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Interview with anarcho-syndicalists in Eastern Ukraine

Yavor Tarinski

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Retrieved on 22<sup>nd</sup> February 2023 from [freedomnews.org.uk](https://freedomnews.org.uk)

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*Yavor Tarinski from the Greek libertarian journal Aftoleksi interviews two anarchists from eastern Ukraine. They themselves were politically active for decades in eastern Ukraine until before the 2014 invasion – where the possibility of any unmediated political action collapsed. They are both what many people tend to simplistically call “Russian-speaking” citizens of Ukraine. This interview was prompted by the referendums conducted by the occupying Russian forces in that region, as well as the resurfacing of fake news about their anarchist organization RKAS, in which they themselves participated and were founding members. We continue to give voice to those directly involved in this barbaric war of physical violence and vilification. A voice that states and organized political interests are attempting to silence.*

**Yavor Tarinski (Y.T.): Hello, and thank you very much for taking the time to talk to us in the middle of a war zone. Let's start by getting to know you a little bit better. What part of Ukraine do you live in?**

Anatoliy Dubovik (A.D.): My name is Anatoly Dubovik. I am 50 years old, an anarchist since 1989. I was born in Kazan (Russia) and have been living for over 30 years in Ukraine, in the city of Dnipro (formerly Dnepropetrovsk, formerly Ekaterinoslav). This is the eastern part of Ukraine.

Sergiy Shevchenko (S.Sh.): My name is Sergei Shevchenko. I am 48 years old, an anarchist since 1988. I was born and lived for most of my life in Donetsk, the centre of Donbas. In 2014, I was forced to leave for Kyiv after a Russian-inspired separatist uprising began in my city. I have been at the front since the end of February 2022.

**Y.T.: You are both well-known members of the historical anarcho-syndicalist group RKAS. Can you tell us a little more about it and its activities before the war?**

A.D. and S.Sh.: First of all, we must clarify that RKAS was not just a group but an organization. When the anarchist movement began to revive in the USSR in the late 1980s, it was plagued by irresponsibility, lack of strategy, and not taking its aims seriously – many were simply “playing with anarchism”. The revival of the anarchist movement began in Donetsk when representatives of several small groups and individual activists who had not lost faith in their ideals came together to form their own organization. Thus, as an alternative to the hitherto chaotic movement, in 1994, RKAS, the Revolutionary Confederation of Anarchist-Syndicalists, named after Nestor Makhno, was created. It was an organization – precisely an anarchist organization – that introduced clearer working principles: planning, systematization, internal discipline, division of responsibilities among its members and so on.

All this yielded good results, though not immediately. A few years after its foundation, RKAS was already an organization active in various regions of Ukraine and was quite successful. We were in-

volved in the labour movement, the student movement, we had a significant influence on the independent trade union movement, especially among the Donbas miners, where RKAS representatives participated in local and regional strike committees. We participated in a pan-Ukrainian movement to protect workers' rights and oppose the deterioration of labour legislation.

We proceeded with various editorial initiatives. The first was the newspaper Anarchy [1993–2013], which was published almost all the years of RKAS's existence. We also published the Anarcho-Syndicalist Newsletter & Analytical Bulletin, and various publications for specific social groups – the workers' newspaper Voice of Labour, the student newspaper Unity, the youth magazine Revolutionary Ukraine and others. We also distributed propaganda and theoretical pamphlets by various authors, from the classics of Bakunin and Malatesta to works by contemporary writers.

Over time RKAS evolved into something like a small International – we had chapters in other countries, mainly in Georgia and Israel. They didn't last long, but they existed. And just before the war started [2014], we were working to create an anarcho-syndicalist trade union in Ukraine, the General Confederation of Anarcho-Syndicalist Labour. This could not be completed because of the Russian invasion of Crimea and Donbas.

**Y.T.: Can you describe what was the reaction of RKAS after the beginning of the conflicts in eastern Ukraine in 2014?**

A.D. and S.Sh.: The “conflict”, i.e. the armed invasion, started in southern Ukraine when the Russian army occupied Crimea in February 2014. The Russian-inspired separatist uprising in the east started later, in about a month.

It was clear to us from the beginning that Russia could not do any good in Ukraine. By 2014, a reactionary authoritarian regime had already been established in Russia that denied all individual and social rights and brutally persecuted and destroyed all independent activity. Of course, we still have many questions about the Ukrainian state and the ruling class in Ukraine. But at least the

anarchist movement, the socialist movement in Ukraine was able to operate relatively freely for some years. It suffices to say that throughout the existence of the independent Ukrainian state, there has not been a single political anarchist prisoner here. At the same time, many dozens of our comrades in Russia ended up in Russian prisons – guilty solely for their anarchist convictions. So, we were well aware of what Putin did for libertarian ideas.

The RKAS reaction was therefore irreversible: it was necessary to resist the Russian attack by all means.

But here a problem immediately arose. The point is that RKAS was founded and has existed for 20 years as an organization for the propaganda of anarchist ideas and as an organization supporting anarcho-syndicalist actions. In other words, as an organization adapted to legal and semi-legal forms of peacetime engagement. The war changed everything, including the immediate tasks facing anarchist movement activists in the here and now. The old organization, the old forms of activity proved to be simply insufficient or impossible under the new conditions. New forms and principles of work were needed, oriented mainly towards underground resistance against the occupiers. This included armed resistance.

Therefore, in April 2014, there was an extensive discussion among RKAS members about the new process and strategy of resistance, with the results leading to the dissolution of the organization. After that, a new phase in the history of the anarchist movement in Ukraine began.

**Y.T.: Are you aware that false information was being circulated outside Ukraine that RKAS was somehow connected to the creation of the so-called “people’s republics” in Donbas?**

A.D. and S.Sh.: Yes, we found out in September 2022, because of a post on Greek social media. This publication contains nothing but miserable fabrications and the utmost stupid lies. For example, it was accompanied by a picture of a demonstration of people with black and red flags, with the caption: “Members of RKAS at the

A.D. and S.Sh.: Thank you! Long live a free and independent Ukraine!

evitably collapse. When and how it will happen – we will all see it with our own eyes.

**Y.T.: It has been said that the invasion could end with some kind of negotiations, with the Ukrainian state giving up certain territories to maintain its independent sovereignty over all other Ukrainian regions.**

A.D. and S.Sh.: All wars have ended with peace, but not all wars have ended with negotiations. For example, negotiations were not necessary to end the war against Nazi Germany: the Nazis were destroyed and Hitler committed suicide in his bunker. The same fate may await Putin. Especially since he has already prepared a bunker for himself long ago.

The compromise you are talking about (ceding part of the territory in order to maintain the sovereignty of the rest of Ukraine) is impossible. It's not even that surrendering a few million Ukrainians to Putin's fascist regime would be treason. You see, today's Russia has long shown its inability to capitulate, to peacefully coexist with the neighbouring countries it has chosen as its victims. This was evident in the two colonial wars in the Caucasus. In the 1990s, the Chechen people inflicted a serious defeat on the Russian army and the Russian government agreed to peace. The following years were spent preparing for a new invasion of unruly Chechnya, and when a new, even more powerful force was assembled, the Russian army started all over again.

Ukrainian society remembers these events and knows that the only guarantee for peace will be the complete defeat of the Russian army, the destruction of the Putin regime and very serious changes in the Russian state and Russian society. It is probably too early to discuss the specific forms of these changes, but we can no longer live without them.

**Y.T.: Thank you very much for your time! Take care and keep fighting for a freer Ukraine, beyond capitalism and statism!**

anti-Maidan demonstration in Donetsk in 2014"! In fact, this photo was taken by us at the May 1, 2012 demonstration, and the banner we held at that demonstration, which was depicted in the photo, clearly read: "The new labour reform is legalized slavery". In other words, there was nothing for or against Maidan – after all, this rally took place a few years before Maidan, in the midst of our struggle against the government's attempt to change labour laws. The author of the false caption under this photo has deceived his readers, and foolishly so: anyone who knows even a little Russian or Ukrainian and can understand the caption on the banner will immediately see that the demonstration had nothing to do with the events of 2014.

Another example of a clear lie: The authors of the fiction about the (fake) connection of RKAS with pro-Russian separatists refer to Mikhail Krylov, "an old-time veteran of the class war of the Donetsk miners", who "called us to armed rebellion against the Kyiv regime" and participated in the formation of the "Miners' Department" of the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR). Whether or not Krylov called someone to something or not, whether or not he formed something or not, is now irrelevant. Mikhail Krylov was indeed involved in the independent workers' movement in Donbas during the Soviet era and had connections with RKAS in the second half of the 1990s, when we worked closely with the Donbas Regional Stachy Committee, in the leadership of which Krylov participated. But the important thing is that 26 years ago he ended any kind of cooperation with the anarcho-syndicalists. He had long ago become a typical boring labour leader who had sold out to his former opponents. After 1998 he "entered politics", joining various bourgeois parties and running for elected office on their behalf. And now he serves the Russian occupiers.

Naturally, when we saw this article, we were furious. We immediately contacted comrades in Greece, explained the true state of affairs and the fake publication was removed from another website that reproduced it in the meantime... But there is no guarantee that

the same lies will not continue to appear again on other websites or in the print media.

In general, we have been surprised for years that many people in Europe and America prefer to get information about the anarchist or socialist movement in Ukraine not from Ukrainian anarchists or socialists, but from anyone outside Ukraine. Why they do this is a great mystery.

By the way, we should add that the lie about the cooperation of our people from RKAS with the FSB (i.e. Russian secret services) and about the participation of RKAS in the pro-Russian movement in Donbas is supported and spread by the Ukrainian far-right! Thus, those who repeat these fabrications are on the same side with the Nazis. Well, maybe they like it...

In fact, neither before Maidan, nor in general in all the years that RKAS members have been involved in the anarchist movement, we have never supported either pro-Russian separatism in Ukraine or Russian imperialist tendencies. As early as the late 1980s, most Ukrainian anarchists, including future RKAS members, were actively involved in the struggle for Ukrainian independence. Later, as RKAS we stood firmly against the war in Chechnya and supported an independent Ichkeria. Not only that: some of our publications were printed in Ukrainian, our "Radio RKAS Liberter" also broadcasted in Ukrainian and one of our publications, as already mentioned, was called Revolutionary Ukraine. So, long before 2014 the RKAS position was quite clear: in favour of a free, independent, working people's Ukraine. This is the tradition of RKAS, the tradition of the Ukrainian anarchist movement in general. Therefore, any fantasies about a "pro-Russian RKAS" are completely silly and unacceptable.

**Y.T.: What have the RKAS people been doing since the invasion started?**

A.D. and S.Sh.: Those of us who have continued our social work as anarchists have done and are doing all kinds of things. Most of us understood that sooner or later Russia was going to start a massive

thwarted the original blitzkrieg plan, the plan for a quick takeover of Ukraine. The people saw their own strength, their own ability to resist an external enemy. They are unlikely to silently tolerate a future attack by an internal enemy.

Secondly, you see, anarchism has nothing to do with the fact that a punk with a pin in his ear painted "the letter A in a circle" on the wall. It's not even about a respectable scientist with glasses giving another lecture on the thoughts and ideas of Proudhon or Bakunin. Anarchism is about the ability of people to solve their own problems without the involvement of the state and other hierarchical structures. Solving problems based on self-organization and the broad interaction of local initiatives. It does not matter what they call themselves. What matters is the substance, not the name. At the moment, there is a huge number of such non-state self-organized initiatives in Ukraine. They deal with a variety of issues, from helping refugees and guarding small communities to supplying the military with everything they need. In this sense, Ukraine today follows anarchist practices more than many other societies in the world.

By the way, isn't this a good image for dispelling a bit of the myth of the "Nazi regime" in Ukraine?

**Y.T.: What, in your opinion, is the scale of the current counter-attack and can it be considered a turning point in the war? And what are the prospects for the nationalist regimes of Putin and Lukashenko?**

A.D. and S.Sh.: The scale is visible to everyone: in three weeks, the Ukrainian army has driven the Russian troops out of the entire Kharkiv region and is gradually moving the fighting to the Luhansk region. Incidentally, the Russians have been trying to invade the region for five months. Now the pace of the offensive has slowed down considerably, which is quite normal: it has always been like this in all wars. Whether this offensive will be a turning point will be written by the historians of the future...

The fascist nationalist regimes of Putin and Lukashenko will in-

“referendums” are conducted. Anyone can see that there are no polling stations or ballot boxes, transparent or not. In the videos we can see that groups of people, 4–5 people, among whom there are always two people in military uniforms with weapons, go around the apartments of the citizens and ask them to sign the ‘ballot papers’. This is not a referendum. This is a total test of the population’s loyalty to the occupiers, which is literally taking place under the point of automatic rifles.

There is another important point. A referendum is a legal concept. Today’s ‘referendum’ has been called by state authorities. This means that today’s “referendum” must be conducted in accordance with the state law. But with which law exactly does a “referendum” in the occupied territories comply? Russian law says absolutely nothing about referendums, no referendum has ever been held in Russia since 1991. Ukrainian law, on the other hand, stipulates that a referendum can only be held on the entire territory of the country, not in individual regions. In other words, even from a formal point of view, this is a meaningless action that can have no legal consequence.

We are sure that any ordinary person can understand for themselves what to believe about this “referendum”.

**Y.T.: What does the future hold for Ukraine after the end of the war? We hear that the EU is pushing the Ukrainian government to pass new anti-union legislation and that the huge national debt has not been cancelled or reduced.**

A.D. and S.Sh.: After Ukraine’s victory in the war, a new struggle awaits us, for the social and economic interests of the Ukrainian people. Yes, already now the government is passing new anti-union and, more broadly, anti-labour laws. But we hope that after the victory, we will have good prospects for the development and activation of the social and anarchist movement, and this is why:

First, the people of Ukraine have already defeated the aggressor in a sense, at least won the first stage of the war. This happened in late February and March 2022, when the resistance on the front

invasion, which actually started on February 24, 2022. As much as we could, we prepared for all the different forms of resistance: we trained volunteers in unofficial military organizations, from which territorial defense units later emerged. And some others were directly involved in the resistance: in 2014–2015, former RKAS members created illegal combat groups that conducted guerrilla warfare in Donbas. In the Free Territory of Ukraine, groups of former RKAS members also worked in various social projects, mainly helping refugee children from Donbas and Crimea. Of course, we also continued our cultural and educational activities and spread anarchist ideas. So, we did not disappear into thin air, we continued our activities, and our life as anarchists. Just no longer in the form of our former organization RKAS.

Some of us are now on the home front, helping to defend the people. Some are on the front with arms in hand as members of the army or Territorial Defense Units.

They have even managed to organize anarchist committees of soldiers in the units where they serve. These committees defend the rights of soldiers, organize voluntary assistance and carry out anarchist training and ideological activities in their units. All this will be explained in more detail after the victory.

**Y.T.: What was the situation in the so-called “people’s republics” “DPR” and “LPR” and other occupied territories: were anarchists and leftists forced to leave? Was there compulsory recruitment of civilians into the pro-Russian army?**

S.Sh.: I was forced to leave my hometown, Donetsk. A total of 1.5 million people has left Donbas for Ukraine since 2014. While the population of Donbas was 6 million.

A.D. and S.Sh.: It’s not even that the majority of anarchists and socialists have left occupied Donbas (we don’t know what you mean by “leftists”: the word encompasses people with very different views, from anarchists to Stalinists, who have nothing in common...) But the main point is that in the territories occupied by

Russia there is only one possibility: to be absolutely loyal to power. The alternative is arrest, after which there is no more information about people.

As for the recruitment of civilians from occupied Donbas into the army, there was no official forced conscription before 2022. But there was something else: After the establishment of the secessionist regimes, the massive closure of enterprises began and their equipment was exported to Russia. Every year it became more and more difficult to find work in any given profession. The only place where an adult, physically fit man could really earn money was in the army. And a lot of people joined the military service. This continued until February 2022, when the “DPR” and “LPR” announced a general conscription. Then, forced conscription took its most incredible forms: people were rounded up on the streets, on public transport and at universities and driven to the conscription points. A few days later, these men were at the front. Most of them had never held a gun before. They died and continue to die in huge numbers. In reality, the Russian conscription in Donbas was a genocide of the local population. Now, in the very near future, the same fate threatens the population of the Zaporizhzhya and Kherson regions, which have also begun to be forcibly recruited into the Russian army.

**Y.T.: What is the general social situation since 2014 in the regions of eastern Ukraine occupied by Russian-backed separatists?**

A.D. and S.Sh.: Putin’s Russia has essentially turned into a fascist state in which the entire population is deprived of all rights. In the regions of Ukraine that have come under the control of Putin’s army and pro-Russian separatists, the situation is even worse than in Russia itself. For example, at the end of 2014, there were attempts to organize strikes in the mines that were still operating at the time, in defense of purely economic interests of the workers. These attempts were suppressed by purely gangster methods, which we could only read about in 19<sup>th</sup> century history books:

The left sees Putin’s Russia as an alternative to NATO, as a rival to NATO. In a sense, they are right: Russia is indeed opposed to NATO. But they do not see, and do not want to see, that the Russian alternative means only a desire to pursue its own, independent but equally (if not worse) imperialist policy.

Russia’s geopolitical goal is not at all to stop Western imperialism, but to make Russia an empire again, more powerful, aggressive and inhuman than the conventional “West”. The Russian state, having suppressed freedom and independence at home, cannot bring any freedom and independence to other countries.

The pro-Russian “Left” does not see this. To use the analogy of George Orwell’s novel 1984, such “leftists” side with the Big Brother of Eurasia against the Big Brother of Oceania.

Such “leftists” are idiots.

As for the future. We are not particularly interested in the future and prospects of the “Left” and the state socialist movements around the world. We are anarchists and we think first and foremost about the anarchist movement. Our slogan remains the same as it has always been: The emancipation of the workers is a matter for the workers themselves! And the split between social anarchists and those you called “narrow geopoliticalists” hasn’t even happened yet, unfortunately. We have not yet all realized that this split will be necessary and inevitable...

**Y.T.: We would like to know your opinion on the referendums on the annexation of the currently occupied territories of Donbas to the Russian Federation. To what extent can these be considered the will of a people, given the existence of the occupying army and brutal repression? We have seen that such referendums have been held since 2014 with transparent ballots and other problematic points in Crimea, so can we assume that this is an important part of Russian strategy?**

A.D. and S.Sh.: These days, as we are giving interviews, the Internet is full of videos from the occupied territories showing how



A.D. and S.Sh.: We are convinced that too many socialists and even libertarians around the world are stuck in the concepts and realities of the last century, not noticing that the world has changed a lot. And this is a huge problem that has just now become apparent with the start of a new series of aggressive actions by Russia.

We recall that Ukraine was not the first victim of modern Russian imperialism. There were Russian invasions of Georgia and Moldova in the 1990s. There was a colonial war in the Caucasus that continued until the 2000s. Russian tanks re-entered Georgia in 2008. Russia has been intervening in Syria since the early 2010s. Russian troops were used to suppress the uprising in Kazakhstan in January 2022. The war in Ukraine is simply a new scale of violence by Moscow, which has not happened in Europe for a long time, but not something fundamentally new to Moscow's policy of murder, destruction and occupation.

The 'leftists' who support Russia today see it as something like the USSR of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Without noticing that even the talk of 'socialism', 'social justice' and 'nation state' used then has long since collapsed, and people in Russia are deprived of most rights and live in appalling social, economic and everyday conditions. People in Russia live in a police state and are persecuted for their nationality (like the Crimean Tatars)<sup>1</sup>, for their religious beliefs (such as belonging to the Jehovah's Witnesses, the Mormons or the non-orthodox sects of Islam), not to mention persecution for their oppositional beliefs. Just two examples: Moscow mathematician and anarchist Azat Miftahov was accused of breaking a window in the offices of the ruling United Russia party. He was tried for this heinous crime and in 2021 he was sentenced to six years in prison. Anarchists Dmitry Chibukovsky and Anastasia Safonova from the city of Chelyabinsk in the Urals posted a banner on a fence that read "The FSB [Federal Security Service, Russian secret services] is the main terrorist". They were sentenced to 2.5 and 2 years in prison for this act. This was only on 10<sup>th</sup> September 2022.

the initiators and active participants of the strikes were taken out of town, where they were beaten and threatened with death. No gatherings, marches, meetings and other public actions by independent social organizations, including trade unions, are possible: the pro-Russian authorities have maintained martial law with all the relevant bans since 2014. In fact, independent social organizations themselves have long since ceased to exist in the "people's republics" – as has already been said, the only acceptable form of life there is associated with full and unconditional support for the occupation regime.

Like any fascist regime, the Russian authorities and their puppet governments in Donbas consider it their duty to interfere in people's personal lives. First of all, people who do not share the so-called 'traditional' values, that is, the most conservative views of the ultra-conservative section of the Russian Orthodox Church. The 'wrong' sexual orientation or the 'wrong' religion is reason enough for a person to be persecuted, harassed, fired from his job, arrested. Of course, there are no LGBTI organizations in the "People's Republic" of Donetsk (DPR) and Luhansk (LPR) – it is simply impossible to exist.

At the same time, most Protestant, Greek, and Catholic religious organizations that existed before 2014 have been dissolved. Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons, whose activities are also banned in Russia, are particularly harshly persecuted.

The main thing you should know about the DPR and LPR regime is that their goal is to destroy ANY dissent and suppress ANY disobedience. This is what puts them on par with the worst examples of regimes from the past. Like Nazi Germany or Stalin's USSR. This is the thing that leaves us no choice but to fight against these regimes.

**Y.T.: It is, however, striking the ease with which pro-Russian separatists took over towns in Donbas in the first days of the 2014 conflict. It does not appear that there was much resistance from the Ukrainian authorities. On the**

**contrary, it is as if a regime change organized ‘from above’ had taken place.**

A.D. and S.Sh.: Yes, there was no resistance from the local authorities to the secessionist uprisings in the cities of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. At best, the authorities disappeared, and removed themselves from the events. At worst, they led the uprising! This applies to the political administration, the entire leadership of the police, the SSU secret services, the prosecutor’s office and so on.

Nevertheless, there was resistance, but it was simply coming from ordinary people with no particular authority. In March and April 2014, pro-Ukrainian rallies were held in Donetsk and other cities, where many people gathered. These rallies were attacked by separatists. The first victims of the war in Donbas were those same people who were beaten with batons or kidnapped by pro-Russian soldiers, taken outside the city and executed there. All this is considered to be quite well known.

**Y.T.: You will be aware, however, that outside Ukraine, some alternative disinformation channels claim that the “real” leftists in Ukraine support the separatists and the occupier (and as we mentioned earlier, even your group has been slandered with similar fake news)? And in general, are they trying to portray the conflict as one between the Ukrainian “4<sup>th</sup> Reich” and the pro-Russian progressive front?**

A.D. and S.Sh.: Of course, we know this. And we hope that your readers will have already seen how “progressive” the actions of the pro-Russian authorities are.

But in fact, almost all Ukrainian anarchists are now resisting Putin and the Russian invasion in some way. And we know many Ukrainian anti-authoritarian Marxists who are in the same position, for example, the Social Movement group, the independent trade union Defending Labour, the editorial board of the socialist magazine Commons and other initiatives. These and other groups

are little known outside Ukraine, but this is simply because “leftists” outside Ukraine (again: we don’t know who they are) are used to listening only to people from Moscow. In our view, this means that for many who live outside the former Soviet Union, the Soviet empire is still alive today. At least in their minds, in their fantasies... It is as strange as hearing news about events and processes in Mexico or Argentina from people in Madrid, news about India and Canada from people in London!

As for the Stalinists... They can say whatever they like, they can wear the reddest flags in the world, but in reality, they are a reactionary force subservient to Russian nationalism and Russian imperialism. Western “leftists” look at the names of the parties in our countries here and think something like: “Oh, these must be great people!” For example, in our country there was the famous “Progressive Socialist Party of Ukraine”. With this very resounding name, this party organized joint events with one of the main ideologists of modern Russian nationalism and outright fascism Alexander Dugin, used racist and homophobic images and vocabulary in its propaganda. You can consider them “leftists”, but in this case neither Marx, nor Lenin, nor Trotsky could be “leftists” in any sense.

**Y.T.: Indeed, the Russian invasion of Ukraine revealed some deep-rooted problems in libertarian and leftist movements around the world. While these movements have traditionally been ostensibly against authoritarianism, it turns out that there is a not-so-small percentage of people, even among those who consider themselves anarchists and libertarians, who are expressing, at least indirectly, their support for Putin’s invasion, because for them the geopolitical goal of Russia gaining ground against NATO is worth even many civilian lives lost in the war or in the creation of a new mafia regime in the occupied territories. What, in your view, is the future of the world’s anarchist movements in light of the split between what we might call “narrowly geopolitical” and social anarchists?**