

Conference of the Speakers of the European Union Parliaments
"What's in a Name?" – A Reflection on Symbols and Values
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Ladies and gentlemen,

"What's in a name?" Shakespeare asked this timeless question — suggesting that the true essence of things lies beyond what we call them.

And yet, in public life, names and symbols carry real weight. They reflect our values, our memory, our shared purpose.

In the 80s and 90s, I followed European Union summits closely, as a journalist. I remember powerful moments with leaders like François Mitterrand, Helmut Kohl, and Margaret Thatcher. Mitterrand once said: "Politics is exercised in symbols and symbolism." That phrase stayed with me.

I thought of it again just days ago, when a presidential candidate in Poland burned the European flag. A flag that represents not bureaucracy, but our shared values about democracy. That act brought Shakespeare's question back to mind — and I want to share a brief reflection.

Consider the flag of the Council of Europe: twelve golden stars on a blue field. No national markings. Only universal ideals: unity, harmony, and the rule of law.

At 75 years old, the Council remained a cornerstone of our continent. It sets democratic standards and has helped many countries on their path to EU membership.

We steadily support enlargement under the condition that all candidate countries respect our common values.

Symbols like our flag are more than decoration — they are anchors of meaning. “Totalitarianism begins with the destruction of shared meaning — and symbols are the first target”, wrote Hannah Arendt: Let us remain vigilant.

When symbols fall, so can the foundations of our democracy.

Thank you.