

Pål Kolstø. National symbols as signs of unity and division.

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National symbols as signs of unity and division

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The oneness of nations

National identity is not an innate quality in human beings, neither is it acquired naturally as one grows up. Like any other identity, national identity has to be *learned*. Important instruments in any learning process are various kinds of audiovisual aids, and so also in the school of national identity construction. That is why *national symbols*—flags, coats of arms, national anthems—play such a crucial role in nation-building and nation-maintenance. Moreover, national symbols are *interactive* aids through which the students can participate themselves. The people who are learning how to acquire an identity as a Dane, a Frenchman, or an Australian are invited not only to watch the Danish, French, and Australian flag from afar, but to carry it in their hands, participate in flag parades, in flag hoisting ceremonies.

While this pedagogical work is carried out in all states, it is done more explicitly and systematically in some countries than in others. A particularly explicit strategy for patriotism-training by means of national symbols can be found in a statement published by the Central Propaganda Department of the Chinese Communist Party in 1996 entitled ‘Teach the General Public and

¹ The author wishes to thank Jan Oscar Engene, Stefan Troebst, Ole Kristian Grimnes, and Iver Neumann for very helpful comments and suggestions to draft versions of the article.

Especially the Young to Love the National Flag and the National Anthem'. Here it is explained that 'the national flag and national anthem are symbols of a nation's sovereignty and dignity and concentrated expressions of its patriotic spirit'. ('Teach the General Public' 1996) Another vivid example of such identity learning is the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag that is carried out in schools all over the USA every morning throughout the entire school year. The words of this pledge are well known, but bear repeating.

I pledge allegiance to the flag,
of the United States of America,
and for the Republic for which it stands,
one nation under God, indivisible,
with liberty and justice for all.

What is the key word of this endlessly repeated pledge? Opinions may of course differ, but to my mind it is one of the small, inconspicuous words so easily overlooked, namely 'one'. More than anything else, the pledge celebrates the *unity* of the American nation. In order to make this point abundantly clear, it is repeated and reinforced with the addition of the word 'indivisible'. In terms of ethnic background, country of origin, religion, and phenotype, the American nation is anything but homogeneous. Even so, the vast majority of the citizens of the United States today *do* see themselves as one nation. This is evident not least through their attitude towards the flag.

In the 1940s, the obligation to participate in the flag ceremony was a matter of controversy. In 1940, the Supreme Court ruled that students should be required to recite the Pledge of Allegiance in public schools, but in a new ruling only three years later the Court reversed this decision. (The History of America's National Symbols'). From the viewpoint of effective nation-building this was probably a wise decision. Had the pledge remained mandatory it would have become a welcome target for antistate demonstration, for instance in the rebellious 1960s. The ceremony of the Pledge of Allegiance would have contributed far less to the maintenance of national unity and instead been turned into a possible rallying point for opposition and dissent.

The Pledge of Allegiance ceremony may at the same time be described as routine, trite and ineffective, on the one hand, and as a success story, on the other. Both assessments are in a sense equally true. Many of the pupils participating in the ceremony no doubt couldn't care less about the words they are uttering, or even worse, while uttering them continue to believe that 'no, our nation is *not* one of liberty and justice, it is *illiberal* and *unjust*'. But through such a rejection of the official ideology such rebellious youngsters reveal that they nevertheless have taken on board the notion that there *is* one specific nation on earth called the American nation and they have internalized their membership in it ('Our' nation is not...). By rejecting the specific positive *attributes* ascribed to this nation, they confirm and reinforce the most important message of the school pledge: the *essence* of the nation, which is its oneness. Their action— participation in a ritual that celebrates the unity of the nation—is far more

constitutive of the national community as such than whatever thoughts they may harbor *about* this nation.

The dividedness of the nation in new states

Despite the crucial role symbols play in the formation of national unity few theoreticians of nationalism devote much attention to this phenomenon. Two authors who do discuss this topic are Anthony Smith and Michael Billig (Smith 1999; Billig 1995). Both of them contribute with important insights but both at the same time misrepresent and underestimate the difference between symbolic nation-building in old states and newly established states.

Anthony Smith calls his theory ‘ethno-symbolism’ and treats the symbols of the nation as part of the ethno-cultural heritage which modern nationalists can make use of to forge a national unity and identity. This function symbols fill alongside the myths, values, and memories of the group. Smith assumes that national symbols derived from mythical ethno-history will be unifying not only in established nation-states, but also in new and fragile multicultural states.

Even those new state-nations in Africa and Asia that sought to turn ex-colonies into territorial nations must forge a cultural unity and identity of myth, symbol, value, and memory that can match that of nations built on pre-existing ethnic ties, if they are to survive and flourish as nations. It is this *ethnic model* of the nation that has proved most influential (Smith 1999, 13, emphasis in the original).

No doubt state leaders in new states often follow the ethnic model of nation-building, but, as I argue below, this is not the only possible solution, and normally not the best one in order to survive and flourish as nations. Symbols that are rooted in a cultural past will more often than not be more *divisive* than unifying since different ethnic and political groups often hark back to different pasts. Symbols taken from political history or even created from scratch may in fact fulfill the function of unifying the nation just as well, or better, than can ethnic symbols. If traditions can be 'invented,' then certainly also symbols can (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1992).

In *Banal Nationalism* (1995) Michael Billig analyses what he sees as creeping 'banal' nationalism in the United States, the United Kingdom, New Zealand and other states that he describes as the 'established nations.' These are states that 'have confidence in their own continuity'. The basic difference between these nations and unestablished nations on the symbolic level, Billig claims, is one between 'the flag hanging unnoticed on the public building' and 'a flag which is being consciously waved with fervent passion'. (Billig 1995, p. 8). Massive and fervent flag waving certainly takes place in the United States as well these days, more so than in many other states, so the difference between the function of the flags in established and unestablished states cannot lay here. The crucial difference, in my view, is that in new, insecure nations the flags and other national symbols often fail to fulfill their most important function as promoters of national unity. Quite to the contrary, they often bring to the fore strong divisions within the putative nation.

The reasons behind the frequent failures of national symbols in new or newly reestablished states are several. One is resources. New states normally are weaker than established states, institutionally and economically. Another reason is that the national symbols of new states have to fulfill a much more difficult task. They must not only keep alive, but *create* a national identity and an allegiance to a state that did not exist before.

Cornelius Castoriadis has maintained that in today's world, the flag is 'a sign ... that one can and must die for and what sends shivers down the spine of patriots as they watch the military parade pass by'.(Castoriadis 1987, p. 131) To produce such shivers among the on-lookers may be a less daunting task than it sounds like if the state leaders can assume, as Castoriadis seems to do, that the people are *already patriots* when they turn out to watch the military parade. Leaders of new states, however, *cannot* assume anything like that. Their task is precisely to *create* such patriotism.

In this article I will contrast the unificatory vs. divisive potential of national symbols in one new state (Bosnia)², one newly reconfigured state (Russia), and one established nation-state, Norway. I will not discuss such national symbols as capitals, currencies, postal stamps, monumental buildings, national heroes and the like, even though they often play very important roles. Instead, I will concentrate on the three most central symbols; the flag, the

² For a discussion of the function of national symbols in two other new states, Macedonia and Belarus, see Kolstø 2003.

national anthem and the coat of arms. In the three states under scrutiny we see disputes over national symbols unfolding along several axes: among ethnic groups; among socio-ideological groups; and among groups with different attitudes towards other states and supranational organizations.

Bosnia-Herzegovina: an artificial flag for an artificial state?

The establishment of Bosnia-Herzegovina as an independent state in 1992 was highly contentious. With 43 per cent Muslims (Bosniaks), 30 per cent Serbs and 17 per cent Croats and 10 per cent other, the state had no majority population. From the very beginning the leaders of the Serb community vehemently opposed the proclamation of independence, and threatened to take up arms should it happen. As is well known, this was no empty threat.

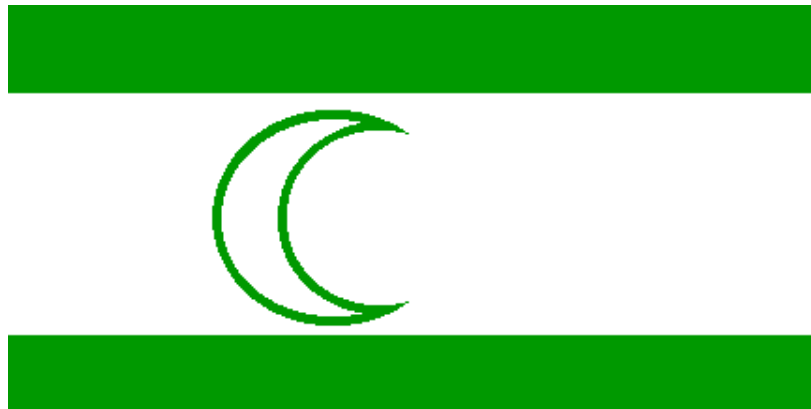


Figure 1: Flag used by Muslim military units during the Bosnian war

The Bosnian leaders fully realized that if their state should have any chance to survive it had to be proclaimed as a supraethnic state, and not be associated by any one ethnic group in particular. This was reflected in the choice of state flag and state coat of arms in 1992. During the war many Muslim military

units used a green-white flag with a crescent as their standard (see Figure 1), and many wanted the crescent, or at least the green color, to be represented also in the state flag. The Bosnian leadership, however, desperate not to provoke the Serbs and the Croats, decided against this solution. Instead, it opted for a design based on a mediaeval Bosnian symbol, the *fleur de lis* (See Figure 2). This was the coat of arms of the Bosnian Kotromanic dynasty, and at first glance seemed to be a most felicitous choice. The lily symbol hailed from the pre-Ottoman period and represented no particular ethnic group. In 1376, the Kotromanic ruler Stefan Tvrtko had proclaimed himself King of the Serbs, Bosnia and the Coastland, and later added to his title 'King of Dalmatia and Croatia.' In this way all major groups in Bosnia-Herzegovina could see themselves as represented by the flag. If any symbol could manage to unite the fragile Bosnian nation it should be a symbol dating from a period prior to present-day ethnic divisions in Bosnia, or so one would assume. But this was not fated to happen.



Figure 2: Bosnian fleur de lis

During the 1992-1995 war the Croats and the Serbs fought under their ethnic symbols. The Croats used the checkerboard and the Serbs often a Yugoslav flag with a Serbian cross adorned by four Cyrillic letters 'C' (see Figure 3). The letters, or fire rakes, are given several interpretations, but most commonly they are said to be an acronym meaning 'Only the Serbs will Save Serbia,' or 'Only Unity will Save Serbia.' The state flag with the lilies was used only by the Muslims. As a result, this originally civic, supraethnic flag was closely associated with one of the warring parties, and in a sense 'ethnicized'. The flag that had been deliberately designed as a symbol of unity became a sign of division and discord.

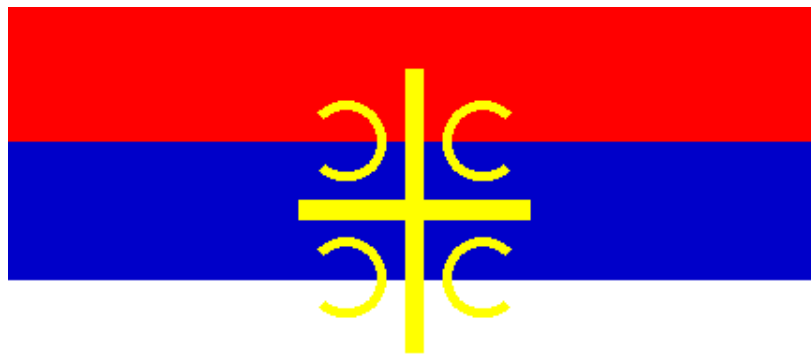


Figure 3: Flag used by many Serbian military units during the Bosnian war

After the signing of the Dayton agreement in December 1995 it was clear that another flag and coat of arms had to be found in order to piece together war-torn Bosnia-Herzegovina into something resembling a united nation. In the summer of 1997 the parliament of Bosnia-Herzegovina began to work on the flag issue, but failed to agree on any of the proposals presented. The Serbian deputies in particular had a tendency to vote against all suggested solutions. There is

reason to believe that many of them did this not so much because they objected to any particular details in the draft design, but simply in order to deny legitimacy to the state as such.

In December 1997, a Peace Implementation Conference for the Dayton Agreement in Bonn, Germany, commissioned the International High Representative in Bosnia, Carlos Westendorp, to work out a compromise solution on the flag issue by the end of the year. If no solution could be found through parliamentary procedures, the High Representative was authorized to enforce the adoption of any flag he saw fit. As the parliamentary deliberations stalled once more, Westendorp appointed an independent flag commission composed of representatives of all three ethnic groups. The commission was told to work in a speedy fashion, as the Olympic Winter Games would start in Nagano in Japan on 7 February. It would be a very bad signal to send to the world if the Bosnian troop would enter the stadium with no flag.

The starting point for the flag commission was that the flag had to be equally acceptable to all citizens and groups in the country. When the flag designers in 1992 had gone back into history to look for unifying symbols, it had not worked, and this time the commission decided to look in the opposite direction, so to speak. They decided on a future-oriented design that did not draw on the traditions of any group or any period in the history of country. The three solutions they presented to the parliament were all very stylized, consisting of stripes, stars, and triangles. (see Figure 4, 5, and 6) The triangle could be interpreted as a stylized shape of the country, while the stars resembled the stars

of the European Union, as did the deep blue background color.³ Colors that were associated with a particular ethnic group, such as green for the Muslims and red for the Croats, were deliberately avoided.



Figure 4 New Bosnian flag commission by Carlos Westerndorp, Draft 1.



Figure 5 New Bosnian flag commission by Carlos Westerndorp, Draft 2.



³ Originally, the background color had been light blue as in the flag of the United Nation, but this was later changed to 'European' blue. In both cases the color was intended to underscore Bosnia's belonging to the international community of states.

Figure 6 New Bosnian flag commission by Carlos Westendorp, Draft 3

None of the three proposed designs, however, got the necessary number of votes in the parliament to be adopted, and Westendorp did what he had warned he would do: he imposed the flag which had received the highest number of votes (based on Figure 5). This was intended as an interim solution and the imposed flag would function as the Bosnian state flag until the Bosnian parliamentarians were able to agree on another one.

At a press conference presenting the new flag, a spokesperson of the High Representative's office declared that 'this flag is a flag of the future. It represents unity not division; it is the flag that belongs to Europe'.⁴ The danger, however, is that it conveys an impression not so much of unity as of artificiality. The flag in many ways looks like a logo of a commercial firm. In fact, when I first saw it outside a building in Sarajevo I did not immediately understand that it was the country's state flag I was looking at. Many people, even among the Muslims, found it difficult to relate to the strange-looking, foreign-imposed state flag of Bosnia-Herzegovina. The day after the adoption of Bosnia's flag a group of Bosniak intellectuals, led by the renowned anti-nationalist philosopher Muhammed Filipovic, signed a collective letter in which they declared that the imposed flag was 'the final way to kill the nation'.⁵

⁴ Duncan Bullivant, as quoted by 'The semiotics of confusion'.

⁵ Printed in *The Times* (London), 5 February 1998, as quoted in Poels 1998, p. 9-12.

In Republika Srpska the flag of Bosnia-Herzegovina is used very little. Instead, the flag of the Bosnian-Serbian entity is prominently displayed. This flag is very similar to the Yugoslav flag, only with the horizontal stripes are arranged in a different order, with red on top, blue in the middle and white on the bottom, in effect a silent, constant reminder of the long-term wish of the Banja Luka leadership to unite with this country. Also in the other entity of the Republic, the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Bosnian state flag must compete for attention with other flags and state symbols. Both the Federation and the ten cantons that it is composed of have their own flags and coats of arms. In contrast to the state coat of arms, the coat of arms of the Federation is based on traditional heraldic conventions,⁶ and conspicuously displays symbols of the two ethnic groups, the Muslims and the Croats (see Figure 7). The circle of stars beneath the two ethnic symbols represents the ten cantons, but clearly also mimics the flag of the European Union, although the stars are differently designed.

⁶ It has, however, been faulted for poor heraldic handicraft. The two shields on the top have different design, one pointed and one rounded at the bottom, and this creates an asymmetrical impression. See 'Flags Of The World: Bosnia and Herzegovina'.



Figure 7: Coat of arms of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina

The Federation flag depicts the coat of arms on the middle field of a green-white-red tricolor. Green and red are the colors of the Muslims and the Croats, respectively, while white supposedly symbolizes peace and accord between them.⁷ At the level of cantons symbolic ethnization is brought even one step further: Most of the Croat cantons display the checkerboard, sometimes to the exclusion of other symbols. Likewise, Bosniak cantons use the *fleur de lis* (but not the crescent).

⁷ This solution strongly resembles the structure of the Indian flag and may well have been inspired by it. In the Indian flag the Hindus are represented in the top stripe by safran yellow and the Muslims by the color green at the bottom. The white color in the middle symbolizes peace and accord between them. See Virmani 1999. This deliberate attempt to make it easier for members of all groups to identify with the Indian state, however, did not prevent its violent partition in 1947.

In this fierce competition for attention the Bosnian state flag has one major advantage over its challengers: only this flag may be used to represent the country abroad at international conferences and sports tournaments. While the composite parts of the United Kingdom—England, Scotland, Wales—are allowed to participate in UEFA cups under their own flags, no such symbolic sovereignty has been granted to the entities of Bosnia-Herzegovina. This means that to the extent that Bosnian athletes make it to the winners' block in Olympic Games and World Cups, it will be the Westendorpian flag that will be hoisted behind them and the Bosnian state anthem that will be played. Such uplifting moments, to the extent that they take place, will associate these state symbols with excellence, pride and 'good feeling'. Whether this is sufficient to create a high degree of emotional attachment to these symbols among the people they are supposed to represent, remains to be seen. Circumstantial evidence from the last years—such as the state flag on small stickers in the window of taxi-cabs and on flagpoles outside gas-stations—suggests that the Westendorpian flag may indeed slowly be gaining a measure of acceptance (in the Federation that is, not in Republika Srpska).

Russia: Putin's composite compromise

Russia is not a new state in the same sense as Bosnia is. In 1991, Russia was recognized as the successor state of the Soviet Union and even inherited this state's seat in the UN Security Council. Even so, there is a sharp rupture between the USSR and Russia in many respects, politically, ideologically and territorially.

Symbolically, this break has been signaled through the introduction of new state symbols, including a flag, coat of arms, and national anthem. For a long time, however, these symbols remained hotly disputed. The Russian case, therefore, shows that a deep crisis of symbol politics may erupt not only in a brand new state, but also in a reconfigured state.

In 1990—that is, more than a year before the break-up of the Soviet Union—demonstrators in Russia began to wave the white-blue-red tricolor during anti-communist street rallies. Even though the tricolor had been one of the flags of the tsarist Russian state, it was not considered a symbol of Tsarism, but of pro-western orientation. Under the Romanovs the white-blue-red tricolor had been used primarily by the merchant fleet, and it was not directly associated with the tsarist regime as such. Moreover, after the February 1917 Revolution, it was used by the Provisional government of Aleksandr Kerenskii, and primarily for that reason it was rejected by Russian nationalists during perestroika.

During World War II the white-blue-red tricolor had been used by the Russian Liberation Army (ROA) under renegade Soviet General Andrei Vlasov, and, if for no other reason, this made it totally unacceptable for Russian communists and nationalists with left-wing leanings. They continued to use the Soviet red flag with its hammer and sickle. Finally, Russian tsarists and other right-wing nationalists flew a black-gold-white flag, which had been the flag of the dynastic flag of the Romanov family. This means that any Russian could easily signal which of the three main camps of Russian politics he or she sympathized with—right-wing tsarists and imperialists, centrist nation-builders,

and left-wing Soviet patriots—simply by hoisting the appropriate flag. The new Russian state authorities were confronted not by one, but two nostalgias: one going all the way back the tsars and one stopping at the commissars.

When the Yeltsin administration took over the offices in the Kremlin on 25 December 1991, the red flag with the hammer and sickle was lowered from the masts on its turrets and replaced by the white-blue-red tricolor. This was now the de facto Russian state flag, but it had not been explicitly adopted as such by the parliament. Likewise, the pre-revolutionary double-headed eagle was introduced as the state coat of arms but without any formal sanction.

An attempt to secure such sanction in January 1998 ended in utter failure. The Duma was asked to pass into law the new state symbols currently in use—flag, state coat of arms, and national anthem. The national anthem was taken from Mikhail Glinka's opera 'A life for the tsar' (in the Soviet period known as 'Ivan Susanin,' after its main hero), composed in 1836. The melody was little known, had no lyrics, and was difficult to hum. Less than one-fourth of the 450 members of the Duma voted in favor of each of these symbols, while the majority wished to retain the symbols of the Soviet era.

A proposal to reintroduce the Soviet anthem adopted during World War II was, however, also defeated—and the proposal to bring back the hammer and sickle had been voted down during an earlier session of the Duma. Finally, Yeltsin decided to take the questions of state symbols off the political agenda and

authorized their use by a presidential decree. For the duration of his incumbency Russia remained a state without unifying, generally recognized national symbols.

During the nine of years of Yeltsin's presidency his popularity and authority was gradually eroded, and during the last years of his reign he was for all practical purposes a lame duck. With this paralysis of the political center the Russian regions—the so-called Subjects of the Federation—were free to assert themselves to the point that some began to act almost as states within the state, carrying out nation-building projects of their own (Kolstø and Blakkisrud 2004)⁸.

Only with the election of Yeltsin's successor in the spring of 2000 did Russian politics gain a new impetus, and outstanding issues could again be addressed. Putin's political profile was extremely vague, but he managed to build up a tremendous personal popularity and from that position he began to court the various factions in Russian politics and rebuild a political consensus. As a part of this endeavor he decided to reopen the vexed issue of state symbols.

As was the case in Bosnia it appears that it was the athletes' need for usable national symbols that forced the issue to the top of the political agenda. The immensely popular Spartak Moscow soccer team complained to Putin that the Glinka song was impossible to sing and claimed that this situation had led to 'a loss of morale and dip in form'. ('Russia at a loss for words' 2000). At the Sydney Olympics in fall 2000 the Russian medallists stood awkwardly in silence

⁸ For a display of the flags of Russia's constituent republics, see

www.theodora.com/wfb/russia/russia_flags.html#MORE

while their national anthem was played (Russia took no less than eighty-eight medals, including thirty-two gold medals). In this situation, a special commission under the leadership of St. Petersburg governor Vladimir Yakovlev was appointed to select a new national anthem ('What Should Russia's National Anthem Express?' 2000). The commission examined eight different tunes, including one promoted and performed by the famous pop star Alla Pugacheva. In the end it decided to readopt the Soviet anthem that had been composed by Aleksandr Aleksandrov in 1936 and adopted as the Soviet state anthem in 1944.⁹ This anthem was voted over in the Duma on 8 December 2000. An overwhelming majority of the deputies supported the motion, which was passed with 381 against 51 ('Russia proposes bill' 2001).

A national contest was announced for the lyrics and no less than 6,000 texts submitted. The commission decided on a version written by one of the two authors of the original song, Sergei Mikhalkov. The eighty year old former Stalinist had dropped all references to communism and socialism but retained a number of words and phrases strongly reminiscent of his Soviet time version, particularly in the refrain. A bill on the new lyrics was passed in the Duma in March 2001 with 345 votes for, nineteen against, and one abstention. ('Russian Duma agrees' 2001)

The adoption of the new national anthem was part of a package that included also a settlement on the flag issue and an agreement on the coat of arms. Taken together, it combined symbols preferred by the Westernizing democrats

⁹ Between 1936 and 1944 this melody had been the anthem of the Bolshevik Party.

and Tsarist emblems favored by Slavophile nationalists, while also retaining some of the attributes of Soviet power so dear to the Communists. The white-blue-red tricolor was finally accepted as the state flag of the Russian Federation, while the Soviet red flag became the official flag of the Russian Armed Forces. Finally, the double-headed eagle became the coat of arms of the Russian state but in new colors: in the tsarist version, there was a black eagle against a golden background, while in the new arms the eagle is depicted in gold against a red background.

The national flag was passed in the Duma with 342 of 450 votes, and the coat of arms with 341. Prominent left-leaning politicians such as Gennadii Ziuganov and Gennadii Seleznev supported the bills. The only dissenting voices came from the extreme left, on the one hand, and Westernizing liberals in Yabloko and the Union of Rightist Forces, on the other. The liberals pointed out that in the mind of many Russian citizens ‘the Stalin anthem’ was closely associated with bloody crimes against the nation. Yabloko chairman Grigorii Yavlinskii claimed that a national anthem should be ‘a symbol of the unity of the state’, but the adoption of the Aleksandrov tune represented ‘a step towards a split in society’. (‘Grigory Yavlinsky’ 2000; ‘Yabloko and the SPS oppose restoration’ 2000). This view was supported by a group of famous Russian cultural figures in a collective statement published in *Izvestia* on 5 December 2000. They claimed that ‘the debate on the anthem has already split a nation in which the process of reconciliation and consolidation had begun.’ (RFE/RL Newline, 6 December 2000)



Figure 9: Coat of Arms of the Russian Federation

Some Russian and Western scholars also adhere to this view. American political scientist Kathleen Smith claims that Putin's attempt to have the best of both worlds with the national anthem—keeping the form while changing the content—is unlikely to have the desired effect. Rather than end the battle over what to take from the past, 'it simply reaffirmed the deep divisions among the Russian people' (Smith 2002, p. 184). Russian political commentator Lilia Shevtsova concurs: 'With his insensitivity and his obtuseness, the president gave new life to old divisive passions and reopened old wounds.' (Shevtsova 2003, p. 145)

This harsh judgment is not entirely convincing. In addition to the overwhelming support the symbols received in the national parliament, it was clearly favored also by the population at large. Opinion polls showed that the Soviet-time anthem was by far the most popular among the ones that were considered for adoption: while only 15 percent wanted to retain the Glinka's song, roughly 50 percent favored a return to the Soviet anthem ('Russia at a loss for words' 2000). It is difficult to see which other solution could have mustered as large, or larger, support among the Russian citizens. To have no national anthem at all was not an option.

One particular detail of the solution to the national symbols issue, however, was clearly unfortunate from the point of view of promoting national unity. The new Russian law on state symbols requires people to stand at attention during the playing of the anthem. This injunction turned the ceremony into an opportunity for ostentatious civil disobedience. According to Lilia Shevtsova, a joke soon went around that 'if you don't stand up on time, you'll do time'. 'At every official function, some would stand and others would remain seated or pretend to be tying their shoelaces. At least for the foreseeable future, it would be a constant reminder of the schism in Russian society' (Shevtsova 2003, p. 146).

It is tempting for national leaders to make obeisance to the national symbols a mandatory duty for the entire population, but as part of a nation-building project such a strategy will probably be counter-productive. As Shevtsova suggests, it will all too easily highlight dissent rather than unity in the nation. As noted above, this danger was apparently perceived by American legal authorities in the 1940s, when participation in the flag ceremony in American schools was made voluntary.

Norway: Can national symbols become signs of division in an established nation-state?

Is the divisive potential of national symbols limited to new states only, or is it conceivable that national symbols can split a country's population also in established nation-states? They no doubt can, but I will nevertheless in this section make three claims: 1) such instances are relatively rare; 2) the ferocity of symbol disputes in established nation-states, while sometimes quite intense, normally does not reach the same high-pitched levels as one may find in new and newly reconfigured states; and 3) when the political conflict that engendered the controversy subsides in an established nation-state, the flag, national anthem and other disputed symbols will soon revert to their normal position as signs of unity and concord.

To substantiate these claims I will present some material from Norwegian 20th century history. On two different occasions—in the 1920s and in the 1970s—a politization of the Norwegian flag was politicized in such a way that it could conceivably have led to a permanent split in the population. While sentiments ran high on both occasions, however, hostility eventually subsided, and a broad-based national consensus and an overarching collective identity was reestablished. The flag resumed its position as a universally accepted symbol of the Norwegian nation that all political and social groups could relate to.

In the second half of the 19th century Norway went through a period of highly successful nation-building. A national history was written, national heroes identified, national costumes constructed and standardized, and national cultural and political institutions put in place (Sørensen 2001). At that time, Norway was ruled from Stockholm in a dual monarchy under the Swedish king, but in June 1905 the Norwegian parliament unilaterally abrogated the Union. When the Swedes grudgingly accepted this *fait accompli*, full political independence was achieved. In a nation-wide referendum the same summer a staggering 99.98 percent voted in favor of separation from Sweden. A monolithic and enduring national unity had been established, or so it seemed.

However, only some fifteen years later the Norwegian nation was torn apart by a deep rent in the national fabric when a strongly radicalized working class clashed with the politically dominant bourgeoisie. This socio-political schism was potentially destabilizing for the entire political system and was played out in a number of different arenas, including the arena of national symbols.

Ever since the 1820s, the day of the adoption of the 17 May 1814 Constitution has been celebrated as one of the most potent expressions of Norwegian national identity (Jor 1980; Aarnes 1994). On that day, citizens' and children's parades are organized in all towns and cities, and particularly the latter have since their inception gained immense popularity. In these parades the children and their parents dress in their very best suit or dress—often a national costume—and sing the national anthem and other patriotic songs while they

cheerfully wave the national flag. In the 1920s, however, the Socialists came to perceive the 17th of May celebrations as a concoction of the class enemy. In his memoirs Einar Gerhardsen—one of the leaders of the Labor party at the time later to become Norway’s longest-serving prime minister—recalled that 'both the Norwegian flag and the national anthem were regarded as bourgeoisie symbols.... [The Socialists] had the red flag which symbolized solidarity across national borders, they had the International as their own battle song' (Gerhardsen 1974, p. 351). The Socialists therefore began to boycott the official 17th of May celebrations and hold their own rival events instead, both on the international Day of Labor, 1 May, and on 17th of May.

In order to win over the masses for their arrangements the Socialists copied important parts of the bourgeoisie arrangement, such as children’s parades. Like the children in the official 17th of May parades, the children in the Socialist demonstrations sang songs and waved flags—only the songs were revolutionary marches and the flags unicolor red.¹⁰ The competition of parades became particularly harsh in 1924, a year marked by massive and drawn-out labor conflicts. In an editorial in *Arbeiderbladet* (*The Workers’ Gazette*)—one of the leaders of the Labor Party remarked that ‘the bitter and protracted war between the poor workers and the rich employers has with sufficient clarity

¹⁰ Remarkably, contemporary photographs show that many of the children in the Socialist parades were dressed in national costumes! Apparently the national costume, based as it was on the peasant Sunday dress, was not regarded as 'bourgeoisie' or reactionary in the same way as the national flag and anthem were.

brought home the message that there is no longer a united people behind the 17th of May.’ (Martin Tranmæl as quoted in Aaby 2001, p. 199).

The length of the various children’s parades was used as a yardstick to gauge the popular strength of each political faction. (Unsurprisingly, both sides claimed to have won.) A historian of this conflict concludes that in 1924, ‘the children’s parade was no longer an innocent symbol of unity or the foremost representation of the national community. The significance of the parade had changed: it had been turned into a powerful means of political expression’ (Aaby 2001, p. 201). While the symbolic competition in the following years was somewhat less intense, the symbolic stand-off nevertheless continued into the mid-1930s. Only in 1936-37 was the symbolical gap finally closed when the children of the workers began to participate in the official 17th of May parades together with their better-to-do coevals (while many of children from working class homes continued to march in the 1st of May demonstrations as well.) It is worth noting that this national reconciliation process took place only after the first Labor government of any duration had been formed in 1935.¹¹ At this stage the labor movement had shed its revolutionary rhetoric and become a normal political player with vested interests in the established socio-political system. This means that the closing of the ranks on the level of symbols came about only *after* the social split had been healed. It was not so much a cause as an effect of greater political harmony.

¹¹ Another Labor government had been established already in 1928, but lasted less than a month.

The final societal and national reconciliation between the left and the right took place under the impact of a common, external threat: the Nazi occupation of Norway 1940-45. The flag—along with the King's monogram and some other patriotic emblems—became the most important symbol of resistance. When the Germans forbade 17th of May celebrations, this further enhanced the value of the flag as a mobilizing symbol.

Post-war Norway has been marked by a high degree of political stability and social harmony. In a period characterized by rising living standards for all groups only a few issues have had the potential to split the nation. Foremost among them has been the question of EEC/EU membership. In two referenda—in 1972 and 1994—the majority of the population voted against joining this European organization, both times with a very narrow margin. The issue has not been laid to rest, and continues to agitate popular debate as few other issues do.

During the 1972 campaign the 'No'-movement made open use of national and nationalist themes and symbols. The movement was dominated by the political center/left; while nationalism in the interwar period had been associated with the political right, it had now migrated towards the opposite pole of the political spectrum. Remarkably, the most leftist faction in the broad and heterogeneous 'No' –movement, the Maoist Workers' Communist Party (AKP), played on nationalist sentiments more unabashedly than any other group.

The logo of the largest anti-EEC organization, 'The People's Movement' (Folkebevegelsen), consisted of stripes of red, white, and blue

arranged in the same order as in the Norwegian flag. (see figure 10) This symbol was ubiquitous and adorned virtually all of their posters, banners, and leaflets. The People's Movement also used the national flag itself extensively at their meetings and other arrangements. Some of their demonstrations were strongly reminiscent of 17th of May parades, with long columns of flag bearers in front (see figure 11). While few, if any, activists would think of themselves as nationalists, in terms of symbols nationalism had nevertheless clearly become the only game in town. The best evidence of this is that the Yes-movement *also* decided to use the three national colors in their logo. Rather than leave the national symbols entirely to the opponent, the Yes-movement, albeit hesitatingly and ultimately unsuccessfully, tried to harness them for their purposes. (see figure 12)



Figure 10 'Vote No! to UNION'



Figure 11 'No to EEC' demonstration in the main street of Oslo



Figure 12 The logo of the 'Yes to EEC'-movement

At the same time, both sides tried to portray their opponent as a traitor to the national cause. One 'Yes'-activist denounced the Maoists' usage of the flag in the anti-EEC campaign as sheer opportunism and hypocrisy: 'Even though they least of all care about the integrity of our land, they more than all other groups insist on the need to preserve full national self-determination... Temporarily infatuated with the three national colors they waive the Norwegian flag from morning until late at night.' (Lassen 1972) Conversely, activists on the No-side insisted that membership in the European community would be tantamount to a sellout of national sovereignty and dignity. A graphic expression of this message was the painting 'Norwegian Neo-Romanticism' by pop-artist Rolf Groven, which famously combined a number of crucial themes in the anti-EEC propaganda: the perceived threat of rural depopulation; fear of pollution and industrialization; the menace of an allegedly rising German eagle; and, last but not least, the loss of national independence represented by the defamation of the

flag.(see Figure 13)¹² This painting hit a raw nerve. When the artist tried to sell posters with this motif in down-town Oslo, he was arrested by the police for allegedly defiling the flag, the same offense he himself insisted that his ideological opponents were guilty of.¹³

¹² The two politicians sitting in close embrace atop the lowered flag are the leaders of the two largest pro-EEC parties, the Conservative party (*Høyre*) and the Labour party. These ostensible political foes were allegedly caught in the act of conspiring against the independence of their own country.

¹³ Author's interview with Rolf Groven, Oslo 26 May 2004.

QuickTime™ og en
Photo - JPEG-dekomprimerer
kreves for å se dette bildet.

Figure 13: Rolf Groven 'Norwegian Neo-Romanticism' (1972)

During the next campaign over membership in the EU, in 1994, many of the arguments and slogans seemed like a mere replay of the 1972 campaign. On the level of symbols, however, something had clearly changed. Compared to the situation twenty two years earlier, nationalist slogans and national emblems were used more sparsely. This is not to say that they had disappeared entirely but they did not dominate public iconography in the same way. Rolf Groven painted

another deliberately insulting anti-EU canvass—portraying the leaders of the Yes-side together with Helmut Kohl as a bunch of Bacchanalians feasting on a table covered by the Norwegian flag as a table cloth. ('Rolf Grovens Nettgalleri') In contrast to Groven's 1972 painting, however, his new canvass failed to stir passions and was largely passed over in silence. No longer the only game in town, nationalism had in the eyes of many become discredited, and could not function as a successful mobilizing strategy. Part of the explanation for this was clearly that, after the breakup of the USSR and in particular after the bloody wars of Yugoslav succession, nationalist symbols carried very different and far more sinister associations even in the Norwegian context.¹⁴ In this way, developments in new states in Eastern and Southern Europe could influence the function of national symbols in an established nation-state in another part of the continent.

After the victory in the 1994 referendum, an MP from the vehemently anti-EU Centrist party proposed to make the day of the referendum, 28 November, an official flag day. The idea did not catch on, however, not even among ardent 'No' activists. As a possible explanation behind their skepticism one Norwegian sociologist has suggested that:

the flag is a symbol of struggle only in times of war. In times of peace it shall be a unifying symbol. In terms of the interests of the No-movement it would probably have been a miscalculation to make this day an official flag day. That would have made the flag a symbol of

¹⁴ Author's conversation with Ingvild Næss Stub, information manager in 'The Europe Movement,' Oslo 2 June 2004.

division rather than a unifying symbol which the No-movement could control and play out again in times of crisis (Aagedal 1997, p. 527).

If this is a precise rendering of the strategy of the ‘No’-movement on the flag issue, it would reveal a remarkable, even cynical, willingness to exploit the national symbols for partisan purposes. It would also suggest an interesting dialectical relationship between the flag as a partisan weapon in domestic struggles and the flag as a national symbol: in order to keep its sharpness as a political weapon the flag must, paradoxically, retain its character as a generally recognized symbol of national unity.

There are strong reasons to believe that since 1994 the mobilizing potential of the national flag in the EU struggle has continued to decline. In the current latent phase of this struggle, when both sides are warming up to a future third referendum that seems ever more likely, neither movement uses the national symbols to any noticeable degree. While spokespersons of both the ‘No’ and ‘Yes’-movement point out that they have not yet made any final decisions on logo and campaign profiles,¹⁵ it is remarkable that the national colors are completely absent from the current version of the logo and information material of both movements. The flag seems to have reverted to its unifying position above the political fray.

¹⁵ Author’s interviews in the headquarters of the ‘No’-movement and the ‘Europe Movement,’ Oslo 2 June 2004.

Conclusions

Some conclusions, I believe, may be drawn from the cases analysed above. As all symbols are arbitrary, there can be no 'natural' flags or other national symbols. By the same token, there can be no artificial ones either, since the concept of artificiality presupposes the existence of a non-artificial variety of the same specimen.

Since there are no inherent qualities in state symbols that prevent them from being accepted, and likewise, no particular design and details will in and of themselves guarantee their success. The divisiveness vs. unifying potential of new state symbols is first and foremost a function of whom they are being associated with and how they are being exploited politically. If a symbol or a design is seen as belonging to one political or ethnic group more than others, it will be extremely hard to get the other groups and parties in the country to accept it as their own. This is not to say that symbols *create* divisions in society. In most cases the order of cause and effect is the opposite: The divisions in society come first, and disagreements over state symbols are a function of these divisions. However, some symbols are easier to attack for their alleged divisive qualities than others. This is particularly true, *pace* Smith, of symbols that are rooted in an ethnic past.

Symbol politics is more about politics than about symbols. But, as the Russian case illustrates, this also means that a way may be found out of a symbolic deadlock when the political climate changes, and when all major parties

conclude that there is more to be gained by seeking compromise than to continue the war of symbolism. A compromise may take many different forms. As the Russian case suggest, the solution does not have to be aesthetically or artistically consistent, and can well be a collage of seemingly disparate elements.

Normally when national symbols are employed as a weapon in a political struggle, the symbolic strife is triggered by groups who unfurl an alternative flag, either ethno-territorial separatists, as in Bosnia, or anti-nationalists, as in Norway in the 1920s. Occasionally, however, as the Norwegian EU-struggles in the 1970s and 1990s show, state-oriented nationalists may also take the initiative to a politicization of national symbols. For state-oriented nationalists, however, it will in the long run be self-defeating to pursue a political strategy that threatens to tear apart the nation (as they perceive it). In any case the national symbols of established states seem to be robust enough to retain, or regain, their position as unifying symbols also after episodes when they have been exploited for partisan political purposes.

In the beginning, a national symbol for a new state will, inevitably, always be regarded as novel and unfamiliar. However, the flags of today's consolidated nation-states were also at one point new and 'artificial'. Since there are no inherent qualities in any symbol that link it emotionally or cognitively to the entity which it symbolizes, this linkage has to be learned. If the Bosnian flag seems more artificial today than most other flags, it is primarily because Bosnia is still at the very start of the learning process.

Certain important psychological mechanisms facilitates the job of symbolic nation-builders. The first is what has been called the 'normative force of what actually is.' (Arvidsson and Fogelklou 1984, p. 34) By this expression is meant that alternatives which actually exist have a kind of ontological upper hand over hypothetical alternatives. This can serve as an important source of institutional and state legitimacy. The national symbols that were discarded will gradually fade from memory (unless some opposition groups with high visibility go on using them), while the ones that are adopted will be displayed all over the landscape and the citizens will constantly be reminded of them. Gradually they will grow accustomed to them.

In new states that manage to survive their infancy period nation-building will gradually fade into nation-maintenance. While nation-building and nation-maintenance are closely related as stages of the same process, the latter is normally a far easier task than the former. In an established nation-state not only the state itself, but also its main institutions and symbols will be taken for granted in a way that is not the case in new states.

A national compromise can never satisfy all protagonists, and nation-builders will normally try to win over, first and foremost, the centrist 'silent' majority and turn a deaf ear to the clamor of vociferous fringe groups. In today's Russia, the most pro-Western liberal-democratic parties, the Union of Rightist Forces and Yabloko, are increasingly regarded as fringe phenomena. Their dissent is therefore not likely to influence the priorities of the Kremlin or the attitudes of the population at large. Lilia Shevtsova, as we saw, claims that

controversy over the new-old Russian national anthem will continue to split the Russian nation 'in the foreseeable future'. If we accept her prognosis, the prospects for the intermediate and long term future may still be less bleak. As a national flag and anthem gradually gain acceptance in a population those politicians who continue to make a point of not respecting them will be branded as anti-patriots. Their demonstrative actions will only have the effect of driving them into deeper isolation. The original motivation behind their protest—such as solidarity with the victims of Stalinism—will be largely forgotten and their point be lost on the public. Since there is no inherent linkage between a symbol and what it symbolizes the linkage between them cannot only be learned, but also 'de-learned' or forgotten.

Another powerful psychological mechanism that may boost the prestige of national symbols is Pavlov's 'law of association'. If state symbols can be linked to events and situations that the citizens psychologically associate with pride, joy, and high spirits, these good feelings may rub off on the flag and other national symbols and enhance their emotional value. The most obvious way through which this is done is participation in international sports events. Even though few if any may feel anything special about a newly designed flag, many will come to feel a lump in their throats and tears in their eyes when, as the national flag is slowly raised and the national anthem played, the top athletes of the nation ascend the winners' block at international sports tournaments. Whenever that happens few people will ask about the ethnic, ideological, or social membership of the athletes. In such situations, the athletes do not

represent any particular section of society, but the Nation and its state, the nation-state.

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