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Article

Unchartered territory: Large-scale asset purchases by the European Central Bank

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The European Central Bank (ECB) decided at its Council meeting in January to implement a comprehensive program to purchase bonds, including euro area government bonds. The purchases are intended to anchor the rate of inflation and inflation expectations at below but close to two percent again. Given the lack of experience with this unconventional monetary policy instrument, the ECB is venturing into uncharted territory. Market expectations that the ECB would implement an additional round of monetary easing to fulfill its mandate have, in recent months, contributed to a further fall in interest rates and a depreciation of the euro. Since interest rates in the euro area are already very low and the current weak price development is also affected by factors that are difficult to influence through monetary policy, the further effectiveness of the bond purchase program is uncertain. In particular, its success depends largely on its impact on consumption and investment. At the same time, this kind of unconventional monetary policy measure also involves certain risks. The present report describes the current development of inflation in the euro area and outlines the main reasons for the recent decline in prices. It also discusses the transmission channels of a bond purchasing program, their possible relevance for the euro area, and potential risks associated with the program.

Over the past year, the rate of inflation in the euro area has declined steadily and departed clearly from the European Central Bank’s (ECB) target of below but close to two percent. Despite a series of conventional and unconventional monetary policy measures, the ECB has so far failed to stabilize inflation or to keep inflation expectations anchored to its inflation target. 1

In August 2014, at the central bank symposium in Jackson Hole, ECB President Mario Draghi spoke publically for the first time about declining inflation expectations and announced that the ECB might consider using more unconventional monetary policy measures to stabilize them again. Since then, the ECB has made a number of public statements to gradually prepare the markets for the introduction of a large-scale bond purchase program.

In January 2015, the ECB decided to purchase private and public sector assets to the tune of 60 billion euros per month from March onward until a long-term adjustment of inflation is achieved, at least until September 2016. The ECB will purchase bonds worth approximately 7.2 billion euros (12 percent of total purchases) from European institutions and government bodies including, for example, the European Investment Bank, the European Stability Mechanism, or the Reconstruction Credit Institute (Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau, KfW). The remaining 52.8 billion euros will be spent on the purchase programs for asset-backed securities (ABSPP) and covered bonds (CBPP) established in the fall of 2014, and on government bonds from all euro

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one year ahead and to reach 0.9 and 1.4 percent in three and five years, respectively. Thus, they do not expect a return to the ECB's inflation target even in the longer term (see Figure 4). The expected rate of inflation according to a survey of professional forecasters conducted by the ECB in the fourth quarter of 2014 was slightly higher at an average of 1.1 percent in 2016, 1.5 percent in 2017, and 1.8 percent in 2019.4

The weighted share of declining prices as a percentage of all prices (excluding energy prices) in the HICP is currently around 40 percent (see Figure 5) for the entire euro area. However, the individual countries in the monetary union are affected to different degrees by falling prices.1 In Germany, only around 19 percent of prices are in the deflationary range. In contrast, this share is significantly higher in the euro area countries that are most severely hit by the crisis, i.e. Spain, Portugal, Ireland and Greece. Only in Italy are prices falling in only member countries.1 The latter are purchased according to the ECB’s capital key, meaning that about one-quarter of these purchases will include German government bonds (see Figure 1).

**Falling Prices in the Euro Area**

Price developments in the euro area have been weak for some time. In December 2014, prices fell compared to previous year’s level for the first time since the crisis year 2009. The rate of inflation, measured according to the Harmonised Index of Consumer Prices (HICP), was −0.2 percent. In January, the inflation rate reached −0.6 percent, its lowest since the introduction of the euro, but rose again slightly in February to −0.3 percent (see Figure 2). While this development is partly due to sharp declines in energy prices (see Figure 3), core inflation adjusted for energy and unprocessed foods also continued its downward trend and reached its lowest level in January at 0.6 percent.

Inflation swaps suggest that financial market participants expect prices to remain weak. In early February, market participants expected inflation to be −0.4 percent one year ahead and to reach 0.9 and 1.4 percent in three and five years, respectively. Thus, they do not expect a return to the ECB’s inflation target even in the longer term (see Figure 4). The expected rate of inflation according to a survey of professional forecasters conducted by the ECB in the fourth quarter of 2014 was slightly higher at an average of 1.1 percent in 2016, 1.5 percent in 2017, and 1.8 percent in 2019.4

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Inflation needs to be reduced by internal devaluation, i.e., a relative adjustment of prices. As a result, either production costs have to fall or productivity in the tradable sector must increase for domestic production to become more competitive. Additionally, production of tradable goods must become more profitable than the production of non-tradables and services in order to strengthen the relative importance of the export sector. This adjustment is already taking place in the crisis countries, although they have not yet resulted in sufficient strong and long-lasting gains in competitiveness (see Figure 6). Furthermore, any productivity gains observable so far should not obscure the fact that these are largely due to a sharp increase in unemployment, particularly in Spain and Greece. These productivity gains have therefore been accompanied by a loss of purchasing power and a weakening of domestic demand; the resultant unemployment induces high social costs. Although the ensuing negative pressure on prices and the decline in import demand will support macroeconomic re-balancing, it has not yet led to suf-

Causes of Weak Price Developments: Oil Prices, Internal Devaluation, and Debt Reduction

Weak price developments in the euro area are influenced by both demand- and supply-side factors. Production costs are falling due to the decline in oil and energy prices; companies pass at least some of these savings on to consumers in the form of lower prices for goods. The overall impact on the price level will differ from country to country in the euro zone. In particular, it depends largely on the energy intensity of their economies and industries, the duration of the fall in oil prices, the degree of wage and price rigidity, and the development of the exchange rate of the euro against the US dollar.

Moreover, a major trigger for the decline in inflation are relative price adjustments within the euro area. Crisis countries such as Greece, Ireland, Spain, and Portugal are no longer able to reduce their large current account deficits and thus their net foreign liability positions by currency devaluation as they could before the introduction of the single currency. Thus, external re-balanc-
The share of declining prices is particularly large in the crisis countries; in contrast, for Germany, this share is rather low.
example, since 2012, loans to non-financial corporates in the crisis countries have fallen on average at a rate of about 4.3 percent per year. While the decline has slightly slowed down lately, overall credit growth continues to be in negative territory. (see Figure 9). In the recent Bank Lending Survey (BLS) conducted by the ECB, Europe-

Crisis countries need to continue to devalue in real terms to re-gain competitiveness.

The ongoing debt deleveraging in the private and public sectors further contributes to the weak price development in the crisis countries. The share of impaired loans to total assets on bank balance sheets is still very high and there are clear indications that for both, households and companies, debt reduction still has precedence over new investment spending. Among other things, this is manifested in the overall decline in lending. For
banks reported in the fourth quarter of 2014 a slight increase in demand for loans by firms and households and the surveyed institutions stated that their refinancing conditions had eased considerably in the past few months. Despite all this, the balance sheet adjustment process in the crisis countries is far from complete and is likely to continue to have a downward effect on prices also in the future.

Furthermore, the fall in demand caused by fiscal consolidation has also contributed to the decline in prices. As necessary and appropriate the restoration of sustainable public finances and the reduction in national debt levels are, under the present institutional arrangements of the currency area, the lack of fiscal flexibility and international transfer mechanisms mean that the major part of the burden of intra-euro area adjustment must be borne by the crisis countries. This deleveraging process constitutes the other side of the paradox of thrift, i.e., that higher aggregate savings push down aggregate demand and thereby exacerbate the ongoing recession. As a consequence, the debt overhang problem in the crisis countries is liable to get worse.

It can therefore be said that weak price developments are determined to a substantial degree by factors that are difficult to influence by a single monetary policy. At the same time, however, given the fact that the ECB has clearly missed its inflation target and that inflation expectations are further deteriorating, paired with the significant public pressure on the central bank to take action have probably turned the balance in favor of the establishment of a large-scale asset purchase program.

Since only a few central banks have made use of similar purchase programs to date, there is only little empirical evidence on the effectiveness of such purchases. Empirical studies suggest, however, that purchases may indeed contribute to a reduction in interest rates, but whether this effectively stimulates economic growth and inflation is not clear.

**Empirical Evidence of the Effectiveness of QE in the US and UK**

Studies examining the effects of bond purchase programs in the United States and the United Kingdom between 2009 and 2012 confirm that immediately after the announcement or right at the start of the programs (long-term) interest rates fell significantly and sharply.

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What Is Expected of Asset Purchases in the Euro Area?

Since the empirical results, on the whole, are inconclusive with regard to the effectiveness of previous purchase programs, it is difficult to assess to what extent the ECB’s purchase program will strengthen the euro area economy and will have a positive impact on inflation.

Interest rates in the euro area, in particular the spreads between crisis countries and Germany, are currently at a historical low level. The convergence of interest rates in the euro area observed already since September 2013 is likely to have been supported by expectations about a bond purchase program (see Figures 10). A quite pronounced effect could be observed on inflation expectations. Already one week prior to the announcement, perhaps in anticipation of the program, and on the day of the announcement inflation expectations were revised noticeably upward across various maturities (see Figure 4).

While the announcement channel was obviously working well, it is questionable what role in the euro area the so-called portfolio balance channel (see box) has in the transmission process of bond purchases. Since initially, 9 however, tentative simulations show that the initial decline in interest rates leveled off quickly within a few months, although one should mention that the general volatility of interest rates makes it rather difficult to identify the effects after a few months.

Furthermore, while the effect on interest rates in both countries, particularly during their first bond purchase programs, was very pronounced, interest rate effects of proceeding programs were much smaller or even not statistically significant according to some studies. One possible explanation for this is that quantitative easing works largely through its signaling effect (see box). This suggests that it is neither the number of purchase programs nor the respective purchase volume that is crucial but the signal being sent by the central bank that it is willing to use any means to defend its inflation target. In addition, the later programs were implemented at a time when interest rates on the bond markets were already extremely low. Therefore the substitutability between bonds and central bank money was probably quite high, implying that further reductions in interest rates could have hardly been achieved.

Furthermore, a number of studies have examined to what extent purchases of government bonds by the Federal Reserve and the Bank of England affected other assets such as corporate bonds or foreign exchange rates. There is evidence that sovereign bond purchases also reduce interest rates on corporate bonds, thus improving companies’ financial situations. In contrast, the effect on exchange rates was much more muted.

Moreover, also the effects of asset purchases on output and inflation are difficult to evaluate. Although some studies show that both magnitudes can be stimulated by means of asset purchases, however, the underlying assumptions on the size of interest rate effects made in these studies are often not very convincing. 10 Hence, any inference based on estimation results of potential stimulating effects achieved in other countries should be taken with great caution.


Interest rates in the euro area have already fallen sharply since 2013, any further reductions in interest rates will probably be only of small magnitude. Moreover, it is uncertain whether any minor interest rate cuts will have noticeable effects on the real economy. Interest rates on corporate bonds have already fallen significantly (see Figure 11). Moreover, the vast majority of European firms are financed primarily by bank loans. Also here, interest rate reductions in the market for government bonds are not likely to have a major impact,
They are expected to rise substantially as a result of the new purchase program. The program might thus create a problematic interdependence between (national) central banks and their fiscal authorities. It is important that national governments would willingly accept any valuation losses to the central bank that may result from future policy rate hikes. Otherwise the euro area would run the risk of slipping into a regime of fiscal dominance in which any effective control of inflation is complicated by fiscal considerations. 12

This leads to the more general question of how unconventional monetary policy measures could be phased out in the future, something that now poses a serious problem for all major central banks. Should central banks reduce their asset portfolios before policy rates are increased in order to avoid valuation losses? Or would a reversal of

11 These purchases were conducted regularly between 2002 and 2010 and were likely implemented without much public attention but fully in line with European regulations. They served to assist the portfolio and risk management of the national central banks.

purchases generate too strong upward pressure on secondary market yields? In future, its new purchase program is likely to leave the ECB facing the challenge of devising a well-considered exit strategy and post-crisis monetary policy regime. An exit can only be successfully conducted if the monetary dominance of the central banks in the euro area is maintained.\footnote{See P. Turner, “The exit from non-conventional monetary policy: What challenges?,” BIS Working Paper 448 (May 2014).}

**Conclusion**

Price developments in the euro area have slowed further in recent months; for the first time since 2009, inflation has fallen into negative territory. The ECB has now missed its inflation target for several quarters. The resulting pressure on the ECB to take action to fulfill its mandate may have finally tipped the balance in favor of introducing a large-scale asset purchase program. However, weak price developments are also determined by factors that are difficult to influence with monetary policy—particularly in the current environment of very low interest rates. Expectations of the introduction of a bond purchase program and its announcement are likely to have already induced an increase in inflation expectations and supported the depreciation of the euro. Yet any further effects on the level of interest rates, as well as any real economic impacts, are likely to be rather limited temporally and quantitatively.

In particular, large-scale quantitative easing is not sufficient as the sole economic policy measure for combating the ongoing effects of the crisis in the euro area. As even ECB President Draghi outlined in August at the Jackson Hole symposium itself, it is, in particular, the fiscal policies of those countries that still have fiscal scope that must play a key role in overcoming the crisis.

Monetary policy measures should not be implemented in isolation; a coordinated monetary, fiscal, and structural policy with a strong orientation towards sustainable growth is required for the entire euro area.

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