

Present Representations of the National Past

## **Symbols and the National Representation of the Past**

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### *Abstract*

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The aim of this paper is to present an analytical model framework on the representations of the national past through a case study: the celebration of the Eleventh of September in Catalonia, the National Day. On 11th September Catalonia commemorates the defeat it suffered at the hands of the Spanish troops of Philip V of Spain in 1714. Catalonia, which had been a sovereign nation up to that point, lost its national rights and liberties, with its own laws abolished and the Catalan language and culture prohibited.

Therefore, for Catalans the Eleventh of September represents the loss of their political liberties.<sup>1</sup> To the eyes of a foreigner it might seem strange that this date, which commemorates a defeat, has become the national day of a country. However, it is important to bear in mind the activist significance of this celebration, and that it has been maintained through its history until the present day. So the commemoration of this date has institutional components —given that it is the official National Day—, activist components and —more recently— festive components. Moreover, the commemoration of the Eleventh of September as National Day of Catalonia (the *Diada*), is very recent. It was first commemorated at the turn of the twentieth century, and did not legally become

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<sup>1</sup> In the case of Valencia and the Balearic Islands, the national days commemorate the respective arrivals of King Jaume I to these territories, which were incorporated into the Catalan crown. Moreover, in Valencia the most Catalanist sectors commemorate the battle of Almansa every 25th April with a mass concert of music in Catalan and various activist events.

the national day of Catalonia until 1980, with the restoration of the Catalan Parliament after the Franco dictatorship.

## **1. The forms of symbolic representation of the past**

This case has interesting features as a pattern of the present representation of the past and the uses of symbols.

### **A) The oblivion and re-emergence of the 1714 reference**

In fact, the date and the events that led to the commemoration (11th September 1714) had hardly been cultivated by historiography, or evoked by the different formats of construction of the mythical national tales (cinema, literature, etc.) until only a few years ago. In 2000 some novels began to appear about the fall of Barcelona at the hands of the troops of Philip V,<sup>2</sup> as well as some academic works on the history of the seventeenth century and events of 1714. No producer has yet emerged from Catalan cinema prepared to risk such an ambitious undertaking. But since the showing of *Braveheart* on Catalan screens, there are those who dream that one day Hollywood will pick up the heroic legend of 1714 for a blockbuster. The epic of the events of 1714 would certainly be suited to the big screen, just as they were recorded with admiration by the contemporary chroniclers of Europe with books such as *The Deplorable History of the Catalans* (London, 1714).<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, the popular memory of Catalans has focused more on the date of 11th September 1977 than that of 1714. The Eleventh of September 1977, at the height of the democratic Transition and at the time when it was not clear what the development of the political change would be, a million people went out into the street shouting the demand “Volem l'Estatut” (We want the Statute).

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<sup>2</sup> See Alfred Bosch, 1714 (novelized trilogy). Columna-Planeta, 2002-2004; Josep Maria Torras, *Felip V contra Catalunya*. Rafael Dalmau Editor, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> *The Deplorable History of the Catalans* is the title of a booklet published in London in 1714, where the Catalan cause is defended. The author explains that Catalonia, a brave ancient land, had been betrayed by the European monarchies and left to their mercy.

That demonstration had been the most important in the history of Catalonia until that time, and the most important in terms of the number of people during the political Transition.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the National Day 1977 has remained as a mythical reference for Catalans. Since then, the most sovereigntist sectors of Catalanism have demonstrated every eleventh of September to call for the independence of Catalonia, while the institutional celebration focused, until 2004, on the floral offering to the monument of Rafael Casanova. In fact, the commemoration of the Eleventh of September has different “faces”, which respond to the different forms of representation of the past and to different political aims. Next, we want to go further in the analysis of this diversity of approaches in relation to bringing the symbols that represent the past into the present.

## **B) The different forms of symbolic rituals in the celebration of the National Day**

The National Day of Catalonia has different dimensions and formats. In the last five years, however, there have been some important changes, which have made all the events and meanings adopted by this commemoration more complex. For some years, the National Day has been divided into diverse events, all located in a very limited area at the centre of the city of Barcelona.

### *The popular dimension*

The most popular act of the day is in fact that of hanging the *senyera* (Catalan flag) on the balcony or window of homes. Not all families do this, but many people do. But the most central celebration are them which take place with the monuments and historical places in the centre of Barcelona.

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<sup>4</sup> Years later two demonstrations have surpassed the Eleventh of September of 1977: the demonstration of 23 November 2000, after the assassination of the socialist politician Ernest Lluch at the hands of ETA, and the demonstration against the war in Iraq, 15th February 2003.

First thing in the morning begins the floral offering of the diverse associations, and the private and public institutions of the country, which ends at midday.<sup>5</sup> A wide spectrum of civil associations and institutions participate in the floral offering (the city football teams, trade unions, cultural associations, professional associations, etc.). Each one places a wreath of flowers with its emblems at the foot of the statue of Rafael Casanova. The participation of the political parties in this event has always attracted shouted abuse from the radical Catalanists against the Spanish-leaning parties, such as the PP. But also from the more moderate Catalanists (CiU). Since 2004 the PP decided not to participate in this floral offering because of the virulence with which they were shouted at (and attacked with eggs).

### *The institutional dimension*

Meanwhile, the President of the Government of Catalonia, Pasqual Maragall (PSC), launched the initiative, in 2004, of holding a purely institutional event separate from the popular initiative and outside the reach of the attacks which on that day the political parties receive for their moderation in the defence of the liberties of Catalonia. This has also been interpreted as a change that seeks to symbolically move on after 23 years of the government of Jordi Pujol (CiU). This event is organized by the Catalan Parliament and is held in Ciutadella Park, just in front of the Parliament. It has been highly controversial, especially because of the presence of singers who only use Spanish on such a symbolic day for Catalonia, which for so many years has had to confront the persecution of its language and the imposition of Spanish since 1714.

### *The activist dimension*

This is the most significant dimension during the day of the Eleventh of September, although for the press the role of the institutional and floral offering

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<sup>5</sup> The statue of Rafael Casanova is currently located in the same place where he was wounded in 1714, at the old gate of Sant Pere and the current crossroads of Ronda de Sant Pere and Ali-Bei Street.

is far more important. Apart from the monument to Rafael Casanova, there are two spaces that historically play host to the most activist events: the Ronda de Sant Pere and the Fossar de les Moreres. All along the street of Ronda de Sant Pere are stalls from diverse Catalanist organizations and parties (ERC and the young CiUs). Therefore, this space is like a boulevard where throughout the morning the people can buy activist material, with diverse emblems and symbols. In the evening the demonstration is held, each year attracting between 5,000 and 7,000 people.

A hundred metres away, behind the historic church of Santa Maria del Mar, there is another space of activist commemoration: the Fossar de les Moreres, the place where those who fought in the battle of 1714 are buried. The inscription on the commemorative monument is from a poem by Frederic Soler: *Al Fossar de les Moreres no s'hi enterra cap traïdor, fins perden nostres banderes serà l'urna de l'honor* (In the Fossar de les Moreres not a traitor is buried; even if we lose our emblems it will be the urn of honour). During the morning there are meetings of the most radical political groups of left-wing Catalanism. The place is full to overflowing with stalls of symbolic emblems, t-shirts, pamphlets, etc.

### *Civil Society dimension*

It is difficult to separate the activism from a celebration that commemorates the defeat at the hands of Spanish and French troops. However, there are aspects of the National Day that have a more popular dimension, or to put it another way, less politicized, and above all separated from the political parties. In a more activist spirit, since 2000 the Festa per la Llibertat (Festival of Liberties) is organized every year, with a concert at the end of the day. This mass concert is organized by a group of Catalanist associations, under the name of the Eleventh of September Committee. Its aim is to popularize the National Day as a festival, combining activism, the simple fact of going out into the street to enjoy the atmosphere, and the meeting of the associations of the country. Throughout the day, on the same site where the concert takes place, and for the last three years, a Fair of Organizations is held, which attracts thousands of people. There are nationalist organizations, but also cultural organizations

(some of them immigrant), trade unions, etc., take part. There are children's activities and performances to entertain visitors and talks and debates on diverse topics related with nationalist demands.

The Festival of Liberties represents an element of transformation in the celebration of the National Day, as it places the commemoration in the sphere of civil society. Curiously, this is how the celebration of the Eleventh of September began, as an initiative of Catalanist civil society. This transformation was also produced through the format proposed by this celebration, that is, the holding of a fair of organizations and a concert; in other words, activities that are not strictly political, which are not the classic format of political activity and also form part of the National Day: the meeting and the demonstration. The Festa per la Llibertat therefore seeks to cross the line that separates the militant members of an organization from those who simply want to celebrate the National Day. In fact, the most important aim of the Eleventh of September Committee is to reach the general public, and achieve the participation of those people who do not have a clearly nationalist posture.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, it is a proposal that seeks to *popularize* the celebration of the National Day, in this case slightly separate from the commemoration of 11th of September 1714 or from any other commemoration and closely linked to the present. During the concert, a manifesto is read which normally refers to the current demands of Catalanist civil society, and of civil society in the world (condemnation of the terrorist attacks of 11th September in New York, call for peace in Iraq, etc.).

So far, this proposal has managed to bring together 15,000 people in the activities it organizes. This is as many as in the institutional celebration organized by the Catalan Parliament in Ciutadella Park, which started in 2004, and more than the independentist demonstration. Therefore, we can talk of a certain success in this proposal in the context of events in celebration of the National Day.

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<sup>6</sup> This aspect has never been evaluated, but it would be interesting to carry out a survey among those attending the Festa per la Llibertat in order to discover the different motivations for attending the Fair and the concert, and the significance they give to this way of celebrating the National Day.

### *Commemorations in conflict*

Symbolic devices (Sperber, 1974) work independently, in so far as it is impossible to pin them down with “objective” interpretations. Moreover, the interpretations that can be made of the symbols are also in themselves symbolic. Therefore, they are “objectively” and “anthropologically” ambiguous. Although the popular or culturally anthropological substrate is present, the politicization of the symbols converts them into references of clearer (sometimes explicit) formulations with respect to the orientation and the characteristics that the national community must have. In the political field (and the nation is the political field par excellence), what we will call *symbolic action* takes place; that is, an action consciously directed towards the formation and the strengthening of some determined symbolic references over others. This is what generates conflicts, because ideologically oriented action converts symbolic resources into tools of power and of counter-power.

The opposed interpretations with respect to the characteristics of the national community also create opposed performances of the symbolic elements, in short, of political discourse.

*This is quite apparent in the Catalonia-Spain relationship, in which the symbolic conflicts reveal a conflict in the recognition of Catalonia as a “national” entity. Thus, Catalan public radio and television stations are “national” because it has been so established by the Catalan Parliament. But when Spanish public radio and television stations call themselves “national”, they also include the territory of Catalonia, which is not recognised by the Spanish state as “national”. The same thing happens in numerous cases. So that the concept “national” generates many ambiguities and conflicts, and the interpretations are quite different depending on whether they are made in a Spanish framework or in a Catalan framework.*

*This ambiguity and confusion in the political framework are also reflected internally in the Catalan case. What is “national” in Catalonia, that is institutional (which belongs to the Catalan government sphere, to the public sphere), must compete with other symbolic definitions of reality. Thus, the symbolic references*

multiply as they compete to occupy the political space. This gives way to the apparent confusion between institutional, activist symbols of private or more popular use, with their corresponding Catalan and Spanish counter-symbols. This context propitiates a situation of choice, in which citizens in some way select their symbols, so that the truly “national” symbols are not clear to all. And this can also be seen on the National Day.

The different ways of celebrating the National Day that we have seen represent different forms of bringing the past into the present and of representing it. In other words, the defeat of the Eleventh of September is conceived in one way or another in terms of the current ideological position. For those who believe that Catalonia must be accommodated within the Spanish political-judicial framework, those events represent the start of a new era, the recovery of Catalonia as a country, thanks to the effort and work of its people. For those who desire full sovereignty of Catalonia, the Eleventh of September represents the end of an era, a loss from which Catalonia will not recover until it regains its sovereignty.

Meanwhile, the forms of representation of this past respond to different strategic logics. There are those who support the construction of rituals that unite, which form a consensus, around which the identity of Catalonia can be strengthened. This is the case of the institutional celebration and of the events organized by the Eleventh of September Committee. In contrast, there are sectors that put forward their own posture, differentiated from the others, which they consider more legitimate because it is more radical. This is the case of the celebration at the Fossar de les Moreres, where the most radical sectors make their place, as a symbol of resistance.

### *Public symbols and private symbols?*

So, both the symbolic rituals and the occupation of the space form a map where the different Catalanist tendencies are distributed, each one of them representing the past and bringing it into the present in their own way. The presence in the press of these symbolic differences is visible when determined symbolic representations or ritualizations are put in open conflict (for example,

in the change of institutional celebration, or the attacks with the throwing of eggs at political representatives in front of the Rafael Casanova monument). The non-institutional celebrations of the Eleventh of September are used to having very low visibility in the press and on television. Therefore, this symbolic complexity we have described is seen in the street, but never reflected in the press. One might think that the popular expressions of Catalan nationalism are accustomed to being hidden by the great newspapers of Barcelona, to say nothing of those in Madrid. It is a phenomenon that is increasingly more apparent, as sovereignty establishes itself among the citizens.

Therefore, in terms of the most popular expressions of Catalanist demands, especially those from civil society (and not the political parties) the role of the press has so far been to conceal rather than inform, as long, as we have said, as there is no open conflict or newsworthy event. In other words, when there is open controversy in which the political parties participate. The last clear conflict of this kind, and therefore reflected in the press, was the campaign “Un país, una bandera” (One Country, One Flag), which demands that on the day of the Eleventh of September the town councils should only fly the Catalan flag. That is, without the accompaniment of the Spanish flag. Many town councils (177) have done so. The motive of the campaign is to call for the defence of Catalonia’s own symbols.<sup>7</sup>

Both this set of symbolic conflicts we have described and the concealment by the press of determined symbolic representations makes us consider that we must distinguish between the presence of the symbols in the street and the media and institutional presence of the symbols. And even more so, it is necessary to distinguish between the *public symbols* and the *private symbols*. This duality is highly visible in terms of the remembrance of the Eleventh of September 1714. In the context of private consumption there has been a revival of the presence of this “myth”. Thus, we can find a whole range of products that bear this symbol: stickers, caps, t-shirts, etc. We also find a growing presence on Internet through blogs.<sup>8</sup> This is a phenomenon that encompasses many

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<sup>7</sup> At the end of the text you will find a list of websites of interest.

<sup>8</sup> For example, <http://barcelona1714.blogspot.com/>.

other national and activist symbols of Catalans. It is important to closely bear in mind the role of youth culture in the transformation of political symbols. These symbolic elements are a fundamental resource in the construction of youth identity, in the process of identification with the peer group, or further, in the formation of their opinions. In this context, it is important to note the profusion of symbolic elements in youth merchandising, which is marketed by associations, in concerts, political events and celebrations like that of the Eleventh of September, or through Internet. So the private uses of symbolic elements constitute a highly relevant facet of the formation of a political and national symbolic context, to the extent that we can say that it is one of the factors that most contribute to the renewal of the transformation of political symbols.

### **3. Conclusion. The renewal of symbols: the return of 1714?**

Let's remember that symbols are the condensation of socially constructed meanings. The transformation of these meanings results in the same symbol having different significance without changing in form. The symbols also go through transformations in form, in their expression. They are *renewed*. The *renewal* of the symbols means that they are set out in relation to the present, with the ideology of the present. This is a phenomenon which we can observe in the case of the Eleventh of September 1714.

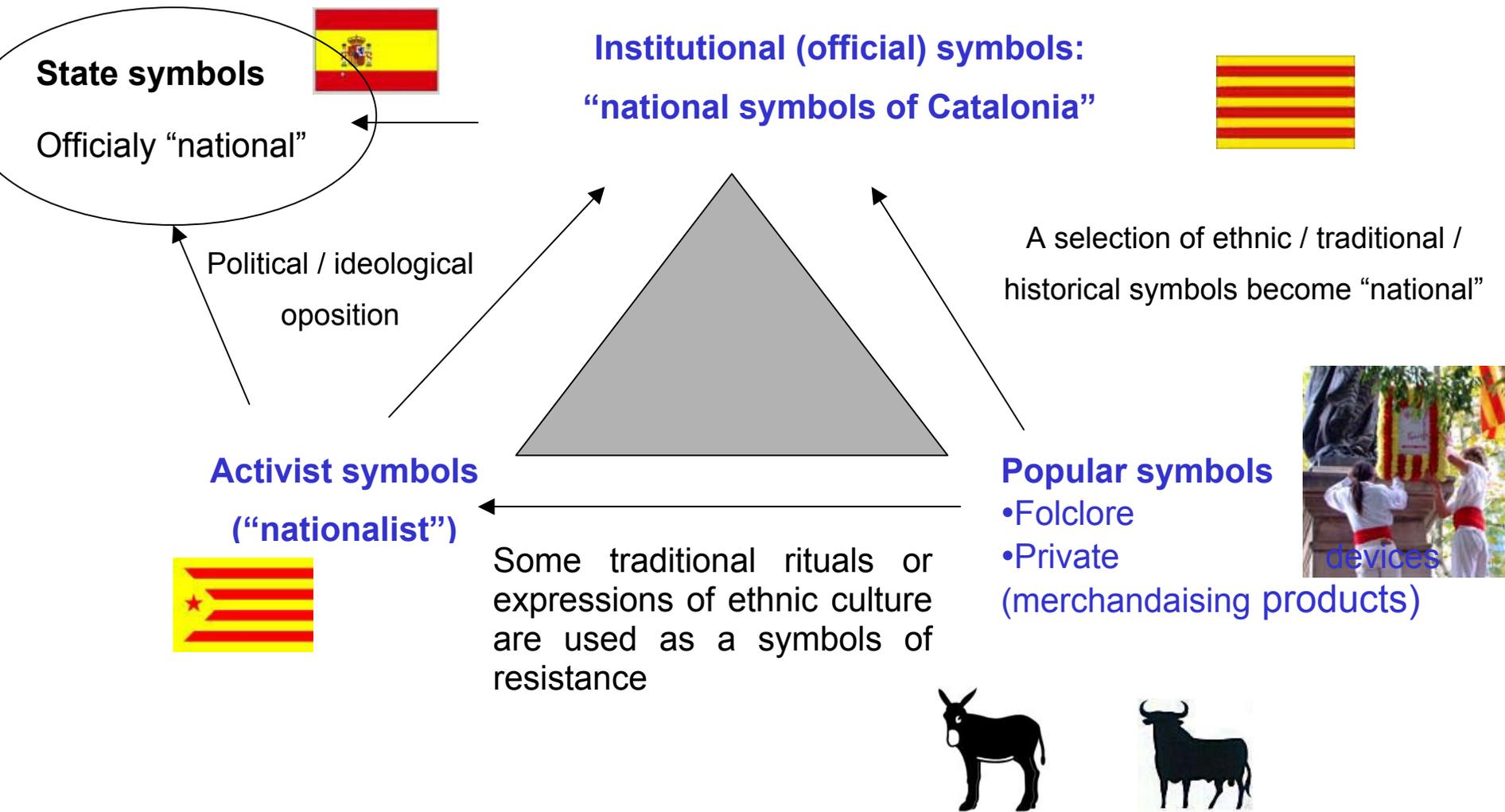
In terms of the symbols related with 1714, we have seen a growing presence of them in these private uses, also with repercussions in the public sphere. The social interest of these questions is growing in Catalonia. In the context of 1714, but also in terms of other symbolic elements, we can see the appearance of new sources of diffusion. On the one hand, as we have said, the merchandising aimed at private consumption. In this context another remarkable phenomenon is produced: that of the proliferation of symbolic references as consumer products. Is there a market of symbols? It is possible if we understand a market as the existence of an offer from which we can choose and obtain whatever most satisfies our need for national references. On the other hand, there is the appearance of publications about history with clear aims of promotion and entertainment. Therefore, the symbolic discourse on the nation, which is based on its past, acquires highly dynamic forms. It is such that raising awareness of

the past, of the symbolic references and of everything which is recreation, artistic representation or mythical evocation, has powerful tools of promotion.

In the case of 1714 it is worth saying that the current political context in Catalonia is reviving its representation as a highly present reference of the past. The most reliable proof of this is the commemoration, since 2005, of diverse dates that recall the 300 years since the Catalan defeat. These commemorative events occur at a local level, organized by the councils and civil society. Thus, in 2005 the 300 years of the *Pacte dels Vigatans*, the start of the War of Succession, was commemorated in Vic. In 2006 there was a commemoration in Vila-real (Valencia), which was burnt by Bourbon troops three centuries ago because the inhabitants of the town refused to accept Philip V of Spain as king and defended their Valencian liberties and laws. The same has happened in Dénia and other towns will follow. Moreover, the government of Catalonia is planning a major commemoration for 2014.

At the start of this paper we said that the National Day of Catalonia has as its point of reference more the date of 1977 than 1714. However, this is changing. These two references of the Catalan past are changing roles. Until the consensus of the Transition marked Spanish and Catalan political life, the reference of 1977 was a clear symbol for Catalans, because it represented the will of the Catalan people for democracy and national unity and, with the demands for the Statute, to adhere to the Spanish democratic process in the hope of having a place within it. But now this consensus has been broken. The political reactions to the new Statute proposal by Catalonia have been very negative, and the anti-Catalan climate that has spread through Spain, although it has always existed, is now very violent. So the situation is more conflictive. And the reference of 1714 offers many parallelisms with the current situation: anti-Catalanism, contempt for the Catalan institutions by Spanish politicians, and strong demands by Catalans in terms of the recognition of their nation and their rights and liberties. So it is quite clear that in this context the commemoration of the Eleventh of September can take on a new significance, which it will be important to observe over the next few years.

# Symbols and counter-symbols in the case of nations without states



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