Less austerity = more growth and less unemployment

Eric Heyer and Xavier Timbeau

The European Commission has just released its spring forecast, which anticipates a recession in 2012 for the euro zone ("mild" in the words of the Commission, but still -0.3%), which is in line with the OFCE's economic analysis of March 2012.

The brutal fiscal austerity measures launched in 2010, which were intensified in 2011 and tightened even further in 2012 virtually throughout the euro zone (with the notable exception of Germany, Table 1 and 1a), are hitting activity in the zone hard. In 2012, the negative impact on the euro zone resulting from the combination of raising taxes and reducing the share of GDP that goes to expenditure will represent more than 1.5 GDP points. In a deteriorating fiscal situation (many euro zone countries had deficits of over 4% in 2011) and in order to continue to borrow at a reasonable cost, a strategy of forced deficit reduction has become the norm.

Table 1. The euro zone in 4 macroeconomic aggregates from 2009 to 2012

	2009	2010	2011	2012
GDP growth (%/yr)	-4,4	1,8	1,5	-0,4
Public deficit (% GDP)	-5,5	-5,5	-3,6	-2,9
Jobless rate (% active pop)	9,6	10,1	10,2	10,9
Fiscal impulse (% GDP)	1,7	-0,3	-1,1	-1,5

Sources : National accounts, OFCE calculations and forecasts.

This strategy is based on declarations that the 3% ceiling will be reached by 2013 or 2014, with balanced budgets to follow by 2016 or 2017 in most countries. However, these goals seem to be overly ambitious, as no country is going to meet its targets for 2013. The reason is that the economic slowdown is undermining the intake of the tax revenue needed to balance budgets. An overly optimistic view of the impact of fiscal restraint on activity (the so-called fiscal multiplier) has been leading to unrealistic goals, which means that GDP growth forecasts must ultimately be systematically revised downward. The European Commission is thus revising its spring forecast for the euro zone in 2012 downward by 0.7 point compared to its autumn 2011 forecast. Yet there is now a broad consensus on the fact that fiscal multipliers are high in the short term, and even more so that full employment is still out of reach (here too, many authors agree with the analyses made by the OFCE). By underestimating the difficulty of reaching inaccessible targets, the euro zone members are locked in a spiral where jitters in the financial markets are driving ever greater austerity.

Unemployment is still rising in the euro zone and has hardly stopped increasing since 2009. The cumulative impact on economic activity is now undermining the legitimacy of the European project itself, and the drastic remedy is threatening the euro zone with collapse.

What would happen if the euro zone were to change course in 2012?

Assume that the negative fiscal impulse in the euro zone is on the order of -0.5 percent of GDP (instead of the expected total of -1.8 GDP points). This reduced fiscal effort could be repeated until the public deficit or debt reaches a fixed target. Because the effort would be more measured than in current plans, the burden of the adjustment would be spread out more fairly over the taxpayers in each country, while avoiding the burden of drastic cuts in public budgets.

Table 2 summarizes the results of this simulation. Less austerity leads to more growth in all the countries (Table 2a), and all the more so as the fiscal consolidation announced for 2012 intensifies. Our simulation also takes into account the impact of the activity in one country on other countries through trade. Thus, Germany, which has an unchanged fiscal impulse in our scenario, would experience an 0.8 point increase in growth in 2012.

Table 2. Fiscal impulse of -0.5 GDP point in the euro zone in 2012

	GDP (%/yr)		Public deficit (% GDP)		Jobless rate (% active pop.)	
	2011	2012	2011	2012	2011	2012
2012, under current plans	1,5	-0,4	-3,6	-2,9	10,2	10,9
2012, if 0.5% GDP impulse		1,7		-3,1		9,7

Note: The impulse is the change in the structural deficit. The structural deficit is the public deficit excluding the impact of the economic cycle. A negative impulse reflects a restrictive fiscal policy. Here the public («administrations publiques», or "APU") deficit includes the central state, regional government and social security agencies.

Sources: National accounts, OFCE calculations and forecasts.

In the "less austerity" scenario, unemployment would decline instead of continuing to increase. In all the countries except Greece, the public deficit would be lower in 2012 than in 2011. Admittedly, this reduction would be less than in the initial scenario in certain countries, in particular those that have announced strong negative impulses (Spain, Italy, Ireland, Portugal and … Greece), which are the ones most mistrusted by the financial markets. In contrast, in some countries, such as Germany and the Netherlands, the government deficit would shrink more than in the initial scenario, with the indirect positive effect of stronger growth outweighing the direct effect of less fiscal consolidation. For the euro zone as a whole, the public deficit would be 3.1 percentage points of GDP, against 2.9 points in the initial scenario. It is a small difference compared to more favorable growth (2.1%), along with lower unemployment (-1.2 points, Table 2) instead of an increase as in the initial scenario.

The key to the "less austerity" scenario is to enable the countries in greatest difficulty, those most obliged to implement the austerity measures that are plunging their economies into the vicious spiral, to reduce their deficits more slowly. The euro zone is split into two camps. On the one hand, there are those who are demanding strong, even brutal austerity to give credibility to the sustainability of public finances, and which have ignored or deliberately underestimated the consequences for growth; on the other are those who, like us, are recommending less austerity to sustain more growth and a return to full employment. The first have failed: the sustainability of public finances has not been secured, and recession and the default of one or more countries are threatening. The second strategy is the only way to restore social and economic – and even fiscal – stability, as it combines a sustainable public purse with a better balance between fiscal restraint and employment and growth, as we proposed in a letter to the new President of the French Republic.

Table 1a. Details on the 4 macroeconomic aggregates for the euro zone from 2009 to 2012

	GDP growth (%/yr)				Public deficit (% GDP)				Jobless rate (% active pop.)				Fiscal impulse (% GDP)			
	2009	2010	2011	2012	2009	2010	2011	2012	2009	2010	2011	2012	2009	2010	2011	2012
DEU	-5,1	3,6	3,1	0,3	-3,2	-4,3	-1,0	-1,1	7,8	7,1	6,0	5,5	0,7	1,2	-0,9	-0,3
FRA	-2,6	1,4	1,7	0,2	-7,5	-7,1	-5,2	-4,4	9,2	9,4	9,3	9,8	2,5	-0,7	-1,7	-1,7
ITA	-5,5	1,8	0,5	-1,7	-5,4	-4,6	-3,8	-2,8	7,8	8,4	8,4	9,4	0,8	-0,4	-1,0	-2,9
ESP	-3,7	-0,1	0,7	-1,1	-11,2	-9,3	-8,5	-6,5	18,0	20,1	21,7	23,5	4,1	-1,9	-1,2	-3,4
NLD	-3,5	1,6	1,3	-1,1	-5,6	-5,1	-5,0	-4,5	3,7	4,5	4,5	5,4	3,8	-1,5	-0,2	-1,9
BEL	-2,7	2,3	1,9	0,1	-5,8	-4,1	-4,0	-3,4	7,9	8,3	7,2	7,6	1,8	-0,3	-0,1	-1,4
PRT	-2,9	1,4	-1,5	-2,9	-10,1	-9,8	-4,0	-4,5	10,7	12,1	12,9	13,4	4,9	-0,6	-5,5	-3,0
IRL	-7,0	-0,4	0,7	-0,3	-14,4	-32,0	-10,1	-8,7	11,9	13,7	14,5	14,9	3,7	-4,1	-2,5	-3,0
GRC	-2,3	-4,4	-6,2	-5,3	-15,8	-10,6	-9,3	-7,3	9,5	12,5	17,2	19,5	3,4	-7,9	-5,6	-5,3
FIN	-8,4	3,7	2,8	0,7	-2,5	-2,5	-1,2	-0,9	8,8	8,4	7,8	7,5	0,4	-1,5	-1,1	-1,1
AUT	-3,6	2,5	3,0	0,4	-4,1	-4,4	-3,4	-3,0	4,8	4,4	4,2	4,5	0,4	0,6	-0,5	-1,2

Note: DEU Germany; FRA France; ITA Italy; ESP Spain; NLD Netherlands; BEL Belgium; PRT Portugal; IRL Ireland; GRC Greece; FIN Finland; AUT Austria.
Sources: National accounts, OFCE calculations and forecasts.

Table 2b. Fiscal impulse of -0.5 GDP point in the euro zone countries in 2012

	DEU	FRA	ITA	ESP	NLD	BEL	PRT	IRL	GRC	FIN	AUT
GDP growth rate (%/yr)	1,1	2,2	1,4	2,6	2,1	1,8	0,7	2,8	0,2	1,9	1,8
Difference with Table 1a	0,8	2,0	3,1	3,7	3,2	1,7	3,6	3,1	5,5	1,2	1.4
Of which: - direct impact	0,0	1,2	2,4	2,9	2,5	0,9	2,5	2,5	4,8	0,6	0,7
- impact *via* trade	0,8	0,8	0,7	0,8	0,7	0,8	1,1	0,6	0,7	0,6	0.7
Public deficit (% GDP)	-0,7	-4,6	-3,7	-7,5	-4,3	-3,4	-5,2	-9,7	-9,4	-0,9	-3,0
Difference with Table 1a	0,4	-0,2	-0,9	-1,0	0,2	0,0	-0,7	-1,0	-2,1	0,0	0,0
Jobless rate (% active pop.)	5,1	8,8	7,9	21,6	3,8	6,7	11,6	13,3	16,8	6,9	3,8
Difference with Table 1a	-0,4	-1,0	-1,5	-1,9	-1,6	-0,9	-1,8	-1,5	-2,7	-0,6	-0,7

Sources: National accounts, OFCE calculations and forecasts.

A letter to President François Hollande

by Jérôme Creel, Xavier Timbeau and Philippe Weil [1]

Dear Mr. President,

France and the European Union are at a crucial economic juncture. Unemployment is high, the output loss to the financial crisis since 2008 has not been recovered and you have promised, in this dismal context, to eliminate French public deficits by 2017.

Your predecessor had committed to achieving the same objective a tad faster, by 2016, and a distinctive feature of your campaign has been your insistence that the major burden of the coming fiscal retrenchment be borne by the richest of taxpayers. These differences matter politically (you did win this election) but they are secondary from a macroeconomic viewpoint unless the long-run future of France and Europe depends on short-run macroeconomic outcomes.

In the *standard macroeconomic framework*, which has guided policy in "normal" and happier times, fiscal multipliers are positive in the short run but are zero in the long run where productivity and innovation are assumed to reign supreme. In such a world, giving your government an extra year to reduce public deficits spreads the pain over time but makes no difference in the long run. When all is said and done, austerity is the only way to reduce the debt to GDP ratio durably – and it hurts badly:

- The fantasy that short-run multipliers might be negative has been dispelled: a fiscal contraction depresses economic activity unless you are a small open economy acting alone under flexible exchange rates and your own national central bank runs an accommodative monetary policy – hardly a description of today's France. Since France 2012 is not Sweden 1992, the prospect of a rosier fiscal future is not enough to outweigh the immediate recessionary effects of a fiscal contraction.
- To add insult to injury, if the financial crisis has lowered economic activity permanently (as previous banking or financial crises did, according to the IMF), public finances are now in structural deficit. To insure long-term debt sustainability, there is no way to escape fiscal restriction.
- On top of this, the consensus now recognizes that short-run fiscal multipliers are low in expansions and high in recessions. As a result, accumulating public debt in good times and refraining from running deficits in order to control debt in bad times is very costly: it amounts to squandering precious fiscal ammunition when there is no enemy and to scrimping on it in the heat of combat.

It increasingly looks like, that we are living, since the financial crisis, in a *"new normal" macroeconomic environnent* in which fiscal multipliers are still positive in the short run but non-zero in the long run because of **two conflicting effects**:

- A primal fear of French and European policy makers – fed by the outstanding historical work of Carmen Reinhardt and Kenneth Rogoff and the difficulties encountered by Italy, Spain or Greece to roll over their public debt – is that bad things might happen when the debt to GDP ratio steps over 90%. For instance, the sudden realization by investors that, past that level, there is no easy way to bring debt back to "normal" levels without inflation or outright default might lead to a rapid rise in sovereign interest rates. These high rates precipitate an increase in the debt to GDP ratio by raising the cost of servicing the debt and impose intensified deficit reduction efforts that further shrink GDP. Thus, crossing the 90% threshold might lead to a one-way descent into the abyss. This implies that fiscal contraction, although recessionary in the short run, is beneficial in the long run. Fiscal pain now is thus an evil necessary for long-run prosperity and debt sustainability. According to this narrative, we may survive – but only if we stop dancing right away.
- An opposite danger is that fiscal contraction now – in a context of public finances damaged (except for Greece) not by fiscal laxity but by the slowdown in economic activity engendered by the financial crisis since 2008 – might cause a social, political and economic breakdown or durably destroy productive capacity. Fiscal contraction is thus recessionary both in the short run and in the long run. Short-run fiscal expansion is then a necessary condition for long-run prosperity and debt sustainability. In this narrative, we may survive – but only if we keep dancing!

The advisability of your proposal to reduce the public deficits to zero by 2017 depends, Mr. President, on which of these two dangers is the most intense or the most difficult to thwart. Should you be more concerned that loose fiscal policy may hurt long-run growth by increasing the cost of debt service, or should you fear instead first and foremost that strict fiscal policy may harm output durably by leading to social unrest or by reducing productive capacity?

To answer these portentous questions, whose answer is not a matter of ideology or of economic paradigm, we urge you to look at the evidence:

- The sovereign rating of countries with large deficits and debts, like the US and the UK, has been downgraded without any adverse effect on interest rate. This suggests that markets understand, seemingly better than policymakers, that the key problem with EU public finances nowadays is not deficits and debt per se but the governance of the euro zone and its fiscal and monetary policy mix. With a lender of last resort – the euro zone has none –, managing a national debt crisis would be easy and straightforward. The counter-argument that it would lead the ECB to monetize public debts, in sharp contrast with the statutes of this institution and its duty to reach price stability, is invalid: the ex-ante ability to monetize debt would reduce risk premia by eliminating self-fulfilling runs on national debts.
- Ugo Panizza and Andrea Presbitero have shown that there is no convincing historical evidence that debt reduction leads to higher economic growth. Hence the statement that public debt reduction is a prerequisite to economic growth is at worse an assumption, at best a correlation, but in any case not a causal relation supported by data.
- Twenty years of Japanese stagnation remind us that deflation is a deadly and durable trap. Under-activity pushes prices down slowly but surely. Paul Krugman and Richard Koo have shown how real expected interest rates feed a spiralling of deleveraging when deflation locks into prices expectation. If deleveraging extends to the banking sector, it adds a credit squeeze to the contraction.

- One of the pernicious drawbacks of fiscal austerity is the destruction of human capital by long unemployment spells. Young cohorts entering now on the job market will undergo a problematic start and may never recover. The longer unemployment remains over its natural rate, the larger the frustration stemming from a bleak future will grow.
- Beyond human capital, firms are the place where all sorts of capital are accumulated, ranging from social capital to immaterial assets such as R&D. Philippe Aghion and others have argued that this channel links short-term macroeconomic volatility to long-term growth potential. Moreover, in a competitive world, underinvestment in private R&D impairs competitiveness. Hence, austerity, by making output more volatile, has a negative long-term impact.
- What is true for private immaterial assets is even truer for public assets, that is to say assets that generate flows of public goods that individual incentives fail to produce. Typically, so-called golden rules neglect such assets which are by their very nature hard to measure. As a result, the pursuit of quick deficit reduction is usually carried out at the expense of investment in assets which have a high social profitability and are essential to ensure a smooth transition to a low carbon economy.

Drawing on these facts, please let us suggest you a four-pronged strategy:

1. You should argue that fiscal austerity is bad for both short-term *and* long-term growth and remind Mrs. Merkel that, as a result, it should be handled with the utmost care.
2. Slowing down the pace at which austerity is imposed on EU countries is vital – both to reduce unemployment in the short-run and to maintain the long-run prosperity

without which the reduction of debt-to-GDP ratios will be impossible.

3. You should acknowledge that the fears of your predecessor were well-founded: in the absence of a lender of last resort or without debt mutualization, slowing down austerity does expose sovereign debt to the risk of rising interest rates by provoking the self-fulfilling anxiety of creditors. But the experience of the US shows that the best way to deal with this danger is to have a full-fledged central bank that can act as a lender of last resort. The Maastricht Treaty should be amended fast in that dimension. Endowing the ECB with growth as a second mandate is not essential.
4. Mrs. Merkel is right that allowing the ECB to bail out States is a sure recipe for moral hazard. You should therefore agree, as a complement of the modification of ECB statutes, with her insistence that a Fiscal Compact governs Europe but you should strive for a Smart Fiscal Compact. This Smart Fiscal Compact should aim at enforcing the sustainability of public finances in a world where the long run is not given but depends on the short-run fiscal stance. It should draw its strength from legitimate European political institutions endowed with the power to control and enforce the commitment of each country to fiscal discipline. This task will require pragmatism and evidence-based economic policy – rather than budgetary numerology and simple-minded rules.

Failing to reduce deficits in Europe may end in a debacle. However, reducing them cold turkey is a sure recipe for disaster. Believing that old tricks like deregulating job markets will bring back economic growth lost in the recession is delusional, as the ILO warned in its last report. The possibility of brutal switches in economic or social trends rules out half-measures. The creeping build-up of long-term disequilibria requires prompt and decisive action in the short run. What is true for France is even truer for our main neighbors: the whole EU needs room for maneuver, and it needs it fast for the sake of its future.

Yours faithfully.

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[1] Jérôme Creel is deputy director of the Research Department, Xavier Timbeau is director of the Analysis and Forecasting Department, and Philippe Weil is president of OFCE.

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