

Putin's PR Boo-Boo

By [Michele A. Berdy](#)

November 24, 2011

The  **Moscow Times**

Освистывать: to boo, shout catcalls

The political buzz this week in Moscow was: Did they or didn't they? Boo Vladimir Putin at the boxing match, that is. ☒

But I was buzzing about the verb used to describe the audience reaction: освистать, which comes from the root word свист (whistle). So did they whistle or boo?

It turns out that whistling in Russian is a tricky business.

Let's start with the basics. The imperfective verb свистеть (to whistle) can refer to any whistling sound, produced either by nature, machine or man. За окном шумят деревья, свистит ветер. (Outside the tree branches are rustling and the wind is whistling.) В тёмной хате, где свежо и тонко пахло сеном, он свистел чисто и сильно. (In the dark hut, scented lightly with fresh hay, his whistling was pure and strong.)

In slang, свистеть means to lie or fib. Не свисти мне! Ты не сидел на работе допоздна! (Don't fib to me! You didn't stay late at work!)

Свистнуть, the perfective verb in the pair, can refer to a single whistle: Он свистнул своему терьеру (He gave a short whistle to his terrier.) In slang, it can mean to call (out) to someone: Лена, если тебя отпустят с работы — сразу свисти мне на мобильный. (Lena, call me right away on my cell if they let you off work.) ❏

Свистнуть in slang can also mean to strike someone or something — perhaps like the sound of a fist whistling through the air: Он свистнул меня по уху. (He cuffed me on the ear.) It can also be a slangy way of describing a theft — perhaps like the sound of your property being whisked off: У меня свистнули часы. (Somebody snatched my watch.)

And what about the curious case of the whistling crab? The expression когда рак на горе свистнет (literally “when a crab whistles on a mountain”) is the Russian version of “when pigs fly” — something that won't ever happen.

The tricky bit is that свистеть and свистнуть can be used to describe any loud noise produced by people, either jeering (usually) or cheering (less commonly). This sound is not really a whistle. It can be hooting, shouting, roaring, or otherwise making a racket. When the buzz is positive, свистеть is usually modified: Зал свистел от восторга (The audience roared with delight.) When it's negative, the verb usually stands alone: Они свистели на Путина. (They booed Putin.)

The related verb pair освистывать/освистать is not ambiguous. It is used for booing or hissing someone off the stage. One newspaper wrote: Премьер-министр Владимир Путин впервые за свою политическую карьеру был освистан на публике. (For the first time in his political career, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin was booed in public.) This is nothing new for politicians and an old tradition in Russia: В Думе все большевики освистывали неугодных им ораторов. (In the Duma, all the Bolsheviks booed the speakers they didn't like.)

So was Putin booed? It sure sounded like it to me. But so what? All politicians get booed. It wouldn't have been such a big deal if the TV stations hadn't cut the sound, and if the spin doctors hadn't come up with ludicrous explanations, like the story about beer-guzzling fans anxious to use the bathrooms.

When will politicians learn that it's the cover-up that gets them in trouble? Когда рак на горе свистнет?

Michele A. Berdy, a Moscow-based translator and interpreter, is author of “The Russian Word's Worth” (Glas), a collection of her columns.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

Original url: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2011/11/24/putins-pr-boo-boo-a11015>