Interview with an anarchist activist from Kyiv

ANIKA

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At the beginning of the war we sent some questions to an anarchist activist in Kyiv to get some information about the situation in the Ukraine. The Following interview processed the last three weeks. We asked questions as Activists of the local anarchist network of Karlsruhe called ANIKA. We asked the questions two days before the russian federation began the war. We got the Answers on march, 20th 2022.

Hey if you like we would be happy to hear a bit about you, as the responding person...

I have been an anarchist activist since 2007, took part in dozens of street protests since that time. I was a member of Direct Action student union and later Autonomous Workers Union, as well as some other smaller initiatives. I took some humble part in 2014 Maidan revolution, as I had quite contrast feelings about it – I was disgusted that the far right groups increased their popularity during the protests, but was inspired about wide-spread demands of reduction of police force and against authoritarianism. After 2014 I became less active and not part of any collective, but still tried to support local initiatives

1. We are glad to get the chance to ask some questions those difficult days, can you tell us where you are, how you survive this conflict since now?

I live in Kyiv, and it is relatively comfortable here, compared to other places, of course. We still have gas, electricity, heating and water, some of public transport is still functioning too, and the shops are still providing food. The curfew is from 8 PM to 7 AM and people here are obliged to always have their ID with them. About half of about four million of Kyiv population have left the city, and some of those who remain prefer to sleep in the bomb shelters.

Kyiv is almost intact, only a few bombs and rockets fell inside the city. However, the Russian army tries to encircle Kyiv, so some of the neighboring towns and villages were wiped out by their artillery – most notably Gostomel, Bucha and Irpin to the northwest. Now the Russian army is trying to reach the town of Fastiv to the southwest of Kyiv and cut the main railroad connecting Kyiv to the west of the country. The Russians are also trying to approach Kyiv from the east and northeast, so there might be fighting in the following days.

However, I feel quite privileged. Kyiv is defended very well and almost all of military experts worldwide say that it is practically impossible for the Russian army to take the city, as they already have suffered terrible losses. In fact, I am more worried for the people in Mariupol, Kharkiv,

Chernihiv, and Sumy as well as other towns where the heavy fighting takes place – they are constantly shelled and bombed, some of them don't have heating, electricity and water. Many occupied towns face looting by Russian soldiers there are some reports of Russian police and secret services already arresting people for pro-Ukrainian position.

2. We understand this conflict as part of the history of the last years. Connected with economical and geostrategic interests of the global west and the Russian federation. Can you tell us how you understand the process since the maidan protests and the annexation of krim, so since around 2014?

Contrary to what many people in the global west think, Ukraine wasn't of much interest for the western capitalist circles. Much of the resources Ukraine has can be easily found elsewhere. The western foreign investments into Ukrainian economy were comparatively low. Russian capital definitely had some interests in Ukraine, but more than that, Russian government saw Ukraine as a valuable geopolitical goal for Russia. Russian navy had a military base in Crimea, which allowed them to support their wars in Georgia in 2008 and in Syria since 2015. Additionally, Ukraine was seen as some sort of buffer state between NATO countries and Russia. The support of joining NATO in Ukraine was quite low before 2014, but after the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbass, it rose higher than 50% and much further after the full-scale invasion.

3. Did Politics of Ukrainian government from 2014 change?

In short, Petro Poroshenko, the president elected in 2014 was a conservative politician, who made some populist moves along with some tries to reduce Russian soft power in Ukraine, such as creation of a new independent Ukrainian orthodox Christian church, support of Ukrainian language, etc. However, his economic and social policies didn't satisfy anyone, and he didn't came up with anything better than "Army! Language! Faith!" slogan on his re-election campaign, so in 2019 Volodymyr Zelensky was elected the president. His policies were more liberal both in economics and in culture, the later gave Putin false perception that Ukrainians are in favor of more pro-Russian policy. However, the policy of Ukrainian government remained more or less independent and generally pro-western, and it seems that it caused Putin to resolve this in military way.

Considering the far right in Ukraine, they have lost most of their influence as time has passed. The far right party Svoboda lost any but one parliament seat, the National Corps party, connected to the infamous Azov regiment got only 2% of the votes and failed to enter parliament. The minister of interior Arsen Avakov, who used far right activists to gain political advantage, also lost his job half a year ago. There is a possibility that the far right will get some advantage after the war, as there is much hate towards Russia because of their actions, and the hate is likely to last after the war. However, the war is largely perceived as a fight of democracy against the Kremlin dictator, so the chances of authoritarian rule in Ukraine are quite low.

4. Did you see the Ukraine as buffer state & how do you think about the anti-war perspective ?

The current negotiations between Ukraine and Russia are going in the direction of trading off Ukrainian NATO ambitions in return for reintegrating occupied regions into Ukraine, security guaranties and reparations for the damage caused by the Russian army. The recent poll suggests that this position is suitable for much of Ukrainian public. However, the implementation of the peace terms on these conditions remains largely dependent on the situation in Russia, as only the threat of internal dissent due to economic and military failures will force Russian authorities to make such concessions. A lot of leftists in Ukraine, as well as in Russia and Belarus are hoping that the Russian military failure will cause the anti-authoritarian revolutions in later two countries.

5. What is Lugansk and Donetsk?

The "People's Republics" of Donetsk and Lugansk are military dictatorships under direct Russian control. Any more or less independent leaders of separatists were killed in the previous years, probably by the Russian security services. Current leader of DNR is a former Ponzi scheme advertiser; it seems that he was picked up as he had lacked his own political autonomy. The region is cut off from the rest of the world by sanctions, stagnated economically, surviving mostly on coal mining and Russian direct financial aid. Just before the conflict, the leaders of the "People's Republics" announced the mandatory mobilization of the male population. There were reports of men being kidnapped at the streets and forced into the army, now they are used as infantry ahead of advancing regular Russian troops.

6. How was the Recognition of those two regions before?

Before 2014, there were very little reports of any separatist organizations in Donbas region, just a few small groups of political activists. It always seemed to me that the opposition between eastern and western Ukrainians was pushed by the politicians who wanted to gain some voting advantage in some regions. At least the younger generation clearly seemed not to give a shit about these divisions much. And after living eight years near the warzone but in relative peace, people in Ukrainian-controlled parts of Donbas definitely didn't want the war to spread to the rest of the region and live in the unrecognized republics under sanctions. Because of it, there already have been videos of pro-Ukrainian meetings in the streets of Russian-occupied towns in Donbas.

The recognition of these republics was probably part of a plan to partition Ukraine into several countries – Belarus dictator Alexander Lukashenko on his TV briefing had accidentally shown a map where Ukrainian territory was divided in several parts, based on pre-war assumptions on pro- and anti-Russian sentiment in Ukraine.

7. How is the Russian conduct of war ?

Russian Federation has invaded Ukraine from several directions simultaneously. Now it is clear that have expected almost no resistance and to be capable to capture main cities in a few days and occupy rest of the country in the following weeks. It seems that the war was prepared in great secrecy, so even a lot of people who were gathering information for Kremlin didn't know that invasion was coming. This fragmentation of information led to a completely fake perception of Ukraine as a country that would welcome the Russians, or at least would be too scared to resist. To the contrary, after 2014 Ukrainians always assumed that the threat of a full-scale invasion was quite real and prepared accordingly. A lot of people took some form of military or medical training and prepared uniforms, bulletproof vests and other useful gear, which were bought by their own money. After the war had started, such people immediately volunteered for fighting, while others donated money or self-organized to provide fighting units with the gear bought from those donations and which the state wasn't able to get them. People in the occupied territories started to organize civil disobedience actions, and some of them, especially in the north, acted as partisans, burning or capturing Russian tanks and other vehicles. The Ukrainian army took the tactics of active defense, maneuvering and organizing constant ambushes, which led Russian army to catastrophic losses and their invasion almost stopped by the second week of the war. Unfortunately, the Russian army didn't back off and started systematic shelling and aerial bombing of Ukrainian cities which resulted in thousands of civilian casualties. Now both sides are trying to organize reinforcements while the land advancements are limited.

8. How do you feel within the war situation?

There was a feeling quite close to panic in the first two days of the invasion. I woke up at about 5 AM due to sound of explosions, the sky was lit red – the Russian army was attacking Ukrainian military objects around Kyiv. A lot of people were packing their belongings into cars and going in the western direction or trying to escape by trains or busses, big queues near ATMs, pharmacies, and shops. The next day was somehow even worse, as the news were that the Russian tanks are closing in on the outskirts of Kyiv. I tried to get mentally prepared that the city would become a place of vicious house-to-house fighting, but it seems that such preparation is impossible. However, the next day brought some good news: the Russian advance nearly stopped on the outskirt of Kyiv, numerous videos appeared that the Russian army was prepared extremely badly, and many soldiers didn't even know why they had to fight this war. The next days were a complete emotional roller-coaster, as the emotional stance improved and declined several times per day, depending on the news. Finally, after three weeks of war, the emotional stance became more or less stable. Still it's quite hard to concentrate on anything except the news.

I live quite far from the objects of military significance, however, so I feel much safer than many others in Ukraine. People who live in the warzones have to survive in their basements without heating, communication and often without sufficient food and water supplies for days and even weeks while listening to the artillery shelling destroying the cities above their heads. I can't really imagine what they feel, and I doubt that they will tell this any time soon – people who survived WW2 were also silent about what they experienced.

9. How would you describe repressions against anarchists/antifascists?

Ukrainian anarchists and antifascists had a lot of problems with street Nazis, who tried to attack their events (or some other events like those organized by LGBTQ+ community of the feminists). However, the cops didn't care much about the anarchist activity, except some investigations about supposed cases of property damage, which didn't result in any arrests. Another case was when Security Service of Ukraine tried to deport one of Belarus anarchists back to his country of origin, where the Lukashenko's cops would likely put him in jail. However, the case was successfully defended in court and our comrade remained in Ukraine.

The electoral support of the far right declined year by year, and they lost all but one parliament seats. The Ukrainian Minister of interior, Arsen Avakov, had also lost his job half a year ago – he supported far right groups as they gave him political advantage. He had let them to use street violence on different occasions, than cops arrested them, and after a few hours released them without any charges. After that, Avakov would appear on the TV and say that his cops under his authority successfully prevented the violence. This scheme enabled him to remain in power for 7 years; however, as more and more scandals of police corruption, ineffectiveness and brutality mounted, he had finally lost his job. So, after the far right had lost most of their allies in the government, the hope of easier times appeared in anarchist community, as well as some others.

However, now the new danger is upon us, as the Russians are likely to put in jail or even kill many political activists from all of political spectrum should they overcome Ukrainian resistance. As we can see in videos from many occupied towns, the occupation can only be enforced trough the brute force – the Russian police and secret services are already acting there and kidnapping the activists who are trying to organize the resistance. And near Kharkov the Ukrainian army had ambushed and destroyed a huge (about 35 cars) convoy of Russian cops – with shields, helmets in their cars, with a lot of paddy wagons.

I know that many activists in the western countries were worried about Ukrainian Nazis. However, all of activists who live in Ukraine know, that the police violence, organized by the state

is much worse than any number of street Nazis, even more so if it is organized by completely uncontrollable dictators like Putin or Lukashenko.

10. Are there any kind of Self-organized movements ?

Many of the anarchist and anti-fascist activists have joined the territorial defense forces or even the army. Some of them joined the territorial defense forces together as a group and formed a platoon of anti-fascist fighters. You can find information about them at operation-solidarity.org . Others joined individually in whatever unit they saw fit.

Others joined the volunteer movement. In Ukraine, the term 'volunteer' usually stands for a person who helps some activity in non-violent way where the government is not able or is too slow to provide aid. Some help to collect donations, some help the refugees, some provide the purchasing of valuable equipment to the fighting units. The volunteer movement is quite widespread in Ukraine, and thanks to it, many people managed to get humanitarian aid, to evacuate from the warzone, and the fighting units are better equipped with bulletproof vests, radios and infrared visors than the Russian army is.

I know that many of anarchists in the western countries would say that it is not ok to join the government forces. However, the anarchists during the Spanish civil war fought as a part of regular Republican army, and later joined the Free French army to fight in WW2. We see the situation as quite similar – Vladimir Putin made it quite clear in his declaration of war speech that he considers Ukrainians as fake nation and all Ukrainians should 'return' to considering themselves as Russians – which they never did. Now it is clear to everyone that Putin is an ethno nationalist dictator who cares only about open conquests of other territories and their subjugation through military and police force, full control over media and the propaganda of military victories of the past times. All of this is totally unacceptable for the anarchist movement, and that's why we chose to fight.

11. Help, is there a sensible way to give it?

We all are grateful to all of western countries citizens who helped the refugees from Ukraine, and it is definitely great to continue to do that. If you feel ok to support the anarchist movement in their direct fight, you can go to operation-solidarity.org and find a way to do so.

12. Would you give us some thoughts?

As far as I know, there is a great deal of whataboutism in the western leftist circles: Ukraine is bad because it wanted to join NATO; Ukraine is bad because there is a Nazi Azov regiment; the west had shown it's racist attitude as they host white Ukrainian refugees while denying the refuge to the non-white.

No one in NATO leadership with at least some sanity would really like to have a war with Russia, as Russia possesses the largest nuclear arsenal on the planet. Russia is afraid of NATO expansion not because NATO wants to invade Russia, but because it will block Russia's ambitions and direct interference into neighboring countries. Such as they did in Moldova in 1992, In Georgia in 2008 and in Ukraine since 2014, as well as their support to different factions in the Middle Asia region. While it is ok to be critical of the western imperialism, it is also crucial to be critical of imperialist ambitions of other so-called 'world powers' and not to make excuses of their war-crimes because the western powers have more resources to commit them. Russia was involved in a brutal military campaign is Syria where their aviation leveled cities to the ground, like they are doing today in Ukraine, as well as provided it's mercenaries and shipped enormous amount of weapons to various regimes in Africa, but this is usually overlooked.

Azov regiment consisted of up to 1000 troops before the full-scale invasion, now there are likely to be more of them as some of their retired fighters went back to rejoin the ranks. However, the Ukrainian army has more than 300 000 troops now and their number is increasing day by day, and there were more than 40 000 000 people living in Ukraine before the war. So it looks very hypocritical to deny any support to Ukraine because a small fraction of it's troops are Nazis, while the whole country is under attack of an ethno nationalist dictator who believes that the millions of people should consider themselves Russians.

Finally, as I told before, it is amazing to see the support of Ukrainian refugees and we are very grateful for that. I hope that this support will become a valuable example, which would teach people all across the world to show more help for the refugees from other warzones around the globe, no matter from where they were coming.

Thank you for all of your support!

Best wishes.

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