

An anti-fascist message from the shadows of Central and Eastern Europe

Czech Antifa

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In this long read Czech Antifa explain their perspective on the Ukrainian conflict, critique primarily Western logics surrounding much of the debate which has emerged, and address what they see as forms of colonial hangover which have hamstrung responses to Russian imperialism.

Russian imperialism brings fascism and genocide, disguised in the language of anti-fascism, to Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). Central European anti-fascists were among the first to call attention to Russia's dangerously systematic and massive support for ultranationalists and neo-Nazis across Europe since 2014. Today, tacit support has become open warfare, and CEE antifas are sending a message – Russia must be defeated and expelled at all costs, or death, darkness and subjugation will come to the CEE region, and all emancipatory activities, as well as their bearers, will get a bullet between the eyes.

If we had a time machine and could take you back to meet us, to the past and the recent past, do you know what you would see if you looked around?

The Russian Empire to the east, the German Empire to the west and the Turkish Empire to the south. Three empires, many historical forms, and one all too often shared ambition, the 'disease' of all empires, namely the need to expand their sphere of influence, to occupy the spaces around them, to conquer.

And do you know what you would see among them, in their shadow? Small, historically, geographically and linguistically diverse regions and political entities stretching from Estonia to Romania, from the Czech Republic to Ukraine, surviving to this day in spite of empires, and sometimes in spite of themselves.

Welcome to our region, Central and Eastern Europe (CEE).

A region historically shaped by the pinch between three empires.

A region defined not by ocean shores, but externally and geopolitically – namely, by whether one of the neighboring empires wanted to overreach and subjugate parts of CEE – as in Czechoslovakia in 1938 and 1968, Poland in 1939, the Baltics in 1940, Hungary in 1956.

In a region where the little ones sometimes have to forge controversial alliances to resist empires.

In a region whose voice and perspective are chronically overlooked and ignored.

In a region that is neither the rich West or North, nor the populous East, nor the poor South.

In a region that is now back to having its life and identity at stake – if contemporary Turkey is directing its imperial ambitions eastwards, and Germany has undergone a transformation that has hopefully stunned its imperial aspirations for a long time, it is Putin's Russia that continues to hold the line of imperial policy against the CEE, as well as other regions it considers its "sphere of influence."

Against "anti-fascist fascism"

When the organised anti-fascist movement emerged in the CEE in the 1990s, the situation was clear. The Soviet empire had departed with the ideology of State Communism, and it was

Nazi ideology that was beginning to make its mark in the post-Soviet space. Racist attacks and murders were common, the Communist police often pretended not to see anything, and it was clear to us that nobody would do this job for us. So we began to systematically denazify our space ourselves.

But the situation gradually began to change. We were able to disperse the bands of racist skin-heads, but in their place a new enemy gradually pushed in, autocrats, authoritarians, nationalists, traditionalists of all kinds, who, although they were more polished, basically wanted the same thing as the bald scum – a nation-conservative state.

In recent years we have watched with extreme suspicion the “browning of the mainstream” in several places, but most of all in Russia. Russia has become a regime which, since Putin came to power, has become a conservative autocracy closely linked to the Orthodox Church, which not only suppresses, expels, kills all political opposition, independent media, progressive activities, LGBTQI+ minorities, NGOs, but also gives considerable space to ultra-nationalists and tolerates neo-Nazis as part of the formation of a Great Russian imperial belief in its population. Not only that – not only do neo-Nazis abound in paramilitary pro-Russian groups such as Wagner and Rusich, but there is also evidence of links between local neo-Nazis and the FSB secret service.

If Putin’s Russia is shielded by the ideology of “anti-fascism” that it promotes through nationalist youth organisations like Nashi, then the real anti-fascists fighting the neo-Nazis there are ending up in prisons, exile and morgues. It is supremely absurd that Russia is wrapping the language of anti-fascism around its “browning” and the fact that it has become the world’s main centre of autocracy, traditionalism, ultra-nationalism, censorship, conservatism, the far right, chauvinism and specifically Russian “anti-fascism” in the last two decades.

Want quantifiable proof? How about the number of politically motivated murders committed by adherents of the ultra-right? There were 459 recorded in Russia between 2000 and 2017 alone. In the rest of Europe, between 1990 and 2015, there were 330 such murders, including all 77 victims of Anders Breivik. So if there is any country that requires deep denazification, it is Russia in the first place.

What is more, around 2014 and in the context of the Crimean invasion, but also the return to a foreign policy of intervention and spheres of influence, Russia began to export these products. No, Russian exports are not just natural gas and oil, but also fascism and ultra-nationalism. As various academics, as well as our own investigations at www.antifa.cz, Russia in the last eight years has begun to support financially, materially, but also through systematic disinformation on the Internet throughout Europe not only various left-authoritarian associations, but also open ultra-nationalists and neo-Nazis – from the Slovak LSNS, to the German AfD, Orbán in Hungary, the FPÖ in Austria to Le Pen in France. Today we also know that this was part of a broader strategy, culminating in the wartime entry into Ukraine, the drive to re-conquer the CEE and to return Russia to the borders and imperial spheres of influence of the Soviet Union. After 30 years, the Eastern Empire wants to come back, to bite off as much of our space as possible, to take it over, using, among other things, a carefully nurtured fifth column of ultra-nationalist parties and movements in Europe that are in its hand.

Fighting for the life of the region

Our CEE region is once again fighting for its life – and this is not a metaphor, an exaggeration, a rhetorical turn of phrase, but a tangible reality, the contours of which can be seen today in Bucha, Irpin, Hostomel and many other places. It's nothing else than genocide of Ukrainians that's taking place in Ukraine. After all, it is what the ideological mouthpiece of the Putin regime, Alexander Dugin, has been calling for since 2014, when he described Ukrainians as a “race of bastards.” In this sense, the actions of Russian soldiers are not surprising. Under the bizarre guise of denazification, a policy of extermination – one of the pillars of Nazism – is taking place in Ukraine. “A Nazi,” says historian Timothy Snyder of Nazism as conceived by Russia, “is a Ukrainian who refuses to admit being a Russian.” If every Ukrainian today is a Nazi in the eyes of Russia, so is every citizen of CEE, foremost us, as organised anti-fascists.

Putin's regime in Ukraine is murdering not just civilian life itself, but the very conditions of civilian life. For if the Russian empire wins, all social, emancipatory, liberal, anarchist, feminist, anti-fascist, ecological, autonomous, human rights, subcultural and other activities will be trampled into the ground, and with them their representatives and defenders. As is the case in contemporary Russia.

In this sense, the war in Ukraine today is not only about life, but also about the conditions of future life. And the locals are well aware of this, which is why ordinary people are joining the fight in large numbers and far beyond so-called territorial defence to defend their homes. One of the volunteers from the Lviv-based Operation Solidarity initiative remarks: “If the Russians occupy [Ukraine] they will kill off every politically active person, no matter of their [political views] ... if the fight is lost, there will be no one left, [no right wing, no left wing], it will be eradicated.” Either imperial enslavement, extermination, colonisation by a conservative autocracy, or the defense of a world that is not ideal, but which at least allows for the cultivation of diversity, the expansion of alternatives, and does not offer jail, exile, or a bullet for dissent. Another of the Operation Solidarity volunteers in Ukraine put it even more clearly: “We are not charmed by the Ukrainian State (it's neoliberal rather than Nazi or strongly authoritarian) – it has a lot of troubles like an oligarchic system, corruption, destruction of social safety nets, cop and Nazi violence etc. At the same time Ukraine is a space of relatively low State control that is growing, from one side, but from the other it's also a space of uprising progressive social powers. So we resist because it's a question of our future (physical and political). If Russia wins, all progressive things that we got through social struggle will be raped, trampled and annihilated.”

With these cards on the table, it is not surprising that on the front against the Russian invasion one can meet representatives of all political trends, lifestyles, cultural currents, and social classes, from animal rights activists, the poorer and richer strata of society, to representatives of youth music subcultures or human rights organisations, to anti-fascist hooligans or organised anarchists.

Their diversity goes far beyond the Russian State's view, which tries to claim that only Ukrainian nationalists and neo-Nazis stand against it.

The task is clear and shared by all – to stop Russian imperialism by all means and to defeat it by force. Thanks to our historical experience in the CEE, we know that this is the only thing that applies to Russia, or that it understands. A policy of appeasement will not help, as Europe should remember very well from the events after the Munich Agreement with Hitler in 1938, when it made this fatal mistake once before. It will only bait the empire into further expansion.

And in this new task of putting this imperial pride to sleep (as the campaign of the Ukrainian anti-authoritarians, GNIP – Good Night Imperial Pride, also goes) we have no choice but to ally ourselves situationally and positionally with almost anyone ... just as the anti-fascists were willing to ally themselves with anyone in the fight against Nazi Germany during the Second World War. In a war that is annihilating the life and condition of an entire region, there is no other option. Yes, when Putin loses, there will be a problem with the new ultra-nationalists for whom the total militarisation of CEE is a catalyst, but this problem will be of completely different parameters and incomparably more solveable than if imperial Putin wins, moves further into the CEE, imposes a dark age there and further dismantles the EU through the support of a fifth column of ultra-nationalist parties and movements in the rest of Europe.

This is our position and perspective – a message from some of the local natives, namely anti-authoritarians and anti-fascists, who are at home in the CEE region, defending it and will defend it against any form of oppression as much as possible. It is our perspective that we send out to the world, based on a practical perspective, on our lives, on our experience, on our determination, but also on our concern for the future of our children.

But will anyone hear it? Will it be taken seriously? We hope they will, but we also fear that they will not. Why? Because the voice of the CEE region is being ignored in this war, as it has been for a long time. It remains ignored and invisible.

The empty vessel of Central and Eastern Europe

Reading through the texts that have been written on the war since its outbreak in the West and especially by the Western left, we find three main frameworks that shape events in Ukraine – symmetrisation; generalisation; ideologisation.

Through symmetrisation, the conflict is presented as a clash between two equal, superpower partners, most often as Russia vs Nato, or Russia vs the US, and less often, Russia vs the EU. In this view, one has to look for some great game of superpowers behind everything, a clash of empires over spheres of influence on the global chessboard, and reduce Ukraine to a puppet controlled by a higher power. This is a view shared not only by many political organisations, but also by prominent Western intellectuals and politicians – from Jeremy Corbyn to Noam Chomsky to Yanis Varoufakis. This attitude, which ascribes historical agency only to empires and superpowers, is so common and recurrent in the West that it has been given a name – sometimes it is called imperial narcissism, sometimes western exceptionalism, but most often westsplaining. Westsplaining has been criticised many times – mostly by various authors from the CEE region (see, for example, Zosia Brom's text). The main danger of westsplaining is the attribution of the ability to act exclusively to the West and the US, which leads to a self-centred anti-imperialism in the critique of war that overlooks the agency of non-Western actors, their needs and attitudes. In a slightly different context, British-Syrian author and activist Leila Al-Shami came up with the term “anti-imperialism of idiots” to criticise the position of those who see only the role of the US but overlook the actions of Russia, Iran or Assad in Syria.

In the case of the war in Ukraine, the anti-imperialism of idiots does not lead to ignoring Russia's role, but rather to the symmetrization of both sides of the conflict and the resulting relativisation of the war and a subsequent demobilisation of any aid. In fact, it ends up stating

that both sides are actually equally to blame for the war and that taking a position in such a conflict is problematic.

Through generalisation and multiplication, the conflict is presented for a change either as a general example of a war that needs to be opposed in the same general way, or as one example of the many wars that are currently taking place in the world and that needs to be opposed in unison, because they are all wars on the same global chessboard. It is a view that fetishises global perspectives, universalism and seeing abstract similarities at the expense of concrete contexts and specificities. It seeks common global denominators so that it can declare that all wars are capitalist, neoliberal, and condemn them as such in a unified way, so that it does not have to take sides anywhere. In such a constellation, the local and regional perspective will always be, by nature, incommensurable, humiliated, provincial, immature and incomplete compared to the global one.

Last but not least, through ideologisation, the conflict is presented as a matter of mere opinion and debate, in which the purity of ideological positions is defended, which taints any practical, realistic and strategic proposals for resolving it, led by the conclusion of controversial alliances. It is an approach that is inherently risk-free – cultivated from the comfort of a home far enough away that it does not fall within the life-threatening sphere of influence of Russian neo-imperialism. It is ultimately an exit strategy not to fight a specific enemy, but to hide in the fold of privileged ideocracy, abstract and general attitudes, relativisation and symmetrisation, in order to continue living one's carefree life somewhere far away from Ukraine. In this case, war is a matter of an opinion and ideology, not of life and death.

What do these framings have in common? Two key characteristics – the disregard for CEE voices and the adoption of Putin's logic. By completely disregarding perspectives, positions and voices from the CEE, our region is implicitly taken as a space without its own ability and capacity to act and decide freely, and therefore as a region without its own agency and relevance to the world ... an empty vessel into which versions of history written by the great powers can be poured at will. The CEE region is seen here as too small, fragmented, diverse, bland, without a history of its own, and too insignificant to actively influence the course of history. It thus becomes a passive object – reduced to a mere “sphere of influence and interest”, a “buffer zone” or “expendable space”.

This disregard for CEE and the framing described above also plays into the Kremlin's hands. As Smoleński and Dutkiewicz have shown. In the westsplaining framework, the concerns of Russia are recognised but those of Eastern Europe are not. Indeed, it is the Kremlin, as Putin showed at the Munich Security Conference back in 2007, that envisions the world as a clash of great empires pulling strings over spheres of influence and a world where tiny CEE-type regions do not exist as independent, distinct and worthy of their own voice and respect. Whoever symmetrises, generalises, ideologises in such a constellation in a time of war becomes a useful idiot for Putin.

Colonialism by blind eye

How to understand such chronic disregard for positions and voices from the CEE region, especially in a war that is primarily about the CEE? As a specific variant of colonialism. Yes, colonialism. Thus, it is not only Russia that is taking a stance towards CEE, but in a way the West with its rich colonial past. Why a specific variant? Because on the part of the West, it is

colonialism towards the semi-periphery on the East-West axis and not the periphery of the global South. It is done not so much by physical violence, extermination, subjugation and domination, as in the case of Russia's colonialism, but rather by disregarding and ignoring the otherness and specificity of the region given, among other things, by the history of the pinch between the three empires.

By overlooking Western colonialism, we see it as a process of a longer-term nature, imprinted, we self-critically admit, not only on ourselves by the West's unfinishable catching-up since the 1990s. The CEE perspective has been diminished in the anti-globalisation, but also in older forms of anti-authoritarian struggles – from the diminution of the CEE perspective in the anti-globalisation, but also a decade later anti-cuts movements oriented primarily along a North-South axis, to the paternalism of some anti-fascist groups and platforms from Germany. No, there is no room in this already voluminous text for a detailed analysis of this colonialism, but rather for its emphatic rejection and war-motivated decolonisation of CEE. How?

A world into which many worlds fit, including the world of CEE

How then to decolonise the CEE? Nothing new under the sun. Just learn from the decolonisation processes through which the West is learning to change itself in relation to the places of its former colonies. The basic rule is: to learn to listen to, and therefore take seriously, the voices of local people in their otherness, and to recognise that every voice, including those from the imperial centre, is shaped by the context of the time and space in which it was produced.

In other words, perspective matters, which is captured perfectly by a Belarusian activist in a series of interviews that give space to anarchist voices from Ukraine, Belarus and Poland on the current war: 'it is clear that people will speak from their perspective, from the perspective of the places where they live, from the realities in which they live and from the struggles and battles in which they are active. I have lived my whole life in what is essentially a colony of Moscow ... So my perspective is shaped by a different enemy.'

Similar decolonising skills of listening and acknowledging otherness that people from the global North and West learn on solidarity trips to war zones among South Mexican Zapatistas or to Rojava, need to be activated when looking at the war in Ukraine. After all, when the Zapatistas say they want a world that can accommodate many worlds, to clearly declare that the view from their corner of the world is original and respectful, we fully agree with them. And we add – one of those worlds is the world of CEE, with its unique perspective historically shaped by the pinch between the three empires and its current position shaped by the acute threat to the life of the region and especially to the life of Ukraine. And it is to the voices from Ukraine that today we need to listen as a priority, to be in full solidarity with them and to take their words seriously. As the Czech journalist Ondřej Bělíček points out, "In all these geopolitical debates about Nato and Russia, we should not forget the Ukrainians and their right to choose their future. For decades, their country has been the playground of the geopolitical ambitions of rival imperial blocs. We should support their struggle to defend their independence."

To be clear, we are not suggesting to listen to the Ukrainian oligarchs. Nor are we suggesting to listen to ultra-nationalists like Right Sector, whose influence in Ukraine, to Putin's benefit, is greatly exaggerated and cannot be compared, for example, with the influence of parliamentary parties like the AfD in Germany, United Russia in Russia or politicians like Orbán in Hungary or

Le Pen in France. In this respect, we fully agree with the autonomous anti-fascists from Ukraine who say “Several thousands Nazis, with minimal electoral support in a country of 40 million, are neither a threat nor a reason to invade... Yes, there are Nazis in Ukraine, same as in other countries. No, we don’t need the help of Putin or other authoritarians to deal with them. We’ll do it on our own.”

We suggest that you listen primarily to the voices of ordinary people and organised activists who have practically, quietly, without media fanfare, joined the armed defense of Ukraine and mutual aid networks, going from below, against the authorities, anti-fascist and in the spirit of committed Ukrainian anarchists like Nestor Makhno. We are thinking of initiatives and activities like Operation Solidarity, which say “We don’t want to die, we don’t want to flee, we don’t want to obey, we don’t have such a privilege. We are fucking angry and we want our freedom!” or the Resistance Committee/Anti-authoritarian Union, who again say “We were all brought to war by the desire to oppose Russian imperialist aggression. We are here to defeat the occupiers and defend the Ukrainian people, their freedom and independence.”

We are in this with them.

Be in this with us.

We are all Ukrainians today.

Російський військовий корабель, иди на хуй!

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