

The Sanctions Shambles

By [Michele A. Berdy](#)

August 13, 2015



Са́нкция: sanction

If you've been following the news here in Russia, you know that the word of the week is *санкция* (sanction), which means "something bad done to Russia." Or maybe the word of the week is *анти-санкция* (anti-sanction), which means "something bad done to Russia."

You see the problem. Everything having to do with *санкция* is fraught and confusing. I must admit that I've never liked the word, neither the English *sanction* nor the Russian *санкция*, because it has two diametrically opposed definitions. One meaning is an approval or permission. In order for a demonstration to take place it must get *санкция* (sanction), and if it doesn't receive one, it becomes *несанкционированная демонстрация* (unsanctioned demonstration), that is, illegal and very wicked.

The verb *санкционировать* (to sanction) always means to approve of something or to grant permission for something, even if that something is nasty: *Судья санкционировала его*

аспект. (The judge signed a sanction for his arrest.)

But then there are the other kinds of sanctions, the ones that are not approvals or permissions but just the opposite — actions taken against a state, organization or individual as punishment for violating rules or laws. These are the things that the West, broadly speaking, has imposed against Russia. You read about new ones every day.

So we've got "permission sanctions" and "punishment sanctions." And then things get even more confusing: Президент Владимир Путин подписал указ об ответных мерах России на санкции. (President Vladimir Putin signed a decree on measures that Russia will take in response to the sanctions.) These are what people call контрсанкции (counter-sanctions) or анти-санкции (anti-sanctions). They are "punishment sanctions" against the folks imposing "punishment sanctions" on Russia.

But the problem is: В российском правительстве признали, что контрсанкции вредят экономике РФ. (The Russian government admitted that counter-sanctions harm the Russian economy.) So анти-санкции are really something like само-санкции or себе-санкции (self-sanctions).

Russians themselves find all these sanctiony words confusing. For example, the adjective for "a product banned under a sanction" is санкционный: Уже уничтожено 500 килограммов санкционных продуктов, которые люди привезли в Россию в ручной клади. (Five hundred kilograms of products banned under the sanctions and brought into Russia in hand luggage have already been destroyed.)

But spell-check doesn't recognize that adjective, and so you can find plenty of newspapers using the adjective санкционированный: Первая партия санкционированных продуктов была уничтожена. (The first batch of sanctioned products was destroyed.) That actually means that permitted products were destroyed.

Do you have a headache yet? There are easier ways to talk about this. You can say запрещённые к ввозу продукты (products forbidden for import). Or you can use the word запрет (ban): запрет на ввоз ряда товаров из западных стран (a ban on import of a number of goods from Western countries). Or the word эмбарго: Российское продовольственное эмбарго — запрет ввоза в Россию отдельных видов сельскохозяйственной продукции. (The Russian food embargo is a ban prohibiting the import of certain kinds of produce.)

Or use the slang terms санкционка and запрещёнка: Санкционку будут уничтожать. (They're going to destroy the banned stuff.) Нашёл в Москве ресторан с запрещёнкой (I found a restaurant in Moscow with bootleg products.)

See, it's like Prohibition, only more confusing.

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

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow

Times.

Original url: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2015/08/13/the-sanctions-shambles-a48944>