

# Symbolism of money: finances and historical consciousness of Ukraine, Lithuania and Belarus<sup>1</sup>

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## *Abstract*

Images on banknotes are one of the ways of visualizing and distributing knowledge about a certain historical period and fixing it in a nation's consciousness, thus influencing the national identity. The author analyses the images on the banknotes of the three neighboring countries: Lithuania, Ukraine and Belarus, studying the common features and differences in their design. The author draws a conclusion about the closeness of the Lithuanian and Ukrainian approaches that influenced their national identities through the banknotes' images, while Belarusian identity engineers ignored this approach.

*Key words:* political symbols, symbolism of Belarus, Lithuania and Ukraine, historical memory, identity construction, finances, money.

While forming or strengthening a chosen variant of the national identity, every nation tries to highlight some historical facts and to avoid or “forget” some other ones. Thus, the “reconstruction” of the national memory and history chooses some periods from the nation's history and intensifies them (Snyder, 2003). Various methods are used in order to visualize and distribute knowledge about certain historical periods and to fix them in a nation's consciousness, such as creation of memo-

rials, museums and historical memory places, monuments' erection, designation of streets in honor of great people or events, sometimes a State Coat of Arms, National Anthem and Flag.

This article analyses one more method of spreading a chosen historical orientation, i.e. through the images on banknotes. Bearing in mind the fact that the majority of the population uses money, this method seems to be quite justified. Prior to analyzing the Belarusian banknotes' semantic load, let's first

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<sup>1</sup> The source for translation is: Сяргей Кузняцоў Сімволіка грошаў: фінансы і гістарычная свядомасць Украіны, Літвы і Беларусі // “Палітычная сфера” №7, 2006 с.54-62.

take a close look at the images on the banknotes of Ukraine and Lithuania.

## Ukraine

After the disintegration of the USSR in 1991, the Presidium of the Supreme Council (Rada) passed a decree concerning the introduction of a “karbovanets” (a coupon) from the 10<sup>th</sup> of January 1992 on the territory of Ukraine (Decree, 1991). In the beginning of 1992, these coupons circulated together with the old Soviet Rubles however as early as May the Rubles were withdrawn and in November it became possible to carry out coupon non-cash transactions. At the same time the work on the creation of the Ukrainian currency, hryvnia, was ongoing. Regardless of the fact that the new Ukrainian currency

desire of the authorities to stabilize the economy first, thus transferring the major blows of inflation to the coupons.

The name of the Ukrainian currency, the hryvnia, dates back to the times of the Old Rus (Ruthenia). At those times, a “hryvnia” (“grivna”) most likely meant something valuable worn around the neck, usually made of silver or gold. Later on the word was used to describe silver or golden ingots of a certain weight.

On 18 July 1917 the creation of the Ukrainian People’s Republic was announced and started immediate emission of its own currency, the karbovanets. The banknotes’ designer Heorhiy Narbut addressed to the Ruthenian times and pictured the Family Coat of Arms of Prince Volodymyr (Vladimir), which can be found on the



was ready to be introduced already at the end of 1992, the currency reform was implemented only in August 1996. During 15 days both coupons and hryvnias were in circulation however starting from September 16th, 1996, the only currency accepted for payments in the territory of Ukraine became the hryvnia. This delay was caused by the

old Ruthenian coins. This idea led to the new name of the Ukrainian currency. On March 1<sup>st</sup>, 1918, the UPR Central Rada introduced its new currency, the hryvnia (Chernoivanenko, 2001).

Therefore the name of the present Ukrainian currency emphasizes the connection between the history of Ruthenia with its center in Kyiv (Kiev)

where the hryvnias were used, and the contemporary Ukrainian state. In the light of this concept, the name of the subunit, "kopiyka" (the Ukrainian variant of the Russian "kopeyka") does not quite fit in. The word kopek, kopeck or copeck (kopeyka) derives from the Russian word "kop'yo", i.e. a spear. The first kopek coins, minted at Novgorod and Pskov since around 1535 onwards, contained an image of a horseman with a spear. From the 1540's onwards the horseman bears a crown and undoubtedly represented the intention was to refer to Ivan the Terrible. There is a theory that the word "ruble" has derived from the Russian verb "rubit", i.e. to chop. Historically, "ruble" was a piece of a certain weight chopped off a silver ingot (grivna), hence the name.

The images on banknotes are rather detailed. The Ukrainian banknotes' designers did not highlight a certain historical period however put emphasis on the concept of the common historical past of Ruthenia and Ukraine and filling Ruthenia with a Ukrainian content. Each of the value's obverse has an image of Ukraine's outstanding persons, e.g. Princes Volodymyr (Vladimir) the Great and Yaroslav the Wise (1 and 2 UAH), hetmans Bohdan Khmelnytsky and Ivan Mazepa (5 and 10 UAH), Ivan Franko (20 UAH), Mykhailo Hrushevsky (50 UAH), Taras Shevchenko (100 UAH) and Lesya Ukrainka – 200 UAH (National Bank of Ukraine).

The images of Vladimir the Great and Yaroslav the Wise represent the period of Old Ruthenia as the first Ukrainian state. Unlike in Belarus, where Prince Vladimir the Great (958? - 1015) is remembered as the ruler who raped

Rahnieda (Rogneda) and killed her father Rahvalod (Rogvolod), the Prince of Polatsk (Polotsk), in Ukraine he is praised for the Baptizing of Ruthenia and being a wise commander and statesman. The son of Vladimir and Rogneda, Kyivan Prince Yaroslav the Wise (about 983–1054) is one of the most powerful warriors of his time, in the course of his ruling the state with its center in Kyiv reached its blossom. Yaroslav the Wise is believed to be the founder of many cities, including those which are beyond the borders of Ukraine, e.g. Tartu in Estonia, Yaroslavl in Russia, and even a former capital of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, Navahradak.

The banknotes with the images of the hetmans Bohdan Khmelnytsky and Ivan Mazepa refer to the period of the Ukrainian history when there were attempts of reviving the state. The Ukrainian historiography considers B. Khmelnytsky (1595–1657) as a leader of the national liberation movement, when some Ukrainian lands were freed from Rzecz Pospolita (Kingdom of Poland) and joined Muscovy, remaining its autonomy. I. Mazepa (1639–1709) is known for his attempts of liberating the Ukrainian lands from Muscovy with the assistance of the Swedish King Charles XII. Neither Russian, nor Soviet historiography forgave Mazepa, considering him a betrayer. It is interesting that there are two hetmans on the banknotes, who are thought to be antagonists from the Soviet point of view however this is the way the designers highlighted the independence of the Ukrainian state interests.

The period of the Ukrainian People's Republic is represented by the image of

Mykhailo Hrushevsky (1866–1934), the first UPR President, Chairman of the Central Rada, an outstanding scientist, historian and academician.

On the reverses of the Ukrainian banknotes there are images of architectural monuments connected to the persons on the obverses, i.e. ruins of Chersonese (1 UAH), the St. Sophia Cathedral in Kyiv (2 UAH), the Church in Subotiv where B. Khmelnytsky is buried (5 UAH), the Kyiv Pechersk Lavra (10 and 100 UAH), Opera Theater in Lviv (20 UAH), the building of the Supreme Rada (50 UAH), a tower of Lutsk Castle – 200 UAH (National Bank of Ukraine).

The image of Chersonese's ruins is the most apposite. The authors meant to reach several goals simultaneously. Firstly, they emphasized the Ukraine connection with the Byzantine culture and entire Roman civilization (Chersonese was founded by the Greeks in the 7th century B.C., then it passed to both Roman and Byzantine Empires), secondly, a reminder of the Christian roots (Vladimir accepted Christianity in Chersonese, which he seized in 988) and, thirdly, underlined the fact that the Crimea belonged to Ukraine (Starodub).

In 2004, the National Bank of Ukraine issued banknotes with new images, which resulted in accusations of the Bank in destruction of the images concept. The fact is that back then the Head of the National Bank Serhiy Tyhipko was a supporter of Viktor Yanukovich, a well-known supporter of the pro-Russian policy, contributed to it. While studying this issue, it is really possible to find the grounds to blame

the political forces that controlled the National Bank at that time of presenting their own attitude to the identity, based on the Soviet and Russian cultural and historical stereotypes.

The new banknote has no Chersonese's ruins, it was replaced with an image of Kyiv of Vladimir's times instead, which indeed does not have the semantic load the previous image had. According to Ukrainian historians, a review of the roles played by the persons pictured on the banknotes (i.e. changes in their appearance and adding of new elements) blasted the concept (Starodub). From artistic point of view, the new banknotes look more refined. Still, together with B. Khmelnytsky's image, now there is a quiver and arrows, which is probably supposed to stress that he was a soldier. The banknote dedicated to the poet I. Franko has a facsimile with his verse written in accordance with the orthography used in the Western Ukraine at his times, "Земле, моја всеплодбучаја мати!.." (My Land, my dear kind mother!..) One can only imagine the effect such "not-traditionally-Russian" orthography might have on the 'Russified' population of the East Ukraine. It can be compared with the effect of K. Kalinouski or F. Bahuszevich original orthography, which might have had on the modern Belarusian readers, who would not believe it was not written in the Polish language. Let us remind that we are talking about the banknotes used by everybody, not just academicians. The banknote with M. Hrushevsky's image has now a title of his scientific work which is now supposed to put accent on his academic background rather than his political ac-

tivity as the first president of the independent Ukraine.

I. Mazepa, “the betrayer of Russia”, has suffered most of all. Instead of an experienced political figure, now there is an image of a young Cossack with a frivolous face. Maybe, the designers wanted to underline his early period of life, when due to his love affairs he had to flee the royal household of Jan Kazimierz. Books, a quill and a musi-



ly diadems. As a matter of fact, the Russian and Ukrainian historians have been quarreling for a long time. There is no data concerning Prince Vladimir’s appearance, but there is a description of his father Svyatoslav, a portrait of his son Yaroslav on a coin and an image of his grand-son Svyatoslav Yaroslavich in the book of Svyatoslav’s Corpus. According to the Byzantine historian Leo Deacon who met Svyatoslav person-

cal instrument also contrast with the hetman’s image. A historian Andriy Starodub calls these changes of Mazepa banknote cynical, given that the banknote’s semantic load and effect were also decreased due to the fact that today instead of being monuments, the way they look their historical appearance is unknown to the majority of the population (Starodub).

Some Ukrainian intellectuals were resentful with regard to the changes in the Kyivan princes’ appearance – now they have zibeline hats and beards, i.e. the Russian czars’ usual attributes, instead of smooth-faced chins and prince-

ally, the latter had long handlebars. On a coin of his times, Yaroslav the Wise is also smooth-faced with a moustache. Yaroslav’s son Svyatoslav looks like a typical Ukrainian, has no beard, but only handlebars. The Ukrainian publicist Oleksandr (Alexander) Paliy writes in his article, “the first Russian historians, who studied Svyatoslav’s Corpus were perplexed, “If the son of Yaroslav the Wise was a “khokhol” (a derogative name of a Ukrainian used by Russians), where were the Russians then?” (Paliy).

At the Soviet times, a well-known Soviet scientist Mikhail Gerasimov made a reconstruction of the appear-





ance of Yaroslav the Wise based on his skull and added a beard to the way he looked, making Yaroslav look alike with the Moscow czars. His perception corresponded completely to the Soviet historical concept. It seems that it is Gerasimov's reconstruction that is rejected today by the majority of scientists and was used on the banknote.



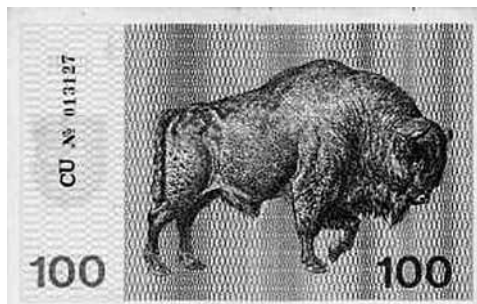
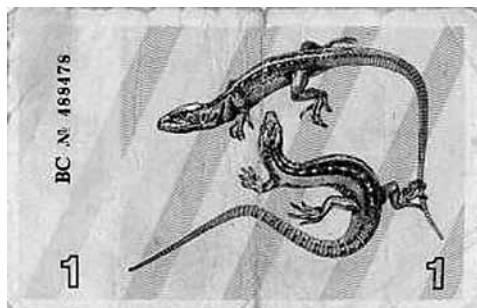
It is worth mentioning that regardless the Ukrainian historians' negative remarks, the new banknotes have the image of the State Coat of Arms

of Ukraine, the symbol of the Kyivan princes, the Trident, popularizing it this way among the population.

## Lithuania

The name of the Lithuanian currency, Litas, was invented during the times of the independent Lithuanian Republic between the two World Wars. Indeed, it is a newly designed concept, which has nothing to do with the reconstruction of the historical memory. The name of the subunit, "centų," can be understood as a reference to the all-European heritage, while still without relevant evidence.

The Litas was introduced in 1922 and replaced "auksinas" (the Lithuanian name of the Ostmark). On 25 March 1941, it was replaced by the Soviet Ruble. The first money of the post-Soviet Lithuania was introduced on August 5th, 1991. They replaced the "talonas", also called the "vagnorkas" after the Lithuanian prime-minister Gedimin Vagnoris of that time. Like in the other countries of the former USSR at the



first stage of independence, the talonas were used together with the Soviet Rubles however after the 1<sup>st</sup> October 1992 the vagnorkas became the only valid currency. Same as in Ukraine the authorities were prepared to introduce the real currency at the same time. However, the introduction of Litas was delayed due to the fact that the printed banknotes were of extremely low quality (one could easily counterfeit them with a simple color printer; especially the 10, 20, and 50 Litas banknotes). The Chairman of the Bank of Lithuania, Vilius Baldisis, was dismissed. The new issue of Litas banknotes was redesigned, re-

printed, and introduced on June 25th, 1993, and on August 1st, they became the only means of payment in the territory of Lithuania.

Regardless the fact that the Lithuanian historiography considers Lithuania at the times of heathendom to be the country's "Golden Age", and the period of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania is also thought to belong to the present-day Lithuania, the currency of Lithuania does not represent that era. The only exception is the image of the State Coat of Arms of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, the Pahonia (called "Vytis" in Lithuanian), and the pictures of the Grand Dukes' castles in Troki (Trakai) and Vilnia (Vilnius).

The way the symbols are presented is the same as the Ukrainian one: a historical figure on the one side, architectural monuments are on the other. However unlike the Ukrainian designers, the Lithuanian ones did not try to show any continuity of the tradition. All the images belong to two historical periods, i.e. the 19th – early 20th century, when the new Lithuanian nation was born, and the independent Lithuania between the two World Wars.

The One Litas banknote has Zemaite (Julija Benesevic-Zemantene, 1845–1921), a Lithuanian folk writer, public and cultural figure. The 2 Litas banknote has Matejus Valancius (1801–1875), a historian, interpreter



and enlightener (Lietuvos...). The 5 Litas banknote has Jonas Jablonskis (1860–1930), a linguist, interpreter, founder of the Lithuanian literary language. The 20 Litas banknote features a portrait of a Lithuanian romantic poet Maironis (Jonas Maciulis, 1862–1932). The 100 Litas banknote features Simonas Daukantas (1793–1864), a historian who wrote the first history of Lithuania in the Lithuanian language. The 200 Litas banknote features a portrait of Vydunas (Vilhelmas Storosta, 1868–1953), a prominent Lithuanian philosopher, writer, poet, playwright, musician, pedagogue and culture educator. The 50 Litas banknote pictures the national patriarch, scholar, statesman and signatory of Lithuania's Declaration of Independence of February 16th, 1918, Dr. Jonas Basanavicius (1851–1927). Sometimes he is nicknamed as the “father of independence” as he was the chairman of the Council of Lithuania when the declaration was signed (Lietuvos...).



Among the above-mentioned list of the cultural and national figures, the image on the 10 Litas banknote looks rather strange as it features two Lithu-

anian heroes-pilots Steponas Darius (1896–1933) and Stasys Girenas (1893–1933). In 1933 they flew from New York over the Atlantic Ocean on a small plane called Lituania. However, the plane mysteriously crashed in Germany (now Poland). The duo did not survive (Lithuanian Aviation...).

The 500 Litas banknote depicts a portrait of Vincas Kudirka (1858–1899), a Lithuanian writer, participant of the national Revival Movement and au-



thor of the National Anthem. The back of the note shows the Bell of Freedom in the background of the Nioman (Neman, Nemunas) loops, a well-known scenery. The bell is inscribed in Lithuanian, “Thou shall ring through the centuries to the children of Lithuania: he who does not defend freedom is not worthy of it”. This four-line poem was created by Bronius Kazys Balutis (1879–1967) and became the motto of the Bell of Freedom.

Analyzing the banknotes' reverses, the tendency which is similar to the Ukrainian Chersonese should be noted. The fact that the cities of Vilnia (Vilnius) and Klaipeda now belong to Lithu-



ania is represented by three banknotes (50, 100 and 200 Litas).

## Belarus

The beginning of the Belarusian monetary system during the USSR disintegration period differed from the similar processes in Lithuania and Ukraine. Unlike the neighbors who decided to introduce their own currencies, Belarus expressed its desire to stay in the Ruble zone. Therefore on the territory of Belarus, there were the Soviet Rubles and the banknotes issued by the Central Bank of Russia in circulation. However on April 29th, 1992, the National Bank of Belarus said that there were lots of problems with the cash deliveries from the Russian Federation and it introduced the so-called “razlikovy bilets” (cash banknotes) of the National Bank of the Republic of Belarus. Unlike its predecessor, the “kartka-coupons” which were in use together with the Rubles (when one was buying something,

considered to be an additional means of payment which were used without the Rubles. One cash banknote was equal to 10 Rubles (Almazov, 2001). The cash banknotes were introduced in denominations of 0,5; 1; 3; 5; 10; 25; 50; and 100 Rubles which, according to the instruction of the Council of Ministers dated May 20th, 1992, corresponded to 5; 10; 30; 50; 100; 250; 500 and 1000 Rubles. Nevertheless all the prices were given in Rubles.

As Ukraine, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia finally left the Ruble zone, on November 9th, 1992, the National Bank ordered to carry out all payments in the Belarusian Rubles only. On July 24th, 1993, the National Bank ordered to stop the circulation of the Russian Rubles on the territory of Belarus.

The cash banknotes did not have a status of the national currency. There also was a funny situation when all the prices were given in Rubles however it was only possible to pay in the cash banknotes which differed from the Ru-



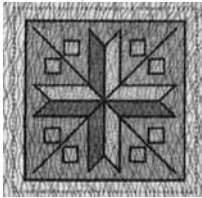
it was necessary to cut off the number of “kupon” equivalent to the sum paid in the Rubles), the cash banknotes were

bles by 10 times. In particular if something cost 1,000 Rubles, one had to pay 100 cash banknotes. The local popula-

tion got used to it, while foreigners had some difficulties with it. On August 12th, 1994, a denomination was made, which settled this matter.

In 1994 the Belarusian Ruble started its history as an independent currency. In May 1994, the National Bank started elaborating a real Belarusian currency and introduced an exchange rate, etc. As Stanislau Bahdankevich said later, it was not legal as it was not up to the National Bank to decide however to the Supreme Council and the government, but the latter did not want to do it. Only 5 months later the Supreme Council passed the decree and left the Ruble zone (Belarusian ruble's...).

There are several concepts concerning the Belarusian money. The first cash banknotes of the independent Belarus were neutral, representing the Belarusian fauna which gave grounds for their unofficial name "zaichyki" ("hares"). The designers themselves prove that they borrowed the idea from the Lithu-



the ancient cultural tradition) and the State Coat of Arms of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, *Pahonia* which showed the continuity between the GDL and the Belarusian Democratic Republic.

The 200 and 500 Rubles banknotes were issued in December 1992; 1,000 Rubles – in December 1993; 5,000 and 20,000 Rubles – in 1994. Soon fauna was replaced by the examples of Minsk architecture, including the Towers near the Railway Station, Victory Square, the building of the Academy of Sciences, River Svislach, Upper Town and Trinity Suburb. The banknotes' small format and their style looked like tourist postcards rather than a tool of creating the national memory.

After the state symbols were changed, the banknotes' obverses were left blank, they had no new State Coat of Arms. The solar cross disappeared at all. The only thing left was architecture.

The 50,000 Rubles banknote is interesting because it features the Brest Fortress, thus somehow referring to the national memory. The other banknotes



anian talons (Khareuski, 2002). At the same time, there were two important elements: the solar cross (referring to

had the buildings of the National Bank, Opera and Ballet Theater and State Museum of Arts.

One more interesting banknote is 1,000 Rubles one as it had the State Museum of Arts and a detail of a painting by Ivan Khrutsky (1810—1885) which can be perceived as an attempt to remind to the world that the painter is a Belarusian national, not a Russian one (Belarus National Fine Art...). However

both stress that some places belong now to their territories.

The Belarusian currency's name, the Belarusian Ruble, has nothing to do with the national history. In the early 1990's there was a proposal to name it the "Thaler" or the "Belarusian Thaler" because it was the currency of the



the detail does not mention the author and as a result, the majority of the population considers it just as a decoration.

Most of the first banknotes' architecture belongs to the period of the Soviet Belarus. An example of a new tendency can be the 20,000; 50,000 and 100,000 Rubles banknotes which refer to the pre-Soviet history of Belarus, e.g. the Palace of the Rumyantsev-Paskevichs in Homiel, the Mir Castle and the Palace of the Radzivils in Niasvizh.

While comparing the images of the three countries' banknotes, one can conclude that the banknotes' design as an instrument of influence on the national consciousness is used quite well in Lithuania and Ukraine. Moreover, the national idea can be found rather easily. Even though the Lithuanian and Ukrainian concepts differ highlighting different periods of their national histories the common feature is that they

Grand Duchy of Lithuania however the pro-Soviet Supreme Council supported the "Ruble" idea.

The present Belarusian banknotes' design proves that there is no concept at all. The fact that the mechanism of influencing the national consciousness and historical memory is not applied means that the state is passive in terms of forming the Belarusian people's national identity. Belarus needs a developed model of the national identity and the money symbolism can play its vital role in it.

It is not important who is pictured on the banknotes, the Prince of Polatsk, the Grand Duke of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania or a liberation movement hero, the very fact of their presence is important given that it is a way of influencing the national identity, its formation and strengthening.

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