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Poor-Speaking Romney Gets Bad Translation

By Michele A. Berdy

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Враг номер один: No. 1 enemy

I am, in general, a big fan of the democratic process. Give the candidates their say, vote 'em in, or vote 'em out.

But during the electoral season — which in the United States is pretty much nonstop these days — I start waffling on the "give them their say" part of the process. Sometimes I wish they'd shut up.

That goes double when they babble on camera, circle around a topic, leave clauses dangling and use nonstandard vocabulary. Because when you filter their comments through translation, headlines and some editorial cherry-picking, a stupid comment becomes a международный инцидент номер один (No. 1 international incident).

According to the Russian media, Mitt Romney, a candidate for the Republican presidential nomination, called Russia враг номер один США (the No. 1 enemy of the U.S.), or геополитический враг США номер один (the geopolitical enemy No. 1 of the U.S.). What Mitt Romney said many times and in many ways was that Russia is "the geopolitical foe."

So is враг a good translation of foe? Sort of. Maybe. I dunno.

Foe is a weird word. It's old-fashioned — Who goes there? Friend or foe? — and can be used both to refer to a military enemy and to an opponent or impediment, like in the phrase "taxes are the foe of economic development."

In Russian, enemies come in many shapes and sizes. There are general enemies: противная сторона (the opposing side); недруг and неприятель (enemy, literally "not a friend"). There are armed enemies: агрессор (aggressor); военный противник (military opponent). There are ideological enemies: инакомыслящий (dissenter); диссидент (dissident). And spiritual enemies: чёрт (devil); нечистый дух (unclean spirit); демон (demon). And people who are up to no good: злоумышленник (malefactor); недоброжелатель (ill-wisher); обидчик (offender); преследователь (pursuer); притеснитель (oppressor); гонитель (persecutor); and злопыхатель (mudslinger). And really bad enemies: ненавистник (hater, bitter enemy); заклятый враг (sworn enemy); and кровник (blood enemy). There are also competitors (соперники), who might be vying for someone's hand, someone's company or someone's geopolitical backyard.

Of all these options, I'd probably say that in style and meaning, недруг is closest to foe. True, недруг номер один sounds odd in Russia, but then "No. 1 geopolitical foe" sounds pretty weird in English, too.

Another issue with the translations of Romney's meandering comment was whether he said Russia was worse than Iran and North Korea or not. Most Russian press reports asserted that he did: "Сегодня именно Россия, а не Иран и КНДР, является геополитическим врагом для США." (Today it is Russia and not Iran or North Korea that is the geopolitical enemy of the U.S.) In fact, Romney said, "... of course, the greatest threat that the world faces is a nuclear Iran, and nuclear North Korea is already troubling enough ..." but then after a spate of confused pseudo-clarification, he circled back to "Russia is the geopolitical foe" — albeit this time without the "No. 1." Well, Mitt, if you can't speak clearly, you deserve the translation you get.

I have to say I agree wholeheartedly with President Dmitry Medvedev, who recommended that candidates should "включать доводы рассудка, голову использовать" (use their powers of reason and their heads) and suggested that they could "посматривать на часы — а сейчас 2012 год, а не середина 70-х годов" (look at the clock — it's 2012, not the mid-1970s).

I just wish he'd said that to the Russian presidential candidates, too.

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