

White-Red-White Flag: The True Belarusian Symbol or a Sign of the Opposition?

Earlier this month the International Ice Hockey Federation (IIHF) officially banned the White-Red-White flag and the heraldic symbol Pahonia from the 2013 Ice Hockey World Championship held in Sweden and Finland. Tony Wirehn, Secretary General of 2013 Ice Hockey World Championship, commented that the IIHF cannot allow supporters to use any political symbols and signs in areas where matches are played.

Until Lukashenka came to power the White-Red-White flag served as the official symbol of Belarus. Now the Belarusian diaspora and nearly all opposition parties in Belarus consider it as the only true flag of Belarus. In Belarus it is largely banned by the authorities and Belarusian sport officials put pressure on the organisers of international sport events to eliminate the former state symbols from the stands, to prevent spectators from seeing “opposition” symbols on TV.

Rada (Council) of Belarusian Peoples Republic, the most influential political organisation of the Belarusian diaspora, condemned the decision of the IIHF. Many figures in Belarusian Civil Society along with Swedish human rights activists and even the former Swedish ambassador in Belarus, Stefan Eriksson, have spoken out against the prohibition. They argued that Belarusians should be given a chance to use what they consider as national symbols.

A petition against the ban quickly collected [over 3000 signatures](#). The petition argues that the IIHF “use political motives to prevent Belarusian supporters from using national symbols at the games of the championship. Ironically, the IIHF was also using the rationale of avoiding mixing

politics and sports to ban the symbols.

Lukashenka vs the Flag

The White-Red-White flag and Pahonia have [a long history](#). When Belarus became a separate state in 1918-1919 these were the official symbols of the Belarusian Peoples Republic until replaced by a Communist government. The Belarusian minority in Poland actively used these symbols during the inter-war period. During World War II they were also used by Belarusian organisations that collaborated with the Nazis who saw it as a chance to revive the Belarusian culture.

In 1991, when the country declared independence the flag and shield again became official symbols of Belarus. The draft law "On the State Flag of the Republic of Belarus" prepared by the Belarusian People's Front faction in the Supreme Council of Belarus, the main national political force in the country at the end of 1980s and in the beginning of 1990s.

In 1995, to consolidate his power Lukashenka initiated a referendum. One of the objectives of the referendum was to change the state symbols which were associated with the national movement against the USSR at the end of the 1980s. Lukashenka promised to revive the Soviet Union and by changing the national symbols to those associated with Soviet Belarus, he gained a symbolic victory over the Belarusian Popular Front.

Lukashenka's main argument to change the White-Red-White flag and the Pahonia symbol was that during [the World War II](#) Belarusian organisations that collaborated with the Nazis had used them. Propaganda movies which followed this initiative compared the Belarusian Popular Front, the main pro-democracy opposition party, to fascists. According to Lukashenka's logic those who use White-Red-White flag are ideological followers of Nazi collaborators. The referendum took place with gross violations of democratic standards and

in the atmosphere of massive state propaganda. Nonetheless, the symbols were changed.

The Symbol of Freedom

Today most of the organisations of the Belarusian diaspora and Belarusian opposition refuse to use the official Red-Green flag and represent their country with White-Red-White flag. In late of 1990s and 2000s as Lukashenka's political regime consolidated its power, the White-Red-White flag became more than a banned national symbol but also a sign of struggle against authoritarianism.

The current Red-Green official flag refers to the Soviet past of Belarus and corresponds to official historiography and state ideology praising the Soviet period. While the White-Red-White flag symbolises a brief democratic period of 1990s as well as an anti-Soviet tradition of Belarusian national revival it clearly confronts the official interpretation of the Belarusian history.

Not surprising that Belarusian authorities do not tolerate the former state symbols. It is strictly prohibited to fly the White-Red-White flag at sports events in Belarus and scores of democratic activists have been imprisoned for displaying the flag in public.

An illustration of this is the case of Siarhei Kavalenka. In January 2010, he placed a White-Red-White flag on the top of the Christmas tree in the centre of Vitebsk for which a criminal court sentenced him to a three year suspended sentence. In 2011, police arrested Kavalenka again, this time on the basis of violating the conditions of the suspended sentence, he was sentenced to 25 months in prison.

Using White-Red-White flag at Sports Events Abroad

Belarusian sports officials often try to put pressure on the organisers of international sport events to remove White-Red-White flags from the stands. The recent ban at the Ice Hockey World Championship is not an isolated case.

In 2011, the former Belarusian official flag was banned from FIBA EuroBasket Women's matches in Poland. Security searched for and removed fans with White-Red-White flags from the stands during the match Belarus played against Lithuania.

In October 2010 at the match of UEFA Europa League FC Dynamo Minsk played against Club Brugge K.V. in Belgium several fans supported Belarusian team with White-Red-White flag. An unknown man, introducing himself as a person "in charge of the Belarusian fans", was trying aggressively to take away the flag from Belarusian supporters.

A similar story took place in Moldova at a match where FC BATE Barysau played against FC Sheriff Tiraspol – fans with White-Red-White flags and Red-Green flags started a fight with each other during the game. This resulted in the arrest of 15 people.

Many sports fans persist in supporting Belarusian athletes in international competitions using the White-Red-White flag, which in most cases the organisers tolerate. This irritates the Belarusian government: to them, this symbolizes not the country where they come from but the political opposition which they cannot tolerate.

Many Belarusians will continue taking the risk of using what they regard as their true national symbols. They cherish a rare sense of freedom and self-expression unavailable at sports events back home.