

Spies Like Us

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Иностранный агент: spy

I never thought I'd write a column about the word агент (agent). What's there to write?

Both агент and agent come originally from the Latin, although агент probably entered Russian later than it entered English. Both агент and agent share pretty much the same range of meanings. Агент might be a representative of an organization or person who is empowered to act for them, like страховой агент (insurance agent) or литературный агент (literary agent). ☒

Or агент might be a substance that causes some kind of change, like активный агент (active agent) in a chemical process. And then агент might be a spy, like двойной агент (double agent). Interestingly, a dictionary from the 1930s lists the last meaning as разговорное, устаревшее (colloquial, archaic). My, how things change.

But still — so far, so good. For once, the two languages are in perfect harmony.

And then in its recent legislative bacchanalia, the Russian parliament proposed that the term иностранный агент (foreign agent) be used to identify any nongovernmental organization in Russia that receives foreign funding, insisting that this is a direct translation of the U.S. designation "foreign agent."

And with that, harmony went out the window.

First, in the United States, "foreign agent" has a very specific legal meaning when applied to an organization or person, and the term is generally not applied to nongovernmental organizations that receive foreign funding. Those are simply called "really lucky."

And then "foreign agent" is a bit of a connotational chameleon in English. In some contexts, the term might be quite neutral, simply describing someone acting on behalf of a foreign entity. At the other end of the spectrum, in a John Le Carre novel, "foreign agent" would be short for "foreign intelligence agent" and a very bad person indeed.

But in Russian, иностранный агент is pretty much always just a synonym for "spy." Признаться, что ты иностранный агент (Admit that you're a spy).

So, in the United States, sticking "foreign agent" on the publications of the Russian Interest Lobbying Group (I made that up) means they were produced on behalf of the Russian government. But in Russia, sticking иностранный агент on the site of the organization Мемориал (Memorial; I didn't make that up) means that it's a den of foreign spies.

As they say in Odessa: Две большие разницы (literally "that's two big differences," something like, "That's a whole other kettle of kasha.").

I say: Why use a calque from the English and obfuscate? If the folks in the State Duma think they're spies, well then, назвать их своими именами (call a spade a spade).

They could make foreign-funded NGOs put a banner on their sites that reads: Мы — представители иностранного государства (We're representatives of a foreign state). Or: Мы — уполномоченные иностранного государства (We're the authorized representatives of a foreign state). Or: Мы — поверенные иностранного государства (We're acting on behalf of a foreign state).

If that's too genteel, how about: Мы — шпионы! (We're spies!) Or: Мы — разведчики! (We're intelligence agents!) Or: Мы — кроты! (We're moles!)

Or, alternatively, Russia could just borrow U.S. legislation. My favorite is a law that "requires registration of persons who have knowledge of or have received instruction or assignment in espionage, counterespionage or sabotage service or tactics of a foreign country or political party."

I wonder if you can register online.

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