

José Manuel González-Páramo: The euro as one of the main aspects shaping European identity today

Speech by Mr José Manuel González-Páramo, Member of the Executive Board of the European Central Bank, on the occasion of the inauguration of the Euro Exhibition at Banca Națională a României, Bucharest, 10 March 2011.

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Dear Governor Isărescu,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am delighted to be here today for the opening of the Euro Exhibition, which is being hosted by Banca Națională a României until 27 May 2011. This is yet another example of the strong ties that the European Central Bank has developed with Banca Națională a României over the last few years – I remember vividly the Romanian artists who performed in Frankfurt in 2009 as part of the ECB's Cultural Days, which were showcasing Romania that year.

The Euro Exhibition is dedicated to Europe's single currency: the euro. Stage Three of Economic and Monetary Union began on 1 January 1999 with the irrevocable fixing of the exchange rates of the currencies of the 11 Member States initially forming the euro area, and culminated on 1 January 2002 with the introduction of the euro banknotes and coins. Since then, countries have continued to join the euro area, the latest, as you know, being Estonia on 1 January this year. The euro banknotes and coins are therefore now legal tender in 17 of the 27 EU Member States and are used by the 331 million citizens in an area stretching from Cyprus to Ireland and from Portugal to Finland. In fact, they have become one of the most visible symbols of Europe and the euro is one of the main aspects shaping the European identity today.

The introduction of the euro has brought many advantages – not only for citizens of the euro area countries, but also for citizens of other EU Member States, such as Romania. For example, when travelling within the euro area, Romanian citizens can use the euro as a means of payment across borders and thus only need to exchange their currency once. Furthermore, they can compare prices across the euro area countries much more easily. Finally, Romanian enterprises, for which the euro area is an important trading partner, can use one currency, namely the euro, in their transactions with business partners from the 17 euro area countries.

In order to join the euro area, each EU country must meet a number of clearly defined criteria, namely:

1. it must not be subject to an EU Council decision that an excessive budget deficit exists;
2. it must have a price performance that is sustainable and an average inflation rate that does not exceed by more than one and a half percentage points that of the three best-performing EU countries in terms of price stability;
3. it must have had an average nominal long-term interest rate that does not exceed by more than two percentage points that of the three best-performing EU countries in terms of price stability;
4. its national currency must have participated in the Exchange Rate Mechanism II for at least two years and thus have respected the defined fluctuation margins of the currency towards the euro;
5. it should ensure that it meets the requirements of legal convergence.

In its regular convergence reports, the European Central Bank has emphasised that these criteria be met in a sustainable manner. With regard to Romania, achieving an environment conducive to sustainable convergence requires, inter alia, a stability-oriented monetary policy and the strict implementation of its fiscal consolidation plans.

Let me now return to the Euro Exhibition itself. The Euro Exhibition has been on display at many locations throughout the EU, so far including Bratislava, Barcelona, Rome, Berlin, Frankfurt, Luxembourg, Warsaw and Tallinn. After Bucharest, it will continue its journey across Europe to Paris, Sofia and Athens.

The main objective of the Euro Exhibition is to give citizens of all ages the opportunity to familiarise themselves with the euro. Visitors will have the chance to explore subjects ranging from the history of money to the production of euro banknotes. In addition, they will be able to learn how to check the security features of euro banknotes through the many interactive displays.

As you walk around the exhibition, you will no doubt recognise the images of bridges that feature on the back of the euro banknotes. These bridges symbolise communication between the people of Europe, and between Europe and the rest of the world. They also represent the connection between the past and present, and symbolise a common European future. The diversity of Europe is also reflected on the national sides of the euro coins, which depict national icons and symbols representing the national heritage and culture of each euro area country.

The Euro Exhibition also takes the younger generations into consideration. In the kids' corner, children can play the educational computer games, learn more about the features of euro banknotes from the interactive displays or follow the story of Anna and Alex as they catch counterfeiters. For those of you here who have children, this is a good opportunity for them to learn about the euro in an entertaining and enjoyable way.

Ladies and gentlemen, I sincerely hope that you will enjoy your visit to the Euro Exhibition. It is a pleasure for me, on behalf of the European Central Bank, to declare the exhibition open.