

Muddling the Masses, Russian Style

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

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Sergei Savostyanov / TASS

Пенсия: pension, that thing our parents used to get in old age

Since the dawn of time, when leaders have wanted to do something their subjects aren't going to like, the first thought is not how to change their plan to make it easier on them, but rather what to call it to make them think it's better than it is.

The Russian government is no exception. They want to do something almost none of their 130 million citizens is going to like — raise the pension age five years for men and eight years for women. Their task, as they reportedly told the major Russian news outlets, is to ensure that the law to raise the pension age *восприниматься позитивно (или хотя бы нейтрально)* (is perceived positively — or at least neutrally).

To that end, they are not using the word *повышение* (raise), lest people focus on five to eight more years of hard labor, or *реформа* (reform), since that is associated with the economic upheavals — i.e., impoverishment of the population — during the 1990s.

Instead, they are using the word *изменение* (change) and phrases like *совершенствование пенсионного законодательства* (improving pension legislation), and they are recommending — i.e., ordering — everyone else to do so, too.

And so they are. If you check the reports on the main television channels pre- and post-request, you see that folks have toed the new line. On one channel, *закон о пенсионной реформе* (law on pension reform) became *законопроект по изменению пенсионного законодательства* (draft law to change pension legislation). On another, *поэтапная реформа* (gradual reform) was out and *законопроект об изменении параметров пенсионной системы* (draft legislation to change the parameters of the pension system) was in.

Other bland, vaguely positive and totally opaque phrases to describe the plan appeared, like *изменения и преобразования в пенсионной системе* (changes and transformations to the pension system) and *корректировка отдельного параметра пенсионной системы* (amendment of one parameter of the pension system), which succeeds in being simultaneously absolutely true and utterly deceptive. After all, they are just changing one

thing, right?

When in doubt: modernize. Everyone wants to be part of the 21st century, so let's call it модернизация пенсионной системы (modernization of the pension system).

While this was going on, the newspaper Novaya gazeta had a better idea. Putting their faith in the ingenuity and wit of the народ (the people), they asked them to come up with their versions of what to call this law. And the people did not let them down.

One suspects that some of them have government experience. Who else but a good bureaucrat could come up with диверсификация трудовых ресурсов (diversification of labor resources); пенсионное обновление (pension renovation); пенсионная реорганизация (pension reorganization); or расширение рамок трудоспособности (expanding the limits of work capacity)? Or come up with this lovely bit of bureaucratic balderdash: реклассификация возрастной ликвидности населения (reclassification of the population's age-related liquidity)?

Others presented this as a great opportunity for the older generation. It's not a burden! It's усиление конституционного права на труд (strengthening the constitutional right to labor); стимулирование активной трудовой деятельности старшего поколения (stimulating active employment of the older generation); and интеграция старшего поколения в трудовую систему (integrating the older generation into the labor market). No ageism here!

The techie crowd took a page from their lexicon and thought the law should be presented as optimization. Only of what? How about денежно-возрастная оптимизация (money-age optimization) or оптимизация численности нетрудовых ресурсов (optimization of the number of non-working resources)?

And one person sent in this gem: Основные направления работы правительства по стабилизации роста трудовой активности населения (The main directions of the government's efforts to stabilize the growth of the labor activity of the population.)

Unfortunately, the prime minister is not permitted to take part in the contest.

Some contestants recalled the Soviet era penchant for abbreviations. So they suggested Пенсионная инновационная система — ПенИС (Pension Innovation System, or PenIS); the dark Государственная коррекция человеческих пенсий — ГКЧП (State Correction of Human Pensions, or its Russian abbreviation GKChP, the name used by the 1991 coup plotters); or the cheery Оптимизация пенсионной нагрузки ОПана (Optimization of pension burden, Russian acronym ОПана – Wowza!)

Other contestants decided: надо называть вещи своими именами (you've got to call a spade a spade). So they proposed пенсионный грабёж (pension robbery); пенсионный геноцид (pension genocide); пенсионный рэкет (pension racket); пенсионный дефолт (pension default) or эвтаназия (euthanasia). Or this just might be called четыреста первый сравнительно честный способ отъёма денег у граждан (the four hundred and first relatively honest way to seize money from citizens.)

Or it could just be called what it really is: Попытка отодвинуть экономический крах (An attempt to stave off economic collapse.)

May the best wordsmith win!

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.

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