

Terms, Prerogatives and Matters of Taste

A Mini Word's Worth

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

December 20, 2019



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Подряд: consecutively, in a row

This year out of the four-hour-and-20-minute press conference that President Vladimir Putin conducted, journalists and commentators focused on one section that they called ambiguous. That got my attention, since “ambiguous” is the linguistic equivalent of honey to a bear.

The bit began when Yelena Glushakova at RIA Novosti asked three questions. The first was

about the Constitution: “Has the time come for changes to the Constitution?” The second was what she called “political”: “In a few days you will be 'at the helm' for 20 years. What do you think — is there again [as with the Constitution] a need to introduce some changes? That is, is it possible, say, to redistribute the powers of the parliament, cabinet and even the president?”

The third question was whether or not Russia had a competitive political environment.

That set-up — entirely innocent and unscripted, I’m sure — let Vladimir Vladimirovich make some interesting comments. Concerning the Constitution, he said that although it was a “living instrument [of governance]” he didn’t think it should be entirely scrapped and a new one written, especially the first part that concerns fundamental values. Those, he said, were “sacrosanct.”

But the rest was more or less up for grabs. He said this about the Constitution: “Всё остальное, в принципе, так или иначе менять можно. Я знаю, конечно, о тех дискуссиях, которые на этот счёт идут, я их вижу, слышу. Я понимаю логику тех, кто предлагает эти вещи. Связано это как раз с возможным расширением прав парламента, с некоторым изменением прерогатив и президента, и правительства. Но это всё можно делать только после хорошей подготовки и глубокой дискуссии в обществе, но очень аккуратно.” (In principle, the rest can be changed in one way or another. Of course, I know about the ongoing discussions about this — I see and hear them. I understand the logic of the people who are proposing these things. It is connected with the possible expansion of the rights of parliament, with some changes to the prerogatives of both the president and cabinet. But all this ought to be done only after really serious preparatory work and a wide-ranging discussion in society — and with very great care.)

And then he got down to the issue of the presidency: Что касается прежних изменений. Они были, насколько мне известно, связаны с количеством сроков. Что можно было бы сделать, что касается этих сроков? Отменить оговорку «подряд». У нас два срока подряд, ваш покорный слуга два срока отслужил, потом ушёл с этой должности и имел конституционное право вернуться на должность президента, потому что это было уже не два срока подряд. Она некоторых наших политологов, общественных деятелей смущает. Можно было бы её отменить, наверное. (And then about the previous changes. They were, as far as I know, connected with the number of terms. What could be done with regard to those terms? Get rid of the stipulation “consecutive.” We have two consecutive terms, and your humble servant served two terms, then left that post and had the constitutional right to return to the post of the presidency because it was no longer two consecutive terms. That [stipulation] bothers some of our political scientists and public figures. It could probably be abolished, I guess.”

And then this: Есть какие-то другие вопросы, но они носят уже более вкусовой характер. (There are some other issues, too, but they are more questions of taste.)

And as far as political competition goes: У нас зарегистрированы 54 партии, четыре из них находятся, по-моему, в состоянии ликвидации, но 50 — это уже нормально, 12 из них действуют на федеральном уровне. Я считаю, что это вполне соответствует требованиям, связанным с политической конкуренцией. (We’ve got 54 registered parties, although I think four of them are being closed out, but 50 is just fine, and 12 of them

are nationwide parties. I think that completely meets the need for political competition.)

Strictly speaking, there is nothing linguistically ambiguous in what he says — it's all very precisely stated, including his comment that the presidency could be limited to two terms.

But it's not at all clear what he is referring to. What changes in the Constitution are being discussed? How might the various prerogatives and rights of the three institutions — parliament, cabinet and presidency — be redistributed? What are “these things” that are being proposed? If the presidency is limited to two terms, when would that start? What other positions might be created?

And for me the most intriguing: What are those other issues that are ultimately just “a matter of taste”?

Inquiring minds want to know.

In the meantime, I wouldn't lose too much sleep over it. It will happen when — and if — it happens. Heck, I'm still waiting for that прорыв (breakthrough) that has been promised for decades.

And now back to my regularly scheduled vacation.

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