

King of the Castle

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Пешка: pawn

Ever since the Great Russian Political Announcement two weeks ago, I've been unhappy. Well, yeah, about that, but also about how to best translate the most commonly used Russian word to describe what was happening: рокировка.

Рокировка comes from the game of chess and means "castling." Castling — and I write this with great authority, having read five online chess manuals just yesterday — is the only move in chess where a player gets to move two pieces at the same time — the king (король) and the rook (ладья).

If we ignore the complicated set of conditions under which this can be done, the point of the move is that the king and rook more or less switch places on the board. Why would a player do this? According to one source: "If the king is attacked, it must move out of danger immediately. ... It is a good idea to move the king from the action to a safe place in the corner and to move the rook to the middle of the board where it can take part in the battle."

Note to Kremlinologists: Next time, just read a chess manual.

In Russia, where chess is widely played, the specialized meaning of рокировка seems pretty well known. But the word has also entered the general language to mean any sort of shuffling of personnel within a company or other organizational changes.

Sometimes this means switching jobs. For example, one CEO wrote: Главное событие дня — рокировка. Я поменял местами Павла Вячеславовича с Максимом Андреевичем. (The main event of the day was a job swap: I switched the positions of Pavel Vyacheslavovich and Maxim Andreyevich.)

In other cases, рокировка (or the plural рокировки) is a synonym for перестановка (rearrangement, shuffling). An article called “В грузинском правительстве рокировки” (A reshuffling of the Georgian cabinet) detailed a half dozen horizontal and vertical personnel shifts.

As far as I can tell, in Russian the figurative meaning of рокировка is not a dead metaphor: People still “hear” the original specialized chess meaning in the word. So when Russians opened their newspapers and read headlines like “Рокировка тандема,” they perceived it as “castling in the tandem.” And everyone knew who was the king and who was the rook.

So how do you translate it? It is very tempting to render this as something like “Kremlin castling,” with that delightful alliteration and clear reference to the great political game of chess. But the problem with this translation is that a lot — if not most — English speakers wouldn’t get the chess reference, and “castling” has not become part of general English usage the way рокировка has become part of Russian. Russian readers get it, but English readers might have to pull out their dictionaries.

So you have few other translation options. For example, Рокировка Медведева и Путина удивила даже их окружение (Trading Places: Medvedev and Putin’s job swap surprised even their close associates). Or: Рокировка в тандеме поставила его перед серьёзными проблемами (The reshuffling of the tandem has created serious problems for it).

But you have to stick with chess when commentators play out the metaphor. For example, someone asked: Рокировка наверху, а как с пешками? (There was a castling move at the top, but what will happen to the pawns?)

Good question. We’ll have to wait for the next move. There’s still time on the clock.

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