

“Social VAT”: Is it anti-social?

by [Jacques Le Cacheux](#)

The prospect of a “social” value added tax, which was raised anew by the President of France on December 31 during his New Year speech, is once again provoking controversy. While the French employers association, the MEDEF, has included this measure in a series of proposed tax changes designed to restore France’s competitiveness, the Left is mostly opposed. It views the “social VAT” as an oxymoron, an antisocial measure that is designed to cut the purchasing power of consumers and hits the poorest among them disproportionately and unfairly. But what exactly are we talking about? And from the viewpoint of taxes on consumption, what is the situation in France relative to its main European partners?

The proposal to establish a social VAT represents, in fact, a combination of two measures: raising the VAT rate and allocating the additional revenue obtained to finance social welfare, while lowering – in principle by the same amount – social contributions. The way that these two operations are conducted can differ greatly: the rise in VAT could involve the standard rate (currently 19.6%), the reduced rate (currently 5.5%, but recently increased to 7% for a range of products and services), the creation of an intermediate rate, a switch to the standard rate of certain products or services currently at the reduced rate, etc., while the reduction in social contributions could cover employer contributions or employee contributions, be uniform or targeted on low wages, etc. Many policy choices are available, with distributional impacts that are not identical.

France now has one of the lowest rates of implicit taxation on consumption in the European Union (Eurostat). Its standard VAT

rate was reduced to 19.6% in 2000 after having been raised to 20.6% in 1995 to help ensure compliance with the Maastricht criteria, as the recession of 1993 had pushed the budget deficit significantly higher. This rate is now slightly lower than the rate applied by most of our partners, particularly as the deterioration of public finances has recently prompted several European countries to raise their standard rate of VAT. The reduced rate, at 5.5%, was, until the increase decided in December 2011 on certain products and services, the lowest in the EU.

What can we expect from a social VAT? Let's consider in turn the effects on competitiveness and then on purchasing power, while distinguishing the two aspects of the operation. A VAT hike has a positive impact on the competitiveness of French business, because it increases the price of imports without burdening exports, which are subject to the VAT of the destination country. In this respect, a VAT increase is equivalent to a devaluation. In so far as most of France's trade is conducted with our European partners within the European single market, this could be deemed a non-cooperative policy. Fine, but if all our partners were to use this type of "internal euro zone devaluation" – recall that in 2007 Germany increased its standard VAT rate from 16% to 19% – and we didn't, this would actually amount to a real appreciation of the "French euro". It would undoubtedly be better to aim for improved fiscal coordination in Europe, and to work for more uniform rates. But current circumstances are hardly favourable for that, and the threat of a VAT increase may be one way to encourage our main partner to show more cooperation on this issue.

Allocating the revenue raised to reduce social contributions will, in turn, have an additional positive impact on competitiveness only if it leads to a real reduction in the cost of labour to firms located in France. This would be the case if the reduction targeted employer contributions, but not

if it were on employee contributions.

Can we expect a positive effect on employment? Yes, at a minimum thanks to the impact on competitiveness, but this would be small, unless we were to imagine a massive increase in VAT rates. The effect of lowering labour charges is less clear, because the employers' social contributions are already zero or low on low wages, which, according to the available studies, is precisely the category of employees for which demand is sensitive to cost.

Isn't the decline in the purchasing power of French households likely to reduce domestic consumption and cancel out these potential gains? In part perhaps, but it's far from certain. Indeed, the rise in VAT is unlikely to be fully and immediately reflected in selling prices: in the case of Germany in 2007, the price increase was relatively small and spread over time –meaning that the margins of producers and distributors absorbed part of the increase, thus reducing the positive impact on business somewhat. In France, [empirical work on the increase in 1995](#) shows that it too was not fully and immediately reflected in prices; and, although one cannot expect symmetrical results, it's worth recalling that the cut in VAT in the restaurant business was not passed on much in prices.

Would the rise in VAT be “antisocial” because it winds up hitting the poorest households disproportionately? No! Don't forget that the minimum income, the minimum wage (SMIC) and pensions are indexed to the consumer price index. So unless these indexes were somehow frozen – which the government has just done for some benefits – the purchasing power of low-income households would not be affected, and only employees earning above the minimum wage, together with earnings on savings, would suffer a decline in purchasing power, if consumer prices were to reflect the rise in VAT. It should also be noted that, if there is a positive impact on employment, some unemployed workers would find jobs and total

payroll would increase, meaning that the depressive impact on consumption often cited by opponents of this measure would only be minor, or even non-existent.

In short, “social VAT” should be neither put on a pedestal nor dragged through the dirt. As with any tax reform, we should certainly not expect a panacea against unemployment, or even a massive shift in our external accounts, even though it should help to improve our external price-competitiveness. But rebalancing our tax burden to focus more on consumption and less on the cost of labour is a worthy goal. In the context of globalization, taxing consumption is a good way to provide resources for the public purse, and VAT, a French innovation that has been adopted by almost every country, is a convenient way of doing this and of applying, without explicitly saying so, a form of protectionism through the de-taxation of exports. VAT is not, on the other hand, a good instrument for redistribution, since the use of a reduced rate on consumer products ultimately benefits the better-off as much or more than it does the poor. Most of our European partners have understood this, as they either do not have a reduced rate (as in Denmark) or have one that is substantially higher than ours (often 10% or 12%). It would be desirable to make the French tax system fairer, but this requires the use of instruments that have the greatest and best-targeted potential for redistribution: direct taxes – income tax, CSG-type wealth taxes, property tax – or social transfers, or even certain government expenditures (education, health). What is missing in the proposed “social VAT” is making it part of a comprehensive fiscal reform that restores consistency and justice to the system of taxes and social contributions as a whole.

Monetary policy: Open-Market Operations or Open-Mouth Operations?

By [Paul Hubert](#)

Can the communications of a central banker influence agents' expectations in the same way as they change interest rates? To believe Ben Bernanke, the answer is yes.

In a [speech on 18 October 2011](#), Ben Bernanke, governor of the US central bank, highlighted his interest in finding new tools to help businesses and consumers anticipate the future direction of monetary policy. Thus we learn that the bank's Federal Open Market Committee ([FOMC](#)) is exploring ways to make its macroeconomic forecasts more transparent. Indeed, if the publication of the forecasts influences the formation of private expectations about the future, then this could be treated as another tool of monetary policy.

It is worth pointing out that the impact of communicating the central bank's forecasts depends on the bank's credibility. Any impact that the publication of the forecasts has on the economy is neither binding nor mechanical, but rather is channelled through the confidence that businesses and consumers place in the statements of the central bank. So if a statement is credible, then the action announced may not be needed any more or its amplitude may be reduced. The mechanism is straightforward: publishing the forecast changes private expectations, which in turn modifies decision-making and therefore the economic variables. Ben Bernanke's determination to implement what he calls "[forward policy guidance](#)" and the emphasis he is giving to the importance of the central bank's forecasts suggest that the Fed is seeking to use its forecasts as another instrument to implement its monetary policy more

effectively.

Based on the inflation expectations of private agents collected through quarterly surveys called the Survey of Professional Forecasters (available [here](#)), it appears that the FOMC inflation forecasts, published twice yearly since 1979, have a persistent positive effect on private expectations (see the [working document](#)). Expectations rise by 0.7 percentage point when the Fed increases its forecast by one percentage point. Two interpretations of this effect could be offered: by raising its forecast, the Fed influences expectations and in a certain sense creates 0.7 percentage point of inflation. The effectiveness of such an announcement would therefore be questionable. In contrast, it is conceivable that an increase of 1 percentage point of inflation will occur and that by announcing it, the Fed sends a signal to private agents. They then expect a response from the Fed to counter the increase, and so reduce their expectation of the increase. The Fed's communication would therefore have succeeded in preventing a 0.3 percentage point increase in future inflation, meaning that the announcement has been effective.

This last mechanism, called "Open-Mouth Operations" in an [article](#) published in 2000 dealing with the central bank of New Zealand, would therefore act as a complement to the bank's [open market operations](#) that are intended to modify the central bank's key rates so as to influence the economy.

In order to shed light on the reasons why private expectations have increased, it would help to characterize the mechanisms underlying the influence of the FOMC forecasts. If the FOMC forecasts are a good leading indicator of the Fed's future key rates, they provide information about future decisions. It appears from this study that an increase in the FOMC forecasts signals that there will be an increase in the Fed's key rates 18 to 24 months later.

Furthermore, the FOMC forecasts do not have the same impact as

the bank's key rates on macroeconomic variables, nor do they respond in the same way to macroeconomic shocks: the responses of key rates to macroeconomic shocks are substantial and rapid in comparison with the responses of the forecasts. This suggests that the FOMC forecasts are an *a priori* instrument intended to implement monetary policy over the long term, whereas the key rates are an *a posteriori* instrument that responds to shocks to the economy, and thus to the short-term cycle.