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Russian Reply Is Often Short, Simple and Stale

By Luc Jones

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Expats in Russia often struggle with cross-cultural communication. Here is a classic example: I spotted a colleague eating an ice cream one day and asked, "Ira, where did you buy the ice cream?"

The answer was "In a store."

"Thanks for the valuable information," I thought to myself. I had thought the ice cream had fallen from the sky.

When I said there is more than one store in Moscow, Ira simply looked at me as to why should it matter which store she bought it in. The thought that I was enquiring because I might want to know where, so that I could buy one myself presumably never occurred to her.

Here is another typical situation:

“Mozhno”? (May I?)

“Nyet!” (No!)

“Pochemu?” (Why?)

“Nelzya!” (It’s forbidden!)

A Westerner would most likely follow this up with an additional question, along the lines of “Well, why isn’t it allowed,” although Russians seem to accept “Nelzya” (It’s forbidden) as the end of the conversation.

I have come to the conclusion that Russians are masters at being able to answer questions by giving almost no factual information whatsoever. A typical answer to a question about why something happened is “Nu, tak slozhilos” (Well, that’s the way it turned out).

Another response which frequently occurs in recruitment is the answer to the standard question, “Why did you leave your last employer?”

“Ne poluchilos” (It didn’t work out), with no further elaboration.

These examples show how Russians tend not to volunteer additional information when answering what they perceive to be simple questions. The general consensus among Russians is that they feel it’s either not necessary or relevant.

The moral on cross-cultural communication is to not simply assume that you will receive a full answer. You should be ready to ask additional questions to reach the conclusion that you require.

It is also worth bearing in mind that whereas in English we answer questions with “Yes, it is,” or “No, it isn’t,” in Russian it’s quite common to answer “Yes, it isn’t” or “No, it is.”

So if someone answers your question with a simple yes or no, you might want to double-check, especially if the answer wasn’t what you wanted or were expecting.

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