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# Finland's top political ally: The sauna

NATO recently installed a sauna in its headquarters. Coincidence? Maybe.



The sauna has historically served as an ally for Finland's politicians | Illustration by Dato Parulava/POLITICO

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THE SAUNA AT THE FINNISH PERM REP, BRUSSELS — It's very hot in here. But not hot enough, according to my Finnish hosts.

The time has come for a ladle's worth of water to be poured onto the pile of smoldering rocks in the corner, they explain. Only then will the room reach an acceptable temperature, in the vicinity of 100 degrees Celsius.

In Finland, the sauna is an institution. It's on the UNESCO Cultural Heritage List and has famously also played a role in its politics, proving a collaborative atmosphere for officials to bridge divides as they bargain in the buff. There used to be a running joke that the country was "one sauna away" from joining NATO.

Of course, it took Russia's invasion of Ukraine to get Finland's government to change its tune on joining the military alliance, something that Prime Minister Sanna Marin said was "very unlikely" before the war started. Finland, which goes to the polls on Sunday for a general election, has now gotten the Turkish parliament's approval to become a NATO member.

Marin's cabinet declined to comment on whether the decision to seek NATO membership was taken in the sauna. But, at NATO HQ in Brussels, they have just installed ... a sauna! Coincidence? Maybe.

"The sauna is, in a way, a holy place," said Finland's European Commissioner Jutta Urpilainen. She was not present during my visit to the permanent representation's sauna but did speak highly of it during a later interview.

The sauna is "a place that brings people together — to relax, to discuss," Urpilainen said. "It's also the place where people share their deepest thoughts."

For the uninitiated, a cheat sheet tacked on the wall near the sauna entrance in the perm rep's office in Brussels offers some context. "There are more saunas than cars in Finland," it says.

All government buildings in Finland, as well as all its embassies, consulates and the office of its permanent representation to the EU, must have a sauna on their premises. Finnish defense forces even build pop-up "field saunas," the foreign ministry said.

"It's the atmosphere," said Jyrki Katainen, a former prime minister of Finland and the

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country's one-time European Commissioner. “When people are in there, they are equal. You never argue in the sauna, the atmosphere is relaxed. You never raise your voice, never insult, never argue. It’s understandable that people would find a common tone in this kind of environment.”

During his time as prime minister from 2011 to 2014, Katainen was “in the sauna very often,” at times accompanied by guests at the prime minister’s official lakeside residence in Helsinki. “The only thing I regretted while being in Brussels is that we didn’t have our own sauna in our house,” he said.

Katainen did frequent the sauna in the perm rep’s office, which he considers “very nice.”

Katainen also had access to another, more exclusive location: the sauna in the basement of the Berlaymont, the European Commission’s headquarters.

“I’m ashamed to say I never tested it,” he said. “People say it’s too small.”



Water is poured onto a smoldering pile of rocks to create steam | Illustration by Dato Parulava/POLITICO

Urpilainen has also never used the Berlaymont sauna, at least in part because it was

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closed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Olli Rehn, Katainen's predecessor as Finland's commissioner, did make use of the sauna and in 2012 was accused of sexism after it emerged that he briefed selected — male — journalists in the sauna.

The Berlaymont sauna may not have proven too popular since Rehn left the Commission but, according to an unscientific study of Finns in the Brussels bubble, the permanent representation's sauna is the hottest ticket in town (pun very much intended). Other nominations included the sauna in the Seamen's Church (yes, a sauna built into a church), and one in the Atrio Restaurant, which serves a fusion of Finnish and Italian cuisines.

## Glory days

Perhaps the biggest fan of sauna diplomacy in recent history was Finland's longest-serving president, Urho Kekkonen.

**"It was part of his [political] strategy,"** said Minna Ålander, a research fellow at the Finnish Institute of International Affairs. "A way to handle the very delicate relationship with the Soviet Union."

In 1957, Nikolai Bulganin, premier of the USSR, and Nikita Khrushchev, first secretary of its Communist Party, visited Kekkonen in Helsinki and were invited to visit the sauna in the presidential residence. Bulganin declined but Khrushchev and Kekkonen ended up sweating the night away — much to the dismay of the Politburo.

It wasn't just politicians who joined Kekkonen for a sweat. Britain's Prince Philip was a regular visitor and in 1969, a Finnish company was asked to build a log sauna in the grounds of Balmoral Castle, the British royal family's residence in Scotland.

**In the past two decades, however, the sauna has seemingly faded into the political background.** Mikko Saikku, a professor in the department of culture at the University of Helsinki, says **many people associate sauna diplomacy with "the male-dominated politics of the 60s, 70s and 80s."**

**"Another dimension of it is the nudity,"** said Saikku. **"For Finns, it's not a big deal, we interact naked and do not feel awkward about it. But it's something that's often, you know, really weird for someone British or for Americans. It's quite different in Anglo-Saxon culture."**

Kekkonen, the former president, would release official pictures in which he was wearing just a towel wrapped around his waist. That sort of thing doesn't happen anymore.

While the glory days of sauna politics may be in the past, they still have a part to play.

Aura Salla, Meta's head of EU affairs, has been living in Brussels for eight years, having previously worked in the Commission. She said that gender has played a part in the fading popularity of sauna politics, as the number of women in senior roles has increased.

"Now, the deals are made around the table," she said, "and then everyone goes to the sauna to relax."

Politics aside, the sauna is a big part of Salla's life. During trips home, she and her husband take advantage of being back in Finland and take daily trips to the sauna. "I'm really looking forward to when my son turns one," she said, "so he can start coming to the sauna with us."

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