

Ukraine : "Self-organisation will not disappear without leaving traces"

Monday 20 March 2023, by [Bilkis](#), [LE TRÉHONDAT Patrick](#) (Date first published: 3 March 2023).

The members of the feminist group Bilkis in Lviv like to cycle and when the military situation and the weather allow it, they organise rides.

Founded 3 years ago in Kharkiv, Bilkis found refuge in Lviv due to the war. Since 24 February, Bilkis has changed its range of activities to meet the needs of the Ukrainian population. "The main thing for Ukrainians who lost everything was to provide them with shelter, food and medicine," explain the feminists. During the first four months of the war, "we sent parcels to eastern and central Ukraine. Most often it was to Dnipro and Kropyvnytskyi, because that is where many people from the Donetsk and Luhansk regions were evacuated," they say. Today, in Lviv, they have opened an anti-capitalist "space of things", "a space where you can leave things and where you can certainly take them". The opening hours of this space, which aims to be "a real alternative to existing market relations and is based on mutual help, cooperation", are announced on social media. Clothes, toys, etc. are made available free of charge to those who need them. But Bilkis does not forget its feminist identity. In December 2022, her activists organised a campaign against the liquor brand Drunk Cherry, which displays a naked woman on its bottles. The activists stood outside the brand's shop in Lviv, holding signs that read "Stop sexualising women", "The female body is not an advertisement" and "Boycott the sexists". The Ukrainian fascist group Katarsis came to the scene, threatened them, and its activists stood in front of them at the entrance to the shop. Only the presence of the police prevented them from attacking the activists. Later, a local councillor denounced them as "communist" supporters. Undeterred, after a harrowing weekend, passers-by saw Bilkis activists putting up their posters on sexual consent on the city's walls. Bilkis, what kind of name is that? "We thought for a long time about choosing a name and decided to use Bilkis - the Queen of Sheba, described in Muslim mythology as the goddess of love and of all the poor, a half-demon, a witch."

You claim to be an anti-capitalist and anti-patriarchal group. Does this mean that you consider Ukraine to be a capitalist country? We notice that in your activities you insist on free of charge. A form of demerchandization. Is this the main anti-capitalist dimension of your activities?

In one way or another, all countries in the world are capitalist, and Ukraine is no exception. Our country has some social guarantees, free health care and education, but that does not make it anti-capitalist. We would like to see the social side of the state become stronger, to see people's economic rights better protected, to see the value of wealth change into the value of collective welfare. At the moment we have a project called "The Space of Things", which is a space without money, without exchange or other capitalist instruments. We try to show people that it is possible to live and have things without money, that money is a convention that can be eliminated. Also, this month we have launched the 'Feeding ourselves' project. Every Sunday we feed the homeless and people in need with a hot lunch; we also disseminate information about the Space of Things among them.

Fighting against patriarchy in wartime does not seem obvious. And yet you are very active on this subject. Why is this necessary in such a difficult period? I saw that you support the demands of women soldiers. A stance that is not often seen in the Western feminist movement. Can you tell me why you are committed to women soldiers? Can this be seen as a weakening of Ukraine's military defence?

Why is this necessary in such a difficult time? The answer is simple: because patriarchy does not disappear because of war, domestic violence still exists, sexist signs still exist, harassment still exists. There is no point in putting your activism on hold because of the war (unless you are involved in military operations or in the armed forces); life goes on, the problems remain.

Why are we involved in the issue of women in the military? First of all, because one of our members has been in the Ukrainian armed forces for a year now, and many of our feminist friends have also joined the army and are defending our country. And of course, because we generally see how many women are involved in this field, and they often have different problems because of their gender.

Of course, this is not very common among Western feminists, because there is no war in their countries. It's hard for us to talk about pacifism and anti-militarism now. I mean, in theory you could be against wars, against guns, against the army, but when your house is occupied, when it is destroyed day after day, when your family is killed by a rocket, that theory doesn't work. Either you take up arms, or tomorrow you may not be here.

In our view, being anti-militaristic is a security privilege. It is easy to give up the army when your country is not being wiped off the face of the earth, or when you are not personally threatened.

None of us like war, guns or people with guns, but we like the idea of being killed physically or culturally even less.

Everything you do, the sending of parcels, the Space of Things and more recently the free distribution of food is the result of your self-organisation. Since the state can't provide all this, you do it. Do you think that these activities, in their own way, show that civil society can do as much as the state, or even better? And how can we ensure that this power of self-organisation in Ukrainian society does not disappear and return to the situation before the war? And if so, how to protect this spirit of self-organisation?

Ukrainian society today is an example of how people can organise themselves for a purpose. We believe that yes, civil society can do (or even does) more than the state in some respects. We would like this experience to show the people of our country that it is they, this civil society, who are the state, i.e. they are the political force that can and must change everything around them. In fact, it is difficult to say whether and how this level of self-organisation can be maintained after the war. However, it seems to us that this experience itself does not disappear without leaving traces, that somehow it changes people's values and practices.

Looking at your activities and your writings, I have the impression that self-management is at the heart of your projects. Grassroots organisation, radical democracy, managing your own affairs to build alternative projects to capitalism. Does the concept of self-management seem to you to be the right one to describe the political meaning of your activities?

Yes, this description is accurate. We try to make all decisions in a collaborative way, and we are all equally involved and equal in our initiative. We also practice open communication and discuss all problems and misunderstandings immediately, which improves our work and relationships.

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