

Executive Summary of the qualitative study on new themes for euro banknotes



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Executive summary

The Eurosystem has a specific responsibility to preserve public confidence in euro banknotes, to ensure the safe and convenient use of euro banknotes and to further enhance the efficiency of cash. Banknotes are highly sophisticated products that take years to develop and produce. As part of the regular development of future euro banknotes, a process has been launched to consider new themes and designs. This process involves two main steps: first, the development of a new theme¹ (and associated motifs²); and second, the development of new designs based on the new theme. To support the first step, the European Central Bank (ECB) commissioned Ipsos to conduct qualitative research aimed at providing insights that could help inform the definition of the new theme.

The objectives of the research were twofold: (1) to understand the public's preferences on the theme of future euro banknotes, with the desired outcome being a list of preferred themes and associated motifs; and (2) to understand public perceptions of the current Europa Series 2 (ES2) common design elements³ as well as possible new common design elements, again with the aim of establishing a list of preferred common design elements.

The study was conducted between December 2021 and March 2022 via online focus groups in all 19 euro area countries plus Croatia and Bulgaria. Four focus groups were established in each country, giving a total of 84 focus groups overall (or 422 participants). The groups were stratified by age (16-25, 26-40, 41-60, 61+) and configured to be broadly representative of the national populations using other key socio-demographic and attitudinal variables (including gender, education, country of birth, attitudes towards the EU and frequency of banknote usage). Communication within the groups was carried out in the main languages of the participating countries.

Qualitative research aims to identify and explore perspectives and issues relating to the subject in question. The assumption is that perspectives and issues advanced by participants reflect perspectives and issues in the wider population(s) concerned. However, the extent to which they apply to those wider population(s), or specific sub-groups, cannot be quantified. **The value of qualitative research lies rather in identifying the range of relevant perspectives and experiences that exist and the considerations underpinning them.** Accordingly, **the findings reported in this document should not be treated as statistically representative of the perspectives and preferences of the populations concerned.** Similarly, although the report includes commentary on apparent differences in perspectives and preferences based on, for example, age group and geography, these differences too should be seen as indicative only. In other words, they may provide indications that certain perspectives and preferences are more dominant among specific age groups, countries or social groups.

Overview of the main findings

Conceptions of European-ness

To provide context for views on themes for future euro banknotes, each focus group began with a discussion of what being European meant to participants. Four main categories of associations were spontaneously identified across the groups:

- **travel and/or the free movement of persons within Europe;**
- **the euro or a single currency within Europe;**
- **liberal values such as freedom, solidarity and equality;**

¹ Theme: the recurrent, underlying central subject or idea that ensures consistency in the design of a range of banknotes.

² Motifs: images that develop or represent the theme and that can take different forms for each denomination.

³ Common design elements: images or symbols that are unrelated to the theme but are present for practical purposes and to display European identity.

- **cultural aspects such as the diversity of languages and cultures within Europe and shared European history.**

In each case, European-ness was predominantly interpreted through the lens of personal values and everyday cultural experiences and interests, rather than via references to European institutions and EU legislation. **Notably, European-ness was associated both with feelings and perceptions of unity, shared values and a common history (i.e. the things that bind Europeans) as well as with an appreciation of the variety of distinctive cultures and languages that Europe represents (i.e. the things that differentiate Europeans).**

Recall and perceptions of the current (Europa) series of euro banknotes

Generally, recall of the current series of euro banknotes (including the theme) was limited. This was especially the case among younger people and participants who favoured card-based or digital payment methods.

Once reminded that the theme of the current series was the “ages and styles of Europe”, **participants had mixed reactions, ranging from very positive to neutral and rather negative.** Those who were positive saw the theme (and associated motifs) as aesthetically appealing and appropriate for euro banknotes as it reflected a key element of Europe’s cultural history and one that was relevant for all Member States. They also referred spontaneously to the “neutrality” of the theme. More negatively, there were participants who found the historical focus “old-fashioned” or “stuffy”, or who felt that the inherent neutrality of the design was “bland” or “boring”. Others felt that the theme and motifs were not “meaningful” or distinctly European.

Participants rarely felt any sense of identification with or emotional connection to the current banknotes. Reflecting this, they appeared to generally welcome the idea of changes being made to the notes, seeing this as an opportunity to create more appealing, distinctive notes.

General considerations surrounding possible themes and motifs for future euro banknotes

When asked to consider possible new themes for future euro banknotes and evaluate them comparatively, participants often referred spontaneously to specific criteria that they felt were important. In particular, they said that **any future theme should have pan-European relevance and resonance, should highlight both unity and diversity among Member States, should be easy to discern and should lend itself to an eye-catching design.** The general acceptability of the theme and the ease with which it could be depicted on banknotes were also considered key. More affective considerations, including the extent to which a theme could instil a sense of pride in citizens, tended to be somewhat less spontaneously prominent.

When it came to identifying motifs to represent themes, participants generally felt that these should be recognisable and easy to relate to, and that potentially controversial, divisive or offensive motifs – for example, motifs that reflected cultural stereotypes or that were in any way religious, political or ideological – should be avoided. In addition to these considerations, participants were clearly drawn to the idea of symbolism in motifs, especially as pertaining to EU unity or values. At the same time, they sometimes found it difficult to identify motifs that they felt met the aforementioned criteria or that would be both well-known and widely accepted. As detailed below, this sometimes resulted in them becoming less enthusiastic about certain themes as the discussions progressed.

Participants often said that they would feel **happy or even proud to see a motif from their own country being featured on euro banknotes** to represent a broader, common theme. This often prompted discussion of the fact that there were a limited number of euro banknote denominations and therefore a restricted amount of “space” within which to represent the various Member States,

resulting in the possible need for a different approach, such as the selection of **motifs that were regionally based or that otherwise cut across or transcended national boundaries**. Not all participants were as ready to compromise on the idea of national motifs, however. This was especially the case in Bulgaria and Portugal, where a focus on such motifs was partly tied to a perceived need for these countries to feel more equal to and valued by their EU partners. In this regard, the design of future euro banknotes was seen as a potential vehicle through which Member States could be endowed with greater parity of esteem.

Preferred themes and motifs for future euro banknotes

A vast array of new themes and associated motifs were suggested by participants. These ranged from themes traditionally associated with banknotes and coinage, including portraits of dignitaries, elements of nature, monuments, historical events, science and forms of transport, to more contemporary themes such as space, modern art, popular food and drinks, and sports tournaments. There was also considerable mention of more abstract or conceptual themes such as values (for example, freedom, equality and democracy), diversity, culture and sustainability.

While some suggestions for new themes were unique to one or two focus groups or individuals, the **overwhelming majority were recurring** or very closely related to other suggestions made. Moreover, there was a **striking degree of consistency across the four age groups and the different countries in the frequency with which different themes were mentioned**.

When participants were asked to choose their preferred themes from those identified and discussed within their respective focus groups, they did so with relative ease. At the all-country level, this process led to a reduction of the initial list of suggested themes, as some themes were entirely rejected or judged to overlap with others. For example, the history and science themes were sometimes seen to overlap with the theme of portraits (or vice versa) and so were not carried forward in isolation. The most commonly preferred themes (as derived through an expressed preference exercise conducted within each focus group) were:

- **nature;**
- **monuments and landmarks;**
- **portraits;**
- **European values;**
- **science and progress;**
- **art.**

Views on these preferred themes evolved somewhat over the course of the discussions, however. There was an increase in the popularity of perceived neutral themes – especially nature and European values – and a slight waning of support for themes that had sparked greater debate, most notably monuments and landmarks and, to a lesser extent, portraits (for reasons outlined below).

Nature

Nature-related themes were by far the most suggested themes across the focus groups. Nature was repeatedly described as a **“neutral”, “safe” or “light” topic that was unlikely to cause controversy**. It was also commonly referred to as **“borderless” or “universal”** and so something with which all Europeans could readily identify. In this regard, some participants felt that the topic also carried special symbolic significance, with the EU itself being a shared territory where citizens of all Member States could feel a sense of belonging. A further reason nature themes were so popular concerned the aesthetic value and general “mood” that participants felt these could bring to future banknotes. In several countries, it was also suggested that a nature theme would provide an opportunity to bring an ecological focus to future banknotes. Suggested nature motifs fell into four main categories: landscapes (especially mountains); waterways and basins; flowers, plants and trees; and animals and birds.

Monuments and landmarks

There was a widely held perception that **historical monuments and landmarks represented a core, instantly recognisable element of Europe's cultural identity** and thus would serve as very accessible, relatable themes for banknotes. There was also the repeated suggestion that such monuments and landmarks were symbols not only of Europe's development, but of its resilience and values – aspects that were seen to further unite Europeans. At the same time, in a small number of focus groups, there was spontaneous recognition of the potential challenges involved in choosing motifs to represent the themes. First, it was noted that monuments and landmarks were sometimes associated with past conflicts or tragedies and, as such, could carry negative connotations for or even offend some groups of citizens. Second, reference was made to the possible difficulties involved in choosing monuments or landmarks that would effectively represent all euro area countries. Nonetheless, commonly suggested motifs for the themes of monuments and landmarks were specific historical buildings, castles and landmarks; religious buildings; bridges; museums and galleries; and EU institution buildings in Brussels and Strasbourg.

Portraits

Portraits emerged as **popular themes in their own right and also as motifs associated with several other themes**, especially science and progress, art, history and sport. Specifically, participants were often in favour of banknotes featuring **prominent figures who had played a pivotal role in building or shaping the Europe of today** and who had thus helped forge or inspire European identity. Suggestions for portrait motifs fell into five main categories: musicians and composers; historical figures, including the founders of Europe; scientists; philosophers and writers; and artists. While most of these categories proved relatively uncontroversial, this was not the case when it came to historical figures. Here, there was recognition **that some leaders or political figures, especially, could hold different associations for different groups of citizens and thus may not be universally acceptable as motifs**. Once mentioned, this perspective tended to gain currency within the relevant focus groups, often resulting in agreement that such figures would best be avoided in favour of individuals who were more universally lauded or respected, such as great artists or writers.

European values

Participants who favoured themes within this category typically argued that **Europe was virtually synonymous with values such as unity, peace, democracy, human rights, freedom, equality, and respect for diversity and inclusion**. Further, they contended that these values transcended country borders and social hierarchies, uniting or “bonding” Europeans and providing them with a shared identity. Some participants were also keen to point out that the values had more direct day-to-day relevance for citizens than other popular themes, such as monuments and prominent figures, because values effectively defined how they lived their lives. There was a clear sense that the values discussed had become more salient in participants' minds against the backdrop of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which was building (and then ongoing) at the time of the fieldwork and which was seen as posing a threat to democracy and freedom. Indeed, significantly more focus groups considered shortlisting values than actually went on to do so, ultimately deciding that these themes were too abstract to depict on banknotes.

While participants often found it difficult to translate values into concrete motifs, three main types of motif surfaced: a white dove to symbolise freedom and peace; people holding hands or hugging to represent solidarity, democracy, unity and connectedness; and hands (e.g. circle of hands, outstretched hands, handshake), which were associated with cooperation, solidarity, community and equality. Other value motifs that circulated included Lady Justice and the scales of justice (as motifs of human rights, equality and respect); the peace sign; open borders or barriers (as motifs of freedom); and motifs of togetherness and inclusivity, such as people standing together, the geographical map of Europe and European flags presented together.

Science and progress

Participants who advocated for this theme pointed to the **many inventions, discoveries and technological advancements that had emanated from Europe over the course of history** and

gone on to have global reach and impact. They also suggested that adopting such themes for banknotes could serve an important educational function, raising citizens' awareness of Europe's achievements and encouraging them to learn more. The most suggested category of motifs for the themes was European inventions and discoveries, specifically transport-related technologies, energy-related technologies, space technology and astronomy, medical discoveries and technologies, discoveries in physics, industrial or work-related tools and technologies, and communication technologies. There was also the widespread suggestion that the motifs could comprise specific scientists, inventors or explorers themselves. However, as with the portraits theme, a small number of participants came to question whether specific scientists or inventors should be featured, given the potential for some such individuals to cause division or for the significance ascribed to them (or their inventions and discoveries) to evolve over time or to vary by country.

Art

Art themes were more typically shortlisted in the south and west of Europe than elsewhere. Participants who favoured these themes described **art as among Europe's strongest, most renowned and most unique assets**. As with the themes of nature and monuments and landmarks, there was a perception that featuring art on banknotes could pique citizens' interest and curiosity, encouraging them to discover where great works were created or displayed. On a more practical level, there was also a view that art themes would, almost by definition, lend themselves to a very aesthetically appealing design for banknotes. Specific types of art motifs suggested were great works of art, painters and sculptors, the history of art and different styles, dance and dancers, buildings and architecture, and musical instruments and genres. Participants often approached the discussion of art motifs by looking at them through an inclusive lens and focusing on how the motifs represented and combined different themes or countries. Examples cited were artists such as Leonardo da Vinci, who symbolised both art as well as science and inventions; ancient statues that represented art, history and values of civilisation; landscape paintings that combined art with nature; and art motifs that represented different countries.

Other relatively popular themes

Other relatively popular themes that emerged across the focus groups, albeit less often than those described above, were history or historical events; customs and traditions; food, drink and cuisine; culture; environment and sustainability; maps and geography; sport; languages; Member States' flags; and transportation and travel. Comparatively infrequently preferred themes (that is, in only one or two focus groups) were education, religion, family, public and social services, and messages/text.

Common design elements⁴

As for the theme and motifs of the current euro banknotes, awareness of common design elements was quite low overall. Participants often said that they had never noticed or paid much attention to these elements. Once prompted, they often observed that there were too many common design elements, which contributed to making the banknotes cluttered and "busy" as a whole. This view was reinforced by a perception that there was unnecessary redundancy between some elements, especially between the flag of Europe and the ring of stars.

There was broad consensus that the most essential common design elements were:

- the **ring of stars**;
- the **European flag**;
- the **map of Europe**;
- the **€ currency symbol**;
- the **"euro" currency name in three alphabets**;

⁴ Common design elements are images or symbols that are unrelated to the theme but are present for practical purposes and to display European identity.

on the grounds that these elements were easily recognisable, relatable and useful.

The perceived least important elements were the portrait of Europa, the ECB President's signature and, to a lesser extent, other elements such as the copyright symbol or the ECB acronym in all languages. The portrait of Europa was not really known by participants, nor linked in their minds with the concept of Europe or European identity. The ECB President's signature and other administrative elements were described as difficult to see and understand, and not especially functional.

When prompted, participants offered some suggestions for **new common design elements**, including adding (portions of) the European Convention on Human Rights or the Anthem of Europe, a picture of the European Parliament or the flags of all EU Member States. There was also the suggestion that the existing map of Europe on the notes could be confined to euro area countries, and that the ECB acronyms could be reduced.

Other suggestions for future euro banknotes

Participants were asked if there were any other considerations that they felt should have an important bearing on the future design of euro banknotes. They were keen to emphasise that the notes should be **simple and uncluttered**, as well as **colourful, vibrant and eye-catching**. Some also emphasised the importance of using contrasting colours to denote the different euro denominations, so that people could easily distinguish between them. In a few focus groups, participants felt it was important to maintain the current contrasting colours, as people had got used to them over time. There was also the suggestion that the notes should incorporate features to make the different denominations more easily recognisable and mutually distinctive for people with visual impairments, such as Braille elements or varying irregular edging.

Alongside these suggestions, there were calls for euro banknotes to be smaller, as well as uniform in size, so that they could be more easily fitted into a wallet. Some participants called for the notes to be made from a plastic-based material to help ensure their durability. Others, by contrast, emphasised the importance of sustainable materials being used.

In several countries, participants called for continued public engagement in decisions around the design of future euro banknotes, to increase the likelihood of the final design being widely accepted.

Conclusions

At the most fundamental level, **the research laid bare the foreseeable challenges involved in arriving at a design that is widely accepted in all Member States and among different groups of citizens.** One such challenge relates to the various (and to an extent conflicting) expectations that were evident in the focus groups. On the one hand, participants called for a design that was underpinned by principles of universality and inclusivity, while on the other, they displayed a strong appetite for the representation of Member States' distinctiveness – whether in terms of physical assets, culture or contribution – albeit within the context of the EU collective.

Still, six themes in particular had clear and widespread resonance for participants of all nationalities and age groups, namely **nature; monuments and landmarks; portraits; European values; science and progress; and art.** Among these themes, nature and European values stood out as appearing to have both very broad appeal and the lowest perceived potential to spark controversy – considerations that also explain why the popularity of these themes strengthened to an extent over the course of the discussions. Other themes, such as monuments and landmarks, portraits and history, though also relatively popular, were seen to carry comparatively greater risks and present more challenges in terms of identifying motifs that would have pan-European resonance and acceptability.

At the same time, the discussion of potential themes, and even more so associated motifs, brought to the fore **clear overlaps between some of the themes**. Indeed, participants themselves sometimes pointed to the possibility of combining different themes within a single design, such as nature with sustainability, portraits with science and/or history, science with history, art with history, art with nature, European values with sustainability, or European values with language.

Participants typically identified numerous and varied motifs for each of their favourite themes, despite finding the task challenging at times for the reasons described above. Common underlying traits of preferred motifs were **beauty or majesty** and **allusions to Europe's greatness** (in terms of its assets or contribution) or **strong character** (in terms of its values and dynamism). The **recognisability** of motifs was also very important for participants and something they appeared to see as almost a prerequisite for being able to identify with the banknotes.

In terms of the second objective of the study – understanding views and preferences on the ES2 **common design elements** – the research identified a clear and consistent preference for certain elements over others, as described above. Equally if not more important than these specific insights, however, was what the research revealed about how participants evaluated common design elements more generally. They clearly placed a premium on elements that they saw as **easily recognisable, relatable** and **functional** – criteria that could therefore potentially serve as partial parameters for the determination of future common design elements.

Structure of the report

The next section of this report provides a detailed description of the background to the study and the methodology adopted. Section 2 considers participants' general conceptions of European-ness. Section 3 considers their recall and perceptions of the current series of euro banknotes, and Section 4 describes their preferred themes and motifs for future euro banknotes. Section 5 considers participants' preferences regarding common design elements, while Section 6 sets out other considerations that they felt were important for the design of future banknotes. Section 7 sets out the main conclusions of the research. Additional supplementary information is provided in the form of annexes.