

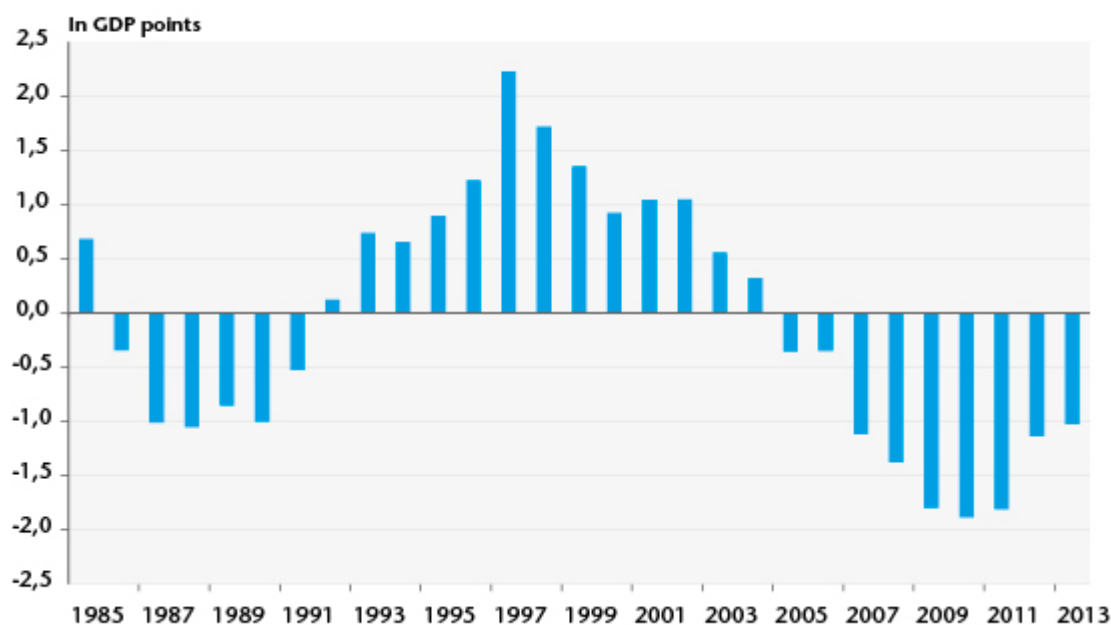
# Is France's trade deficit entirely structural?

By [Eric Heyer](#)

The issue at the heart of the debate between those arguing that a lack of supply is behind the low level of activity in France over the last four years and those arguing that the problem is a lack of demand is the nature of the country's trade deficit.

On the one hand, the French economy has a number of symptoms characteristic of an economy experiencing a shortfall in demand: strong disinflation, high unemployment, businesses declaring substantial spare capacity due mainly to a lack of demand, etc. But, on the other hand, the existence of a persistent deficit in the trade balance (Figure 1) casts doubt on the competitiveness of French firms and on their capacity to meet additional demand, which would thus express a problem with supply.

Figure 1. French trade balance since 1985



Source: INSEE.

So, after more than ten years of trade surpluses, which

represented over 2 GDP points in 1997, France's trade balance turned negative in 2005. After widening gradually until 2010 when the deficit reached nearly 2 GDP points, the trend turned around. In 2013 (the latest available figure), the trade deficit still stood at 1 GDP point.

This observation is not however sufficient to dismiss all the arguments of the proponents of a demand shortage that France simply suffers from a supply problem. What is needed at a minimum is to analyze the nature of the deficit and try to separate its structural component from its cyclical component. The latter is the result of a difference in the economic cycle between France and its major trading partners. When a country's situation is more favourable than that of its partners, that country will tend to run a deficit in its trade balance linked to domestic demand and thus to more buoyant imports. A trade deficit may thus arise regardless of how competitive the country's domestic firms are.

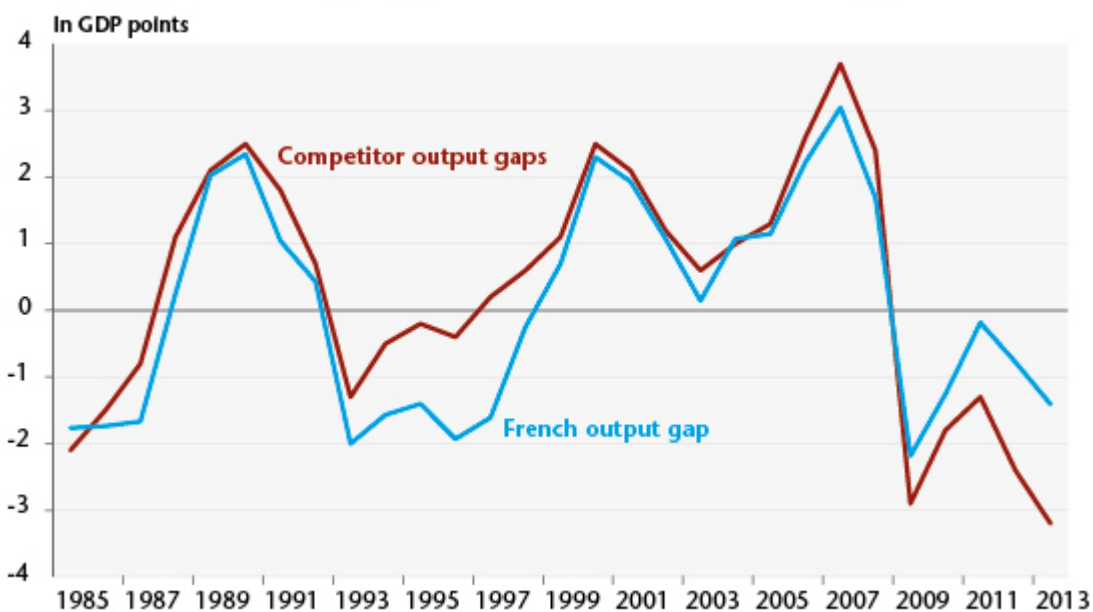
One way to take this cyclical gap into account is to compare the gaps between an economy's actual output and its potential output (the output gap). At the national level, a positive output gap (respectively negative) means that the economy is in a phase of expansion (respectively of contraction) of the cycle, which, other things being equal, should lead to a cyclical deterioration (or improvement) in its trade balance. In terms of the trading partners, when they are in a cyclical expansionary phase (positive output gap), this should lead to a cyclical improvement in the trade balance of the country in question.

Using data from the latest issue of the OECD's *Economic Outlook* (eo96), we calculated an "aggregate" output gap for France's partners by weighting the output gap of each partner by the weight of French exports to that country in France's total exports.

This calculation, shown in Figure 2, highlights two points:

1. The first is that, according to the OECD, France's output gap has been negative since 2008, signalling the existence of room for the French economy to rebound.
2. The second is that the economic situation of our trading partners is even worse. The cyclical gap, measured by the difference between the output gaps of France and of its partners, indicates a significant difference in favour of France.

**Figure 2. The output gap of France and its main trading partners**



Source: OECD, eo96.

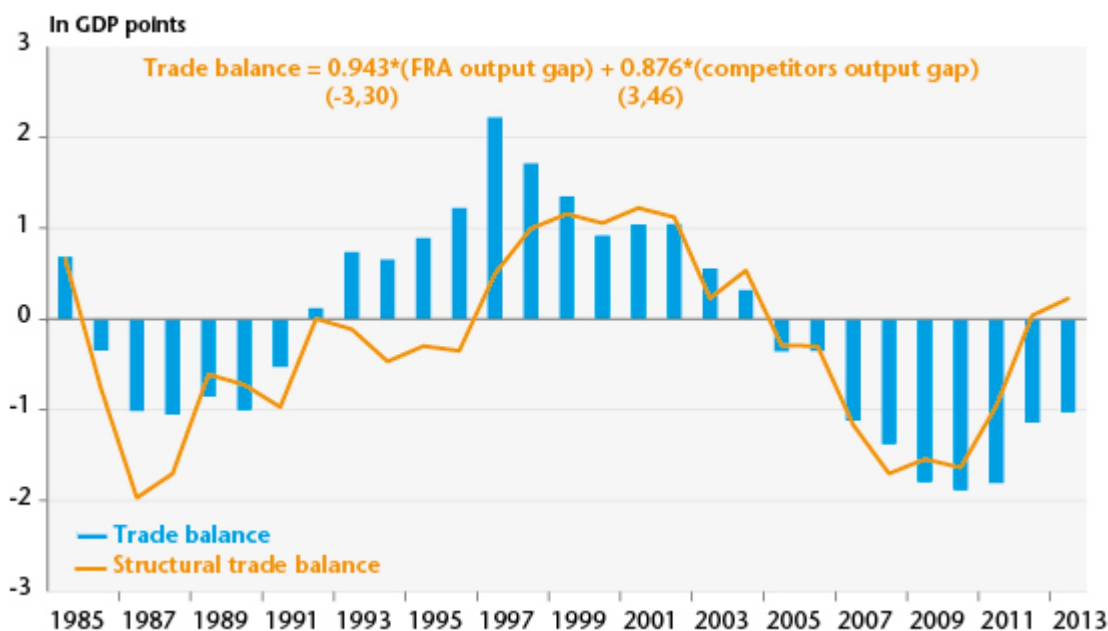
It is then possible to assess the impact of the cyclical situation of the country and that of its main partners on the trade balance.

A simple estimate using Ordinary Least Squares over the period 1985-2013 shows a relationship of [cointegration](#) between these three variables (trade balance, output gap of France and output gap of its partners) for France. The signs obtained are consistent with what we would intuitively expect: when France is in an expansionary phase, its trade balance tends to worsen (coefficient of -0.943). In contrast, when rival countries are experiencing a boom, this makes for an improvement in France's trade balance (coefficient of +0.876).

France's structural trade balance since 1985 can then be calculated by subtracting the cyclical effect (national and competitors) from the observed trade balance.

Figure 3 shows this calculation. First, the fall in the euro in the late 1990s led to a structural improvement in France's structural balance. The sharp deterioration in the trade balance between 2001 and 2007 would then be entirely structural: it would be explained in particular by China's entry into the WTO, by the competitive disinflation policy adopted by Germany, and by the appreciation of the euro. Since the 2008 crisis, however, an increasingly substantial portion of the French trade deficit would be cyclical. So even if French growth were sluggish, the country's economic difficulties were nonetheless less dramatic than in the case of some of its trading partners [1]. It is this relatively more favourable performance compared to its major trading partners that would have led to the rise of a trade deficit, part of which was cyclical. By 2013, the imbalances in the current account would be entirely cyclical in origin.

**Figure 3. France's structural trade balance based on OECD data**



Source: OECD, eo96, author's calculations.

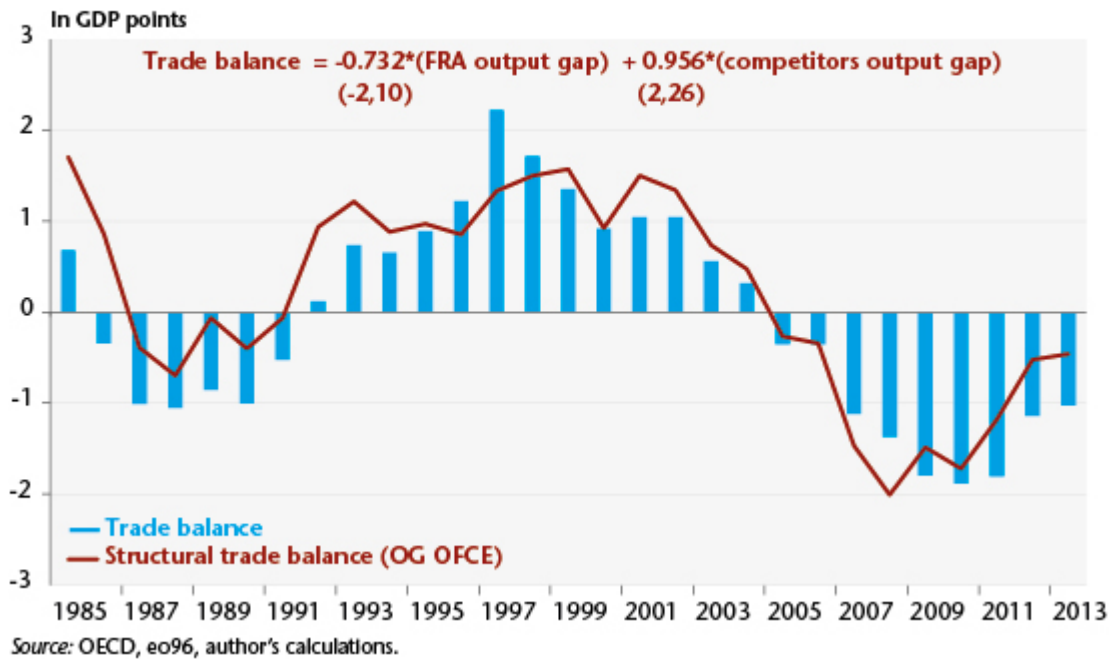
This result echoes the analysis provided by the French

national accounting office on the factors driving growth over the last four years: the level of real GDP in the third quarter of 2014 was only 1.4% higher than in first quarter 2011. An analysis of the factors contributing to this performance is unambiguous: private demand (household and business) was down sharply (-1.6%), particularly household consumption, the traditional engine of economic growth. While there are more households today than four years ago, their total consumption was 0.6% below their 2011 level. However, while the French economy's ability to deal with the global competitive framework is being questioned by the dominant discourse, foreign trade has in fact had a very positive impact in the last four years, with a boost from exports, which contributed a positive 2 GDP points to growth. In short, for four years the French economy has been driven mainly by exports, while it has been held back by private demand.

This analysis is of course based on an assessment of output gaps, whose measurement is tricky and subject to sharp revisions. In this respect, while there is an institutional consensus on the estimate that France has a negative output gap, there is also a broad range in the magnitudes of the room for a rebound, ranging in 2014 from 2.5 to 4 points, depending on the institution (IMF, OECD, European Commission, OFCE).

This diagnosis would be somewhat attenuated if an output gap were used for France that was more negative than the one calculated by the OECD: using the OFCE's estimate for France (an output gap of -2.9 GDP points in 2013 instead of the OECD's -1.4 points) and retaining the OECD measure for its partners, France's more favourable relative performance compared to its major trading partners would now explain only half of its trade deficit [\[2\]](#). Part of the deficit observed would therefore be explained by the competitiveness problems of French business (Figure 4).

**Figure 4. France's structural trade balance based on OFCE data**



In conclusion, as with any measurement of a structural variable, the evaluation of the structural trade balance is sensitive to the measure of the output gap. Nevertheless, it is clear from this brief analysis that:

- If the French economy is considered to suffer mainly from a supply problem (output gap close to zero), whereas our partners, mainly European, face a shortfall in demand (negative output gap), then the deficit in our trade balance would essentially be cyclical.
- However, if France, like its partners, is also experiencing a shortfall in demand, then only part of our deficit is cyclical, and the rest is related to a problem with the competitiveness of our companies.

This last point seems to us closer to the actual situation of the French economy. While French companies' have undeniably lost some competitiveness, this should not be overestimated: the sluggishness that has characterized our economy for nearly four years is due not only to a lack of supply and the disappearance of the potential for growth – even if this is unfortunately likely to taper off – it is also due to a significant decline in demand.

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[1] For example, Italy and Spain entered a second recession in third quarter 2014, leaving their GDP lower than its pre-crisis level by 9% and 6% respectively.

[2] We find a similar result when the previous version from the OECD (eo95) it used for France and all its partners.

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# The responsibility pact's obligation of a result

By [Xavier Timbeau](#), @XTimbeau, OFCE

*The original French text was published in the "Rebonds" section of the newspaper Libération on 28 February 2014.*

Is the policy supply-side or demand-side? This debate takes us back decades to a time when the advocates of supply-side policy, Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, wanted to put Keynesian practices into the closet. With respect to the responsibility pact, the debate is moot. There is a clear diagnosis that companies are suffering from such low margin rates that their very survival is threatened. The losses of market share since the 2000s cannot be explained solely by the transition to a post-industrial society. It is thus a priority to boost corporate margins by whatever means necessary. But the restoration of business margins will not be sufficient to put them back on a path of increasing productivity, ensuring their competitiveness in the medium term. Getting back on this

path will require numerous reforms, ranging from a better education system to a stable tax system that is as neutral as possible, while making use of the impact of agglomeration and specialization. Coordinating everyone's projects around a comprehensive strategy to make the energy transition is also a powerful instrument. But the responsibility pact remains silent on this.

To be clear, the responsibility pact aims to improve the situation of business, which could partially offset the decline in activity resulting from the 2008 crisis and the French economy's loss of competitiveness relative to its partners undergoing deflation (including Spain) or due to a rise in the euro. In so far as the pact is financed by taxes or spending cuts, this will constitute a tax depreciation, which will make consumers, employees and those on social benefits pay for the reduction in business costs. When the decrease in the cost of doing business is more focused on lower wages, then we can expect the creation of something like 130,000 jobs in five years, taking into account the financing (see for example the [article by Heyer and Plane in the revue de l'OFCE no. 126](#)). The counterparties, the support of the trade unions and the MEDEF employer association and the general mobilization around a shared bleak diagnosis, will not lead to the revolution that some expect, but it is part of the solution.

A fiscal devaluation at a time when the countries of southern Europe are flirting with deflation and everyone is chasing after a balanced current account, including by curbing domestic demand, will of course not lead the euro zone out of crisis, but instead keep it in prolonged stagnation. Fiscal devaluation is not the right policy for Europe. But so long as Europe has no path other than mass suicide, then fiscal devaluation is the logical response for France.

130,000 jobs will not be sufficient to reverse the trend in unemployment. In the face of the more than one million



additional unemployed since 2008, it is downright derisory. But the responsibility pact could be something other than a fiscal devaluation. The obligation of a result, namely to reduce unemployment, does not leave much choice. For the responsibility pact to be accompanied by a significant reduction in unemployment, the key is not to finance it. The proposal to be made to our partners consists of laxity on our public deficit trajectory in exchange for reforms that everyone would consider structural. Public spending cuts, favourable taxation of business, the prioritization of competitiveness, are all measures that can generate some manoeuvring room.

France has made a commitment to Brussels to reduce its structural deficit by 50 billion euros. If this fiscal effort is made by 2017, almost 1 point of growth will be lopped off every year, and unemployment will virtually not decline at all by 2017. In fact, only the public deficit would be reduced, to 1.2 percent of GDP; this would open up very favourable prospects after 2017, since the public debt will fall without further budgetary cuts and therefore without hindering the decline in unemployment. It's a comfortable scenario for François Hollande's successor, assuming there is one, as they can even use the situation to lower taxes for the rich. With a combination of lower taxes, lower unemployment and a declining public debt, it will look like a "magician" has succeeded an "incompetent".

On the other hand, using the flexibility offered by the 50 billion euros, that is to say, renouncing the 50 billion goal for structural deficit reduction, would yield a very different result. Simulations at the OFCE indicate that unemployment could be cut by nearly 2 points by 2017. Admittedly, the structural deficit would remain unchanged, but the public deficit, what we see, would be on a downward trajectory: in 2017, it would come to just over 2 GDP points (against 4.2 points at end 2013), bringing the public debt into the region

of a reduction in the debt-to-GDP ratio. The situation on the eve of the presidential election would be better, and the voting more open.

To develop this manoeuvring room, our partners (and the European Commission) need to be convinced of just how drastic the situation is. The results of the European elections are likely to remind them and make the obligation of a result clear to all.

Reagan had a great ability to look towards fiscal policy for the motor of his supply-side policy. He thus created the myth that lowering taxes on the rich is good for growth, with consequences for inequality that we are still seeing today. Thatcher believed until the end that reducing the public debt was the right policy. This merely prepared the ground for Tony Blair a few years later. This is the way that political cycles are made, based on results. In the same way, we are responsible for the long-term consequences of the choices we make today.

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## **A recession is not inevitable**

By Marion Cochard, Bruno Ducoudré and Danielle Schweisguth

The cold blast from the autumn forecasts continues with the publication of the European Central Bank's latest forecasts. Revising its growth outlook for the euro zone downwards (to -0.3% for 2013, against the forecast of 0.9% in September), the ECB in turn is now pointing to the reinforced austerity measures and the growing impact of uncertainty in the financial markets. It is clear that the intensity of the

fiscal consolidation is paralyzing growth in the euro zone through the interplay of the fiscal multipliers, while not managing to restore confidence. In this note we show that the recessionary spiral that the euro zone is getting sucked into is not an inevitability.

In the first edition of the [2013 iAGS report](#), which was produced in partnership with the German IMK institute and the Danish ECLM institute, the OFCE offers an alternative strategy to the current fiscal consolidation policy. This alternative would make it possible to restore growth in the medium term while still meeting the European budget commitments. As Jérôme Creel showed in his latest post, [“Could France have a different fiscal policy?”](#), there is room for budgetary manoeuvring in a way that is consistent with the current treaty framework.

Under the aegis of the European Commission, the European countries have pledged to continue their austerity programmes from 2013 to 2015 on a relatively large scale, especially if we take into account the efforts already made. Apart from Germany, where the cumulative fiscal impulse will be virtually nil, most European countries are planning to reduce their primary structural deficit by more than 2 GDP points between 2012 and 2015 (from -1.4 points for Finland to -7.5 points for Greece, cf. the table).

**Table. Cumulative fiscal impulses in the euro zone**

In GDP points

	Germa- ny	France	Italy	Spain	Nether- lands	Bel- gium	Greece	Portu- gal	Ireland	Austria	Finland
2010-2012	0,1	-4,1	-4,7	-7,0	-2,3	-1,5	-18,3	-9,1	-8,3	-1,1	-3,3
2013-2015	-0,3	-2,9	-2,1	-4,2	-2,9	-2,2	-7,5	-2,6	-5,7	-1,8	-1,4

Source : Eurostat data, iAGS simulations.

These adjustments are being undertaken in a very poor economic climate, which has been marked by austerity budgets from 2010 to 2012: growth in the euro zone will be -0.4% in 2012 and -0.3% in 2013. However, according to a series of recent

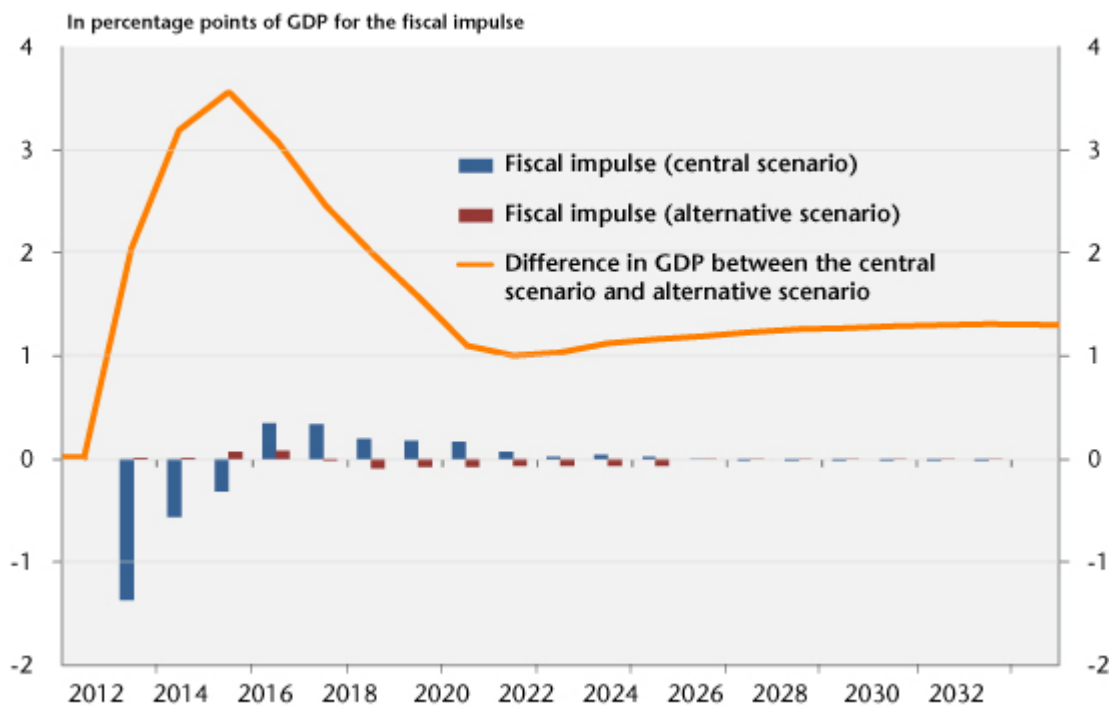
theoretical and empirical studies[\[1\]](#), the fiscal multipliers turn upwards as the economic cycle heads downwards. In this context, the speed and magnitude of the fiscal adjustment is especially costly in terms of growth, and thus counter-productive in terms of the fiscal consolidation.[\[2\]](#) Encouraging a return to growth by easing the austerity would enable the economies of the euro zone to pull out of their recessionary spiral, which is marked by a steep rise in unemployment.

In order to develop this alternative strategy, we used the iAGS model to carry out simulations for the euro zone countries over a period of 20 years. These were conducted in two steps:

1. In our central scenario, we integrated the planned budget cuts announced by the various countries up to 2015. Starting from 2016, we calculated the fiscal impulses needed to achieve the 60% debt threshold by 2032, while limiting the size of these impulses to  $\pm 0.5$  GDP points per year. As shown in Figure 1 (central scenario), the structural adjustment carried out between 2010 and 2015 is significant enough in most countries to allow a relaxation of economic policy starting in 2016, while meeting the debt criterion by 2032.
2. For each country, we then decided on an alternative budget strategy by staggering the reduction of the structural deficit over time. This strategy consists in starting in 2013 with the implementation of fiscal impulses of a more limited amount in absolute value than those announced by the current governments (maximum  $\pm 0.5$  GDP points per year), and doing this until the adjustment is sufficient to achieve the debt target of 60% of GDP by 2032. This strategy leads to more measured fiscal adjustment for the euro zone countries in difficulty and to slightly positive fiscal impulses in

countries whose debt trajectory is in better shape (Germany, Finland, and Italy). For the zone as a whole, the fiscal impulse is almost zero in 2013 and 2014, with the bulk of the adjustment spread from 2017 to 2024.

**Figure 1. Fiscal impulses and difference in GDP between the central and alternative scenarios**



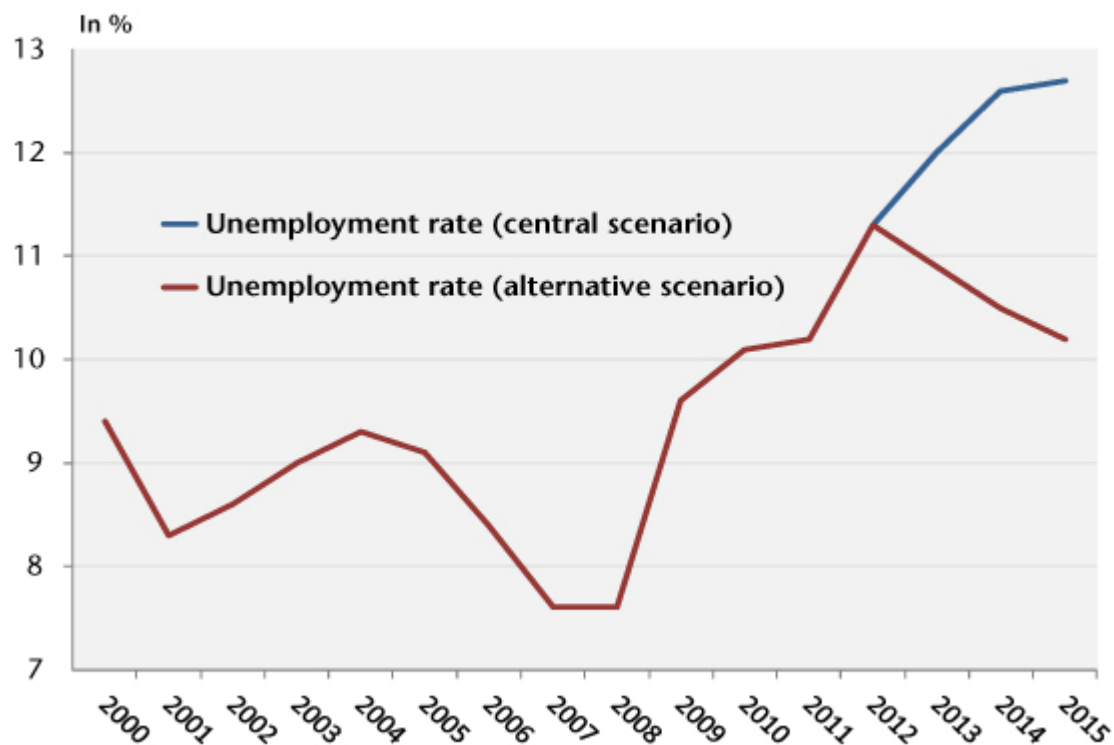
Source : iAGS, authors' calculation.

Figure 1 shows the difference in the level of GDP between the two scenarios. Limiting the size of the fiscal impulses helps to achieve a higher level of GDP and is compatible with a debt target of 60% of GDP by 2032 (alternative scenario). The effectiveness of the fiscal consolidation is enhanced when it is being conducted in an environment that is less unfavourable to the economy. This strategy achieves the same debt target with a cumulative fiscal adjustment that is 50 billion euros less than in the central scenario.

According to our calculations, the alternative scenario would restore a 2% growth rate in the euro zone in 2013, compared with -0.3% if the planned fiscal policies are carried out. The revival of activity would boost the labour market and help to turn around the unemployment rate in 2013, with a decline to

10.2% in 2015, compared with 12.8% if the austerity policies are continued, representing 3 million fewer unemployed people in 2015.

**Graphique 2. Unemployment rate in the euro zone - Central and alternative scenarios**



Source: Eurostat data, iAGS simulation.

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[\[1\] A review of the recent literature on fiscal multipliers: size matters!](#)

[\[2\] What is the value of the fiscal multipliers today?](#)

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# Could France have a different fiscal policy?

By [Jérôme Creel](#)

Shouldn't the economic crisis that is gripping the euro zone, including France, lead to calling into question the approach being taken by fiscal policy? In light of the unprecedented [broad consensus](#) among economists about the impact of fiscal policy on the real economy, it is clear that the austerity measures being adopted by France are a mistake. Moreover, invoking European constraints is not a good enough argument to exclude a much more gradual process of putting the public purse in order (also see the [iAGS project](#)).

There is no need to go beyond what European legislation requires, and doing so can be especially harmful if in fact the additional budgetary efforts generate less growth and, ultimately, further deterioration in the public finances due to higher social spending and lower tax revenue. What do the existing European treaties actually demand? In the case of a government deficit that exceeds 3% of GDP, the minimum effort required for fiscal adjustment consists of reducing the cyclically adjusted deficit, *i.e.* the structural deficit, by at least 0.5% of GDP per year. Furthermore, the time period for reducing the debt to 60% of GDP is 20 years. Finally, exceptional circumstances now include an "unusual event" that could justify deviating from the current standards for the deficit.

Based on these exceptional circumstances and on the rule requiring an annual improvement of at least 0.5% of GDP in the structural deficit, it can be shown that the French government has fiscal maneuvering room in 2012 and 2013, while still complying with European fiscal rules.

Table 1 lists the sequence of public deficits and of GDP growth from 2011 to 2013 according to two forecasts produced by the European Commission in the Spring and then the Autumn of 2012. According to the Spring forecast, the French structural deficit was supposed to decrease by 1.2% of GDP between 2011 and 2013, on average slightly above what is required by the Commission. In fact, the improvement from 2011 to 2012 exceeded 0.5% of GDP, while it fell below that from 2012 to 2013.

What about the Autumn 2012 forecast? The expected improvement in France's structural deficit was now expected to be 1.1% of GDP between 2011 and 2012 and then 1.4% of GDP between 2012 and 2013, taking into account [the government's commitment to reduce public spending and raise taxes](#). These projected improvements in the structural deficit are two and three times greater than what European fiscal rules require, which is a lot! For the year 2013, this amounts to almost 20 billion euros that need not be levied on French households and businesses. Abandoning this levy does not mean abandoning fiscal austerity, but rather *spreading it out over time*.

Furthermore, the European Commission now expects a slowdown in the French economy in 2013. Unless one argues that the French government is responsible for this slowdown – and while this might indeed be the case in light of the austerity budget the government is imposing on the French economy, it is far from clear that the European Commission would want to employ such an argument, given its role in championing austerity! – this deterioration in the country's growth prospects could fall within the category of an "unusual event," thus giving France an opening to invoke exceptional circumstances in order to *stagger* and *extend* its fiscal adjustment efforts.

Instead of awaiting the miraculous effects of structural reform – a potentially lengthy and uncertain process – all that is really needed is to apply the regulations in force,



without imposing an overly restrictive reading of what they contain, so as to limit the reduction in growth being caused by austerity and avoid a new period of rising unemployment. According to the conclusions of the [iAGS report](#), staggering the fiscal austerity measures in France would lead to adding 0.7 GDP point to growth every year from 2013 to 2017.

The “unusual event” constituted by yet another year of very low growth in 2013 for France also opens the possibility of suspending the austerity policies, at least temporarily. Once again according to the findings of the iAGS report, the French government should put off till 2016 its policy of consolidating the public finances. The gain in terms of growth would be 0.9 percentage point per year between 2013 and 2017. Provided that this policy is actually conducted carefully and not postponed indefinitely, it would enable France to reduce its public debt to GDP ratio in compliance with existing EU treaties.

#### Forecast for the French economy

		2011	2012	2013
Public deficit (% of GDP)	Spring 2012	5.2	4.5	4.2
	Autumn 2012	5,2	4.5	3.5
Structural deficit (% of GDP)	Spring 2012	4.1	3.2	2.9
	Autumn 2012	4.5	3.4	2.0
PIB (%)	Spring 2012	1.7	0.5	1.3
	Autumn 2012	1.7	0.2	0.4

Source: European Commission forecasts.

# Must balancing the public finances be the main goal of economic policy

By [Henri Sterdyniak](#)

The financial crisis of 2007-2012 caused a sharp rise in public deficits and debt as States had to intervene to save the financial system and support economic activity, and especially as they experienced a steep drop in tax revenues due to falling GDP. In early 2012, at a time when they are far from having recovered from the effects of the crisis (which cost them an average of 8 GDP points compared to the pre-crisis trend), they face a difficult choice: should they continue to support activity, or do whatever it takes to reduce public deficits and debt?

[An in-depth note expands on nine analytical points:](#)

- The growth of debt and deficits is not peculiar to France; it occurred in all the developed countries.
- France's public bodies are certainly indebted, but they also have physical assets. Overall the net wealth of government represented 26.7% of GDP in late 2010, or 8000 euros per capita. Moreover, when all the national wealth is taken into account (physical assets less foreign debt), then every French newborn has an average worth at birth of 202 000 euros (national wealth divided by the number of inhabitants).
- In 2010, the net debt burden came to 2.3% of GDP, reflecting an average interest rate on the debt of 3.0%, which is well below the nominal potential growth rate. At this level, the real cost of the debt, that is, the primary surplus needed to stabilize the debt, is zero or even slightly negative.

– The true “golden rule” of public finances stipulates that it is legitimate to finance public investment by public borrowing. The structural deficit must thus be equal to the net public investment. For France, this rule permits a deficit of around 2.4% of GDP. There is no reason to set a standard for balancing the public finances. The State is not a household. It is immortal, and can thus run a permanent debt: the State does not have to repay its debt, but only to guarantee that it will always service it.

– The public deficit is detrimental to future generations whenever it becomes destabilizing due to an excessive increase in public spending or an excessive decrease in taxation, at which point it causes a rise in inflation and interest rates and undermines investment and growth. This is not the situation of the current deficit, which is aimed at making adjustments to provide the necessary support for economic activity in a situation of low interest rates, due to the high level of household savings and the refusal of business to invest more.

– For some, the 8 GDP points lost during the crisis have been lost forever; we must resign ourselves to persistently high unemployment, as it is structural in nature. Since the goal must be to balance the structural public balance, France needs to make an additional major effort of around 4 percentage points of GDP of its deficit. For us, a sustainable deficit is about 2.4 GDP points. The structural deficit in 2011 is already below that figure. It is growth that should make it possible to reduce the current deficit. No additional fiscal effort is needed.

– On 9 December 2011, the euro zone countries agreed on a new fiscal pact: the Treaty on Stability, Coordination and Governance of the European Monetary Union. This Pact will place strong constraints on future fiscal policy. The structural deficit of each member country must be less than 0.5% of GDP. An automatic correction mechanism is to be

triggered if this threshold is exceeded. This constraint and the overall mechanism must be integrated in a binding and permanent manner into the fiscal procedures of each country. Countries whose debt exceeds 60% of GDP will have to reduce their debt ratio by at least one-twentieth of the excess every year.

This project is economically dangerous. It imposes medium-term objectives (a balanced budget, a debt rolled back to below 60% of GDP) that are arbitrary and are not *a priori* compatible with the necessities of an economic equilibrium. Likewise, it imposes a fiscal policy that is incompatible with the necessities of short-term economic management. It prohibits any discretionary fiscal policy. It deprives governments of any fiscal policy instrument.

– As the rise in public debts and deficits in the developed countries came in response to mounting global imbalances, we cannot reduce the debts and deficits without addressing the causes of these imbalances. Otherwise, the simultaneous implementation of restrictive fiscal policies in the OECD countries as a whole will lead to stagnating production, falling tax revenues and deteriorating debt ratios, without managing to reassure the financial markets.

– A more balanced global economy would require that the countries in surplus base their growth on domestic demand and that their capital assumes the risks associated with direct investment. In the Anglo-American world, higher growth in wage and social income and a reduction in income inequalities would undercut the need for swelling financial bubbles, household debt and public debt. The euro zone needs to find the 8 GDP points lost to the crisis. Instead of focussing on government balances, the European authorities should come up with a strategy to end the crisis, based on a recovery in demand, and in particular on investment to prepare for the ecological transition. This strategy must include keeping interest rates low and public deficits at the levels needed to support

activity.