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My immigrant parents have highly influenced my morals and methods of communication surrounding civic discourse. Moving to a new country to start a new life has taught them grit and will that has translated into the way they think and communicate. They have passed these values on to me. My father is very cautious and ingrained in me a sense of skepticism and awareness of the world around me. My communication style reflects his, as we are both introverted and blunt and hold strong in our beliefs. We both perceive communication quite literally. My mother, on the other hand, is more extroverted and open when meeting new people, but no less stubborn. She is more trusting of the way people act and has influenced me in the way that I handle unfamiliar situations and personalities. From her, I learned my "civil" behavior, such as how to introduce myself to a professor, interviewer, or a stranger.

I was born and raised in America, but my family was determined to keep me connected to our Russian culture. At home, we speak English and Russian. I grew up watching Soviet cartoons and movies before American ones. My first preschool teacher even learned some Russian words because I was more comfortable with that language. Currently, English is my primary language; my Russian is not as perfect as I would like it to be, but it has shaped and will continue to shape my life. Exposure to my family and friends, as well as visits to the country, has inevitably affected the way I act having an influence equal to that of my American childhood.

From my parents' upbringing and my visits to Russia, my understanding of the culture is in many ways different there than that

Layout by Yusra Khazaleh. Photo by furkanfdemir from Pexels: https://www.pexels.com/photo/public-building-hallway-with-rushing-people-5849505.

of the United States. "The Russian smile" is a primary example. Russians tend to smile much less at strangers, and many will consider it odd or even a sign of mental illness if one smiles at a random passerby (Putnam & Gartstein). Wariness of insincerity is prevalent in Russian culture, and it is considered impolite to smile without having a specific reason to. Therefore, smiling at a stranger in Russia may be interpreted as an impolite gesture, the face of someone who is trying to take advantage of the other. Another paper, led by a member of the Institute of Psychology at the Polish Academy of Sciences, argues that the people of certain countries such as Russia and other Slavic countries avoid smiling at strangers because of a phenomenon called "uncertainty avoidance" (Krys et al, 104). In her *Atlantic* article, Olga Khazan suggests that smiling is often interpreted as a sign of certainty and confidence, and therefore a trend emerges in which smiling without reason is considered odd. My behavior with regard to this simple gesture has impacted my communication with others. Friends have described me as sullen and difficult to approach at first glance because I wear a cold expression around unfamiliar faces. What I interpret to be calm observation may be misconstrued as a look of disdain. Living in the United States my whole life has definitely made me quicker to smile, especially after working a customer service job. However, I still come off more aloof than other people.

Another element of Russian etiquette that differs from the typical American communication style is what in psychology are called "display rules," defined as societal rules that dictate expression (APA). These rules vary by

country and culture. According to a study on etiquette in 2009, Russians have a smaller "social distance" than Westerners (Arapova, 37). This means that Russians assume a greater mutual understanding than Americans at initial meetings and rely less on small talk during first encounters. Additionally, a word for "privacy" does not exist in Russian, the closest equivalent being "confidentiality," demonstrating the concept's lack of value to Russians compared with its role in American culture. As a result, Russians are direct to an extreme degree in the eyes of Americans. What native Russians view as typical conversation can be perceived as invasive and therefore uncivil in the United States. Dr. Shelley Lane and Helen McCourt further explore this idea in "Uncivil Communication in Everyday Life: A Response to Benson's 'The Rhetoric of Civility,'" in which they claim "we cannot assume that all rhetorical norms are shared or that norms remain unchanged over time" (Lane & McCourt, 25). As an American with Russian heritage, I am familiar with both styles of communication, a fluency in rhetorical norms that cross cultures. The disparities between them are clear, especially when watching my parents interact with their fellow Russian friends. Their conversations sound aggressive to the outside observer, but I know that their blunt and combative speech represents trust and mutual understanding.

My upbringing has also influenced my perceptions of "civil" interactions in the realm of institutions and entities. My father has always argued for a healthy level of caution when in public. Coming from a state with little stability and rampant government corruption, my parents have advocated for respect but do not believe in the blind trust of authority figures. My experience as an American meshes with habits picked up from my family in curious ways. For example, when discussing news or politics, my parents will ask the source of the news I have found, whether I have looked at alternative sources to corroborate the information, and who is reporting it and why. Jack Beatty, a news analyst for the radio program *On Point*, asserts that "reform of institutions might lead to greater trust" (Chakrabarti). In other words, the way in which a civic society functions and communicates is largely influenced by how much trust people in it are able to have in a governing body. Dr. Berls, senior advisor for the Nuclear Threat Initiative, claims, "In an authoritarian state, civil society is often perceived [by the government] as an adversary…." He argues that in these kinds of societies, Russia especially, there is a lack of recognition that a state must be built from the ground up with regard to the government: the people are largely powerless against the influence of authority. David Cooper in "Is Civic Discourse Still Alive?" argues that "conversation plays a central role in the way citizens connect to public concerns" (162). Reform of institutions is impossible without a venue of open dialogue through which people can critically discuss matters regarding it. Authoritarian governments limit this dialogue using methods of force and censorship combined to muffle voices that counter theirs. Without a proper venue in which to communicate with and relate to figures in power, Russians are left distrustful and cynical. A lack of democracy and faith in government structures as a whole creates a reluctance to communi-

cate. This disinclination is reflected in my own opinions of politics, as I avoid the topic whenever possible, expecting disappointment regardless of any particular political candidate. This is a fault that Americans I have interacted with do not have—they hold strong opinions about specific people.

Communication styles vary greatly from one country to another. What appear to be minor differences in speech or expression become examples of civility or incivility depending on the perspective and culture of a person. Exposure to multiple methods of civic discourse has conflicting effects on behavior. I wake up and go to school and live my everyday life as an American university student, and yet evidence of my Russian upbringing reveals itself through small expressions or habits. This coalition of customs has muddied the murky waters of civic discourse even more. In a modern world of overlapping cultures and ideas, what is considered civil becomes increasingly argued about. In a larger world, civic discourse becomes ever more challenging because of the blurring of boundaries of civility that differ and overlap depending on the place and the person. In a contemporary era, there needs to be a better understanding of influences that can act upon civic communication, whether cultural or otherwise, to create a productive sphere of dialogue that produces greater understanding for all parties involved.

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