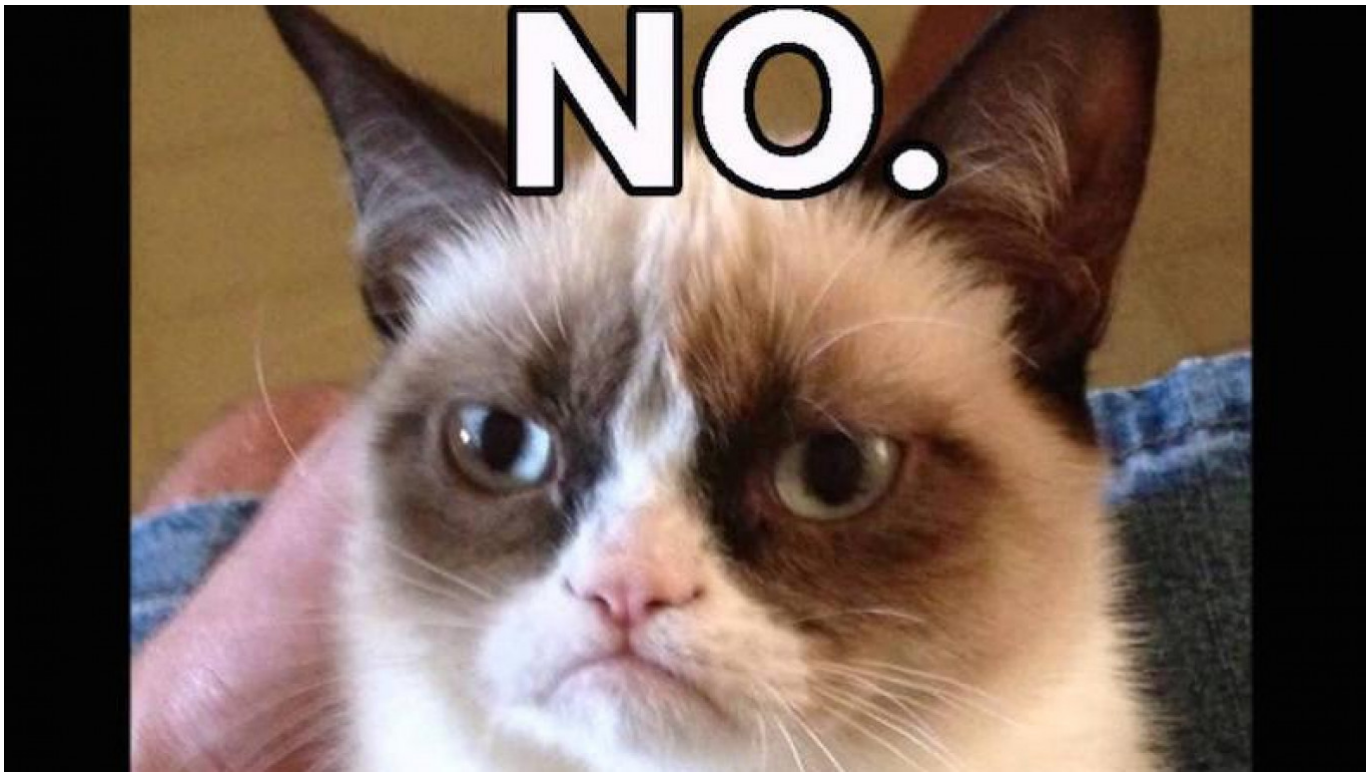
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# Mastering a Polite 'No' in Russian

By Michele A. Berdy

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*Отказ: refusal*

You goofed.▣You agreed to take your significant other's cousin's mother's best friend to▣the mall for a day of shopping, and then you realized you couldn't. It's not▣that you don't want to — such fun, right? — but you completely forgot another▣commitment.

There are a▣lot of ways to describe backing out of something in Russian. The most▣straightforward is
отказаться от обещания (to renege on your promise),
something▣everyone has to do every once in a while:
Придётся отказаться от обещания
пойти на
вечеринку (I have▣to renege on my promise to come to the party.) This is also
не сдержать
обещания (to not▣keep your promise):
Он никогда не
держит обещания (He never keeps his▣promises.)

If the shopping expedition was one of your family responsibilities and you have a habit of not fulfilling them, an angry family member might use the word уклоняться (to shirk), which is a more negative than just breaking a promise.
Ты всегда уклоняешься от
своих семейных обязанностей! (You always weasel out of your family responsibilities!) If you think this is unfair — А кто ходил с ней к врачу? В парикмахерскую?
(Who took her
to the doctor? And the beauty parlor?) — or if you plan on doing it, just not this weekend, you can make it clear that this isn't a cancellation but a postponement. This is откладывать (to put off): Мы просто откладываем до следующей субботы (We're just postponing until next Saturday.)

When you are reneging on commitments greater than a trip to the mall, you might use the phrase
пойти на попятную, a curious expression that means to walk backward metaphorically: Правительство пошло на попятную по ряду наиболее одиозных мер налоговой реформы (The government had to back pedal on a number of the most objectionable tax reform measures.) Or you could just дать задний ход (to go backward). This can be literal: Он попробовал дать задний ход, но машина забуксовала (He put the car in reverse, but it just spun its wheels.) But it also means reversing a policy or behavior: Власти были вынуждены дать задний ход (The authorities had to back down.)

Now that you know what to call your back-pedaling, postponing, shirking, and reneging, we come to the really tricky bit: what do you say? It's hard enough to smooth over a broken promise or politely break off an appointment in your native tongue — how do you do it in a foreign language?

The art of what Russians call
вежливый отказ (politely saying no) is worth mastering.
First of all, memorize a few openers: Увы (alas); к сожалению (unfortunately); жаль (it's a shame); очень жаль (it's really a shame); как ни
печально (sadly); or even
как назло (as luck would have it).

Then call up the subjunctive mood —
бы + past tense — to mollify your family — or
electorate: был бы
рад (I'd be happy to); рада бы
помочь (I'd be happy to help);
сходила бы с
вами (I'd go with you);
хотелось бы (I'd love to). This is followed by
но (but) where you
explain why you can't.

And then use impersonal phrases like
придётся (it will be necessary to...) or
не

получается (it won’t work out).

If polite doesn’t work, your back-up position is the simple, unadorned, emphatic:
просто не
могу (I just can’t.)

And they finally say:
Нет, так нет. (“No” it is then.)

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