

A Very Russian Mishmash

[Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth](#)

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Screenshot Eralash

Суматоха: turmoil

Here's a little known Friday Fun Fact about the Russian language: Studies show that there is a direct correlation between level of turmoil and number of consonants in words used to describe it.

Okay, I made that up.

But I am going to get a grant some day to study this, because the bigger the mess and mishmash, the greater the mouthful of consonants you have to spit out to describe it.

Let's start with the relatively mild mess of *суета* (commotion, excitement, rush). This can be used to describe a train station — though maybe not at rush hour; or the hubbub of setting out on a journey — though maybe with only two kids and no pets; or all the distractions of life — though not its chaos. However, it probably depends on the speaker and his or her level of tolerance for insanity. For some, *суета* is just the stuff of daily life: Этот писатель умел увидеть и поведать нам о том, чего в суе будней многие из нас просто не замечают (This writer had the ability to see and describe for us what many of us simply don't notice in the bustle of everyday life.)

For others, it's a pleasant hum of activity: Я учусь в университете уже второй год и радуюсь — очень нравится атмосфера, люди, суета (I'm in my second year at the university and I love it — I really like the atmosphere, the people, the buzz.)

But for the religious minded, *суета* is the attractive but distracting part of earthly life: Написать, опубликовать ✕ всё это суета сует. (Writing and getting published — all that is the vanity of vanities.)

Next up the hubbub ladder is the fabulous word *суматоха* — a rather confusing flurry of activity. This might be the train station at rush hour and definitely a highway rest stop with five kids, two dogs and a rabbit. It's the chaos of preparations for a big party: Была суматоха, хлопали дверью лифта, таскали от соседей с пятого этажа стулья, сдвигали столы

(There was turmoil as people slammed the doors of the elevator, hauled chairs from our fifth-floor neighbors and moved tables around.) Or any kind of sudden move: В суматохе эвакуации никаких справок и документов ей захватить не удалось (In the chaos of evacuation, she didn't have a chance to grab any documents or certificates.)

This level of confusion might also be called кутерьма, although this word is often used to describe a pleasant kind of confused hustle and bustle: Много водки и никакой еды. Обычная студенческая кутерьма. (Lots of vodka and nothing to eat. The usual student mess.) But not always. Кутерьма can be the kind of terrible chaos that acts as a screen for destruction: Итог этой кутерьмы один ☒ нанесен страшный, по сути, уже непоправимый ущерб стране, всему народу (There was just one result of all this mayhem — terrible damage was done to the country and the entire population — in essence, damage that cannot not be healed.)

Another kind of mix-up or mishmash is the rhyming ералаш, from the Turkic aralash. This is more of a muddle or a hodgepodge, now firmly fixed in Russians' minds as a beloved kid's show that began in the 1970s and showed a mix of comedy skits. But it can mean something similar to каша в голове (porridge in your head) — a mishmash of nonsense: Как же тут все перепутано, какой ералаш! (How mixed up everything is! What a muddle!)

There is yet another word for a mix-up or mess, although it usually applies to something specific, not general chaos: заваруха. In this word you hear the root варить (to boil), and in fact the first meaning of this word was a porridge made of flour mixed with boiling water or milk. Figuratively it means a complicated issue, relationship, or situation, often the result of human meddling. Like, you know, what happens when demonstrations of conflicting political parties are set for the same day and place: Сначала устроит заваруху, а потом смотрит, что из этого выйдет (First he'll make a holy mess, and see what comes of it.)

Sometimes all of this confusion and chaos leads to неразбериха — a hornet's nest, a mess that can't be sorted out (не разобрать). It might be temporary and unintentional: Невозможно понять, как он мог бегать среди людной тесноты, неразберихи рук, ног, голов (It's incomprehensible how he could run through the human mass of arms, legs and heads.) Or it might be the result of human hands: Надоела неразбериха в стране (I'm sick of the mess the country's in.)

Now then, we've got суета, суматоха, ералаш and неразбериха, заваруха and кутерьма. I like them all. But please vote for your favorite mishmash of consonants.

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