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ROOTS AND PERSPECTIVES OF APPROXIMATION OF LAWS ON MOTOR VEHICLES REGISTRATION AMONG EU MEMBER STATES

Abstract:

In 1998, the EU Council adopted Council Regulation (EC) No 2411/98 of 3rd November 1998 on the recognition in intra-Community traffic of the distinguishing sign of the Member State in which motor vehicles and their trailers are registered. The purpose of the regulation was primarily to reflect a situation when several EU Member States had introduced a model registration plate which, on the extreme left, was displaying a blue zone containing the twelve yellow stars representing the European flag plus the distinguishing sign of the Member State of registration. The future of European license plates will be connected with European integration even if individual Member States maintain their national features.

Keywords:

EU internal market, mutual recognition, vehicle registration.

Introduction

In 1998, the EU Council adopted Council Regulation (EC) No 2411/98 of 3rd November 1998 on the recognition in intra-Community traffic of the distinguishing sign of the Member State in which motor vehicles and their trailers are registered. The purpose of the regulation was primarily to reflect a situation when several EU Member States had introduced a model registration plate which, on the extreme left, was displaying a blue zone containing the twelve yellow stars representing the European flag plus the distinguishing sign of the Member State of registration. First state introducing such a new type of "European license plate" was Germany - to be more specific the two federal states of Berlin and Brandenburg adopted such a model in 1994.[1]

Germany thus became again a country of a big influence on vehicle registration in Europe. Since the end of 19th century, German model competing with the French one has been shaping the format of European license plates up to now when German type seems to have won the competition.

1. German style format versus French style format

The first country introducing vehicle (obviously non-motor vehicle) regis-

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[1] HERZFELD, A., Die Geschichte der deutschen Kfz-Kennzeichen, Leipzig, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Flaggenkunde, 2010.

tration was apparently France in 1783. The decree of Royal Council imposed to all owners of carriages to fix on their vehicles a metallic plate with their name and address.[2] Since then a dark license plate of metal or mineral with white characters and numerals was born. The mineral substance of ancient French plates baptized the French category of *"plaques minéralogiques"* as an official legal term for license plates in French speaking countries. Black plate with white or silver characters and numerals became a symbol of French style license plates in Europe. In 1893, French local authorities started to issue black plates with name, address and number attributed to the vehicle. Such plates had to be fixed at the left side of each vehicle.[3]

At the end of 19th century, several European countries established a system of motor vehicle registration. The first national system of license plates was established by the Dutch authorities on 26th April 1898. "French style" black plates were containing white numerals starting from "1". The series achieved "2065" in 1906. Number "11" was omitted because in Dutch it gives a reference to fools.[4]
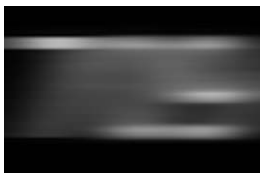
Dutch "French style" license plate of 1898 - 1906.[5]

Three years later, "French style" license plates were introduced as well in France through its own national system of vehicle registration of 1901.[6]

At the same time in Germany, individual states were starting to issue license plates. In 1899 the state of Hessen issued first white plate with black numerals.[7] Distinction between "French style" black plates and "German style" white plates was thus launched at the very early stage of vehicle registration in Europe.

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[2] Arrêt du Conseil du Roi du 20 avril 1783.

[3] ORSELLI, J., De la plaque nominative à la plaque minéralogique au XIXème siècle, Comité Histoire du ministère de l'Ecologie, de l'Energie, du Développement durable et de l'Aménagement du territoire, Paris, 2010.

[4] TER WAL, A., Registration plate encyclopedia - the Netherlands, Gorinchem, 2002.

[5] TOMÁŠEK, M., Registrační značky v Evropské unii - Nizozemsko *(License plates in the European Union - Netherlands),* Czech news agency, 7th June 2010.

[6] Circulaire du 11 septembre 1901 sur la mise en place du système d'immatriculation basé sur le principe des arrondissements minéralogiques.

[7] HERZFELD, A., Die Geschichte der deutschen Kfz-Kennzeichen, Leipzig, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Flaggenkunde, 2010.

Berlin "German style" license plate of 1901.[8])

Until World War I, both styles expanded to further European countries. "French style" was adopted by Belgium (1911), Luxembourg (1895), United Kingdom (1903), Portugal (1901) and Romania (1908). "German style" was introduced in German national system of 1906, in Austria-Hungary (1905)[9]), in Italy (1903), in Denmark (1903), in Spain (1901) and in Sweden (1906).

In the 1920's, new states of Europe were about to introduce their own vehicle registration. Most of them adopted German style plates like Bulgaria, Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland[10]) or Greece.

Greek license plate of 1922.[11])

Interesting situation can be followed in the countries succeeding the former Austro-Hungarian Empire which maintained the system of 1905 until early 1930's.[12]) Austria introduced new "French style" black plates with silver characters and numerals in 1930, Czechoslovakia did so a year later.[13]) In Hungary the authorities due to a small amount of vehicles were not issuing any new plates at all. The old plates of imperial times were used until 1940's.

Czechoslovak "French style" license plate of 1931.[14])

[8]) TOMÁŠEK, M., Registrační značky v Evropské unii - Německo *(License plates in the European Union - Germany)*, Czech news agency, 19[th]May 2010.

[9]) In Hungarian part of the Empire the numerals on white plates were black but the characters were red.

[10]) Polish license plates of early 1920's were in "national" colors, i.e. red characters and black numerals on a white plate.

[11]) TOMÁŠEK, M., Registrační značky v Evropské unii - Řecko *(License plates in the European Union - Greece)*, Czech news agency, 6th October 2010.

[12]) HANS SEPER, H., KRACKOWIZER, H., BRUSATTI, A., Österreichische Kraftfahrzeuge von Anbeginn bis heute, Verlag Welsermuhl, Wels, 1992.

[13]) MARINOV, P., České poznávací značky - historie, dnešek, budoucnost *(Czech license plates - history, nowadays, future),* Kampe, Praha, 2007.

[14]) TOMÁŠEK, M., Registrační značky v Evropské unii - Česko *(License plates in the European Union - Czech Republic)*, Czech news agency, 7th September 2009.

During 1930's, not only successors of Austria-Hungary like Austria or Cze-choslovakia switched from "German style" to "French style" license plates but also Italy (1927) or Poland (1937) underwent the same procedure.

Polish license plate of 1937.[15])

An interesting system of rotation of "French style" and "German style" plates was introduced during 1930's in Estonia and Finland: in odd years black surface and white characters and numerals, in even ears vice versa.

Estonian license plate of 1935.[16])

Although European license plates have always been considered very boring in comparison with colorful American plates, during late 1920's some European states adopted colorful plates as well. First of all, Belgium in 1927 introduced its famous red-white plates which have been in use up to now.[17]) In 1929 Yugoslavia introduced green-yellow license plates with red and black numerals.

During World War II, Germany imposed its system to all occupied territories. White plates with black characters and numerals replaced "French style" plates in Austria, Czechoslovakia, or Luxembourg. On the contrary in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania the Soviet occupation in the 1940's brought "French style" black plates with white numerals and black Cyrillic characters.

Soviet license plate for Estonia of 1941.[18])

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[15]) TOMÁŠEK, M., Registrační značky v Evropské unii - Polsko *(License plates in the European Union - Poland)*, Czech news agency, 22nd June 2010.

[16]) TOMÁŠEK, M, Registrační značky v Evropské unii - Estonsko *(License plates in the European Union - Estonia)*, Czech news agency, 6th October 2009.

[17]) DUPONT, A., MATHIS, R., Plaques d'immatriculation belges, Liège, 2009.

[18]) TOMÁŠEK, M., Registrační značky v Evropské unii - Estonsko *(License plates in the European Union - Estonia)*, Czech news agency, 6th October 2009.

After World War II, some countries switched back from German to pre-war "French style" model, like Austria or Luxembourg. Czechoslovakia maintained German style plates.[19])

Czechoslovak license plate for Prague of 1946.[20])

The post-War competition between "German style" and "French style" license plates ended with a success of white license plates with dark characters and numerals. "German style" license plates became an EC standard in 1970's thanks to Council Directive 70/156/EEC of 6th February 1970 on the approximation of the laws of the Member States relating to the type-approval of motor vehicles and their trailers. EC Members States using up to that time "French style" plates were about to introduce "German" model: Ireland (1970), United Kingdom (1973), Luxembourg (1974), Malta (1974), Denmark (1976), Netherlands (1978) or Italy (1986). France was the last old Member State which did so in 1993. The EC standard did not rigorously impose colors white and black. Luxembourg or Netherlands thus introduced yellow plates, United Kingdom or France use front white plates and rear yellow plates. A special case is Belgium using still traditional red characters and numerals on white surface of a license plate. Some countries had to switch from black to white license plates in connection with their future accession to the European Communities like Austria (1988), Finland (1972), Cyprus (1990) or Portugal (1987). The last European country with black plates was Poland which replaced them with white European standard plates only in 2000 as a part of preparation to EU accession. There were also countries in Europe where a switch over to white plates was done independently to EC procedures. Those were some Soviet bloc countries. First of them, was Romania in 1966, manifesting a sort of independence on Soviet model. The Soviet Union replaced "French style" black license plates with white ones in 1982. The new model was automatically implemented in present EU member states Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Bulgaria followed the Soviet example in 1986 but introduced yellow plates with black numerals.

2. Territorial and state distinction

One of important goals of Council Regulation (EC) No 2411/98 of 3rd November 1998 on the recognition in intra-Community traffic of the distin-

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[19]) ZELENÝ, F., FEUEREISL, D., Poznávací značky v Čechách, na Moravě a ve Slezsku *(License plates in Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia),* SAXI, Praha, 2011.

[20]) TOMÁŠEK, M., Registrační značky v Evropské unii - Česko *(License plates in the European Union - Czech Republic*), Czech news agency, 7th September 2009.

guishing sign of the Member State in which motor vehicles and their trailers are registered is to meet objective of identifying the State of registration as provided for in Article 37 of the Vienna Convention on Road Traffic of 8th November 1968, concluded under the auspices of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe. Territorial distinction by states means a "distinguishing sign of the Member State of registration", i.e. a set composed of one to three characters in Latin capitals indicating the Member State in which the vehicle is registered.

Territorial distinction has its historical roots in the early years of registration of motor vehicles at the end of 19th century. As mentioned above, when the Netherlands began to issue first license plates its neighbors like Belgium or Luxembourg had to distinguish their vehicles from the Dutch ones. Both countries began to add on the plate the territorial distinction "BELGIQUE", respectively "LUX".

Luxembourg license plate of 1895.[21])

Particularly big countries were at the same time starting to reflect internal territorial distinction of vehicle registration. First system of territorial distinction was introduced in 1901 in France. French system of territorial distinction which was in use between 1901-1928, was working with alphabetic combinations attributed to administrative units, for example like "T" for Toulouse or like "F" for Clermont-Ferrand etc. The alphabetic system was introduced as well in Denmark, Spain and Sweden in 1903 or in Austria-Hungary in 1905. An original logic was to attribute alphabetic characters according to the name of region: like "B" for Bordeaux or to start with the character "A" for the capital of the country, like "A" for Copenhagen in 1903, for the Police District of Vienna in 1905 or for the City of London in the UK system of 1904.[22]) This was obviously not always possible due to duplicity of first characters in names of regions, later as well due to increasing amount of cars. For example in France in 1920's, it was necessary to use for vehicles registered in Paris characters "E", "G", "I" or "U". From the beginning of the century, some countries were starting to develop keys for alphabetic territorial distinction. The first complete system was developed in Austria-Hungary in 1905: "A" - Police District of Vienna, "B" - Niederösterreich, "C" - Oberösterreich, "D" - Salzburg, "E" - Tirol, "F" -

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[21]) TOMÁŠEK, M., Registrační značky v Evropské unii - Lucembursko *(License plates in the European Union - Luxembourg)*, Czech news agency, 19th March 2010.

[22]) Such a logic was implemented much more later in Czechoslovakia when „A" was attributed to the vehicles from Prague in 1963.

Kärnten, "H" - Steiermark, "N" - Police District of Prague, "O" - Bohemia, "P" - Moravia, "S" - Silesia etc.[23]) Similar system existed in Portugal from 1911: Azorra (A), South - including Lisbon - (S), Madeira (M), North (N) and Center (C). British system of territorial symbols was achieved in 1920.[24])

Austro-Hungarian license plate for Prague of 1906.

The logic of attributing alphabetic symbols as an expression of territorial distinction was adopted on international level in the Paris Convention on Road Traffic of 1909. The convention adopted state indexes - distinguishing signs of states. Nowadays the EU law defines a "distinguishing sign of the Member State of registration" as a set composed of one to three characters in Latin capitals indicating the Member State in which the vehicle is registered.[25])

But Paris Convention of 1909 worked only with harmonization of national (state) distinguishing signs. Internal regime remained in hands of individual countries and it has been so up to now within the European Union. Nevertheless the system of territorial distinction by alphabetic symbols became common usage in most European states, including the newly created ones after World War I: Bulgaria (1922), Estonia (1929), Finland (1922), Latvia (1921), Lithuania (1926) and Poland (1922). In Czechoslovakia, Austrian system was replaced in 1931 by a similar system of territorial distinction by alphabetic symbols: "Č" - Bohemia, "P" - Prague, "M" - Moravia and Silesia, "S" - Slovakia and "R"- Carpathian Ruthenia.[26])

A numeral system of territorial distinction introduced in Italy in 1903 became an alternative to the alphabetic system of territorial distinction. Each administrative unit received a number composed of two numerals. Such a combination of two numerals in red color was succeeded by further combination in black as a series of registration. Italy quitted numeral system in 1927 adopting an alphabetic one.[27]) The numeral system was then adopted by France

[23]) Reichsgesetzblatt für die im Reichsratevertretenen Königreiche und Länder, Jahrgang 1905, Nr. 156.

[24]) PARKER, N., WEEKS, J., WILSON, R., Registration Plates of the World, Third Edition, Europlate, Somerset, U.K., 1994.

[25]) Art. 2 of the Council Regulation (EC) No 2411/98 of 3rd November 1998 on the recognition in intra-Community traffic of the distinguishing sign of the Member State in which motor vehicles and their trailers are registered.

[26]) ZELENÝ, F., FEUEREISL, D., Poznávací značky v Čechách, na Moravě a ve Slezsku (License plates in Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia), SAXI, Praha, 2011.

[27]) Evangelista, G., Letarghe e i veicoli dell'esercito italiano, Roma, 1999.

in 1950 and has been since then the most typical feature of French vehicle registration.[28]) Except of France it has not found any general use in Europe, maybe, with an exception of Yugoslavia in 1930's, or of Poland from 1937 until 1939.

French license plate of 1950 with numeral territorial distinction (famous "75" for Paris).

A mixed combination of both alphabetic and numeral territorial distinction was introduced in 1906 in Germany. Combinations of Roman numerals and characters were attributed to individual lands and districts. For example, Roman "I" for Prussia, followed in Berlin by characters "A", "C" etc.

German license plate with numeral and alphabetic territorial distinction of 1906.[29])

This system worked in Germany until 1945. Then it was replaced in West Germany by alphabetic distinction by districts.[30]) In East Germany it was used for East Berlin until German reunification in 1991.

East German license plate for East Berlin with numeral and alphabetic territorial distinction of 1970's.[31])

Finally, the last category of territorial distinction should be mentioned which is no territorial distinction at all. Particularly smaller countries have not been

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[28]) BAUDIN, T., Plaques et immatriculations en France : une rétrospective 1901-2008, Comité Histoire du ministère de l'Ecologie, de l'Energie, du Développement durable et de l'Aménagement du territoire, Paris, 2010.

[29]) TOMÁŠEK, M., Registrační značky v Evropské unii - Německo *(License plates in the European Union - Germany)*, Czech news agency, 19th May 2010.

[30]) HERZFELD, A., Die Geschichte der deutschen Kfz-Kennzeichen, Leipzig, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Flaggenkunde, 2010.

[31]) TOMÁŠEK, M., Registrační značky v Evropské unii - Německo *(License plates in the European Union - Germany)*, Czech news agency, 19thMay 2010.

using any territorial distinction on their license plates because the shape or color of a registration plate already gave sign where did the vehicle come from. Such has been the case of Belgium or Luxembourg. Also islands like Cyprus or Malta were not using any territorial distinction marks on their license plates because it was unlikely to have foreign vehicles on their territory.

Cypriot license plate without territorial distinction of 1953.[32])

Even some big countries have recently quitted the system of territorial distinction like Sweden in 1973 or Spain in 2000.

Swedish license plate of 1973 with characters and numerals without any meaning of territorial distinction.[33])

On the contrary, some European countries began to put a distinguishing sign of own country on their license plates. The first country in Europe which did so was Luxembourg in 1966 where a distinguishing sign "L" was placed on registration plates.[34])

Luxembourg license plate of 1966 with state distinguishing sign "L".[35])

Second country putting its state distinguishing sign "M" on license plates was Malta in 1974.

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[32]) TOMÁŠEK, M., Registrační značky v Evropské unii - Kypr *(License plates in the European Union - Cyprus),* Czech news agency, 20th January 2010.

[33]) TOMÁŠEK, M., Registrační značky v Evropské unii - Švédsko *(License plates in the European Union - Sweden),* Czech news agency, 4th January 2011.

[34]) Histoire d'immatriculation des véhicules au Luxembourg, Société nationale de contrôle technique, Luxembourg, 2010.

[35]) TOMÁŠEK, M., Registrační značky v Evropské unii - Lucembursko *(License plates in the European Union - Luxembourg),* Czech news agency, 19th March 2010.
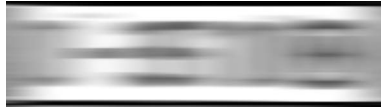
Maltese license plate of 1974 with state distinguishing sign "M".[36])

In 1994, state distinguishing sign "D" began to appear on license plates of Berlin and Brandenburg in Germany and in 1998 state distinguishing sign on license plates became a European standard. Article 3 of Council Regulation (EC) No 2411/98 of 3rd November 1998 on the recognition in intra-Community traffic of the distinguishing sign of the Member State in which motor vehicles and their trailers are registered provides for a mutual recognition by EU Member States of model registration plate which, on the extreme left, displays a blue zone containing the 12 yellow stars representing the European flag plus the distinguishing sign of the Member State of registration. For the purpose of intra-Union transport this distinguishing sign meets the objective of identifying the State of registration as provided for in Article 37 of the Vienna Convention on road traffic of 8 November 1968, concluded under the auspices of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe.[37]) Member States requiring vehicles registered in another Member State to display a distinguishing registration sign when they are being driven on their territory shall recognize the distinguishing sign of the Member State of registration displayed on the extreme left of the registration plates being equivalent to any other distinguishing sign that they recognize for the purpose of identifying the State in which the vehicle is registered. Retro-reflecting distinguishing sign of the Member State of registration should be of a white or yellow color, height of minimum 20 mm. The only EU country with derogation from this standard is the United Kingdom. The use of state distinguishing sign "GB" is optional.[38]) Very often vehicles with a sign of England or Scotland on their official license plates can be seen on British roads.

3. Distinction based on vehicle use or on date of registration

Apart from territorial distinction another types of distinctive features could have been observed during the development of European registration plates. Even if they have had a marginal importance and nevertheless there has been no European standard for internal distinction features of license plates country by country they should be mentioned in this article.

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[36]) TOMÁŠEK, M., Registrační značky v Evropské unii - Malta *(License plates in the European Union - Malta)*, Czech news agency, 20th April 2010.

[37]) CHEVRY, J-E., Plaques d'immatriculation, enjeux territoriaux et construction européenne: une lecture géopolitique, Comité Histoire du ministère de l'Ecologie, de l'Energie, du Développement durable et de l'Aménagement du territoire, Paris, 2010.

[38]) NEWALL, L.H., A History of Motor Vehicle Registration in the United Kingdom (3rd edition), Newby Books, Scarborough, 2008.

Distinction based on vehicle use is reflected in a lot of European countries by issuing different shape or color plates for personal vehicles, vans or trucks. In some systems alphabetic distinction of personal vehicles, trucks or even other categories on unified shape and color of license plates was introduced. The first attempt was undertaken in Poland in 1937 where characters "A", "B", "C", "D", "E", "H", "K", "L", "X", "Y", "Z" were attributed to personal vehicles. In Poland, this system was combined with territorial distinction and existed until 1956.

Polish license plate of 1946 for personal vehicle[39])

The most remarkable example of distinction according to a group of users is that of Hungary. In 1948 Hungarian authorities introduced a system of license plates where initial character indicated a group of users: "A" official vehicles, "H" military vehicles, "R" police vehicles, "I", "J" or "U" private vehicles. There has been no territorial distinction in Hungary and this system has been in force until now without any major change.
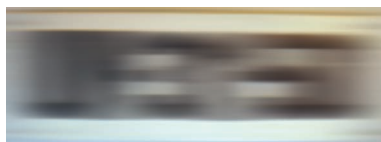
Hungarian license plate of 1950's for private vehicles.[40])

System of distinction according to a type of vehicle was introduced as well in 1951 in the Netherlands where characters "D", "G", "K", "P" or "T" were given to personal cars, characters "A", "F", "J", N" to vans up to 2,2 meters length or character "B" to heavy trucks.[41])

Dutch license plate of 1950's for personal vehicles.[42])

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[39]) TOMÁŠEK, M., Registrační značky v Evropské unii - Polsko *(License plates in the European Union - Poland)*, Czech news agency, 22nd June 2010.

[40]) TOMÁŠEK, M., Registrační značky v Evropské unii - Maďarsko *(License plates in the European Union - Hungary)*, Czech news agency, 7th April 2010.

[41]) TER WAL, A., Registration plate encyclopedia - the Netherlands, Gorinchem, 2002.

[42]) TOMÁŠEK, M., Registrační značky v Evropské unii - Nizozemsko *(License plates in the European Union - Netherlands)*, Czech news agency, 7th June 2010.

Similar system existed from 1953 until 1960 in Czechoslovakia where characters "O", "P" or "R" were on license plates for private cars, character "N" on license plates for trucks etc. But in Czechoslovakia concrete series were attributed to concrete regions, for example, combinations "OF", "OG", "OI" for Prague.[43]) From 1974 until 1995, distinction according to a type of a vehicle was in force in Malta.


Czechoslovak license plate of 1950's for Prague.[44])

Quite strange system of distinction according to a group of users existed from 1970's in Rumania. Special combinations of characters and numerals were delivered for license plates on cars of Ceauşescu Communist Party top members or of secret police Securitatè agents or collaborators, like "1-B" for Bucharest. Also in other countries particular combinations of characters or numerals have become a sign of suspected illicit advantages or corruption. That's why a lot of EU Member States have introduced a possibility to pay officially for a smart combination on a personalized license plate in order to prevent corruptive practices.

Romanian license plate of 1970's.[45])

Distinction based on date of registration was implemented in 1963 in the United Kingdom. An alphabetic suffix was introduced indicating a year of registration: "A" for 1963, "B" for 1964 etc.[46])
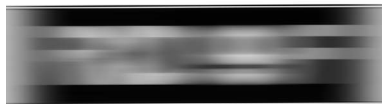
British license plate of 1967 with year of registration
marked by suffix "F".[47])

[43]) MARINOV, P., České poznávací značky - historie, dnešek, budoucnost *(Czech license plates - history, nowadays, future),* Kampe, Praha, 2007.

[44]) TOMÁŠEK, M., Registrační značky v Evropské unii - Česko *(License plates in the European Union - Czech Republic),* Czech news agency, 7th September 2009.

[45]) TOMÁŠEK, M., Registrační značky v Evropské unii - Rumunsko *(License plates in the European Union - Romania),* Czech news agency, 21st September 2010.

[46]) NEWALL, L. H., A History of Motor Vehicle Registration in the United Kingdom (3rd edition), Newby Books, Scarborough, 2008.

[47]) „E" was not used since it was reserved for Ireland.

Distinction based on date of registration was then introduced in Ireland in 1987. Year of registration is marked by first two numerals. In 1998, Portugal decided to place on right side of license plates a yellow stripe with month and year of first registration of a vehicle. Analogic decision was adopted in Malta in 1995 when month of registration is expressed by first character, for example "C" or "O" for March.

Irish license plate of 2008 with year of registration
marked by numerals "08".[48])

4. Different alphabets or numerals

Vienna Convention on road traffic of 8th November 1968 provides for the registration number referred to in its Articles 35 and 36 to be composed either of numerals or of numerals and characters. The numerals shall be Arabic numerals and the characters shall be in capital Latin characters. Other numerals or characters may, however, be used, but if so the registration number shall be repeated in Arabic numerals and in capital Latin characters.

When in 1981 Greece joined the European Communities, European law acquired a new alphabetic system of Greek language. The same occurred in 2007 after accession of Bulgaria when Cyrillic became third alphabet of EU communication. Nevertheless use of Greek or Cyrillic characters on European license plates had come out of use quite a long time before 1998 when Council Regulation (EC) No 2411/98 of 3rd November 1998 on the recognition in intra-Community traffic of the distinguishing sign of the Member State in which motor vehicles and their trailers are registered was adopted. Greece had been using Greek characters on its license plates until 1963. Bulgaria introduced Latin alphabet for territorial distinction on license plates in 1992.

Bulgarian license plates of 1920's with distinction for
Sofia in Cyrillic alphabet.[49])

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[48]) TOMÁŠEK, M., Registrační značky v Evropské unii - Irsko *(License plates in the European Union - Ireland*), Czech news agency, 21st December 2009.
[49]) TOMÁŠEK, M., Registrační značky v Evropské unii - Bulharsko *(License plates in the European Union - Bulgaria*), Czech news agency, 24th August 2009.

Cyrillic alphabet was used as well on license plates in former Soviet Union even in those parts of Soviet empire where national language was based on Latin alphabet. Those states: Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania became in 2004 members of the European Union.

Soviet license plate of 1959 in Cyrillic for Latvia.[50])

Only Estonian authorities managed in 1971 to convince Soviet government to use for Estonia instead of Cyrillic distinction character "э" a distinction character "E" of Latin alphabet.

Soviet license plate for Estonia of 1971 using Latin alphabetic system.[51])

Use of Roman numerals had been quite common in Europe until World War II. As mentioned above, Roman numerals went out of use in Austria in 1930, in Czechoslovakia in 1931 and in Germany in 1945.

Czechoslovak license plate for Prague of 1930's with Roman numerals.[52])

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[50]) TOMÁŠEK, M., Registrační značky v Evropské unii - Lotyšsko *(License plates in the European Union - Latvia)*, Czech news agency, 18th February 2010.

[51]) TOMÁŠEK, M., Registrační značky v Evropské unii - Estonsko *(License plates in the European Union - Estonia)*, Czech news agency, 6th October 2009.

[52]) TOMÁŠEK, M., Registrační značky v Evropské unii - Česko *(License plates in the European Union - Czech Republic)*, Czech news agency, 7th September 2009.

5. Coat of arms, flags and other symbols

It has already been written in this article that European license plates were considered very boring in comparison with for example license plates in the United States of America. Nevertheless during more than a century lasting history of vehicle registration in Europe, some countries have progressed to more colorful plates using in particular motives of their flags, coats of arms or other heraldic symbols. The first European country which did so was Switzerland in 1905. Since then up to now, Swiss rear license plates have been containing small shields representing the flags of Switzerland and the canton.

Concerning the present EU Members, early attempts to "animate" registration plates of vehicles were performed by totalitarian regimes. First of them was Mussolini regime in Italy. From 1928 until 1944, Italian rear license plates were containing fascist symbol of fasces.[53] Nazi symbols were placed on German license plates as well in Germany under Nazi regime. After World War II, Tito's communist Yugoslavia started to put red star symbol on registration plates.

Seal of Italy on Italian license plates since 1948.

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[53] EVANGELISTA, G., Letarghe e i veicoli dell'esercito italiano, Roma, 1999.

In 1956, Greece started to place on license plates Greek national emblem.

Seal of Greece on Greek license plates since 1956.

In Germany, both Eastern and Western, registration plates were sealed with state coat of arms to proof authenticity of registration. East German license plates launched in 1953 were sealed by the official emblem of the German Democratic Republic.

Seal of GDR on East German license plates.

West German license plates of 1956 have been sealed with an emblem of Municipality or "Bundesland".[54])

Seal of Municipality of Amberg in the State of Bavaria on West German license plate of 1956.

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[54]) HERZFELD, A., Die Geschichte der deutschen Kfz-Kennzeichen, Leipzig, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Flaggenkunde, 2010.

In 1988, Austria followed an example of Switzerland decorating its new license plates with colorful heraldic emblems. Reform of registration plates in Austria was preceded by a long discussion criticizing that new white Austrian license plates could be very similar to German ones. Therefore Austrian authorities decided to place on the top and bottom of license plates red-white-red stripes, which were the national colors of Austria. A heraldic emblem of each "Bundesland" is placed after characters identifying territorial distinction.[55]) Analogic approach was adopted in Slovenia in 1992. In 1997 Slovakia started to place Slovak national emblem of its license plates as well. Recent reform of registration plates in France of 2009 introduced simplified logos of regions.

Simplified logo for the region of Picardie on French
license plates after 2009.

In some countries illicit symbols appeared on license plates. In 1970's in Spain, license plates with Basque separatist symbols appeared in the province of Navarra.

Use of flags has not been very common on European license plates. In 1976, Denmark introduced a red frame around white license plate as a motive of Danish national flag. Similar approach of Austria has been already treated above in this article. First country introducing a full format of a flag on its license plates was Luxembourg in 1978. But this was not a flag of Luxembourg but the flag of the European Communities. Use of "European" flag became an EU standard in 1998 according to Council Regulation (EC) No 2411/98 of 3rd November 1998 on the recognition in intra-Community traffic of the distinguishing sign of the Member State in which motor vehicles and their trailers are registered. The Regulation provides for mutual recognition of a registration plate which, on the extreme left, displays a blue zone containing the 12 yellow

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[55]) HANS SEPER, F., Krackowizer, H., Brusatti, A., Österreichiche Kraftfahrzeuge von Anbeginn bis heute, Verlag Weisermühl, Wels, 1992.

stars representing the European flag plus the distinguishing sign of the Member State of registration. For the purpose of intra-Union transport this distinguishing sign meets the objective of identifying the State of registration as provided for in Article 37 of the Vienna Convention on Road Traffic of 8th November 1968, concluded under the auspices of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe. The Regulation provides for a detailed specification as follows: retro-reflecting blue background, 12 retro-reflecting yellow stars and retro-reflecting distinguishing sign of the Member State of registration, of a white or yellow color. Blue background: height = minimum 98 mm width = minimum 40 mm, maximum 50 mm. The centers of the 12 stars to be arranged in a 15 mm radius circle; distance between two opposing peaks of any star = 4 to 5 mm. Where the dimensions of the blue background have been reduced for registration plates taking up two lines and/or for registration plates intended for two or three-wheel motor vehicles, the dimensions of the stars and of the distinguishing sign of the Member State of registration may be proportionately reduced.

Since the adoption of Council Regulation (EC) No 2411/98 of 3rd November 1998 on the recognition in intra-Community traffic of the distinguishing sign of the Member State in which motor vehicles and their trailers are registered, some candidates for EU membership started to use their national flags on left side of their license plates, together with distinguishing sign of their country. This was the case of Latvia or Hungary. Some candidate countries like Bulgaria or Romania were even placing their national flag and national distinguishing sign on "European" blue stripe without 12 stars.

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The future of European license plates is going to be connected with European integration even if individual Member States maintain their national features. The European blue stripe has been playing an increasing role since its first introduction in early 1990's. In 1999, Italy introduced a new "two-stripe system". A left blue stripe reflects provisions of the Council Regulation (EC) No 2411/98 of 3rd November 1998 on the recognition in intra-Community traffic of the distinguishing sign of the Member State in which motor vehicles and their trailers are registered. The right blue stripe contains data on year of registration and an abbreviation of province of origin.[56]) Similar "two-stripe system" was introduced in 2009 in France where the right blue stripe contains a logo of region and a number of a department of registration.[57])

[56]) EVANGELISTA, G., Letarghe e i veicoli dell'esercito italiano, Roma, 1999.
[57]) CHEVRY, J-E., Plaques d'immatriculation, enjeux territoriaux et construction européenne : une lecture géoplitique, Comité Histoire du ministère de l'Ecologie, de l'Energie, du Développement durable et de l'Aménagement du territoire, Paris, 2010.

Ad 1/

Polish license plate in national colors of 1922.[i])

Belgian red-white license plate of 1927.[ii])

Yugoslavian green-yellow license plate of 1929.[iii])

Dutch yellow license plate of 1978.[iv])

Bulgarian yellow license plate of 1986.[v])

Ad 2/

Italian license plate with alphabetic territorial distinction of 1903.[vi])

British license plate with distinction for England of 2001.[vii])

[i]) TOMÁŠEK, M., Registrační značky v Evropské unii – Polsko *(License plates in the European Union – Poland)*, Czech news agency, 22nd June 2010

[ii]) TOMÁŠEK, M., Registrační značky v Evropské unii – Belgium (*License plates in the European Union – Belgium*), Czech news agency, 23rd November 2010.

[iii]) TOMÁŠEK, M., Registrační značky v Evropské unii – Slovinsko (*License plates in the European Union – Slovenia*), Czech news agency, 6th December 2010.

[iv]) TOMÁŠEK, M., Registrační značky v Evropské unii – Nizozemsko (*License plates in the European Union – Netherlands*), Czech news agency 7th June 2010.

[v]) TOMÁŠEK, M., Registrační značky v Evropské unii – Bulharsko (*License plates in the European Union – Bulgaria*), Czech news agency, 24th August 2009.

[vi]) TOMÁŠEK, M., Registrační značky v Evropské unii – Itálie (*License plates in the European Union – Italy*), Czech news agency, 4th January 2010.

[vii]) TOMÁŠEK, M., Registrační značky v Evropské unii – Velká Británie (*License plates in the European Union – Great Britain*), Czech news agency, 7th March 2011.

Ad 3/

Portuguese license plate with date of registration of May 1998.[viii])

Ad 4/

Greek license plate of 1956 when Greek alphabet was still in use.[ix])

Ad 5/

Yugoslavian license plate of 1947 with red star.[x])

Austrian license plate of 1988 with national colors of Austria
and heraldic symbol of Vienna.[xi])

Slovenian license plate of 1992 a heraldic symbol of Ljubljana.[xii])

Slovak license plate of 1997 with national emblem.[xiii])

[viii]) TOMÁŠEK, M., Registrační značky v Evropské unii – Portugalsko (*License plates in the European Union – Portugal*), Czech news agency, 21st July 2010.

[ix]) TOMÁŠEK, M., Registrační značky v Evropské unii – Řecko (*License plates in the European Union – Greece*), Czech news agency, 6th October 2010.

[x]) TOMÁŠEK, M., Registrační značky v Evropské unii – Slovinsko (*License plates in the European Union – Slovenia*), Czech news agency, 6th December 2010.

[xi]) TOMÁŠEK, M., Registrační značky v Evropské unii – Rakousko (*License plates in the European Union – Austria*), Czech news agency, 6th September 2010.

[xii]) TOMÁŠEK, M., Registrační značky v Evropské unii – Slovinsko (*License plates in the European Union – Slovenia*), Czech news agency, 6th December 2010.

[xiii]) TOMÁŠEK, M., Registrační značky v Evropské unii – Slovensko (*License plates in the European Union – Slovakia*), Czech news agency, 20th October 2010.
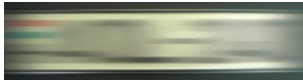
Spanish license plate of 1970's with illicit Basque separatist symbol.[xiv])

Danish license plate of 1978 framed with a red stripe as a motive from Danish national flag.[xv])

Luxembourg license plate of 1976 with the flag of European Communities.[xvi])

Hungarian license plate of 2000 with national flag and distinguishing sign "H".[xvii])

Romanian license plate of 2000 with national flag and distinguishing sign "RO" on a blue stripe.[xviii])

Italian "two-stripe" license plate of 1999 for Rome.[xix])

French "two-stripe" license plate of 2009 for Paris.[xx])

[xiv]) TOMÁŠEK, M., Registrační značky v Evropské unii – Španělsko (*License plates in the European Union – Spain*), Czech news agency, 23rd December 2010.

[xv]) TOMÁŠEK, M., Registrační značky v Evropské unii – Dánsko (*License plates in the European Union – Denmark*), Czech news agency, 21st September 2009.

[xvi]) TOMÁŠEK, M., Registrační značky v Evropské unii – Lucembursko (*License plates in the European Union – Luxembourg*), Czech news agency, 19th March 2010.

[xvii]) TOMÁŠEK, M., Registrační značky v Evropské unii – Maďarsko (*License plates in the European Union – Hungary*), Czech news agency, 7th April 2010.

[xviii]) TOMÁŠEK, M., Registrační značky v Evropské unii – Rumunsko (*License plates in the European Union – Romania*), Czech news agency, 21st September 2010.

[xix]) TOMÁŠEK, M., Registrační značky v Evropské unii – Itálie (*License plates in the European Union – Italy*), Czech news agency, 4th January 2010.

[xx]) TOMÁŠEK, M., Registrační značky v Evropské unii – Francie (*License plates in the European Union – Italy*), Czech news agency, 4th December 2009.