

Americans – are not worse or better than us, they are just different.

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In the articles I will present here, I am not going to discover America for those who already discovered it for themselves. Today to get to the U.S.A. – the country that was hardly accessible for us in the past, is not a problem any more for the vast majority of Russians.

I just want to share with you the impressions of MY America, the one that I discovered for myself during my first visit, which lasted for about a month. Our trip was arranged by USAID (US Agency for International Development) through the “Community Connections” program. I won the competition and was selected for the group of 9 persons, who were lawyers, judges, NGO representatives and two of us, journalists. “Corruption Awareness: Prevention and Prosecution,” was the program theme that required including into the group these particular types of professionals.

I decided to divide these articles into two parts. The first of them, the one that I am offering to you today, is about my impressions of the U.S.A. and specifically of Columbus, the capitol of Ohio, where we stayed. The second one will be about how they prosecute, but even more important, how they prevent corruption in this State.

Our first step on the American soil was at the Los Angeles airport, where we arrived by the “Korean Air” flight from Vladivostok via Seoul. And one of the first questions at the immigration check point was: “Are you Russians?” This came from a middle-aged Armenian woman, an airport employee. “So how is Russia now? Is the life changed for better?”

Later, when we have been meeting immigrants that left for the US 10-15 years ago, we have been hearing the same question again and again. To tell you the truth I didn’t know how to answer it. But later I realized that many of these people left ANOTHER Russia.

In recent years our country changed a lot. Supermarkets with huge variety of food, relative freedom of choice, the ability to travel around the world... If that’s what they had in mind, so yes, we have all of this in Russia now.

Before our trip to America, they have been telling us about the culture shock that we might experience. But I didn’t have any shock neither when I was in U.S.A., nor when I came back.

But during the entire trip I tried to compare everything with Russia (isn’t it normal?!). Why we don’t have it this way? Why their streets are taken care of (I didn’t see trash anywhere!), why their restrooms (pardon me) are clean? Why the people are nice and smiling? Why their infrastructure works great in all aspects of life?

So we arrived to Columbus, the capitol city of the State of Ohio. As it was easy to guess, it was named after Columbus the explorer. The huge monument to this person who officially discovered America stands in front of the City Hall, and at the Bicentennial Park (the 200th anniversary was celebrated in 2003), you could see the real- size replica of the ship on which Columbus crossed the ocean.

Columbus is the home of the largest University in the US. On the university campus they have a giant stadium (everybody in Columbus is an American football fan).

The State of Ohio is located in the north of the United States. It became the 17th State of the Union. This is why official flag of the State has 17 stars. By the way, each State in America has not only the flag but other symbols (in Ohio – State Bird is Cardinal, State Tree is Buckeye), and its own constitution, too.

There are 88 counties in Ohio. The city of Columbus is located in Franklin County. The population of the state is 12 million. Ohio is an industrial state. Cincinnati, Cleveland, Dayton, Toledo – in these cities there are manufacturing facilities for car engines, machinery and refrigerators, and the steel industry. The State's annual budget is 52 billion dollars (compare it to the budget of Primoriye). The major taxes are sales tax, income tax and property tax. There is major financing of social programs from the federal budget.

The spending of the budget, as far as I understood, mostly covers medical insurance (it is very expensive here) for low income people and education. Actually all of the counties, cities, villages (any other municipal structure) set their own taxes and decide how to spend their budgets.

There are 130 nationalities living in Ohio today. Out of 12 million, 4.5 million are ethnic Germans. They, by the way, were the first settlers in the town. There are also many Slovenians and Hungarians. Latin Americans are the fastest growing part of the population.

Russians and Ukrainians live mainly in Cleveland (more than 75 thousand). And everybody has a right for his religion and cultural heritage. "We are trying to preserve the multinational diversity of our state," Roman Fedkiw, Director of the Multicultural Affairs and International Relations at the Governor's Office, told us. Our first meeting in Columbus was actually with this high ranking official.

When he was explaining to us the political structure of the State, Roman showed us a chart. On the top of the chart they put "people," down under, in the lower level were Governor, Attorney General, Inspector General, etc. Do you see the difference? In our country on the top there always is President or Governor, and in their country - people.

Our meeting with Roman (his family, by the way, is from Ukraine) took place in the state capitol building, the working place for Governor and Legislature. We had a tour of this beautiful old building. At that time they were finishing the renovation of it. What is

interesting (again – compare it with us) that in November they are going to elect new Governor. We were surprised, because in our country the renovation usually takes place at the **beginning** of the high ranking official's term, not at the end.

In the Capitol, we were lucky to get to one place where ordinary visitors are not allowed. Actually, the entrance to the building is free and open to the public; everybody could come and take a tour. So I had a chance to have my picture taken in the Governor's chair, the one that also belonged to the former US President Taft. Today's Governor is his grandson, Bob.

By the way, not every state has the reason to be as proud as Ohio, seven US Presidents were from here.

It is now time to tell you about American patriotism. Practically in all offices that we visited, we have seen flags of the US, of the state and of cities. You can find American symbols everywhere – on the homes, cars, in places that seem very unusual for us, like on napkins, even on ice cream wraps. And such expression of patriotism, especially after September 11, is not fake, it is real, sincere. And I think that the American patriotism is based not on national, religious or geographic feelings, but on the idea of freedom and equality. These particular values keep Americans together. And exactly these values are symbolized by the American flag. And with respect they treat their symbols; first of all their flag. They also treated the Russian flag with respect. They put it in many places we visited. And it made us feel nice.

As I mentioned before, Americans are very cheerful and friendly. Some people think that their smiles are fake and not sincere. No. Just every American likes his own space. This is, probably, why for Americans individual values are more important than social, not to say about the rest of the world problems. We noticed that in the newspapers, on TV, in the movies (and in the American movie theatres, pictures made outside US are really rare) all the stories are about events in America, or somehow related to the country's interests. Another comparison. We, Russians, are ready to make everybody in the world happy (sometimes not without our own damage). But the average American cares much more about the score of the last game of the local basketball team than about the hunger in a certain African country with a name he never heard before.

We, Russians, make movies about our life, about our problems, our worries and sufferings. Sometimes we turn our feelings upside down there.

American movies usually are about what is not happening in real life – sci-fi; thrillers, action movies. Something that one will never experience.

People in America don't ask many questions, they respect your privacy. They value personal achievements, but not without jealousy sometimes.

Their children leave parents early, and learn how to make money themselves. This is not like Russian mentality – “what kind of parents are we if we wouldn’t be able to support our children until their retirement.”

Personal space one can feel in America even physically. For example, it is considered not polite to come too close to the register in the supermarket, or ATM machine, anywhere when you could possibly see something from behind somebody when he is paying the bill or being served otherwise.

Because it is different in our country, sometimes we found ourselves in funny situations. It is not uncommon in American families that husband and wife have different bank accounts, and even don’t know how much money each other has.

In the U.S.A., as I mentioned before, even in Ohio, one can meet representatives of more than 100 different nationalities and races. But do they have a “nationality problem?” I never heard about it, even after September 11, the day that changed America (they always refer to it now - before and after). Tolerance - to other nationalities, to other religious faiths and races, to any kind of differences, one could notice this attitude immediately and everywhere.

During all the time of our visit to Columbus we have been staying with host families in the suburbs; in private, as we would call it Russia, cottages. They had enough space, but were very cozy and comfortable. The responsibilities of the host families included lodging, breakfast and dinner for the visitors. Our first question was – who pays them for that? We learned that there is no pay. “This is our American tradition – charity and volunteerism,” explained Palmer McNeal. In his, and his wife Barcy’s, home I, together with Larisa Kavun, Chairman of Artem Entrepreneurs’ Council, had an enjoyable stay. In our broken English we attempted to communicate with this couple that also was in charge of the International Visitors Council of Columbus, our host organization.

Volunteerism is very common in America, because people are very grateful for what they have. And they want to give back. We were able to experience the US volunteerism in action on many occasions. The John Glenn Institute in Columbus is financed by the astronaut’s charity foundation. We visited the Mershon Center, which conducts independent research and studies, mainly political, inviting scholars from all over the world. This center was founded and still exists on Ralph Mershon’s (contemporary of T. Edison) money. He left all his fortune to create this kind of institution.

My answer for a very common question, “Did you have a chance to see American Indians?” is “No”. We were told Indians live mostly on reservations. And, contrary to the negative meaning of the word “reservation,” their life is not bad there. Now they are called “Native Americans” in the US. We even heard rumors that they recently started a movement in the country to request financial compensation from the government for the extermination of the Indians by the first settlers.

I would like to mention two major problems that I , and not only me, experienced in America. First of them is - food. They eat much and plenty. The things that we are not used to eating – fatty hamburgers and Coca-Cola with ice! They put ice in every liquid, even in winter. I was under the impression that they are constantly chewing something. I tried to save myself with juices and fruits; there were a lot of different kinds.

The other problem I had - was poor knowledge of the language. That was the most frustrating. At the meetings our interpreter Sofia Zinkovskaya, former Muscovite, did an excellent job to help us understand, but at home we had a hard time. We tried to communicate in different ways – with a dictionary, using key words, and with a website that translated Russian to English and English to Russian.

“What is it like, America? “ asked my friends and colleagues after I came back. “Who are they, Americans?” They are not worse or better than us. They are just different. But are very much like us!

Did my attitude to America, which was sometimes not too favorable, change? Yes, it did change, very much so! Now when I hear about aggressive politics of the United States in the world, I think about my new friends in Ohio.....