

Taking a Stroll Through Protest Lingo

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May 17, 2012

The  Moscow Times

Контрольная прогулка: test stroll

As the protest movement continues in Moscow, I really feel sympathy for the one part of the population that has been suffering the most — translators.

The words protesters are using to describe their activities are "simple" words known to any speaker of Russian. But these words each have two or three meanings and carry a cartful of historical and linguistic connotations.

Take the контрольная прогулка (literally "test walk") organized by a group of writers last weekend. In general, any peregrination of protesters from point A to point B is a "march" in English. But that word won't work. First of all, as a translator I'd want to use march for марш миллионов (March of Millions), the organized protest march that turned violent on May 6.

Russian writers used the hum-drum, everyday word прогулка to describe their attempt

to exercise their civil right to walk around the city wearing white ribbons. Out comes the thesaurus: walk, walkabout, stroll, promenade, constitutional. I'd probably go with "test stroll" or "test promenade," although you could also call it a "test walkabout" to describe the sauntering writers signing autographs and shaking the hands of fans.

But if I were in charge of English-language PR for the promenading writers, I'd call it a constitutional constitutional.

But what are translators to do with народное гуляние (people's/popular/civil/national/public/folk festivities/promenade/romp/revelry/carnival)?

Let's start with народный, which can be translated variously depending on the context. Sometimes the emphasis is on "belonging to the entire nation," as in народное хозяйство (national economy) or народное образование (public education). Sometimes it refers to the ethnographic qualities, as in народное средство (folk cure) or народные ремесла (folk crafts). In other cases, it stresses the democratic nature of an institution, as in народное представительство (popular representation) or народное собрание (national assembly). In still other cases, it stresses the people, not the state, as in народное движение (grassroots movement) or народная дипломатия (people's diplomacy).

In the case of today's народное гуляние, the emphasis is more on "people's" — as opposed to state — overlaid with the sense of popular, democratic and open to the public.

Гуляние comes from the verb гулять, which can mean to stroll, as in гулять по городу (walk around the city). Or it can mean to spend time outside, as in дети пошли гулять (the kids went out to play). Or it can mean to party, as in мы гуляли до утра (we partied until dawn). Or it can even mean marital infidelity, as in муж гулял налево (her husband cheated on her).

Народное гуляние usually means a street party, open-air festivities, a carnival or an outdoor celebration. Today the phrase also plays on the notion of moving around the city and having a good time. It doesn't include marital infidelity, but does include sleeping with strangers.

More important, when anti-corruption activist Alexei Navalny called for бессрочное, круглосуточное народное гуляние (a nonstop, around-the-clock street party), he was choosing his words carefully. А митинг (rally) or демонстрация (demonstration) requires official permission. Народное гуляние (open-air celebration) does not.

In the end, I guess I'd call today's народное гуляние a people's street party. But judging by the sleeping bags, Porta Potties, food and soda, if I were in charge of the protesters' English-language PR, I'd call it the people's moveable feast.

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