

Talking Russian Politics in an American Banya

By [Bryon MacWilliams](#)

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I am resting between steams at a Russian bathhouse on the outskirts of Philadelphia, doing what I try never to do at banyas: talking politics.

"If you want to know your friend," the man seated across from me, an ethnic Russian, is saying, "talk to him about Ukraine."

I come to the banya to forget. We all do. We can be alone, yet among others, while the elements of fire, water and air work their powers on us — lifting any weight we were carrying when we arrived, helping us right ourselves in a world where much isn't right.

Today none of us can forget because televisions high along the walls surrounding the pool are showing footage of fighting in eastern Ukraine, not that many of the men and women here need television to tell them what's going on: They talk daily — online and by phone — with relatives and friends living in and around the conflict zones.

Viktor is in his late 50s. He steams regularly on weekend mornings with friends — Americans originally from Russia and Ukraine — at the Southampton Spa, the only authentic banya in a sprawling community of an estimated 100,000 immigrants from the former Soviet Union.

Everywhere the banya is a great leveler. But here, the Russian language is a great leveler, too. New and old immigrants — from Kiev to Moscow, from Armenia to Uzbekistan — are united by a common language.

That unity has frayed ever since Russia annexed Crimea, and separatists sparked conflict in Ukraine's east. Brawls are breaking out in restaurants. Shoppers are boycotting Russian-owned stores, Russian products. Friendships are not only under strain, but ending. Families, too, are splintering.

"Ukraine was always under someone's thumb," says Viktor, sticking out a thumb and turning it downward, as if about to squash an ant. "Russians. Germans. Poles."

"It's a small, lovely country. But what's happening there ..."

Viktor won't tell me his last name. His friends won't even tell me their first names. I divine respective lands of origin, though, from the mildly pejorative terms they use, jokingly, to refer to each other: the Ukrainian "Moskaly" for Russians, the Russian "khokhly" (or "Banderovtsy") for Ukrainians.

Ethnic Ukrainians tend to see in me a sympathizer, someone who is rooting for them against Russian aggressors. Ethnic Russians tend to see in me the face of the Cold War enemy who again is on enemy footing — particularly if they speak little English and watch lots of Russian television.

Today I want to know what Viktor and his friends think, but they want to know what I think. Everyone at the banya does, or so it seems. For I'm an American without Russian roots who also speaks Russian, an American who was a foreign correspondent based in Moscow for half his adult life.

Clearly, to some, that makes me a spy. But that doesn't mean they won't have anything to do with me. It merely makes me more interesting. Today they're asking me what I think, so I tell them.

What's happening in Ukraine, I say, is really about what has happened, and what hasn't happened, in Russia over the past 20 years. There were no truth commissions under President Boris Yeltsin. No one was punished for Soviet-era crimes — between 20 and 25 million people were direct victims of Soviet political repression. There is no official number of the millions indirectly affected by the repression.

In Ukraine, though, people twice have tried to reconcile the legacy of their Soviet past. They didn't get the government they deserved after the Orange Revolution of 2004, so last spring they kicked the bums out, again.

That scenario is terrifying to a Kremlin that is terrified of its own people — so Russia is stopping Ukrainians from doing what Russians can't bring themselves to do.

No one at the table agrees with me, but no one disagrees, either. One of Viktor's friends concedes there might be something to what I'm saying. Another says: "Truth is born of arguments."

A man at a neighboring table — part Georgian, part Russian — has overheard us and says: "The cause of everything is government. People might fight among themselves, but it's all in the interests of the Ukrainian and Russian governments so that leaders can steal more."

Another man, an ethnic Russian who was raised in the small Ukrainian city of Slovyansk, a hotspot of the conflict in Ukraine's east, says simply: "What is to be done? Better to drink beer."

I get up, grab a bottle of Grolsch from the table next to the beer drinker from Slovyansk, and carry it into the steam room. I dilute the beer with hot water, then hurl it into the stove — something I learned to do while I was a sort of apprentice to a steam-maker at the Seleznyovsky Baths in Moscow.

I've resuscitated my banya ritual in the U.S. ever since I returned. I make steam with beer, and the stalwart scents — eucalyptus, mint, pine. But I also make steam with sea salt that I dissolve in water, accented by aromas of either anise or mandarin orange.

I make mustard steam, too, and wormwood-scented steam. I even use complementary aromas in my steams by sprinkling oils and tinctures across the fabric of a fan — a thin aluminum pole about five feet long with a hoop at one end — that I loll over and across the bodies of bathers.

I learned the fan technique in Moscow, too, but most bathers here have never seen it. The steam I make is for everyone — irrespective of their views about Ukraine.

When the steam is ready, bathers drift in, sit quietly or massage themselves, each other, with bundles of leafy oak twigs. After I cool in the frigid plunge pool I return to the table, to relax. No one wants to talk about Ukraine anymore, and I'm glad. We steam four, five more times. Then I shower, ready to leave.

On the way out acquaintances from Russia, Moldova and southeastern Ukraine — ethnic Jews — invite me to join them for lunch in the banya's restaurant. There are plenty of jokes, and there is plenty of food: a cold soup, okroshka, which is made with kvas, a fermented drink made from rye bread; and smoked trout; baked chicken; potatoes pan fried with wild mushrooms; watermelon; and bottles of vodka, tequila and beer.

"The banya unites people," says the Moldovan.

The Russian, from somewhere in Siberia, proposes a toast.

"To peace," he says.

Our glasses clink.

Bryon MacWilliams is an American writer whose memoir, "With Light Steam: A Personal

Journey Through the Russian Baths," was published last month by Northern Illinois University Press.

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