

Your Silence Will Not Protect You - Autonomy takes responsibility

Contributed by by Alex
 Wednesday, 06 August 2008
 Last Updated Wednesday, 06 August 2008

Dedicated to all those denied the freedom to move and the freedom to stay.

Dedicated to all those denied the freedom to move and the freedom to stay.

Romania's Supreme Defense Council (CSAT) raised the national terrorist alert level on March 25th 2008, a week before the NATO Summit in Bucharest, at the proposal of the Romanian Intelligence Service. The NATO Summit took place in Bucharest from April 2nd till 4th 2008, with the enlargement, operations in Afghanistan and Kosovo as its main topics.

Many protesters from outside the country have been denied entry at the Romanian border. So also myself and the whole anti-militarist / anti-nato infotour we had been doing for weeks. Many have been outraged by this. Calling it a blow against the Romanian constitutional right of free speech, against the European right of free movement and a blow to democracy in Romania, or even better a fall back into 'good old totalitarian times'. Actually it surprises me that you are surprised. Welcome to the real world.

Of course I don't want to equalize my own Romanian border experiences during this April with other people's experience. It makes a difference, if I have a 'German ID' in my pocket. Even if I oppose states, it is clear to me how deadly and threatening state borders are for many people. And it is clear that I am automatically in a more privileged position, according to my own ID than many other people. Also being regarded as 'anarchist leader' for the NATO counter summit, by the border controls, the Romanian intelligence service and so on, my fuckin ID makes a difference. For example, when being held for up to 20 hrs at the first time of entry at the Romanian border and repeatedly interrogated by Romanian Intelligence Service during the night, their own perception of my national background makes a difference in how they treat me. It's not so much the question of myself not accepting their presumed authority over me, but rather their assumption that they cannot get away with every treatment in my case. The same for example, when we tried to enter a second time over another Romanian border point a few days later, by than already put on a national and international alert list. After being denied entry again and deportation back into Bulgaria, we decided to carry out our protest by setting up a 'no border / anti-NATO' camp right at the check points. Because anyway, I might have to accept the fact that the Romanian authorities have in that very moment the power to expel me and keep me away from the counter summit, by means every state uses to hold down resistance, but they don't have the power over myself, my non-acceptance of their assumed authority, my protest and disagreement. And I can try to express this everyday in my life, it doesn't matter in which spot I am exactly locally. But still, there is a difference, when being interrogated again by national and/or local police, because of making a political protest camp. It might make the difference of 'just' being threatened and intimidated by police somewhere in 'no mans land' at the Bulgarian-Romanian border in the middle of the night, or brutally beaten bloody, when nobody there can hear you scream. edicated to all those denied the freedom to move and the freedom to stay.

Of course it makes a difference and determines maybe the risks you are willing to take. After all, violence, or the threat of violence or harm, is a key means by which individual autonomy is destroyed and restricted. Around the world the word 'terrorism' is used indiscriminately by politicians, police, or media with the intention of arousing hostility to any phenomenon of resistance. Well in general it is important to acknowledge that the state is constantly involved in trying to prevent the expression of political opinions by the threat of slander, harassment or disruption. Much activity of the state falls under this kind of intimidation. This is not a blow against democracy, it is exactly what democracy based on a state looks like. So indeed there has been a state surveillance of anti-militarist and anarchist activities during the NATO summit. But it would be stupid to think that there has been none before and will be none afterwards. Also it's not restricted to the Romanian state or activist scene. Just to give you a few examples: Soon after we got the first police visit at our no border / anti- NATO camp, the Bulgarian police started to raid a place of Bulgarian activists and monitored their as well as others activities more closely. I don't want to go into all the little incidents of state intimidation or harassment, which accumulated for us, after being back in Germany. It doesn't matter so much. But what matters is the preparedness for this, the context you see it in and the collective structures you are involved. Mutual aid, collective discussions and activities are an opportunity to mix and grow, share, learn and become empowered - especially in terms of anti-repression.

The desire for political freedom and personal autonomy is fundamental to many people. Historically, countless family, religious, political, military systems have manipulated people and taken much of their freedom away. Eventually, in some systems people regain some of their lost freedom. But freedom is somewhat different than autonomy. Freedom is what someone or some state authority lets you have. Autonomy is a personal dynamic that enables you to mature, take responsibility and bring your own emancipation. Freedom describes the absence of chains for example a

government can use to restrict a person. But autonomy functions to discover how to survive, find happiness, and fulfill one's own potential. There is a difference between both terms.

the LOST battle

If I talk about autonomy, I don't mean 'unaccountability', like 'I can do whatever I want because I'm autonomous'. Autonomy doesn't mean for me being separated from each other, it means self-organising, self-management, self-activity. But autonomy indicates a level of inter-dependence. So the focus is not solely on my own freedom and autonomy to make my own decisions, but also on deciding in a way which shows consideration for others. Autonomy is integral to self-esteem, self-determination, self-actualization. Autonomy takes responsibility.

During the whole anti-NATO mobilization for over a half year, I believed in the capacity of all involved activists to self-organize around the autonomous mobilization and form networks of solidarity. I guess I've been mistaken. At a certain moment I felt that I have been suddenly moved to a position where I have the major influence on the actions of the whole mobilization. Means to occupy a position within the mobilization that has a large part in determining where it moves.

In my opinion resistance should be a self-directed and face-to-face effort of communities, in which people draw support and inspiration horizontally from each other rather than depending on a charismatic figurehead.

We should be clear, even if we try to establish horizontalism and sitting in a circle during meetings, there are clearly power-inequalities. There are observable situations where some activists consistently have a larger personal presence, more frequently initiate actions and projects, assume positions of responsibility, and speak and get listened to more than others.

But it needs to be emphasised, that the question who has disproportionate power and why is conceptually separate from what power is and how it is exercised.

The habits and perspectives that accompany hierarchical social arrangements in society today, do not automatically disappear as one gets involved in the autonomous scene. Many drift into modes of behaviour that is decidedly authoritarian, the leaders AND the followers.

I had the imagination of power not to command, but to suggest and be listened to, to begin something and see it happen. What was wrong was to assume that all people in the mobilization are equally empowered. So having a leading influence may not be a problem as such, but it's rather the connection to equality in access to that influence, and by this also the distribution and multiplication of 'leadership' over time.

Those who don't have much influence can begin to consider whether they want it and how to get it. In this process, those who have an unequal share of power are called upon to exercise responsible leadership. Means instead of using skills, knowledge, information and experience to barricade oneself in a position of power, we share them, try to spread them as widely as possible among others. So people are called upon redistributing. Seeing different levels of responsibility as stepping stones to help people get concrete things done, to build their involvement, to increase their sense of what they are capable of and to develop the skills necessary. This is also about encouragement, recognizing that people frequently carry enormous insecurities about being good enough, having enough experience, having anything worth while to say and doubting that anyone thinks they're capable enough.

Concrete resources are for example money, space, logistical equipment and publicity. Not manifest resources can be divided into unspecialised (time, commitment, personality characteristics like articulation and confidence) and specialised (expertise, access to networks, status and publicity within the movement).

Some resources are zero sum resources, means the possession/use of a resource by one person prevents/excludes another person from doing the same, like using a van at the same time. Voluntary redistribution in this case, could be sharing and collectivising.

As for commitment, like the willingness to take risks or entertain inconvenience, it is at least to some degree shaped by personal circumstances, like one's age, biography, experiences and so on. The point about commitment is, that it is harder to duplicate than skills and access to networks. So are energy as well as personal resources like confidence, articulation. But they are not even stable resources for a given individual - it changes with one's priorities and circumstances, or with conditions like health, mood and disposition.

But what if there is an equal access to influence - when everyone can, if they want to, contribute in a genuinely equal way to defining the direction of the mobilization, to the making of collective decisions, and more generally to changing their little world. And they don't do it?

I've been thinking about silence lately. How we use silence to protect ourselves. How we use silence to maintain the status quo. How we use silence to express indifference. How we use silence because it's easier than taking a risk. How silence becomes just another expression of laziness. I have always interpreted silence as indifference or disdain. Being banished from a group of people by silence is how we are forced back into line, like it happens very often in family structures. And as we use silence in our private interactions, it extrapolates out to the larger world and becomes a way of life. Not speaking. Not asking. Passivity that comes from simple indifference and laziness.

But passivity and silence is also accompanied by an ever bigger growing gap in access to resources, discussions and decision-making in a movement - it feeds hierarchy. Well even in autonomous groups, hierarchies can depend on comfort: comfort with familiar patterns of relationships. Hierarchy really can be comfortable - it appeals to the CHILD in us

and is easier than alternatives that demand an adult, independent stance.

Anyway this kind of silence stops everything cold. It chills the soul. It destroys relationships. It serves no purpose. It allows things to go on that should never go on. And the fear and the silence of many, make it possible for the violence to continue. Silence born of laziness, can also easily become silence based on fear.

There can be of course a positive silence, the kind of silence that is based on trust. Certain things that don't need to be said, because it's all been said before and is an internalized part of the relationship. But that takes time and it takes a level of comfort.

I see the formation of collectives and affinity groups as one of the best ways to create the necessary bridges between the society we live in today and the trust we are working on to build. It also involves keeping collectives alive and thriving. But to come back to my concrete example: The anti- NATO mobilization was in the very beginning being pushed and carried by a variety of people, but after a couple of months most of the energy and enthusiasm into functioning and maintaining it until the upcoming counter-summit, was only put forward by a handful of people. The rest have rather chosen to become a bunch of passive individuals (with rare and rather periodical and mostly unproductive exceptions). Well some people had rather blurry or diffuse concepts about autonomous mobilization. Some agreed in the beginning to take over certain tasks, yet almost never took any initiative on their own. The most self-responsible approach came mainly from those, being active in a working collective (which is a rare occasion in Romania).

Unfortunately none existing in Bucharest, where the counter summit was going to take place, didn't make things easier. After months of delay, silence on mailing-lists by the most and some pseudo- radicals putting hard-core critic of the circumstances, but at the same time not even trying to face these problems, but rather clean their own hands and went back into their clique of friends.

The freshly build structure in the capital collapsed and people even took the stance not to host a counter summit anymore, because

everybody is too busy with personal matters (well given the fact that the international mobilization was already running since a half year). At the end just leaving in the supposed to be collective mobilization the spirit of 'mistrust', 'deep conflict', 'ongoing destruction', 'paternalistic attitudes' and a 'non political character'. Still a couple of individuals agreed to help with stuff, so at least a place could be found for the counter summit. Meanwhile the tasks of international mobilization, solidarity actions, raising money, call outs, development of material and translation into different languages, gathering of exhibitions, films, books, workshops for the counter-summit was carried out entirely by people not being physically present at this time in the area where the counter-summit should later take place. Besides this only one collective from Romania kept carrying on a huge workload. While the discussions for the upcoming counter summit, were shared with the people active in the autonomous mobilization from beginning, over existing mailing-lists, they didn't take part. Still for whatever reasons, some felt like being part of it. Even if they didn't care to take part in the discussion and setting up, when a place was found a few individual people turned up again to help.

In a certain sense this is the positive value of 'leadership' - anyone who has sufficient motivation and commitment, will likely become part of the multifaceted, de facto, and ever-changing 'leadership' within a non-hierarchical scene. But this kind of 'leadership' has as it's very centre, the ideas of voluntarism, temporariness and rotation. But what happens if the collective structures are missing to effectively recall on 'so-called or self-proclaimed leaders', when the people feel it's rather an exercise of power? This positive sense of 'leadership' is determined in great measures by personal affinity, close mutual knowledge and trust. Something that was not possible to establish, due to the silence of the majority of the people for the most part of the mobilization.

Irresponsible autonomy or 'leadership' gives rise easily to cliques of friends, which diminishes the collective decision-making of those outside them, with much of the decisions happening behind the scenes through mobile phone conversations or in informal meetings. People who are friends form kind of a structure, where it is can become hard to break into, if you are not assumed to bring some kind of fame or glory.

That something in the structure was rotten became very visible to me, when I heard that people are leaving the place of the counter-summit (before it had even started), because our anti- NATO infotour was not able to cross the border into Romania and take part in the preparation on the site. Or when I heard that people from other countries decided not to go for the counter-summit anymore, as we were not able to be present to organize it. What happened to the idea of D.I.Y.? What, could it be that it involves too much responsibility for yourself? In this case, I specifically think it lead to the reproduction of hierarchical relationships, elitist assumptions about people, knowledge and traditions within initially or potentially autonomous activities. In this sense, the state is EVERYWHERE damn-near. But so are still FREE ACTIVITIES, and in many cases both exist in crazy and conflicting ways, side by side within people, communities, collectives and personalities.

Reviewing one's life over and over again has come to be a very necessary practice. You read, you learn; you experience, you learn; you reflect on it all, you learn and hopefully grow or move beyond where you'd just arrived. It's important to reflect on experience and analyze it from as many different angles as possible. Or at the least be open to more than just one point of view (which is like being stuck on stupid).

No matter how big the importance of this project was for me politically, I cannot go on reproducing all these inequalities and fucked up behaviours. From my perspective, there has not been a thorough reflection and analyse of personal and collective responsibilities in the mobilization and the counter-summit, as well as there absence. The whole discussion became already during the counter-summit - as the state repression rose - a kind of tunnel-vision of perception, leading

away from mistakes that have been done in regard to anti-repression work, or even the total neglect of it. It's easier to create a scapegoat - spreading the gossip that XY is an informer, and by this targeting somebody who is not an "established" person in the autonomous scene, but carried out many tasks in the final mobilization, as others preferred to go after their private matters. Besides this, there have been also a couple of attempts to slander an entire Romanian collective, by spreading the rumour over international e-mail lists, that they gave information about international protesters and their routes towards the counter-summit to the Romanian Intelligence Service over international e-mail lists. Well, the collective is much more known in the autonomous scene than XY and it was more easily assumed that the rumours were false. There are many people who bring a heavy load of pain to others because their aspirations are not joined with what autonomy really is; the unleashing of competence and relatedness. I understand gossip as the spreading of dust and misinformation, as through excited discussion of a scandal, like XY is an informer. I see gossip also as hurtful and socially unproductive - it's kind of backbiting. Gossip can serve as a form of passive aggression, as a tool to isolate and harm others. And in the case of XY it did very well.

Most people at the counter-summit heard something about an informer through the grapevine, means they learned of it informally and unofficially through gossip and rumour. Some consequences where the erosion of trust, increased anxiety among people as rumours circulate without any clear information as to what is fact and what isn't. While the scandal got widely publicized, taken back home to the local communities with all the foreign protesters, it remains the question if it is based on reality. Many things that have been said about XY are misinformation, means wrong or inaccurate information, a few things are as well disinformation, means they are intended to mislead. For example: If I tell people that XY was hiding guns in my place, without clarifying that they were requisites from theatre as well as water guns for kids, for the purpose of making a clowns army during the counter-summit, I personally take a responsible part in the slander. If I tell people that XY was driving around the site of the counter-summit with a person in a car filming, without clarifying that this person was already before let into the space of the counter-summit - by all the others - because he is a reporter and known to somebody of the "clique of friends", now wanted to have a shot from the outside, asked around and XY was the one who had a car, I personally have to take responsibility for spreading rumour. If I tell people that XY was the first person to know, that the anti-NATO infotour was not able to pass the border at the second try and well how could he know if he is not an informer (well as I happen to know, because I was on the infotour, while people talking about this, where not - like many others, that where concerned about us and kept in contact, when we where held at Romanian borders, interrogated or expelled, XY happened to be the first one to call, when we where refused entry the second time) without having the intention of furthering a solution or clarify the facts, I have to take the responsibility for this slander.

"I only told one person! I was just repeating it! I didn't say I know for sure XY is an informer! I didn't give his/her name!" are worthless defences. At the end XY asked people to come together for a meeting, to clarify their suspicions, if possible.

Anyway, rumours are not stopped that easily, after they started to spread around and trust cannot be regained overnight, let alone the willingness to work on it. And don't get me wrong, I don't want to defend the individual case of XY. I want to raise suspicions regarding the rumours. I want to show how easily they were created and that they actually served a purpose and draw much attention away from other serious issues regarding the local scene.

Security measures for a counter-summit like this, cannot be set up in the last minute. What do we see if we look away from the actual scandal? Imagine the Romanian Intelligence Service had an easy time, to bug personal laptops, keep phone, mail and chat conversations under surveillance, even months before the counter-summit. Does it really matter, when there is no common discussion on security measures and how to put it in practice for a mobilization like this?

At least, where is the reflection and analysis? That this is not the priority became evidence in the organizing of the so called "No Border Festival". I don't want to go into details - mainly because there is an article from somebody else specifically on this - but it bears many interesting examples of irresponsible autonomy. But after rumours of an informer, after a police attack on the counter-summit, leaving many people hurt, and so on, how is it possible that a few people carry on hosting a "punk party" at the space of the counter-summit? First of all it had been communicated before that this "punk party" is putting the anti-NATO protest to much in danger, means not opening the space of the counter-summit for this. Second, even if this statement was not respected by the organizers of the "No Border Festival", because the loudest critics were stuck somewhere at the Romanian border, how could there be no discussion of security? Leading to an almost non-existence of an entrance-policy (alright "everybody that pays gets in" could be also seen as an entrance-policy), no clear emergency plan, fascists inside the space, once again police inside the space for the counter summit because of public disturbance through the punk party, violent fights and a withdrawal of political activists from the counter-summit.

What stays after all of this, is a climate of suspicion for many people, which makes analyzing, learning and restructuring of collective structures quite difficult. Because this process needs more interaction, more joint learning, more sharing of responsibility and above all in a structure of mutual respect and openness.

Well I hope it is only "a lost battle" and the need for the building of a healthy collective will remain a priority at the end - at least for some people.

A final tribute goes to all the great people and collectives we met (sometimes sadly only by phone, due to annoying border controls) on the infotour. You all have been truly inspiring and many thanks for all the support.