Less austerity = more growth and less unemployment

Eric Heyer and Xavier Timbeau

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

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

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

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

Sources : National accounts, OFCE calculations and forecasts.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sources: National accounts, OFCE calculations and forecasts.

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

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

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

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

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

Note: DEU Germany; FRA France; ITA Italy; ESP Spain; NLD Netherlands; BEL Belgium; PRT Portugal; IRL Ireland; GRC Greece; FIN Finland; AUT Austria.
Sources: National accounts, OFCE calculations and forecasts.

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

	DEU	FRA	ITA	ESP	NLD	BEL	PRT	IRL	GRC	FIN	AUT
GDP growth rate (%/yr)	1,1	2,2	1,4	2,6	2,1	1,8	0,7	2,8	0,2	1,9	1,8
Difference with Table 1a	0,8	2,0	3,1	3,7	3,2	1,7	3,6	3,1	5,5	1,2	1.4
Of which: - direct impact	0,0	1,2	2,4	2,9	2,5	0,9	2,5	2,5	4,8	0,6	0,7
- impact *via* trade	0,8	0,8	0,7	0,8	0,7	0,8	1,1	0,6	0,7	0,6	0.7
Public deficit (% GDP)	-0,7	-4,6	-3,7	-7,5	-4,3	-3,4	-5,2	-9,7	-9,4	-0,9	-3,0
Difference with Table 1a	0,4	-0,2	-0,9	-1,0	0,2	0,0	-0,7	-1,0	-2,1	0,0	0,0
Jobless rate (% active pop.)	5,1	8,8	7,9	21,6	3,8	6,7	11,6	13,3	16,8	6,9	3,8
Difference with Table 1a	-0,4	-1,0	-1,5	-1,9	-1,6	-0,9	-1,8	-1,5	-2,7	-0,6	-0,7

Sources: National accounts, OFCE calculations and forecasts.

A letter to President François Hollande

by Jérôme Creel, Xavier Timbeau and Philippe Weil [1]

Dear Mr. President,

France and the European Union are at a crucial economic juncture. Unemployment is high, the output loss to the financial crisis since 2008 has not been recovered and you have promised, in this dismal context, to eliminate French public deficits by 2017.

Your predecessor had committed to achieving the same objective a tad faster, by 2016, and a distinctive feature of your campaign has been your insistence that the major burden of the coming fiscal retrenchment be borne by the richest of taxpayers. These differences matter politically (you did win this election) but they are secondary from a macroeconomic viewpoint unless the long-run future of France and Europe depends on short-run macroeconomic outcomes.

In the *standard macroeconomic framework*, which has guided

policy in “normal” and happier times, fiscal multipliers are positive in the short run but are zero in the long run where productivity and innovation are assumed to reign supreme. In such a world, giving your government an extra year to reduce public deficits spreads the pain over time but makes no difference in the long run. When all is said and done, austerity is the only way to reduce the debt to GDP ratio durably – and it hurts badly:

- The fantasy that short-run multipliers might be negative has been dispelled: a fiscal contraction depresses economic activity unless you are a small open economy acting alone under flexible exchange rates and your own national central bank runs an accommodative monetary policy – hardly a description of today’s France. Since France 2012 is not Sweden 1992, the prospect of a rosier fiscal future is not enough to outweigh the immediate recessionary effects of a fiscal contraction.
- To add insult to injury, if the financial crisis has lowered economic activity permanently (as previous banking or financial crises did, according to the IMF), public finances are now in structural deficit. To insure long-term debt sustainability, there is no way to escape fiscal restriction.
- On top of this, the consensus now recognizes that short-run fiscal multipliers are low in expansions and high in recessions. As a result, accumulating public debt in good times and refraining from running deficits in order to control debt in bad times is very costly: it amounts to squandering precious fiscal ammunition when there is no enemy and to scrimping on it in the heat of combat.

It increasingly looks like, that we are living, since the financial crisis, in a *“new normal” macroeconomic environnent* in which fiscal multipliers are still positive in the short run but non-zero in the long run because of **two conflicting effects**:

- A primal fear of French and European policy makers – fed by the outstanding historical work of Carmen Reinhardt and Kenneth Rogoff and the difficulties encountered by Italy, Spain or Greece to roll over their public debt – is that bad things might happen when the debt to GDP ratio steps over 90%. For instance, the sudden realization by investors that, past that level, there is no easy way to bring debt back to "normal" levels without inflation or outright default might lead to a rapid rise in sovereign interest rates. These high rates precipitate an increase in the debt to GDP ratio by raising the cost of servicing the debt and impose intensified deficit reduction efforts that further shrink GDP. Thus, crossing the 90% threshold might lead to a one-way descent into the abyss. This implies that fiscal contraction, although recessionary in the short run, is beneficial in the long run. Fiscal pain now is thus an evil necessary for long-run prosperity and debt sustainability. According to this narrative, we may survive – but only if we stop dancing right away.
- An opposite danger is that fiscal contraction now – in a context of public finances damaged (except for Greece) not by fiscal laxity but by the slowdown in economic activity engendered by the financial crisis since 2008 – might cause a social, political and economic breakdown or durably destroy productive capacity. Fiscal contraction is thus recessionary both in the short run and in the long run. Short-run fiscal expansion is then a necessary condition for long-run prosperity and debt sustainability. In this narrative, we may survive – but only if we keep dancing!

The advisability of your proposal to reduce the public deficits to zero by 2017 depends, Mr. President, on which of these two dangers is the most intense or the most difficult to thwart. Should you be more concerned that loose fiscal policy may hurt long-run growth by increasing the cost of debt

service, or should you fear instead first and foremost that strict fiscal policy may harm output durably by leading to social unrest or by reducing productive capacity?

To answer these portentous questions, whose answer is not a matter of ideology or of economic paradigm, we urge you to look at the evidence:

- The sovereign rating of countries with large deficits and debts, like the US and the UK, has been downgraded without any adverse effect on interest rate. This suggests that markets understand, seemingly better than policymakers, that the key problem with EU public finances nowadays is not deficits and debt per se but the governance of the euro zone and its fiscal and monetary policy mix. With a lender of last resort – the euro zone has none –, managing a national debt crisis would be easy and straightforward. The counter-argument that it would lead the ECB to monetize public debts, in sharp contrast with the statutes of this institution and its duty to reach price stability, is invalid: the ex-ante ability to monetize debt would reduce risk premia by eliminating self-fulfilling runs on national debts.
- Ugo Panizza and Andrea Presbitero have shown that there is no convincing historical evidence that debt reduction leads to higher economic growth. Hence the statement that public debt reduction is a prerequisite to economic growth is at worse an assumption, at best a correlation, but in any case not a causal relation supported by data.
- Twenty years of Japanese stagnation remind us that deflation is a deadly and durable trap. Under-activity pushes prices down slowly but surely. Paul Krugman and Richard Koo have shown how real expected interest rates feed a spiralling of deleveraging when deflation locks into prices expectation. If deleveraging extends to the banking sector, it adds a credit squeeze to the contraction.

- One of the pernicious drawbacks of fiscal austerity is the destruction of human capital by long unemployment spells. Young cohorts entering now on the job market will undergo a problematic start and may never recover. The longer unemployment remains over its natural rate, the larger the frustration stemming from a bleak future will grow.
- Beyond human capital, firms are the place where all sorts of capital are accumulated, ranging from social capital to immaterial assets such as R&D. Philippe Aghion and others have argued that this channel links short-term macroeconomic volatility to long-term growth potential. Moreover, in a competitive world, underinvestment in private R&D impairs competitiveness. Hence, austerity, by making output more volatile, has a negative long-term impact.
- What is true for private immaterial assets is even truer for public assets, that is to say assets that generate flows of public goods that individual incentives fail to produce. Typically, so-called golden rules neglect such assets which are by their very nature hard to measure. As a result, the pursuit of quick deficit reduction is usually carried out at the expense of investment in assets which have a high social profitability and are essential to ensure a smooth transition to a low carbon economy.

Drawing on these facts, please let us suggest you a four-pronged strategy:

1. You should argue that fiscal austerity is bad for both short-term *and* long-term growth and remind Mrs. Merkel that, as a result, it should be handled with the utmost care.
2. Slowing down the pace at which austerity is imposed on EU countries is vital – both to reduce unemployment in the short-run and to maintain the long-run prosperity

without which the reduction of debt-to-GDP ratios will be impossible.

3. You should acknowledge that the fears of your predecessor were well-founded: in the absence of a lender of last resort or without debt mutualization, slowing down austerity does expose sovereign debt to the risk of rising interest rates by provoking the self-fulfilling anxiety of creditors. But the experience of the US shows that the best way to deal with this danger is to have a full-fledged central bank that can act as a lender of last resort. The Maastricht Treaty should be amended fast in that dimension. Endowing the ECB with growth as a second mandate is not essential.
4. Mrs. Merkel is right that allowing the ECB to bail out States is a sure recipe for moral hazard. You should therefore agree, as a complement of the modification of ECB statutes, with her insistence that a Fiscal Compact governs Europe but you should strive for a Smart Fiscal Compact. This Smart Fiscal Compact should aim at enforcing the sustainability of public finances in a world where the long run is not given but depends on the short-run fiscal stance. It should draw its strength from legitimate European political institutions endowed with the power to control and enforce the commitment of each country to fiscal discipline. This task will require pragmatism and evidence-based economic policy – rather than budgetary numerology and simple-minded rules.

Failing to reduce deficits in Europe may end in a debacle. However, reducing them cold turkey is a sure recipe for disaster. Believing that old tricks like deregulating job markets will bring back economic growth lost in the recession is delusional, as the ILO warned in its last report. The possibility of brutal switches in economic or social trends rules out half-measures. The creeping build-up of long-term disequilibria requires prompt and decisive action in the short

run. What is true for France is even truer for our main neighbors: the whole EU needs room for maneuver, and it needs it fast for the sake of its future.

Yours faithfully.

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Italy: Mario Monti's challenge

By Céline Antonin

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

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

Ici graph

To meet his first objective of fiscal discipline, in December 2011 one of the government's first measures was to adopt an austerity plan, which came to 63 billion euros over three years. This plan, the third in a single year, has the

evocative name of *Salva Italia* (Save Italy) and aims to achieve a near balance of the public books by 2013 (see Italy: Mario Monti's wager in French).

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

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

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

greatly benefited Italy's banks, definitely helped to ease the pressure on rates. Moreover, the success of the plan for the exchange of Greek debt with private creditors also contributed to easing rates.

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

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

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

The financial markets: Sword of Damocles of the presidential election

By Céline Antonin

Although some of the candidates may deny it, the financial risk linked to the fiscal crisis in the euro zone is the guest of honour at the presidential campaign. As proof that this is a sensitive issue, the launch in mid-April of a new financial product on French debt crystallized concerns. It must be said that this took place in a very particular context: the Greek default showed that the bankruptcy of a euro zone country had become possible. Despite the budgetary firewalls in place since May 2010 (including the European Financial Stability Fund), some of France's neighbours are facing a lack of confidence from the financial markets, which is undermining their ability to meet their commitments and ensure the fiscal sustainability of their government debt, the most worrying example to date being Spain. What tools are available to speculators to attack a country like France, and what should be feared in the aftermath of the presidential election?

The tool used most frequently for speculation on a country's public debt is the Credit Default Swap, or CDS. This contract provides insurance against a credit event, and in particular against a State's default (see the "Technical functioning of CDS" annex for more detail). Only institutional investors, mainly banks, insurance companies and hedge funds, have direct access to the CDS market on sovereign States [1].

Credit default swaps are used not only for coverage, but also as an excellent means of speculation. One criticism made of the CDS is that the buyer of the protection has no obligation to hold any credit exposure to the reference entity, i.e. one

can buy CDS without holding the underlying asset (“naked” purchase/sale). In June 2011, the CDS market represented an outstanding notional amount of 32,400 billion dollars. Given the magnitude of this figure, the European Union finally adopted a Regulation establishing a framework for short-selling: it prohibits in particular the naked CDS on the sovereign debt of European States, but this will take effect only on 1 November 2012.

The FOAT: new instrument for speculation on French debt?

This new financial instrument, introduced by Eurex on April 16 [2], is a futures contract, that is to say an agreement between two parties to buy or sell a specific asset at a future date at a price fixed in advance. The specific asset in this case is the French Treasury OAT bond, with a long residual maturity (between 8.5 and 10.5 years) and a coupon of 6%, and it has a face value of 100,000 euros. Should we worry about the launch of this new contract on the eve of the presidential election? Not when you consider that the launch of the FOAT addresses the gap in yields between German and French bonds that has arisen since the recent deterioration of France’s sovereign rating: previously, as German and French bond yields were closely correlated, the FOAT on German bonds allowed coverage of both German and French bond risks. After the gap in yields between the two countries widened, Eurex decided to create a specific futures contract for French bonds. Italy witnessed this same phenomenon: in September 2009, Eurex also launched three futures contracts on Italian government bonds [3]. In addition, Eurex is a private market under German law, and is much more transparent than the OTC market on which CDS are traded. Note that the FOAT launch was not very successful: on the day it was launched, only 2,581 futures contracts were traded on French bonds, against 1,242,000 on German bonds and 13,671 on Italian bonds [4].

Even if, as with the CDS, the primary function of the FOAT is to hedge against risk, it can also become an instrument for

speculation, including via short selling. While speculation on French debt was previously limited to large investors, with an average notional amount of 15 billion euros per CDS [5], the notional amount of the new FOAT contract is 100,000 euros, which will attract more investors into the market for French debt. If speculators bet on a decline in the sustainability of France's public finances, then the price of futures contracts on the OAT bonds will fall, which will amplify market movements and result in higher interest rates on OAT contracts.

The not so rosy future?

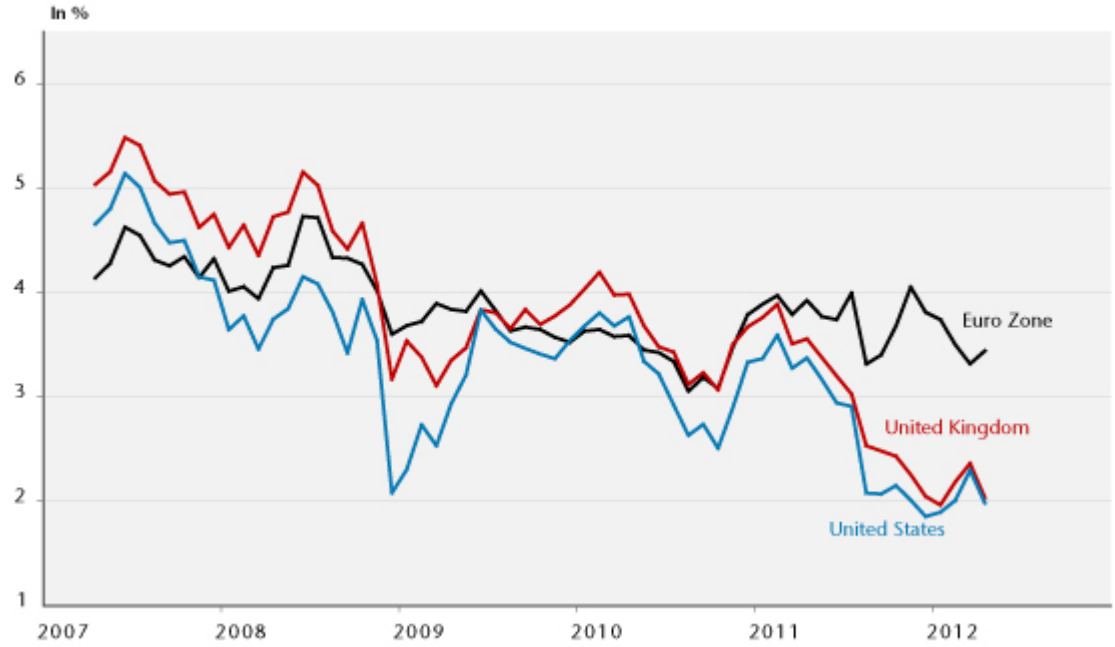
It is difficult to predict how the financial markets will behave in the wake of the French presidential election. Studying what has happened in other euro zone countries is not very informative, due to each one's specific situation. The country most "comparable" to France would undoubtedly be Italy. However, the appointment of Mario Monti in November 2011 took place in an unusual context, where the formation of a technocratic government was specifically intended to restore market confidence through a strenuous effort to reduce the deficit, with Italy also benefitting from the ECB's accommodative policy.

The French budgetary configuration is different, as the financial imperative appears only in the background. The candidates of the two major parties both advocate the need to restore a balanced budget. Their timetables are different (2016 for Nicolas Sarkozy's UMP, 2017 for François Hollande's PS), as are the means for achieving this: for Sarkozy, the focus will be more on restraint in public spending (0.4% growth per year between 2013 and 2016, against 1.1% for the PS), while Hollande emphasizes growth in revenue, with an increase in the tax burden of 1.8% between 2012 and 2017 (against 1% for the UMP).

But this is not the heart of the matter. What is striking,

beyond the need to reduce public deficits in the euro zone countries, is the fact that our destinies are inextricably linked. As is shown by the graph on changes in bond yields in the euro zone (Figure 2), when the euro zone is weakened, all the countries suffer an impact on their risk premium relative to the United States and the United Kingdom, although to varying degrees. It is therefore unrealistic to think about France's budget strategy and growth strategy outside of a European framework. What will prevent the financial markets from speculating on a country's debt is building a Europe that is fiscally strong, has strict rules, and is supported by active monetary policy. This construction is taking place, but it is far from complete: the EFSF does not have sufficient firepower to help countries in difficulty; the growth strategy at the European level agreed at the summit of 2 March 2012 needs to be more comprehensive; and the ECB needs to pursue an active policy, like the Fed, which specifically requires a revision of its statutes. As was pointed out by Standard and Poor's when it announced the downgrade of the French sovereign rating last December, what will be watched closely by the financial markets is the fiscal consistency of the euro zone. On 6 May 2012, what attitude will the next President then take vis-à-vis the construction of the budget and how able will he be to assert his position in the euro zone – this will determine the future attitude of the financial markets, not only vis-à-vis France, but also vis-à-vis every euro zone country.

Figure 1. Average yields on 10-year bonds in the euro zone, the United States and the United Kingdom



Source : Datastream.

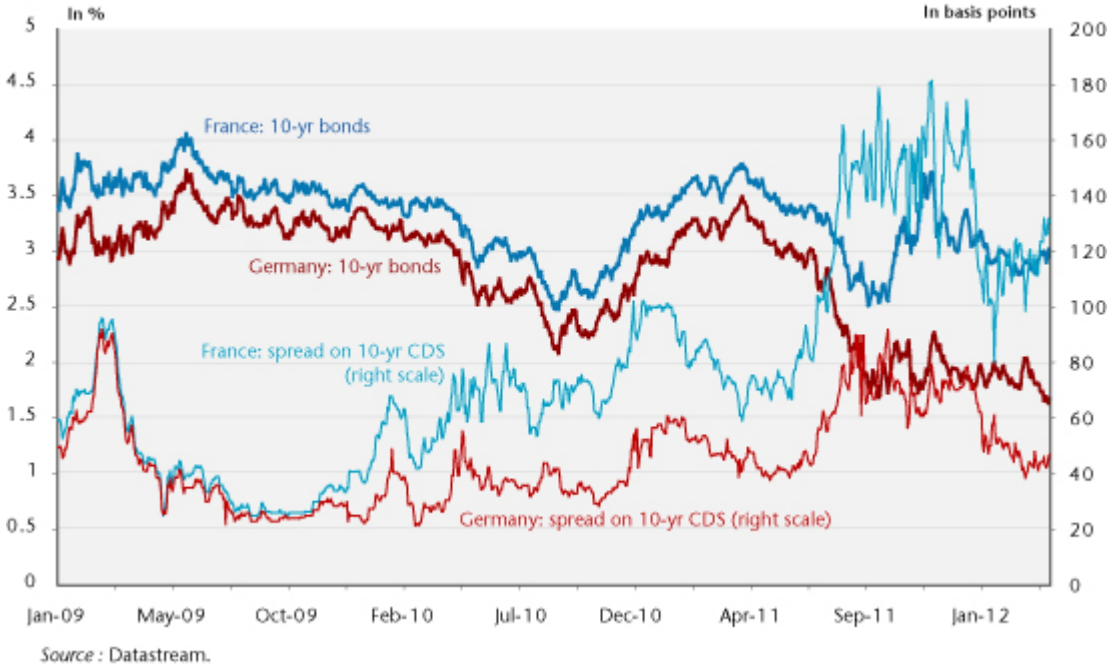
Annex: Technical functioning of Credit Default Swaps

The contract buyer acquires the right to sell a benchmark bond at its face value (called the "principal") in case of a credit event. The buyer of the CDS pays the seller the agreed amounts at regular intervals, until maturity of the CDS or the occurrence of the credit event. The swap is then unwound, either by delivery of the underlying instrument, or in cash. If the contract terms provide for physical settlement, the buyer of the CDS delivers the bonds to the seller in exchange for their nominal value. If the CDS is settled in cash, the CDS seller pays the buyer the difference between the nominal amount of the buyer's bonds and the listed value of the bonds after the credit event (recovery value), in the knowledge that in this case the buyer of the CDS retains its defaulted bonds. In most cases, the recovery value is determined by a formal auction process organized by the ISDA (International Swaps and Derivatives Association). The annual premium that the bank will pay to the insurance company for the right to coverage is called the CDS spread and constitutes the value listed on the market: the higher the risk of default, the more the CDS spread increases (Figure 1). In reality, as the banks are both the buyers and sellers of protection, the spread is usually

presented as a range: a bank can offer a range from 90 to 100 basis points on the risk of a French default. It is thus ready to buy protection against the risk of default by paying 90 basis points on the principal but it demands 100 to provide that protection.

To illustrate this, consider the following example. On 7 May 2012, a bank (buyer) signs a CDS on a principal of 10 million euros for five years with an insurance company (seller). The bank agrees to pay 90 basis points (spread) to protect against a default by the French State. If France does not default, the bank will receive nothing at maturity, but will pay 90,000 euros annually every 7 May for the years 2012-2017. Suppose that the credit event occurs on 1 October 2015. If the contract specifies delivery of the underlying asset, the buyer has the right to deliver its French bonds with a par value of 10 million euros and in exchange will receive 10 million euros in cash. If a cash settlement is expected, and if the French bonds are now listed only at 40 euros, then the insurance company will pay the bank 10 million minus 4 million = 6 million euros.

Annex Figure. France/Germany: premiums on 10-year CDS and 10-year bond yields



Source : Datastream.

[1] Individuals can play on the markets for corporate CDS via trackers (collective investment in transferable securities that replicates the performance of a market index).

[2] The Eurex was created in 1997 by the merger of the German futures market, Deutsche Termin-Borse (DTB), and the futures market in Zurich, the Swiss Options and Financial Futures Exchange (SOFFEX), to compete with the LIFFE. It belongs to Deutsche Börse and dominates the market for long-term financial futures.

[3] In September 2009 for bonds with long residual maturities (8.5 to 11 years), October 2010 for bonds with short residual maturities (2 to 3.25 years) and July 2011 for bonds with average residual maturities (4.5 to 6 years).

[4] Note that this comparison is biased due to the fact that there are 4 types of futures contracts on German debt, 3 on Italian debt and only 1 on French debt.

[5] Weekly data provided by the DTCC for the week of 9 to 13 April 2012 on CDS on French sovereign debt: the outstanding notional amount came to 1,435 billion dollars, with 6822 contracts traded.

Europe’s banks: leaving the

zone of turbulence?

By Vincent Touzé

The 2008 crisis almost endangered the entire global financial system. Thanks to support from governments and central banks, the banking sector has recovered and once again appears to be solid financially. In the aftermath of the crisis, the public finances of the Southern euro zone countries – Portugal, Italy, Spain and Greece – and Ireland (the "PIIGS") have, in turn, been severely weakened. Greece was forced to suspend payments, and the risk of default is still hanging over the others. Since early 2011, bank liabilities in these economies have become a significant concern of the financial markets. Despite good stress tests, this fear intensified in August 2011. European banks then entered a new period of turmoil, and the European Central Bank was forced to lend them more than 1,000 billion euros for 3 years at a rate of 1% in order to avoid a major credit crunch.

As part of their investments abroad and through their foreign branches, Europe's banks hold liabilities from the PIIGS countries through lending to the banking sector, to the public sector (sovereign debts and credits) and to households and private non-bank enterprises. France is one of the countries that is most heavily exposed to the PIIGS (public and private sectors combined), with a total commitment by the banking system in the third quarter of 2011 of about 437 billion euros (see table), or 21.9% of GDP. Germany's exposure, at about 322 billion euros (12.5% of GDP), is smaller. The exposure of the UK banking system is comparable and is valued at 230 billion euros, or 13.3% of GDP. In comparison, the Japanese and US banks hold little debt: 59 billion euros (1.4% of GDP) for Japan and 96 billion (0.9% of GDP) for the United States. In the course of the financial crisis, Europe's banks have pulled back from these countries (1). According to the statistics of the Bank for International Settlements (Figure 1), the

reduction in exposure was most pronounced in Greece (-55% since Q1 2007) and lowest in Portugal (-15%). Divestments of the debt of Spain (-29%), Italy (-33%) and Ireland (39%) have been comparable and are at an intermediate level compared to the previous two.

Guarantee funds can be drawn on if a bank goes bankrupt, but generally their provisions are insufficient to support a “big” bank in difficulty. According to the principle of “too big to fail”, the state must intervene to avoid bankruptcy. Possible avenues of action include acquiring some of the bank’s capital, nationalizing it by refloating it, or facilitating its long-term refinancing through the purchase of bonds. A bank failure has to be avoided at all costs, because it is frequently accompanied by panic, with collateral damage that is difficult to predict or contain. The mere fact that a State announces credible support for a bank or a banking system is often sufficient to avert a panic. If the States were to come to the rescue of the banks in the case of the Greek default, the macroeconomic implications of a 50% default on all private and public debts seem relatively minor, since it would require, for example in the case of France, a cost of around 17 billion euros, an amount that is much less than 1% of GDP (see table). By contrast, a 50% default of all the PIIGS would require 220 billion euros in support from France (11% of French GDP). The macroeconomic cost beforehand might seem high, but it is not insurmountable. Unfortunately, the spontaneous failure of one or more PIIGS would lead to an uncontrollable chain reaction whose overall macroeconomic costs could be considerable.

This financial crisis is also hitting the life insurance companies, right in the midst of a period of reform in prudential regulations. The banking sector has just managed to come up to Basel II standards and will steadily have (until 2019) to adopt Basel III (2), while the insurance industry is changing rapidly towards Solvency II (3). These two regulatory

reforms are leading to an increasing need for capital just as the financial crisis is undermining balance sheets and putting greater pressure on capital ratios. While equity capital can be used to withstand a financial crisis, at the same time regulations can compel recapitalizations in very difficult refinancing conditions. This is an undesirable pro-cyclical result of the prudential regulations.

The risk of a default on payments by some PIIGS has made financial analysts pay particularly close attention to the solvency and profitability of European banks. However, the results of the stress tests (4) on the European banks published in mid-July 2011 were considered good. The hypotheses used are far from being optimistic. In the euro zone (and respectively in the other countries), they point to a fall in the growth rate of 2 points (2.4 points respectively) in 2011 and 2 points (1.9 points respectively) in 2012 compared to a reference scenario. In the euro zone, this entry into recession (-0.5% in 2011 and -0.2% in 2012) would be accompanied by higher unemployment (0.3 point in 2011 and 1.2 points in 2012), a lower inflation rate (-0.5 point in 2011 and -1.1 points in 2012), a sharp drop in property prices, a rise in long-term rates as well as discounts on sovereign debt (5) of up to 30%. The objective of this "stressed" scenario is to test the capacity of the banks to be able to maintain a "core Tier 1" ratio greater than 5% (6). Under these extreme assumptions, only 8.9% of the 90 banks tested achieved a ratio that was below the 5% ceiling that would trigger a de facto recapitalization to meet the target (7). The four French banks succeeded on the stress tests without difficulty, as they maintain high ratios: 6.6% for Societe Generale, 6.8% for the Banque populaire-Caisse d'épargne, 7.9% for BNP Paribas and 8.5% for Crédit Agricole. The countries where failures were observed include Austria (1 bank), Spain (5 failures) and Greece (2 failures). In view of the stress tests, the European banking system could therefore be considered as capable of withstanding a major economic

crisis.

After the second aid package to Greece on 21 July 2011, and with ongoing pressure on the other sovereign debts, worry seized the stock markets, and European bank stocks fell sharply from August to December 2011 (Figure 2). These stock market changes were in complete contradiction with the positive results of the stress tests. There are three possible ways to interpret the reaction of the financial markets:

– An actual crisis would be much sharper than the hypotheses of the stress tests;
– The stress test methods are not adequate for estimating the consequences of a crisis;
– The markets get swept up in the slightest rumors and are disconnected from basics.

For now, with respect to the most pessimistic forecasts, it does not seem that the stress test hypotheses are particularly favorable. However, they have weaknesses for assessing systemic financial crisis, in that each bank does not include in its assessment the damage brought about by the application of the scenario to other banks or the consequences for the credit market. There is no feedback from the financial interconnections. Moreover, the economic crisis can greatly increase the default rates of private companies. This point may have been underestimated by the stress tests. Note also that the tests are performed at an internal level, which can also lead to different assessments of the consequences of certain scenarios. In addition, the stress tests evaluate the financial soundness of the banks, but de facto, a bank, although solvent, can see its stock price fall in times of crisis for the simple reason that its expected profitability decreases. Most importantly, the runaway financial markets are due to the lack of a consensus on the decisions taken within the European Union on finding a definitive solution to the debt crisis but also to the fact that the statutes of the European Central Bank prohibit it from participating in public debt issues. These uncertainties reinforce the volatility of

the stock price of banks that are particularly exposed to PIIGS, as evidenced by the strong correlation between CDS on private banks and on sovereign debt in the euro zone (8).

With the beginning of a solution on Greek debt, the stock market listings of European banks have been rising since January 2012. Hopefully the agreement of 21 February 2012 on Greek sovereign debt will calm the storm that hit the bond markets. The operation provides that private investors agree to give up 107 billion euros of the 206 billion of debt they hold and that the euro zone States agree a new loan of 130 billion. The agreement is a swap of debt. The old bonds are exchanged against new ones at a discount of 53.5% of the face value (9) and at a new contractual interest rate. The write-down was not a surprise for the banks, which have already set aside provisions for the losses. The operation was a clear success (10), as 83% of the holdings were voluntarily offered for exchange on 9 March (11). The level of participation was increased to more than 95% by carrying through a compulsory exchange with creditors who had not responded positively to the operation (collective action clauses for debt held under Greek law). After this exchange, the European states, the IMF, and the ECB will hold “more than three-quarters of Greek debt” (12), which means that any new crisis of Greek sovereign debt would have little impact on private investors. A new source of uncertainty comes from the CDS that were taken out for the purpose of hedging or speculation (“naked CDS”). Initially, the International Swaps and Derivatives Association (ISDA) (13) announced on 1 March that this exchange was not a “credit event”. On 9 March, it revised its judgment (14). The ISDA now believes that the collective action clauses are forcing owners to accept the exchange, which constitutes a credit event. The Greek default on payments is a legally recognized event, and the CDS are thus activated. According to the ISDA, the net exposure of CDS to Greece would amount to only 3.2 billion dollars. To estimate the overall cost of the CDS for the financial sector, the residual value of the bonds would have

to be subtracted from that amount. Given the inability of Greece to resume growth, the sustainability of its remaining debt is not guaranteed, and the risk of contagion persists. In any event, the public debt of the Southern euro zone countries and Ireland are now considered risky assets, which is a factor that is weakening the European banking sector. In this respect, since late March the recent rise in interest rates on Italian and Spanish public debt has provoked a decline in the stock prices of European banks (Figure 2).

The ongoing financial crisis is weakening the banking sector in the euro zone, which could lead it to reduce its exposure to risk: a major credit crunch is thus to be feared. The latest ECB survey covering 9 December 2011 to 9 January 2012 (15) with regard to the lending conditions set by banks is not very reassuring. Tighter conditions are expected by 35% (against 16% last quarter) of banks on business loans and by 29% (against 18% last quarter) of banks on consumer loans. In light of this prospect, on 21 December 2011 the ECB conducted a long-term refinancing operation. This was a huge success, with 489 billion euros in credits granted to the banking sector. The funds were loaned at 1% for a period of 3 years. Although it is still difficult to assess the impact of this measure, ECB president Mario Draghi said in February that this injection of liquidity had clearly avoided a major credit crunch. On 29 February 2012, the ECB launched a second long-term refinancing plan (16). The subscription was very substantial, with 530 billion euros disbursed. It is therefore reasonable to think that a credit crunch will be avoided.

In conclusion, the banking sector’s escape from the zone of turbulence depends on four key factors:
1) Only a long-term return to growth across the euro zone as a whole will make it possible to consolidate the public purse and reduce the number of business failures (17), thereby de facto reducing banks’ exposure to the risk of default, with responsibility incumbent on the European governments and the

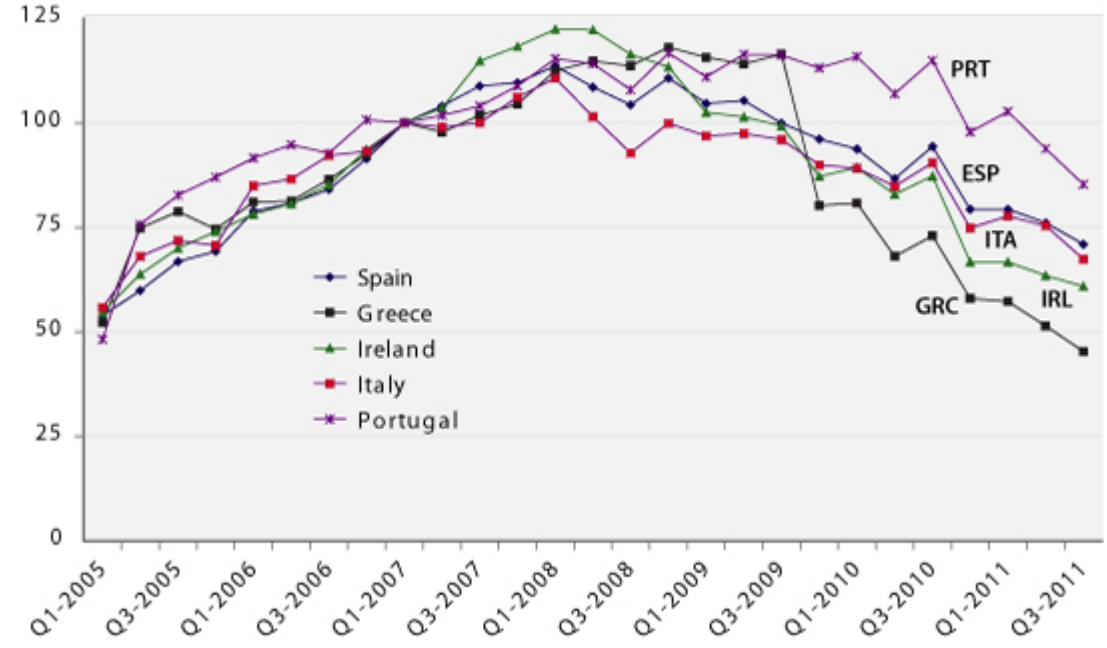
ECB to identify and implement the “right” policy mix and the appropriate structural measures.
2) The Greek State is insolvent; this failure in public finances must not be allowed to spread to other economies, since the banking crisis is also a test of the strength of financial solidarity in the euro zone, and it remains to be seen whether the Germans are more inclined to support Spain or Italy in case of a risk of default than they were with Greece.
3) The banking crisis has brought to the fore the procyclical effects of the prudential regulations, which need to be corrected.
4) The maneuvering room of governments as first responders in a crisis has become very limited due to their massive debt. If there is a new major shock, the ECB could have no other choice but to be the lender of last resort.

Exposure of the national bank sector to the PIIGS 3rd quarter 2011 (billion euros)

Creditor country	DEU	FRA	GBR	JPN	USA
			SPAIN		
Bank	44,3	25,0	13,4	2,9	13,0
Public sector	18,6	19,1	4,3	7,0	3,7
Private non-bank sector	50,7	57,9	48,0	7,5	17,0
Total	**113,6**	**102,0**	**65,7**	**17,4**	**33,7**
			GREECE		
Banks	0,7	0,4	0,7	0,2	0,9
Public sector	8,0	5,1	1,5	0,1	1,0
Private non-bank sector	4,5	28,3	6,0	0,5	2,3
Total	**13,2**	**33,8**	**8,2**	**0,8**	**4,2**
			IRELAND		
Banks	14,1	6,9	12,7	1,1	6,4
Public sector	2,0	1,8	3,3	0,5	1,3
Private non-bank sector	55,6	11,7	80,8	12,2	23,2
Total	**71,7**	**20,5**	**96,8**	**13,9**	**30,8**
			ITALY		
Banks	28,4	26,3	5,5	1,9	6,8
Public sector	31,4	58,1	6,0	17,5	7,2
Private non-bank sector	42,4	178,6	31,7	6,3	9,3
Total	**102,1**	**262,9**	**43,3**	**25,7**	**23,3**
			PORTUGAL		
Banks	6,2	4,4	2,3	0,1	1,1
Public sector	5,6	3,8	1,2	0,3	0,6
Private non-bank sector	9,4	10,0	13,0	0,6	1,8
Total	**21,2**	**18,2**	**16,5**	**1,0**	**3,5**
			TOTAL PIIGS		
Banks	93,6	63,0	34,6	6,3	28,2
Public sector	65,6	87,9	16,3	25,4	13,9
Private non-bank sector	162,6	286,5	179,6	27,1	53,6
Total	**321,8**	**437,4**	**230,4**	**58,8**	**95,6**
% of GDP	12,5	21,9	13,3	1,4	0,9

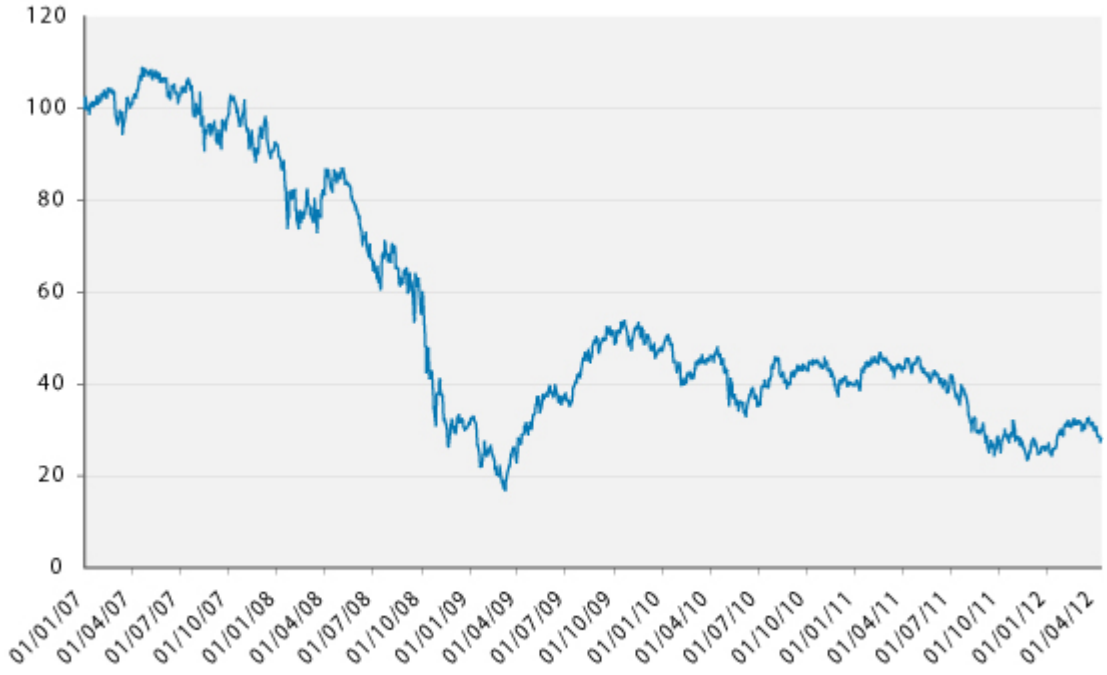
Sources : Banque des règlements internationaux – *Consolidated banking statistics / ultimate risk basis* – and author's calculations.

Graphique 1. Foreign debt held by European banks (Base 100 = 1st quarter 2007)



Source : Banque des règlements internationaux – *Consolidated banking statistics /ultimate risk basis* – and author's calculations.

Figure 2. Stock market index of European banks (base 100 = 1 January 2007)



Sources : Datastream (FTSE World Europe Banks).

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[1] Note that a financial depreciation (capital loss) on the balance sheet value of assets in the PIIGS implies an automatic reduction in the exposure to these economies.

[2] http://www.bis.org/speeches/sp100921_fr.pdf

[3] http://ec.europa.eu/internal_market/insurance/solvency/background_fr.htm.

[4] *European Banking Authority*, 2011, http://stress-test.eba.europa.eu/pdf/EBA_ST_2011_Summary_Report_v6.pdf.

[5] European Banking Authority (2011), *Methodogical Note – Additional guidance*, June 2011.

[6] The minimum level required by Basel II for the Core Tier 1 ratio is only 2%, which rises to 4.5% under Basel III (in force in 2013). This ratio measures the proportion of risk-weighted assets covered by equity capital.

[7] For a bank whose ratio falls to x%, the recapitalization requirement corresponds to (5%-x)/x % of post-shock equity capital. Hence if x=4%, the recapitalization requirement would correspond to 25% of the equity capital.

[8] "The correlation between interest rates on public debt and on private debt will make it difficult to resolve the sovereign debt crisis in the euro zone", *Flash marchés*, Natixis, 14 March 2011 – N° 195, http://cib.natixis.com/flushdoc.aspx?id=57160.

[9] For example, each old bond with a face value of 100 euros is exchanged for a new one worth 46.5 euros. The EFSF guarantees 15 euros and the Greek state 31.5 euros.

[10] http://www.minfin.gr/portal/en/resource/contentObject/id/baba4f3e-da88-491c-9c61-ce1fd030edf6.

[11] In light of the holders of public debt who are not subject to Greek law and who are refusing to take part in the operation, the deadline of 9 March (see

http://fr.reuters.com/article/frEuroRpt/idFRL6E8F54O20120405) was put off to 4 April and then to 20 April. The Greek state considers that this refusal to exchange will not be sufficient to block the operation, as, given the collective action clauses, voluntary or required participation amounts to at least 95.7%. With regard to the recalcitrant investors, the Greek state has the choice of waiting a little longer, meeting its contractual commitments (continued reimbursement of the face value and interest as initially scheduled), make a new exchange offer (but this must be equitable with respect to those who accepted the previous offer) or default, with the risk of pursuit in the international courts.

[12] Olivier Garnier, "Comprendre l'échange de dette publique grecque", *Le Webzine de l'actionnaire – Analyses*, Société Générale, 13 March 2012, http://www.societegenerale.com/actiorama/comprendre-l%E2%80%99echange-de-dette-publique-grecque.

[13] http://www.isda.org/dc/docs/EMEA_Determinations_Committee_Decision_0103201202.pdf.

[14] http://www2.isda.org/greek-sovereign-cds/

[15] The Euro Area Bank Lending Survey, 1February 2012, http://www.ecb.int/stats/pdf/blssurvey_201201.pdf.

[16] http://www.ecb.int/press/pr/date/2011/html/pr111208_1.en.html.

[17] "Les entreprises après la crise", Colloquium Banque de France, 28 June 2011, http://www.banque-france.fr/fileadmin/user_upload/banque_de_france/publications/Bulletin-de%20la-Banque-de-France/Bulletin-de-la-Banque-de-France-etude-185-2.pdf

Towards a major tax reform?

By Guillaume Allègre and Mathieu Plane (eds.)

Taxation is more at the heart of the current election campaign and public debate than ever before. The economic and financial crisis, coupled with the goal of rapidly reducing the deficit, is inevitably shaking up the electoral discourse and forcing us to confront the complexity of our tax system. How do taxes interact with each other? What are the effects? How are they measured? What kind of consensual basis and constraints does taxation require? How should the tax burden be distributed among the economic actors? How should social welfare be financed? Should we advocate a "tax revolution" or incremental reform? The contributions to a special "Tax Reform" issue of the Revue de l'OFCE – Débats et Politiques aim to clarify and enrich this discussion.

The first section of the special issue deals with the requirements and principles of a tax system. In an introductory article, Jacques Le Cacheux considers the main principles that should underpin any necessary tax reform from the viewpoint of economic theory. In a historical analysis, Nicolas Delalande emphasizes the role of political resources, institutional constraints and social compromises in drawing up tax policy. Mathieu Plane considers past trends in taxation from a budgetary framework and analyzes the constraints on public finances today. In response to the problem of imported carbon emissions, Eloi Laurent and Jacques Le Cacheux propose the implementation of a carbon-added tax.

The second section deals with the issue of how the tax burden

is distributed among households. Camille Landais, Thomas Piketty and Emmanuel Saez respond to the important article by Henri Sterdyniak in which he recommends a "tax revolution". Clément Schaff and Mahdi Ben Jelloul propose a complete overhaul of family policy. Guillaume Allègre attempts to shed light on the debate over France's "family quotient" policy. Finally, Guillaume Allègre, Mathieu Plane and Xavier Timbeau propose a reform of taxation on wealth.

The third section concerns the financing of social protection. In a sweeping review of the literature, Mireille Elbaum examines changes in the financing of social protection since the early 1980s, and considers the alternatives that have been proposed and their limits. Eric Heyer, Mathieu Plane and Xavier Timbeau analyze the impact of the implementation of the "quasi-social VAT" approved by the French Parliament. Frédéric Gannon and Vincent Touzé present an estimate of the marginal tax rate implicit in the country's pension system.

Must balancing the public finances be the main goal of economic policy

By Henri Sterdyniak

The financial crisis of 2007-2012 caused a sharp rise in public deficits and debt as States had to intervene to save the financial system and support economic activity, and especially as they experienced a steep drop in tax revenues due to falling GDP. In early 2012, at a time when they are far from having recovered from the effects of the crisis (which cost them an average of 8 GDP points compared to the pre-

crisis trend), they face a difficult choice: should they continue to support activity, or do whatever it takes to reduce public deficits and debt?

An in-depth note expands on nine analytical points:

– The growth of debt and deficits is not peculiar to France; it occurred in all the developed countries.

– France's public bodies are certainly indebted, but they also have physical assets. Overall the net wealth of government represented 26.7% of GDP in late 2010, or 8000 euros per capita. Moreover, when all the national wealth is taken into account (physical assets less foreign debt), then every French newborn has an average worth at birth of 202 000 euros (national wealth divided by the number of inhabitants).

– In 2010, the net debt burden came to 2.3% of GDP, reflecting an average interest rate on the debt of 3.0%, which is well below the nominal potential growth rate. At this level, the real cost of the debt, that is, the primary surplus needed to stabilize the debt, is zero or even slightly negative.

– The true "golden rule" of public finances stipulates that it is legitimate to finance public investment by public borrowing. The structural deficit must thus be equal to the net public investment. For France, this rule permits a deficit of around 2.4% of GDP. There is no reason to set a standard for balancing the public finances. The State is not a household. It is immortal, and can thus run a permanent debt: the State does not have to repay its debt, but only to guarantee that it will always service it.

– The public deficit is detrimental to future generations whenever it becomes destabilizing due to an excessive increase in public spending or an excessive decrease in taxation, at which point it causes a rise in inflation and interest rates and undermines investment and growth. This is not the situation of the current deficit, which is aimed at making

adjustments to provide the necessary support for economic activity in a situation of low interest rates, due to the high level of household savings and the refusal of business to invest more.

– For some, the 8 GDP points lost during the crisis have been lost forever; we must resign ourselves to persistently high unemployment, as it is structural in nature. Since the goal must be to balance the structural public balance, France needs to make an additional major effort of around 4 percentage points of GDP of its deficit. For us, a sustainable deficit is about 2.4 GDP points. The structural deficit in 2011 is already below that figure. It is growth that should make it possible to reduce the current deficit. No additional fiscal effort is needed.

– On 9 December 2011, the euro zone countries agreed on a new fiscal pact: the Treaty on Stability, Coordination and Governance of the European Monetary Union. This Pact will place strong constraints on future fiscal policy. The structural deficit of each member country must be less than 0.5% of GDP. An automatic correction mechanism is to be triggered if this threshold is exceeded. This constraint and the overall mechanism must be integrated in a binding and permanent manner into the fiscal procedures of each country. Countries whose debt exceeds 60% of GDP will have to reduce their debt ratio by at least one-twentieth of the excess every year.

This project is economically dangerous. It imposes medium-term objectives (a balanced budget, a debt rolled back to below 60% of GDP) that are arbitrary and are not *a priori* compatible with the necessities of an economic equilibrium. Likewise, it imposes a fiscal policy that is incompatible with the necessities of short-term economic management. It prohibits any discretionary fiscal policy. It deprives governments of any fiscal policy instrument.

– As the rise in public debts and deficits in the developed countries came in response to mounting global imbalances, we cannot reduce the debts and deficits without addressing the causes of these imbalances. Otherwise, the simultaneous implementation of restrictive fiscal policies in the OECD countries as a whole will lead to stagnating production, falling tax revenues and deteriorating debt ratios, without managing to reassure the financial markets.

– A more balanced global economy would require that the countries in surplus base their growth on domestic demand and that their capital assumes the risks associated with direct investment. In the Anglo-American world, higher growth in wage and social income and a reduction in income inequalities would undercut the need for swelling financial bubbles, household debt and public debt. The euro zone needs to find the 8 GDP points lost to the crisis. Instead of focussing on government balances, the European authorities should come up with a strategy to end the crisis, based on a recovery in demand, and in particular on investment to prepare for the ecological transition. This strategy must include keeping interest rates low and public deficits at the levels needed to support activity.

The new European treaty, the euro and sovereignty

By Christophe Blot

On 2 March 2012, 25 countries in the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) adopted a new treaty providing for greater fiscal discipline. The treaty became an object of dispute almost before the ink was dry [1], as Francois Hollande announced that, if elected, he would seek to renegotiate it in order to emphasize the need to address growth. There is no doubt that a turnabout like this on a treaty that was so fiercely negotiated would be frowned upon by a number of our European partners. The merit of strengthening fiscal discipline in a time of crisis is, nevertheless, an issue worth posing.

So how should we look at this new treaty? Jérôme Creel, Paul Hubert and Francesco Saraceno have already demonstrated the potential recessionary impact of the rules it introduces. In addition to these macroeconomic effects, the treaty also fails to deal with an essential question that should be at the heart of the European project: sovereignty.

In 1998, one year before the launch of the euro, Charles Goodhart [2] published an article in which he raised a peculiar feature of the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) with respect to monetary theory and history. Goodhart recalled that a currency is almost always inextricably bound up with the expression of political and fiscal sovereignty. However, in the context of the EMU, this link is broken, as the euro and monetary policy are controlled by a supranational institution even though they are not part of any expression of European sovereignty, as fiscal policy decisions in particular remain decentralized and regulated by the Stability and Growth Pact. Goodhart concluded that the creation of the euro portends tensions that will need careful attention.

The current crisis in the euro zone shows that this warning was well founded. The warning makes it possible above all to consider the crisis from a different perspective – a political one. The issue of the sustainability of the debt and compliance with rules in effect masks the euro's underlying problem, its "original sin": the single currency is doomed if it is not based on fiscal and political sovereignty. If there are any exceptions to this, they consist of micro-states that have abandoned their monetary sovereignty to neighbours that are far more powerful economically and politically. The euro zone is not the Vatican.

The renegotiation of the treaty or the opening of new negotiations with a view to the ratification of a European Constitution is not only urgent but vital to the survival of the European project. Beyond the overarching objectives of growth, employment, financial stability and sustainable development, which, it must be kept in mind, are at the heart of European construction, as is evidenced by their inclusion in Article 3 of the Treaty on the European Union, any new negotiations should now address the question of Europe's political and fiscal sovereignty, and therefore, by corollary, the issue of the transfer of national sovereignty.

It should be noted that this approach to the implementation of European sovereignty is not inconsistent with the existence of rules. In the United States, most states have had balanced budget rules since the mid-nineteenth century, prior to which a number of them had defaulted (see C.R. Henning and M. Kessler [3]). However, these rules were adopted at the initiative of the states and are not included in the US Constitution. There are, however, ongoing efforts to include a requirement in the Constitution for a balanced budget at the federal level. For the moment, these have not been successful, and they are being challenged on the grounds that this would risk undermining the stabilizing power of the federal budget. In the United States, before the crisis the resources of the

federal state accounted for 19% of GDP, compared with an EU budget that does not exceed 1% of GDP and which must always be balanced, and therefore cannot be used for of macroeconomic adjustments. In the US, the stabilization of shocks is thus handled through an unrestricted federal budget, which offsets the poor responsiveness of local fiscal policies that are constrained by the requirement for balance. While the euro zone must surely find its own way, the fact remains that the euro should not be an instrument in the hands of the European Central Bank alone: it must become a symbol of the political and fiscal sovereignty of all the euro zone's citizens.

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[1] It will only take effect, however, after a ratification process in the 25 countries. This could be a long and uncertain process, as Ireland has announced that it will hold a referendum.

[2] See "The two concepts of money: implications for the analysis of optimal currency areas", *Journal of European Political Economy* vol.14 (1998) pages 407-432.

[3] "Fiscal federalism: US history for architects of Europe's fiscal union", (2012) Peterson Institute for International Economics.

Is government expenditure in

France too high?

By Xavier Timbeau

Since 2005, France has vied with Denmark for first place in terms of government expenditure as reported by the OECD. Since the ratio of "government expenditure" to GDP reached 56.6% in 2010, it has been necessary, according to a widely held view, to "deflate" a State that is taking up "too much" space in the economy. First place would thus be, not a badge of honour, but a sign that we have reached an unsustainable level of "government expenditure". Since, moreover, it is essential to reduce the public deficit, the path ahead is clear: reducing public spending is the only way to bring public finances under control. But this simplistic analysis is wrong.

This analysis is based on a poor use of the statistics on government expenditure reported by the OECD and flows from an inadequate understanding of what the term "government expenditure" means. This term, it must be recognized, can be confusing.

What is called "government expenditure" combines, on the one hand, collective expenditures (*e.g.* from maintenance of the security forces to public administration and the fight against poverty) and, on the other, insurance-related transfer expenditures. This transfer spending covers pension insurance and health insurance. These are individualizable in the sense that we know the direct beneficiary of the expense (which is not the case for administrative expenditures, for which the benefits are diffuse), and they are funded by contributory schemes: to qualify for coverage, it is necessary to have contributed. In most countries, the pension system is almost completely contributory, in the sense that the relative level of benefits for individuals of the same age is related to their relative contributions. The rate of return on the contributions (which relates the expected present value of the

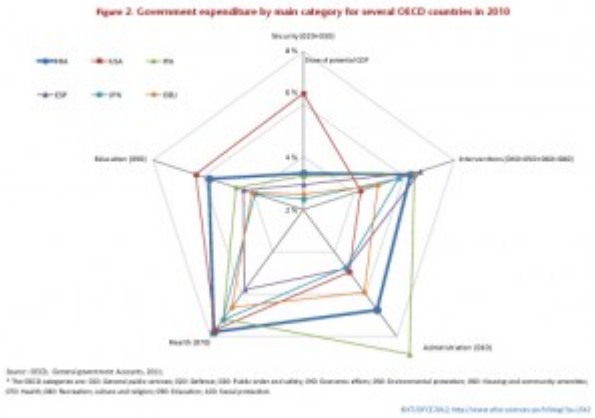
flow of pension benefits to the present value of the contributions) is comparable to that obtainable over a long period by capitalizing savings. The minimum pension payment, family benefits and survivor benefits might seem to deviate from this contributory principle, but in practice these “benefits” compensate for short careers that have been interrupted by the accidents of life and do not differ much from a contributory scheme. With regard to health, another pillar of the modern welfare State, the contributory aspect is mitigated by the redistribution effected by a contribution that is proportional to income and an expense that depends on age and not much on income (with the exception of daily allowances). When health care provision is universal, some people benefit without having contributed, but these cases are marginal and do not alter the quasi-contributory character of our health systems.

Depending on the country, the pooling of transfer expenditures takes various organizational forms. It may be done inside the company, within sector-wide organizations, or by management and trade union bodies or it may be mediated by central government. The particularity of France is that social protection is mainly organized through the State’s intermediation. This is not the case in other countries like the United Kingdom, the United States or Germany. Even unemployment insurance, which is handled by management/union bodies, is treated by the national accounts as pertaining to the public sector, and UI contributions are considered compulsory levies (automobile insurance premiums, although imposed on anyone who uses the roads, are not classed as levies).

Figure 1 shows the unique position of France. In 2010, “government expenditure” in the strict sense (that is to say, not individualizable, such as domestic and foreign security, administration, miscellaneous expenditure on interventions) represented 18.2% of the country’s GDP. In terms of this “strict government expenditure”, in 2009 France ranked 10th among the OECD countries (see also Figure 2). If the “competition for being thin” covered only expenditure in this narrower sense, France would be relatively average compared to other bigger-spending countries like the United States, Portugal and Italy. Moreover, unlike the UK, the US or Ireland, over the last 20 years France has cut “strict government expenditure”, in a rather unexpected demonstration of fiscal control.

Figure 1 also shows that there is not great variation among the OECD countries with respect to the hard core of “government expenditure”. A developed country needs security, public administration and expenditure on interventions. It is difficult to compress this kind of State spending; the difference between the State with the largest expenditure (Hungary) and that with the smallest (Switzerland) is 8 GDP points. If we limit ourselves to large States, the gap is smaller (a difference of 3.6 GDP points between Japan and Italy). In contrast, with respect to “government social expenditure”, the differences between countries are major: the gap between Korea and Denmark is 27 GDP points, and, among the major countries, 13 GDP points between the United States and

France. This makes France, along with Denmark, Sweden, Austria and Finland, a country where “government social expenditure” in relation to GDP is high.



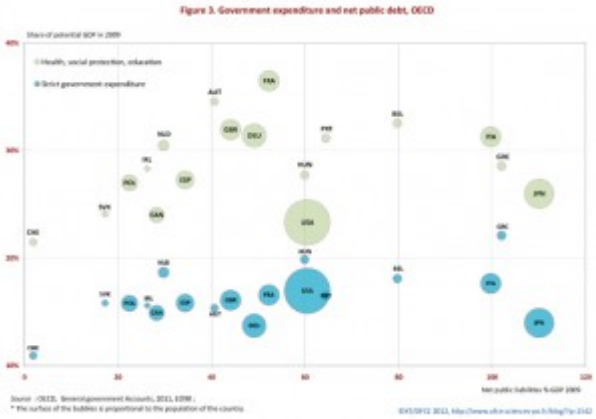
Can we conclude from these data that the French system of social protection is more generous than in other countries? And that this is the cause of an unsustainable public debt (Figure 3)? Can we say that the system is too generous and that we must reverse the course of the past 20 years by reducing the share of social spending in GDP? No, the data tell us only one thing: that social welfare, health and education in France are dispensed directly by the State, which provides funding for these through the tax system. In other countries, intervention by the State (or by local authorities) may be just as massive (for instance, by defining specifications for education, prices of treatments or medications, or obligations to take out health or retirement insurance), but the performance of the service or the distribution of the benefit may be delegated to a non-public entity. In some countries, only a portion of health or retirement coverage is mandatory, and individuals are then “free” to choose the level of spending they want. This freedom is relative, as people can be steered by tax incentives (instead of “government expenditure”, we speak of a “tax expenditure”, since it implies a shortfall in tax revenue for the State) or by necessity.

Total spending on health care and education is, for example,

higher in the US than it is in France, relative to GDP, although the share directly distributed by the State is lower. How is it that expenditures deemed characteristic of a welfare State are higher in a more individualistic society? Are tax incentives and social norms being taken sufficiently into account? Another example: the introduction of the premium and the discount (*surcote* and *décote*) into the French pension system has changed individual incentives, and therefore individual returns (towards greater "actuarial neutrality"). But this did not affect the GDP share of "government expenditure" on pensions. In the future, the establishment of long-term care insurance may increase "government social expenditure" by a few GDP points. The right question is not the legal personality of the distributing entity, but rather, what are the incentives that individuals perceive, and what kind of inter- or intra-generational support will this long-term care insurance involve.

A social system must be judged on the rights it confers and the duties it entails, and thus on the extent to which it is more contributory or more solidarity-oriented and redistributive. To this end, we need to look at the benefits and the levies, as well as the implicit or explicit guarantees given in case of a shock to the private or public institutions that provide the benefits. A private system can be very redistributive (when the pricing of certain risks is prohibited, when there is a full State guarantee), and a public system can be very contributory and more neutral from an intergenerational perspective than a private system, as illustrated by Swedish pensions.

A simple review of the aggregate data is not enough to settle this debate, which is why the argument that cutting "government social expenditure" on the grounds that it is higher than in any other country simply makes no sense.



Figures in.pdf:

[Figures_government expenditures]

A carbon tax at Europe's borders: Fasten your seat belts!

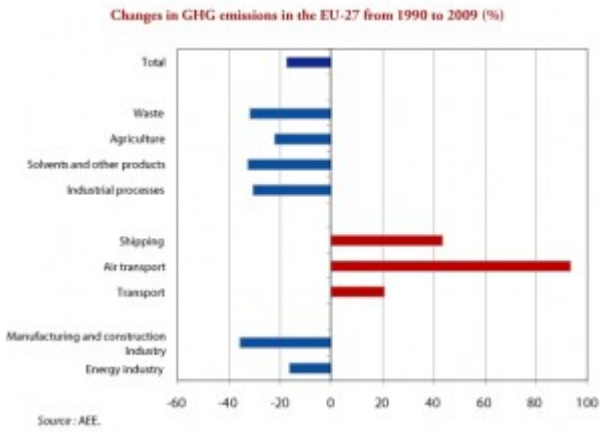
By [Éloi Laurent] and [Jacques Le Cacheux]

How can the current deadlock in international climate negotiations be resolved? By an optimal mix of incentives and constraints. In the case that currently opposes the European Union and the international air carriers, the EU is legitimately bringing this winning combination to bear by imposing what amounts to a carbon tax on its borders. It is brandishing a constraint, the threat of financial penalties, to encourage an industry-wide agreement that is long overdue among the airlines to reduce their greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions.

The ongoing face-off with the carriers of several major countries, which, with the more or less open support of their governments, are contesting the application of these new regulations on GHG emissions from planes flying into or out of the EU is, from this perspective, a crucial test. It is an issue with considerable symbolic value, as it represents a first: all the airlines serving airports in the EU are subject to the new measure, regardless of their nationality. On March 9th, European officials reaffirmed their determination to maintain this regulation, so long as a satisfactory solution has not been proposed by the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO). However, 26 of the 36 member states of the ICAO Board, including China, the United States and Russia, have expressed their opposition to the new European requirement, advising their airlines not to comply. And the Chinese government is now threatening to block or outright cancel orders for 45 Airbus aircraft, including 10 A380 super-jumbos, if the European measure is not repealed.

Air emissions up sharply

GHG emissions attributable to air transport account for only about 3% of global and European emissions (about 12% of total emissions from transport in the EU). But despite the progress made by aircraft manufacturers in energy intensity, these emissions, which are still modest compared to road transport, have been experiencing explosive growth over the last 20 years, and are rising much faster than those in all other sectors, including shipping (see chart). They must be controlled.



In addition, in most countries, in particular in the EU, airline fuel is not subject to the usual taxation applied to oil products, which obviously distorts competition with other modes of transport.

A robust legal framework

The new European regulations, which took effect on 1 January 2012, require all airlines serving any EU airport to acquire emission permits in an amount corresponding to 15% of the CO2 emissions generated by each trip to or from that airport. The measure is non-discriminatory, since it affects all airlines flying into or out of European air space, whatever their nationality or legal residence. This requirement, which is grounded in environmental protection, is therefore fully consistent with the Charter of the World Trade Organization (WTO).

The measure is also of course in compliance with European treaties as well as with the various provisions of international law in the field of civil aviation, as is reiterated in the judgment of 21 December 2011 by the Court of Justice of the European Union, in a case brought by several US carriers challenging its legality. The legal framework for this new provision is thus robust.

Towards the death of air transportation?

The airlines and the governments of the countries that are

major emitters of greenhouse gases and that are hostile to this measure justify their outright opposition by arguing its poor timing, given the current economic climate of low growth and rising fuel costs, and its excessive cost, *i.e.* that the resulting rise in passenger air fares would be likely to further depress an already fragile industry.

In reality, the measure is largely symbolic and the cost is almost insignificant. Judge for yourself: according to the Air France calculator approved by the French environmental agency, the ADEME, emissions per passenger amount to just over one tonne of CO2 for a Paris-New York return trip, and approximately 1.4 tonnes for Paris-Beijing. The current price of a tonne of carbon on the European carbon market on which companies must buy emissions permits, the ETS, is just under 8 euros. The additional cost per ticket thus amounts, respectively to 2 euros for Paris-New York and 1.7 euros for Paris-Beijing! (estimates using the ICAO calculator are even lower).

Towards a trade war?

Given the current state of the legislation, the threats to cancel Airbus orders or similar retaliatory trade measures are obviously out of proportion to the economic impact of the tax on the European skies. To fear that this might trigger a "trade war" is also to forget that such a war has already been declared in industry, particularly in the aviation sector (with the multiplication of more or less disguised subsidies, including in Europe, and with the use of exchange rates as a veritable weapon of industrial policy). Furthermore, agreements or cancellations of orders in this sector are in any case very often influenced by the political context, sometimes for dubious reasons (as in the case of diplomatic reconciliation with relatively distasteful regimes). In this case the cause, the defence of the integrity of Europe's climate policy, is legitimate.

The various threats and blackmail attempts being taken up by the pressure groups targeted, in this case air passengers, are intended to sway governments for obtaining short-sighted gains. They are targeting particular countries, foremost among them Germany and Poland, which are currently dragging their feet in accepting the EU Commission's proposal to accelerate the pace of European emissions reduction by raising the goal of emissions reduction for 2020 from 20% to 30% (compared to 1990 levels). As is their right, on the climate issue Germany and Poland have been following an approach that is in accordance, respectively, with a growth strategy based on exports and an energy strategy based on coal. In both cases, these are national decisions that should not take precedence over the European approach. From the perspective of Europe's interests, there is therefore no valid reason to yield to these pressures even if some member states become involved.

By confirming its determination, the EU can provide proof that leadership by example on the climate can go beyond simply setting a moral example and lead to actual changes in economic behaviour. The EU can ensure that everyone sees that, despite the impasse at the global level, a regional climate strategy can still be effective. If its approach is confirmed, the success of the European strategy, which consists of encouraging cooperative strategies under the threat of credible sanctions, would point towards a way to break the deadlock on climate negotiations.

The European Union will, in the coming weeks, be passing through a zone of turbulence (yet another) on the issue of its border carbon tax. It would be legally absurd and politically very costly to make a U-turn now: instead, let's fasten our seat belts and wait calmly for the stop light to change.