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Starting the Presidency All Over Again

The Word's Worth

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

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April King

Embed:

Обнуление: resetting the counter to zero

This week was one for the books: coronavirus, stock market in free-fall, ruble takes a tumble, oil war, collapse of travel industry, and probably much more that I've forgotten. And in the midst of all this anxiety-producing news, suddenly over the course of a few hours, the entire structure of the Russian government changed.

Former cosmonaut and current United Russia deputy to the Duma Valentina Tereshkova went up to the speaker's podium in the Russian parliament and began to change history: Терешкова предложила поправку, согласно которой предлагается либо снять

ограничение для президента на два срока, либо обнулить президентские сроки после принятия поправок в Конституцию. (Tereshkova proposed either annulling the two-term limitation of the presidency or, after amendments to the Constitution were passed, resetting presidential terms to zero.)

After that: Путин в Госдуме поддержал предложение обнулить его президентские сроки после принятия обновлённой конституции (In the State Duma Putin supported the proposal to reset his presidential terms to zero after the revised Constitution is approved.) That got passed by the Duma in a nanosecond, and all that remains is for the citizens to vote on the new Constitution on April 22. And then Vladimir Putin can start his two terms as president all over again. It's like Groundhog Day only measured in decades — and not for Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania, but for the Russian Federation.

The key word in all this is обнулить, which with its verb pair обнулять means to turn a meter or gauge back to zero or to cancel something out. Счетчики принтеров можно обнулить очень просто —следует сделать сброс информационного сообщения о необходимости сменить картридж (It's easy to turn printer cartridge counters back to zero. You need to clear the message that it's time to change the cartridge.) С бюджетом ничего не произойдёт, если обнулить налоги на малый и средний бизнес (Nothing will happen to the budget if we cancel taxes on small and medium-sized businesses.) Идите гулять в хвойный лес, чтобы обнулить негативные эмоции (Go take a walk in a pine forest to get rid of those negative emotions.)

The heart of this is нуль (zero, null) aka ноль (also zero, null), two words that are almost interchangeable. I once spent half of a day figuring out the difference between the two before finally realizing that it comes down to usage. Typically, temperatures are нуль. Anything starting from nothing is с нуля. You find this a lot in advertising, like Интернет-маркетинг с нуля! (Internet marketing for dummies, literally from nothing, from scratch). Another нуль is in that chic convict haircut for men — sheered close to your head so an opponent can't grab your hair in a fight. It can be called нулевая стрижка ("down-to-nothing" haircut), although in recent years the vowel has shifted and now it's more commonly стрижка под ноль. Either way, in English it's a buzz cut.

Ноль is used in a number of expressions. If someone is a total idiot about something or just basically a nobody, he's полный ноль. В компьютерной технике я полный ноль (I'm hopeless with computers.) Or it's used in an expression that means "no attention": Он прошел мимо, на меня ⊠ ноль внимания, как будто меня просто нет в комнате (He walked by and didn't even glance at me, like I wasn't even in the room).

But that's just the basics. The big linguistic news of the week — the ray of hope in the darkness, the shining star of humanity, the triumph of humor and intelligence — was the long list of puns, jokes, and snark that appeared before Tereshkova had even walked away from the podium. Russian wits had a field day with all those zeros and nullification.

First of all, Valentina Tereshkova got her share of jokes. She immediately was renamed Нулентина Нулешкова (Nullotina Nulleshkova) and someone suggested: Давайте полёт Терешковой обнулить и запустить повторно (Let's nullify Tereshkova's flight [into space] and send her up again).

But Vladimir Putin got most of the attention — and new names: He was обнулец (null-er); обнулидер (nulleader); and обнудиссимус (Nullissimo). In a nod to Nursultan Nazarbayev, the leader of Kazakhstan whose rule seems immortal, Putin is called Нульсултан (Nullsurtan). Or he is a modern Обнулеон (Nulloleon); Граф Обнулин (Count Nullulin, a reference to poet Alexander Pushkin's ardent dandy landlord, Count Nulin); or Владимир Обнуленский (Vladimir Nullensky, another Pushkin reference, this time to Vladimir Lensky, the dreamy poet whom Yevgeny Onegin kills in a duel).

Or he is simply нулевой президент, which means both "the very first president from whom all presidents are counted" and "a nothing president."

Outside the Kremlin, a demonstrator held up a sign calling him "пересидент," a play on президент (president) and пересидеть (overstay your welcome).

And finally, the wits of Russia invented a plethora of new nothing expressions: Совсем обнулел! (Are you completely out of your nulling mind?); Обнуляй и властвуй! (Nullify and rule, a play on разделяй и властвуй! — divide and rule); всё нулём! (everything's null!, a play on всё путём — everything's fine, everything's on course); Обнулификация всей страны! (Nullification of the whole country!, a play on электрификация всей страны — the Bolshevik slogan "Electrification of the whole country!); and Не более двух обнулений подряд (Two term limits on zeroing out term limits).

My favorite? The laconic Öбнулись! (We're nulled!, a play on a word we cannot print that means to be screwed).

Now then, don't you feel better? The joys of the Russian joke machine are restorative. We will survive.

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