

When ideology gets in the way of solidarity

Anarchist Black Cross

16 April 2024

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In the 15 years of our collective's existence, we have gone through several major political crises. During elections, protests, and political repression, the Belarusian anarchist movement has not met with isolation from its comrades. People from all over the world showed solidarity in the struggle against the Belarusian dictatorship and for a just and free society: from Los Angeles to Hong Kong.

During this period, we only rarely encountered people who tried to explain to us that the Belarusian regime is not really that bad, and that all the horrors are just liberal propaganda. Since 2014, we have met anti-fascists or anarchists abroad who somehow believed Russian propaganda about the LDNR. But until 2022, we rarely met "experts" on Eastern Europe who confidently told us about a reality that existed only in the realm of political propaganda.

After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the situation changed very dramatically. Suddenly, within the anarchist and anti-fascist movements, there appeared "specialists" of Eastern European realities who completely denied the facts in favor of a simplistic model of the world. Many discussions of the war as a conflict between NATO and Russia or the fascist regime in Kiev fundamentally ignore objective facts. In this text we would like to discuss how this attitude affects the development of international solidarity and how some anarchists choose to distort reality in the struggle for ideological supremacy.

International of Anarchist Federations (IFA)

In eastern Europe, few people have heard of the IFA, an international anarchist organization founded in 1968 in Italy. At the time of this writing, the federation consisted of groups from Europe, Asia, Central and South America. At one point it even included organizations from the former Soviet Union, including Belarus.

With the decline of the Federation of Anarchists of Belarus (FAB), our group became the IFA contact organization in the country. For many years we worked closely together: we visited comrades in different regions and together with other organizations we held infotours in separate countries. Up until 2022, we hardly had any serious political conflicts with IFA member organizations. The invasion of Ukraine has greatly changed the attitude of many International members towards our group.

One of the reasons lies in our initiative to hold informal online meetings with International members on the war in Ukraine: the main goal at that stage was to convey objective information about what was happening and to actively combat Russian disinformation. Such meetings were to take place every two weeks. Already at the second meeting, we encountered serious problems when some of the International's participants started repeating Russian propaganda about NATO, fascism in Ukraine, and so on, almost word for word.

The series of online meetings ended rather quickly. On the one hand, the unwillingness of many anarchists to accept objective facts hindered them. On the other hand, some of the International's participants insisted on formalizing such meetings, which we regarded as a blatant attempt to "bureaucratize" inconvenient information.

We encountered the problem of "selective bureaucracy" a year later, when at one of the formal meetings of the International we proposed to invite comrades from Ukraine and Russia to explain the situation in these regions and the possibility of interacting directly with local activists, rather than with information from social networks and dubious groups.

The participation of anarchists from Ukraine and Russia was blocked, and after several months of constant attempts to exclude people from Belarus, Ukraine and Russia from discussions of the war in Ukraine, we decided to withdraw from the International.¹

This situation was the first in a long line of building barriers around the topic of the war in Ukraine by certain “expert” groups that prefer the same simplistic picture of the world. Unfortunately, in some countries, our former internationalist comrades play an active role in maintaining the myth of “NATO against Russia”.

The conflict within the IFA has shown us how fragile international ties are in the face of government disinformation programs, ideological dogmatism, and the unwillingness of many anarchists to understand complex international conflicts.

Book Fair and Congress

In the summer of 2023, we applied to participate in the Ljubljana Anarchist Book Fair, where we gave a presentation about repression in Belarus, with a separate block discussing how the war in Ukraine affects anarchists’ political struggles. When we saw the “no war propaganda” signs, our collective members were somewhat confused, knowing that the position of the organizers of the book fair on the war is ambiguous. We never realized who the posters were aimed at, although at one point we were worried that we would be told to remove brochures with interviews about the war from various anarchists in Ukraine and Russia.

At the event we met, among others, comrades who had previously organized benefit events and presentations for ABC. Some of them refused to talk to us at all, while others preferred to communicate in the format of political statements rather than dialog.

At the anarchist congress in St. Imier we began to speak openly about our fears that our political position on the war in Ukraine was affecting solidarity with repressed comrades inside Belarus: the more we try to question positions that do not take into account the situation in the region, the more “untouchable” we become in certain branches of the anarchist movement, which used to be ready to provide diverse support to comrades from the BUR (Belarus, Ukraine, Russia).

In Switzerland we also became aware that we started to be considered as militarists and supporters of the war in Ukraine, although nobody directly expressed it to us. We learned about this perception almost a year after our trip to Switzerland.

Partner organizations

Before touching on our “commitment to militarism”, we would like to briefly discuss how Western anarchists and leftists find “alternative” partners in the region to confirm their political views.

In the situation with Ukraine, the main partner of the antimilitarists was the odious media group “Assembly” from Kharkiv, which prefers to disassociate itself from the rest of the anarchist movement and actively cooperates with the group of Vadim Damye, a Russian historian who has

¹ In case anyone doubts our membership in the International, the proof is at the link (website archive as of 2021) web.archive.org

been spreading the myth of a fascist Ukraine since 2014. If you want to know more about the “Assembly”, ask Ukrainian anarchists.

In the case of Belarus, the situation became quite strange, as anti-militarists and pacifists suddenly started working with the controversial Olga Karach, a “professional” NGO activist with a dubious background, which was already entrenched before the events of 2020. People familiar with the political environment of Belarus have heard about Karach, and understand the danger of political interaction with this person: disinformation for Olga serves as one of the tools for building political power and raising money.

It turns out that the organization “Our House”, which Olga leads, is actively involved in creating a myth about a mass movement of deserters inside Belarus, who want to leave the country in an attempt to avoid mobilization. In November 2022, there were allegedly already tens of thousands of such evaders². How many such souls Karach sold to the Western left remains a mystery to this day.

Using the example of the above-mentioned organization, it becomes obvious that in their search for new “partners” in Eastern Europe, leftists and anti-authoritarians are ready to work with dubious figures, as long as they confirm the facts necessary for their picture of the world. The criterion of trust becomes not an attempt to understand the real situation in the region and a desire to support the struggle, but rather interaction with those who confirm already existing misconceptions.

With this approach, some activist groups risk falling into the trap of fraudsters primarily interested in the money side of things. The inability or unwillingness to delve into certain issues makes anarchists easy prey for those who traditionally “dipshit” liberal and center-left political forces.

Does ABC-Belarus support the war in Ukraine?

A few months ago, ABC-Belarus applied to participate in a book fair in Berlin with an info table and/or presentation³. The organizers of the fair stated that they planned to pay much attention to the issue of the war in Ukraine. The response to our inquiry came categorically negative and contained the following wording:

“...You are in favor of the war in Ukraine, so we have nothing more to say...”

And it is obvious that this perception of anarchists from the BUR resisting Russian imperialism continues to strengthen in the minds of a part of the anarchist movement. Instead of critical analysis and attempts to build a dialog, we again and again run into a wall of blatant political ignorance. As a result, ABC-Belarus will not go to the fair in Berlin (our last talk in the city concerning the situation with repression in the country happened before the full-scale invasion began), and the organizers of the event will be able to conduct debates in an atmosphere of general “consent”, having secured themselves from the opposition of people who directly carry out activities in the BUR region.

As the war in Ukraine continues and Western activists become “tired” of the topic, we expect this approach to our collective to only increase, and “weeds” of misinformation and outright lies to grow in the place of solidarity.

² pramen.io

³ anarchistischebuechermesse.noblogs.org

We will not knock on the closed rooms of social centers in the west and try to tell the story of our struggle or repression against our comrades. We have plenty of room to direct our energies as it is. But do the people who censor solidarity groups realize that they would then have to take it upon themselves to support the repressed comrades with their own forces, if they are really committed to the ideas of internationalism and anarchism? It is then also the responsibility of such groups to inform the broader anarchist movement about the repression and to raise money for basic support for those who continue the struggle in prison.

In turn, we want to express our gratitude to those who are still supporting our collective and our comrades in Belarus, in Ukraine and in other Eastern European countries. Despite all challenges and obstacles, it is you who show an example of international solidarity and readiness to stand shoulder to shoulder in the most difficult moments of our struggle, no matter how many kilometers and walls separate us!

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Retrieved on 18th July 2024 from abc-belarus.org

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