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The Many Faces of Живопырка

The Word's Worth

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

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Живопырка: (originally) tearoom or cafeteria

A few weeks ago a question came up about a strange-sounding word used by Dmitry Medvedev in an interview: живопырка. It's not a word I've ever heard or used, and although some of my friends had heard it, none of them knew what it meant. For me this is linguistic catnip. The search was on.

As I began to poke around in my dictionaries and online I slowly began to realize that живопырка is a real treasure, one of the rare magical Russian words that seem to float around people, places and times searching for new meanings. And it found not one meaning, but a dozen of them.

Perhaps once upon a time it did have just one meaning that everyone who used it agreed upon.

Живопырка is in two of my dictionaries. In Gorodin's Dictionary of Camp and Prison Slang it has a perfectly respectable meaning: a tearoom or cafeteria. That is referenced to a previous dictionary of camp jargon from 1927.

And then, in the way of camp slang, it entered civilian life with returning prisoners and began to change in meaning. Ozhegov's Dictionary of 1935-40 provides two definitions: an augmented original meaning – now including a club — and then a second meaning that follows, as it were, from the first and is marked as "vulgar" and "from prison jargon": место, где постоянная толчея народа, шум, скандалы (a place where there is a constant throng of people, noise and ruckus).

The word is rather evocative — it sounds like it begins with живо(т) (belly) and then ends with perhaps a noun from пырять (to butt or push), like people poking each other in the belly in crowded little food joints.

In a marvelous article from January of this year, a writer named Darya Bunyakova presents an array of possible живопырки. The most common accepted meaning of живопырка today is from the business slang of the 1990s: a company that conducts some sort of illegal business, often a front company for another enterprise. Завести на живопырку is to make a company the formal owner of assets to hide the fact that your company really owns them.

I found that meaning, specifically the notion of a front company, in several other sources. In one description of unsavory business practices and jargon the author mentions "скинуть деньги на бивиайскую живопырку" (to move it to some BVI [British Virgin Islands] front company, i.e., to move money offshore).

When Sergei Ivanov was deputy prime minister a decade ago, he lamented the sad state of business affairs to a class at St. Petersburg university. Here живопырка appears to mean companies used for shady deals: В России банков чрезмерное количество, так же, как вузов и авиакомпаний. 100 авиакомпаний, из них 10 нормальные, а остальные живопырки (Russia has a huge number of banks, as well as educational institutions and airline companies. Out of 100 airlines, 10 are functioning and the others are covers for something else).

Other Russian politicians each have their own personal understanding of живопырка. At the beginning of the year the head of the Communist Party press service took offense when someone pointed out that two party deputies "cast votes" in the Duma while hospitalized in intensive care: "Какая-то живопырка нахамила по поводу умершего человека." Here живопырка is some variety of nasty person: Some nasty witch made cracks about a dead person.

Another official thinks живопырки are incompetent organizations. When asked about a Freedom Index, he replied: Я не обращал бы внимания на разного рода никому не известные живопырки, которые берут данные с потолка (I wouldn't pay any attention to these fake groups no one's ever heard of who pull statistics out of thin air).

In another part of Russia a mayor complained about privately owned heating plants in his city: "Живопырки стоят в центральной части города и дымят" (Those stinkers are in the city center and produce a lot of smoke).

And yet another politician commented on the merger of several small parties with a big one. Here he seems to think живопырки are dupes: Понятно, зачем политтехнологам власти надувать „жертвенные живопырки“. Ими удобно манипулировать (It's obvious why the authorities' political strategists want to blow up 'sacrificial dummies.' It's easy to manipulate them).

Most of the examples above come from about a decade ago. In 2018 someone on a language forum wrote about attending a linguistic festival — we language folks know how to have a good time — and heard that живопырка came from St. Petersburg and was another word for хрущёвка (a derogatory term for a Khrushchev-era apartment building, literally a Khru-slum). The writer disagreed: Живопырка — это не обязательно хрущёвка, просто очень маленькое помещение (Живопырка doesn't necessarily mean a Khrushchev building, but just a very small structure). No, someone said, "Живопырка это тесное густонаселенное помещение" (Живопырка is a cramped space crowded with people).

Those definitions seem to be related, however distantly, to the first meaning of the word as a café or tearoom, presumably small. But how about this: Живопыркой в моей юности называли маленький ножик (When I was younger, we called a small knife a живопырка). Actually, that makes sense – пырять can mean to wound, so this might be the name of something that cuts a belly.

So which живопырка did Dmitry Medvedev mean? He said that having two or three major parties in the parliament would be fine, "Но вот уж чего точно не должно быть и что плохо для страны — это когда соревнуются десятки, извините, живопырок, между ними распределяются голоса, а в результате в парламенте невозможно найти консенсус" (But what we really shouldn't have and what would be bad for the country — that's when there are dozens of — pardon my French — живопырки competing with each other and dividing up the votes among them, and as a result it would be impossible to reach a consensus in the parliament).

So, what is it? It's not a knife or an apartment building or a heating plant or even a disreputable business. My guess is he is using the word to mean something like "sham parties" — groups that are shady and maybe front organizations for other interests.

Or maybe he has his own definition. Who knows? It's a big world of живопырки out there.

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