

'The night the Europeans unified their currency' from Le Monde (2 January 2002)

Caption: On 1 January 2002, the 12 countries of the euro zone celebrate the arrival of their new currency. Political leaders are there to mark the event.

Source: Le Monde. dir. de publ. Colombani, Jean-Marie ; RRéd. Chef Plenel, Edwy. 02.01.2002, n° 17 709. Paris: Le Monde. "La nuit où les Européens unifièrent leur monnaie", auteur:Tréan, Claire , p. 2.

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The night the Europeans unified their currency

As the clock struck twelve on 1 January 2002 and the New Year dawned, 12 of the 15 European Union Member States put euro notes and coins into circulation. The celebrations were intermingled with traditional New Year revelry. Political leaders welcomed this momentous occasion.

[...]

Emotional message

Not all governments made the same festive effort as the Spanish to honour the new currency. France simply bathed the oldest bridge in Paris in blue light, while Jacques Chirac and Laurent Fabius sought in schoolmasterly fashion to ensure that people were fully aware of the importance of the event. In Berlin, for the 600 000 people who flocked to the Brandenburg Gate, New Year celebrations took place beneath the euro symbol, while in Frankfurt, proud to be the capital of the euro, the celebrations were more modest: 5 000 people collected, under Goethe's gaze, around the offices of the European Central Bank (ECB). In Brussels, another capital, the celebrations were nothing other than contrived, despite the emotional message delivered to the press during the afternoon of 31 December by the President of the European Commission, Romano Prodi: 'The euro was a dream just a few years ago. We have now made it a reality. Tomorrow will see a new chapter in the history of Europe.'

Alongside Spain's Pedro Solbes, European Commissioner with special responsibility for Economic Affairs, Mr Prodi then proceeded to inaugurate the façade of the Commission's Charlemagne Building, which sports a giant euro made of blue balloons, together with the motto 'The euro, the European Union in your hands', written in the 11 official European Union languages. The ceremony took just 10 minutes and was witnessed only by journalists and a few token officials. This party never took off, all the more so as Romano Prodi had decided to spend the night in Vienna, taking up an invitation issued by the Austrian Chancellor, Wolfgang Schüssel, whose Government, which includes Jörg Haider's far-right party, had been temporarily ostracised from Europe.

In his statement, Mr Prodi emphasised the euro's role as a 'symbol of unity'. However, it is well known that Europe is not perfect; it does not yet share the same time zone. Accordingly, it was unable to celebrate its new currency simultaneously. Greece and Finland opened fire one hour earlier than the majority of the troops: at midnight local time, hundreds of blue balloons were released into the Athens sky, while 21 000 blue neon lights were lit, creating a 'euro-monument' in Constitution Square; at the same time, in more northerly climes and in temperatures of 12 degrees below zero, to the sound of the accordion and traditional songs, the Finns formed a queue more than 300 metres long in front of the Central Bank in Helsinki in order to be among the first to withdraw the new banknotes. Conversely, Ireland and Portugal, one hour behind the majority, were the last to make the 'changeover'.

Peoples' desire to confirm the changeover, and to be sure that the event had indeed taken place, led to the same scene being repeated everywhere: there was a rather frenetic and generalised rush towards the only true witnesses of this end of one era and the beginning of another: the cash points. Amid the crowds, people did not hesitate to punch in their PIN watched by dozens of curious onlookers; some screens were 'temporarily out of order', while others bid a joyous 'welcome' in several languages.

[...]

Claire Tréan with our correspondents around Europe