

iAGS, independent Annual Growth Survey 2013

by OFCE (Paris), ECLM (Copenhagen) and IMK (Düsseldorf)

The independent Annual Growth Survey (iAGS) brings together a group of internationally competitive economists from three European economic institutes to provide an independent alternative to the Annual Growth Survey (AGS) published by the European Commission. [iAGS 2013](#) focuses on the Eurozone economic outlook and on the sustainability of public finances until 2032. This first report advocates delaying and spreading fiscal consolidation in due respect of current EU fiscal rules.

Four years after the start of the Great Recession, the euro area remains in crisis. GDP and GDP per head are below their pre-crisis level. The unemployment rate has reached a historical record level of 11.6 % of the labour force in September 2012, the most dramatic reflection of the long lasting social despair that the Great Recession produced. The sustainability of public debt is a major concern for national governments, the European Commission and financial markets, but successive and large consolidation programmes have proven unsuccessful in tackling this issue. Up to now, asserting that austerity was the only possible strategy to get out of this dead end has been the cornerstone of policymakers' message to European citizens. But this assertion is based on a fallacious diagnosis according to which the crisis stems from the fiscal profligacy of members states. For the Euro area as a whole, fiscal policy is not the origin of the problem. Higher deficits and debts were a necessary reaction by governments facing the worst recession since WWII. The fiscal response was successful in two respects: it stopped the recession process and dampened the financial crisis. As a consequence, it led to a sharp rise in the public debt of all Euro area countries.

During normal times, sustainability of public debt is a long-term issue whereas unemployment and growth are short-term ones. Yet, fearing an alleged imminent surge in interest rates and constrained by the Stability and Growth Pact, though transition towards more normal times had not been completed, member states and the European Commission reversed priorities. This choice partly reflects well-known pitfalls in the institutional framework of EMU. But it is equally reflecting a dogmatic view in which fiscal policy is incapable of demand management and the scope of public administrations has to be fettered and limited. This ideology has led member states to implement massive fiscal austerity during bad times.

As it is clear now, this strategy is deeply flawed. Eurozone countries and especially Southern European countries have undertaken ill-designed and precipitous consolidation. The austerity measures have reached a dimension that was never observed in the history of fiscal policy. The cumulative change in the fiscal stance for Greece from 2010 to 2012 amounts to 18 points of GDP. For Portugal, Spain and Italy, it has reached respectively 7.5, 6.5 and 4.8 points of GDP. The consolidation has rapidly become synchronized leading to negative spillovers over the whole euro area, amplifying its first-round effects. The reduction in economic growth in turn makes sustainability of public debt ever less likely. Thus austerity has been clearly self-defeating as the path of reduction of public deficits has been by far disappointing regarding the initial targets defined by member states and the Commission.

Since spring 2011 unemployment within the EU-27 and the Euro zone has begun to increase rapidly and in the past year alone unemployment has increased by 2 million people. Youth unemployment has also increased dramatically during the crisis. In the second quarter of 2012 9.2 million young people in the age of 15-29 years were unemployed, which corresponds to 17.7 percent of the 15-29 years old in the workforce and

accounts for 36.7 percent of all unemployed in the EU-27. Youth unemployment has increased more dramatically than the overall unemployment rate within the EU. The same tendencies are seen for the low skilled workers. From past experience it is well known that once unemployment has risen to a high level it has a tendency to remain high the years after. This is known as persistence. Along with the rise in unemployment the first symptoms that unemployment will remain high in the coming years are already visible. In the second quarter of 2012 almost 11 million people in EU had been unemployed for a year or longer. Within the last year long term unemployment has increased with 1.4 million people in the EU-27 and with 1.2 million people within the Euro area.

As a result of long term unemployment the effective size of the workforce is diminished which in the end can lead to a higher structural level in unemployment. This will make more difficult to generate growth and healthy public finances within the EU in the medium term. Besides the effect of long term unemployment on potential growth and public finances one should also add that long term unemployment may cause increased poverty because sooner than expected unemployment benefits will stop. Thus long term unemployment may also become a deep social issue for the European society. Given our forecast for unemployment in EU and the Euro area, we estimate that long term unemployment can reach 12 million in EU and 9 million in the Euro area at the end of 2013.

What is striking is that consequences of ill-designed consolidation could and should have been expected. Instead, they have been largely underestimated. Growing theoretical and empirical evidence according to which the size of multipliers is magnified in a fragile situation has been overlooked. Concretely, whereas in normal times, that is when the output gap is close to zero, a reduction of one point of GDP of the structural deficit reduces activity by a range of 0.5 to 1% (this is the fiscal multiplier), this effect exceeds 1.5% in

bad times and may even reach 2% when the economic climate is strongly deteriorated. All the features (recession, monetary policy at the zero bound, no offsetting devaluation, austerity amongst key trading partners) known to generate higher-than-normal multipliers were in place in the euro area.

The recovery that had been observed from the end of 2009 was brought to a halt. The Euro area entered a new recession in the third quarter of 2011 and the situation is not expected to improve: GDP is forecast to decrease by 0.4 % in 2012 and again by 0.3 % in 2013. Italy, Spain, Portugal and Greece seem to sink in an endless depression. The unemployment soared to a record level in the Eurozone and especially in Spain, Greece, Portugal and Ireland. Confidence of households, non financial companies and financial markets has collapsed again. Interest rates have not receded and governments of Southern countries still face unsustainable risk premium on their interest rate, despite some policy initiatives, while Germany, Austria or France benefit from historically low interest rates.

Rather than focus on public deficits the underlying cause of the crisis needs to be addressed. The euro area suffered primarily from a balance of payments crisis due to the build-up of current account imbalances between its members. When the financial flows needed to finance these imbalances dried up the crisis took hold in the form of a liquidity crisis. Attempts should have been made to adjust nominal wages and prices in a balanced way, with minimal harm to demand, output and employment. Instead salvation was sought in across-the-board austerity, forcing down demand, wages and prices by driving up unemployment.

Even if some fiscal consolidation was almost certainly a necessary part of a rebalancing strategy to curb past excesses in some countries, it was vital that those countries with large surpluses, especially Germany, took symmetrical action to stimulate demand and ensure faster growth of nominal wages and prices. Instead the adjustment burden was thrust on the

deficit countries. Some progress has been made in addressing competitive imbalances, but the cost has been huge. Failure to ensure a balanced response from surplus countries is also increasing the overall trade surplus of the euro area. This is unlikely to be a sustainable solution as it shifts the adjustment on to non-euro countries and will provoke counteractions.

There is a pressing need for a public debate on such vital issues. Policymakers have largely ignored dissenting voices, even as they have grown louder. The decisions on the present macroeconomic strategy for the Euro area should not be seized exclusively by the European Commission at this very moment, for the new EU fiscal framework leaves Euro area countries some leeway. Firstly, countries may invoke exceptional circumstances as they face *“an unusual event outside the control of the (MS) which has a major impact on the financial position of the general government or periods of severe economic downturn as set out in the revised SGP (...)”*. Secondly, the path of consolidation may be eased for countries with excessive deficits, since it is stated that *“in its recommendation, the Council shall request that the MS achieves annual budgetary targets which, on the basis of the forecast underpinning the recommendation, are consistent with a minimum annual improvement of at least 0.5 % of GDP as a benchmark, in its cyclically adjusted balance net of one-off and temporary measures, in order to ensure the correction of the excessive deficit within the deadline set in the recommendation”*. This is of course a minimum, but it would also be seen as a sufficient condition to bring back the deficit to Gdp ratio towards 3 % and the debt ratio towards 60 %.

A four-fold alternative strategy is thus necessary:

First, delaying and spreading the fiscal consolidation in due respect of current EU fiscal rules. Instead of austerity measures of nearly 100 billion euros for the whole euro area, a more balanced fiscal consolidation of 0.5 point of GDP, in

accordance with treaties and fiscal compact, would give for the sole 2013 year a concrete margin for manoeuvre of more than 60 billion euros. This amount would substantially contrast with the vows of the June and October 2012 European Councils to devote (still unbudgeted) 120 billion euros until 2020 within the Employment and Growth Pact. By delaying and capping the path of consolidation, the average growth for the Eurozone between 2013 and 2017 may be improved by 0.7 point per year.

Second, it involves that the ECB fully acts as a lender of last resort for the Euro area countries in order to relieve MS from the panic pressure stemming from financial markets. For panic to cease, EU must have a credible plan made clear to its creditors.

Third, significantly increasing lending by the European Investment Bank as well as other measures (notably the use of structural funds and project bonds), so as to meaningfully advance the European Union growth agenda. Vows reported above have to be transformed into concrete investments.

Fourth, a close coordination of economic policies should aim at reducing current accounts imbalances. The adjustment should not only rely on deficit countries. Germany and the Netherlands should also take measures to reduce their surpluses.

The euro zone: confidence won't be enough

By [Céline Antonin](#), [Christophe Blot](#) and Danielle Schweisguth

This text summarizes the OFCE's October 2012 forecasts for [the economy of the euro zone](#).

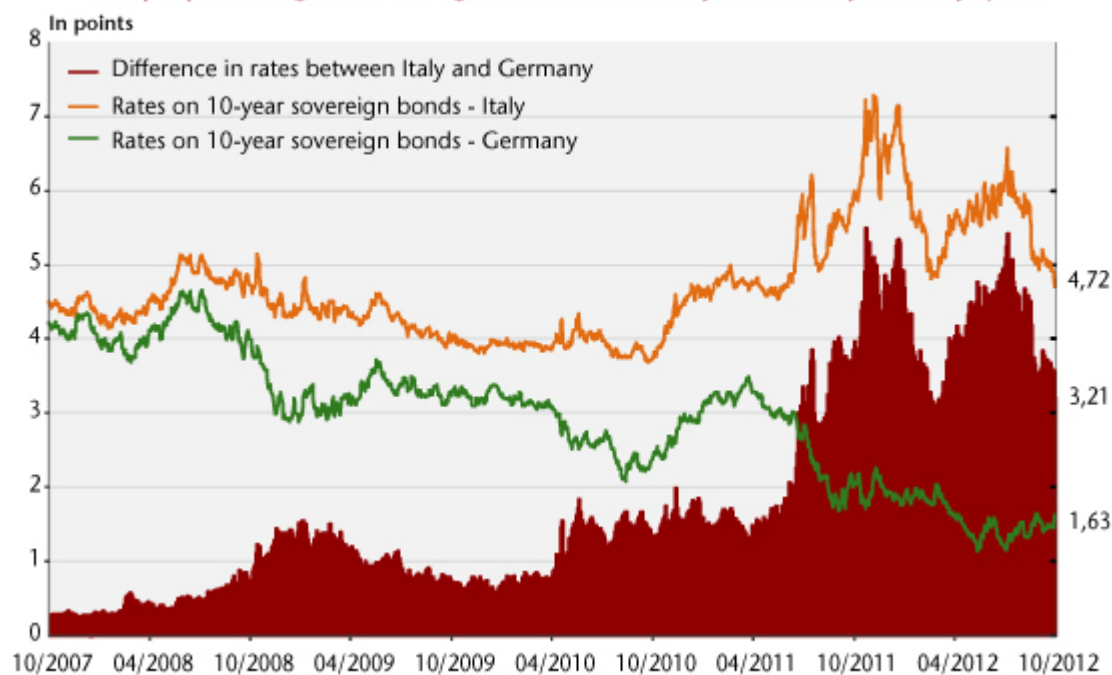
After more than two years of crisis in the euro zone, this time the meeting of the European Council, held on 18 and 19 October, had nothing of the atmosphere of yet another last-chance summit. Even though discussions on the future banking union [\[1\]](#) were a source of tension between France and Germany, there was no sword of Damocles hanging over the heads of the European heads of state. However, it would be premature to assume that the crisis is coming to an end. It is sufficient to recall that the GDP of the euro zone has still not regained its pre-crisis level, and in fact declined again by 0.2% in the second quarter of 2012. This decline is forecast to continue, as we expect GDP to fall by 0.5% in 2012 and by 0.1% in 2013. Consequently, the unemployment rate in the euro zone, which has already surpassed its previous historical record from April 1997, will rise further, reaching 12.1% by end 2013. What then are the reasons for the lull? Can the euro zone quickly resume its growth and hope to finally put an end to the social crisis?

Since the end of 2011, Europe has adopted a new treaty (the Treaty on stability, coordination and governance, the TSCG) which is being ratified in the 25 signatory countries. The new law is specifically intended to strengthen both budgetary discipline – through the adoption of national golden rules – and solidarity through the creation of the European Stability Mechanism (ESM), in so far as the use of the ESM is conditional on ratification of the TSCG. On 6 September, the ECB unveiled the basic points of its new conditional purchase of sovereign debt ([see here](#)), which is aimed at reducing the interest rates of countries subject to the ESM. Thus, the risk premium, as measured by the difference between the Italian and Spanish sovereign interest rates and the German rate, after peaking on 24 July 2012, decreased respectively by 2.2 and 2.5 points (Figures 1 and 2). This is of course still far from

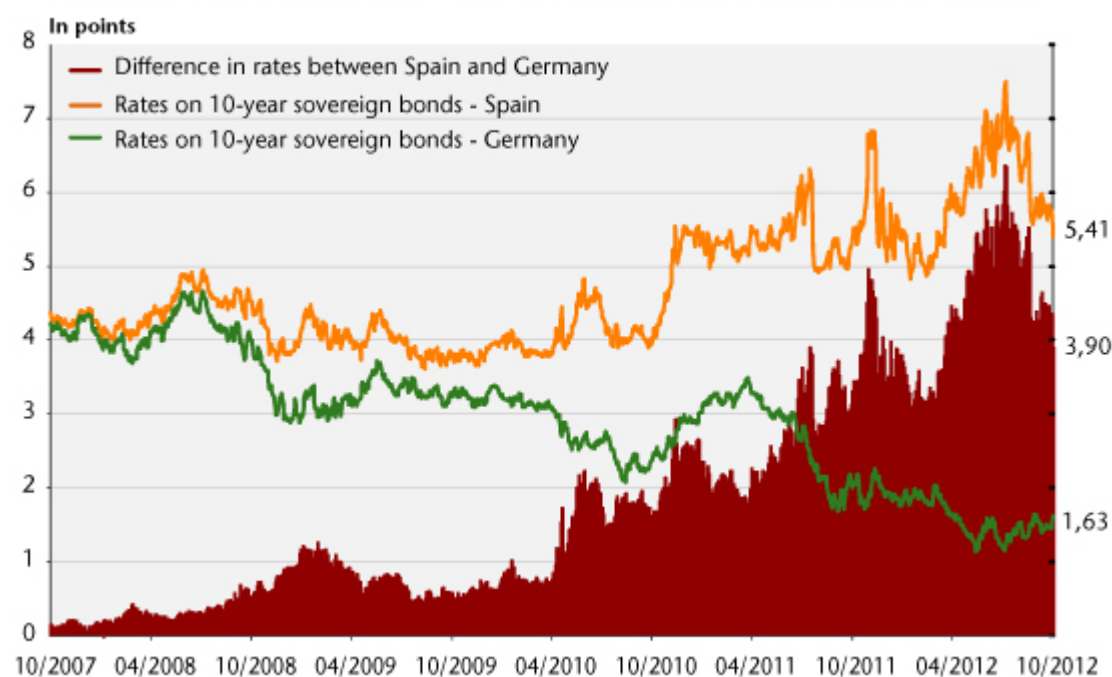
normal, but this lull is nevertheless welcome and it shows that the spectre of a breakup of the euro zone has receded.

Could this new wave of optimism be a precursor to an upturn in the economy of the euro zone? The answer to this question is, unfortunately, negative. The fiscal policies of countries in the zone are still highly restrictive, a situation that has even intensified in 2012, pushing Italy and Spain back into recession and deepening the recession that was already hitting Portugal and Greece. For the euro zone as a whole, the fiscal stimulus will come to 1.7 percent of GDP in 2012 (table). The series of votes on national budgets confirms this strategy of a forced reduction of budget deficits for 2013, with the overall fiscal consolidation for the euro zone as a whole coming to 1.3%. There will be significant differences between the countries, since in Germany the fiscal stimulus will barely be negative (-0.2 point) while in Spain, Italy and Greece it will be more than -2 GDP points. However, the recessionary impact of this synchronized fiscal consolidation will be even greater given that the euro zone countries are still at the bottom of the economic cycle. In these conditions, the targets for budget deficit reduction will not be met, which will inevitably raise the question of the appropriateness of further budget cuts. More and more Member States thus risk being caught in a vicious circle where low growth calls for further fiscal adjustments that in turn deepen the economic and social crisis. It is essential that any decision about improving the governance of the European Union or the transmission of monetary policy restores confidence and creates the conditions for a return to growth. But this will be insufficient to escape the recession and should not obscure the impact of the fiscal strategy.

Graphique 1. Long-term sovereign interest rates in Italy and the Italy-Germany Spread



Graphique 2. Long-term sovereign interest rates in Spain and the Spain-Germany Spread



Source : Datastream.

Tableau. Fiscal stimulus in the euro zone countries

In GDP points

	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Germany	0,7	1,5	-0,9	-0,5	-0,2
Austria	0,4	0,6	-1,6	-0,1	-0,9
Belgium	1,9	-0,3	-0,1	-1,1	-0,8
Spain	3,8	-2,5	-1,1	-3,4	-2,4
Finland	0,4	1,5	-1,6	-0,4	-1,3
France	2,3	-0,5	-2,9	-1,6	-1,8
Greece	3,2	-8,0	-5,3	-5,0	-3,9
Ireland	2,2	-4,4	-1,5	-2,4	-1,8
Italy	0,8	-0,4	-1,2	-3,2	-2,1
Netherlands	4,0	-1,1	-0,2	-1,0	-1,2
Portugal	5,0	-0,7	-3,7	-3,7	-1,8
Euro zone 11*	1,8	-0,3	-1,3	-1,7	-1,3

* Excluding Cyprus, Luxembourg, Malta, Slovakia, Slovenia and Estonia.

Note : The fiscal stimulus is measured by the opposite of the variation in the cyclically adjusted primary balance, that is, excluding interest charges and exceptional revenue: it approximates the discretionary budget policy.

Sources : OFCE calculations and forecasts, October 2012.

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[1] See [here](#) for an analysis of the importance of the proposed banking union and the questions it raises.

The debacle of austerity

By [Xavier Timbeau](#)

This text summarizes [the OFCE's October 2012 forecasts](#).

The year 2012 is ending, with hopes for an end to the crisis disappointed. After a year marked by recession, the euro zone will go through another catastrophic year in 2013 (a -0.1% decline in GDP in 2013, after -0.5% in 2012, according to our forecasts – see the table). The UK is no exception to this trend, as it plunges deeper into crisis (-0.4% in 2012, 0.3%

in 2013). In addition to the figures for economic growth, unemployment trends are another reminder of the gravity of the situation. With the exception of Germany and a few other developed countries, the Western economies have been hit by high unemployment that is persisting or, in the euro zone, even rising (the unemployment rate will reach 12% in the euro zone in 2013, up from 11.2% in the second quarter of 2012). This persistent unemployment is leading to a worsening situation for those who have lost their jobs, as some fall into the ranks of the long-term unemployed and face the exhaustion of their rights to compensation. Although the United States is experiencing more favourable economic growth than in the euro zone, its labour market clearly illustrates that the US economy is mired in the Great Recession.

Was this disaster, with the euro zone at its epicentre, an unforeseeable event? Is it some fatality that we have no choice but to accept, with no alternative but to bear the consequences? No – the return to recession in fact stems from a misdiagnosis and the inability of Europe's institutions to respond quickly to the dynamics of the crisis. This new downturn is the result of massive, exaggerated austerity policies whose impacts have been underestimated. The determination to urgently rebalance the public finances and restore the credibility of the euro zone's economic management, regardless of the cost, has led to its opposite. To get out of this rut will require reversing Europe's economic policy.

The difficulty posed by the current situation originates in widening public deficits and swelling public debts, which reached record levels in 2012. Keep in mind, however, that the deficits and public debts were not the cause of the crisis of 2008-2009, but its consequence. To stop the recessionary spiral of 2008-2009, governments allowed the automatic stabilizers to work; they implemented stimulus plans, took steps to rescue the financial sector and socialized part of

the private debt that threatened to destabilize the entire global financial system. This is what caused the deficits. The decision to socialize the problem reflected an effort to put a stop to the freefall.

The return to recession thus grew out of the difficulty of dealing with the socialization of private debt. Indeed, in the euro zone, each country is forced to deal with financing its deficit without control of its currency. The result is immediate: a beauty contest based on who has the most rigorous public finances is taking place between the euro zone countries. Each European economic agent is, with reason, seeking the most reliable support for its assets and is finding Germany's public debt to hold the greatest attraction. Other countries are therefore threatened in the long-term or even immediately by the drying up of their market financing. To attract capital, they must accept higher interest rates and urgently purge their public finances. But they are chasing after a sustainability that is disappearing with the recession when they seek to obtain this by means of austerity.

For countries that have control of their monetary policy, such as the United States or the United Kingdom, the situation is different. There the national savings is exposed to a currency risk if it attempts to flee to other countries. In addition, the central bank acts as the lender of last resort. Inflation could ensue, but default on the debt is unthinkable. In contrast, in the euro zone default becomes a real possibility, and the only short-term shelter is Germany, because it will be the last country to collapse. But it too will inevitably collapse if all its partners collapse.

The solution to the crisis of 2008-2009 was therefore to socialize the private debts that had become unsustainable after the speculative bubbles burst. As for what follows, the solution is then to absorb these now public debts without causing the kind of panic that we were able to contain in the summer of 2009. Two conditions are necessary. The first

condition is to provide a guarantee that there will be no default on any public debt, neither partial nor complete. This guarantee can be given in the euro zone only by some form of pooling the public debt. The mechanism announced by the ECB in September 2012, the Outright Monetary Transaction (OMT), makes it possible to envisage this kind of pooling. There is, however, a possible contradiction. In effect this mechanism conditions the purchase of debt securities (and thus pooling them through the balance sheet of the ECB) on acceptance of a fiscal consolidation plan. But Spain, which needs this mechanism in order to escape the pressure of the markets, does not want to enter the OMT on just any conditions. Relief from the pressure of the markets is only worthwhile if it makes it possible to break out of the vicious circle of austerity.

The lack of preparation of Europe's institutions for a financial crisis has been compounded by an error in understanding the way its economies function. At the heart of this error is an incorrect assessment of the value of the multipliers used to measure the impact of fiscal consolidation policies on economic activity. By underestimating the fiscal multipliers, Europe's governments thought they could rapidly and safely re-balance their public finances through quick, violent austerity measures. Influenced by an extensive economic literature that even suggests that austerity could be a source of economic growth, they engaged in a program of unprecedented fiscal restraint.

Today, however, as is illustrated by the dramatic revisions by the [IMF](#) and the [European Commission](#), the fiscal multipliers are much larger, since the economies are experiencing situations of prolonged involuntary unemployment. A variety of empirical evidence is converging to show this, from an analysis of the forecast errors to the calculation of the multipliers from the performances recorded in 2011 and estimated for 2012 ([see the full text of our October 2012 forecast](#)). We therefore believe that the multiplier for the

euro zone as a whole in 2012 is 1.6, which is comparable to the assessments for the United States and the United Kingdom.

Thus, the second condition for the recovery of the public finances is a realistic estimate of the multiplier effect. Higher multipliers mean a greater impact of fiscal restraint on the public finances and, consequently, a lower impact on deficit reduction. It is this bad combination that is the source of the austerity-fuelled debacle that is undermining any prospect of re-balancing the public finances. Spain once again perfectly illustrates where taking this relentless logic to absurd lengths leads: an economy where a quarter of the population is unemployed, and which is now risking political and social disintegration.

But the existence of this high multiplier also shows how to break austerity's vicious circle. Instead of trying to reduce the public deficit quickly and at any cost, what is needed is to let the economy get back to a state where the multipliers are lower and have regained their usual configuration. The point therefore is to postpone the fiscal adjustment to a time when unemployment has fallen significantly so that fiscal restraint can have the impact that it should.

Delaying the adjustment assumes that the market pressure has been contained by a central bank that provides the necessary guarantees for the public debt. It also assumes that the interest rate on the debt is as low as possible so as to ensure the participation of the stakeholders who ultimately will benefit from sustainable public finances. It also implies that in the euro zone the pooling of the sovereign debt is associated with some form of control over the long-term sustainability of the public finances of each Member State, *i.e.* a partial abandonment of national sovereignty that in any case has become inoperative, in favour of a supranational sovereignty which alone is able to generate the new manoeuvring room that will make it possible to end the crisis.

OFCE growth forecasts, October 12

Annual growth in GDP, %

	2011	2012	2013
Euro zone	1,5	-0,5	-0,1
Germany	3,1	0,8	0,6
France	1,7	0,1	0,0
Italy	0,5	-2,4	-1,1
Spain	0,4	-1,4	-1,2
Netherlands	1,1	-0,2	0,3
Belgium	1,8	-0,1	0,9
Finland	2,8	0,8	1,1
Austria	2,7	1,0	0,5
Portugal	-1,7	-2,8	-1,2
Greece	-6,2	-6,2	-3,7
Ireland	0,8	-0,4	-0,1
United Kingdom	0,9	-0,4	0,3
United States	1,8	2,2	0,9
Japan	-0,7	2,4	1,3

Sources : National calculations, OFCE forecasts October 2012.

The crisis and market sentiment

By Anne-Laure Delatte

Fundamental factors alone cannot explain the European crisis. A [new OFCE working document](#) shows the impact of market beliefs during this crisis. In this study, we search for where market sentiments are formed and through what channels they are transmitted. What is it that tipped market optimism over into pessimism? Our results indicate that: 1) there is a strong self-fulfilling dynamic in the European crisis: fear of default is precisely what leads to default, and 2) the small market for credit derivatives, credit default swaps (CDS), insurance instruments that were designed to protect against the risk of a borrower's default, is the leading catalyst of market sentiment. This result should be of great concern to

the politicians in charge of financial regulation, since the CDS market is opaque and concentrated, two characteristics that are conducive to abusive behaviour.

What role do investors play during a crisis? If massive sales of securities reveal the weaknesses of a certain business model, then it would be dangerous to limit them: it would be killing the messenger. But if these massive sales are triggered by a sudden turnaround in market sentiment, by investors' panic and distrust of a State, then it is useful to understand how market beliefs are formed so as to better control them when the time comes.

To answer this question in the context of today's European crisis, we have drawn on work on the crisis in the European Monetary System (EMS) in 1992-93, which has many common features with the current situation. At that time investors were skeptical about the credibility of the EMS and put it to the test by speculating against European currencies (*sic*). The pound sterling, the lira, the peseta, etc., were attacked in turn, and governments had to make concessions by devaluing their currency. At first this crisis puzzled economists, as they were unable to explain the link between the speculative attacks and fundamentals: firstly, the countries under attack did not all suffer from the same problems, and secondly, while the economic situation had deteriorated gradually, why had investors decided all of a sudden to attack one currency and not another? Finally, why did these attacks succeed? The answer was that the speculation was not determined solely by the economic situation (the "fundamentals") but was instead self-fulfilling.

The same may well be the case today. If so, then the crisis in Spain, for example, would have its roots in the beliefs of investors: in 2011, as Spain had been designated the weakest link in the euro zone, investors sold their Spanish securities and pushed up borrowing rates. Interest payments ate into the government accounts, and the debt soared. Spain's public

deficit will be higher in 2012 than in 2011 despite its considerable austerity efforts. The crisis is self-fulfilling in that it validates investors' beliefs *a posteriori*.

How could this be proved? How can we test for the presence of a self-fulfilling dynamic in the European crisis? Our proposal is as follows: market beliefs must be a critical variable if, given the same economic situation, investors nevertheless require different interest rates: when the market is optimistic, the difference in interest rates between Germany and Spain is less than when the market is pessimistic.

Our estimates confirm this hypothesis for a panel consisting of Greece, Ireland, Italy, Spain and Portugal: without any significant change in economic conditions, interest rate spreads rose suddenly following a change in the beliefs of the market.

The next question is to understand where these market beliefs are formed. We tested several hypotheses. Ultimately it is the market for credit default swaps (CDS) that plays the role of the catalyst of market sentiments. CDS are insurance products that were originally designed by banks to ensure against the possibility of a borrower's default. An investor who holds bonds may guard against the non-reimbursement of their security at maturity by buying a CDS: the investor then pays a regular premium to the seller, who agrees to repurchase these bonds if the borrower goes bankrupt. But this insurance instrument quickly became an instrument for speculation: the vast majority of operators who buy CDS are not actually owners of an underlying bond (underlying in financial jargon). In reality, they use CDS to bet on the default of the borrower. It is as if the inhabitants of a street all insured the same house, but did not live in it, and are hoping that it catches fire.

However, our results indicate that it is precisely in this market that investors' beliefs vis-à-vis the debt of a

sovereign country are formed. In an environment marked by uncertainty and incomplete information, the CDS market transmits a signal that leads investors to believe that other investors “know something”. Given equivalent economic situations, our estimates indicate that investors require higher interest rates when CDS spreads increase.

To summarize, some European countries are subject to self-fulfilling speculative dynamics. A small insurance market is playing a destabilizing role, because investors believe in the information it provides. This is troubling for two reasons. On the one hand, as we have said, this instrument, the CDS, has become a pure instrument of speculation. On the other hand, it is a market that is unregulated, opaque and concentrated – in other words, all the ingredients for abusive behaviour ... 90% of the transactions are conducted between the world’s 15 largest banks (JP Morgan, Goldman Sachs, Deutsche Bank, etc.). Furthermore, these transactions are OTC, that is to say, not on an organized market, *i.e.* in conditions where it is difficult to monitor what’s going on.

Two avenues of reform were adopted in Europe this year: on the one hand, a prohibition against buying a CDS if you do not own the underlying bond – the law will enter into force in November 2012 throughout the European Union. Second is a requirement to go through an organized market in order to ensure the transparency of transactions. Unfortunately, neither of these reforms is satisfactory. Why? The answer in the next post...

France-Germany: The big demographic gap

By [G rard Cornilleau](#)

The divergence in the demographic trajectories of Germany and France will have a major impact on social spending, labour markets, productive capacity and the sustainability of public debt in the two countries. The implications are crucial in particular for understanding Germany's concern about its debt. These demographic differences will require the implementation of heterogeneous policies in the two countries, meaning that the days of a "one-size-fits-all" approach are over.

The demographic trajectories of France and Germany are the product of Europe's history, and in particular its wars. The superposition of the age pyramids (Figure 1) is instructive in this regard: in Germany the most numerous generations are those born during the Nazi period, up to 1946; then come the cohorts born in the mid-1960s (the children of the generations born under the Nazis). In contrast, in France the 1930s generation is not very numerous. As a consequence, the baby-boomer generation which, as can be easily understood, kicked off earlier than in Germany (starting in 1945, at a time of a baby crash in Germany that ended only in the early 1950s, with the German baby boom peaking somewhat late, in the 1960s), was limited in scale, as people of childbearing age were not numerous. On the other hand, the birth rate in France slowed much less in the wake of the 1970s crisis, and most of all it has risen again since the early 1990s. This has resulted in the fertility rate remaining close to 2 children per woman of childbearing age, so that the size of the generations from 1947 to the present has remained virtually constant. German reunification led to a collapse in the birth rate in former East Germany, which converged with the rate in ex-West Germany in the mid-2000s (Figure 2). Overall, French fertility has

generally been higher than German fertility in the post-war period, with the gap widening since the early 2000s. As a result, the number of births in France is now substantially higher than the number in Germany: in 2011, 828,000 compared with 678,000, *i.e.* 22% more births in France.

Figure 1. Age pyramids in 2011

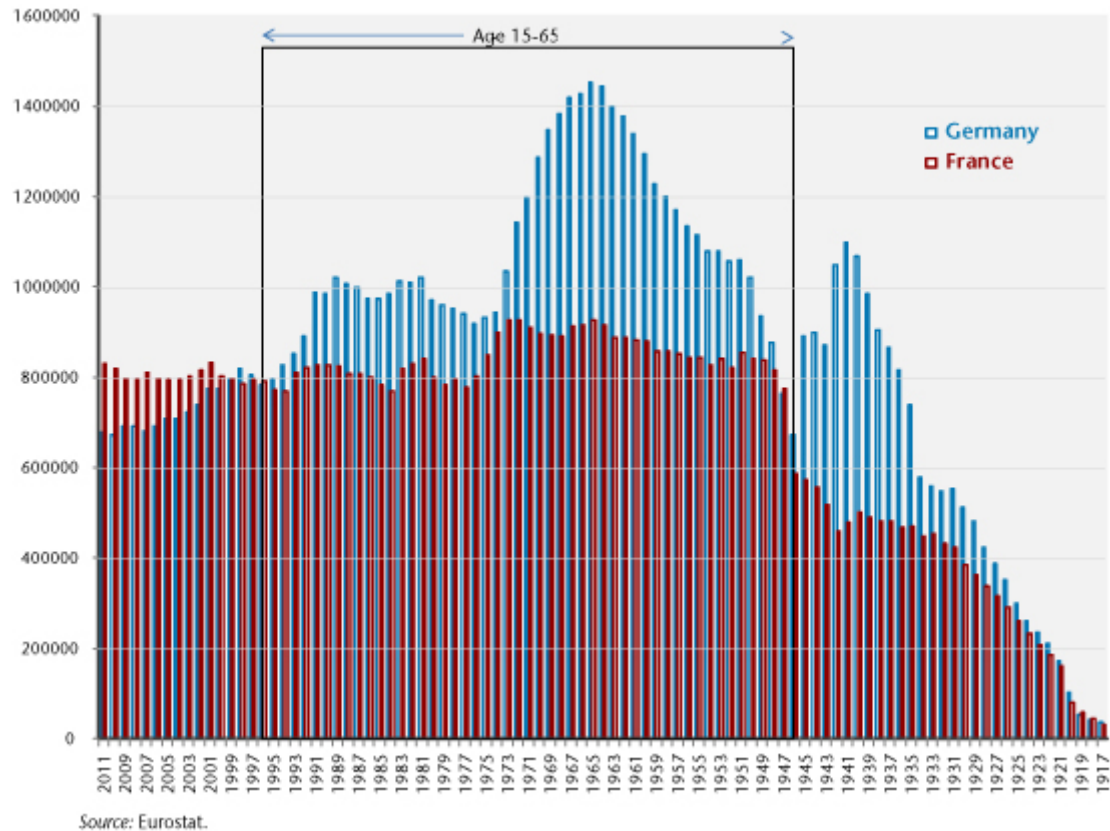
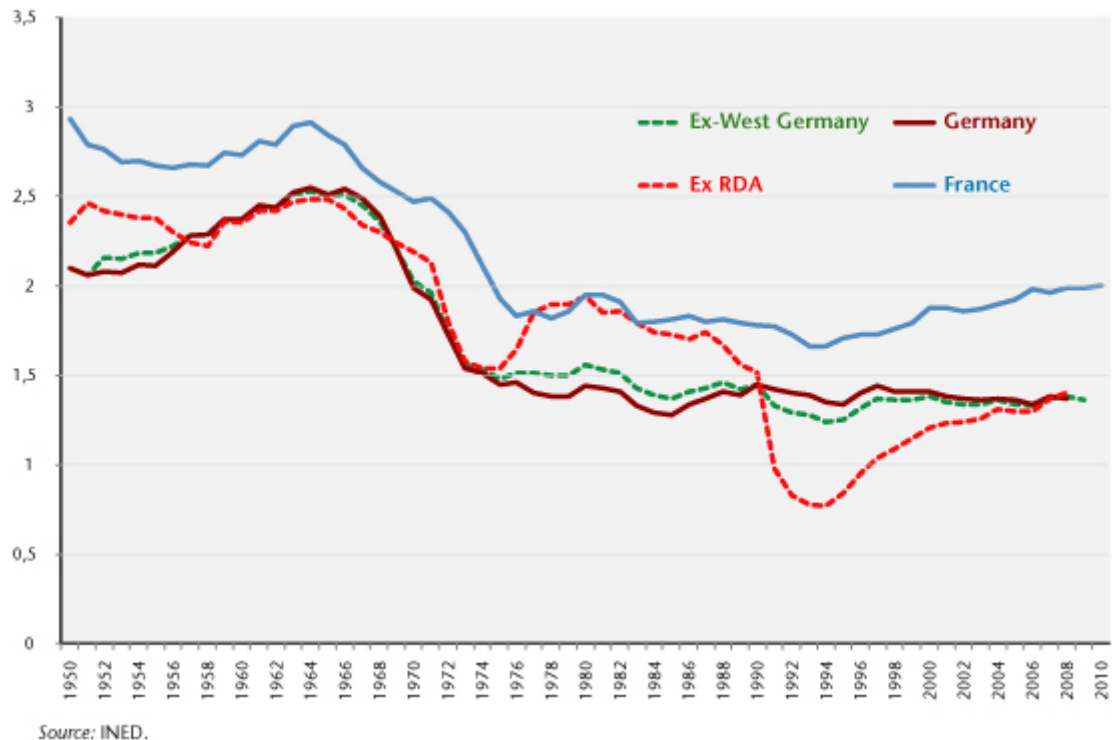


Figure 2. Instantaneous fertility indicators in France and in Germany



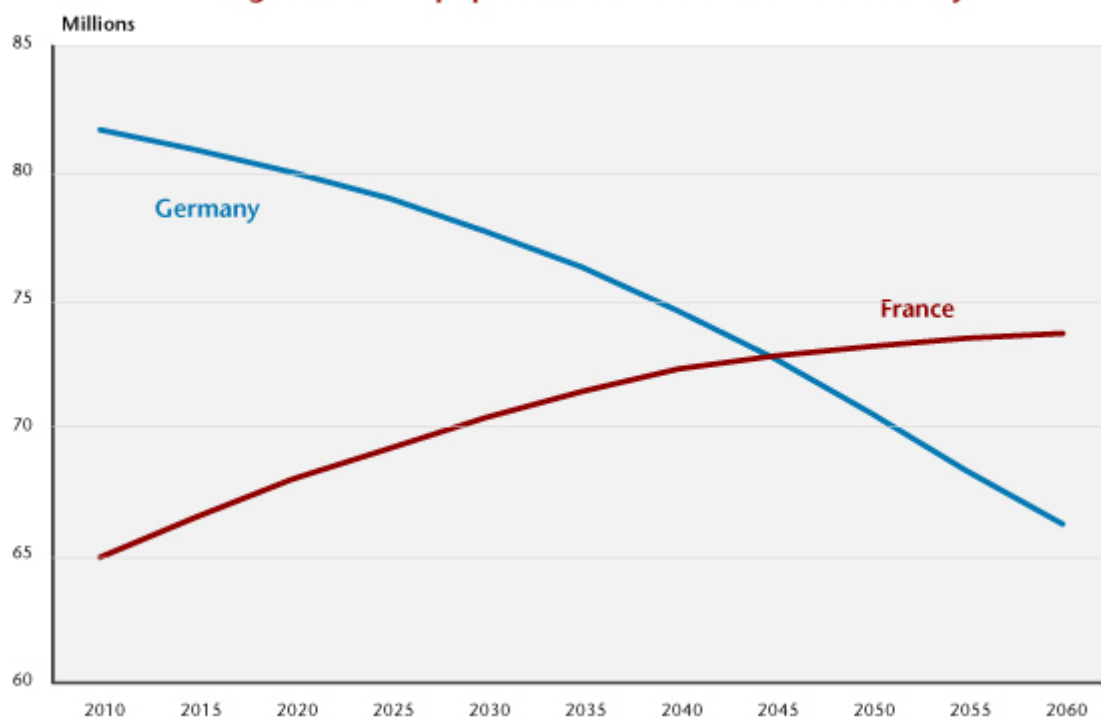
From a demographic standpoint, France and Germany are thus in radically different situations. While France has maintained a satisfactory fertility rate, almost sufficient to ensure the long-term stability of the population, Germany's low birth rate will lead to a substantial and rapid decline in the total population and to much more pronounced ageing than in France (Figures 3 and 4).

According to the population projections adopted by the European Commission [\[1\]](#), Germany should lose more than 15 million inhabitants by 2060, while France gains just under 9 million. By 2045, the populations of the two countries should be the same (a little under 73 million), while in 2060 France will have approximately 7 million more people than Germany (73 million against 66 million).

Migration is contributing to population growth in both countries, but only moderately. Net migration has been lower in Germany during the most recent period, with a rate of 1.87% between 2000 and 2005 and 1.34% between 2005 and 2010 against,

respectively, 2.55% and 1.62% in France [2]. The net migration rates adopted by the European Commission for France and Germany are similar, with a contribution to population increase by 2060 on the order of 6% in each country [3]. The UN [4] uses a similar hypothesis, with the contribution of migration growing steadily weaker in all countries. This reflects a general slowdown in overall international migration due to rising incomes in the originating countries. In this situation, Germany does not seem to have a large pool of external labour available, as it has limited historical links with the main regions of emigration.

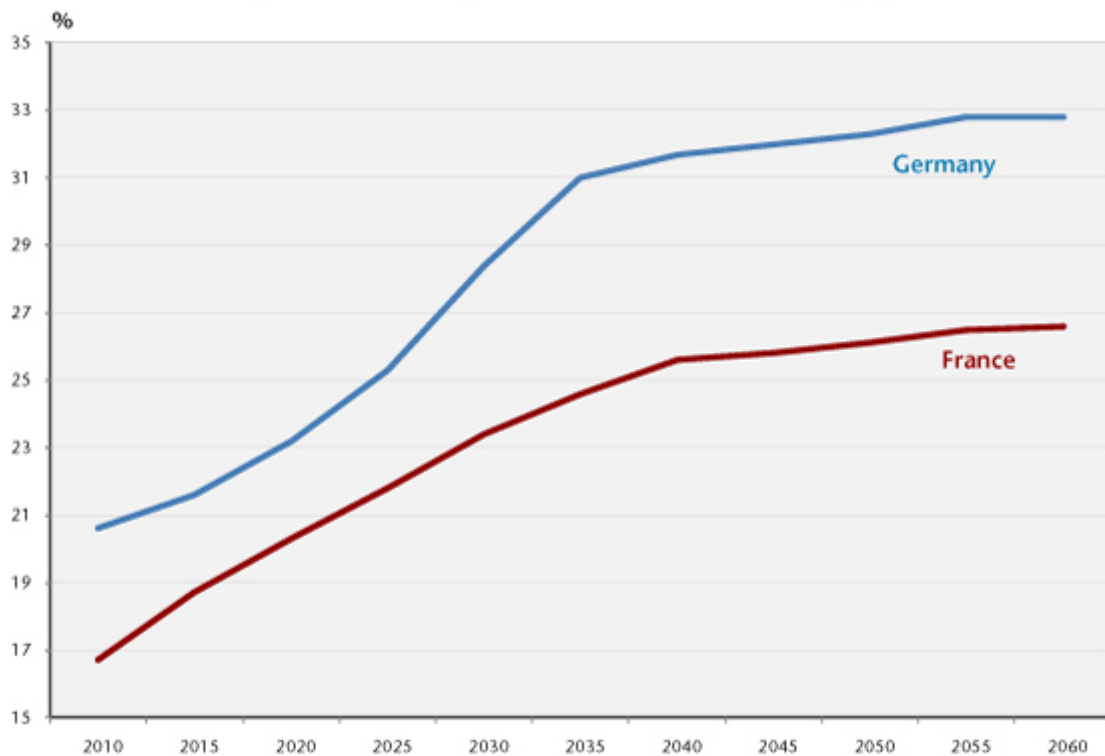
Figure 3. Total populations in France and in Germany



Source: European Commission, "The 2012 Ageing Report".

This inversion in demographic weight thus seems inevitable, and it will be accompanied by a divergence in the average age of the population, with considerably more graying of the population in Germany than in France (Figure 4). By 2060, the share in the total population of those aged 65 or older will reach almost one-third in Germany, against a little less than 27% in France.

Figure 4. Share aged 65 and over in the total population



Source: European Commission, "The 2012 Ageing Report".

As a consequence, and in light of the reforms implemented in the two countries, the share of GDP that goes to public spending on pensions would increase a little in France and a lot in Germany. According to the Report of the European Commission (*op. cit.*), between 2010 and 2060 this share would rise in France from 14.6% to 15.1% of GDP, up 0.5 GDP point, but by 2.6 points in Germany, from 10.8% to 13.4%. This is despite the fact that the German reform of the pension system provides for postponing the retirement age to 67, while the French reform postpones it only to 62.

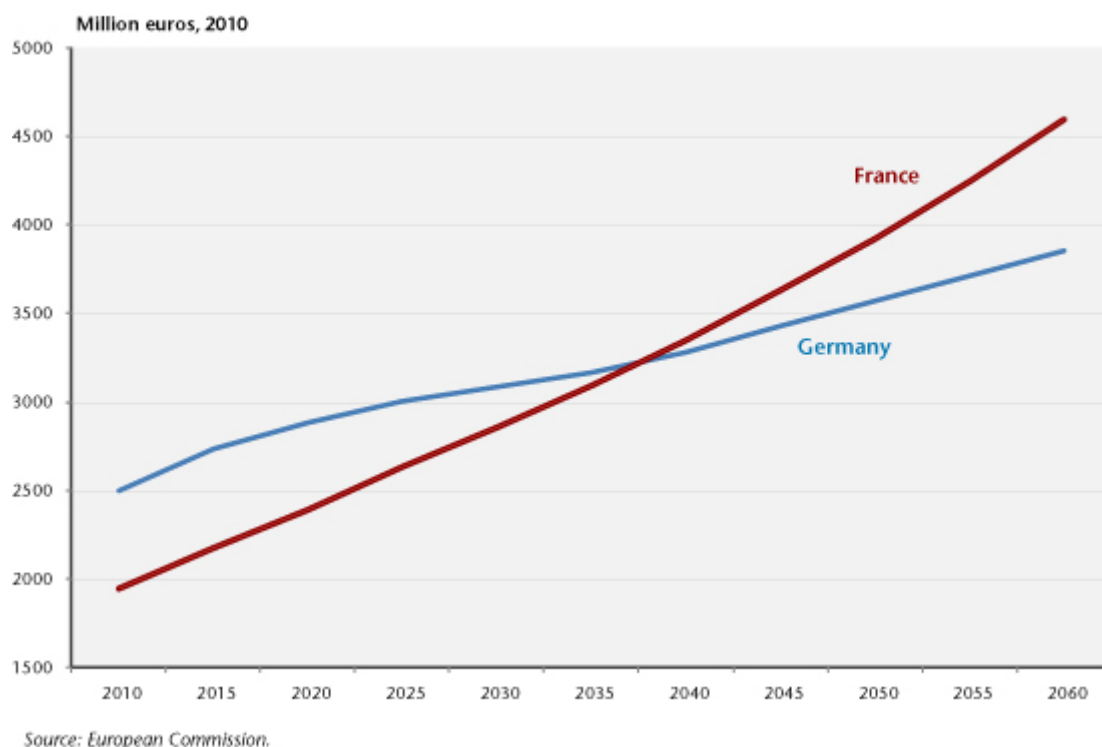
Demography also has an impact on the labour market, which will be subject to changing constraints. Between 2000 and 2011, the French and German workforces increased by the same order of magnitude – +7.1% in Germany and +10.2% in France – but while in Germany two-thirds of this increase resulted from higher labour force participation rates, in France 85% of the increase was due to demography. In the near future, Germany will come up against the difficulties of further increasing its rate. Germany's family policy now includes provisions,

such as parental leave, which aim to encourage female employment through a better reconciliation of work and family life, but female participation rates are already high, so that the problem now is more that of increasing the fertility rate than the labour supply. France, which is starting from a lower participation rate, especially because older workers leave the labour market much earlier than in Germany, has greater reserves to draw on. In recent years, the disappearance of early retirement and the increase in the working years required to receive a full pension have begun to have an impact, with the employment rate of older workers rising significantly, even during the crisis [\[5\]](#). The employment of older workers has also increased in Germany, but it is not possible to continue to make significant increases in this area indefinitely. The most likely result is a long-term convergence in employment rates between France and Germany. Ultimately, then, according to the projections of the European Commission [\[6\]](#), the German participation rate is likely to increase by 1.7 points between 2010 and 2020 (from 76.7% to 78.4%), while the French rate increases by 2.7 points (from 70.4% to 73.1%). By the year 2060, the French participation rate will increase more than twice as much as the German rate (4.2 points against 2.2). But France's rate would still be lower than Germany's (74.7% against 78.9%), meaning that France would still have reserves to draw on.

This divergence in demographics between the two countries has major consequences in terms of long-term average potential growth. Again according to the projections of the European Commission (which are based on the assumption of a convergence in labour productivity in Europe around an annual growth rate of 1.5%), in the long term potential growth in France will be double the level in Germany: 1.7% per year by 2060, against 0.8%. The difference will remain small until 2015 (1.4% in France and 1.1% in Germany), but will then grow quickly: 1.9% in France in 2020, against 1% in Germany.

Just as for the population figures, this will result in a reversal of the ranking of French and German GDPs by about 2040 (Figure 5).

Figure 5. GDP in France and in Germany



The demographic situations of France and Germany thus logically explain why there is more concern in Germany than in France for the outlook on age-related social spending. This should lead to a more nuanced analysis of the countries' public debts: given the same ratios of debt to GDP in 2012, over the long term France's public debt is more sustainable than Germany's.

[\[1\]](#) Cf. "The 2012 ageing report", *European Economy* 2/1012.

[\[2\]](#) Cf. United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2011). *World Population Prospects: The 2010 Revision*, CD-ROM Edition.

[\[3\]](#) Net migration is projected to be slightly higher in Germany than in France, at a level of 130,000 per year in 2025-2030, but under 100,000 in France. But the overall

difference is very small: in 2060, cumulative net migration between 2010 and 2060 would increase the population by 6.2% in Germany and by 6% in France (as a percentage of the population in 2010).

[4] *Op. cit.*

[5] See the summary of changes in the labour force in 2011 by the Insee: <http://www.insee.fr/fr/ffc/ipweb/ip1415/ip1415.pdf>.

[6] *Op. cit.*

Friends of acronyms, here comes the OMT

By [Jérôme Creel](#) and [Xavier Timbeau](#)

We had the OMD with its Orchestral Manœuvres in the Dark, and now the OMT with its Orchestral Manœuvres in the [liquidity] Trap, or more precisely, “Outright Monetary Transactions”, which is undoubtedly clearer. The OMT is a potentially effective mechanism that gives the European Central Bank (ECB) the means to intervene massively in the euro zone debt crisis so as to limit the differences between interest rates on euro zone government bonds. The possibility that a country that comes into conflict with its peers might leave the euro zone still exists, but if there is a common desire to preserve the euro then the ECB can intervene and play a role comparable to that of the central banks of other major states. Opening this

door towards an escape route from the euro zone's sovereign debt crisis has given rise to great hope. Nevertheless, certain elements, such as conditionality, could quickly pose problems.

The OMT is simply a programme for the buyback of government bonds by the European Central Bank, like SMP 1.0 (the Securities Markets Programme) which it replaces but limited to States that are subject to a European Financial Stability Fund / European Stability Mechanism (EFSF / ESM) programme and thus benefiting from European conditional aid. For the ECB to intervene, the country concerned must first negotiate a macroeconomic adjustment plan with the European Commission and the European Council, and apply it. The ECB, potentially members of the European Parliament or the IMF can be a party to this (these institutions – the Commission, the ECB and the IMF – form the Troika of men in black, so famous and feared in Greece). Secondly, and more importantly, the country will be under the supervision of the Troika thereafter.

So if Italy and Spain want to benefit from the purchase of their bonds by the ECB, then their governments will have to submit to an EFSF or ESM adjustment programme. This does not necessarily imply that the plan imposed will be more drastic in terms of austerity than what these governments might have already devised or implemented (the doctrinaire approach in the management of public finances is highly contagious in Europe), but it will require the two countries to submit *ex ante* to outside scrutiny of any adjustment plan they develop and *ex post* to control by the Commission and the Council. If the country under surveillance starts *ex post* to veer away from implementing the adjustment plan, then it could, of course, withdraw from the programme, but its sovereign bonds would no longer be covered by OMTs. They would lose the support of their peers and would thus sail into the financial markets in uncharted waters. That would probably be the first step towards a default or an exit from the euro.

Furthermore, the ECB has not committed itself to absorbing all the bonds issued and thus maintains a real threat capacity: if the country were to rebel, it could be obliged to face higher rates. The OMT thus introduces both a carrot (lower rates) and a stick (to let the rates rise, sell the bonds the ECB holds in its portfolio and thereby push rates upward), upon each new issue. The OMT is therefore akin to being put under direct control (conditionality) with progressive sanctions and an ultimate threat (exiting the programme).

The ECB says that its interventions will mainly cover medium-term securities (maturity between 1 and 3 years), without excluding longer-term maturities, and with no quantitative limits. Note that short / medium-term emissions *usually* represent a small proportion of total emissions, which tend to be for 10 years. However, in case of a crisis, intervention on short-term maturities provides a breath of fresh air, especially as maturing 10-year securities can be refinanced by 3-year ones. This gives the Troika additional leverage in terms of conditionality: the OMT commitment on securities is only for three years and must be renewed after three years. The financial relief for countries subject to the programme may be significant in the short term. For example, in 2012 Spain, which has not yet taken this step, will have issued around 180 billion euros of debt. If the OMT had reduced Spain's sovereign borrowing rates throughout 2012, the gain would have amounted to between 7 and 9 billion for the year (and this could be repeated in 2013 and 2014, at least). This is because, instead of a 10-year rate of 7%, Spain could be benefitting from the 2% rate at which France borrows for 10 years, or instead of its 4.3% rate at 3 years, Spain could have borrowed at 0.3% (France's 3-year sovereign rate). This is the maximum gain that can be expected from this programme, but it is significant: this roughly represents the equivalent of the budgetary impact of the recent VAT hike in Spain (or a little less than one Spanish GDP point). This would not alter Spain's fiscal situation definitively, but it would end the

complete nonsense that saw Spaniards paying much more for their debt to compensate their creditors for a default that they have been striving arduously not to trigger.

It can even be hoped (as can be seen in the easing of Spanish sovereign rates by almost one point following the ECB announcement on Thursday, 6 September 2012, or the almost half a point reduction in Italian rates) that the mere existence of this mechanism, even if Spain or Italy do not use it (and thus do not submit to control), will be enough to reassure the markets, to convince them that there will be no default or exit from the euro and therefore no justification for a risk premium.

The ECB announced that it would terminate its preferred creditor status for the securities. This provision, which had been intended to reduce the risk to the ECB, led to downgrading the quality of securities held outside the ECB and thus reducing the impact of ECB interventions on rates. By acquiring a government bond, the ECB shifted the risk onto the bonds held by the private sector, since in case of a default the Bank was a preferred creditor that took priority over private holders of bonds of the same type.

The ECB explained that its OMT operations will be fully sterilized (the impact on the liquidity in circulation will be neutral), which, if it is taken at its word, implies that other types of operations (purchases of private securities, lending to banks) will be reduced correspondingly. What do we make of this? The example of the SMP 1.0 can be drawn on in this regard. SMP 1.0 was indeed also accompanied by sterilization. This sterilization involved short-term deposits (1 week, on the ECB's liabilities side), allocated in an amount equal to the sums involved in the SMP (209 billion euros to date, on the ECB's assets side). Each week, the ECB therefore collects 209 billion euros in short-term fixed-term deposits. This is therefore a portion of bank deposits that the ECB assigns to the sterilization instrument, without there

being sterilization in the strict sense (because this does not prevent an increase in the size of the ECB's balance sheet nor does it reduce the potential liquidity in circulation). The mention of sterilization in the OMT appears to be an effort at presenting this in a way that can convince certain states, such as Germany, that this monetary policy will not be inflationary and therefore not contrary to the mandate imposed on the Bank by the Treaty on the European Union. Currently, and because the crisis remains unresolved, private banks have substantial deposits with the ECB (out of fear of entrusting these deposits to other financial institutions), which gives it considerable flexibility to prevent the announced sterilization from affecting the liquidity in circulation (the ECB has a little more than 300 billion euros in deposits that are not mobilized for sterilization). The ECB can then probably use the current accounts (by blocking them for a week), which poses no difficulty since the ECB lends to the banks on tap through long-term refinancing operations (LTROs). At worst, the ECB would lose money in the sterilization operation in case of a gap in compensation between the fixed-term deposits and the loans granted to banks. Sterilization could therefore lead to this kind of absurd accounting, but wind up, in a situation of monetary and financial crisis, having no impact on liquidity. On the other hand, if the situation normalizes, the constraint of sterilization would weigh more heavily. We're not there yet, but when we do get there, the ECB needs to limit lending to the economy or to accept an increase in liquidity if the OMT continues to be implemented for some euro zone members.

The deal that is now on the table places the euro zone countries in a formidable dilemma. On the one hand, acceptance of the Treaty on Stability, Coordination and Governance of the euro zone (TSCG) determines eligibility for the EFSF and the ESM [\[1\]](#), and therefore now determines eligibility for the OMT programme. Refusing to sign the fiscal treaty means rejecting in advance the potential intervention of the ECB, and thus

accepting that the crisis continues until the breakup of the euro zone or until a catastrophic default on a sovereign debt. On the other hand, signing the treaty means accepting the principle of an indiscriminately restrictive fiscal strategy (the rule on public debt reduction included in the TSCG will be devastating) that will trigger a recession in the euro zone in 2012 and perhaps in 2013.

Signing the treaty also means relieving the pressure of the markets, but only to wind up submitting solely to the Troika and to the baseless belief that the fiscal multipliers are low, that European households are Ricardian and that the sovereign debt is still holding back growth. It is true that lowering sovereign interest rates, particularly those of Italy and Spain, will create some breathing room. But the main gain from lower rates would be to spread the fiscal consolidation over a longer period of time. Interest rates place a value on time, and reducing them means granting more time. The debts contracted at negative real interest rates are not ordinary debts, and do not represent the same kind of burden as debts issued at prohibitively high rates.

It would be a terrible waste to gain new maneuvering room (the OMT) only to bind one's hands immediately (the TSCG and the Troika's blind fiscal strategy). Only a change in fiscal strategy would make it possible to take advantage of the door opened by the ECB. In short, saving the euro will not help if we do not first save the EU from the disastrous social consequences of fiscal blindness.

[\[1\]](#) Paragraph 5 of the preamble to the Treaty establishing the European Stability Mechanism states: "This Treaty and the TSCG are complementary in fostering fiscal responsibility and solidarity within the economic and monetary union. It is acknowledged and agreed that the granting of financial assistance in the framework of new programmes under the ESM

will be conditional, as of 1 March 2013, on the ratification of the TSCG by the ESM Member concerned and, upon expiration of the transposition period referred to in Article 3(2) TSCG on compliance with the requirements of that article.”

Social action, but no end of the crisis

Evaluation of the five-year economic programme (2012-2017)

By [Eric Heyer](#), [Mathieu Plane](#), [Xavier Timbeau](#)

The initial decisions of the five-year programme are coming amidst an extremely difficult and very uncertain economic situation. In a recent [OFCE Note](#) (No. 23 of 26 July 2012), we first analyze the macroeconomic context for François Hollande’s five-year programme and the XIVth legislature. This analysis details the likely consequences for the next five years of the strategy currently being implemented in Europe. We evaluate both the cost to the public finances as well as the impact on economic activity, employment and the distribution of income. In part two, we analyze the public policy choices being given priority by the new government, including both those aimed at the young (generation contracts, jobs of the future), at some seniors (revision of the pension reform), and at the middle and lower classes (allowance for the start of school, boost to the minimum wage, Livret A bank accounts, rent control, revised taxation of overtime), as well as those intended to revive certain public expenditures that are deemed essential (public jobs in education, the justice system and the police in the “public finance” section, and public early childhood services).

François Hollande was elected President of the French Republic at a time when France and Europe are going through an unprecedented crisis. Unemployment in metropolitan France has increased by over 2 percentage points since the crisis began and is now (in ILO terms, 9.6% of the workforce in first quarter 2012) approaching the record levels of 1997 (10.5%). Gross domestic product per capita in terms of purchasing power has fallen since 2008 by 3%. If the growth trend for the five years preceding the crisis had continued at that same rate from 2008 until early 2012, GDP per capita would now be 8% higher than it is. The current account has deteriorated during the crisis by 1.5 GDP points (25.7 billion euros, 10 billion of which is for the oil bill), thus worsening France's net balance of trade by 7.8 GDP points. The public debt increased by 577 billion (nearly 30 GDP points), and at the beginning of 2012 represented almost 90% of GDP. Industry has paid a heavy price for the crisis (almost 300,000 jobs lost), with all signs indicating that the job losses and closures of industrial sites might be irreversible.

Yet this dire situation, which can be chalked up to the crisis that began in 2008, is not over. Due to the impact of austerity policies implemented at a time of panic at seeing financing of the public debt dry up, the sovereign debt crisis is threatening the euro zone with a prolonged recession in 2012 and 2013. And the even worse scenario looming on the horizon – the disintegration of the euro zone – would transform the threats of recession into the risk of a major depression.

Assessments of the situation differ depending on the elements available. Some measures have been implemented by decree, while others are being discussed by the legislature, but the proposed bills do permit a quantitative analysis. Others are in the planning stage, with the main trade-offs still to be made, so our assessment tries to explore the main points.

Our assessment of the economic strategy for the five-year

programme does not stop there. The outlines of the premises for a strategy to end the crisis can now be seen. The deficit reduction commitments and the initial steps taken in this direction in the budget packages in July 2012, such as those announced during the budget orientation debate of June 2012, point to a strategy whose first step is the achievement of a reduction in the public deficit to 3% of GDP by the end of 2013, regardless of the cost. Based on this fiscal virtue, this amounts to a strategy to end the crisis by stabilizing the state of the public accounts, thereby reassuring the financial markets and other economic agents and establishing the conditions for a strong future recovery. This strategy is based on cutting public expenditures and raising taxes (see the “public finance” section, government tax proposals and the taxation of the oil companies).

This strategy for ending the crisis is risky, to say the least, because it does not take full account of the crisis facing Europe today. It might be justified if we were already on course to end the crisis and if the point were simply to set priorities. But Europe remains in a situation of extreme uncertainty, living in the expectation of a massive failure of one or another Member State in the euro zone, fearing the collapse of this or that financial institution, and suffering the consequences of a spiral of austerity that is being fueled by rising sovereign interest rates. In this situation, everything is coming together to strengthen the existence of a liquidity trap and to generate high fiscal multipliers. Given this, *ex ante* reductions in the deficit through tax hikes and spending cuts is weighing heavily on activity, and thus limiting or even cancelling out any actual deficit reductions. The factors pushing up the public debt are not being reversed, and the reduction in activity is heightening the risk that the unsustainable private debt will be socialized. The increase in sovereign interest rates is being fueled by an inability to meet deficit reduction targets and by rising public debt, and is thus pushing public deficits higher, forcing even more

austerity.

One response to this dynamic that is bringing about the collapse of the euro would be one form or another of pooling public debts in Europe. This would require relatively complete control of the budgets of member countries by a federal body with strong democratic legitimacy. A response like this would therefore mean “more Europe”, and would make it possible to define “more moderate” austerity policies for France as well as its major trading partners. It would make putting an end to involuntary mass unemployment and the liquidity trap prerequisites to an improvement in the public finances. It would also make it possible to ensure the sustainability of public finances without leading to the lost decades that are now gestating.

In the first part of the Note, we analyze the macroeconomic context for François Hollande’s five-year programme and the XIVth legislature. This analysis details the likely consequences for the next five years of the strategy currently being implemented in Europe. The value of the fiscal multiplier is a critical parameter, and we show that the current strategy is valid only if the multipliers are low (*i.e.* on the order of 0.5). However, a slew of empirical evidence indicates that, in the exceptional situation we are experiencing today, the budget and fiscal multipliers may be larger than 0.5 (between 1 and 1.5, see the Note). We detail in a second part the measures taken in the Supplementary Budget Act of July 2012 (for 2012) and the elements outlined in the budget orientation debate in preparation for the Budget Act for 2013 and for the period 2012-2017. To succeed in reducing the public deficit to 3%, it seems that there must be over 10 billion euros in additional tax revenue or in savings on expenditure, *ex ante*.

We then present an evaluation of eleven measures. Guillaume Allègre, Marion Cochard and Mathieu Plane have estimated that the implementation of the *contrat de génération* [“generation

contract"] could create between 50,000 and 100,000 jobs, at the cost of a strong deadweight effect. Eric Heyer and Mathieu Plane point out that in the short term, subsidized *emplois avenir* ["jobs for the future"]-type contracts can help to reduce unemployment. Eric Heyer shows that the revision of taxation on overtime will help to cut the public deficit by 4 billion euros, without hurting the labour market. Guillaume Allègre discusses the consequences of increasing the *Allocation de rentrée scolaire* [allowance for the start of school] and shows that it mainly benefits the lowest five deciles in terms of standard of living. Henri Sterdyniak analyzes the possibilities for fiscal reform. The point is not to evaluate the government's proposals for fiscal reform, but to provide a comprehensive overview of the current system's margin for change and its inconsistencies. Henri Sterdyniak and Gérard Cornilleau evaluate the increased opportunities for retiring at age 60 and analyze the possible paths to a more large-scale reform of the pension system. Hélène Périvier evaluates the possibilities for an early childhood public service, the eventual cost of which could be covered in part by an increase in activity that would generate more than 4 billion euros. Eric Heyer and Mathieu Plane analyze the impact of a boost in the minimum wage (SMIC) and conclude that, given the small spillover of increases in the SMIC onto the rest of the wage structure, the impact on the cost of labour is limited by the greater reduction in social charges on low wages. While the effect on employment is small, it would cost the public purse 240 million euros. Sabine Le Bayon, Pierre Madec and Christine Riffart evaluate rent control. Hervé Péléraux discusses the compensation of Livret A bank accounts and the impact of doubling their ceiling. Céline Antonin and Evens Salies evaluate the new taxes on the oil companies, which could provide 550 million euros in tax revenue in 2012, at the risk that this tax might ultimately be passed on to the end consumer.

Banking union: a solution to the euro crisis?

By Maylis Avaro and [Henri Sterdyniak](#)

The European summit on 28th and 29th June marked a new attempt by Europe's institutions and Member states to overcome the crisis in the euro zone. A so-called Growth Pact was adopted, but it consists mainly of commitments by the Member states to undertake structural reform, and the limited funds made available (120 billion over several years) were for the most part already planned. The strategy of imposing restrictive fiscal policies was not called into question, and France pledged to ratify the Fiscal Compact. The interventions of the European Financial Stability Facility (EFSF) and the European Stability Mechanism (ESM) will now be less rigid, as, without additional conditions, they can help countries that the financial markets refuse to finance so long as they meet their objectives in terms of fiscal policy and structural reform. But euro-bonds and the mutual guarantee of public debt were postponed. The summit also launched a new project: a banking union. Is this an essential supplement to monetary union, or is it a new headlong rush into the unknown?

The current crisis is largely a banking crisis. The European banks had fed financial bubbles and housing bubbles (especially in Spain and Ireland), and they had invested in mutual funds and hedge funds in the United States. After major losses during the crisis of 2007-2010, the Member states came to their rescue, which was particularly costly for Germany, the UK, Spain and above all Ireland. The sovereign debt crisis in the euro zone has compounded their woes: the sovereign debt that they hold has become a risky asset. The problem of

regulating the banks has been raised at the international level (new Basel III standards), in the United States (Volcker's rule and Dodd-Frank law) and in Britain (Vickers report).

In June 2012, doubts about the soundness of Europe's banks surfaced yet again. The measures taken since 2008 to stabilize the financial system have proved insufficient. When Bankia, Spain's fourth-largest bank, announced that it was requesting State assistance of 19 billion euros, worries about the balance sheets of Spanish banks rose sharply. The rate of bad loans of the country's banks, whose balance sheets were hit hard by the real estate crash, rose from 3.3% at end 2008 to 8.7% in June 2012 [1]. Furthermore, many Greeks, fearing an exit from the euro zone, began to reduce their deposits in the banks there [2].



In response to these dangers, the proposal for a European banking union was given a new boost by Mario Monti. Italy's PM suggested developing the proposals in preparation for the European Commission Single Market DG, an idea that currently has the support of the Commission, the European Central Bank,

and several Member states (Italy, France, Spain, etc.) On the other hand, Germany believes that a banking union is impossible without a fiscal union. While Angela Merkel acknowledged [3] that it was important to have a European supervisory authority, with a supranational banking authority with a better general overview, she clearly rejected the idea of Germany taking a risk of further transfers and guarantees without greater fiscal and policy integration [4]. The euro zone summit meeting on 29 June asked the Commission to make proposals shortly on a single monitoring mechanism for the euro zone's banks.

This kind of banking union would rest on three cornerstones:

- a European authority in charge of centralized oversight of the banks,
- a European deposit guarantee fund,
- a common mechanism for resolving bank crises.

Each of these cornerstones suffers specific problems: some are related to the complex way the EU functions (Should a banking union be limited to the euro zone, or should it include all EU countries? Would it be a step towards greater federalism? How can it be reconciled with national prerogatives?), while others concern the structural choices that would be required to deal with the operations of the European banking system.

As to the institution that will exercise the new banking supervisory powers, the choice being debated is between the European Banking Authority (EBA) and the ECB. The EBA was established in November 2010 to improve oversight of the EU banking system, and it has already conducted two series of "stress tests" on the banks. As a result of the tests, in October 2011 Bankia reported a 1.3 billion euro shortage of funds. Five months later, the deficit was 23 billion; the EBA's credibility suffered. In addition, the London-based EBA has authority over the British system, while the United

Kingdom does not want to take part in the banking union. The ECB has, for its part, received support from Germany. Article 127.6 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union [5], which was cited at the euro zone summit of June 29th as a basis for the creation of a European Banking Authority, would make it possible to give the ECB supervisory authority. On 12 June, the Vice-President of the ECB, Mr. Constancio, said that, "the ECB and the Eurosystem are prepared" to receive these powers; "there is no need to create a new institution".

European oversight implies a common vision of banking regulation. There must be agreement on crucial issues, such as: "Does commercial banking need to be separated from investment banking?" "Should banks be prohibited from operating on the financial markets for their own account?" "Should public or mutual or regional banks be encouraged rather than large internationalized banks?" "Should banks be encouraged to extend credit primarily to businesses and government in their own country, or on the contrary to diversify?" "Should the macro-prudential rules be national or European?" In our opinion, entrusting these matters to the ECB runs the risk of taking a further step in the depoliticization of Europe.

Applying the guidelines of this new authority will be problematic. A banking group in difficulty could be ordered to divest its holdings in large national groups. But would a country's government expose a national champion to foreign control? Governments would lose the ability to influence the distribution of credit by banks, which some people might find desirable (no political interference in lending), but in our opinion is dangerous (governments would lose a tool of industrial policy that could be used to finance Small and Medium Enterprises [SMEs] and Economic and technological intelligence [ETI] projects or to support the ecological transition).

For example, in a case involving Dexia, the opposition between the European Commission on the one hand and France, Belgium and Luxembourg on the other is blocking a restructuring plan. The plan includes the takeover of Dexia Credit Local's financing of local authorities by a banking collectivity that would be created based on cooperation between La Banque postale and the Caisse des depots. In the name of fair competition, Brussels is challenging the financing of local communities by such a bank, as Dexia has received public funding for its restructuring plan. This is threatening the continuity of the financing of the French local authorities, and could put a halt to their plans; in particular, it could prevent France from providing specific secure mechanisms for financing local authorities through local savings.

The purpose of a deposit guarantee fund is to reduce the risk of a massive withdrawal of deposits during a banking panic. This fund could be financed through contributions by the European banks guaranteed by the fund. According to Schoenmaker and Gros [6], a banking union must be created under a "veil of ignorance", that is to say, without knowing which country poses the greatest risk: this is not the case in Europe today. The authors propose a guarantee fund that at the outset would accept only the strongest large transnational banks, but this would immediately heighten the risk of the zone breaking apart if depositors rushed to the guaranteed banks. The fund would thus need to guarantee all Europe's banks. According to Schoenmaker and Gros, assuming a 100,000 euro ceiling on the guarantee, the amount of deposits covered would be 9,700 billion euros. The authors argue that the fund should have a permanent reserve representing 1.5% of the deposits covered (*i.e.* about 140 billion euros). But this would make it possible to rescue only one or two major European banks. During a banking crisis, amidst the risk of contagion, such a fund would have little credibility. The guarantee of deposits would continue to depend on the States and on the European Stability Mechanism (ESM), which would

have to provide support funds, ultimately by requiring additional contributions from the banks.

The authority in charge of this fund has not yet been designated. While the ECB appears well positioned to undertake supervision of the banking system, entrusting it with management of the deposit guarantee fund is much more problematic. According to Repullo [7], deposit insurance should be separated from the function of lender of last resort. Indeed, otherwise the ECB could use its ability to create money to recapitalize the banks, which would increase the money supply. The objectives of monetary policy and of support for the banks would thus come into conflict. What is needed is a body that handles deposit insurance and crisis resolution and is separate from the ECB, and which must have a say on the behavior of the banks, and which would be additional to the EBA, the ECB, and the national regulators. The ECB on the other hand would continue to play its role as lender of last resort. But it is difficult to see how such a complicated system would be viable.

As the risk of a country leaving the euro zone cannot yet be dismissed, the question arises as to what guarantee would be offered by a banking union in the case of a conversion into national currency of euro-denominated deposits. A guarantee of deposits in the national currency would, in the case of an exit from the euro, heavily penalize customers of banks that suffer a devaluation of the national currency against the euro, whose purchasing power would decline sharply. This kind of guarantee does not solve the problem of capital flight being experienced today by countries threatened by a risk of default. What is needed is a guarantee of deposits in euros, but in today's situation, given the level of risk facing some countries, this is difficult to set up.

German and Finnish politicians and economists such as H. W. Sinn are, for instance, denouncing an excessive level of risk for Germany and the Nordic countries. According to several

German economists, no supranational authority has the right to impose new burdens (or risk levels) on the German banks without the consent of Parliament, and the risk levels need to be explicitly limited. The German Constitutional Court might oppose the deposit guarantee fund as exposing Germany to an unlimited level of risk. Moreover, according to George Osborne, the Chancellor of the British Exchequer, a bank deposit guarantee at the European level would require an amendment to existing treaties and the consent of Great Britain.

On 6 June, the European Commission began to develop a common framework for resolving banking crises by adopting the proposal of Michel Barnier, which has three components. The first is to improve prevention by requiring banks to set up *testaments*, that is, to provide for recovery strategies and even disposal plans in case of a serious crisis. The second gives the European banking authorities the power to intervene to implement the recovery plans and to change the leadership of a bank if it fails to meet capital requirements. The third provides that, if a bank fails, the national governments must take control of the establishment and use resolution tools such as divestiture, the creation of a defeasance bank, or “bad” bank, or an internal bailout (by forcing shareholders and creditors to provide new money). If necessary, the banks could receive funds from the ESM. Bank-related risks would therefore be better distributed: the shareholders and creditors not covered by the guarantee would be first to be called upon, so that the taxpayers would not pay to reimburse the creditors of insolvent banks. In return, bank loans and shares would become much riskier; bank reluctance about inter-bank credit and the drying up of the interbank market due to the crisis would persist; and the banks would find it difficult to issue securities and would have to raise the level of compensation. However, Basel III standards require banks to link their lending to the level of their capital. This would pose a risk of constraining the distribution of

credit, thereby helping to keep the zone in recession. Based on the decisions of the summit on 29 June, Spain could be the first country whose banks would be recapitalized directly by the ESM. However, this would not take place until early 2013; the terms of the procedure and the impact of ESM aid on the governance of the recapitalized banks still need to be determined. As can be seen in the Dexia example, what terms are set for the reorganization of a bank can have serious consequences for the country concerned: are governments (and citizens) willing to lose all power in this domain?

A banking union can help break the correlation between a sovereign debt crisis and a banking crisis. When the rating agencies downgrade a country's debt, the securities suffer a loss in value and move into the category of "risky assets", becoming less liquid. This increases the overall risk faced by the banks in the country concerned. If a bank is facing too much overall risk and it is no longer able to meet the capital requirements of Basel III, the State must recapitalize it, but to do this it must take on debt, thereby increasing the risk of a default. This link between the banks' fragile balance sheets and public debt generates a dangerous spiral. For instance, since the announcement of the bankruptcy of Bankia, Spain's 10-year refinancing rates reached the critical threshold of 7%, whereas last year the rates were about 5.5%. In a banking union, the banks would be encouraged to diversify on a European scale. However, the crisis of 2007-09 demonstrated the risks of international diversification: many European banks lost a great deal of money in the US; foreign banks are unfamiliar with the local business scene, including SMEs, ETIs and local government. Diversification based on financial criteria does not fit well with a wise distribution of credit. Moreover, since the crisis, European banks are tending to retreat to their home countries.

The proposal for a banking union assumes that the solvency of the banks depends primarily on their own capital, and thus on

the market's evaluation, and that the links between a country's needs for financing (government, business and consumers) and the national banks are severed. There is an argument for the opposite strategy: a restructuring of the banking sector, where the commercial banks focus on their core business (local lending, based on detailed expertise, to businesses, consumers and national government), where their solvency would be guaranteed by a prohibition against certain risky or speculative transactions.

Would banking union promote further financialization, or would it mark a healthy return to the Rhineland model? Would it require the separation of commercial banks and investment banks? Would it mean prohibiting banks whose deposits are guaranteed to do business on the financial markets for their own account?

[1] According to the Bank of Spain.

[2] The total bank accounts of consumers and business fell by 65 billion in Greece since 2010. Source: Greek Central Bank.

[3] "La supervision bancaire européenne s'annonce politiquement sensible", *Les Echos Finance*, Thursday 14 June 2012, p. 28.

[4] "Les lignes de fracture entre Européens avant le sommet de Bruxelles", *AFP Infos Economiques* 27 June 2012.

[5] Art 127.6: "The Council, acting by means of regulations in

accordance with a special legislative procedure, may unanimously, and after consulting the European Parliament and the European Central Bank, confer specific tasks upon the European Central Bank concerning policies relating to the prudential supervision of credit institutions and other financial institutions with the exception of insurance undertakings.”

[6] D. Schoenmaker and Daniel Gros (2012), “A European Deposit Insurance and Resolution Fund”, *CEPS working document*, No. 364, May.

[7] Repullo, R. (2000), “Who Should Act as Lender of Last Resort? An Incomplete Contracts Model”, *Journal of Money, Credit, and Banking* 32, 580-605.

The euro zone in crisis: challenges for monetary and fiscal policies

By [Catherine Mathieu](#) and [Henri Sterdyniak](#)

The 9th EUROFRAME conference [\[1\]](#) was held on 8 June 2012 in Kiel on issues concerning the economic policy of the European Union. The topic was: “The euro zone in crisis: challenges for monetary and fiscal policies”. The conference was, of course, dominated by the issue of the sovereign debt crisis in the euro zone. How did it come to this? Should the blame be put on mistakes in national economic policies? Must the way the euro

zone is organized be changed?

A number of fault lines appeared (*cf.* also the related [Note](#) in French):

- Some believe that it is irresponsible domestic policies that are the cause of the imbalances: the southern countries were allowed to develop real estate and wage bubbles, while the northern countries carried out virtuous policies of wage moderation and structural reform. The southern countries must adopt the strategy of the northern countries and accept a prolonged dose of austerity. For others, the single currency has allowed the development of mirror opposite imbalances: too much austerity in the North, and too many wage increases in the South; what is needed is a convergence where stimulus in the North facilitates the absorption of the external imbalances in the South.
- For some, every country must implement policies that combine fiscal consolidation and structural reform. For others, what is needed is an EU-wide growth strategy (in particular by financing an ecological transition) and a guarantee of public debt so as to promote a convergence of national interest rates at lower levels.
- Some believe that any new solidarity measures involve developing a Union budget, which means the inclusion of binding rules in the Fiscal Compact; for others, what is needed is the open coordination of economic policies, without pre-established standards.

We provide a report that includes brief comments [\[2\]](#) in a lengthy [Note](#).

[\[1\] EUROFRAME](#) is a network of European economic institutes that includes: DIW and IFW (Germany), WIFO (Austria), ETLA (Finland), OFCE (France), ESRI (Ireland), PROMETEIA (Italy),

CPB (Netherlands), CASE (Poland), NIESR (United Kingdom).

[2] Most of the articles are available at: <http://www.euroframe.org/index.php?id=7>. Selected articles will be published in an issue of the *Revue de l'OFCE*, in the "Débats et Politiques" collection, at the end of 2012. The report reflects the views of the authors alone.

European Council: wait and sink?

By [Jérôme Creel](#), Paul Hubert and [Francesco Saraceno](#)

The European Council meeting being held at the end of the week should have been spent, according to the wishes of the French authorities, on renegotiating the European Fiscal Compact adopted on 2 March 2012. However, renegotiation has not been on the agenda. Alas, the Fiscal Compact does need to be re-opened for debate: it should be denounced for being poorly drafted, and its overly restrictive character needs to be reviewed; ultimately, the text should be amended. The focus of the debate on the structural deficit rule, which is unfairly described as the "golden rule", is wide of the mark in so far as it is the rule on the reduction of public debt that is the more restrictive of the two rules included in the Fiscal Compact. This is the rule that demands to be discussed, and urgently, in order to avoid sinking deeper into a contagion of austerity plans that are doomed in advance..

The conflict over European growth between the French and Italians on the one side and the Germans on the other was

probably defused by the agreement late last week with Spain in favour of a coordinated European recovery plan. The plan represents 1% of Europe's GDP, *i.e.* 130 billion euros, though its contours and funding remain to be clarified. The slogan of the European Council has thus been, by a process of elimination, "banking union", in an effort to prevent a new wave of banking and financial crises in the European Union. Is the creation of a banking union important? Certainly. Is it urgent? Less so than a return to growth, which, while it certainly cannot be decreed, can be prepared. Given the state of the current Fiscal Compact, we can conclude that what is being prepared is not economic growth, but recession [\[1\]](#).

The Fiscal Compact, which is contained in Title III of the [Treaty on Stability, Coordination and Governance in the Economic and Monetary Union](#), explicitly includes two fiscal rules. The first clarifies what constitutes a budgetary position that is "balanced or in surplus", a term enshrined long ago in the Stability and Growth Pact. According to the Fiscal Compact of March 2012, a budgetary position that is "balanced or in surplus" means a structural deficit of at most 0.5% of GDP. The structural deficit is the cyclically adjusted public deficit, *i.e.* adjusted for the well-known automatic stabilizers; this includes interest charges, among other items. When the structural deficit is exceeded, apart from exceptional circumstances, *e.g.* a "significant" downturn in activity, an automatic adjustment mechanism, whose nature is not specified, must bring it back below this limit. The structural deficit rule is relaxed for Member States whose public debt is below 60% of GDP: the structural deficit ceiling is increased to 1% of GDP.

The second fiscal rule is also a requirement for euro zone Member States with a public debt in Maastricht terms that is greater than 60% of GDP. In 2012, this rule applies to 12 out of the 17 Member States of the euro zone. This second rule aims to reduce the public debt by one-twentieth every year.

Unfortunately, the text adopted is poorly written and opens the door to different interpretations, as we show below. It is therefore inapplicable. Even worse, given the current state of the economy, this rule is the more restrictive of the two rules in the Fiscal Compact. It is therefore urgent to pay attention to it and modify it to make it enforceable.

According to Article 4 of the Treaty, “When the ratio of a Contracting Party’s general government debt to gross domestic product exceeds the 60% reference value..., that Contracting Party shall reduce *it* at an average rate of one-twentieth per year as a benchmark....” The problem is that “it”, which we have put in italics, refers to the public debt ratio rather than to the difference between the public debt and the 60% reference value. So, in 2012 should Germany, with a public debt in 2011 of a little more than 80% of GDP, reduce its debt by 4 GDP points (one-twentieth of 80% of GDP) or by 1 GDP point (one-twentieth of the difference with the reference value of 60% of GDP)? Legally, it is essential that a clear answer can be given to this kind of question.

Moreover, the Fiscal Compact is silent on the nature of the surplus to be used to reduce the debt: if, to leave room for maneuver in case of a cyclical deficit, this rule were to address the structural deficit – which would therefore need to be explained in the Compact – the debt rule would be even more restrictive than the golden rule: a structural *surplus* would be systematically required to reduce the public debt to 60% of GDP in the 12 Member States whose debt exceeds the reference value. Again, the formulation needs to be clear.

Suppose now that the “it” in Article 4 concerns the difference between the debt and the reference value, and that the rule on debt reduction applies to the entire public deficit. The question can then be asked, which of the two rules – the “golden rule” or the debt reduction rule – places greater restrictions on the Member States, and thus needs to be applied. We have set out, in an appendix [\[2\]](#), the small set of

fiscal rules compatible with the Fiscal Compact. The total deficit is the sum of the cyclical deficit and the structural deficit. The cyclical deficit depends on the difference between actual and potential GDP, *i.e.* the output gap, which has an elasticity of 0.5 (average elasticity customary in the literature on the European countries, cf. [OECD](#)). The “golden rule” relates only to the structural deficit, while the debt reduction rule concerns the total public deficit, and thus depends on both the output gap and the structural deficit.

For what values of the public debt and the output gap is the “golden rule” more restrictive than the debt reduction rule? Answer: when the output gap is greater than 1 plus one-tenth of the difference between the original debt and the reference value. This means that, for a country like Germany, the debt reduction rule would predominate over the “golden rule” except in cases of very high growth: the real GDP would have to be at least two points higher than the potential GDP. According to the OECD economic forecast published in May 2012, Germany’s output gap in 2012 will be -0.8. The debt reduction rule is thus much more restrictive than the “golden rule”. This is also true for France (debt of 86% of GDP in 2011), which would have to have an output gap of at least 3.6 points for the “golden rule” to be binding; yet the OECD forecasts an output gap of -3.3 in 2012. The same holds true for all the countries in the euro zone with a debt greater than 60% of GDP, without exception.

Except in cases of very strong growth, the debt reduction component dominates the structural deficit component. Yet it is the latter that is the focus of all the attention.

When a treaty is open to such differences in interpretations, isn’t it normal to want to revise it? When a treaty requires intensifying austerity measures in an area like the euro zone, whose GDP is almost 4 percentage points below its potential, according to the estimates of an organization, the OECD, that is generally not suspected of overestimating the said

potential, is it not desirable and urgent to renegotiate it?

[1] A recent post emphasized the risks of social instability and the potential losses that might result from austerity-induced contagion in the euro zone (cf. [Creel, Timbeau and Weil, 2012](#)).

[2] Annex:

We start by defining with def the total public deficit, which includes a structural component s and a cyclical component dc :

$$def = s + dc$$

All the variables are expressed as a proportion of GDP. The cyclical component is composed of the variation in the deficit that occurs, thanks principally to the action of the automatic stabilizers, when the economy deviates significantly from its potential. A reasonable estimate is that the deficit increases by 0.5 point per point of lost output. The cyclical component can thus be expressed as:

$$dc = -0.5 y$$

where we define y as the output gap, *i.e.* the difference between GDP and its potential level.

The rules introduced by the fiscal compact can be expressed as follows:

$$s_1 < 0.5,$$

that is, the structural deficit can never exceed 0.5% of GDP (s_1 refers to the first aspect of the rule), and

$$def = - (b_0 - 60)/20,$$

that is, the total deficit must be such that the public debt (expressed as a proportion of GDP) is reduced every year by

one-twentieth of the difference between the initial public debt (b_0) and the 60% reference level. The debt rule can thus be re-written in terms of the structural deficit as:

$$s_2 = \text{def} - \text{dc} = 0.5 y - (b_0 - 60)/20.$$

We thus have 2 possible cases for when the structural deficit component is less restrictive than the debt reduction component:

Case 1

$$s_1 < s_2 \text{ if } y > 1 + (b_0 - 60)/10.$$

Assume the case of a debt level like Germany's ($b_0 = 81.2$ % of GDP). Case 1 implies that the structural deficit component will be less restrictive than the debt reduction component if and only if $y > 3.12\%$, that is, if Germany has a GDP that is at least three points higher than its potential. If a country has a higher level of debt (e.g. Italy, at 120% of GDP), then $y > 7\%$!

Case 2

If the debt reduction rule concerns the structural deficit (rather than the total public deficit), then we have:

$$s_1 < 0.5$$

and

$$s_2 = - (b_0 - 60)/20$$

In this case, $s_1 < s_2$ if $1 < - (b_0 - 60)/10$, which will never happen so long as the public debt is greater than the reference level.