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Impressions from the Baltic Anarchist Meeting 2012

Antti Rautiainen

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Almost two months have passed since the Baltic Anarchist Meeting was organised in Tallinn of Estonia 25th-27th of May, but only now I had time to write some impressions. I haven't come across any other reports yet, but I hope they will show at some point up as I missed many of the discussions.

All countries in the Northern part of the Baltic Sea have an active anarchist movement, but for unclear reasons, connections are not very good. This was the first ever meeting, which attempted to increase links between the movements in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Russia and Sweden. Tallinn was a logical place for such a meeting, as it is accessible from all directions – the only drawback is the visa requirement for Russians, due to which Russian participation was eventually rather small (fewer people than from other countries in the region), and no workshops were organised by Russian guests besides my talk on anarchism in Russia.

The anarchist movement in Estonia is rather small. It revolves around the Punamust (Red and Black) Movement, the infoshop in Tartu and the Social center Üläse12 in Tallinn.

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Eventually there were more Finnish at the meeting than Estonians, during discussions it sometimes had to be pointed out to the Finnish that they were slipping into internal topics of the Finnish scene, not so interesting for the rest of the participants. Apparently Estonian politics is still characterised by bitterness towards Russia and the Soviet regime, and it is hard to advance anything anti-capitalist in Estonia. The BAM was organised during the meeting of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly in Tallinn. Although Estonia has taken relatively heavy casualties in Afghanistan (9 killed from a population of 1,340,000), there is not much of any visible opposition against the war. NATO is considered as the guarantor of Estonian independence against the Russian threat.

However, the good side of the small size of the movement is that it is not considered as a threat, and thus the meeting could proceed with much less police harassment than there would have been in Russia, or even Sweden and Finland. There are not many other open threats either, as Estonian fascists are not interested in attacking anarchist events. There was some unease, as a biker club which has a space next to the social center Üläse12 which was used as a night place was having a party at the yard, and some Nazis were expected to show up at the party, which made some guests quite nervous. But eventually there were no problems.

My presentation opened the event on Friday evening. It was followed by a presentation of different anarchist initiatives in Finland. The last lecture of Friday evening was Gabriel Kuhn's "What is Anarchism: a movement, a lifestyle, an ethic?".

Hopefully I am not making too much violence by attempting to summarize Gabriel's point, but basically he was juxtaposing "anarchism as a movement" against "anarchism as a philosophy/lifestyle/ethic". In his opinion, the first position was promoted in the book "Black Flame: the revolutionary class politics of anarchism and syndicalism" by Lucien van der Walt and Michael Schmidt, which did not take into account tendencies

such as ancient Daoism, Middle-Age heretics or indigenous peoples' lifestyles. Apparently this juxtaposition dates back to this David Graeber's 2002 work *The New Anarchists*, perhaps via the article by Wayne Price *The Two Main Trends in Anarchism*. However, as with all such attempts to categorize anarchists, it is quite a relevant question how many anarchists in the end identify themselves with any of the two categories proposed by Graeber, Price or Kuhn.

Saturday was launched by an energetic demo against the parliamentary assembly of NATO. Authorities had banned marches through the old city of Tallinn, however, we went there anyway and they did not care at all. Only at the very end of the demonstration did a few plainclothes police, or secret service operatives, come to take photos. After the march, there was a demonstration at Tammsaare Park in the very center of the city — but this was attended only by BAM participants, and some guy from a one-person sect with mixed Trotskyist and Stalinist politics. I saw one of their posters in the city center against NATO assembly, but only in Russian language — although the guy himself was Estonian, apparently he had no hope of convincing the Estonian majority.

It was a bit unclear to me why many of the local anarchists wanted to stick to a black bloc style, although no property destruction was intended or desirable, and as there are at most 5 anarchist activists around in Tallinn, the authorities know them very well anyway. There is not much of anything “left” in Estonia besides a few anarchists, the war in Afghanistan is only one of the many raised by them alone, so they could easily skip all the fetishist barrage and try to be as accessible as possible to local people. Guests of the conference were for sure even more clueless, afraid of TV cameras for reasons beyond my comprehension etc. Maybe due to lack of briefing, but in my opinion it is pointless to waste hours to brief people before an action without any ambitious goal to disturb anything.

What followed were discussions on anarchism in Lithuania and anarchism in Sweden, but these I missed. At the last panel discussion on popularising anarchist ideas in the Baltic region, I joined in the very end when it was already approaching midnight, and most of the people except slow Finnish folks had already phased out. A local anarchist hang-around considered discussion to be mostly bullshit, so he demonstratively poured a bottle of beer over his head. He was politely asked to mop up the floor, which he did — a cultural shock for the Russians, who expected him to be beaten up.

All discussions were conducted in English only, without translations. This could have limited Russian participation, as unlike other countries in the region, the quality of English teaching in Russian schools is rather bad.

The last day, Sunday 27th, began with the presentation “Soccer vs. The State” by Gabriel Kuhn, on the grassroots struggle against control and commercialization, which is as long as the sport itself. He recently published a book with the same name, where you may read more on detail of the topic. This was followed by “How to be and remain a feminist activist” by Dagmar Kase. I did not know that Tallinn, although a relatively small city of 416,000, has such thriving feminist and queer communities, including a local Ladyfest (in Finland there has not been a Ladyfest since 2009).

Following discussions on fighting Fascism in the Baltic region (by Lithuanians) and non-verbal communication I missed, I only came around for the party, at which point many had left already.

It is a good question, how much you may get from such events, more than just socialising. All languages of the region are mutually unintelligible and with exception of Russian, relevant only locally, so there may not be much of any cooperation in field of political work which in conditions of such a modest scale of the movement mostly revolves around publishing and propaganda only.

I liked the gathering overall; the schedule was well-thought out and not too late, with a good balance between different types of events, and the food was excellent. I especially appreciated, that although many of the local anarchists came from a subcultural background, no gig was organised — in Russia and especially in Finland, often 80–90% of the organising effort are put on the concerts which do not interest me anyway. There were few enough participators (maximum one hundred) to have a cosy atmosphere, where everyone could participate in everything and make some personal contacts as well. At bigger events, one often ends up hanging with only the people you knew before.