

# Has monetary policy become ineffective?

By [Christophe Blot](#), [Catherine Mathieu](#) and Christine Riffart

This text summarizes the [special study](#) of the October 2012 forecast.

Since the summer of 2007, the central banks of the industrialized countries have intervened regularly to counter the negative impact of the financial crisis on the functioning of the banking and financial system and to help kick-start growth. Initially, key interest rates were lowered considerably, and then maintained at a level close to 0 [\[1\]](#). In a second phase, from the beginning of 2009, the central banks implemented what are called unconventional measures. While these policies may differ from one central bank to another, they all result in an increase in the size of their balance sheets as well as a change in the composition of their balance sheet assets. However, three years after the economies in the United States, the euro zone and the United Kingdom hit bottom, it is clear that recovery is still a ways off, with unemployment at a high level everywhere. In Europe, a new recession is threatening [\[2\]](#). Does this call into question the effectiveness of monetary policy and of unconventional measures more specifically?

For almost four years, a wealth of research has been conducted on the impact of unconventional monetary policies [\[3\]](#). Cecioni, Ferrero and Sacchi (2011) [\[4\]](#) have presented a review of recent literature on the subject. The majority of these studies focus on the impact of the various measures taken by the central banks on financial variables, in particular on money market rates and bond yields. Given the role of the money market in the transmission of monetary policy, the ability of central banks to ease the pressures that have

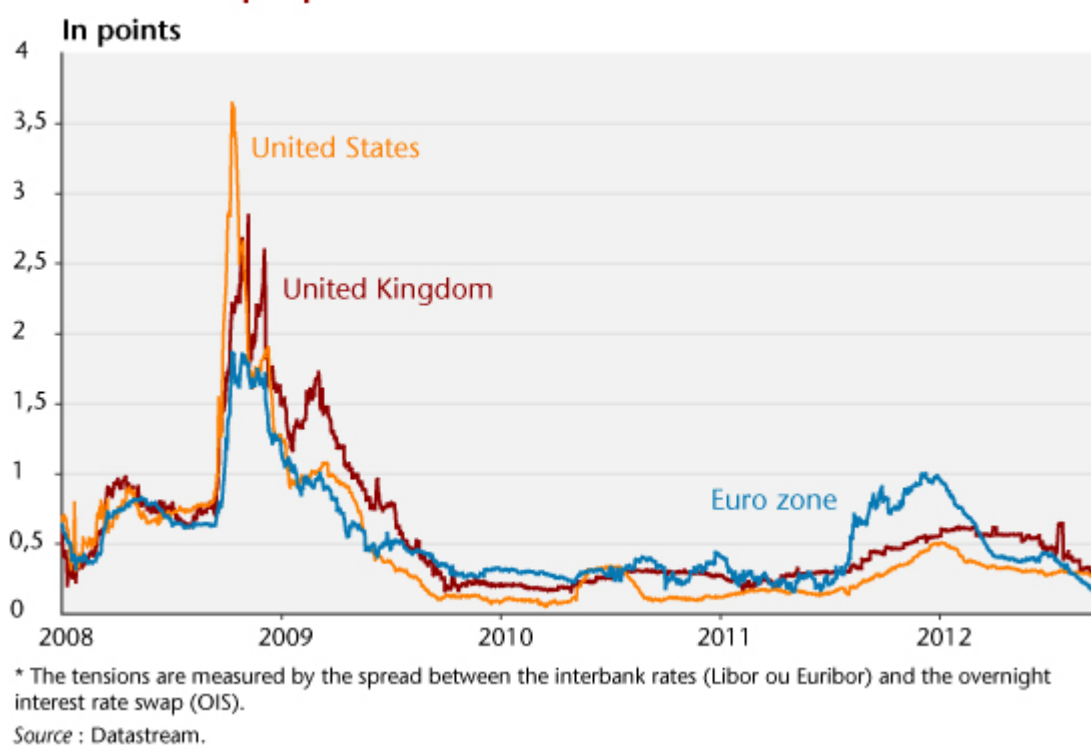
emerged since the beginning of the financial crisis constitutes a key vector for effective intervention. More recently, this was also one of the reasons motivating the ECB to conduct an exceptional refinancing operation in two stages, with a maturity of 3 years. This intervention has indeed helped to reduce the tensions on the interbank market that had reappeared in late 2011 in the euro zone, and to a lesser extent in the United States and the United Kingdom (see graph). This episode seems to confirm that central bank action can be effective when it is dealing with a liquidity crisis.

Another critical area of debate concerns the ability of unconventional measures to lower interest rates in the long term and thereby to stimulate activity. This is in fact an important lever for the transmission of monetary policy. The findings on this issue are more mixed. Nevertheless, for the United States, a study by Meaning and Zhu (2012) [\[5\]](#) suggests that Federal Reserve programs to purchase securities have contributed to lowering the rates on 10-year US Treasury bills: by 60 points for the first “Large-scale asset purchase” program (LSAP1) and by 156 points for LSAP2. As for the euro zone, Peersman [\[6\]](#) (2011) shows that the impact of unconventional measures on activity has in general closely resembled the effect of lowering the key interest rate, and Gianone, Lenza, Pill and Reichlin [\[7\]](#) (2012 ) suggest that the various measures taken by the ECB since the beginning of the crisis have helped offset the rise in the unemployment rate, although the impact is limited to 0.6 point.

Under these conditions, how is it possible to explain the weakness or outright absence of a recovery? One answer evokes the hypothesis of a liquidity trap [\[8\]](#). Uncertainty is still prevalent, and the financial system is still so fragile that agents are continuing to express a preference for liquidity and safety, which explains their reluctance to undertake risky projects. Thus, even if financing conditions are favourable, monetary policy will not be sufficient to stimulate a business

recovery. This hypothesis probably explains the timidity of the recovery in the United States. But in the euro zone and the United Kingdom this hypothesis needs to be supplemented with a second explanation that recognizes the impact of restrictive fiscal policies in holding back recovery. The euro zone countries, like the UK, are pursuing a strategy of fiscal consolidation that is undermining demand. While monetary policy is indeed expansionary, it is not able to offset the downward pressure of fiscal policy on growth.

**Graphique. Tensions on the interbank markets\***



[1] One should not, however, forget the exception of the ECB, which prematurely raised its key interest rate twice in 2011. Since then it has reversed these decisions and lowered the key rate, which has stood at 0.75% since July 2012.

[2] The first estimate of UK GDP for the third quarter of 2012 indicates an upturn in growth following three quarters of decline. However, this rebound is due to unusual circumstances (see [Royaume-Uni: l'enlissement](#)), and activity will decline again in the fourth quarter.

[3] Unconventional monetary policies have already been analyzed repeatedly in the case of the Bank of Japan. The implementation of equivalent measures in the United States, the United Kingdom and the euro zone has contributed to greatly amplifying the interest in these issues.

[4] [“Unconventional monetary policy in theory and in practice”](#), *Banca d'Italia Occasional Papers*, no.102.

[5] [“The impact of Federal Reserve asset purchase programmes: another twist”](#), *BIS Quarterly Review*, March, pp. 23-30.

[6] [“Macroeconomic effects of unconventional monetary policy in the euro area”](#), ECB Working Paper no.1397.

[7] [“The ECB and the interbank market”](#), CEPR Discussion Paper no. 8844.

[8] See [OFCE](#) (2010) for an analysis of this hypothesis.

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## Long-term competitiveness based on an environmental tax

By [Jacques Le Cacheux](#)

“Shock” or “Pact”? The debate over the loss of France’s competitiveness has recently focused on how fast a switchover from employer payroll taxes to another type of financing is being implemented, implying that the principle of doing this has already been established. As France faces a combination of

a deteriorating situation in employment and the trade balance, plus growing evidence that its companies are becoming less competitive compared to those of most of our partners [1] and that business margins are alarmingly low for the future, the need to reduce labour costs seems to be clear. But how and how fast are subject to debate. Should there be a rise in the CSG tax, VAT, or other charges, at the risk of reducing the purchasing power of households in an economic context that is already worse than bleak?

***The economic situation has to be managed at the euro zone level***

The value of switching a portion of charges on employers – a figure of 30 billion is often bandied about – over to another levy is often disputed by invoking the risks that such a strategy would pose to what is already sluggish growth: undermining consumption would further curtail business opportunities, hurting activity and thus employment and margins.

But France is in this depressed situation only because the European Union is committed to a forced march of fiscal adjustment that everyone – or almost everyone – now recognizes is counterproductive and doomed to failure: as the heartbreaking situation in Spain illustrates, the quest to reduce the budget deficit when the economy is in recession is futile, and “virtuous” efforts – repeatedly slashing public spending and increasing taxes – merely weaken the economy further and increase unemployment, since the fiscal multipliers are very high, as Keynes demonstrated over 70 years ago!

Fiscal support for economic activity is the only way out. But the experience of the early years of the first Socialist government is alive in all our memories: the failure was as great as were the illusions, and the “turn to austerity” made the government unpopular. An approach that failed in the

context of the early 1980s, with a less open economy, an autonomous monetary policy and the possibility of adjusting the currency's exchange rate, is all the less appropriate in the context of deeper integration and the single currency. Trying to maintain the purchasing power of French households while the rest of the euro zone is in recession and French companies are less competitive could only widen the deficit without boosting growth or employment.

We must therefore continue the fight in Europe: to slow down the pace of deficit reduction; to implement a more accommodative monetary policy in the euro zone, which would have the double advantage of reducing the cost of debt, public and private, thereby making them more sustainable, and of exerting downward pressure on the exchange rate of the euro, boosting external competitiveness at a time when the US and Japanese central banks are seeking to reduce the value of their own currencies, which would automatically push the euro up; and to jointly engage in a coordinated European policy to support growth, by funding research and investing in trans-European transport and electricity and in education and training.

***The national productive capacity must be supported and stimulated***

The lack of competitiveness of French industry is not reducible to a problem of labour costs. And it is well known that a downward spiral of wage moderation and social dumping, which we can already see is wreaking havoc in Europe, can only lead the euro zone into a deflationary spiral, comparable to what these same countries vainly attempted in the 1930s in their "every man for himself" effort to escape the Great Depression.

Reducing social spending cannot therefore be an answer, while rising unemployment and the precarious situation of an increasing number of households, workers and retirees are

pushing up the needs on all sides. Lowering wages, as some countries have done (Greece and Ireland in particular), either directly or through an increase in working hours without an increase in pay, is not a solution, as wage deflation will further depress demand and thereby feed yet another round of social dumping in Europe.

Improving cost competitiveness by reducing the charges on wages may be part of the solution. But this option does not necessarily send the right signals to businesses and will not necessarily lead to a decrease in their selling prices or an increase in hiring: windfall gains are inevitable, and the greatest affluence is likely to go to shareholders as much as to customers and employees. Reductions in social security contributions could be targeted for certain levels of pay, but they cannot be sectoral or conditional or else they would violate European rules on competition.

It is also necessary to encourage and assist French companies in modernizing their supply capacity. The new Public Investment Bank [*Banque publique d'investissement* – BPI] can help by funding promising projects. But we can also make use of the taxation of corporate profits, including through incentives for investment and research that allow tax credits and depreciation rules: this is a way of more directly using incentives for businesses and conditioning public support on conduct that is likely to improve their competitiveness.

### ***Environmental taxation: a lever for long-term competitiveness***

Which charges should now bear the cost of these measures to boost business? Discussions on the respective advantages and disadvantages of VAT and the CSG tax abound. Suffice it to recall here that the VAT has been created to anticipate the reduction in tariff protection, which it replaces very effectively without discriminating on the domestic market between domestic products and imports but while exempting exports: an increase in VAT therefore differs little from a

devaluation, with very similar pros and cons, especially with regard to its non-cooperative character within the euro zone. But also recall (see our post of July 2012) that consumption is now relatively less taxed in France than a few years ago, and less than in many of our European partners.

The recourse to a genuine environmental tax would, with regard to the other options for financing these concessions, have the great advantage of promoting sectors that are less polluting and less dependent on fossil fuels – while at the same time diminishing our problems with trade balances, which are partly due to our energy imports – and putting in place the right price and cost incentives for both businesses and consumers. In particular, taking a serious approach to the energy transition demands the introduction of an ambitious carbon tax that is better designed than the one that was censored by the *Conseil constitutionnel* in 2009. Its creation and its step-by-step implementation need to be accompanied by reforming both the direct levies on household income and the main means-tested benefits so that compensation is kept under good control (cf. article in the [work “Réforme fiscale”, April 2012](#)).

A “competitiveness shock” therefore, but also a “sustainable competitiveness pact”, which encourages French companies to take the right paths by making good choices for the future.

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[1] See in particular the [post of 20 July 2012](#).

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# How France can improve its trade balance\*

By [Eric Heyer](#)

Prime Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault has made a commitment to restoring France's balance of trade, excluding energy, by the end of his five-year term. Without addressing the curious anomaly of leaving the energy deficit out of the analysis of the country's trade position, as if it did not count in France's dependence on the rest of the world, we will examine the various solutions that the government could use to achieve this goal.

The first solution is to do nothing and to wait until the austerity policy that has been implemented in France through public spending cuts and higher taxes reduces consumer spending. In the face of higher unemployment and the resulting increase in household precautionary savings, the French will cut back on consumption. However, since some of this comes from outside France, this will limit imports into France from abroad and, everything else being equal, improve the country's trade balance.

This solution, it is clear, not only is not virtuous, as it relies on a reduction in employee purchasing power and rising unemployment, but it also has little chance of success, because it assumes that French exports will not follow the same path as imports and will continue to grow. However, since our partner countries are following this same strategy of a rapid return to balanced public finances, their austerity policies will result in the same dynamics as described above for France, thereby reducing their own domestic demand and hence their imports, some of which are our exports.

As a result, and since the austerity programmes of our

partners are more drastic than ours, it is very likely that our exports will decline faster than our imports, thus exacerbating our trade deficit.

The second solution is to increase our exports. In a context where our European partners, who represent 60% of our trade, are experiencing low or even negative growth, this can be achieved only through gains in market share. Lowering the cost of labour seems to be the fastest way to do this. But in the midst of an effort to re-establish a fiscal balance, the only way to lower the charges on labour is to transfer these to another tax: this was the logic of the "social VAT" set up by the previous government, but repealed by the new one, which seems to lean more towards transferring these to the CSG tax, which has the advantage of having a larger tax base, affecting all income, including capital income.

But in addition to the fact that this strategy is not "cooperative", since it resembles a competitive devaluation and thus is essentially aimed at gaining market share from our euro zone partners, there is no indication that it would be sufficient. Indeed, there is nothing to prevent our partners from adopting the same approach, particularly since their economic situation is worse than ours, and this would cancel all or part of any potential gains in our competitiveness.

The last solution consists of making the country more competitive by raising the productivity of our employees and by specialising in high value-added sectors that are not subject to competition from the emerging countries with their low costs.

This is a medium-term strategy and requires the establishment of policies to promote innovation, research and development, and training. It also means expanding the range of our traditional products such as automobiles, but also specializing in the industries of the future.

The need for a transition to an ecological mode of production that is more energy-efficient could represent this industry of the future, and therefore be the solution to our trade deficit.

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\* This text is taken from a series of reports by Eric Heyer for the programme “Les carnets de l'économie” on France Culture radio. It is possible to listen to the series on [France Culture](#).

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## **Plea for a growth pact: the sound and fury hiding a persistent disagreement**

By [Jean-Luc Gaffard](#) and [Francesco Saraceno](#)

The emphasis on the need to complement fiscal restraint by measures to boost growth, which is rising in part due to the electoral debate in France, is good news, not least because it represents a belated recognition that austerity is imposing an excessively high price on the countries of southern Europe.

Nevertheless, there is nothing new about invoking growth, and this may remain without consequence. In 1997, as a result of a French government intervention, the Stability Pact became the Stability and Growth Pact, but this had no significant impact on the nature of strategy, which remained fully oriented

towards the implementation of strict monetary and fiscal rules and a constant search for more flexible markets.

Last week, [Mario Draghi](#), along with [Manuel Barroso and Mario Monti](#), were worried not only about the recession taking place in Spain, Portugal, the Netherlands and Great Britain but also about the need to respond formally to a request that may come from a new French government. They too are arguing for a negotiated Growth Pact, while taking care to note that it must consist of a common commitment to carry out structural reforms wherever they have not yet been made. This position echoes the February [letter](#) of the eleven Prime Ministers to the European authorities. In other words, nothing is to change in the doctrine that determines the choice of Europe's economic policy: growth can be achieved only through structural reform, in particular of the labour markets.

There are two grounds for criticizing this position. [It is far from sure](#) that structural reform is effective, unless, that is, it is wielded in a non-cooperative spirit to improve the competitiveness of the country that undertakes the reform at the expense of its trading partners, as Germany was able to do with the Hartz reforms. Secondly, widespread reform, including where this is justified in terms of long-term growth, would initially have a recessionary impact on demand [\[1\]](#), and hence on activity. Reform cannot therefore deal with what is actually the immediate top-priority requirement, namely stemming the spreading recession.

The real challenge facing Europeans is to reconcile the short term and the long term. The solution proposed so far, general fiscal austerity aimed at [restoring the confidence of private actors](#), which would be complemented by structural reforms intended to increase the potential growth rate, just doesn't work. This can be seen by developments in Greece, as well as in Portugal and Ireland, which are model students of Europe's bailout plans, and also in Britain, Italy and Spain. The fiscal multipliers remain firmly Keynesian (see [Christina](#)

[Romer](#), and [Creel, Heyer and Plane](#)), and any “non-Keynesian” effects on expectations are limited or nonexistent.

Growth can neither be decreed nor established instantly, unlike the deflationary austerity spiral in which more and more European countries are currently trapped.

Growth is likely to materialize only if fiscal consolidation is neither immediate nor drastic – in fact, only if the consolidation required of countries in difficulty is spread over time (beyond the year 2013, which in any case will be impossible to achieve) and if the countries that are able to carry out a more expansionary fiscal policy actually do this in such a way that at the European level the overall impact is neutral or, even better, expansionary. This strategy would not necessarily be punished by the markets, which have shown recently that they are sensitive to the requirement for growth. Otherwise, steps should be taken by the ECB to deal with the constraints imposed by the markets. This short-term support must be accompanied by substantial medium-term investment made through European industrial programs financed by the issuance of Eurobonds – which would mean, finally, a European budget on a scale large enough to handle the tasks facing the Union. This method of coordinating short- and medium-term choices would be an important step towards the establishment of the kind of federal structure that alone will allow the resolution of the “European question”.

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[\[1\]](#) R.M. Solow, Introduction to Solow, R.M. Ed. (2004), *Structural Reforms and Macroeconomic Policy*, London: Macmillan).