self-confidence that I got in that country, I'm going to keep here.

That's why in Russia I'll smile whenever I want.

Yeah, I think I became more positive after going to the US and seeing that wow, you can actually smile more.

But after this video, don't think that Russian people are so rude and that they are not smiling, because we actually do smile.

And our genuine smile is not less genuine than a genuine smile of an American person.

Oh my god, it was hard.

But I mean that we smile and we laugh, and we just don't smile to strangers.

And if you are a tourist who wants to go to Russia, you just have to be prepared ~~to~~ [for] the fact that people can seem ~~to you angry~~ [angry to you].

Yes, they might be annoyed BY THIS LIFE in this country.

But still, maybe they don't even know English, and this will be the reason why you will not get help from them, but not because they don't want to help.

Because in fact, when Russian people see foreigners, they are actually very interested, and they are like: "Wow! You came to Russia", Why?

Or "What do you like here or how do you find it?", because we don't have so many tourists in Russia, that's why we are not angry towards foreigners.

And when you come to Russia, you don't have to try to be Russian and to make a poker face, no, be yourself, and maybe they will smile back to you...

I mean that there is no solution for this thing.

And by this video I don't want to offend anybody, because it's just the fact, and just what I saw and what I think.

We all are different, the cultures are different.

So I don't judge American people for this smile because it's actually not fake.

I mean, "fake" is a really bad word...

Yeah, it is fake in a sense, but I don't want to use this bad word because it's good when people are smiling to you, it means that they at least don't have bad intentions (probably).

Yeah, and also in Russia, it's not bad that people don't smile, because this comes way back to our history, to the Soviet Union, where people were put ~~to~~ [in] the labor camp ~~to die for~~ [and died because of] jokes about Stalin.

So we have kind of a fear to be smiling and happy or to show our happiness to others.

But what I do have to say is that it is changing.

This Soviet habit is ~~being diluted~~, [slowly fading away], removed from our Russian way of thinking and lifestyle with every year.

So the younger people are, the friendlier they are, and the more tolerant they are.

And I think this is changing for the better.

So write in the comments your opinion about all this smile thing, what do you prefer more: ~~more~~ [the] Russian way of behavior or ~~more~~ [the] Western?

It will be really interesting for me to read your comments and to read your stories about how this is in your country.

Thank you for watching!

If you liked this video, tap the like, write your comments, subscribe to my channel and tap the bell to see more videos about Russia.

Good bye! See you in the next video!