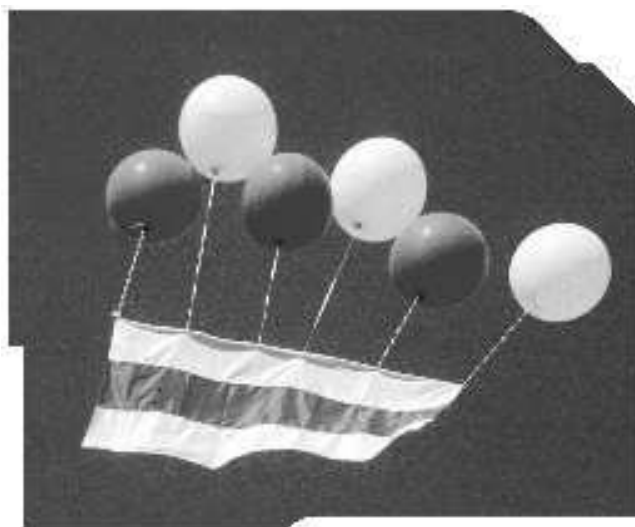


Ihar Lalkou

NATIONAL SYMBOLISM IN BELARUS: THE PAST AND PRESENT

Belarusian society is deeply split. Less than a decade after the establishment of an independent Republic of Belarus, one part of society is so radically separated from the other that if a casual observer were to overhear conversations and read articles by the two groups, it could be concluded that they live in different worlds. Of the parameters that identify a nation, place of residence is the only thing these two groups have in common. They differ by language, their historical memory, identity (despite the fact that both call themselves Belarusians, the meaning is completely different), relations with other nations (close and distant), their vision of the country's future development, etc.

It sometimes seems that these two groups would feel more comfortable in two different countries. The two Belaruses already have two totally separate sets of national symbols. One set comprises the knightly emblem Pahonya (a knight on horseback against a red shield) and the white, red and white flag. The other set comprises a traditional Soviet shieldless emblem look-alike framed



A white-red-white flag, Minsk, Oct. 1st, 2000.

Photo: IREX/ProMedia

by a garland and a red and green flag with an ornamental pattern. The Pahonya was inherited by Belarus from the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (GDL), a country in which the ancestors of most Belarusians lived during the greater part of their history (in the 13th–18th centuries). It was during this period that



the ethnic group later called “Belarusians” was actually formed. Together with the white, red and white flag, the emblem was adopted as the national emblem of the Belarusian Popular Republic (BPR), the first country to appear on these lands after the break up of the Russian empire. (It is still used by the BPR government-in-exile that had to leave the country in 1920 under the blows of Soviet Russia’s Red Army.) These symbols were also the first state

symbols of the independent Republic of Belarus between 1991 and 1995. The alternative set of symbols originates entirely from the period of the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR), a puppet quasi-state within the USSR founded by the Bolsheviks in one part of the BPR. The BSSR emblem (1927 model) and flag (1951 model) were declared new state symbols of Belarus in 1995 (after minor modifications) when neo-Soviet dictator Alaksandar Lukashenka came to power.

Philosophers say that the structure of any symbol is “aimed at presenting a total image of the world.”¹ Accordingly, in the Belarusian situation the attitude taken to these symbols is the main indicator of a person’s world-view, the main test of whether a person is a citizen of European or Soviet Belarus.

It will be sufficient to quote three comments on the symbols made by representatives of the two opposed sides in order to illustrate the above. The statement below was made by the leaders of the so-called “National Assembly,” a representative body of today’s power, people assigned personally by Lukashenka after the 1996 dismissal of the lawfully elected parliament:

“In 1995 and 1996 the people of Belarus specifically and unambiguously expressed themselves on vital issues concerning the further development of our state and society. The old, anti-national symbols were rejected and the “new-old” ones approved. This means that the previous symbols with which a majority of Belarusian citizens associate their lives and the history of the Motherland before and after the war when Belarus was a flourishing republic, one of the 15 fraternal republics within the mighty Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, have been accepted.”²

And this is the “response” of Ryhor Baradulin, a People’s Poet of Belarus:

“Maybe, we’ve been bashed too little
To long for an empire
Under a Muslimish flag,
With an Ivanish Politburo.”³

And the judgement of historian Aleh Trusaw, Director of the Fellowship of the Belarusian Language:

“The authorities pretty well understand (even now) the artificiality of their symbols. Their emblem disappeared from Belarusian postal stamps long ago and was never printed on its bank notes. And this is not incidental. The people have not accepted the symbols forced on them. As early as Independence Day (July 27) 1995, in the town of Lyozna in the Vitsebsk region the legendary Miron raised the white, red and white flag on a 40-metre chimney and left a note saying “Give people back their historical memory.” And it will soon return. The latest 40-thousand-strong Path

¹ The Philosophic Encyclopaedic Dictionary, Moscow, 1989, p. 581.

² Zvyazda, September 12, 2000.

³ Nasha Niva, May 15, 2000.

of Chernobyl adorned with national symbols is good testimony to that.”⁴

In order for the lay reader, unfamiliar with Belarusian politics, to form an opinion regarding the historical basis for the views on the state symbols (and therefore world-views), a more detailed presentation of the history of these symbols is given below.

According to old Belarusian chronicles, the Pahonya became a symbol in the 1770s or 1790s when the image of a horseman with a sword above his head “had been established as a symbol representing those who exercised supreme power in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania,”⁵ a country that throughout its entire history (from the mid-13th to the late 18th century) united the lands on which Lithuania and Belarus appeared in the 20th century. At various times, the ancestors of today’s Belarusians constituted 50% of the Duchy’s population, so it is not surprising that they dominated the culture of that country throughout its history (also evidenced by the fact that state documents of the GDL used Old Belarusian until the end of the XVII century when it was replaced by the kindred Polish language). Belarusian cultural domination also influenced the choice of state symbols. A mounted knight was a common subject in the heraldry of Europe at that time and was “an iconographic equivalent to the expression of dux (prince).”⁶ However, only the Grand Duchy of Lithuania adopted this symbol on the state emblem (in 1566). Experts believe that the symbol originates from local Slavic traditions (that survived in Belarus until the XIX century) connected with the pagan deity Yaryla “who rides a white horse with a white mantle on his shoulders”⁷ and from local iconography of the Christian saints most popular among Belarusians — St. Dzimistry, St. George, St. Barys and St. Hleb, depicted armed and riding a horse. Apart from the state emblem, the Pahonya was also present in the local emblems of most GDL administrative divisions and on the Duchy’s state gonfalon — a red rectangular banner “with the images of Pahonya and Virgin Mary with baby Jesus in a Sun.”⁸ Therefore, for more than 500 years all ethnically Belarusian lands existed “under the sign of Pahonya,” and the ancestors of today’s Belarusians simply did not know any other state emblem. The Russian empire also saw the Pahonya as a generally recognised and accepted symbol of the lands that were part of the GDL in the latter period of its existence (i.e., modern Lithuania and Belarus). Therefore this emblem continued to be used in these lands after their incorporation into Russia in the late 18th century. Anatol Tsitow, a well-known Belarusian heraldic expert, believes the following to be true for that time: “The representation of the ancient Pahonya on

Belarusian provincial, district, town, and military emblems was a phenomenon that certified the neighbouring peoples’ realisation of the identity of the two concepts: the geographic and ethnic Belarus and the heraldic Pahonya.”⁹

Under these conditions it looks perfectly natural that activists of the Belarusian national liberation movement, which manifested its full power in early XXth century, respected the Pahonya as a natural national symbol of their people. In 1916, Maksim Bahdanovich, a classic of Belarusian literature, wrote in his famous poem ‘Pahonya’:

“As I feel in my worried heart
Fear for my native country,
I remember the holy Sharp Gate
And warriors on ferocious studs.

Clad in white foam the studs run by,
Rushing, striving, and heavily snorting,
The ancient Lithuanian Pahonya
Can be neither broken, nor stopped, nor held
back.”

At that time the white knight of the Pahonya adorned the red national flag as well. However, soon after, at the turn of 1916/1917, a new original flag of the Belarusian movement appeared. In full accordance with the wide spread principle of emblem-based flag design in Europe, when the colours of the main details (the emblem and field) are shown in the flag as a combination of horizontal stripes of different or same width, a draft of this white, red and white flag was drawn by Klyawdziy Duzh-Dushewski, a Belarusian architect and politician. In early March 1917 the white, red and white flag appeared in Petersburg on the building of the Belarusian Fellowship of Aid for War Victims, which Duzh-Dushewski worked for. On March 25 the Minsk Belarusian National Committee adopted the following resolution:

“1. Due to the fact that almost all towns in the Minsk province used the ancient Pahonya in their seals, we resolve to retain this heritage of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. The Committee has unanimously adopted the Pahonya as the state emblem of the independent Belarus to come.

2. Due to the fact that Belarusian folk art is dominated by white and red ornaments, it is considered appropriate to use these colours in the Belarusian national flag. Thus the Committee has resolved that the flag is to consist of three horizontal stripes, white, red and white in equal widths, and its length be twice its width.”¹⁰

The new flag matched the ancient Pahonya so organically that in a short time it became a generally re-

⁴ Nasha Niva, May 10, 2000.

⁵ The Encyclopaedia of the History of Belarus, v. 5, Minsk, 1999, p. 367.

⁶ Tsitow A., ‘Our Symbol — Pahonya: a Road through Centuries’, Minsk, 1993, p. 5.

⁷ Afanasyev A., ‘Poetic Views of Slavs on Nature’, v. 1, Moscow, 1865, p. 441.

⁸ Tsitow A., *ibid.*, p. 27.

⁹ Tsitow A., *ibid.*, p. 38.

¹⁰ Source: Nasha Niva, 1995, #5.

cognised national symbol. In 1917 the "Statute of Belarusian National Cultural Educational Circles in the Army" obliged their members to "wear the Belarusian national sign — a white band with a red stripe in the middle; all three stripes — white, red and white — of the same width."¹¹ The following December, white, red and white flags decorated the session hall of the All-Belarusian Congress — the most important national constituent forum in the modern history of Belarus. The 1,872 delegates to the congress, representing all Belarusian organisations that existed at that time, spoke in favour of the country's self-determination as a free state. Thus the question of state symbols of the first modern Belarusian state had been de facto resolved in advance: the state emblem of the Belarusian Popular Republic founded in 1918 was the Pahonya, and the white, red and white flag became the national flag.

It was at this time that first problems related to those symbols arose. The problem consisted in the fact that the process establishing the new country on the Belarusian lands coincided with similar developments undertaken by Lithuanians, the other heirs of the history and traditions of the bygone Grand Duchy of Lithuania. In 1918, an independent Lithuanian state, first a monarchy and later a republic, was declared covering the former Zhmudskaye (Samahidskaye) region of the GDL (the only large administrative division that had its own emblem, a black bear on a silver field) and adjacent districts of the former Vilna and Troks voivodships (provinces). In order to emphasise its historical and legal continuity with the GDL (and at that time Lithuanian national leaders attempted to establish control over all the lands once constituting the Grand Duchy), the new independent Lithuania chose the Pahonya as its state emblem. Moreover, as official ideology declared this newly created Lithuania the only true heir to the former GDL, the descendants of Zhmudzins also usurped the right to use the emblem with an armed horseman on a red background. This caused repeated scandals, such as in December 1919 when a diplomatic delegation of the BPR travelling from Berlin to Riga was arrested on the Lithuanian border. The reason for the arrest, according to the minutes of detainment, was the discovery by customs agents of "blank passports of a so-called Belarusian Republic with the Lithuanian emblem on the cover."¹²

However, the Russian Bolsheviks arriving from the East were even less disposed to the Belarusians using the Pahonya and the white, red and white flag. During the All-Belarusian Congress their representative stated: "We stand for the fraternity of all peoples. There should be no separation into nations."

Pointing at the national Belarusian flag, he said, "Lower this flag."¹³

The Bolsheviks established power in Belarus in 1920 and founded "the first state of workers and peasants on Belarusian land." In 1922, along with other similar "states," the Bolsheviks incorporated Belarus into a single Communist empire — the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. The only flag allowed within its territory was the red flag of the Bolshevik party. The only deviation allowed was an inscription in the upper left corner, in the case of Belarus — "BSSR." The same applied to the emblem. The first emblem of Soviet Belarus "was a copy of the state emblem of the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic (RSFSR) with a different inscription."¹⁴ Liberalisation implemented by the Communist regime during the period known as the New Economic Policy included the right of the "Soviet republics" to show some degree of national identity. This raised the question of creating new "state" symbols for those administrative divisions of the USSR that were to be "national by form and socialist by content." In 1924 the BSSR announced a competition for the best design of such symbols. The Council of People's Commissars chose the version by Russian artist Valentin Volkov, who saw no reason to complicate matters and presented a slightly modified copy of Soviet Russia's emblem: a hammer and sickle, a five-pointed star, sun and garland. For local colour, the artist rendered the ribbons that wrap the garland in the colours of the national flag of Belarusians — white, red and white. On April 11, 1927, the 8th Congress of Soviets of the BSSR approved the "new" emblem after a "minor" adjustment: the ribbons were returned the original colour red. Local "comrades" knew better than the graduate of the Petersburg Art Academy, where the bacillus of "Belarusian bourgeois nationalism" hid. Nothing in the symbols of the "small brother" in the "brotherly family of Soviet peoples," which was taking steps toward the construction of a "new national unity — a united Soviet people," was to remind Belarusians of the times when they were trying to determine the future of their country without the assistance of the "leaders of the world proletariat." The 1927 project (with occasional modifications) became the "state emblem" under which Belarus lived until late 1991. One of the modifications involved the language of the slogan "Proletarians of all countries, unite!" written on the garland's ribbon. Initially, the text was written in Belarusian, Yiddish, Russian and Polish. On July 28, 1938, the Supreme Soviet of the BSSR decided to leave only the Belarusian and Russian slogans. Small wonder, as it was at this time that the NKVD was engaged in eliminating "Trotsky's agents" and "White-Polish spies" in Belarus. In May 1995 the

¹¹ Source: Nasha Niva, 16.03.1998.

¹² Nasha Niva, 28.07.1997.

¹³ Source: October 1917 and the Fates of Political Opposition. Part III: The Reader on the History of Social Movements and Political Parties, Homel, 1993, p. 190.

¹⁴ The Encyclopaedia of the History of Belarus, v. 3, Minsk, 1996, p. 246.

same "heraldic device" (which actually has little to do with traditional heraldry) appeared on the pediment of the presidential palace to symbolise the aspiration of the new head of state and a large part of the population to shed the burden of independence and return to the "bright Soviet yesterday."

The red and green flag that currently hangs above the same palace has an even shorter history. In the early 1950s Moscow ordered the administrations of the Soviet republics to complement the Bolshevik red flags featuring a hammer and sickle (that were considered state flags in all the member republics of the Soviet Union) with some standardised details to symbolise the "specificity" of each territory. In order to comply, the Presidium of the BSSR Supreme Soviet issued an edict on December 25, 1951 (without explanation!) that added a green stripe at the bottom of the red flag as well as an ornament (taken from a hand towel embroidered in 1917 by M. Markevich from the village of Kastsilishcha, Senna district) alongside the staff. This flag was designed (as was the BSSR emblem) by a Russian artist, this time Nikolay Gusev.

The Pahonya and the white, red and white flag remained the official symbols of the Belarusian Popular Republic and its government-in-exile around which the Belarusian political emigration was grouped, and therefore were automatically forbidden in the BSSR. Prior to 1990, these symbols could be used relatively freely in Belarus only between 1941 and 1944 when the Soviet occupation was replaced by the Nazi occupation. In an effort to gain some degree of loyalty from the local population, the Germans did not forbid Belarusians to use their national symbols. Naturally, under those conditions they were also used by some collaborationist organisations (the Belarusian Council of Trust, the Belarusian Central Council, the Union of Belarusian Youth, etc.). As is known, the Nazis did not gain much from this act of "generosity," but it later gave the Soviets grounds for political speculation concerning the symbols.

During the entire 70-year history of the Communist regime, these images remained the chief symbols for all people in Belarus in favour of restoring the country's independence. In the 1940s and 1950s, they were the symbols of the anti-Soviet partisan movement and underground (the Belarusian Liberation Army, the Belarusian Independence Party, the Union of Belarusian Patriots, etc.). In the 1960s and 1970s, their legal revival in Belarus was the dream of the humanitarian intellectuals of the Academic Centre (liquidated by the KGB in 1974–1975) and the dissident artists of the creative circle "Na Paddashku" (In the Attic) who distributed samizdat postcards and posters featuring the Pahonya. One of the postcards by Yauhen Kulik found its way abroad, was reprinted and evoked a great deal of interest. Therefore, those modest

works added the flavour of political liberation to this historical and cultural symbol, and showed the world that the Moscow-directed processes of national degradation and assimilation of the Belarusian people was not yet complete. In the 1980s, the Pahonya and the white, red and white flag became the well-known symbols of Belarus and independence, while their public demonstration was unambiguously interpreted by the authorities and their opponents as an act of national resistance. An example of this is an event that occurred in the autumn of 1985 when Mikhal Miroshnikaw and Yury Makeyew, students of the Hlebaw Art School in Minsk, tore the USSR flags off the school building and hoisted the white, red and white flag. As a result, the KGB started legal proceedings against six people; Makeyew was forced to leave school.

As the process of democratisation unfolded in the Soviet Union, the use of pre-Soviet symbols became wide-spread and demands for their legalisation were voiced (for the first time by the independence-oriented youth organisation "Talaka" in August 1988). It was under the white, red and white flag that the first opposition political meeting authorised by the BSSR authorities was held at the Dynamo stadium in Minsk on February 19, 1989. However, at that time people were often arrested and persecuted for using this flag and the Pahonya, particularly in the provinces. Even on June 19, 1991 when the Belarusian Popular Front (BPF, the largest opposition organisation at that time) was officially registered (two years after it was founded), the registration was granted on the condition that, within three months, the organisation bring its statutes into line with legislation, specifically by removing the provision stating that "the BPF uses the Belarusian historic symbols — the white, red and white flag and the Pahonya emblem."¹⁵ This condition was imposed despite the fact that the flag had been legalised a year earlier in the capital of the BSSR. In 1990, the Minsk City Council adopted a resolution that allowed using the white, red and white flag as a national (not state) symbol of the Belarusians (not Belarus).

BPF never had to adjust its statutes to BSSR legislation. On September 19, 1991, exactly three months after its registration, the country was renamed the Republic of Belarus and adopted the Pahonya and the white, red and white flag. As a result of the continuing collapse of the Soviet empire and the failure of the coup attempt in Moscow earlier in August, the ruling elite in Belarus was ready to do anything to retain power in the country. The Communist Party of the Soviet Union and its Belarusian local branch were banned on August 25, 1991, and those in power found the communist symbols of little practical use. There were no other historic symbols of Belarus apart from those used

¹⁵ Svaboda, 1993, #9.

by the opposition and there was no time to invent new ones. The opposition, through its minority in the parliament, submitted proposals for the de-sovietisation and de-communisation of the country, among which the demand to change the symbols appeared the least threatening to the pragmatic nomenclature. However, for the advocates of Belarusian independence, which represented a minority in the parliament, returning the national symbols to the status of state symbols was a matter of principle. Settling this matter was seen as a guarantee of the irreversibility of Belarus' independence and the belarusification of its society.

Thus, at the end of 1991 an independent Belarusian state was revived with its main emblems corresponding to those of the former states formed on this territory, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Belarusian Popular Republic. However, for a large part of the new country's population, people not particularly keen in the area of history (the "pre-Soviet" history of Belarus was hardly mentioned if at all in schools and universities of the BSSR), and those unfamiliar with the subtleties of political manifestos, those symbols appeared to be the "private" symbols of the opposition, who took advantage of the situation to "foist" them on the entire country. Moreover, the former rulers of the BSSR, who usurped power over the Republic of Belarus, proved absolutely unable to manage the economy under the new conditions. The first two years after the declaration of independence was the worst period of the economic crisis that began in the late 1980s in the former USSR. Instead of undertaking the necessary reform, the country's leaders preferred to present the problems flooding Belarus as the inevitable price of state independence so desired by the "nationalist opposition." It is therefore little surprise that under those circumstances the words "crisis," "deterioration of living conditions," "independence," "Pahonya," "white, red and white flag" and "opposition" merged in the minds of "ordinary people" into one synonymous series. Meanwhile pro-Soviet and pro-Russian forces, primarily grouped in so-called "force structures" (such as the never-reformed KGB) and who enjoyed strong support from outside, did not abandon hope to change the trajectory of history and involved themselves in incessant, secret and open, "work among the population." This "work" was most gratefully accepted by the older generation, Soviet veterans of World War II and pensioners, for whom the USSR was the country of their youth and the unexpected changes brought only poverty and want. It is worth noting that at that time those people made up almost one third of the working population.

All of these factors were the main reason for the victory of Alaksandar Lukashenka in the first free presidential elections in 1994. An advocate of restoring the USSR and returning to a Socialist economic system, the young retired KGB Major backed by Rus-

sia was bound to win. The following was one of Lukashenka's pre-election promises:

"I will return our native Belarusian flag [i.e. not the BPF flag — I.L.] and symbols. The people themselves will decide via a referendum! Let them choose from several versions. Not the one we want to thrust in their teeth but the one that raises their spirit."¹⁶

The promised referendum was held on May 14, 1995 and became the culmination point of the slide-back: Belarus was reverting to the pre-independence situation in terms of politics, civil rights and economics. The restoration of the BSSR-like emblem and flag was, for the initiators of these retrogressive processes, a necessary "last stroke" to complete the picture of the country's return to the blessed Soviet yesterday. The voting was preceded by an insane campaign in the state-run media (including the national television channel, the only one that covers the entire country) against the Pahonya and the white, red and white flag, the country's main symbols of state at that time! It was heavily stressed that those symbols were used by some collaborators during the World War II. Lithuania and its claim to the entire historic heritage of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania was thrown in as well. Lukashenka stated: "Brazauskas [then president of Lithuania — I.L.] said to me: why did you, Alaksandar Hryhoryevich, take my emblem? I answered: I didn't, I don't need it!"¹⁷ Russian "psychics" pondered over the "alien ethnic bioenergy in the Pahonya and white, red and white flag."¹⁸ However, the main point hammered into the heads of readers and viewers was the following: the difficult present is symbolised by the signs of independent Belarus and the "damned nationalists and democrats," whereas the better future (equal to the bright past) is represented by the BSSR emblems; to return to the communist symbols is a return to youth for the elderly or adolescence-childhood for the middle-aged. Have you never wanted to return to childhood?!

The trick worked! In May 1995, society in the Republic of Belarus split almost exactly in half. The about face to the old Soviet symbols was supported by 40.7% of the voters while 59.3% voted against or ignored the referendum altogether.¹⁹ Moreover, the press pointed out that some of those who answered in the affirmative to the question worded by Lukashenka's lawyers "Do you support the introduction of the new state symbols?" did not at all mean to vote in favour of emblematic re-sovietisation. This is illustrated in the letter below written by L. Dambrowskaya to the newspaper *Nasha Niva* :

"Dear beloved newspaper! At the referendum I voted for the new state symbols — the white, red, and white flag and the emblem Pahonya. Suddenly it turned out that the "new flag" meant the old red and green... For my 37-years of life the red and green flag is the old symbol. I am sure that this is true for many,

¹⁶ Source: Svaboda, 1994, #21.

¹⁷ Source: Svaboda, 28.04.1995.

¹⁸ Free News Plus, 1995, #20.

¹⁹ Nasha Niva, 10.05.2000.

many people. Has it been so long since we discussed and adopted the symbols of our newly born state — the historic banner and emblem? Whose fault is it then that political thought jumps around like Punch, bows now to one side and then to another, now to this and then to another audience? I think that many people did not question the decision already made about the new symbols of the new state, because new state symbols are not like new brands of sausage or vodka and there can not be several in the memory of one generation.”²⁰

However, the authorities had achieved their aim. Lukashenka's proposal was supported by a majority of voters in the referendum. Despite the fact that legislative provisions specifically stated that issues of this importance could only be resolved with the participation of the majority of all registered voters, the presidential regime immediately announced its victory. Not waiting until a formal announcement of the voting results, Ivan Tsitsyankow, head of the presidential affairs department and former communist district leader, took the hated symbol of Belarus' independence off the main flagpole of the country (on the roof of the presidential palace) and publicly tore the white, red and white flag into shreds. That symbolic act of savageness opened an epoch of schizophrenic existence of the still-independent Republic of Belarus under the “new-old” state symbols of the sub-Soviet BSSR.

Seven months after the Soviet-style symbols were adopted, the absurdity of the situation was made yet more outrageous when the head of the presidential administration announced a “contest for the best explanatory text for the State symbol and State flag of the Republic of Belarus.”²¹ However, explaining the signs that according to Vyacheslaw Nasivich, head of the State heraldic service, “are usually interpreted as slightly modified symbols of the Soviet period which illustrates the nostalgia of a large part of population for those times,”²² proved a very difficult task. This is surprising, considering the extraordinary intellectual potential of the advocates of the “bright yesterday.” Jury member Arkadz Zhurawski, a notorious advocate of linguistic russification, provided an eloquent summary of the contest:

“As a whole, the versions sent in for the contest leave a sad impression. They show that the leading Belarusian writers, artists and publicists evaded the contest, and it is not by chance in the present political and ideological climate of Belarus...”

“Some of the versions are verses whose authors use a passionate and emotional form to express their positive attitude to the present symbols. However, one has to admit that these versified works do not meet the main requirement of the competition which

was to give the broadest context to the sense and meaning of the present state symbols as a whole or their particular elements...”

“The prosaic descriptions of the emblem and flag [sic!] submitted for the contest largely vary in both length and content... however, all of them are too short, on average one type-written page. Their general drawback is a complete lack of historic data.”²³

The contest that started with a bang ended with a whimper. The “first two prizes — 50 minimum salaries each”²⁴ never found their owners, and the presidential promise to “publish the original text by the contest winner as a decorative brochure”²⁵ hangs in the air. The Belarusian intellectual elite demonstrated its attitude toward the policy of reviving the ghosts of the recent past.

Thus, by the end of 2000 the Republic of Belarus saw the coexistence of two symbolic systems that have the value of state symbols for two main groups in society.

Currently, the “Resolution on the State Emblem of the Republic of Belarus” and its counterpart regarding the state flag, endorsed by presidential edicts 213 and 214 dated June 7, 1995, are valid. These documents bestow national status on the neo-Soviet symbols. The symbols are maintained by the State Heraldic Service controlled by the State Committee for Archives and Records. Syarhey Rassadzin, the current director of the service, is perfectly aware whose “heraldic tastes” his institution is servicing:

“We enjoy total support of the leadership, and especially the leader of our state who expresses his interest in the development of symbols.”²⁶

Lukashenka's “heraldmaster” Rassadzin (a historian) also unambiguously expressed his understanding of Belarusian heraldry and its prospects while writing on military heraldry:

“Modern Belarusian military heraldry has been and is developing based primarily on the achievements of Soviet military heraldry. The latter has been developing over many decades and has produced a consistent, original system...”

“In the 1990s the situation in military heraldry changed abruptly. In particular, the then official symbols of the Republic of Belarus, the Pahonya emblem and the white, red and white flag as well as their derivatives, were introduced into our military system of emblems. The problem was that the very style of the emblem and flag was essentially different from that used before, which caused numerous expenses...”

“The necessary prerequisites for the normalisation of military heraldry were made in Belarus after the 1996 national [sic!] referendum was con-

²⁰ Nasha Niva, 1995, #6.

²¹ Directive of the Head of the Administration of the President of the Republic of Belarus #41ra of December 21, 1995 // The current archive of the State heraldic service of the Republic of Belarus.

²² The letter from V. Nasevich to V.M. Saprykov, chief specialist of the State archive service of Russia, August 17, 1995 // Ibid.

²³ The resolution about the material of the contest for the best explanatory text for the State symbol and State flag of the Republic of Belarus // Ibid..

²⁴ The resolution of the head of the administration ... #41pa.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ The Belarusian service of Radio Liberty, August 1, 2000.

ducted, when the state received its present emblem and flag...

[Among the urgent tasks] is, of course, to maintain continuity in the development of our military heraldry. To deny the best achievements of the Soviet epoch in this area is obviously morally unacceptable, if practically uneconomic... Furthermore, it is not worthwhile to replace the symbols that are firmly associated in people's consciousness with the heroic past of the Armed Force with new ones. Thus, the Battle Banner of a military department must remain red, and the star pentagonal."²⁷

This long quote seems appropriate because it reflects the world-view of that part of the Belarusian population whose flag is now hanging above the country's administrative buildings: history beginning in 1917, the "golden age" in the Soviet past, the national symbols of the Belarusian as "signs of decline," etc. Meanwhile, the effort to meticulously regulate all expressions of social life, characteristic for Lukashenka's regime, resulted in the use of the symbols being largely reduced. For example, it is illegal to use them in the emblems of non-governmental organisations and the manufacture of state emblems is subject to licensing — at a costly rate.²⁸ The above mentioned presidential resolutions even introduce a list of officials who have the right to display the symbols in their offices. As a consequence, these symbols are used "informally" (that is, voluntarily and outside the office) only during events held by Soviet veterans of World War II or Communists. Even at such events, one is more likely to see the flag of the USSR and the original BSSR flag than the Lukashenka-modified replicas.

The picture is completely different with the present use of Belarus' pre-Soviet state symbols. They are used in whole or in part in the emblems of a large number of Belarusian political parties (from the conservative Belarusian Popular Front to social democrats) and various non-governmental organisations (from "Batskawshchyna" — Fatherland, the international Association of World Belarusians, to the regional Centre of Civil Initiatives in Maladzechna). They decorate mass rallies of those in favour of democratic reform. They appear as graffiti on the walls of Belarusian towns. These symbols have become the symbols of unity for everyone (no matter the ethnic background) who wants Belarus to become a democratic, lawful, economically strong and decent European state. Lukashenka's "law enforcement" responds to this by unlawfully fighting these national symbols. Their references to edict 990-X, dated April 9, 1981 (!) of the Presidium of the BSSR Supreme Soviet that banned "the use of unregistered flags and pennants" make no sense if only because the white,

red and white flag is an officially registered symbol of BPF. The police arrest and beat up people who use the disgraced symbols (the independent Belarusian press has been full of such incidents over the past five years) or, for example, ban the activity of the "Khata" (House) Publishing House for "printing the book *"Pahonya" in Your Heart and Mine* the contents of which is at odds with the results of the referendum on state symbols and thus negatively influences understanding, unity and stability in society."²⁹ However, all this only increases the attraction to these symbols in the eyes of the people who are displeased with the restoration of neo-Soviet order in Belarus (and even those unaffiliated with the Belarusian national movement).

Therefore, it can be said that the issue of state symbolism in the Republic of Belarus today originates from the uncertainty regarding the country's further political and civil development. The restoration of the Pahonya and the corresponding flag as the official symbols of an independent Belarusian state depends whether an European Belarus triumphs over a Soviet Belarus.

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²⁷ *Armya*, 2000, #1, c. 4–5.

²⁸ See: the Resolution about the order of licensing business entities for the production of the State emblem of the Republic of Belarus in the polygraphic form, out of metal, plaster or other material, as well as in the form of carved wood, embossed metal

and other three-dimensional forms. Approved by the Chairman of the committee for archives and record-keeping of the Republic of Belarus on March 13, 1996 // The Current archive of the State heraldic service.

²⁹ The order of A.I. Butevich, minister for culture and press of the Republic of Belarus, of September 11, 1995 #331 // Svatoda, October 13, 1995.