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## WORKSHEET

### The Importance of Friendship in Different Cultures

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When I asked my Spanish friend if it is better to have \$100 in the wallet or 100 friends in life, he without a second of hesitation chose \$100. In post-Soviet countries this dilemma is not a dilemma at all. There is an old saying in Russian: “Instead of having 100 rubles, better have 100 friends.”

This apparent difference of opinion about the **importance of friendship** does not really mean that people of one region are more financially prudent while their peers in Russia have exclusively pure hearts and thoughts. But different mentalities can create apparent barriers between cultures and countries. While you may think ‘culture’ has little to do with decades of political conflict between Russia and the US, the media plays a key role in forming and shaping opinions and deepening already existing cultural misunderstandings.

So, is the importance of friendship really a point of difference, or something on which all cultures agree?



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### The importance of friendship in post-Soviet countries

People in the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States, a collective of **post-Soviet countries**) are known as extremely hospitable and overall very amicable, openhearted human beings. Furthermore, the term “friendship” is given lots of significance when raising children. One is supposed to be a loyal and faithful friend.

Classic Belarusian, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Russian, Ukrainian and Tajik literature shows how important the friendship relationship is in these countries. Famous literary characters such as Bazarov and Kirsanov (Turgenev, *Fathers and Sons*), Bezuhov and Bolkonsky (Tolstoy, *War and Peace*), Abai and Mikhailov (Auezov, *Abai's Way*) help to form people's basic values and beliefs. Other characters that ruin friendship by lying or giving up are shown as bad examples, so that no one would prefer to be like those characters in real life.

Of course this does not really mean that friendship in post-Soviet countries is perfect for everyone. They are just normal people and consequently subject to the universal pros and cons of human essence, with both attractive and repulsive elements. So relationships can never be ideal.



### Different types of friendship

At the same time, classic American literature also abounds with stories about friendship. Readers can feel what friendship means while reading, for example, Hemingway's memories of Paris in *A Moveable Feast*: “When you cannot make friends any more in your head is the worst.”



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One of my American friends who has worked in post-Soviet countries for a while tried to explain the difference between two **types of friendship**. “You know, I have a friend in the US. We used to play golf every other weekend. We are friends. Golf friends. And here is the line. Everything else is outside this relationship.”

My tour guide in Spain made a similar point about different types of friendship. “I have been living in Spain for 11 years and, of course, I have friends. We usually have a nice time together. We can share thoughts, debate and give each other presents. But there is a barrier that starts at any problematic point. We are friends, but every single person is responsible for his or her life and there is no way to share this responsibility. Your problems are just yours. You have to find a solution yourself.”

These different types of friendship are also expressed in various definitions. The Russian Ozhegov Dictionary explains the term “friendship” as “a close relationship, based on mutual trust, affection and unity of interests.” The Oxford English Dictionary, however, suggests there may be two different levels of friend – of which the more common may be closer to mere acquaintance: “A person with whom one has developed a close and informal relationship of mutual trust and intimacy; (more generally) a close acquaintance.”



### The importance of friendship worldwide

Western and Russian cultures have similar proverbs when it comes to the importance of distinguishing true friends from false ones. The Western saying, “A friend in need is a friend indeed” echoes the Russian proverb “a friend is known in a trouble” and the words of Kazakh philosopher, poet and writer Abai: “You can distinguish a good friend from a fake one. Fake friends are like a shadow. On a sunny day you cannot get rid of them. When it is cloudy you cannot find them, no matter how much effort you make.”



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There is also a darker side to highly valued friendship – when it comes to the issue of nepotism and unfair preference. It seems probable that the roots of the issues related to corruption in post-Soviet countries can be partially found here, in the way people think and act in terms of friendship. When it comes to job vacancies and staff hiring, friendships or valuable connections arise. Here comes another proverb: “not because of job obligation, just because of the friendship.” Modern people from the CIS region say: “Of course it is better to have 100 friends; with such an amount of ‘your’ people you can make much more than 100 rubles.”

I have friends with diverse origins. And friendship makes me feel happy regardless of whether I met a friend in Chicago, Yekaterinburg or Lisbon. Plus, as scientists from North Carolina have found, a strong friendship has a positive effect on health and overall physical state. So good friendships make people both healthier and happier.

As for the different types of friendship, if you are studying, working or just traveling in a country with another culture, be prepared to experience new approaches to friendship and just enjoy it! And as a tip for anyone making new friendships in the post-Soviet region, try calling your new friends “brat”. That means “brother” and is a very common informal expression of friendship.



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