

Shame on Naughty American Hooligans

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Хулиганство: hooliganism (sort of)

As the world watched the U.S. debt ceiling negotiations, Standard & Poor's rating downgrade and the stomach-flipping volatile market, it seems like everyone and his brother (кому не лень) had something nasty and accusatory to say about the U.S. economy and political system. Can't say I blame them. I myself was nasty and accusatory — that is, when I wasn't frantically recasting my retirement to admit the possibility of subsistence farming.

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin couldn't resist getting into the act. In his first foray, he said the United States was behaving like “паразит мировой экономики” (a parasite on the world economy). I ignored this as linguistically boring and factually erroneous. When one of Russia's ruling tandem stops flashing his iPhone, I'll entertain the notion of parasitism.

But Putin's second foray provided more fodder for my linguistic interests. This time, Putin accused the United States of хулиганство (hooliganism). Now that's a nice, juicy word.

Хулиганство comes, of course, from English, where it first appeared in print in 1898. The meaning in English hasn't changed much over the last century. It refers to violent, rowdy, or destructive behavior. But today, with the exception of the phrase sports hooliganism, the words hooligan and hooliganism are decidedly dated.

Hooliganism seems to have quickly jumped from Britain over to Russia, and by 1922 хулиганство wasn't just a word in Soviet Russia, it was a crime. And a crime it has remained to this day. The legal definition has changed a bit over the decades, but there is one element of it that has remained more or less the same: грубое нарушение общественного порядка, выражающее явное неуважение к обществу (flagrant violation of public order expressing clear disrespect for society).

The lack of clarity about what exactly constitutes хулиганство — who decides what public order is and what indicates clear disrespect? — has left a lot of wiggle room for judiciary discretion. In the Soviet period, this article was used not only to incarcerate drunks who bashed up metro cars but also to jail folks for a wide variety of “anti-social” (read: anti-Soviet) activities. Today, the article is still used for jailing thugs as well as social activists defending forests and architectural treasures. But sometimes it's used to help thugs avoid more serious charges. So boys who bash foreigners are sometimes just хулиганы (hooligans).

In everyday speech, хулиганство, хулиган and хулиганить (to behave like a hooligan) are often much less dire crimes. When applied jokingly to children or loved ones, these words convey the sense of being naughty, mischievous or mildly lascivious. When a mom finds a giggling kid's bedroom a mess of tossed pillows, she might exclaim in mock horror: Кто тут нахулиганил? (Who got into mischief?) Or when an elderly gent kisses his wife of 60 years, she might swat him away with a pleased: Хулиган! (You devil!) And when I write a column that pokes fun at a sacred cow, I call it a хулиганская рубрика (a naughty column).

As for Mr. Putin, my guess is that he doesn't think the U.S. leaders are being charmingly naughty. I'd guess he means they are showing clear disrespect for the world order and behaving like irresponsible teenagers. Fair enough. I just wonder what he'd have said if a U.S. leader had accused Russia of хулиганство when it defaulted in 1998.

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