

The Top 7 Words of the Year

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Слова года: words of the year

As 2010 slides to an icy end, I've been thinking about слова года (words of the year) — words and phrases that characterized the year or were on the tip of everyone's tongue. To draw up my list, I considered checking usage frequency or polling a representative sample of Russian speakers. But why change now? Unsubstantiated personal opinion is so much more fun.

So here's my highly unscientific, very personal and extremely cranky list of key words for 2010:

1. Аномальные погодные условия (anomalous weather conditions). Remember the sweltering heat, smoke and smog of summer? Remember hearing the weather forecasters say week after week: Ничего подобного никогда не было (There's never been anything like this)? I kept thinking: хуже не бывает (it can't get any worse), which is always a mistake in Russia. Here, things can always get worse. Case in point: Christmas Day. We waded through knee-high puddles and pouring rain to our parties, and while we were enjoying our turkey with all the trimmings, the temperature dropped 10 degrees. We left the parties to discover

that Moscow had been transformed into a citywide skating rink. And didn't you just love spending four hours blasting an inch of ice off your car?

Can we please have normal weather conditions in 2011?

2. Модернизация (modernization). This is definitely President Dmitry Medvedev's favorite word of the year. But what does it mean? Dictionaries tell you that модернизация is the process of making things modern, bringing them up to date or in accordance with contemporary norms. It usually refers to technologies, but can also refer to social and political systems. After studying Medvedev's usage, I've come to the conclusion that it's really just a fancy way of saying реформа (reform), only without the nasty associative baggage of past reform efforts, such as factory closings, price hikes and loss of savings. But Kremlin first deputy chief of staff Vladislav Surkov explains модернизация this way: Надо покупать технологии, внедрять их и двигаться вперёд (We have to buy technologies, introduce them and move forward). Now that's easy. But if it's so easy, why hasn't it happened?

3. Инновация (innovation). Everyone wants some of this stuff. Every ministry is investing billions in it. Every office is working on producing it. And there's going to be a whole city built and dedicated to dreaming it up, testing it, mass producing it and marketing it to the waiting world. And what exactly is инновация, you ask? After consulting several dictionaries and reference books, I've come to the conclusion that инновация is ... хорошая идея (a good idea). I'm no economist, but wouldn't you get the same result by handing out pencils and paper?

4. Перегрузка (reset). Everybody laughed when U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's red button representing U.S.-Russian relations was mislabeled перегрузка (overload), but this year перегрузка has become a journalistic cliché, used to describe any supposedly major change in just about anything. There's демократическая перегрузка (a reset of democracy), пенсионная перегрузка (pension fund reset); перегрузка на рынке ипотеки (reset of the mortgage market) and even hopes for перегрузка милиции (reset of the militia). To be honest, so far I haven't seen a lot of resetting or reloading going on. In fact, перегрузка, like модернизация and инновация, seem like the Holy Grail: something longed for but never attained.

5. Несанкционированный митинг (a demonstration held without a permit). In 2010, it seemed like all Russians did was hold несанкционированные митинги. They were upset about buildings being torn down and buildings going up; forests being razed to build highways and highways not being built; journalists being beaten up and the Constitution not being upheld; convictions of some people and acquittals of others; in support of foreigners in Russia and against foreigners in Russia. The authorities didn't want to give permits for these demonstrations (except for some against foreigners in Russia), and so несанкционированные митинги usually ended with cops loading demonstrators into paddy wagons. This was getting tiresome, so resourceful Russians — the world's masters at figuring out how to get around any law — came up with одиночное пикетирование (one-person picketing), which can be held without a permit. Ingenious!

Doesn't this suggest that Russians could come up with enough инновация and модернизация to blast Russia into the 22nd century if only the authorities would stop

tossing them in paddy wagons?

6. Блогосфера (blogosphere). This year the Russian блогосфера came into its own. It's the place to go for real news about what's happening in the country. It's the town crier and the national message board. During the summer's fires, it virtually replaced state structures to organize deliveries of supplies and volunteer firefighters. It's witty, creative, opinionated, well-educated and clever, except for when it's xenophobic, hateful, dishonest and deceptive. That is, it's the only place in Russia that reflects all of Russian society. You can even meet the president there.

7. Транспортный коллапс (total collapse of the transportation system). This was practically Topic No. 1 in Moscow as a worst-case-scenario, future event. But as someone who consults the Yandex traffic-jam-o-meter the way other people check out their horoscopes, I can tell you that when weeks go by with traffic above 8 ("многокилометровые пробки" — multikilometer jams) and often at 10 ("город стоит" — the city is at a standstill), the future is now.

I'd tell you how to fix it, but I've got to go. The traffic jam I'm in looks like it's moving, and I think I can manage to drive over the snow bank and along the sidewalk, into the park, along the paths, across the railroad tracks and into my courtyard in time to make my deadline.

See you all next year. С НОВЫМ ГОДОМ!

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