

Some reflections on Krynki NoBorder camp 2003

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Local activists already wrote a comprehensive report on the camp, so I will just try to add some reflections here.

Anarchists of Bialystok successfully organised camp in 2001, and decided to repeat camp this year. And why not, successful projects deserve to be repeated. Unfortunately, anarchist movement and activist movement in general often works with the logic of the spectacle, where projects which are not so fresh anymore do not attract that much people, whether their content is more actual than ever or not. So number of participants in this camp was only half of that of 2001, 150 people (or more optimistically 200 people). In other hand there was much wider international presence than before, organisers counted 16 countries (and forgot at least Ukraine, from where there were people). 2002 camp was in Wizajny, I was not there so I may not compare – I have heard that this camp was more discussions than actions.

Besides numbers, the difference with camp of 2001 was that this time practically all organising work of the camp fell to shoulders of local people for various reasons, one for example being international anarchist meeting and antiborder conference many people were busy organising in Warsaw. Most of the time of the local people went to solving logistic questions, so the camp program was quite empty when camp began – but people quickly self-organised many workshops, such as on making paintbombs, womens meeting, evaluation of Warsaw anarchist meeting, on theme “oppressed nations of Europe” and some others. Actions in 2003 were also better than in 2001.

Oppressed nations

“Oppressed nations of Europe” took place in morning of Friday the 4th, I could not listen it to end since I had to left for Bialystok. In the beginning it was called by free Caucasus committee of Krakow, but soon somebody wanted to talk about kurds and basques as well. As for the presentation of the Chechen situation goes, I respect that people in Krakow keep up working with this mostly forgotten theme. But this presentation was a primitive lecture of the most elementary history of the conflict, and did not touched any of the difficult questions anyone following the tragedy has to deal with. But I had to leave and there was no intention to have discussion about these issues (such as sensible solutions of the conflict) from the beginning, so I decided to leave difficult questions for the next time.

Event hopping

I would not complain that there was too little program in the camp. But I was surprised that for many people 5 camp days were too much, although it is about nothing compared to Russian Rainbow Keepers protest camps which last 6 weeks in average. People in West seem to be so hectic that they have to rush directly to climax of the camp (which was Saturdays action in the border), and after that to run away quickly in order to find some even cooler vibes in some other country. First full camp day, Thursday 3rd of July was quite lame because most of the people had not come yet and thus there was little program – and in afternoon of Sunday 6th of July most of the people had left already. So effectively the five day camp was only two days, Friday and Saturday.

Demo in Bialystok

Demo of Wednesday 2nd was nice, although mostly repeating the one two years before. We managed to create less huzzle than then, since police was better prepared. A megaphone would have been a good thing to have, but it was still having a holiday in Warsaw after Monday's demo against visa regime. Visiting Belarussian consulate was a good idea, not only because authoritarian regime of Lukashenko must be protested but also because this was in a quiet street with excellent acoustics, and it was possible to have a speech without megaphone.

Chill out day

After demo we left for Krynki to set up the camp, and next day was the much needed chill out day after quite stressful week of travelling and meeting in Warsaw. Some people were hanging banners and posters in Krynki, but I was just funkin' around in the part watching that they won't get stolen... nice job since locals were more supportive than against, and would not do such a thing. Evil border guards were maybe more of a risk, but they had a quite low-profile presence this year after the ridiculous show-offs we had two years before.

Support of local people has been characteristic to all Polish border camps, but participation has been almost none, with some exceptions (such as local children joining to actions of this year). This is not so surprising, many local people have relatives, friends or neighbours working in border guard to whom they have to maintain loyalty, and although campers might be sympathetic and interesting, they are for sure also crazy, look strange and little bit scary. This time local people for sure got lots of information, but maybe there would still be some undiscovered ways to increase involvement in some suitable way. There was for example an idea to organise general meeting (or assembly, or plenary as you like to call it) about tactics of Saturdays demo in the center of Krynki and to invite all local people so that they could see how our camp makes decisions, but that did not get realized. Maybe good, since some would have discovered that direct democracy and anarchy will never work;-)

Problems with process

I have been in Polish camps twice before, 2000 and 2001 — both times after a very stressful period in my life, and I was happy to just observe and join actions without any special planning or organising effort. This year I had a bit more energetic mood, so I tried to make more effort to participate to camp organising. So I saw much more problems in the process which seemed to me a very smooth and effective the previous times, although I would suggest some problems have been around since the beginning. The main problem was that general meetings were quite badly facilitated. I am sure no one had malicious intention to control camp, I think disease was first of all lack of practical facilitation skills and partly also attitude of many camp participators to general meetings as informational, not organisational events.

First problem was the translation, which was simultaneous. I think a good simultaneous translation would be the best alternative, but now when translation was missing things, at times incorrect and behind, Russian and English speakers had much worse chances to participate than

Polish because direct replying is much more different when discussion is lacking behind. Non-simultaneous translation gives more equal opportunities with a time cost.

Second problem was decisionmaking and planning in the general meeting. For example when we began making camp schedule in the first general meeting, someone turned on the sound system aggregator and everyone took that as a sign of end of the meeting. In the next day most of the people also dispersed when the discussion about Saturday tactics had not even started yet. It also happened more than once that some propositions which were maybe something too new for most of the people just got ignored.

Facilitation

Among many others, tasks of a facilitator are to take account that people with limited language abilities may equally participate, to structure discussion so that every proposition will be discussed and nothing ignored, that decisions on one point will be made before moving to second one (or at least it should be generally acknowledged that decision on that point may not be made right now), and that meeting will not finish until all the relevant concerns have been handled. I do not claim that camp organisers completely ill-performed in this respect, these are not at all too clear things. General meetings with dozens of people with different languages are a completely different issue than usual meetings with few people known to each other where everyone speaks the same language. It could have been much worse, for example I heard that in Thessaloniki such a thing as translation just did not exist. I do not claim that lack of these skills is something characteristic for Bialystok or Polish scene in general, it is more like a global matter. Good facilitating has been a very rare or unexisting phenomena in all of the scenes I have been a member of.

Action of Saturday

I still have no really idea how Saturday's big action really got planned, since Thursday evenings meeting which should have planned tactics did not handle the issue, and neither did the Saturday morning meeting. Somehow different affinity groups making program just appeared more or less spontaneously. And they managed to make a great action, for example guerilla theatre which was in the Krynki center managed to explain everything what a conscious person has to know in a compact manner, for example European Union, border regimes, consumerist culture, dangers of genetically modified organisms and events in Genoa G8 2001. The border action later on was also nice although more repeating that one we had two years before, but there still was many nice new details, such as local children making anti-border drawings to street in front of the border guards. Affinity groups which organised these actions consisted of Polish, so this spontaneous self-organisation effectively excluded non-Polish — again hardly maliciously but still no good.

Mutiny

After Thursday evenings general meeting there was a lot of discontent among foreigners, and a spontaneous meeting to plan tactics of Saturday was set up. Many people wanted to do some-

thing more radical than just symbolical performances, such as illegal border crossing. There was a long discussion, but in the end few Polish participating to this discussion managed to clarify background of their tactical choices for Saturday which were not clarified in the general meeting. Civil disobedience just does not really make sense since border guards have live ammunition, and most likely they will prefer using it to some physical contact if their orders and warnings are ignored. Guards are not trained to handle this kinds of situations. And consequences if someone got caught in the Belarussian side of the border could be unfortunate.

However this extra meeting was necessary to get that minimal consensus about Saturdays action which could not be reached in the general meeting. Some ideas to improve facilitation also popped up, but they were not realised since many of the people who participated to this session left camp the next day – some to Bialystok, some to Wijazny.

Anti-occupation action

During this night session we accidentally heard about American ambassador in Poland coming to Bialystok the next day, 4th of July, to open week of American culture in Bialystok. Local anarchist had not planned any actions connected to this one since their hands were so tied with the camp.

Some people thought that action must be organised. I was a bit hesitant to join since it was clear that action could not be open for everyone since camp was the main thing and there was the logistical problem between Krynki and Bialystok as well. Anyway when people were leaving for Bialystok in the morning I decided to join in order to save effort of explaining the idea for some more people.

After changing the plan many times, it happened that we were exactly the optional amount of people for this action, 3 Russified Finns and one girl from Tel Aviv, with locals giving backup but not participating to action. We managed to sneak in to the gallery where the presentation took place, one of us even heard security talking to phone about “anarchists are coming” since some of us did not managed to hide their camplook that succesfully. Still they did not removed us, too bad for them. We had banner “Stop okupacija Iraku”, fliers in Polish and those of us who did not get confused with words shouted in Polish language, which none of us spoke. I failed to shout and tried distribute leaflets and grab the mic in order to make some crap freestyle speech in English, which would have been embarassement since even the American ambassador spoke in Polish in the event. Fortunately security saved me from the embarassement, and everything was over in 15 seconds. We were arrested for 2 hours without any juridicial proceeding, good for Poland since in Finland we would have got probational prison sentences for 2 months.

Apology of the vanguard

I did not liked that this action had to be closed one, still we got some nice media and we managed to make our point. Local people maybe could not make such action even if they tried, their faces too familiar to coppers. For sure some local people had to sacrifice lots of effort with making leaflets and escorting us, but we just took what was rightfully ours since Mira’s husband Punch had been working to earn some cash for Bialystok anti-fascists and Black Cross in the support concert in Helsinki less than 3 months before;-) Later on S showed us massive tear gas thrower with 10 meter range which had been partly financed with Helsinki money. This had helped up a

lot in beating up a leading local nazi few weeks before, so Helsinki money had ended up to the very right target!

Thank you to all camp organisers

I liked this camp the most among those three I participated, maybe just because I happened to be in an excellent mood. I think it would be fine to have Polish bordercamp in Krynki or some other place every year as long as there are borders, but we should also take into account that diminishing numbers mean exhaustion of the border camps as a form of the protest. Event may still have a big significance in somewhat provincial city of Bialystok where anarchist movement is struggling with emigration to richer cities and to West, but if form of protest will not change significance will be increasingly local, not global one.

Moving eastward

There has been 2–3 years of talk about a bordercamp in Ukraine and Belarus and people outside these countries are more and more eager to move protest there. But in Western Ukraine anarchist movement practically does not exist, and in Belarus interest to bordercamps has declined almost to zero, only one person from Minsk came to this years camp, no-one came from Grodno which is almost in a walking distance.

It is true that Belarussian movement is much weaker than that of the Poland, but much of the organising work could be done outside Belarus. Some of the people who have been involved in organising the Polish bordercamps from the beginning were involved in organising the anti-nuclear march in Belarus in summer 1998, although they were not living there then either. After bordercamp I spent week in Belarus talking to people, some were sceptical, afraid of repression, others were very supportive for the idea but still sceptical, burned out and refocusing their interests. But in camp it was decided that we will still scan the situation, and if possible make some preliminary decisions in the next conference of the Noborder network.

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