

# A Russian Sleeping Beauty

## The Word's Worth

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

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### Embed:

*Note: This article discusses explicit themes that might offend some readers.*

*Моя красавица: my beauty*

This week has been one long Throwback Thursday. In the early days of Vladimir Putin's presidency, at almost every public speaking engagement he would toss out a bawdy expression or a folksy phrase that was long forgotten by the young city folk covering his press conferences. There were so many of these non-standard phrases that they got their own name — Путинки (Putinisms) — and were gathered up in little illustrated books.

These Путинки had me pawing through dictionaries, combing the internet, and driving my friends, acquaintances and even strangers mad with my questions. My task was to figure out what he meant, what associations the phrase had — mostly to find out why journalists were chortling — and then come up with a way to translate it, especially without breaking any laws against use of obscenity in the media.

After a long, long stretch of using more standard-issue governmental language, Putin broke out of his conventional box this week. In a press conference after his meetings with French President Emmanuel Macron, Putin commented that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy didn't like one article of the Minsk Agreements. Putin said: “Нравится, не нравится — терпи, моя красавица.” Надо исполнять. По-другому не получится (“Like it or not — put up with it, my beauty.” You have to follow the terms. There's no other way”).

If the phrase didn't immediately set off alarm bells — it should have, since it's not likely that Putin would call Zelenskiy “my beauty” — all you had to do was click on or open any newspaper in the country to see that it was something of a sensation. As one publication noted, “Высказывание российского президента моментально разлетелось по заголовкам СМИ (The comment by the Russian president instantly hit the headlines of the media).

I hit the books and the internet.

It has been an education! First, I learned that the phrase “Нравится, не нравится — спи, моя красавица” (literally, “Like it or not, it's time to sleep, my beauty”) is thought to be “детские стихи” (children's verse) and completely inoffensive. True, no one can cite the poem or author, but folks told me it was something you said to misbehaving children.

But there is a second camp who told me the phrase was the last couplet in an extremely obscene 4-line rhyming verse (частушка), which, like all частушки, has a number of variations. None of these people knew when it had appeared — although one person found a citation dating to 1978 — but most people read it scrawled on a fence or scribbled on a scrap of paper passed surreptitiously in a classroom.

Some of the second camp also know the частушка version from the song called Спящая Красавица (Sleeping Beauty) performed by the punk rock group Красная Плесень (Red Mold) in 1995.

And no one has any idea if the kiddie version and the dirty version are related, or which came first if they are.

In the days after the press conference we did, however, learn that the president did not pick up the phrase from listening to 1990s punk rock. The next day presidential spokesperson Dmitry Peskov explained: “Президент имел в виду, что, если государство взяло на себя обязательства, и если стоит подпись главы государства, то эти обязательства нужно выполнять: (“The president meant that if a state takes on obligations and if the signature of the head of the state is on the documents, those obligations must be carried out.”)

He laid to rest the idea of President Putin as a big Red Mold fan. “Я убежден, что Владимир Путин не знаком с творчеством этой группы, (“I'm sure that Vladimir Putin is not

acquainted with the music of this group”). He continued, however, “...думаю, что в свое время эта группа – я, честно говоря, тоже не знаком – позаимствовала это из русского фольклора” (“I think that the group — that, to be honest I don’t know either— borrowed it from Russian folklore.”)

So, it’s time to look at the folklore.

If there is a children’s poem, a cartoon, a song, a book, or a bit of oral tradition which has “нравится, не нравится, спи, моя красавица” — please tell me. I can’t find it. What I did find are lots of phrases in lullabies (колыбельные), that begin спи... (Sleep) followed by an endearment. One of the most famous is the aria in Rimsky-Korsakov’s opera “May Night” that begins Спи, моя красавица! (Sleep, my beauty!).

But you can also find lullabies with спи, моя радость, усни (Sleep, my joy, go to sleep); спи, младенец мой прекрасный (Sleep my baby, my darling); спи мой ангел, тихо, сладко (Sleep my angel, quietly and sweetly); спи мой воробышек, спи мой сыночек (Sleep, my little sparrow, sleep, my little boy). The list goes on and on.

Somewhere between 1910 (Rimsky-Korsakov) and 1960ish (according to online commentary), the phrase “нравится, не нравится” got added to all those endearing calls to go to sleep. Now the full phrase Нравится, не нравится — спи, моя красавица is used to exhort children to do anything they don’t want to do. It basically means: “Tough luck, kid. You got to do it, whether you like it or not.”

For example, in a mom chat room, one mother said that her 3-year-old was refusing to put on her hat to go outside in the winter, so they were staying inside. The other moms were outraged. One asked: Боже, вы ребёнок? (Good Lord, are you the child?!) Оделась и вперед. Нравится, не нравится спи моя красавица (She puts it on and out you go. ‘If they like it, if they don’t / Change their bedtime? No, we won’t.)

That’s the benign version that all my pensioner friends know.

But there is also the dirty ditty version that most of my pensioner friends did not know.

Here it is with the ненормативная лексика (obscenities) replaced by asterisks: Лежит милая в гробу / Я пристроился и \*\*\* / Нравится, не нравится / Спи, моя красавица! (In her coffin lies my darling / I jumped in and started \*\*\*ing / She may like it, she may not / Sleep, my dearest, it’s your lot). Sometimes the last line is Терпи, моя красавица (Bear it, dearest, it’s your lot).

Well, now you know what the buzz was about. Cultured people discovered a dark side to what they thought was an innocent bit of kiddie lit: Дожила до 75 лет и не слышала первые две строчки! (I’m 75 years old and just heard the first two lines for the first time!)

Grandmas and grandpas are going to need a new go-to-bed rhyme.

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