

Getting Out the Vote the Russian Way

The Word's Worth

[Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth](#)

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Всероссийское голосование: nationwide vote

This week in Russia has been all about the Big Vote: the 7-day nationwide vote on amendments to the Constitution that ended on July 1. It was, as would be expected, the hot political topic for weeks. But then, unexpectedly, it suddenly became a hot topic for language nerds when the бюллетень (ballot) came out. It turned out there was a grammatical error.

But actually, after reading up on this all week, it's all more complicated than a simple error in grammar. It turns out that choice of language has played a big role in this entire process.

The issue that started the whole discussion was the discovery of an error in the ballot. The question read: Вы одобряете изменения в Конституцию Российской Федерации? (Do you approve of the changes to the Constitution of the Russian Federation?) According to

several language specialists, the problem is that the unmodified word изменения (changes) requires the prepositional case — в Конституции (changes in the Constitution)— while here it's in the accusative case — в Конституцию (to the Constitution). To be grammatically proper, the question should have been: Вы одобряете изменения в Конституции (Do you approve of the changes in the Constitution?) Or even: Вы одобряете изменения Конституции (something like: Do you approve of the Constitutional changes?)

The problem with that, of course, is it sounds like the changes were already in the Constitution (which they were, in a way). So the better construction, both grammatically and politically, would have been: Вы одобряете изменения, вносимые в Конституцию Российской Федерации? (Do you approve of the changes being made to the Constitution of the Russian Federation?)

Ah, but the problem with that question is that the changes had been, in a way, already added to the Constitution, so perhaps the question should have been Вы одобряете изменения, внесённые в Конституцию Российской Федерации? (Do you approve of the changes that have been made to the Constitution of the Russian Federation?)

But that's no good. What's the point of voting for something that has already been decided?

Another option was the word поправки (amendments), but it had some of the same problems as изменения. Поправки в конституцию (amendments to the Constitution) using the accusative case was dismissed by grammarians as разговорный вариант (a colloquial version). The question would have had to be either поправки, вносимые в Конституцию (amendments being added to the Constitution, accusative case) or поправки к Конституции (amendments to the Constitution, dative case).

After pondering this for a long while, I began to understand the genius of this official formulation: С 25 июня по 1 июля пройдет всероссийское голосование по вопросу одобрения поправок в Конституцию (From June 25 to July 1 the nationwide vote on the question of approving amendments to the Constitution will be held.) Did you catch that? “Vote on the question of approving amendments”! That's top-quality legalistic gobbledegook. Снимаю шляпу! (I take off my hat.)

The question of what exactly this vote was turned out to be confusing, in part because terms have legal definitions and everyday definitions, and it is hard to tell what meaning is intended. For example, in some countries, this would be called плебисцит (plebiscite), which is a kind of opinion-gathering poll that is sometimes binding and sometimes not, depending on the country and vote. In Russian плебисцит is defined as всенародное голосование, устраиваемое для решения каких-нибудь особенно важных вопросов; то же, что референдум (nationwide vote organized to decide some especially important issues; the same as a referendum).

In this case, the term was used by the media in the general sense of a poll. Плебисцит по Конституции будет неформальным (The plebiscite on the Constitution won't be formal.) I have no idea what that means. Not formal – how? You can wear shorts and a T-shirt while you vote? Since many voted at home – I guess you could come as you are.

In the end: Голосование по поправкам — самый странный плебисцит в новейшей

истории России (The vote on the amendments was the strangest plebiscite in the new history of Russia.)

That I understood.

Референдум (referendum) is another one of those words – might be a legal term, might not. For example, here it's not used as a legal term: Песков назвал итоги голосования «триумфальным референдумом о доверии президенту Путину» (Peskov called the results of the vote “a triumphant referendum” on trust in President Putin.)

In fact, the word референдум is only used in the everyday sense and never used in the legal sense to describe the vote. The reason for this is simple: референдум is defined, described, and detailed down to the last pen and type of paper in the Constitution and various laws. For reasons above my pay grade, holding a referendum didn't suit the organizers of this vote. So they had to come up with a new term that could be defined in a new way. Enter: всероссийское голосование (nationwide vote), which was then described and codified in the Constitution, or rather in the new Constitution, or maybe I should say the draft of the new Constitution...?

You see how confusing it is.

Equally confusing is whether the amended Constitution was, er, constitutional before the vote. The amendments had been approved by the two houses of the parliament and all the regional parliaments. And they have been printed up and put on sale in book stores. But, according to most sources: Конституция вступит или не вступит в силу в зависимости от итогов волеизъявления граждан (The Constitution shall enter into force or not enter into force depending on the results of the will of the citizens.)

How the vote would be held — very different from standard election procedures — and what a will of “yes” would be, was also defined in the part of the Constitution people were voting on: if more than half of the people who voted supported the new Constitution, then it would be considered “the will of the people.”

And so, people voted, and they didn't just break ground for a new kind of vote. They broke an old tradition, as one way or another: народ не безмолвствовал (the people were not silent).

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