

From Squats to Trenches

Ukrainian eco-anarchists on the front line

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The Ukrainian soldiers interviewed here have ideas that diverge from the politics of the Tempest Collective, but their words offer important insights into who is fighting the war, how it's being fought, and the role of the Left in the rank and file of the Ukrainian armed resistance. An earlier version of this article appeared in the Polish-language edition of *Le Monde Diplomatique*. The author, **Paweł Jędrał**, is now offering the report in English (and other languages).

When Vegan (his combat nickname) first tells me about himself, it is 2024, and summer can still be felt in Ukraine. He has found time to talk because, as part of a rotation, he has temporarily been pulled back from the front. He is the spokesperson for Ekoplatforma, a Ukrainian eco-anarchist organization bringing together soldiers and activists. He runs its Instagram account. Vegan is very young. Perhaps too young. He is 19. "I volunteered in 2022. In 2023 I signed a contract. The beginning of my service was not entirely legal," he says with a smile.

Ekoplatforma is one of many small left-wing initiatives operating in Ukraine under the broad umbrella of the anti-authoritarian movement. These groups, often made up of only a few people, stand out for their clearly defined views; they prefer cooperation within networks of small, ideologically precise entities that do not compromise, rather than forming one larger, more politically moderate bloc. Among them are radical vegans, squatters, LGBTQ+ organizations and tenants' movements.

From the outside, many of these circles may seem radical, even exotic. Ekoplatforma stands out in particular for its unusual style of communication: a combination of military aesthetics, animated characters drawn from Japanese anime and drawings of animals. The group makes no secret of its sympathy for Ted Kaczynski, known as the Unabomber, quotes Mao Zedong, and some of its actions could be described as eco-terrorism. They use a green-and-black flag cut diagonally, referring to the traditions of anarcho-primitivist movements.

Although they report events from the front, they just as often address issues related to animal rights, share information about left-wing cultural initiatives or even youth basketball tournaments in Odesa. This vivid, at times ironic way of running social media clearly contrasts with the typical heroic-patriotic narrative of right-wing military groups.

"A perfectly prepared ambush"

Soldiers connected with Ekoplatforma publish body-camera recordings from the battlefield online, adding provocative comments such as:

Our perfectly prepared ambush turned into a real nightmare for Russian infantry. After approaching the enemy, we opened fire at close range, immediately eliminating the attackers. In this way we managed to reduce the number of non-vegans on the planet >smiling emoji<.

The recordings show the bodies of killed Russian soldiers.

At the same time, these same soldiers became known for actions rescuing animals left behind in areas under evacuation. Often, with their commanders' consent, they encouraged other members of their units to take part in such operations. In the rush that accompanied the evacuation of towns threatened by fighting, many people left pets and farm animals in homes, farmsteads, and farms. For many of them, this meant a slow death from hunger and thirst. Depending on the situation, the animals rescued by the soldiers were taken deeper into the country to organizations involved in animal protection, or at least released into forests, which gave them even a small chance of survival.

Vegan—like his comrades from Ekoplatforma and other green activists scattered across many units throughout Ukraine—also encourage other soldiers to adopt his model of eating. Ekoplatforma's posts and materials contain detailed instructions on how to maintain a vegan diet even during direct combat operations. Some of the food is self-purchased or taken from captured Russian rations, which “often contain one-third vegan products,” says Vegan. “Usually, however, there is plenty of vegan food in the trenches: fresh vegetables, canned food, Huel.’

More than a squad

Although Vegan gives me the exact number of people who are members of Ekoplatforma, he asks me not to state it publicly. “You can write that there are a few more of us than a close circle of friends, but fewer than a large organization. There are more of us than a small squad, but fewer than a platoon.”

Before the war we were active in several cities, mainly in Odesa. We dealt with street protests, performances and art. We organized exhibitions, published zines and, as far as possible, carried out social work: We helped homeless people and animals, and distributed free vegan food. A few of us had experience of the war in Donbas, but most were civilian activists. When the war (meaning the escalation in 2022) broke out, half of us joined the army and the other half volunteered for other tasks.

Vegan smiles sadly: “Now it doesn't matter. All the men from Ekoplatforma are already in the army, scattered among different units.”

Now we work with solidarity and anti-authoritarian groups, both on the front and in social activity. We work with the Resistance Committee (also called the anti-authoritarian platoon—a volunteer unit made up of anarchists, active since the beginning of the 2022 war), SAD (Street Aid Daily, an aid group operating in Odesa), the Akhmat collective... it is hard to list them all. The scale of mutual aid is enormous. We support one another

through front-line experience, training, organizing fundraisers and exchanging knowledge, but we also continue the work we did before: Our civilian members or people on rotation get involved in publishing zines, doing graffiti and murals, helping squats, or organizing free shops where we distribute aid to people in need.

Vegan Two, or Alfarius

Vegan does not want to give his real name. His friend, another member of Ekoplatforma, who finds time to talk in the first months of 2025, also hesitates for a long moment. Many of you know his face—he was depicted in one of the works by David Chychan, the Ukrainian anarchist artist and soldier killed in August 2025. His combat nickname is also Vegan. “Our name is Legion,” the second Vegan laughs. “If you are the only vegan in the company and you also speak up about animal rights, it somehow sticks. Several of us got that nickname from our comrades. But you can call me Alfarius or Omegon; that is the nickname I use online,” he says, referring to a pop-cultural motif from Warhammer 40k.

A large part of Ekoplatforma’s communication is based on pop culture: games, anime, memes. All the members I have met are very young and very ideological, while at the same time keeping a strong distance from the “seriousness” of the uniform. This prevents them from becoming pompous. They paint their grenades and magazines in colorful patterns. Their Instagram accounts have thousands of followers. In the photographs, frames from the war and destroyed Russian equipment are interwoven with shots in which they wear animal costumes. In one photo, Alfarius poses with a rifle against a white wall, looking straight into the lens; in another, he attends a protest wearing a giraffe-head hat; in yet another he is with his unit during heavy fighting for Kherson. His saved stories contain motifs from Warhammer and his favorite series. Contrary to what someone might think of them, they are not paper soldiers. They have fought on the hardest fronts of this war: in Donbas, Kursk Oblast, and Kherson. Many of them have been wounded, often more than once.

In 2025 Alfarius is 23; he has served since 2022 and also volunteered. He has been a member of Ekoplatforma—and a vegan—for more than seven years. His real name is Gerard, or Gera for short.

I cannot tell you everything I do on and off the front, but in simple terms I am a contract soldier and an eco-activist. I always wanted to be in the middle of the action and feel that I had an impact on reality—whether that meant distributing food to homeless people, vegan and ecological protests and initiatives, or fighting the invader.

Anarchist education

Alfarius sounds like a participant in an academic seminar or a warrior-poet when he writes to me from his positions in Kursk Oblast:

My main everyday interest is spreading vegan and anti-authoritarian values, ideas and practices in every environment, both civilian and military. I would also like to look at the existing problems in these structures, analyzing them through the prism of an anti-civilizational and anti-technological approach.

In our conversations Alfarius emphasizes that he believes in, and promotes, a vision of the army based on horizontal, personal relations between soldiers rather than an authoritarian vision of a hierarchical military. A war of materiel, based on technology that kills people en masse, seems equally inhuman to him.

In fact, life in the army can strengthen you in being an anarchist. Many people who previously had no developed political views began, under our influence, to lean toward our ideas. In the army you see the negative aspects of strict hierarchy. You see officers who do not care about soldiers. In the units where we are, we often manage—or at least try—to build better relationships, in which soldiers and officers talk to one another about decisions and risks. Usually, in the Ukrainian army there is, despite everything, more freedom than in the old and academic structures of European or NATO armies. But this freedom and flexibility of structures also has its bad side: Many processes often do not work as they should, information is not properly processed, standards are not maintained.

Vegan grows serious. “After all, an anti-authoritarian model of the army is not about chaos and lack of organization. Our goal is to limit oppression or internal violence, which are so common in traditional, hierarchical military structures.”

Asked whether they had ever served together as one unit and how such a unit coped on the battlefield, he replies:

No, in fact we never fought as one unit. One of our comrades served in the anti-authoritarian platoon at the very beginning of the war, before its reorganization. I and another comrade from Ekoplatforma were assigned for a while to a regular unit where anarchists from other collectives also served. We stuck together. At the turn of 2023 and 2024 I was transferred to another unit, but my last combat mission was carried out together with that guy from Ekoplatforma.’

Vegan’s tone changes for the first time during the conversation. For most of the talk he had smiled and joked; we were somewhere between exchanging anecdotes and an

academic left-wing discussion. Now, for the first time, clear sadness can be heard in his voice.

“Contrary to appearances, it is not nice to be at war with friends. At first it is good, because you support each other, but later it is hard to deal with the grief when they die. It overwhelms you and pulls you away from your tasks,” and when he speaks of tasks, it seems he means both his mission as a Ukrainian soldier and as a green anarchist shaping the attitudes of other soldiers. “That is why it makes no sense to have an anarchist battalion. It is much better to have anarchists in many battalions.”

I know that for Vegan and his comrades from Ekoplatforma, work on the vision of the society that will emerge after the war is as important as the fight against the Russians. Ekoplatforma’s social media and those of related anti-authoritarian groups show what matters to them: an egalitarian society without leaders and strict hierarchy, workers’ rights, the right to housing, the struggle for animal rights (even in the middle of war), veganism, and the restoration of nature destroyed by war and industry. Publishing zines, distributing free food to homeless people, or organizing the “first anti-authoritarian basketball tournament in Odesa.”

Asked whether he believes anarchism or opposition to authoritarianism fits the Ukrainian national character in some special way (in the context of the history of Nestor Makhno and the Black factions—Ukrainian anarcho-communists during the Russian Civil War—or the strong tradition of Slavic anarchist movements), Alfarius answers:

You know, people talk a lot about Ukrainians “longing for freedom,” but in practice I do not feel that we perceive radical ideas such as anti-authoritarianism, veganism or anarchism differently or more deeply than other Europeans. The anarchist or anti-authoritarian movement has always been active in Ukraine, but it has always consisted of a small group of devoted people.

“I would very much like to give you a different answer, but after getting to know similar groups in other countries, it is hard for me to point to any significant difference,” Vegan says, spreading his hands.

War in the streets

Far-right and left-wing groups in Ukraine were very popular before the war. Perhaps their appeal resulted from the disappointment mainstream politics had delivered to most Ukrainians; the extensive social activity carried out by such entities was also significant. In a country with a very low level of access to free social services, both right-wing initiatives—such as the Azov-linked Kozatska Khata, a former squat turned cultural center in Kyiv, which offers, among other things, free language lessons, sports classes and tutoring—and the artistic and social activity of left-wing groups fill an

important gap. If you are a young person with the will to learn or act, but without resources, such initiatives provide you with a space to do so. If life has knocked you down, they will feed you and give you a place to sleep for a while.

Alfarius says:

In my youth, from my teenage years onward, I spent a lot of time in street confrontations with the far right. There was a lot of violence in that. Honestly, I will say that it ended in different ways. Apart from taking part in vegan circles and Ekoplatforma, I was also a member of other anarchist groups. We sometimes blocked right-wing raids on squats. Besides fights with nationalists, we also blocked evictions and supported workers' protests against exploiters. Very often we fought greedy developers who wanted to evict people or destroy green areas. We also distributed food; for years we helped homeless people.

The struggle for hearts and minds led to tensions and street clashes between nationalist and right-wing circles and leftists even before the war. Beatings and acts of vandalism were an everyday reality before 2022. After the outbreak of the war, however, tensions eased.

"There is no point comparing the level of street confrontation before the war and now. Of course, there will always be young Nazis looking for trouble, but that is irrelevant. They have no idea how much harm they can do themselves by acting this way, and we try not to be provoked more than necessary," says Vegan.

The problem, after all, is the external enemy: Both sides realize that it is mainly provocateurs and Russia's allies who benefit from their internal fights.

From time to time, however, open clashes between Ukrainian left-wing and right-wing organizations occur again. In May 2024 in Odesa, a group of Ukrainian nationalists attacked the launch of a left-wing magazine organized by a number of anti-authoritarian organizations. The attackers took several copies of the magazine and burned them; they also clashed with the organizers of the event. There were scuffles and pepper spray was used, as a result of which, among others, two soldiers from Ekoplatforma who were attending the event during rehabilitation after being wounded at the front were injured. The organization points out that since the beginning of 2024 the number of similar attacks has increased — and more and more attacks from the right are aimed at feminist, LGBTQ and ecological initiatives. Ekoplatforma commented on the attack on its official Instagram account:

Right now we are all fighting an existential threat from Russia, which wants to bring torture, oppression, homophobia, and authoritarian rule here, while Ukrainian right-wing youth decide that the best response is to beat their own people in the name of >traditional values<. They do not see that their actions serve the same thing Russia wants here: racism, authoritarian values and homophobia.

I am going back to work

At the beginning of 2025 Vegan ends up in a hospital in Sumy Oblast—he has a shrapnel fragment in his leg.

“Nothing serious,” he says. “I will rest for a while and go back to work.”

The stories and recordings he passes on to me make a huge impression. They describe fighting in Donbas, in Kursk Oblast and on other sections of the front. One story in particular stays with me: a tragic mistake experienced by one of his comrades. A lone Ukrainian soldier, belonging to the Ekoplatforma collective, was withdrawing from a position during shelling in one of the Donbas villages. In the night and chaos he pulled along—as he thought—his companion. They ran several hundred meters together before stopping and realizing that they were on opposite sides. Both grabbed their weapons; the eco-anarchist fired first.

Alfarius does not say it outright, but he implies that he served in assault units. He did not take part in the animal-rescue actions in combat areas that Ekoplatforma boasted about on social media. He describes the landscape of the places where he has fought in recent months:

In most of the places where I served, living animals were practically never seen. Sometimes there may have been cats. I remember one that the guys from another unit had taken in. I offered to help evacuate it out of the combat zone, but they refused; they preferred it to stay close to them. Usually, where we were sent, the destruction was so great that any life ceased to exist. Everything died or fled. Only the organisms most adapted to survival remained: mice, rats. And us.

Something else is striking here: although these are representatives of one of the most left-wing circles in Ukraine, certain patterns remain unchanged. Like ordinary soldiers or guys from more right-wing units, some members of Ekoplatforma also use words such as “pidar” and “fag” for Russian soldiers. I know, however, that this has nothing to do with homophobia. “That is just how people speak. It has nothing to do with orientation; it is simply an insult,” they explain to me.

What strikes me most in conversations with them, however, is how strongly the army shapes language. People who, in everyday life, write with enormous empathy about the rights of animals, women or minorities, who can become furious about injustices that an average observer would shrug off, completely change their tone when speaking about war. Vegan, Alfarius and their comrades create beautiful, poetic posts and photographs showing devastated areas abandoned by humans and slowly reclaimed by nature. These images bring to mind the famous passage from Palahniuk’s *Fight Club* about deer wandering through a ruined Rockefeller Center years after the collapse of civilization.

Yet when they talk about the fighting itself, their language becomes technical. “Zachystyt”—to clear—is the word they use to describe killing Russians. They also

use it when referring to the deaths of their comrades: “The occupier attempted to clear our position.” “Going around the APC, I entered the enemy trenches from the side they did not expect and cleared the right side.” Waging war is “work” for them: Vegan, Alfarius and the rest of Ekoplatforma “go to work,” just as artillery, air defense, and other units work.

I ask them about their vision of the future. How do they see their own future—and the future of their values—after the war ends?

“I don’t believe in a quick peace, and I don’t think about it,” Vegan tells me.

I don’t think about what will happen after the war. I’m afraid that even if it ends, it will in fact continue in another form—frozen for a while—and Russia will attack again. That’s why I don’t want to think about what comes afterward.

Gera, Alfarius, however, has a more concrete vision:

After the war, I will actively engage in vegan and anarchist activism. I would like to promote primitivism, a return to roots and a simple life. To live with friends in a community we create together, and to help others establish similar temporary autonomous zones where the ideals of ecological living, anarchism, and cooperativism can be put into practice.

Several months after finishing work on the first version of the text, while scrolling through Instagram, I come across a new post by Ekoplatforma. “You cannot save nature without saving Ukraine and rebuilding a healthy society,” one of the guys writes on Ekoplatforma’s profile, as if answering all the questions.

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The Ted K Archive

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