

Russians Like to Call Things as They Are

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Политкорректность: literally, “political correctness”; commonly, idiocy

❑ If you read Russian newspapers or blogs, you’ll see the word политкорректность (political correctness) constantly. But the more you read, the less you understand what it means in Russian.

Политкорректность and its variants – the adjective политкорректный and adverb политкорректно – come from English. The words aren’t yet in standard Russian dictionaries, so I began to look for examples of usage. Sometimes the usage is like in English. For example, someone said: Это не политкорректно, но... (It’s not politically correct, but...) when citing a fact that seemed to support a negative ethnic stereotype.

In specialized dictionaries, политкорректность is defined as a Western or American phenomenon. In a dictionary of political terminology, the definition reads in part: тактичное, общественно приемлемое отношение к различным политическим и общественным группам (a tactful, socially acceptable attitude towards various political and

social groups).

But the definition in a dictionary of foreign words begins: утвердившееся в США понятие-лозунг, демонстрирующее либеральную направленность современной американской политики. В начале 90-х годов XX в. крах равновесия мировых идейно-политических систем способствовал появлению идеологических эрзацев (a firmly established concept-slogan in the United States demonstrating the liberal trend in modern American politics. In the early 1990s the dissolution of the balance of the world's ideological and political system facilitated the appearance of ersatz ideologies). A fake ideology that appeared as a result of the break up of the U.S.S.R.? That would be a surprise to Americans who used the term in the 1970s.

Another dictionary calls it разновидность неофициальной необъявленной цензуры (a type of unofficial, undeclared censorship) and further clarifies: политкорректность — это один из методов манипуляции общественным мнением (political correctness is a method of manipulating public opinion).

These people have got to stop watching Fox News. They also have to get a sense of humor. Many people seem to think that “follicly challenged” is now the legally mandated way to say “bald.”

Among the blogging crowd, where they apparently have taken at face value all the parodies of political correctness, the proclaimed definitions are negative. Политкорректность — диктатура меньшинств... (political correctness is the dictatorship of the minority) ... враг демократии (the enemy of democracy) ... расизм наоборот (racism in reverse) ... новая, злейшая версия марксизма (a new, evil version of Marxism) ... это не только мерзость, но ещё и маразм (it's not only revolting, it's demented).

The underlying complaint seems to be this: Политкорректность: это невозможность сказать поддону, что он – поддон, дабы не задеть его (Political correctness is the inability to tell a creep that he's a creep for fear of hurting his feelings.) But the problem is really that all those creeps are, well, not Russian: надо называть вещи своими именами: эта сволочь понаехала в Россию (you have to call a spade a spade: that scum has overrun Russia).

Of course, the worst elements in any society tend to be exaggerated on the Internet. But the foggy notion of what Western political correctness is wreaks havoc with translation: Патриарх Московский и всея Руси Кирилл считает несовместимыми православие и политкорректность в современном западном понимании (Kirill, Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia, considers Orthodoxy to be incompatible with political correctness in the modern Western understanding).

That's what he says, but in this Westerner's understanding, I'm sure it's not what he means.

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