

The chalice of austerity, right to the dregs

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[This text summarizes the OFCE's April 2013 forecasts](#)

The macroeconomic and social situation in the euro zone continues to cause concern. The year 2012 was marked by a further decline in GDP (-0.5%) and a continuing rise in the unemployment rate, which reached 11.8% in December. While this new recession is not comparable in magnitude to that of 2009, it is comparable in duration, as GDP fell for the fifth consecutive time in the last quarter of 2012. Above all, for some countries (Spain, Greece and Portugal), this prolonged recession marks the beginning of deflation that could quickly spread to other countries in the euro zone (see [The onset of deflation](#)). Finally, this performance has demonstrated the failure of the macroeconomic strategy implemented in the euro zone since 2011. The strengthening of fiscal consolidation in 2012 did not restore market confidence, and interest rates did not fall except from the point when the risk of the euro zone's collapse was mitigated by the ratification of the Treaty of stability, coordination and governance (TSCG) and the announcement of the new WTO operation allowing the ECB to intervene in the sovereign debt markets. Despite this, the fiscal dogma has not been called into question, meaning that in 2013, and if necessary in 2014, the euro zone countries will continue their forced march to reduce their budget deficits and reach the symbolic threshold of 3% as fast as possible. The incessant media refrain that France will keep its commitment is the perfect reflection of this strategy, and of its absurdity (see [France: holding the required course](#)). So until the chalice has been drunk to the dregs, the euro zone countries seem condemned to a strategy that results in recession, unemployment, social despair and the risk of

political turmoil. This represents a greater threat to the sustainability of the euro zone than the lack of fiscal credibility of one or another Member State. In 2013 and 2014, the fiscal stimulus in the euro zone will again be negative (-1.1% and -0.6%, respectively), bringing the cumulative tightening to 4.7 GDP points since 2011. As and to the extent that countries reduce their budget deficits to less than 3%, they can slow the pace of consolidation (Table). While in the next two years Germany, which has already balanced the public books, will cease its consolidation efforts, France will have to stay the course in the hope of reaching 3% in 2014. For Spain, Portugal and Greece, the effort will be less than that what has already been done, but it will continue to be a significant burden on activity and employment, especially as the recessive impact of past measures continue to be felt.

In this context, the continuation of a recession is inevitable. GDP will fall by 0.4% in 2013. Unemployment is expected to break new records. A return to growth is not expected until 2014, but even then, in the absence of any relaxation of the fiscal dogma, hopes may again be disappointed since the anticipated growth of 0.9% will be insufficient to trigger any significant decline in unemployment. In addition, the return to growth will come too late to be able to erase the exorbitant social costs of this strategy, while alternatives to it are discussed inadequately and belatedly.

Table. Public balance and fiscal impulse in the euro zone countries

In GDP points

	Public deficit			Fiscal impulse	
	2012	2013 (p)	2014 (p)	2013 (p)	2014 (p)
Germany	0,2	-0,4	-0,1	0,1	0,0
Austria	-3,0	-2,5	-1,8	-0,6	-0,3
Belgium	-3,0	-2,8	-1,9	-0,5	-1,0
Spain	-10,2	-6,5	-5,8	-2,0	-1,1
Finland	-1,6	-1,5	-0,9	-0,8	-0,7
France	-4,8	-3,9	-3,0	-1,8	-1,4
Greece	-6,6	-5,4	-4,5	-3,8	-2,0
Ireland	-8,2	-8,4	-6,6	-1,9	-1,8
Italy	-3,0	-3,9	-3,4	-1,4	-0,7
Netherlands	-4,1	-3,4	-3,0	-1,7	-0,7
Portugal	-5,0	-4,4	-3,0	-2,1	-1,9
Euro zone 11*	-3,2	-2,6	-1,8	-1,1	-0,6

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

Sources : Eurostat, European Commission, OFCE calculations and forecast March 2013.

Family benefits: family business?

By [Hélène Périvier](#)

[Bertrand Fragonard has submitted his report to the Prime Minister](#); it aims, first, to enhance the redistributive nature of family policy and, second, to rebalance the accounts of the family branch, which have recently been running a deficit, by 2016. A realignment of family benefits towards low-income families is proposed as the first objective. As for the second, the two options proposed are adjusting benefits based on means, or taxing them. How can 2 billion euros be found in today's lean times?

With the cow already thin, is it really the time to put it on a diet?

The cutbacks in spending on family policy are part of a

broader economic austerity policy aimed at rebalancing the public accounts. The government deficit is of course a serious issue, which cannot simply be swept under the rug. It is bound up with the durability and sustainability of our welfare state, and as concerns the topic being discussed here more specifically, with the future of family policy. But the magnitude and timing of the fight against deficits are central to its effectiveness. The OFCE's forecasting work shows that the massive reductions in public spending being made by France will undercut growth. The lack of growth will in turn slow deficit reduction, which will thus not live up to expectations. Ultimately, you can't have your cake and eat it too, in particular if the economy isn't producing the ingredients.

If we continue down this path of trimming family policy, then how should we proceed? Who should bear the cost? Should we cut spending or increase revenues?

Staying the course?

A number of principles guide public action. They constitute a compass that helps to stay the course that we have set and to develop the tools needed to do this. With regard to family policy, the first principle concerns horizontal equity: this requires that a household should not see its standard of living fall with the arrival of a child. In other words, based on this principle, all households finance support that benefits only households with dependent children. This constitutes redistribution from households without children to those with children, whether the household is rich or poor. This sharing of the cost of children is justified by the idea that a healthy birth rate benefits everyone. Family allowances are emblematic of this principle.

The second principle concerns vertical equity: every household should participate in the financing of family policy in a progressive manner based on its income, and low-income

households with dependent children should receive special assistance, such as the family income supplement [*le complément familial*], a means-tested assistance for families with three or more children.

Nothing of course prevents us from changing tack by changing the relationship between these two principles. Indeed, family policy does need to be reformed: it should take into account the changes undergone by French society in recent decades (which policy now does only partially): increased numbers of women in the workforce, the rise in divorce and unmarried partnerships (today most children are born to couples who are neither married nor civil partners), new family configurations, concern for the equality of children with respect to collective care and socialization, territorial inequalities, etc. ([Périvier and de Singly, 2013](#)). These considerations on family policy need to be integrated into an overall vision of the tax-benefit system for families –otherwise public policy risks becoming incoherent. The mission statement behind the Fragonard report highlights above all rebalancing the family branch accounts by 2016, “with a significant shift from 2014”.

Don't lose your bearings!

While staying the course on family policy, some leeway is possible. To draw on the contributions of all households, the taxation of the couple could be reviewed. Under the current system, married couples or civil partners have two tax shares; this leads to tax reductions that increase in line with the difference in the income of the two partners (the extreme case being that of Mr. Breadwinner and Mrs. Housewife, the arrangement that this type of taxation was designed to encourage). This is what is called the conjugal quotient [\[1\]](#). This “benefit” is not capped [\[2\]](#), unlike the benefit related to the presence of a child (the famous family quotient, whose ceiling was recently reduced to 2000 euros). Capping the conjugal quotient would not call into question the principle

of horizontal equity, as many childless couples benefit from it, couples who, for the most part, had dependent children in the past and have benefited from a generous family policy. Doing this would spread the effort to rebalance the family branch accounts over a wide range of households, including those who do not have or no longer have dependent children [\[3\]](#). The complete elimination of the conjugal quotient (*i.e.* the individualisation of taxes) would provide additional tax revenue of 5.5 billion euros ([HCF, 2011](#)). This tax “benefit” could initially simply be capped: the yield would be greater or smaller, depending on the ceiling adopted [\[4\]](#). The distribution of the gain for couples related to the marital quotient is concentrated among the highest income deciles ([Architecture des aides aux familles, HCF, 2011](#)). Another possible tax revenue concerns the extra half-share granted for having raised a child alone for at least 5 years. Now capped at 897 euros, this benefit could be eliminated, as it does not meet any of the principles set out above and it is doomed to disappear.

These steps would increase tax revenue and help fund family policy. These options would unquestionably increase the tax burden on households. If we add to the effort requested the constraint to not increase taxation, then the 2 billion euros would have to be found through cuts in spending on family benefits. The room for manoeuvring becomes almost razor thin. Out of concern for vertical fairness, these cuts must be borne by the best-off families with children. But this vertical redistribution is conceived within the limited framework of families with children. Yet vertical equity generally consists of a redistribution from better-off households to poorer households. What is therefore being applied here would be a principle of vertical equity that could be described as “restricted vertical equity”.

There is no free lunch...

The family allowance is clearly in the firing line in this

narrow framework for family policy that excludes from its scope the taxation of couples in particular. It represents 15% of the family benefits paid, or 12 billion euros. There are two main options: the amount could be adjusted in line with the level of household resources, or the benefits could be taxed. But which? Both options have advantages and disadvantages.

Subjecting the family allowance to conditions would help to target wealthy families while not affecting the others. This targeting would enhance the redistributive character of the system, which would definitely be an advantage. But this requires setting income thresholds above which the amount of benefits received decreases. So families in similar situations would receive different levels of benefits depending on whether their incomes were just below or just above the threshold. This would undermine the universal commitment to the welfare state. Furthermore, the thresholds could lead to a contraction in the labour supply of women in couples: the “classic” trade-off would be, “if I work more, we will lose benefits” – it is still the activity of women, and always the activity of women, that suffers. To limit these negative effects, the thresholds could be smoothed and variable income ceilings introduced based on the activity of the two partners by raising those applying to couples where both work. What would gradually emerge is a huge white elephant, a Rube Goldberg machine that generates higher management costs with extra work for the CAF service. In addition, the system would be less transparent, because it is more complex, leading to overpayments, fraud, and even more annoying, a lack of take-up (those eligible for a benefit don’t apply). Finally, selective benefits are the breeding ground for debate around a culture of dependency, with the suspicion that “the reason these people don’t work is in order to get benefits”. Note that this risk disappears if the thresholds are set at a high level.

Taxing the family allowance would get around these problems:

it is simple, with no extra management costs, as the amount of benefits received would just be added to taxable income. So the progressiveness of the income tax system would apply. More affluent families with children would pay more than those on lower incomes. But targeting would be less accurate than before: many families with children would be affected, and households that were previously not taxable may become so (even if this involved small amounts). Finally, the tax burden would increase, which is politically costly.

By construction, in both cases families that have only one child would not be affected because, under a family policy designed to promote high birth-rates, they do not receive family benefits. And in both cases families without dependent children are not required to contribute.

Don't throw the baby out with the bath water ...

Adjusting the family allowance for income is the track that seems to be preferred by the Fragonard report. The opinion of the High Council for the family (HCF) indicates that this approach has been rejected by the majority of that body's members. Overall, the measures proposed in the report are to reduce the spending on families with dependent children within the limited scope of family policy, namely benefits. The danger looming is that the guidelines proposed lead to paralysis by freezing the different oppositions and exacerbating the conservative visions for family policy. Some will justly view this as a systematic attack on family policy, since the overall budget is cut. Nevertheless, an overhaul of family assistance is needed, but it cannot involve a reduction in spending in this area as the need is so great, especially to ensure progress with regard both to gender equality and equality between children. Any reform must be based on the principles of justice and on an approach to the welfare state that needs to be reviewed and renegotiated. Even though the budget constraints are serious, we cannot reduce the amount allocated to family policy, but nor should we retreat from the

in-depth reform that is needed.

[\[1\]](#) Note that mechanisms such as a tax break or incentive to promote employment tend to favour people who are cohabiting over married couples. The interactions between the multiple tax provisions complicate comparisons of the tax treatment of people with different marital statuses.

[\[2\]](#) It is, implicitly, but for extremely high levels of income, reaching the upper end of the income tax brackets with or without the marital quotient (this implicit cap limits the advantage to 12,500 euros).

[\[3\]](#) On condition that these additional tax revenues are paid to the family branch.

[\[4\]](#) For a ceiling of 2,590 euros, the extra tax revenue from capping the conjugal quotient would be about 1.4 billion euros ([HCF, 2013](#)).

Cyprus: Aphrodite to the rescue?

By [Céline Antonin](#) and [Sandrine Levasseur](#)

For two weeks Cyprus sent tremors through the European Union. If the banking crisis that the island is going through has attracted much attention, it is essentially for two reasons.

First, because the dithering over the rescue plan led to a crisis of confidence in deposit insurance, and second, because it was the first time that the European Union had allowed a bank to fail without coming to its aid. While the method of resolving the Cyprus crisis seems to represent an institutional advance [\[1\]](#), insofar as investors have been forced to face up to their responsibilities and citizens no longer have to pay for the mistakes of the banks, the impact of the purge of the island's real economy will nevertheless be massive. With its heavy dependence on the banking and financial sector, Cyprus is likely to face a severe recession and will have to reinvent a growth model in the years to come. In this respect, the exploitation of natural gas resources seems an interesting prospect that should not be ruled out in the medium / long term.

To grasp what is at stake in Cyprus today, let us briefly recall the facts. On 25 June 2012, Cyprus requested financial assistance from the EU and the IMF, essentially in order to bail out its two main banks (Laiki Bank and Bank of Cyprus), whose losses are estimated at 4.5 billion euros due to their high exposure to Greece. Cypriot banks were hit both by the depreciation of the Greek assets they held on their balance sheets and by the partial write-down of Greek debt under the second bail-out plan (PSI Plan of March 2012 [\[2\]](#)). Cyprus estimated that it needed 17 billion euros in total over four years to prop up its economy and its banks, about one year of the island's GDP (17.9 billion euros in 2012). But its backers were not ready to give it this much: the national debt, which had already reached 71.1% of GDP in 2011, would become unsustainable. The IMF and the euro zone thus came to an agreement on a smaller loan, with a maximum amount of 10 billion euros (9 billion financed by the euro zone and 1 billion by the IMF) to recapitalize the Cypriot banks and finance the island's budget for three years. Cyprus was in turn ordered to find the remaining 7 billion through various reforms: privatizations, an increase in corporate tax from 10

to 12.5%, and a windfall tax on bank deposits.

Initially [\[3\]](#), Nicosia decided to introduce a one-off tax of 6.75% on deposits of between 20,000 and 100,000 euros and 9.9% on those above 100,000 euros, and a withholding tax on interest on these deposits. Given the magnitude of the resulting protest, the government revised its approach, and the taxation of deposits gave way to a bankruptcy and restructuring. The solution adopted concerned the country's two main banks, Laïki Bank and Bank of Cyprus. Laïki was closed and split into two: first, a "good bank" that will take over the insured deposits (less than 100,000 euros) and the loans from the ECB to Laïki [\[4\]](#), but which will also take over its assets and ultimately be absorbed by Bank of Cyprus; and second, a "bad bank" that will accommodate the stocks, bonds, unsecured deposits (above 100,000 euros), and which will be used to pay off Laïki's debts [\[4\]](#), according to the order of priority associated with bank liquidations (depositors being paid first). In addition to absorbing the "good bank" hived off of Laïki, Bank of Cyprus will freeze its unsecured deposits, some of which will be converted into shares to be used in its recapitalization. To prevent a flight of deposits, temporary [\[5\]](#) capital controls were put in place.

This plan introduces a paradigm shift in the method of resolving banking crises in the European Union. At the beginning of the euro zone crisis, in particular in the emblematic case of Ireland, the European Union considered that creditors had to be spared in the event of losses, under the logic of "too big to fail", and it called on the European taxpayer. But in 2012, even before the declaration of Jeroen Dijsselbloem, Europe's doctrine had already begun to bend [\[6\]](#). Hence, on 6 June 2012, the European Commission proposed a Directive on the reorganization and resolution of failing credit institutions, which provided for calling on shareholders and bondholders to contribute. [\[7\]](#) However, the rules on creditors are to apply only from 2018, after approval

of the text by the Council and the European Parliament. This type of approach is now being tested experimentally in the Cyprus crisis.

Heavy consequences for the real economy

The situation of the country before 2008

In the period preceding the global economic crisis, the Cypriot economy was thriving, and indeed in 2007 even in danger of overheating. Over the period 2000-2006, its GDP grew on average by 3.6% per year, with growth of 5.1% in 2007. The unemployment rate was low (4.2% in 2007), with even some labour shortage as a result of the emigration of Cypriot nationals to other EU countries. The influx of foreign workers into Cyprus helped to hold down wages. Consumer spending and, to an even greater extent, business investment, which were largely financed through credit, were particularly dynamic starting in 2004, with growth rates that in 2007 reached, respectively, 10.2% and 13.4%. Inflation was moderate, and in this generally positive context, Cyprus qualified to adopt the euro on 1 January 2008.

In this pre-crisis period, the Cypriot economy – a small, very open economy – relied in the main on two sectors: tourism and financial services.

The two key sectors of the Cypriot economy

Revenue from tourism (Table 1) has provided a relatively stable financial windfall for the Cypriot economy. This (non-cyclical) flow brings in approximately 2 billion euros annually. [\[8\]](#) As a share of GDP, however, the weight of tourism has decreased by half since 2000, to a level of less than 11% in 2012. Likewise, the share of tourism in the export of services fell sharply during the last decade: in 2012, it accounted for 27% (against 45% in 2000). Over the last 15 years, the number of tourists has fluctuated somewhat between 2.1 million (in 2009) and 2.7 million (2000), compared

with about 850,000 people who are residents of the island.

Financial services constitute the other pillar of the Cypriot economy (Table 2). Two figures give a clear idea of its significance: bank assets accounted for more than 7.2 times GDP in 2012 (with a maximum of 8.3 achieved in 2009), and the stock of FDI in the sector “Finance & Insurance” is estimated at more than 35% of GDP, *i.e.* more than 40% of all FDI inflows.

Table 1. Weight of tourism in Cyprus

	2000	2004	2009	2012
Tourist revenue				
In millions of €	2 040,1	1 678,4	1 493,2	1 926
In % of GDP	20,5	13,3	8,9	10,8
By tourist (In €)	759	715	697	781
In % of services exports	44,8	32,6	25,0	26,8
Tourists (1000s of people)	2 686	2 349	2 141	2 465

Source: Central Bank of Cyprus and National statistical office. Author's calculations.

Table 2. Weight of the banking sector in Cyprus

	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
Banking assets						
In billions of €	92,9	118,1	139,4	135,0	131,6	128,1
Relative to GDP	5,8	6,9	8,3	7,8	7,3	7,2
Stock of FDI in the Finance and Insurance sector						
In billions of €						6,4
In % of GDP						35,6
In % of total FDI						41,6

Source: Central Bank of Cyprus and National statistical office. Author's calculations.

As major sources of wealth for the Cypriot economy, these two sectors have played an important role by, at least until 2007, compensating (partially) the considerable deficit in the balance of payments, which has risen continuously since the early 1990s and fluctuated at around 30% of GDP since 2000 (Table 3). The “fuel” bill has been an increasing burden on imports into Cyprus, mainly due to higher oil prices: the energy bill has tripled over the last decade, rising from 461 million euros in 2000 to 1.4 billion in 2011. As a percentage of GDP, the rise in energy costs has also been very visible, as it has shot up from 5% of GDP in 2000 to 8% in

2011.

Reducing the size of the financial sector therefore raises the question of a new growth model for the Cypriot economy, *i.e.* its “industrial conversion”.

Table 3. Extract from the balance of payments of Cyprus

In millions of € (unless stated otherwise)

		2000	2004	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Balance of goods								
Exports	Total	1 011	936	1 083	1 190	971	1 137	1 404
	o/w “re-exports”	600	521	578	643	491	570	777
Imports	Total	4 104	4 578	6 353	7 367	5 692	6 517	6 311
	o/w “fuels”	461	503	895	1 247	880	1 157	1 381
Exports - Imports	Total	-3 093	-3 641	-5 271	-6 176	-4 721	-5 381	-4 907
	Total (% of GDP)	-31 %	-29 %	-33 %	-36 %	-28 %	-31 %	-27 %
Balance of services								
Exports	Total	4 552	5 147	6 579	6 538	5 779	6 049	6 262
Imports	Total	1754,40	2 201	2 841	2 937	2 416	2 467	2 676
Exports - Imports	Total	2 797	2 946	3 739	3 601	3 363	3 583	3 586
	Total (% of GDP)	28 %	23 %	24 %	21 %	20 %	21 %	20 %
Balance of goods and services								
Exports - Imports	Total	-295	-696	-1 532	-2 575	-1 358	-1 798	-1 321
	Total excl. “fuels”	165	-192	-637	-1 328	-479	-641	60
	Total (% of GDP)	-3 %	-6 %	-10 %	-15 %	-8 %	-10 %	-7 %
	Total excl. “fuels” (% of GDP)	2 %	-2 %	-4 %	-8 %	-3 %	-4 %	0 %

Source: Office statistique national, Eurostat et banque centrale de Chypre. Calculs des auteurs.

The temptation to exit the euro

The plan decided by the Troika undermines the island’s growth model by penalizing the country’s hyper-financialization, and condemns it to years of recession. To avoid a long convalescence, the idea of “leaving the euro zone has taken root, as it did in Greece. However, leaving the euro zone is far from a panacea. Regaining monetary sovereignty undeniably offers certain advantages, as is described by C. Antonin and C. Blot in their note, [Comparative study of Ireland and Iceland](#): first, an internal devaluation (through lower wages) would not be as effective as an external devaluation (through exchange rates); second, fiscal consolidation is less costly when it is accompanied by a favourable exchange rate policy. Nevertheless, given the structure of the Cypriot economy, we

do not think that leaving the euro is desirable.

In fact, upon leaving the euro, the Central Bank of Cyprus would issue a new currency. Assuming it remains convertible, this currency would depreciate vis-à-vis the euro. By way of comparison, between July 2007 and December 2008 the Icelandic krona lost 50% of its value vis-à-vis the euro. Such a depreciation would have two consequences:

– One, an improvement in competitiveness (the real exchange rate has appreciated by 10% since 2000), which would boost exports and help reduce the deficit in the balance of trade in goods and services (Table 1). Since the accession of Cyprus to the European Union in 2004, this balance has deteriorated as a result of several factors: first, the slowing of inflation from 2004 related to pegging the exchange rate to the euro, which encouraged the growth of real wages at a higher rate than productivity gains; and second, the boom in bank lending, with the substantial decline in risk premiums on loans as a result of accession to the EU [9]. Consumption was boosted, the competitiveness of the Cypriot economy deteriorated, and imports increased. Would exiting the euro reverse this trend? This is the argument of [Paul Krugman, who supports Cyprus leaving the euro zone](#) by evoking a tourist boom and the development of new export-oriented industries. However, according to our calculations, a 50% depreciation in the real exchange rate would result in an increase in the value of exports of 500 million euros, including 150 million from additional tourism revenue. [10] As for imports, they are weakly substitutable, as they are composed of energy and capital and consumer goods. Given the weakness of the country's industries, Cyprus will not be able to undertake a major industrial restructuring in the short or medium term. There are therefore limits to improvements in the trade balance. Furthermore, inflation would increase, including through imported inflation, which would lead to a fall in consumer purchasing power and mitigate any competitiveness

gains.

– In addition, the devaluation would substantially increase the burden of the outstanding debt, but also of private debt denominated in foreign currency. Net foreign debt in Cyprus is low, at 41% of GDP in 2012. In contrast, public debt reached 70% of GDP, or 12.8 billion euros. 99.7% of the public debt is denominated in euros or in a currency that is part of the European Exchange Rate Mechanism (and thus pegged to the euro), and 53% of this debt is held by non-residents. In addition, the deficit was 6.3% of GDP. If Cyprus no longer had the euro, it would without doubt default on part of its public debt, which would temporarily deprive the country of access to foreign capital, and thus require the kind of violent fiscal consolidation that Argentina went through in 2001.

The exploitation of natural gas resources

The crisis in Cyprus raises the question of the natural gas discoveries in the south of the island in the early 2000s. According to the US Geological Survey, the Levant Basin located between Cyprus and Israel could contain 3,400 billion cu.m of gas resources. By way of comparison, [the entire EU has 2,400 billion cu.m](#) (mainly in the North Sea).

Cyprus thus has *a priori* a major natural gas bonanza, even if all of the deposits are not located in its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). At present, only one out of the twelve parcels of land belonging to the Cypriot EEZ has been subject to exploratory drilling, and in December 2011 a deposit of 224 billion cu.m of natural gas was discovered. According to the Government of Cyprus, the value of this field, called Aphrodite, is estimated at [100 billion euros^{\[11\]}](#). The exploration of the other eleven parcels belonging to the Cypriot EEZ could prove successful (or even very successful) in terms of natural gas resources. As the licenses for the exploration of these eleven parcels are in the process of being awarded by the Cypriot authorities, the EU could have

used the (sad) occasion of the rescue package to secure a portion of the aid granted to Cyprus on its gas potential. Why did the EU not seize on such an occasion?

For the EU, the discovery of the natural gas reserves is good news, in the sense that the exploitation of these deposits will help it to achieve the energy diversification that it values so highly. However, several problems have arisen, problems that darken the prospects for exploiting the gas fields in the very near future. First of all, the discovery of gas reserves in the Levant basin has revived tensions with Turkey, which occupies the northern part of the island of Cyprus and which believes it has rights to the exploitation of the fields. The growing number of Turkish military manoeuvres reflects an effort to impose its presence in the areas being surveyed and could lead to an escalation of violence in the region, especially since the Greek-Cypriot authorities (the southern part) have been working with Israel to defend the gas fields. [\[12\]](#) Second, even assuming that the Greek-Turkish dispute is resolved, the exploitation of the gas will require heavy investment in infrastructure, in particular the construction of an LNG tanker whose cost is estimated at 10 billion euros. Finally, there will be no immediate return on the investment, as it will take at least eight years to put in place the necessary infrastructure. In these conditions, it is understandable why the EU did not take the opportunity to secure some of the aid to Cyprus against these gas resources: exploitation is still too uncertain and, in any case, the horizon is too distant (given the immediacy required for a response to the crisis).

Furthermore, the EU would likely wind up in an awkward situation vis-à-vis several countries. If the EU supports Cyprus in the gas dispute, this comes down to supporting Israel, at the very time that the EU is holding negotiations on Turkey's membership and is trying to build good relations in the region, including with the regimes that have emerged

from the “Arab Spring”. In addition, two pipeline projects are already in competition: the South Stream project, linking Russia to Western Europe by 2015, and Nabucco, connecting Iran, via Turkey, to Western Europe by 2017. A new gas pipeline connecting the Cypriot fields to the European continent would further reduce Russia’s bargaining power, by shifting the centre of gravity of natural gas southwards. This would promote greater dispersion and intensify geopolitical divisions in Europe, between a Northern Europe (including Germany) supplied by Russia and a Southern Europe dependent on the Middle East and Turkey.

Conclusion

If in the immediacy of the crisis the EU has made the right choice (that of the “bad” and “good” bank), the question is posed in the medium / long term of a new growth model for the Cypriot economy. Given the comparative advantages of Cyprus, the exploitation of natural gas seems to offer the only serious solution for the economy’s conversion. However, for this strategy to be achievable, the EU will have to take a clear position in favour of Cyprus in the Greek-Turkish dispute.

Not only would the exploitation of the gas bring Cyprus energy self-sufficiency, it would also constitute a major source of revenue for the island. Energy costs would cease being a burden on the balance of payments (Table 1). This is especially important, because, even though tourism (another pillar of the economy) has provided a stable (non-cyclical) source of income since 2000, it is not immune to geopolitical events in the region or to new competition over tourist destinations, in particular from the “Arab Spring” countries.

Consider this simple calculation. Suppose Cyprus manages to maintain its tourism revenues at the level of 2 billion euros (an assumption that, despite the caveats outlined above, is nevertheless realistic); in the absence of industrial

restructuring, if the share of the banking sector in the economy is halved (as desired by the Troika and common sense), then Cypriot GDP would return to its 2003 level, or slightly less than 12 billion euros. And GDP per capita would fall by about a third...

Industrial reconversion is thus important for the Cypriot economy, just as for other economies in crisis... except that Cyprus has Aphrodite.

[1] See [Henri Sterdyniak and Anne-Laure Delatte, "Cyprus: a well-conceived plan, a country in ruins..."](#), OFCE blog, March 2013.

[2] See Céline Antonin, [Would returning to the drachma be an overwhelming tragedy?](#), OFCE Note no. 20, 19 June 2012.

[3] For more on the dithering on the rescue plan, see [Jérôme Creel, "The Cypri-hot case!"](#), OFCE blog, March 2013.

[4] These loans, granted via Emergency Liquidity Assistance (ELA), amount to 9 billion euros.

[5] Article 63 of the Treaty of the European Union prohibits restrictions on the movement of capital, but Article 64b authorizes Member states to take control measures for reasons of public order or public safety.

[6] *"If the bank can't recapitalize itself, then we'll talk to the shareholders and the bondholders. We'll ask them to contribute in recapitalizing the bank. And if necessary the uninsured deposit holders"*, statement by Jeroen Dijsselbloem, 25 March 2013, to the *Financial Times*.

[7] <http://www.revue-banque.fr/risques-reglementations/breve/les-c>

[reanciers-des-banques-mis-contribution](#)

[8] The tourist revenue of Cyprus depends in the main on tourists from Britain (43% in 2011), Russia (14%), Germany and Greece (6.5 % each).

[9] On the factors worsening the current accounts, see [Natixis, Retour sur la crise chypriote, novembre 2012](#).

[10] Estimation made using the elasticities calculated by the [IMF](#).

[11] Not far from Aphrodite, 700 billion cu.m of deposits were discovered in the Israeli EEZ, proof that the region is rich in natural gas.

[12] The tensions between Cyprus (southern part) and Israel were resolved (peacefully) by the signing of a treaty in December 2010 defining their respective exclusive economic zones (EEZ). The two entities also plan to cooperate in the construction of common infrastructures to exploit the gas. See [the analysis of Angélique Palle](#) on the geopolitical consequences of the discovery of these natural gas resources in the Levant basin.

And what if the austerity budget has succeeded better in France than elsewhere? [1]

By [Mathieu Plane](#)

Faced with a rapid and explosive deterioration in their public accounts, the industrialized countries, particularly in

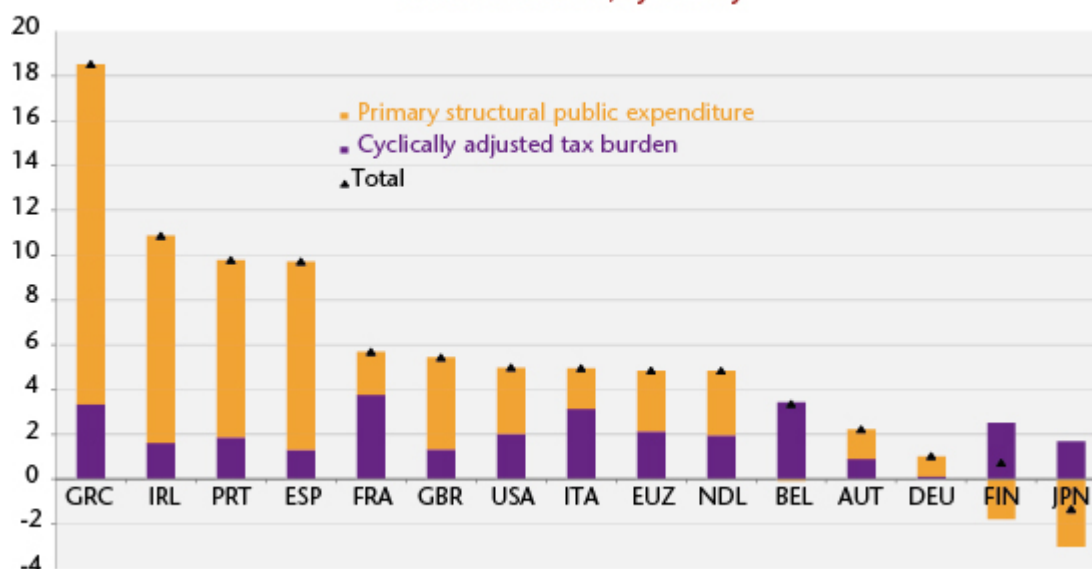
Europe, have implemented large-scale austerity policies, some as early as 2010, in order to quickly reduce their deficits. In a situation like this, several questions about France's fiscal policy need to be examined:

- First, has France made a greater or lesser fiscal effort than other OECD countries to deal with its public accounts?
- Second, is there a singularity in the fiscal austerity policy implemented by France and has it had more or less effect on growth and the level of unemployment?

With the notable exception of Japan, between 2010 and 2013 all the major OECD countries implemented policies to reduce their primary structural deficits [2]. According to the [latest OECD figures](#), these policies represented a fiscal effort of about 5 percentage points of GDP over three years on average in the euro zone, the United States and the United Kingdom. In contrast, the differences within the euro zone itself were very large: they range from only 0.7 percentage points in Finland to more than 18 points in Greece. Among the major industrialized countries of the OECD, France is, after Spain, the country that has made the greatest fiscal effort since 2010 from a structural viewpoint (5.7 percentage points of GDP over three years). In the post-World War 2 era, France has never experienced such a brutal and sustained adjustment in its public accounts. For the record, the budget effort that took place in the previous period of sharp fiscal consolidation from 1994 to 1997 was twice as small (a cumulative negative fiscal impulse of 3.3 GDP points). Between 2010 and 2013, the cyclically adjusted tax burden increased in France by 3.8 GDP points, and the structural effort on public spending represented a gain of 1.9 GDP points over four years (Figure 1). Among the OECD countries, it was France that made the greatest cyclically adjusted increase in the tax burden in the period 2010-2013. Finally, from 2010 to 2013, the structural effort to reduce the public deficit broke down as follows: two-thirds involved an increase in the tax burden and

one-third came from public spending. This breakdown is different from that observed on average in the euro zone, where the fiscal effort over the period 2010-13 involved a nearly 60% reduction in public expenditure, rising to over 80% in Spain, Portugal, Greece and Ireland. In contrast, in Belgium, the entirety of the fiscal effort came from a higher tax burden. And in the case of Finland, primary structural public spending in points of potential GDP rose over the period 2010-2013, which was more than offset by the increase in the tax burden.

Figure 1. Contribution of each component to the change in the primary structural balance from 2010 to 2013, by country

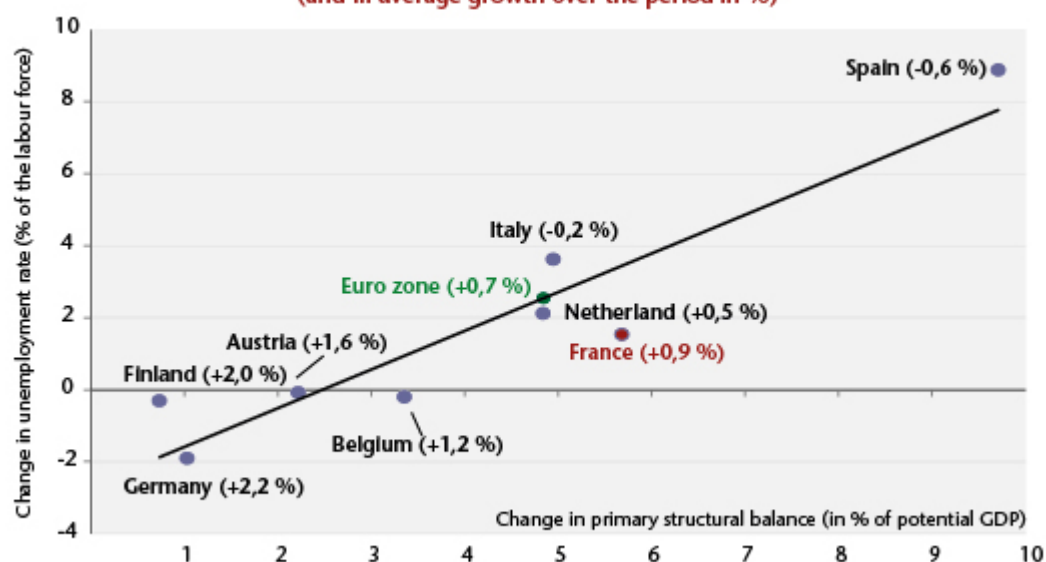


Sources: OECD, OFCE calculations.

While France's substantial budgetary efforts have undeniably had a negative impact on economic activity and employment, it is nevertheless true that the budget decisions of the various governments since 2010 appear to have affected growth and the labour market relatively less than in most other countries in the euro zone. Within the euro zone-11, from 2010 to 2013 only four countries – Germany, Finland, Austria and Belgium – experienced average growth of over 1% per year, with unemployment rates that not only did not increase, but occasionally even fell. However, these are also the four countries that made the smallest reductions in their structural deficits over this period. France, on the other

hand, is among the countries that made the greatest structural effort since 2010, and it has simultaneously managed to contain the rise in unemployment to some extent. Indeed, compared with the Netherlands, Italy and the euro zone average, France's fiscal policy was more restrictive by about 1 GDP point from 2010 to 2013, yet the unemployment rate increased by 40% less than in the Netherlands, 60% less than the euro zone average and more than two times less than in Italy. Likewise, growth in France was higher on average over this period: 0.9% per year, against 0.5% in the Netherlands, 0.7% in the euro zone and -0.2% in Italy.

Figure 2. Change between 2010 and 2013 in the primary structural balance and the unemployment rate (and in average growth over the period in %)



Sources: OECD Economic Outlook, November 2012; OFCE calculations.

Why has the French fiscal contraction had less impact on growth and employment than in most other countries? Beyond the economic fundamentals, some evidence suggests that the budget decisions of the successive governments since 2010 may have led to fiscal multipliers that are lower than in the other countries. After Finland and Belgium, France is the country where public spending played the smallest role in reducing the structural deficit. As illustrated by recent studies, in particular the IMF study and the article signed by economists from the central banks in Europe and the U.S., the European Commission, the OECD and the IMF, targeting fiscal adjustment through raising the tax burden rather than cutting public

spending has given France smaller short-term fiscal multipliers than those observed in countries that have made □ the opposite choice (Greece, Portugal, Ireland and Spain). In the case of France, nearly 50% of the fiscal adjustment was achieved by an increase in the direct taxation of household and business income (Table 1). And as has also been the case for the United States, Belgium and Austria, which achieved between 50% and 75% of their fiscal adjustment by increasing direct taxation, it seems that these countries have also done best at maintaining their growth in the face of the budget cuts. Conversely, the ones that have used this lever the least in their fiscal adjustments are the southern European countries and the Netherlands.

Table. Contribution of each component to the change in the primary structural balance between 2010 and 2013, by country

In % of potential GDP	GRC	IRL	PRT	ESP	FRA	GBR	USA	ITA	EUZ	NLD	BEL	AUT	DEU	FIN	JPN
Primary structural balance (PSB)															
(= a + b)	18,5	10,9	9,8	9,7	5,7	5,4	5,0	4,9	4,8	4,8	3,4	2,2	1,0	0,7	-1,3
Cyclically adjusted tax burden (a)	3,3	1,6	1,9	1,3	3,8	1,3	2,0	3,1	2,1	2,0	3,4	0,9	0,1	2,5	1,7
o/w Increase in direct taxes on household and business income	1,5	3,2	1,9	1,2	2,7	0,0	2,4	1,2		0,8	1,7	1,7	0,1	0,6	0,9
Primary public spending (b)	15,2	9,2	7,9	8,4	1,9	4,1	3,0	1,8	2,7	2,9	-0,1	1,3	0,9	-1,8	-3,0
Contribution of primary public spending to the change in the PSB	82	85	81	87	34	76	59	36	56	60	-2	59	89	-242	225

Sources: OECD Economic Outlook, November 2012; OFCE calculations.

[1] This post makes use of certain parts of the article published in [Alternatives Economiques](#), M. Plane, "L'austérité peut-elle réussir en France ?", Special issue no. 96, 2nd quarter 2013.

[2] The primary structural deficit measures the structural fiscal effort made □□by general government (les administrations publiques). It corresponds to the public balance, excluding interest charges, that would be generated by the government if the GDP of the economy were at its potential level. This measure is used to adjust the public

balance for cyclical effects.

Zero interest loans: only for the rich?

By Pierre Madec

On 1 January 2013, a new version of the zero-interest loan (*prêt à taux zéro* – PTZ) came into force. It is more restrictive than previous versions, with lower eligibility ceilings and a sharper focus on new housing (and old “HLM” council housing). Here we review the measure’s possible consequences.

Given the great pressure on today’s rental market ([Le Bayon, Madec and Rifflart, 2013](#)), the goal of facilitating access to homeownership for first-time buyers with low down payments is commendable. Nevertheless, some questions need to be asked: are the poorest households the primary beneficiaries? Does a PTZ loan trigger the purchase of a first principal residence (an incentive effect) or does it simply accompany the purchase (a windfall effect)? Has the development of PTZ loans and their long-term implementation significantly helped expand supply on the market for new properties? And is the budgetary expenditure associated with the measure cost-effective in light of the overall results?

Established in 1995 to facilitate access to homeownership for poorer households, zero interest loans have evolved since then

along with budgetary constraints and political decisions. In 2005, the scheme, previously reserved for the purchase of a new home (or an existing home needing extensive renovation), was extended to include the acquisition of existing homes with no conditions on renovation in order to increase homeownership in areas with a shortage of land (including Paris). This led to doubling the number of PTZ loans granted in 2005. Similarly, in 2011, the removal of eligibility ceilings allowed the programme to set a record with the grant of nearly 352,000 PTZ loans. In the context of the fiscal and real estate crisis, the reappearance in 2012 of ceilings on income and the elimination of old dwellings (excluding HLM housing) from the programme's eligibility list reduced the number of PTZ loans to a historically low level (64,000).

On paper, the principle of this “reimbursable non-interest-bearing loan” is simple: in return for the agreement of a loan at zero interest, the banks benefit from a tax credit in the amount of the uncollected interest. This loan, which is limited to a certain loan-to-value ratio [\[1\]](#), must be associated with a mortgage, or principal loan, and can therefore be considered as a personal contribution during the acquisition of the principal residence, thus at the time the principal loan is granted.

In fact, calculating the volume of PTZ loans granted is complex, as it involves [ceilings on income](#) and on the [transaction amounts](#), which depend on the geographical area and the loan-to-value ratio. Similarly, the terms of repayment (the duration and grace period) are defined based on membership in an “[repayment bracket](#)” (*tranche de remboursement*) that is calculated based on the household's resources and composition.

Are PTZ loans stimulating the supply of housing on the market for new properties?

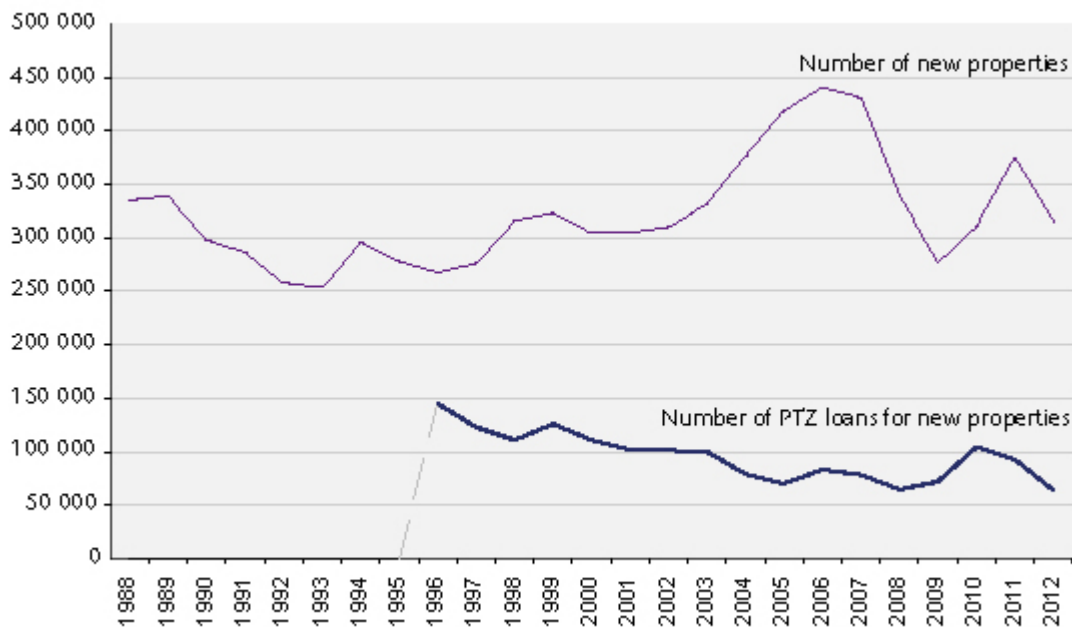
One of the stated objectives when creating the programme was

to support and boost a sluggish market for new properties. It is actually difficult to assess the impact of PTZ loans on the construction market. Observing the evolution of the number of dwellings constructed before and after the implementation of PTZ loans (Figure 1), it does not appear that the 150,000 PTZ loans granted in 1996 had a significant impact on the volume of new housing units. From this quick observation seems to emerge the idea that even without the programme, and taking into account the rather mild economic situation, the housing market would have been equally dynamic. Similarly, the growth observed on the new property market over the period 1999-2007 is not attributable to the programme to facilitate homeownership [\[2\]](#).

According to the latest available statistics ([SGFGAS 2012](#)), as with incentive schemes for rental investment ([Madec 2013](#), [Levasseur 2011](#)), the zones established during the implementation of PTZ loans leave it very difficult to direct investment into the areas under the greatest pressure. Thus, in the third quarter of 2012, more than half of PTZ loans were granted for purchases in Zone C, that is to say, the area least susceptible to market pressures (against 15% for Zone A [\[3\]](#)). This is largely explained by the extreme scarcity (and high cost) of land in Zones A and B. It was in order to end this form of geographical discrimination that in 2005 the system was opened to old housing. Over the period 2005-2011, more than a million PTZ loans were granted for the acquisition of an existing dwelling, thereby betraying one of the initial objectives of the programme.

Finally, despite a willingness to promote high environmental quality housing, including through the provision of higher loan-to-value ratios for energy-efficient housing (BBC) [\[4\]](#), the PTZ loans have played only a small role in the construction of BBC housing, as in the third quarter of 2012 two-thirds of the loans granted were for the purchase of housing that does not meet BBC standards.

Figure. Number of new properties built and of PTZ loans granted



Sources : Minister of Housing, SGFGAS.

Do PTZ loans facilitate homeownership for poorer households?

One of the main criticisms of PTZ loans is the poor quality of the targeting. Whereas the purpose of the programme is to help households in the greatest difficulty by financing an initial down payment, the particularly high level of the income ceilings (when they are not simply eliminated entirely as in 2011) has meant eligibility for households with no *a priori* need for the State in order to acquire property. For example, the eligibility ceiling in 2012 was 43,500 euros annually for one person wishing to acquire a principal residence in Zone A. This ceiling made 90% of households in the Paris region eligible for PTZ loans (source: INSEE) [\[5\]](#).

Furthermore, numerous studies have attempted to measure the impact of PTZ loans on household financing capacity ([ANIL 2011](#), [Beaubrun-Diant 2011](#), [Gobillon and Le Blanc 2005](#), [Thomas and Grillon 2001](#)). Gobillon *et al.* thus concluded that PTZ loans “trigger the purchase” for only 15% of homebuyers. In other words, according to the model proposed by the authors, 85% of households have access to the property with or without

the PTZ. Similarly, recent studies on the profile of homebuyers ([Le Bayon, Levasseur et Madec 2013](#), [Babès Bigot Hoibian 2012](#), [INSEE 2010](#)) highlight how it is becoming increasingly difficult for poorer households to purchase a home. Thus, according to Le Bayon *et al.*, households in the lowest quartile of living standards, the households targeted by the homeownership programme, have seen their chance of acquiring a principal residence halved between 2004 and 2010. In view of these various results, it seems that the PTZ loan programme is having difficulty, at least in its earlier versions, playing a role in helping low-income households to become homeowners. This conclusion may need to be nuanced, however, if we look at the latest statistics provided by the SGFGAS. According to these data, workers and employees accounted for 25% and 33% respectively of the recipients of PTZ loans in the third quarter of 2012. Similarly, one out of three recipients belonged to the lowest “repayment bracket”. However, as the calculation of these brackets takes into account particularly high income ceilings, membership in the first repayment bracket is not really equivalent to meeting “poverty criteria”.

Finally, by increasing demand for new housing on a market with low supply elasticity and by allowing many households to acquire more expensive housing, programmes to assist homeownership have long been reproached for their inflationary effects ([ANIL, 2002](#)).

The PTZ programme: how much does it cost?

For 2012, the cost to the State for the PTZ programme was 1.34 billion euros. Given the number of beneficiaries, this may seem expensive, but, like all public assistance programmes, it needs to be analyzed in terms of efficiency.

A quick assessment can be made of the impact of the PTZ programme on housing investment. To estimate the multiplier effect of the PTZ programme in 2012, we used the latest

available statistics (SGFGAS 2012) and made the following assumptions [\[6\]](#):

- 50% of the beneficiaries belonging to the lowest (*Tranche 1*) repayment bracket are what are called “triggered” households (*i.e.* 15 % of all beneficiaries);
- Thanks to a PTZ loan, “non-triggered” households increase the amount of their purchase by 3%.

Table. Breakdown of PTZ loans by repayment bracket and evaluation of the Impact on housing Investment

Repayment bracket	Membership	Membership in %	Average amount of the operation (€)	Average amount of PTZ loan granted	Impact of PTZ on investment in housing (billion €)
1	19 200	30	173 000	38 620	+ 1 711
2	6 400	10	178 000	32 077	+ 34
3	6 400	10	184 000	32 500	+ 35
4	6 400	10	183 000	29 000	+ 35
5	12 800	20	170 000	23 000	+ 65
6	12 800	20	188 000	21 000	+ 72
Total	64 000	100	179 000	29 800	+ 1 953

Source: SGFGAS, author's calculations.

Overall, therefore, according to our estimates and under the assumptions spelled out above, in 2012 the PTZ programme stimulated almost 2 billion euros in investment in housing at a tax cost of 1.3 billion euros. The multiplier effect was therefore 1.5. This is in the lower range of what has been observed in other countries with similar programmes (1.5 to 2). This multiplier could be much higher if households were targeted more rigorously. Indeed, for the “Tranche 1” repayment bracket, under the above assumptions and considering that this segment accounts for half of the tax expenditure (a generous assumption), the multiplier is 2.6. However, we are still far from the optimal theoretical multiplier of 6 estimated by Gobillon and White [\[7\]](#).

What about the 2013 version of the PTZ?

To deal with the various criticisms that have been raised, on 1 January the government attempted to improve the conditions for access to the PTZ programme by:

- Reducing eligibility ceilings from 17% (in zone A) to 30% (in zone C);
- Freezing ceilings on the transaction cost in new housing and ex-HLM (council) housing;
- Lowering the loan-to-value ratios;
- Re-establishing repayment deferrals of up to 15 years for households in the lowest repayment bracket.

For the most part, these measures will help to target assistance for homeownership more accurately. However, some improvements could still be made. In 2013, the income ceilings for Zone A still include about 80% of inhabitants of the Paris region. In addition, the possibility of acquiring existing HLM council housing, which is potentially very energy-consuming, seems inconsistent with the promotion of new energy-efficient housing. For low-income households in high-demand areas, would it not be better to promote the purchase of housing that, while not new, has energy characteristics closer to what is required for new housing?

Likewise, re-establishing the principle of repayment deferrals of up to 15 years could prove objectionable. Indeed, it may lead to undermining the solvency of some households by reducing the duration of their principal loan. The banks, taking into account the deferral, tend to align the duration of the principal loan with the duration of the deferral in order to avoid an excessive jump in the future monthly repayment. So, the deferral may on the contrary increase the risk of default, as, once the deferral is over, households may be hit by a surge in their monthly payments ([Bosvieux and Vorms, 2003](#)).

Finally, the freeze on transaction ceilings cannot be sustained given first, the growing gap that exists between the

ceilings and market prices, and second, the continuous increase in construction costs resulting from the normative inflation experienced by the sector.

To conclude, it is important to take note of the existence of a debate over the very need for a programme to assist homeownership: should the State encourage, assist or finance homeownership for renters? Should taxpayers help renters to become homeowners, as with tax incentives for investment in rental housing? For the poorest households, who find it impossible to come up with a sufficient personal contribution for a purchase, it may seem reasonable to assume that the State is playing its role by helping the most vulnerable to follow the standard residential trajectory, from cohabitation with parents to rental and then ownership. For others, we cannot rule out the existence of significant windfall effects, as outlined above. To avoid these problems and improve the financial positions of the households originally targeted by the programme, a thorough overhaul of programmes to promote homeownership (social or otherwise) is essential.

[\[1\]](#) That is, a maximum percentage of the amount of the transaction.

[\[2\]](#) The new property market was, for the period under consideration, boosted strongly by programmes to stimulate rental investment (see Le Bayon *et al.* 2013).

[\[3\]](#) Paris, the near suburbs and part of the outer suburbs.

[\[4\]](#) In 2012, for purchases in Zone A, the loan-to-value ratio was 38% for new energy-efficient (BBC) housing versus 26% for non-BBC.

[\[5\]](#) For an annual income of 43,500 euros, assuming a rate of 3.2%, borrowing capacity came to an average of 260,000 euros (excluding the PTZ loan), *i.e.* a housing unit of at least

50 sq.m in the near Paris suburbs (excluding the communes bordering Paris).

[6] These assumptions are in accord with the results of the modelling proposed by Gobillon and Le Blanc (2005). The latter found a multiplier effect for the PTZ programme on the order of 1.1 to 1.3.

[7] This multiplier was estimated by assuming perfect targeting for the programme, that is, that all the beneficiaries are “triggered” households.

How to reform the reduction on payroll taxes?

By Mathieu Bunel, Céline Emond, Yannick L'Horty

More than 20 billion euros are spent every year by the State to compensate the general exemptions from social security contributions, making this the leading employment policy plank in France, both in terms of the total budget and the numbers concerned – more than one employee out of two benefits from the reduction in contributions. In these times of fiscal pressure and the inexorable upward trend in unemployment, questions are being raised about the sustainability of such a scheme, whose scale, which was unified by the 2003 Fillon reform, consists of a reduction that shrinks as the wage rises, up to the level of 1.6 times the minimum wage (SMIC). At the level of the SMIC, the reduction comes to 26 points (28 points for firms with fewer than 20 employees).

In an article published in the [*Revue de l'OFCE \(Varia, no. 126, 2012\)*](#), we evaluate the impact of a complete removal of

the general exemptions as well as of a number of partial reforms of the thresholds for exemption from social security contributions, using the latest data suited to the analysis. In our estimate, the simple elimination of all general exemptions would lead to the destruction of about 500,000 jobs. We also explore the effects of reorganising the exemption thresholds, by screening a number of possibilities that would affect the various parameters that define the exemption arrangements. In every case, a reduction in the amount of exemptions would have a negative impact on employment, but the extent of the job losses would vary from simple to double depending on the terms of the reform. To ensure the least negative effect would require that the reductions in the exemptions spare the sectors that are most labour-intensive, which means better treatment for the exemption schedules that are most targeted at low wages. Since the goal is to improve the unemployment figures, it is important to concentrate the exemptions on lower wages, and thus to give a boost to the sectors that are richest in terms of labour.

However, concentrating exemptions too much in the vicinity of the minimum wage would increase the cost to employers of granting wage rises, which would be favourable neither to purchasing power nor to the quality of the jobs that condition future employment. While a new balance can always be sought in order to meet the urgent budget situation, to be sustainable it must be good for today's jobs without neglecting those of the future.

The death throes of the “Confederation of Europe”?

By [Jacques Le Cacheux](#)

Will the institutions that the European Union has developed – from the Treaty of Maastricht in 1992, which created it and defined the roadmap that led to the launch of the euro in 1999, to the Treaty of Lisbon in 2009, which took up the main articles of the constitutional treaty that the French and Dutch had refused to ratify in referendums in 2005 – be sufficient to resolve the crisis facing the EU today? After five years of economic stagnation and nearly four years of persistent pressure on national debts, it had seemed that fears about the sustainability of the European Monetary Union had been appeased by the determination shown in early autumn 2012 by Mario Draghi, President of the European Central Bank, to ensure the future of Europe’s single currency at any cost. But the results of the recent general elections in Italy have once again unsettled the European sovereign debt markets and revived speculation, while the euro zone has plunged back into a recession even as the wounds of the previous one lay still unhealed.

How much longer will we be content with mere expedients? Would it not be better to make a real institutional revolution, like the one undertaken between 1788 and 1790 by the framers of the Constitution of the United States of America, as they faced an acute crisis in the public debt of the Confederation and the confederated states? In his Nobel Lecture, which the OFCE has just published in [French](#), Thomas Sargent invites us to consider this through an economic and financial reading of this critical episode in the institutional history of the United States, and through a parallel with the current situation of the euro zone that some may find audacious, but which is certainly enlightening.

There are of course many differences between the situation of the former British colonies ten years after independence and the Member States of the European Monetary Union. But how is it possible not to see certain similarities, such as the inability to find a collective solution to the national public debt crises or the inanity of the agreement in February 2012 on the future EU budget? *Mutatis mutandis*, it is a question of fiscal federalism, as well as political, in one case as in the other.

France, Germany: The nonworking poor

By [Guillaume Allègre](#)

“The ways of thinking society, managing it and quantifying it are indissolubly linked”

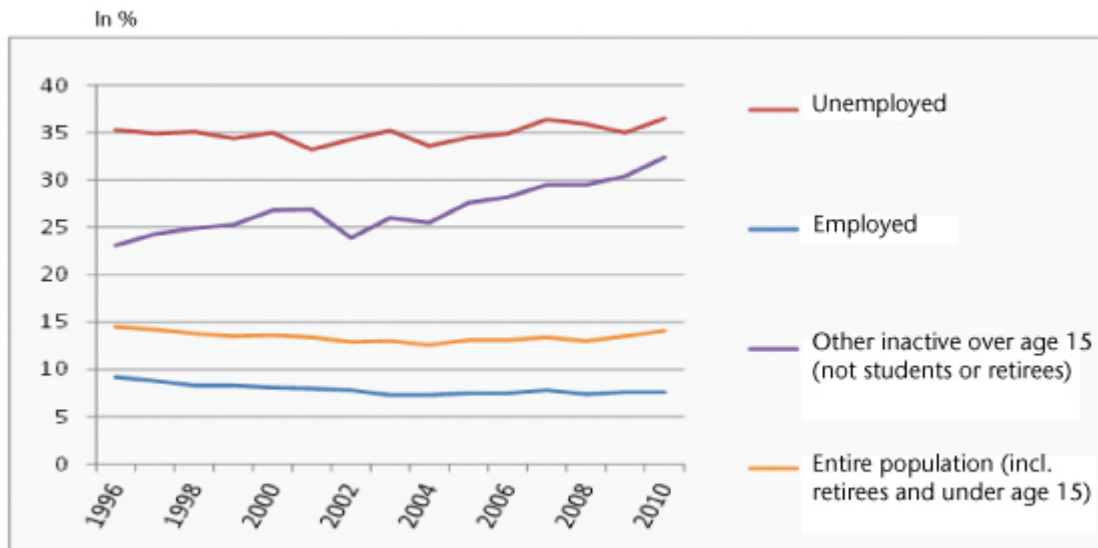
[Alain Desrosières](#), 1940-2013

The subject of working poverty emerged in Europe in public debate and academic discussion in the early 2000s, in parallel with the implementation of policies to “make work pay”. European guidelines on employment have explicitly mentioned the need to reduce working poverty since 2003, and Eurostat set up an indicator on the working poor in 2005 ([Bardone and Guio](#)). In France, policies to make work pay have taken the particular form of earned income supplements ([PPE](#), then [RSA](#)). In Germany, a series of reforms of the labour market and social welfare (the Hartz Laws) were introduced in the early 2000s with the aim of activating the unemployed. Critics of

the German reforms often highlight the proliferation of atypical forms of employment ([Alber and Heisig, 2011](#)): the recourse to part-time, low-wage work and mini-jobs without social protection. In France as in Germany, this focus on workers has masked a less well-known aspect of the changing face of poverty: among working-age people, it is poverty among the unemployed (the “inactive” in France, the “unemployed” in Germany) that has been on the rise since the late 1990s.

Figure 1 shows the change in the poverty rate for individuals between 1996 and 2010, calculated at the threshold of 60% of the median living standard, according to their employment status. Two points stand out. First, poverty primarily affects the unemployed: their poverty rate was about 35% over this period. Second, economically inactive people over age 15, who are neither students nor retired (called “other inactive”), *i.e.* the “discouraged unemployed” and men and women (especially women!) in the home, are the group most affected by the rise in poverty. Their poverty rate was 23% in 1996, but hit 32% in 2010. At the same time, poverty among people in work fell from 9% to 8%. As a result, while the economically active with jobs accounted for 25% of the poor in 1996 and “other inactive” 12%, the latter’s share of the poor rose to 17% in 2010 while the share of the active declined to 22%. The weight of the working poor among all poor people is tending to decrease, while the weight of the inactive is rising.

Figure 1 : Poverty rates according to activity status, France



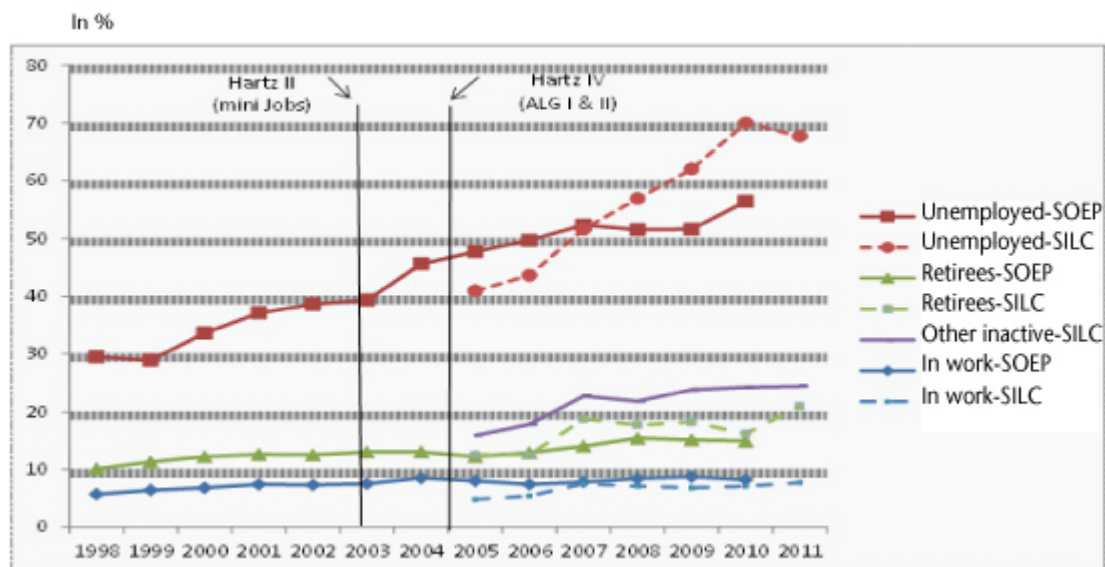
Source : Insee-DGI, Enquêtes Revenus fiscaux et sociaux rétrospectives 1996 à 2004 ; Insee-DGFiP-Cnaf-Cnav-CCMSA, Enquêtes Revenus fiscaux et sociaux 2005 à 2010.

As for Germany, the analysis of poverty rates by employment status is fraught with discrepancies attributable to the sources, in particular with regard to changes in the poverty level among the unemployed, which according to Eurostat (EU-SILC survey) is much higher than in the national SOEP survey (see Figure 2). Despite the statistical uncertainties, it is still clear that poverty affects the unemployed above all, and that their poverty rate has risen substantially: from 30% to 56% between 1998 and 2010, according to the SOEP survey, which is generally considered more reliable than the SILC ([Hauser, 2008](#)). While poverty is increasing for all categories of the population ([see Heyer, 2012](#)), it is among the unemployed that it is most pronounced.

The increase in poverty among the jobless is the result of certain provisions of the Hartz IV laws, which are less well known than those establishing mini-jobs (Hartz II). Prior to this legislation, the jobless could receive unemployment benefits for a maximum period of 32 months, after which they could receive means-tested unemployment assistance for an indefinite period ([Ochel, 2005](#)). But unlike the ASS benefit [i] in France, the amount of this assistance depended on the net income at the last job and provided a relatively generous replacement rate (53% of net income for people without

children). This system was replaced starting in 2005 by a much less generous compensation, based on the goal of employment activation. Unemployment benefit (*Arbeitslosengeld I* – ALG I) was limited to 12 months for unemployed people under age 55, and the grounds for penalties were expanded. Following this period, unemployment assistance (*Arbeitslosengeld II* – ALG II) is greatly reduced and essentially serves only as an ultimate safety net: the amount for a single person is limited to 345 euros per month, while the penalties have also been expanded and toughened [ii]. Germany's strategy to promote employment hence uses two levers: reducing income support for the unemployed, and penalties. While this policy may have contributed to lowering unemployment (see [Chagny, 2008](#), for a discussion of the controversial impact of this reform), by its very design it has had a significant impact with regard to poverty among the unemployed.

Figure 2 : Poverty rates according to employment status and source, Germany



Source : Eurostat (SILC) ; DIW (SOEP).

One paradox that needs to be examined is the only small change since the early 2000s (at least according to the SOEP survey) of the poverty rate among people in work. Indeed, during this period, the proportion of low-wage workers rose and the recourse to part-time work increased sharply, without a substantial rise in the poverty rate for people in work. In 2010, 4.9 million people (12% of people in work) held a mini-

job for which they cannot receive more than 400 euros per month in earned income ([Alber and Heisig, 2011](#)). There has also been the growth of part-time work with social protection (from 3.9 million jobs in 2000 to 5.3 million in 2010). We would expect therefore to see an increase in working poverty. But this is being countered by two factors: the development of opportunities for cumulation with unemployment benefits (the third lever of the employment activation policy), and family solidarity. Indeed, part-time and low-wage jobs are predominantly held by women, who account for two-thirds of workers on low annual incomes [iii]. The income of their spouse, when they have one, often enables them to avoid poverty, as the income of all household members is aggregated to determine the standard of living and poverty. In this respect, to paraphrase [Meulders and O'Dorchai](#), the household is a fig-leaf concealing women's low incomes. Lone mothers, on the other hand, are especially affected by poverty: the poverty rate is about 40% among single-parent families.

From the perspective of the indicators, the use of the category "working poor" thus poses several problems. First, the category hides the role of unemployment and inactivity as determinants of poverty; by its very name, it highlights one important determinant of working poverty ("work doesn't pay") in relation to other determinants ("small number of hours worked" or "heavy family responsibilities"). Public policies based on this approach thus run the risk of limiting the population targeted by the fight against poverty (in France, people on unemployment benefit are excluded from the RSA-activité [income supplement for the working poor]) and of focusing on strengthening financial incentives for returning to work in order to stimulate the supply of labour, even though the high level of unemployment is related to the demand-side rationing of labour. Second, the category is blind to gender inequality: women are more often poor and constitute the majority of low-wage workers, but they are less likely to be working poor! ([Ponthieux, 2004](#)) If all that we manage well

is what we measure, it is necessary that the measure be easily interpreted by policy makers. Reducing inequalities in living standards (between households) and in earned income (between individuals) are two legitimate public policy goals (as explained [here](#) [in French]), which need to be measured separately, just as these two goals require the use of specific instruments.

From the standpoint of public policy, the change in poverty based on employment status in France and Germany emphasizes that an effective fight against poverty requires addressing all forms of poverty. For the working-age population, in economies where dual-earner couples have become the norm, this means putting in place policies on full-time work and full employment policies that do not foster atypical forms of work. This requires, from a macroeconomic point of view, growth or job-sharing (and the associated income-sharing) and, from a microeconomic point of view, meeting needs with respect in particular to childcare, training and transport. While these policies are costly, more economical measures, such as strengthening financial incentives, have failed to demonstrate that they can actually reduce overall poverty.

[i] The *Allocation de solidarité spécifique* (ASS), means-tested benefits paid to unemployed persons whose right to unemployment benefits has expired.

[ii] In total, 1.5 million penalties were applied in 2009, for 2.8 million on jobless benefits, compared with 360,000 in 2004, for 4 million on jobless benefits (according to [Alber and Heisig, 2011](#), Tables 6-8, pp. 24-30).

[iii] Set at the threshold of two-thirds of median salary.

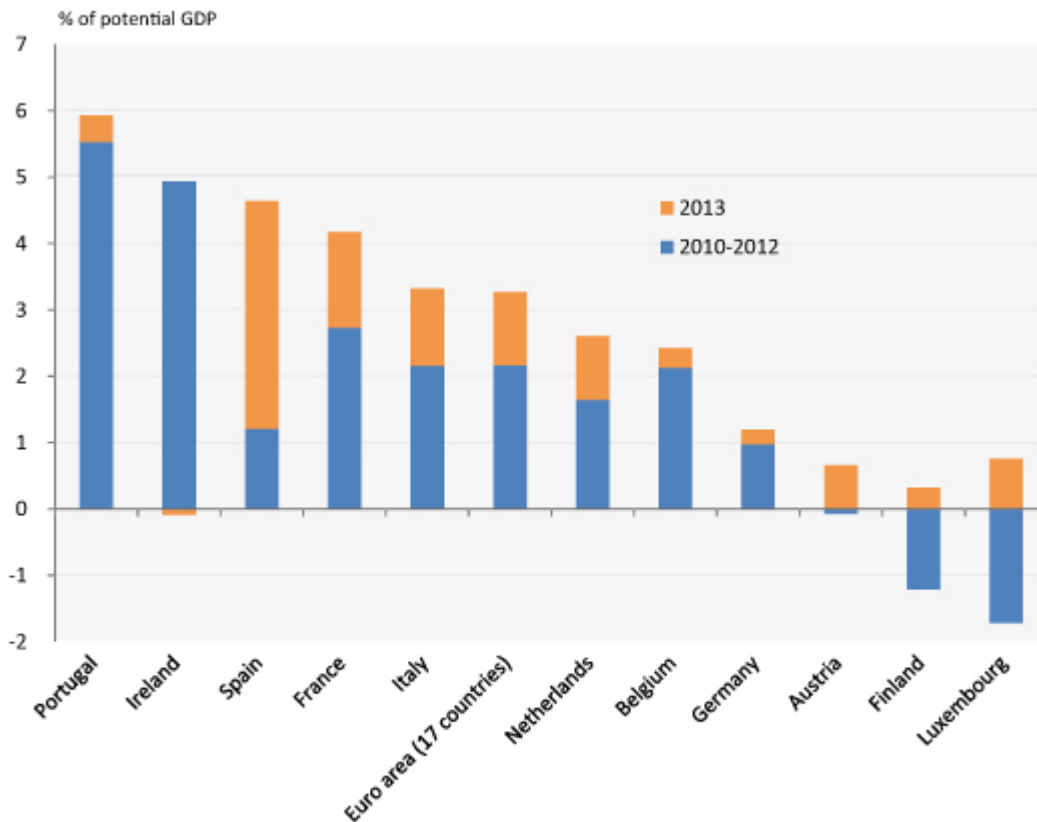
Why France is right to abandon the 3% public déficit target by 2013

By [Mathieu Plane](#)

Given the statements by the Minister of Economy and Finance, the government seems to have reached a decision to abandon the goal of a deficit of 3% of GDP by 2013. In addition to the change of tack in the policy announced up to now, which was to bring the deficit down to 3% by 2013 “whatever the cost”, we can legitimately conclude that France is right to abandon this goal, and we offer several arguments for this. While in this post we do not review [the economic consequences of the fiscal policy being undertaken in France and the euro zone](#), which has been dictated by nominal targets for the deficit that do not take into account the way it breaks down structurally / cyclically and that have a dangerously pro-cyclical character, we nevertheless present several arguments that the European Commission may find of value:

1 – According to the latest figures from the European Commission on 22 February 2013^[1], of the euro zone countries making the greatest fiscal adjustment in 2013 from a structural viewpoint, France, with 1.4 GDP points, comes behind only Spain (3.4) and Greece (2.6). For the 2010-2013 period, the reduction in France’s structural deficit represents 4.2 GDP points, which makes France the euro zone country which, alongside Spain (4.6 GDP points), has carried out the largest budget cutbacks of the major countries in the zone, ahead of Italy (3.3 GDP points), the Netherlands (2.6) and of course Germany (1.2) (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Change in the structural deficit of the euro zone countries*



* For reasons of scale, we have not put Greece in the figure. Over the 2010-2013 period, Greece's structural fiscal adjustment came to 16.9 GDP points, including 2.6 in 2013.
Sources: European Commission, OFCE calculations.

2 – In 2007, before the crisis, according to the European Commission France had a structural public deficit of -4.4 GDP points, compared with an average of -2.1 for the euro zone and -0.9 for Germany. In 2013, this came to -1.9 GDP points in France, -1.3 for the euro zone, and +0.4 for Germany, which represents an improvement of the structural deficit of 2.5 GDP points for France since the start of the crisis, *i.e.* three times the average for the euro zone and twice that for Germany (Table 1). Leaving aside public investment, France's structural public deficit in 2013 was positive and higher than the euro zone average (1.2 GDP point in France, versus 0.8 for the euro zone average and 1.9 for Germany). Note that France is spending 3.1 GDP points on public investment in 2013 (0.2 GDP point less than in 2007), against a euro zone average of only 2 points (0.6 point less than in 2007) and 1.5 in Germany

(equivalent to 2007). However, public investment, which has a positive impact on potential growth, and which also increases public assets, while not changing the public administration's financial situation, can reasonably be excluded from the calculation of the structural public deficit.

Table. Public deficit and structural deficit with and without public investment

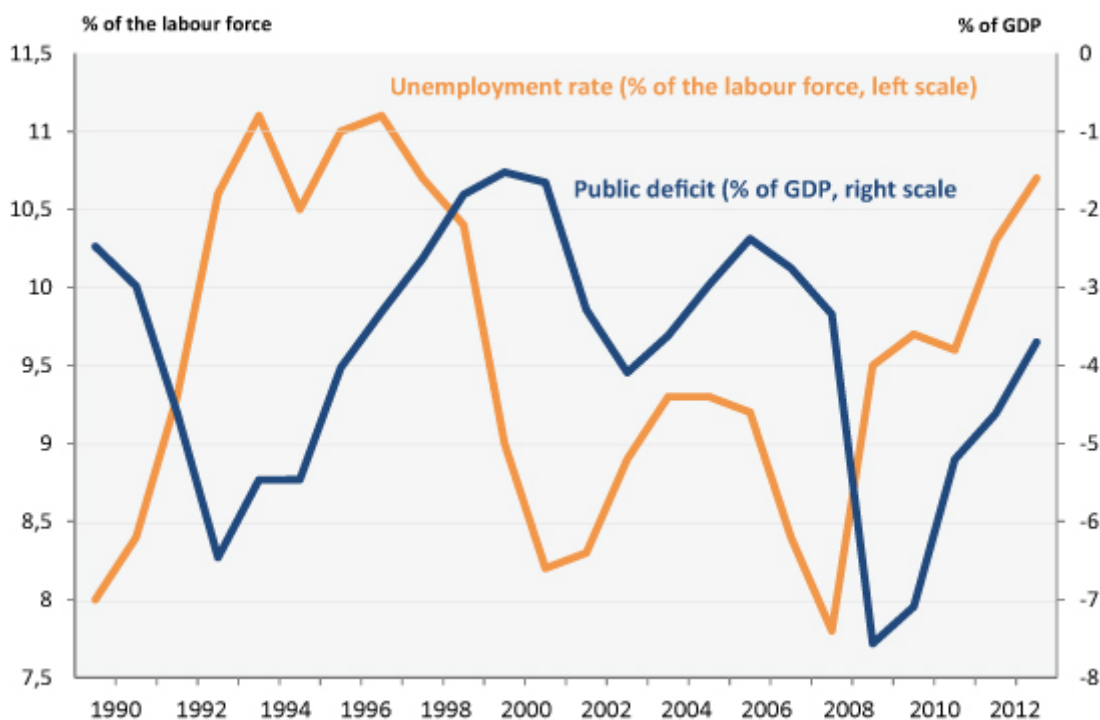
In GDP points	Public balance				Structural public balance				SPB w/o public investment			
	FRA	DEU	EZ	FRA-EZ diff.	FRA	DEU	ZE	FRA-EZ diff.	FRA	DEU	EZ	FRA-EZ diff.
2007	-2.8	0.2	-0.7	-2.1	-4.4	-0.9	-2.1	-2.3	-1.1	0.6	0.5	-1.6
2013	-3.7	-0.2	-2.8	-0.9	-1.9	0.4	-1.3	-0.6	1.2	1.9	0.8	0.4
Change 2007-2013	-0.9	-0.4	-2.1	1.2	2.5	1.3	0.8	1.6	2.3	1.3	0.3	2.1

Sources : European Commission, OFCE calculations.

3 – In 2013, the public deficit, even at 3.7% of GDP according to the European Commission, is once again at a level close to that of 2008, similar to that of 2005, and below that of 2004 and of the entire 1992-1996 period. The public deficit figure expected for 2013 corresponds to the average over the past thirty years, and thus no longer seems so exceptional, which is easing the pressure that France could experience on the financial markets. In contrast, according to the European Commission the unemployment rate in France in 2013 will reach 10.7% of the workforce, which is very close to its historic peak in 1997 (Figure 2). With an unemployment rate in 2013 that is 1.3 percentage points higher than the average over the last thirty years, an exceptional situation now characterizes the labour market more than it does the government deficit. While new austerity measures would help to reduce the deficit, however painfully, due to the [high value of the fiscal multiplier in the short term](#) they will lead on the other hand to going well beyond our historic unemployment peak. Indeed, as we showed in our [latest forecast in October 2012](#), if France really tries to meet its budget commitment for 2013 “whatever

the cost”, this will require a new fiscal tightening of over 20 billion euros, in addition to the [36 billion euros already planned](#). This would lead to a recession, with GDP down -1.2% and 360,000 job losses (instead of expected growth of 0% and the loss of about 160,000 jobs), with the unemployment rate reaching 11.7% of the labour force by late 2013.

Figure 2. Public deficit and unemployment rate



Source: European Commission.

To restore its public accounts since 2010, France has undertaken a historic fiscal effort, well beyond the average of its European partners, which has cost it in terms of growth and employment. Adding another layer of austerity in 2013 to the already historic build-up of austerity would lead us this year straight into a recession and an unprecedented worsening in the labour market. If there is a choice, are a few tenths of a point in the public deficit worth such a sacrifice? Nothing is less certain. It is thus essential to put off the goal of reducing the deficit to 3% of GDP to at least 2014.

[\[1\]](#) We have a different evaluation of the level of the structural deficit. For example, for 2013 we evaluate the improvement in France's structural public deficit at 1.8 GDP points, but in order not to prejudice the analysis we are using the figures provided by the Commission.

Should family benefits be cut? Should they be taxed?

By [Henri Sterdyniak](#)

The government has set a target of balancing the public accounts by 2017, which would require cutting public spending by about 60 billion euros. The Prime Minister, Jean-Marc Ayrault, has given Bernard Fragonard, President of the Haut Conseil à la Famille, France's advisory body on the family, a deadline of end March to propose ways to restructure family policy so as to balance the budget for the family accounts by 2016. Aid to families thus has to be cut, by 2.5 billion euros (6.25% of family benefits), *i.e.* the equivalent of the 2012 deficit for the CNAF, the French national family allowances fund. Is this justified from an economic perspective and a social perspective?

The CNAF accounts have been hit by the recession, as the amount of social security contributions and CSG tax that it

receives has gone down. Based on an estimate that total payroll is 5% below its normal level, the loss of revenue for the CNAF can be estimated at 2.5 billion euros. The CNAF deficit as a whole is thus cyclical. Arguing that the way to cut the deficit is by reducing benefits undermines the stabilizing role of public finances. Consider a fall in private demand of 1% of GDP; assuming a multiplier equal to 1, GDP also shrinks by 1%; the deficit in the public finances will then increase by 0.5%. If you want to avoid this deficit, then government spending would need to be cut by 0.5% of GDP, which would then reduce GDP, and consequently tax revenue, thereby requiring further reductions. *Ex post*, public spending would fall by 1% and GDP by 2%. Fiscal policy would then be playing a destabilizing role. The CNAF therefore needs to be managed based on looking at its structural dimension, which was in fact balanced in 2012. On the economic front, in a situation of a deep depression, when consumption and activity are stagnant, nothing can justify undermining the purchasing power of families [\[1\]](#).

Moreover, successive governments have gradually made the CNAF responsible for both pension benefits for stay-at-home parents (4.4 billion euros in 2012) and increases in family pensions (4.5 billion in 2012). Thus, of the CNAF's 54 billion euros in funds, nearly 9 billion is being diverted into the pension scheme and does not directly benefit children.



This diversion has been possible because family benefits have risen only slightly in the past, as they are generally indexed to prices, not wages. Worse, in some years, benefits have not even risen at the same pace as inflation. Finally, from 1984 to 2012, the monthly basis for calculating the family allowance (the BMAF) lost 5.7% in absolute purchasing power (column 1 of the table), but 25% in purchasing power relative to median household income (column 2). Should we perpetuate

and even widen this growing gap?

Young people under age 20 represent 25% of the population. Using the INSEE's equivalence scale, 12.5% of household income should be provided by the family benefits that go to families with children in order to ensure that they have the same standard of living as people without children. Yet the totality of family benefits represents only 4.2% of household income [\[ii\]](#).

The RSA income support is significantly lower than the pension minimum under the pretext of encouraging RSA beneficiaries to work, but this is hurting the living standards of children, who usually live with people in the workforce, not with pensioners. The creation of the RSA *activité* [the income supplement for the working poor] could have provided significant additional resources for many families of low-wage workers, but it is poorly designed: many potential beneficiaries don't even apply for it. Moreover, it does not benefit the unemployed (and thus their children). In 2010, the poverty rate of children (at the 60% threshold) was 19.8%, compared with 14.1% for the population as a whole. At the 50% threshold, it was 11.1%, against 7.8% for the general population. This means that 2.7 million children are below the 60% poverty line, with 1.5 million even below the 50% line.

A family with three children has a lower standard of living than a childless couple earning the same wages: by 16% at the level of two times the minimum wage, and by 30% at the level of five times the minimum wage. Family allowances have become very low for the middle classes; the family quotient simply takes into account the reduction in living standards caused by the presence of children, but it does not provide specific assistance to families. Aid to children is not excessive at any level of income. In 2010, the average standard of living was 10% lower for children than for the average population. The opposite should be the case, since children need a decent standard of living to develop their full potential, and

parents who raise their children play a fundamental social role, in addition to their role in the workforce.

Should the family allowance be taxed? This would mean ignoring that the amount is already very low compared to the cost of children. Median income per consumption unit was around 1 660 euros in 2012; the average cost of a child, who represents 0.3 consumption unit, is thus about 500 euros. Yet the allowance amounts to 64 euros per child for a family with two children and 97 euros per child for a family with three children. The allowance would thus have to be at least multiplied by 5 before taxing it became a legitimate question.

Making progress toward the goals on French family policy proclaimed in the Social Security Financing Act (LFSS) [\[iii\]](#) – reducing disparities in living standards due to family structure, lifting all children out of poverty, increasing the number of places in childcare – would require devoting greater resources to family policy. This is a burden that should be borne by all taxpayers, not just by middle-class families, who are not the ones most favoured under the existing system.

Cutting the amount that the nation spends on its children by 2.5 billion euros would be a mistake in terms of both macroeconomic policy and social policy. As Charles Gide observed, “Of all the investments a country can make, it is the education of the children that is the most profitable.”

[\[i\]](#) For a similar argument, see Gérard Cornilleau, 2013, “Should spending on unemployment benefits be cut?”, *OFCE blog*, 6 February.

[\[ii\]](#) See Henri Sterdyniak, 2011, “Faut-il remettre en cause la politique familiale française”, *Revue de l’OFCE*, no. 116.

[\[iii\]](#) See the PLFSS, 2013, *Programme de qualité et d'efficience, Famille*.