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Filtering Through Russian Elections

By Michele A. Berdy

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So you want to be mayor of Moscow? Join the crowd! But be prepared. Running for the highest office in the capital has some major stumbling blocks — linguistically, that is.

First thing: make coffee. No, that can't be right. But to become a candidate you do have to go through a filter — муниципальный фильтр (municipal filter) to be precise. Although it suggests a device at a water purification plant, it is actually the process by which a mayoral hopeful gets signatures from 5 to 10 percent of the municipal lawmakers to become a candidate. It's sort of like an e-mail фильтр нежелательной почты (blacklist; literally filter for spam) — a safety valve to make sure that no undesirables get on the ballot.

Makes sense, right? Надо держать планку! (We must maintain our standards!) But there's a catch. When all the municipal lawmakers are from one party, why would they sign a petition allowing another's party's candidate to run?

But let's say you make it through the filter. The next step is simple: набрать голоса (get votes). You can do this in three ways: разместить рекламу (place ads), встретиться с

избирателями (meet with voters), and принять участие в дебатах (take part in debates). The first is impossible for some, the last is beneath the dignity of others, and so kissing babies and babushkas seems to be your best bet.

When election day draws closer, you've got another headache: making sure your supporters actually vote for you. The ones who have decided to enjoy бархатный сезон (the "velvet season" of good weather in the south) in September need to get themselves открепительное удостоверение (absentee ballot), also called талон (voucher) or билет (ticket).

The phrase открепительное удостоверение troubled me for a long time. It literally means "certificate of unfastening" — открепительный being an adjective from the verb откреплять (to unfasten). What are you certifying that you are unfastened from?

It turns out that Russian citizens are said to be прикреплены к своему территориальному избирательному участку (registered at — or attached to — their territorial polling station), and to vote somewhere else, they must открепляться (get unhooked).

Открепительные билеты can be used in other contexts, too: Зайдите заранее и получите открепительный билет, дающий право на бесплатное посещение музея в любое время (Stop in beforehand and get an open ticket that lets you visit the museum free of charge at any time). Here the ticket is "unhooked" from any date or time.

Being a dumb American — or a person without a talent for creative criminality — I couldn't figure out how открепительные удостоверения were, in the words of one analyst, привычный для российских избирателей метод фальсификации голосования (typical method of voter fraud for the Russian electorate). The law says you get the ballot at your polling place, bring it to another, hand it in and vote.

But some негодяи (rats) don't hand it in but use it to vote several times, and others print up a whole batch of fake ones. This is why your next task as a candidate is to set up a good system of мониторинг (monitoring), and an even better system: документация фальсификаций (fraud documentation).

In case of fraud, you've got to make a stink. At this moment, don't be surprised if a filtering process makes another appearance. As you rant, someone from the opposing party is likely to growl: Фильтруй базар (watch what you say, bub).

Better luck next time.

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