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Putin: Not Completely Stupid or Completely Not Stupid? Or Neither?

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По́лный идио́т: a complete fool



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I feel a rant coming on. Actually, I've been working up to a rant ever since the Russian press got hold of Jeffrey Goldberg's enormous piece called "The Obama Doctrine" that was published in the Atlantic magazine. Out of about 20,000 words covering seven years of foreign

policy decisions and considerations, what did the Russian media focus on? Four words: "he's not completely stupid."

And although these words were said about Vladimir Putin, they were not the only words Barack Obama said about the Russian president. But they got almost all the attention.

The first issue was what they meant. One writer insisted: Эту фразу можно перевести как "совсем не глупый" или же "не совсем глупый" — кому как нравится (You can translate that phrase as "not at all stupid" or as "not completely stupid" — however you like.) A lot of people who should have known better agreed with this, and it was hotly debated in the social media. Можно фразу трактовать по-разному (You can interpret this phrase in different ways.) А может быть, двусмысленность специально оставлена? (Maybe ambiguity was left there intentionally?)

But all that is as wrong as could be; there's nothing ambiguous about the phrase at all. It can only mean "не совсем глупый" (not completely stupid).

Russians came up with dozens of more or less correct translations, although some were a great deal stronger or slangier or ruder than Obama's phrase. If you ever want to say this in Russian, you can choose from: Не совсем же он глупый (He's not completely stupid); Не конченый же он идиот (He's not a total idiot); Он же не окончательно сбрендил! (He hasn't completely lost his mind!); Он не полный дурак (He's not a complete fool.)

But those discussions were on Facebook pages frequented by language nerds. After a day or two, the niceties of context, if they were ever under discussion, had disappeared. Now the news was simple: Обама сказал, что Путин — тупица. (Obama said that Putin was dumb as a stick.)

And here I start to lose it. Because the words were said in a specific context, in reply to a specific comment ("I had been under the impression that Obama viewed Putin as nasty"), in a spoken conversation, with punctuation added by the journalist.

The real news was that Obama had good things to say about Putin. He said he was "scrupulously polite, very frank. Our meetings are very businesslike." And then he said why Putin is behaving this way. He wants to be seen as a peer when his country is not the economic or political equal of the United States. "He's not completely stupid" — he knows that, and that's why he's on good behavior.

It's not Obama's assessment of Putin's intelligence. It's a throwaway line, almost a figure of speech, the kind of thing you say in English and Russian all the time: Я же не полная дура. Я понимаю, как надо себя вести (I'm not a complete idiot. I know how to behave.)

But now this will get filed with all the other carefully culled and intentionally mistranslated American "insults" and become common knowledge.

Years ago I joked that Russia had finally found its национальная идея (national idea), and it was: Нас обижают! (They're mean to us!) I was almost right. It might not be the national idea, but it has become the national rallying cry.

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