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Let's Talk About Ukraine

The Word's Worth

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

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Марионетки: puppets

One of the curiosities of television news and talk shows in Russia is that they don't cover much Russian news or talk much about Russia. Topic No. 1 is Ukraine, followed by what's happening in the U.S., with some nasty highlights of the Brexit debate in the U.K. and then, to round things up, a bit of local news. If it weren't for the language, you'd think you were watching WMOS in Moscow, Idaho.

But in the run-up to the first round of the Ukrainian presidential elections, on election day, and then in the fevered post-election analysis phase, Ukraine has been front and center on Russian television. In the interests of scholarly inquiry, I thought I'd watch a slew of shows and analyze the language used to discuss Ukraine.

Now I think I need hardship pay.

It's not that I didn't know what the shows were like. But it's another thing to watch 10 hours of them. For one thing, in every show — even the ones that seem to be a bit less sensational by design — there are times when all the guests begin to shout all at once, talking over one another, getting louder and louder and cruder and more aggressive until someone either walks out, threatens to hit someone, or there is a commercial break. If my fourth-grade teacher were here, she'd have smacked them all and sent them to the principal's office. I kept thinking: А где же духовные скрепы? (Where are those spiritual values?) And then I kept thinking: Куда же я положила таблетки Баралгин? (Where did I put those headache pills?)

But I soldiered on. Here's what I learned about the Russian language of discourse about Ukraine and Ukrainians.

You're a @#(*#@#! The first day I turned on the TV someone was screaming Ну посмотрите на этих уродов! (Will you just look at those degenerates!) I peered at the TV screen, expecting to see right-wing thugs, but they just looked like normal folks on a spring day.

I almost got used to the name-calling, which was pretty much constant. Although the Russian guests and hosts did use the word украинцы (Ukrainians), they also used the much less acceptable term хохлы. Хохол is the traditional Ukrainian men's tuft of hair and slang for a Ukrainian man. A Ukrainian woman is хохлушка. These words can be used affectionately in certain contexts, but they are totally inappropriate in what used to be called "polite company." It would be like a group of Americans on a talk show calling Italians "wops."

What else did I hear? I heard about хитрые хохлы (crafty Ukes) and украинская хитринка (Ukrainian guile). Ukrainians were often described as лукавые (sneaky, lying, conniving). Ukrainians were called нацисты (Nazis); бандеровцы (Bandera supporters); and подонки (lowlifes). Их президент обезумел (Their president has lost his mind). Зеленский – марионетка (Zelenskiy is a puppet). Зеленский — детсадовец. Как он может общаться с Меркель, или с Трампом, или с Путиным? (Zelenskiy is a kindergartner. How could he talk with Merkel, or Trump, or Putin?) Amid the general shouting and screaming, I could catch phrases like тупая провокация (dumb provocation); их бараньи башки (stupid as sheep); and тупоголовые (fatheads).

What a hoot! Guests and hosts make fun of almost everything Ukrainian, especially the language. The premise — totally and completely false with absolutely no evidence to support it — is that Ukrainian is a derivative of Russian, and those sneaky, dumb, conniving Ukrainians испортили его (went and ruined it). Every time a clip of a Ukrainian-speaking person is shown, there are hoots of laughter. One politician found it hilarious that in Ukrainian the stress in the first-person singular word for "want" is on the first syllable — хОчу — while in Russian it's on the second syllable — хочУ. Дикий язык! Не хОчу, а хочУ! (What an uncivilized language! They're saying it wrong!)

On another show, there was much merriment about Petro Poroshenko having to slip out of the country in the night if Zelenskiy wins the run-off: Порошенко в жёлтом платье бежит, как Керенский (Poroshenko will run off in a yellow dress like Kerensky, in reference to the apocryphal story about how the head of the Provisional Government escaped the country when the Bolsheviks came to power).

Another joke was: В США президента выбирает Бог. В России — народ. Только на Украине — генератор случайных чисел (In the U.S. the president is chosen by God. In Russia – by the people. Only in Ukraine is it done by a random number generator.)

Is that funny? The punchline seems a bit lacking in punch.

In another discussion about the elections, the host ridiculed the candidates Poroshenko and Zelenskiy for refusing to take part in debates. After a bit of hemming and hawing, the host said that he could only find one word to describe their behavior, and even though it was not quite appropriate for broadcast, it was the only word to possibly describe them: Бздят! The very crude slang word бздеть has two meanings: to fart and to be scared. Here he's saying: They're crapping in their pants, they're so scared.

But here weird things is: Didn't Vladimir Putin decline to debate other candidates in the Russian elections?

It's a strange, strange world. All the guests and most of the hosts spin out elaborate conspiracy theories. I tried to follow some of the arguments, but their logic eluded me. They start out with the usual kind of thing: Украинские выборы нелегитимные (The Ukrainian elections aren't legitimate). Much talk of давление (pressure); административные ресурсы (administrative resources); странная явка (the strange turn-out); and фальсификация на всех этапах, особенно во время подсчёта (falsification at every stage, but especially during the count). They all know so much about this, you'd think they'd had experience in it.

Somehow it's all being arranged by the Americans. Or the Europeans. Or both. Here it gets confusing, since someone claimed: Корабль НАТО причалил в Одессе, вышли американские политтехнологи и ЦРУшники (a NATO ship docked in Odessa and American campaign managers and CIA agents got off). Now I find that downright baffling. How did anyone know that the people who got off were American campaign managers and CIA agents? I mean, they don't wear name tags or Kevlar vests with ЦРУ (CIA) in big white letters. Do they?

In any case, we know the Americans or Europeans are involved because: Они заранее заявили, что выборы будут честными (they announced ahead of time that the elections would be fair). This was, they said, ridiculous. How could they know about the legitimacy of the elections ahead of time?

But then, after making the argument against pre-judgment, they said that there was a bill before the Russian Duma for непризнание выборов (nonrecognition of the elections). This should be passed right away, before the run-off. Everyone applauded.

I didn't get that part.

I also lost the thread when someone asserted: Есть риск, что украинские ястребы отодвинут войну в сторону Мариуполя (There is a risk that the Ukrainian hawks will move the war towards Mariupol.)

I'm not, perhaps, a skilled military strategy analyst, so maybe someone can tell me why

Ukrainians would want to move the frontline of a war deeper into their own territory. Don't you try to move the frontlines away from your country?

It's a puzzle.

There is no Ukraine. In every show someone says at least once, either in passing or as part of a larger argument: Нет Украины (There is no Ukraine). To be exact: Не было Украины. Не было! Всё, что есть, русские дали! (There was no Ukraine. There wasn't! And everything they have now — Russians gave it to them!)

In this context, the use of на Украине (in Ukraine) is significant. In Russian, you use the preposition в (in) with countries, but you use на (in) for territories and parts of countries.

Threats. In virtually every show, the agitated guests or host start shouting threats. Не будет Украины! (There won't be a Ukraine!) Дам приказ, и вашей Украины не будет! (I'll give the order and your Ukraine won't exist! I don't actually think anyone in the show can issue such an order, but still. Not friendly.

Come home to mama. And yet, towards the end of the shows most of the guests calm down, wipe the sweat from their brows, and insist that all they want is: принять Украину в лоно России (take Ukraine back into the bosom of Russia). Or they are certain that both countries could live in peace and harmony if only: Украина отдаст нам восток — и конечно же, забудет про Крым (Ukraine gives us the East and of course forgets about Crimea).

But why would they want to?

It's a puzzle.

I still want hardship pay.

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