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On racism in the Russian antifa and hardcore subculture

Antti Rautiainen

22 March 2015

In February, a critique of Moscow-based bands What We Feel(WWF) and Moscow Death Brigade(MDB) written by “Antifascist Subculture Worldwide”-collective appeared on the German website, Linksunten. Both WWF, MDB as well as 210 have since responded to the criticisms. I would like to add few points to answers of WWF and MDB.

As I see it, the main problem with the statement by “Antifascist Subculture Worldwide” is its chosen approach and target audience. As I write this, a month has passed since its original publication and still, only an English translation has been made available, and no Russian one. Basically, the author is speaking from within the German scene, without inviting participation from the Russian hardcore scene. This approach serves as a reinforcement of the usual racist stereotypes about Eastern-Europeans as ignorant barbarians, whose racism, sexism and homophobia is of a genetic nature and with whom it is impossible to engage in any meaningful discussion on any of the aforementioned topics.

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Retrieved on 3rd November 2021 from avtonom.org

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The reality is that there are people having these discussions in Russia, people inside the antifa and hardcore subcultures with anti-racist, feminist and queer perspectives, and it is a shame not to invite them to take part in discussion. It is obvious that the authors of the text have an excellent understanding of Russian language and could have put out a Russian version had they been interested.

A second problem is the shotgun argumentation. More accusations are thrown than are actually proven — for example the text refers to “homophobia” a number of times, without explicitly mentioning either MDB or WWF, yet the reader is left to infer that these bands have homophobic positions. There are definitely problems with other bands in the Russian antifa scene being homophobic - for example this song by Klowns, “Burn in hell” , has the following lyrics:

“Old Europe approaching its demise, what kind of future is waiting for her? Migrant is living there on a welfare, spitting on the law, same-sex marriage legalised, families destroyed..”

Although Klowns had never identified as an anarchist band, it only turned towards red-brown Stalinism in 2014 under the influence of the massive wave of state propaganda launched to support Russian involvement in the war in Ukraine. Klowns is now the subcultural version of the Russian state-owned channel Rossiya 1 controlled by Dmitri Kiselyov.

There’s a chance that the views of this reborn red-brown Klowns will not be accepted by the hardcore community, and the band will instead drift into the, separate, national-bolshevik punk scene which has existed in Russia since the 90’s and has traditionally not overlapped with the hardcore. On the 9th of May 2015 Klowns is booked to play in Moscow with longstanding national-bolshevik band Echelon, and Madrid Stalinists Nucleo Terco. It is up to the Russian hardcore community to decide if these positions will be tolerated or not, but the scene has yet to have its final word.

No matter the omissions and the problems with the approach chosen by the “Antifascist Subculture Worldwide,” I think it is a good starting point for a much needed discussion. But as an anarchist, I must say that WWF and MDB are amongst the elements in the hardcore subculture making the most sense in a rather depressing situation, and thus the statement by “Antifascist Subculture Worldwide”-statement is rather off target.

Still, I am afraid that as long as the Moscow hardcore community faces no outside threat, such as the Nazi threat until around 2011, or a threat such as the authorities pose in Belarus currently, it will turn more and more into itself. There will be more and more strange positions on issues such as racism and homophobia and any attempts to raise a discussion in order to return these developments will be more and more futile.

threat as in Western Europe, you could easily run into trouble on the streets of Moscow with some muslims if you are a subcultural kid. Unfortunately, as the hardcore community is drifting further and further away from any kind of political or social involvement, there is no proper analysis of these problems and the only way left to deal with “issues” like Islam and the competing muslim subcultures are primitive and racist stereotypes.

The internationalist anarchist approach would be unity of youth across all subcultures against the state and capital, but due to hardcore’s exodus from politics, the only remaining question is whose gang will have the streets. This only leaves the prospect of more senseless violence and death. And this path has been chosen even by many “anarchists,” such as “Autonomous Action – social revolutionary,” which posted a statement with an emphasis to the nationality of the victim for Prahov (but eventually deleted it) to their vk.com page. This is a group which split from Autonomous Action in the summer of 2013 for personal reasons, but eventually picked a stance against fighting homophobia and sexism.

Despite the fact that the statements by WWF, MDB and 210 don’t show even the slightest interest in discussing these problems, there are also obviously positive aspects to them. For example, this is first time I have noticed 210 taking a clearly anti-homophobic position.

The main reason the Moscow hardcore scene is stepping back from political engagement is the disappearance of the Nazi threat. Up until 2008 people in the scene were involved in underground anti-Nazi violence, from 2008 to 2012 there was also involvement in the protest movement, but these days neither of these two is present in Moscow. Meanwhile, a good part of the anarchist movement has jumped on the Kremlin propaganda bandwagon and, under public pressure, rejected the struggles against sexism, homophobia and racism. Thus, instead of pushing the hardcore scene in a more radical direction, those anarchists still part of it are either turning a blind eye to or encouraging its shortcomings.

It is also clear that a number of the issues presented in the text should be viewed as some aspect of the German narrative. For example it is mentioned that “it is important to study the history of the pretty young left scene in Russia,” but even the people criticizing sexist, macho and homophobic aspects of the hardcore scene, rarely identify themselves as being leftist. In the land where Lenin and Stalin once ruled, the term “left” rarely makes sense, and most of the people who criticize homophobic, sexist and racist aspects of the hardcore scene are likelier to self-identify as anarchists (although to be honest, lately many anarchists are likelier to be part of the problem than the solution)..

The statement by “Antifascist Subculture Worldwide,” focuses almost exclusively on Moscow bands, a city in which a majority of antifascists has always been apolitical “patriots.” Anarchists have dominated both the antifa and hardcore scenes in a number of other Russian cities. Historically, Antifa in Russia has been a broad alliance between anarchists, leftists, liberals and even non-Nazi right-wing people from the hardcore subculture.

With the Nazi threat almost completely absent from the Moscow hardcore scene, the war in Ukraine has increased already existing divisions within the scene, and Antifa has lost much of its relevance. As a consequence, people who were first around as “apolitical patriots” are leaning further right. But due to past friendships and loyalties formed during the years when joining a band meant putting your life on the line, people still stick together even with their politics drifting in opposite directions. For example, when Anton Fatullayev, former antifa prisoner who participated in the right-wing attack against the 8th of March demonstration in Moscow last spring, died fighting on the rebel side in Eastern Ukraine, a memorial event was organised by his former anti-fascist comrades from the hardcore community. Even though they hardly shared his most recent political views. Due to the perceived hardcore community values of “loyalty and friendship,” there hasn’t been much distancing from Fatullayev, and his support of the ultra-right governments

of Donetsk and Luhansk is just “one opinion amongst others” in the scene.

The biggest problem in the statements by MDB, WWF and 210 is the total lack of a discussion on the issues of racism and homophobia in the hardcore community as a whole. The truth is that many people in the hardcore subculture have been increasingly obsessed with “problems” such as “Islamization” and “tolerance” for years, and Klowns from Kirov is just one example. Even if MDB and WWF are not part of the problem, it is rather strange to write as if this problem does not exist at all.

As for Gryundik of 210, I wonder if his interview was indeed taken down because of “misinterpretations,” or if it was because people who organised their gigs in Western Europe could read Russian and began to ask questions. I would really like to see a detailed statement from him clarifying the exact issues which were misinterpreted in the interview.

One explanation of crude anti-Caucasian racism, openly present in the scene in the last couple of years, is an ill-informed reaction against the aggressive subculture amongst Caucasian youth, which is quite similar to the “gopnik” subculture of Russia. This rather aggressive subculture, the rough equivalent of the British chav subculture, which targeted any youth taking part in “western” subcultures, used to be widespread in Moscow up until 10 to 15 years ago, but has survived amongst Caucasian migrants. Violent encounters with representatives of hardcore and other subcultures happen from time to time. Although streetfights between youth subcultures are hardly a clash of civilizations, the other side in the division are muslims and a substantial part of it sympathises with the ongoing Islamist insurrection in Northern Caucasus.

The Russian hardcore scene has people from more diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds than in any Western European scene and most scenes, if not all, in US cities. There are plenty of people of Caucasian and muslim origin in the bands and in the audience, who do not see themselves targeted when seeing “images of Caucasians

in designer clothes” used in 210 leaflets and other representations. This tension is first of all between subcultures rather than nationalities or religions, however the way 210 and their allies present the problem is definitely racist and should be addressed, as their approach easily opens up doors for even bigger problems.

Such as the recent case of 20 year-old Dimitry Prahov, from the Saint-Petersburg hardcore scene, who is facing murder charges for stabbing an 18 year old Dagestani man, Mihail Saygidaliyev, to death on the 13th of March of this year. Apparently, Prahov and his friends were returning home from a gig, when Saygidaliyev and his friends mistook their group for Nazis. In the resulting fight, Prahov pulled a knife and killed Saygidaliyev.

I can't say who pulled the knife first, and it is possible that Prahov had a legitimate case for self-defence. But it is well possible that the widespread anti-muslim and anti-Caucasian views in the hardcore community influenced these events. Prahov was also one admin of the “Mojahideens and skinheads”-community on the Russian facebook equivalent vk, which opens up a window into the complex mindset of the relationship between this subculture and Islam.

At first sight, it is just about subcultural kids cracking jokes that present Islam in an overly simplistic manner. But upon a closer look there are also attempts to understand it, as well as a clear fascination with it. Skinhead subculture is an ultra-masculinist reaction to various crisis masculinity has faced in the Western (and Russian) world. It is of no surprise that it is fascinated by ISIS and other kinds of Islamic fundamentalism, which are also ultra-masculine. It is rather common in Russia for both Nazis and hardcore kids to listen to Islamist musicians such as Chechen bard Timur Mut-surayev, and not unusual for people from both Nazi and hardcore scenes to turn to radical Islamism.

None of this is a justification for the crude and primitive anti-Caucasian imagery used by 210. But one should understand that although the “Islamization” of Russia is just as much an imagined