

Risking Life and Limb

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Риск: risk

As I've watched events unfold in Egypt, my mental storehouse of differences between Russians and Americans got a new load of evidence. American tourists on a luxury cruise ship docked near Luxor said they were comfortable, had plenty of food and were in absolutely no danger, but yet demanded that their government immediately airlift them out — at the taxpayers' expense incidentally.

Russian tourists splashing around the Red Sea not only didn't demand immediate evacuation by their government, they refused to leave. That is, the stereotypes of self-reliant Americans conditioned to take care of themselves and dependent Russians craving cradle-to-grave state aid were turned on their heads. Either great swaths of the populations don't fit the stereotypes, or common wisdom is uncommonly stupid.

Or we have vastly different expectations of what our governments can and should do for us.

And then there's my pet theory that we generally have vastly different notions of acceptable risk.

In any case, risk is a relatively young word in both English and Russian. It came to Russian via French, and to English via Portuguese or Spanish. Some etymological dictionaries claim that the origin of the word is unknown. Others suggest that the original meaning was a cliff that posed danger to sailors, which morphed into the danger of sailing uncharted waters and then into the modern notion of potential danger of any kind.

In Russian, you subject yourself to risk by using either подвергать себя риску or подвергаться риску. Заявитель чаще всего проживает на территории страны без документов и подвергается риску быть задержанным милицией (The applicant usually lives in the country without documents and runs the risk of being detained by the police). Or you can use the verb рисковать (to risk) with what you risk in the instrumental case: Мы имеем право рисковать своей жизнью (We have the right to risk our own lives). Or if you are talking about a specific bit of risky business, you can use the phrase идти на риск (literally, "to go for the risk"): Многие водители шли на большой риск и существенно превышали предельно допустимую скорость (Many drivers took a big risk and went way above the speed limit).

If you are taking full responsibility for your actions — however fraught with risk — you can use the phrase на свой страх и риск (literally, "at one's own risk and peril"). Когда ты посол, часто от центра не получаешь чётких директив и вынужден действовать на свой страх и риск (When you're an ambassador, you often don't get clear instructions from the home office and have to act on your own authority).

There are also a number of set phrases for risk taking. If someone says a business deal is без всякого риска (without any risk), chances are you are being sold the Brooklyn Bridge. You should say no, even if the seller says he'll делить риск пополам (share the risk).

On the other hand, if someone tells you that jumping off the bridge is с риском для жизни (with risk to life and limb), you probably should believe him. If you jump anyway, you are in what is called группа риска, a calque from the English "group at risk" (now called an "at-risk group").

You'd probably agree with the saying: Риск — благородное дело (risk is a noble endeavor). But keep in mind it's the motto of gamblers.

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