

The Only Real Way to Thank Bureaucrats

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Откат: kickback

I've had a particular interest in the Russian code language for bribe-taking ever since I was asked for a bribe — or more precisely, *откат* (kickback) — and missed the cue. After signing a rent agreement, the representative of the renting organization flashed a smile and said, Я надеюсь, что вы меня отблагодарите (I hope you'll thank me).

I cheerfully said: Да, конечно! Спасибо! (Of course! Thanks!)

The rep tried again: Ну, отблагодарить надо (Well, you really should thank me). I noted the prefix *от-* but still didn't get it. So I went through my repertory of Russian gratitude: Благодарю! (I thank you!) Я очень признательна! (I'm very grateful!) Спасибо огромное! (Thanks so much!) Finally, in desperation, I shouted: Большое человеческое спасибо! (A great big thanks straight from my heart!)

The guy gave up.

Back at the office, when my staff stopped rolling on the floor with laughter, I learned what отблагодарить meant: Aren't you going to thank me, wink, wink?

So I was naturally interested in a recent series of publications from Russia's labor ministry explaining in excruciating detail all the no-nos of bureaucratic behavior. The texts are written in a style that I call High Bureaucratism, in which five words are always used when one would suffice. My favorite phrase was возможные ситуации коррупционной направленности (possible situations with a corrupt orientation).

But in one section, the language dropped down to Earth. State workers were helpfully provided with a list of phrases they should eschew in their dealings with the public: слова, выражения и жесты, которые могут быть восприняты окружающими как просьба (намёк) о даче взятки (words, expressions and gestures that might be perceived by outsiders as a request [hint] for a bribe). Examples: вопрос решить трудно, но можно (it'll be tough to resolve this issue, but it's possible); спасибо на хлеб не намажешь (you can't butter bread with thanks); договоримся (we can reach an agreement); нужны более веские аргументы (I need some more convincing arguments); нужно обсудить параметры (we have to discuss the parameters); and my favorite: ну, что делать будем? (so, what are we going to do?)

They were also advised to stop whining about their low pay, their lazy brother-in-law who needs a job or the expense of giving their kid a good education. In the ominous words of the text, this может восприниматься как просьба о даче взятки (might be perceived as a request for a bribe).

One of my friends says the whole point of these texts is to help bureaucrats avoid being caught in a sting operation, whether they are sitting in their offices or out on an inspection. That's why there is a section on провокация со стороны должностных лиц проверяемой организации (provocations from administrators in the organization being inspected). The state workers are advised: не оставлять без присмотра служебные помещения, в которых работают проверяющие, и личные вещи (одежда, портфели, сумки и т. д.) (do not leave unattended the office or personal possessions, such as clothing, briefcases or purses, where the inspectors are working).

Man, it's tough being a Russian bureaucrat. There you are, trying hard to help a citizen — вопрос решить трудно, но можно — commiserating about the rising cost of living. And then, out of nowhere, the citizen starts throwing cash at you. Because, you know, people are just dying to hand over their hard-earned money to get you to do your job.

Бедные чиновники (poor bureaucrats).

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