



Evolution of the National Emblem and the Coat of Arms of the Republic of Poland as a Result of the Structural Transformation of 1989¹

(Excerpts)

It is natural to change the national emblem as well as the national constitution, especially when the state is based on new principles. The symbol of the eagle has been used by the Polish sovereigns for about 1000 years. The Polish coat of arms, representing an image of a crowned white eagle, has been present for 700 years². In times of monarchy, the coat of arms was changing together with sovereigns. Nowadays, alterations of the national coat of arms are rare. Introduction of a new coat of arms symbolizes changes within the state. The current coat of arms in the Republic of Poland has been used – though not without modifications – for about 80 years. Only slight modifications of such important national symbol, introduced during intense structural transformation in the XXth century, can be surprising. Three ideologically different states adopted very similar coats of arms. However, the similarity is illusory. Adding or removing any elements often raised strong emotions among Polish people. Complex understanding of the symbolism of the Polish coat of arms requires consideration of its origin.

Polish coat of arms during the People's Republic of Poland

In the years 1944 -1989, three types of the state coat of arms were present. The first one was used since the forties until 1955, though there were no legal regulations introducing it



The coat of arms of the People's Republic of Poland used after the II World War

It represented the image of a white eagle with a distorted beak, deprived of a crown, placed on a red, elongated shield framed with a general wavy line. Although seemingly only slightly different from the pattern of 1927, the coat of arms differed considerably. It was deliberate and symbolized a break with traditions characteristic for

the period between the two World Wars. Due to no legal regulations introducing this coat of arms, formally the coat of arms of 1927 was in force.³

The first Polish constitution which regulated the issue of the coat of arms was the Constitution of the People's Republic of Poland of 1952.⁴ The issue of the emblem, the colours and the capital was regulated in a separate ninth chapter, placed rather unfortunately at the nearly end of the legal act. According to the Article 89(1) "The image of a white eagle in a red field shall be the emblem of the People's Republic of Poland." The Constitution described the state emblem very concisely, specifying only the fact that it refers to the tradition of the white eagle. Detailed regulations were left to the executive acts⁵.

The coat of arms of 1927 was officially derogated by a State Council's decree on the emblem and the colours of the People's Republic of Poland and the state's seals of the 7th December 1955⁶. According to the Article 1(1) "The image of a white eagle with his head turned right, outstretched wings, gold beak and talons in a red rectangular shield rounded at the bottom shall be the emblem of the People's Republic of Poland." The pattern of the state emblem (Illustration 7), for the first time incorrectly named as the coat of arms in a legal act, is represented in a graphic attachment. In spite of the later modifications concerning legal acts and the emblem itself, the conceptual mistake – i.e. replacing the term coat of arms with an emblem – has become a permanent element in the Polish legal system and the Polish language.



The coat of arms of the People's Republic of Poland (1955)

¹ Originally published in *International Journal of Public Administration in Central and Eastern Europe*. No. 2010/1. p.78-84.

² A. Jaworska, *Orzeł Biały. Herb państwa polskiego*, Warszawa 2003, p. 5.

³ D. Górecki, *Godło RP (art. 28)*, [w:] *Konstytucja Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej. Komentarz encyklopedyczny*, pod. red. W. Skrzydły, S. Grabowskiej, R. Grabowskiego, Warszawa 2009, p. 164.

⁴ Dz. U. z 1952 r. nr 33 poz. 232.

⁵ P. Sarnecki, *Artykuł 28*, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

⁶ Dz. U. z 1955 r. nr 47 poz. 314.

The pattern of the coat of arms of 1955 was a slightly modified version of the pattern of 1927. The eagle was deprived of a crown which manifested structural transformations and a break with tradition. The crown, which symbolized the sovereignty of the Polish state, was removed against expert's opinions⁷. It unintentionally emphasized the dependence of the People's Republic of Poland from the Soviet Union. Modifications affected the shield as well. The wavy frame of the 1927's coat of arms, subjected to a strong criticism since the period between the World Wars, was removed.

Another modification of the state coat of arms took place in 1980, when a complex law on the state symbols was passed. Regulations of The emblem, the colours and the anthem of the People's Republic of Poland Act of the 31st January 1980 were preceded by a preamble which precisely defined the meaning of the state symbols for the Polish nation⁸. The Article 2(1) of the Act described the state coat of arms in a nearly identical manner as in the decree of 1955. Its graphical pattern, presented in the attachment no. 1 (Illustration 8), differed slightly from the previous version.



The coat of arms of the People's Republic of Poland (1980)

In relation to the 1955's coat of arms, the shape of the eagle's beak was corrected. However, the abovementioned modification can be considered irrelevant. The change of the end of the band on the eagle's wings is more important. The band's endings, formed in a five-leaf shape since 1927, were replaced with five-arm stars. Allegedly, the replacement was a result of the designer's mistake, though the explanation has not been credible. The symbol of a five-arm star was unambiguously associated and the Polish authorities had clearly pro-Russian sympathies.

The coat of arms of the Republic of Poland (1990)

The structural transformations that took place in Poland after 1989 had a substantial character. Therefore, the fact that – unlikely to many other states of the former soviet bloc⁹ – no new Constitution was passed directly after the structural breakthrough can be surprising. However, modification introduced into the Constitution of the People's Republic of Poland were so far-reaching that

⁷ A. Jaworska, *op. cit.*, ss. 6-7.

⁸ Dz. U. z 1980 r. nr 7 poz. 18.

⁹ After 1989 new Constitution were adopted in Croatia (1990), Bulgaria (1991), Macedonia (1991), Slovenia (1991), Czech Republic (1992), Estonia (1992), Lithuania (1992), Romania (1992), Slovakia (1992), Russia (1993), Belarus (1994) Ukraine (1996), Poland (1997). The Hungarian Constitution was thoroughly modified and Latvia restored the 1992's Constitution subjecting it to thorough changes.

they are described as the constitutional revision of the constitution¹⁰. Modifications affected the name of the state (the traditional name The Republic of Poland was restored) and the state symbols, including the emblem and the coat of arms.

The modified Article 103(1) of the Constitution stipulated that "The image of a white eagle in a crown in a red field shall be the emblem of the Republic of Poland."¹¹ The regulations of the Article 3 of the Act on the revision of the Constitution of the People's Republic of Poland kept in force the validity of all the state documents prepared on forms and blanks provided with the former emblem and state name. The above regulation applied to orders, distinctions and tenders¹². The Article 4(1) of the abovementioned Act allowed to prepare documents on forms and blanks provided with the former emblem and state name and to decorate with orders designed during the period of the People's Republic of Poland – until supplies ran out. The usage and issue of tenders was restricted to 31st December 1995.¹³ The Article 4(1) provided two temporary periods relating to the use of the emblem which was applied until 1989. All the seals provided with the former emblem and state name were to be used until 31st December 1995. The official boards with the former emblem and state name were to be modified until 31st December 1992.¹⁴ The longest temporary period related to the military symbols which had to be modified by 31st December 1997.¹⁵

Detailed regulations concerning the emblem and the coat of arms were included in The emblem, the colors and the anthem of the Republic of Poland Act. Similarly as in the case of the Constitution, no new legal act was adopted but the binding act was modified¹⁶. The modifications included the Article 2(1) which was given a new wording: "The image of a white eagle with a gold crown on his head which is turned right, with outstretched wings, placed on a shield with a red field shall be the emblem of the Republic of Poland."¹⁷

Modifications within the Act were related only to selected regulations on the emblem and the national flag. As a consequence of the above, the title of the Act as well as the unaltered regulations still used the People's Republic of Poland as the state's name. It can be surprising especially as it was an act which regulated the issue of the national symbols, modified due to the structural breakthrough. Nowadays it is hard to establish whether such fragmentary changes resulted from haste or legislative chaos connected with numerous amended legal acts. The abovementioned Article 2(1) used the Republic of Poland as the official state's name whilst the former name, i.e. The People's Republic of Poland, was left unamended in the Article 2(2) which stipulated that "The patten of the emblem of The People's Republic of Poland

¹⁰ R. Grabowski, *Klasyfikacja konstytucji z uwagi na tryb ich zmiany*, [w:] *Zasady zmiany konstytucji w państwach europejskich*, red. R. Grabowski, S. Grabowska, Warszawa 2008, p. 13-14.

¹¹ Ustawa z dnia 29 grudnia 1989 r. o zmianie Konstytucji Polskiej Rzeczypospolitej Ludowej, Dz.U. 1989 nr 75 poz. 444.

¹² *Ibidem*, art. 3.

¹³ *Ibidem*, art. 4 ust. 1.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, art. 4 ust. 2.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, art. 4 ust. 3.

¹⁶ Art. 43 ust. 1 Ustawy o godle, barwach i hymnie Polskiej Rzeczypospolitej Ludowej z dnia 31 stycznia 1980 r. Dz. U. z 1980 nr 7 poz. 18.

¹⁷ Art. 1 ust. 2 ustawy z dnia 9 lutego 1990 r. o zmianie przepisów o godle, barwach i hymnie Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej, Dz. U. z 1990 r. nr 10 poz. 60.

is included in the attachment no. 1.”¹⁸ The attachment no. 1 represented a graphic design of the new emblem which was consistent with the description given in the Article 2(1). The neglect was not removed until 1997, when the governmental administration was reformed¹⁹.

Currently, The emblem, the colours and the anthem of the Republic of Poland and the state seals Act of 31st January 1980 is in force. The act was amended many times. Eight amendments approved in the years 1990 – 2009 modified the list of subjects entitled to use the national symbols and changed the rules related to their usage.



The coat of arms of the Republic of Poland (1990)

Attachment no. 1 to The Emblem, the Colours and the Anthem Act includes – as it is stipulated in the Act – the pattern of the emblem of the Republic of Poland. The term “emblem” is incorrectly used instead of the “coat of arms” term²⁰. The graphic attachment represents an image of a white eagle with a gold beak and talons placed on a red heraldic shield of a modern French type from the XVIIIth century. The eagle’s head is crowned which traditionally symbolizes the state sovereignty²¹. The idea of bringing the crown back was commonly expressed during the transformation period and was supported by specialists²². The idea expressed the will to restore the traditional image of the white eagle. The restoration of the eagle’s crown was symbolic as well. It represented the breach of the ideology traditional for the People’s Republic of Poland; ideology which discarded the Polish monarchist traditions by means of using the eagle without a crown. On the other hand, the pattern of the state coat of arms clearly refers to the symbolism of the period of the Second Republic of Poland.²³

The eagle is represented in a classic combat position with outstretched wings and an open beak. The eagle’s wings included a band with endings shaped as a three-leaves with additional fragmentary petals. The shape of the band’s endings, never used before, was introduced in 1990 because the former endings were shaped as five-arm stars which aroused unfortunate associations.

¹⁸ Art. 2 ust. 2 Ustawy o godle, barwach i hymnie Polskiej Rzeczypospolitej Ludowej z dnia 31 stycznia 1980 r. Dz. U. z 1980 nr 7 poz. 18.

¹⁹ Ustawa z dnia 4 września 1997 r. o działach administracji rządowej Dz. U. z 1997 r. nr 141 poz. 943.

²⁰ A. Jaworska, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 6-7

²² *Stanowisko Polskiego Towarzystwa Historycznego i Polskiego Towarzystwa Heraldycznego w sprawie polskiego godła państwowego*, *Mówią Wieki*, nr 6, 1989, p. 26.

²³ P. Sarnecki, *Artykuł 28*, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

The issue of the coat of arms was regulated in the New Constitution of the Republic of Poland of 2nd April 1997. The Article 28(1) stipulates that “The image of a crowned white eagle upon a red field shall be the emblem of the Republic of Poland.”²⁴ The regulations of the Constitution are the same as those of 1989. Detailed regulations of the national symbols were left to other legal acts²⁵.

Conclusion

The structural breakthrough, that took place in 1989, resulted in modifications of the national symbols. It also affected the state coat of arms. The designs used during the period of the People’s Republic of Poland were abandoned whilst patterns from the period of the Second Republic of Poland were adopted. The coat of arms of the Republic of Poland introduced in 1927 has become a prototype of both, the coat of arms of the People’s Republic of Poland and the Republic of Poland reborn after 1989.

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²⁴ Konstytucja Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej z dnia 2 kwietnia 1997 r. Dz. U. z 1997 r. nr 78 poz. 483.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, art. 28 ust. 5.