

Bumming Around

By [Michele A. Berdy](#)

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The other day I read an article about a draft law on homeless people being floated by the Moscow city government. What caught my eye in particular was the phrase "авторы [закона] предлагают законодательно закрепить понятия 'бродяжничество' и 'бездомный гражданин'" (the drafters propose to legislatively establish definitions of 'vagrancy' and 'a homeless citizen').

This is, of course, no big deal. Bureaucrats, lawmakers and lawyers all over the world define words in a particular way in specific documents. But it got me thinking about the linguistic differences are between vagrants and homeless people in Russian and ways to describe a rootless life.

Some of it is easy for English speakers to understand: бродяжничество is the same as vagrancy, and бездомный is the equivalent of homeless. In fact, бродяжничество comes from бродить (to wander), and vagrancy comes originally from the Latin vagari (to wander).

In both Russian and English, бродяга (vagrant) is someone who wanders from place to place,

usually in poverty and without a home or regular employment. Бездомный (homeless person) doesn't have a permanent living place — and in Russia, registration.

As I understand it, бродяга/vagrant is almost always бездомный/homeless, but бездомный/homeless is not always бродяга/vagrant.

In colloquial Russian today, a homeless person is бомж, from the Soviet abbreviation без определённого места жительства ([a person] without a definite place of residence). This abbreviation, invented to describe homeless people who ideologically couldn't exist in the U.S.S.R., has turned into a masculine noun with the plural бомжи (stress on last syllable) and feminine form — бомжиха.

And then there are words that are old fashioned but more expressive, like босаяк (tramp, from босой — barefoot); оборванец (bum, someone dressed in tatters, from рвать — to tear); скиталец (wanderer, from скитаться — to go from place to place); or even странник (wayfarer, wanderer or pilgrim).

Another wonderful word is шатун (wanderer, bum). This comes from шататься, which most commonly means to shake or be unsteady, like a loose tooth. But it also has the sense of going from place to place, and шататься по миру is to knock around the world. Today you are more likely to hear шатун used metaphorically about people: Он был политическим шатуном (He was a political pendulum.) Or terrifyingly, about bears: медведь-шатун is a bear that doesn't hibernate. Медведь стал шатуном, бродил по лесу, выходил на дорогу, нападал на лошадей и людей (The bear left his den, wandered around the woods, went out on the roads, and attacked horses and people.)

Reminds me of a boyfriend I once had — he was a real bear if he didn't get enough sleep.

During the Soviet era, being a vagrant or homeless was simply against the law. In fact, not working was against the law. This was called тунеядство (parasitism), a word that I used to have such trouble remembering I used the mnemonic device of "tuna fish" — lying around like a fish. Being fish-like could land you in the camps for a couple of years.

Thankfully, Moscow officials aren't going to put you in jail for not working. If you are бездомный, they'll register you and give you access to medical aid. But they have special centers for anyone into бродяжничество, which they define as a homeless, unemployed way of life, "оскорбляющий человеческое достоинство и противоречащий требованиям личной гигиены" (insulting human dignity and inconsistent with the needs of personal hygiene).

Essentially, if you stink, you're going to be in big trouble.

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

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