

Words of the Year 2021

The Word's Worth

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Слова года 2021: Words of the year 2021

It's that most special time of year, when work is (almost) done, holidays are about to begin, and we pull the wrapping off our new planner for the next year, crack it open, and breathe in that heavenly scent of possibility. Nothing beats the joy of starting afresh.

And there is one more end-of-the-year ritual: слова года (the words of the year).

In many countries around the world, a group at an educational or governmental organization — or sometimes at a dictionary publishing house — convenes at the end of the year and votes on the word or words that typified or defined the outgoing year. In Russia, several institutions and informal groups put forth their words of the year. My favorite group is headed by Mikhail Epstein, a linguist and professor of Russian language and literature. I like it for two reasons.

First, because it is well-organized: about 3,000 word-obsessed Russian speakers send in their suggestions over the course of the year, of which about 400 are shortlisted and then voted on in secret by an expert council of linguists, writers, journalists, philosophers and specialists in language and literature.

And second, it's just a little bit wacko. One of the four categories of words of the year is what they call протологизм ("proto-logism"), which is a fancy linguistic way of saying: a hilarious invented word or phrase.

The other three categories, however, are more conventional: word of the year, phrase of the year, anti-language (the language of hatred, propaganda or falsehood).

The tallies are in for 2021, and in general, it's a sad and Covid-heavy year. If last year the top words of the year were reflecting a country learning about coronavirus, this year they reflect a country coping with it, more or less.

And so (drum roll): the word of the year for 2021 is actually two: вакцина (vaccine) and вакцинация (vaccination). This is what we have all been discussing, doing and posting on social media — or discussing, not doing and justifying on social media all year. The second- and third-place words are also related to the pandemic and, like вакцина and вакцинация, which come from Latin, are also originally borrowed from other languages: QR (pronounced кю ар) and антиваксеры (antivaxers).

But the runners-up reflect not only Covid but the other defining issue of the year — the animosity between the state and some of its citizens. These words make for tragic reading: пытки (torture); репрессия (repression); хейтер (hater); задержание (detention); токсичный (toxic); антитела (antibody); уйти (to depart in the sense of die); ревакцинация (revaccination); маска (mask); Коммунарка (Kommunarka, the central Covid facility in Moscow). It was not an easy year in Russia.

In the expressions of the year, we see the national obsession with Covid and death, but also this year's dark political life. In first place is избыточная смертность (excess deaths), followed by дворец Путина (Putin's palace) and in third place, бункерный дед (Grandpa in the bunker). If you've been avoiding politics all year (can't say I blame you), the palace refers to the grand residence being built for and/or by the Russian president in the south of the country. It was the subject of one of opposition leader Alexei Navalny's video reports. The "grandpa in the bunker" is another Navalnyism — how he refers to the Russian president, holed up in a protective underground residence.

The runners-up reflect a wider variety of issues troubling Russian citizens this year. Глобальное потепление (global warming) and изменение климата (climate change) were on the list along with следственный комитет (Investigative Committee).

My favorite newish expression on the list is белое пальто (white coat). Надеть белое пальто (literally to put on a white coat) means to get all high and mighty, to pontificate, to lord it over someone — basically to ponce around acting superior and handing out obnoxious advice. It's not clear where exactly the expression came from, but it's certainly vivid. You can see it in your mind's eye and immediately understand it, as in this comment about a hypocritical public figure: Он надел белое пальто и выступил в защиту семейных традиционных

ценностей... а его обвиняли в многолетних изменах жене (He got on his high horse and defended traditional family values... while being accused of cheating on his wife for many years.)

Anti-language — hate-speak, propaganda or lies — are the kind of words, Epstein writes, “that you want to put in quotation marks to show that they are not something you’d say.” This year the top words in this category were иноагент aka иностранный агент (“foreign agent”); рекорд смертей (record number of deaths); and берлинский пациент (Berlin patient) aka Alexei Navalny. If you missed it, the Russian leaders and state media regard Alexei Navalny as “he whose name must not be spoken,” so he is always referred to as “блогер” (a blogger); “этот господин” (that certain mister); or “персонаж” (that figure). When Navalny was in Germany being treated for poisoning by a nerve agent, he was referred to as that “пациент берлинской клиники” (patient in a Berlin clinic).

Another phrase you don’t want to hear, especially with regard to yourself: проверить на предмет экстремизма (to check for signs of extremism), what the Investigative Committee does when you’re in its sights. And here’s a strange phrase on the list: другого качества люди (different quality people). This was used by Moscow Mayor Sobyenin to explain who he thought should replace migrant workers in the city. You might guess what quality the replacements should have.

And this brings us to my favorite category — invented words and phrases that describe some aspect of the year. The winner is неподшутный (not someone to joke about) by Pavel Lozhkin, followed by хамостийность, defined as “being obnoxious always and everywhere...regardless of public opinion,” coined by Anna Khistochevskaya. See above sections for the background on these two phrases.

The third invented phrase might be my choice for the year, since it involves the kind of sound and wordplay I adore: занудалёнка – a mix of зануда (a downer, an insufferable bore, a nudnik) and удалёнка (slang for working from home, working out of the office). This lovely word, coined by Otar Bezhanov, defines the dreary sameness of working from home. As someone who has worked at home for decades but in previous years actually went places from time to time, I love this word.

Слова десятилетия

This year the group also voted on words of the decade 2011–2021. The words of the previous decade were гламур (the borrowed word glamor but actually something trendy, hot, or glitzy); блог and блогер (blog and blogger); ЕГЭ (unified state examination, a highly contested new educational testing system); and нано- (nano-everything). Rather cheerful and forward-looking, no?

But the words of the next decade, 2021–2031, were ковид (Covid); обнуление (zeroing out, what happened to Vladimir Putin’s previous presidential terms and much of public life — and life itself); and санкции (sanctions, what happened after Russia’s annexation of Crimea and other behavior deemed illegal and aggressive in the West). Definitely not cheerful.

But the expressions of the decade 2011–2021 are something of an antidote to the gloom and doom. Like in some other categories this year, they reflect Russia’s connection with the world

and world trends — one of the bright spots of this list and life today. They are выйти из зоны комфорта (to get out of your comfort zone); глобальное потепление (global warming); and искусственный интеллект (artificial intelligence).

But we're back in the darkness with the language of hatred for 2011–2021. In first place is the long text in capital letters that must precede anything published or posted by a person or organization deemed a “foreign agent”: ДАННОЕ СООБЩЕНИЕ (МАТЕРИАЛ) СОЗДАНО И (ИЛИ) РАСПРОСТРАНЕНО ИНОСТРАННЫМ СРЕДСТВОМ МАССОВОЙ ИНФОРМАЦИИ, ВЫПОЛНЯЮЩИМ ФУНКЦИИ ИНОСТРАННОГО АГЕНТА, И (ИЛИ) РОССИЙСКИМ ЮРИДИЧЕСКИМ ЛИЦОМ, ВЫПОЛНЯЮЩИМ ФУНКЦИИ ИНОСТРАННОГО АГЕНТА (This message [material] has been created and [or] distributed by a foreign mass information medium carrying out the function of a foreign agent and [or] a Russian legal entity carrying out the function of a foreign agent).

In second and third place — иноагент (that “foreign agent” cited above) and the battle cry “Крымнаш” (Crimea is Ours!)

Most of the rest of that list of the decade's dark words and expressions is terribly depressing: нежелательная организация (undesirable organization); экстремизм (extremism); оскорбление чувств верующих (offending the feelings of believers) — all of which is новая нормальность (the new normal).

In 2020, the top expression of the year in Russia was Жыве Беларусь! (Long live Belarus!). This year in Belarus the word of the year is чабор (thyme) — not exactly what I would have expected. But an acquaintance explained that “The Scent of Thyme” is the name of a poem by Belarusian poet Piatrus Brovka and is used as a euphemism for the now-illegal protest calls of “Long Live Belarus.”

I keep thinking about that and wondering what the words of the year will be in Russia in 2022. Will they be code words, snippets of poems uttered like secret handshakes?

Let's be honest: 2021 was a difficult year of terrible losses and unspeakable tragedies for many people. All I can do is look forward to the clean slate of 2022 and, with all my heart, поздравляю вас с Новым годом! (Happy New Year!)

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