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Happy New Year From Your Leader

A short history of Russian New Year's Eve addresses

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

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Viktor Zhdanov / MT

Every year just before midnight on December 31, about 140 million people all over Russia take a break from pouring vodka and dishing out Olivier salad to listen to the annual address of the president.

This tradition is not as long-standing or as predictable as you might think. The first radio address was broadcast on Dec. 31, 1935 when Mikhail Kalinin, chairman of the Central Executive Committee of the All-Russian Congress of Soviets, wished some polar explorers a happy new year. Then it was an off-and-on thing for a while — depending on whether the country was permitting New Year's celebrations or not — until Leonid Brezhnev began his television addresses in 1970. That also sputtered along over the years — depending on Brezhnev's state of health and dentures — until 1985 when Mikhail Gorbachev cemented the tradition.

But that tradition wobbled at the end of 1991. The Soviet Union had just been dissolved four days before the end of the year and no one knew what to do. Writer and comedian Mikhail Zadornov took to the airwaves, but he misjudged the time and the Kremlin chimes were rung a full minute late — a decidedly inauspicious way for the Russian Federation to enter the new year and its new life.

Along came Boris Yeltsin, a New Year's innovator. He raised a glass of champagne at the end of his address and later was filmed with his family — an unprecedented touchy-feely moment for a country raised on men in suits standing alone in a nondescript office. And then he came up with a really special innovation: in his New Year's address to the nation on Dec. 31, 1999, he ended the century by ending his presidency. He officially resigned and figuratively passed the champagne flute to his Prime Minister, Vladimir Putin, who said a few words before he became acting president as soon as the Kremlin chimes struck.

Vladimir Putin was also an innovator. No champagne or family for him — but also no boring office. He does his addresses as stand-ups outside. They are set up ahead of time and filmed regardless of the weather. In the Kremlin an hour before the filming is to begin, special handlers release falcons to scare away the crows that live on the Kremlin grounds so that their

cawing doesn't ruin the sound feed.

Who knew, right?

Putin's earliest New Year's addresses were quite personal, fairly specific about events in the year gone by, and occasionally even a bit whimsical. After reassuring everyone in 1999 that everything was under control — не будет вакуума власти в стране (there won't be a power vacuum in the country) — he said: В Новый год, как известно, сбываются мечты. А в такой необыкновенный Новый год – тем более. Всё доброе и всё хорошее, задуманное вами, обязательно исполнится. (Everyone knows that on New Year's, dreams come true. This is especially true on such an unusual New Year's Eve. Everything kind and good that you have planned will surely come to pass.)

In the first years he ended his address with cheery wishes, as if he were your chummy neighbor Вова who had stopped in to raise a glass with you: Счастья вам! С Новым годом! Успехов вам, любви и веры. Веры в себя и в Отечество наше. С Новым годом вас, дорогие друзья! Удачи! (I wish you happiness! Happy New Year! Success, love and faith! Faith in yourself and in our Fatherland. Happy New Year, dear friends! Good luck!)

He also reviewed the year gone by. For example, he said 2003 "конечно был разным" (2003 was, of course, a mixed year). But in later years, except for a few events like the Olympics or an important anniversary, he stuck to abstract phrases about the outgoing 12 months: Возникли новые проекты, подходы к решению насущных общегосударственных задач (New projects arose along with new ways of solving urgent state tasks). And his wishes got more abstract and uncontroversial, too: Чтобы меньше стало бедных... Чтоб детей было больше и чтобы они были счастливы (We wish for fewer poor people... for more children and for them to be happy.) Who could argue with that?

When he returned to the presidency in 2012, Putin's addresses changed. In the past he'd occasionally used the first person singular — я (I) — but since 2012 he only uses third person plurals: мы, нас, наши (we, us, ours). There is a bit less about Mom and Pop and a bit more about Родина (Motherland) and Отечество (Fatherland). Now citizens are encouraged обеспечить движение России вперёд (to facilitate Russia's movement forward) and are reminded that Любовь к Родине – одно из самых мощных, возвышающих чувств (Love for the Motherland is one of the most powerful and uplifting feelings). And in 2015 a new theme appeared: remembering servicemen and -women and anyone on duty: Мы благодарны всем тем, кто днём и ночью, в будние дни и в праздники всегда на посту (We are grateful for everyone who is always on duty, day or night, weekday or holiday.)

And they now end the same way: С праздником вас! (Happy holiday!) С Новым 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017 годом! (Happy 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017!)

There probably will not be any surprises this year, but... turn on television at 11: 55 p.m. this Dec. 31. You just never know what you'll hear.

С Новым годом! Happy New Year!

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