

The OFCE optimistic about growth – “As usual”?

By [Magali Dauvin](#) and [Hervé Péléraux](#)

In the spring of 2019, the OFCE forecast real GDP growth of 1.5% for 2019 and 1.4% for 2020 (i.e. cumulative growth of 2.9%). At the same time, the average forecast for the two years compiled by Consensus Forecasts[\[1\]](#) was 1.3% each year (i.e. 2.6% cumulative), with a standard deviation around the average of 0.2 points. This difference has led some observers to describe the OFCE forecasts as “optimistic as usual”, with the forecasts of the Consensus or institutes with less favourable projections being considered more “realistic” in the current economic cycle.

A growth forecast is the result of a research exercise and is based on an assessment of general trends in the economy together with the impact of economic policies (including budget, fiscal and monetary policies) and exogenous shocks (such as changes in oil prices, social disturbances, poor weather, geopolitical tensions, etc.). These evaluations are themselves based on econometric estimations of the behaviour of economic agents that are used to quantify their response to these shocks. It is therefore difficult to comment on or compare the growth figures issued by different institutes without clearly presenting their analytical underpinnings or going into the main assumptions about the trends and mechanisms at work in the economy.

However, even if the rigour of the approach underlying the OFCE’s forecasts cannot be called into question, it is legitimate to ask whether the OFCE has indeed produced chronic overestimations in its evaluations. If such were the case, the forecasts published in spring 2019 would be tainted by an optimistic bias that needs to be tempered, and the OFCE should

readjust its tools to a new context in order to regain precision in its forecasts.

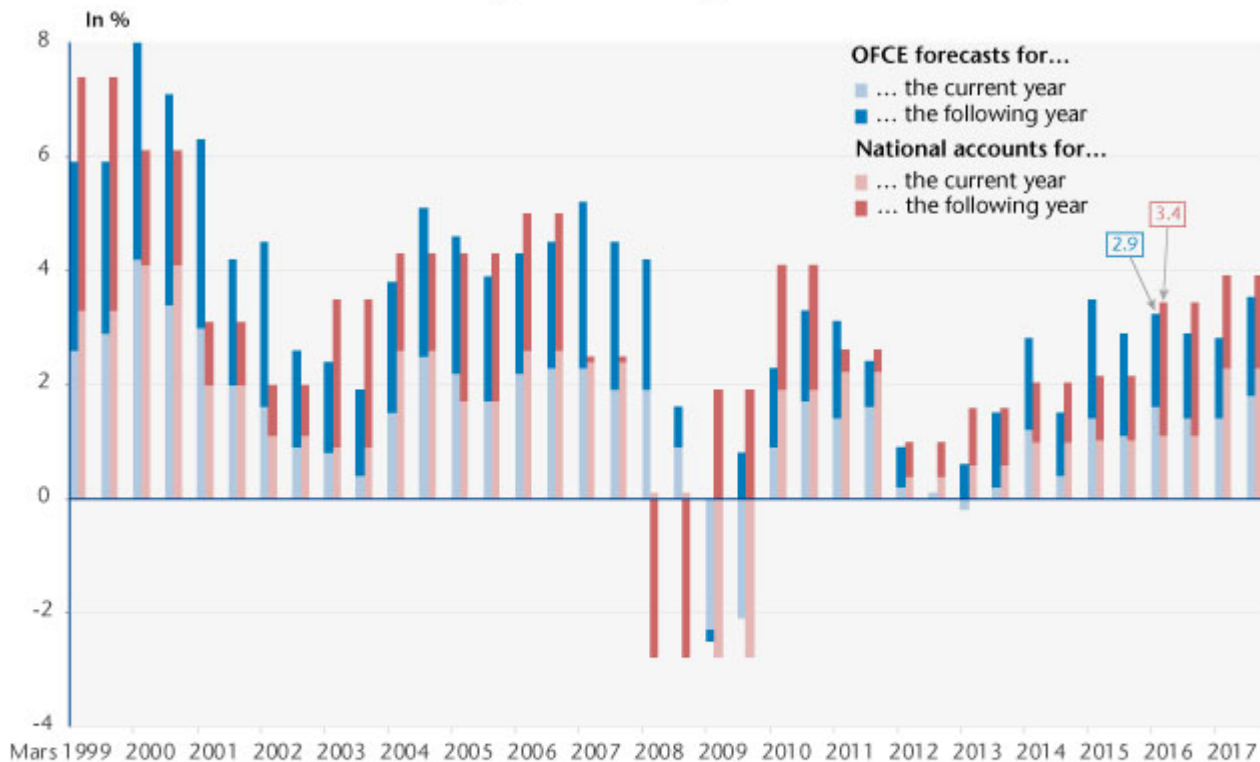
No systematic overestimation

Figure 1 shows the cumulative forecasts of French GDP by the OFCE for the current year and the following year and then compares these with the cumulative results of the national accounts for the two years. In light of these results, it can be seen that the OFCE's forecasts do not suffer from a systematic bias of optimism. For the forecasts conducted in 2016 and 2017, the growth measured by the national accounts is higher than that anticipated by the OFCE, which, while revealing an error in forecasting, does not constitute an overly optimistic view of the recovery.

The opposite can be seen in the forecasts in 2015 for 2015 and 2016; the favourable impact of the oil counter-shock and of the euro's depreciation against the dollar during the second half of 2014 was indeed slower to materialize than the OFCE expected. The year 2016 was also marked by one-off factors such as spring floods, strikes in refineries, the tense environment created by the wave of terrorist attacks and the announcement that certain tax depreciation allowances for industrial investments would end.

In general, there is no systematic overestimation of growth by the OFCE, although some periods are worth noting, such as the years 2007 and 2008 when the negative repercussions of the financial crisis on real activity were not anticipated by our models during four consecutive forecasts. Ultimately, of the 38 forecasts conducted since March 1999, 16 show an overestimate, or 40% of the total, with the others resulting in an underestimation of growth.

Figure. The OFCE's growth forecasts for the current year and the following year and actual growth



Note: This figure shows the OFCE's forecasts for the current year and the following year, cumulated over two years, with respect to the actual figures published by the national accounts. In October 2016, for example, the OFCE forecast cumulative GDP growth of 2.9% from 2015 to 2017, which broke down into growth of 1.4% from 2015 to 2016 and 1.5% from 2016 to 2017. The latest version available of the national accounts on 29 May 2019 shows economic growth of 1% from 2015 to 2016 and 2.4% from 2016 to 2017, i.e. cumulative growth of 3.4% over the two years, which was 0.4 point higher than the OFCE forecast. Hence, a red bar (national accounts) rising higher than the blue bar (OFCE forecast) reflects an "overly pessimistic" GDP growth forecast on the part of the OFCE, and vice versa.

Sources: INSEE, OFCE calculations and forecasts.

Forecasts relatively in line with the final accounts

Furthermore, the accuracy of the forecasts should not be evaluated solely in relation to the provisional national accounts, as INSEE's initial estimates are based on a partial knowledge of the real economic situation. They are revised as and when the annual accounts and tax and social information updates are constructed, which leads to a final, and therefore definitive, version of the accounts two-and-a-half years after the end of the year^[2].

Table 1 compares the forecasts made by the OFCE and the participating institutions in the spring of each year for the current year and assesses their respective errors first vis-à-vis the provisional accounts and then vis-à-vis the revised accounts. On average since 1999, the OFCE's forecasts have

overestimated the provisional accounts by 0.25 points. The forecasts from the Consensus appear more precise, with an error of 0.15 point vis-à-vis the provisional accounts. On the other hand, compared to the definitive accounts, the OFCE's forecasts appear to be right on target (the overestimation disappears), while those from the Consensus ultimately underestimate growth by an average of 0.1 points.

Statistical analysis conducted over a long period thus shows that, while there is room for improvement, the OFCE's forecasts are not affected by an overestimation bias when assessing their accuracy with respect to the final accounts.

Table. OFCE / Consensus forecasts in the spring of the current year and the provisional and revised national accounts

					OFCE error on...		Consensus error on...	
	OFCE	Consensus	Provisional account	Revised account	... Provisional account	... Revised account	... Provisional account	... Revised account
1999	2.6	2.3	2.7	3.3	-0.14	-0.69	-0.44	-0.99
2000	4.2	3.7	3.2	4.1	1.01	0.14	0.51	-0.36
2001	3.0	2.8	2.0	2.0	0.97	0.99	0.77	0.79
2002	1.6	1.4	1.2	1.1	0.44	0.49	0.24	0.29
2003	0.8	1.2	0.2	0.8	0.63	-0.04	1.03	0.36
2004	1.5	1.7	2.3	2.6	-0.82	-1.12	-0.62	-0.92
2005	2.2	1.9	1.4	1.7	0.81	0.49	0.51	0.19
2006	2.2	1.9	2.0	2.6	0.24	-0.41	-0.06	-0.71
2007	2.3	2.0	1.9	2.4	0.42	-0.12	0.12	-0.42
2008	1.9	1.5	0.7	0.1	1.18	1.78	0.78	1.38
2009	-2.3	-2.5	-2.2	-2.8	-0.11	0.48	-0.28	0.31
2010	0.9	1.4	1.5	1.8	-0.59	-0.94	-0.07	-0.42
2011	1.4	1.7	1.7	2.2	-0.31	-0.84	-0.06	-0.59
2012	0.2	0.3	0.0	0.4	0.21	-0.17	0.33	-0.05
2013	-0.2	-0.1	0.3	0.6	-0.47	-0.80	-0.37	-0.70
2014	1.2	0.9	0.4	1.0	0.84	0.21	0.58	-0.05
2015	1.4	1.1	1.1	1.0	0.30	0.36	0.00	0.06
2016	1.6	1.3	1.1	1.0	0.51	0.56	0.22	0.26
2017*	1.4	1.3	1.9	2.4	-0.52	-0.98	-0.61	-1.07
2018*	2.0	2.1	1.6	1.7	0.42	0.28	0.52	0.38
1999-2018 Average					0.25	-0.02	0.15	-0.11

* : the latest definitive accounts are those for 2016. The national accounts for 2017 and 2018 are, respectively, semi-definitive and provisional. The "provisional account" column shows the GDP growth rate as an annual average as it is calculated from knowledge of the quarterly growth rates once they are published in the fourth quarter of every year. Compared with this version, the 2018 account has already been subject to a first adjustment on the annual provisional account published in mid-May 2019, with an upwards revision of growth from 1.6% to 1.7%.

Sources: INSEE, OFCE calculations and forecasts.

[1] The Consensus Forecast is a publication of Consensus Economics that compiles the forecasts of the world's leading forecasters on a large number of economic variables in about 100 countries. About 20 institutes participate for France.

[2] At the end of January 2019, the INSEE published the accounts for the 4th quarter of 2018, which provided a first assessment of growth for 2018 as a whole. At the end of May 2019, the accounts for the year 2018, calculated based on the provisional annual accounts published mid-May 2019, were revised a first time. A new revision of the 2018 accounts will take place in May 2020, and then a final one in 2021 with the publication of the definitive accounts. For more details on the National Accounts revision process, see Péléraux H., « [Comptes nationaux : du provisoire qui ne dure pas](#) », [The national accounts : provisional accounts that don't last], *Blog de l'OFCE*, 28 June 2018.

France: growth as inheritance

by OFCE Department of Analysis and Forecasting (France team)

This text summarizes the OFCE's 2017-2019 forecast for the French economy; the full version can be found [here](#).

After five years of sluggish growth (0.8% on average over the period 2012-16), a recovery is finally taking shape in France, with GDP expected to rise by 1.8% in 2017, 1.7% in 2018 and 1.9% in 2019. Some negative factors that affected 2016 (a fall in agricultural production, impact of terrorist attacks on tourism, etc.) were no longer at work in 2017, and the economy should now feel the full benefit of the supply-side policies

implemented during the Hollande presidency. Added to this is the ripple effect from stronger growth in the European economies. Fiscal consolidation should be at a lower level in the coming two years^[1] (0.3 GDP point over 2018-2019), and should not jeopardize the ongoing recovery or the fall in unemployment that started in 2015. In total, by incorporating the delayed impact of past supply-side policies, fiscal policy will have a neutral impact on GDP growth in 2018 and a slightly positive one in 2019 (+0.2 GDP point). The reduction of the public deficit will be slow (2.9% of GDP in 2017, 2.6% in 2018 and 2.9% in 2019), but this masks a sharp improvement in the public balance in 2019, excluding the one-off impact from the conversion of the CICE tax credit. The reduction should be sufficient to stay below the 3% mark and ensure the exit from the corrective arm of the Stability Pact.

The brighter financial prospects for French business and the pick-up in productive investment since 2015 should boost export market shares. Given the more buoyant economic environment in the euro zone, foreign trade should no longer be a drag on France's growth. Ultimately, economic growth will be relatively robust, creating jobs in the commercial sector (247,000 in 2017, 161,000 in 2018 and 223,000 in 2019) and bringing down the unemployment rate in metropolitan France to 9.2% by the end of the second quarter 2017, to 8.9% by the end of 2018 and to 8.5% by the end of 2019. But the sharp decline in new subsidized contracts in the second half of 2017, which will continue in 2018 (falling from 320,000 in 2017 to 200,000 in 2018) and the completion of the implementation of tax plans to enrich job growth (the CICE, Liability pact), and sometimes their elimination (hiring bonus), will be a significant drag on efforts to cut unemployment in 2018.

^[1] This forecast does not take into account measures included in the 2018 supplemental Budget Bill (PLFR).

An end to growth?

Analysis and Forecasting Department (international team)

This text relies on the 2016-2018 forecast for the global economy and the euro zone, the full version of which [is available here, in French](#).

After avoiding a Grexit in the summer of 2015, Europeans will now have to face a Brexit. In addition to what should be a significant impact on the UK economy lies the question of the effect this shock will have on other countries. Given that all the indicators seemed to be green for finally allowing the euro zone to recover from the double-dip recession following the 2007-2008 financial crisis and then the sovereign debt crisis, will a Brexit risk interrupting the trend towards a recovery? This fear is all the more credible as the delayed recovery was not sufficient to absorb all the imbalances that built up over the years of crisis. The unemployment rate for the euro zone was still over 10% in the second quarter of 2016. A halt to growth would only exacerbate the social crisis and in turn fuel doubt – and therefore mistrust – about Europe's ability to live up to the ambitions set out in the preamble to the [Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union](#) and reiterated in [Lisbon in 2000](#).

Nevertheless, despite fears of a new financial shock, it is clear that it hasn't happened. Brexit will of course be the fruit of a long process that has not yet started, but it seems that the worst has been avoided for now. The British economy will see growth halved in 2017. But the short-term negative effects on other euro zone countries should be fairly limited, except perhaps Ireland which is more interdependent on the United Kingdom. In any case the global recovery should

continue, but growth will be down in the euro zone from 1.9% in 2015 to 1.3% in 2018.

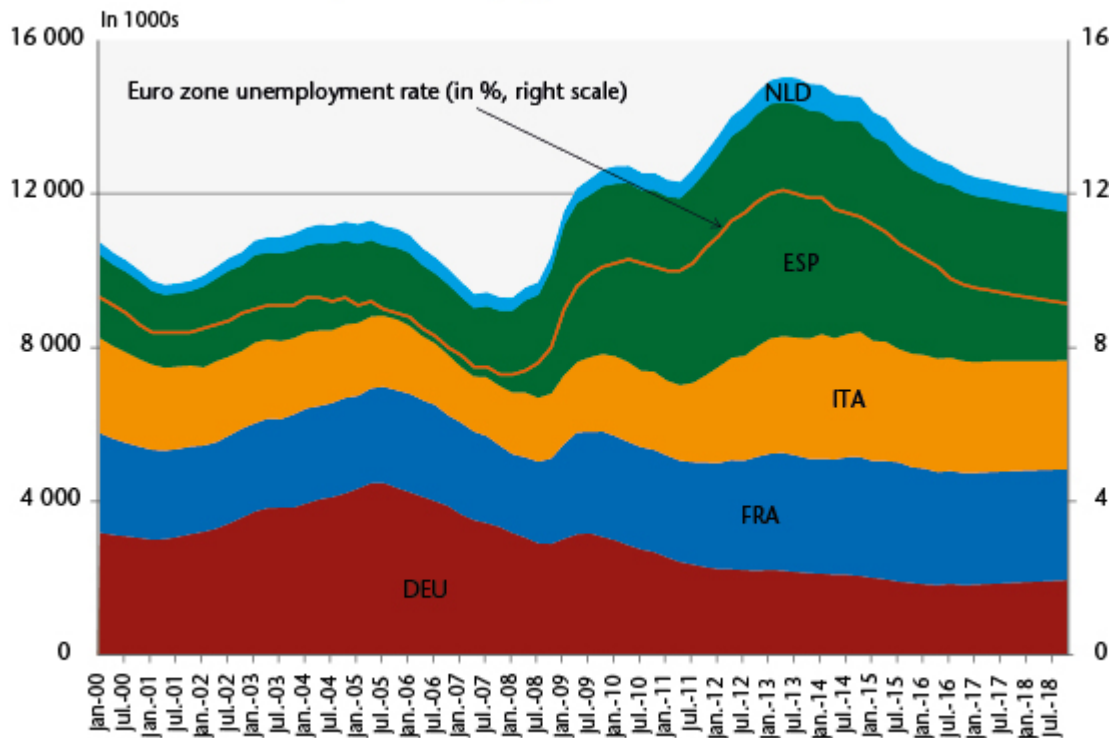
The many factors that helped initiate the recovery^[1] will to some extent lose steam. The price of oil has already begun to rise after hitting a low of under USD 30 in January 2016. It is now once again over 50 dollars a barrel. As for the euro, it has fluctuated since the beginning of the year at around 1.10 dollar, while in 2014 and 2015 it depreciated by 12.5% and 11.3%, respectively. In contrast, the European Central Bank has stuck to its expansionary monetary policy, and fiscal policy is much less restrictive than from 2011 to 2014. In 2015 and 2016, the aggregate fiscal impulse was even slightly positive.

Finally, world trade is slowing significantly, well beyond what would be expected simply from the change in China's economic model, which is resulting in a deceleration of imports. There were hopes that after the recovery kicked off, a virtuous cycle of growth would be triggered in the euro zone. Higher growth partly driven by exogenous factors would lead to job creation, higher incomes and better prospects for households and businesses. These elements would be conducive to a return of confidence and in turn stimulate investment and consumption. The dynamics of productive investment in France and Spain in the last quarter have given credence to this scenario.

The recovery will certainly not be aborted, but this rate of growth seems insufficient to reduce the imbalances brought about by long years of recession and low growth. At the end of 2018, the unemployment rate in the euro zone will still be nearly 2 percentage points higher than at end 2007 (graphic). For the five largest countries in the euro zone, this represents nearly 2.7 million additional people without jobs. In these conditions, it is undoubtedly the social situation of the euro zone which, even more than Brexit, is putting the European project in jeopardy. Europe certainly cannot be held

solely responsible for low growth and high unemployment in the various countries, but the current forecast indicates that we have undoubtedly not achieved the goals that were set in Lisbon in 2000, i.e. making the European Union “the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion”.

Figure: Unemployment in the euro zone



Source: Eurostat, OFCE forecasts – October 2016.

[1] View See the OFCE’s earlier [synthesis](#) (in French) of the international outlook (summarized [here](#) in English).

France’s battered growth

By the Analysis and Forecasting Department

This text summarizes the 2016-2017 forecast for the French economy. [Click here to consult the full version, in French.](#)

The news on 28 October that French economic growth came to 0.2% in the third quarter of 2016 constitutes a cyclical signal that is consistent with our analysis of the state of France's economy. This figure is close to our latest forecast (+0.3% forecast for the third quarter) and in line with our growth scenario up to 2018.

After three years of sluggish growth (0.5% on average over the period 2012-14), activity picked up moderately in France in 2015 (1.2%), driven by falling oil prices, the depreciation of the euro and a lowered level of fiscal consolidation. For the first time since 2011, the French economy has begun to create jobs in the private sector (98,000 for the year as a whole), which has been encouraged by tax measures that cut labour costs. Combined with an increase in the number of employees in the public sector (+49,000) and the creation of non-salaried jobs (+56,000), the number of unemployed according to the ILO fell in 2015 (-63,000, or -0.2 percentage point of the active population). Meanwhile, boosted by additional tax cuts on industrial equipment, business investment has revived in 2015 (+3.9% yoy).

French growth has been below that of the rest of the euro zone since 2014; in addition to the fact that it did better over the period 2008-2013, this is due to two major factors: first, France made greater fiscal adjustments than its European neighbours over the period 2014-16, and second, exports did not contribute much to growth, even though the fiscal approach to supply policy aimed to restore the competitiveness of French business. It seems, however, that since 2015 French exporters have chosen to improve their margins rather than to reduce their export prices, with no impact on their export volumes. While for a number of quarters now this behaviour has resulted in falling market share, this might still turn out to be an asset in the longer term due to strengthening the

financial position of the country's exporters, especially if these margins are reinvested in non-cost competitiveness and lead to upgrading the products manufactured in France.

In 2016, despite a strong first quarter (+0.7%) driven by exceptionally strong domestic demand excluding stock (+0.9%), GDP growth will peak at 1.4% on average over the year (see table). The mid-year air pocket, which was marked by strikes, floods, terrorist attacks and the originally scheduled end of the investment tax reduction, partly explains the weak recovery in 2016. As a result of the pick-up in margin rates, the historically low cost of capital and the extension of the investment tax cut, investment should continue to grow in 2016 (+2.7% yoy). The creation of private sector jobs should be relatively dynamic (+149,000), due to support from the CICE competitiveness tax credit, the Responsibility Pact and the *prime à l'embauche* hiring bonus. In total, taking into account unwaged employees and the workforce in the public sector, 219,000 jobs will be created in 2016. The unemployment rate will fall by 0.5 point over the year, of which 0.1 point is linked to the implementation of the "training 500,000" programme, so at year end will come to 9.4% of the workforce. Meanwhile the public deficit will drop to 3.3% of GDP in 2016, after a level of 3.5% in 2015 and 4% in 2014.

In 2017, France's economy will grow at a 1.5% rate, which will be slightly above its potential rate (1.3%), as the country's fiscal policy will not hold down GDP for the first time in seven years. On the other hand, in contrast to the forecast last spring, France will have to confront two new shocks: the negative impact of Brexit on foreign trade and the terrorist attacks' influence on the number of tourists. These two shocks will cut 0.2 percentage point off GDP growth in 2017 (following 0.1 point in 2016). The French economy will create 180,000 jobs, including 145,000 in the private sector, reducing the unemployment rate by "only" 0.1 point, due to the rebound in the labour force as people who benefit from the

training programme gradually re-join the workforce. The renewed rise in oil prices and the depreciation of the euro will see inflation rising to 1.5% in 2017 (after 0.4% in 2016). Finally, the government deficit will be 2.9% of GDP in 2017, back below the 3% threshold for the first time in ten years. After stabilizing at 96.1% of GDP in 2015 and 2016, the public debt will fall slightly, down to 95.8% in 2017.

The French economy though battered by new shocks and with the wounds from the crisis far from having healed, is recovering gradually, as can be seen by the gradual improvement in economic agents' financial position: business margins are up, household purchasing power has rebounded, the deficit is down and the public debt has stabilized.

Table. Summary of the forecast for France

Change from the preceding period, in %

	2016				2017				2015	2016	2017	2018
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4				
GDP	0.7	-0.1	0.3	0.5	0.4	0.4	0.4	0.4	1.2	1.4	1.5	1.5
GDP / capital	0.6	-0.2	0.2	0.4	0.3	0.3	0.2	0.3	0.8	0.9	1.0	1.0
Household consumption	1.1	-0.1	0.2	0.5	0.3	0.3	0.3	0.3	1.5	1.5	1.3	1.3
Public consumption	0.4	0.4	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.3	0.3	1.4	1.5	1.0	1.2
Total GFCF, of which:	1.3	-0.2	0.4	0.6	0.7	0.4	0.4	0.4	0.9	2.7	1.9	1.4
<i>Private production</i>	2.1	-0.4	0.4	0.6	0.8	0.4	0.4	0.4	2.7	3.7	1.9	1.4
<i>Housing</i>	0.1	-0.3	0.3	0.6	0.6	0.7	0.5	0.4	-0.8	0.4	2.0	1.5
<i>Public</i>	0.1	0.7	0.4	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.4	0.4	-3.9	2.5	1.9	1.2
Exports of goods and services	-0.4	0.2	0.5	0.5	0.6	0.6	0.6	0.6	6.0	0.8	2.2	2.5
Imports of goods and services	0.2	-1.8	0.5	0.4	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	6.4	1.8	1.3	2.0
Contributions :												
Non-inventory domestic demand	0.9	0.0	0.2	0.5	0.4	0.3	0.3	0.3	1.4	1.8	1.4	1.3
Change in inventory	-0.1	-0.8	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.1	-0.1	-0.1	0.1
Foreign trade	-0.2	0.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	-0.3	-0.3	0.2	0.1
Consumer prices (HICP), Q/Q-4	0.0	0.1	0.4	0.9	1.8	1.1	1.5	1.6	0.1	0.4	1.5	1.6
Unemployment rate	9.9	9.6	9.5	9.4	9.4	9.4	9.4	9.3	10.1	9.6	9.4	9.3
Household savings rate (% of GDI)	14.5	14.8	14.9	14.7	14.6	14.5	14.6	14.7	14.5	14.7	14.6	14.6
Margin rate of non-fin corp. (% of VA)	32.2	31.7	31.8	31.8	31.9	31.8	31.8	31.7	31.4	31.9	31.8	31.8
Public deficit (% of GDP)									-3.5	-3.3	-2.9	-2.4
Public debt (% of GDP)									95.8	96.1	95.8	95.3

Sources: INSEE, OFCE forecasts 2016-2018.

Small recovery after a big crisis

By the Analysis and Forecasting Department

[This text summarizes the 2016-2017 outlook for the global economy and the euro zone. Click here to consult the complete version \[in French\].](#)

Global growth is once again passing through a zone of turbulence. While growth will take place, it is nevertheless being revised downwards for 2016 and 2017 to 2.9% and 3.1%, respectively. The slowdown is first of all hitting the emerging countries, with the decline in Chinese growth continuing and even worsening (6.1% anticipated for 2017, down from 7.6% on average in 2012-2014). The slowdown in Chinese demand is hitting world trade and fuelling lower oil prices, which in turn is exacerbating the difficulties facing oil and commodity producers. Finally, the prospect for the normalization of US monetary policy is resulting in a reflux of capital. The dollar is appreciating even as the currencies of the emerging countries of Asia and Latin America are depreciating. While the industrialized countries are also suffering from the Chinese slowdown through the demand channel, growth is resilient there thanks to falling oil prices. The support provided by monetary policy is being cut back in the US, but is strengthening in the euro zone, keeping the euro at a low level. Countries are no longer systematically adopting austerity policies. In these conditions, growth will slow in the US, from 2.4% in 2015 to 1.9% in 2016 and then 1.6% in 2017. The recovery will pick up pace slightly in the euro zone, driven mainly by the dynamism of Germany and Spain and the improved outlook in France and Italy. For the euro zone as a whole, growth should come to 1.8% in 2016 and 1.7% in 2017. This will push down the unemployment rate, although by year-end 2017 it will still be

2 points above its pre-crisis level (9.3%, against 7.3% at year-end 2007).

While the United States seems to have avoided the risk of deflation, the euro zone is still under threat. Inflation is close to zero, and the very low level of expectations for long-term inflation reflects the ECB's difficulty in regaining control of inflation. Persistent unemployment indicates some continuing shortcomings in managing demand in the euro zone, which has in fact been based entirely on monetary policy. While the ECB's actions are a necessary condition for accelerating growth, they are not sufficient, and must be supplemented by more active fiscal policy.

At the level of the euro zone as a whole, overall fiscal policy is neutral (expansionary in Germany and Italy in 2016 but restrictive in France and even more so in Greece), whereas it needs to be more expansionary in order to bring unemployment down more rapidly and help to avert deflationary risks. Furthermore, the continuing moderate growth is leading to the accumulation of current account surpluses in the euro zone (3.2% in 2015). While imbalances within the euro zone have been corrected to some extent, this mainly took place through adjustments by countries in deficit prior to the crisis. Consequently, the surplus in the euro zone's current account will eventually pose risks to the level of the euro, which could appreciate once the monetary stimulus ends, thereby slowing growth.

Table. Outlook for world growth

Annual growth rate (%)

	Weight in the total(1)	GDP in volume		
		2015	2016	2017
DEU	3,7	1,4	1,9	1,6
FRA	2,6	1,2	1,6	1,6
ITA	2,3	0,6	1,2	1,0
ESP	1,6	3,2	3,3	2,4
EUZ	13,4	1,5	1,8	1,7
GBR	2,4	2,3	2,1	1,7
NPM(2)	2,4	3,8	3,1	3,2
UE 28	18,6	1,9	2,0	1,8
USA	17,2	2,4	1,9	1,7
JPN	4,8	0,5	0,7	0,4
Developed countries	44,5	1,9	1,7	1,6
RUS	3,6	-3,7	-1,0	1,0
CHN	14,9	6,9	6,3	6,1
Other Asian countries	16,6	5,2	5,2	5,4
Latin America	8,8	-0,4	-0,9	1,5
World	100	2,9	2,9	3,1

(1) Weight according to GDP and PPP estimated by the IMF for 2008.

(2) Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic, Romania, Bulgaria and Croatia.

Sources: IMF, OECD, national sources, OFCE calculations and forecast, April 2016.

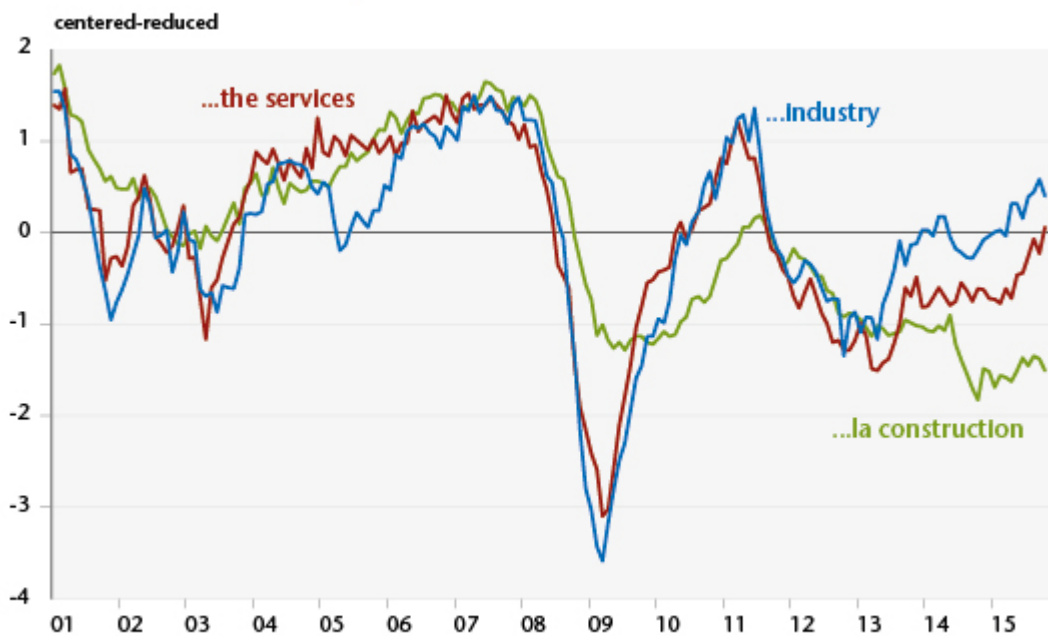
The French economy on the road to recovery

by Hervé Péléraux

The publication of the INSEE's business surveys on October 22 confirms the French economy's positive situation in the second half of 2015, suggesting that the negative performance in the

second quarter of 2015 (0%) will turn out to have been merely “an air pocket” after the strong growth seen in the first quarter (+0.7%). The business climate in industry has exceeded its long-term average for the seventh month in a row, and the service sector has been recovering rapidly since May 2015 and has climbed back to its average, the highest level in four years (Figure 1). The business climate in the construction sector nevertheless is still suffering from the crisis that hit it, but its downward trend halted at the end of 2014; despite monthly hiccups, the sector has begun a slow recovery that could signal the end of its woes in the coming quarters.

Figure 1. Business climate in ...



Source : INSEE.

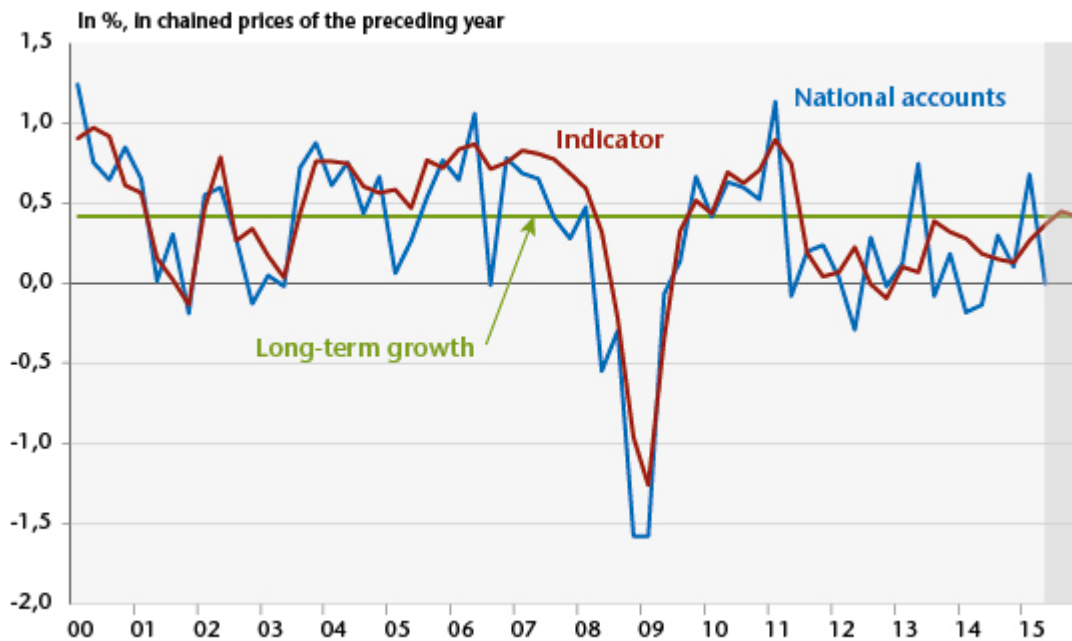
The confidence indicators, which provide qualitative information summarizing the balance of opinion on the various questions posed about business activity, consumer confidence and the situation in commerce, can be converted into quantitative information by means of an econometric equation linking these to the quarterly GDP growth rate^[1]. Doing this makes it possible to use these purely qualitative data to estimate the GDP growth rate in the past and near future (two quarters), given that the publication of the surveys precede that for GDP. Among the sectoral indicators available, only

the business climate in industry, services and construction provide econometrically useful information to trace the trajectory of the GDP growth rate. The other series are not significant, in particular the indexes for consumer confidence and for confidence in the retail and wholesale trade.

The leading index, which has a significantly more smoothed profile than GDP growth rates, cannot fully capture the volatility of activity and therefore should not strictly speaking be considered a predictor of growth (Figure 2). On the other hand, from a more qualitative viewpoint, it manages to delineate quite correctly the phases during which growth is above or below average (or the long-term) determined by the estimate. From this perspective, the indicator can be seen as marking a turning point in the economic cycle. Since the second quarter 2011, the indicator has not depicted any crossing of the long-term growth rate, despite the false signs of recovery raised by the quarterly GDP figures for Q2 2013 and Q1 2015.

Based on the survey data available up to October, the growth foreseen by the indicator is 0.4% in the third and fourth quarter of 2015, exactly equal to long-term growth[\[21\]](#). While a signal of recovery is not yet clearly given by the indicator, it should be noted that the information on the fourth quarter, which is limited to the October surveys, is quite partial. The confidence climates, which are extrapolated to the end of the year, are based on conservative assumptions and are likely to be upgraded if the surveys continue to improve from now to December.

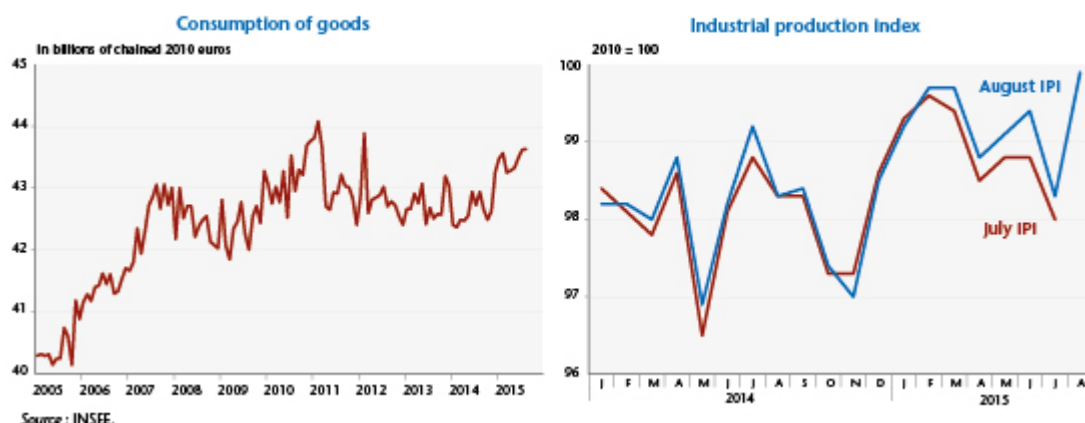
Figure 2. GDP growth rate observed and estimated by the indicator



Source : INSEE, OFCE calculations and forecasts.

The quantitative information available at this time for the third quarter of 2015 also gives cause for optimism, after the disappointment of the second quarter. Under the impact of the disinflation brought on by lower energy prices, which enabled a sharp rebound in purchasing power, household consumption of goods recovered sharply at the beginning of the year (Figure 3). The rise was interrupted in the second quarter, due to poor sales in March, which pulled down the figures, but consumption has resumed its upward trajectory continually since then. The carry-over in August for the third quarter was clearly positive (+0.6%), which suggests that the consumption of goods will again contribute positively to GDP growth for the quarter.

Figure 3. Household consumption of goods and Industrial production Index



The projection of a return to growth in the third quarter is also confirmed by trends in the industrial production index (IPI), which rose sharply in August (+1.6% for the total IPI, and +2.2% for the manufacturing index itself). This rebound followed a drop in production after the peak in February-March 2015[3], which contributed to the poor performance of GDP in the second quarter (Figure 3), and nourished the idea that the second quarter was not an “air pocket” but the continuation of a long phase of stagnation for a France that was unable to take advantage of the favourable winds blowing from outside[4]. The carry-over in industrial production in August now stands at 0.3%, while it was -0.7% in the old series available in July.

The recent trends in the monthly indicators augur a renewal of growth in the third quarter of 2015. The extrapolation of GDP growth using the leading indicator, supplemented by the already available quantitative data, also points to a 0.4% increase in activity in the third quarter, which, if it is realized, would then put the economy on a firm track to finally initiate a recovery.

[1] For greater detail, see: « [France : retour sur désinvestissement, Perspectives 2015-2017 pour l'économie](#)

[française » \[The 2015-2017 forecast for the French economy\]](#), pp. 34-37.

[2] The long-term growth considered here is not the potential growth estimated by its structural determinants using a production function, but the average GDP growth rate as reflected in the estimate of the indicator.

[3] It should be noted that the statistical revisions can change the perception of the economy's dynamics in the very short term. The IPI series published on 9 October 2015 by the INSEE has revised the level of the index significantly upwards compared to the previous publication. The IPI is still on a downward trend between February and July 2015, but the trajectory described is less negative, and the quarterly average of the index in the second quarter of 2015 is affected: according to the old series, it stood at -0.7%, compared with -0.4% according to the revised series.

[4] See Heyer E. and R. Sampognaro, 2015, « [L'impact des chocs économiques sur la croissance des pays développés depuis 2011](#) », [The impact of economic shocks on the growth of the developed countries since 2011], *Revue de l'OFCE*, no. 138, June 2015.

France: Recovery ... at last!

By [Mathieu Plane](#), [Bruno Ducoudré](#), [Pierre Madec](#), Hervé Péléraux and Raul Sampognaro

[The OFCE's forecast for the French economy in 2015-2016 is now available.](#)

Not since the beginning of the subprime crisis has the French

economy been in such a favourable situation for a recovery. The fall in oil prices, the ECB's proactive and innovative policy, the easing of fiscal consolidation in France and the euro zone, the gathering impact of the CICE tax and the implementation of the Responsibility Pact (representing a tax transfer to business of 23 billion euros in 2015 and nearly 33 billion in 2016) all point in the same direction. The main obstacles that have held back French activity over the last four years (over-calibrated fiscal austerity, a strong euro, tight financial conditions, and high oil prices) should all be out of the way in 2015 and 2016, with pent-up growth finally released. The supply policy being pushed by the government, whose impact on business is still pending, will be all the more effective thanks to the positive demand shock from foreign trade, which will allow the economic rebalancing that was lacking up to now.

French GDP will grow by 1.4% in 2015, with the pace accelerating in the course of the year (to 2% yoy). The second half of 2015 will mark the turning point in the recovery, with the corporate investment rate picking up and the unemployment rate beginning to fall, ending the year at 9.8% (after 10% in late 2014). 2016 will then be the year of recovery, with GDP growth of 2.1%, a 4% increase in productive investment and the creation of nearly 200,000 private sector jobs, pushing the unemployment rate down to 9.5% by end 2016. In this positive context, the public deficit will fall significantly, and is expected to be 3.1% of GDP in 2016 (after 3.7% in 2015).

Obviously this virtuous cycle will only take effect if the macroeconomic environment remains favourable (low oil prices, a competitive euro, no new financial tensions in the euro zone, etc.) and if the government limits itself to the budget savings already announced.

France: gradual adjustments (forecasts)

[2014-2015 outlook for the French economy](#)

By [Éric Heyer](#), Marion Cochard, [Bruno Ducoudré](#) and Hervé Péléraux

In 2013, the French economy grew at an annual average rate of 0.3%, which enabled it to return to the level it had reached six years ago, in early 2008. Between 2008 and early 2011, the economy had shown resilience in comparison with the performance of France's main partners. In the first quarter of 2011, the country's GDP had even come close to regaining its pre-crisis level, and lagged only slightly behind Germany and the United States. But the situation changed in the second quarter of 2011 as the austerity measures introduced in 2010 began to have an impact. The initial spurts of recovery seen after the recession were cut off. While the country did experience positive annual GDP growth, until 2013 this was close to zero. Ultimately, France is leaving this six-year period behind with an increased deficit that is still greater than the threshold of 3 GDP points. Fiscal consolidation has not proved very effective: the cost in terms of activity, unemployment and the financial situation for business has been disproportionate to the results.

In recent months, the economic situation in Europe has clarified considerably, with a return to growth and a strengthening of the main economic indicators. Business surveys also show a return of confidence in the productive sectors in France.

The relaxation of austerity should enable the French economy

to continue along this path, with growth in GDP gradually picking up pace in 2014 and 2015.

For 2014, if we consider only the measures already approved, the French economy would grow by 1.2%, a level that is insufficient to bring down unemployment or to hit the 3.6% deficit target. The announcement by Manuel Valls in his general policy (“DPG”) speech on 8 April 2014 of additional austerity measures of 4 billion euros through a supplementary budget prior to the summer should allow the government to meet its deficit commitment. But this will inevitably hurt activity and reduce the growth expected for the French economy to 1%, bringing the unemployment rate to 10.2% of the workforce by year-end.

Table 1. Measures announced in the General Policy (DPG) speech by Manuel Valls on 8 April 2014

		Date implemented	Amount in bn euros	Multiplier	Impact on growth (%)
	CICE tax credit yr 1	1 Jan 2014	9	1,0	0,5
	CICE yr 2	1 Jan 2015	7	0,8	0,3
	CICE yr 3	1 Jan 2016	1	0,8	0,0
	CICE yr 4	1 Jan 2017	2	0,8	0,1
	CICE yr 5	1 Jan 2018	1	0,8	0,0
Responsibility Pact	Reductions on low wages	1 Jan 2015	4,5	0,9	0,2
	Reductions wages > 1.6 SMIC	1 Jan 2016	4,5	0,8	0,2
	Reductions free-lancers and artisans	1 Jan 2015	1	0,8	0,04
	TOTAL		30		1,4
Solidarity Pact	Reductions social contributions < 1.3 SMIC	1 Jan 2015	2,3	0,8	0,1
	Income tax reductions	2016-2017	2,7	0,7	0,1
	TOTAL		5		0,2
Tax base	Elimination of the C3S tax	2015	1		0,04
		2016-2017	4	0,8	0,16
	Elimination of the IS corporation surtax	2016	2,3	0,9	0,1
	Reduction in the IS corporation tax rate	Around 2020			

CICE = “Crédit d'impôt pour la compétitivité et l'emploi” (Tax credit for competitiveness and employment)

SMIC = French minimum wage

Sources: DPG speech, authors' calculations.

The DPG speech is also upsetting expectations for 2015: prior to this announcement we had forecast GDP growth of 1.6%.

Companies would benefit from this renewed growth to gradually restore their financial positions. This strategy is based primarily on increasing productivity, which would help to reabsorb marginal production capacity and restore business margins. In this scenario, the public finances would also continue their gradual adjustment and the government deficit would come to 3% of GDP. As a corollary to the announced adjustment, the unemployment rate will continue to rise in 2015. The acceleration of the implementation of the Responsibility and Solidarity Pact promised in the DPG speech and the vagueness about how it will be funded may well affect the scenario set out above. Without new measures to cut public spending other than the 12 billion euros already included in our central scenario, the injection of 8.8 billion euros in new measures (Table 1) would allow the French economy to achieve 2% growth in 2015, as it did in 2011. This growth, combined with the impact of reductions in social security contributions on low wages, would by the end of 2015 push the unemployment rate down to its end 2013 level of 9.8% of the labor force. The reduction in the fiscal stimulus to -0.1% of GDP, although partly offset by the impact of growth on tax revenues, will nevertheless take the scenario off the path set out by Brussels, with a public deficit of 3.2% of GDP. If new cost-cutting measures are taken to finance these new measures *ex ante* in 2015, then, given the higher fiscal multipliers for government spending, the positive impact on growth would vanish, and the general government deficit would surpass 3% (3.1% of GDP) and the unemployment rate would hit 10% at end 2015. This scenario appears worse than the central scenario with respect to public finances and growth, with the slight fall in the unemployment rate being due simply to the impact of reducing social contributions on low wages, leading to a larger proportion of low-wage jobs in total employment (Table 2).

Table 2. Summary of the forecast for 2014 and 2015

	2013	2014		2015		
		Before DPG	After DPG	Before DPG	After DPG Not funded Funded*	
GDP (%)	0,3	1,2	1,0	1,6	2,0	1,5
Public deficit (% of GDP)	-4,3	-3,7	-3,6	-3,0	-3,2	-3,1
Unemployment rate*	9,8	10,0	10,1	10,1	9,8	10,0
Fiscal impulse	-1,2	-0,7	-0,9	-0,6	-0,1	-0,6

* It is assumed that the 9.3 billion euros in measures to reduce social contributions and income tax are financed by a reduction by the same amount in public spending, which would be added to the 50 billion already announced by the government.

Sources: INSEE, national accounts, authors' calculations.

Growth in the 4th quarter of 2013, but ...

By Hervé Péléraux

According to the [OFCE's leading indicator](#), the French economy has grown by 0.5% in the fourth quarter of 2013. This result, which was anticipated, reflects the improvement in business surveys seen for about a year now. However, does this mark the return of GDP to a path of higher long-term growth? It is still too early to say.

The improvement in the business surveys anticipated the interruption in the second recession that took place in the first half of 2011. The national accounts then validated the signal emitted by the surveys, with renewed growth of 0.6% in the second quarter of 2013 (Table). GDP did of course fall again in the third quarter (-0.1%), but on average over the last two quarters there was growth of approximately 0.2% per quarter, a rate that, though very moderate, was still positive.

At the same time, the leading indicator, which aims to arrive at an estimate of GDP growth in the very short term by translating the cyclical information contained in the surveys, also pointed to a slow recovery in activity: on average over the last two quarters, growth was estimated at 0.1%, a figure that is slightly under the assessment of the national accounts.

Table. Rate of growth of French GDP according to the national accounts and the indicator

In %, Q/Q-1, chained prices, base 2005

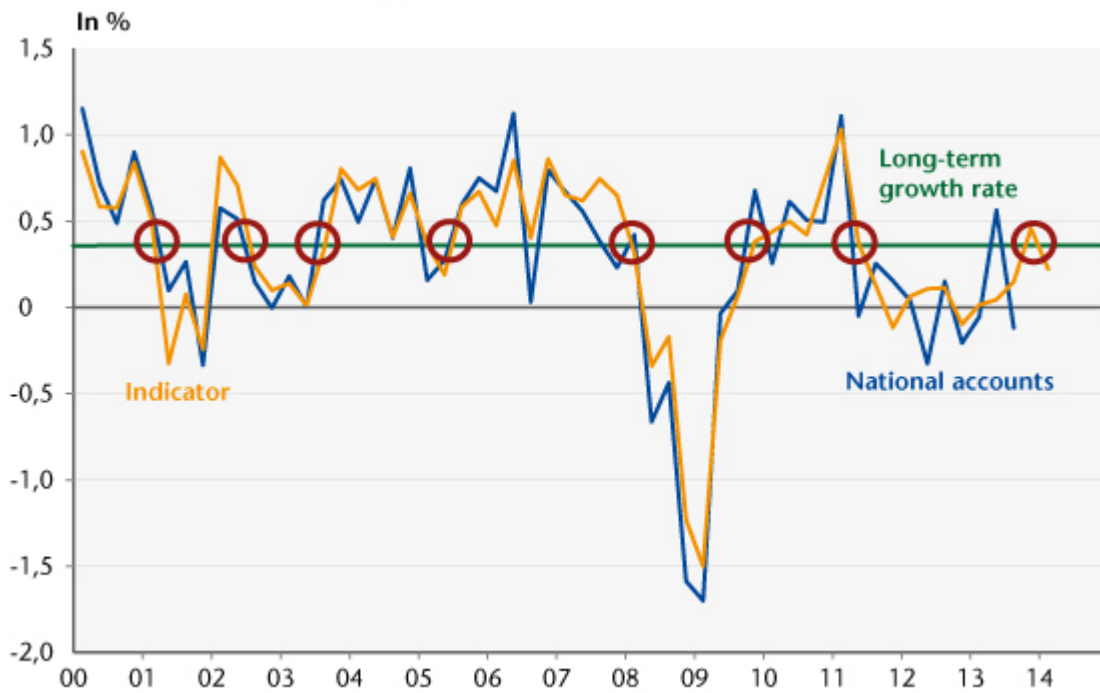
	2012	2013				2014
	Q4	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1
National accounts	-0,2	-0,1	+0,6	-0,1	-	-
Indicator	-0,1	0,0	0,0	+0,1	+0,5	+0,2

Sources: INSEE, European Commission, OFCE calculations.

In the last few months, the uncontested growth in the confidence of private agents has enhanced the outlook for the end of 2013: the debate is now focusing on the possibility for the French economy to break through a turning point upwards and for growth to settle in at a level higher than the pace of long-term growth (0.35% per quarter).

Based on past experience, when the indicator has sent out warning signs of a turning point in the economic cycle, the signal issued for the fourth quarter of 2013 is indicating that the long-term growth rate of the French economy is being crossed (Figure). This signal is fragile: the still very partial information on the first quarter of 2014, i.e. the business surveys for January, point towards the growth rate falling below its potential. The possibility of a real lasting recovery that is able to create jobs and reverse the trend in unemployment is thus still very uncertain.

Figure. GDP growth – estimated and forecast



Sources: INSEE, European Commission, OFCE calculations.

Note on the leading indicator:

The leading indicator aims to forecast the quarterly growth rate for French GDP two quarters beyond the latest available data. The components of the indicator are selected from survey data sets that are rapidly available and unrevised. The selection of the data series is made on an econometric basis, starting from the business surveys carried out in different productive sectors (industry, construction, services, retail) and among consumers. Two series related to the international environment are also significant: the rate of growth of the real exchange rate of the euro against the dollar, and the real growth rate of oil prices.

Some components are at least two quarters in advance and as such can be used to predict GDP growth. Others are coincidental, or are not sufficiently advanced to make a forecast two quarters ahead. These series need to be forecast, but over a short-term horizon that never exceeds four months.

The leading indicator is calculated at the beginning of each month, shortly after the publication of the business and consumer surveys.

France: less austerity, more growth

By [Eric Heyer](#)

This text summarizes the [OFCE's 2013-2014 forecast for the French economy](#).

In 2013, the French economy should experience annual average growth of 0.2%, which means that by the end of the year its level of production should return to the level of six years earlier, at the end of 2007. This mediocre performance is very far from the trajectory that an economy recovering from a crisis should be on.

The French economy did however have great potential for recovery: average spontaneous growth of about 2.6% per annum over the period 2010-2013 was possible and would have allowed France to make up the output gap accumulated in 2008-2009. But this “recovery” has been hampered mainly by the introduction of budget savings plans in France and across Europe. For the single year 2013, this fiscal strategy will cut economic activity in France by 2.4 GDP points.

The understanding that the fiscal multipliers were high came late, and occurred only after the austerity plans had already had a negative impact on growth. At the end of May 2013, this

awareness pushed the European authorities to give additional time to six EU countries, including France, to correct their excessive deficits. The easing of the Commission's requirements provided a breath of fresh air that enabled the government to relax the austerity measures set for 2014. According to the budget presented in autumn 2013, the domestic impact of the austerity measures will be reduced by 0.5 GDP points between 2013 and 2014; since our partners are also relaxing their policies, a boost to external demand is also anticipated. Overall, the easing of austerity will mean the addition of almost one point of growth in 2014 compared to 2013, despite the still high fiscal multipliers.

In these conditions, growth should come to 1.3% in 2014 on an annual average. By running at a rate still below its potential, the forecast growth will add to the output gap accumulated since 2008 and will continue to hurt the labour market. The unemployment rate in metropolitan France will rise slightly, reaching 10.9% by end 2014.

As a result of the easing of austerity, the public deficit will be higher than what was initially planned. It is expected to come to 3.5% of GDP in 2014, after reaching 4.1% in 2013, with gross government debt near 95% of GDP next year.