

# European insurance

# unemployment

By Léo Aparisi de Lannoy and [Xavier Ragot](#)

The return of growth cannot eradicate the memory of how the crisis was mismanaged at the European level economically, but also socially and politically. The divergences between euro area countries in unemployment rates, current account balances and public debts are at levels unprecedented for decades. New steps in European governance must aim for greater economic efficiency in reducing unemployment and inequalities while explaining and justifying the financial and political importance of these measures in order to render them compatible with national policy choices. The establishment of a European unemployment insurance meets these criteria.

The idea of a European mechanism for unemployment compensation is an old idea dating back to at least 1975. The idea is now being extensively debated in Europe, with proposals from Italian and French economists and policymakers and studies conducted by German institutes, with the latest [OFCE Policy Brief](#) offering a summary. The possibility is even being mentioned in communications from the European Commission. The Policy Brief describes the European debates, as well as the system in place in the United States.

The European unemployment insurance mechanism presented in this note aims to finance the unemployment benefits of countries experiencing a severe recession and draws on the US experience to do this. A programme like this would constitute a second European level, supplementing the different national levels of unemployment insurance. It would help provide the unemployed support in countries hit by a deep recession, which would also contribute to sustaining aggregate demand and activity while reducing inequality in the recipient countries.

It is also consistent with a reduction in the public debt. This mechanism would not lead to permanent transfers to countries that are not carrying out reform, nor to unfair competition or the transfer of political powers that are now covered by subsidiarity. As in the case of the United States, it is consistent with the heterogeneous character of national systems.

To give an order of magnitude, an insurance system that is balanced over the European economic cycle and involves no permanent transfers between countries would have boosted growth in Spain by 1.6% of GDP at the peak of the crisis, while Germany would have received European aid from 1996 to 1998 and from 2003 to 2005. France would have experienced a GDP increase of 0.8% in 2013 thanks to such a system, as shown by the simulations conducted by the European teams.

For the complete study, see: [\*Policy Brief de l'OFCE, no. 28, 30 November 2017.\*](#)

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## France – the sick man of Europe?

by [Mathieu Plane](#) – Economist at OFCE (French Economic Observatory – Sciences Po)

The year 2014 was marked for France by the risk of European Commission sanctions for the failure of its budget to comply with Treaties; by the downgrade by Fitch of French government debt (following the one by S&P a year earlier); by the absence of any sign of a in the unemployment rate; by a rising deficit

after four years of consecutive decline; and by the distinction of being the only country in Europe to run a significant current account deficit: economically, it seemed like the country's worst year since the beginning of the crisis, in 2008. France did not of course go through the kind of recession it did in 2009, when the Eurozone experienced a record fall in GDP (-4.5% and -2.9% for the EMU and for France respectively). But for the first time since the subprime bubble burst, in 2014 French GDP grew more slowly (0.4%) than eurozone average (0.8%). The country's weakening position is fuelling the view that France may be the new sick man of Europe, a victim of its leaders' lax fiscal approach and its inability to reform. Is this really the case?

It is worth noting first that the French economic and social model proved its effectiveness during the crisis. Thanks to its system of social safety nets, to a combined (consumers, business, government) debt level that is lower than the Eurozone average, while the household savings rate that is higher, to a low level of inequality, and to a relatively solid banking system, France weathered the crisis better than most of its European partners. Indeed, between early 2008 and late 2013, French GDP grew by 1.1%, while during that same period the Eurozone as a whole contracted by 2.6%; France also avoided the recession in 2012 and 2013 that most Eurozone countries experienced. Looking at Europe for the six years from 2008 to 2013, France's economic performance was relatively close to that of Germany (2.7%), better than that of the UK (-1.3%) and well ahead of Spain (-7.2%) and Italy (-8.9%). Similarly, during this period investment in France contracted less than in the Eurozone as a whole (-7.7% versus -17%), and unemployment increased less (+3 points versus +4.6). Finally, the French economy's ability to stand up better to the crisis was not linked with a greater increase in public debt compared to the Eurozone average (+28 GDP points for both France and the Eurozone) or even the United Kingdom (+43 points).

Nevertheless, France has seen its position in the Eurozone deteriorate in 2014. This was marked not only by lower growth than its partners, but also by higher unemployment (the Eurozone rate has gradually fallen), an increase in public debt (which virtually stabilized in the Eurozone), a decline in investment (which improved slightly in the euro zone), an increase in its public deficit (while that of the Eurozone fell) and a substantial current account deficit (the euro zone is running a significant surplus). Why this divergence?

While France does have a problem with competitiveness, note that almost half of its current account deficit is cyclical due to more dynamic imports than its major trading partners, which generally have worse output gaps. Furthermore, until 2013, the country's fiscal adjustment was focused more on the tax burden than on public spending. Conversely, the focus in 2014 was more on public spending. Given France's position in the business cycle and its budget decisions, the fiscal multiplier in 2014 was higher than in previous years, so that fiscal consolidation imposed a heavy toll in terms of growth. In terms of competitiveness, French industry is caught in the middle of the Eurozone between, on the one hand, peripheral countries of the euro area, including Spain, which have entered into a spiral of wage deflation fuelled by mass unemployment, and the core countries, especially Germany, which are reluctant to give up their excessive trade surpluses through higher domestic demand and more inflation. Faced with the generalization of wage devaluations in the Eurozone, France had no choice but to respond with a policy to improve the competitiveness of its businesses by cutting labour costs. Thus, the CICE tax credit and the Pact of Responsibility represent a total transfer of 41 billion euros to the firm system, mainly financed by households. While the positive impact of these transfers will be felt over the medium-to-long term, the financing effort together with the country's fiscal consolidation effort had an immediate adverse effect on purchasing power, which goes a long way in explaining the poor

growth performance of 2014. Finally, 2014 also saw a steep fall in housing investment (-7%), the largest drop since the real estate crisis of the early 1990s (excluding 2009).

There are several reasons why France's poor performance is not likely to be repeated in 2015: first, in order to halt the decline in construction, [emergency measures were taken in August 2014 to free up housing investment](#), with the first effects to be felt in 2015. Second, the programmes enacted to improve business competitiveness will begin to take full effect from 2015: the CICE tax credit and the Responsibility Pact will slash business costs by 17 billion euros in 2015, up significantly from only 6.5 billion in 2014. Third, the slowdown in the fiscal consolidation programmes of our commercial partners and the introduction of a minimum wage in Germany will both help French exports. In addition, [the lower exchange rate for the euro](#) and falling oil prices are powerful levers for boosting the French economy in 2015, and together could amount to one extra point of growth. Given the ECB's policy on quantitative easing, interest rates should also remain low for at several more quarters. Finally, although timid, the Juncker plan along with marginal changes in Europe's fiscal rules will favour a pickup in investment. These factors will put some wind in the sails of French growth by helping to offset the negative impact of the reduction in public spending for 2015, so that the economy finally reaches a pace that will be sufficient to begin to reverse the unemployment curve and reduce the public deficit.

While France is not the sick man of Europe, [it is nevertheless still very much dependent, like all euro zone countries, on Europe having strong macroeconomic levers](#). Up to now, these have had a negative impact on business, be it through overly restrictive fiscal policies or a monetary policy that has proved insufficiently expansionary in the light of other central banks' action. In an integrated currency zone, deflation cannot be fought on a national basis. The choice of

a European policy mix that is more geared towards growth and inflation is a first since the start of the sovereign debt crisis. Boosted by lower oil prices, let us hope that these levers will prove strong enough to halt the depressive spiral that the Eurozone has been going through since the onset of the crisis. The recovery will be European, before being French, or there won't be one.

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## **Austerity without end – or, how Italy found itself trapped by European rules**

By Raul Sampognaro

If the budget submitted by France is out of step with the rules on fiscal governance in the euro area (see the recent posts on this subject by [Henri Sterdyniak](#) and [Xavier Timbeau](#)), Italy is also in the hot seat. The situations of France and Italy are, however, not directly comparable: the case of Italy could be far more restrictive than that of France, once again reflecting the perverse effects of Europe's new governance. While, unlike France, Italy is no longer subject to an Excessive Deficit Procedure (EDP), with its budget deficit at the 3% threshold since 2012, it is still covered by the Stability and Growth Pact's preventive arm and thus enhanced surveillance with respect to the debt criterion. The country's debt of 127% of GDP is well above the 60% level set by EU rules and, according to its medium-term budgetary objective (MT0), Italy must come close to balancing government spending.

While the French budget deficit for 2015 will be the highest in the entire euro area (excluding countries subject to a programme [\[11\]](#)), since the latest announcements on October 28, Italy has a deficit of 2.6%, which should not trigger a new EDP. However, the Pact's preventive arm puts constraints on changes in the country's structural balance:

- (i) in the name of convergence towards its MT0, Italy must make a structural adjustment of 0.5 percentage point per year for 3 years (i.e. cut its structural deficit by 0.5 point per year),
- (ii) if the structural deficit defined in the MT0 is not sufficient to reach a debt level of 60% within 20 years, the country must make an extra effort under the *debt criterion*. According to the latest forecast by the Commission, Italy must provide an average annual structural effort of 0.7 point in 2014 and 2015.

Yet the government is counting on a *deterioration* in the structural balance of 0.3 point in 2014, followed by an *improvement* of 0.4 point in 2015.

Thus, while according to the Commission the treaties require Italy to make a cumulative effort of 1.4 point in 2014 and 2015 (for its part the Italian Government considers that this effort should instead be 0.9 point), Italy is announcing an *improvement* in its structural balance of 0.1 point during the period, a difference of 1.3 points from that demanded by the Commission. From this perspective, Italy is further from European requirements than France, and will have to justify its lack of a structural adjustment. In addition, Italy is not expected to reach its MT0 in 2015, even though at the end of the European Semester in July 2014 the Council had recommended it stick to the 2015 target.

Italy is the first country to be constrained by the *debt criterion* and is serving as a laboratory for the application

of the rules by showing some of their adverse effects. Indeed, the adjustment required under the *debt criterion* is changing in line with several parameters, some of which were not really anticipated by the legislator. For example, the amount of the adjustment depends on a forecast of the ratio of nominal debt / nominal GDP at the end of the transition phase. However, the fall in prices currently underway in Italy is lowering the nominal GDP forecast for the next three years, without any change in fiscal policy. Thus, the debt criterion is tightening mechanically without any government action, endlessly increasing the need for structural adjustment as the new adjustments induce more deflation. In addition, the procedures used to find deviations from the debt criterion are slower because the controls are carried out essentially *ex post*, based on the accumulated deviations observed over two years. However, the magnitude of the deviation announced by the Italian government could spark procedures based on *ex ante* control. Recall, however, that unlike France, Italy is not currently in a procedure. This would have to be opened before any sanctions could be envisaged against Italy. This preliminary and necessary step gives the Italian government time to take suitable measures or to justify its deviation from the MTO.

Furthermore, the EDP's preventive arm provides more opportunities for deviation than the corrective arm. In addition to the clause on exceptional economic circumstances, Italy can argue major structural reforms that will improve the future sustainability of the debt. This argument, which is also raised by the French government, is not set out in the EDP text (the Commission could accept some flexibility). Here, however, the Renzi government is drawing on its reputation as more of a reformer than the French government.

Both governments have requested the application of the exceptional economic circumstances clause in order to break their commitments. The Commission could be more sensitive to



the Italian request because its economic situation has deteriorated: Italy has seen 3 years of falling GDP, which is continuing in the first half of 2014. The country's GDP is 9 points below its pre-crisis peak, while in France it is one point higher. The latest survey indicators, for example on industrial production, do not augur well for recovery in the short term. Finally, Italy is suffering deflation.

In summary, while the Italian gap seems larger than that of France, it could benefit from greater indulgence. The procedures applied to each country differ and give Italy more time before any sanctions can be applied. The country's willingness to reform could win it higher marks than France from the Commission. Finally, the most important point in the discussion is that Italy's economic situation is much more serious, with an uninterrupted recession since the summer of 2011 and with prices falling.

But in both cases the reinforced pact, whether it is corrective or preventive, implies endless structural adjustment. Italy demonstrates that getting out of the excessive deficit procedure will demand continuing efforts to meet the debt criterion. If France leaves the EDP in 2017, its debt will be, according to government forecasts, around 100% of GDP. It must then continue with adjustments of more than 0.5%. Confirmation of deflation will make the Pact's rules even more recessive and absurd. Ultimately, the fiscal pact meant to preserve the euro by chasing free-riders or stowaways could lead to blowing it apart through an endless recession.

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[\[1\]](#) Greece, Ireland and Portugal have received European aid and thus have been subject to joint monitoring by the ECB, the IMF and the European Union. Ireland and Portugal are now out of their bailout programme.

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# Manic-depressive austerity: let's talk about it!

By [Christophe Blot](#), [Jérôme Creel](#), and [Xavier Timbeau](#)

*Following discussions with our colleagues from the European Commission [\[1\]](#), we return to the causes of the prolonged period of recession experienced by the euro zone since 2009. We continue to believe that premature fiscal austerity has been a major political error and that an alternative policy would have been possible. The economists of the European Commission for their part continue to argue that there was no alternative to the strategy they advocated. It is worth examining these conflicting opinions.*

In the [iAGS 2014](#) report (as well as in the [iAGS 2013](#) report and in [various OFCE publications](#)), we have developed the analysis that the stiff fiscal austerity measures taken since 2010 have prolonged the recession and contributed to the rise in unemployment in the euro zone countries, and are now exposing us to the risk of deflation and increased poverty.

Fiscal austerity, which started in 2010 (mainly in Spain, Greece, Ireland and Portugal, with a fiscal impulse [\[2\]](#) for the euro zone of -0.3 GDP point that year), and then was intensified and generalized in 2011 (a fiscal stimulus of -1.2 GDP point across the euro zone, see table), and then reinforced in 2012 (-1.8 GDP point) and continued in 2013 (-0.9 GDP point), is likely to persist in 2014 (-0.4 GDP point). At the level of the euro zone, since the start of the global financial crisis of 2008, and while taking into account the economic recovery plans of 2008 and 2009, the cumulative fiscal impulse boils down to a restrictive policy of 2.6 GDP

points. Because the fiscal multipliers are high, this policy explains in (large) part the prolonged recession in the euro zone.

The fiscal multipliers summarize the impact of fiscal policy on activity [\[31\]](#). They depend on the nature of fiscal policy (whether it involves tax increases or spending cuts, distinguishing between transfer, operating and investment expenditure), on the accompanying policies (mainly the ability of monetary policy to lower key rates during the austerity treatment), and on the macroeconomic and financial environment (including unemployment, the fiscal policies enacted by trading partners, changes in exchange rates and the state of the financial system). In times of crisis, the fiscal multipliers are much higher, *i.e.* at least 1.5 for the multiplier of transfer spending, compared with near 0 in the long-term during normal times. The reason is relatively simple: in times of crisis, the paralysis of the banking sector and its inability to provide the credit economic agents need to cope with the decline in their revenues or the deterioration in their balance sheets requires the latter to respect their budget constraints, which are no longer intertemporal but instantaneous. The impossibility of generalizing negative nominal interest rates (the well-known “zero lower bound”) prevents central banks from stimulating the economy by further cuts in interest rates, which increases the multiplier effect during a period of austerity.

**Table. Fiscal impulses in the euro area**

In GDP points

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
DEU	1,3	-1,1	-1,2	0,2	0,1
FRA	-0,5	-1,8	-1,2	-1,4	-0,7
ITA	-0,7	-0,4	-3,0	-1,5	-0,6
ESP	-1,4	-1,3	-3,4	-1,6	-1,0
NLD	-1,1	-0,5	-1,4	-1,5	-1,0
BEL	-0,1	0,1	-0,6	-1,0	-0,5
IRL	-4,2	-1,5	-2,0	-1,7	-1,7
PRT	-0,3	-3,7	-3,9	-1,5	-1,5
GRC	-7,6	-5,5	-3,9	-3,3	-1,7
AUT	0,5	-1,4	-0,3	-0,9	-0,4
FIN	1,3	-0,7	-0,3	-1,4	-0,3
EA (11)	-0,3	-1,2	-1,8	-0,9	-0,4

Sources: Eurostat, National accounts.

If the fiscal multipliers are higher in times of crisis, then a rational reduction in the public debt implies the postponement of restrictive fiscal policies. We must first get out of the situation that is causing the increase in the multiplier, and once we are back into a “normal” situation then reduce the public debt through tighter fiscal policy. This is especially important as the reduction in activity induced by tightening fiscal policy may outweigh the fiscal effort. For a multiplier higher than 2, the budget deficit and public debt, instead of falling, could continue to grow, despite austerity. The case of Greece is instructive in this respect: despite *real* tax hikes and *real* spending cuts, and despite a partial restructuring of its public debt, the Greek government is facing a public debt that is not decreasing at the pace of the budgetary efforts – far from it. The “fault” lies in the steep fall in GDP. The debate on the value of the multiplier is old but took on new life at the beginning of the crisis.[\[4\]](#) It received a lot of publicity at the end of 2012 and in early 2013, when the IMF (through the voice of [O. Blanchard and D. Leigh](#)) challenged the European Commission and demonstrated that these two institutions had, since 2008, systematically underestimated the impact of austerity on the euro zone countries. The European Commission recommended remedies that failed to work and then with each setback called

for strengthening them. This is why the fiscal policies pursued in the euro zone reflected a considerable error of judgment and are the main cause of the prolonged recession we are experiencing. The magnitude of this error can be estimated at almost 3 percentage points of GDP for 2013 (or almost 3 points of unemployment): If austerity had been postponed until more favourable times, we would have reached the same ratio of debt-to-GDP by the deadline imposed by treaty (in 2032), but with the benefit of additional economic activity. The cost of austerity since 2011 is thus almost 500 billion euros (the total of what was lost in 2011, 2012 and 2013). The nearly 3 additional points of unemployment in the euro zone are now exposing us to the risk of deflation, which will be very difficult to avoid.

Although the European Commission follows these debates on the value of the multiplier, it (and to some extent the IMF) developed another analysis to justify its choice of economic policy in the euro zone. This analysis holds that the fiscal multipliers are *negative* in times of crisis *for the euro zone*, and for the euro zone alone. Based on this analysis, austerity should *reduce* unemployment. To arrive at what seems to be a paradox, we must accept a particular counterfactual (what would have happened if we had not implemented austerity policies). For example, in the case of Spain, without an immediate fiscal effort, the financial markets would have threatened to stop lending to finance the Spanish public debt. The rise in interest rates charged by the financial markets to Spain would have pushed its government into brutal fiscal restraint, the banking sector would not have survived the collapse of the value of Spain's sovereign notes, and the increased cost of credit due to the fragmentation of the financial markets in Europe would have led to a crisis that spiralled way beyond what the country actually experienced. In this analytical model, the austerity recommended is not the result of dogmatic blindness but an acknowledgement of a lack of choice. There was no other solution, and in any case,

delaying austerity was not a credible option.

Accepting the European Commission's counterfactual amounts to accepting the idea that the fiscal multipliers are negative. It also means accepting the notion that finance dominates the economy, or at least that judgments on the sustainability of the public debt must be entrusted to the financial markets. According to this counterfactual, quick straightforward austerity would regain the confidence of the markets and would therefore avoid a deep depression. Compared to a situation of postponed austerity, the recession induced by the early straightforward budget cuts should lead to less unemployment and more activity. This counterfactual thesis was raised against us in a seminar held to discuss the iAGS 2014 report organized by the European Commission (DGECFIN) on 23 January 2014. Simulations presented on this occasion illustrated these remarks and concluded that the austerity policy pursued had been beneficial for the euro zone, thereby justifying the policy *a posteriori*. The efforts undertaken put an end to the sovereign debt crisis in the euro zone, a prerequisite for hoping one day to get out of the depression that began in 2008.

In the [iAGS 2014](#) report, publically released in November 2013, we responded (in advance) to this objection based on a very different analysis: massive austerity did not lead to an end to the recession, contrary to what had been anticipated by the European Commission following its various forecasting exercises. The announcement of austerity measures in 2009, their implementation in 2010 and their reinforcement in 2011 never convinced the financial markets and failed to prevent Spain and Italy from having to face higher and higher sovereign rates. Greece, which went through □□an unprecedented fiscal tightening, plunged its economy into a deeper depression than the Great Depression, without reassuring anyone. Like the rest of the informed observers, the financial market understood clearly that this drastic remedy would wind

up killing the patient *before* any cure. The continuation of high government deficits is due largely to a collapse in activity. Faced with debt that was out of control, the financial markets panicked and raised interest charges, further contributing to the collapse.

The solution is not to advocate more austerity, but to break the link between the deterioration in the fiscal situation and the rise in sovereign interest rates. Savers need to be reassured that there will be no default and that the state is credible for the repayment of its debt. If that means deferring repayment of the debt until later, and if it is credible for the State to postpone, then postponement is the best option.

Crucial to ensuring this credibility were the intervention of the European Central Bank during the summer of 2012, the initiation of the project for a banking union, and the announcement of unlimited intervention by the ECB through Outright Monetary Transactions ([Creel and Timbeau \(2012\)](#)), which are conditional upon a programme of fiscal stabilization. These elements convinced the markets almost immediately, despite some institutional uncertainty (particularly concerning the banking union and the state of Spain's banks, and the judgment of Germany's Constitutional Court on the European arrangements), and even though OMT is an option that has never been implemented (in particular, what is meant by a programme to stabilize the public finances conditioning ECB intervention). Furthermore, in 2013 the European Commission negotiated a postponement of fiscal adjustment with certain Member States ([Cochard and Schweisguth \(2013\)](#)). This first tentative step towards the solutions proposed in the two IAGS reports gained the approval of the financial markets in the form of a relaxation of sovereign spreads in the euro zone.

Contrary to our analysis, the counterfactual envisaged by the European Commission, which denies the possibility of an

alternative, assumes an unchanged institutional framework [\[5\]](#). Why pretend that the macroeconomic strategy should be strictly conditioned on institutional constraints? If institutional compromises are needed in order to improve the orientation of economic policies and ultimately to achieve a better result in terms of employment and growth, then this strategy must be followed. Since the Commission does not question the rules of the game in political terms, it can only submit to the imperatives of austerity. This form of apolitical stubbornness was an error, and in the absence of the ECB's "political" step, the Commission was leading us into an impasse. The implicit pooling of the public debt embodied in the ECB's commitment to take all the measures necessary to support the euro (the "Draghi put") changed the relationship between the public debt and sovereign interest rates for every country in the euro zone. It is always possible to say that the ECB would never have made ☐this commitment if the countries had not undertaken their forced march towards consolidation. But such an argument does not preclude discussing the price to be paid in order to achieve the institutional compromise. The fiscal multipliers are clearly (and strongly) positive, and it would have been good policy to defer austerity. There was an alternative, and the policy pursued was a mistake. It is perhaps the magnitude of this error that makes it difficult to recognize.

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[\[1\]](#) We would like to thank Marco Buti for his invitation to present the iAGS 2014 report and for his suggestions, and also Emmanuelle Maincent, Alessandro Turrini and Jan in't Veld for their comments.

[\[2\]](#) The fiscal impulse measures the restrictive or expansionary orientation of fiscal policy. It is calculated as the change in the primary structural balance.

[\[3\]](#) For example, for a multiplier of 1.5, tightening the



budget by 1 billion euros would reduce activity by 1.5 billion euros.

[4] See [Heyer \(2012\)](#) for a recent review of the literature.

[5] The institutional framework is here understood broadly. It refers not only to the institutions in charge of economic policy decisions but also to the rules adopted by these institutions. The OMT is an example of a rule change adopted by an institution. Strengthening the fiscal rules is another element of a changing institutional framework.

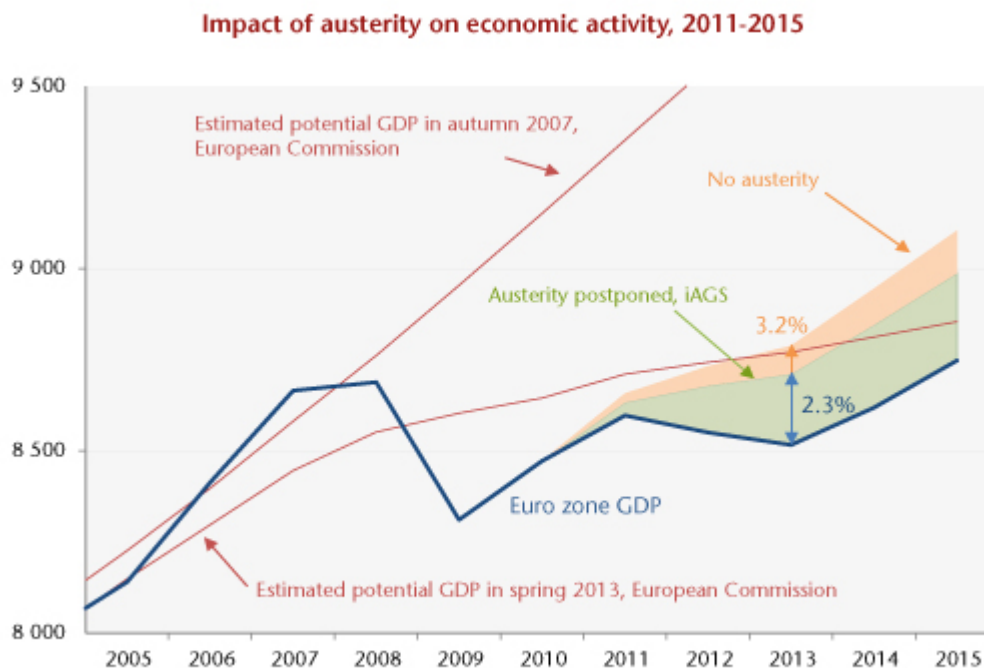
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## From austerity to stagnation

By [Xavier Timbeau](#)

Since 2010, the European Commission has published the Annual Growth Survey to stimulate discussion on the occasion of the European semester, during which the governments and parliaments of the Member States, the Commission, and civil society discuss and develop the economic strategies of the various European countries. We considered it important to participate in this debate by publishing simultaneously with the Commission an independent Annual Growth Survey (iAGS), in collaboration with the IMK, a German institute, and the ECLM, a Danish institute. In the 2014 iAGS, for instance, we estimate the cost of the austerity measures enacted since 2011. This austerity policy, which was implemented while the fiscal multipliers were very high and on a scale unprecedented since the Second World War, was followed simultaneously by most euro zone countries. This resulted in lopping 3.2% off euro zone GDP for 2013. An alternative strategy, resulting

after 20 years in the same GDP-to-debt ratios (*i.e.* 60% in most countries), would have been possible by not seeking to reduce public deficits in the short term when the multipliers are high. In order to lower the fiscal multipliers again, it's necessary to reduce unemployment, build up agents' balance sheets and get out of the liquidity trap. A more limited but ongoing adjustment strategy, just as fiscally rigorous but more suited to the economic situation, would have led to 2.3 additional points of GDP in 2013, which would have been much better than under the brutal austerity we find ourselves in today. This means there would not have been a recession in 2012 or 2013 for the euro zone as a whole (see the figure below: GDP in million euros).



Source: iAGS 2014, Eurostat and European Commission.

It is often argued that the state of euro zone public finances left no choice. In particular, market pressure was so great that certain countries, like Greece for example, were concerned that they would lose access to private financing of their public debt. The amounts involved and the state of the primary deficit are advanced to justify this brutal strategy and convince both the markets and the European partners. However, the sovereign debt crisis, and hence market pressure,

ended when the European Central Bank announced that no country would leave the euro and set up an instrument, Outright Monetary Transactions, which makes it possible under certain conditions to buy back public debt securities of euro zone countries and therefore to intervene to counter the distrust of the markets ([see an analysis here](#)). From that point on, what matters is the sustainability of the public debt in the medium term rather than demonstrating that in an emergency the populace can be compelled to accept just any old policy. Sustainability does however require an adjustment policy that is ongoing (because the deficits are high) and moderate (because fiscal policy has a major impact on activity). By choosing the difficult path of austerity, we paid a high price for the institutional incoherence of the euro zone, which was exposed by the crisis. In the 2014 iAGS, we point out costs due to austerity that go beyond the loss of activity. On the one hand, inequality is increasing, and “anchored poverty”, *i.e.* as measured from the median incomes of 2008, is increasing dramatically in most countries affected by the recession. The high level of unemployment is leading to wage deflation in some countries (Spain, Portugal and Greece). This wage deflation will result in gains in cost competitiveness but, in return, will lead the countries’ partners to also take the path of wage deflation or fiscal devaluation. Ultimately, the adjustment of effective exchange rates either will not take place or will occur at such a slow pace that the effects of deflation will wind up dominant, especially as the appreciation of the euro will ruin the hopes of boosting competitiveness relative to the rest of the world. The main effect of wage deflation will be a greater real burden (*i.e.* relative to income) of private and public debt. This will mean a return to centre stage of massive public and private defaults, as well as the risk of the euro zone’s collapse. It is possible nevertheless to escape the trap of deflation. Possible methods are explored and calculated in the 2014 iAGS. By reducing sovereign spreads, the countries in crisis can be given significant maneuvering room. The levers for this

include the continuation of the ECB's efforts, but also a credible commitment by the Member states to stabilizing their public finances. Public investment has been cut by more than 2 points of potential GDP since 2007. Re-investing in the future is a necessity, especially as infrastructure that is not maintained and is allowed to collapse will be extremely expensive to rebuild. But it is also a way to stimulate activity without compromising fiscal discipline, since the latter must be assessed by trends not in the gross debt but in the net debt. Finally, the minimum wage should be used as an instrument of coordination. Our simulations show that there is a way to curb deflationary trends and reduce current account imbalances if surplus countries would increase their minimum wage faster in real terms than their productivity while deficit countries would increase their minimum wage slower than their productivity. Such a rule, which would respect both national practices in wage bargaining as well as productivity levels and the specific features of labour markets, would lead to gradually reducing macroeconomic imbalances in the euro zone.

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# Is the euro area out of recession?

By [Philippe Weil](#)

At its meeting on October 9<sup>th</sup>, the [Euro Area Business Cycle Dating Committee](#) of the [Centre for Economic Policy Research](#) (CEPR) in London drew on the OFCE for this thorny issue (for the composition of this committee, which I chair,

see [here](#)). The Committee's mission is to establish a chronology of recessions and expansions in the euro area, similar to what the National Bureau of Economic Research has done for the United States, [dating back to 1854](#).

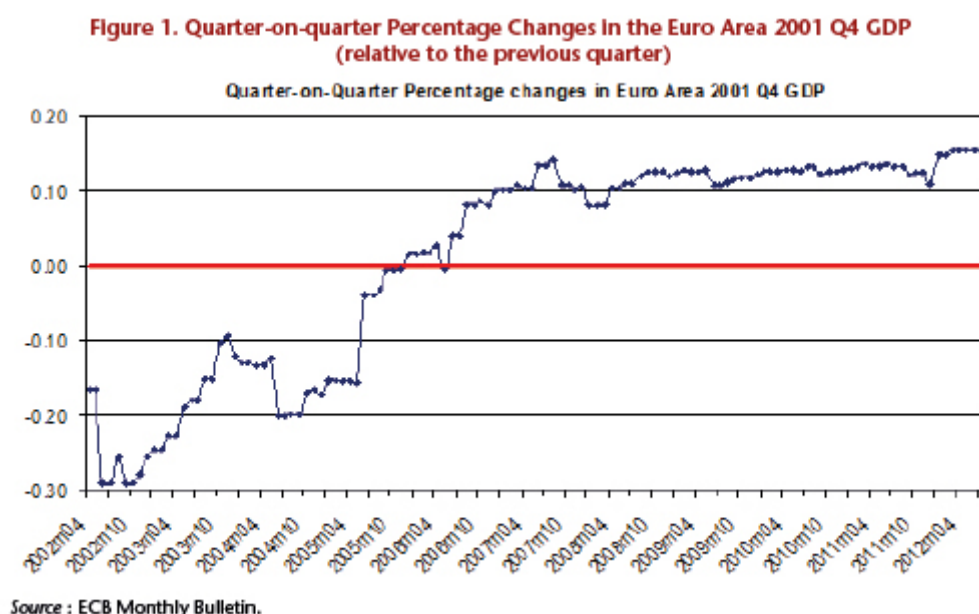
This chronology is valuable in two ways.

The first is that it allows economists to examine the characteristics of Europe's economic development. Do recessions tend to be short or long-lasting? Frequent or rare? Deep or mild? Is the euro area evolving in concert with the US economy? Is the slowdown in economic activity caused by the financial crisis unusual (more persistent than usual, sharper)? Without a clear definition of the timing of the ups and downs in Europe's economic activity and without a sketch of cyclical fluctuations, we cannot provide answers to these relatively basic questions.

The second advantage of this chronology is that establishing it requires an examination of all aspects of economic activity: GDP, of course, but also consumption, investment and especially employment (number of employed persons, number of hours worked). According to the CEPR's dating exercise, an expansion is a period in which every aspect of economic activity is growing significantly. It is not necessarily an episode of at least two consecutive quarters of GDP growth (much less one quarter!). For example, the CEPR Dating Committee has determined that the countries composing the future euro area were in recession during [the period from the 3<sup>rd</sup> quarter of 1980 to the 3<sup>rd</sup> quarter of 1982](#), whereas real GDP had risen for several quarters during this time and it was higher at the end of the recession than at the beginning! The culprits were investment and employment, which fell sharply during this period.

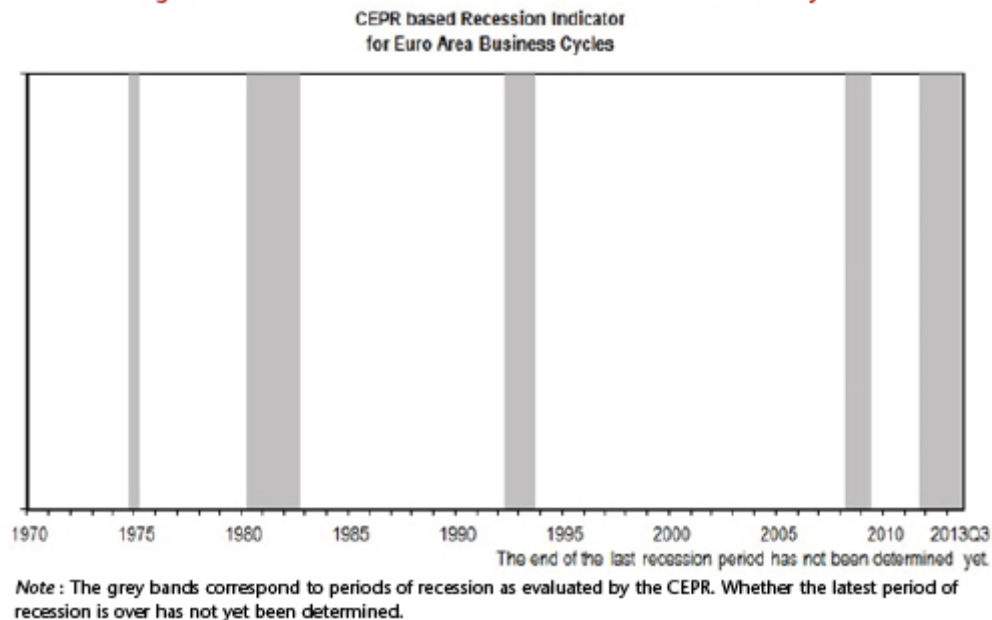
To add to the complexity of the dating effort, the harsh reality of the world of economic statistics should not be forgotten: the statistics reach us late and are subsequently

revised, sometimes significantly, over time. Unlike meteorologists who know the temperature at the top of the Eiffel Tower in real time, economists have no idea, for example, of the level of GDP for the current month or quarter. The first estimates are released only several months later (e.g. the first flash estimate of euro area GDP for the third quarter of 2013 will be published by Eurostat only on 14 November 2013), and it might turn out that growth rates that seem positive based on preliminary estimates wind up after subsequent revisions to be negative – or vice versa. By examining all the determinants of economic activity (including employment), and not just GDP, the Committee is guarding against (so far successfully) the imperfections in this data so as to avoid, for instance, declaring the existence of a recession which turns out to be a statistical mirage that disappears after further review of the data. Thus, the Committee did not report [in September 2003](#) the existence of a recession between 2001 and 2003 even though the data showed a decrease in GDP during that time (but never, it is true, for two consecutive quarters). It concluded that there had been a prolonged pause during a period of expansion. This was a good move, as subsequent revisions of GDP cancelled these quarters of declining economic activity (see Figure 1). Its diagnosis was thus well advised.



So let's get back to the euro area in the state we see it in October 2013. The area hit a [peak in economic activity in the 3<sup>rd</sup> quarter of 2011](#) and, since going into recession at that time, it experienced quarterly growth that was slightly positive in the second quarter of 2013. The first estimate for the third quarter of 2013 will not be known, as mentioned earlier, until 14 November. There are, it is true, several corresponding indexes indicating that the cycle is in an upwards phase and that the macroeconomic outlook for 2014 is more favourable. But [on 9 October](#) the Dating Committee noted, nevertheless, that it would be premature at that time to conclude that the euro area was out of recession. Indeed, neither the length nor the strength of the putative recovery in economic activity was sufficient to conclude that the recession was already over. This judgment was not based on the absence at that point of two consecutive quarters of GDP growth because this is not the criterion that (mechanically) guides the Committee's thinking. Nor does it reflect any pessimism about the economic outlook for 2014, because the Committee is not in the business of making predictions. The Committee's assessment is based simply on a review of all the data available at the time it meets. The Committee has not excluded that the euro area is simply going through a pause in the recession it entered a year ago.

**Figure 2. CEPR-based Recession Indicator for Euro Area Business Cycles**





# Competitiveness: danger zone!

By [Céline Antonin](#), [Christophe Blot](#), Sabine Le Bayon and [Catherine Mathieu](#)

The crisis affecting the euro zone is the result of macroeconomic and financial imbalances that developed during the 2000s. The European economies that have provoked doubt about the sustainability of their public finances (Spain, Portugal, Greece and Italy [\[1\]](#)) are those that ran up the highest current account deficits before the crisis and that saw sharp deteriorations in competitiveness between 2000 and 2007. Over that same period Germany gained competitiveness and built up growing surpluses, to such an extent that it has become a model to be emulated across the euro zone, and especially in the countries of southern Europe. Unit labor costs actually fell in Germany starting in 2003, at a time when moderate wage agreements were being agreed between trade unions and employers and the coalition government led by Gerhard Schröder was implementing a comprehensive programme of structural reform. This programme was designed to make the labour market [\[2\]](#) more flexible and reform the financing of social protection but also to restore competitiveness. The concept of competitiveness is nevertheless complex and reflects a number of factors (integration into the international division of production processes, development of a manufacturing network that boosts network effects and innovation, etc.), which also play an important role.

In addition, as is highlighted in a [recent analysis by Eric Heyer](#), Germany's structural reforms were accompanied by a broadly expansionary fiscal policy. Today, the incentive to improve competitiveness, strengthened by the implementation of improved monitoring of macroeconomic imbalances (see [here](#)), is part of a context marked by continued fiscal adjustment and high levels of unemployment. In these conditions, the implementation of structural reforms coupled with a hunt for

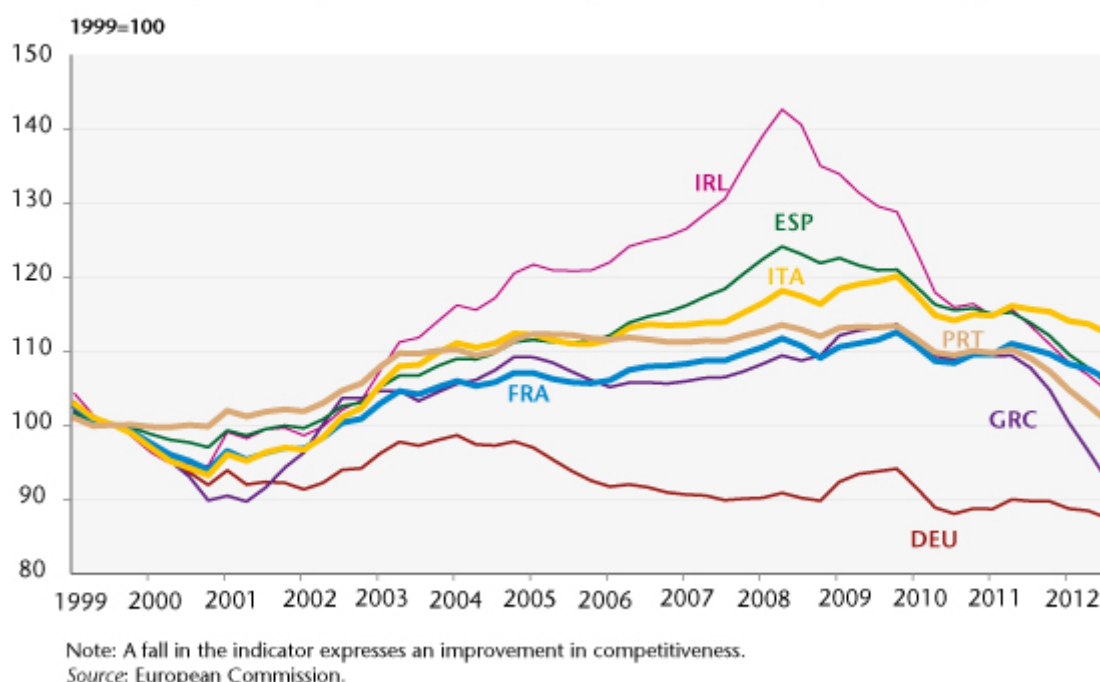


gains in competitiveness could plunge the entire euro zone into a deflationary situation. In fact, Spain and Greece have already been experiencing deflation, and it is threatening other southern Europe countries, as we show in [our latest forecast](#). This is mainly the result of the deep recession hitting these countries. But the process is also being directly fueled by reductions in public sector wages, as well as in the minimum wage (in the case of Greece). Moreover, some countries have cut unemployment benefits (Greece, Spain, Portugal) and simplified redundancy procedures (Italy, Greece, Portugal). Reducing job protection and simplifying dismissal procedures increases the likelihood of being unemployed. In a context of under-employment and sluggish demand, the result is further downward pressure on wages, thereby increasing the deflationary risks. Furthermore, there has also been an emphasis on decentralizing the wage bargaining process so that they are more in tune with business realities. This is leading to a loss of bargaining power on the part of trade unions and employees, which in turn is likely to strengthen downward pressure on real wages.

The euro zone countries are pursuing a non-cooperative strategy that is generating gains in market share mainly at the expense of other European trading partners. Thus since 2008 or 2009 Greece, Spain, Portugal and Ireland have improved their competitiveness relative to the other industrialized countries (see graph). The continuation of this strategy of reducing labor costs could plunge the euro zone into a deflationary spiral, as the countries losing market share seek in turn to regain competitiveness by reducing their own labour costs. Indeed, this non-cooperative strategy, initiated by Germany in the 2000s, has already contributed to the crisis in the euro zone (see the box on p.52 of the [ILO report](#) published in 2012). It is of course futile to hope that the continuation of this strategy will provide a solution to the current crisis. On the contrary, new problems will arise, since deflation [\[3\]](#) will make the process of reducing both public

and private debt more expensive, since debt expressed in real terms will rise as prices fall: this will keep the euro zone in a state of recession.

Figure 1. Competitiveness measured by unit labour costs (total economy)



[1] The Irish case is somewhat distinct, as the current account deficit seen in 2007 was due not to trade, but a shortfall in income.

[2] These reforms are examined in detail in a report by the Conseil d'analyse économique (no. 102). They are summarized in a special study [La quête de la compétitivité ouvre la voie de la déflation](#) ("The quest for competitiveness opens the door to deflation").

[3] For a more comprehensive view of the dynamics of debt-driven deflation, see [here](#).

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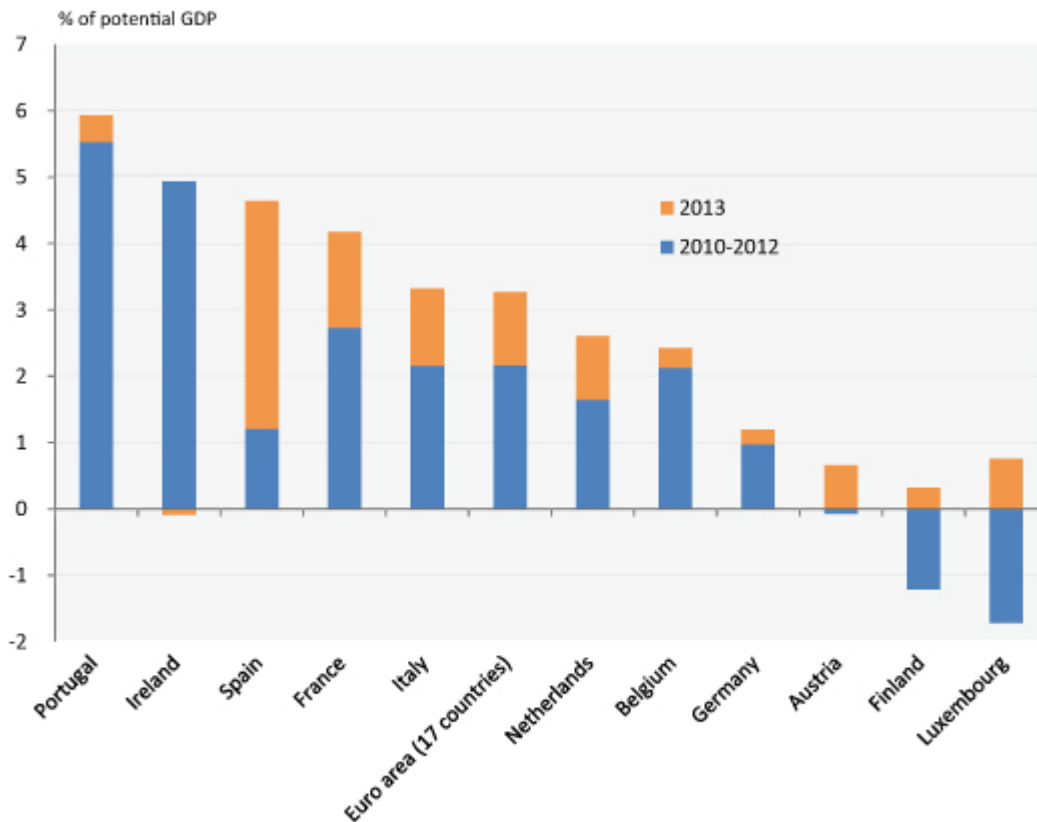
# Why France is right to abandon the 3% public déficit target by 2013

By [Mathieu Plane](#)

Given the statements by the Minister of Economy and Finance, the government seems to have reached a decision to abandon the goal of a deficit of 3% of GDP by 2013. In addition to the change of tack in the policy announced up to now, which was to bring the deficit down to 3% by 2013 “whatever the cost”, we can legitimately conclude that France is right to abandon this goal, and we offer several arguments for this. While in this post we do not review [the economic consequences of the fiscal policy being undertaken in France and the euro zone](#), which has been dictated by nominal targets for the deficit that do not take into account the way it breaks down structurally / cyclically and that have a dangerously pro-cyclical character, we nevertheless present several arguments that the European Commission may find of value:

1 – According to the latest figures from the European Commission on 22 February 2013<sup>[1]</sup>, of the euro zone countries making the greatest fiscal adjustment in 2013 from a structural viewpoint, France, with 1.4 GDP points, comes behind only Spain (3.4) and Greece (2.6). For the 2010-2013 period, the reduction in France’s structural deficit represents 4.2 GDP points, which makes France the euro zone country which, alongside Spain (4.6 GDP points), has carried out the largest budget cutbacks of the major countries in the zone, ahead of Italy (3.3 GDP points), the Netherlands (2.6) and of course Germany (1.2) (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Change in the structural deficit of the euro zone countries\*



\* For reasons of scale, we have not put Greece in the figure. Over the 2010-2013 period, Greece's structural fiscal adjustment came to 16.9 GDP points, including 2.6 in 2013.  
Sources: European Commission, OFCE calculations.

2 – In 2007, before the crisis, according to the European Commission France had a structural public deficit of -4.4 GDP points, compared with an average of -2.1 for the euro zone and -0.9 for Germany. In 2013, this came to -1.9 GDP points in France, -1.3 for the euro zone, and +0.4 for Germany, which represents an improvement of the structural deficit of 2.5 GDP points for France since the start of the crisis, *i.e.* three times the average for the euro zone and twice that for Germany (Table 1). Leaving aside public investment, France's structural public deficit in 2013 was positive and higher than the euro zone average (1.2 GDP point in France, versus 0.8 for the euro zone average and 1.9 for Germany). Note that France is spending 3.1 GDP points on public investment in 2013 (0.2 GDP point less than in 2007), against a euro zone average of only 2 points (0.6 point less than in 2007) and 1.5 in Germany

(equivalent to 2007). However, public investment, which has a positive impact on potential growth, and which also increases public assets, while not changing the public administration's financial situation, can reasonably be excluded from the calculation of the structural public deficit.

**Table. Public deficit and structural deficit with and without public investment**

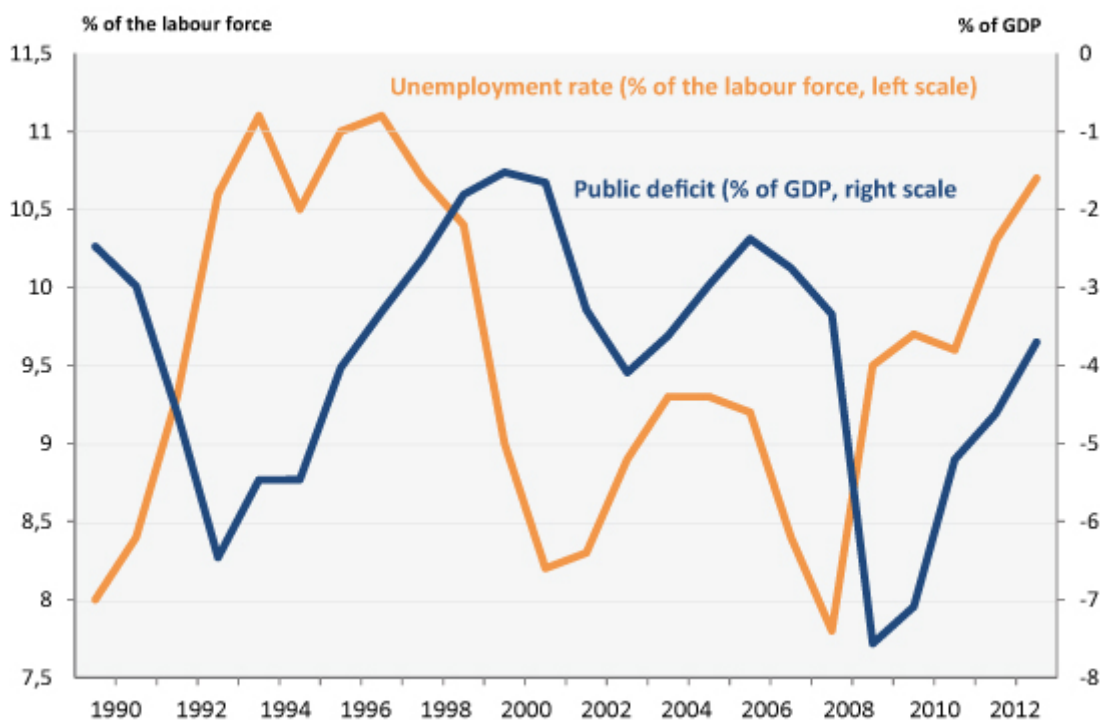
In GDP points	Public balance				Structural public balance				SPB w/o public investment			
	FRA	DEU	EZ	FRA-EZ diff.	FRA	DEU	ZE	FRA-EZ diff.	FRA	DEU	EZ	FRA-EZ diff.
<b>2007</b>	-2.8	0.2	-0.7	-2.1	-4.4	-0.9	-2.1	-2.3	-1.1	0.6	0.5	-1.6
<b>2013</b>	-3.7	-0.2	-2.8	-0.9	-1.9	0.4	-1.3	-0.6	1.2	1.9	0.8	0.4
<b>Change 2007-2013</b>	-0.9	-0.4	-2.1	1.2	2.5	1.3	0.8	1.6	2.3	1.3	0.3	2.1

Sources : European Commission, OFCE calculations.

3 – In 2013, the public deficit, even at 3.7% of GDP according to the European Commission, is once again at a level close to that of 2008, similar to that of 2005, and below that of 2004 and of the entire 1992-1996 period. The public deficit figure expected for 2013 corresponds to the average over the past thirty years, and thus no longer seems so exceptional, which is easing the pressure that France could experience on the financial markets. In contrast, according to the European Commission the unemployment rate in France in 2013 will reach 10.7% of the workforce, which is very close to its historic peak in 1997 (Figure 2). With an unemployment rate in 2013 that is 1.3 percentage points higher than the average over the last thirty years, an exceptional situation now characterizes the labour market more than it does the government deficit. While new austerity measures would help to reduce the deficit, however painfully, due to the [high value of the fiscal multiplier in the short term](#) they will lead on the other hand to going well beyond our historic unemployment peak. Indeed, as we showed in our [latest forecast in October 2012](#), if France really tries to meet its budget commitment for 2013 “whatever

the cost”, this will require a new fiscal tightening of over 20 billion euros, in addition to the [36 billion euros already planned](#). This would lead to a recession, with GDP down -1.2% and 360,000 job losses (instead of expected growth of 0% and the loss of about 160,000 jobs), with the unemployment rate reaching 11.7% of the labour force by late 2013.

Figure 2. Public deficit and unemployment rate



Source: European Commission.

To restore its public accounts since 2010, France has undertaken a historic fiscal effort, well beyond the average of its European partners, which has cost it in terms of growth and employment. Adding another layer of austerity in 2013 to the already historic build-up of austerity would lead us this year straight into a recession and an unprecedented worsening in the labour market. If there is a choice, are a few tenths of a point in the public deficit worth such a sacrifice? Nothing is less certain. It is thus essential to put off the goal of reducing the deficit to 3% of GDP to at least 2014.

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[\[1\]](#) We have a different evaluation of the level of the structural deficit. For example, for 2013 we evaluate the improvement in France's structural public deficit at 1.8 GDP points, but in order not to prejudice the analysis we are using the figures provided by the Commission.

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## So far so good ...

By [Christophe Blot](#)

The euro zone is still in recession. According to Eurostat, GDP fell again in the fourth quarter of 2012 (-0.6%). This figure, which was below expectations, is the worst quarterly performance in the euro zone since the first quarter of 2009, and it is also the fifth consecutive quarter of a decline in activity. For 2012 as a whole, GDP decreased by 0.5%. This annual figure masks substantial heterogeneity in the zone (Figures 1 and 2), since Germany posted annual growth of 0.9% while for the second consecutive year Greece is likely to suffer a recession of more than 6%. Moreover, taking all the countries together, the growth rate will be lower in 2012 than in 2011, and some countries (Spain and Italy to name but two) will sink deeper into depression. This performance is all the more worrying as several months of renewed optimism had aroused hopes that the euro zone was recovering from the crisis. Were there grounds for such hope?



Although it is very cautious about growth for 2012, the European Commission, in its [annual report](#) on growth, noted the return of some good news. In particular, the fall in long-term sovereign rates in Spain and Italy and the success on the financial markets of the public debt issues by Ireland and Portugal reflected renewed confidence. It is clear now however that confidence is not enough. Domestic demand has stalled in France and is in freefall in Spain. All this is hurting trade within the zone, since a decline in imports by one country means a decline in exports from others, which is amplifying the recessive dynamics afflicting the countries in the zone as a whole. As we noted in our [previous forecasting exercise](#) and on the occasion of the publication of the [iAGS](#) (independent Annual Growth Survey), a recovery cannot in any case rely solely on a return of confidence so long as highly restrictive fiscal policies are being carried out synchronously throughout Europe.

Since the third quarter of 2011, the signals have all confirmed our scenario and showed that the euro zone has gradually sunk into a new recession. Unemployment has continued to rise, setting new records every month. In December 2012, according to Eurostat 11.7% of the euro zone working population were jobless. However, neither the European Commission nor the European governments have adjusted their fiscal strategy, arguing that fiscal efforts were needed to restore credibility and confidence, which would in turn lower interest rates and create a healthy environment for future growth. In doing this, the Commission has systematically underestimated the recessionary impact of the fiscal consolidation measures and has ignored the increasingly abundant literature showing that the multipliers rise in times of crisis and may be substantially higher than one (see the post by [Eric Heyer](#) on this subject). Advocates of fiscal austerity also believe that the costs of such a strategy are inevitable and temporary. They view fiscal consolidation as a prerequisite for a return to growth and downplay the long-term



costs of such a strategy.

This dogmatic blindness recalls the final comment in the film *La Haine* (directed by Mathieu Kassovitz): “This is the story of a society that is falling, and to reassure itself as it falls constantly repeats, so far so good, so far so good, so far so good ... what’s important is not the fall, it’s the landing.” It is time to recognize that the economic policy in force since 2011 has been a mistake. It is not creating the conditions for a recovery. Worse, it is directly responsible for the return of recession and for the social catastrophe that is continuing to deepen in Europe. As we have shown, other strategies are possible. They do not neglect the importance of eventually making the public finances sustainable once again. By postponing and reducing the scale of austerity (see the note by [Marion Cochard, Bruno Ducoudré and Danielle Schweisguth](#)), it would be possible to make more rapid progress in restoring growth and cutting unemployment.



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## Repeat

By [Jérôme Creel](#)

In a beautiful book for children, every two pages [Claude Ponti](#) drew two chicks, one of which says to the other: “Pete and Repeat are in a boat. Pete falls overboard. Who is left?” Then the other chick says, “Repeat”, and off we go again. At the end of the book, the second chick, its eyes bulging, screams:

“Repeat!” And it never stops. It’s a bit like these analyses of economic growth and fiscal contractions where almost every month it is rediscovered that the ongoing fiscal contractions are reducing economic growth or that underestimating the real impact of fiscal policy is leading to forecast errors.

Recently, and after having authored a box in the *2013 World Economic Outlook* in October 2012, Daniel Leigh and Olivier Blanchard of the IMF published a [working document](#) that confirms that the IMF’s recent forecasting errors are due to erroneous assumptions about the multiplier effect. Because this effect was underestimated, especially at the bottom of the economic cycle, the IMF forecasters, though they are not alone (see in particular the note by [Bruno Ducoudré](#)), underestimated growth forecasts: they had not anticipated that what was required by the austerity measures and their implementation would have such a negative impact on consumer spending and business investment. The attempt to reduce state debt was taking place during a period when households and businesses were also deleveraging, meaning that it would be difficult to avoid falling into the trap of recession.

Since it must be repeated, let’s repeat! “Expansionary-fiscal-contractions and Repeat are in a boat. Expansionary-fiscal-contractions falls overboard. Who is left in the boat? Repeat!” In support of this short story, it is worth referring to a literature review conducted by [Eric Heyer](#): he shows the extent of the consensus that actually exists on the value of the fiscal multipliers, a consensus that has emerged since 2009, *i.e.* in the midst of a recession and at the very time that recommendations for austerity measures began to emerge. A note by [Xavier Timbeau](#) shows that the analysis of current fiscal cutbacks supports an assessment that the value of the fiscal multiplier is much higher in a crisis than in normal times ... What paradoxes!

What is to be done now? Repeat, yet again, that recession may not be inevitable: as [Marion Cochard, Bruno Ducoudré and](#)

[Danielle Schweisguth](#) pointed out in a supplement to the [2013 iAGS report](#), it is urgent to temper existing fiscal austerity measures in the euro zone: European growth but also actual fiscal consolidation would improve at last.