INDEPENDENT ANNUAL GROWTH SURVEY 2013

ECLM-IMK-OFCE

Executive summary

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 member 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 aged 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 by 1.4 million people in the EU-27 and by 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 it 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, that long term unemployment may cause increased poverty unemployment benefits stop because sooner than expected. 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 the EU and 9 million in the Euro area at the end of 2013.

What is striking is that the 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 fiscal 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 severly depressed. 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 rates, 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 130 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 2013 alone a concrete margin for manoeuvre of more than 85 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, the ECB must fully act 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.

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