

Ukraine: Between Two Fires

Anarchists in the Region on the Looming Threat of War

Elephant in the Room

February 3, 2022

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In hopes of providing crucial background on the current tensions between Russia, Ukraine, the United States, and other members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), we present the transcript of an excellent interview with an anarchist in Ukraine, followed by another perspective contributed by a Ukrainian anarchist from Luhansk who is now located in Kyiv. We are awaiting another text from a group of Ukrainian anarchists, which we hope to publish shortly.

How are we to understand the conflict that is playing out over the Russian troops that are currently massed on the Ukrainian border? Is it just a performance from both sides, aimed at securing leverage and destabilizing the opposition?

Unfortunately, in today's volatile global context, even the most experienced geopolitical players could go into a showdown planning only to do a little saber-rattling and still end up in over their heads. Perhaps all that is taking place is brinkmanship, but it could still eventually lead to war. The past month has seen Russian troops deploy to Kazakhstan and Belarus, securing Putin's role as a guarantor of dictatorships and indicating the extent of his ambitions, not to mention the precarious balance of power throughout the entire region. The United States is now deploying troops to Eastern Europe as well, ratcheting up the tension in pursuit of rival imperial ambitions. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, who began 2021 by taking the offensive against Putin's allies in Ukraine, recently asked the Biden administration to dial back its doomsaying; this does not indicate that the threat of war is not real, but rather that Zelensky still has to look out for the Ukrainian economy—whether war looms for weeks, months, or years.

The prospect of a Russian invasion poses thorny questions for anarchists. How do we oppose Russian military aggression without simply playing into the agenda of the United States and other governments? How do we continue to oppose Ukrainian capitalists and fascists without helping the Russian government to craft a narrative to justify direct or indirect intervention? How do we prioritize both the lives and the freedom of ordinary people in Ukraine and the neighboring countries?

And what if war is not the only danger here? How do we avoid reducing our movements to subsidiaries of statist forces without winding up irrelevant in a time of escalating conflict? How do we continue to organize against all forms of oppression even in the midst of war, without adopting the same logic as state militaries?

This is not the first time that events in Ukraine have posed difficult questions. In 2014, during the occupation of the Maidan¹ that ultimately toppled the government of Viktor Yanukovich, nationalists and fascists gained power within the movement. As one witness wrote:

“The Ukrainian leftist and anarchist movement as a whole found itself between two fires. If the Maidan protest wins... it is already possible to predict the strengthening and emergence of new ultra-right organizations focused on the use of violence and

¹ Maidan Nezalezhnosti (“Independence Square”) is the central square of Kyiv, the capital city of Ukraine. It was the site of massive protests in 2004, during the so-called “Orange Revolution,” and again in 2013 through 2014 during the events that led to the Ukrainian Revolution of 2014.

terror against political opponents. If Yanukovich wins, then a wave of the most severe repression will indiscriminately hit all who are disloyal to the authorities.”

-Lviv, February 19–21, 2014

This interview from those days describes the situation. It’s important to emphasize that nothing was inevitable about this: a more vibrant anarchist movement could have produced different results in Kyiv, as it did in Kharkiv.

At the time, we described the ascendance of fascists in the Maidan protests as “a reactionary counterattack within the space of social movements”:

This may be a sign of worse things to come—we can imagine a future of rival fascisms, in which the possibility of a struggle for real liberation becomes completely invisible.

Today, we are eight years further into that future. The tragedies in Ukraine—from 2014 through the Russian-backed civil war in the regions of Donetsk and Luhansk up to the present day—show the catastrophic consequences of the weakness of anti-authoritarian movements within Russia, Ukraine, and the United States.

In this context, we see state actors on both sides of the conflict mobilizing the discourses of anti-fascism and anti-imperialism to recruit volunteers and to delegitimize their adversaries. Fascists and self-described anti-fascists alike have fought on both sides of the Russia/Ukraine conflict for years already, just as supporters of each side have described the other side as imperialist. As we get deeper into the 21st century, there will likely be more and more armed struggles seeking to recruit anarchists and other anti-fascists and anti-imperialists. We should neither make ourselves irrelevant by standing aside from all confrontations nor let a sense of urgency propel us into costly bad decisions. Likewise, if we excuse ourselves from taking any position on the grounds that the situation is messy and there are not-so-fine people on both sides, we will share responsibility for the massacres that ensue.

Before presenting the perspectives from Ukraine, we’ll review some of the other proposals regarding how anarchists might engage.

In his text, “Why is it necessary to support Ukraine?” Antti Rautiainen, a Finnish anarchist who spent years in Russia, argues that the most important priority is to oppose a Russian war of conquest:

The results of the first 30 years of “democracy” in Ukraine are, to put it mildly, unconvincing. The economy and the media are in the hands of rival oligarchs, corruption is at staggering levels, economic development lags behind many countries in Africa, and in addition, the country has become the center of the neo-Nazi movement around the world. And these problems are basically home-grown, not the result of the Kremlin’s intrigues.

But the alternative is even worse.

Putin's government represents the KGB without socialism. As we have documented, Putin's underlings routinely use torture and fabricated conspiracy cases alongside old-fashioned police violence to suppress dissent. According to Antti, "Putin is not the gendarme of Europe, but the gendarme of the whole world"—from Syria to Myanmar, whenever a dictator tortures and kills thousands of his own people, Putin is there to support him.

Antti argues, contrary to the anarchist interviewed below, that in the event of a Russian invasion, anarchists should support the Ukrainian military, and in the event of a Russian occupation, should be prepared to cooperate directly with a statist resistance organization, should a powerful one exist.

This raises a variety of difficult questions. Are anarchists in a position to offer useful assistance to a state military? If they can, *should* they? How could they support the Ukrainian military without thereby enabling it to be more dangerous to social movements and minorities inside Ukraine, not to mention legitimizing the fascist Azov regiment? One of the principles of three-sided warfare is that you must not strengthen one adversary in order to defeat another. This is illustrated by the misfortunes of anarchists in Ukraine a century ago, who prioritized defeating the reactionary White Army only to be betrayed and assassinated by Trotsky's Red Army.

Likewise, if anarchists *are* going to work alongside statist groups—as has already occurred in Rojava and elsewhere—that makes it all the more important to articulate a critique of state power and to develop a nuanced framework by which to evaluate the results of such experiments.

The best alternative to militarism would be to build an international movement that could incapacitate the military forces of all nations. We have seen understandable expressions of cynicism from Ukrainian radicals regarding the likelihood that ordinary Russians will do anything to hinder Putin's war efforts. This calls to mind the 2019 revolt in Hong Kong, which some participants also framed in ethnic terms. In fact, the only thing that could preserve Hong Kong from the domination of the Chinese government would be powerful revolutionary movements inside China proper.

Considering that Russia was able to establish a foothold for its agenda within the Donbas region in Ukraine in part because of tensions between Ukrainian and Russian identity, anti-Russian sentiment will only play into Putin's hands. Anything that polarizes against Russian people, language, or culture will facilitate the Russian state's efforts to create a little breakaway republic. Likewise, looking at the history of nationalism, we can see that any resistance to Russian military aggression that deepens the power of Ukrainian nationalism will only pave the way for future bloodshed.

Regarding the prospect of war, anarchists from Belarus have articulated some of its many drawbacks:

"Anarchists have never welcomed wars because they distract the population from the real problems that surround us on a constant basis. Instead of striving for freedom, the populace begins to discuss the successes of advancement on the front lines. The place of international solidarity is taken by nationalism, which has turned brothers, sisters and comrades into mortal enemies. There is nothing progressive about war. War is the triumph of a misanthropic ideology of power. Today, as always, war is the business of the rulers, except that ordinary people die in it. In a patriotic trance, or simply for the money."

-“If Only There Was No War”

Yet the global anarchist movement is not in a position to offer people in Ukraine a surefire alternative to war. Just as the uprising in Kazakhstan was ultimately crushed by brute force, nearly all of the uprisings around the world since 2019 have failed to overthrow the governments they challenged. We are in a time of interlinked worldwide repression and we have yet to solve the fundamental problems it poses. The bloody civil war that drew out in Syria—partly as a consequence of Putin’s support for Assad—offers an example of what many parts of the world may look like if revolutions continue to fail and civil wars emerge in their place. We may not be able to forestall the wars ahead, but it is still up to us to figure out how to continue to pursue revolutionary change amidst them.

It is worth noting, in passing, that at least one Ukrainian anarchist, an editor of the magazine *Assembly* in Kharkov, does not seem to be particularly concerned about a Russian invasion of Ukraine, considering it an overblown fabrication of Western media outlets. Hopefully this person is correct—though we note that Russian and Belarusian media have also been publishing dramatic stories about a looming conflict over Ukraine.

Finally, we would like to call attention to this communiqué from an action in Sweden expressing solidarity with rebels in Kazakhstan by targeting a trailer belonging to Shell Corporation in order to call attention to the complicity of Western oil corporations in the bloodshed in Kazakhstan and other places threatened by Russia. Though clandestine actions are no substitute for powerful movements, the action admirably succeeds in showing the way that Russian autocracy is interlinked with Western capitalists:

Russian bayonets defended the throne of Putin’s vassal Tokayev. But not only him. Just look at oil production, one of the main branches of Kazakhstan’s economy. Western corporations have a huge stake in the country’s oil sector. If the rebels won, the property of these corporations could be expropriated by the people. Russian intervention and suppression of the uprising provided bloody “stability” not only for the oligarchic regime, but also for Western capitalists parasitizing on the natural resources of Kazakhstan.

One of the Western corporations active in Kazakhstan is the British-Dutch Shell. Thus, at the Karachaganak field, one of the three largest in the country, its share is about 30%. And these are not the only assets of the corporation in Kazakhstan. It is not surprising at all that the Russian regime sent troops to protect the wealth of Shell’s owners. Shell has invested in the construction of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline and has consistently lobbied for the interests of the Russian regime in European politics. (...)

The theory and practice that unites resistance to dictatorships, capitalism, imperialist wars, and the destruction of nature into a single great struggle is anarchism. The achievement of true freedom from all forms of oppression will take place under the black banner of anarchy.

Now the Russian state may unleash another imperialist war. We want to appeal to the Russian soldiers: you are sent to kill and die for the interests of greedy and cruel rulers and the rich. If a war breaks out, desert with your weapons, disarm the officers, join the revolutionary movement.

Interview: “Anarchists and War in Ukraine”

This interview was conducted by a Belarusian anarchist currently living abroad with an anarchist activist involved in different struggles in Ukraine. The audio version can be found at [Elephant in the Room](#).

Already, for several weeks, Russian forces have been gathering at the Ukrainian border, with a possibility of invasion. We got in touch with a comrade who can explain to us a little bit more what is happening there and what to expect.

Today, we have a comrade and a friend, Ilya, an anarchist activist who’s currently staying in Ukraine. Hey, Ilya.

Hello, hello.

Thanks a lot for actually agreeing to this interview. Today, we’ll be talking a lot about different things. I think for a lot of people what is happening in Ukraine is really confusing, and there’s a lot of misunderstanding and a lot of propaganda going on from both sides, I believe. But before we jump to the story of the current possibility of an invasion, I would like to talk about the position of Ukraine in post-Soviet times. Where was it politically after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and why was it so important for Russian elites to maintain influence and exercise control over the political processes in Ukraine?

First of all, thanks a lot for having me here.

About the position of Ukraine after the Soviet Union collapsed, I would say that it was quite turbulent. It passed through several different phases. Under President [Leonid] Kuchma and through most of the 1990s, it was a loose state of different oligarchical groups competing for different spheres of power. (To some extent, it exists like this through today.) But also, it’s important to note that in this period, in the 1990s, the Russian state’s policy was very different from how it is now. Under the Yeltsin presidency, it was not a particularly imperialist policy, as far as I can estimate at least. Of course, there was very close interaction between the two governments, both business and state authorities between Russia and Ukraine. But it was not as though Ukraine was expected to be subordinate to Russia, even though a lot of economic ties and dependencies had already existed already between Russia and Ukraine within the Soviet Union, ties which continued to exist after it collapsed.

The situation changed when Kuchma left the presidency and a competition between the [Ukrainian] Presidents [Viktor] Yanukovich and [Viktor] Yushchenko emerged. Viktor Yushchenko represented this more Western- and national-oriented perspective. This conflict came to its peak during the first Maidan protests in 2004, I would say. Yushchenko won, and because of this, this more Western course of politics and this course of distancing from Russia was the prevailing political current for a while in Ukraine. In 2008, when the war in Georgia (over southern Ossetia) happened, Ukraine definitely took sides—just politically, not militarily—more with the Georgian side of that conflict.

But it’s important to understand that within Ukraine, there are many different cultural groups, groups of business and political interests, and groups of different ideological tendencies. They are

not all equal to each other. It's a really complex and multi-layered mosaic, which creates a lot of confusion and a lot of different political currents and developments. These are not easy to follow and understand even from inside of Ukraine, sometimes.

So even though Yushchenko won for a while, conflict existed between—for example—more Western and more anti-Russian oriented groups of the population, on one side, and on the other side, more pro-Russian groups, or, I might say, groups with a post-Soviet or Soviet mentality. And this conflict was also taking place between political groups that promoted a more Western course and those, like some oligarchical clans and mafia clans, who were more open to interacting with Russia and with the Russian authorities. It's important to understand that in Ukraine, there is a lot of corruption; a lot of shady politics are going on behind closed doors all the time. Much more than in Europe, for example—even though we all know that in Europe these also exist—the official declarations of the local authorities don't necessarily correspond with their actual activities.

So after the presidency of Yushchenko, Yanukovich returned to running for the presidency and finally won elections [in 2010]. After this, the situation became very unclear, because he took a very sly approach, I would say—constantly trying to pretend to deal both with the West and with Russian authorities. Because of this, he created a lot of confusion within the population. After first making some agreements with the European Union, he unexpectedly tried to cancel them and to move more officially into the sphere of Russian influence. This created a lot of disagreement and unrest, which gave rise to the [second] Maidan protests, which started in the late autumn of 2013.

Talking about the Maidan protests: can you sum up a little bit what happened there (but in a really short version, because the story is really long), with the key points that might be interesting about who was participating, why was it provoked, and what were the results of the Maidan?

Yeah, sure. Of course, it's very hard really to describe it briefly, but I will try the best I can. At first, it began with mainly student protests. These appeared after the [aforementioned] political steps by Yanukovich, which were very unpopular among the population, and among the youth especially. Many people were very supportive of becoming closer to the European Union: of having the possibility to go to the EU without visas and other forms of collaboration. So when Yanukovich stepped back from this line that he had previously declared, it was the trigger for the large protests involving youth, mainly student youth, in November 2013.

But it was not only the youth who were unhappy with the politics of Yanukovich. So, after the youth were beaten badly by riot police, this provoked an intense retaliation from broader parts of Ukrainian society. Starting from that point, the protests became multi-layered, multi-class protests, which drew in different strata from society to participate. Many people from different regions of Ukraine came into the streets of Kyiv and also to many other cities, in both eastern and western parts of the country. People came to the streets and also, after a while, started to occupy administrative buildings. The most intense protests took place in Kyiv and also in several western cities, which are believed to be more pro-Western, more distant from Russia, more Ukrainian speaking, and the like.

The conflict went through several stages of worsening confrontations, then a temporary pacification. But then, in February [2014], it came to its peak. The final conflict started as protesters tried to occupy the parliamentary building in Kyiv, and also to come to the presidential office demanding the immediate resignation of President Yanukovich due to his repression, corruption,

and pro-Russian politics. The retaliation from the riot police and special forces was super harsh; about one hundred people were killed. Then it came to a stage of open confrontation, even armed confrontation we could say, between the side of the protesters and the side of the government. That was the moment when some shady stuff started to develop. Yanukovych just disappeared after several days in mid-February and then appeared in Russia.

When he fled, that was the moment of the collapse of the more pro-Russian regime in Ukraine. This was the turning point from which current situation started to develop.

Right. And he forgot his golden baguette² when he left, right?

Yes, yes, exactly—and a lot of other things! [laughs]

A lot of people in the West, influenced by Russian propaganda and the disinformation campaign, started to believe the narrative that what happened in Ukraine back in 2014 was a fascist coup supported by NATO. Some journalists—also liberals, but besides liberals, there were also anarchists and leftists who reproduced that narrative—argued that it was a NATO coup and that a fascist government was established afterwards.

Can you evaluate that narrative? Was it like that, or was there something else happening at that point?

Yes, I think I can speak about it confidently, because I participated in the events myself. I was in Kyiv for nine days in the very hot phase of the conflict in February. So what I witnessed personally was the really popular movement in which hundreds of thousands of people [participated]. When I discussed it later with some Western comrades, I heard these speculations about what NATO did behind the scenes and a Nazi coup and stuff like this. Other people answered that, OK, if there were hundreds of thousands of people on the streets, it could not be *just* an orchestrated coup or something like that.

The far right participated in this, of course. They participated actively, made effective political developments in this, and were very aggressive, very dominant, and successful to a certain point. But they were still a minority in these protests, of course. And even though their ideological influence—it did really exist, it's true, but they were not the ones who were legislating the protests, or who really designed the demands and the ideological face of these events.

I saw a lot of very spontaneous popular self-organization. I saw a lot of very sincere popular unrest and anger against the state establishment, which really made this country poor and humiliated. So to the biggest extent, it was absolutely an authentic popular uprising. Even though, of course, all of the political powers who could benefit from it tried to influence it as hard as they could. And they were partly successful.

But I take this mostly as the question to us—to libertarians, anarchists, the radical left if you want—why weren't we organized enough to compete effectively with fascists? This is not a question to the Maidan movement or to the people of Ukraine, but to *us*. And once again, to summarize, Maidan was first of all a popular uprising.

After Maidan, what happened was that Putin was disappointed, there were a lot of political speculations and political struggles, and eventually the [Russian] occupation or takeover of Crimea, and then the move [towards the Russia-backed separatist war] in Donbas. Can you summarize a bit of what actually happened between 2014–2015 and

² Reportedly, after Yanukovych fled, protesters found a two-kilogram solid gold representation of a loaf of bread at his residence, as well as gold-plated toilets. Ukrainian capitalist Vladimir Lukyanenko had apparently presented the loaf to the former president as a birthday present.

now? How much of a conflict was brewing there, or did the things that are happening there just pop up out of nowhere?

When the Ukrainian regime of Yanukovich started to crash, it was the moment of truth, the point when all stability and all clear things were somehow broken. Then the Russian authorities started to react very harshly—and also impulsively. They wanted to take counter-measures against the Maidan movement, which had the tendency to move Ukraine away from Russian state influence. After this, they occupied the Crimean peninsula. They also took a stand in the local population to a large extent, because the local population there is not that much—of course, we cannot generalize, but many people there do not identify with Ukraine, do not associate themselves with Ukraine. That was the basis that gave Russia the opportunity to successfully take it from Ukraine.

They [the Russian authorities] also influenced the events in Donbas a lot, because the new Ukrainian authorities, the provisional government, made some very stupid moves against the Russian language. This gave Russian propagandists the opportunity to portray the Maidan events as “anti-Russian,” in the national sense of these words. This was not true to a larger extent, but to the people of Donbas—which is a very Russian-speaking and very psychologically close to Russia, as far as I can estimate, even though a lot of different people are living there—it created the opportunity for the Russian authorities to extend [their influence] there, to send forces there³ and to support local secessionist groups to fight effectively, or at least to survive against the Ukrainian army which tried to assure the integrity of the Ukrainian state. At this point, some dramatic military events happened in Donbas, where some portion of the population declared they did not want to be a part of Ukraine any more. But without Russian state support, it would not have been possible for that movement to grow to such a great extent. And we need to recall that millions of refugees from Donbas then came both to Russia and to Ukraine.

A lot of people from Donbas still feel themselves close to Ukraine. But this is not a question that can really be solved within this state logic of two national states, or rather, the Russian imperialist state and Ukrainian nation-state. It’s a question that really needs a confederal solution. But as usual, both state sides used this conflict for their own benefit, and this was the point that started to increase nationalistic opinion, both in Russia and in Ukraine, I would say.

Right. There were these Minsk agreements [in 2015] that were kind of a settlement between Putin, Merkel, and the West/East pretty much. But just to give an impression in Donbas: was there something happening there over the last few years, or was it true that no military actions were happening and no violence of any kind was happening?

Of course, it’s important to know that up to today, those Minsk agreements were never really implemented. And even though the active phase of conflict—during which the front line went up and down and significant movements of armies took place—is really finished, this is still a zone of constant conflict, of constant smaller clashes, with deaths every week definitely and sometimes even every day. Shellfire from both sides still takes place a lot. This is a wound that never healed. This is still something going on constantly, even at low intensity.

So with these events happening, what was actually the reaction of the local anarchist movement, or the anti-fascist movement? As I remember, the “anti-fascist” part of the anti-fascist movement joined the fight against Russians and went to war in Donbas... but

³ The Russian government denied sending troops into the Donbas region of Ukraine.

what's up with the anarchists and the rest of the anti-fascists who were not participating in the war?

At this point, I need to say first of all that in periods we are discussing, I was not living in Ukraine yet, in 2015, 2016, 2017 and so on. But still even today, I can evaluate somehow and of course I had my fingers on the pulse of this movement even before.

Yes, some part of the anarchist movement really got this “patriotic” sentiment, or, if you want, this “anti-imperialist” sentiment, and they took this defensive side—that is, some people joined the voluntary units and also the army, the regular army, motivated by the necessity to confront the bigger evil of the Putin imperialist state. Some people took maybe a more moderate and more internationalist position, trying to stress that both sides are in no way good, that both sides represent oppressive and bad politics—both the Russian state side and the Ukrainian state side.

But at the moment, I think the absolute majority of the local anarchist community are super hostile to any Russian invasion, and do not believe all the speculations of the Putin side that this is somehow an anti-fascist action confronting the Ukrainian far-right politics and so on. No way. It is just an imperialist move. This is clear to all the local comrades.

This year started as a huge shitstorm. Russians invaded Kazakhstan with their partners and helped to stabilize the Tokayev regime. Now there is the possibility of a war in Ukraine. Can you give your thoughts on why Putin started these really aggressive moves so quickly? It's been several months, I think, since they started moving the army to the Ukrainian border, and the Kazakh crisis, and so on. What are your thoughts on the reasons why this is happening?

Speaking very generally and overall, the Putin regime is in a desperate situation. On the one hand, it is still very powerful, having a lot of resources and a lot of control over its own territory. But at the same time, their power is slipping away like sand between their fingers. In different places, there are clear cracks in this Putin-designed system of border states that are supposed to be satellites of his regime, like Kazakhstan, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, and Armenia. Very big social currents, major social uprisings and protests, are taking place in every country I just mentioned. Geopolitically, there is a serious threat that his control over these neighboring territories will decrease.

Also, internally, the economic situation in Russia started to degrade since 2014, actually since these Maidan events, the Crimean takeover, and the big sanctions from the Western powers against Russia. It triggered a constant economic decrease, and now a lot of the popularity that Putin gained after the Crimean takeover is already gone. Also, this was galvanized under the COVID-19 pandemic, which didn't contribute at all to his popularity among the population. Now, to a big extent, he is not that popular of a leader even inside Russia.

So this is the situation, if you are Putin: you are still very powerful, but at the same time, you see situations playing out that are not in your favor. I think all these aggressions are desperate attempts to prevent his power from slipping away, to somehow still preserve his authoritarian rule.

I think all the bullshit Putin has historically been doing in all these other countries was normally an effort to take attention away from the internal problems, as you were mentioning. How popular is the current conflict with Ukraine in Russian society, actually? Is it a patriotic euphoria, like, “Yeah, let's fucking take it”? Or is there a resistance, does nobody support that? What is brewing inside of the big Russian community?

For me, this is a bit hard to estimate correctly, because I haven't been in Russia for almost three years. But at the same time, I can say that of the people who I've stayed in contact with, they are super pessimistic with this war perspective. Of course, the people I am in contact with represent a specific ideological frame. Normal people, as far as I can guess and assume and as far as I can see in the examples of the ordinary people with whom I'm familiar... I would say they are still not very optimistic about the prospects of a big war with anybody, because they understand that it will result in deaths, and in even further economic downturn. Even the television propaganda, which is becoming more and more terrible in Russia year after year—it's kind of a constant tide of shit going directly into the brains of the people—even this is not actually capable of really turning the people in favor of war.

So no, there is no patriotic euphoria as far as I can see at all in Russia, This is actually a kind of depressive time after all these waves of the pandemic, after all these battles about QR codes and vaccination, and also some other unpopular steps from the authorities, like the obvious electoral fraud that we witnessed this autumn in Russia: all of these are a very bad foundation for people to become really hysterical[ly pro-war].

Of course, if a war is started, I assume that initially it could provoke some increase in patriotism, as almost always happens. But I think it will not be stable or really significant. And if Russia faces any determined resistance, any big problems in Ukraine, I think all this pro-state patriotism will fade away very soon and turn into its opposite.

On the other side, right now, the Ukrainian government is trying to use the situation as well—for example, moving really fast with the Western allies, getting weapons, and so on. But can you summarize the reaction inside of Ukrainian society to actions of the Ukrainian government? What are they trying to do apart from all these mobilization efforts?

Actually, the situation is not very clear to me now. Since 2004, as I mentioned already, before this conflict in the east of Ukraine, [the conflict benefitted] both the Putin regime and the local authorities, because when you have this defensive nationalist patriotic hysteria, it is really easier to protect yourself from any questions from below, from the grassroots level. Questions like, what's going on in our country? Why is it so poor? Why is it so deep in shit? There was a clear, fast answer to those questions: this is all because of the external enemy.

That was the tool used a lot by local authorities, this attitude of, "We will take measures on all the internal problems after the external threat goes away." This line is actually not very popular in Ukraine, but it exists, and it is expressed vocally in some parts of the society.

It is clear that the Zelensky government is fighting in many different ways with its political opponents—both with former president Poroshenko, who is now facing criminal prosecution, and also more pro-Russian forces like Medvedchuk, who is also facing criminal prosecution now and his party is experiencing repression. Somehow, the far right also came under repression, since their beloved patron, Interior Minister Avakov, resigned several months ago. After this, some people from the Azov movement—from this national corps, which is the largest far-right party in Ukraine at the moment—they were put under arrest as well.

So the Ukrainian state has consolidated itself, somehow. This much is visible. As for how that affects internal politics around this threat, that is not very clear to me as of now. But we can see some really alarming tendencies threatening to concentrate executive power in the hands of the president and his crew.

Speaking of the politics of the current government, how would you describe them? I remember Zelensky being a populist—like saying, yeah, we will fight corruption, we will make everybody happy, and so on. What are his politics right now? There is also a narrative that I hear in the Western hemisphere that the war doesn't matter so much because it's basically replacing one fascist regime with another fascist regime. How much do the politics and "liberal freedoms" in Ukraine differ from Russia right now?

First of all, the Zelensky regime is definitely not fascist, at least not right now—if only because it still does not have that much control. This is because in Ukraine, the state's power is not as consolidated as it is in Russia or in Belarus. But this regime is still in no way "good," of course. They are still corrupt liars who are doing basically neoliberal bullshit. This is the design of most of their politics, I would say. But still, this country is much less authoritarian in its social structure, at least, even though it's super shitty in its economic structure. This is the reason why so many political dissidents from Belarus, Russia, and also Kazakhstan, too, for example, are sheltering here. Because here, there is not such a unified state line, there is not that much opportunity or possibility for the state to control and design the entire social landscape—even though, as I said before, the state is trying to do it more now.

So a takeover of Ukraine by the Russian authorities or a clearly pro-Russian government will be a catastrophe, because a somewhat freer area—or I would say, more of a "gray zone," as Ukraine is now—will shift to being under the control of the authoritarian and harsh dictatorship of Putin. To be clear, the Ukrainian state is still a super shitty populist regime that has not made any positive political steps, as far as I can tell, since Zelensky came into power. The only concrete step which I can remember right now was this law about agricultural lands, which can be now freely bought and sold on the market, whereas before there were some obstacles. We believe that this legislation will soon result in the concentration of agricultural lands in the hands of several big agricultural corporations. So all the neoliberal politics like this are being put into place.

But still, we see a lot of poverty, both in Ukraine and in Russia. Of course, Ukraine is a poorer country because it doesn't have as much oil and gas. But if Russia will occupy Ukraine, do we really believe that local working class and poor people will gain some economic benefits from the new occupation regime? Of course not. It's really hard for me to believe in that. Because the Russian economic situation is getting worse and worse, and they simply have no resources to share with other people. To construct this big bridge from continental Russia to Crimea, it necessitated ceasing the construction of several bridges in Siberia and in other parts of Russia. So they have no resources to share with local people here, even if they would want to buy them off somehow. And in the sphere of politics and society, of course, we can expect nothing better from the Putin regime. In terms of dictatorship, regarding state control and state oppression, the Putin regime is currently much more dangerous than the local regime. The local regime is not "better," it is just less powerful.

A lot of the things that are happening with Russia, the things that Putin has allowed himself in the last fifteen or so years, happened with some kind of tacit OK from international community. Or [they only result in an empty statement to the effect that] "we condemn the violation of human rights," blah blah blah. Like the situation in Kazakhstan, for example—the most recent one, didn't actually cause any political or social backlash from other players in the political arena. For me, it's interesting to ask what the reaction of the international community might be to the possibility of the invasion of Ukraine? Is it like, OK, we're going to go into the war and we're all going to fuck up

Russia? Or is it more like, we will be “concerned” if Russia takes over Ukraine, blah blah blah?

Well, I’m not sure if my picture is really correct from here, but of course, every day in the news we hear and see that, for example, the American [i.e., US] president and American government are threatening Russia with huge economic sanctions in the case of military aggression. And also, we learned recently that some military support has come to Ukraine as well—not military personnel, but some weapons. So I think there is some reaction from the so-called international community.

But from here, it always looks like the West is constantly promising but never actually taking the crucial steps that could actually prevent Putin’s aggression. So the people of Ukraine, I think even those who had some sympathy with Western countries, feel themselves more and more abandoned by the powers that they once believed in.

Talking about the anarchists in Ukraine—I know that the anarchist movement in Ukraine is not the strongest in the region, and it suffered from the recent conflicts in Donbas and so on. What is the current reaction to the possibility of the Russian invasion? What are anarchists talking about? What are anarchists thinking about, or mobilizing to do in case the Russian forces march in?

Well, I would say that there are two different modes within the anarchist community here. Of course, we discuss it a lot, almost every day, and in every meeting, and some people are really interested in participating in resistance. Some in military terms, and some also in terms of peaceful volunteering, some logistics volunteering, and so on. Of course, some other people are thinking more about fleeing and taking refuge somewhere. I am more in sympathy (and this is my personal position, but also political) with the first idea. If you flee, you are out of any political and social protest. We as revolutionaries, we need to take some active stand, not a passive stand of just observing or fleeing. We need to intervene in these events. This is for sure.

The biggest challenge, and the biggest question, is: in what way should we intervene in them? Because if, as it happened in 2014–15, we just individually go and join some Ukrainian troops to confront the aggression, that is not actually a political activity. It is just an act of self-assimilation into state politics, into the politics of the nation-state.

Fortunately, this is not only my opinion. Many people are thinking here about making some organized structure... which may be in some collaboration with the state structures of self-defense, but will still be autonomous and under our influence, and will be composed of comrades. So this will be organized participation with our own agenda and our own political message, for our own organizational benefit. Not just taking sides with some state player in this conflict.

Right, but some people would be saying for sure that, “Hey, you’re anarchists against the state, and now you’re protecting the state.” I’m pretty sure that some people think that anarchists should be out of those conflicts altogether. What would you answer to them?

First of all, I would answer them—thanks, this is a valuable critique. We really need to evaluate how to intervene so as not to just become a tool in some state’s hands. But definitely, if we apply some smart politics—if we apply the art of politics, I would say—we have a chance to do this. If we stay away from the state conflicts, then we stay away from actual politics, as I said before. This is now one of the most significant social conflicts that is going on in our region. If we isolate

ourselves from it, we isolate ourselves from the actual social process. So we need somehow to participate.

Of course, it is beyond question that we need to confront Putinist imperialism. If we need any kind of collaboration in this way, then we need it. Of course, we have to evaluate very carefully, very cautiously, how not to become dependent on some very reactionary and negative powers. This is really a question and a challenge, but this is the difficult path that we can go on. Running from those challenges just equals surrender in terms of promoting anarchy and promoting social liberation and revolution in our region. And this is not an acceptable position for me and for many other comrades.

I think for me it's also important here to point out that all in all, Ukraine is kind of like a last stand among the former Soviet countries. Currently, the expansion of Putin's empire is taking more and more aggressive steps—again, the Kazakhstan story, the Belarus story, the full support of the Lukashenko regime under certain terms of reintegration of Belarus into Russia—all of these steps are aiming to bring the whole region back under Putin's authoritarianism. For us as anarchists, it is extremely important to give an answer to that and not just sit on our thrones and say, "Oh that's so great, we are anarchists; we are against the state, and all those simple, stupid politics of the state do not touch us."

That's correct, of course. But at the same time, I want to stress that we also should not take sides with the local nationalist circles and local nation-states. Because these are by no means progressive political entities or progressive political voices. They also really produce a lot of oppression and exploitation, and this also really needs to be confronted, both vocally and by means of our activities.

Exactly. I totally agree with that. To [readers] who are not in the region, how can people support you? Or how can people actually get more information on the situation?

Well, first of all, support could be informational; if you follow what is going on here attentively and spread information, spread the word, this would already be a really big thing. Also, I think if you have an opportunity to come in contact with local anarchist comrades, it is possible to request some kind of support: maybe solidarity actions, maybe preparing some conditions for people who need to flee, for example, to escape the region. Also, some financial support may be required at some time. If we will have some organizational presence in this conflict, that will require a lot of material things and finances.

Unfortunately, at the moment I cannot recommend some unified website or Telegram channel or something like that, which you could follow in order to know everything. There is still a multitude of different smaller media projects and smaller groups, not some really big unified union or unified organization. But definitely, if you make some effort, you will easily come into contact with this or that faction of the local anarchist movement, so you can keep an eye on the situation and be ready to react somehow. This will be already extremely appreciated.

Cool. Thanks a lot for the conversation. Take care, and hopefully the war won't happen and the Russians will fuck off, and there will be other things to take care of in the struggle rather than actually organizing resistance to the Russian invasion.

Yes, hopefully.

A View from Kyiv

Ukraine has been at war with Russia and its proxies for eight years now. The death toll has already exceeded 14,000. Yet as Russian troops gather along our northern and eastern borders, it's the first time in the history of this war—or even in the entire history of Ukraine as I recall it—that I am regularly receiving messages from my foreign friends, some of whom I haven't heard from in years, all eager to learn whether I am safe and if the threat is as significant as they have been told. These friends vary in their political views, ages, occupations, life experiences, and backgrounds. The one thing they all have in common is that they're all from the United States.

The rest of my comrades around the world seem to have less anxiety about this. Last week, I hosted one friend from Greece and another from Germany, both of whom seemed surprised to learn that they had landed in a country that is supposed to become the epicenter of the Third World War any minute now (which is probably why their plane tickets only cost eight euros). I would have been surprised, too, if it weren't for the fact that I also happen to watch US television myself. Over the past few weeks, I noticed a surge of references to Ukraine's situation on all sorts of talk shows I see online. It almost feels as if there's more talk about Ukraine in the United States now than there was during Joe Biden's son's corruption scandal.

For a Ukrainian, what this sudden rise in interest in our endless fight against our abusive imperialist neighbor makes you feel will depend on your political stance. When we agreed to give up our nuclear weapons in 1994, joining the Budapest memorandum, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the USA promised to respect and protect the independence, sovereignty, and existing borders of Ukraine and to refrain from any threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of Ukraine. When all of those promises were proven to be completely worthless just twenty years later, many people here couldn't help but feel betrayed. Many of these people now feel like it's right about time for the US to step up its game delivering on its promises. Without this context, it would be extremely challenging to understand why some people in Ukraine would applaud when an offshore empire that refers to Ukraine as "Russia's backyard" flies war planes filled with soldiers over this sovereign country.

However, there are some others in Ukraine who, like myself, don't limit their mistrust to the empire that we are unfortunate enough to share a border with, but extend this well-earned lack of confidence to the rest of them. Even for the people who truly believe that the enemy of their enemy is their friend, it's worth asking how many such friends that the US has made around the world—Vietnamese, Afghans, Kurds, and more—have not regretted acquiring such an ally.

This fairly low bar of critical thinking is unfortunately not nearly as common in Ukraine as short-sighted patriotism, nationalism, and militarism, all of which are gaining momentum here as war hysteria grows. In Ukraine, there is not much discussion about why we are finally being noticed by the US and UK now, after eight painful years of losing lives and territories—including my hometown of Luhansk. And this absence of curiosity about the motives of the empires works both ways: just as most of us couldn't care less what Biden's administration stands to gain from this power play, our understanding of why Putin would attempt to invade further now is limited to "This bloodthirsty maniac is simply mad." Hardly anyone entertains a possibility that there could be something more going on.

Even fewer question the claim that Russia has indeed increased its presence on the Ukrainian border in a way that makes our current situation more threatening than it was a year ago.

I am not saying that the threat of the invasion of the very real Russian troops amassing at our borders is insignificant. But I question whether the involvement of the US is truly aimed at de-escalating this conflict to benefit the people of Ukraine.

Unfortunately, being here on the ground doesn't really give me any particular expertise to rely on. Back in early 2014, seeing everything that was happening around the country, I refused to believe that Ukraine was about to go to war until the very moment it happened. In retrospect, it seems like it was inevitable. Now, none of us truly know if the war will happen, and if it does, when it will escalate.

Some people have already fled the country. Most people can't afford even a brief short-distance trip abroad, so they are bound to keep calm and carry on. Beyond corruption and war, the reason why most people in Ukraine are so desperately poor may or may not coincide with the fact that Ukraine outlawed communism in 2015 and is currently the only country in Europe in which the parliament consists entirely of different shades of right-wing parties.

When events like this unfold almost 6000 miles away from you, it's natural for an overseas anti-authoritarian to seek to make sure that they're not rooting for the bad people. Not everyone standing up for themselves is Zapatistas, Kurds, or Catalans. A wide spectrum of different groups around the world resist imperialist aggression. On this spectrum, many of the people claiming to guard Ukraine fall much closer to groups like Hezbollah and Hamas. Are many of them xenophobic, conservative, sexist, homophobic, anti-Semitic, racist, pro-capitalist, or even outright fascist? Yes. But are they fighting an uneven fight against an extremely powerful and violent neighboring state, in which they seem to be the only hope for any meaningful resistance whatsoever? Also yes.

And these aren't the hardest questions.

If an autocratic empire is trying to destroy another state that is defended, in part, by fascists, do we sit back and rejoice there are going to be a few less fascists in the world? What if the deaths will also include thousands of innocent people who are trying to defend themselves or are simply at the wrong place at the wrong time? Do we step in, understanding that these divisions between people only benefit those who are already powerful, never the people being divided?

This begs another question: what does "stepping in" mean? Is there a way to "step in" here that is both substantial and without negative consequences? Neither of the two strategies that the United States has employed so far have shown much success. Antagonizing Russia only makes things worse for everyone, while many people here believe that the alternative—expressing "deep concern" without standing in Putin's way—is what led to the war getting started in 2014 in the first place. This is why I doubt that any solution to the problem of the imperial appetite that doesn't involve the simultaneous abolition of both empires can be anything more than a bandaid for an issue of this scale. The truth is, Ukraine is not the first victim of the hunger for power, nor will it be the last. As long as we keep these monsters alive, it won't matter whether they are friends or foes, tamed or rabid, chained or free. They will always be hungry.

I do hope, however, that there is still a lot more that people in the US and the rest of the world can do. I hope we can all organize and create communities that transcend the superficial divisions imposed on us by the noxious ideologies of capitalism, conservatism, and individualism, striving to remember that it is only when we are separated, segregated, careless of one another, or at each other's throats that we are truly weak and helpless. With education and solidarity, we can try to create a world in which a senseless conflict like this would make even less sense. Until we can

do that, we can do our very best to provide support to those around the world who fall victim to these cruel wars.

What does this mean, concretely, right now, here in Ukraine? And in the meantime, does the fact that many people fighting for Ukraine are indeed fascists mean that all the people who are hiding behind their backs—including me—are also liable for their politics? Here, we are getting into the harder questions.

But no one is addressing these questions here. The people of Ukraine are all busy taking first aid and gun handling classes—or learning where the city shelters are—or, mostly, just struggling to get by. There's no all-out panic here, just dull weariness. The threat of the big war remains very real; if it occurs, it is unlikely that it will result in anything other than an even weaker, worse, and smaller Ukraine than the one we already have. And I really can't recommend even the current version.

All that being said, it's also worth admitting that I will not risk my life fighting for this country against the Russian army. I will probably do my best to evacuate if Kyiv becomes even more unlivable than it already is. This is admittedly the intention of a person with some privileges. Most of the people here have absolutely nowhere to go.

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Elephant in the Room
Ukraine: Between Two Fires
Anarchists in the Region on the Looming Threat of War
February 3, 2022

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Introduction and transcription by CrimethInc. "Ilya" has been identified as Dmitry Petrov, who died fighting in the Battle of Bakhmut on 19 April 2023.

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