

Interview with Ukrainian War Resister

Anarchist Communist Group, Czechoslovak Anarchist Association

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In December 2024 some media sites reported on the rescue of a Ukrainian man and his kitten in the mountains in Romania after crossing the border from Ukraine¹. They failed to mention the reasons why he fled. The Czechoslovak Anarchist Association (ČAS) contacted him for an interview.

An interview with a war resister who, rather than fighting, escaped from Ukraine across Romanian mountains.

At the beginning we would like to wish you good health and we hope that you and your kitten are alright. Could you introduce yourself to our readers?

Thank you very much. My name is Vladislav Duda and I'm 28 years old. I'm a solicitor but I very quickly realised that this field is designed to take bribes, not to protect human rights and liberties.

I'm from a small village next to the city of Bucha in the Kyiv region. For unknown reasons the Ukrainian media are saying in their materials that I'm from Kharkiv but that's not true. In the years 2022 – 24 I was involved in citizen-based journalism. I have published many materials on human rights violations in the law enforcement and judicial systems of Ukrainian state power. Unfortunately due to the censorship not many materials regarding human rights violations in the military sphere got published.

Your brave escape grabbed the attention of international media but the Czech media stayed silent because it doesn't fit their war propaganda. Tell us of your crossing of the mountains to Romania.

Originally my plan was to cross Maramures Mountains in May 2024. But on the train to Rakhiv in Zakarpattia I got checked by the border patrol so I decided to jump off the train. Unfortunately the train was still going quite fast and I injured my head. After I received stitches I stayed two months in a hotel in Rakhiv and was treated as an out-patient. On the 28th of July when I was leaving a supermarket I was attacked by an officer from the local police station. He drove me against my will to the Army draft centre in Rakhiv. There I was held all day in a cage and guarded by armed men despite my documents confirming that I'm unfit for Army service because I suffer with ADHD and OCD since my childhood. But after my friends began to raise

¹ <https://apnews.com/video/vladislav-duda-romania-ukraine-war-and-unrest-animals-33a8135128c34cea82824ac34dfd6e07>

attention to my treatment I got released. Afterwards, a judge ordered the state prosecutor to initiate criminal proceedings against the officers and people who illegally incarcerated me. But the Military prosecutor stopped these proceedings which he justified with statements from the perpetrators who stated that I was in custody voluntarily. The prosecutor who investigated this case, Andrei Sokolov, officially stated that I didn't have a status of a journalist. Later, the judge refused to recognise this circumstance as sufficient to suspend the prosecutor from the investigation.

Due to the strict security of the section of the mountains that leads to the border I had to stay in Rakhiv till the beginning of winter. At last, on the 28th of November 2024, when only small number of border patrol stayed in the mountains I could finally begin with the crossing. Despite the bad weather I've met two other men in the mountains attempting to cross the border. And on 6th December, after covering more than 40 kilometres on snow-covered mountain paths (from 50cm to 140cm of snow) we crossed the border between Ukraine and Romania. Unfortunately during the descent on the Romanian side the slope is over 45 degrees and we fell in the river. I was pulled out by the Romanian rescue team.

Why did you choose the Carpathian Mountains crossing for your escape to Romania? At least 16 people died there so far. What are the options to get out of Ukraine and escape the mobilisation into the army? What would be your advice to other people trying to escape?

In Ukraine the life of a person, who isn't an employee of a state apparatus or doesn't pay those who draft him to the army, is worthless. My position is simple – I'd rather die for my freedom than for the interests of corrupted bureaucrats.

There are not many ways to escape Ukraine. Men usually either swim across the river Tisza or Dniester or they walk for a several weeks through the mountains to Romania. The borders with Hungary and Slovakia are rigorously guarded and Poland, in contrary to the standards of the Geneva Convention on the Rights of Refugees, is handing the men back to the Ukrainian Security Services.

My advice to people who want to follow my footsteps would be – don't be afraid of the state bureaucrats and leave Ukraine at the first opportunity. It's better to be seen as a coward in the eyes of the authorities and the people loyal to them, but stay alive, then to be a war hero but lose your life or health while the Russian and Ukrainian authorities profit out of the war.

To escape with a help of a people-smuggler can costs over 100,000 CZK, which is a lot of money that ordinary working person in Ukraine can't afford, is that right? Did you consider this option?

Escaping through a smuggler in Ukraine costs 1,000 – 15,000 USD. But there isn't any guarantee that the smuggler is an undercover employee of the Secret Services, who only takes your last savings and then force you to the military service, without a proper training, to die in the first battle with the Russian Army.

I know of examples when the Secret Service organised schemes where they were offering an escort to the border for money. Later, after receiving the money, led the men into a trap set up by the Ukrainian Border Patrol. The Border Patrol then handed the men to the Army recruitment centre which, based on falsified medical reports, declared 99% of men fit for military service despite their medical limitations and sent them to war. In light of this information I didn't consider the option of an escape with smugglers but I worked out my own plan of escape out of Ukraine.

Let's return to the time before your escape. Why did you decide to run away from Ukraine? Can you outline your reasons why you didn't want to fight?

Since 2014, since Maidan, I actively speak out against violations of human rights and freedoms by the Ukrainian authorities. In Ukraine everyone who dares to stand up against the authorities is persecuted. The Ukrainian Special Service organise surveillance and persecution of people who don't agree with the abuse and torture methods of the Secret Service. I've been bullied by the Security Service and it's minions for 10 years. They manufacture criminal cases, destroy public reputation and try to break the morale of those who fight against the criminal regime. I've had enough of being the target of the Ukrainian power structures, so I decided to leave the country. I like my country but I despise that criminal regime of power. I hold pacifist and anarchist views and for that it is unacceptable for me to take up arms and take part in any military actions. I don't want to die for the interests of corrupted officials who will run away from the country with the money stolen from the ordinary people as soon as the war ends.

You are from the area of Bucha which was mentioned a lot in the media in connection with the war crimes of the Russian Army. What happened there? How are people coping with the aftermath?

I'm not following the news but I've heard of the large number of killed civilians by soldiers of Ramzan Kadyrov. As far as I know, Russian soldiers weren't part of the mass shooting of the population. That was done by members of the Chechen Special Forces. But I could be wrong. In Bucha, the majority of people still communicate in Russian but some people insist on using Ukrainian. In Kharkiv 99% of the population speak only Russian and in Kiev all civil servants, including those in the office of the president Vladimir Zelensky, communicate in Russian. Ukrainian is used only at official events, so the wave of hate towards the Russian language that is spread through the media is peculiar. Ukrainian is used only in the western parts because it's a mother-tongue for the inhabitants of the western regions. In the east and in Kiev most people use Russian.

What is the mood among the population and what is their relationship with the army? Desertion, escapes and draft dodging is on the rise, what are the reasons? Why don't people want to fight?

In most cases people support the war and mobilisation if it doesn't personally affect them or the people close to them. The real patriots are already fighting or were killed. Generally, people have a positive attitude towards the army, but they hate the army personnel that forces people to go to war. Majority of the escapees and deserters on both sides of the conflict don't want to die for the interests of the corrupted authorities. The children of the officials aren't taking part in the military operations but most of them are formally on the army list or they are taking part just "on paper". In reality though the borders are open for them and they are spending money stolen from the state budget abroad. The war against corruption in Ukraine is only a show for the international community. In reality most of the corrupt officials stay free and without punishment. People don't want to fight under these institutions.

Do you think there is a hope for the end of the fighting and peaceful solution? What scenario, do you think, is realistic?

As long as both warring states don't steal all the money possible from the budget of the taxpayers and don't gain all the greatest material profit from the war – the fighting won't end. When both warring sides run out of material resources, the war will end that very day. Don't forget that every war ends at the negotiation table.

What does your family and friends think about your escape?

I don't have any friends in Ukraine because of the persecution by the Ukrainian Security forces. They make outcasts out of the people who fight for justice and human rights by spreading slander about them and force other people to stop communicating with them. My mother supports my decision. But I don't communicate with other members of my family because of their ties to the Security Service. Moreover, my father Andrij Duda, almost got me in prison on the basis of fictional accusation because among his relatives are members of Security Service.

How is your life as an emigrant? Are you afraid of the Ukrainian Secret Service? What are your plans for the future?

Here, where I am currently, I feel safe. I'm not afraid of the Secret Service, I have found myself on the brink of life and death many times, and these situations have strengthened my morale. I'm not hiding my situation, my personal details or how I look. It is possible that the Ukrainian Secret Service might try to kill me or return me back to Ukraine, because I have already received threats from people close to the Security Service. However, this cannot in any way affect my world views and force me to stop believing in them. Plans for the future is best to keep secret, otherwise it's highly likely that their realisation will be thwarted. But I wouldn't mind climbing Mount Everest.

What would you say to all the people in Ukraine and Russia if there was a hope that everyone would read it?

I would like for them to realise that it is pointless to lay down their lives or to take someone else's life at the order of the authorities that profit from the war. There are no winners and losers in the war, all armed conflicts end by negotiation. Millions of lives ruined by the world powers' lust for dominant political role. These lives will never be appreciated. There is a proverb – A live dog is better than a dead lion.

Thank you for the interview and we wish you all the best.

Thank you for addressing such a sensitive subject and for your support for free opinions without censorship.

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