

Wage moderation in Germany – at the origin of France's economic difficulties

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If the future of the euro zone does indeed depend on political cooperation between France and Germany, then economic divergences between the two countries should be a cause for concern. These divergences need to be analysed, with particular attention to three specific areas: the unemployment rate, the trade balance and the public debt. Germany's unemployment rate is falling steadily; in June it was under the 5% mark, which represents almost full employment, whereas the French rate is over 10%. Germany's low unemployment rate does not however reflect strong consumption by German households, but rather the country's export capacity. While France continues to run a negative trade balance (importing more than it exports), Germany is now the world's leading exporter, ahead of China, with a trade surplus that will run close to 8% in 2015. As for the public deficit, it will be around 3.8% in France in 2015, while Germany is now generating a surplus. This has impressive consequences for the way the public debt is changing in the two countries. In 2010 they were similar, at around 80% of GDP, but in 2014 Germany's public debt fell below 75%, and is continuing to decline, while France's debt has continued to grow, and has now hit 97%. This kind of gap is unprecedented in recent times, and is fraught with mounting tension over the conduct of monetary policy.

This triple divergence is inevitably leading to differences in the political response, with respect to the population's ability to take in migrants and to the understanding of

countries facing economic difficulties, such as Greece, but also with respect to the ability to cope with future economic crises. Economic divergence will become political divergence. The point is not to idealize the German situation, which is characterized by a large number of workers who have failed to benefit from the fruits of growth, as is shown in a recent study by France Stratégie, as well as by a rapid decline in population. This should not stop us from taking a hard look at the economic gap arising between the two countries.

What are the reasons for Germany's commercial success?

Many factors have been advanced to explain the divergence between the two neighbours: for some, it's a matter of the German strategy – outsourcing value chains, aggressive wage moderation, fostering competition between companies – and for others, French weaknesses: poor geographical and / or sectoral specialization, insufficient public support for exporters, and a lack of competition in certain sectors. Our [recent study](#) emphasizes the delayed impact of German wage moderation and suggests that this could explain almost half of the Franco-German divergence. To understand the mechanisms involved, it is necessary to distinguish between the sectors exposed to international competition and the sectors that are sheltered. The exposed sectors include industry, but also agriculture, including animal husbandry, which is currently in the news, and some services that can be traded. The sheltered sector includes transportation, real estate, retailing and a large part of personal services.

While unit labour costs in France have risen regularly and at similar levels in the two above-mentioned sectors, they have remained extraordinarily stable in Germany for nearly ten years. This wage moderation is the result of both poor management of German reunification, which tipped the balance of power during wage negotiations in favour of employers, and, to a much less extent, the introduction of the Hartz reforms in 2003-2005, which aimed to create low-paid work in the less

competitive sectors (particularly the sheltered sector). The cost of German reunification is estimated at 900 billion euros, in terms of transfers from former West Germany, or slightly less than three times the Greek debt. Faced with this kind of challenge, the wage moderation initiated in 1993 represented a strategy for re-convergence between the two parts of Germany. In 2012, German nominal wages were 20% lower than French wages in the exposed (tradable) sector and 30% lower in the sheltered sector, compared to the 1993 levels. A look at French and German margin levels shows that in the exposed sector, French exporters have made significant efforts by reducing their margins in order to maintain their price competitiveness. In the sheltered sector, French margins are on average 6% higher than German margins. The bulk of France's loss of price competitiveness is therefore a loss of cost competitiveness.

How much have these differences contributed to unemployment and the trade balance in the two countries? Our quantitative analysis shows that if German wage restraint had not taken place between 1993 and 2012, today's 8% gap in the trade balances would instead be 4.7% (2.2% of this being due solely to German wage moderation in the sheltered sector). Thus, Germany's wage moderation policy explains almost 40% of the difference in trade performance between the two countries. We also found that this wage moderation accounts for more than 2 points of France's unemployment.

The non-price competitiveness gap

This leaves nearly 60% of the difference in the trade balances still needing to be explained. Our study suggests that this difference is due to the quality of the goods produced, so-called non-price competitiveness. Between 1993 and 2012, the German quality-price ratio increased by around 19% compared with that of France, which has therefore more than offset the rise in German export prices relative to French prices. There is clearly a "quality" effect in this non-price

competitiveness: Germany produces “high end”, more innovative goods than France does in the same sectors. It is also possible to see an impact due to the outsourcing of some German production (nearly 52% of production volume in 2012) to countries where costs are lower: Germany today is a centre for design and assembly, which saves money on its intermediary costs, enabling it to invest more in brand strategies and efforts to move upscale.

This effect is nevertheless probably endogenous, that is to say, it flows in part from Germany’s advantage in cost competitiveness. Low labour costs have enabled German exporters to maintain their margins in the face of external competition. The funds generated have led to investments which French companies have probably had to forego in order to maintain their price-competitiveness, thus losing the opportunity to catch up with German products in terms of non-price competitiveness over the longer term.

A positive way out and up

The root cause of the gap in economic performance between Germany and France lies in the nominal divergence observed between the two countries since the early 1990s. One way to reduce these differences would be to promote convergence in wages in Europe and in its labour markets more generally. Germany would need to allow wage inflation that was higher than in the periphery countries, thereby dealing with the increase in social inequalities in Germany, while France must not fall into the trap of competitive deflation, which would destroy its domestic demand, while keeping wage movements under control. In this respect, the report of the five Presidents presented by the European Commission on 22 June 2015 proposes the establishment of national competitiveness authorities, which hopefully would allow greater cooperation on social welfare and employment.

The difference in wages between France and Germany has

profound implications in terms of economic thought. The increased trade integration that followed the introduction of the euro led not to a convergence but to a divergence in labour markets. It is then up to each State to once again bring about convergence of the economies while supporting economic activity. This State intervention in the economy is more complex than the simple Keynesian framework for the management of aggregate demand, and now involves the convergence of labour markets. Heretofore, Europe's response has been systematic cuts in labour costs, while what is really needed is to increase wages in surplus countries, such as Germany, for example by using the minimum wage as a tool. All this, it is true, is economics. The politics begins when we realize that only long-term cooperation can bring about a convergence in national interests.