

Will Germany be caught up in the recession of its European partners?

[Christophe Blot](#) and Sabine Le Bayon

Can Germany avoid the recession that is hitting a growing number of countries in the euro zone? While Germany's economic situation is undoubtedly much more favourable than that of most of its partners, the fact remains that the weight of exports in its GDP (50%, vs 27% for France) is causing a great deal of uncertainty about the country's future growth.

Thus, in the last quarter of 2011, the downturn in the German economy (-0.2%) due to the state of consumption and exports has upset hopes that the country would be spared the crisis and that it could in turn spur growth in the euro zone based on the strength of its domestic demand and wage increases. Exports of goods fell 1.2% in value in late 2011 over the previous quarter, with a contribution of -1.5 points for the euro zone and -0.4 points for the rest of the European Union. Admittedly, the beginning of 2012 saw renewed growth, with GDP rising by 0.5% ([versus 0% in the euro zone](#)). Once again this was driven by exports, in particular to countries outside the euro zone. The prospects of a recession across the Rhine in 2012 thus appear to be receding, but there is still great uncertainty about how foreign trade will be affected in the coming months and about the extent of the slowdown "imported" into Germany. The question is whether the improvement in the first quarter of 2012 is temporary. The decline in manufacturing orders from euro zone firms to Germany (-7.5% in the first quarter of 2012, after -4.8% in the last quarter of 2011) could spell the end of German's persistent growth, especially if the recession in the euro zone continues or worsens.

With GDP per capita above the pre-crisis level, Germany has been an exception in a euro zone that is still profoundly marked by the crisis. The country's public deficit is under control, and it already meets the 3% threshold set by the Stability and Growth Pact. Germany is still running a foreign trade [1] surplus, which came to 156 billion euros (6.1% of GDP) in 2011, whereas at this same time France ran a deficit of 70 billion euros (3.5% of GDP). Despite Germany's favourable foreign trade performance, the crisis has left scars, which today are being aggravated by the energy bill. For instance, before the crisis the trade surplus was 197 billion euros, with over 58% from trade with partners in the euro zone. With the crisis, activity slowed sharply in the euro zone – the zone's GDP in the first quarter of 2012 was still 1.4% lower than the level in the first quarter of 2008 – which is automatically reflected in demand addressed to Germany. Thus, exports of goods to the euro zone are still below their level of early 2008 (down 2.9% for Germany and 6.3% for France, see Table 1). Germany's trade surpluses vis-à-vis Italy and Spain – two countries that were hit hard by the crisis – have fallen significantly, mainly due to lower demand from the two countries. German exports to these two countries have decreased by 27% and 4% respectively since 2007.

Nevertheless, although Germany is more exposed to foreign trade shocks than France, it is less exposed to the euro zone. The share of euro zone countries in German exports fell from 44.8% in 2003 to 39.7% in 2011 (Table 2a). In France, despite a fall on the same order of magnitude, 47.5% of exports are still directed towards the euro zone. When the European Union as a whole is considered, however, the gap disappears, as the EU represents 59.2% of German exports compared with 59.8% of French exports. The lower level of dependence on the euro zone has been offset by increasing exports to the new member states of the European Union (the NEM), with which German trade reached 11.4% in 2011. Moreover, Germany has maintained its

lead over France on the emerging markets: in 2011 Asia represented 15.8% of German exports and China 6.1%, against 11.5% and 3.2% in the French case. By managing to diversify the geographical composition of its exports to areas experiencing vigorous growth, Germany has been able to dampen the shock of the slowdown in the euro zone. This can be seen in recent trade trends: while Germany's exports (like France's) have surpassed their pre-crisis level, this was due to exports to countries outside the euro zone, where Germany has benefited more than France (Table 1). Germany has in fact succeeded in significantly reducing its deficit with Asia, which has helped to offset the poor results with the euro zone and with Central and Eastern Europe. Finally, Germany has advantages in terms of [non-price competitiveness](#) [2], which reflects the dynamism of trade in automobiles and electrical, electronic and computer equipment. The surpluses in these two sectors regained their pre-crisis level in 2011 (respectively, 103 and 110 billion euros in 2011), whereas the balances in these two sectors have continued to deteriorate in France.

Even if orders from countries outside the euro zone remain buoyant (up 3.6% in early 2012), the weight of the euro zone is still too strong for exports to emerging markets to offset the decline in orders placed by the euro zone to Germany. This will inevitably affect the country's growth. GDP should therefore rise less rapidly in 2012 than in 2011 (0.9% according to the OFCE [3], following 3.1%). Germany might thus avoid a recession, unless the euro zone as a whole experiences even sharper fiscal contraction. Indeed, the slowdown in growth means that the euro zone member states will not be able to [meet their budget commitments in 2012 and 2013](#), which could lead them to decide on further restrictive measures, which would in turn reduce growth throughout the zone, and therefore demand addressed to the zone's partners. In this case Germany would not avoid a recession.

Finally, the role of foreign trade is not limited to growth

and employment. It could also have an impact on negotiations between France and Germany about the governance of the euro zone. The relative growth of the two countries will in practice affect the balance of power between them. The expected slowdown in growth in Germany clearly reflects its conflicting interests between, on the one hand, maintaining its market opportunities and, on the other, its fears vis-à-vis the functioning of the euro zone and the cost to public finances of broader support for the countries in greatest difficulty. While up to now the latter consideration has dominated the German position, this could change once its commercial interests come under threat, especially at a time when the German Chancellor is negotiating with the Parliamentary opposition about the ratification of the fiscal pact – an opposition that could demand measures to support growth in Europe, as has the new French president.

Table 1. German and French exports since the crisis, in value

2008 Q1 = 100

		2009 - Q2	2012 - Q1
Totale	Germany	76,5	108,4
	France	77,6	101,6
Euro zone	Germany	76,4	97,1
	France	75,4	93,7
Other EU countries	Germany	71,2	103,3
	France	71,4	89,4
Rest of the world	Germany	79,8	123,0
	France	83,1	117,5

Sources : Customs, Destatis.

Table 2a. The main partners of Germany and France

%

	2003		2011	
	Germany	France	Germany	France
European Union	65,0	67,0	59,2	59,8
Euro zone	44,8	52,2	39,7	47,5
- <i>France/Germany</i>	10,4	15,8	9,6	16,3
- <i>Italy</i>	7,3	9,2	5,9	8,0
- <i>Spain</i>	4,9	10,0	3,3	7,2
- <i>Netherlands</i>	6,4	3,8	6,5	4,2
- <i>Belgium/Luxembourg</i>	5,8	8,2	5,0	7,5
- <i>Austria</i>	5,4	1,0	5,4	0,9
United Kingdom	8,4	9,5	6,2	6,5
NEM*	9,2	3,7	11,4	4,8
United States	9,3	6,7	6,9	5,5
Asia	11,4	7,3	15,8	11,5
- <i>China</i>	2,7	1,4	6,1	3,2
- <i>Japan</i>	1,8	1,6	1,4	1,5

Note : The NEM include Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovenia, Slovakia and Estonia.

Sources : Customs, Destatis.

Table 2b. The main suppliers of Germany and France

%

	2003		2011	
	Germany	France	Germany	France
European Union	61,4	65,2	55,7	58,9
Euro zone	42,4	53,6	37,7	48,2
- <i>France/Germany</i>	9,3	18,9	7,6	17,3
- <i>Italy</i>	6,5	9,4	5,3	7,4
- <i>Spain</i>	3,0	7,6	2,8	6,1
- <i>Netherlands</i>	7,9	4,7	8,4	4,4
- <i>Belgium/Luxembourg</i>	5,1	7,4	4,5	8,2
- <i>Austria</i>	4,1	1,0	4,1	0,9
United Kingdom	6,4	6,7	4,8	4,4
NEM*	9,3	3,2	10,7	4,0
United States	7,8	6,5	5,6	5,7
Asia	15,5	12,5	20,4	15,7
- <i>China</i>	4,1	4,1	9,7	8,2
- <i>Japan</i>	3,8	3,2	2,8	1,9

Note : The NEM include Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovenia, Slovakia and Estonia.

Sources : Customs, Destatis.

[1] Measured by the gap between the export and import of goods.

[2] See also J.-C. Bricongne, L. Fontagné and G. Gaulier (2011): “Une analyse détaillée de la concurrence commerciale entre la France et l’Allemagne” [A detailed analysis of commercial competition between France and Germany], Presentation at the Fourgeaud seminar [in French].

[3] This figure corresponds to the update of our forecast of April 2012, which takes into account the publication of the growth figures for Q1 2012.

Taxes on wealth: what kind of reform?

By [Guillaume Allègre](#), [Mathieu Plane](#) and [Xavier Timbeau](#)

Why and how should wealth be taxed? Are France’s wealth taxes fair and efficient? In an article entitled, “[Reforming the taxation of wealth?](#)”, published in the [special Tax Reform issue](#) of the *Revue de l’OFCE* [in French], we examine these issues and propose some possible ways to reform the taxation of wealth.

We show that in recent years real economic income from capital has been very substantial. The visible income from capital (interest, dividend, rents received, etc.) exists alongside less visible income (capital gains net of the consumption of fixed capital and inflationary tax). As only a portion of

potential capital gains are realized, this less visible income forms a significant part of average personal income. Between 1998 and 2010, despite two financial crises, capital gains increased real per capita income by an annual average of 12% (33% on average from 2004 to 2007). This growth was due in large part to the sharp rise in property prices.

We also show that the actual tax rate on income from wealth is low, even though the nominal interest rates on capital income are high, and the tax rate *on income that is actually taxed* is even higher due to not taking into account inflationary tax in the calculation of taxes [1]. After taking into account all taxation based on household wealth, including wealth which is held ("ISF" wealth tax, property tax) or which is passed on (property transaction taxes *i.e.* "stamp duty") and income from wealth (income tax, "CSG" wealth tax, etc.), the actual rate of taxation on economic income from capital [2] comes to an average of 11.1%. This low rate for the actual taxation of capital income is due to the fact that a large portion of this income fully or partially escapes taxation: real property gains on principal residences are totally exempt, and secondary residences are partly exempt; the housing enjoyed by owner-occupiers ("imputed rent") is not taxable, even though, net of interest, it constitutes income; gifts serve to "purge" any capital gains, even when these are not taxed (there is a tax allowance of 159,000 euros per child for gifts to direct heirs, which is renewable every ten years); and some financial income avoids income tax (life insurance, tax-exempt bank accounts, etc.).

Next we discuss possibilities for reform that would lead to taxing all income from wealth. We believe that income from wealth (net increased income from wealth) should be taxed in the same way as labour income. This principle is fair (in the sense that households are then taxed on their contributory capacity, regardless of the source of their income), and it would also help to combat tax avoidance. In an increasingly

financialized economy, the interface between labour income and capital income has become porous. Taxing capital income differently opens the door to tax schemes. Any reform of wealth taxation should make it a priority to tax all real capital gains, in particular real property gains, which currently are subject to specific rules. In addition, since property is a fixed asset, the existing rules cannot be justified as due to tax competition in Europe. They are occasionally defended based on the need to take account of inflation or due to the unique character of the principal residence. But taking inflation into account cannot justify the total exemption of real property gains on secondary residences after they have been held for a certain time (currently 30 years, previously 22 years): not only does the exemption on capital gains seem unfair, but it can also prompt some households to keep their property, in particular during speculative bubbles. Furthermore, the specific character of property cannot be invoked once there has been a definitive withdrawal from the market. The taxation of realized capital gains, net of inflation, of the consumption of fixed capital and of renovation costs, would thus be preferable to a system of allowances based on the period of ownership. This could take place when the sale is not followed by another purchase – so as not to penalize mobility – and during inheritance (taxation of unrealized gains, before calculating inheritance tax). The taxation of real property gains upon a definitive withdrawal from the market could gradually replace the system of property transaction taxes or “stamp duty”, which would promote mobility and greater horizontal fairness.

In light of these arguments, what do we make of the proposals by the new French President François Hollande with regard to the taxation of wealth? He proposes (1) to tax capital income at the same rate as labour income is taxed; (2) to roll back the tax breaks on the ISF wealth tax and to raise the rate of taxation on the top income brackets; and (3) to reduce the inheritance tax allowance from 159,000 euros per child to

100,000 euros (it was raised from 50,000 euros to 150,000 euros in 2007).

(1) The first point would also involve eliminating the flat-rate withholding tax and the various tax loopholes that permit tax avoidance. It is similar to our proposals, so long as the income subject to tax takes into account inflationary tax and the consumption of fixed capital. This kind of proposal would involve taxing imputed rent, which constitutes an imputed income from capital. Nevertheless, given the difficulty of estimating the tax base, imputed rent has not been taxed since 1965 (see the article by [Briant and Jacquot](#)). One solution to this difficulty is to permit renters and first-time buyers to deduct their rent or loan interest payments from their taxable income, while increasing the average income tax rate to offset this.

(2) The second point departs from our proposals, but the ISF tax offers one solution for taxing large estates bit by bit, *even when they do not procure any taxable income* (when there are unrealized capital gains but an absence of dividends or earned rent, for example). In a situation like this, the ISF tax makes sense *only if it is not capped based on the taxable income (or a similar notion)*. The ISF tax on wealth makes even more sense when the actual yields, including the unrealized gains on the assets, are not very heterogeneous (but it is then equivalent to a tax on the income from the assets) or when the supervision of the asset owners can improve their yields (taxation based on holding the wealth, and not on income, then serves as an additional incentive “to owners to ‘activate’ their estate,” in the words of Maurice Allais). In contrast, if the asset yields are heterogeneous and strong incentives to optimize the wealth already exist, then a tax on the income from the wealth is preferable from the viewpoint of fairness and not undermining economic efficiency.

(3) Higher inheritance taxes seem legitimate from the perspective of equal opportunity. We feel, however, that this

should go further, at least by eliminating the purge of capital gains, in particular when the goods have been exempted from inheritance tax.

* *This text is taken from the article [Reforming the taxation of wealth?](#) published in the special Tax Reform issue of the *Revue de l'OFCE*, available on the [OFCE website](#).*

[1] As [Henri Sterdyniak](#) points out: "It is thus erroneous to claim that capital income is taxed at a lower rate. When it is *actually* taxed, this is at higher rates."

[2] Defined as the ratio between the sum of taxes based on wealth and the net increased income from the wealth after having subtracted the consumption of fixed capital and inflationary tax.

What risks face the Greeks if they return to the drachma?

By Anne-Laure Delatte (associate researcher of the Forecasting Department)

The debate about whether the Greeks will stay in the euro zone is intensifying. Christine Lagarde, head of the IMF, has lambasted the Greek government. The German Finance Minister, Wolfgang Schäuble, believes that the euro zone can now deal with a Greek exit, and that the Greeks no longer have a choice. What would be the risks for the Greeks of a return to the drachma? Would this inevitably plunge the country into

chaos? Argentina's experience with returning to the peso in 2002 provides some insight.

In Argentina, the peso/dollar parity was set at one peso per dollar by law in 1991. The dollar could be used freely in domestic exchange. The result was that dollars began to be used for everyday transactions, including the denomination of financial assets. In practice, in the 1990s, on average more than 70% of bank deposits and two-thirds of private sector lending were denominated in dollars. These figures peaked in the last quarter of 2001, just before the system was abandoned, when 75% of private deposits and 80% of all loans were denominated in dollars.

The average Argentinean's strong commitment to the dollar was propped up during the 1990s by the promises of all the presidential candidates to continue the system. Moreover, the abandon of the dollar in January 2002 took place in an especially dramatic context, after five presidents in a row had resigned and amidst a period of popular revolt that was felt beyond the country's borders. The peso was devalued by more than 70% against the dollar, and a massive amount of domestic savings fled the country into foreign banks. While the barter economy remained marginal, the provinces and the central State began to issue their own currency to pay civil servants and government suppliers. According to the country's central bank, in 2002 these parallel currencies accounted for an average of 30% of all bills in circulation.

The context in which Argentina returned to its national currency in 2002 therefore bears some resemblance to the current situation in Greece: widespread political confusion, a serious recession, and above all a national currency with no credibility.

Against all expectations, despite the serious crisis, the social and political disorder and monetary disintegration, which led to predictions that it would take 10 years for

Argentina's GDP to return to its pre-crisis level, an economic recovery began to take hold by the second half of 2002. With nominal annual growth of 9% and controlled inflation, Argentina ultimately restored its pre-crisis level by 2004. How did the country manage to leave the dollar with such results?

The default on 90 billion dollars in public debt, followed by a fiscal pact between the provinces and the central State, along with budget controls, led to a recovery in public finances. But the unique feature of Argentina's experience was the monetary reform carried out in January 2002.

The devaluation of the peso rocked the country's financial equilibrium. With 80% of lending contracted in dollars, most consumers and businesses saw the value of their debt virtually quadrupled! After the devaluation, in 2002 the amount of private debt came to 120 billion dollars, whereas the country's GDP was only 106 billion dollars. To avoid bankrupting the entire private sector, the national authorities came up with a rule for the reimbursement of debt.

The logic was that, to avoid bankruptcy, business revenue should be denominated in the same currency as the debt. Hence on 4 February 2002, the government issued decree 214/02, which imposed the "peso-fication" of the entire economy: all prices and all contracts in the real and financial sectors, all salaries and debts, were converted into pesos at a rate of one peso per dollar, whereas the market rate was almost four pesos per dollar. Contracts in the financial sector were also converted: deposits that did not exceed thirty-thousand dollars were converted at a rate of 1.4 pesos for 1 dollar [1]. How could such a rule be imposed in light of the disastrous wealth effects on creditors?

The conversion at a rate of one for one (or 1.4 for 1) imposed by the authorities resulted in a settlement of conflicts over debt in favour of debtors, and to the detriment of national

and foreign creditors. However, the main debtor in the economy is the productive sector, that is, businesses. By offering them a protected way out of the crisis, the new monetary rules neutralized balance sheet effects and permitted the devaluation to have the expansionary impact one would conventionally expect. In effect, trade began to run a surplus and the country's economy was able to benefit from the booming global economy in the early 2000s. Exports rose from 10% to 25% of GDP, and by 2004 GDP was 2% higher than the average for the 1990s. In short, the government's monetary rule led to a return to growth and employment, which explains why it won the support of the majority of the population.

In actuality, the Argentines, like the Greeks today, were caught in a trap: with contracts denominated in dollars, the return to the peso, following the devaluation, was leading towards a generalized bankruptcy of the private sector. If the Greeks were to leave the euro right now, the entire country would go bankrupt. If the drachma were devalued by 50%, as certain forecasts currently predict, private debt would double. With revenue denominated in drachmas and debt in euros, businesses and consumers would be incapable of repaying their lenders. This was the same kind of trap that paralyzed Argentina's leaders before 2002.

Argentina's experience thus provides several lessons. First, the main risk for Greece of leaving the euro is that the entire private sector would go bankrupt. Given that the public sector has already restructured 50% of its debt, all else being equal, a return to the drachma would lead to financial conflicts between private creditors and debtors that would paralyze the entire system of payments. Secondly, the State has to play a key role as arbitrator in order to resolve the crisis. In conditions like these, the nature of the rules adopted is not neutral. A number of solutions exist, and these reflect different policy orientations and have different economic consequences. In Argentina, the decision to favour

national debtors ran counter to the interests of the holders of capital and foreign investors. Furthermore, contrary to the assertions of Wolfgang Schäuble, the Greek government does have choices. This is the third lesson. The resolution of the Greek crisis is not simply an economic matter, and the options being offered to the Greek people involve political choices. The choice made will have a more favourable result for some economic groups (such as European creditors, Greek employees, holders of capital, etc.).

Depending on the nature of the political order, the State could seek to maintain the existing balance of forces, or, on the contrary, disrupt them. A reform could lead to a rupture, and provide an opportunity to establish a new balance of forces. The option pursued up to now has consisted of spreading the cost of resolving the Greek crisis over creditors, on the one hand, by restructuring the public debt, and over debtors, on the other hand, by means of structural efforts (cuts in wages \and social transfers), along with an increase in the tax burden. In contrast, a withdrawal from the euro zone accompanied by an Argentina-style restructuring of private and public debt would place the burden of the crisis resolution more on the shoulders of creditors, mainly the rest of Europe. This explains the renewed pressure seen in the discourse of some European creditor countries with respect to Greece, as well as the confusion that typifies the debate in Europe today: in the absence of an optimal solution with a neutral impact, each party is defending its own interests – at the risk of destroying the euro.

[1] Deposits of greater amounts could be either converted under the same conditions or transformed into dollar-denominated Treasury bonds.

Japan's reconstruction: constrained by the deterioration in public finances

By Bruno Ducoudré

Following the earthquake that hit Japan in March 2011, the government estimated the cost of the loss at 16.9 trillion yen (3.6 points of GDP). The response in terms of the structural deficit needed to deal with this exogenous shock conflicts with the government's desire to implement an austerity policy to reduce the deficit. The additional financing requirements are thus coming at the worst possible time, amidst the economic crisis that began in 2008, which has been accompanied by a sharp deterioration in public finances due to the need to prop up the economy.

On the growth front, 2011 was a difficult year for Japan, coming on the heels of a 4.4% rebound in GDP in 2010 following a 5.5% drop in 2009. While the economy saw renewed growth in Q3 of 2011 (1.9% GDP growth quarter-on-quarter), after two quarters of falling GDP, at year end floods in Thailand again disrupted the supply chains of Japanese firms, and the economy faltered (zero growth in Q4 and -0.7% growth for 2011). The period of reconstruction begins in 2012.

In fiscal year 2011, four additional budget bills were passed for a total of 3.9 percentage points of GDP, mainly to cope with emergency expenses (1.3 GDP points) and to prepare for reconstruction (2.3 GDP points). The services of the State have estimated the total bill for reconstruction at 23

trillion yen (4.8 GDP points). The reconstruction will be spread over the next ten years, with the main effort concentrated on the period 2012-2016. The government decided to allocate 0.8 GDP points for reconstruction in fiscal 2012, three-quarters of which is to be funded by debt (Table).

Contrary to expectations, the series of plans passed in 2011 have not resulted in a rapid surge in public spending: public consumption grew by 2.1% in 2011, unchanged from 2010 and less than in 2009, and public investment fell by 3.1% in 2011. Reconstruction costs were partly substituted for other expenses. Also, part of the budget adopted was set aside and so is just beginning to be spent. Public orders for construction work rose by 20% in Q4 of 2011 yoy, and public works in progress rose sharply at year end. Thus, the additional expenses related to the reconstruction costs already approved will be spread in part over the coming quarters, and even beyond fiscal year 2012.

Japan's fiscal situation is actually precarious. The expenditures needed to rebuild the devastated areas were decided in a context of high levels of deficit and debt related to the crisis. The budget deficit has indeed deteriorated sharply since the beginning of the crisis, rising from 2.2% of GDP in 2008 to 8.1% in 2010, while the debt has risen by 31.2 GDP points since 2007, to reach 199% of GDP in 2010. In 2011, the deficit widened to 9.3% of GDP mainly due to the increased debt burden, higher social security spending and the fall in GDP in 2011. The government announced that some plans would be financed by a combination of restrictions in other areas of expenditure, surplus tax revenues related to the improvement in activity in 2010, and the accumulated reserves from past budgets (for a quarter of the budget dedicated to reconstruction in 2011-2012).

In the short term, the government has nevertheless chosen to favor growth over fiscal consolidation. We expect, for instance, a fiscal stimulus of 0.4 GDP point in 2012 and 0.5

GDP point in 2013, and the Japanese economy should see average annual growth of 1.9% in 2012 and 1.5% in 2013 (see [“Japan: reconstruction time”, in our forecast dossier](#), in French). In these circumstances, the budget deficit will be stable at 9.2% of GDP in 2012, and will worsen to 9.8% of GDP in 2013.

**Provisional budgets for 2011-2012 for reconstruction
Central government**

In % GDP

	2011	2012
Revenue and financing	3.9	0.8
Tax revenue	0.3	0.1
Non-tax revenue	0.0	0.1
Bond issues	2.1	0.6
Surplus from previous years	1.1	0.0
Reduction in expenditure	0.4	0.0
Expenditure	3.9	0.8
General expenditure, including:	3.3	0.7
<i>Public works</i>	1.4	0.2
<i>Other expenditure</i>	1.9	0.6
Transfers to local government	0.6	0.1

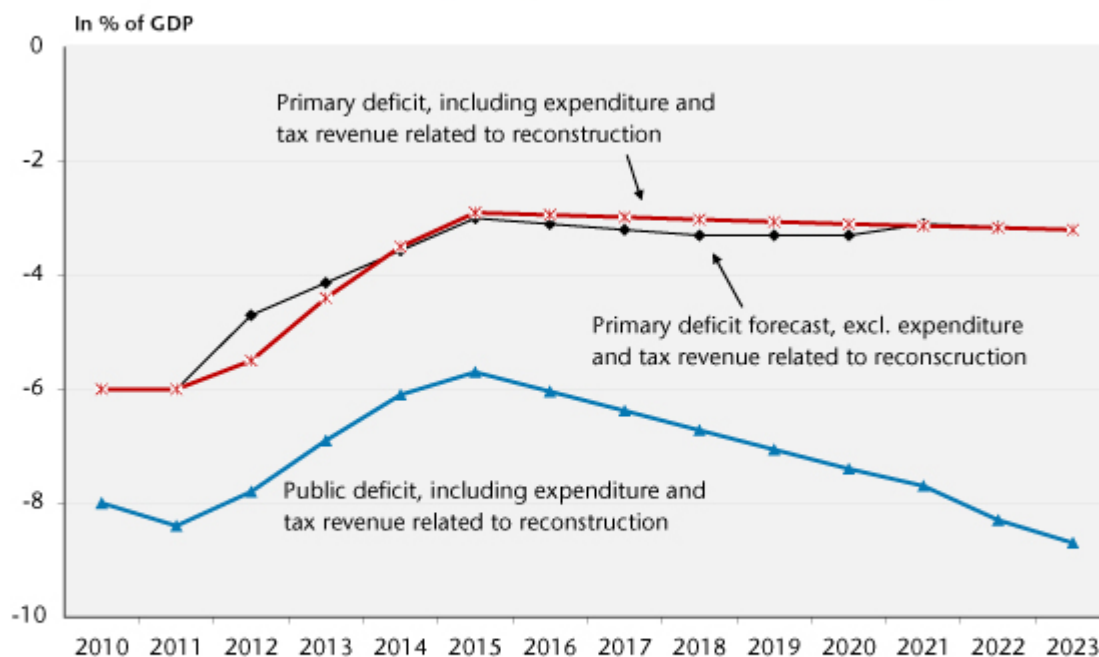
Sources: Cabinet Office, Ministry of Finance, OFCE calculations.

However, beyond 2013, there is still uncertainty about the direction of government economic policy. In the Japanese government’s [medium-term fiscal strategy](#), decided in 2010, it aimed to halve the primary deficit of central and local government by 2015 compared to the level in 2010 (6.4% of GDP), and to break even by 2020. According to our calculations, balancing the primary structural deficit would require the implementation of a major fiscal consolidation effort. This would involve a negative fiscal impulse on the order of 1.1 GDP points a year in 2014, which is nevertheless a slower pace than the consolidation policies planned in the euro zone in 2012-2013 (see [“He who sows austerity reaps recession”](#) in our forecasting dossier). To this end, an increase of 5 points in the consumption tax is to be considered during the current session of the Diet, Japan’s parliament, which will wind up in June. This increase would

occur in two stages and yield 2.5 GDP points in tax revenue. According to [the latest medium-term forecast of the Japanese government](#), this will not be sufficient to meet its targets (Figure 1). Moreover, the means to achieve a balance by 2020 have not been clarified, and the government has not indicated how the debt built up to finance reconstruction would be repaid. Finally, given the continuing growth of the public debt, the interest burden, which currently is low (1.8 GDP points in 2011), will place an increasing burden on state finances in the future. This will exacerbate the government's difficulties in implementing any budgetary changes aimed at stabilizing the debt-to-GDP ratio by 2020, and then to bring it down even further.

Despite all this, Japan does not seem to need a brutal fiscal consolidation, as it is currently borrowing at low interest rates (0.86% for the last issue of 10-year government bonds). Furthermore, the share of the debt held by non-residents is still low (6.7% in Q4 of 2011), and the abundant savings of the Japanese population, together with the Japanese Central Bank's programme of share purchases, considerably reduces the risk of a sovereign debt crisis like the one seen in the euro zone.

Government forecasts of the primary deficit over the reconstruction period



Note: These forecasts are based on the hypothesis of a rise in the VAT rate from 2013 and a nominal GDP growth rate of about 2% on average over the period. This includes a rise in tax revenue distributed evenly over 10 years to finance reconstruction-related expenditure. The forecast covers only central and local government.

Source: Cabinet Office.

This text refers to the economic analysis and forecast for 2011-2012, which is available on the [OFCE website](#).

Fiscal reform: Now or never*

By Nicolas Delalande (*Centre d'histoire at Sciences Po*)

While the question of taxation was one of the major economic issues of the presidential election, it must not be forgotten that there often exists a gap between the political and media attention received by a set of campaign promises (what political scientists would call the “politics”) and their practical implications in terms of public policy (the “policies”). It is also worth asking whether any such tax

reform will actually take place.

For over a year, commentators and politicians have repeatedly argued that taxation would be a key question in the presidential election. Many saw it as one of the only real issues distinguishing the outgoing majority, which with the TEPA law of August 2007 had bet on a strategy of "fiscal shock" to unleash growth (50% cap on taxes, reduction of inheritance taxes, exemption of overtime, etc.), from the Left opposition, which has been quick to denounce the injustice and inefficacy of measures that undermine progressive taxation without obtaining the expected economic benefits, while deepening the deficit. The promise of reform, or even a tax "revolution", was high on the political agenda, particularly for the Left. However, intense conflicts and debates over taxes do not guarantee that the election of Francois Hollande will be followed by a genuine transformation of the French tax system. There may very well be a gap between the political and media attention received by campaign promises (the "politics") and their practical implications for public policy (the "policies"). However much tax reform may be touted during the campaign, it may well be distinctly less popular when it comes time for implementation, when political will runs up against varied forms of sometimes unanticipated resistance.

There has, nevertheless, been a felt need almost everywhere in Europe to increase the taxation of the wealthy, not so much to solve the problem of government deficits as to restore a semblance of fairness and shared effort in a time of economic crisis. A number of countries have embarked on this path (the top marginal rate of income tax is 57% in Sweden, 50% in Britain, and 45% in Germany), even though some have already sounded the retreat (David Cameron's Conservative government has proposed cutting the top marginal rate back to 45% in 2013). Even billionaires like Warren Buffett in the United States have called for raising taxes on better-off strata to put an end to the most blatant inequalities. This kind of

reform actually consists of backing off the policies of the last fifteen to twenty years by reversing the trend to erode the progressivity of the tax system: strictly speaking, this is less a matter of reform than of cancelling previous reforms. Increasing tax revenue no longer results as before from creating new tax measures but from removing the tax reductions and exemptions enacted in recent years. Hence the debate, both in the US and Europe, over the real nature of the “tax increases”: the Republicans accuse the Democrats of increasing the tax burden, while the latter claim to be merely reversing exemptions that they consider unwarranted and inefficient. Reform thus amounts to nothing more than the restoration of the situation *ex ante*. In France, for example, the Socialists have pledged to cancel what remains of the tax package of 2007 (after having removed the tax cap in 2011), to significantly reduce tax loopholes and to establish a new income tax bracket: the reference point for these proposals is in fact the actual system as it existed only five to ten years ago, with the exception of the promise added during the campaign to create an exceptional 75% bracket on incomes of over 1 million euros.

A more ambitious structural reform, for example along the lines proposed in the recent [book](#) by Camille Landais, Thomas Piketty and Emmanuel Saez, would involve an entirely different scale. Opening the “black box” of the redistribution machine actually implies a much wider debate on the missions of the tax system, its administrative organization and its relationship to social and family policy. This is where the “costs” of policy reform, such as the eventual cancellation – or modulation – of France’s “family quotient” tax-splitting system, may be felt most directly. In any case, the erosion of the belief that the only reforms that could possibly be any good involve reducing the tax burden means that the current environment has never been more favourable for initiating this debate. The political, social and financial implications of this new configuration will certainly be complex and demanding

in terms of democracy, but, in light of the numerous critics of the failings of the existing system, there is little doubt that 2012 offers a unique opportunity for undertaking ambitious reform. Tax reform implies the need for an effective political coalition to overcome the various social, institutional and technical obstacles that are likely to arise and to be able to take advantage of the favourable circumstances in which ideologies and beliefs that were thought to be firmly established are now on shaky ground. From a historical standpoint, it should not seem absurd that the current economic crisis, which is often compared to the 1930s, calls for and indeed even requires a renegotiation of the fiscal pact on a scale as significant as that experienced by Europe and America in the first third of the 20th century. The process of reform will, however, inevitably be more complex than before: the systems for collection and redistribution, now more sophisticated than ever, are based on an array of measures that have arisen in different periods and in unique political, economic and social contexts.

** This text is taken from the article [“The political economy of tax reform: a historical analysis”](#), which was published in a special Tax Reform issue of the OFCE Revue and is available on [the OFCE web site](#).*

Underlying deflation

[Christophe Blot](#), Marion Cochard, Bruno Ducoudré and [Eric Heyer](#)

A look at the latest statistics on price trends indicates that the risk of deflation seems to have given way to renewed

inflation in the major developed countries. So do we really need to fear the return of inflation, or are these economies still structurally deflationary?

First, note that the nature and scale of the economic crisis we have been living through since 2008 are reminiscent of what led to past periods of deflation (the crisis of 1929, the Japanese crisis of the 1990s, etc.). The recessionary pattern that began in 2008 has followed the same path: the shock to activity led to a slowdown in inflation – and sometimes lower prices or wages – in most of the developed countries. However, a fall in prices is not necessarily synonymous with deflation: this has to be long term and, above all, it must be anchored in expectations and a vicious cycle of debt deflation. But this deflationary scenario did not materialize. Far from sitting by idly, at the end of 2008 governments and central banks took fiscal and monetary measures to stabilize activity and limit the rise in unemployment. Moreover, independently of the response by economic policy, price trends were strongly influenced by changes in commodity prices. While the collapse in oil prices in the second half of 2008 accelerated the deflationary process, the rise in prices since 2009 has fuelled more general price rises and held off the risk of deflation. Moreover, business has partially cushioned the impact of the crisis by accepting cuts in margins, which has helped to mitigate rising unemployment, a key factor in the deflationary process.

In a study by the OFCE published in its journal of forecasts ([Prévisions de la Revue de l'OFCE](#)), we start from a wage-price model to develop a method for assessing the way that oil price dynamics and labour market adjustments affect changes in inflation. We show that if oil prices had continued their upward trend after they peaked in the summer of 2008, and if the adjustment on the labour market had been, in all countries, the same as in the US, then the year-on-year change in inflation in second quarter 2011 would have been lower, by

0.7 points in France to 3.4 points in the UK (Table 1). This confirms that these economies are still structurally deflationary.

Despite the central banks' repeated efforts at quantitative easing, they need not fear the return of inflation. The macroeconomic environment is still characterized by a risk of deflation, and therefore by the need for an accommodative monetary policy.

Impact of shocks on consumer prices

Year-on-year change

	Impact on the inflation rate...	2010				2011	
		Q1	Q2	Q3	T4	Q1	Q2
Germany	... of the speed of productivity adjustment	0.3	0.5	0.6	0.8	0.8	0.8
	... of the change in oil prices	0.0	0.2	0.2	0.3	0.4	0.4
	Total impact	0.3	0.7	0.8	1.0	1.2	1.3
France	... of the speed of productivity adjustment	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.1	0.1
	... of the change in oil prices	0.2	0.4	0.2	0.3	0.5	0.6
	Total impact	0.2	0.4	0.2	0.4	0.6	0.7
Italy	... of the speed of productivity adjustment	0.3	0.3	0.3	0.3	0.2	0.1
	... of the change in oil prices	0.6	0.8	0.6	0.5	0.6	0.6
	Total impact	0.8	1.2	1.0	0.8	0.8	0.8
Spain	... of the speed of productivity adjustment	0.0	-0.1	-0.2	-0.2	-0.3	-0.4
	... of the change in oil prices	0.0	0.3	0.3	0.3	0.4	0.5
	Total impact	0.0	0.2	0.1	0.0	0.1	0.1
UK	... of the speed of productivity adjustment	0.7	1.3	1.8	2.2	2.8	3.1
	... of the change in oil prices	0.1	0.1	-0.1	-0.1	0.1	0.3
	Total impact	0.8	1.4	1.7	2.2	2.9	3.4
USA	... of the speed of productivity adjustment	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
	... of the change in oil prices	0.5	0.4	0.1	0.0	0.2	0.4
	Total impact	0.5	0.4	0.1	0.0	0.2	0.4
Japan	... of the speed of productivity adjustment	0.6	0.8	0.9	1.0	1.1	1.2
	... of the change in oil prices	0.0	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.3	0.4
	Total impact	0.6	1.0	1.1	1.2	1.3	1.6

Source : National data, OFCE calculations.

Less austerity = more growth and less unemployment

[Eric Heyer](#) and [Xavier Timbeau](#)

The European Commission has just released its [spring forecast](#), which anticipates a recession in 2012 for the euro zone (“mild” in the words of the Commission, but still -0.3%), which is in line with [the OFCE’s economic analysis of March 2012](#).

The brutal fiscal austerity measures launched in 2010, which were intensified in 2011 and tightened even further in 2012 virtually throughout the euro zone (with the notable exception of Germany, Table 1 and 1a), are hitting activity in the zone hard. In 2012, the negative impact on the euro zone resulting from the combination of raising taxes and reducing the share of GDP that goes to expenditure will represent more than 1.5 GDP points. In a deteriorating fiscal situation (many euro zone countries had deficits of over 4% in 2011) and in order to continue to borrow at a reasonable cost, a strategy of forced deficit reduction has become the norm.

Table 1. The euro zone in 4 macroeconomic aggregates from 2009 to 2012

	2009	2010	2011	2012
GDP growth (%/yr)	-4,4	1,8	1,5	-0,4
Public deficit (% GDP)	-5,5	-5,5	-3,6	-2,9
Jobless rate (% active pop)	9,6	10,1	10,2	10,9
Fiscal impulse (% GDP)	1,7	-0,3	-1,1	-1,5

Sources : National accounts, OFCE calculations and forecasts.

This strategy is based on declarations that the 3% ceiling will be reached by 2013 or 2014, with balanced budgets to follow by 2016 or 2017 in most countries. However, these goals seem to be overly ambitious, as no country is going to meet its targets for 2013. The reason is that the economic slowdown

is undermining the intake of the tax revenue needed to balance budgets. An overly optimistic view of the impact of fiscal restraint on activity (the so-called fiscal multiplier) has been leading to unrealistic goals, which means that GDP growth forecasts must ultimately be systematically revised downward. The European Commission is thus revising its spring forecast for the euro zone in 2012 downward by 0.7 point compared to its autumn 2011 forecast. Yet there is now a broad consensus on the fact that fiscal multipliers are high in the short term, and even more so that full employment is still out of reach (here too, [many authors](#) agree with the [analyses made by the OFCE](#)). By underestimating the difficulty of reaching inaccessible targets, the euro zone members are locked in a spiral where jitters in the financial markets are driving ever greater austerity.

Unemployment is still rising in the euro zone and has hardly stopped increasing since 2009. The cumulative impact on economic activity is now undermining the legitimacy of the European project itself, and the drastic remedy is threatening the euro zone with collapse.

What would happen if the euro zone were to change course in 2012?

Assume that the negative fiscal impulse in the euro zone is on the order of -0.5 percent of GDP (instead of the expected total of -1.8 GDP points). This reduced fiscal effort could be repeated until the public deficit or debt reaches a fixed target. Because the effort would be more measured than in current plans, the burden of the adjustment would be spread out more fairly over the taxpayers in each country, while avoiding the burden of drastic cuts in public budgets.

Table 2 summarizes the results of this simulation. Less austerity leads to more growth in all the countries (Table 2a), and all the more so as the fiscal consolidation announced for 2012 intensifies. Our simulation also takes into account

the impact of the activity in one country on other countries through trade. Thus, Germany, which has an unchanged fiscal impulse in our scenario, would experience an 0.8 point increase in growth in 2012.

Table 2. Fiscal impulse of -0.5 GDP point in the euro zone in 2012

	GDP (%/yr)		Public deficit (% GDP)		Jobless rate (% active pop.)	
	2011	2012	2011	2012	2011	2012
2012, under current plans	1,5	-0,4	-3,6	-2,9	10,2	10,9
2012, if 0.5% GDP impulse		1,7		-3,1		9,7

Note: The impulse is the change in the structural deficit. The structural deficit is the public deficit excluding the impact of the economic cycle. A negative impulse reflects a restrictive fiscal policy. Here the public («administrations publiques», or "APU") deficit includes the central state, regional government and social security agencies.

Sources: National accounts, OFCE calculations and forecasts.

In the "less austerity" scenario, unemployment would decline instead of continuing to increase. In all the countries except Greece, the public deficit would be lower in 2012 than in 2011. Admittedly, this reduction would be less than in the initial scenario in certain countries, in particular those that have announced strong negative impulses (Spain, Italy, Ireland, Portugal and ... Greece), which are the ones most mistrusted by the financial markets. In contrast, in some countries, such as Germany and the Netherlands, the government deficit would shrink more than in the initial scenario, with the indirect positive effect of stronger growth outweighing the direct effect of less fiscal consolidation. For the euro zone as a whole, the public deficit would be 3.1 percentage points of GDP, against 2.9 points in the initial scenario. It is a small difference compared to more favorable growth (2.1%), along with lower unemployment (-1.2 points, Table 2) instead of an increase as in the initial scenario.

The key to the "less austerity" scenario is to enable the countries in greatest difficulty, those most obliged to implement the austerity measures that are plunging their economies into the vicious spiral, to reduce their deficits more slowly. The euro zone is split into two camps. On the one hand, there are those who are demanding strong, even brutal austerity to give credibility to the sustainability of public

finances, and which have ignored or deliberately underestimated the consequences for growth; on the other are those who, like us, are recommending less austerity to sustain more growth and a return to full employment. The first have failed: the sustainability of public finances has not been secured, and recession and the default of one or more countries are threatening. The second strategy is the only way to restore social and economic – and even fiscal – stability, as it combines a sustainable public purse with a better balance between fiscal restraint and employment and growth, as we proposed in a [letter to the new President of the French Republic](#).

Table 1a. Details on the 4 macroeconomic aggregates for the euro zone from 2009 to 2012

	GDP growth (%/yr)				Public deficit (% GDP)				Jobless rate (% active pop.)				Fiscal impulse (% GDP)			
	2009	2010	2011	2012	2009	2010	2011	2012	2009	2010	2011	2012	2009	2010	2011	2012
DEU	-5,1	3,6	3,1	0,3	-3,2	-4,3	-1,0	-1,1	7,8	7,1	6,0	5,5	0,7	1,2	-0,9	-0,3
FRA	-2,6	1,4	1,7	0,2	-7,5	-7,1	-5,2	-4,4	9,2	9,4	9,3	9,8	2,5	-0,7	-1,7	-1,7
ITA	-5,5	1,8	0,5	-1,7	-5,4	-4,6	-3,8	-2,8	7,8	8,4	8,4	9,4	0,8	-0,4	-1,0	-2,9
ESP	-3,7	-0,1	0,7	-1,1	-11,2	-9,3	-8,5	-6,5	18,0	20,1	21,7	23,5	4,1	-1,9	-1,2	-3,4
NLD	-3,5	1,6	1,3	-1,1	-5,6	-5,1	-5,0	-4,5	3,7	4,5	4,5	5,4	3,8	-1,5	-0,2	-1,9
BEL	-2,7	2,3	1,9	0,1	-5,8	-4,1	-4,0	-3,4	7,9	8,3	7,2	7,6	1,8	-0,3	-0,1	-1,4
PRT	-2,9	1,4	-1,5	-2,9	-10,1	-9,8	-4,0	-4,5	10,7	12,1	12,9	13,4	4,9	-0,6	-5,5	-3,0
IRL	-7,0	-0,4	0,7	-0,3	-14,4	-32,0	-10,1	-8,7	11,9	13,7	14,5	14,9	3,7	-4,1	-2,5	-3,0
GRC	-2,3	-4,4	-6,2	-5,3	-15,8	-10,6	-9,3	-7,3	9,5	12,5	17,2	19,5	3,4	-7,9	-5,6	-5,3
FIN	-8,4	3,7	2,8	0,7	-2,5	-2,5	-1,2	-0,9	8,8	8,4	7,8	7,5	0,4	-1,5	-1,1	-1,1
AUT	-3,6	2,5	3,0	0,4	-4,1	-4,4	-3,4	-3,0	4,8	4,4	4,2	4,5	0,4	0,6	-0,5	-1,2

Note: DEU Germany; FRA France; ITA Italy; ESP Spain; NLD Netherlands; BEL Belgium; PRT Portugal; IRL Ireland; GRC Greece; FIN Finland; AUT Austria.

Sources: National accounts, OFCE calculations and forecasts.

Table 2b. Fiscal impulse of -0.5 GDP point in the euro zone countries in 2012

	DEU	FRA	ITA	ESP	NLD	BEL	PRT	IRL	GRC	FIN	AUT
GDP growth rate (%/yr)	1,1	2,2	1,4	2,6	2,1	1,8	0,7	2,8	0,2	1,9	1,8
Difference with Table 1a	0,8	2,0	3,1	3,7	3,2	1,7	3,6	3,1	5,5	1,2	1,4
Of which: - direct impact	0,0	1,2	2,4	2,9	2,5	0,9	2,5	2,5	4,8	0,6	0,7
- impact via trade	0,8	0,8	0,7	0,8	0,7	0,8	1,1	0,6	0,7	0,6	0,7
Public deficit (% GDP)	-0,7	-4,6	-3,7	-7,5	-4,3	-3,4	-5,2	-9,7	-9,4	-0,9	-3,0
Difference with Table 1a	0,4	-0,2	-0,9	-1,0	0,2	0,0	-0,7	-1,0	-2,1	0,0	0,0
Jobless rate (% active pop.)	5,1	8,8	7,9	21,6	3,8	6,7	11,6	13,3	16,8	6,9	3,8
Difference with Table 1a	-0,4	-1,0	-1,5	-1,9	-1,6	-0,9	-1,8	-1,5	-2,7	-0,6	-0,7

Sources: National accounts, OFCE calculations and forecasts.

Let's negotiate a global carbon price signal – quickly!

By Stéphane Dion [\[1\]](#) and [Éloi Laurent](#)

Two decades after the Rio Conference, and just as a new climate conference is opening in Bonn on Monday 14 May 2012, we must admit to collective failure in combating human-induced climate change. We cannot escape serious climate disruption if we continue down this same path. We must change direction, and we must do it quickly.

The International Energy Agency forecasts warming of over 3.5°C by the end of the 21st century if all countries respect their commitments, and by more than 6°C if they content themselves with their present policies. At that level of warming, climate science warns us that our planet will become much less hospitable for humans and all other forms of life.

At the Durban Conference in December 2011, the countries expressed their grave concern about the gap between their

commitments and achieving the objective of a 2°C limit on increased global warming (relative to the pre-industrial era). They promised to re-double their efforts to bridge this gap. But they failed to make any commitment to achieve more stringent targets. We are thus facing an increasingly untenable gap between the urgent need for action and the inertia of international negotiations.

The developed countries are refusing to strengthen their climate policies so long as the other major emitters don't do the same. But the emerging economies, particularly China and India, with annual GDP growth rates of 8 to 10%, will not accept in the foreseeable future targets for the reduction of the volume of their greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. On the other hand, these countries might be more open to the idea of setting a price per ton of CO₂ that was standardized at the global level, from which they would derive revenue, and which their economic competitors would also be required to levy.

We believe that the best instrument for the international coordination needed to combat climate change is a global carbon price signal. This is why we are proposing that the forthcoming negotiations focus on this crucial goal.

Here is what we are proposing (for more detail, see, in French, <http://www.ofce.sciences-po.fr/pdf/dtravail/WP2012-15.pdf> and, in English): every country would make a commitment to introduce, in their respective jurisdictions, a carbon price aligned with a scientifically validated international standard, in order for the world to achieve or at least come as close as possible to the objective of keeping global warming below 2°C. Each country would decide whether to extract this levy through taxation or through a system of ceilings and trading in emissions permits (a "carbon market").

Governments would be free to invest, as they see fit, revenues from the carbon emission levy and from the corresponding

elimination of fossil fuel subsidies. They could, for example, invest in research and development in clean energy and public transportation, etc. They could also choose to address social inequalities with respect to access to energy.

Developed countries would be required to set aside part of their revenues to help developing countries introduce policies to mitigate emissions, to adapt facilities and to create carbon sinks (by means of reforestation, for example). The contributions of each country would be based on what their respective GHG emissions represent relative to the total emissions of all the developed countries.

Under this international agreement, countries would have the right to levy border taxes on products from countries that have not established a carbon price in accordance with the international standard. The message would be clear to all large emitters: if you do not levy a carbon tax on your products before you export them, the other countries will do so in your place, and it is they who will collect the revenues. Each country will understand that it is in its own commercial interests to comply with the international agreement, to tax its own emissions and to use the corresponding revenues as it sees fit.

In this way, the world would have available an instrument that is vital to its sustainable development. At last, carbon emitters would be required to pay the environmental price for their actions. Consumers and manufacturers would have an incentive to choose lower-carbon-content goods and services and to invest in new emission-reducing forms of technology.

We need to negotiate a global carbon price signal, and quickly. What better place to do this than at Rio, where the problem of climate change was first recognized by the international community 20 years ago?

[1] Stéphane Dion is a Member of the House of Commons of Canada; as Canada's then Minister of the Environment, he chaired the 11th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, held in Montréal in 2005 (COP 11).

Italy: Mario Monti's challenge

By [Céline Antonin](#)

From his arrival in power on 12 November 2011, Mario Monti has explicitly set out his aims, which are structured around three points: fiscal discipline, growth and equity. Will he meet the challenge?

Mario Monti succeeded Silvio Berlusconi at a time when investors' lack of confidence in Italy was growing continuously, as was seen in the widening gap with German bond rates and the sharp increase in CDS prices.

Ici graph

To meet his first objective of fiscal discipline, in December 2011 one of the government's first measures was to adopt an austerity plan, which came to 63 billion euros over three years. This plan, the third in a single year, has the evocative name of *Salva Italia* (Save Italy) and aims to achieve a near balance of the public books by 2013 (see [Italy: Mario Monti's wager](#) in French).

The second objective, to restore growth and enhance the country's competitiveness, is addressed in the *Cresci Italia*

plan ("Grow Italy") adopted in stormy conditions by the Council of Ministers on 20 January 2012. This plan calls for further reforms, including to simplify administrative procedures (tendering procedures, business creation, digital switchover, etc.) and to liberalize the regulated professions, energy, transportation, and insurance, and in particular to enhance labor market flexibility. The ease with which the austerity measures contained in this second plan were adopted was matched by their poor reception, in particular with regard to discussion of the amendments to Article 18 of the Labour Code, which provides protection against dismissal for employees and workers in firms with more than fifteen employees.

Finally, with respect to equity, progress is still slow, especially in the fight against tax evasion and against the underground economy.

Italians know that these measures will be painful: the financial daily *Il Sole 24 Ore* announced that the annual increase in taxes for an average family living in Lombardy will come to 1,500 euros per year, and almost 2,000 euros for a family from Lazio. Yet up to now the people of Italy have displayed great awareness of the national interest, accepting the cure of fiscal consolidation in a spirit of resignation. As for the financial markets, they initially relaxed the pressure on the country, with the gap in long-term government rates with Germany falling from 530 to 280 basis points from early January to mid-March 2012. Mario Monti's actions are not the only explanation: the ECB's purchase of bonds in late 2011 and its two 3-year refinancing operations (LTRO) of the banking system for a total of 1,000 billion euros, which greatly benefited Italy's banks, definitely helped to ease the pressure on rates. Moreover, the success of the plan for the exchange of Greek debt with private creditors also contributed to easing rates.

The situation is still fragile and volatile: the weakness

Spain showed regarding fiscal discipline was enough to trigger a renewed loss of confidence in Italy, as the interest rate differential with Germany on long-term bonds began to rise again, reaching 400 basis points in early May 2012, as did CDS premiums (graph).

So what are the prospects for the next two years? After a recession that began in 2011, with two quarters of negative growth, Italy is expected to experience a difficult year in 2012, with GDP falling sharply by 1.7% as a result of the three austerity plans approved in 2011. Their impact will continue to be felt in 2013, with a further contraction in GDP of -0.9% [\[1\]](#). In the absence of additional austerity measures, this will reduce the country's deficit, but less than expected, due to the [multiplier effect](#): the deficit will fall to 2.8% of GDP in 2012, and to 1.7% in 2013, i.e. a pace of deficit reduction that falls short of its commitment to balance the public finances by 2013.

[\[1\]](#) The IMF forecast is more pessimistic for 2012, with growth of -1.9%, and more optimistic for 2013, at -0.3 %.

**Competitiveness and
industrial demand: The**

difficulties facing the French-German couple

[Jean-Luc Gaffard](#)

The obsession with competitiveness has returned to centre stage with the election campaign. This reflects the reality that French companies are indeed suffering a loss of competitiveness, which is behind the deterioration in foreign trade for almost a decade. This loss is clear vis-à-vis the emerging markets and explains the trend towards relocating abroad. It is also clear vis-à-vis firms from other developed countries, mainly in the euro zone and in particular German companies. This latter situation is especially serious, as it challenges the coherence of European construction ([cf. OFCE, note 19: Competitiveness and industrial development: a European challenge in French](#)).

The gap in competitiveness that has emerged with Germany is clearly based on non-price competition. One of the reasons for this is Germany's superior business model, which is characterized by the maintenance of a network of local businesses of all sizes that focus on their core business and on the international fragmentation of production. This model is especially suitable for business development that is targeted at global markets, and it largely protects the countries hosting these companies from the risk of deindustrialization.

It would, nevertheless, be a mistake to ignore that this development is also the product of an adverse change in price competitiveness. This reflects labour market reforms in Germany, which lowered the relative cost of labour, as well as strategies that are based on the segmentation of production and the outsourcing of intermediate segments, which have also contributed to lowering production costs.

Germany has thus managed to virtually stabilize its market

share of global exports by increasing their level in the European Union (+1.7% in the 2000s) and even more so in the euro zone (+2.3%), while France has lost market share in these same areas (3.1% and 3.4%, respectively).

Two developments have particularly hurt France's industry. Its network of industrial SMEs has fallen apart. They were hit less by barriers to entry than by barriers to growth. All too often SME managers have been inclined or encouraged to sell the enterprises to large corporations rather than to ensure their growth. This is due both to the lack of genuine partnerships with these corporations and to the difficulties experienced in obtaining permanent financing from the banks and markets. For their part, the large industrial firms, both those operating on a multitude of local markets and those in the international markets, have chosen to focus on acquisitions and on the geographical decentralization of both their operations and their equipment and services suppliers. This strategy has been designed to meet geographical shifts in demand and to deal with the demand for immediate profitability set by volatile shareholders, but this has come in part at the expense of the development of local production networks. This process involved a vast movement of mergers and acquisitions that primarily drew on financial skills. The financial institutions were, in turn, converted to the universal banking model, abandoning some of their traditional role of being lending banks and investment banks. These concomitant developments have proved disastrous for overall competitiveness, particularly as hourly labour costs in industry were rising simultaneously.

There are two requirements for restoring the competitiveness of French companies and thereby encouraging the country's re-industrialization. The first is to allow immediate control of labour costs and the restoration of profit margins; this could be helped in particular by tax measures that would adjust the financing of a portion of social protection. The second

requirement is to promote the reorganization of industry through the creation of a network of stable relationships between all those involved in the industrial process, especially by the use of aid that is conditioned on cooperation between large and small firms in "competitiveness clusters".

This medium-term effort will nevertheless largely remain ineffective if cooperative policies are not implemented across Europe. These policies need both to stimulate supply through the implementation of technology development programmes and to boost internal demand wherever it is clearly insufficient to satisfy production capacity.