

# The Ukrainian Flag Banned in Belarus?

On 21 November the Minsk Arena hosted the famous Ukrainian rock band Okean Elzy, who are known for their support of Euromaidan and its pro-European orientation. The musicians did not raise any political issues during the gig according to agreement with the administration, but their concert became politicised nonetheless.

The next day videos appeared online in which policemen refused to allow people sporting the colours of the Ukrainian flag into the concert and even went so far as to pull a flag out of a fan's hands inside the venue.

Belarus has so far only placed a ban on the Belarusian national white-red-white flag which is considered by the authorities to be an anti-government and anti-Lukashenka symbol that is unauthorised at public gatherings.

With the start of Euromaidan and the Ukraine Crisis the symbols of these conflicting sides have also become a target of political persecution.

## **Music and Politics**

The Russian government banned Okean Elzy from holding concerts back in the spring while the Euromaidan revolution was unfolding in Ukraine. St Petersburg city government representative Vladimir Milonov accused them of radicalism and holding anti-Russian views and went on to urge the Minister of Culture to restrict their activity in Russia. Shortly afterwards several entertainment agencies informed the band that they were not going to be able to have any concerts in Russia.



However, in Belarus Okean Elzy does not face any restrictions so far. On 21 November they played a gig at the largest concert hall in Minsk – the Minsk-Arena, which holds a total of 15,000 people.

The band was truly triumphant in their return to Belarus with a hall full of fans – a rare situation for Belarus. This itself did not come as much of a surprise as the previous Okean Elzy concert in Minsk, back in December 2013, had a similar turnout.

Deputy Director of the Minsk-Arena Mikalaj Serhiejenka commented after the concert that the administration had discussed the set list with the band in advance and asked them not to sing certain songs that might be viewed as having political undertones. “We do not want to escalate the atmosphere during the concert as it can lead to some kind of abnormal action”, he said. In compliance with this agreement, Okean Elzy did not raise any political issues during the concert.

### **The Ukrainian Flag Banned?**

The next day, however, a video appeared on the Internet in which plain-clothed policemen, who were searching audience members, refused a group of girls enter the concert with a Ukrainian flag. They forced visitors to leave all symbols containing yellow-blue Ukrainian colours in a cloakroom outside the hall.

The girls demanded to see some kind of documentation that forbade Ukrainians symbols being displayed at concerts, but instead they received only a vague response that “this is not a political event”. After some resistance and the police's own persistent demands, they gave in after being threatened with arrest.

Another video from the concert showed a policeman pulling a Ukrainian flag out of a fan's hands after failing to persuade her to give it up voluntarily.

In an interview with TUT.by after the concert, Volha Kavałkova and Maryna Chomič, the girls from the same video, said that “the police did not even let people in with small Ukrainian flag ribbons on their bags. They even insisted that we remove a ribbon from my friend's hair”.

The Minsk-Arena web site only says that visitors cannot display symbols of fascist or racist content at concerts.

### **The Authorities Deny Political Background**

The concert organisers acknowledged that the decision to ban Ukrainian flag came from the Minsk police. Regarding the inquiries made by TUT.by journalists, the Press Secretary of the Minsk Internal Affairs Department explained that flags and other things might disturb other visitors, and their use was restricted strictly in the name of security.

After a few taped incidents appeared online, the Press Secretary of the Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs wrote on his twitter in Belarusian: “Colleagues, is this sane? Is the Ukrainian flag banned in Belarus?”

*[@BelarusMFA](https://t.co/xtXxqIHseu) Калегі, гэта нармальна? – <https://t.co/xtXxqIHseu>  
Няўжо ўкраінскі сцяг забаронены ў Беларусі?*

*– Yevhen Perebyinis (@YPerebyinis) [November 23, 2014](#)*

On 24 November the Belarusian MFA replied to the tweet “According to the Ministry of Interior, when the house is full, the same thing would be seen with the Belarusian flag because it should not disturb the spectators. Our people love Okean Elzy!” The Ukrainian reply was “Thanks for the reply, but I cannot imagine [a scenario where] the police handled the Belarusian flag with equal disrespect and brutality”.

On 25 November the Belarusian Ambassador to Ukraine was summoned to the Ukrainian MFA. The Ukrainians asked him to explain the incident with the flag and he replied that concert regulations do not allow for it to be displayed. However, he failed to explain why the police handled the flags with disrespect.

## **Politicised Symbols in Belarus**

In Belarus, the white-red-white flag that was abolished by the Lukashenka-initiated referendum in 1995 remains one of the most contentious of outlawed symbols in the country. The flag can only be used as a BNF political party symbol at officially sanctioned meetings and pickets. Otherwise its appearance in public is regarded as a kind of anti-government protest and is a regular target for the police.

Merely displaying it in a public place is qualified as an "unauthorised action" that can lead to fines being levied or even a few days in jail. Even hanging the flag out of the window of your own apartment is illegal.

The most famous case of a demonstration held under the white-red-white banner occurred in 2010 in Viciebsk when the activist Siarhei Kavaliienka [placed a flag](#) on the top of the city's downtown Christmas tree. Thus far this has also been the only strictly flag-related criminal case, though Kavaliienka was accused of disturbing public order.



Despite the authorities' claims that during a concert flags cannot be displayed on security reasons, the official Belarusian flag can regularly be seen at concerts. In fact, before the Euromaidan revolution, the Ukrainian flag also was not considered a "political symbol". Afterwards, however, it has become highly politicised and a source of potential problems with the police.

It now appears that besides the white-red-white flag, symbols

employed during the Ukraine crisis have also received official censure. The flags of the Donetsk and Luhansk Peoples Republics have yet to show up at large public events, but during Victory Day this past May, Belarus [banned the use of St. Georges ribbons](#) – a World War II symbol that has also become a symbol of the pro-Russian separatists in Eastern Ukraine.

Another remarkable case of pro-Russian symbol restriction occurred back in November 2012, when the Mahilioŭ local authorities forbade the organisers of “Slavic March” to use a black-yellow-white flag – the traditional symbols of Russian monarchists and nationalists. In effect, this means that the authorities are restricting not only the symbols of the democratic opposition but every other dubious political symbol that they cross.

Belarus continues to maintain its balancing act between Russia and the West on the Ukraine issue, all while trying to be a reconciling partner for the conflict. Clearly, non-alignment will remain an important element of Belarus's foreign policy, including the symbolic dimension that this entails. The Belarusian police, as usual, will continue to try to serve Lukashenka to the best of their ability, even if that means ensuring that the smallest disagreeable symbol does not rear its head in public.

---

## **Belarus and Ukraine Football Fans Unite against Putin**

On 9 October, during a Belarus-Ukraine qualifying match to Euro 2016, Ukrainian and Belarusian fans demonstrated an

unprecedented level of solidarity. They shouted the national slogans of both countries and chanted an infamous anti-Putin song.

Although the police detained around two dozen fans before and after the game, their response was rather restrained. This "light punishment" could be a signal to the Kremlin that Belarus does not support its imperialist politics in the post-Soviet space.

Belarus' security services see the hardcore fans, known as ultras, as a threat to society, as during the Ukraine crisis they proved to be a formidable protest force. But because of the decentralised nature of their activity, which is mostly non-political and popular among a younger crowd, the ultras are hard to control. This may play into Lukashenka's hands, as they may be used by the regime in its games with Russia.

### **Preemptive Measures of Police**

A week before the match Belarusian fans announced that they would be making a show of solidarity with Ukrainians. They made stickers and banners with [national Belarusian](#) and Ukrainian symbols, saying "Brothers Forever" and "Together Forever".

The Belarusian security services, of course, were preparing for the possible political implications that the game could carry. On match day, Ukrainian sport and fan web sites reported that Belarusian border guards denied several dozen Ukrainian fans entrance into the country because they cited the football match as the aim of their visit.

Belarusian ultras also reported the police detaining known fans at home and at work. Police told them that they had to sign some papers at the police station, and upon their arrival, they were sentenced up to 10 days in custody. Many were arrested on their way from Minsk to the match, which took

place in Barysaŭ, a town not far from Minsk.

## **Belarus and Ukraine – Together Forever**

This game, as many commentators noted afterwards, was made by the fans, not by the football teams. Ukrainians brought an atmosphere of freedom to Belarus, where security services restrict any unauthorised activity and carefully control the ultras. This seems to be the first time that the fans of any two countries displayed such a high degree of solidarity over the whole course of history of football in Belarus.

Taking turns, the Belarus and Ukraine fan sectors shouted famous national slogans from both countries: “Slava Ukraini-Heroyam Slava!” (Glory to Ukraine – Glory to the Heroes!) and “Žyvie Belaruś!” (Long Live Belarus!).

The fans also jointly sang the famous obscene chant about Putin. Belarusian fans sang patriotic songs in the Belarusian language. The stadium was indeed filled with an unbridled spirit of enthusiasm as many visitors would go on to state later.

Interestingly, the match became widely popular in Ukraine thanks to the massive support for Ukraine displayed by the Belarusian fans. For instance, the web site censor.net had 130,000 views for its piece on the phenomenon just in the first night following the game.

However, the captain of Belarusian team Cimafiej Kalačoŭ in an interview with Euroradio said that he regards the behaviour of fans improper. “Shouting political slogans was wrong. And anti-Russian songs were really stupid”, Kalačoŭ said.

He also accused the Belarusian fans of being somewhat uncultured because, in his opinion, they provided their home team with weak support. His claims stirred up a wave of anger among fans on the Internet, as most of them were enthralled

with the actions of the fans – and disappointed with the team.

Regarding the game itself, Belarus lost 2:0, but neither Ukrainian nor Belarusian fans were satisfied with their teams and wrote the game off.

### **Authorities Dole Out Light Punishment**

Such unprecedented action from the fans could not, of course, go unpunished. The Minsk regional police office reported detaining 41 fans, 14 of them being Ukrainian citizens, accusing them of 'hooliganism' and being drunk in public.

In reality, some of them simply had national symbols on clothes or banners, which is more than enough reason for the Belarusian police to detain them. Fans themselves claimed that around 130 people had been detained. A majority of those who were detained were then quickly released.



One Ukrainian was accused of possessing a swastika and received 10 days in prison, while a few others received 5 days for using foul language. For their troubles, the Belarusians got US\$60 fines.

However, a Dynamo Kyiv Ultras representative going by the name of Vitali claimed in an interview to Football.ua that the Minsk police transferred six Ukrainians to Homiel, a city near the Ukrainian border, where local police took them outside of the city limits and beat them.

On 11 October, a Ukrainian Foreign Ministry spokesman reported that all of the detained Ukrainians had been released and were already home. He said president Poroshenko personally dealt with securing their release.

The authorities, it would appear, gave out the most minimal punishment possible for such a massive anti-Putin action.

Although the police anticipated it and took measures in advance, in the end, they largely acted with restraint. The punishment served out was more of a formality, a reminder that the authorities are in control. Many senior officials in Belarus, including the president, may have rather enjoyed the anti-Putin chants.

## **Solidarity of Ultras**

The Belarusian police view the ultras as potentially dangerous groups and try their best to control them. They are known to [apply overly restrictive regulations](#) on their activities, and detentions are a widespread practise during sporting events. One should hardly be surprised to find out that Belarusian ultras are not the biggest fans of Aliaksandr Lukashenka's repressive regime.

Many Belarusian ultras, much like other ultras, hold right-wing views and do not shy away from promoting blatantly racist views. At the same time, they are one of very few groups engaged in reviving national identity and employing the Belarusian language, national symbols and historical episodes that have been rejected by the state's official ideology.

Being nationalists, and therefore rejecting the imperialist ideas of Russia, Belarusian ultras were themselves on the side of Ukraine when the whole crisis erupted. Currently, they present perhaps the only social group that regularly tries to express its position on the Ukrainian conflict publicly.

On the one hand, this is inconvenient for Lukashenka, as he tries to extract money from the Russian budget, all while maintaining his official disagreement with Russian policy towards Ukraine.

On the other, this kind of behaviour by fans may actually be quite useful for him, as it demonstrates to Putin that Belarusian society does not support his imperialist behaviour – a society that democratically elected Lukashenka enjoys the

support of.

---

# **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 à 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 Yanukovych, 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.