

**A report on International anarchist meeting
in Warsaw 27–30th of June 2003**

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Contents

Best always comes last	3
Anti-sexist workshop	3
Evil men	4
Nagnag	4
Evil liberals	5
N-word always scores biNGO	5
No expectations – no disappointments	5
Evil chekists	6
Saturday	6
Learn Belarussian or die	7
Enough talking shit	7
I admit it was cool anyway	7
Culture sucks	8
To conference or not to conference	8
Opportunities and expectations	9
Realities	9
Theory which solves everything	10
Identity	10
Solidarity and common projects	10
Organisation	11
Two steps forward, one step back	11
To be continued	11

With some 250 participators together with the parallel anti-border conference, the first East-European anarchist meeting in five years became a success. Especially fascinating was the scale of the Eastern-European involvement — besides masses of Polish practically all anarchist tendencies from the European side of Russia were present, as well as plenty of people from Minsk and Kiev, almost all once so hostile to each other Czech groups, people from Slovakia and Romania, lots of people from Lithuania and even more East-European immigrants from Western Europe. From other countries at least Canada, Germany, Italy, USA and Finland were present, organisers counted 20 different countries.

Arrangement with the anti-border meeting, which took place in the same building the same time was quite confusing for many, especially when relations between organisers of the anarchist meeting and (also anarchist) organisers of the antiborder conference developed from hostile to open warfare during the events. I will write another article on this theme for Alter-EE subscribers and other concerned because I just love to stick my nose to other peoples business, but in this article I just want to mention that I still believe that intentions of the both parts were honest, although pursued political aims slightly different. I believe none was parasiting the other. Besides chaos there was also clear synergy. It is no doubt that vast majority of people came first of all for the anarchist meeting, but many also attended antiborder workshops, enriching the conference. Antiborder conference had applied for grants, which was useful for the anarchist meeting for example as far as sleeping arrangements were concerned. I am sure both groups could have made it also without each other, but with cost of quality of the events.

Best always comes last

Best event of the anarchist meeting was the evaluation which we made at the Polish border camp 5 days afterwards, too bad for those participators who did not come to the border camp. I will write another article about the border camp, but this particular discussion influenced a lot my opinions about the event in general. The evaluation was just enough days after the end of the meeting for people to formulate their impressions, and not so long time afterwards that people could forget them. We could only start evaluation discussion 23:00 in the evening after a long day of action and people were very tired, which was very good since everyone was now sitting peacefully, too tired to run around doing other business or to booze or to make noise. We could still continue almost 2 hours, so I will try to fool people to late night workshops in future as well. Only big minus was that it was outdoors around campfire, and thus it was too dark for taking any notes.

Anti-sexist workshop

First event of the anarchist meeting were the parallel anti-sexism and anarcha-feminist workshops. Difference between these was clear to few or none of the participants, since both of them were mixed — maybe the confusion was an intended provocation by organisers. I ended up to anti-sexism discussion, where we had 21 men and 6 women — the anarcha-feminist meeting had maybe same numbers with opposite relation. Discussion began late, and round of presentations took more than one hour. This was because everyone was asked to tell about their opinions and feelings about anti-sexist work, as well as about expectations on this workshop. No convergence

of ideas was reached, as one could expect in a room full of people from very different traditions as far as the anti-sexist work goes. Moderators (two German and one Polish) had some ideas in prior, but were somewhat afraid to govern the course of discussion which meant that it did not lead much to anywhere. For most of the people issue of sexism is related to very personal experiences, so discussion was sort of endless list of most various appearances of the problem people had seen around them. For some various other kinds of psychological violence in personal relations than sexist seemed to be closer to their personal experience.

Evil men

Actually German moderators were unhappy, since many people put up arguments of relating oppression of women to more general issues such as mutual abuse in personal relations. I suppose these kind of comments would have considered blatantly anti-feminist and reactionary in big section of the German scene. I agree that there was at least one person around to whom feminist argument was a completely blind spot. But I am sure 10 years before it would not have been one person but all of the room. The original intention of the German moderators seems to have been enlarging so-called pro-feminist men network to Eastern Europe, but this idea ended up as completely ignored. One reason being that it popped up towards the end of the discussion. This was a shame, there are things I would have liked to talk about the pro-feminist men network, I have followed a bit their organising in Finland from outside and I have some questions I would like to ask, but seems like I have to wait until the next opportunity. And I had to translate, and when one is translating it is really impossible to take an active part to the discussion. Some people who participated to the parallel anarchy-feminist meeting complained that most of the time went to argument about having or not having separate groups, which was a hot topic for some Russian MEN involved but generally passé for many participators.

Nagnag

Failure to maintain the schedule was a really big minus for the meeting. The difference between big (50 persons) and huge (250 persons) events is that in big events it might be somewhat collectively spontaneously decided when it is time to begin a discussion, but in huge events the mass inertia is just too much and if there is no discipline and no-one wants to be authoritarian, program will never start. Every morning program began like 90 minutes late, which was very annoying since the whole schedule got fucked up and it was impossible to know when there will be food and when workshops will start later on during the day. I am sure that if organisers were authoritarian enough the first day, later on people would have learned that if they are not in the workshops the right minute, they will miss something. It should be ones own problem to be around in time. We could have began any workshop when 5 people were around, this way people would have learned that they won't be waited. And what is the point to formally began program 10 AM, if everyone thinks it is impossible that early anyway?

Evil liberals

Friday 27th was the only day I participated to parallel anti-border program, I had to translate to a Belarussian for a while in a lecture about “New forms of fascism and anti-Semitism in Poland”, made by some Piotr from Warsaw. He was a totally annoying liberal who made points like “The very pleasant thing in the Polish society is that unlike Germans and Russians, we have always been in the centre, extremists such as fascists or communists have always had just a minor support over here”. The point of these “new forms” was that mainstream Polish parliamentary politicians like nowadays to use sort of non-direct anti-Semitic rhetoric, for example slogan “I am 100% Polish” means actually that a Politician is proud not to have any Jewish blood. Whatever, fuck this guy, I hope I will never have to see him again.

N-word always scores biNGO

First working group in Saturday 28th was the Eastern-European Networking, something which really should have required some preparation and pre-planned concept. I counted almost 30 different groups or initiatives present, so having all of them presented would have required the whole day. It was a good innovation to have presentations in randomised order, but we still did not get very far because we began so much late. But it is a question how much it makes sense in general to have presentations in such a massive event.

There are two kinds of people, those who understand better written, and those who understand better spoken information. Those who prefer spoken information may read countless articles, but they are always happy to hear exactly same things spoken since they process spoken information much better. But since I process written information much more effectively, it was no surprise to me that all presentations in the meeting together gave me a minimal amount of new information, adding to what I had read from internet or journals already. Spoken information is always less intense especially if it has to be translated to two languages.

One idea that came to my mind already few days before the meeting was to have “continuous presentation”, that every participator was given half hours of time to present their group activities, theoretical backgrounds and history in a working group which would be continuously taking place during the whole meeting time. Presentation order would be available in schedule, so that people could attend to presentations of groups interesting to them, and hear much more in depth about their ideas than just the usual 5 minute superficial torso. Maybe we could implement this the next time, although in general I think interests of those preferring written information are in an eternal controversy with those preferring spoken word.

No expectations – no disappointments

One reason why I am so happy with the Warsaw meeting is that I had not much of any expectations, or any ideas of common projects I wanted to get realised there. For example 5 years before in East-West meeting of Prague I proposed setting up a news bulletin about East European issues, but when time was ripe for that it emerged in form of Abolishing the Borders from Below-paper, completely independently from the networks which once organised the anarchist East-West meetings. I think Alter-EE list and ABfB paper already completely fulfil the demand

of information networks in the Eastern Europe, next step should be creating networks connected to some projects. Of course working group on networking was a good place to promote these two existing initiatives, but inviting people to ready table is never the most creative approach, there are always much more people willing to start something new than to join already existing initiatives concept of which they may not formulate. But no one had any other ideas except these two already running initiatives. We also decided to split to smaller more concrete groups, but only group proposed was the anti-repression one.

Evil chekists

I was to moderate it (I am afraid I do not qualify to title of facilitator), but I just ended up delivering a lecture about the trouble we have lately had with chekists in Krasnodar, Yaroslavl, Ivanovo and Moscow. This was not my intention, since we have not yet set up a proper counter-repression strategy in Russia (when writing this we still are working on it), and I had nothing concrete to propose to people at that point. I would rather had seen some kind of emergency response network set up by people who participated, and a general discussion about anti-repression/Anarchist Black Cross strategy in Eastern Europe. But unfortunately no people with experience or ideas on anti-repression or Black Cross activities from Poland (where are many very active Black Cross groups) or from elsewhere came to this discussion, so I ended up being the lecturer. All the remaining program of Saturday I missed because I was doing distro. A good hint for the next meeting would be to spend one half of a day to a book market, so that people do not have worry that everyone gets the literature they were looking for, and do not have to miss so much other program.

Saturday

In Sunday 29th the first working group was about anarcho-syndicates and workers' activists. It started that much late that I had to leave in the middle in order to make it to presentation of the Navinki editors, just when it was about to get interesting. Of course the syndicalist working group was again mostly presentations, and since less new information since most of the thing has been covered in internet and ABfB in the past, the essential new information was foundation of active Casual Workers Union by some Belarus Anarchist Front people from Minsk, they had even had some successes.

Navinki presentation was something unusual for me, a pleasant lecture. This was mainly because Pavlyuk (editor in chief of Navinki) is such an excellent speaker, among two of the best I know from the former Soviet Union. Good speakers are a rare phenomena in the anarchist movement of today. Although everyone should know it already, Navinki is a satirical paper published by an anarchist collective (with nihilist tendencies;-) from Minsk. Lukashenko is running libel charges against Navinki, which will most likely lead to closure of the paper. Already now Pavlyuk has had his parents (!) property confiscated due to inability to pay his fines given after the libel court of the spring.

Learn Belarussian or die

I have always trouble in maintaining serious face when explaining to someone that Navinki is an anarchist paper which needs support of the anarchist movement, since there is absolutely nothing serious in Navinki. This is also the reason why Navinki has been so tremendous success in Belarus, at times it has been printed 5000 copies which very few anarchism-related periodicals may beat (only Norwegian Gateavisan and diy-ad financed Profane Existence come to my mind). I would have liked to have a sort of brainstorming about organisation of the support campaign, I was in a need of funny and creative ideas since supporting Navinki with serious face would not make any sense. Such ideas did not really came out in the discussion. I have some ideas anyway, such as to organise besides the usual picket a counter-picket as well, where dressed up KGB agents distribute Belarussian roubles (value of which is 1/2000 \$) to everyone subscribing petition against "obscure" Navinki. Another idea is to organise parodical studying circles of Belarussian state-ideology in construction, just as Maoists, Hoxhaists etc. had their wacko studying circles back in the days.

Enough talking shit

Besides presentations, another disturbing thing in the international meeting are the demonstrations. When idea about this international meeting came up in the aftermath of 2001 Polish bordercamp, one of the reasons I thought we needed such meeting was that in bordercamps it is never really enough time just to sit down and discuss ideas and projects, since people are all the time running around and huzzling about the next days actions. There are number of Polish I have known by face since the 2000 border camp, but with whom I still have not had time to have a discussion with...

but what happened in Warsaw meeting was that anti-border people organised support demo for abortion ship on Saturday, many people spent most of the Sunday in planning Mondays anti-visa regime demo and since many people got arrested on Monday, all the meeting program remaining on Monday had to be cancelled. So people still had a chance to spend most of the meeting in demos or in planning them, if they liked.

Anarchist movement in Poland as well as in most of the places is very young, and most of the people prefer doing concrete things to discussions. Much more people had opinions and ideas about the demonstration tactics than were participating during the other discussions, and atmosphere in demonstration planning meeting was much more electric and inspiring than during all other workshops. I also prefer being in a movement which prefers doing against bare talk than the contrary. But really I have 365 days in a year to organise (maybe little less spectacular) demos, but only once in five years I have 4 days for an East European anarchist meeting.

I admit it was cool anyway

Ok, this visa policy demo was part of the concept of the meeting from the beginning, and everyone except me liked the idea a lot (I also liked idea but with reservations), and vast majority except a vocal minority liked the realisation as well, so I wont be whining on that anymore. And in the beginning date was definitely very important and symbolical, last day of visa free travel

for people from non EU candidate countries. Although demo was not legalised, we successfully marched a long time, distributed a plenty of leaflets and banner we hanged from the bridge was there the next day. Eventually we got surrounded, few people beaten up and 23 arrested. Demo definitely made a wrong turn, and even worse went to a sidewalk where it could be surrounded. This mistake might have had something to do with the fact that first 20 persons were non-Polish who had little idea about the road, a clear tactical mistake. In another hand I do not think we could have walked much more without siege attempts by police. Well disciplined and trained demonstration force would have quickly dispersed in beginning of the police blockade and re-grouped 500 meter further on the road, but I guess I wont see anything like that during my lifetime. I will write more opinions about demo tactics in another text dealing with dirty laundry of the meeting and anti-border conference. I also wonder why so few people from Warsaw came to demo, half of the 150 people were foreigners and I suppose most of the rest from other Polish cities. But anyway, demo was ***** so enough about that.

Culture sucks

Only fraction of the participators participated to daily evening program, maybe not so bad since at least there was always space. The performance of Sunday evening was quite horrible, all performance clichés with masked person staggering around on after-trip, raw meat and bones... only good thing was the music which was nice free jazz. However that evening I had enough sense of humour to watch the trash to its end. Theatre of the next evening was not much better, but who cares.

To conference or not to conference

The question remains do we really need such events. It is easy to see point of a project meeting gathering 30 persons around a concrete issue, but what is a sense of collecting 200 anarchists to some spot? Identity-building without any contents? Comment I hear most often after such events is that maybe workshops and presentations were not that useful, but people managed to make lots interesting connections and meet lots of interesting people off program. But if that is the main goal, it would require much less effort to invite just my 30 friends to a closed meeting, no effort needed for booking lecturers since everything could be discussed in a pub in informal environment, no any promotion work necessary. Or maybe to have a big and open meeting, but without any program or lectures so that everyone could hang around in corridors 24 h/day. And even if bigger events were necessary to connect with people about whom I maybe had never heard before, I still wonder if these kinds of corridor networks were the way I want anarchist movement to organise, even if they were as effective as their capitalist equivalents WEF, TABD and Trilateral commission have proven themselves to be. Networking based solely on personal relations is at first vulnerable, because people may get repressed or leave anarchist movement, and all these connections disappear with them and must be built from zero by the followers. At second, it creates decisionmaking procedures which are not democratic and transparent for the movement in general, if the most interesting and important discussion in such meetings are informal you must know the right people and be in the right place in the right time to participate to them.

Opportunities and expectations

In another hand, never before have we had so developed communication and transport mechanisms which allow us to organise events for 200 people. 100 years ago anarchists meetings were just for a handful of delegates from each country, maybe now we could at last organise a completely other kind of international movement, a movement where everyone is a leader? Well, I still doubt that there could ever be any constructive discussion with 200 persons participating, but maybe there could still be some more effective means to use the opportunities we have today.

For me, the best point which came out during the evaluation was the vast variation of expectations people had when coming to the meeting. People from ABfB collective had discovered this when they were making a videotape with a more in-depth interviews of the meeting participators. Even more, they had discovered that many people had no any expectations whatsoever, which also became evident to me when many people were not saying anything in the workshops. It is not necessarily a negative thing, but somewhat irritating anyway. I think taking into account peoples expectations beforehand is a very crucial thing for a meeting to be a success, we should experiment some methods such as asking people to fill a blank about their expectations when they announce interest to participate.

One person from Russian delegation noted me that some people from Russia, who were first time participating to some international event seemingly had inflated expectations. Actually size of the event is also a dangerous factor of alienation, everyone who comes has some story to tell but it might be no-one is interested to hear it, at least if you are not able to grab right person on the right moment. We should think mechanisms to have everyone feel that they are wanted, welcome and important.

Realities

It is fact of nature that most organising among human beings is based on inter-personal dynamics, so attempts to organise otherwise might be doomed to fail. It still remains to be checked, if it is possible to collect 30 persons strangers to each other to one working group, so that they could left the room 2 hours later with some positive results. In this anarchist meeting I did not encounter such a miracle, so we must continue experimenting the next time.

When I voiced these concerns in our evaluation meeting five days later, I was soon responded by one Russian enemy of our mode of organisation as if I was about to form some 4th international. Others were less hostile, but still stressed the importance of personal contact. Although I think formalisation and delegated meetings may solve problem of informal hierarchies in some cases, I do not think they could be applied in the East-European context. Language barriers would create huge demand of translating bureaucracy, movement is yet way too little developed, has way too local and particular approaches. Organisations are created by demand, organisation for sake of organisation is just empty fetishism. Besides there already exists a number of anarchist internationals, although they are not very interested to network in our area, have different approaches than we have (such as that of exclusively forming workers syndicates) or are inward-looking in general.

Theory which solves everything

I would illustrate my model of natural development of international networking with the following linear hierarchy of phases:

information space » identity » solidarity » common projects » organisation » ? » revolution

The very first phase is creation of the common information space for the East-European area, I think this phase is now completed with Alter-EE list, ABfB newsletter and increase of international contacts in general. This has been a drastic development since launching of the Alter-EE some 7 years ago.

Identity

Second phase is creation of some East-European anarchist identity, idea that there exists a specially East-European anarchist movement with some special kind of struggles which would be the common ground for further common projects. I think this anarchist meeting might have been a milestone in this development, it was definitely an event with a distinctively East-European character. I may already see some special common factors in the East-European movement. The factor I value the most is the attempt to create a specific anarchist subject, even if weak, instead of being just a drop in the ocean of the “left” as often is the case in the Western Europe. If anarchist movement was just one left flavour without its own identity and subjectivity, it would be deemed to disappear. Although voices calling for left unity are regularly raised in the East as well, they are still a minority.

Of course this state of affair is partly due to necessity as well, since in East-Europe the “progressive segment” of the society mostly just does not exist. At times it makes things difficult, since left allows some channels for anarchists to have dialogue with the larger part of the society, but in another hand I have seldom seen as positive articles in the mainstream media about our actions as in the extremely neo-liberal and conservative Polish society. Often the forces which try most violently to marginalize and destroy us are those of the left, as the murderous attack Swedish social democrats launched in Gothenburg 2001 and during its aftermath shows. Everyone keeps talking about reaching out for the wider society, but reaching out is pointless if it comes with a price of giving out our militancy. And as for the militancy goes things are doing quite well in most of the East Europe, and as for the reaching out goes many people are very serious with that. Examples of anarchists drifting to NGO activity have in general been quite scary, I admit that there do are some non sell-out NGO’s around in the East-Europe, but they are less and less every day. Especially in Russia our task is to prevent emergence of the pacifying civil society at any cost.

Solidarity and common projects

Common identity and interests create solidarity, which gives way to common projects and initiatives.

This is the phase right now, right now we have common identity and solidarity, but common projects are still few. This of course depends on the concrete circumstances as well, many struggles still have a very local character and that will be the case for a long time. Paradoxically

globalisation has also brought temporary decentralisation of the economy in some sense, in time of closed national economies corporations managed to oligopolize to an extent that they were present everywhere in the limits of a certain nation-state, but after disappearance of economic barriers many actors have only limited area of presence in the economic space which is most of the planet, and for example a company with which anarchists are engaged in some conflict in Poland maybe has not any Russian representation to attack. In another hand chances to have solidarity actions are abundant, since anarchist are getting into trouble in some spot of the planet about every day. This abundance would require some coordination and setting up priorities, I really wonder if it makes sense to make a fax appeal alert if few anarchists got arrested in Warsaw or Bialystok for 3 hours for a minor misdemeanour.

Organisation

For me, other word for transparent and democratic means of common coordination and setting up common priorities is the organisation, fifth level in my linear development of networking, which as I stated before is yet out from our reach. It is already details to which extent the organisation has to be formalised, I suppose it is always easier to agree in general that we need some coordination and ability to set up priorities than on the question of formalisation.

Two steps forward, one step back

In reality for sure the development will not be linear at all, with all the dirty laundry in the aftermath of the meeting I would suppose that if we got two step forward this time, we went at least one step back soon after. Polish movement was the only one in East Europe which had both necessary material resources and connections to organise such an event, and so much shit has been flying in the air that it will take years until anything similar will get organised in Poland again. In general I was a bit surprised why so many people in the evaluation discussion called for a similar kind of big international meetings as often as possible, I suppose we do not want to repeat failure of anarchist East-West meetings of middle-nineties, who partly collapsed because they were organised annually, a way too often.

To be continued

As for the continuation, my idea is to organise a more specific and concrete meeting the next year for a smaller audience, for example around anti-repression issues, or around structural adjustment in Eastern Europe, or noborder organising in East Europe, or maybe EU enlargement (in the last case we would not come from Russia). Workshops in future international meetings should have much more substance, and only way to have this substance is that there is a continuous process in creating their agenda, preferably a small international group of people organising around the theme around the year. Many people gave positive feedback that the meeting program was organised interactively through internet, and it is very unfortunately that I had no way to participate to planning more actively. Besides this, several people in the noborder camp were very much willing to organise a Noborder camp in Ukraine or Belarus, unfortunately none of this people are from Ukraine or Belarus, so we will see what comes out from that. As for

the Polish camp, yet there is only an idea to organise a music festival against border in Poland, border camp as a form of protest is loosing some momentum in Poland and it is unclear if they will continue in their present form (see a separate article on border camp for this discussion).

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