

SPEECH

The digital euro: preparing for a potential launch

Introductory statement by Piero Cipollone, Member of the Executive Board of the ECB, at the Committee on Economic and Monetary Affairs of the European Parliament

Brussels, 24 March 2026

Thank you for this opportunity to provide an update on the digital euro and answer your questions.

Last week, the leaders of the euro area reaffirmed, once again, the vital importance of advancing this initiative.^[1] And your recent resolution on the ECB's Annual Report underlined how this project is essential to strengthening EU monetary sovereignty, reducing fragmentation in retail payments and supporting the integrity and resilience of the Single Market.^[2]

The Eurosystem – for its part – is continuing its technical preparations to ensure we are ready to deliver a digital euro that works everywhere in the euro area, for all use cases. We will only consider issuing the digital euro once the legislation is in place and we would issue it in full compliance with the legislation.

In parallel – and with the same determination – we are also ensuring that central bank money retains its role as the anchor in tomorrow's wholesale financial markets. Pontes – the Eurosystem's DLT solution – will be launched in the third quarter of 2026 to enable central bank money settlement for DLT-based transactions. And earlier this month we published a roadmap for Appia, an initiative to build an integrated European market for digital assets together with private and public stakeholders.^[3]

Today, I would like to update you on four key strands of our ongoing work on the digital euro: (i) our efforts to ensure inclusion and accessibility by design, (ii) our work on innovation, (iii) how we are ensuring the digital euro fits into the broader European payments ecosystem, and (iv) the activities for digital euro piloting.

Inclusion and accessibility by design

I would like to start with a very important element of the digital euro: inclusion.

To serve as a true digital complement to cash, the digital euro must be accessible to everyone. This includes people with disabilities. For instance, estimates suggest that around 30 million Europeans are blind or partially sighted.^[4] This work also addresses digital financial exclusion. Research shows that more than one in five Europeans do not feel comfortable using digital financial services.^[5] We must cater for the accessibility needs of these citizens – and many others. This has also been a consistent call from consumer associations.^[6]

To achieve that, we have made digital financial inclusion an integral part of the digital euro project from the beginning. This “accessibility by design” approach has been – and will continue to be – a key consideration in all digital euro activities.

For that reason, in the previous phase we conducted research across the euro area, including interviews and focus groups with vulnerable consumers.^[7] This allowed us to pinpoint challenges in payment methods, such as system complexity and barriers related to availability and acceptance, ensuring that our ongoing work is fully aligned with their needs.

A few weeks ago, we took another important step forward and signed a collaboration agreement with the ONCE Foundation for Cooperation and Social Inclusion of People with Disabilities.^[8] The Foundation will collaborate with us on the design of the digital euro app and test its functionalities once the first prototypes are available. This will allow us to integrate accessibility from the start of the mobile app’s design and development, rather than fixing issues later.

For example, we are exploring adaptive user interfaces, including features such as voice commands, large-font displays and simplified workflows, to ensure the digital euro app is easy to use for people with accessibility needs or limited digital literacy. We are also looking into budget management and support tools for consumers to help them manage their daily spending and finances effectively.

We aim to offer accessibility features that not only are in line with the minimum requirements set out in the European Accessibility Act^[9], but go above and beyond to meet the needs of all euro area consumers – much like banknotes already do in the physical world.

Innovation

In the digital euro project, we are not just working hand in hand with consumer organisations. We are also partnering with the private sector to unlock the full innovation potential of this initiative.

The EU does not have a shortage of innovation; however, it faces challenges in scaling these innovations and addressing fragmentation across national borders. Without sufficient scale, European payment firms struggle to efficiently absorb the fixed costs associated with innovation, which in turn reinforces the dominance of non-European companies that can capitalise on their global reach.

The digital euro has the potential to change this, ultimately lifting productivity and resilience – as also recognised by the International Monetary Fund.^[10]

The digital euro will provide a common payment infrastructure and shared standards that the market can build on to develop innovative value-added services. The unique pan-European reach of the digital euro will enable the private sector to scale up solutions across the euro area, opening doors for companies and payment service providers (PSPs) to trial new business models and expand their customer base beyond national borders.

In 2024 we launched a collaborative initiative with the market to explore how the digital euro can spur innovation and unlock new business opportunities.^[11] This innovation platform attracted around 70 market

participants – including merchants, banks, fintech companies and researchers – who proposed concrete ideas on how the digital euro could drive innovation, foster growth and simplify everyday payments for people and businesses.

In view of the considerable market interest in the innovation platform, we will carry out further work with the private sector, focusing on two workstreams: experimentation and exploration.

The experimentation workstream aims to support the market in the development of innovative features and value-added services, leveraging the digital euro's technological capabilities, such as conditional payments, 24/7/365 availability and pan-European reach.

In 2026 the workstream will revisit promising ideas from the previous project phase and discuss how to support them to create tangible market opportunities. We aim to support market participants – PSPs, fintech companies and IT providers – in developing innovative features that go beyond the core functionalities offered by the Eurosystem. The workstream will mainly focus on conditional payments and other services that could improve the user experience, such as e-receipts, bill-splitting and budget management tools.

These services have the potential to deliver substantial value to people in Europe while also unlocking new revenue streams for European companies. For example, conditional payments could enable automatic refunds in the event of travel disruptions, or ensure travellers always pay the best available fare, making transport easier, cheaper and less stressful.

As part of this workstream, we will also explore the innovative potential of the digital euro's offline functionality. For example, we will hold an offline payments hackathon, working with market participants to identify innovative use cases and functionalities and ways to improve the user experience.

The exploration workstream is more forward-looking: it will examine technological developments and features that could potentially be integrated into later releases of the digital euro. We will actively engage with businesses to explore a wide range of payment instruments that could support business-to-business use cases, as well as micropayments.^[12]

In this workstream, we will also keep investigating cutting edge areas such as the use of artificial intelligence in payments and machine-to-machine use cases. As payment use cases continue to evolve, we must strive to offer truly European payment rails as much as possible to avoid finding ourselves, in the future, facing the same dependencies for these use cases – such as those at the point of sale – that we are experiencing today.

Fit in the payments ecosystem

Over the past months, we also made progress on discussing with the industry how the digital euro would fit into the current payments ecosystem, with a special focus on synergies with domestic European payment schemes.

We have identified two promising avenues for integration: co-badging with domestic schemes and establishing common European standards.^[13] We are actively discussing both options with market participants in the context of the Euro Retail Payments Board and the Rulebook Development Group.

These two synergies can give credence to what we have said all along – that the digital euro will not compete with private European means of payment, but instead help them scale across Europe.

First, the digital euro can complement existing domestic European payment schemes through co-badging on physical cards. This means users would only need a single card to pay merchants that accept the domestic scheme, and they could use this same card to pay any other merchant in the euro area thanks to a co-badging arrangement with the digital euro.

Similarly, the digital euro can be used in digital wallets provided by European banks alongside domestic cards or account-to-account schemes. Imagine you are at a pub in Dublin but the bar does not accept the domestic payment scheme included in the wallet provided by your Spanish bank, which you use in your everyday life. With the digital euro, you would not need to worry: using the same wallet, you could simply switch to paying with the digital euro.

This reduces dependence on international card schemes, which are more expensive and traditionally used for co-badging and wallet integration, and ensures that you can pay anywhere in the euro area with a Europe-based payment solution.^[14] Moreover, the banks that provide you with a card co-badged with the digital euro will retain the full interchange fee when the transaction is processed via digital euro. In recent months, we have held co-badging workshops with PSPs and merchants on specific legal, technical and user experience aspects, as they have shown significant interest in this topic.

Second, the digital euro will set a European standard for retail payments comprising upgraded versions of existing European standards – a set of interoperable “rails” that private providers can build on, innovate with and scale across borders.

As you have heard me say many times before, you can think of this as a rail network. The infrastructure is public but private companies can use these tracks to reach any destination in Europe, competing on services, quality and innovation.

This is why we are developing the digital euro rulebook in close cooperation with market participants in the context of the Rulebook Development Group. This collective work enables us to provide early clarity on how existing solutions can build on and harness digital euro standards. And in defining these standards, we are collaborating with European market participants and standardisation bodies to use existing standards whenever possible.

Building on the input from the industry in the Rulebook Development Group’s dedicated workstream, the ECB announced last year the potential open standards being explored.^[15] Since then, we have further strengthened our dialogue with standardisation bodies.

By this summer, we expect to make an announcement on the European standards we will use for the digital euro. Thereafter, we will work closely with market participants to support them in getting ready to

embed these new standards into the payment terminals as soon as possible.

Importantly, the digital euro standards can only be finalised once the legislation is adopted, and only then can the market have certainty that these standards will be widely deployed across the euro area. Such certainty will support private payment initiatives to start leveraging the digital euro's front-end infrastructure before the digital euro itself has been issued.

Concretely, as merchants upgrade their payment terminals, the new devices can be digital euro-ready. This will allow European PSPs to begin expanding their reach as well as the range of use cases they can support, thereby starting to strengthen our strategic autonomy and resilience as soon as the legislation is adopted.

Prompt adoption of the digital euro Regulation is therefore crucial to unlocking the benefits that this project can bring to European private payment solutions.

Digital euro piloting

Finally, turning to our piloting activities.

This step is crucial to test the infrastructure we are developing and validate it in real-life conditions. It will also allow us to collect structured feedback. Pilot PSPs will gain first-hand experience of the digital euro ecosystem and provide their views that will help to further shape its technical specifications.

The pilot will test the envisaged digital euro features in a controlled environment, focusing on person-to-person and person-to-business payments. The exercise will be conducted through a mixture of activities online and offline at the premises of the Eurosystem central banks. It will involve staff from participating Eurosystem central banks, as well as selected merchants providing everyday services on our premises – for example, in cafeterias and restaurants – or e-commerce services.^[16]

In early March, we launched a call for expression of interest inviting licensed PSPs to take part in the pilot exercise. The Eurosystem will evaluate the applications based on eligibility requirements and weighted evaluation criteria.^[17]

The pilot has already generated considerable interest among stakeholders, many of whom joined the two focus sessions in January and March.^[18] In the coming weeks, we will continue engaging with the market ahead of the application deadline in May. Selected PSPs will be notified in June, with a view to starting development already in the third quarter, ensuring readiness to launch the pilot in the second half of 2027, which will run for 12 months.

This piloting activity is a concrete part of our preparations to ensure technical readiness for potentially issuing the digital euro as of 2029, based on the working assumption that the co-legislators will adopt the Regulation in the course of this year.^[19]

The Eurosystem's readiness is just one side of the coin. Should the decision be made to issue the digital euro, all PSPs that will ultimately be responsible for distributing the digital euro to citizens must be equally prepared.

This is why we will make sure that all market participants will benefit from the results, whether they participate in the piloting or not, as all relevant information will be published and made available to the wider public. We have already launched a dedicated web page featuring substantial technical documentation and the answers to the questions we receive from PSPs.^[20] We will continue updating it to keep all market players informed every step of the way.

We will keep you informed about the progress of the pilot in our regular exchanges.

Conclusion

Let me now conclude.

The digital euro is a European project. It can reinforce innovation and competitiveness, enhance inclusion, reduce fragmentation in our payments market and strengthen Europe's resilience in an increasingly uncertain global environment.

As I have outlined today, our technical work is progressing steadily across all these fronts. The Eurosystem's role at this stage is to be ready. Through pilot activities, our engagement with market participants and our work on standards, we are laying the necessary technical foundations.

A clear and timely legal framework would allow us to complete our preparations and it would give market participants, including PSPs and merchants, certainty about what needs to be done for them to be digital euro-ready.

We look forward to the ECON Committee taking its position on this important matter.

I now look forward to your questions.



1.

See [European Council Conclusions](#) and [Euro Summit statement](#), 19 March.

2.

[European Parliament resolution of 10 February 2026 on the European Central Bank – annual report 2025 \(2025/2182\(INI\)\)](#).

3.

See ECB (2026), [Eurosystem Unveils Appia Roadmap for Europe's Tokenised Finance](#), *press release*, 11 March. See also P. Cipollone (2026), "[Building the rails for Europe's tokenised financial markets](#)", Brussels, 23 March.

4.

See the [European Blind Union's website](#) and the [European Federation of Hard of Hearing People's website](#).

5.

See European Commission (2023), [Flash Eurobarometer FL525 : Monitoring the level of financial literacy in the EU](#), Publications Office of the European Union. See also European Retail Payments Board (2025), [The impact of digitalisation on the accessibility of electronic retail payments in the EU – perspective of associations representing vulnerable citizens](#), November.

6.

European Consumer Organisation (2025), "[Consumers expect the digital euro to be safe and reliable, easy to use, and free](#)", *press release*, 25 September.

7.

See Ipsos (2025), [Digital euro user research report](#), 30 October.

8.

The ONCE Foundation for Cooperation and Social Inclusion of People with Disabilities is a Spanish organisation that works to promote the social inclusion of people with disabilities through initiatives in the areas of accessibility, employment, training and digital transformation. See ECB (2026), "[ECB and ONCE Foundation launch collaboration to ensure digital euro is accessible for everyone](#)", *press release*, February

18.

9.

[Directive \(EU\) 2019/882 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 April 2019 on the accessibility requirements for products and services](#) (OJ L 151, 7.6.2019, p. 70).

10.

International Monetary Fund (2025), "[Euro area Policies: 2025 Annual Consultation](#)", *IMF Country Report*, No 25/174, July.

11.

See ECB (2025), "[Digital euro innovation platform – Outcome report: pioneers and visionaries workstreams](#)", 26 September.

12.

Instead of paying a fixed monthly fee for services, users could authorise conditional payments at the beginning of the month, with charges triggered later based on actual usage. This model would offer more flexibility and keep costs more closely aligned with real consumption. By minimising upfront commitments and subscription barriers, these kinds of conditional payments might support broader participation in services that are traditionally paid for via fixed fees or lengthy, inflexible contracts.

13.

See ECB (2025), [*Fit of the digital euro in the payment ecosystem – Report on the dedicated Euro Retail Payments Board \(ERPB\) technical workstream*](#), 30 October.

14.

See the annexes to ECB (2025), [*Fit of the digital euro in the payment ecosystem – Report on the dedicated Euro Retail Payments Board \(ERPB\) technical workstream*](#), 30 October.

15.

The digital euro rulebook provides a single set of rules, standards and procedures for the provision of basic digital euro payments services for payment service providers participating in the scheme. It draws as far as possible on existing industry standards and market practices, for instance CPACE. See ECB (2025), [*Update on the work of the digital euro scheme’s Rulebook Development Group*](#), 30 October.

16.

The digital euro used in this exercise will be a digital means of payment without legal tender status. In the pilot, the “beta” digital euro will be a digital means of payment issued by the Eurosystem central banks upon receipt of funds from pilot payment service providers (PSPs), leading to the creation of Eurosystem liabilities vis-à-vis third parties. It will be a liability (representation of value on the books of the Eurosystem) subject to the rules for cashless payment transfers applicable to pilot PSPs, individual end-users and business end-users. As regards the online beta digital euro exclusively, it will be considered “scriptural money”, falling under the current definition of “funds”, under the revised Payment Services Directive (including relevant level 2 legal acts). It will not be a banknote and/or a coin, and it will not constitute an account held directly with the ECB or any other Eurosystem central bank. While the beta digital euro will be designed to replicate features of the technical design of the envisioned digital euro as closely as possible, it will not be a digital euro as defined in the proposed Regulation on the establishment of the digital euro.

17.

PSPs first need to meet eligibility requirements that ensure that only PSPs that are licenced and technically and operationally capable to participate are selected. Eligible PSPs will then be subject to a weighted evaluation in order to ensure that the pilot has comprehensive coverage, for example in terms of geographical footprint. See ECB (2026), [*Call for expression of interest – Participation of payment service providers in the digital euro pilot*](#), 5 March.

18.

See [*Focus Session \(virtual\) – digital euro pilot*](#).

19.

See [European Council Conclusions](#) and [Euro Summit statement](#), 19 March.

20.

See the dedicated pilot [hub](#) on the ECB's website.

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