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Cultural and Linguistic Adaptation of International Students at Russian Medical Universities: A Narrative Case Study

Istvan Lenart * , Irina Markovina 

Institute of Linguistics and Intercultural Communication, Sechenov University, Moscow 119991, Russia

ABSTRACT

In the context of the intense internationalization process of higher education institutions globally, and amid the emergence of the conception of transcultural universities whereas students encounter the complex and multidimensional character of cultural and linguistic diversity, the effectiveness of international students' cultural adaptation is becoming more salient than ever. In this paper, accordingly, the authors aimed at gaining an insight to foreign students' cultural and linguistic adaptation process at Russian medical universities. International students from 49 countries were surveyed enabling respondents to elaborate on their intercultural experiences in Russia. Narratives were gathered from foreign students (N = 200) and investigated applying Polkinghorne's concept of narrative analysis followed by the application of an innovative method, the identification of linguistic lacunas (lexical gaps) between students' native languages and the Russian language. Linguistic lacunas were identified in 28 cases from the semantic domains of food, national holidays, personality traits, urban and rural areas, restaurants, nature, communication, transportation, local government, habits, events, and artifacts. 97% of respondents were able to evoke a best experience in Russia, that shed light on the following major thematic groups: travel, friends, cuisine, local events, and university. Worst experiences were revealed by 84,5% of students – those originated from the domains of language, cultural differences, weather, infrastructure, unpleasant events, racism, discrimination, and bureaucracy. 50,5% of respondents were parts of an intercultural misunderstanding or conflict, mostly due to the language barrier, discrimination, bad behavior of locals, lack of cultural knowledge, and racism. Results of the study can be effectively utilized primarily in the preparation of and assistance to international students in Russia

*CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Istvan Lenart, Institute of Linguistics and Intercultural Communication, Sechenov University, Moscow 119991, Russia;
Email: istvan_lenart@hotmail.com

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to alleviate their cultural adaptation process by enhancing their intercultural awareness and transcultural communicative competence. Furthermore, the outcome of this research can help university faculty members in curriculum development and in the organization of intercultural trainings for university students and faculty members alike.

Keywords: Intercultural Communication; Intercultural Adaptation; Intercultural Awareness; Transcultural Communicative Competence; Russia; Medical University; Narrative Analysis; Linguistic Gaps; Lacuna Theory; Intercultural Misunderstandings and Conflicts

1. Introduction

As internationalization in higher education has become an eminent global trend recently resulting in student mobility to increase to a significantly higher level than before, the importance of the effectiveness of students' cultural adaptation as well as the development of their intercultural awareness and intercultural communicative competence is rapidly growing^[1-3].

Intercultural awareness is a key factor in the success of international students' adaptation process, moreover, it is "embraced as one of the critical learner outcomes in the current English language teaching pedagogy so that learners navigate through multilingual and multicultural contexts and effectively communicate with culturally different people."^[4] Intercultural awareness has a pivotal role in foreign students' well-being in the host country and this awareness can be effectively developed by faculty members applying various methods including telecollaboration projects besides others^[5, 6].

The conception of *transcultural universities* is gaining also ground^[2] whereas international students who use English for the main language during their studies are seen as being exposed to a complex matrix of culturally determined factors (values, attitudes, beliefs, time concepts, communication patterns to mention but a few) that can be grasped not solely through national scales of languages and cultures but with a more multifaceted approach. "The goal can no longer be knowledge and competence in a single 'standard' form of a language and an associated 'target culture' and corresponding cultural practices. Instead, students need linguistic awareness and intercultural awareness to be able to cope with the complexity and variability of communicative practices in which negotiation and adaptation are central."^[2]

Further to that, students' communication is often coined as transcultural communication^[7] rather than intercultural

communication. Transculturality is defined as "a dynamic and complex perspective with cultural practices, forms and contexts operating at multiple spatiotemporal scales that transcend boundaries"^[1].

In the above context, this paper aims to investigate the cultural adaptation process of international students at Russian medical universities, with the fundamental objective of shedding light on the factors that help or hinder them to sojourn at their receiving institutions effectively.

The number of international students enrolled in university programs in Russia reached 351,500 in 2022, an 8% increase compared to the previous year^[8] and the number continues to show a rising tendency despite Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. In accordance with the Russian government's objectives as stated in the "Education" program 2019–2024, this statistics is supposed to augment to 425,000 by the end of 2024^[9] with global competitiveness of Russian higher education institutions aimed to ameliorate as well, striving to place the country into the top 10 best countries of the world in terms of quality of education.

In accordance with the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS), the top destination countries of the global flow of student mobility include the United States of America (15%), the United Kingdom (8.7%), Australia (7.2%), Germany (5.8%), and Canada (5.1%), followed by Russia (4.4%), France (4.0%), China (3.5%), Japan (3.2%) and Turkey (2.9%). The list of the largest sending countries of international students globally is topped by China (17.1%) followed by India (8.1%), Vietnam (2.1%), Germany (1.9%), the USA (1.7%), France (1.7%), the Republic of Korea (1.6%), Nepal (1.5%), Kazakhstan (1.4%) and Brazil (1.4%)^[10].

The above statistics, as well as the growing importance of national budgetary income from foreign students^[11, 12] clearly indicate the scope and relevance of this paper and the investigation of international students' sojourn and cultural adaptation in the Russian Federation.

The Russian government has been actively and heavily supporting the internationalization of the country's higher education system^[13] through several initiatives. The country joined the Bologna process in 2003 followed by a decree approved by the Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation in 2005 about the "Implementation of Provisions in Bologna Declaration in System of Higher Professional Education of the Russian Federation"^[8] alleviating the mutual recognition of diplomas between Russia and the European higher education area.

The majority of foreign students in Russia are citizens of CIS countries. Based on UIS data from 2022 it can be stated that Kazakhstan leads the list followed by Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan. China, India are the two most noteworthy non-CIS countries, while African, European, and other countries account for a smaller proportion of the incoming students^[10].

International students' general wellbeing as well as the efficiency of their studying abroad is highly dependent on how successfully they can adapt to the new environment and integrate to the host culture. Numerous researchers scrutinized the question of foreign students adaptation in a host country. Lavrik^[14] described four aspects of the adaptation process: the socio-cultural, the socio-psychological, the cognitive-psychological, and the cultural and household dimensions.

Berry^[15] and Ward^[16] introduced acculturation theory as a substantial aid to better comprehend foreigners' adaptation process by delineating the four acculturation practices including assimilation (seeking interactions with hosts and not maintaining one's cultural identity), integration (maintaining one's home culture and seeking interactions with hosts), separation (maintaining one's home culture and avoiding interactions with hosts), and marginalization (showing little interest in both maintaining one's culture and interactions with others)^[15].

In line with the integrative theory of communication and cross-cultural adaptation^[17] it can be also stated that the adaptation process is reflected in the degree to which sojourners in an unknown culture have internalized the host culture's meanings and communication symbols, their psychological well-being, and the development of a cultural identity^[18].

The effectiveness of the adaptation process is highly dependent on students' intercultural awareness which is understood here as "a conscious understanding of the role

culturally based forms, practices, and frames of understanding can have in intercultural communication, and an ability to put these conceptions into practice in a flexible and context specific manner in real time communication."^[1] In this connection, international students of higher education are exposed to a multitude of culturally programmed behaviors, attitudes, perceptions, values, and communication patterns, thus, they need to develop their intercultural awareness not only in order to successfully adapt to their new learning environment but also to gain knowledge and skills that enhance their intercultural communication after graduation. "Intercultural awareness involves cultural knowledge, openness and tolerance towards cultural differences as well as an interest in and curiosity about other cultures, and more importantly, it incorporates the ability to put all of these into practice in real intercultural encounters."^[3]

Problems of the cultural adaptation process may materialize in phenomena including culture shock, discrimination, difficulties with communication and language, differences in educational system, financial hardships, lack of appropriate housing, isolation and loneliness, homesickness, and loss of established support and social networks^[10].

In the realm of difficulties with communication and language, with the aim of identifying intercultural and inter-linguistic differences and incongruencies between students' native languages and cultures and those of the host country, an effective theoretical tool is the lacuna theory^[19-25] developed by the Russian school of thought of Psycholinguistics from the late 1970s.

A lacuna is "a gap in cross-cultural communication. Lacunas are the verbal and non-verbal elements of another culture that might be misinterpreted, (partly) overlooked and/or confused, and that have the potential to cause misunderstandings or even failures in cross-cultural communication"^[23].

Lacunas are also called as gaps, untranslatable elements, non-equivalent lexemes or culture-words that serve on the one hand side as good markers for the problematic search for equivalence in translation studies^[22] but also in the cross-cultural context as markers of cognitive, linguistic, and cultural differences between cultures and languages compared.

Besides various other classifications of lacunas, Markovina differentiates between linguistic and cultural lacunas^[25] as foundational types of lacunae that enable the researchers to investigate not only translational difficulties

but also problems of and misunderstandings in cross-cultural communication. In this paper, the lacuna theory is applied for the first time – to the authors’ best of knowledge – to help to understand and analyze international students’ adaptation in higher education institutions.

2. Materials and Methods

A questionnaire-based research was undertaken with international students of Russian medical universities (N = 200). Participants were selected and surveyed in two rounds applying separate sampling methods. Firstly, 23 international students of Sechenov First Moscow State Medical University were selected using purposive sampling, international students of the university, speaking sufficient English to complete the questionnaire and willing to take part were assigned into this group. Respondents filled out and submitted the English-language questionnaires individually, in written form. Subsequently, the snowball method was applied, each respondent was requested to recommend another 2–4 of his acquaintances, fellow students to take part in the survey. Entry requirements for new participants were as follows: 1. medical university student; 2. pursuing studies in the Russian Federation; 3. sufficient English-language skills to fill out the questionnaire. Participation in the survey was anonymous, voluntary and respondents gave informed consent to taking part in it. No compensation was provided for the students for their participation.

This paper is aiming at answering the following research questions:

- (1) What are the major obstacles and challenges of international students pursuing their studies at Russian medical universities that hinder them from effectively adapting to the host culture and how can those problems be classified into major thematic groups?
- (2) What are those lexical items (words) in the Russian language that international students identify as unknown to them and how can these lexical items be grouped into principal categories?
- (3) To what extent discrimination and racism are perceived by foreign students in Russia and how does this relate to data from other countries?
- (4) What country-level characteristics can be identified in relation to foreign students’ adaptation problems in Russia?

In order to effectively investigate the above research questions, respondents were given an anonym questionnaire inquiring basic personal information first (year of birth, nationality, mother tongue, gender) followed by five open questions whereas students were invited to share (1) their impressions about Russia; (2) their best experiences during the time of their studies; (3) their worst experiences respectively; (4) differences between their native country and Russia; and (5) misunderstandings or conflicts they ran into with locals. Data collection started in 2021 (N = 31), continued in 2022 (N = 20) and was concluded in 2024 (N = 149).

In the analysis of the results of the questionnaires, a dual methodology was applied by firstly scrutinizing the obtained narratives relying on Polkinghorne’s concept of Paradigmatic Analysis (Polkinghorne 1995)^[26]. Subsequently, linguistic lacunas (lexical gaps) were identified and classified in order to better understand those Russian terms and notions that proved to display characteristics of lacunarity in the respondents’ perception.

The average age of respondents is 24,5, ranging from 18 to 52, standard deviation 4,65 with a normal age distribution displaying a right-skewed Bell curve (**Figure 1**). The most typical respondent came from the 21–24 age group (38%) while 88,5% of respondents represented the 18–29 age category.

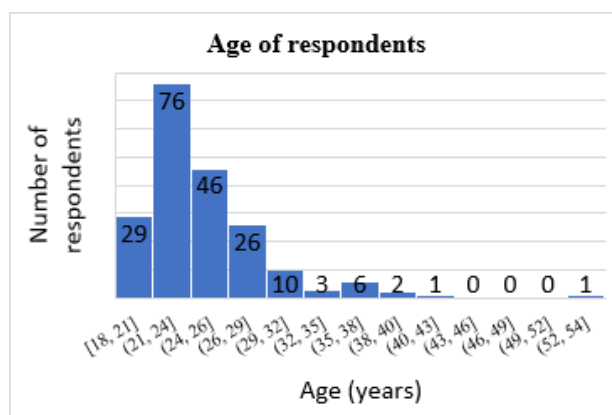


Figure 1. Age of respondents.

Figure 2 visualizes respondents’ age distribution on a scatter chart. The horizontal axis represents each respondent by their ordinal numbers while the vertical axis displays their age (years). The average value of 24,51 and the standard deviation of 4,65 visibly results in the major part of respondents falling into the 20–30-year age category.

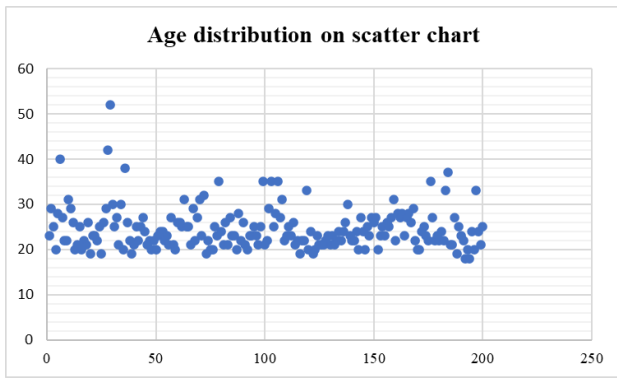


Figure 2. Age distribution on scatter chart.

Approximately 55% of respondents were male, 45% female students as displayed on Figure 3 below.

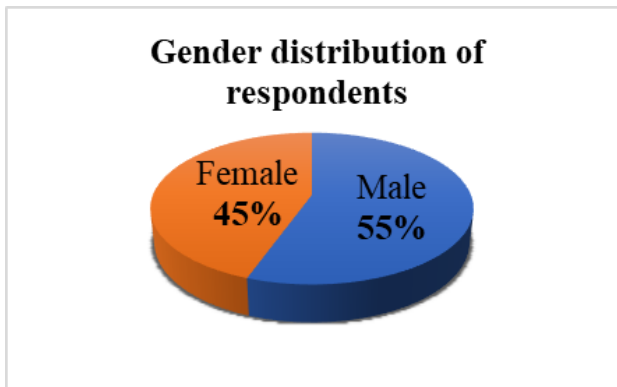


Figure 3. Gender distribution of respondents.

The research encompassed 49 nationalities as shown in alphabetical order on the horizontal axis of Figure 4. The largest group of respondents (N = 45) were Iranian students, followed by Chinese (N = 17), Indian (N = 15), Belarusian (N = 10), and British (N = 8) international students. Countries represented by five or six respondents included Malaysia (N = 6), Sri Lanka (N = 6), Vietnam (N = 6), as well as Germany (N = 5), South Korea (N = 5), South Africa (N = 5), and Turkey (N = 5). Countries of origin with one to four respondents are Afghanistan, Albania, Algeria, United States, Angola, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Brazil, Cameroon, Canada, Cyprus, Egypt, United Arab Emirates, Ecuador, France, Georgia, Greece, Hungary, Iraq, Israel, Italy, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Lebanon, Namibia, New Zealand, Nigeria, Norway, Palestine, Scotland (categorized separately from Great Britain here), Serbia, Singapore, Spain, Syria, Thailand, Tunisia, and Uzbekistan.

A total of 35 languages were identified as respondents' mother tongue. Major languages of respondents were topped

by Persian (Farsi) (N = 44), followed by Arabic (N = 22), Chinese (N = 20), English (N = 19), and Hindi (N = 11) (see Figure 5).

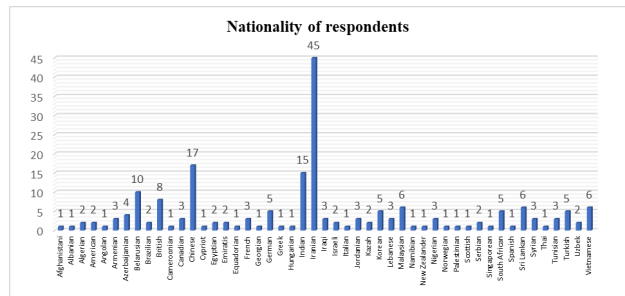


Figure 4. Nationality of respondents.

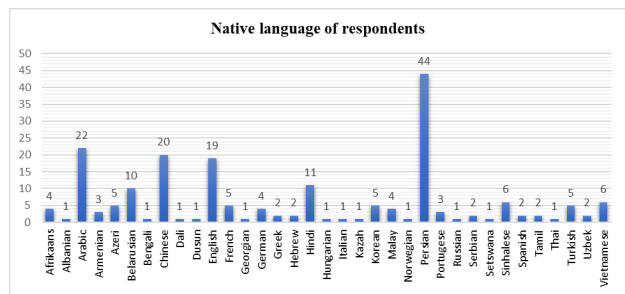


Figure 5. Native language of respondents.

The methodology of this research is a mixed one as the fundamentally quantitative questionnaire-based survey on the one hand determines numbers and proportions of responses of a certain type, from a certain topic, on the other hand, the five open questions of the questionnaire resulted in a considerable amount of qualitative information that was categorized thematically using Polkinghorne's concept of Paradigmatic Analysis^[26]. The author defines *narratives* as follows: "In the context of narrative inquiry, narrative refers to a discourse form in which events and happenings are configured into a temporal unity by means of a plot."^[26].

Narratives serve as a distinct form of discourse that focuses on the biographical, social, cultural and historical situations that have conditioned life experiences^[23]. Furthermore, Paradigmatic analysis is understood in the cited work as well as in this paper as "Paradigmatic-type narrative inquiry gathers stories for its data and uses paradigmatic analytic procedures to produce taxonomies and categories out of the common elements across the database."^[26]. In this paper, international students' narratives were collected as answers to open-ended questions, then were arranged into taxonomies and categories, also called as thematic groups.

A second research method that complemented the Paradigmatic Analysis, was the application of the lacuna theory^[19-23] in order to identify linguistic lacunas emerging in the foreign-Russian context. This approach – to the best of the knowledge of the authors – is a completely innovative way to investigate foreign students' adaptation to the higher education system by identifying culturally motivated lexical items, lacunas, that are unknown for international students of higher education.

3. Results

3.1. Impressions About Russia

Respondents were firstly requested to describe their overall impression about Russia resulting not only in the multifaceted description of Russia as a country and Russian people in general but also identifying prime locations of Russia that foreigners feel attached to as well as in revealing the major obstacles and challenges respondents faced during their stay in Russia.

Russia as a country is most frequently described as beautiful (37), diverse (14), big (13), and cold (11) followed by such characteristics as safe (10), multinational (9), full of opportunities in the fields of work and education (9), modern (8), developed (8), interesting (7), amazing (7), and vast (7). Furthermore, the country is characterized as wonderful (5), clean (5), great (4), unique (4), large (4), organized (4), and of grandeur (4). Further traits mentioned by respondents included friendly (3), peaceful (3), nice (3), stunning (3), majestic (3), expensive (3), home to a comfortable life (3) as well as evoking both good and bad feelings (3). Russia is also described as unique, strange, mysterious place that is hard to understand.

“A place that truly needs to open up to the world as I believe the country and more so it's people are gravely misunderstood and misrepresented, at least in the 'West'.” (British student)

Russia is associated primarily with its culture and language (34), its history and traditions (34), and its architecture (24) as well as its landscapes (14), nature (13), and cuisine (11). Culture is perceived by students via literature (6) whereas Tolstoy and Dostoevsky are mentioned, ballet,

art, theatres, classical music, dance, and opera.

The most common traits evoked about Russian people include friendly (43), helpful (18), hospitable (8), cold (8), warm (8), nice (6), cannot speak English language (5), and kind (4), followed by characteristics including hardworking, resilient, generous, noble, strange, strict, disgusting, serious, resourceful, not respectful, tolerant with foreigners, distant with foreigners, and proud. However, another perception of Russians is that they often seem unfriendly and rude from outside, then later, after getting to know them they become extremely helpful and friendly.

“They may not show it at first but when they see that you are an easy-going type of person and also have your guts, they will treat you with all respect and care.” (Indian student)

Prime locations evoked by respondents are topped by Moscow (17) mentioning such peculiarities and attractions as the metro stations (7), buildings (7) including skyscrapers, the transportation system in general (5), exhibitions and museums (6), venues of art (3) and ballet (3), restaurants (3). Specific places mentioned by foreign students include the Red Square (5), the Kremlin (3), Tretyakov Gallery, and “the wooden church”. Saint Petersburg is associated with the Hermitage, the Winter Palace, the Neva river as well as with night life, the canals, the cathedrals including Saint Isaac Cathedral. Impressions about Russia are also associated with the wonderful metro stations, the buildings of grandeur, the highly developed transportation system, and exhibitions and museums.

“Russia boasts an impressive array of architectural styles, from the grandeur of tsarist palaces to the austere beauty of Soviet-era buildings.” (Indian student)

Based on respondents' answers to their impressions about Russia, the challenges they faced during their stay can also be delineated. Most importantly, the language barrier (12) and cultural differences (8) are mentioned, but xenophobia (racism, discrimination) also seems to be of concern as well as traffic (crowded roads, traffic jams, and bad roads), the expenses of local life (accommodation, tuition fee, and other expenses), the lack of availability of halal food, bureaucracy, and misogyny.

“I was always feeling alone a little in Russia and Russians are so racist and when they see someone is not blonde or doesn’t have blue eyes or can’t speak Russian good, just everything changes.” (Iranian student)

3.2. Best Experience/Memory in Russia

In the course of the survey, both best and worst experiences or memories were collected from respondents. Best memories (Table 1) were identified in 97% of the responses,

while 3% (6 respondents) either did not have any best experience (3 persons, 1,5%) or did not answer the question (3 persons, 1,5%). All collected best memories and experiences were arranged into thematic groups as follows: travel and sightseeing (163 respondents, 81,5%); people (59 respondents, 29,5%); festivals and other events (30 respondents, 15%); cuisine (30 respondents, 15%); school (28 respondents, 14%); cultural experiences (21 respondents, 10,5%); activities (20 respondents, 10%); local habits (8 respondents, 4%); unexpected situations (5 respondents, 2,5%); romantic relations (3 respondents, 1,5%); and others (26 respondents, 13%).

Table 1. Thematic groups of best experiences/memories in Russia.

		Number of Respondents	Percentage of Responses (%)
1.	Travel and sightseeing	163	81,5
2.	Friends and local people	59	29,5
3.	Food and cuisine	30	15
4.	Festivals and other events	30	15
5.	University	28	14
6.	Cultural experiences	21	10,5
7.	Activities	20	10
8.	Local habits	8	4
9.	Unexpected situations	5	2,5
10.	Romantic relations	3	1,5
11.	Others	26	13
12.	No best experience/No answer	6	3

Students’ most memorable experiences were connected to traveling and sightseeing. In terms of geographical location, Moscow (37) took first place with various locations within the city, followed by Saint Petersburg (26) emerging as the second most impressive city that respondents felt attached to.

“Exploring the stunning architecture of St. Petersburg, the vibrant culture of Moscow, and the breathtaking natural scenery of places like Lake Baikal have all contributed to unforgettable memories that I hold dear.” (Nigerian student)

Russian people proved to be another major thematic focus of students accumulating their best memories about the country, mostly referring to the importance of new friendships with Russians (23) and the helpfulness of locals in difficult situations (11). A substantial group of Russian individuals students felt grateful to is university friends (7) and representatives of other nationalities they had the chance to

get acquainted with (5), furthermore, other friendly people (4), host families, professors, flat owners, and hospital staff.

“When I first arrived in Moscow, I got lost and did not know how to get to the center because my money and phone were stolen while I was in a third country (transit). One Russian girl saw me confused and helped me get to the embassy.” (German student)

“I made so many friends that I will cherish forever and I had so many wonderful experiences with them.” (Namibian student)

“The most pleasant impression can be obtained by visiting Russian friends for a family lunch or dinner. This will provide you with strong emotions!” (Indian student)

Food and cuisine emerged as another cardinal topic that is often associated with best memories. Besides unique Russian cuisine (8) in general, borscht soup was mentioned

multiple times (4), as well as further dishes including blini (pancakes), pelmeni (dumplings), draniki (potato pancakes), holodets (meat jelly), okroshka soup, caviar, home-made vodka, draft beer, honey-beer (medovucha), and cocktails. The availability of home dishes (Indian, Korean, and Vietnamese cuisines as well as halal food) also proved to be of high importance to international students.

“The most memorable experience for me is the walk with my Russian friends who showed me a Korean restaurant with karaoke. I was so depressed at the time, and feeling a part of Korean culture was a relief for me.” (Korean student)

The university and the opportunities it offered (9) were identified as the primordial reasons and the most unforgettable memories in the respondents’ mindset. Expert faculty members, the outstanding educational resources, the academic environment, the classes, as well as classmates and friends were named as the substantial sources of good memories.

Lasting memories, best experiences also emerged in connection with Russian holidays, feasts, celebrations, and other events. Maslenitsa (Pancake Spring Festival) proved to be the most popular out of those (5), followed by the soccer World Cup (4), New Year’s Eve (3) and Christmas celebrations (3) friends’ wedding parties, the White Nights celebrations in Saint Petersburg, Easter, Kresheniye (Epiphany), friends’ birthday celebrations, student events and folklore festivals organized by the university, Victory Day festivities, Unity Festival, pottery club, and gastro tour all organized by the university, as well as cultural events under the auspices of the Indian embassy.

Several respondents mentioned unexpected situations as the most remarkable experiences such as getting lost in Moscow and receiving help from a kind local, meeting

friendly policemen who gave them a T-shirt as a birthday gift, learning Russian language from an elderly lady in a public park, and being unable to find the way out from the metro and getting help from a passerby.

Russian habits highly appreciated by foreign students included high respect and gentlemanly behavior towards women, a good sense of humor, respect of war heroes, and the habit and possibility of bargaining at local markets.

Remarkable and unforgettable experiences in Russia are sometimes connected to major events of students’ personal lives including the birth of their child, getting to know their future wives or girlfriends.

Further to the above, the best memories were also listed to seeing snow for the first time (8), nice winter (5), good weather in general (5), kind and nice women (3), the metro system, working at medical forums, and cheap rental fee of apartments.

3.3. Worst Experience/Memory in Russia

A total proportion of 84,5% (169 respondents) of the subjects could recall a worst experience or memory, 15% (30 persons) did not have any such memories, while 0,5% (1 respondent) did not provide an answer. These memories and experiences were classified into thematic groups, resulting in the following major themes (**Table 2**): language and cultural differences (49 respondents, 24,5%); weather (45 respondents, 22,5%); infrastructure and living conditions (28 respondents, 14%); unpleasant events (28 respondents, 14%); racism or discrimination (26 respondents, 13%); bureaucracy (21 respondents, 10,5%); study- and work-related problems (14 respondents, 7%); conflicts with locals (13 respondents, 6,5%) missing home country (7 respondents, 3,5%); and problems with police or immigration officers (7 respondents, 3,5%).

Table 2. Thematic groups of worst experiences/memories in Russia.

		Number of Respondents	Percentage of Responses (%)
1.	Language and cultural differences	49	24,5
2.	Weather	45	22,5
3.	Infrastructure and living conditions	28	14
4.	Unpleasant events	28	14
5.	Racism or discrimination	26	13
6.	Bureaucracy	21	10,5
7.	Study- and work-related problems	14	7
8.	Conflicts with locals	13	6,5
9.	Missing home country	7	3,5
10.	Problems with police or immigration officers	7	3,5
11.	No worst experience/No answer	31	15,5

The language barrier (18) proved to be one of the most crucial reasons of bad experiences, with the perception of Russians not being able to speak English (13).

“People didn’t want to talk to me because I’m a foreigner and I speak Russian very poorly, because of this I don’t like to go shopping, I order everything online” (Israeli student)

Besides linguistic problems, culturally different habits appeared in multiple forms causing the worst experiences including Russians drinking too much alcohol and misbehaving (3); Russians being sullen and not smiling to strangers; drivers yelling out angrily from their cars; Russians behaving culturally inappropriately on public spaces (kissing, hugging, wearing provocative clothes); being unfriendly with neighbors; walking and traveling alone rather than with friends as well as living in smaller families instead of several generations staying together. Russians’ stereotypes about foreigners also caused unpleasant situations i.e., Koreans being called dog-eating Chinese who take away locals’ jobs or German women being generalized as poorly dressed people. Specific cultural habits were identified as sources of bad memories including not taking off the coat before entering a house leading to misunderstanding. The low number of public holidays – vis-à-vis India – also proved to be the source of the worst memory in Russia.

“I noticed that Russians tend to display publicly their affection. They can hug, hold hands or even kiss in public (in the subway, on the streets, etc.). This is one of the things I would hardly recover from, for I am Muslim and I come from a very conservative family.” (Algerian student)

Harsh weather (coldness, snow) is the second most severe shock for foreign students, followed by issues with infrastructure and living conditions as well as unpleasant events.

“These are consistently gloomy and rainy weather; bland food; low English proficiency among the local population and cold winters.” (Indian student)

Infrastructure and living conditions caused problems via heavy traffic and traffic jams (5), public transportation

(4), city infrastructure and old buildings, noise and the high amount of people, dirt and smell in bigger cities, dirty hotel rooms, poor hygiene contributing to the spread of viral infections, poor quality service in shops and restaurants, the too fast pace of life, expensive commodities, and the need to buy bottled water.

Food-related problems were mentioned including “blatant food” putting dill on everything or just simply not liking Russian cuisine. Some experiences connected to Russian people were also added to living conditions such as unfriendly and cold people, short-tempered men that are always ready to fight with foreigners, impatient and nervous people or members of the younger generations saying it is not worth to come to Russia and learn the language. Finally, changed conditions in Moscow were mentioned by shops and supermarkets closing down, international brands being replaced by Russian ones, and losing access to the world in general.

Unpleasant events comprised a variety of bad experiences such as having been ignored in a restaurant, dropped off a local minibus far away from the metro station, harassed by a drunk person on the subway, treated rudely by Russian workers, having been spat in the face, strangers bumping into them without apologizing, having been denied to board the airplane, robbed at the airport, scammed by phone scammers, frauded by 3.000 rubles, threatened by an aggressive taxi driver, or spending time at a police station due to the theft of a mobile phone. An Asian student was shocked as nobody offered their seats to her visiting parents and grandparents on the metro. One student found that eating holodets (meat jelly) was his worst experience in Russia. Furthermore, multiple worst memories were connected to falling ill including having been infected by rotavirus, getting sick and fainting in the hospital, drinking tap water leading to health problems, and food poisoning. A student had to live in a park for a week as nobody was open to rent him an apartment, another female student was maltreated by her Russian boyfriend, another student felt humiliated every time he needed to say his name publicly in offices as it has a bad meaning in the Russian language. Tragic events were also mentioned including students who witnessed the horrific attack in the Moscow Concert Hall, another one who was injured when a train got off the rail, as well as a student whose five-year-old child died.

Racism and discrimination were perceived and identi-

fied as the reason of the worst experiences 26 times, in the case of 13% of the students. These descriptions reflect perceived or presumed racist or discriminatory behavior against the respondents.

“I faced racism. I always heard in my house: ‘oh, the Chinese has arrived, you want our lands.’ When I said that I was from Korea: ‘you’re eating dogs.’ I used to feel hurt and uncomfortable because of such words.” (Korean student)

Due to the fact that racism and discrimination may be dependent on the nationality and appearance, the country of origin of the affected students are also marked in the descriptions or in parentheses. Discrimination based on race or nationality was experienced by students from China, Nigeria, Iran, Tunisia, Malaysia, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Korea, Belarus, and South Africa. Russians were perceived as being unfriendly with foreigners in general. A Chinese student faced unprovoked racial discrimination, an Iranian respondent said Russians did not talk to him because of his nationality and appearance, while several students were warned to speak only in Russian while on public places (Iranian, British). An Iranian respondent was attacked on the street for speaking in English, an English-speaking British student had to pay twice for the train ticket supposedly because being a foreigner, a taxi-driver refused to take a British student presumably for the same reason, a British student was thought to be an American and was chased down the street by aggressive locals, a Nigerian student received derogatory remarks on public transport because of her appearance, a South African female student was sexually harassed on the metro, and a Tunisian respondent was called a terrorist in the bus stop, supposedly because she was wearing a veil.

Bureaucracy was identified as another notable hurdle for foreign students who complained for too much unnecessary paperwork and too many legal documents, filling out and stamping papers, endless bureaucracy and medical checkups, as well as the low efficiency and slow processing of their documents (residence permit, work permit, invitation letter, visa).

“Moscow seems to run on bureaucracy. I have never encountered so much paper fillings, stamping of documents and having to

provide so much documentation for residency.”
(British student)

Furthermore, the language barrier also hinders effective communication as staff of government offices and university departments cannot always speak English. Obtaining a Russian visa abroad is also impeded by high cost and the necessity to take part in an in-person interview.

Worst memories are often connected to study- and work-related problems (14). The most remarkable challenge is the Russian language that is perceived as difficult (4), as well as the training program, the marks and the examinations. A student remembered needing to re-read a course as his worst experience, while another one lost two years when transferring to another medical university as not all of his completed subjects were recognized. Bad management of the university and university authorities not treating foreign students well were also mentioned. Covering the expenses is made more difficult by not allowing students to work in parallel with their studies.

The most common reasons for conflicts with locals (13) were presumed to be connected with Russians being rude (5) and unfriendly (3). Conflicts arose multiple times by speaking a language other than Russian in public places, fight with drunk people, meeting dangerous or strange individuals in the metro, and fraudulent taxi drivers.

Missing home (7) was not limited to feeling homesick (3) and missing the family but also missing the feasts and celebrations of the native country, as well as the non-availability of home spices, and missing colorful clothes and emotional people.

Students evoked bad experiences with police or immigration officers taking note of unpleasant situations such as waiting for two hours at the airport for clearance, the passport control at airports in general, the compulsory fingerprinting process, policemen checking the documents too often as well as the intimidating security personnel at some places.

3.4. Differences Between Students’ Native Countries and Russia

Results of the data collection about differences between Russia and students’ native countries were analyzed thematically again, however, those countries with a reasonable amount of respondents – Iran (45), China (17), India

(15), Belarus (10), and Great Britain (8) – are discussed separately.

3.4.1. Iran

Cultural habits (12), culture in general (9), weather (9), food (7), and religion (3) topped the list of differences, noting the importance of Persian (Farsi) as the official language of Iran and the numerous minority languages – similarly to the case of the Russian language and minority languages in the Russian Federation. Russia is seen as a more advanced nation in terms of economic development, lower inflation, the level of digitalization, better and up-to-date equipment, higher quality public transportation including metro lines, trams, buses, trolleybuses, minibuses, taxis, online applications for transportation as well as higher security standards.

Cultural habits are said by respondents to differ significantly between Russia and Iran in several walks of life. Eating pork is forbidden in Iran in line with Islam.

“Pork is not used because Iran is a Muslim country. As for greeting, we shake hands with each other, and then press their own right hand to their hearts. I see how men shake hands too as a greeting. It is not customary to shake hands with women, it is also forbidden to touch women and look them straight in the eye. In Russia I can look at a woman, even stare at her.” (Iranian student)

Social protocols of attire state that women need to cover their arms and legs, they wear a shawl (chador), and they are not allowed to wear revealing or tight outfit. Men need to cover their arms above the elbow and are supposed to wear long trousers, no shorts are allowed. Men are neither supposed to look directly in the eyes of unknown women nor to touch women in social interactions as well as when saying hello. Handshakes in Iran are usually followed by a hand gesture, placing the right hand on the heart. Before meeting someone, it is expected to know his/her full name and title.

3.4.2. China

Similarly to Iran, the thematic groups also comprise weather (6), culture (5), cultural habits (5), and food (4), complemented by such topics as people and their characteristics, pace of life, and holidays.

Chinese food is described as more reliant on vegetables and rice, while Russian cuisine prefers ingredients as potatoes, cabbage, mushroom, sour cream, and other dairy products. Russians are seen as gloomy and angry, the atmosphere is colder in general, they are more formal in communication and with names and titles as well. At the same time, they are also helpful and friendly.

As a part of nonverbal communication, eye-contact proved to be as essential difference. While Chinese prefer to avoid it *“in my country people do not maintain direct eye contact”*, and Egyptian students even ran into a cultural misunderstanding due to, improper use of eye-contact *“I didn’t make the eye contact during a conversation, so the person thought I was rude or not paying attention. Later I learned that the eye contact is important to Russians and sign of respect and now try to do so”*.

Chinese respondents – interestingly – found Russia’s pace of different from their native land in a way that Muscovite life is perceived as more measured and relaxed than that if China.

“I also like the pace of life in Russia. Compared to China, it is very measured, which is good. In my homeland, I did not notice how time flies by. Because everything was so fast, I was stressed, like most Chinese people.” (Chinese student)

This perception coincides with experiences of German students *“In Russia, life is more measured, people are less in a hurry about their business, they may be late.”*, and Korean students *“In Korea, people often feel that they are always competing because of the small land and many people, and here, people often feel that they do not live in a hurry.”*, however they go counter to some other nations’ feelings including Thais *“I don’t like the fast pace of Moscow life, lots of traffic jams.”*, Indians *“Compared to India, it immediately caught my eye that the Russian people are mostly gloomy, people are always in a hurry somewhere.”* –, or Israelis *“The biggest differences are the weather and the hustle. in my native country it is always sunny and there is no fuss, people are not in a hurry.”*. The approach to time management (leisurely vs. strict and punctual) seems to be highly dependent on students’ country of origin.

National holidays differ greatly with Maslenitsa, Victory Day, and New Year’s Eve as some of the fundamental

Russian celebrations, while Chinese celebrate Chinese New Year, the Mid-autumn Festival, and the Dragon Boat Festival as mentioned by respondents. Russians are seen as superstitious. Steam bath (banya) is seen by Chinese as an attractive Russian free time activity.

Superstitions exist in both countries even though they take different forms as stated by a Chinese student: *“In Russia a black cat is a harbinger of misfortune, and in China it is a raven.”*

3.4.3. India

Thematic foci of Indian respondents (15) regarding differences between Russia and India coincided to a great extent to the fields identified by Iranian and Chinese students, consisting of the main themes of (cold) weather (8), culture and language (5), food (4), and religion (3). New focal points could be identified as well: education (3) and attire (3) proved to be of particular importance to the Indian participants of the survey.

As a comparison of the weather, respondents pointed out that Russia has a cold, humid, continental climate with a long winter and an often hot summer while India has a humid, subtropical climate with hot summers and mild winters, affected by the monsoon.

In terms of religion, Russian population was described as belonging mostly to the Russian Orthodox Church which materialized for Indian students in the form of beautiful buildings, churches and cathedrals. When contrasted to India, it was pointed out that it has a more multireligious landscape that incorporates religions as Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism, Christianity, and many more.

“Moscow has a strong presence of the Russian Orthodox Church, with many historic churches and cathedrals. New Delhi, being a multicultural and multireligious city, has places of worship for Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism, Christianity, and other faiths.” (Indian student)

Clothing is seen as more vivid and colorful in India that is often missed by respondents. Russia is perceived as following European fashion trends and being more traditional and less colorful.

“Russian fashion is influenced by European trends, while Indian fashion incorporates a mix of traditional and modern styles from var-

ious regions across the country. I don't feel like I am fitting in, I am a fist out of water.”
(Indian student)

The highly developed Russian transportation system was singled out too, described as running vast railway systems, highways, and airports of very high standards.

The Russian education system is seen as offering remarkably more opportunities to students from even kindergarten level where children can sometimes already learn how to read and write, to a better quality elementary school system, and higher education that offers more opportunities to students especially when taking into account that in India does not offer too many specialized higher education institutions. In Russian universities, the number of students in a group is lower, consequently, more attention can be paid to them. Russians are seen as better read people in general when compared to Indians.

“There are practically no specialized educational institutions in India. Technical universities are aimed at training specialists for a wide range of industries. (...) Another difference is that the number of students in the group is several times less than in India. This directly affects the proportion of attention that the teacher pays to each student.” (Indian student)

3.4.4. Belarus

Besides (cold) weather (3), the transportation system (3), and food (2), Belarusian respondents focused mostly on the differences in personal characteristics. Russians were described as more reserved, keeping everything for themselves, not so open-minded as Belarusians, and they are hard to communicate with. Meanwhile, other respondents stressed the similarities of the two countries.

Belarusian respondents provided contradictory impressions about Russia, some of them found it very similar or almost the same as their home country. However, the greater part of Belarusian students found it difficult to communicate with Russians and found them rather reserved.

“People in Russia are really reserved. They keep everything to themselves and do not want to help others, are absolutely not open-

minded. People in Belarus are, vice versa, really friendly and helpful." (Belarusian student)

Transportation in Russia is described as better and more developed than in Belarus, the metro system is excellent, however it is also described as too busy, causing ecological problems. A somewhat funny wording of a Belarusian student confirms a wider array of possibilities in Russia including a greater variety of food and books.

"In Russia you can find a lot of things which you can never find in Belarus. For example, books or food." (Belarusian student)

Russia is considered expensive when compared to Belarus especially in terms of rental fee and medical insurance.

3.4.5. Great Britain

Contrariwise, British students found Russian life less expensive and they also pointed out how much more smoothly and professionally some of the logistics and infrastructure work in Russia than in Great Britain, including transportation system, public gyms, play areas, parks, besides others.

"The infrastructure tends to run more smoothly in Russia and is incredibly affordable, whereas in the United Kingdom it's considerably more expensive." (British student)

British respondents referred also to differences in weather (5), personality traits (5), culture and language (3), and food (3), while singling out several other dissimilarities as detailed below.

Weather is perceived as not only colder but also greyer, darker, and less rainy, with a bleak winter. Russian personality traits that are seen as differing from those of British people were pointed out including Russians being more curious asking a lot about personal life, more direct, straightforward and sincere in communication, also rough and often disregarding etiquette. There is thought to be less obese people in Russia and more smokers which strikes the eyes of a British person as smoking is less and less widespread in the UK. Muscovites are seen as nicer in general than dwellers of other cities and regions. Regarding communication style, Russians can be contrasted to British people who are more timid, indirect and

often use understatements in communication.

"Russians are often perceived as more direct in their communication style, valuing honesty and straightforwardness, which can sometimes come across as blunt or stern to those from more reserved cultures. In contrast, the English tend to be timider, often using indirect language and understatement to convey their thoughts and feelings." (British student)

Cultural differences are reflected in dissimilar clothing that can be traced back to cultural reasons.

"They dress smartly and well in a style that is more elegant than in the West where there is a tendency to dress casual and informally to the point in which informality borders on scruffy and unkempt." (British student)

Russian humor is described as incomprehensible, bureaucracy as awful, clothing as more elegant, infrastructure as better and cheaper with wide streets and no graffiti. British respondents are impressed by the large number of outdoor and public use facilities including play areas, gym equipment, and park areas that can be used without payment.

The variety of goods in supermarkets is different, in Russia the alcohol section seems to be twice as large as in Great Britain while the cereal section is a quarter of the British size. Pace of life is also different reflected by shops opening later and closing later as well.

3.5. Misunderstandings and Conflicts with Russians

101 students (50,5%) revealed an intercultural misunderstanding or conflict with a Russian individual while 99 respondents (49,5%) said they have not had one or they cannot remember. It is worth to note that three respondents gave multiple examples of misunderstandings and conflicts, thus a total number of 106 such cases were registered. Misunderstandings and conflicts were arranged into the following thematic groups (**Table 3**): language barrier (32), discrimination (17), bad behavior of Russian individuals (17), lack of cultural knowledge (14), racism (8), humor (6), cheating, fraud (5), and stereotyping (2).

Table 3. Causes of misunderstandings and conflicts with Russians.

		Number of Respondents
1.	Language barrier	32
2.	Discrimination	17
	Bad behavior of Russian individuals	17
3.	Lack of cultural knowledge	14
4.	Racism	8
5.	Humor	6
6.	Cheating, fraud	5
7.	Stereotyping	2
	<i>Total</i>	<i>101</i>

Most of the problematic situations emerged as a result of the language barrier which accounted for 32 cases. The insufficient or improper knowledge of the Russian language caused misunderstandings when doing shopping, ordering in restaurants, at workplace, when bumping into a police officer, with host family, in the airport border control office, and when courting a girl. Linguistic miscommunication was due not only to the insufficient knowledge of vocabulary or grammar but also to such factors as word stress, directness, style (Indian, Hungarian), hand gestures, facial expressions, nonverbal signs, the use of proverbs, and volume of speech (Italian). Several students complained that Russians either have a very low level of English or they get irritated or hostile when they hear foreigners speaking another language.

“I got attacked in the street by a Russian man because I was speaking English with my friend and he said I need to only speak Russian in this country” (Iranian student)

Foreign students evoked 32 cases (16%) when their insufficient Russian language skills caused a misunderstanding or conflict in various situations of everyday life (doing the shopping, ordering in restaurants), at the university or at work.

In 17 cases (8,5%), students encountered discrimination based on their nationality and in 2 cases (1%) due to their religion. It involved almost not being serviced by a doctor (British), not being able to rent an apartment (Azerbaijan), or ceasing communication when the respondent’s religion was revealed (Canada).

“I couldn’t rent an apartment in Moscow because of my nationality. I could solve this problem through my Russian friends.” (Azerbaijanian student)

nian student)

“The only really bad interaction I’ve had was with a Russian doctor who almost refused me service because I was British. I came in with a bleeding foot injury and he initially refused to treat me and instead got angry and started questioning my views on my government and its dealings with Russia.” (British student)

“People often say that this country is for the Russians, even though I am from Belarus. People do not want to help with the documents, do not assist in any situation, sometimes even pick on me.” (Belarusian student)

“A few Russian men assumed me and my friends were American, and began yelling at us to ‘go back home and leave Russia’”. (American student)

“Another time some Russian guys came up to us in a restaurant and were friendly, but when they learnt of our religious affiliations, they left us and refused to acknowledge our existence.” (Canadian student)

The most typical reason of conflicts were identified as due to drunkenness of Russians. Such cases occurred with students from China, South Africa, Cyprus, Iran, Malaysia, Iran, and Greece.

Racist incidents were identified in 4% of the cases (8 times), most frequently (3) against African or Afro-American students and sometimes against Asian students as well.

“A man almost the same height as me came up to me and said, “Hey, nigga, you’re a nigga,

aren't you?" He tried to get closer and apparently wanted to attack, but people nearby stopped him." (American student)

"Few times, when someone started showing 'narrow eyes' and did the ching chang chong sounds." (Korean student)

Different types of bad behavior of Russian individuals (17) were revealed, most dominantly drunk people (7) harassed or verbally abused the students (China, South Africa, Cyprus, Iran, Malaysia, Iran, and Greece), rudeness and arrogance appeared (3), and teachers behavior with students was identified as cause of the problem (3) (Norway, Lebanon, Germany). Further to these, aggressive driving style, provocation of fights, and yelling in the metro were mentioned as main reason of misunderstandings.

Misunderstandings and conflicts were based on lack of cultural knowledge (14) including cases connected to time management and punctuality (India, Korea), eating too loudly (China), not knowing the proper type, color, and number of flowers given to girlfriend (Korea, China), missing to take eye-contact (Egypt), making faces (Ecuador), and smoking in a café where smoking is forbidden (Turkey).

In the university setting, misunderstandings happened with teachers who have a different approach to teaching style and the question of authority than the teachers in the respondent's home country.

"We had misunderstandings with teachers at the university. When I got into an argument with the teachers at the university, they didn't like it. They felt that it detracted from their authority. But in Norway, it is a common practice to engage in disputes and discussions with teachers, such an educational process. You can't object to the teacher here, he's always right. Therefore, I began to take less initiative in discussions at seminars." (Norwegian student)

Racist acts (8) included calling a student "nigga" (US), spitting at someone on the street (US), not being able to rent an apartment because of nationality (Azerbaijan), showing narrow eyes and making the sounds "ching chang chong" (Korea), receiving a bill in the restaurant written "Afro" on it (US), and cutting in front of a respondent by car (US).

Culturally different types of humor (6) were the core of misunderstandings in several cases (Armenia, Iran, India, Ecuador), cheating taxi drivers and other frauds (5) caused problems too, while stereotyping from the students' side led to misunderstandings (2).

3.6. Lacunas, "Gaps" in Intercultural Communication

In the frames of the second conceptual approach to this survey, the lacuna theory was applied with the aim of identifying lacunas, as defined by Denisova-Schmidt et al. [23]: *"verbal and non-verbal elements of another culture that might be misinterpreted, (partly) overlooked and/or confused, and that have the potential to cause misunderstandings or even failures in cross-cultural communication"*.

28 linguistic lacunas were identified (see **Table 4**), mostly representing Russian cuisine and its strange or unknown items including *блины* (pancakes), *борщ* (beetroot soup), *драники* (potato pancakes), *кефир* (a sour dairy product), *медовуха* (honey-beer), *окрошка* (cold vegetable soup), *пельмени* (dumplings), *пирожки* (baked or fried buns), *салат Оливье* (a salad with mayonnaise dressing), *холодец* (meat jelly), and *щи* (traditional Russian cabbage soup). Local feasts, national holidays were mentioned as curious or unknown events including *День Победы* (Victory Day), *Крещение* (Epiphany), and *Масленица* (Pancake Festival). Unique Russian personality traits were identified as national peculiarities such as the type of an unfriendly elderly lady (*бабушка*), a suburban person with low education, sometimes conducting criminal activities (*зопник*), and the prototype of the all-enduring Russian person (*терпила*). Two brand names of restaurants were mentioned and identified as lacunas namely *Му-Му* (a reasonable-priced Russian restaurant chain often visited by foreign students) and *Теремок* (a well-known Russian fast-food chain).

International students noticed the notion of the very culture-specific Russian weekend house which is often considered as a second home (*дача*), and the specific commuter towns in the vicinity of Moscow (*спальный район*). Smaller, fixed-route buses that alleviate urban transportation (*маршрутка*) were taken note of, and local habits and events were identified as intercultural, laconic peculiarities such as *баня* (traditional Russian steam bath) and *вечеринка* (small party). Further to the above, the following linguistic

lacunas, gaps were identified: *степь* (unforested grassland in Siberia), *матрёшка* (a set of wooden dolls), *МФЦ* (multifunctional government office), and *разговор по душам* (a deep, heart-to-heart conversation).

Table 4. Linguistic lacunas, lexical gaps.

	Lacunas in Russian	Meaning	Semantic Domain
1	<i>бабушка</i> [babushka]	grandma/an unfriendly elderly lady	personality traits
2	<i>баня</i> [banya]	traditional Russian steam bath	habits
3	<i>блины</i> [blini]	pancakes	food
4	<i>борщ</i> [borscht]	traditional Russian beetroot soup	food
5	<i>вечеринка</i> [vecherinka]	party	events
6	<i>гоним</i> [gonimik]	suburban person with low education	personality traits
7	<i>дача</i> [dacha]	a second home in the countryside	urban and rural areas
8	<i>День Победы</i> [Victory Day]	9 May, victory of the Soviet Union in WW2	national holidays
9	<i>драники</i> [draniki]	potato pancakes	food
10	<i>кефир</i> [kefir]	a sour dairy product	food
11	<i>Крещение</i> [Kresheniye]	Epiphany	national holidays
12	<i>Масленица</i> [Maslenitsa]	Pancake Festival	national holidays
13	<i>маршрутка</i> [marshrutka]	fixed-route minibus	transportation
14	<i>матрёшка</i> [matryoshka]	a set of wooden dolls	artifacts
15	<i>медовуха</i> [medovucha]	honey-beer	food
16	<i>Му-Му</i> [Moo-Moo]	Russian restaurant chain	restaurants
17	<i>МФЦ</i> [MFC]	Multifunctional Center (government office)	local government
18	<i>окрошка</i> [okroshka]	cold vegetable soup	food
19	<i>пельмени</i> [pelmeni]	dumplings	food
20	<i>пирожки</i> [pirozhki]	baked or fried buns	food
21	<i>разговор по душам</i> [razgovor po dusham]	heart-to-heart conversation	communication
22	<i>салат Оливье</i> [Olivier salad]	a salad with mayonnaise dressing	food
23	<i>спальный район</i> [spalniy rayon]	commuter town	urban and rural areas
24	<i>степь</i> [steppe]	unforested grassland in Siberia	nature
25	<i>Теремок</i> [Teremok]	Russian fast food chain	restaurants
26	<i>терпила</i> [terpila]	a person who endures all	personality traits
27	<i>холодец</i> [holodets]	meat jelly	food
28	<i>щи</i> [shchi]	traditional Russian cabbage soup	food

4. Discussion

4.1. Thematic Groups of Factors Influencing Adaptation, Russian Specificities

In terms of the major obstacles and challenges that international students face during their study years, previous studies identified a multitude of factors. Wenhua and Zhe^[27] investigated university students in UK, US, and Australia and proposed five groups of such problems: personal psychological issues, academic issues, socio-cultural issues, general living issues, and English language proficiency. The authors also stress the importance of financial issues, academic progress, and homesickness. Jamal and Wok^[28] examined the question in the Malaysian higher education context and found that the most primordial problems are difficulty to mix with the locals, Malaysian weather, difficulty to stay in

Malaysia, Malaysian food, and education. Boubekbri and Saidi^[29] scrutinized Sub-Saharan African students' cross-cultural adaptation in Moroccan higher education institutions. The authors identified four basic factors that influence the outcome of the adaptation process: language and cultural barriers, interpersonal relationships, host receptivity, and intercultural personality. Chen et al.^[30] discuss mental health and well-being of Chinese college students in Thai higher education institutions. The authors enumerate influencing factors including problems with language skills, social support, and financial capacity, multiple forms of loneliness (personal, social, and cultural), as well as racism, discrimination, gaps in expectation between students and academics, and culture or transition shock. Yu & Wright^[31] examined international students' socio-cultural and academic adaptation during their studies in Australia. The research identified

key influencing factors of the adaptation of students arriving from five countries (China, Malaysia, UK, Germany, Mexico) such as integration into the community, interacting with other students, relationships with supervisors, and the provision of adequate desk space.

In this research, numerous factors were identified as considerable obstacles of successful adaptation. Firstly, when respondents evoked their impressions about Russia, they enumerated such hindering issues including the language barrier; cultural differences; xenophobia (racism, discrimination); traffic; high costs of local life; not appropriate or not available food; bureaucracy; and misogyny. Secondly, the collection of respondents' worst experiences in Russia also shed light to a great number of problems: 169 respondents identified issues that made their sojourn in Russia challenging. Those factors were arranged into the thematic groups by the authors as follows: language and cultural differences; weather; infrastructure and living conditions; unpleasant events; racism or discrimination; bureaucracy; study- and work-related problems; conflicts with locals; homesickness; and problems with police or immigration officers. Thirdly, intercultural misunderstandings and conflicts with locals were evoked by more than half (50,5%) of participants of the survey. The authors arranged these problematic cases into the following major thematic groups: language barrier, discrimination, bad behavior of Russian individuals, lack of cultural knowledge, racism, humor, cheating, fraud, and stereotyping.

All in all it can be stated that thematic groups of intercultural adaptation problems of international students in Russia partly coincide with those discussed widely in the aforementioned academic literature including language barrier, cultural differences, study- and work-related problems, homesickness, racism and discrimination, and stereotyping. Some of the groups seem to be less typical to groups in existing literature but display a stronger specificity of the Russian context including bureaucracy; bad behavior of Russian individuals; problems with police or immigration officers; humor; and cheating and fraud.

4.2. Lacunas, Lexical Items as Markers of Russian Culture

Multiple studies draw the attention to the primordial role of linguistic skills in students' cultural adaptation. Ward

& Kennedy^[32] claim that sociocultural adaptation is predicted by the cultural distance between home and host countries, cultural identity, cultural knowledge and competence, linguistic skill, and contact with host nationals. An & Chiang^[33] examined international students' sociocultural and educational adaptation in China based on five pivotal influencing factors including language proficiency, cultural empathy, open-mindedness, emotional stability, and social flexibility. Yu & Wright^[31] identify the lack of language proficiency as a possible major barrier to integration. In sum, nearly all literature focusing on the underlying factors of international students' adaptation considers linguistic skills as a determining factor of successful sociocultural integration.

The language barrier and other culture-related reasons caused the worst experiences in the case of 24,5% of international students of Russian medical universities. Results confirm intercultural communicative competence^[34] being a crucial factor in the success of foreign students adaptation in a host country. Intercultural communicative competence is also "*the foundation for 'intercultural citizenship'*"^[34] that helps students to successfully exchange thoughts and ideas with locals and sojourners as well as to become a sojourner themselves. Furthermore, it is essential to incorporate the development of foreign students' intercultural communicative competence into the teaching process^[35].

With the above in mind, in this research, a second, complementary research method was applied whereas linguistic lacunas (lexical gaps)^[25] were identified and categorized into the major semantic domains (**Table 4.**) such as: food, national holidays, personality traits, urban and rural areas, restaurants, nature, communication, transportation, local government, habits, events, and artifacts.

The knowledge of these Russian concepts enables students to lessen their hardships in everyday life by familiarizing them with Russian cuisine in general, more specifically with typical Russian foods including *борщ* (beetroot soup), *окрошка* (cold vegetable soup), *пельмени* (dumplings), *пирожки* (baked or fried buns), etc., as well as with Russian restaurants fellow international students endorse including *Му-Му* (Moo-Moo) and *Теремок* (Teremok). Getting to know local transportation and urban environment can be equally important for international students. The identification of lacunas including *маршрутка* (smaller, fixed-route buses) and *спальный район* (suburbs of bigger Russian cities,

especially Moscow with a large proportion of the population commuting to the big city to work).

As part of local culture, national celebrations, notable Russian events were identified such as *День Победы* (Victory Day), *Крещение* (Epiphany), and *Масленица* (Pancake Festival), as well as local habits and traditions to go to *баня* (traditional Russian steam bath) or to the family's weekend house outside of the city (*дача*) or to take part in a *вечеринка* (smaller party usually in someone's apartment).

More abstract and deeper, culturally strongly motivated expressions were identified as well, allowing foreign students to learn more about the Russian psyche and soul including *терпила* (an all-enduring Russian person), *бабушка* (an unfriendly elderly lady) or *зопник* (a suburban person with low education, sometimes conducting criminal activities) and the concept of *разговор по душам* (a deep, heart-to-heart conversation).

This newly identified set of lacunae sheds light on vital, culture-specific information that can serve as excellent data pool not only to describe current problems and challenges of international students but also to acquire the means to train future prospective students with Russia-specific cultural knowledge.

Lastly, it needs to be mentioned that in contrast with the mainstream approach to linguistic problems in intercultural adaptation, whereas issues with the host culture's dominant language are seen solely through international students' level of the respective language, in this paper, linguistic lacunas were identified in order to obtain a clearer picture of major linguo-cultural differences that influence the intercultural communication and adaptation processes.

4.3. Feeling of Discrimination and Racism

Prejudice, discrimination, racism, and feeling of inferiority appear among international students' notable challenges in a host culture^[36–38]. It is important to note that the aforementioned phenomena (discrimination, racism, etc.) are not fully objective and factual but contain a high proportion of subjectivity from their subject's side. For this reason it is more appropriate to mention "perceived discrimination" or "feeling of racism" rather than "discrimination" or "racism" in this article.

Events that were perceived in this research as racism and discrimination were responsible for foreign students'

worst experiences in 13% of the cases. The most affected nationalities in this survey were found to be China, Nigeria, Iran, Tunisia, Malaysia, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Korea, Belarus, and South Africa. Such cases included various acts and behaviors including refusing to take foreign students by taxi, refusing to let an apartment for them presumably because of their nationality or ethnicity, making derogatory remarks, not communicating with them, chasing them down on the street, spitting in the face, sexually harassing them on the metro, and calling them a terrorist.

In this survey, 50,5% of respondents (101 persons) perceived cases of intercultural misunderstanding or conflict with Russians. After the language barrier, discrimination and bad behavior of Russian individuals were identified as the most frequent sources of misunderstandings and conflicts, perceived discrimination appearing in the case of 8,5% of respondents. Racism was perceived by 4% of the total sample and stereotyping also appeared in 1% of the cases.

Findings resonate with Boubekri and Saidi^[29] who confirm that feelings of discrimination and inferiority were reported by Sub-Saharan African students in Morocco. 23% of African students strongly disagreed with the statement that Moroccan people kindly accept and welcome them in their society. African students' cultural adaptation in Morocco was hindered in several cases because they were subject to certain types of discriminatory and racist behaviors by some Moroccans. This study identified two major underlying reasons: cultural and religious differences and Moroccans' stereotypical views towards foreign students.

Brown and Jones^[39] investigated 153 international students of higher education institutions in UK and found that 32% of them experienced some sort of abuse. This took either verbal or physical form, this latter manifested physically as a result of perceived racism in the case of 6% students.

Regarding the US, results of primary data survey of 1249 college students of US universities^[40] show that 17,6% of respondents perceived race-related bias or hatred in the previous 1–2 months (while 47,5% of them have experienced such discrimination during their lifetime). The odds of facing face-related bias or hatred is significantly higher among Asians, Black Asians, multiple races, and other non-White students in the US. Another high-scale study conducted with 2230 international students in the US^[41] indicates that 11,5–32,0% of respondents experienced discrimination in the past

year, while the lifetime experience of discriminatory events ranged from 14,8% to 40,2%. More affected groups of lifetime discriminatory experience of being called a racist name are American Indians and Alaska Natives, Asians, Hispanic/Latinx, Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders, Middle Easterns and North Africans, and the least affected group was White participants.

Latipova et al.^[42] confirms that for Chinese students pursuing their studies in Russia, besides the language barrier, racial and national tolerance causes notable problems. 30% of Chinese students often face this issue in public transport, 13% claimed that their rights have been violated in the service sector, and 3% mentioned the same problem at their receiving universities.

In sum, Russian results gained in this survey do not stand out from international tendencies of foreign students being subjects to perceived discrimination and racism. The phenomenon implies that more attention should be paid for the effective education and training of local and international students and university faculty members alike in order to enhance intercultural awareness and raise intercultural/transcultural competence.

4.4. Country-Level Characteristics of Foreign Students' Adaptation Problems in Russia

Based on the number of participants of this survey, Iran, China, and India emerged as most well represented countries with 45, 17, and 15 respondents respectively. This also reflects recent trends of an increasing proportion of international students arrive to Russia from these countries – medical universities are popular targets of these students. Language wise, the following three native languages topped the list in this survey: Persian (Farsi) (44 respondents), Arabic (22 respondents), (Mandarin) Chinese (20 respondents). Country-level characteristics of students' adaptation process of the aforementioned three best represented countries – Iran, China, and India – will be discussed below.

As Iranian students' main challenges in Russia were identified including cultural differences, weather, food, and religion. Although some similarities between the two countries were mentioned such as the fact that both are multicultural, multiethnic societies with a dominant language (Russian and Persian/Farsi) and a high number of other languages, results suggests that cultural distance is rather notable, thus

mutual understanding generally causes significant problems. This confirms Kunovski & Novoselova^[43] who state that in the Russian-Iranian context “*there are certain differences in the national mentality of the teachers and the students, so the intercultural cooperation sometimes goes not in the productive way*” (ibid. 2018:1). Religion and connected themes of food preferences, attire, gender roles, and communicational habits emerged as noteworthy underlying factors. Iranian students generally see Russia as a more developed country in several fields including economy, public transportation, online services and digitalization, safety, and security.

Similarly to Iranian students, Chinese also mentioned weather, cultural differences, and food, as main sources of problems staying in Russia, however new, country-specific items appeared too including Russian people and their characteristics, slow pace of life, and differences in national holidays. A general feeling that Russians are not so friendly as Chinese, the atmosphere is colder and gloomier in Russia. Other researchers confirm that Chinese students often perceive Russians as unfriendly, including Latipova et al.^[42] who states that first year Chinese students in Russia “*felt the negative attitude of others, they faced difficulties in communicating with others (36.5%)*”. Even though Russian cities might seem busy and stressful, Chinese students were content with the perceived slow pace of life in Russia when compared to China. Cultural distance seems to be great between China and Russia in the field of annual national days and other festivities which is considered unusual for Chinese students who are accustomed to bigger festivities during Chinese New Year and the Mid-autumn Festival, while Russians celebrate New Year's Eve and Victory Day besides others.

Indian students' peculiar, country-specific problems proved to be education and dissimilar attire, besides those points observed by all abovementioned Iranian and Chinese as well (cold weather, language and cultural differences, and food). Religion also appeared as an aspect displaying great differences and causing problems in Indian students' adaptation process. The Russian religions landscape is seen as more homogenous with the dominance of the Russian Orthodox Church, while in India there is a more heterogenous landscape composed of Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism, Christianity, and other religions. The Russian education system is seen as considerably more developed than the one in India, offering specialized programs, while Russian attire is more

conservative and less colorful than Indian clothes. Time management and interpersonal communication issues also emerged in the responses, confirming other scholars findings including Fedotova & Zhdanova^[44] stating that Indian students face great difficulties in situations associated with time and interpersonal communication.

5. Conclusions

In line with the acceleration of integration of global society and the world transforming into a global village with individuals being increasingly interconnected, the number of university students is growing rapidly every year. The phenomenon clearly affects the Russian Federation, consequently, its higher education system needs to face the changed reality of a growing proportion of international students that need to be assisted in adapting to their new cultural environment and help them to avoid intercultural misunderstandings and conflicts in Russia.

The current research formulated four fundamental questions regarding 1. types and groups of the major obstacles and challenges international students face in Russia; 2. lexical items, words unknown and incomprehensible for foreign students that can be used as markers of the host culture; 3. perceived discrimination and racism in connection with foreign students in Russia; 4. country-specific issues and problems in foreign students' adaptation process in Russia.

Regarding obstacles and challenges in intercultural students' sojourn in another country, previous studies^[27-31] identified a vast array of such items and thematic groups including personal psychological issues, academic issues, socio-cultural issues, general living issues, English language proficiency, financial issues, academic progress, homesickness, difficulty to mix with locals, weather, difficulty to stay in the foreign country, food, education system, language and cultural barriers, interpersonal relationships, host receptivity, and intercultural personality, social support, financial capacity, loneliness, racism, discrimination, gaps in expectation between students and academics, culture or transition shock, integration into the community, interacting with other students, relationships with supervisors, and the provision of adequate desk space. This research shed light to international students problems and obstacles of effective adaptation, that partly coincided with previous academic literature (language

barrier, cultural differences, study- and work-related problems, homesickness, racism and discrimination, stereotyping) and partly displayed stronger specificities of the Russian context such as bureaucracy; bad behavior of Russian individuals; problems with police and immigration officers; humor; cheating and fraudulent behavior.

In the course of the research, a multitude of intercultural differences were identified during the research that were discussed and can be further utilized on both country level (between Russia and one single country of origin of international students) and generally (between Russia and foreign countries in general). Some of the many differences on the country level are pinpointed here as the outcome of this research. *Time management* is often perceived as very different in Russia when compared to other countries. Certain countries were found as having a more relaxed time management than Russia (India, Israel), while others were found more stressful in this regard (Germany, China). Some countries of origin including India tend to follow a more flexible attitude towards time (India), while others tend to be more punctual (Korea, Malaysia, Germany). In terms of the role of the *community*, Americans were proved to be more individualistic while Thai and Turkish students felt the need of a more communitarian behavior. *Prices* in Russia were also regarded differently, depending on the nationality and cultural background of the student: French, Canadian, Malaysian, and South African students found Russia rather affordable, while Tunisian, Lebanese, Italian, German reported the problem of too high prices. The Russian *education system* was described as very developed by several nationalities including Iran, India, and Nigeria, however, Germans stated that German higher education was more professional. Similarly, international students from the majority of the countries praised the good *infrastructure* and the highly developed *economy and transportation system* in Russia (including Lebanese, Algerian, Vietnamese, and Sri Lankan students), however certain nationalities found it underdeveloped when compared to their native countries (Thailand, Malaysia).

As an innovative research tool, the lacuna theory was applied in search of lacunas or lexical gaps, such lexemes that are not comprehensible for non-members of Russia's linguo-cultural community. The lacuna theory proved to serve as an effective theoretical tool to identify linguistic lacunas. The 28 such lacunas that were grasped well demon-

strated the wide scope of unknown, unfamiliar, and strange items or phenomena of Russian culture to foreign students. Such lacunas covered multiple semantic domains including food, national holidays, personality traits, urban and rural areas, restaurants, nature, communication, transportation, local government, habits, events, and artifacts. Such collections, glossaries of Russian lacunas can be effectively utilized in the future to train international students and familiarize them with Russian linguistic-cultural specificities.

Unfortunately, as international academic research proves (Kim^[36]; Iwamoto & Liu^[37]; Junious et al.^[38]), prejudice, discrimination, racism, and feeling of inferiority is always present in the case of international student mobility. Data gained in this research – 13% of worst experiences of foreign students in Russia are connected to perceived discrimination and racism; 50,5 % of respondents shared situations of perceived intercultural misunderstandings or conflicts with Russian individuals; 8,5% of international students perceived discriminative measure or actions against them; 4% of them perceived racist behavior; and 1% of students complained about negative stereotyping. In international comparison, the numbers cannot be evaluated as either significantly higher or lower when compared to other countries including US, UK, Morocco.

Three major donor countries of international university students at Russian medical universities were identified including Iran, China, and India. Country-specific adaptation problems of students coming from these countries were identified. For Iranian students, religion and connected themes proved to cause intercultural problems along with different food, attire, gender roles, and communicational habits. Country-specific items that Chinese respondents underlined include Russians' unfriendly and gloomy behavior, as well as the pleasantly slow pace of life, and the differences in national holidays. For Indian respondents, the dissimilar education system and differing (less colorful) attire proved to be country-specific problems besides general obstacles of adaptation such as cold weather, linguistic and cultural differences, and food.

All in all, it can be stated that the current study clearly demonstrated that a critical factor of international students' well-being in Russia is the systematic development of their intercultural communication competences (Byram^[34]). Simultaneously, for university faculty members, it is an imper-

ative to acquire intercultural knowledge, skills, and behavior in order not only to get prepared for dealing with students arriving to Russia with culturally diverse backgrounds but also to become capable of effectively assisting those students to turn into effective communicators and successful individuals in their new, Russian cultural context.

In relation to the future possible continuation of this paper, multiple fertile fields of research are shaping up including a *longitudinal study* following up on international students' experiences and the development of their intercultural awareness and intercultural communicative competence; the conduction of *further transcultural as well as country-specific surveys* including but not limited to the largest three countries (Iran, China, and India) of this study; *curriculum development* taking the results of this paper into account, especially in the fields of teaching Russian as a foreign language and Russian culture; the organization of *intercultural trainings* for university faculty members; and last but not least the continuation of this research adding *further research methods* such as the study of foreign students' level of intercultural sensitivity.

Author Contributions

The article was compiled by joint efforts of the two authors. Conceptualization, I.L. and I.M.; methodology, I.L. and I.M.; software, I.L.; validation, I.L.; formal analysis, I.L. and I.M.; investigation, I.L. and I.M.; resources, I.L. and I.M.; data curation, I.L. and I.M.; writing—original draft preparation, I.L.; writing—review and editing, I.L. and I.M.; visualization, I.L.; supervision, I.M.; project administration, I.M. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement

All data and materials contained in the article can be accessed and used freely for non-commercial, academic purposes.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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