

Belarus Bans St. George's Ribbons at V-Day Celebrations

On the May 9th most post-Soviet countries, including Belarus, celebrate Victory Day to commemorate World War II.

But unlike in previous years, this time around before May 9th state organisations in Belarus received an unexpected order – replace all V-Day decorations containing the St. George's ribbon.

Originally a Russian Empire military decoration, it was used during World War II in a modified form and since that time all former Soviet Union republics have widely used the symbol in their annual celebrations of Victory Day.

However, after the separatist actions in Ukraine, where militants use the ribbon as their identifying colours, it has acquired a negative meaning and became associated with Russian imperialism.

Unlike in Ukraine, where this year authorities introduced a completely new symbol, the Belarusian authorities simply replaced it with the colours of green-red flag of Belarus. With such a move Lukashenka is demonstrating his unwillingness to back Russia-inspired separatism in Ukraine.

History of St. George's Ribbon

The Georgian ribbon emerged as part of the Order of St. George, established in 1769 as the highest military decoration of Russian Empire. After 1917 the Soviet authorities abolished the imperial award, but the black-orange ribbon was used in the Soviet Army under the name the Guard Ribbon on banners and decorations during World War II. Afterwards it became widely

used in commemoration of World War II throughout the union.

The modern Russian army reestablished the Order of St. George, but in public opinion, which Putin's propaganda has pushed, the imperial and Soviet ribbons are seen as identical and called the St. George's ribbon.

The popularisation of the ribbon started back in 2005 with an ideological campaign in Russia. Activists began to distribute the ribbons among the population leading up to the annual Victory Day celebration on May 9th. People usually attach the ribbons to their clothes, cars and the black-orange colours are used on visual materials elsewhere.



However, in the current turmoil in Ukraine the St. George's ribbon has become a symbol of pro-Russian separatists, who "fight Kyiv's fascist junta" for East Ukraine's independence.

Most militants in Ukraine wear the ribbon along with other separatist symbols. Due to this, the Ukrainian authorities banned the use of the ribbon as commemorative symbol for May 9th, although it had been widely used in the past.

Previously, Belarus also supported the post-Soviet symbol and the authorities were ordered to distribute the ribbons among state organisations and government bodies. However, this year the Belarusian authorities have apparently banned the use of St. George's ribbon – a decision that was almost certainly made at the highest levels of government.

No St. George's Ribbon in Official Celebrations

On May 6th a photo of a note appeared in the Vkontakte social network which was sent to all the schools in Homiel. In the note the Homiel BRSM (Pro-government Youth organisation) chief, with a direct no nonsense message, ordered the schools not to use St. George's ribbon in their V-Day celebrations, but instructed them instead to use the green-red colours of the Belarusian flag.

Another BRSM functionary from the central committee explained to Radio Liberty that the colours of Belarusian flag are the official colours of BRSM, and the organisation does not associate its activity with the St. George's ribbon colours.

The pro-government Belaja Rus public association, which includes practically all representatives of the ruling elite of Belarus, said that it was not planning to use St. Georges ribbons in their annual celebration. "We never used them, we have used the green-red ribbons and our emblem", commented the Belaja Rus press-secretary.

Many other state organisations also confirm in private that they were ordered to remove or replace all decorations containing the St. George's ribbon leading up to May 9th.

Not only the state but also private companies received the order not to use the ribbon. Belarusian retail giant Euroopt posted on its website that its volunteers will distribute the ribbons in large cities of Belarus from the 7-9 May. However, after multiple publications about the campaign in the media on May 7th Euroopt deleted the announcement.

Society and State in Symbolic Controversy

However, the authorities could not prevent some public associations and parties from distributing the ribbon.



The Liberal-Democratic Party, mostly loyal to the regime, claimed it will hand out the ribbons at its office and in the streets. Russian-backed organisations like Rus Molodaya (Young Rus') actively engaged in ribbon campaign in Belarusian cities, though fortunately they are very small in number.

Opposition forces, on the contrary, urged the authorities not to use the ribbon calling it a symbol of separatism and military aggression.

In Ukraine this year, authorities decided to introduce a new symbol of commemoration – a red poppy flower. According to Kiev, it presents a Europe-wide symbol of remembering war victims. Ukraine also launched their commemorative celebration on May 8th as many countries of the anti-Nazi coalitions do annually. This symbol will avoid the glorification of war a la Soviet and will avoid parity with the separatist's symbol.

The Belarusian authorities decided on their own approach to the problem in a more delicate and gentle manner. They did not announce a total ban on individual use, but in official celebrations replaced the orange-and-black symbol with the colours of the current flag of Belarus.

Many Belarusians would not accept a ban on donning St. Georges ribbons, as large portions of the population remain friendly to Soviet ideology and are heavily influenced by Russian propaganda. Despite this, the infamous symbol has become a rare sight in Minsk, particularly when considering its widespread usage in years past.

Lukashenka Will not Back Separatism in Ukraine

This time around the celebration of Victory Day coincided with Lukashenka's own urgent visit to Moscow, the details of which remain unknown. On 7 May he reassured Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev that, "Belarusians have never hesitated about celebrating Victory Day as the [nation's] greatest holiday", and invited Medvedev to visit the new museum of the Great Patriotic War in Minsk. But these words sound like an excuse for the recently altered policies from the Belarusian leadership towards St. George's ribbon in Belarus, an issue which has caused discontent in Russian media in recent days.



Interestingly, in 2010 in Moscow during the commemoration events Lukashenka himself wore the green-red ribbon of Belarusian flag, while his colleagues, Medvedev and Yanukovich, wore St. George ribbons. It should also be noted that in Belarus, Lukashenka has always worn only the nation's flag colours during WWII commemorations.

The fact that the ribbon's usage was banned at the highest level demonstrates that Lukashenka is currently very suspicious of Russia's actions in Ukraine.

Lukashenka [refused to officially recognise the Crimea annexation](#) and supports Ukraine's territorial integrity and non-federalisation. At the annual address to the nation and Parliament in April he [employed a fair amount of independence rhetoric](#) and went on about the importance of preserving Belarus' sovereignty as the unfolding regional crisis

continues. The case of St. George's ribbon has become another sign of Minsk's altered view of the Kremlin politics.

Re-Writing History in Belarus

The official interpretation of history in Belarus has experienced a dramatic evolution since the USSR's collapse. At the first stage a Belarusian nationalist-oriented approach dominated in historiography. After Lukashenka came to power in 1994, a reversal to a Soviet driven narrative took place, which, however, included a number of additional elements.

On the one hand, Lukashenka's narrative reconciled the national version of history in the pre-Soviet period. They both agree that Belarusian statehood has a long tradition of independent existence and holds value for all Belarusians. On the other hand, many aspects of the Soviet period remain a taboo or cannot be criticised. The period of independence (since early 1990s) remains the most ideologically charged and distorted, as it involves the rule of Lukashenka himself.

The Rise of National Narrative

After the collapse of the USSR and before Lukashenka's first term in power, a nationally-oriented elite offered an interpretation of the past that was typical for transitional countries of that period. This version of history showed Soviet period as mostly negative, highlighting the horrors of [Stalin's terror](#), the destruction of national identity of Belarusians and life as experienced in a totalitarian society.

Instead, a new version of Belarusian history started not from the Soviet era, as Muscovite historians often like to portray,

but rather from the Middle Ages. The forefathers of the new Belarus sought origins of national statehood in the period of Polack Princedom and later the Grand Duchy of Lithuania as the peak of sovereign development for the Belarusian nation.

World War II, which became the core element of the present official ideology, received its proper name and replaced the Sovietized name of the "Great Patriotic War". Former Soviet heroes of the war often became simply victims of occupations by the communists and fascists.

Also, the new narrative presented a rather anti-Russian picture of history. It glorified battles against Russia throughout history and condemned periods of Russian occupation during the eras rule by the Russian Empire or Soviet.

Back to the USSR

As with any political authority, Lukashenka's regime tries to use history to legitimise and support his policies as well as to form a particular world view amongst the citizenry. As a result, present day historical education has become overly ideological and lacks a balanced view of Belarus' past.

But unlike the Soviet version of the Belarusian history, which involved class struggle and Russia-centrism in every period of Belarusian history, Lukashenka's narrative does not care much for the class-based approach nor discussion of early relations with Moscow.

[Belarusian Identity - The Impact Of Lukashenka's Rule](#)

Lukashenka's narrative managed to reconcile the nationalist version of history of the pre-Soviet period with its own modern conception of Belarusian history.

On the contrary, official ideologists accept the importance of early feudal princedoms like Polack and Turaŭ, and later the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, in the genesis of Belarusian statehood. They speak, although very carefully, about numerous

wars with Moscow and uprisings by Belarusians against the Russian Empire.

But the picture changes completely after we come to the collapse of the Russian Empire, and the socialist revolution which was followed by the creation of the Soviet Union. Authorities recognise the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic as the first real Belarusian state and the whole existence within USSR remains sort of sacred, and its criticism of it is taboo.

Take for instance a history textbook for schools that was published in 2006. The book covers the period from 1945-2005, the postwar period for the USSR and independent Belarus. One will not find a word about the Stalinist terror after World War II nor the anti-Soviet activities that took place within the country. Instead, it describes how the Belarusian people heroically overcame hardships during the post-war period and helped the leadership to implement industrialisation. The authors do not criticise the Soviet political regime.

Likewise, when it comes to Perestroika, schoolchildren will not find any information on the Belarusian Popular Front or other anti-soviet national associations that emerged during the period of liberalisation in the 1980s. All this despite the fact that they played a key role in gaining Belarusian independence. Likewise, the book does not mention the Kurapaty burial grounds, discovered by Zianon Paźniak, the place where thousands of Belarusians were executed during Stalin's terror. But the most distorted period in the current textbooks remains the period when Lukashenka has ruled Belarus.

The Era of Lukashenka

The story of independence in the textbook starts like this: "To overcome the crisis caused by the USSR's collapse, Belarus needed a strong authority and the political will of the leadership. The establishment of the post of president in 1994

started a new stage in the development of our country”.

So, the idea of the exclusive role of Aliaksandr Lukashenka serves has been planted as the main element of the official narrative. It portrays his every major political step as something extremely important and desired by the common people. Meanwhile, the book remains silent on the very active period of party politics in the first half of 1990s or methods of consolidation of power which Lukashenka exercised and which involved violence and even the physical elimination of opponents.

Schoolchildren can hardly find the names of the some prominent figures that contributed greatly to attaining independence, like the Belarusian Popular Front leader Zianon Paźniak or Stanislau Šuškievič, the official Head of State of Belarus in 1991-1994. Reading the book ones get the impression that the opposition never existed, neither does Belarusian civil society. There are just two main actors: the president and the Belarusian people, who totally support him.

State Identity instead of National Identity

Although the ideology of the regime reconciled more or less with the national narrative on pre-soviet Belarusian past, it does not actively use it for strengthening national unity and identity. Hence, a new generation of people, unlike their elder colleagues from 1990s, have no interest in national history whatsoever.

If asked, young people can hardly produce any coherent knowledge about the past of their country, apart from a few ideological clichés. Rather than accepting their national identity and speaking about historical and cultural heritage, most Belarusians identify themselves with the state.

Lukashenka likes to repeat that he cannot stand any cult of personality, yet the official ideology and historical education is building just that. The influence of ideology on

youth is pretty obvious, especially in small towns and villages, but the picture remains inherently unstable.

The new generation of Belarusians do not exist in informational isolation and hardly believes everything that the state tries to preach. Internet has spread massively during recent years and alternative versions of history are available to all interested. After all, there is no need to worry about Belarusians: they are accustomed to the constant changing of rulers and ideas, and it is hard to make them take something too seriously.

Vadzim Smok