The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Putin's Bad Russian Conservatism

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

May 18, 2018

Sergei Bobylev / TASS

Охранительство: traditionalism, but not in a good way

Having just written at considerable length about how bland Vladimir Putin's speeches have gotten, I did find a passage in his inaugural address that is very interesting. It's not folksy or bawdy or slangy. But it involves one word I personally loathe — too many meanings to choose from; one word that doesn't exist in any dictionary but that everyone seems to more or less understand — although each in his or her own way; a bit of ye olde Russian, and three phrases that are almost synonyms but aren't quite.

That is: your basic translation nightmare.

Here it is: Нам нужны прорывы во всех сферах жизни. Глубоко убежден, что такой рывок способно обеспечить только свободное общество, которое воспринимает все новое и все передовое и отторгает несправедливость, косность, дремучее охранительство и бюрократическую мертвечину.

The first part is a snap: We need breakthroughs in every sphere of life.

Then the second sentence starts out fine: "I am deeply convinced that such a leap forward can be provided only by a free society, a society that accepts everything new and advanced and rejects injustice..."

And then in my first draft I finished the sentence like this: "... something or other crooked, backwoods/old-fashioned/backward/hopeless, philistine/ignorant/uncultured clinging to the past/old values/status quo/patriarchy and bureaucratic carrion/dead thing/stagnation/inertia."

Well, that's certainly clear.

Actually, it is clear that this new, free society is going to reject all the bad stuff holding the country back. But what specific bad stuff?

Let's begin with косность. It's an old word that originally meant something like "late" or "slow" about a millennium ago and now means the quality of liking things the way they are

and being resistant to anything new — being an all-around stick-in-the-mud. It might be translated as narrow-mindedness or close-mindedness, inflexibility, backwardness, or intransigence.

Косность could also be translated as conservatism, but I find that a difficult word these days. For most people it means a particular political party platform, but here it is conservatism in the sense of disliking change, wanting to hold onto the past and the way things were.

Next up: дремучее. This is the word I grind my teeth over. It comes from дремать (to doze, snooze) but is used in a variety of figurative senses that stray far, far away from that original notion of slumbering. For example, дремучий лес is a thick forest. I sort of get the idea — a forest that slumbers, untouched by man and machine, would be thick with trees. But then it also refers to, say, a village or dwelling out in the boondocks: Я родился в самой дремучей русской глуши (I was born in the most remote Russian hinterland.) The only slumbering might be what people do out there, without electricity, television or even decent WiFi.

And then дремучий can refer to people, usually as if they came from out there in the boonies and are unsophisticated, uncultured, and generally backward and ignorant. Она вышла замуж за такого дремучего провинциала (She married this really backward guy from the back of beyond.) When referring to ideas, дремучий usually means backward, but can sometimes be an intensifier: Он демонстрирует дремучее невежество в вопросах современного мирового экономического развития (He demonstrates gross ignorance about contemporary world economic development.)

And now we come to the word that doesn't exist: охранительство. From the verb охранять (to preserve, safeguard), it is one of those nouns that Russian loves and English hates. It means something like the-act-of-preserving-ness.

The question arises: what is being preserved? The question was asked. A variety of Russian sources, representing various age cohorts, education levels, and political views all responded with more or less the same answer: A loud snort followed by Откуда я знаю? (How should I know?) or Его спроси! (Ask him!) Patriarchal values, status quo, political and social structures... No one knew. Basically охранительство seems to be something like traditionalism, conservativeness or even plain old opposition or reluctance to change.

And finally we come to the kicker: бюрократическая мертвечина. This is literally a bureaucratic corpse but figuratively more like bureaucratic stagnation.

So. Let's try that sentence again: Глубоко убежден, что такой рывок способно обеспечить только свободное общество, которое воспринимает все новое и все передовое и отторгает несправедливость, косность, дремучее охранительство и бюрократическую мертвечину.

"I am deeply convinced that such a leap forward can be provided only by a free society, a society that accepts everything new and advanced and rejects injustice, intransigence, ignorant traditionalism and bureaucratic stagnation."

Not too bad (although I'll probably change it four times).

And it only took me two days.

Michele A. Berdy is a Moscow-based translator and interpreter, author of "The Russian Word's Worth," a collection of her columns. Follow her on Twitter @MicheleBerdy.

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2018/05/18/putins-bad-russian-conservatism-a61501