Digital Euro: Increasingly an Infrastructure and Competitiveness Issue

In its communication on the digital euro, the European Central Bank (ECB) is increasingly emphasizing that the initiative is about much more than introducing a new electronic means of payment. The digital euro could become the foundation of a common European payments infrastructure that simultaneously supports European financial sovereignty, the resilience of the payments system, and innovation.

Back in June, EFISZ highlighted that the digital euro is not merely a financial innovation but is also becoming a competitiveness issue. Recent developments across Europe have further reinforced this perspective.

A Shared Infrastructure on Which the Market Can Build

The ECB is increasingly describing the digital euro as a common European payments infrastructure that is intended not to replace market solutions but to complement them and support economic growth and competitiveness.

Under the concept, banks and other payment service providers would be able to integrate the digital euro into their existing applications, digital wallets, and even physical payment cards. At the same time, they would continue to compete through their own customer experiences and value-added services.

In a previous speech, Piero Cipollone, Member of the ECB's Executive Board, compared the digital euro infrastructure to a common European network: a shared foundational infrastructure on top of which private-sector players can compete with their own distinctive services and innovations. Common standards and a unified acceptance network could also enable European payment services to become genuinely cross-border offerings.

This represents an important shift in perspective. In this approach, the digital euro is not simply a new payment product **but a shared digital foundation layer on which banks, payment service providers, and technology companies can build additional services.**

The Sovereignty and Competitiveness Dimension Is Becoming More Prominent

The ECB's communication is also placing greater emphasis on the issue of Europe's strategic autonomy.

A significant share of Europe's electronic payments currently relies on non-European infrastructures and service providers. In a July interview, Piero Cipollone noted that approximately two-thirds of European card transactions are processed through non-European schemes. From the ECB's perspective, this represents not only a substantial market dependency but also a potential geopolitical and operational vulnerability.

As a result, the digital euro is increasingly being presented as a tool for strengthening European payments sovereignty: an infrastructure governed within Europe while creating opportunities for market participants to innovate and strengthen European payment solutions.

The key question is therefore no longer simply whether there will be a digital euro, but also what kind of European payments ecosystem will be built around it, who will be able to develop

services on top of it, and where the economic value generated by innovation will ultimately be created.

This is particularly important from a competitiveness perspective for countries and service providers that are able to participate in shaping the new European payments environment already during the preparation phase.

Despite Digitalisation, Cash Remains Highly Relevant

The rapid and dynamic growth of digital payments does not mean the sudden disappearance of cash.

According to an ECB survey of euro area businesses published on 13 August 2026, **92% of businesses** with a physical point of sale continue to accept cash. This even represents a slight increase compared with the 90% recorded in 2024.

The survey also clearly shows the rapid growth in mobile payment acceptance: while 36% of surveyed businesses accepted mobile payments in 2024, this figure had **risen to 68%** by 2026. Acceptance of physical payment cards, meanwhile, remained around 88%.

These figures demonstrate that developments in the payments market are not necessarily about replacing one payment method with another. Rather, a multi-channel payments environment is emerging, in which cash, cards, mobile payments, and potentially central bank digital money in the future coexist side by side.

This also reinforces one of the fundamental design principles of the digital euro: the ECB intends to create the digital euro not as a replacement for cash, but as its digital complement.

An Opportunity for Hungary in the Next Era of Payments

Hungary is not entering this new European payments environment without prior experience. In recent years, domestic infrastructures and digital payment services have been developed that can serve as strong foundations for the next stage of growth.

Qvik, built on Hungary's Instant Payment System, provides account-based real-time payment capabilities and supports transactions through QR codes, NFC, deep links, and payment requests. The solution is integrated into domestic mobile banking environments and offers a strong example of how multiple use cases and services can be built on a shared payments infrastructure.

The development of qvik, instant payments, domestic banking services, and mobile payment solutions has created significant technological, service, and user experience expertise that can provide a valuable foundation for the future. **Therefore, the emergence of the digital euro should not be viewed solely as the need to adapt to a new European system, but also as an opportunity to explore how Hungary's payments ecosystem can connect to the evolving European payments ecosystem.**

The greatest opportunity lies in existing infrastructures, service-provider capabilities, development expertise, and the new services that can be built upon them.

Preparation Is Also a Competitiveness Opportunity

Recent developments confirm that preparation for the digital euro should not be viewed solely as a regulatory or IT compliance exercise.

The emerging European payments infrastructure may create new opportunities for collaboration and innovation among banks, payment service providers, fintech companies, and technology firms. At the same time, increasing importance is being placed on financial sovereignty, infrastructure resilience, social inclusion, and preserving consumer choice among different payment methods.

For Hungary, this is not only an adaptation challenge but also a development opportunity. The continued enhancement of existing payments infrastructures and digital services, stronger alignment with European standards and systems, and the reinforcement of domestic providers' innovation capabilities together have the potential to create a competitive advantage.

The strategic question therefore remains whether Hungary will merely adapt to the emerging European payments environment at a later stage, or whether it will make conscious use of the preparation period to strengthen its own service capabilities, innovation opportunities, and overall competitiveness.