

Kompromat By Any Other Name

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Компромат: dirt

At the end of last week I was thrilled to learn that along with sputnik, vodka, troika and glasnost, English got a new Russian word. This word is apparently so complex in meaning that it has no English equivalent, and yet somehow after just three days everyone in the English-speaking world is using it daily.

The word? Компромат.

Of course this is all very silly.

Компромат has several English equivalents, from the neutral

“compromising materials” to the slangy “dirt.” In fact,

компромат is a shortened form of

компрометирующие материалы (compromising materials) and there is nothing magical, arcane, complicated or particularly Russian about it. So when a Western journalist writes “Biden is right that these kinds of rumors, even specific rumors about Russian kompromat

on political figures, are not uncommon,” it’s what Russians call выпендрёж and what English-speakers call grandstanding. Or worse.

But since the whole world is talking about компромат, we might as well, too.

With компромат: you can have it, gather it or look for it.

У меня, между прочим, компромат на вас всех (By the way, I have dirt on all of you.) Искал на себя компромат, чтобы уничтожить (I looked for compromising material about myself so I could destroy it.)

Собирать компромат на человека, который приехал и занимался проведением конкурса красоты — кому это интересно? (Gather compromising material on a man who came here and ran a beauty contest — who would be interested in that?)

Answer to the last question: Everyone in the world, apparently.

Once you have it, the embarrassing material turns into liquid sleaze, which you either leak (сливать, слить) to the press, toss or pour on the person who did the embarrassing deeds. На меня стали выливать тонны компромата (I was inundated with tons of material incriminating me.)

В еженедельнике, дружественном мэрии, компромат слили на

бывшего главу одного района (In a weekly with links to the mayor’s office, they leaked compromising materials on the former head of a district.)

Они

считали тогда, что необходима дискредитация партии коммунистов, вброс компромата на её ведущих игроков (At the time they believed that they needed to discredit the communist party by digging up dirt and throwing it on their leaders.)

When there is a lot of

компромат on both sides, you can start война компроматов. In

English, this can be called a sleaze or smear war, although it’s usually described as dirty politics or mud-slinging: Трамп и Клинтон: война компроматов на выборах президента США (Trump and Clinton: Mud-Slinging Both Ways in the U.S. Presidential Elections).

But the big question is this: Is

компромат true or fake? Well... hard to say. In the old days, when there was honor among thieves and spies,

компромат was the real thing. In fact, it’s

still defined as публичное оглашение сведений о некотором лице, порочащих его репутацию (

publicly revealing information about someone that harms his reputation).

But now — sometimes it’s fake, like here: На меня был фантастический

компромат, что я чуть-ли не Доктор Зло, который контролирует русские ядерные компании и в то же время является агентом британской разведки (They made up incredible stuff on me, like I was Dr. Evil who controlled Russian nuclear firms while being a British agent.) But sometimes it's hard to tell. Это же чистый компромат, манипуляция общественным сознанием (It's pure sleaze meant to manipulate public opinion.)

So is that sleaze real or fake? Nobody knows. And that, my friends, is the real power of компромат in any language.

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