

Meet the motley crew of anarchists and anti-fascists fighting Russia in Ukraine

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“In a world where rulers use all kinds of manipulation, compulsion and violence to wage bloody wars for their own interests, organised people must confront them with force.”

These are the incandescent words of Ilya, a self-styled Ukrainian anarchist.

He is part of a motley crew of “anarchists, anti-fascists and football hooligans”, who say they have united under the black flag — a key symbol of anarchism — to help Ukraine defend itself from Russian aggression.

Although “security concerns” prevent them from sharing too much about their identity, their self-styled “anti-authoritarian” platoon numbers several dozen, with volunteers coming from all around the world.

“For us, this invasion reflects the imperialist policies of Putin’s regime,” Ilya told Euronews. “It is clear that the Kremlin’s propaganda about ‘fighting Nazis in Ukraine’ is just a smoke screen to disguise greed for power and the desire to establish harsh authoritarian rule.”

Ilya’s anti-authoritarian platoon is part of Ukraine’s Territorial Defence Forces (TDF), a volunteer military reserve formed after Russia’s 2014 invasion of Crimea.

In keeping with the anarchist tradition of rejecting the state, Ilya said their platoon was not fighting for the Ukrainian government, but for Ukrainian society “which is the main resistance against this brutal aggression”.

“Both for the sake of justice and the basic survival of Ukrainian society this invasion should be fought boldly and defeated completely,” he said. “Society here is under deadly attack – it should defend itself.”

‘What does Putin’s regime bring them?’

Even if Ukraine is at war with Russia, the anti-authoritarian platoon says they do not consider Russians as enemies.

In a manifesto published by the Resistance Committee, which helps coordinate the anti-authoritarian resistance in Ukraine, Russians — and Belarusians — were called upon to join the war.

“Until the nest of tyranny in Moscow is removed, the whole region will constantly face harassment against its freedom,” the manifesto reads. “Every local tyrant, suppressing his rebellious people, will be assisted by the tsar of Moscow.

“We want to set ourselves and our neighbours free,” it added. “The struggle of Ukrainians gives hope for liberation to everyone oppressed by Putinism.”

In recent years, Moscow helped suppress protests in both Belarus and Kazakhstan against the country’s leaders, arguing intervention was necessary to maintain order.

Much attention has been paid to the alleged role of the far-right within the Ukrainian armed forces, particularly surrounding the Azov Regiment, **as well as neo-Nazis in Russia’s military.**

But this group of soldiers, who have loosely aligned under the flag of anarchism, are unique to the Ukrainian side.

They are the latest incarnation of a small anarchist movement which has fought for their political ideals in a foreign war, following the International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War (1936 — 39) and those fighting with the Kurdish YPG in Syria.

‘The epicentre of Ukrainian resistance is here’

Spared the frontline so far, the platoon has provided territorial defence in the central regions of Ukraine, patrolling to “detect and root out enemy infiltrators”.

They have also assisted those on the battlefield logistically and with intelligence, which they say has led to the “destruction” of enemy targets.

The platoon has also helped evacuate civilians from combat areas, often coming under mortar fire in the process.

Inside their unit, the fighters try to live out their politics, with a more democratic culture of free discussion and critique. Deputy commanders are elected for each section, while regular meetings allow fighters to relay feedback.

Ilya hoped that the existence of their platoon would contest the allegations surrounding the far-right in Ukraine.

“The myth about the far-right dominating Ukrainian politics relies partly on very huge, well-financed and active propaganda by the Kremlin and partly on the actual, visible presence of the far-right in Ukraine,” says Ilya.

“But statements that the far-right shape Ukrainian politics, society or army are simply not true,” he added.

Moscow has repeatedly said its “special military operation” is to disarm and “denazify” its neighbour.

Ukraine and its allies call this a baseless pretext for a war that has killed thousands, flattened cities and forced millions of people to flee.

‘We were ready’

The platoon formed on 24 February, the very first day of the war.

“Of course, it did not start life from scratch,” said Ilya. “Hearing rumours about the coming war, anarchists in Kyiv began planning what to do should our fears come true.” They contacted their “comrades” in the TDF, began training together and plotted how to find one another should something start.

Shortly after, it did.

The “source and root of the platoon are the anti-fascist struggle,” says Ilya. Before the war, practically all of the fighters were environmental activists, in trade unions or part of Antifa, a radical left wing group.

Many had also fought in Syria with the Kurdish YPG.

‘We need more democracy, more diversity, more ideas’

Faced with the challenges of war, many in the platoon are pursuing far-reaching goals, although they are far from united on what they should be.

In their manifesto, the platoon outlines some of the changes they want to see in Ukraine, including the cancellation of the country’s international debt and a credit amnesty for those inside the country.

Debt is a “noose around the country’s neck held by international financial institutions and wealthy states,” reads the document.

Since the outbreak of the war in 2014, international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, World Bank and European Commission, have lent Ukraine some \$40 billion (€37.4 billion).

This money, they say, has been necessary to keep Ukraine’s economy afloat and finance its war effort.

If they are to achieve their objectives both on and off the battlefield, the platoon says it needs more support from around the world.

“Solidarity plays a super important role,” says Ilya. “Everyone speaks about the urgent importance of supplying weapons from abroad. But I would also stress the moral importance of solidarity from people worldwide against injustice and occupation.”

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"Ilya" has been identified as Dmitry Petrov, who died fighting in the Battle of Bakhmut on 19
April 2023.

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