

Small recovery after a big crisis

By the Analysis and Forecasting Department

[This text summarizes the 2016-2017 outlook for the global economy and the euro zone. Click here to consult the complete version \[in French\].](#)

Global growth is once again passing through a zone of turbulence. While growth will take place, it is nevertheless being revised downwards for 2016 and 2017 to 2.9% and 3.1%, respectively. The slowdown is first of all hitting the emerging countries, with the decline in Chinese growth continuing and even worsening (6.1% anticipated for 2017, down from 7.6% on average in 2012-2014). The slowdown in Chinese demand is hitting world trade and fuelling lower oil prices, which in turn is exacerbating the difficulties facing oil and commodity producers. Finally, the prospect for the normalization of US monetary policy is resulting in a reflux of capital. The dollar is appreciating even as the currencies of the emerging countries of Asia and Latin America are depreciating. While the industrialized countries are also suffering from the Chinese slowdown through the demand channel, growth is resilient there thanks to falling oil prices. The support provided by monetary policy is being cut back in the US, but is strengthening in the euro zone, keeping the euro at a low level. Countries are no longer systematically adopting austerity policies. In these conditions, growth will slow in the US, from 2.4% in 2015 to 1.9% in 2016 and then 1.6% in 2017. The recovery will pick up pace slightly in the euro zone, driven mainly by the dynamism of Germany and Spain and the improved outlook in France and Italy. For the euro zone as a whole, growth should come to 1.8% in 2016 and 1.7% in 2017. This will push down the unemployment rate, although by year-end 2017 it will still be

2 points above its pre-crisis level (9.3%, against 7.3% at year-end 2007).

While the United States seems to have avoided the risk of deflation, the euro zone is still under threat. Inflation is close to zero, and the very low level of expectations for long-term inflation reflects the ECB's difficulty in regaining control of inflation. Persistent unemployment indicates some continuing shortcomings in managing demand in the euro zone, which has in fact been based entirely on monetary policy. While the ECB's actions are a necessary condition for accelerating growth, they are not sufficient, and must be supplemented by more active fiscal policy.

At the level of the euro zone as a whole, overall fiscal policy is neutral (expansionary in Germany and Italy in 2016 but restrictive in France and even more so in Greece), whereas it needs to be more expansionary in order to bring unemployment down more rapidly and help to avert deflationary risks. Furthermore, the continuing moderate growth is leading to the accumulation of current account surpluses in the euro zone (3.2% in 2015). While imbalances within the euro zone have been corrected to some extent, this mainly took place through adjustments by countries in deficit prior to the crisis. Consequently, the surplus in the euro zone's current account will eventually pose risks to the level of the euro, which could appreciate once the monetary stimulus ends, thereby slowing growth.

Table. Outlook for world growth

Annual growth rate (%)

	Weight in the total(1)	GDP in volume		
		2015	2016	2017
DEU	3,7	1,4	1,9	1,6
FRA	2,6	1,2	1,6	1,6
ITA	2,3	0,6	1,2	1,0
ESP	1,6	3,2	3,3	2,4
EUZ	13,4	1,5	1,8	1,7
GBR	2,4	2,3	2,1	1,7
NPM(2)	2,4	3,8	3,1	3,2
UE 28	18,6	1,9	2,0	1,8
USA	17,2	2,4	1,9	1,7
JPN	4,8	0,5	0,7	0,4
Developed countries	44,5	1,9	1,7	1,6
RUS	3,6	-3,7	-1,0	1,0
CHN	14,9	6,9	6,3	6,1
Other Asian countries	16,6	5,2	5,2	5,4
Latin America	8,8	-0,4	-0,9	1,5
World	100	2,9	2,9	3,1

(1) Weight according to GDP and PPP estimated by the IMF for 2008.

(2) Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic, Romania, Bulgaria and Croatia.

Sources: IMF, OECD, national sources, OFCE calculations and forecast, April 2016.

Is missing disinflation a uniquely American phenomenon?

By [Paul Hubert](#), Mathilde Le Moigne

Are the dynamics of inflation after the 2007-2009 crisis atypical? According to Paul Krugman, "If inflation had responded to the Great Recession and aftermath the way it did

in previous big slumps, we would be deep in [deflation](#) by now; we aren't." In fact, after 2009, inflation in the US has remained surprisingly stable in terms of changes in real activity. This phenomenon has been called "missing disinflation". Can a phenomenon like this be seen in the euro zone?

Despite the worst recession since the 1929 crisis, the inflation rate has remained stable at around 1.5% on average between 2008 and 2011 in the US and 1% in the euro zone. Does this mean that the Phillips curve, which links inflation to real activity, has lost its empirical validity? In a [note](#) in 2016, Olivier Blanchard argued instead that the [Phillips curve](#), in its simplest original version, is still a valid instrument for understanding the relationship between inflation and unemployment, in spite of this "missing disinflation".

Blanchard nevertheless noted that the relationship between the two variables has weakened, because inflation increasingly depends on inflation expectations, which are themselves anchored to the inflation target of the US Fed. In an [article](#) in 2015, Coibion and Gorodnichenko explained this missing disinflation in the US by the fact that inflation expectations are influenced by variations in the most visible prices, such as fluctuations in the price of oil. Furthermore, since 2015 inflation expectations have declined concomitantly with oil prices.

The difficulty of accounting for recent trends in inflation through the Phillips curve led us to evaluate its potential determinants in a [recent working paper](#) and to consider whether this "missing disinflation" phenomenon was also present in the euro zone. Based on a standard Phillips curve, we did not come up with the results of Coibion and Gorodnichenko when the euro zone was considered in its entirety. In other words, real activity and inflation expectations do describe changes in inflation.

However, this result appears to come from an aggregation bias between the behaviours of national inflation within the euro zone. In particular, we found a significant divergence between the countries of Northern Europe (Germany, France), which demonstrate a general tendency towards *missing inflation*, and countries on the periphery (Spain, Italy, Greece), which exhibit periods of *missing disinflation*. This divergence nevertheless appears right from the start of our sample, that is to say, in the early years of the creation of the euro zone, and seems to reverse around 2006, without any significant change during the crisis of 2008-2009.

Unlike what happened in the US, it appears that the euro zone has not experienced missing disinflation as a result of the economic and financial crisis of 2008-2009. It seems instead that divergences in inflation in Europe preceded the crisis, and tended to subside with the crisis.

Give Recovery a Chance

By iAGS team, under the direction of [Xavier Timbeau](#)

The ongoing recovery of the Euro Area (EA) economy is too slow to achieve a prompt return to full employment. Despite apparent improvement in the labour market, the crisis is still developing under the covers, with the risk of leaving long-lasting “scars”, or a “scarification” of the social fabric in the EA. Moreover, the EA is lagging behind other developed economies and regardless of a relatively better performance in terms of public debt and current account, the current low rate of private investment is preparing a future of reduced potential growth and damaged competitiveness. So far, the

Juncker Plan has not achieved the promised boost to investment. The internal rebalancing of the EA may fuel deflationary pressure if it is not dealt with through faster wage growth in surplus countries. Failure to use fiscal space where it is available will continue to weigh down on internal demand. Monetary policy may not succeed in the future in avoiding a sharp appreciation of the Euro against our trade partners' currencies. Such an appreciation of the real effective exchange rate of the Euro would lock the EA in a prolonged period of stagnation and low inflation, if not deflation.

A window of opportunity has been opened by monetary policy since 2012. Active demand management aimed at reducing the EA current account combined with internal rebalancing of the EA is needed to avoid a worrying "new normal". Financial fragmentation has to be limited and compensated by a reduction of sovereign spreads inside the euro area. Active policies against growing inequalities should complement this approach. Public investment and the use of all policy levers to foster a transition toward a zero carbon economy are ways to stimulate demand and respect the golden rules of public finance stability.

For further information, see [iAGS 2016 report](#)

An ever so fragile recovery

By the Department of Analysis and Forecasting, under the direction of [Eric Heyer](#) and [Xavier Timbeau](#)

This text summarizes the OFCE's [economic forecast for 2015-2017](#) for the euro zone and the rest of the world.

The figures for euro zone growth in the first half of 2015 have confirmed the upswing glimpsed at the end of 2014. While the zone's return to growth might once have been taken to indicate the end of the global economic and financial crisis that struck in 2008, the turbulence hitting the emerging countries, particularly over the summer in China, is a reminder that the crisis ultimately seems to be continuing. China's economic weight and its role in world trade are now so substantial that, even in the case of a soft landing, the impact on growth in the developed countries would be significant. We nevertheless anticipate that the scenario for a recovery need not be called into question, and that euro zone growth will be broadly supported by favourable factors (lower oil prices and ECB monetary support) and by some weakening of unfavourable factors (easing of fiscal policies). But the fact remains that the situation in the developing world will add new uncertainty to an already fragile recovery.

Between 2012 and 2014, the euro zone economies stagnated at the very time that the United States turned in average GDP growth of 2%. The recovery that got underway after the sharp contraction in 2008-2009 was quickly cut short in the euro zone by the sovereign debt crisis, which led almost immediately to the uncontrolled tightening of financial conditions and the reinforcement of the fiscal consolidation being implemented in the Member States, as they searched for market credibility.

The euro zone then plunged into a new recession. In 2015, these economic policy shocks are no longer weighing on demand. The ECB helped to reduce sovereign debt risk premiums by announcing the Outright Monetary Transaction programme (OMT) in September 2012 and then by implementing quantitative easing so as to improve financial conditions and promote a fall in the euro. In terms of fiscal policy, while in some countries

the consolidation phase is far from over, the measures being taken are smaller in scale and frequency. Furthermore, growth will also be helped by the fall in oil prices, which should last, and the resulting gains in household purchasing power should in turn fuel private consumption. These factors thus reflect an environment that is much more favourable and propitious for growth.

However, it is clear that this scenario depends on some volatile elements, such as the fall in oil prices and the weaker euro. The Chinese slowdown adds another element of risk to the scenario, which is based on the assumption that China will make a smooth transition from an export-oriented growth model to one driven by domestic demand. We expect the euro zone to grow at a rate of 1.5% in 2015 and 1.8% in 2016 and 2017. The main short-term risks to this scenario are negative. If oil prices go up and the euro doesn't stay down, and if the slowdown in the emerging countries turns into an economic and financial crisis, then growth worldwide and in the euro zone will be significantly lower. This risk is particularly critical given the very high level of unemployment still plaguing the zone (11% in August 2015). Nevertheless, given the pace of anticipated growth, we expect the unemployment rate to fall in 2016-2017 by around 0.6 percentage point per year. At this pace, it will take almost seven years to bring the rate back to its pre-crisis level. So while the prospects for recovery from the 2008 crisis are uncertain, the social crisis undoubtedly has a long time to run.

Greece: an agreement, again and again

By [Céline Antonin](#), Raul Sampognaro, [Xavier Timbeau](#), [Sébastien Villemot](#)

<i>... La même nuit que la nuit d'avant</i>	[...The same
night as the night before	
<i>Les mêmes endroits deux fois trop grands</i>	The same
places, twice too big	
<i>T'avances comme dans des couloirs</i>	You
walk through the corridors	
<i>Tu t'arranges pour éviter les miroirs</i>	You
try to avoid the mirrors	
<i>Mais ça continue encore et encore ...</i>	But it
just goes on and on...]	

[Francis Cabrel, *Encore et encore*, 1985.](#)

Just hours before an exceptional EU summit on Greece, an agreement could be signed that would lead to a deal on the second bail-out package for Greece, releasing the final tranche of 7.2 billion euros. Greece could then meet its deadlines in late June with the IMF (1.6 billion euros) as well as those in July and August with the ECB (6.6 billion euros) and again with the IMF (0.45 billion euros). At the end of August, Greece's debt to the IMF could rise by almost 1.5 billion euros, as the IMF is contributing 3.5 billion euros to the 7.2 billion euro tranche.

Greece has to repay a total of 8.6 billion euros by September, and nearly 12 billion by the end of the year, which means funding needs that exceed the 7.2 billion euros covered by the negotiations with the Brussels Group (i.e. the ex-Troika). To deal with this, the Hellenic Financial Stability Fund (HFSF) could be used, to the tune of about 10 billion euros, but it

will no longer be available for recapitalizing the banks.

If an agreement is reached, it will almost certainly be difficult to stick to it. First, Greece will have to face the current bank run (despite the apparent calm in front of the bank branches, more than 6 billion euros were withdrawn last week according to the *Financial Times*). Moreover, even if an agreement can put off for a time the scenario of a Greek exit from the euro zone, the prospect of exceptional taxes or a tax reform could deter the return of funds to the country's banks. Furthermore, the agreement is likely to include a primary surplus of 1% of GDP by the end of 2015. But the [information on the execution of the state budget](#) up to May 2015 (published 18 June 2015) showed that revenue continues to be below the initial forecast (- 1 billion euros), reflecting the country's very poor economic situation since the start of 2015. It is true that the lower tax revenues were more than offset by lower spending (down almost 2 billion). But this is cash basis accounting. The [monthly bulletin](#) for April 2015, published on 8 June 2015, shows that the central government payment arrears have increased by 1.1 billion euros since the beginning of 2015. It seems impossible that, even with an excellent tourist season, the Greek government could make up this lag in six months and generate a primary surplus of 1.8 billion euros calculated on an accrual basis.

A new round of fiscal tightening would penalize activity that is already at half-mast, and it could be even more inefficient in that this would create strong incentives to underreport taxes in a context where access to liquidity will be particularly difficult. The Greek government could try to play with tax collection, but introducing a new austerity plan would be suicidal politically and economically. Discussion needs to get started on a third aid package, including in particular negotiations on the reduction of Greece's debt and with the counterparties to this relief.

Any agreement reached in the coming days risks being very

fragile. Reviving some growth in Greece would require that financing for the economy is functioning once again, and that some confidence was restored. It would also require addressing Greece's problems in depth and finding an agreement that was sustainable over several years, with short-term steps that need to be adapted to the country's current situation. In our study, "[Greece on the tightrope](#) [in French, or the English-language post describing the study at <http://www.ofce.sciences-po.fr/blog/greece-tightrope/>]," we analysed the macroeconomic conditions for the sustainability of the Greek debt. More than ever before, Greece is on the tightrope. And the euro zone with it.

Greece on a tightrope

By [Céline Antonin](#), Raul Sampognaro, [Xavier Timbeau](#) and [Sébastien Villemot](#)

[This text summarizes the special study, "Greece on a tightrope"](#)

Since early 2015, Greece's new government has been facing intense pressure. At the very time that it is negotiating to restructure its debt, it is also facing a series of repayment deadlines. On 12 May 2015, 750 million euros was paid to the IMF by drawing on the country's international reserves, a sign that liquidity constraints are becoming more and more pressing, as is evidenced by [the letter](#) sent by Alex Tsipras to Christine Lagarde a few days before the deadline. The respite will be short: in June, the country has to make another payment to the IMF for 1.5 billion euros. These first two deadlines are only a prelude to the "wall of debt" that

the government must deal with in the summer when it faces repayments of 6.5 billion euros to the ECB.

Up to now, Greece has made its payments despite its difficulties and the suspension of the bailout program negotiated with the “ex-Troika”. Thus, 7.2 billion euros in remaining disbursements have been blocked since February 2015; Greece has to come to an agreement with the former Troika before June 30 if it is to benefit from this financial windfall, otherwise it will fail to meet its payment deadlines to the ECB and IMF and thus default.

Besides Greece’s external repayments, the country must also meet its current expenses (civil servant salaries, retirement pensions). But the news on the fiscal front is not very encouraging (see [State Budget Execution Monthly Bulletin, March 2015](#)): for the first three months of the year, current revenue was nearly 600 million euros below projections. Only the use of its European holding funds, combined with an accounting reduction in expenditures (1.5 billion euros less than forecast) allowed the Greek government to generate a surplus of 1.7 billion euros and to meet its deadlines. So by using bookkeeping operations, the Greek government was able to transfer its debt either to public bodies or to its providers, thus confirming the tight liquidity constraints facing the State. Preliminary data at the end of April (to be taken with caution because they are neither definitive nor consolidated for all government departments) seem nevertheless to qualify this observation. [At end April](#), tax revenues had returned to their expected level; however, the government’s ability to generate cash to avoid a payment default is due to its holding down public spending through the accounting operations described above. These accounting manipulations are simply emergency measures, and it is high time, six years after the onset of the Greek crisis, to put an end to this psychodrama and finally find a lasting solution to Greece’s fiscal difficulties.

Our study, ["Greece on a tightrope"](#), considers what would be the best way to resolve the Greek debt crisis over the long term and the potential consequences of a Greek exit from the euro zone. We conclude that the most reasonable scenario would be to restructure the country's debt, with a significant reduction in its present value (cutting it to 100% of Greek GDP). This is the only way to significantly reduce the likelihood of a Grexit, and is in the interest not only of Greece but also of the euro zone as a whole. Furthermore, this scenario would reduce the scale of the internal devaluation needed to stabilize Greece's external position.

If the Eurogroup were to refuse to restructure Greece's debt, a new assistance program would then be needed in order to deal with the current crisis of confidence and to ensure funding for the cash needs of the Greek State over the coming years. According to our calculations, this solution would require a third bailout plan of around 95 billion euros, and its success would depend on Greece being able to generate major primary budget surpluses (of around 4% to 5% of Greek GDP) over the coming decades. Historical experience shows that, due to political constraints, there is no guarantee of being able to run a surplus of this magnitude for such a long time, so this commitment is not very credible. A new assistance program would not therefore eliminate the risk that the Greek State would face yet another financial crisis in the coming years.

In other words, the full repayment of the Greek debt is based on the fiction of running a budget surplus for several decades. Accepting a Greek exit from the euro zone would imply a significant loss of claims that the world (mainly Europe) holds both on the Greek public sector (250 billion euros) and on the private sector (also on the order of 250 billion). To this easily quantifiable loss would be added the financial, economic, political and geopolitical impact of Greece's departure from the euro zone and possibly the European Union. This might look like an easy choice, since writing off 200

billion euros in loans to the Greek State would make it possible to end this psychodrama for once and for all. But the political situation is deadlocked, and it is difficult to give up 200 billion euros without very strong counterparties and without dealing with the issue of moral hazard, in particular the possibility that this could induce other euro zone countries to demand large-scale restructurings of their own public debt.

The planetary alignment has not always been favourable to the euro zone countries

By [Eric Heyer](#) and Raul Sampognaro

In 2015, the euro zone economies will benefit from a favourable [“planetary alignment”](#) (with the euro and oil prices down and financial constraints on the economy easing), which should trigger [a virtuous circle of growth](#). Over the previous four years (2011-2014), the “planetary alignment” that existed was in a diametrically opposite direction: the euro and oil prices were high, with financing conditions and the fiscal stance very tight.

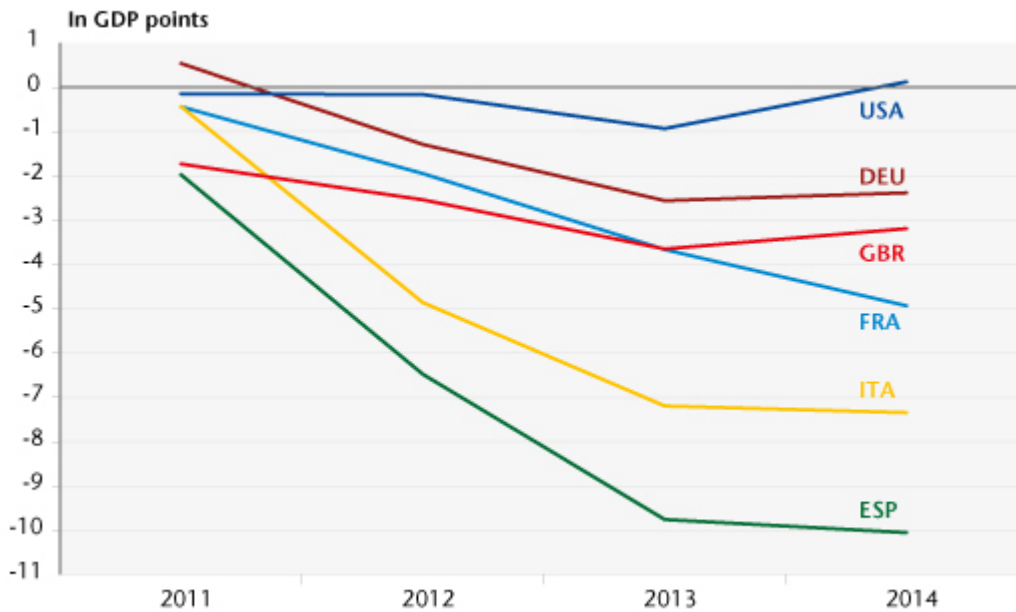
In [a recent article](#), we propose an evaluation of the impact of these four factors on the economic performance of six major developed countries since 2011 (France, Germany, Italy, Spain, the UK and USA).

It is clear from our analysis that the combination of these

shocks explains a large part of the differences in growth recorded during the period 2011-2014 between the United States and the major European economies. A non-negligible part of this performance gap is explained in particular by the difference in the economic policies adopted, with a policy mix that has been much more restrictive in the euro zone than in the case of the US. In particular, a very sharp fiscal adjustment took place in the countries experiencing pressure on their sovereign debt, such as Spain and Italy. In addition, the effects of the pressure on sovereign debt were multiplied by financial fragmentation, which can be seen in the deterioration of private sector financing terms, whereas the quantitative easing measures taken by the Fed and the Bank of England helped to prop up financing conditions in these countries. It was not until Mario Draghi's speech in July 2012 and [the announcement of the OMT programme](#) in September 2012 that the ECB's actions were sufficient [to reduce the financial pressure](#). While exchange rate trends tended to support activity in the euro zone throughout 2011-2014, the contribution of this factor depended on the way the various countries were integrated with global trade flows [\[1\]](#) and on the scale of wage disinflation, which was particularly pronounced in Spain. Finally, the rise in oil prices held back Europe's growth, while it had less impact in the United States, which [benefited from the exploitation of shale oil](#).

The cumulative loss in GDP was very significant in Spain (-10 points between 2011 and 2014), Italy (-7.5 points) and France (-5 points) and more moderate in the UK (-3 points) and Germany (-2.5 points). In contrast, the cumulative impact since 2011 on growth in the United States was zero, suggesting that real growth in the US was in line with spontaneous growth [\[2\]](#) (Figure 1).

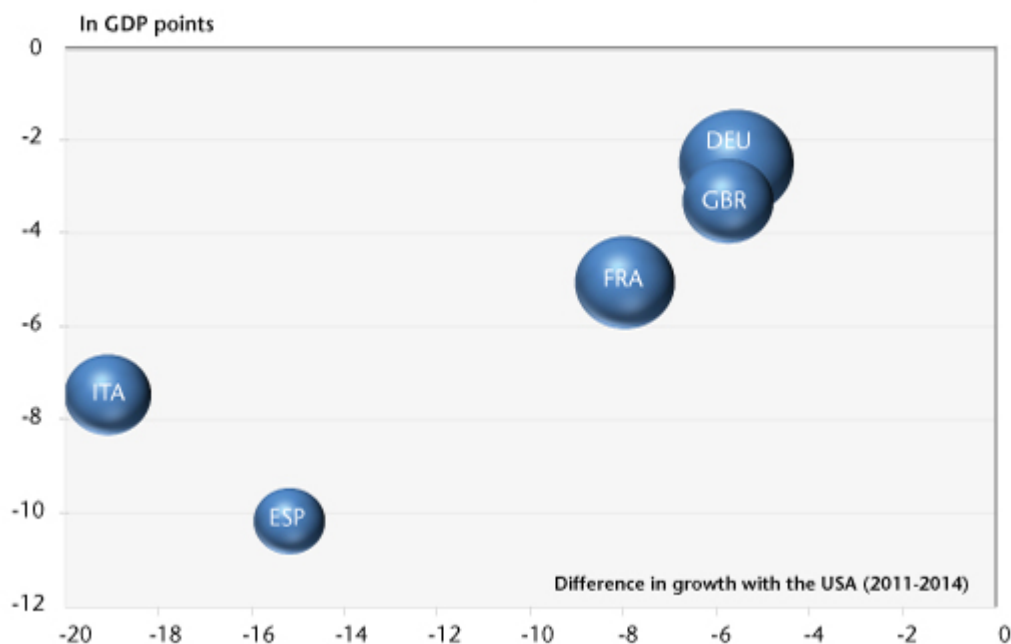
Figure 1. Cumulative impact on GDP of various shocks since 2011



Sources: National accounts, OFCE calculations.

Thus, in the absence of these shocks, Europe's spontaneous growth could have exceeded the rate of potential growth, as in the United States (Figure 2). This would have led in the euro zone countries in particular to a long-term convergence of GDP with its potential level, to a reduction in imbalances on the labour market, to the normalization of capacity utilization, and to a recovery in the public accounts.

Figure 2. Difference in growth and the cumulative impact on GDP of various shocks for countries over the period 2011-2014



Sources: OECD eo96 for the output gap, national accounts, OFCE calculations for the impact of the shocks.

[Go to the full version of our study.](#)

[1] The impact of these competitiveness shocks differs across countries because of differences in the elasticity of foreign trade, but also due to variations in the countries' degree of exposure to trade and to intra / extra euro zone competition. For more on this, see [Ducoudré and Heyer \(2014\)](#).

[2] An economy's spontaneous growth results from its long-term potential growth (which depends on structural factors that determine in particular changes in the global productivity of the factors and the labour force) and the rate of closing the output gap, which was deepened in most countries by the 2008-2009 crisis and which depends on an economy's capacity to absorb the shocks that hit it.

The coming recovery

By the Analysis and Forecasting Department, under the direction of [Eric Heyer](#) and [Xavier Timbeau](#)

This text summarises the [OFCE 2015-2016 economic outlook for the euro zone and the rest of the world](#)

While up to now the euro zone had not been part of the global recovery, the conjunction of a number of favourable factors (the fall in oil prices and depreciation of the euro) will unleash a more sustained process of growth that is shared by all the EU countries. These developments are occurring at a time when the massive and synchronised fiscal austerity that had pushed the euro zone back into recession in 2011 is easing. The brakes on growth are gradually being lifted, with the result that in 2015 and 2016 GDP should rise by 1.6% and 2%, respectively, which will reduce unemployment by half a point per year. This time the euro zone will be on the road to recovery. However, with an unemployment rate of 10.5% at the end of 2016, the social situation will remain precarious and the threat of deflation is not going away.

The expected demand shock

After a period during the Great Recession of 2008-2009 when growth was boosted by expansionary fiscal policy, the euro zone countries quickly reversed their policy orientation and adopted a more restrictive one. While the United States also chose to reduce its budget deficit, austerity has had less effect there. First, the negative demand shock at the euro zone level was amplified by the synchronisation of the consolidation. Second, in a context of rising public debt, the lack of fiscal solidarity between the countries opened up a

breach for speculative attacks, which pushed up first sovereign rates and then bank rates or the non-financial agents market. The euro zone plunged into a new recession in 2011, while globally the momentum for growth gathered pace in the other developed countries (chart). This episode of consolidation and financial pressure gradually came to an end. In July 2012, the ECB made a commitment to support the euro; fiscal austerity was eased in 2014; and the Member States agreed on a draft banking union, which was officially initiated in November 2014, with new powers on banking supervision entrusted to the ECB. All that was lacking in the euro zone then was a spark to ignite the engine of growth. The transfer of purchasing power to households that resulted from the fall in oil prices – about one percentage point of GDP if oil prices stay down until October 2015 – represents this positive demand shock, which in addition has no budget implications. The only cost resulting from the shock comes from the decline in income in the oil-producing countries, which will lead them to import less in the coming quarters.

An external demand shock will combine with this internal demand shock in the euro zone. The announcement of a quantitative easing programme in the euro zone represents a second factor accelerating growth. This programme, under which the ECB is to purchase more than 1,000 billion euros of securities at a pace of 60 billion per month until September 2016, not only will amplify the fall in sovereign yields but more importantly will also lead to a reallocation of portfolio assets and drive the euro (further) down. Investors looking for higher returns will turn to dollar-denominated securities, especially as the prospect of a gradual monetary tightening in the US improves the outlook for earnings on this side of the pond. The rising dollar will lift the currencies of the Asian countries with it, which will increase the competitive advantage of the euro zone at the expense this time of the United States and some emerging countries. It is unlikely that the fragility induced in these countries and in the oil-

producing countries by the oil shock and by the decline in the euro will offset the positive effects expected in the euro zone. On the contrary, they will also be vectors for the rebalancing of growth needed by the euro zone.

Investment is the factor that will complete this growth scenario. The anticipation of higher demand will remove any remaining reluctance to launch investment projects in a situation where financing conditions are, overall, very positive, representing a real improvement in countries where credit constraints had weighed heavily on growth.

All this will lead to a virtuous circle of growth. All the signals should turn green: an improvement in household purchasing power due to the oil impact, increased competitiveness due to the lower euro, an acceleration in investment and, ultimately, growth and employment.

A fragile recovery?

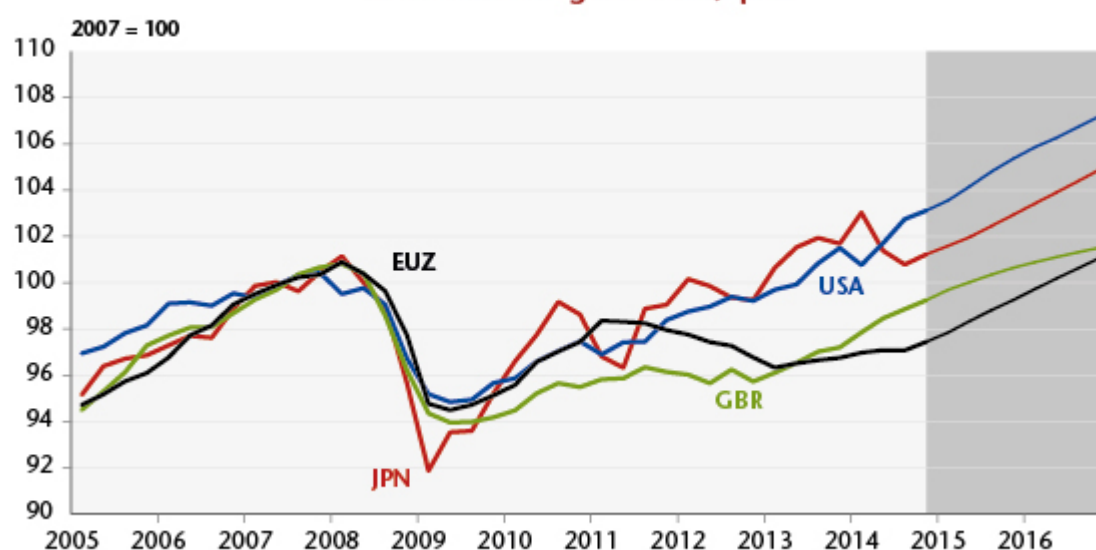
While the elements promoting the euro zone's growth are not mere hypotheticals about the future but represent a number of tangible factors whose effects will gradually make themselves felt, the fact remains that they are somewhat fragile. The falling price of oil, for instance, is probably not sustainable. The equilibrium price of oil is closer to USD 100 than USD 50 and, ultimately, a rise in energy prices is in the cards: what has a positive effect today could undermine the resumption of a recovery tomorrow. The decline of the euro seems more long-term; it should last at least until the end of the ECB's quantitative easing programme, which officially is at least September 2016. The euro should not, however, fall below a level of 0.95 dollar per euro. The time it takes for changes in exchange rates to translate into trade volumes, however, should allow [the euro zone to benefit in 2016 from a gain in competitiveness](#).

It is worth noting that a Greek exit from the euro zone could

also put a halt to the nascent recovery. The firewalls set up at the European level to reduce that risk should limit any contagion, at least so long as the political risk has not been concretised. It will be difficult for the ECB to support a country where a party explicitly calling for leaving the euro zone is at the gates of power. The contagion that is now considered extinguished could then catch fire again and reignite the sovereign debt crisis in the euro zone.

Finally, the constraints of the Stability Pact have been shifted so as to leave more time to the Member States, particularly France, to get back to the 3% target. They have therefore not really been lifted and should soon be reinforced once it comes to assessing the budgetary efforts being made by the countries to reduce their debt.

Figure. The GDP of the euro zone, the United States, the United Kingdom and Japan



Source : National accounts, OFCE forecasts April 2015.

The ECB's quantitative easing

exercise: you're never too young to start

By [Christophe Blot](#), [Jérôme Creel](#), [Paul Hubert](#) and Fabien Labondance

The ECB decision to launch a quantitative easing (QE) programme was widely anticipated. Indeed, on several occasions in the second half of 2014 Mario Draghi had reiterated that the Governing Council was unanimous in its commitment to take the steps needed, in accordance with its mandate, to fight against the risk of a prolonged slowdown in inflation. Both the scale and the characteristics of the ECB plan announced on 22 January 2014 sent a strong, though perhaps belated signal of the Bank's commitment to fight the risk of deflation, which has been spreading in the euro zone, as can be seen in particular in inflation expectations over a two-year horizon (Figure 1). In a [special study entitled, "Que peut-on attendre du l'assouplissement quantitatif de la BCE?"](#) ["What can we expect from the ECB's quantitative easing?"], we clarify the implications of this new strategy by explaining the mechanisms for the transmission of quantitative easing, drawing on the numerous empirical studies on previous such programmes in the US, the UK and Japan.

Figure. Inflation expectations in the euro



Source : ECB (Survey of Professional Forecasters).

The terms of the quantitative easing decided by the ECB are indeed similar to those adopted by other central banks, especially by the US Federal Reserve and the Bank of England, which make comparisons legitimate. It appears from the American, British and Japanese experience that the measures implemented have led to a decline in sovereign interest rates and more generally to an improvement in the financial conditions of the overall economy[1]. This has been the result of sending a signal about the present and future stance of monetary policy and a reallocation of investors' portfolios. Some studies [2] also show that the US QE caused a depreciation of the dollar. The transmission of QE from the ECB to this variable could be critical in the case of the euro zone. An analysis using VAR models shows that the monetary policy measures taken by the ECB will have a significant impact on the euro but also on inflation and inflationary expectations. It is likely that the effects of the depreciation of the euro on European economic activity will be positive (cf. [Bruno Ducoudré and Eric Heyer](#)), which would make it easier for Mario Draghi to bring inflation back on target. The measure would therefore have the positive effects

expected; however, it might be regrettable that it was not implemented earlier, when the euro zone was mired in recession. Inflation in the euro zone has fallen constantly since late 2011, reflecting a gathering deflationary risk month after month. In fact, the implementation of QE from March 2015 will consolidate and strengthen a recovery that would undoubtedly have occurred anyway. Better late than never!

[1] The final impact on the real economy is, however, less certain, in particular because the demand for credit has remained stagnant.

[2] Gagnon, J., Raskin, M., Remache, J. and Sack, B. (2011). "The financial market effects of the Federal Reserve's large-scale asset purchases," *International Journal of Central Banking*, vol. 7(10), pp. 3-43.

Should Germany's surpluses be punished?

By [Henri Sterdyniak](#)

On the procedure for macroeconomic imbalances

Since 2012, every year the European Commission analyses the

macroeconomic imbalances in Europe: in November, an alert mechanism sets out any imbalances, country by country. Countries with imbalances are then subjected to an in-depth review, leading to recommendations by the European Council based on Commission proposals. With respect to the euro zone countries, if the imbalances are considered excessive, the Member state is subject to a macroeconomic imbalance procedure (MIP) and must submit a plan for corrective action, which must be approved by the Council.

The alert mechanism is based on a scoreboard with five indicators of external imbalances [\[1\]](#) (current account balance, net international investment position, change in the real effective exchange rate, change in export market shares, change in nominal unit labour costs) and six indicators of internal imbalances (unemployment rate, change in housing prices, public debt, private debt, change in financial sector liabilities, credit flows to the private sector). An alert is issued when an indicator exceeds a certain threshold, e.g. 60% of GDP for public debt, 10% for the unemployment rate, -4% (+6% respectively) for a current account deficit (respectively surplus).

On the one hand, this process draws lessons from the rise in imbalances recorded before the crisis. At the time of the Maastricht Treaty, the negotiators were convinced that economic imbalances could only come from the way the State behaved; it therefore sufficed to set limits on government deficits and debt. However, between 1999 and 2007, the euro zone saw a steep rise in imbalances due mainly to private behaviour: financial exuberance, securities and property bubbles, swollen foreign deficits in southern Europe, and a frantic search for competitiveness in Germany. These imbalances became intolerable after the financial crisis, requiring painful adjustments. The MIP is thus designed to prevent such mistakes from happening again.

On the other hand, the analysis and the recommendations are

made on a purely national basis. The Commission does not propose a European strategy that would enable the countries to move towards full employment while reabsorbing intra-zone imbalances. It does not take into account inter-country interactions when it demands that each country improve its competitiveness while cutting its deficit. The Commission's recommendations are a bit like the buzzing of a gadfly when it proclaims that Spain should reduce its unemployment, France should improve its competitiveness, etc. Its proposals are based on a myth: it is possible to implement policies on public deficit and debt reduction, on wage austerity and on private debt reduction, while offsetting their depressive impact on growth and employment through structural reforms, which are the *deus ex machina* of the fable. This year there is also, fortunately, the European Fund for strategic investments (the 315 billion euros of the Juncker plan), meaning that the Commission can claim to be giving "a coordinated boost to investment", but this plan represents at most only 0.6% of GDP over 3 years; its actual magnitude is thus problematic.

For 2015, all the countries in the European Union have at least one imbalance according to the scoreboard [\[2\]](#) ([see here](#)). France has lost too much of its export market share and has an excessive public debt and private debt. Germany, too, has lost too much of its export market share, its public debt is excessive and above all its current account surplus is too high. Of the 19 countries in the euro zone, seven, however, have been absolved by the Commission and 12 are subject to an in-depth review, to be published in late February. Let's take a closer look at the German case.

On Germany's surplus

A single currency means that the economic situation and policies of each country can have consequences for its partners. A country that has excessive demand (due to its fiscal policy or to financial exuberance that leads to an excess of private credit) and is experiencing inflation (which

can lead to a rise in the ECB's interest rate), thereby widening the euro zone's deficit (which may contribute to a fall in the euro), requires its partners to refinance it more or less automatically (in particular via TARGET2, the system of automatic transfers between the central banks of the euro zone); its debt can thus become a problem.

This leads to two observations:

1. Larger countries can have a more harmful impact on the zone as a whole, but they are also better able to withstand the pressures of the Commission and its partners.
2. The harm has to be real. Thus, a country that has a large public deficit will not harm its partners, on the contrary, if the deficit makes up for a shortfall in its private demand.

Imagine that a euro zone country (say, Germany) set out to boost its competitiveness by freezing its wages or ensuring that they rise much more slowly than labour productivity; it would gain market share, enabling it to boost its growth through its trade balance while reining in domestic demand, to the detriment of its euro zone partners. The partners would see their competitiveness deteriorate, their external deficits widen, and their GDP shrink. They would then have to choose between two strategies: either to imitate Germany, which would plunge Europe into a depression through a lack of demand; or to prop up demand, which would lead to a large external deficit. The more a country manages to hold down its wages, the more it would seem to be a winner. Thus, a country running a surplus could brag about its good economic performance in terms of employment and its public account and trade balances. As it is lending to other member countries, it is in a strong position to impose its choices on Europe. A country that is building up deficits would sooner or later come up against the mistrust of the financial markets, which would impose high interest rates on it; its partners may refuse to lend to it. But there is nothing stopping a country that is accumulating

surpluses. With a single currency, it doesn't have to worry about its currency appreciating; this corrective mechanism is blocked.

Germany can therefore play a dominant role in Europe without having an economic policy that befits this role. The United States played a hegemonic role at the global level while running a large current account deficit that made up for the deficits of the oil-exporting countries and the fast-growing Asian countries, in particular China; it balanced global growth by acting as a "consumer of last resort". Germany is doing the opposite, which is destabilizing the euro zone. It has automatically become the "lender of last resort". The fact is that Germany's build-up of a surplus must also be translated into the build-up of debt; it is therefore unsustainable.

Worse, Germany wants to continue to run a surplus while demanding that the Southern European countries repay their debts. This is a logical impossibility. The countries of Southern Europe cannot repay their debts unless they run a surplus, unless Germany agrees to be repaid by running a deficit, which it is currently refusing to do. This is why it is legitimate for Germany to be subject to an MIP – an MIP that must be binding.

The current situation

In 2014, Germany's current account surplus represented 7.7% of GDP (or 295 billion euros, Table 1); for the Netherlands the figure was 8.5% of GDP. These countries represent an exception by continuing to run a strong external surplus, while most countries have come much closer to equilibrium compared with the situation in 2007. This is in particular the case of China and Japan. Germany now has the highest current account surplus of any country in the world. Its surplus would be even 1.5 GDP points higher if the euro zone countries (particularly those in Southern Europe) were closer to their potential output.

Thanks to Germany and the Netherlands, the euro zone, though facing depression and high unemployment, has run a surplus of 373 billion dollars compared with a deficit of 438 billion for the United States: logically, Europe should be seeking to boost growth not by a depreciation of the euro against the dollar, which would further widen the disparity in trade balances between the euro zone and the United States, but by a strong recovery in domestic demand. If Germany owes its surplus to its competitiveness policy, it is also benefitting from the existence of the single currency, which is allowing it to avoid a surge in its currency or a depreciation in the currency of its European partners. The counterpart of this situation is that Germany has to pay its European partners so that they remain in the euro.

Table 1. Current account balance as % of GDP

	2007	2014
Netherlands	6,7	8,5
Germany	7,5	7,7
Austria	3,5	2,5
Italy	-2,4	1,8
Belgium	1,9	-0,1
Spain	-10,0	-0,1
Portugal	-10,1	-0,2
Finland	4,1	-1,4
France	-1,0	-1,8
Greece	-14,6	-2,0
Euro zone	0,2	2,8
United Kingdom	-2,2	-4,1
Denmark	1,4	6,5
Sweden	9,3	5,9
United States	-5,0	-2,2
Japan	4,9	0,1
China	10,7	3,3

Source : European economy.

There are three possible viewpoints. For optimists, Germany's surplus is not a problem; as the country's population ages, Germans are planning for retirement by accumulating foreign assets, which will be used to fund their retirements. The Germans prefer investing abroad rather than in Germany, which they feel is less profitable. These investments have fuelled international financial speculation (many German financial institutions suffered significant losses during the financial crisis due to adventurous investments on the US markets or the Spanish property market); now they are fuelling European debt. Thus, through the TARGET2 system, Germany's banks have indirectly lent 515 billion euros to other European banks at a virtually zero interest rate. Out of its 300 billion surplus, Germany spends a net balance of only 30 billion on direct investment. Germany needs a more coherent policy, using its current account surpluses to make productive investments in Germany, Europe and worldwide.

Another optimistic view is that the German surplus will decline automatically. The ensuing fall in unemployment would create tensions on the labour market, leading to wage increases that would also be encouraged by the establishment of the minimum wage in January 2015. It is true that in recent years, German growth has been driven more by domestic demand and less by the external balance than prior to the crisis (Table 2): in 2014, GDP grew by 1.2% in Germany (against 0.7% in France and 0.8% for the euro zone), but this pace is insufficient for a solid recovery. The introduction of the minimum wage, despite its limitations (see [A minimum wage in Germany: a small step for Europe, a big one for Germany](#)), will lead to a 3% increase in payroll in Germany and for some sectors will reduce the competitiveness gains associated with the use of workers from Eastern Europe. Even so, by 2007 (relative to 1997), Germany had gained 16.3% in competitiveness compared to France (26.1% compared to Spain, Table 3); in 2014, the gain was still 13.5% relative to France (14.7% relative to Spain). A rebalancing is taking place very

slowly. And in the medium term, for demographic reasons, the need for growth in Germany is about 0.9 points lower than the need in France.

Table 2. Contributions to GDP by domestic demand and the external balance

	GDP		Domestic demand		External balance	
	1998-2007	2007-2014	1998-2007	2007-2014	1998-2007	2007-2014
Germany	1,60	0,70	0,85	0,70	0,75	0,00
France	2,25	0,30	2,60	0,35	-0,35	-0,05
Spain	3,85	-0,70	4,60	-2,10	-0,75	1,40
Italy	1,50	-1,30	1,65	-2,80	-0,15	1,50
Euro zone	2,30	-0,10	2,20	-0,55	0,10	0,45

Table 3. Indicator of relative unit labour costs

Base 100 = 1997

	2007	2013
Euro zone	99,0	105,2
Germany	86,2	90,4
Austria	94,2	98,1
Finland	98,9	109,3
France	103,0	104,5
Belgium	103,2	107,8
Italy	107,9	111,9
Portugal	110,3	101,8
Netherlands	108,2	111,9
Greece	110,5	98,3
Spain	116,6	106,0
Ireland	124,1	106,1
<i>Outside euro zone</i>		
United Kingdom	122,2	104,1
Sweden	92,4	98,6

Source : European economy.

Furthermore, a more pessimistic view argues that Germany should be subject to a macroeconomic imbalance procedure to get it to carry out a macroeconomic policy that is more favourable to its partners. The German people should benefit more from its excellent productivity. Four points need to be

emphasised:

1. In 2014, Germany recorded a public surplus of 0.6 percent of GDP, which corresponds, according to the Commission's estimates, to a structural surplus of about 1 GDP point, *i.e.* 1.5 points more than the target set by the Fiscal Compact. At the same time, spending on public investment was only 2.2 GDP points (against 2.8 points in the euro zone and 3.9 points in France). The country's public infrastructure is in poor condition. Germany should increase its investment by 1.5 to 2 additional GDP points.

2. Germany has undertaken a programme to reduce public pensions, which has encouraged households to increase their retirement savings. The poverty rate has increased significantly in recent years, reaching 16.1% in 2014 (against 13.7% in France). A programme to revive social protection and improve the prospects for retirement [\[3\]](#) would boost consumption and reduce the savings rate.

3. Germany should restore a growth rate for wages that is in line with growth in labour productivity, and even consider some catch-up. This is not easy to implement in a country where wage developments depend mainly on decentralized collective bargaining. This cannot be based solely on raising the minimum wage, which would distort the wage structure too much.

4. Finally, Germany needs to review its investment policy [\[4\]](#): Germany should invest in Germany (public and private investment); it should invest in direct productive investment in Europe and significantly reduce its financial investments. This will automatically reduce its unproductive investments that go through TARGET2.

Germany currently has a relatively low rate of investment (19.7% of GDP against 22.1% for France) and a high private sector savings rate (23.4% against 19.5% for France). This

should be corrected by raising wages and lowering the savings rate.

As Germany is relatively close to full employment, a significant part of its recovery will benefit its European partners, but this is necessary to rebalance Europe. Any policy suggested by the MIP should require a change in Germany's economic strategy, which it considers to be a success. But European integration requires that each country considers its choice of economic policy and the direction of its growth model while taking into account European interdependencies, with the aim of contributing to balanced growth for the euro zone as a whole. An approach like this would not only benefit the rest of Europe, it would also be beneficial to Germany, which could then choose to reduce inequality and promote consumption and future growth through a programme of investment.

[1] For more detail, see [European Commission \(2012\) : "Scoreboard for the surveillance of macroeconomic imbalances", *European Economy Occasional Papers 92*](#).

[2] This partly reflects the fact that some of these indicators are not relevant: almost all European countries are losing market share at the global level; changes in the real effective exchange rate depend on trends in the euro, which the countries do not control; the public and private debt thresholds were set at very low levels; etc.

[3] The ruling coalition has already raised the pensions of mothers and allowed retirement at age 63 for people with lengthy careers, but this is timid compared with previous reforms.

[4] The lack of public and private investment in Germany has been denounced in particular by the economists of the DIW, see for example: "Germany must invest more for future", *DIW*

Economic Bulletin 8.2013 and *Die Deutschland Illusion*, Marcel Fratzscher, October 2014.