

Interview: Anarchism, the USSR, alternative media and Belarus

Anarchist Federation (of Britain)

2006

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The AF recently hosted a meeting of the International of Anarchist Federations. Two comrades, Pauluk and Maryna, from the BAF, an organisation applying to join the International, attended the meeting and made a presentation on the situation in their country at the 2005 London Anarchist Bookfair.

The collapse of the Soviet Union has resulted in yet another repressive regime taking power, making it extremely difficult for anarchists and others to operate politically. This interview focuses on the history of anarchism in Belarus, as seen through the personal experiences of these two comrades. It provides insights into the situation for anarchists in the ex-Soviet influenced countries and shows how anarchist ideas and practices emerge in places where there has not been a strong anarchist tradition in recent years. The works of our comrades also illustrates how people in different situations take the ideas and make them their own, through creative and imaginative initiatives.

How did you get involved in anarchism? How did you first hear about it?

Pauluk: I have been in the anarchist movement since 1994. All Soviet people, sooner or later, hear about anarchism. During our childhood, we watched films about the Civil War and there were always anarchists in them. The propaganda portrayed them negatively. But it had the opposite effect. The anarchists were shown as people who, in between fighting the Reds and Whites, were drinking and dancing. So from childhood we had the impression that anarchists were fun loving!

I was impressed with the critical position towards the changes in the political system. Lukashenko, the current President, used the democratic movement to get elected and then the repression started. So I got the impression that the problem didn't lie just with the democratic movement but was somewhere deeper. So I started to try and find out where the root of the problem was.

I read about anarchism and by the end of 1994 I sympathised with anarchist ideas.

How did you learn about anarchism in Belarus? What did you read?

Pauluk: I read about anarchism in the library; there were books by people like Kropotkin. But not much was available. We didn't have contact with other anarchists either in the west or in other eastern European countries. There wasn't even much communication with other anarchists in Belarus.

So there was a federation of anarchists at that time?

Pauluk: Yes, already in 1992, founded by 8 people. There are still 6 of the original members involved. In 1994, there were about 20 people, but scattered around the country in just two cities so I didn't hear about anarchism from them, but from books.

So how did things develop from there?

Pauluk: In October 1994 students organised some actions against the rise in prices on bread and milk. It was a street performance action, with the slogan 'Thank you President for bread and milk'. It was the first big action organised against the President who had been in office for two months. The organisation of this action was influenced by anarchists and so because of this I met other anarchists and by the end of the year I was a confident anarchist.

Who were these other anarchists? Were they from the federation?

Pauluk: Yes, they were from the Minsk group.

What attracted you to anarchist ideas?

Pauluk: Taking into account that I was coming to the anarchist movement from the democratic side, I was attracted by the idea that anarchism seemed the only real democracy. Democracy that the democrats were talking about was just a lie, an illusion of democracy. I was reading about other left ideas in general, including Trotskyism, Maoism, everything possible. Amongst these ideas, anarchism was the only thing I could imagine.

Maryna, when did you start becoming an anarchist?

Maryna: It is difficult to say because I was very young when the Soviet Union crashed. I was interested in the punk movement. It seemed natural that we shouldn't have what we had in the country. Then I met Pauluk and he just gave a name to what I was thinking about. It was what I wanted, what I was thinking about. That was in 1998 when I first got involved in student demonstrations.

[The following questions are mostly answered by both Maryna and Pauluk after discussion between them.]

How many anarchists are there in Belarus?

It is difficult to say because we don't have membership like you do. Participation in the federation is only possible when you act. About 200 maybe.

After you had the student actions, what did you do? Were you more involved in the federation?

The federation consists of a number of different initiatives.

Is it like in Poland?

Yes, it is like that but in Poland they have more local groups. This is because of the history of Poland- there is anarchist inter-city relations. The Belarusian federation also has local sections, but the work is done around initiatives. One initiative was the anti-Party initiative.

The purpose was of this initiative was to stop young people get entangled with the work of political parties because they use the youth as a cheap workforce. So we organised different humorous actions, 'happenings' on the street, which made fun of all political parties, both the government and the opposition.

Why do you think humour is such a good weapon?

We took a risk because had never done it before, we didn't know where it would lead us, but it led to the fact that the movement began to grow. But of course we didn't invent it ourselves; we were attracted by a Polish initiative that was used under the dictatorship where they organised many street parties and happenings.

Were you at all influenced by the street parties in the west, like Reclaim the Streets?

No, just from Poland. We read about what was happening in Poland in newspapers. In the 1990s, there was a drought of information, it was difficult to get. But now it is possible to get information from the internet.

So the things we did attracted many people, mostly young people. There was a lot of publicity in the press, saying how anarchists organised another funny action. So people became interested, thinking that anarchists must be very amusing people.

Maryna: I remember that I was involved in the nationalist opposition movement for some months and in one of the meetings the leader told the audience about how they conducted an action and anarchists were in a separate block. They were hungry and the anarchists said we have some sandwiches and offered them around. The leader was trying to laugh at this but it showed how anarchists were being noticed by people, even inside other political movements.

After you did these initial actions, what happened next?

One thing was a counter-cultural group that influenced the movement that organised actions against the military. They were formed in 1995 and by the end of 1995 they were already in touch with and participated in actions of the Anarchist Federation. At that time, it was the three main cities, Minsk, Hroda and Homel that were the basis of the Federation. There were many actions carried out by different initiatives in the federation so it is difficult to talk about all of them.

One is the syndicalist group. They organised strikes in places like the trolley bus depot, they published a lot of propaganda and they had a day of solidarity with the unemployed. These days of action always ended with arrests of the participants. The result of this was that many activists lost their jobs. It is difficult to continue to be a syndicalist without a syndicate. They

didn't work anymore and the government began to put pressure on all unions so they couldn't practice syndicalism anymore. One of the people became a local councillor!

What about your paper?

There were several papers before our paper. We got the idea of doing a newspaper from our anti-Party actions. It is a continuation of our work to make fun of all authority- the government etc.

Did you do this along with the street parties and 'happenings'?

By the end of 1998 it became more difficult to do actions because the President issued a decree, which made it likely that you could be arrested for participating in these actions. We continued to organise them but not as frequently as before. So we had to replace them with something.

Where did you get the idea of this newspaper?

It was always in our heads because we had published some newspapers, so the idea was born quite naturally. And when the first issue was published we realised we had done the right thing because it was extremely popular.

And was it mainly popular amongst young people?

No it was popular amongst everyone who was interested in politics. With the newspaper, all politicians knew about us. First it was a little newspaper, but after a year we registered it officially. We celebrated our first year with an action under the slogan 'Legalise It'. The name of the newspaper, Navinki, is the name of a mental hospital and it also means 'small news'. The main newspaper is called just 'news' so we are making fun in two ways.

Our request to register the newspaper officially was refused because the authorities said that it had the name of the mental hospital. We made a scandal in the newspaper, so they became afraid and accepted our registration.

What is your circulation? Do you sell it?

It is difficult to say, about 10,000 copies. First it was a monthly and then a weekly. But the circulation reduced because some outlets for circulation were closed. Also, we had a problem that the official distributors only took our newspaper in small quantities. The private distribution networks were often afraid to take the paper because of repression.

What happened to the paper?

Maryna: We were closed by the authorities. We wrote about the President and ‘insulted people’s morality’. Pauluk was called to court and fined 700 Euros. This was impossible to pay. They came to his parents’ house and confiscated things from his parents.

What do you now?

We publish an illegal magazine, because illegally you can publish what you want.

How big is the movement now?

The thing is, we don’t have membership, so it is difficult to say. When people aren’t satisfied with the work of one group they may join another group or start their own initiative and work independently.

Have you been able to maintain an interest amongst young people as they have become older and because of the repression?

Everyone who comes to the movement understands that there can be repression. So they don’t discover that; they know it already. There is one main way that we lose comrades: they emigrate for different reasons such as problems with the authorities. But they keep in contact.

Maryna: My personal opinion is that they do not do much anymore. They are too busy with making ends meet. We are at the stage where we only have young people and they are still active, but there are some people who are just at home, raising children.

What do you think is the most important activity to do now?

Right now the movement and the initiatives are all growing. When someone comes to anarchism we want to give him or her all opportunities to participate in the way they want. We are trying to build more of a network so we have organised social forums that can involve everyone. We want people to see that they are not alone and that the movement is very wide, one united front of struggle against the system. And, a person can find his or her place in this. It is difficult to find ways of doing something because the State tries to monopolise all possible activities. They try to get people to communicate only through state organisations.

What do you think about the other organisations that you have come in contact with when you have been abroad?

Our first contacts were with Russian Anarchists. It is a funny fact that anarchists from Minsk and from Hroda were put in contact with each other by Russian anarchists. From our western contacts we got a lot of information about anarchism in the modern world. Our anarchism was based on historical anarchism, Kropotkin, Bakunin, and no one really knew what was going on

in the west. We knew about the Spanish Revolution but not about what happened after the war, like 1968. And when the Iron Curtain fell, it was a discovery to know what was really happening, your ideas and what discussions were going on.

But the western countries didn't seem to be familiar at all with what was happening in the post-Soviet countries. We also noticed that there are long theoretical discussions, often about small points, while we discuss more concrete issues. We want to discuss issues that we could talk about to 'the man in the pub'. In Russia we find that they are often having debates about who is the better anarchist.

To conclude, this interview shows how anarchist ideas and action emerge in a variety of contexts. For Maryna anarchism is the name given to what she was thinking anyway. Disillusions with the so-called new democracy propelled Pauluk into the library, where he found the ideas that helped him make sense of what was going on. Though they had no initial contact with anarchists outside their country, their movement benefited from hearing about what was going on in other countries. Similarly, the comrades in the International have been inspired by the courage, imagination and commitment of the Belarusian Federation. Their experiences show how important it is to spread anarchist ideas as widely as possible. There are millions of people who are looking for alternative perspectives, fed up with the current political and religious ideologies. We need to make sure that they come into contact with both anarchist ideas and anarchism in action in order to strengthen and enrich the global struggle for a new society.

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Retrieved on 12th August 2020 from
<https://libcom.org/news/article.php/anarchism-belarus-interview-110106>
From Organise!, magazine of the Anarchist Federation

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