
The European Union

1. Flag

- Created in 1955
and adopted in 1985

The flag of the European Union (EU) consists of a blue background spangled with twelve golden stars set in a circle. This arrangement symbolises the unity, solidarity and harmony that exists among the peoples of Europe. The number of stars does not reflect the number of member states, it is the circle itself which symbolises unity. Indeed, the number twelve is a symbol of perfection and plenitude in many cultures.



The flag was initially used to represent the Council of Europe in Strasbourg, a body tasked with watching over human rights and with promoting European culture. In the early 'fifties, the Council suggested displaying fifteen stars to reflect the number of members in the Council of Europe at the time. The Sarre region being one of the members but not an independent state, it proved impossible to achieve unanimity over that figure. After a series of debates, however, a decision was reached to adopt a symbolic number of stars, and that number has never changed since.

The emblem of the Council of Europe came into force in 1955 in compliance with a decree approved by its principal forum, the ministerial conference (comprising the member states' foreign affairs ministers and representatives). At the same time, the conference urged the other European institutions to adopt it in their turn in order to avoid appearing to call into question the complementarity, solidarity and sentiment of unity in democratic Europe by displaying different emblems.

The European Parliament was to become the second European institution to use the symbol, in 1983, and in the same year it adopted a resolution urging that the flag created by the Council of Europe in 1955 become the official Community flag. It also stressed the need, in June 1984, to promote Europe's identity and image both with its own citizens and throughout the world.

In 1985 the European Council, the body comprising the EU's heads of state and government members charged with deliberating the European Union's overall policy guidelines and priorities, decided to adopt the blue flag with twelve stars as the official symbol of the European Union (or of the "European Community" as it was known at the time). The flag was raised for the first time outside the buildings of the European Commission on 29 May 1986, to the accompaniment of the European anthem which had been decreed the previous year.

The use of the European flag has become far more widespread since then. Today it is flown by the European Union's member states alongside their own national flags both on public buildings and at official ceremonies and events.

2. Anthem

- The Fourth Movement of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony (*Ode to Joy*)
- Composed by Ludwig van Beethoven
- Created in 1824 and adopted in 1972

"The Ode to Joy" is the last movement of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. When it was written in Berlin in 1824, the critics were particularly harsh. It is the composer's only symphony requiring human voices. The lyrics were taken from a poem written by Friedrich von Schiller in 1785, entitled "Ode to Joy". Schiller's poem embodies the ideal of brotherhood which the author felt towards mankind and which was shared by Beethoven. The poem had a major effect on Beethoven when he was still only twenty-two years old and he soon began to dream of composing a suitable melody for the text, although he was only to succeed in achieving that dream in the twilight years of his life.

The idea of a European anthem began to take shape in 1949. Several draft anthems were submitted including the "Ode to Joy", which was proposed for the first time in 1955. The Assembly of the Council of Europe designated the "Fourth Movement of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony" as the European anthem in 1972, although it rejected Schiller's lyrics. It was decided during a European Commission round table in 1972 that Schiller's poem was "not specifically European in nature", so the European anthem is not actually a sung anthem. The official instrumental version was entrusted to celebrated orchestra conductor Herbert von Karajan.

In 1985 the member countries' heads of state adopted the symphony, without words, as the official anthem, leaving it to the universal language of music to conjure up the ideals of freedom, peace and solidarity in which Europe believes.

The anthem does not symbolise the European Union (EU) alone but Europe in the broadest sense of the term. Thus it is not intended to replace the European Union member states' individual national anthems but to celebrate the values that those member states share.

