

ARTICLE

Standing for Europe: Citizens' perceptions of European symbols as evidence of a “banal Europeanism”?

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Abstract

This article analyses the perception of the symbols of the European Union (EU) by citizens. Relying on a survey of a representative sample of the population in eight countries (France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Romania, Spain and the United Kingdom) carried out in December 2020, it investigates to which extent these symbols are considered as good representations of the EU and differences related to political, cultural, social and economic belongings. Empirically, our findings show a large acknowledgement of these symbols in congruence with general attitudes towards the EU. Theoretically, it offers some evidence of the existence of a “banal Europeanism” taking - to a certain extent - European symbolism as granted in contrast with its politicisation in elite discursive struggles.

KEYWORDS

citizenship, European Union/European identity/Europe, nationalism, symbolism

1 | INTRODUCTION

The creation of political symbols for the European Union (EU) has been a long and controversial process. A key step was the Adonnino report mandated by the European Council in June 1985 that paved the way for the adoption of the flag, the anthem and Europe Day. However, during the constitutional process led by the Convention on the Future of the European Union (2001–2007), the symbols were included in the draft treaty only at a late stage due to the resistance of some Conventioneers, considering that such attributes would make the EU look too much like a

“super-state” in-the-making and would constitute illegitimate competitors for national emblems. Bolder ideas, like turning Europe Day held on 9 May every year into a bank holiday for all Europeans, were discarded. Still, after the “no” in French and Dutch referenda that was interpreted as a rejection of a Europe threatening national identities, the European Council in June 2007 decided to delete from the treaty anything sounding like a reference to a state-like EU, from the word “constitution” to ... the European symbols. (De Poncins, 2003, pp. 72–73, 82–83). Since then, these symbols have been in use and were granted official recognition by some institutional actors. The European Parliament (EP) integrated them in its internal regulation; and 16 member states attached to the Lisbon treaty a non-binding declaration that “the flag with a circle of twelve golden stars on a blue background, the anthem based on the ‘Ode to Joy’ from the Ninth Symphony by Ludwig van Beethoven, the motto ‘United in diversity’, the euro as the currency of the European Union and Europe Day on 9 May will for them continue as symbols to express the sense of community of the people in the European Union and their allegiance to it.”¹

These controversies show two things. First, symbols are usually considered secondary elements related to the mere appearance of politics. They may nevertheless become bones of contention regarding the very nature of the polity they stand for. Second, citizens' perceptions of these symbols are the object of constant anticipations based on little hard empirical evidence by decision-makers. The instrumental uses of these symbols at the political level and the occasional conflicts over them may overshadow more positive, appeased or indifferent popular attitudes in everyday life. The purpose of this article is to contribute to filling the gap by relating the understudied perceptions that Europeans have of these symbols to their broader political attitudes and representations. Therefore, our research question is twofold: First, to which extent are the attitudes of Europeans towards EU symbols shaped, first, by their general attitudes towards the EU and, second, by their political, social, economic and cultural belongings? Second, does this reflect the existence of a “banal Europeanism”?

The notion of “banal Europeanism” (Cram, 2009) refers to the “banal nationalism” coined by Billig (Billig, 1995) to emphasise that identification frequently lies in non-passionate, ordinary and profane means. Far from the elite discursive struggles, feelings of belonging and loyalty may develop in low-intensity forms anchored in routine. This involves even more the way to relate to the EU, which remains subordinated and secondary to the national attachment. This “banalisation of Europe” (Soysal, 2002) also implies that various identities may coexist, combine and overlap differently according to the context, the uses and the actors and take various meanings and supports without necessarily conflicting or even competing. Going further, the top-down politicisation of the EU and its emblems could go hand in hand with its relative pacification in grassroots politics (or with a de-politicised everyday life that is the reality of many citizens). This does not exclude either a “synergistic relationship” (Cram, 2009) between identities attached to the EU and to national states, the former being a background that may support, reinforce, enlarge or correct the latter. Looking at the broader picture, the existence of a “banal Europeanism” would mean that the routinisation of EU symbols overcome (without suppressing) differences of perception related to political, social, economic and cultural belongings.

We investigate these questions through a survey (Appendix S1) that offers original data on the perceptions of citizens, a subject that is not regularly documented by official opinion polls (such as the Eurobarometer). Like any mass survey of this type, it requires interviewees to answer closed-ended questions at a specific moment and therefore does not claim to map the multidimensional dynamics of symbols that can only be grasped through in-depth interviews and observation, technics that we used in other research on the same topic. A representative sample of the population (total no. 8000) was interviewed in eight countries, including the largest (France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Romania, Spain and the United Kingdom) and most controversial (Hungary) ones in December 2020. Cost-wise it was not possible to carry out the survey at the scale of the EU. Nevertheless, our sample claims both quantitative and qualitative representativeness. Quantitatively, the surveyed countries account for 86% of the pre-Brexit EU at 28's population (and still 73% of the post-Brexit EU without the United Kingdom). The comparison of the answers from our sample to questions taken from the Eurobarometer to data provided by the said Eurobarometer at the scale of the whole EU shows its reliability. Qualitatively, the choice of countries includes founding and more recent member states; reflects possible differences between Northern/Southern or Western/Eastern Europe; and

societies with different economic, historical, cultural and religious backgrounds. The inclusion of the United Kingdom, which had formally left the EU on 1 February 2020 but was still under the rules of the Single Market and the Customs Union at the time of the fieldwork in December 2020, is justified as some of the most heated controversies over European symbols took place there. In the same way, the presence of Hungary is explained as its prime minister Viktor Orbán is a protagonist of the debate on the ethnocultural dimension of European identity. Looking at the broader picture, our country cases illustrate the variety of the European “state tradition” (Dyson, 2009) that has shaped different institution- and nation-building processes and subsequent ways to relate to collective identity and symbols. They are also representative of the singular combination that each member state operates between national and European belongings (Bulmer & Lequesne, 2020) and of the resilient national framing of political attitudes and treatment of EU affairs in media and political discourses (Medrano, 2003).

This article is organised as follows. A first part frames European symbolism in the general theoretical debate about the legitimisation of the EU in comparison with national polities. A second part maps the collective perceptions and hierarchy of European symbols. A third part investigates the individual perceptions of EU symbolisms and frames these perceptions in different models according to the combination of key variables (feelings of national and European belonging, usual socio-economic and political indicators shaping the attitudes towards the EU).

Our main findings are twofold. First, against the institutional fears that the EU should not look too much like a state, nation-style European symbols enjoy stronger support among European citizens than those strictly related to European institutions. Second, at the individual level, usual socio-economic and political factors shaping the relation of the citizens to the EU are reliable predictors of their appreciation of European symbols. Empirically, this suggests that European symbols reflect faithfully the polity they stand for and, as such, can be used as a proxy to objectify political attitudes and identification towards the EU. Theoretically, our conclusion highlights that national and European symbolisms are not necessarily antagonists and that the top-down politicisation of the EU is not exclusive of its bottom-up banalisation. Overall, the mimetism between European and national symbols; the congruence between attitudes towards the EU and EU symbols; and the limited variations of these attitudes according to political, social, economic and cultural belongings frame these EU symbols as routinised and relatively taken for granted. This global picture suggests evidence of a kind of “banal Europeanism.”

2 | EUROPEAN SYMBOLISM AS A POLITICAL NECESSITY DEVELOPED IN THE SHADOW OF NATIONAL BELONGINGS

The creation of political symbols for the EU has emerged as a necessity for its legitimisation but must cope with specific constraints due to its multicultural and polycentric model and the fact that the allegiance it requests from citizens is always second to and framed by primary belongings.

2.1 | Symbols in the legitimisation of political orders

Political symbolism encompasses all organised systems of signs, overloaded with meanings, and functioning as reactivation of cultural codes of behaviour (Braud, 1996). Symbolism is, in its nature, polysemous, thus allowing for diverse and changing interpretations. It facilitates unity even where an agreement does not prevail or, in Kertzer's words, “solidarity with consensus” (Kertzer, 1992). Drawing on Clifford Geertz's classic work, political symbols can be said to be constitutive of a community, differentiating those who identify with it from those who do not; of a space delineated as their sphere of use; of a temporality revolving around the myth of origins and the history linked to the symbols; and of a centre, the power that controls the legitimate narrative about the symbols (Geertz, 1973, 1986).

As a functionalist project aiming to transcend political passions by creating bonds of interests controlled by technocratic and rational-legal structures, European integration may appear as a sterile ground for political symbolism.

However, the necessity emerged quickly for the European Union (EU) to search for the consent and the loyalties of citizens. Two models of narratives have shaped the legitimisation of European communities since their origins. The first narrative frames the EU as a *sui generis* political system that is justified mostly by its outputs, the public goods (security, prosperity) offered to the citizens. It relies on utilitarian arguments and draws on market-driven communication in terms of means and resources. The second narrative duplicates the nation-state model to shape the EU as an imaginary community in the making and to mobilise ethnocultural claims. The two narratives have constantly alternated and overlapped in the legitimisation of the EU according to the period, the context and the issue at stake. Both narratives have shaped European symbolism in different ways but have met the same constraints and limits (Foret, 2008).

2.2 | The EU as a symbolic producer constrained by the collective representations of Europeans

The literature has increasingly questioned the capacity of the EU to build a European feeling of belonging by reshaping the socialising patterns of citizens (van Houwelingen et al., 2019). Successive waves of works analysing the effects of interactions between European institutions and citizens suggest that the outcomes are still limited in terms of identity-building (Deutsch, 1957; Fligstein, 2008; Kuhn, 2015; Medrano, 2020). The limits of the great narratives sponsored by EU institutions have been largely documented (Checkel & Katzenstein, 2009; Risse, 2011). While the consensus prevails that no congruence between culture and politics is possible at the European level (McNamara, 2015) but that identity politics is now impossible to ignore (Börzel & Risse, 2018), views are more diverging regarding the range and outcomes of symbolic resources. Saurugger and Thatcher emphasise that the EU political identity is most designed through its different policies, is different from one policy to another and does not imply convergence of positions on European integration itself (Saurugger & Thatcher, 2019, p. 68).

European identity has also a different relevance and meaning at institutional, collective and individual levels. It may have little salience in the self-definition of a person but much more in social interactions, especially when confronted with people displaying different cultural features (Gaxie et al., 2011, p. 282). Likewise, the dominant attitude towards the EU is neither identification nor rejection, but indifference (Van Ingelgom, 2014). “Europe” constitutes a blurred object that does not create an imaginary powerful enough to directly impact the political and social attitudes of citizens (Duchesne, 2010, p. 14). Still, in some situations where Europeans experience the practical effects of European integration, the EU, its policies and its symbols are likely to gain more concreteness.

European symbols are submitted to these structural constraints, shaping the ways citizens relate to the EU. They are floating signifiers allowing everyone to project into it their own visions of the world and political ends. Meanwhile, when confronted with cultural differences, they become stronger markers of belonging. The European flag operates at its best to highlight the practical advantages of a Europe without borders when it is associated with pictures of passport controls in airports (Cram et al., 2011). But this openness of meaning comes with the price of uncertainty regarding the effects that are produced. The twelve stars banner stimulates the identification of Europeans with a cultural community although it was conceived as a primarily legal and civic sign of belonging (Bruter, 2005). EU citizens have a positive perception of EU symbols and tend to associate them to ‘anti-national’ values in essence (e. g. peace, harmony, co-operation). However, they identify little to these symbols (Bruter, 2004).

2.3 | Justification of the symbols included in the survey

The EU has progressively enlarged its symbolic repertoire. In our survey, we test the main official symbols that the polity has created or appropriated. It includes those duplicated from national states: a flag, an anthem, a day, a motto, a currency; the seats of European institutions as centres of power; and incumbents of key positions as human embodiments of power.

The *European flag* is the most ancient symbol, taken by the EU in 1986 from the Council of Europe which adopted it in 1955 and is still its legal owner. It has gained public awareness and appreciation without creating as much emotional attachment as the national colours (Hedetoft, 1998; Lager, 1995). The few waves of the Eurobarometer that asked questions about the flag showed that most Europeans say they have seen this emblem before and know what it means. A narrower but still large majority declares that it is a good symbol for Europe and that it stands for something good. And an even smaller majority (with significant national variations) states that the flag should be seen on all public buildings in their country next to the national flag and that the citizens identify with it (European Commission, 2007). This positive rating does not exclude some long-standing controversies. The flag has been criticised as a colonial legacy and a cultural fallacy (Shore, 2001, 2013). Its interpretation is conflictual. Some advocate its religious meaning, associating the number 12 with the number of apostles and the blue with the colour of the Virgin Mary. This religious reading has no official basis as, for the EU and the Council of Europe, the flag only represents “solidarity and harmony among the peoples of Europe” and the blue “the Western sky”² but re-emerges regularly as a factor of attraction or rejection of the European banner. The European flag is still a bone of contention, not only in countries ruled by Euroskeptic forces like Hungary, but also in founding member states. In 2017 still, in France, the leftist politician Jean-Luc Mélenchon protested its presence in the National assembly as a violation of “laïcité.” On the other side of the political spectrum, the leader of the National Rally Marine Le Pen refused the presence of the European banner in the background of her TV show during the presidential campaign. Nevertheless, these conflicts of meaning are incomparable with the passions raging around national flags such as the American “Stars and Stripes” framed as the icon of a civil religion (Guenter, 1987), the object of a pledge of allegiance (Ellis, 2005) and of physical and legal battles over its desecration (Goldstein, 1996).

Another state-like symbol is the *anthem*. As for the flag, the EU decided in 1985 to follow the example of the Council of Europe that had adopted Beethoven’s “Ode to Joy” in 1972. The purpose was to symbolise both Europe in the wider sense and the continuity between all continental unification projects. From scratch, the European anthem was left without words, a tangible obstacle to its ritualisation as people cannot unite in singing. The choice of a piece of music, already anchored in popular culture and used by a variety of actors ranging from public institutions to private companies, had ambivalent effects. The bet was to take advantage of its fame to popularise Europe, but it came with the risk to suffer from the association of the music with some dark pages of European history, as the Nazis have been keen users of it (Buch, 1999). Still, in the same nation-state style, *Europe Day* on the 9th of May mirrors national days. However, it is considered a relative failure in terms of mass outreach and ritualisation. It is best compared to the German Unity Day on 3 October, another recent creation that has struggled to emerge as a political and social event due to its short history and its perception as a non-consensual artefact (Elgenius, 2005).

The motto “*United in diversity*” is a resource mobilised by European institutions and other actors in their communication since its adoption in 2000. It is a discursive formula adaptable to all kinds of interpretations and uses, a good example of those symbolic words that have managed to transcend linguistic diversity and disseminated largely in political, economic and social discourses, to legitimise or de-legitimise the European Union (Sternberg, 2013).

The *euro* is another latecomer turned into a prominent European symbol, with the important nuance that it is not the currency of all member states. Still, it stands for a representation of the EU as a whole for the rest of the world and of the Eurozone as “core Europe” regarding member states that do not belong to it. The euro is also one of the main EU policy successes and a rare example of a European symbol replacing national ones. In this substitution, the European currency has sometimes suffered from the comparison with its national precedents. In Germany, for example, it has not gained the iconic status once enjoyed by the Deutsche Mark as the expression of a restored national pride after WW2 and a guarantee of stability. The euro has also faced opposition. It was framed as an emblem of a neo-liberal EU imposing austerity. It served as a scapegoat when the “€,” standing for a federal and bureaucratic Europe threatening national sovereignty, motivated the British Euroskeptic party UKIP to choose the “£” logo of the pound to proclaim its patriotic loyalty (Calligaro, 2013). Finally, the iconography of the euro was criticised for its anonymisation of cultural references to avoid jealousies between member states and was granted the nickname “Money for Mars” to emphasise that it came from nowhere and had no roots (Hymans, 2006). The

euro is still discussed as the paradigmatic expression of the emancipation of the economy from politics (Aglietta & Orléan, 1998).

Finally, the EU has been objectified in places and persons that become symbolic. *Places hosting the seat of European institutions* are addressed as centres of power. “Strasbourg” or “Brussels” are evoked as arenas where the future of the continent is negotiated. European buildings like “the Berlaymont” of the Commission make sense to insiders who interact with the European bureaucracy but do not enjoy the magic of the “Elysée” or “Westminster.” Moreover, the reference to “Brussels” is far from being always positive, as in the common lament about the “technocrats from Brussels.” *Political roles* are the last objectifications of the EU studied in this article. The oldest embodiment of Europe is arguably the president of the Commission, a position with a relatively weak institutionalisation and successive incumbents enjoying very unequal public profiles and leaderships (Bürgin, 2018; Cini, 2008; Drake, 2002; Joana & Smith, 2002). The multiplication of European figureheads and the routinisation of their more and more frequent meetings (aka “summitisation”) contributed little to the notoriety of European institutions and may have increased the confusion in terms of accountability and identification (Foret, 2013; Hubé et al., 2015).

3 | COLLECTIVE PERCEPTIONS OF EUROPEAN SYMBOLS

To map the collective perception of EU symbols, we proceed in two steps. First, we present to which extent and in which ranking these symbols are considered as good representations for the EU. Second, we discuss the differences created by nationality and feelings of national and/or European belonging.

3.1 | Hierarchy of EU symbols and its determinants

The hierarchy of EU symbols sketched by citizens' perceptions is framed mostly by their similitude with national symbols that creates a kind of familiarity and by their cultural evocation of Europe rather than their institutional reference to the EU. Time matters as the longer they exist, the more they may become routinised but it does not work as a strict predictor as some symbols gain a quick prominence over more ancient ones. National belongings create nuances rather than gaps in the attitudes of citizens towards EU emblems. The answers by countries show that there is no univocal determination according to the historical status of each member state as “good” or “bad” European or to the Euroskepticism of incumbent national leaders (Table 1).

3.1.1 | Hail to the flag, boo at the institutions

When asked whether each symbol is a good one for the EU, a majority of citizens express their support but with relatively low intensity. Besides, a hierarchy emerges between three groups of symbols: the flag and the euro; the anthem, the motto and Europe Day; the presidents and the seats of EU institutions.

The most popular symbol is the twelve stars banner with 63% of citizens considering it a very good or good symbol for the EU. Some explanations may be that the European flag is the functional equivalent of the national one; is one of the most ancient European symbols and, as such, has had the time to become anchored in collective representations; and has gained prominence at the frontispiece of public buildings and in the background of political leaders, which gives it authority and mirrors familiar national flags. The euro comes second with 55.4% of “good/very good” answers. The European currency has a shorter history than the flag but has an everyday concreteness in the life of citizens. The anthem *Ode to Joy* ranks third with 47% of “good/very good” answers. Like the flag, it enjoys a similarity with national anthems and was well known before its adoption by the EU. The motto “united in diversity” follows closely with 46.9%. It is a discursive formula adaptable to all kinds of uses and largely mobilised by European

TABLE 1 According to you, what is a good symbol of the European Union? Percentage of respondents “Very good” or “Good”? (4–5)

	Total	UK	Germany	France	Hungary	Italy	Poland	Romania	Spain
The Twelve stars flag	63.0%	45.0%	68.0%	66.2%	61.3%	56.2%	72.7%	69.7%	65.2%
Euro Banknotes and coins	55.4%	37.1%	60.3%	64.6%	52.3%	41.5%	54.2%	68.9%	64.0%
The anthem “Ode to Joy”	47.0%	25.3%	39.9%	41.8%	51.8%	48.5%	62.7%	59.1%	47.0%
The motto “United in diversity”	46.9%	35.6%	43.8%	44.5%	42.8%	44.8%	55.1%	56.4%	52.2%
Europe Day on the 9th of May	41.5%	23.4%	31.4%	32.0%	43.6%	42.5%	58.3%	59.5%	40.9%
Brussels	38.7%	24.3%	33.3%	40.5%	36.8%	24.5%	52.9%	57.0%	40.4%
The president of the European Commission	36.8%	27.5%	31.8%	37.7%	34.6%	28.1%	44.9%	50.5%	39.1%
The president of the European Parliament	36.4%	26.9%	30.8%	37.0%	34.8%	28.2%	44.2%	49.5%	39.9%
The president of the European Council	35.6%	26.1%	29.8%	35.1%	33.8%	25.5%	43.9%	50.7%	40.1%
Strasbourg	35.5%	22.1%	26.5%	39.4%	37.1%	21.8%	47.0%	52.4%	37.5%

institutions and other actors in their communication since its adoption (2000). Europe Day emerges with 41.5% of “good/very good” answers as the laggard of the second group to which it belongs as another duplication of national symbolism. The lower citizen's appreciation of the 9th of May can be related to the fact that national days appear themselves as rituals in decline.

Presidents of EU institutions (of the Commission 36.8%; of the Parliament 36.4% and of the European Council 35.6%) score almost evenly, a sign that the recent multiplication of embodiments of the EU, that may occasionally compete for recognition, had done little to reinforce their prominence (Foret, 2013). Finally, cities hosting the seats of the European institution come last, with a minor advantage for Brussels (38.7% of “good/very good” answers) over Strasbourg (35.5%). This may illustrate the ambivalent perception of these places as centres of power. The bashing of “Brussels” as a technocratic and bureaucratic Moloch does not turn it into a positive symbol and barely demarcates it from Strasbourg that may enjoy more historical positive meaning as a stronghold of French-German reconciliation but is more contested in practical terms regarding the cost and inconvenience of the two seats of the EP.

These first descriptive data suggest three things. First, symbols bearing similarities with national ones take the lead; analogously, the European Parliament receives the most positive appreciation among all EU institutions in successive Eurobarometer surveys, due to its commensurability with national parliaments compared to the strangeness of the Commission or the Councils. Second, symbols more strictly related to European institutions (leaders and seats) are less positively connoted than those standing for the idea of Europe at large also with a cultural meaning, including when they are shared with the Council of Europe (as it is the case for the flag and the anthem). Third, the seniority of a symbol does not seem to always make a major difference, as most recent symbols (like the euro) perform well and more ancient ones do not significantly outperform newer ones (like the presidents of the commission and parliaments compared to the one of the European Council).

3.1.2 | National boundaries draw nuances rather than gaps

The breakdown of answers per country (see Figures 1–10) reveals some interesting nuances more than drastic differences. Overall, new member states—Romania, but also Poland and Hungary despite their feuds with European institutions—figure as the most enthusiastic supporters of EU symbols. This is especially true for the euro in the case of Romania, to relate to the willingness of the country to join the common currency. This is also the case in Poland which gives a quasi-plebiscite (72.7%, the highest score of all answers for the whole sample) to the twelve stars banner. This may illustrate the difference between the short term of politics (exemplified by Euroskeptic incumbent leaders) and the long term of popular attitudes towards European integration (Göncz & Lengyel, 2021). Meanwhile, some middle term inflexions are visible. Italians are no more the poster boys and girls of good Europeans as they used to be; they express a limited taste for European symbols, especially for leaders of EU institutions that were perceived in recent years as more critical than helpful towards Italy confronted with economic and migratory challenges (Matthijs & Merler, 2020).

Without surprise, the Brits in a transit period after Brexit are the least positive—or perhaps the least interested. Germans confirm their appreciation of the euro but show little propensity to enhance the role of president of the Commission as held by a fellow countryman, or the European anthem as a creation of a German composer. The same absence of “national preference” is also visible in the lack of specific support of the French people for Strasbourg. This may suggest that European symbolism works with a margin of autonomy towards national imaginaries. Indeed, beyond the divergences stated above, answers by EU8 citizens are relatively homogenous to sketch a hierarchy of signs. The flag is the most appreciated symbol in all countries, and Strasbourg competes with leaders of EU institutions as the least supported in all countries.

3.2 | Feeling European and feelings for European symbols

The following section investigates the link between the self-definition of people as more or less European and/or national and their appreciation of EU symbols. To do so in our survey, we mobilise a usual Eurobarometer question to measure the hierarchy made by interviewees between their national and European loyalties. Next, we observe the relationship of this hierarchy of loyalties to the appreciation of European symbols. Finally, we draw on this link between the self-definition of citizens as more or less European/national and their perceptions of EU symbols to explore the underlying narratives framing these symbols.

Individuals in our sample were first asked whether they see themselves as national and European; European and national; European only; National only. In congruence with what is shown by the Eurobarometer in the “longue

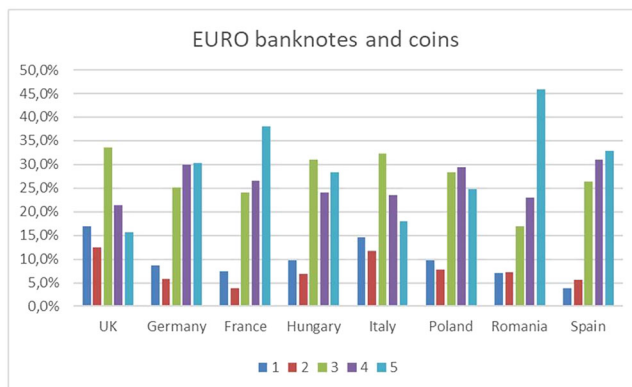


FIGURE 1 According to you, what is a good symbol of the European Union? Euro banknotes and coins (from 1 bad to 5 very good), per country [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

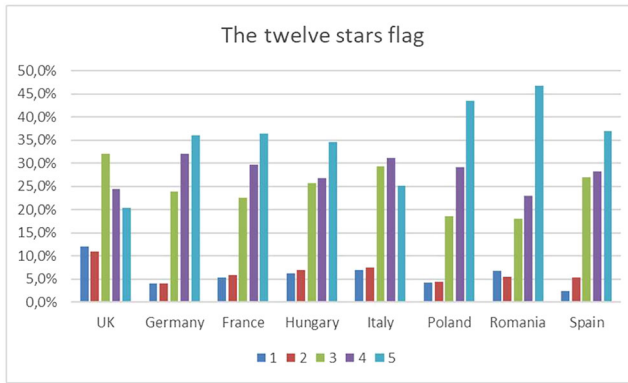


FIGURE 2 According to you, what is a good symbol of the European Union? The twelve stars flag (from 1 bad to 5 very good) per country [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

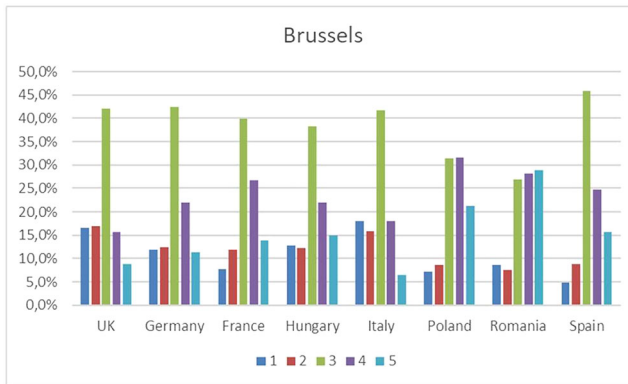


FIGURE 3 According to you, what is a good symbol of the European Union? Brussels (from 1 bad to 5 very good), per country [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

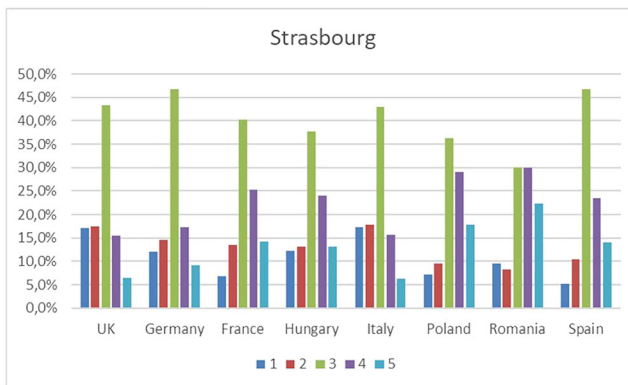


FIGURE 4 According to you, what is a good symbol of the European Union? Strasbourg (from 1 bad to 5 very good), per country [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

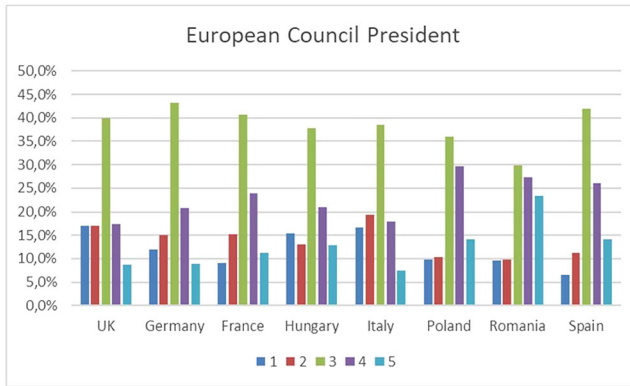


FIGURE 5 According to you, what is a good symbol of the European Union? European Council President (from 1 bad to 5 very good), per country [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

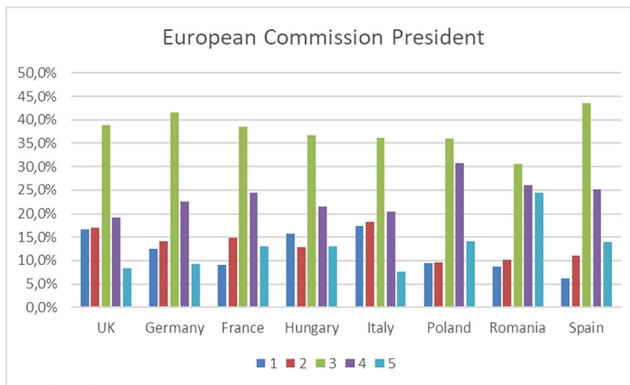


FIGURE 6 According to you, what is a good symbol of the European Union? European Commission President (from 1 bad to 5 very good), per country [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

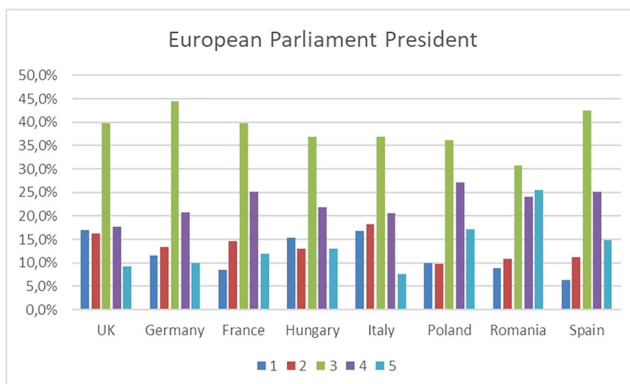


FIGURE 7 According to you, what is a good symbol of the European Union? European Parliament President (from 1 bad to 5 very good), per country [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

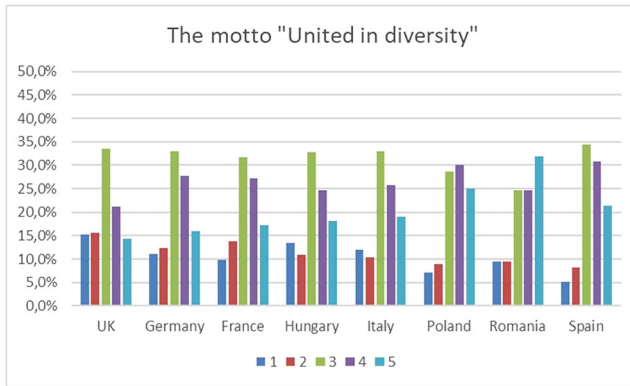


FIGURE 8 According to you, what is a good symbol of the European Union? The motto “United in diversity” (from 1 bad to 5 very good), per country [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

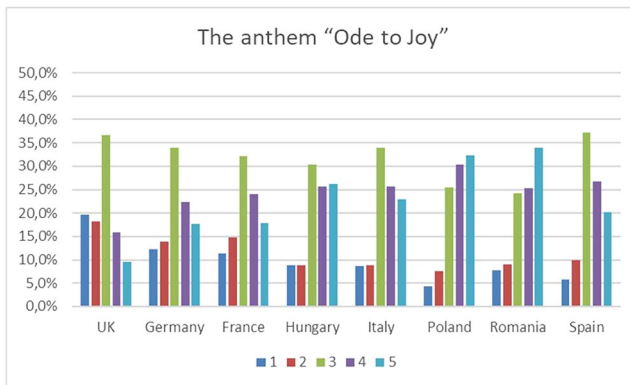


FIGURE 9 According to you, what is a good symbol of the European Union? The anthem “Ode to Joy” (from 1 bad to 5 very good), per country [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

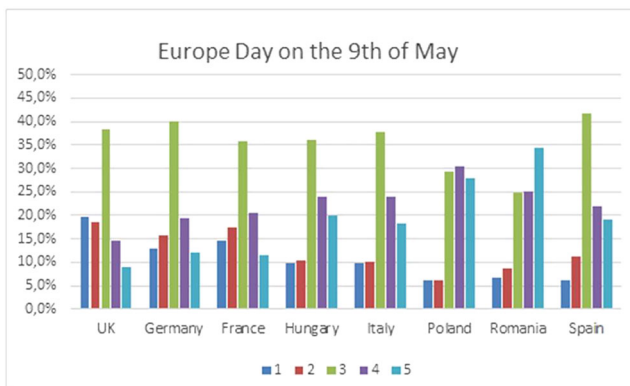


FIGURE 10 According to you, what is a good symbol of the European Union? Europe Day on the 9th of May (from 1 bad to 5 very good), per country [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

durée,” three quarters of respondents declare a double loyalty (to feel both national and European or, much less, European and national), a fifth national only and a tiny group European only (Table 2).

The four groups thus delineated are compared regarding their perceptions of EU symbols. The following table proposes a descriptive cross-tabulation of the perception of national and European belonging and the support for different EU symbols (Table 3).

The two groups feeling “European and National” (9.2%) and “National and European” (65.1%) show limited differences. The citizens stating European identity first are simply a bit more appreciative of European symbols (except on the flag). The 22.6% that define themselves as “national only” logically reject European symbols, with the relative exceptions of the twelve-stars banner and of the euro that get more positive views. The tiny minority (3.2%) of EU8 citizens stating that they feel “European only” constitutes a bit of a surprise at first sight as they declare less positive feelings towards EU symbols. An explanation may be that they are dissatisfied with the EU as a poor expression of their demanding Europeanness. This option could be corroborated by their low ratings of the most institutional symbols like the president and the seats of EU bodies. Another explanation is that they reject any state-like symbolism to promote another kind of political community inspired by post-nationalist and cosmopolitan conceptions (Ferry, 2000). This option is backed by recent studies highlighting the positive correlation between universalism, a positive view of immigration and feeling European with support for the EU as a non-exclusive community (Dennison et al., 2021). The limited number of respondents and the absence of complementary data do not allow going further in this interpretation.

Overall, among those who state both national and European loyalties, whatever the hierarchy is between the two, there is no major discrepancy in the perception of EU symbols. These findings suggest that both the level and the form of identification with Europe matter. Subsequently, it may invite to be cautious when the time comes to frame EU symbols as mostly functional representations creating instrumental responses in contrast with national ones that would be more symbolic representations calling for affective responses (Cram et al., 2011). For sure, the latter is much more intensely invested in affective terms. Still, stimuli created by EU symbols are not only interest-based as they relate to the nature of the polity that stands behind it. This interpretation does not contradict but refines the claims of “banal Europeanism.” Identification with the EU and its symbols are indeed best understood as a process that is banal, contingent and contextual, but is not disconnected from the global perception of the nature of the European political community.

To go a step further, it is necessary to study other factors than those directly related to political belongings and attitudes.

4 | INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL DETERMINANTS OF THE PERCEPTION OF EU SYMBOLS: IN SEARCH FOR MODELS

To test for the relevance of usual individual predictors of support for the EU to see how they influence the perception of symbols, we first aimed at reducing the number of variables. Following the descriptive hierarchy sketched by collective perceptions, we hypothesise the existence of three groups of symbols, as representative of underlying

TABLE 2 Do you see yourself as ...? (National) and European; European and (national); European only; (national) only, per country

	Total	UK	Germany	France	Hungary	Italy	Poland	Romania	Spain
(National) and European	65.1%	32.1%	67.0%	67.9%	64.6%	61.7%	74.6%	74.1%	78.5%
(National) only	22.6%	58.5%	17.0%	25.8%	19.0%	26.9%	8.2%	16.8%	8.4%
European and (National)	9.2%	5.3%	11.7%	4.9%	14.1%	9.2%	14.3%	6.9%	7.1%
European only	3.2%	4.1%	4.3%	1.4%	2.3%	2.2%	2.9%	2.2%	6.0%

TABLE 3 Cross-tabulation of positive perception of EU symbols (percentage of respondents good-very good) and national and/or EU belonging, per country (EU8)

	Flag	Euro	Motto	Ode	9 May	Brussels	Strasbourg	Pres EC	Pres EU Council	Pres EP
National and European	69.4%	60.4%	52.2%	52.6%	46.8%	43.9%	40.0%	41.1%	39.5%	40.9%
European and National	67.6%	62.2%	57.4%	59.8%	51.0%	44.9%	43.7%	46.2%	44.0%	44%
European only	63.0%	55.1%	49.2%	40.7%	37.0%	35.6%	31.9%	32.4%	35.3%	33.6%
National only	42.7%	38.1%	27.0%	26.6%	22.7%	21.7%	19.5%	21.2%	21.1%	20.7%

latent dimensions: the Euro and the flag, receiving the highest appreciation and labelled as standing for a “nation-style frame” due to their similitude to national emblems; the anthem, the motto, and Europe day getting intermediate support and identified as “symbolic frame” because of a duplication of usual national symbolism but in a subdued version (e.g., anthem without words and with less frequent and solemn use than its national counterparts; Europe Day that is not a bank holiday); and a last group including the two seats (Brussels and Strasbourg) and the three leaders (EC, Council and EP presidents) that are the less appreciated and that refer the most to the specific institutional realities of the EU, so-called “institutional frame.” We then perform PCA and run a fixed three-factor solution to verify the consistency of the three groups of symbols (Table 4).

The results of our PCA confirmed the descriptive organisation and allowed us to treat the three symbolic frames as dependent index-based variables.

4.1 | Predictors of support for EU symbols

Based on these results we explored potential sources of support for European symbols. For this purpose, we constructed three linear regression models that investigated the impact of individual determinants. The models test the role of the usual socio-political and attitudinal indicators³: age; gender; employment status as a proxy for the socio-economic situation; the influence of cultural and political attitudes such as religious attendance as a proxy for religiosity; and trust for national and European institutions.

According to the findings of the linear regression models (see Table 5), our three dependent variables are indeed otherwise affected by different individual-level variables. Regarding age, the older you are, the more you are supportive of European symbols. This finding at first sight may challenge the common wisdom stating that young Europeans are typically more positive about the European Union. However, age is a complex indicator. The Eurobarometer data shows that the 15–24 and the 55+ trust more the EU than average, while intermediate generations trust it less (European Commission, 2021, p. 118). We know from the literature that generations matter more than life-cycle effects. The attitude of people depends less on their biological age but more on the fact that they have come of age after their country joined the EU and that they have grown up in the era of globalisation. And young Europeans are more positive about Europe only if they are more positive about immigration and globalisation in general

TABLE 4 Principal component analysis of typology of symbols

Items	Institutional frame	Symbolic frame	Nation-style frame
Brussels	0.727		
Strasbourg	0.765		
EC President	0.890		
EU Council President	0.890		
EP President	0.869		
Euro coin and banknotes			0.819
Flag			0.787
Motto		0.743	
Anthem		0.857	
Europe Day		0.762	
N	8000		
KMO	0.908		
Explained variance in %	61.20	10.61	8.54

Note: Rotated component matrix (varimax rotation with Kayser normalisation). Fixed three-factors solution.

TABLE 5 Linear regression analyses of three frames of symbols (beta coefficients)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
	Institutional frame	Symbolic frame	Nation-style frame
Gender (0 = men)	0.051*** (4.531)	0.044*** (3.876)	−0.006 (−0.522)
Age (3 levels)	0.032** (2.797)	0.027* (2.276)	0.027* (2.236)
Trust in EU	0.372*** (31.009)	0.328*** (26.948)	0.263*** (21.043)
Trust in national parliament	0.031 (1.508)	0.014 (0.0690)	−0.002 (−0.092)
Trust in national government	−0.020 (−0.977)	−0.057** (−2.806)	−0.021 (−0.995)
Religiosity (attendance) (0–2)	0.052*** (4.624)	0.096*** (8.439)	−0.072*** (−6.130)
Political interest	0.004 (0.306)	−0.047*** (−4.011)	0.037* (−3.028)
Socio-economic status (0–3)	0.003 (0.230)	0.010 (0.866)	0.039* (3.167)
Educational level	−0.21 (−1.817)	−0.021 (−1.764)	0.054*** (4.300)
National/EU Belonging (scale)	0.004 (0.296)	0.056*** (4.701)	0.048*** (3.887)

Notes: Data are weighted by design weight; *t* values in parentheses; tests for multicollinearity did not yield any noteworthy results.

* $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$. *** $p < 0.000$.

(Rekker, 2018). A hypothesis may be that, as a proxy for the EU, European symbols may shape it in a too identitarian and restrictive sense to be endorsed by the part of the younger generation that is on the side of globalisation.

Regarding *gender*, women are more appreciative of European symbols than men, with reference to institutional and symbolic frames; nation-style symbolism, on the other side, has a higher appreciation from the male respondents. Still, it is difficult to relate this observation to the general attitude of men and women towards the EU as the usual data like the indicator of trust in the European Union provided by the Eurobarometer do not indicate a significant difference (European Commission, 2021). The “gender gap” has always been modest, and related to secondary elements such as values, ideology, economic vulnerability and national tradition (Nelsen & Guth, 2016). Regarding *socioeconomic status*, it is also well known that those having difficulties paying bills most of the time or occasionally have much less trust in the EU than those who do not have such difficulties. In our models, however, the determinant related to socioeconomic status does not prove itself to be significant in terms of support for symbols, except for the nation-style framework, which has slightly higher support for the economic elites. Interestingly, the same applies to the educational level. Shifting now to cultural and political attitudes, we find again the usual ideational factors framing the relationship to the EU that shape the perception of European symbols. Regarding *religiosity*, our survey showed that religious attendance is strongly associated with a positive appreciation of EU symbols more associated with peace (Europe Day, the anthem), to a lesser extent of institutional symbols (seats and leaders), but not at all (on the contrary) of state-like symbols (the flag, the euro). This is congruent with what the existing scholarship shows, namely that the influence of religion on support to the EU is more and more modest and conditional according to denominational belonging and/or the status of majority/minority religious groups in national society (Nelsen & Guth, 2016). The last parameter is *political trust*. While trust in national institutions does not provide significant indications, trust in the EU is, as expected, particularly relevant. The more respondents trust European institutions, the more they approve of European symbols in all three frameworks. This confirms that EU symbols work as a reliable proxy of the polity they stand for. Regarding the factors shaping trust, the literature highlights the importance of socioeconomic status on three points. First, people with higher social and economic positions are more likely to support EU institutions, and therefore its symbolism. Second, those individuals who consider belonging to the working or lower-middle class have lower levels of trust in politics than those defining themselves as middle to upper class (European Commission, 2021). All these elements converge to suggest that EU symbols, like the EU itself, are more likely to be endorsed by the upper than by the lower classes. These elements confirm the necessity to acknowledge the intertwinement of utilitarian and identity factors to shape the way to relate to the European polity and to its representation (De Vries, 2020).

5 | CONCLUSION

Our findings suggest some evidence of the existence of a “banal Europeanism” in three capacities according to three meanings given to “banal.” First, banal means familiar: the more European symbols look like state symbols, the more they are acknowledged by Europeans. Second, as banal means usual: attitudes towards EU symbols reflect faithfully attitudes towards the EU. Third, as banal means taken for granted: beyond relatively limited differences according to political, social, economic and cultural belongings, EU symbols are widely accepted. This last meaning is in tune with the definition of “banal Europeanism” given by the literature (Cram, 2009) in reference to “banal nationalism” as a non-passionate, ordinary and profane identification. EU signifiers are largely routinised and anchored in the political worldview of our interviewees. Overall, this grassroots normalisation of European symbols contrasts with their occasional politicisation through top-down controversies and elite discursive struggles.

These findings have both policy and scientific implications. Regarding the policy dimension, policy-makers should not overestimate the reluctance of citizens to accept European symbolism. Their propensity to shy away from a state-like symbolism for the EU may be counterproductive as this repertoire (e.g., the flag or the euro) appears more familiar and subsequently more efficient than a more cultural or institutional one (e.g., multiple EU leaders and seats).

As far as the scientific dimension is concerned, our findings pave the way for future research on EU symbols; their uses and counter-uses; and finally, on symbols as instruments to study global attitudes towards the EU. In the first case, the understanding of the European symbols should be investigated further by other surveys covering a broader scope than the eight countries of our sample and integrating other kinds of questions to measure their level of cognitive, normative and affective appropriation by citizens. The Eurobarometer is a prominent candidate to fulfil this function. Qualitative research through in-depth interviews is also indispensable in order to tackle the multi-dimensional meanings of emblems. In the second case, the increasing uses of these symbols as communicative resources in collective action (including for example burning a European flag to protest against austerity or waving it as a claim for democracy and modernity in a candidate country) or in the artistic production about European integration offer fertile ground to analyse the operationalisation of the European reference. In the third case, the relevance of the iconographic representations of the flag or the euro in interviews, focus groups or experiments is confirmed to refine the understanding of the multiple logics at work to frame the attitudes of citizens towards the EU.

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ENDNOTES

¹ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:12016L/AFI/DCL/52>

² http://europa.eu/about-eu/basic-information/symbols/flag/index_en.html

³ Gender: 0 = male, 1 = female; Age in years in categories: 1 = 18–34, 2 = 35–54, 3 = 55-and more; Level of education in categories: 1 = primary or secondary education, 2 Higher education (college, university, ...); Political interest: 1 = Not at all interested 2 = Not very interested 3 = Somewhat interested 4 = very interested; Trust in institutions (EU, parliament, government) 1 = No Trust/5 = High trust; Religious attendance, recoded: 0 = no attendance, 1 = some attendance, 2 = regular attendance; Socio-economic status, recoded: 0 = unemployed, house person 1 = manual work 2 = white collars/retired 3 = managers, others = missing; National/European belonging, recoded -1 = National only, 0 = National and EU, 1 = EU and national, 2 = EU belonging.

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