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Putin's Main Goof

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Клин: birds flying in a V-shaped formation

On this fine September day after the start of the school year, it's time for a pop quiz. Летят журавли (the cranes are flying) is:

a. the name of a famous Soviet film
b. what Vladimir Putin exclaimed on a hang-glider flight to lead Siberian cranes south
c. the phrase that launched a thousand witticisms
d. all of the above.

If you answered (d), you win a white lab coat and your own personal crane beak.

Unless you've been on a beach with no access to news in any language, you know that Putin, dressed in white but apparently not wearing the artificial crane beak he promised to put on, went up in the air three times in a motorized hang glider. The flights were part of Полёт Надежды (Flight of Hope), which led a flock of endangered Siberian cranes south for the

winter. In addition to perhaps saving a few more of these graceful birds, the flights served as inspiration for hundreds of witty headlines, blog posts, cartoons and opinion pieces.

The only problem for us non-native Russian speakers is figuring out what the jokes are. Some jokes are easy to get. Putin took three flights — his three electoral campaigns — and tried to get the birds — the population — to follow him. One disenfranchised blogging crane wrote: Называется всё это почему-то полётом надежды, хотя никаких надежд ни у кого давно нет (For some reason all this is called a flight of hope, although we all lost hope a long time ago).

And then there was this headline "Путин: И в этом строю есть промежуток малый" (Putin: In that formation there is a small space). This is a reference to the song Журавли ("The Cranes"), a famous and much-loved song about World War II. The song was based on a poem written in Avar by Rasul Gamzatov and then translated into Russian by Naum Grebnev. In the final version, soldiers killed on the battlefield become white cranes flying in the misty twilight: И в том строю есть промежуток малый, быть может это место для меня (In that formation there is a small space, perhaps a place for me).

And then folks had fun with beaks. One headline was: Путин клювом не щёлкает (literally, Putin doesn't snap his beak). This is wordplay on the expression в большой семье не щёлкай клювом (literally, "in a big family don't just snap your beak open and shut"). This means that if you are a baby bird with lots of baby bird siblings, when mama bird brings a worm, grab it. Don't just sit there opening and shutting your beak. Today, клювом щёлкать means to do nothing, to miss an opportunity: Don't just stand there gaping. Do something. So the headline might be translated: Putin isn't just hang-gliding around.

Other wits had fun with the word косяк, which means a flock of birds flying in a V-shaped formation. As a slang word, it means some kind of screw-up. One newspaper reported the news: Главный косяк Путина, which means either Putin's Main Flock or Putin's Main Goof.

And still others played around with the word клин, which also means a V-shaped formation but can also refer to a wedge of some sort. In slang, it means a crazy, obsessive idea or a kind of stupor. Hence the headline: Клин Путина.

Translate as you wish.

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