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Why Lying Has Become a National Pastime

By Marilyn Murray

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When I first arrived in Moscow, I soon learned that if I asked if something could be done and I received the answer, "OK, no problem," that did not mean I could expect for the deed to be accomplished. Many times when I left for the United States and had paid for various tasks to be done by the time I returned in two months, I came back to a job that was either done incorrectly or not at all. In fact, several times the other person acted as though our conversation concerning the job had never taken place.

I found lies were more acceptable than admitting a lack of knowledge about how to do what I had requested. Or they had overcommitted and rather than telling me that they would not be able to accomplish my request, they simply procrastinated and kept insisting that the job was "almost done," when in fact, it had not even been started.

When speaking with Russian friends about my frustration in such situations, they laughed and said, "That's normal here!"

Many Russians lie on a regular basis. They lie even when they don't have to lie. It is a national pastime. It can proceed from the small "white lie" of a family member to one of major proportions from a government official. But often, most Russians are not deceived and know when a statement is a falsehood.

So why do they tolerate this phenomenon?

Not telling the truth was reinforced by a Soviet system that lied consistently to their people. The government instilled great fear in its citizenry with nonstop propaganda about enemies who they perceived were everywhere — within and without the country. The Soviet system lied to manipulate, maintain control and create fear and submission. The government could not admit any flaws, and if errors occurred they were instantly denied because they would reveal intolerable weaknesses.

During Soviet times, people often lied just to stay alive. If a parent or spouse was arrested and declared an enemy of the state, the remaining family members often changed their names and lied to obtain false documents to obtain food, a place to live, education or a job. Lying became a standard means of survival to protect oneself or a loved one. I have heard many stories of what people did to stay alive during times of famine or war. Ethics often were discarded while starving or watching a child die.

The government used lies to make the Soviet system appear better than it actually was. They said Russia was the best country in the world, and everyone else had less than they did. They proclaimed that communism destroyed all class variants and everyone was equal when, in fact, Communist Party officials had many privileges the average person did not possess: larger, nicer apartments and furnishings, the ability to shop in private well-stocked stores for food and clothing and the ability to travel and vacation in Party resorts and dachas.

The Party even went so far as to rewrite and delete history. It is interesting to view old photos of Josef Stalin posing with people who were later deemed enemies of the state and compare them with later versions in which these "enemies" were erased — long before Photoshop expertise existed. School history books were rewritten when there were changes in Party leadership or when prominent officials fell out of favor and were arrested, shot or sent to the gulag. My students often mention they have a difficult time with trust because the things that they were taught as absolute truths were so often changed and replaced by new truths. It became an ethical dilemma for teachers and parents who genuinely desired to be loyal Soviet citizens.

One of the ways people survived these mind-bending issues was to practice what is known in Russia as "vranyo." It is deemed a "white lie" and is generally accepted as acceptable. Vranyo is described as when a person knows he is lying and expects the other person to understand that. One of my colleagues said, "He was lying to us, we knew he was lying, he knew we knew he was lying, but he kept lying anyway, and we pretended to believe him."

Lying is often used to maintain a better image and to save face. Russians are a very proud people, and under the Soviet system many genuinely believed they were "the best." For those men and women, their sense of personal value was coupled with this system. Thus, when it fell, so did their personal worth. They also had never been allowed to think independently or understand how to be responsible for themselves. As a result, during the chaos of the 1990s,

many Russians were very confused. They were required to suddenly make decisions and accept responsibilities for which they had no training. At the same time, their pride would not allow them to admit that they did not know how to accomplish these new tasks. Consequently, they fell back into their old familiar pattern of vranyo and lied rather than admit that they could not do something or needed help.

Lying often is used to take advantage of others, thus breeding corruption and outright theft. Many entrepreneurs have been robbed because criminals bribed officials who enabled them to evict the rightful owners of newly successful businesses. Contracts have been canceled and property seized. I remember several years ago walking past the Trinity Motors showroom on Tverskaya Ulitsa, and I was shocked to see the windows painted white. I later read that 25 men had stormed in and given the company only a few hours to evacuate the property. Their lease had been canceled by the presidential administration

In addition, just last week, I shopped in the prestigious Tverskoi Passazh shopping center and was dismayed to find that only three days later it was seized by a group of men who drove out the guards and barricaded the door. The presidential administration reportedly canceled their lease that was to run to 2016.

Russia is plagued by lying that ranges from what is deemed as a mild-mannered vranyo to immoral corruption. Vranyo is a lie, and the acceptance of this creates a system of falsehood that undermines trust and condones and encourages deceit, deception and irresponsibility. If someone lies regarding small things, he will likely lie in more important areas and also will accept this offensive behavior in others.

I challenge my students regarding this major issue of honesty and integrity. They admit it has been a struggle for them, but they are breaking this destructive habit and are proud to see the changes in themselves and their families, personally and professionally. They have made commitments to being truth-bearers and honorable citizens of a healthy Russia.

Marilyn Murray is an educator specializing in the treatment of trauma, abuse and deprivation, with more than 2,000 people attending her classes in Russia and other countries from the Commonwealth of Independent States over the past 10 years. Her second book, "The Murray Method," was recently published in English and Russian. You can read her interview with The Moscow Times here.

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