

Of Courtyards, Grifters and Days Off

One little word with a plethora of meanings.

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

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Sergei Vedyashkin / Moskva News Agency

Проходимец: rogue

Двор (courtyard) is a deceptive word in Russian. You think it's easy to understand and translate. It means a court — as in royal — or a courtyard — as in the space belonging to a house. But in cities some of the дворы are tricky to translate.

The big issue is whether or not a courtyard is проходной (pass-through, meaning with more than one entrance-exit) or непроходной (closed, meaning with just one entrance-exit).

Непроходной двор is not the same thing as закрытый двор (literally a closed courtyard).

Закрытый двор is a new thing for элитные дома (outrageously expensive, er, I mean elite apartment houses). Закрытый двор is an enclosed space with no unauthorized entrance, no cars, and plenty of places for kids to run around and play. In English, we might call this a child-friendly private or gated courtyard/outdoor space.

Note, too, that you wouldn't use the term "gated courtyard" for огороженный двор (fenced-in courtyard) which has шлагбаум (boom gate, automatic barrier gate). Gated anything in English these days suggests something posh and expensive, while almost every courtyard in big Russian cities now has a barrier gate, if only to keep out car owners from neighboring houses looking for a parking space.

But basically, we see that having a courtyard with just one entry/exit is a Good Thing and having multiple entries/exits is a Bad Thing. Indeed, проходной двор (a pass-through courtyard) is a Very Bad Thing — a place of too many people going too many directions at once, creating clamor and chaos. Sometimes this is literal: Часто гуляла возле Патриарших прудов, исследуя головоломную путаницу проходных дворов (I'd often stroll around Patriarchs' Ponds, investigating the mind-boggling confusion of connecting courtyards). But more often it's figurative, used to describe any space with lots of people to-ing and fro-ing. In American English, the image is a bit different: Наша квартира – проходной двор (Our apartment is like Grand Central Station).

In Russia there is another kind of guarded entrance in factories, office buildings, educational institutions and other public buildings: проходная, which is short for проходная будка (literally a pass-through booth). This is the control point (also called entrance checkpoint or entrance gate) where you need to show identification and sometimes other documents and get a pass to enter. The friend you're going to visit at work will tell you: Скажи, когда ты придёшь. Мне надо выписать пропуск для проходной (Let me know when you're coming. I have to get a pass and leave it for you at the entry gate).

And then there is another way to use проходной — it can mean something that allows passage, like a grade: В этом году проходной балл во многие вузы понизился (They lowered the passing grade to get into many universities and institutes this year). Or it can be the number of votes that allows passage into a new job: С 1 января вступил в силу закон, в соответствии с которым проходной барьер на выборах в Госдуму снижен с 7 до 5 процентов (On January 1 a new law came into effect that lowered the vote threshold to be elected to the Duma from seven to five percent).

Проходной can also mean something fleeting and therefore not of permanent value. In English, this might be something ordinary, nothing special, no big deal. Его песни выходили в разные годы и часто казались проходными (His songs came out in different years and were often underwhelming). Sometimes this is a worse than second-rate: В Ялте Сталин сыграл еще одну победную партию в которой он манипулировал президентом Соединенных Штатов и премьер-министром Великобритании, как проходными фигурами (In Yalta Stalin won another round in which he manipulated the U.S. president and British prime minister like pawns.)

You might also hear the word проходной in this odd little phrase: выходные-проходные. It doesn't make much sense, but if you were to translate it literally, it might be "weekend days-passing days." It is really just a rhyming way to say: days off. Or not. When asked how many days a week a seamstress worked, she replied: Каждый день. Ни выходных, ни проходных (Every day. No weekends, no days off).

Grim.

Meanwhile, people can be passers-by, or rather people passing through. People who pass by and don't stick around are generally Bad People: immoral crooks and bounders. I had a hard time making the connection between crime and movement, but then I remembered some English words for criminals: prowler, raider, hijacker, dodger, a shark.

In Russian, there are three main words for these kinds of grifters. Проходимец is the one you meet most often these days in language (and life, I suppose). One of my native Russian-speaking friends says this one is the worst of the trio. Он не мог поверить, что эти крупные ученые, люди безупречной честности, научной добросовестности, могли оказаться вредителями, или проходимцами, или врагами народа (He couldn't believe that these major scholars, people of impeccable honesty and scholarly integrity could be saboteurs or scoundrels or enemies of the people).

The next one down on the scoundrel scale is пройдоха, not quite as bad as проходимец but also a crook. Найдутся новые пройдохи, которые с криками "верни народу награбленное!" бросятся грабить (You'll always find new grifters who shout "return to the people what was stolen from them!" and then start stealing themselves).

And the last of this villainous trio is проныра, an immoral snooping, gossipy, cheeky fellow — a chancer or opportunist. Он чистопробный авантюрист, шпион по натуре, умный проныра: он воровал у великого поэта черновики (He is a hardcore opportunist, a spy by nature, a shrewd operator: he stole the draft poems from a great poet).

Lest this be a too depressing an end to another very depressing week, there is another expression for things that pass that is a reminder that everything passes, both good and bad. This expression is said to have been engraved on King Solomon's signet ring (although this is not written in the Bible), and is very simple: Всё проходит и это пройдёт (literally everything passes and this will pass, too). In English we say: This too shall pass.

To which I say: Дай Бог!

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