



ORIGINAL PAPER

**National Identity and European Unity: a Symbolic Approach**

**Ștefan Viorel Ghenea\***

**Abstract**

A symbolic approach of the European Unity takes us to the main European symbols. Some of them already officially recognized by the European Union (the flag, the anthem, Europe Day and the currency) originate in the national symbols. These were designed to strengthen the national unity and the sense of belonging to a large community like the nation, but at the same time generating a differentiation from the others, members of other national communities and thus leading to the alterity or even violence. The issue that I will address in this study is whether it can be a European identity based on symbols originally linked to national identity without creating new alterities and differences. Are they compatible with the values of tolerance, of equality of chances or with the ideal of unity in diversity promoted by the European Union? We will argue in favor of an affirmative answer, while warning about the dependence of European symbols on their national substrate. The paper will be divided in two parts. In the first one, after a general introduction to the problem, I will focus on the European flag and anthem/hymn and in the second part I will analyze the meanings of the European currency, the Europe's Day and of some religious symbols and places.

**Keywords:** *national identity, European unity, European symbols, flag, anthem*

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\* Lecturer, PhD, University of Craiova, Faculty of Law and Social Sciences. Philosophy Specialisation. Postdoctoral Research Fellow, Romanian Academy. Email: gheneastefan@yahoo.com

## Introduction

Currently, Europe finds itself in the middle of a political, economic and institutional construction. The basis of this process is an idea rooted in European consciousness, that of *European unity*. This idea has a rich and nuanced history with important implications for the present and the future of this continent. But a collective idea like this cannot be only the product of a cognitive or rational process, its roots going deeper in the collective unconscious. In his way of relating to reality and to the others, the human being is building a full network of images, symbols, myths and utopias. A symbolic approach of the European Unity takes us to the myth of the nation. In the nineteenth century, the myth of the nation and the national state captured the historical and political imaginary. The nationalism was to mark the strong historical consciousness. Nowadays, one of the reactions to the European paradigm would be that by Europeanization nations would lose the cultural meaning, would remove their traditional fund, generating the sense of national identity. To counter these tendencies it should be understood that having a European identity does not conflict with having a national identity.

European identity is based, however, on national identity. The European Union has selected its symbols on a national model. The flag, the anthem, the national day, the currency became symbols of a wider community than the nation, but at the level of imaginary they fulfil the same role: to bring people together; strengthen the sense of belonging to a community. But often the national symbols have led to conflict with people of other nations, people have died for defending the national flag, the national day commemorates an event that often means a victory over other nations, independency from a particular oppressing nation or achievement the national unity, which often was done by appealing to force and violence. National currency symbolizes both national unity and unitary national exchange but it is at the same time and support to depict the faces of emblematic figures of national history and culture. Will these symbols serve European unity without having the same effects as the national symbols? We will answer to this question and others related, through an analysis of the major European symbols, referring to the national symbols, and we will analyse the possibility of creating a European identity compared with national identity. We will start with the link between national identity and European unity and continue with that of the national symbols and of European unity.

## National Identity and European Unity

Anthony D. Smith states that “the concept of *national identity* is both complex and highly abstract”. As determinant factors he recalled: “the territorial boundedness of separate cultural populations in their own « homelands»; the shared nature of myths of origin and historical memories of the community; the common bond of a mass, standardized culture; a common territorial division of labour, with mobility for all members and ownership of resources by all members in the homeland; the possession by all members of a unified system of common legal rights and duties under common laws and institutions”. (Smith 1992: 60). Based on these factors/dimensions nation is “a named human population sharing a historical territory, common memories and myths of origin, a mass, standardized public culture, a common economy and territorial mobility, and common legal rights and duties for all members of the collectivity” (Smith, 1992: 60; Smith, 1992, 2001). National myths and symbols play an important role in building identity (Nicoară, 1999; Nicoară and Nicoară, 1996). The nation is built historically,

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socially and politically but also in the imaginary. It acts as a factor of cohesion and strengthening the sense of belonging to the community. Myth unity acts both at European and national identity construction. European identity is closely linked to the myth of European unity (Girardet, 1997; Boia, 2000, 2002, 2005, 2013). The idea of European unity can be traced back to Sully, Podiebrad (that of some kind of European federation controlled by a central council made up of representatives of all its component states), perhaps even Charlemagne and the Holy Roman Empire. Since the project of European integration began, at issue has always been whether a European identity could develop to support the political unification. Is a genuine European identity possible? Both supporters of supranational integration and those of state sovereignty defended their position with economic and political arguments, but also by means of symbolic expression and communication (Smith, 1992; Tartler, 2006).

### **A Vocabulary of Symbolism**

The literature indicates that there were significant variations in the use of the term *symbol* (Durand, 1999, 2000; Evseev, 1983; Benoist, 1995, Todorov, 1983; Ricœur, 1998). It is therefore necessary to define the most appropriate of those figurative forms, which have in common the fact of being signs and not exceed the intellectual meanings. In this respect are useful the terminological distinctions made by Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant: “the emblem is a visible figure, conventionally adopted to represent an idea, a physical or a moral entity; flag is the emblem of the country, the laurel of glory”; (Chevalier, Gheerbrant 1994: 22); “the attribute is a fact or an image that serves as a distinctive sign of a certain character, a community, and a historical or legendary figure: the wings are an attribute of an air navigation company; the wheel of a railway company, the club is the attribute of Hercules, the balance of Justice”; (Chevalier, Gheerbrant 1994: 22); the allegory is a representation in a human, animal or plant form of a proverbial deed, of a situation, of virtues or of abstract beings. A winged woman is an allegory of victory; cornucopia is an allegory of prosperity.” (Chevalier, Gheerbrant 1994: 22); the symbol represents the “heart imaginative life”, “the cipher of a mystery”, the only way to tell what cannot be said otherwise. The symbols are not arbitrary or fruit of conventions; they introduce values and individual and collective patterns of behaviour. Each social group and every age have their symbols. Symbols express self-identity and the sustainability of values (Durand, 1999).

### **National Symbols and the Symbols of European Identity**

Political and cultural symbols together contribute to national identity. Specific to political symbols is that they were created by rulers or political leaders (that is why we call them symbols from top to bottom). Flag, anthem, currency were accepted by the people becoming cultural symbols. They can have a powerful effect on people, but they will decide whether or not to accept them. For example, the Soviet symbols were rejected in the former communist countries (Tartler, 2006: 80). After the establishment of the European Union was considered necessary to introduce new symbols to increase the visibility and contribute to the creation a European identity. For that citizens of different countries can identify with Europe and the European Union has called on political symbols specific to national identity.

## The Flag

The flag or the banner is one of the strongest and most visible national symbols. The flags are considered by some authors as *condensed symbols* (Turner, 1967) or *key symbols* (Ortner, 1973), which encompasses many meanings and are rich in aesthetic and emotional connotations (Eriksen, 2007). The most prominent visual symbol of the EU is its flag with twelve golden stars in a perfect circle on a blue background. This is probably also the most familiar of these symbols to most people inside and outside Europe, since it is widely visible both on flagpoles and in various print and electronic materials related to the EU. In this way, it is a kind of logotype that fulfils a quite traditional role of flags (Fornäs, 2012). Its heraldic description declares that it shows “on an azure field, a circle of twelve golden mullets, their points not touching” (the flag was designed by Arsène Heitz, an employee in the CoE’s Mail Service), and with an official symbolic description stating that “it features a circle of 12 gold stars on a blue background. They stand for the ideals of unity, solidarity and harmony among the peoples of Europe. The official description also states that “the European flag symbolizes both the European Union and, more broadly, the identity and unity of Europe”, and “the number of stars has nothing to do with the number of member countries, though the circle is a symbol of unity”. Regarding the adoption of the flag it is stated that “the history of the flag goes back to 1955” when “the Council of Europe - which defends human rights and promotes European culture – chose the present design for its own use. In the years that followed, it encouraged the emerging European institutions to adopt the same flag”. Lately, in 1983, “the European Parliament decided that the Communities’ flag should be that used by the Council of Europe. In 1985, it was adopted by all EU leaders as the official emblem of the European Communities, later to become the European Union” (<http://europa.eu/about-eu/basic-information/symbols/flag/>).

The history of adoption of the European flag is not so simple, but I will mention only that were proposed several alternatives by various European organizations before they reached an agreement. One of these was the one proposed by the Pan-European Union which contained a red cross on a blue background with a yellow sun. Visible here is the idea of Christian unity, but at the same time exclude other religions in its field. The fact that they finally reached a more abstract, but also more inclusive image, may suggest that even then there was a need to build a Europe as an unity in diversity. In 1951 in a memorandum of the Secretariat General of the Council of the European flag were discussed a number of proposals. Some remained emblems of various private organizations with failing to require official status in all European institutions. The need to find a generally accepted standard is obvious, because it realizes the role of tool or instrument capable at making Europe’s citizens more aware of their unity. None of the already existing variants were not been used, since it was not a wise thing, the memorandum argued. It had to realize a completely new flag that meet the following basic requirements: a sufficient symbolical significance, simplicity, legibility, harmony, pleased appearance, o an orthodox heraldic design (Fornäs, 2012: 117).

The history of decisions on the European flag is suggestive for its significance. They proposed a series of symbols such as “E”, a white star in a circle, more stars equivalent to the number of Member States of the Council of Europe (white stars on a red background, a constellation of stars on a gold background suggesting European capitals, the cross the Pan-European Union which we have discussed and which was among the most controversial because it literally excluded Muslims etc.

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Initially it was chosen neither the blue background nor the number 12, which under the current interpretation symbolizes perfection (Fornäs, 2012: 118). In June 1985 the European flag was adopted as the emblem current official European Community by Council of Europe, and in 1993 became the European Union. Despite some expectations, number of stars remained the same, unlike the European Coal and Steel Society, whose number of stars that represent the number of Member States increased to 1986 when the expansion remained fixed at 12 (Miller, 2008: 3).

We will analyse briefly the main symbols it contains flag, irrespective of the arbitrary or conventional nature of their choice. J. Fornäs argues that the golden on blue colours choice is far from arbitrary, because, first blue is traditionally considered the colour of Europe and secondly, seen from the Earth, blue is the natural background of the stars (Fornäs, 2012: 120). According to the *Dictionary of Symbols* (Chevalier and Gherbraant, 1994: 148), the stars “take the qualities of transcendence and light that characterizes the sky, tinged with inflexible regularity, also imposed by a natural and mysterious reason”. Their arrangement in the sky also has symbolic connotations, because the stars are animated by a circular motion, which is the sign of perfection. Regularity and permanence are also involved: the stars are symbols of perfect behaviour and regularity and of a distant beauty of that knows no withering”. The following text clearly expresses the symbolic complexity of the circle:

“The circle is an extended point and belongs to perfection. Therefore the point and the circle have symbolic common properties: perfection, homogeneity, no distinction or division ... The circle can symbolize if not the mysterious perfections of primordial point, at least the effects created; In other words, the world, as far as it differs from its principle. The concentric circles represent grades of being, created hierarchies. Together they form the universal manifestation of the unmanifested and unique Being. [...] The circular motion is perfect, immutable, without beginning and without end, without variation; therefore the circle can symbolize that time.” (Champeaux, Sterckx, 1966: 24). The blue background, beyond that it symbolize heaven, it has its specific meanings. It is considered the most immaterial of colours and “nature does not portrays it, generally, only made of transparency, i.e. an accumulated vacuum.” Furthermore, “affixed to a blue object relieves its forms, open them, and loosen them. A blue coloured surface ceases to be a surface; a blue wall is not a wall” (Chevalier, Gherbraant, 1994: 79).

### The Anthem/Hymn

The term *hymn* comes from the Greek *hymnos* which refers to a song of praise or glory, an ode to gods or heroes. It may be related to the term *hymenaios*, “wedding song” and Hymen, the Greek goddess of marriage. Since the Middle Ages got a touch of sacredness, having the meaning of religious song. The term *anthem* derives from Greek *antiphona*. The first hymn/anthem is considered the national anthem of Great Britain: “God Save the Queen / King” used since 1745 (Fornäs, 2012: 149). According to information from the official site ([http://europa.eu/about-eu/basic-information/symbols/anthem/index\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/about-eu/basic-information/symbols/anthem/index_en.htm)) “the melody used to symbolize the EU comes from the Ninth Symphony composed in 1823 by Ludwig Van Beethoven, when he set music to the *Ode to Joy*, Friedrich von Schiller's lyrical verse from 1785<sup>\*</sup>. The poem *Ode*

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\* Unlike the flag, for which was avoid the use of emblems or images already known or used (even if the symbols used have a rich tradition, the composition is new), in the case of the anthem they deliberately

*to Joy* expresses Schiller's idealistic vision of the human race becoming brothers - a vision Beethoven shared". Although it was adopted by the Council of Europe in 1972 and in 1985, became the official anthem of the European Union it is assumed that the anthem belongs to Europe in a wider sense, both EU members and other European countries. "The anthem is played at official ceremonies involving the European Union and generally at all sorts of events with a European character". Even if the melody and the title remained the official anthem differs from the original version, being reduced to two minutes and Beethoven's composition elements being readjusted and renouncing at lyrics. The official explanation is as follows: "there are no words to the anthem; it consists of music only. In the universal language of music, this anthem expresses the European ideals of freedom, peace and solidarity". The idea of unity is present in the reporting to the national anthems: "the European anthem is not intended to replace the national anthems of the EU countries but rather to celebrate the values they share".

Even though the formal presentation stated that the European anthem does not replace the national anthems, the question arises: what role does it have? Or more precisely: European anthem meets a similar role with the national anthems at the national level? Grete Tartler notes that "national anthem has a history similar to the flag". Its role was to be used in times with liberating, emotional and commemorative character, to achieve a strong nationalist impact. While the European anthem (*Ode to Joy* from the Ninth Symphony by Beethoven) is a tribute to "human, freedom and spiritual communion", national anthems as the British and German are in the cited author's opinion "clearly against unification with other peoples". For example, the German anthem, *Deutschland, Deutschland über alles*, remained in the memory of those who listen deeply nationalistic meaning. So is the British anthem, which is written before the French Revolution. In this case, "no wonder that in the Germans and the British subconscious there was some reluctance to expand the European Union and NATO". (Tartler, 2006: 84-85)

According to Lucian Boia, German anthem, which originates in a poem by August Heinrich Hoffmann von Fallerslebe, *Das Lied der Deutschen* ("Song of the Germans"), suffered as a remarkable distortion of meaning. It is now almost universally accepted that "Deutschland über alles" would mean "Germany above all", when in reality meaning was "Germany above all else" or "first of all". (Boia 2005: 93) While the first sense would assume primordially and superiority of the German people over other nations and thus justify the expansionist tendencies, the second, but the original meaning, would assume primacy of the nation over any other values; primordially should be in the field of options, not of any hierarchy with other nations. Of course, the primary meaning has a deeply nationalist character, but not imperialist. It would not incite violence and intolerance. However, the double meaning of the mentioned phrase led to the elimination of the first stanza of the hymn. We could say that although the later accused was not the original meaning, he was involved in the ambiguity of the phrase, the national socialist ideology contributing to this shift of meaning. Boia considers that "this little poem, of an idyllic nationalism" that does nothing more than to draw the borders of the country and to provide a list of national values such as "German women, German faith, German wine, and German chant" reached through undue interpretation, to be considered of "a kind of

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sought for a song that is known to the general public and possibly have a rich tradition. The creation of a composer regarded to be a genius was considered more than adequate. The idea of unity present in Schiller's text had a big say.

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monstrosity” (Boia 2006: 94). Not the same with the French anthem. Rather, it came to a completely different route. Linked to this, Boia says that “although it is perceived as a song of freedom, democracy and human dignity”, it is primarily a war song (“Allons enfants de la Patrie,/Le jour de gloire est arrivé!/Contre nous de la tyrannie,/L’étendard sanglant est levé,/Entendez-vous dans les campagnes/Mugir ces féroces soldats?/Ils viennent jusque dans nos bras/Égorger nos fils, nos compagnes!/Aux armes, citoyens,/Formez vos bataillons,/Marchons, marchons!/Qu’un sang impur/Abreuve nos sillons!”)\*. Therefore, *Deutschland über alles* is a more reasonable hymn than *La Marseillaise*. However, censorship is not justified because the intentions with which a hymn was originally written (Boia, 2006: 94-95).

We do not intend here to compare national anthems and to establish hierarchies of their “nationalist” character but to analyze the European anthem with possible references to national anthems. The question is: whether the European anthem, designed to operate on the national anthems model, aims to create attachments to gather the masses together in some kind of unifying solidarity, which creates, at the same time, alterity? Or, though, based on the national model (for the simple fact that it is an anthem), it is designed for another purpose, to create nonviolent solidarities, to open the citizens of Europe both to one another and to non-Europeans, to promote a European identity built on the “unity in diversity”? And what characteristics would get it closer to one or another of the alternatives?

According to Grete Tartler, “the anthem - which mobilize crowds against each other - has an overwhelming emotional charge”. We could say, in other words, the attachments that it creates have a major potential to lead to, what we might call a “unity into hostility”, that brings people together only to send them against others, against foreigners or enemies. However, the author cited expresses its optimism regarding European unity as follows: “However, I believe that here Europeanization will have the best chances, in comparison with the rest of the symbols, because Beethoven’s music exceeds qualitatively the national anthems and most certainly will impose as it is already a part of the collective memory” (Tartler, 2006: 87). The main reasons for Tartler’s optimism are the superior musical quality European Anthem and its prior existence in the collective consciousness. While the second reason may have played a role, still uncertain, in building a European identity, the first may seem, at first glance, downright naive. The powerful attachment to national anthems were not due, most likely, to the musical quality of the songs themselves, but rather to the emotional message, simple and direct, both musically and at the level of meanings. But however Grete Tartler might be right. The aim of the European anthem is not same as that of the national anthems. In other words, its benefits may derive precisely from these differences. The musical quality could generate an attitudinal quality, it would reach higher levels of spirit, and the optimistic and relaxed message would lead to openness and tolerance, at acceptance of diversity. It remains to be seen which will be the long term effects of the anthem’s musical quality. For now, we will refer to some issues related to its text. Although, they later renounced of the lyrics, their connection with the anthem remains. In fact, from the beginning, although the song was generally accepted, Schiller’s lyrics were an obstacle (Fornäs, 2012: 156). One objection was that any lyrics would favor a particular linguistic community, even contradicting the

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\* „Arise, children of the Fatherland./ The day of glory has arrived!/ Against us tyranny’s/Bloody banner is raised./ Do you hear, in the countryside./ The roar of those ferocious soldiers?/ They’re coming right into our arms/To cut the throats of our sons, our women!/ To arms, citizens,/ Form your battalions./ Let’s march, let’s march!/ Let an impure blood/Water our furrows!”

stated unifying purpose of the anthem. It is clear that this objection hides a particular type of linguistic or ethnic nationalism that tries to eliminate the very text of a particular language. Who believes that the universal message of music could eliminate language barriers, he believes that these barriers exist. Another objection referred to the fact that the text has a Universalist or global character, not sufficiently linked to Europe (it was about union of the entire humanity) and European identity. This type of objection shows an attachment to a nationalist view over the anthem. It must gather, but also to separate, to distancing the people, implying, therefore, the idea of alterity. Removing the lyrics was the easiest way, but it was far from solving the issue: the mentality behind these objections remains.

In 2008, in the European Parliament, Jim Allister was one of those who opposed the adoption of both flag and anthem: “Ode to Joy which we are going to purloin may be a very nice tune, but so is Jingle Bells and like Jingle Bells it heralds a fantasy, the fantasy that the EU is good for you. But unlike Jingle Bells, it will damage your national sovereignty and the right to control your own destiny. More, like code to destroy, than Ode to Joy”. (Miller, 2008: 8; Fornäs, 2012: 180).

Some Eurosceptics have used the European anthem to support the idea that the project of European unification is a failure. For example, Žižek (2007) claimed that the European anthem “is a true *empty signifier* that can stand for anything”. Consequently, it would be the expression of an ideology of unification and of the elimination of the inequalities, but with no real basis. This is evident in the attitude towards the situation of those who cannot adapt to this unification. Žižek is using, therefore, the European anthem as an argument related to the obstacles encountered by the project of European unity, especially on the eastern border (Fornäs, 2012: 170). As regards the consequences of waiving the anthem lyrics, Johan Fornäs considers that: (1) at the semantic level, this eliminates a component which Beethoven himself considered it necessary, thereby reducing the force expressiveness of the anthem; (2) on a pragmatic level, it contradicts the original motivation to choose an anthem able to be sung in common, that could help, through its interactive character, to strengthen the feeling of belonging to the European Union (Fornäs 2012: 177-178).

## Conclusions

We note that national flags attachments sometimes lead to fetishism, to idolatry; flags are preserved and defended the sanctity, and people die for the flag just as they die for their country. We cannot ignore these issues that generate deepen alterity and under the sign of the defending of the country they hide ardent opposition, hostile passions which often constitute the base for conflicts between nations or ethnicities. In summary, the European flag symbols refer to unity, perfection, mobility, openness, permanence or durability, close the gaps. In other words, even the key elements of European unity. Flag symbolically reflects European values and ideals. His arbitrary or conventional character is compensated and we could say cancelled by the complexity of its symbols. But, the flag is still the state emblem, for which many have given their lives; is hard to believe that someone would give his life for the European flag. As regarding the European Anthem, the national model is also visible. Even if its purpose is to express the European democratic values, to consolidate European unity and strengthen the feeling of belonging to a wider community than the nation, it is still bound to the tradition the national state. Removing the anthem from the original context in which music and lyrics were created,



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eliminating the lyrics to just let the music speak, shows that the European officials intend to detach from the national model. But precisely this posting attempt proves that the national model still works. Nevertheless, the hymn is linked both through his music and by Schiller's verse, to the non-violent values of the brotherhood, of the joy to be together for higher ideals than those related to purely national context. So, the anthem still has chance of being an element of European unity, in the spirit of tolerance and acceptance of diversity, without directly involving an imaginary of alterity.

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