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Anarchist movement in Belarus 1992-2002

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8 According to a FAB's "legend," Shlioma Kahanovich is considered the first Belarusian anarchist of the 20th century.

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larusian anarchist movement has already proven its viability. And the ten-year history of FAB is a dramatic confirmation of the fact.

Notes:

1 – The ASC is the first anarchist organisation on the USSR territory created in 1988 during *Perestroika*. After the coup in 1991, the ASC split into several anarchist groups because of an organisational and ideological crisis. Formally exists until now.

2 – The Free Inter-professional Workers Union (FIWU) was created in 1972 and has united different dissidents for a long time. In the late 80s, the FIWU in Belarus was transformed into an independent left workers' organisation.

3 – Later on, part of the FIWU activists created the so-called “Organisational Committee of the Workers Party” and issued a working-class newspaper *Basta!*; it also cooperated closely with anarchists.

4 – To be perfectly objective, the first happening in Belarus was “The Burial of Slava CPSU15” held by a group of citizens near the building of the central committee of the Communist Party of Belarus in Minsk just after the coup in August 1991.

5 – The Beer-Lovers Party (BLP) emerged in 1993 as a liberal party. Most of its members comprised non-conformist youth that had a significant influence on the methods of activity and party ideology, shifting it to the moderately left flank of the political spectrum.

6 – (hist.) That was the name of the Uprising Management Committee in Lithuania and Belarus under the command of Kastus' Kalinowski during the liberatory uprising of 1863.

7 – Afterwards, the BLP Executive Committee had to emigrate to Poland in full muster and then to the Czech Republic because of criminal prosecution; the party ceased to exist in 1996.

movement in Belarus. It turned out that such a structure as FAB is impossible to eliminate neither from the outside, by repressing the management (because Belarusian anarchists don't have any "central committees" or "leaders"), nor from the inside, by inspiring a split (because FAB is already "split" into a variety of independent equal groups). The only way to liquidate FAB is to destroy all anarchist activity in Belarus, which seems unlikely.

Today FAB is rather a decentralised network, i.e. a real association emerges only while implementing a specific practical initiative. Right then different coordinating and executive bodies can be created, and only within and for the period of the accomplishment of this initiative involving all people interested. Moreover, there are no mandatory orders, because the efficiency of the activity entirely depends on personal responsibility and self-organisation of each anarchist, which, unfortunately, often leaves much to be desired.

Another thing that was successfully avoided by Belarusian anarchists are the noisy quarrels often involved in the pseudo-ideological "discussions" attempting to define anarchists as "true" or "non-true." It's common knowledge that anarchists shouldn't compete with each other and, what is more, no one has a copyright on anarchism and the right to claim the only right rendering of the "bright anarchist future." Even the ideas of anarchist classics are first of all their own personal opinions which can be supported or not.

Nevertheless, there is still a variety of problems to be solved by the participants of the Belarusian anarchist movement. The major problem is overcoming isolation and aloofness of some anarchist groups and initiatives, which keep emerging in different towns independent from FAB, and their inclusion into the anarchist network. Another critical issue is the lack of common perspective of the goals of the Belarusian anarchist movement at least for the nearest future, which, in its turn, questions trivial coordination of joint actions. However, in spite of these and other negative moments, Be-

You are holding a short historical account of the first decade of anarchism in post-Soviet Belarus. Written in a simple way, it gives you an idea of the processes that took place in the anarchist movement of Belarus from 1991 to 2002. The brochure was issued in Russian and Belarusian in 2002 by a former anarchist Pauliuk Kanavalchyk who recollected the facts and funny stories that he lived through or heard from other contemporaries. Mind that this is a personal account, probably lacking other important dates and happenings. Another Belarusian anarchist Mikalai Dziadok got down to writing the continuation of the history covering the following decades. The book isn't finished yet.

Translated by Anarchist Black Cross Belarus

Anarchism in Belarus has more than a century-old history. The first mentions of anarchists on the territory of Belarus date back to the eve of the Russian revolution of 1905-1907, when first anarchist groups started to emerge in different towns¹. Not numerous at first, anarchists engaged in the trendy at that time individual terror². Thanks to such a "propaganda of the deed" anarchism became a vast revolutionary movement literally over the first years of its existence. The movement attracted radical in thinking young people who were willing to throw a bomb at exploiters.

It is common knowledge that Maksim Bahdanovich, a canonical Belarusian writer, used to be an anarchist during his studies, and under the influence of Bakunin's writings attempted to blow the administration of his own grammar school with a self-made bomb. Explosions, assassination attempts, expropriations – numerous historical books on the history of the early 20th century repeatedly mentioned these acts as inherent to anarchists.

Meanwhile, modern Belarusian anarchism starts from recent history, which has not yet been reflected in school books, but is already stuck upon the memory of many of our contemporaries and has its continuation in the present.

Let's first make a short retrospective journey into the stagnant 70s – the golden age of the Hippie movement. These rootless “flower children” were able to set their own “System” against the Soviet totalitarian system, and it later became a real vital alternative for many young people. It was in the Hippie communities that the first contemporary anarchists appeared³. We cannot speak about any serious anarchist activity in the epoch of all-embracing power of the KGB⁴, though history remembers a few precedents of active resistance to the system.

In 1972 in Hrodna, Hippies organised an anti-military pacifist demonstration. It came as a total shock for the local authorities. The army and the militia⁵ blocked off the centre of the city, and all the demonstrators were arrested. Later many of them tracklessly disappeared in Soviet mental institutions. But this action of Hrodna Hippies is still remembered by many people as the first youth action of disobedience in Belarus⁶.

Of course, one cannot claim that the Hippie movement was the cradle of the modern anarchist movement in Belarus. But some shaggy ginks of the 70s would take an active part in its creation later on.

It's been a long time, and many things have happened since then; that allows us to start writing the chronicle of anarchism in Belarus today.

It is impossible to describe all tricks of Belarusian anarchists during the last decade [the 90s – t/n], but the most crucial actions that caused a public response should be reflected on paper right now.

As some heroes of events discussed below are our contemporaries, their names will deliberately not be mentioned, and some fascinating stories involving specific people will be omitted. Let's leave it to the future researchers and the personalities themselves, who at the set of life will describe them in detail in their memoirs.

anarchists who expressed solidarity with the struggle of the homosexual people for their rights, it was possible to organise the first demonstration of sexual equality in Belarus.

Since spring 2002, the independent initiative Ecoresistance have started the public campaign “Against reserve forests clearance.” A few pickets were organised with collecting signatures under a petition demanding to stop the clearance of valuable timber trees in Prypiatski and Biarezinski reserves, as well as in the Belavezhskaya Puscha. Within the campaign, a musical festival “Green Sabbath” was held. The fest was stopped by the riot police.

Moreover, FAB activists took part in broader leftist projects. In Hrodna, there was a Confederation of Active Groups “Together,” in Homiel and Minsk, the Belarusian Social Movement is created and the newspaper The Attack was issued.

Over ten years of its existence, FAB turned into the structure that doesn't have counterparts in contemporary Belarus. FAB is not an organisation in a usual sense of the word with the necessary attributes: hierarchy, central bodies, formal leader, fixed membership, etc. Just on the contrary – since the time of its formation, there hasn't been created (consciously or by sloppiness) any central body in FAB that would manage the general anarchist movement in Belarus or coordinate it. There is no fixed membership, as FAB have naturally worked not as a centralised organisation of separate anarchist individuals, but as a free union of a variety of anarchist groups and libertarian initiatives, entirely autonomous in their activity, the activists of which are solidarised and act on behalf of FAB. The only common event of FAB is an annual congress of a more entertaining, rather than practical character.

Anarchist bloc during an oppositional action “Chernobyl March,” 2001.

These aspects that at the beginning of FAB activity were considered to be its drawbacks by some, in the late 90s surprisingly demonstrated its efficiency for the development of the anarchist

in the centre of the city. The activists gave flowers to men and offered help with household duties to women. Surprising the citizens by doing so, anarchists finished the action with reading verses and playing music dedicated to the holiday.

In 2000, Belarusian anarchist joined the campaign “No one is illegal!” directed against the toughening of the EU migration policy. In summer 2001, a No Border camp was organised near Białystok (Poland) by the Anarchist Federation (Federacja Anarchistyczna) together with FAB activists. About a hundred activists from Poland, Belarus, Russia, Germany, etc. took part in the camp. Several pickets and demos against the intensification of border control at the Belarusian-Polish border under the EU pressure were organised during the camp.

The years 2000-2001 were characterised by a boom in independent publishing activity. In this period, a few editions of zines dedicated to antifascism, animal liberation, environment, vegetarianism, alternative scene, DIY-movement, etc. were issued. Independent concert activity with the bands promoting anarchist ideas has intensified. We can't but mention such bands as Deviation (Hrodna), Hate to State (Minsk), Twin Pigs (Ivacevičy), Contra La Contra (Hrodna), etc. In Brest, anarchists created the Free Theatre that was an example of independent theatrical art.

On the eve of the presidential elections-2001, anarchists tried out one more kind of activity – film-making. In cooperation with the editors of the paper *Navinki*, the first independent movie was shot – “An Adventure of a Dude.” The movie ironically demonstrates the Belarusian political cuisine to the viewer. “An Adventure of a Dude” created a real furor among Belarusian politically-minded public and won a few prizes on various international film festivals.

In the setting of total gambling on the topic of human rights and freedoms during the electoral campaign, it was anarchists who supported holding of the “Love Parade” in Minsk organised by the Belarusian League of Sexual Minorities “Lambda” within the gay-culture festival “Gay Pride 2001.” Thanks to the practical help of

The hardening of the steel

From the late 80s, on the wave of *Perestroika*⁷ and “democratisation,” different political initiatives (mainly democratic and nationalist) started popping up like mushrooms after a spring rain all over the former Soviet state. Amid the general enthusiasm about previously banned convictions, anarchism was no exception. Anarchist groups spontaneously appeared in many towns of post-soviet countries – students were absorbed in Bakunin and Kropotkin, others, who didn't like books so much, were crazy about Sex Pistols and took up anarchism from punk-rock, etc.

It was the time when most people associated anarchism with drunk sailors with accordions from the Soviet movies or with vomiting punks in backstreets.

Anyhow, in the early 90s, the main form of anarchist resistance to the state was to shit at the Lenin monument in front of a local administration in Hrodna or Mahilioŭ, to fry an egg on the eternal light in Minsk or to get drunk under a black flag in the Brest Fortress⁸. However, people first heard about anarchists not because of these acts, but during the general strike in April 1991. Then a group of Homieĺ anarchists *Borba* (“The Struggle”) in cooperation with the Moscow Anarcho-Syndicalist Confederation (ASC)¹ organised a strike on the typographic factory *Polespechat* in Homieĺ. At the same time, the activists of the Free Inter-Professional Workers Union (FIWU)², who were widely represented in workers' strike committees, claimed to be anarcho-syndicalists and tried to create a leftist alternative to the Free Trade Unions. The first mentions of the “successors of

¹ According to historian Yuri Glushakov, the first anarchist group in the Russian Empire appeared in Białystok (considered to be part of Belarus at that time) in spring 1903. Yuri Glushakov. *“Revolution is Dead! Long Live the Revolution!”: Anarchism in Belarus 1902-1917*. IISS: Saint-Petersburg, 2015.

² Not totally true, according to Yury Hlushakou, anarchists were also active in the workers' movement organising strikes, issuing leaflets, etc. Ibid.

Kropotkin and Makhno” in the media motivated many anarchism adherents to seek contacts with the like-minded. That was also invited by the political “thaw” in August 1991.

The first general meeting of Minsk and Homieĺ anarchists, which took place on 1st August 1992 in a “safe house” in Minsk was attended by only eight delegates. Despite its paucity, the public was rather diverse: followers of classic kropotkianism and anarcho-syndicalism, “new leftists” praying to May’68, simple punks, a university professor and even a businessman who was a veteran of the anarchist movement of the 70s. At this meeting, a fateful decision to create the Federation of Anarchists of Belarus (FAB) was made.

From the first steps of the joint activity of Belarusian anarchists, it’s become clear that there were no hopes for producing some precise and unified action plan on “reaching an anarchist future” suiting all FAB activists. A general policy paper and the FAB Free Agreement were issued. These documents provided, on the one hand, the autonomy of every anarchist group, on the other hand, the solidarity of all participants of the anarchist movement. Such a decision was conditioned by the life itself – anarchists from Minsk and Homieĺ, frankly speaking, differed from each other in their opinions and methods of activism. In Homieĺ, the first anarchist group in Belarus appeared in 1990, and people were interested in social activities guided by the concept of anarcho-syndicalism. On 6th October 1992, the International Unemployment Day, Homieĺ anarchists held an illegal rally that resulted in clashes with the militia and arrests. In the same year, the Trade Union of the Unemployed was created with the involvement of Homieĺ anarchists; different awareness-raising campaigns were organised in the city enterprises.

The Minsk anarchist group united mostly countercultural youth who was interested mainly in various situationist actions, rather than in the labour movement. The sprouts of Minsk anarcho-syndicalism didn’t even hold out till the 1st FAB congress: several

national character of the anti-globalist movement led to the expansion of personal contacts between Belarusian and western associates. In 1999, FAB activists took part in the Mayday demonstration in Prague which was organised by Czechoslovak Anarchist Federation (Československá anarchistická federace) and resulted in clashes with the police. In September 2000, an entire delegation of FAB participated in the international “Anti-Global Action” in Prague hosting the summit of the IMF and the World Bank. During the riots, Belarusian anarchists gained valuable experience of street fights, the command of stone, building barricades and using Molotov-cocktails against the vehicles of the enemy. Most of them smelled tear gas for the first time, and one of the Belarusian delegates was wounded.

The action of Belarusian and Czech anarchists “Attention: the wall!” near the Belarusian embassy in Prague, summer 2000.

However, anarchists didn’t limit their trends to antifascism and anti-globalism. Just at the time when their comrades fought against the power of TNCs in Prague, FAB activists in Minsk organised a solidarity action with that protest called “The Occupation.” A few dozens of anarchists squatted an empty building in Minsk centre. Later the walls were graffitied, and a concert took place inside. The militia came to liberate the building from the squatters only two hours later, a few people were detained.

Taking up the torch from Hrodna anarchists, on 23rd February 2001, Minsk FAB activists held an action against the universal draft. A performance of an incident from army life was shown in front of Minsk regional draft office – some “recruits” were marching, some were brushing the parade ground, others painted the asphalt black. After that, a dozen potential recruits spectacularly burnt their military service registration certificates.

Anarchists also paid attention to women’s rights. Feminist initiatives have developed in Minsk and other cities. On 8th March 2001, the International Women’s Day, anarchists, in cooperation with the Organisation of Feminists-Anarchists, held a happening

mission to school only because they had “too long” hair or a “non-conformist” look. As a result, anarchists were able to secure that all shaggies were admitted. Another notable event held by Ivacevičy anarchists was an animal liberation action concerning the zoo arrival in 2000. It turned out that a monkey died on the way; that became the cause of the action. Activists climbed on the zoo wagons and put posters reading “Freedom to animals!” and “Put zoo staff in cages!” calling the crowd not to visit the zoo. During the clashes with the zoo security, the public actively supported the anarchists.

The proliferation of anarchists inevitably reflected on different practical anarchist initiatives. However, the primary vectors of activity have been gradually determined. One of the major priorities of a variety of anarchist groups became antifascism. From the late 90s, anarchists have carried on the dedicated activity on organising the antifascist movement in Belarus. From then on, antifascist seminars have been arranged regularly, the materials from which were published in the newspaper *Antyfaszyk*. In Minsk, Homieł and Hrodna clashes with neo-nazis became regular in that period, which later provoked anarchists to create the movement “Antifa-Belarus” with branches in the largest cities of the country. It mainly concentrated on direct actions against the Nazis. In 2000-01, FAB activists initiated the Red & Anarchist Skinheads movement, RASH-Belarus.

Another significant tendency in anarchist activity in Belarus became antiglobalism. And it was not only a fashionable western trend. In spite of all its anti-western rhetoric and an open confrontation between Belarus and the West, the authoritarian Belarusian regime easily found common ground with a variety of transnational corporations which unfolded their activities in the country ignoring the notorious “human rights violations.” Belarusian anarchists actively resisted the activity of TNCs participating in international campaigns on boycotting a number of companies, the activity of which concerned Belarus. Particularly, several actions were organised near McDonald’s restaurants in Minsk. The inter-

key activists of the FIWU had been fired from the factories by that time³. Nevertheless, even then the understanding of the “common cause of the movement” and the need to unite disregarding diverging anarchist affiliations was prevailing among Belarusian anarchists.

The first anarchist newspaper in Belarus

Although the main actions of Minsk and Homieł anarchists were held on “banner days” (Mayday, 7th October, 7th November, etc.), they didn’t go unnoticed for society. In 1993, the first anarchist edition, the newspaper *The Anarchy* was issued in Homieł. Minsk anarchists, apart from having conceptual fun, also tried themselves in publishing, and in 1994 the only edition of the newspaper *The Black Squirrel* was printed.

Meanwhile, the time of relative liberalisation of the political and social life in Belarus came to an end. 1994 was the year of the first presidential elections, after which a systematic crackdown started. However, the strengthening of the presidential dictatorship fostered the development of different social initiatives including anarchist ones. The new Belarusian political reality created new forms of resistance, too. What is really important is that the first mass action during Lukashenka’s 11 presidency was organised at the instigation of anarchists.

The action “We are grateful to the president for bread and milk,” which took place on 14th October 1994, was not only the first anti-presidential manifestation but also the first happening⁴. About 500 students marched to the House of the Government drinking milk

³ Other historians and anarchists active at that time don’t share this opinion. *Hereinafter translator’s note.*

⁴ The KGB is the commonly used acronym for the Russian Committee for State Security. It was the national security agency of the Soviet Union from 1954 until 1991 and was the premier internal security, intelligence, and secret police organisation during that time. It still bears the same name in Belarus.

from the bottles and eating it up with bread loaves and chanted slogans to president's health – they were grateful for a tiny rise in their study allowances that was officially named “for bread and milk.” The action resulted in the arrests of three organisers of the action. It was held by the Free Students Syndicate (FSS) founded together with the national-democratic Association of Belarusian Students and the Left Student Movement (LSM) initiated by Minsk FAB activists.

Later the LSM became famous for another political ruffian trick. During the elections to the Supreme Soviet of Belarus in 1995, the activists of the LSM started a loud campaign for their own candidate and initiated signatures collection. The programme of the anarchist candidate was a total mockery at the standard promises of other politics. For example, he promised to strive for penguin genocide in the Antarctic, to repaint orange the House of the Government, etc.

The primary opponent of anarchists at the electoral precinct was a candidate from the Beer-Lovers Party (BLP)⁵, who was at once blamed for beer amateurism and challenged to a beer duel. Strange as it was, but the challenge was accepted by the “beer-lovers.” The duel took place in the pub *Svislach* with a full house. The rules of the duel were set: an equal number of contestants from each side and the most substantial total amount of drunk beer would let a party win. The beer for the duel was paid by the BLP. As a result, anarchists lost but took advantage of the free beer.

Nevertheless, the candidate from the LSM was taken seriously. The candidate from the BLP, afraid of further competition, offered money to anarchists for them to withdraw their candidate. The cash was accepted, and later anarchists could shout about the corruption of the elections at every street corner. In the end, the votes in the precinct failed.

⁵ *Militsiya* or militia is used as an official name of the civilian police in several former communist states, including Belarus.

planned construction sites in Mahilioŭ region. The aim of the march was spreading anti-nuclear propaganda among the population of the nearest districts. Local municipalities in Mahilioŭ, Škloŭ and other towns were picketed. As a result of the broad public campaign involving Belarusian Academy of Sciences' members, a moratorium on the NPP construction project in Belarus was achieved¹⁴.

In summer 1996, another environmental action was organised – the campaign against the contamination of the Dnieper River. The action aimed to draw attention to the environmental state of one of the most significant waterways in Belarus. Within the campaign, rafting along Dnieper from Škloŭ to Bychaŭ was organised; a conference “Clear water” and a musical festival “Ecostock” was held in Mahilioŭ. During the rafting, activists took water samples and later supplied them to the environmental control station in Mahilioŭ.

Some participants who shunned rafting were moving along the bank of the river to the destination. The land group was able to be first at the meeting points with locals and hold press-conferences against the river contamination together with the local affiliates.

Meanwhile, various anarchist initiatives emerged in Hrodna. In 1998, anarchists created the Radical Wing of the Free Students Syndicate of Hrodna University and started issuing the paper *Let's Rebel!* on its behalf. Hrodna anarchists also found an interesting alternative to the lacking accessible music clubs in the city. Under the auspices of the Independent Union of Hrodna Anarchists (IUHA) the squatting of empty houses and cocklofts started, where concerts and other art-events were held. Moreover, they organised animal liberation campaigns, particularly “Free the dolphins!” during the dolphinarium performance in the city.

In the late 90s, anarchist activity emerges in other regions of Belarus. In September 1999, anarchists picketed local education authority's office in Ivacevičy to protest against the discrimination of students by the school administrations based on looks. The thing was that several high-school students were not granted ad-

In September 1996, during the Town Day in Homiel, the militia-men beat a local punk Konstantin Moskvín to death. Homiel anarchists organised a broad public campaign demanding prosecution of the murderers in the uniform. A special edition of the newspaper Youth Fights Back with the details of this case was issued. The criminal case was started twice, but in the end, the authorities were able to cover up the incident.

The year of 1997 was marked by the rise of the anarchist movement in Brest. In June, anarchists organised a mass meeting to which everyone interested in anarchism had been invited. The abundance of black flags drew the attention of the law-enforcement authorities, and the meeting was dispersed. In autumn that year, another attempt to hold a mass protest was made, but it was terminated by the militia in the very beginning. The KGB got interested in the surprising burst in activity of “extremist elements” and launched repressions against Brest anarchists that included arrests, searches, literature seizures, etc. All that led to a temporary decline in anarchist activity in Brest.

One of the longest and at the same time the most successful actions held with the involvement of Belarusian anarchists was the environmental campaign “*Viasiolka*” (“The Rainbow”) initiated in 1998. The campaign was directed against the plans of the Belarusian nuclear power plant construction which was lobbied by the government. An independent environmental initiative Ecoresistance was created involving anarchists. It took responsibility for the whole campaign that engaged employers of Belarusian Academy of Sciences, concerned scientists, the press, as well as the activists of the Russian radical environmental movement “Rainbow Keepers”, who had the experience of organising a similar campaign. The newspaper *Viasiolka* was issued which covered all aspects of nuclear energy and radioecology. In 1998-99, several seminars on the viability of the NPP construction were organised with the assistance of scientists. In summer 1998, Ecoresistance activists organised the “March for nuclear-free Belarus” at the

Apart from drinking conceptually, thus getting ready for the future battles, the LSM issued a few newspapers: Now!, How to Become a Traitor and The Belarusian *Bukharovets*¹².

In general, 1995 was rather fruitful for anarchism in Belarus. In this year, a new anarchist group was created in Hrodna, which later became one of the most active ones; Hrodna anarchists issued the newspaper The Fool. In 1995, an anti-party group *Chyrvony Zhond* (“The Red Backdoor Government”) started its activity, which played an important role in the development of the anarchist movement in Belarus.

Chyrvony Zhond

Chyrvony Zhond, a national-democratic youth organisation with an unusual name, widely known in privy, existed since the early 90s⁶. Needless to say what its activity consisted in, anyhow, the group had fallen into decline by 1994. Its revival, or better, regeneration, happened in 1994, when suddenly a group of youngsters who were noticed as participants of the action “For bread and milk” joined *Chyrvony Zhond*. “Red means left,” thought the comrades joining the ranks of *Chyrvony Zhond*, and made a real coup d’etat in the organisation in February-March 1995 by reelecting all the ruling positions. The usurpation by the far-left elements led to the situation that anarchists took over the organisation that had an

⁶ Some contemporaries don’t agree with this account of events. Here is one that we received from historian and activist:

In August 1971, a Hippie demonstration was held in Grodno. It was caused by yet another police raid on cutting the hair of people in the street, and that time a few Vilnius residents had their hair cut together with Hrodna locals. The demonstration was not spontaneous, it was prepared beforehand. Posters were made in support of long hair and the freedom of rock’n’roll. The protest passed a few hundred metres through the city centre and flew into the Soviet Square, where it was dispersed. The participants underwent all sorts reprisals from forced haircuts to interrogations, searches, expulsions from school and dismissals.

official public association registration. That provided great opportunities for gambling on “legality.”

Here is the story why *Chyrvony Zhond* became an “anti-party group.” Almost all Belarusian youth organisations represented the wings of “adult” political parties and actively supported them. *Chyrvony Zhond* became the first and only organisation on the “youth” political scene which was not an appendage of some party. Pronouncing the necessity of the youth’s own perspective on Belarusian reality, *Chyrvony Zhond* opposed all parties that only manipulated the youth in their own political interests.

The first action where *Chyrvony Zhond* appeared in its new shape was a happening called “The promenade of political prisoners around the Presidential Residency” organised by the Free Student Syndicate in May 1995 with the active involvement of the Beer-Lovers Party. A few hundred students surrounded the Residency marching in a trail with hands on the nape and carrying the flag of the Belarusian Soviet Republic, and then put the flag on the nearest public toilet. That was a certain reflection on the results of the Referendum on the readmission of the Soviet symbols.

The action ended in mass arrests by riot police, which was a precedent of all repression that would later become the usual routine of the law enforcement. A criminal case was initiated over the insult of the national symbols⁷.

For the anniversary of the October Revolution in 1995, *Chyrvony Zhond* organised an independent manifestation at the House of the Government in Minsk with the attendance of Hrodna anarchists. The action was held under red flags with a hole instead of the hammer and sickle and banners “Off with the absolutism” and “Death to capitalism.” Despite the “conventionalism” of slogans for such an action, 12 participants of the rally were detained.

⁷ *Perestroika* is the restructuring of the Soviet political and economic system in the late 80s.

activists joined other anarchist projects, mainly antifascist and environmental. The activity was pursued by the Ivacevičy chapter of *Chyrvony Zhond*, as well as chapters in Prague and Paris consisting of activists who had to emigrate for some reason.

Summing up the period of *Chyrvony Zhond* (1995-2000), it should be pointed out that its main achievement was the considerable growth of the Belarusian anarchist movement. *Chyrvony Zhond* gave out more than a hundred of first-class badges of honour. (However, it must be admitted that some activists received badges twice to replace the ones lost in battles – either with fascists or with the demon alcohol.) Of course, there was also a dark side: the actions held by other Minsk FAB activists that had nothing to do with the anti-party group were often ascribed to *Chyrvony Zhond* in the media, as it was the most famous anarchist group. Such situations brought in disharmony in the development of other anarchist initiatives.

The struggle continues

The Belarusian anarchist movement of the late 90s wasn’t limited to the activity of *Chyrvony Zhond* which was the most active group at that time, but still just one among many other FAB initiatives and groups.

From the mid-90s, anarchist activity expanded significantly in Hrodna. On 23rd February 1996, Hrodna anarchists organised an action “Fuck the Army” which has become the first appearance of the alternative youth in the city since the Hippie demonstration in 1972. Regional and district military commissariats were picketed, and an illegal march to the local municipality was held. As a result, two participants were detained. Later on, the actions against the universal draft were held by Hrodna anarchists on 19th February annually – the day of the abolition of serfdom in 1861. In this way, they compared the present-day “holy duty” to the servitude.

Zhond released other editions, among them the paper for the working youth *AK-47* and the paper *Antyfaszyk* should be pointed out; they were widespread among the youth. On the other hand, plunging into the publishing projects affected the street activity of *Chyrvony Zhond*. The actions were held more seldom but still were memorable for their “artistic-political” character.

In full play of Russia’s “anti-terrorist campaign” in the Caucasus in winter 2000, anarchists organised a campaign against the war in Chechnya. Within the campaign, an illegal picket near the Russian embassy was held. About two dozen “federal soldiers wounded in action” defiled along the fence holding a holy banner with Putin on it. There were no wounded or taken captives by the militia after the action.

In spring 2000, within the boycott of the parliamentary elections *Chyrvony Zhond* held a happening “Dogs’ elections” with the attendance of real dogs: during the “electoral campaign,” the dogs voted for their candidates to the “Dog-house of Representatives.” As a result, the dogs’ elections were falsified by dog breeders. Another funny action was called “Reclaim the oppositional demonstration” and took place in autumn 2000. During an oppositional manifestation, anarchists organised their own bloc – under various flags and banners from the underpants’ cloth with no inscriptions, the company chanted abstract, meaningless slogans. By that, they wanted to demonstrate that the colour of the flags and the sense of the banners had lost its political and practical meaning for the opposition in their struggle against the dictatorship. “Reclaim the oppositional demonstration” was the last public action organised by *Chyrvony Zhond*; after that, the anti-party group *Chyrvony Zhond* folded operations.

There were some attempts to make chapters of *Chyrvony Zhond* in other cities (Hrodna, Brest, Ivacevičy, etc.), but they were synchronised with the decline in activity in the capital, which didn’t let them expand in full force. The core group of *Chyrvony Zhond* settled down in the editor’s office of the *Navinki* newspaper, some

By 1996 the anti-party group *Chyrvony Zhond* had united Minsk FAB activists, the leftovers of the LSM and other leftist anti-authoritarian elements of the capital.

“Politburo” members of *Chyrvony Zhond*, 1999

Drawing on the experience of the first political happenings, *Chyrvony Zhond* started an active promotion of the “concept of the revolutionary-cultural action,” which was influenced greatly by the ideas of Situationist International and the “new left,” as well as the activity of the Polish *Pomeranczowa Alternatywa* (“The Orange Alternative”). The concept consisted in the artistic manipulation of social stereotypes and images of the mass culture, as a result of which “serious politics” was turned into conceptual ridicule and a fun funfair. *Chyrvony Zhond* took up the slogan “Fight and relax!”.

Apart from mocking at the politics, *Chyrvony Zhond* was also occupied with the politicisation of art, particularly of the counter-cultural musical scene. On 25th February 1996, the first music festival “Bash the Fash” was organised with the participation of punk-bands from Minsk, Hrodna, Homieĺ and Mahilioŭ. Besides the announced antifascist topic of the festival that would become an annual event, there was also an attempt to draw new alternative bands to the scene. Hrodna anarcho-punk band Deviation, the band *Sontsa Mao* and others made their first appearance on stage at the festival.

The spring of 1996 brought in the adrenalin of mass public unrest, in which anarchists took the most active part. At the height of the spring anti-presidential manifestations of the opposition, *Chyrvony Zhond* organised a “pro-government” one. On 1st April, a happening “The sacred procession of the loyalists to the Palace of President” was held. The action aimed at holding an illegal march to the Presidential Residency under red-green flags¹³ and portraits of the President and at provoking the authorities into repressing the participants of the “loyalist” demonstration. At a set time, about a hundred participants of the action and the press gathered near the science campus of Belarusian State University. At the meeting, the

“loyalists” approved of the President’s policy, expressed their willingness to integrate with Kyrgyzstan; a “priest” blessed the public. But the march didn’t happen – the militia blocked the exits from the science campus; however, they didn’t act more radically than that, and none of the participants got detained. This protest became known to the public as a meeting “Integration now!”.

The developments of the spring’96 radicalised public attitude; people gained the experience of street fights with the militia and administrative arrests. Major participants of the spring marathon were students, who mostly didn’t affiliate themselves with any political party. The students got a significant portion of repression from the authorities. To help organise the youth resistance to the militia’s terror, activists of *Chyrvony Zhond* started producing the newspaper *The Youth Fights Back*. The paper was rather extremist and contained practical advice (e.g. how to make a Molotov-cocktail, etc.) along with the articles on the resistance theory. *The Youth Fights Back* gained great popularity among politically-minded youth. Altogether in 1996-97, three issues of the newspaper and a special edition were produced.

Devotion to street fights was not the only anarchist vocation in 1996-97. On 1st March 1997, in honour of the 126th anniversary of the assassination of the Russian Tsar Alexander II by the activist of *Narodnaya Volya* Ihnat Hryniavitski, the Shlioma Kahanovich⁸ Free Nomadic Anarchist Theatre Troupe made a public staging of the play “The Death of the Despot.” The performance was organised right on the steps of Minsk Conservatory and had fortunately ended by the arrival of the militia.

One more much-talked-of anarchist action in spring 1997 was an innocent – at first sight – football match between the teams of *Chyrvony Zhond* and the Youth Fraction of the Belarusian Popu-

⁸ A 19th-century Russian fortress in Brest. It was granted the title Hero-Fortress to commemorate the defence of the frontier stronghold during the first week of the German-Soviet War.

lar Front BPF (the future Youth Front). The challenge was that the match was arranged to coincide with the anniversary of the escape of Zianon Pazniak from Belarus, who was the BPF leader. Anarchists called the party youth to the competition and suggested to play for the “Pazniak Cup” so that they couldn’t refuse. The game happened at a local stadium under driving rain. The future Youth Front activists took it too seriously (they were afraid of losing the Cup named after their chief) and hired a few professional football players. The team of *Chyrvony Zhond* lost 8:2, but at the same time won the information war by making several loud statements in the media on the corruption of the BPF football.

The years of 1997-99 were the peak of activity of the anti-party group *Chyrvony Zhond*. It was the time when Belarusian anarchism walked away from the political ghetto and became a remarkable independent subject of the Belarusian political scene. The wide publicity and media response to its actions allowed for a noticeable growth of the anarchist movement, especially in the capital.

From 1998, the most notorious publishing project of *Chyrvony Zhond*, the newspaper *Navinki*, was started. The concept of the issue was as follows: if show-business can grind any alternative by turning it into commercial pops, why not act the other way round, i.e. to sponge on the stereotypes of the mass culture, politicise and at the same time absurdly distort their primary sense; all this should be edited as a parody on the yellow press.

At the beginning of 1999, an official registration of *Chyrvony Zhond* was suspended for the “non-conformity of the activity to the organisation’s articles of association.” This was synchronised with another outstanding event. Just at the beginning of 1999, the official registration of the newspaper *Navinki* was obtained as a result of the campaign “Legalise It.” Before that, the paper was circulated illegally. The two events played an important role in the future of *Chyrvony Zhond*.

On the one hand, that encouraged the development of other anarchist publishing initiatives. In particular, activists of *Chyrvony*