The Greek debt – a European story …

By Catherine Mathieu and Henri Sterdyniak

At end 2014, Greece's debt was 317 billion euros, or 176% of its GDP, up from 103% in 2007, despite debt relief of 107 billion in 2012[1]. This debt is the result of a triple blindness, on the part of: the financial markets, which lent to Greece until 2009, heedless of the unsustainable level of its public deficit (6.7% of GDP in 2007) and its trade deficit (10.4% of GDP in 2007); the Greek government and ruling elite who, thanks to the low interest rates permitted by its membership in the euro zone, allowed unbalanced growth, based on financial and real estate bubbles, corruption, poor governance, fraud and tax evasion; and Europe's institutions, which after the laxism of 2001-2007, imposed crushing, humiliating austerity programmes on the country, with the oversight of the troika, a strange threesome consisting of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the European Central Bank (ECB) and the European Commission (EC). In the eyes of the troika, the austerity programmes were needed to cut the public deficit and debt and put the Greek economy on a path to growth. While the programmes did indeed help to reduce the public deficit (which was only about 2.5% of GDP in 2014, i.e. after excluding interest expenses, a surplus of around 0.5% of GDP), they have pushed up the ratio of debt to GDP, due to the collapse in the country's GDP, which is now 25% less than in 2008. Austerity has above all plunged Greece into economic and social distress, as is sadly illustrated in an unemployment rate of over 25% and a poverty rate of 36%.

The tree of Greek debt must not, however, hide the forest: from 2007 to 2014, the public debt of the OECD countries as a whole increased from 73% of GDP to 112%, reflecting profound imbalances in the global economy. Due to financial globalization, the victory of capital over labour and growing inequality, the developed countries need large public debts; these debts are generally not reimbursable, since reimbursement assumes that agents with a surplus agree to run deficits.

Take the example of Germany. It wants to maintain a large external surplus (7% of GDP), which weighs down its European partners and has contributed to an excessively strong euro. In order for Greece and other European countries to repay their public debts, they need to be able to export, especially to Germany; Germany would in turn have to accept an external deficit and thus greatly increase public spending and wages, which it does not want to do. The contradictory demands of the surplus countries (to maintain a surplus but be repaid) are leading the entire euro zone into depression. Fortunately for the European economy, neither France nor Italy is adhering strictly to its European commitments, while the UK is not subject to them.

Can we require Greece to continue to meet its European commitments, which have led to a deep depression? To reduce its debt to 60% of GDP within 20 years? The effort needed to do this depends on the difference between the interest rate paid on debt (1.9% in 2014) and the nominal rate of GDP growth (-1.2% in 2014). Even if Greece managed to accelerate its growth so that the growth rate equalled the interest rate for its loans, it would still have to turn over 6% of its GDP every year; this drain would unbalance the economy and put the brakes on growth. The Greek people cannot be asked to make further economic and social sacrifices.

If Greece were an emerging country, the solution would be obvious: a strong devaluation and default on the debt. The euro zone, on the contrary, cannot be maintained without solidarity between its members and without a turnabout in its economic policies. Europe cannot ask Greece’s new government to maintain an austerity programme that has no prospects or to abandon its electoral programme and implement the failed policy negotiated by the previous government. A refusal to compromise would lead to the worst result: a showdown, a financial freeze on Greece, and then its withdrawal from the euro zone and perhaps the EU. The people would rightly feel that Europe is a straitjacket and that democratic votes don't count. On the other hand, it will be difficult for the northern European countries and the Commission to give up their demands: tight control of national fiscal policies, a reduction in public debts and deficits, conditionalities on aid, privatization policies and structural reforms.

Syriza's programme includes the restoration of social welfare and the public services as well as a decent standard of living for retirees and employees, but also, very clearly, tax reform, the fight against corruption and bad governance, and the search for a new development model based on the renovation of production and re-industrialization, driven by the State and a restored banking sector, based on public and private investment. This is an ambitious path that presupposes a fight against greed and the inertia of the dominant classes by mobilizing the whole of society, but it is the only future with promise.

The only solution is a compromise that would open the door to a new policy in Europe. Let's distinguish the Greek question from the European question. Europe's institutions must agree to negotiate a restructuring of Greek debt. This 317 billion euro debt is now held as follows: 32 billion by the IMF, and 223 billion by the ECB, the European Financial Stability Facility, and the other Member States, i.e. 80% by public institutions. This enabled the private sector to shed Greek debt, but it has not helped the Greek economy. Greece already benefits from low interest rates and lengthy repayment deadlines [2]. Given the low level of current interest rates and the hunger of financial investors for the risk-free sovereign debt of most Member States, there is no reason for a default on Greek debt; it simply needs to be restructured and secured. We must avoid a situation where every year Greece is in the position of having to repay and refinance an excessive amount of debt, and thus finds itself at the mercy of the capital markets or new negotiations with the troika. Greece needs a long-term agreement based on mutual trust.

Europe should give the Greek people time for their economy to recover. Greece's debt needs to be made sustainable by converting it into very long-term secured debt, possibly confined within the European Stability Mechanism, so that it is sheltered from speculation. This debt could be financed by Eurobonds with very low rates (0.5% at 10 years, or even slightly negative rates by issuing securities indexed to inflation). European taxpayers would thus not be saddled with the burden, and the Greek debt load would be acceptable. It is Greek economic growth that will make it possible to cut the ratio of debt to GDP. The reimbursement should be limited and, as proposed by Greece, depend on growth (e.g. be zero when the volume of growth is less than 2%, and then 0.25 GDP point per additional point of growth). The agreements with Greece should be reviewed to allow the new government to implement its programme for social and production renewal. Two key points must guide the negotiations: that responsibility for the situation is shared between Greece and Europe, that each must bear its share of the burden (the banks have already undergone a partial default); and that Greece must be helped to recover from its deep depression, which means support for consumption in the short term, and in the medium term stimulating and financing the country's productive renewal.

France should support Syriza's proposal for a European conference on debt, because the problem is not just Greek. The Greek experience merely exemplifies the structural problems with Europe's economic governance and the challenges facing all the Member States. This governance needs to be overhauled in order to overcome the economic, social and political crisis gripping the euro zone. The turning point represented by the Juncker Plan must be given resolute support (investment support of 315 billion euros in three years), as must the ECB's quantitative easing programme (1140 billion in 18 months).

The public debts of the euro zone countries must be guaranteed by the ECB and all the Member States. To absorb them, the ECB must keep long-term rates well below the rate of growth, which will require taxing financial activities and controlling the orientation of bank loans to prevent the rise of speculative bubbles. Instead of cutting public and social welfare spending, Europe must coordinate the fight against tax competition and tax evasion by the wealthy and by multinational firms. The unsustainable fiscal straitjacket imposed by the Stability Pact and the European fiscal treaty must be replaced by the coordination of economic policies aimed at full employment and resolving imbalances between euro zone countries. Finally, Europe must propose a strategy for recovery from the crisis based on boosting domestic demand in the surplus countries, coordinating wage policies, and supporting investments that prepare the ecological and social transition. The challenge here is crucial. We need to rethink the way economic policies are organized in Europe in order to allow countries to conduct policies that are different and autonomous, but coordinated. This is the only way the euro zone can survive and prosper.

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[1] More than half of which was used by the Greek state to secure the country's banking system.

[2] Moreover, the ECB Member states are repaying it any gains that they make on Greek bonds.

Flexibility versus the new fiscal effort – the last word has not been spoken

By Raul Sampognaro

On 13 January, the [Juncker Commission clarified its position on the flexibility] that the Member States have in implementing the Stability and Growth Pact (SGP). The new reading of the SGP should result in reining in the fiscal consolidation required for certain countries[1]. Henceforth, the Commission can apply the "structural reform clause" to a country in the corrective arm of the Pact[2], whereas previously this was only possible for countries in the Pact's preventive arm[3]. This clause will allow a Member State to deviate temporarily from its prior commitments and postpone them to a time when the fruits of reform would make adjustment easier. In order for the Commission to agree to activate the clause, certain conditions must be met:

– The reform plan submitted by the Member State must be major and detailed, and approved by the Government or the National Parliament; its timetable for implementation must be explicit and credible;

– The plan must have a favourable impact on potential growth and / or the public finances in the medium-term. The quantification of the impact should be carried out transparently and the Member State must submit the relevant documentation to the Commission;

– The Member State must make a structural budget improvement of at least 0.5 GDP point.

In this new context, France has reforms it can point to, such as the regional reform and the law on growth and activity, the so-called Macron law. According to OECD calculations from October 2014, the reforms already underway or being adopted [4] could boost GDP by 1.6 points over the next 5 years while improving the structural budget balance by 0.8 GDP point[5] (the details of the impacts estimated by the OECD are shown in Table 1).

Table 1. Impact on GDP of the reforms underway or announced

In points

Reforms	Impact on GDP at 5 years	Impact on GDP at 10 years
Reforms underway	1.2	3.0
Greater competition (administrative simplification shock and first measures on regulated professions)	0.2	0.3
Labour market reform	0.6	1.3
– including CICE tax credit and Responsibility Pact	0.5	1.1
– others (unemployment insurance reform, active policies)	0.1	0.2
Modification of tax system	0.1	0.4
Creation of "metropoles" (Paris and Aix-Marseille)	0.3	1.0
Reforms announced	0.4	0.7
Increase in competition in electricity and gas and reform of the regulated professions (reform a little broader than the Macron law)	0.4	0.7

Source: OCDE (2014), "France. Structural reforms: impact on growth and options for the future". October 2014.

In March, the Commission will decide whether France's 2015 Finance Act complies with the rules of the SGP. To benefit from the structural reform clause, France must then meet certain conditions:

1) The outline of the reforms needs to be clarified: at end December 2014, the Commission felt that there were still many lingering uncertainties concerning the regional reform and the content of the Macron law, uncertainties that will be resolved in the course of the parliamentary process.

2) The Ministry of Finance at Bercy must produce credible assessments of the impact of the Macron law, while the Commission will carry out its own evaluation. The Commission has already noted that the OECD's calculations will constitute

the upper bound of the impact.

The evaluation of the 2015 Finance Act may result in the imposition of financial sanctions on France, unless the government decides to go for a greater fiscal adjustment. The Commission warned in late November that further steps would be needed to ensure that the 2015 budget complies with the SGP. Indeed, the Commission found that the adjustment was only 0.3 GDP point, while in June 2013 France had committed to an annual structural adjustment of 0.8 point in 2015 to bring its deficit below 3% in 2015[6].

While the Commission approves the positive effects expected from the reforms, there is a problem with the application of the "structural reform clause": the structural budgetary adjustment is still below 0.5 GDP point, which prevents the application of the new clause. France therefore still faces the threat of sanctions, despite the new doctrine.

While this analysis of the document published on January 13 shows that the Commission has given the Pact greater flexibility, it also shows that the Commission expects France to make a larger fiscal adjustment. This would be on the order of 4 billion euros (0.2 percent of French GDP) instead of the 8 billion (0.4 percent of GDP) that would have been expected back in October (the impact of a strict reading of the Pact has been analyzed here).

The Government's refrain is that it does not wish to go any further with fiscal adjustment, that this is not desirable in the current economic climate: 2015 could be a year for recovery provided that the risk of deflation is taken seriously. There is a lot of support for economic activity, including lower prices for oil and the euro, an expansionary monetary policy and the Juncker plan, even if the latter needed to go much further. However, France's fiscal policy is continuing to be a drag, and just how much so will remain uncertain until March. From now till then, with the terms of the debate clearly spelled out, everyone will need to take the risk of deflation seriously.

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[1] The Commission permits subtracting investments made under the Juncker Commission Plan from the deficit calculation; it clarifies the applicability of the "structural reform clause" and moderates the speed of convergence towards the medium term objectives (MTO) for countries in the preventive arm of the Pact based on their position in the business cycle.

[2]*Grosso modo* this means countries with a deficit of more than 3%.

[3]*Grosso modo* this means countries with a deficit of less than 3%.

[4] Which goes beyond the Macron law alone and includes the CICE tax credit and the Responsibility Pact.

[5] The OECD data were used by the Prime Minister in his October 27 letter to the Commission.

[6] In its 2014 autumn forecast, the Commission quantified the adjustment at 0.1 GDP point, but this figure is not directly comparable with the commitment of 0.8 point from June 2013. Once the changes in national accounting standards and the unpredictable changes in certain variables are taken into account, the corrected adjustment is 0.3 GDP point. This figure is the calculation basis for the excessive deficit procedure.

The Greek Sisyphus and its public debt: towards an end to the ordeal?

By Céline Antonin

After its failure to elect a new President by a qualified majority vote, the Greek Parliament was dissolved, with early elections to be held on 25 January 2015. The radical left party Syriza is leading the opinion polls on the election, ahead of the "New Democracy" party of the outgoing Prime Minister, Anthony Samaras. While Syriza's economic programme has met with enthusiasm from the population, it has aroused concern from the Troika of creditors (IMF, ECB and EU), particularly on three issues: the country's potential withdrawal from the euro zone, the implementation of a fiscal stimulus, and a partial sovereign default. This last topic will be the main issue after the elections.

The election's real stakes: restructuring Greece's public debt

Fears about Greece's potential exit from the euro zone (the infamous "Grexit") need to be nuanced. The situation is different from what it was at the time of the sovereign debt crisis, when bond rate differentials were fuelling worry about contagion and the breakup of the euro zone. Furthermore, Syriza is not in favour of leaving the euro, and no-one can force the country's hand, given that there is no provision for this in any text. Finally, the consequences of such a decision on the other members could be severe, so that a Greek withdrawal from the euro zone would come only as a last resort.

Syriza is calling for an end to austerity and for a fiscal stimulus of 11 billion euros along with restoring the minimum wage to its previous level, better pensions, rehiring civil servants and increased public spending. Can a compromise be reached with the Troika? Nothing is less sure, and it is virtually certain that Syriza will have to revise its ambitions downwards. The Greek deficit has of course shrunk. The country ran a small primary surplus in 2014 and is expected to continue its fiscal consolidation policy in 2015-2016. But Greece must continue to borrow to finance the interest on the debt, to repay or renew the debt reaching maturity and to repay the loans from the IMF. To do this, Greece must rely largely on external aid. From the second half of 2015, the country will face a financing gap of 12.5 billion euros (19.6 billion euros if it does not get IMF assistance). Moreover, Greece's still fragile banks[1] are very dependent on access to the ECB's Emergency Liquidity Assistance Program (ELA), which allows them to obtain emergency liquidity from the Bank of Greece. If Greece rejects the reforms, a showdown with the Troika is likely. The ECB has already threatened to cut off the country's access to liquidity. In addition, the Troika is the main creditor of Greece, which however has a new bargaining point: to the extent that Greece borrows only what it needs to repay its debt, and not to fund its budget deficit, it could threaten its creditors with a unilateral default on payments, even if this is a dangerous game that could deprive it of access to market financing for many years to come.

It is precisely this issue of restructuring Greece's debt and a partial default that is being emphasized by Syriza and which will likely be one of the main post-election issues. Alexis Tsipras wants to cancel a portion of the public debt, to put a moratorium on interest payments, and to condition repayments on the country's economic performance. According to forecasts by the EU Commission and the IMF, Greece's public debt ratio is expected to fall from 175% of GDP in 2013 to 128% in 2020.

However, the assumptions underlying this scenario are not realistic, *i.e.* nominal growth of more than 3% in 2015, a primary surplus of 4.5% of GDP between 2016 and 2019, etc. Given the size of Greece's public debt in 2013 and its amortization profile (with reimbursements amounting to 13 billion euros in 2019 and up to 18 billion euros in 2039[2]), a new restructuring seems inevitable.

A public debt that is essentially held by euro zone countries

Since the onset of the Greek crisis in autumn 2009, the composition of the country's public debt has changed substantially. While in 2010, the debt was held by financial investors, the picture in early 2015 is very different [3]. After two assistance plans (in 2010 and 2012) and a restructuring of the public debt held by the private sector in March 2012 (Private Sector Involvement Plan), 75% of the public debt now consists of loans (**Table 1)**. Together the IMF, the ECB, the national central banks and the countries of the Eurozone hold 80% of Greece's public debt.

Table 1. Breakdown of Greece's public debt, by holder, september 2014

In billion euros

	September 2014	As % of total debt
Total	**321,7**	**100**
Debt securities	**79,8**	**25**
Commercial paper (Short-term)	13,4	4
Treasury bills (Long-term)	66,4	21
By ECB and national central banks	*25,0*	8
By private sector	*41,4*	13
Loans	**241,8**	**75**
IMF	32,1	10
Greek central bank + domestic loans	4,4	1
Euro zone countries	194,8	61
From 1st assistance plan (Greek Loan Facility)	*52,9*	*16*
From 2nd assistance plan (EFSF)	*141,9*	*44*
Other loans and repos	10,5	3

Sources: Debt Management Agency, IMF, ECFIN, author's calculations.

Conversely, since the March 2012 restructuring plan, Europe's banks have sharply reduced their exposure to Greece's public debt (**Table 2**). Moreover, their capital levels have risen since 2010, especially with the gradual implementation of the Basel 3 reform. The banks thus have a safety margin in the case of a partial default by Greece.

Table 2. Exposure of banks to Greek debt (public and total)

In billions of euros

	Total Greek debt (public + private)			Greek public debt		
	Q3 2009	Q1 2012	Q2 2014	Q4 2010	Q1 2012	Q2 2014
Total banks	430,5	105,6	73,8	62,9	9,0	3,5
European banks	389,2	99,1	47,8	60,2	8,3	2,2
France	*112,4*	*54,7*	*3,0*	*20,3*	*2,5*	*0,1*
Germany	*61,8*	*8,3*	*18,9*	*20,0*	*1,0*	*0,2*
United Kingdom	*17,9*	*11,1*	*18,1*	*4,6*	*0,3*	*0,8*
Non-European banks	NA	6,5	26,1	2,6	0,7	1,3
United States	*27,8*	*5,1*	*24,6*	*2,0*	*0,6*	*1,3*

Sources: BIS, ECB, author's calculations.

Since more than half of Greece's public debt is held by members of the euro zone, no renegotiations can take place without their involvement.

So what are the possibilities for restructuring the debt?

The European countries have already made several concessions to help Greece service its debt:

– The maturity of the loans has been increased and the interest rate on loans granted by the EFSF has been reduced. For the first assistance program (bilateral loans), the initial maturity was 2026 (with a grace period until 2019) and the interest rate was indexed to the 3-month Euribor plus a risk premium of 300 basis points. In 2012, this risk premium was cut to 50 basis points and the maturity was extended by 15 years to 2041;

– Any profits made by the ECB and the national central banks on the bonds they hold were returned to Greece;

– Interest payments on the EFSF loans were deferred by 10 years.

Solutions like some used in the past could be implemented. The debt could be rescheduled. Indeed, the rate charged on the loans in the first assistance package (3-month Euribor + 50 basis points) is generally higher than the financing costs of the European countries, and could be lowered. And the term of the loans in the first and second assistance packages could be extended by another 10 years, until 2051. According to the Bruegel think-tank, these two measures combined would reduce Greece's total repayments by 31.7 billion euros.

These measures nevertheless seem limited for resolving the issue of Greek debt: they only postpone the problem. Other measures are needed to relieve Greece of its public debt burden. As the euro zone countries are the main ones exposed to Greece's debt, they have an interest in finding a compromise: if there is a unilateral default, it is taxpayers throughout Europe who will wind up paying.

As for the IMF, there's no point waiting for debt forgiveness. The institution is indeed the senior creditor in case of a country's default, and lender of last resort. Since its founding, it has never cancelled a debt. It is therefore with the members of the euro zone, Greece's main creditors, that a partial default needs to be negotiated. On the one hand, Greece can threaten an uncoordinated unilateral default, causing losses for its creditors. But on the other, it has no interest in alienating euro zone members and the ECB, which have been its main supporters during the crisis. A sudden default would deprive it of access to market financing for many years; even if Greece has achieved a primary surplus, the situation is unstable and it still needs external financing, even if only to honour its repayments to the IMF. One solution would be for the euro zone countries to accept a discount on the face value of the government debt they hold, as was done with private investors in March 2012.

In conclusion, Greece is facing a series of challenges. In the short term, the priority is to find sources of financing to get through 2015. To do this, the country will have to deal with the Troika, in particular the ECB, whose action will be crucial. The Bank has warned Greece that if negotiations fail, it could cut off the country's access to liquidity. Furthermore, on 22 January 2015, the ECB must reach its long-awaited decision on quantitative easing; the issue is whether the ECB will accept the redemption of Greek government bonds. In the longer term, the issue of restructuring the debt will inevitably arise, regardless of who wins the polls. However, the restructuring is likely to be easier with public creditors than with the private banks, if, that is, Greece has in turn won the trust of its European partners.

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[1] See the results of the stress tests published by the ECB on 26 October 2014.

[2]See the Hellenic Republic Public Debt Bulletin, no. 75, September 2014, Table 6.

[3] For a comparison with the situation in June 2012, see Céline Antonin, "Retour à la drachme: un drame insurmontable?", [Return to the drachma: an insurmountable drama?], *Note de l'OFCE* no. 20, June 2012.

France – the sick man of Europe?

by Mathieu Plane – Economist at OFCE (French Economic Observatory – Sciences Po)

The year 2014 was marked for France by the risk of European Commission sanctions for the failure of its budget to comply with Treaties; by the downgrade by Fitch of French government debt (following the one by S&P a year earlier); by the absence of any sign of a in the unemployment rate; by a rising deficit after four years of consecutive decline; and by the distinction of being the only country in Europe to run a significant current account deficit: economically, it seemed like the country's worst year since the beginning of the crisis, in 2008. France did not of course go through the kind of recession it did in 2009, when the Eurozone experienced a record fall in GDP (-4.5% and -2.9% for the EMU and for France respectively). But for the first time since the subprime bubble burst, in 2014 French GDP grew more slowly (0.4%) than eurozone average (0.8%). The country's weakening position is fuelling the view that France may be the new sick man of Europe, a victim of its leaders' lax fiscal approach and its inability to reform. Is this really the case?

It is worth noting first that the French economic and social model proved its effectiveness during the crisis. Thanks to its system of social safety nets, to a combined (consumers, business, government) debt level that is lower than the Eurozone average, while the household savings rate that is higher, to a low level of inequality, and to a relatively solid banking system, France weathered the crisis better than most of its European partners. Indeed, between early 2008 and late 2013, French GDP grew by 1.1%, while during that same period the Eurozone as a whole contracted by 2.6%; France also avoided the recession in 2012 and 2013 that most Eurozone countries experienced. Looking at Europe for the six years from 2008 to 2013, France's economic performance was relatively close to that of Germany (2.7%), better than that of the UK (-1.3%) and well ahead of Spain (-7.2%) and Italy (-8.9%). Similarly, during this period investment in France contracted less than in the Eurozone as a whole (-7.7% versus -17%), and unemployment increased less (+3 points versus

+4.6). Finally, the French economy’s ability to stand up better to the crisis was not linked with a greater increase in public debt compared to the Eurozone average (+28 GDP points for both France and the Eurozone) or even the United Kingdom (+43 points).

Nevertheless, France has seen its position in the Eurozone deteriorate in 2014. This was marked not only by lower growth than its partners, but also by higher unemployment (the Eurozone rate has gradually fallen), an increase in public debt (which virtually stabilized in the Eurozone), a decline in investment (which improved slightly in the euro zone), an increase in its public deficit (while that of the Eurozone fell) and a substantial current account deficit (the euro zone is running a significant surplus). Why this divergence?

While France does have a problem with competitiveness, note that almost half of its current account deficit is cyclical due to more dynamic imports than its major trading partners, which generally have worse output gaps. Furthermore, until 2013, the country’s fiscal adjustment was focused more on the tax burden than on public spending. Conversely, the focus in 2014 was more on public spending. Given France’s position in the business cycle and its budget decisions, the fiscal multiplier in 2014 was higher than in previous years, so that fiscal consolidation imposed a heavy toll in terms of growth. In terms of competitiveness, French industry is caught in the middle of the Eurozone between, on the one hand, peripheral countries of the euro area, including Spain, which have entered into a spiral of wage deflation fuelled by mass unemployment, and the core countries, especially Germany, which are reluctant to give up their excessive trade surpluses through higher domestic demand and more inflation. Faced with the generalization of wage devaluations in the Eurozone, France had no choice but to respond with a policy to improve the competitiveness of its businesses by cutting labour costs. Thus, the CICE tax credit and the Pact of Responsibility represent a total transfer of 41 billion euros to the firm system, mainly financed by households. While the positive impact of these transfers will be felt over the medium-to-long term, the financing effort together with the country's fiscal consolidation effort had an immediate adverse effect on purchasing power, which goes a long way in explaining the poor growth performance of 2014. Finally, 2014 also saw a steep fall in housing investment (-7%), the largest drop since the real estate crisis of the early 1990s (excluding 2009).

There are several reasons why France's poor performance is not likely to be repeated in 2015: first, in order to halt the decline in construction, emergency measures were taken in August 2014 to free up housing investment, with the first effects to be felt in 2015. Second, the programmes enacted to improve business competitiveness will begin to take full effect from 2015: the CICE tax credit and the Responsibility Pact will slash business costs by 17 billion euros in 2015, up significantly from only 6.5 billion in 2014. Third, the slowdown in the fiscal consolidation programmes of our commercial partners and the introduction of a minimum wage in Germany will both help French exports. In addition, the lower exchange rate for the euro and falling oil prices are powerful levers for boosting the French economy in 2015, and together could amount to one extra point of growth. Given the ECB's policy on quantitative easing, interest rates should also remain low for at several more quarters. Finally, although timid, the Juncker plan along with marginal changes in Europe's fiscal rules will favour a pickup in investment. These factors will put some wind in the sails of French growth by helping to offset the negative impact of the reduction in public spending for 2015, so that the economy finally reaches a pace that will be sufficient to begin to reverse the unemployment curve and reduce the public deficit.

While France is not the sick man of Europe, it is nevertheless still very much dependent, like all euro zone countries, on

Europe having strong macroeconomic levers. Up to now, these have had a negative impact on business, be it through overly restrictive fiscal policies or a monetary policy that has proved insufficiently expansionary in the light of other central banks' action. In an integrated currency zone, deflation cannot be fought on a national basis. The choice of a European policy mix that is more geared towards growth and inflation is a first since the start of the sovereign debt crisis. Boosted by lower oil prices, let us hope that these levers will prove strong enough to halt the depressive spiral that the Eurozone has been going through since the onset of the crisis. The recovery will be European, before being French, or there won't be one.

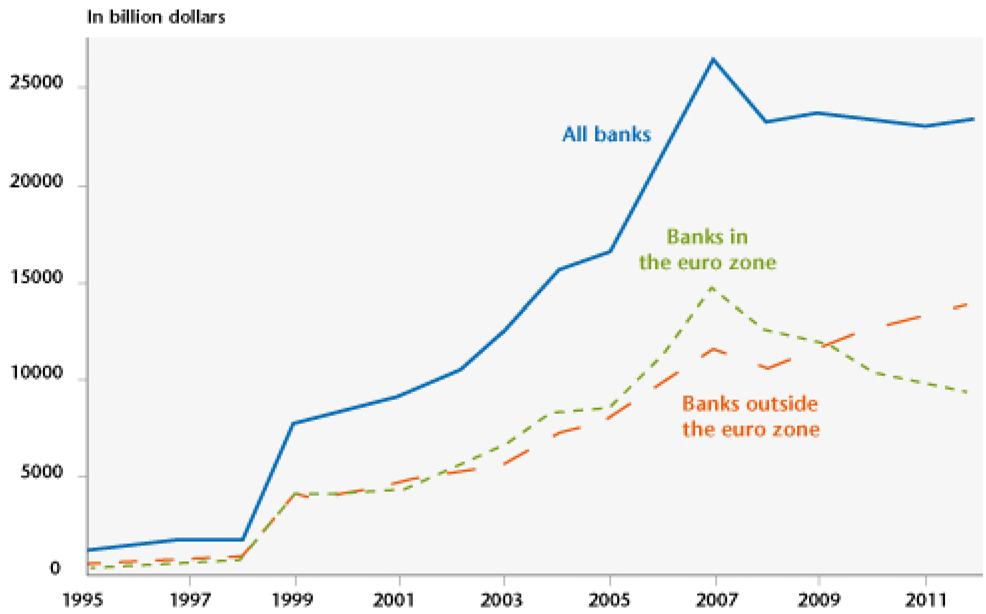
An unprecedented retreat by the euro zone's banks

By Anne-Laure Delatte, CNRS, OFCE, CEPR, Visiting Lecturer at Princeton University

Another small step was taken last month towards a euro zone banking union when the European Commission presented its proposal for the union's Single Resolution Fund [1]. While observers generally agree that the 55 billion euros in the Fund are just a drop in the ocean, we show in a recent study that the euro zone's banks are increasingly isolated from the rest of the world (Bouvatier, Delatte, 2014 [2]). In reality, the fragmentation of the euro zone's banks that the banking union is supposed to resolve is merely one aspect of the international disintegration of Europe's banks.

In 2013, cross-border capital flows came to only 40% of their 2007 levels, and the largest decrease in activity was in international bank lending. Figure 1 shows changes in foreign claims by the banks of 14 countries vis-à-vis their partners and breaks the data down by whether the banks are in the euro zone or not.[3]

Figure 1. Consolidated claims with foreign partners, 1995-2012



Source: Authors' calculations (Bouvatier, Delatte, 2014), using IRB data.

The global financial crisis undoubtedly dealt a serious setback to banking activities: in 2008, foreign claims declined significantly, and then remained at this lower level. However, the aggregated situation conceals two conflicting trends. While the international activities of banks outside the euro zone were undoubtedly hit hard in 2007, they quickly began to pick up again thereafter. In contrast, the activity outside the euro zone of the euro zone's banks has continued to fall. In 2012, the euro zone's banks accounted for 40% of international banking activity, compared with 56% in 2007. In short, the raw data suggest:

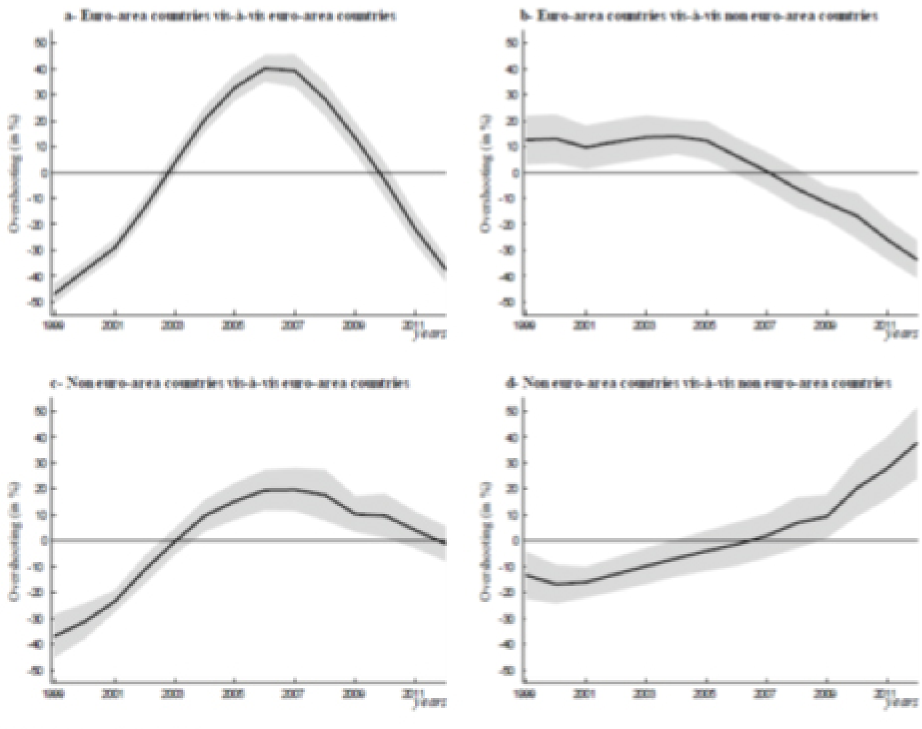
(1) A massive downturn for banks located in the euro zone, and

(2) An interruption that was only temporary for banks

located outside the euro zone.

To what extent can these different trends be explained by differences in economic conditions between the euro zone and the rest of the world? The countries of Europe have in fact faced a series of crises since 2008 (the financial crisis, then the sovereign debt crisis), and today the euro zone is one of the few regions where growth has not resumed. At the same time, the past decade has resulted in a sharp increase in banking integration in the euro zone. So is this just a correction? Also, what differences are there in the way banking integration has taken place in the euro zone and in the rest of the world? To answer these questions, we have developed a unique way to measure international banking integration. Our measure is based on a statistical model of banking that can isolate frictions and variable factors over time [4]. We have extracted temporal trends by geographic region, which enables us to measure at each date where banking activity is at in comparison with the model's predictions. The four charts in Figure 2 show our measurements.

Figure 2. Banking integration. Deviation relative to the predictions of the model (in %)



Source: Bouvatier, Delatte, 2014.

First, it is striking to note that, following the financial crisis of 2008, all the trends in the euro zone were down (Figures 2-a, 2-b and 2-c), in contrast to the situation in the rest of the world (Figure 2-d). Then we see that only banks in the euro zone are going through a process of disintegration (the curve is below the x-axis in Figures 2-a and 2-b). In contrast, the exposure to euro zone debt of banks located outside the euro zone is at precisely the level predicted by the model (Figure 2-c). In other words, non-European banks are less involved in the euro zone, but this is a correction of the 20% excess existing prior to the crisis, and not a downturn. In contrast, the euro zone’s banks have massively reduced their international exposure to inside and outside the euro zone, with a level that is over 30% below the model’s predictions. Thus, the banks’ massive pull-back is not due solely to the economic slowdown in the euro zone since 2008 (as our estimates take the slowdown into account). More importantly, this decline goes well beyond a correction and indeed constitutes a significant level of disintegration. In other words, the bank fragmentation taking place in the euro zone is merely one part of a larger process of the disintegration of the euro zone’s banks.

Finally, Figure 2-d, which traces the situation in the rest of the world, highlights a surprising difference: not only has banking integration not weakened, but, on the contrary, the trend grew stronger after the crisis. In other words, the downturn in banking activity observed in 2008 in the raw data was due entirely to temporary frictions.

Based on these observations, we can draw the following conclusions. First, our estimates suggest that the euro zone’s banks have permanently lost market share at the global level. Second, it is striking to note that the banking integration achieved through the monetary union has been totally erased in recent years. In other words, the benefits conferred by the single currency have fallen in number, while the costs are continuing to rise. Finally, our results concerning the mass pull-back of the euro zone's banks vis-à-vis the rest of the world suggest that the banking union, though crucial to supplement the single currency, will not be enough to meet the banking challenges facing the euro zone.

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[1] "Europe bancaire: l'Union fait-elle la force?", Céline Antonin and Vincent Touze, *Note de l'OFCE*, no. 46, 18 November 2014.

[2] Vincent Bouvatier and Anne-Laure Delatte (2014), "International Banking: the Isolation of the Euro Area", *Document de travail OFCE*, forthcoming.

[3] Among the 14 countries reporting, seven belong to the euro zone: Austria, Belgium, Germany, Spain, France, Italy and the Netherlands. The seven other countries are Canada, Switzerland, Denmark, the United Kingdom, Japan, Sweden and the United States.

[4] More specifically, we have used the approach of Portes and Rey (2005), who were the first to estimate gravity equations to study the determinants of financial activity. See Portes, R. and H. Rey (2005), "The determinants of cross-border equity flows", *Journal of International Economics* 65(2), 269-296.

Does growth in the euro zone

really depend on a hypothetical German fiscal stimulus?

By Christophe Blot and Jérôme Creel

The debate on economic policy in Europe was re-ignited this summer by Mario Draghi during the now traditional symposium at Jackson Hole, which brings together the world's main central bankers. Despite this, it seems that both the one side (Wolfgang Schaüble, Germany's finance minister) and the other (Christine Lagarde, head of the IMF) are holding to their positions: fiscal discipline plus structural reforms, or demand stimulus plus structural reforms. Although the difference can seem tenuous, the way is now open for what Ms. Lagarde called "fiscal manoeuvring room to support a European recovery". She is targeting Germany in particular, but is she really right?

In an interview with the newspaper *Les Echos*, Christine Lagarde said that Germany "very likely has the fiscal manoeuvring room necessary to support a recovery in Europe". It is clear that the euro zone continues to need growth (in second quarter 2014, GDP was still 2.4% below its pre-crisis level in first quarter 2008). Despite the interest rate cuts decided by the ECB and its ongoing programme of exceptional measures, a lack of short-term demand is still holding back the engine of European growth, mainly due to the generally tight fiscal policy being pursued across the euro zone. In today's context, support for growth through more expansionary fiscal policy is being constrained by tight budgets and by a political determination to continue to cut deficits. Fiscal constraints may be real for countries that are heavily in debt and have lost market access, such as Greece, but they are more of an institutional nature for countries able to issue government debt at historically very low levels, such as France. For Ms. Lagarde, Germany has the manoeuvring room that makes it the only potential economic engine for powering a European recovery. A more detailed analysis of the effects of its fiscal policy – both internally and spillovers to European partners – nevertheless calls for tempering this optimism.

The mechanisms that underlie the hypothesis of Germany driving growth are fairly simple. An expansionary fiscal policy in Germany would boost the country's domestic demand, which would increase imports and create additional opportunities for companies in other countries in the euro zone. In return, however, the impact could be tempered by a slightly less expansionary monetary policy: as Martin Wolf argues, didn't Mario Draghi ensure that the ECB would do everything in its power to ensure price stability over the medium term?

In a recent OFCE working document, we have tried to capture these various commercial and monetary policy effects in a dynamic model of the euro zone. The result is that a positive fiscal impulse of 1 GDP point in Germany for three consecutive years (a plan involving 27.5 billion euros per year [1]) would boost growth in the euro zone by 0.2 point in the first year. This impact is certainly not negligible. However, this is due solely to the stimulation that would benefit German growth and not to spillovers to Germany's European partners. Indeed, and as an example, the increase in Spain's growth would be insignificant (0.03 point of growth in the first year). The weakness of the spillover effects can be explained simply by the moderate value of Germany's fiscal multiplier [2]. Indeed, the recent literature on multipliers suggests that they rise as the economy goes deeper into a slump. But based on the estimates of the output gap retained in our model, Germany is not in this situation, and indeed the multiplier has dropped to 0.5 according to the calibration of the multiplier effects selected for our simulations. For an increase in German growth of 0.5 percentage points, the effect of the stimulation on the rest of the euro zone is therefore low, and depends on Germany's share of exports to Spain and the weight of Spanish exports in Spanish GDP. Ultimately, a German recovery would undoubtedly be good news for Germany, but the other euro zone countries may be disappointed, just as they undoubtedly will be from the implementation of the minimum wage, at least in the short term, as is suggested by Odile Chagny and Sabine Le Bayon in a recent post. We can also assume that in the longer term the German recovery would help to raise prices in Germany, thereby degrading competitiveness and providing an additional channel through which other countries in the euro zone could benefit from stronger growth.

And what would happen if the same level of fiscal stimulus were applied not in Germany, but rather in Spain, where the output gap is more substantial? In fact, the simulation of an equivalent fiscal shock (27.5 billion euros a year for three years, or 2.6 points of Spanish GDP) in Spain would be much more beneficial for Spain but also for the euro zone. While in the case of a German stimulus, growth in the euro zone would increase by 0.2 percentage points over the first three years, it would increase by an average of 0.5 points per year for three years in the event of a stimulus implemented in Spain. These simulations suggest that if we are to boost growth in the euro zone, it would be best to do this in the countries with the largest output gap. It is more effective to spend public funds in Spain than in Germany.

In the absence of any relaxation of the fiscal constraints on Spain, a stimulus plan funded by a European loan, whose main beneficiaries would be the countries most heavily affected by the crisis, would undoubtedly be the best solution for finally putting the euro zone on a path towards a dynamic and sustainable recovery. The French and German discussions of an investment initiative are therefore welcome. Hopefully, they will lead to the adoption of an ambitious plan to boost growth in Europe.

Table. Impact of a fiscal expansion in Germany and in Spain

In percentage points

	Fiscal expansion in Germany			Fiscal expansion in Spain		
	German growth	Spanish growth	Euro zone growth	German growth	Spanish growth	Euro zone growth
2013	0,5	0,0	0,2	0,0	4,9	0,5
2014	0,6	0,0	0,2	0,0	5,8	0,7
2015	0,5	0,0	0,2	0,0	2,8	0,4
2016	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	-0,7	-0,1
2017	-0,6	0,0	-0,2	0,0	-2,6	-0,3
2018	-0,8	0,0	-0,2	0,0	-3,0	-0,3
2019	-0,7	0,0	-0,2	0,0	-2,9	-0,3

Source: iAGS model.

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[1] The measure is then compensated in a strictly equivalent way so that the shock amounts to a transient fiscal shock.

[2] Recall that the fiscal multiplier reflects the impact of fiscal policy on economic activity. Thus, for one GDP point of fiscal stimulus (or respectively, tightening), the level of activity increases (respectively, decreases) by k points.

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iAGS, independent Annual Growth Survey 2013

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

The independent Annual Growth Survey (iAGS) brings together a group of internationally competitive economists from three European economic institutes to provide an independent alternative to the Annual Growth Survey (AGS) published by the

European Commission. iAGS 2013 focuses on the Eurozone economic outlook and on the sustainability of public finances until 2032. This first report advocates delaying and spreading fiscal consolidation in due respect of current EU fiscal rules.

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

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

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

Since spring 2011 unemployment within the EU-27 and the Euro zone has begun to increase rapidly and in the past year alone unemployment has increased by 2 million people. Youth unemployment has also increased dramatically during the crisis. In the second quarter of 2012 9.2 million young people in the age of 15-29 years were unemployed, which corresponds to 17.7 percent of the 15-29 years old in the workforce and accounts for 36.7 percent of all unemployed in the EU-27. Youth unemployment has increased more dramatically than the overall unemployment rate within the EU. The same tendencies are seen for the low skilled workers. From past experience it is well known that once unemployment has risen to a high level it has a tendency to remain high the years after. This is known as persistence. Along with the rise in unemployment the first symptoms that unemployment will remain high in the coming years are already visible. In the second quarter of

2012 almost 11 million people in EU had been unemployed for a year or longer. Within the last year long term unemployment has increased with 1.4 million people in the EU-27 and with 1.2 million people within the Euro area.

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

What is striking is that consequences of ill-designed consolidation could and should have been expected. Instead, they have been largely underestimated. Growing theoretical and empirical evidence according to which the size of multipliers is magnified in a fragile situation has been overlooked. Concretely, whereas in normal times, that is when the output gap is close to zero, a reduction of one point of GDP of the structural deficit reduces activity by a range of 0.5 to 1% (this is the fiscal multiplier), this effect exceeds 1.5% in bad times and may even reach 2% when the economic climate is strongly deteriorated. All the features (recession, monetary policy at the zero bound, no offsetting devaluation, austerity amongst key trading partners) known to generate higher-than-normal multipliers were in place in the euro area.

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

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

Even if some fiscal consolidation was almost certainly a necessary part of a rebalancing strategy to curb past excesses in some countries, it was vital that those countries with large surpluses, especially Germany, took symmetrical action to stimulate demand and ensure faster growth of nominal wages and prices. Instead the adjustment burden was thrust on the deficit countries. Some progress has been made in addressing competitive imbalances, but the cost has been huge. Failure to ensure a balanced response from surplus countries is also increasing the overall trade surplus of the euro area. This is unlikely to be a sustainable solution as it shifts the adjustment on to non-euro countries and will provoke counteractions.

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

A four-fold alternative strategy is thus necessary:

First, delaying and spreading the fiscal consolidation in due respect of current EU fiscal rules. Instead of austerity measures of nearly 100 billion euros for the whole euro area, a more balanced fiscal consolidation of 0.5 point of GDP, in accordance with treaties and fiscal compact, would give for the sole 2013 year a concrete margin for manoeuvre of more than 60 billion euros. This amount would substantially contrast with the vows of the June and October 2012 European Councils to devote (still unbudgeted) 120 billion euros until 2020 within the Employment and Growth Pact. By delaying and capping the path of consolidation, the average growth for the Eurozone between 2013 and 2017 may be improved by 0.7 point per year.

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

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

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