

Word of the Year 2024

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Alexander Zemlianichenko / AP / TASS

Слово года 2024: Word of the Year 2024

If there's one thing to get me out of column-writing retirement, it's the annual Слово года (Word of the Year) competition.

For the last 17 years, a group of linguists, writers, translators, journalists, cultural specialists, philosophers and teachers headed by Mikhail Epstein, a professor at Emory University in the US, have gathered up all the words and phrases that in some way capture the zeitgeist of the year gone by. And because they are a creative group, they also invented words that were needed to describe the year. Then they voted on four categories: слово года (word of the year); выражение года (expression of the year); анти-язык (anti-language — язык лжи, пропаганды, вражды, агрессии [the language of lies, propaganda, enmity and aggression]); and протологизм (“protologism,” words or phrases invented by the group members).

Two hundred years from now scholars trying to understand Russia in the first two decades of

the 21st century would do well to begin with these lists.

Since 2007 it has gone like this: Гламурный (glamorous)–кризис (crisis)–перезагрузка (reset)–Крымнаш (Crimea is Ours)–протест (protest)–Новичок (Novichok)–вакцина (vaccine)–война (war).

It's hard to come up with a better way to describe the trajectory from then to now.

The competition has, naturally, been more somber since 2022. The ebullient word-creation is gone. A few words reappear — this year, for example, релокант is on the list again after a year's absence. The word is literally a “relocated person,” a gentler, less definitive way of describing what is more commonly in Russian эмигрант (emigrant), perhaps its foreignness helping to make it less real, less an attribute of Russian language and life.

For the first time this year's слово года is a name: Навальный (Navalny). It could be found millions of times in Russian and English digital media in (heart-breaking) word combinations: смерть Навального (Navalny's death); похороны Навального (Navalny's funeral); книга Навального (Navalny's book); завещание Навального (Navalny's will). It's not “just a name” anymore, but a word that stands for both the perfidy of the authorities and the will to fight them.

Runners-up are mostly words of war: обмен пленными, политзаключенными, территориями (exchange of prisoners of war, political prisoners, and territories); эскалация (escalation); беспилотники (unmanned aircraft systems [UAS]) and дроны (drones).

Aren't UAS and drones the same thing, you ask? Well, I asked and read pages of explanations that come down to this: basically, yes, in common parlance, but UAS means the whole system of vehicle and controller while a drone is just the vehicle.

So now you know.

One war word was the subject of much discussion: Орешник. In non-military parlance орешник is a hazel nut tree, also called a filbert. In the military it's a new medium-range missile system. The question naturally arises: why did the Russian military call their new missile system a nut tree?

There are several versions. One politician said that in the past hazel nut branches were used for flogging, and by giving this missile system the same name it shows that “мы готовы дать урок противникам с помощью этих розог в виде Орешника” (we're ready to give our enemies a lesson using whips in the form of the Oreshnik).

The second version, also from a military man, is connected with the way the Oreshnik works. On a tree “с одной ветки плотной гроздь висают орехи...и новейшая ракета несет "гроздь" из нескольких боевых частей” (nuts hang in a tight cluster on one branch... and the new missile carries a “cluster” from several combat units).

The third version is from Putin, who cites the Bible where “орешник упоминается, как дерево божественной мудрости, дающее проныцательность и наставляющее человека на правильный путь” (the hazel nut tree is cited as the wood of divine wisdom, giving

insight and guiding a person onto the right path). The idea is that the Oreshnik will help Russia's enemies take the “правильный путь — путь к миру и дипломатическим договоренностям (the right path — the path to peace and diplomatic agreements).

I don't think that the idea in the Bible was bombing people into peace, but hey, what do I know?

And finally, there is the boring old version attributed to Western media: Russia is working on but hasn't finished work on a new system of intercontinental ballistic missiles called Кедр (Cedar), and maybe the Russian military is starting out with the shorter — and shorter range — орешник (hazel nut)?

The official Russian media, however, liked it as a play on the translation of the American blockbuster “Die Hard,” which in Russian is Крепкий Орешек (Tough Nut). One Russian media headline is Крепкий Орешник. Как Россия применила супероружие (Tough Oreshnik: How Russia Used its Superweapon).

One of last two contenders for word of the year was квадробер (quadrover). If you aren't up on this (like me), квадробер is someone who dresses up like an animal and walks on all fours. You can order everything online, as explained in this ad: Если ты настоящий квадробер, то тебе сюда! Наш набор для квадробики с маской и хвостом и перчатками кошачьи лапки идеально подойдет детям и девочкам. (If you are a real quadrover, this is the place for you! Our selection of mask, tail and cat paw gloves for quadrobics is ideal for children and girls.)

The last nominated word of the year is the next American president. His name rendered in accordance with Russian transliteration rules is Трамп (Tramp). Which is about right.

The winner in the expression of the year category was the phrase сидиди и не пидиди, which comes from a (very, very witty) [parody clip](#) by Semyon Slepakov about P. Diddy (Пи Диди) that stars Vladimir Putin. It is based on a word that we cannot publish in a family newspaper. The asterisk version is сиди и не пи*ди — more or less the Russian version of sit down and shut up, although here the last word is more accurately “don't mouth off, don't give me any lip.”

With the exception of искусственный интеллект (artificial intelligence), the other contenders for expression of the year are all connected with the so-called СВО (специальная военная операция: special military operation): Курская область (Kursk oblast); третья мировая (third world [war]); мясные штурмы (cannon fodder or meat grinder, literally “meat storming”); and коллективная ответственность [всего общества за действия власти] (collective responsibility [of all society for the actions of the authorities]).

After all this, it's hard to imagine an example of анти-язык (“anti-language” — the language of propaganda, lies, and aggression) that's somehow worse. But they found one: ядерка, which might be translated as “an itty bitty nukie.” This word is described by the marvelous adjective мимимишное (twee), meaning a kind of cloying baby talk. Other examples of this sickeningly sweet word transformation are печалька (so saddy-waddy) and вкусняшка (something yummy-wummy). It is, the group writes, попытка сюсюкать о конце света.... это нагляднее всего говорит о тенденции языка “обласкать” и

тривиализировать даже самое страшное — гибель человечества (an attempt to describe the end of the world in baby talk... it speaks most clearly about the tendency in the language to treat warmly and trivialize even the worst possible event — the annihilation of humankind).

Other nominees for “anti-language” were чайлдфри (childfree, as a prohibition, used in a judgmental way); красные линии (red line, as a threat); деструктивный (destructive, referring to anything the authorities don’t like); традиционные ценности (traditional values, referring to everything patriarchal and imperial, i.e., everything the authorities like); and от реки до моря (from the river to the sea, in the context of anti-Israel demonstrations).

As usual, the irony that Russian imperialist language is so dependent on the language of the nation(s) Russian authorities most despise seems lost on them.

And once again, we can only hope that the trajectory will finally turn upwards. We’ll find out in December 2025.

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