

Short Guide on How to Deal With the Cops

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Всего доброго: All the best

A non-Russian friend happened to visit an acquaintance in the city center during one of the demonstrations this week. This bit of misfortune made him realize two things. First, it's really scary to walk out of an apartment building smack into a division of cops armed to the teeth and in full riot gear.

And second: This communication event is not covered adequately in Russian textbooks. Здравствуйтесь! Как вы поживаете? (Hello! How are you?) really doesn't cut it.

Of course, you should listen to your mother and those embassy warden messages and avoid potential riots. But if you happen to find yourself in the seriously wrong place at the definitely wrong time, here is a short cultural and linguistic guide to making it home safe and sound.

1. Вежливость, вежливость и ещё раз вежливость! (Be polite no matter what!) Take your hands out of your pockets. Stop fiddling with your cell phone. Put your camera away. Smile in a relaxed, friendly manner (this may require some practice in a mirror).

When addressed, use the вы form (polite form) in your response even if you have been asked, “Какого хрена здесь делаешь?” (What the hell are you up to?)

2. Remember: Лесть не бывает грубой (flattery will get you everywhere; literally. “flattery is never too obvious”). Address everyone in uniform as Господин Полковник! (Mr. Colonel!) even if he’s a pimply kid just out of grade school.

3. Explain why you are there in simple phrases that are easy to say and understand. Я тут живу (I live here). Я иду на работу (I’m going to work). Моя подруга/мой друг здесь живёт (My girlfriend/boyfriend lives here). Я просто шёл к метро (I was just heading to the metro station).

4. It is generally not advisable to immediately identify yourself as a foreigner and demand to see a consular officer. That suggests that you are up to no good. When asked, say with an exaggerated accent: Я — студент (I’m a student). Я – американский /английский сотрудник международной организации (I’m an American /English employee of an international organization).

5. If you are hauled off to the police buses before you have a chance to utter a word, не сопротивляйся (Don’t resist). They don’t like that.

6. Just in case, bone/polish up on the Russian for various body parts and organs so that you can say — politely — Не пинайте по почкам, пожалуйста! (Please don’t kick my kidneys!) It may be helpful to memorize the all-purpose phrase: Ой! Больно! (Ouch! That hurts!)

7. In the paddy wagon, it is perfectly acceptable to chat up with the other detainees. A pleasant opening line might be: Здравствуйте! Меня зовут Алан (Hello! My name is Alan). Если что, позвоните моей жене, ладно? (If something happens, could you call my wife?)

You can also exchange pleasantries with the police officers, although this is probably not a good time to discuss the finer points of NATO expansion or European missile deployment. A simple холодно на улице (it’s cold out there) will suffice.

8. At the precinct, state one sentence clearly, calmly and repeatedly: Я ничего не скажу или подпишу без консула моего посольства (I won’t say or sign anything without a consular officer from my embassy). With that simple phrase, you have just become a major headache for the police. At this point, they are likely to ask: Есть у вас претензии к нам? (Do you have any complaints about your treatment?) Your answer is: Нет! (No!)

Then you shake the man’s hand and say: Всего доброго! (Have a nice day!)

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