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How to Protest, From A to Zip Tie Cuffs

The Word's Worth

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

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Одиночный пикет: solo picket

These days in Russia lots of folks are feeling протестное настроение (discontent, literally "mood to protest"). A reader inquiry about various forms of protest made me realize that it was time for an updated look at some of the words to describe exercising your constitutional right to complain.

Because протест means disapproval or protest but not the activity of protesting, there are several words used to describe what you see on the street.

One of the most universal is акция. Акция has a lot of meanings. It's a stock, as in this ad: Купите акции российских фирм онлайн! (Buy stocks in Russian companies online). But it's also any kind of event, act, action, or promotion. You might read about

благотворительные акции (charitable events), and if you live in Russia, you have been certainly called on the phone by a chipper young thing excitedly telling you: У нас идёт акция — купите три окна, и четвёртое — бесплатно! (We're running a special promotion: buy three windows and get the fourth one free!)

In the world of protests, акция refers to any kind of event, and is usually called акция протеста (protest, literally a protest action). В Москве прошли задержания после несанкционированной акции протеста против принятия поправок к Конституции (In Moscow participants were detained after an unsanctioned protest against the constitutional amendments.) Участники акции выстроились в очередь, чтобы поставить подписи против поправок (Participants in the event stood in line to register their disapproval of the amendments.)

Демонстрация (demonstration) is another all-purpose word for any kind of mass event, often against something but sometimes for something. Like in English, it can also mean a show of something: Сегодня в 15 кинотеатрах начинается демонстрация нового фильма модного режиссёра (The new film of a hot director is being shown in 15 movie theaters today.) In the old days, демонстрация was the very upbeat May Day street celebration: Мы всегда ходили с друзьями на первомайские демонстрации (My friends and I always marched in the May Day demonstrations.) And today демонстрация can be a sign of solidarity, while managing to also be a protest: В Хабаровском крае прошли массовые демонстрации в поддержку арестованного губернатора (In the Khabarovsk region mass demonstrations were held in support of the governor, who had been arrested.)

If you don't like the word демонстрация, you can use the word манифестация, which in certain contexts can mean a manifestation, but in the context of protest is a big public demonstration: В день годовщины революции они пошли с красным флагом на манифестацию (On the anniversary of the Revolution they took a red flag and joined the demonstration.)

Like акция, демонстрация can refer to just about anything: marching, holding up signs, gathering signatures, giving speeches, or just generally gathering together, milling about and shouting. Shouting, when done as a group effort of a short pithy phrase or two is called скандировать (to chant). Собравшиеся скандировали "Свободу политзаключенным" и "Позор Кремлю!" (The protesters chanted "Free political prisoners!" and "Kremlin, For Shame!")

And then there is митинг (a rally), митинговать (to rally) and митингующие (participants, protesters). Митинг is recognizably from the English word meeting, but it doesn't refer to any one-on-one or small business or personal get-together. Митинг is a rally, a public meeting, an assembly. In the Soviet period, it could mean the ceremonial part of some event, as defined by writer Sergei Dovlatov in "The Suitcase" (1986): Сначала ⊠ небольшой банкет для избранных. Затем ⊠ короткий митинг. Вручение почётных грамот и наград. (First — a small banquet for the chosen few. Then — a short ceremony. The presentation of honorary diplomas and awards.)

Митинг could also be a crowd of people, but one shouting Ура! (Hurrah!) rather than Долой! (Down with them!): Первого мая с утра мы всей школой должны были собраться на

праздничный митинг (On May Day the whole school had to gather in the morning for a celebration.)

But it can also be a protest event that probably won't be very much fun: Если ты поучаствовал в митинге, то как минимум тебя надо избить, а по возможности и посадить (If you went to the rally, they'd at least beat you up and then put you in jail if they could, too.)

The verb for this activity – going to a rally, not beating up protesters — is митинговать, dourly described in the early post-Soviet years here: Страна изменилась: алкаши стали наркоманами, жулики ушли в коммерцию, придурки возглавили партии и беспрерывно митинговали (The country had changed: drunks became drug addicts, crooks went into business, idiots headed up parties and rallied non-stop.)

And a common way to describe the participants is митингующие: За углом мы увидели митингующих (Around the corner we spotted the demonstrators.) You might need to practice that word a bit.

At the митинг you might join протестный марш (a protest march), also called шествие (march, walk, procession). In non-protest contexts, you might read about похоронные шествия (funeral processions) or, to the contrary, праздничные шествия (holiday parades). These days шествия are a popular form of protest when permission is not granted for a митинг. You set up шествие по городу (a procession about town) which you try to pass off as "just going for a stroll with 3500 of my close personal friends."

But if you can get permission, you might organize пикет (a picket). Russian пикет is almost exactly the same as English picket: both mean a military or other guard unit, a group preventing strike-breakers, and — most commonly — people protesting something, usually with signs. It has the handy forms пикетчик (a picketer); пикетирование (picketing); and пикетировать (to picket). Учителя проводят регулярные пикетирования администрации области и грозят забастовкой (Teachers picket the regional center building regularly and threaten to go on strike.) For many people, the constant question is: Чем же недовольны пикетчики? (What are those picketers so unhappy about?)

The strangest form of protest is одиночный пикет (one-person picket, solo picketing, single-person protest), which is when one person stands with a sign of protest. The reason for this form of protest is simple: it doesn't require permission, is easy to organize — write something on a piece of paper and walk out the door — and can be gratifyingly annoying.

Alas, in a few cases when there have been a number of single-person protests, the police have called it скрытая форма коллективного публичного мероприятия (a disguised collective public activity) and lately just detain everyone anyway: Таганский суд оштрафовал муниципального депутата Юлию Галямину на 200 тысяч рублей за одиночный пикет в поддержку журналиста Ильи Азара (The Taganka Court fined city deputy Yulia Galyamina 200,000 rubles for her solo picketing to support journalist Ilya Azar.)

Задержание (being detained) can be nasty or nice. Fortunately, to the best of my knowledge (untested), you will probably just be shoved into the автозак (paddy wagon), rarely в наручниках (in handcuffs) and never in пластиковых хомутах (zip ties).

There. Now you know the complex language of protests. But you can also make it really easy: Я – против! (I'm against it!)

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