

# Protecting Medvedev's Rear

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Тыл: home front, back, support system

One of the guilty pleasures of translating is hooting over fabulous flubs — those dreadful translation gaffes that distort meaning or introduce a double entendre. This is uncharitable, childish and not at all nice, and I'm always deeply ashamed of myself afterward. But man, how can you help not laughing over this translated headline: “Long Live Dmitry Medvedev, or the All-Russia People’s Rear”?

Come on, folks, isn't there an English-language editor in the house?

It was easy to guess what the original Russian had been: Да здравствует Дмитрий Медведев, или Общероссийский народный тыл. The word that defeated the translator was тыл, which, to be fair, is often a hard word to translate.

The basic meaning of **тыл** is the back of something, which you probably already know from the word **затылок** (back of the head). **Тыл** can be used with **ладонь** (palm of the hand) to refer to the back of a hand. **Ястреб вцепился клювом в тыл ладони парня** (The hawk dug his beak into the back of the boy's hand). Sometimes the adjective **тыльный** is used: **Он поцеловал не в тыльную сторону ладони, а в ладонь** (He didn't kiss the back of her hand, but her palm).

**Тыл** can also be used to describe a location at the back of something. This isn't very common today, but you still might come across this usage: **Сарай находится в тылу двора** (The shed is at the end of the yard). You might also hear someone say he came up to someone **с тыла** or **с тылу** (from behind), which has the sense of sneaking up without being seen or heard.

Sometimes this is used figuratively. An article about competition between two companies noted that while one was busy building a factory, the other **зашла с тылу и купила старый завод** (snuck up and bought an old factory).

Probably the most common usage of **тыл** has to do with wartime. **Тыл** (sometimes the plural **тылы**) is essentially any part of the country or war effort that is not on the front lines. Sometimes it means the troops providing logistics and support for the front: **Тылы отстали** (The logistic support units fell behind). Sometimes it means the part of the country untouched by fighting: **Она сидит себе в глубоком тылу и понять не может, что на передовой** (She is sitting there, far from the fighting, and has no idea what it's like on the front lines). In other contexts, it can refer to all the production and activities to support the war effort, as in this quote from Stalin: **Что такое армия без крепкого тыла? Ничто.** (What is an army without a strong behind-the-lines support system? Nothing.)

This notion of **тыл** (or **тылы**) as a support system can be used metaphorically to refer to someone's family and friends. **Она считала, что мама — самый надёжный тыл** (She could count on her mother to hold down the fort).

In the case of the hilarious headline, the author of the Russian original text was playing with two meanings of the word **фронт** — the front line in a war and a political organization — and contrasting Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's newly formed **Общероссийский народный фронт** (All-Russia People's Front) with Medvedev's informal **тыл**.

I think I would have called it Medvedev's Home Front. It's not great, but at least it's not insulting.

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