

Putin Has Turned Bland

By [Michele A. Berdy](#)

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Длинное, зелёное, мясом пахнет: long, green and smells like meat

My study of the annual addresses of Russian leaders is something like Kremlinology crossed with reading tea leaves with a bit of linguistic analysis thrown in. I'm looking for a sense of mood conveyed by language, some linguistic hint of what lies ahead. And with Vladimir Putin, I'm looking for some "special" expressions, That is, expressions I don't understand that turn out to be archaic or crude — or both.

So I listened to Vladimir Putin's 2012 address before the State Duma on Wednesday. And then I read the transcript. I scratched my head and read it again. Vladimir Vladimirovich! What happened? When did you turn into a linguistic Mr. Bland?

Of course, there is some of his trademark assertiveness, as in *хочу подчеркнуть* (I must stress) and *уверяю* (I insist).

But most of the speech is based on rhetorical questions and answers — a whopping 82

of them, by my count. Many of the questions follow happy talk about progress and admit that things could, of course, be better: Достаточно этого или нет? Недостаточно. (Is that enough? No, it's not.)

Some of the self-interviewing seems to even undercut the stream of positive statistics, like this internal Q&A about rising imports: Почему это происходит? Потому что наша экономика, наша промышленность не отвечает вызовам сегодняшнего дня по качеству и по цене товаров. (Why does this happen? Because our economy and our industries are not meeting today's demand for high-quality, low-cost goods.)

Then there was an astonishing bit about NATO operations in Afghanistan, which was like a patient teacher walking dim-witted students through a difficult concept: Мы с вами понимаем, что происходит в Афганистане, ведь правда? (You and I understand what's happening in Afghanistan, isn't that true?) Мы с вами заинтересованы в том, чтобы ситуация там была под контролем, так? (You and I want the situation there to be under control, right?) И мы с вами не хотим, чтобы наши солдаты воевали на таджикско-афганской границе? Не хотим. (And do you and I want our soldiers fighting along the Tajik-Afghan border? No, we don't.)

This little exchange ended with: Но там западное сообщество и НАТО присутствуют. Дай Бог им здоровья, пускай работают. (But the Western community and NATO are there. God grant them health. Let them work.)

Give me a minute to pick up my jaw from the floor.

In response to criticism from the Communist Party deputies, Putin gave a spirited defense of capitalism: В целом она [плановая экономика] гораздо менее эффективна, чем рыночная экономика (Overall, a planned economy is far less effective than a market economy). And he stomped on any attempt to romanticize the economic success of the Soviet period, sometimes with old jokes: Длинное, зелёное, мясом пахнет. Что такое? Электричка в Москву. (What's long, green and smells like meat? A Moscow commuter train) — that is, a train filled with shoppers who came to Moscow to buy meat that was unavailable outside the capital.

There were shows of modesty and appeals to work together, like: Знаете, вместе надо подумать, это непростой вопрос. (You know, we have to think about that together. It's not an easy question.) Or: Я не знаю, надо вместе подумать. (I don't know. We have to think about that together.)

Что это значит? Я не знаю. Давайте мы с вами вместе подумаем. (What does this mean? I don't know. Let's think about this together.)

Michele A. Berdy, a Moscow-based translator and interpreter, is author of "The Russian Word's Worth" (Glas), a collection of her columns. ☒

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