

Is the ECB impotent?

[Christophe Blot](#), [Jérôme Creel](#), [Paul Hubert](#) and [Fabien Labondance](#)

In June 2014, the ECB announced a set of new measures (a detailed description of which is provided in a special study entitled, "[How can the fragmentation of the euro zone banking system be fought?](#)", Revue de l'OFCE, No. 136, in French) in order to halt the lowering of inflation and sustain growth. Mario Draghi then clarified the objectives of the ECB's monetary policy by indicating that the Bank wanted to expand its balance sheet by a trillion euros to return to a level close to that seen in the summer of 2012. Among the measures taken, much was expected from the new targeted long-term refinancing operation (TLTRO), which gives banks in the euro zone access to ECB refinancing with a maturity of 4 years in return for providing credit to the private sector (excluding mortgages). However, after the first two allocations (24 September 2014 and 11 December 2014), the picture has become rather complicated, with the amounts allocated well below expectations. This reflects the difficulty the ECB is having in fighting effectively against the risk of deflation.

Indeed, having allotted 82.6 billion euros in September (versus anticipations of between 130 and 150 billion), the ECB granted "only" 130 billion on December 11, *i.e.* once again a lower amount than had been anticipated. So we are a long way from the maximum amount of 400 billion euros that had been evoked by Mario Draghi in June 2014 for these two operations. Moreover, these first two allotments were clearly insufficient to boost the ECB's balance sheet significantly (Figure 1), and all the more so as banks are continuing to reimburse the three-year loans that they received in late 2011 and early 2012 in the very long-term refinancing operation (VLTRO) [\[1\]](#). What explains the banks' reluctance to make use of this operation, even though it allows them to refinance the loans

granted at a very low rate for a 4 year term?

The first is that the banks already have very broad and very advantageous access to ECB liquidity through the monetary policy operations already implemented by the ECB[\[2\]](#). These operations actually offer a lower interest rate than does the TLTRO (0.05% against 0.15%). Similarly, a TLTRO is not more attractive than some long-term market financing, especially since many banks do not have financing constraints. TLTRO is thus of marginal interest, due to the maturity of the operation, and more restrictive because it is conditioned on the distribution of credit. For the first two operations conducted in September and December 2014, the allotment could not exceed 7% of outstanding loans to the non-financial private sector in the euro zone, excluding loans for housing, as of 30 April 2014. A new series of TLTRO will be conducted between March 2015 and June 2016, on a quarterly basis. This time the maximum amount that can be allocated to the banks will depend on the growth in outstanding loans to the non-financial private sector in the euro zone, excluding loans for housing, between 30 April 2014 and the date of the operation in question.

The second explanation is that the weakness of credit in the euro zone is not simply the result of supply factors but also demand factors. Sluggish activity and private agents' efforts to shed debt are holding back lending.

Third, beyond banks' ability to find refinancing, it is also possible that they are trying to reduce their exposure to risk. The problem is thus related to their assets. However, non-performing loans are still at a very high level, especially in Spain and Italy (Figure 2). In addition, although the Asset Quality Review (AQR) conducted by the ECB has revealed that insolvency risks are limited in the euro zone, the report also points out that some banks are highly leveraged and that they have mainly used the available liquidity to buy government bonds in order to meet their

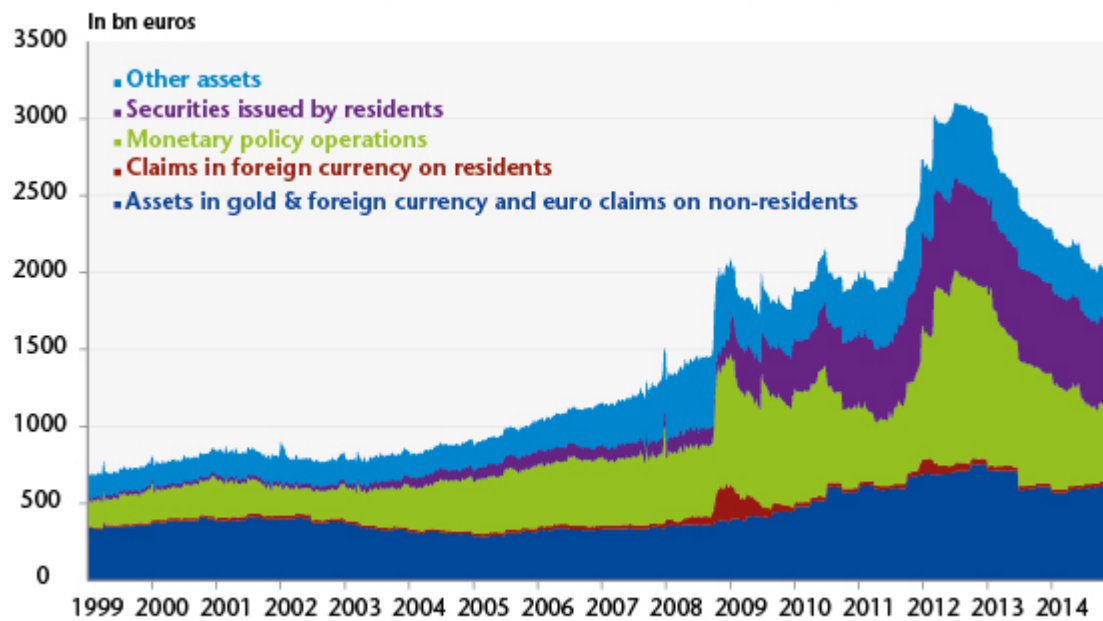
capital requirements. They are then reducing their balance sheet risk by limiting loans to the private sector.

Finally, two uncertainties are also reducing the banks' participation in the TLTRO. The first concerns the stigma attached to the conditionality of the TLTRO and to the fact that banks that do not meet their commitments on the distribution of credit will be required to repay the financing obtained from the ECB after two years. So banks facing uncertainty about their ability to increase their lending may very well wish to avoid the prospect of having to repay the funds sooner. The second factor concerns uncertainties about the programs for purchasing ABS and covered bonds[\[3\]](#). The banks could also turn to these programs to get cash in exchange for the sale of assets that they would like to get rid of.

Has monetary policy become totally ineffective? The answer is certainly no, since by giving banks a guarantee that they can refinance their activity through various programs (TLTRO, ABS, covered bonds, etc.), the ECB is reducing the risk that credit will be rationed due to the deteriorated state of some banks' liabilities. Monetary policy is thus helping to free up the credit channel. But its effects are nevertheless limited, as is suggested by [Bech, Gambacorta and Kharroubi \(2012\)](#) , who show that monetary policy is less effective in periods of recovery following a financial crisis. Can we get out of this impasse? This observation on the effectiveness of monetary policy shows that the ECB should not be viewed as the be-all and end-all. It is still essential to complement its support for activity through an expansionary fiscal policy across the euro zone. This point was also reiterated by the President of the ECB during this summer's [conference at Jackson Hole](#): "Demand side policies are not only justified by the significant cyclical component in unemployment. They are also relevant because, given prevailing uncertainty, they help insure against the risk that a weak economy is contributing to

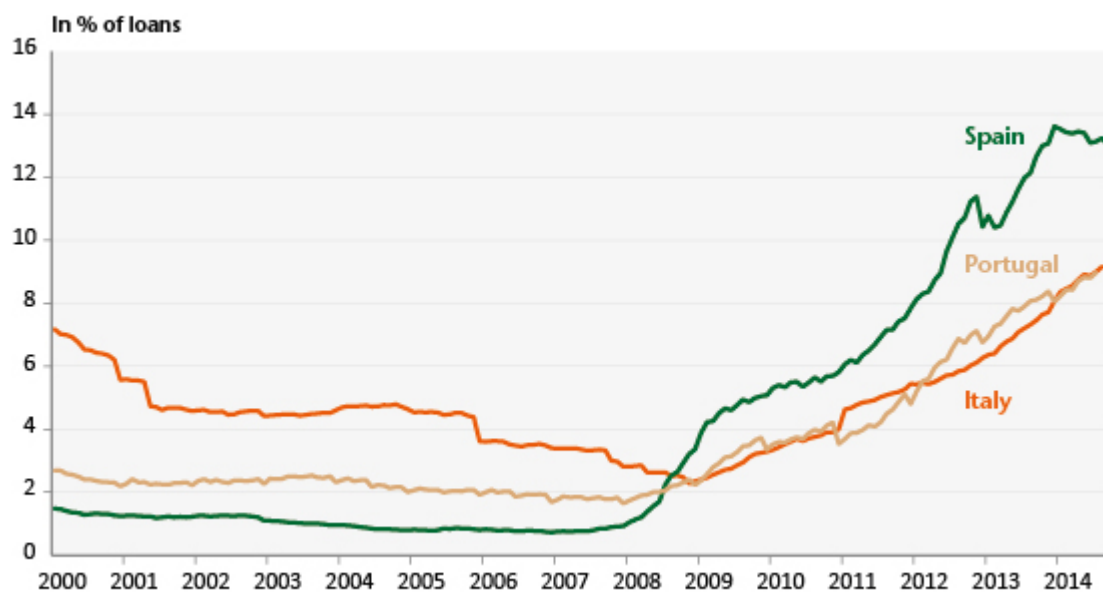
hysteresis effects.”

Figure 1. ECB balance sheet (assets)



Source: ECB.

Figure 2. Bad debt



Source: National central banks.

[1] See the special study in the *Revue de l'OFCE* no. 136, "[Comment lutter contre la fragmentation du système bancaire de la zone euro?](#)" for an examination of the various monetary policy measures taken by the ECB since the onset of the financial crisis and an estimate of their impact on the real economy.

[2] This includes standard monetary policy operations as well as the VLTRO operation through which the ECB provided liquidity for an exceptional term of 3 years in December 2011 and February 2012.

[3] This involves programs for the purchase of securities in the market and not cash distributed directly to the banks. The covered bonds and ABS are securities pledged on assets whose remuneration depends on that of the underlying asset, which is by necessity a mortgage in the case of covered bonds and which in the case of ABS may include other types of loans (credit cards, cash loans to businesses, etc.).

What options for the European Central Bank?

By [Paul Hubert](#)

All eyes are now on the ECB, whose recent statements indicate that it is concerned about the risk of deflation in the euro zone. The further downturn in inflation in May to 0.5% year on year is a reminder that this risk [is increasing](#). This could lead the ECB to take action at the monthly meeting of the Board of Governors being held today, or in the months to come.

This post provides a brief summary of the possible options available to the ECB.

1. To lower the key interest rate (main refinancing operations rate, the MRO rate), which is currently 0.25%. The consensus in the financial markets is for a reduction of around 10 to 15 percentage points, which would further cut financing costs for banks that are still dependent on ECB liquidity. However, this would have a marginal impact on the rates of refinancing operations (MRO and long-term refinancing operations, or LTRO), which would not have much influence on financing conditions and thus not much benefit for Spanish and Italian banks (the main users of this option).

2. To lower the deposit facility rate from zero to a negative rate (again by 10 to 15 percentage points). This option has been largely anticipated by the financial markets. A negative interest rate on deposits should also be accompanied by a change in the policy on the ECB's excess reserves by capping the amount of commercial banks' excess reserves on the ECB's balance sheet or by applying the same negative rate to excess reserves. Otherwise the banks would simply transfer their funds from deposit accounts to excess reserves. A combination of these two policies should lead to a lower Euro OverNight Index Average (EONIA) rate of between zero and 0.05%. The incentive for banks to keep their cash at the ECB would thus be reduced, thereby stimulating the distribution of credit to the non-financial sector.

3. An extension of the policy of providing liquidity in unlimited amounts at a fixed rate (fixed-rate full allotment) from mid-2015 to late 2015 or even mid-2016 is considered by most to be an easy and quick option that would provide additional assurance on the markets before the LTRO deadlines in early 2015. This kind of measure would ensure the liquidity of the banking system but its impact on activity and inflation could be limited, in so far as the banks would prefer to place their cash with the central bank.

4. An ECB announcement of the end of sterilization through the Securities Markets Programme (SMP), a programme for purchasing the sovereign bonds of euro zone countries in difficulty. The markets seem divided on this issue. The ECB has not managed to attract sufficient demand to completely sterilize this operation in the last eight weeks. This would add 164.5 bn euros (the SMP target amount) of liquidity to the system and take the EONIA rate to zero or even into negative territory, and could reduce the volatility that has appeared in recent months. This measure would therefore also cut the interbank refinancing rate, which would more or less amount to the first option.

5. A conditional and targeted LTRO programme could see the light of day. This would consist of copying the Funding for Lending Scheme (FLS) set up by the Bank of England, in which cheap financing is arranged for banks in exchange for granting new loans to the real economy. However, it would take time to implement this, and even more before there is any real impact on the economy. It would nevertheless probably be the most effective way to stimulate activity, because it would go beyond interbank operations in influencing refinancing conditions.

In any event, the economic situation in the euro zone for both the business outlook as well as for the situation on the labour market calls for a strong response from the ECB so as to ensure that the euro zone does not incur deflation. The effect of the signal may be just as important as the measure actually implemented by the ECB. By demonstrating in today's meeting that it is active, the ECB would show its determination to fight against the risk of deflation, which could at least change agents' expectations. While any action by the ECB would be welcome, it is still the case that the current economic situation is also the result of the restrictive fiscal policies that have hit activity (see [here](#)).

Central banks and public debt: dangerous liaisons?

By [Christophe Blot](#)

Since 2008, monetary policy has been in the forefront of efforts to preserve financial stability and stem the economic crisis. Though the Great Recession was not avoided, the lessons of the crisis of the 1930s were learned. The central banks quickly cut short-term interest rates and have kept them at a level close to zero, while developing new monetary policy instruments. These so-called unconventional measures led to an increase in the size of balance sheets, which exceed 20% of GDP in the United States, the United Kingdom and the euro zone and 45% in Japan. Among the range of measures employed was the central banks' purchase of public debt. The goal was to lower long-term interest rates, either by signalling that monetary policy will remain expansionary for an extended period, or by modifying the composition of the asset portfolios held by private agents. However, the Federal Reserve recently announced that it would gradually reduce its interventions ([see here](#)), which could cause a rapid rise in interest rates like that seen in May 2013 (Figure 1) upon the previous announcement of this type. In a context of high public debt, interest rate dynamics are crucial. The central banks need to take into account the enhanced interaction between monetary and fiscal policy by coordinating their decisions with those taken by governments.

In normal times [\[1\]](#), monetary and fiscal policy pursue common goals, foremost among them macroeconomic stability. There are therefore interactions between the decisions taken by the two authorities. A tightening of monetary policy via an increase

in interest rates could for instance counteract a fiscal expansion, and vice versa. It is thus necessary to coordinate economic policy in order to ensure the best macroeconomic balance. The implementation of unconventional monetary policy measures enhances these interactions. The adoption of unconventional measures has led central banks to buy government debt, to such an extent that, with the exception of the ECB, these banks hold a significant portion of the outstanding debt (Figure 2). In doing this, their operations are interfering with the management of debt, which is usually vested in the Treasury. The link between monetary policy and debt management is not new, though it receded as central banks became independent institutions with a primary objective of price stability, which they seek to achieve exclusively by changing the key interest rate. Goodhart [\[2\]](#) (2010) clarifies that this role was historically devolved on them. Nevertheless, the objectives of the central bank and of the agency responsible for issuing public debt may be contradictory (Blommestein and Turner [\[3\]](#), 2012), as the Treasury seeks to minimize the cost of debt service, regardless of the macroeconomic impact of its decisions. Two additional interactions can emerge. On the one hand, the government may partially counteract the central bank's actions on long-term rates by seeking to profit from their decline through additional issues on the maturities targeted by monetary transactions. The excess demand is then partially absorbed by an additional supply for a given maturity. This is what has happened in the United States, as the average maturity of the debt rose from 48.5 months in October 2008 to 64 months in May 2012. Recent work by Chadha, Turner and Zampolli [\[4\]](#) (2013) suggests that this policy of managing the maturity of the public debt supply has a significant impact on interest rates. The [minutes](#) of the US Treasury meeting on 2 November 2010 illustrate the potential conflict between objectives: "It was pointed out by members of the Committee that the Fed and the Treasury are independent institutions, with two different mandates that might sometimes appear to be

in conflict. Members agreed that Treasury should adhere to its mandate of assuring the lowest cost of borrowing ... A couple [of] members noted that the Fed was essentially a 'large investor' in Treasuries and that the Fed's behavior was probably transitory. As a result, Treasury should not modify its regular and predictable issuance paradigm to accommodate a single large investor."

On the other hand, the reduction in the portfolio of government securities held by the central bank should lead to higher long-term rates. This is in any case what is suggested by some of the recent literature on the impact of unconventional monetary policies. The dynamics of bond yields observed in May 2013 (Figure 1), the first time that the markets anticipated [\[5\]](#) a steady decline in purchases by the Federal Reserve, shows that the increase may be rapid and cause high volatility on the financial markets. The explanation for this increase may be related to the end of or the unwinding of arbitrage operations carried out by investors who took advantage of low long-term interest rates in the industrialized countries in order to take on debt and seek more profitable investments in other markets, in particular the emerging markets. The consequences of such a scenario must be taken into account by the central banks. If the conduct of monetary policy involves making fewer central bank interventions, then the impact on debt service of this pull-back needs to be factored in. Despite the process of public debt reduction, government financing needs will stay high, and additional refinancing costs due to higher interest rates could lead States to strengthen fiscal consolidation, which would have adverse effects on economic activity. Conversely, the maintenance of low interest rates could greatly contribute to facilitating fiscal adjustment by allowing low-cost refinancing and by giving a stimulus to the economy, thereby reducing the recessionary impact of the fiscal adjustment.

Due to the nature of these interactions, to a macroeconomic context marked by a high level of public debt, and to the risk of financial instability, it is essential to coordinate monetary and fiscal policy. This necessity is illustrated perfectly in the case of the United States in an observation by James Tobin quoted by Turner[\[6\]](#) (2011): “The Federal Reserve cannot make rational decisions of monetary policy without knowing what kind of debt the Treasury intends to issue. The Treasury cannot rationally determine the maturity structure of the interest-bearing debt without knowing how much debt the Federal Reserve intends to monetize.”

In Europe’s case, this seems to be a second-order question, since the ECB has a small portfolio of assets (Figure 2). While taking note that this portfolio is concentrated on bonds issued by certain countries (Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Greek and Irish), whose public debt represents 42% of euro zone debt, the outstanding debt held by the ECB comes to 5% when considering only the countries in crisis. It’s regrettable that the ECB has not taken a more active monetary policy, which would have made it possible to effect a major uniform reduction in interest rates in all the euro zone countries, which would have helped to reduce the need for fiscal consolidation and mitigate its negative effects.

Figure 1. Interest rates on long-term public debt

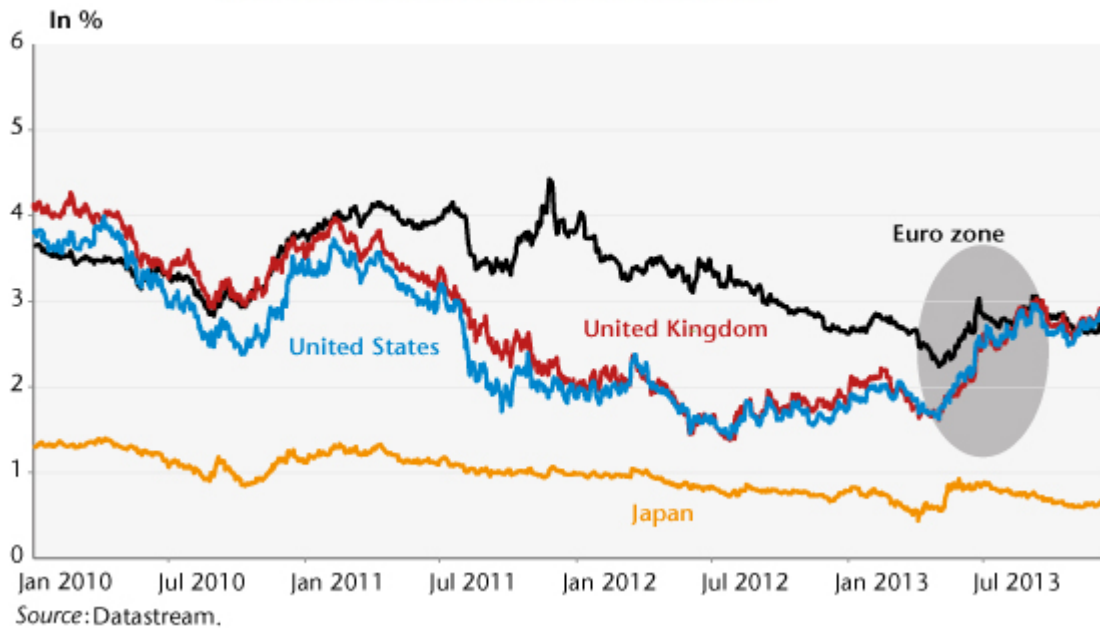
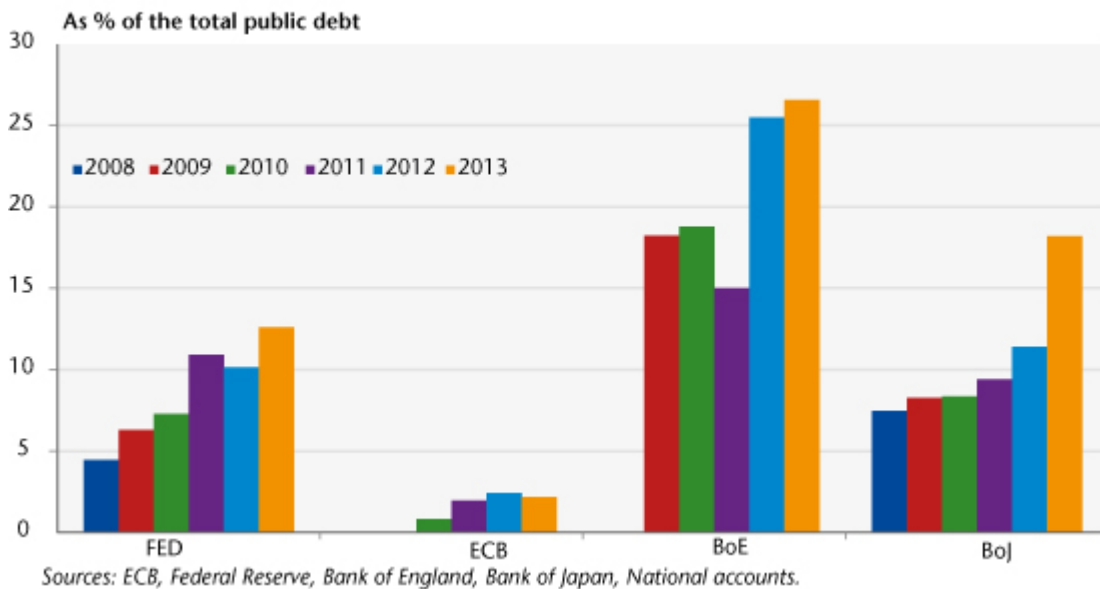


Figure 2. National public debt held by the central banks



[1] Here the expression “in normal times” refers to the fact that the conduct of monetary policy is usually characterized

by decisions taken by the central banks on the key interest rate, which is a short-term rate. During the crisis, the central banks set this key rate at a very low level, near to the zero lower bound, and so turned to new measures to strengthen the expansionary character of monetary policy.

[2] See "[The changing role of central banks](#)", *BIS Working Paper* no. 326, November.

[3] See "[Interactions between sovereign debt management and monetary policy under fiscal dominance and financial instability](#)", *OECD Working Paper* no. 3.

[4] See "[The interest rate effects of government debt maturity](#)", *BIS Working Paper* no. 415, June.

[5] These expectations were initially fuelled by the improving jobs situation in the United States and then by Ben Bernanke's statement confirming a possible pull-back by the Federal Reserve. These elements are described in more detail by the BIS in its [Quarterly Review](#), September 2013.

[6] See "[Fiscal dominance and the long-term interest rate](#)", 2011, *Financial markets group special paper series* 199, May.

Monetary policy and property booms: dealing with the heterogeneity of the euro

zone

By [Christophe Blot](#) and Fabien Labondance

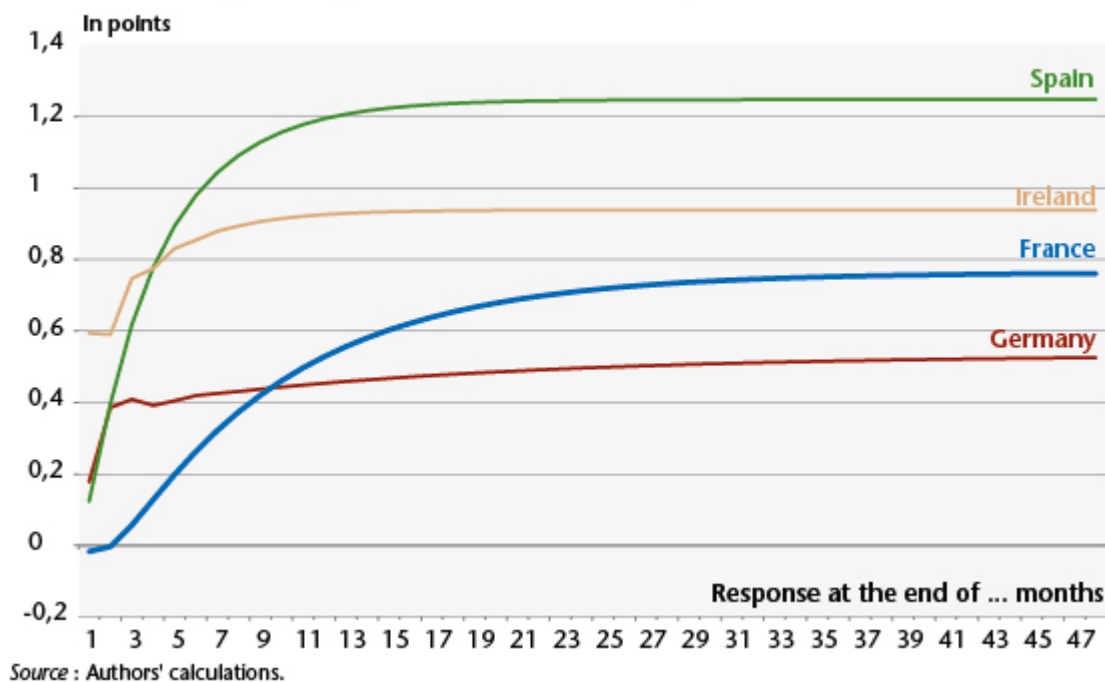
The transmission of monetary policy to economic activity and inflation takes place through various channels whose role and importance depend largely on the structural characteristics of an economy. The dynamics of credit and property prices are at the heart of this process. There are multiple sources of heterogeneity between the countries of the euro zone, which raises questions about the effectiveness of monetary policy but also about the means to be used to reduce this heterogeneity.

The possible sources of heterogeneity between countries include the degree of concentration of the banking systems (*i.e.* more or fewer banks, and therefore more or less competition), the financing arrangements (*i.e.* fixed or variable rates), the maturity of household loans, their levels of debt, the proportion of households renting, and the costs of transactions on the housing market. The share of floating rate loans perfectly reflects these heterogeneities, as it is 91% in Spain, 67% in Ireland and 15% in Germany. In these conditions, the common monetary policy of the European Central Bank (ECB) has asymmetric effects on the euro zone countries, as is evidenced by the divergences in property prices in these countries. These asymmetries will then affect GDP growth, a phenomenon that has been observed both “before” and “after” the crisis. These issues are the subject of an article that we published in the OFCE’s [Ville et Logement](#) (Housing and the City) issue. We evaluated heterogeneity in the transmission of monetary policy to property prices in the euro zone by explicitly distinguishing two steps in the transmission channel, with each step potentially reflecting different sources of heterogeneity. The first describes the impact of the interest rates controlled by the ECB on the rates charged for property loans by the banks in each euro zone country. The

second step involves the differentiated impact of these bank rates on property prices.

Our results confirm the existence of divergences in the transmission of monetary policy in the euro zone. Thus, for a constant interest rate set by the ECB at 2%, as was the case between 2003 and 2005, the estimates made during the period preceding the crisis suggest that the long-term equilibrium rate applied respectively by Spanish banks and Irish banks would be 3.2% and 3.3%. In comparison, the equivalent rate in Germany would be 4.3%. Moreover, the higher rates in Spain and Ireland amplify this gap in nominal rates. We then show that the impact on bank rates of changes in the ECB's key rate is, before the crisis, stronger in Spain and Ireland than it is in Germany (figure), which is related to differences in the share of loans made at floating rates in these countries. It should be noted that the transmission of monetary policy was severely disrupted during the crisis. The banks did not necessarily adjust supply and demand for credit by changing rates, but by tightening the conditions for granting loans. [1] Furthermore, estimates of the relationship between the rates charged by banks and property prices suggest a high degree of heterogeneity within the euro zone. These various findings thus help to explain, at least partially, the divergences seen in property prices within the euro zone. The period during which the rate set by the ECB was low helped fuel the housing boom in Spain and Ireland. The tightening of monetary policy that took place after 2005 would also explain the more rapid adjustment in property prices observed in these two countries. Our estimates also suggest that property prices in these two countries are very sensitive to changes in economic and population growth. Property cycles cannot therefore be reduced to the effect of monetary policy.

Figure. Impact on bank rates of a 1 point hike in ECB rates



To the extent that the recent crisis has its roots in the macroeconomic imbalances that developed in the euro zone, it is essential for the proper functioning of the European Union to reduce the sources of heterogeneity between the Member states. However, this is not necessarily the responsibility of monetary policy. First, it is not certain that the instrument of monetary policy, short-term interest rates, is the right tool to curb the development of financial bubbles. And second, the ECB conducts monetary policy for the euro zone as a whole by setting a single interest rate, which does not permit it to take into account the heterogeneities that characterize the Union. What is needed is to encourage the convergence of the banking and financial systems. In this respect, although the proposed banking union still raises many problems (see [Maylis Avaro and Henri Sterdyniak](#)), it may reduce heterogeneity. Another effective way to reduce asymmetry in the transmission of monetary policy is through the implementation of a centralized supervisory policy that the ECB could oversee. This would make it possible to strengthen the resilience of the financial system by adopting a means of regulating banking credit that could take into account the situation in each country in order to avoid the development of the bubbles that

pose a threat to the countries and the stability of the monetary union (see [CAE report no. 96](#) for more details).

[1] [Kremp and Sevestre \(2012\)](#) emphasize that the reduction in borrowing volumes is not due simply to the rationing of the supply of credit but that the recessionary context has also led to a reduction in demand.