



# **OECD Economic Surveys: Euro Area, December 2010**

**OVERVIEW**



# Summary

The euro area has experienced a severe recession, followed by a sovereign debt crisis in some euro area countries, in the wake of the global financial crisis. This was the first major test of the robustness of the euro area in a downturn. Swift monetary policy easing, massive intervention to support the financial system and supportive fiscal policy helped to stabilise the financial system and mitigate the contraction in private demand.

Excessive economic, financial and fiscal imbalances built up in some euro area countries during the upswing, hindering the efficient operation of the monetary union, and led to growing vulnerabilities. These contributed to especially severe economic and fiscal crises in some countries, leading to spillovers mainly through financial markets across the euro area.

**Exiting from the crisis.** A modest recovery is now underway, although risks remain. Financial conditions have strengthened. Activity has picked up, but the recovery is likely to be muted. Fiscal consolidation is necessary, although it may drag on growth in the short term. As soon as upward risks to price stability in the medium term emerge, monetary policy stimulus should be withdrawn. Non-standard measures should continue to be wound down in line with improvements in the monetary policy transmission mechanism. It is essential that the banking system is restored to good health and remaining weaknesses resolved. The stress test exercise carried out at the EU level in 2010 was an important step forward, which has increased transparency and reinforced the credibility of the euro area financial sector. Structural reforms would facilitate on-going economic adjustment and lift growth prospects.

**Resolving intra-euro area imbalances.** Large current account deficits and surpluses in euro area countries in the run up to the crisis were associated with underlying economic, financial and fiscal imbalances. National economies were subject to a range of diverging pressures, which were compounded by movements in real interest rates that led to divergent saving and investment behaviour in euro area economies. For some countries, low real interest rates sparked credit, consumption and housing booms and weakened competitiveness. The banking system channelled funds from countries with high savings to deficit economies, in the context of weaknesses in supervisory oversight. Market discipline, together with fiscal and financial policies, failed to prevent the build-up of large imbalances in excess of fundamentals within the monetary union. Rebalancing economies with large imbalances has already begun, but further structural reforms are needed to facilitate the process. During the crisis, some deficit countries have faced severe economic, financial and fiscal pressures. Adjustment will be a difficult and prolonged process in some deficit countries, particularly where prices and wages need to adjust to help shift resources from domestically-focussed sectors that grew too big during the boom years.

**Avoiding unsustainable imbalances.** A new cross-cutting approach to economic and financial management is required to stabilise national economies more effectively. This should rest on a broad range of policies that can tackle the sources of macroeconomic imbalances, including sound fiscal policy and the development of macroprudential tools. Stabilisation would be facilitated by structural policies that help economic adjustment, including ensuring that wage setting mechanisms work well and that housing policies do not exacerbate property cycles. The surveillance of country-level economic, fiscal and financial imbalances by EU institutions should be stepped up.

**Rebuilding the public finances.** The fiscal position has deteriorated sharply, leading to large deficits and adding to already high debt levels in some euro area countries. Credit spreads have increased on some countries' debt and Greece required external assistance. Detailed and credible multi-year plans to stabilise the public finances are required. Reducing budget deficits to a sustainable level would nevertheless leave indebtedness at historically high levels in many countries. Prolonged fiscal consolidation and reforms will be needed to bring debt to a more prudent level, increase the ability to withstand future shocks and to prepare for future ageing costs.

**Improving fiscal discipline.** Many euro area governments failed to use economic good times to consolidate. Market discipline and fiscal frameworks should be strengthened. A permanent crisis-management framework should be put in place subject to strong conditionality. Stronger governance should be pursued at EU level through a reinforced Stability and Growth Pact (SGP). In this context, a substantial legislative reform of economic and fiscal governance is already underway. Minimum fiscal standards set by the SGP should be better enforced: a range of sanctions, including financial penalties, should be applied quasi-automatically under the SGP early in the surveillance process, and an appropriate operational definition for required debt reductions should be set out. Fiscal frameworks at the national level should be reinforced. Medium-term rules, such as multi-year expenditure paths or ceilings, are needed. Well-designed independent national fiscal councils to make forecasts and assessments of fiscal policy would improve fiscal outcomes and increase transparency, while their design should reflect national specificities.

**Strengthening the banking system.** Weaknesses in financial regulation and supervision created an environment prone to excessive risk-taking and unsustainable credit cycles in the euro area, as in other OECD economies. Risk was underestimated, capital buffers were inadequate in some cases and liquidity management was not sufficiently monitored. Substantial risks were shifted off balance sheet. Large systemic institutions channelled cross-border flows, partly contributing to growing imbalances and risks in some places. Significant steps have already been taken by the EU authorities to address these issues. Stronger microprudential rules should be implemented in line with the Basel III capital accord, as planned by the EU authorities and as part of a global approach, as well as on-going EU reform initiatives. Macroprudential regulation should be stepped up, including a national counter-cyclical capital buffer in line with Basel III. The activities of systemic banks should be more closely regulated. Effective macroprudential supervision should be developed through the European Systemic Risk Board (ESRB), as well as at national level, to deal with local financial and economic imbalances.

**Managing cross-border risks.** Close but incomplete banking integration in the euro area, together with the absence of a single EU system of bank regulation and supervision, created risks and complicated the resolution of cross-border difficulties. The new supervisory framework is a major achievement. European Supervisory Authorities will be set up, next to an enhanced system of supervisory colleges, to build up a more coherent supervisory framework under the decentralised architecture. A review is foreseen after at most three years to determine whether further steps towards more integration are needed and whether a single supervisor would be more fit for the purpose. Burden-sharing agreements should be in place for all systemic cross-border institutions. There should be credible, effective and harmonised resolution tools in all EU countries. Subject to appropriate regulation, removing obstacles to financial integration would help create a more stable banking system.

# Assessment and recommendations

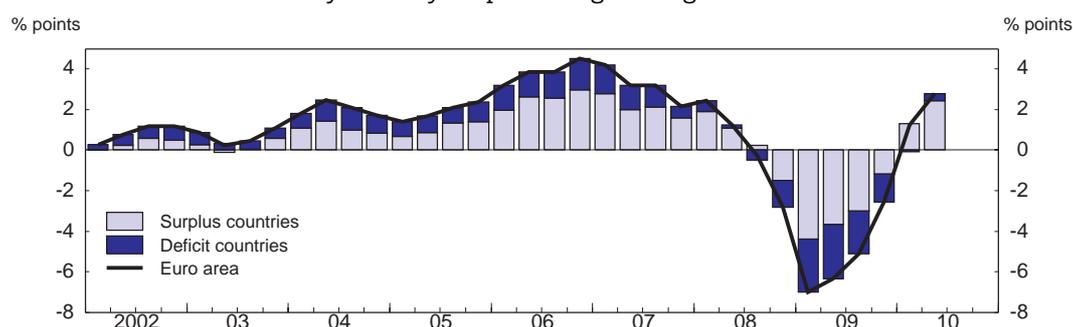
## *The crisis is the first major test of the resilience of the euro area*

1. Euro area countries have experienced their most severe recession of the post-war era, alongside other OECD economies, followed by a sovereign debt crisis in some euro area countries. This has been the first major test of the resilience of the euro area since monetary union. The end of a prolonged global credit and asset price boom around mid-2007 led to turmoil in interbank markets, which intensified into a full-blown international financial crisis from September 2008 after the failure of Lehman Brothers. World trade dropped sharply and there was a rapid retrenchment of private consumption and investment, exacerbated by low confidence and financial sector weakness. Unemployment has increased significantly, although a substantial fall in average hours worked helped to accommodate the weakness of labour demand. While headline inflation rates have been volatile, underlying inflationary pressures have weakened as the result of the scale of economic slack.

2. The euro area in aggregate avoided some of the largest excesses of the global credit cycle and proved fairly resilient in the downturn. Liquidity provision from the European Central Bank (ECB) responded swiftly to the financial turmoil and the ECB's balance sheet expanded substantially. Temporary government interventions through guarantees and other measures further helped to prevent a more dramatic contraction of bank credit, at the cost of shifting the burden from private debt holders to tax payers. Monetary policy rates were rapidly reduced. Governments further supported demand through discretionary fiscal expansion and allowing a considerable deterioration in the budget balance as revenues contracted, although fiscal policy was constrained in some countries by the weak position of the public finances and rising credit spreads.

3. However, in some individual euro area countries, there was a large build-up of economic, financial and fiscal imbalances during the upswing. Policies and markets failed to stabilise the range of shocks acting on different economies. Imbalances led to the misallocation of resources and increased the vulnerability of some deficit economies to a future downturn. Weak policy settings and structural problems in some cases exacerbated these pressures.

**Figure 1. Growth by deficit and surplus countries<sup>1</sup>**  
Contributions to year-on-year percentage change of the euro area GDP



1. The deficit and surplus countries are defined by their average current account balance as a share of GDP between 2002-07. Deficit countries are Greece, Ireland, Italy, Portugal, Slovak Republic, Slovenia and Spain, and surplus countries include Austria, Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Luxembourg and the Netherlands.

Source: OECD, *OECD Economic Outlook Database*.

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#### *Recovery is now underway but will be muted*

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4. Financial conditions are improving and activity has picked up. A gradual and sustained recovery in underlying activity is now underway. This has been supported by considerable policy stimulus. Consumption and investment have begun to expand. Nevertheless, the pace of recovery is likely to be muted as the result of on-going private sector balance sheet rebuilding in the wake of the crisis. While expansion in economic activity in some countries has been faster than had been expected earlier in the year, adjustment to marked macroeconomic and financial imbalances in other countries will weigh on the aggregate performance of the euro area. Fiscal consolidation is essential and will increase confidence, although it may dampen the recovery in the short run. Meanwhile, the crisis is likely to have reduced the level of potential output through a lower capital stock, a weakening of the labour market and higher risk premia. This will further constrain the scope for recovery. Excess capacity is nevertheless likely to remain high for some time, restraining inflationary pressures. *As soon as upside risks to price stability in the medium term emerge, monetary policy stimulus should be withdrawn. This would contribute to avoiding distortions created by low interest rates relative to long-run norms. Non-standard measures should continue to be wound down in line with improvements in the monetary policy transmission mechanism.* Substantial risks remain around the recovery and *it is crucial that the banking system is returned to good health to support growth. Structural reforms in labour and product markets would facilitate economic adjustment and will be particularly important for achieving vigorous growth in the coming years.*

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#### *Large-scale government intervention supported the banking system*

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5. Government balance sheets have been leveraged to shore up the financial system, as well as to support demand. Deposit guarantees were increased to maintain and reinforce depositors' confidence in the financial system. State guarantees of other bank liabilities have been widespread with countries adopting their own schemes along co-ordinated EU policy orientations based on the common state aid rules. Some countries had to recapitalise banks to prevent the meltdown of their financial systems. In the early days of the crisis, financial rescue packages had to be implemented very quickly. Initial reactions were thus fragmented and bailed out debt holders. Few countries have developed a comprehensive approach to deal with weaknesses in the banking system. *Policy support to the financial system should continue to be unwound as global and local conditions allow, but further recapitalisation of banks could be necessary. All countries should have a full set of effective, credible and harmonised bank resolution tools.* There have been two EU-wide stress tests of banks. The 2010 stress test was particularly important in addressing uncertainties regarding some financial systems and has contributed to greater financial stability. *Stress tests should become a regular exercise and be further harmonised.*

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#### *Fiscal policy helped to cushion the downturn but the public finances are now in poor shape*

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6. A sharp increase in government borrowing helped to stabilise activity, largely through the automatic stabilisers and discretionary fiscal stimulus measures. In the wake of the crisis, many euro area countries have large deficits and rising public debt. Revenues have fallen due to the economic slowdown and in some countries the collapse of tax receipts related to the credit and housing cycles, while public expenditure has increased. In some countries, there have also been substantial costs related to supporting the financial system. At the same time, credit spreads on government debt have increased sharply for some countries. *Fiscal consolidation is the immediate priority to stabilise the public finances and should begin by 2011 at the latest in all countries.* Consolidation is already underway in some places but *credible and detailed medium-term plans need to be set out for all countries.* Strengthening the fiscal institutions would help to increase credibility. Reducing deficits to stabilise debt-to-GDP ratios would nevertheless leave indebtedness at a high level by historical comparison, further reducing the margin for manoeuvre in the face of future ageing costs and possible downturns. *Prolonged consolidation is thus required in most countries to reduce the debt-to-GDP ratio to prudent levels.*

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### *Monetary policy has provided stimulus*

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7. The swift reduction in the policy rate, starting in autumn 2008, eased financing conditions and supported activity in the context of weakening inflationary pressures. Policy rates are lower than during the previous downturn, although long-term interest rates are at a similar level. The potential disruption to the normal functioning of monetary policy transmission was addressed by the adoption of non-standard measures. The increased average maturity of refinancing operations and the shift to full allotment tenders at a fixed interest rate helped to ease market tensions. As a result, overnight market interest rates fell to well below the policy rate. In addition, the ECB provided a US dollar swap line facility and purchased covered bonds for monetary policy purposes. The size of the Eurosystem balance sheet has roughly doubled since the pre-crisis period, mostly related to longer-term repurchase operations that are now gradually being phased out. In May 2010, the Securities Market Programme was introduced to purchase public and private debts with the aim of supporting the monetary policy transmission mechanism through the stabilisation of certain securities markets.

8. These exceptional measures helped to stabilise the economy during the crisis but lessons should be drawn for the future. The crisis has underlined the destabilising effect that asset and credit cycles can have on activity and inflation. While macroprudential policy should be the primary tool to manage financial cycles, the recent crisis indicates that *consideration should continue to be given to factors that may present risks at medium- to long-term horizons, such as asset prices and balance-sheet growth*. Through the monetary pillar, the ECB already pays close attention to monetary and credit developments. *In this respect, it is essential that monetary analysis continue to be enhanced in order to be effectively and systematically incorporated into the policy process.*

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### *The governance of the euro area could be strengthened*

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9. The co-ordination of the response to the crisis has been complicated by the governance arrangements of the euro area with many powers remaining at national level and multiple actors at the EU and euro area levels. The institutional framework was strengthened with the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty in December 2009, which for the first time recognised the Euro Group and its role in enhancing co-ordination of economic policies. The Lisbon Treaty empowered euro area members of the Council to take formal decisions related to certain euro area matters. With an effective crisis-management framework, the actions of the ECB to fulfil its price stability mandate in crisis situations could be facilitated.

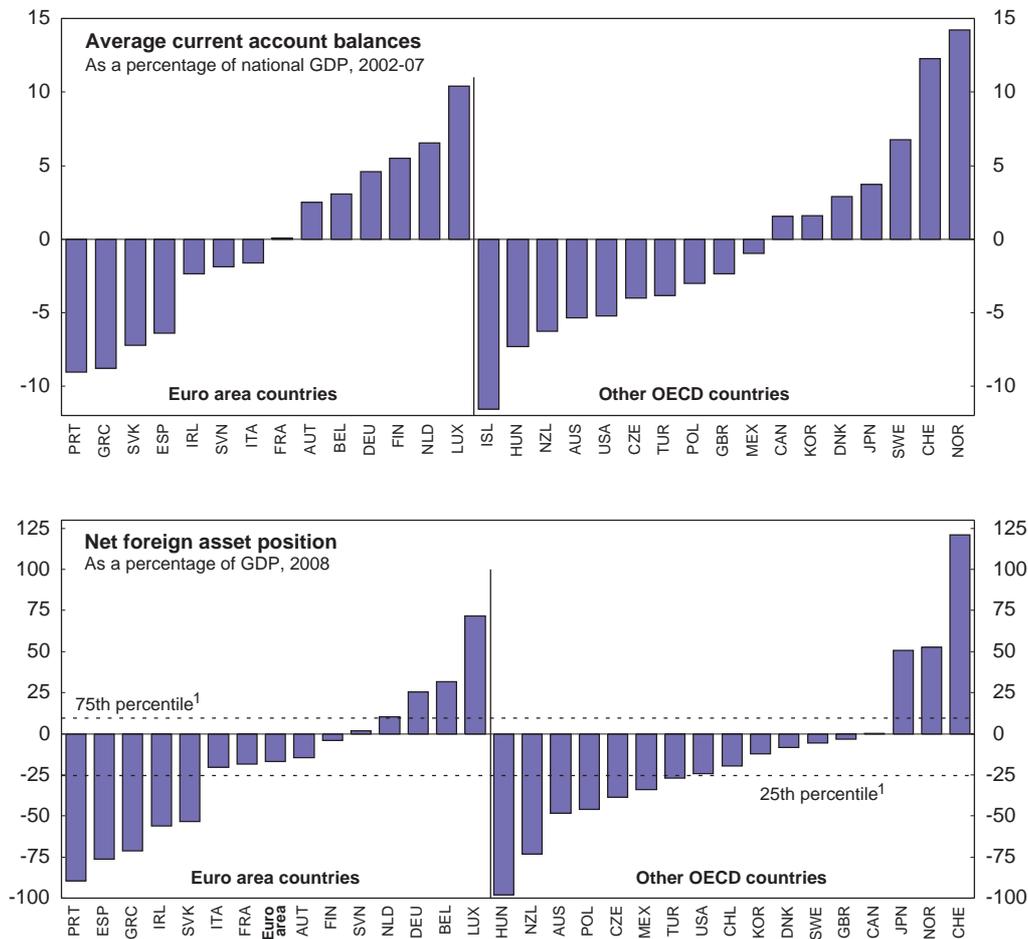
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### *Large imbalances in some euro area countries created problems*

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10. Some euro area countries ran large and persistent external imbalances during the upswing. The scale of these savings and investment mismatches appears too large to be explained by economic fundamentals alone and in part reflects underlying economic, financial and sometimes fiscal imbalances at national level. Countries were exposed to a range of divergent underlying pressures, including “catch-up” growth and overly optimistic growth expectations in lower income economies, financial liberalisation, national structural reforms and different demographic pressures. Diverging real interest rates played a destabilising role that contributed to the imbalances. Low real rates sparked strong credit and house price cycles in some economies. With sluggish productivity growth, upwards pressures on wages and prices from booming sectors left competitiveness impaired in some deficit countries. Strong saving and weak investment in some surplus countries, combined with weaknesses in financial regulation, led to funds being channelled to overheating economies. Achieving macroeconomic and financial stabilisation at national level proved difficult in view of the different pressures acting on local economies, together with structural problems and the absence of market discipline. In some cases, fiscal imbalances added to the problem. Large imbalances that appear excessive led to a misallocation of resources, masked underlying economic weaknesses and increased vulnerability. When the financial crisis hit, those countries with large current account deficits were the most exposed and faced the combined pressures of rebuilding of household and corporate balance sheets, impaired financial systems and weak public finances.

Figure 2. External balances in OECD countries



1. Calculated for the period 1985-2008 with Australia (1986-2008), Austria, Belgium, Canada, Finland, France (1989-2008), Germany, Italy, Japan, Netherlands, New Zealand (1989-2008), Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom and United States.

Source: IMF, *International Financial Statistics* and OECD, *OECD Economic Outlook 88 Database*.

Structural measures can help reduce imbalances

11. Rebalancing economies with large imbalances, both deficits and surpluses, will be a prolonged process. In deficit countries, adjustment will be difficult as prices and wages need to change to restore international competitiveness and to shift resources away from domestically-focussed sectors that grew too big during the boom years. This may require considerable restraint with wages and prices. *Institutional barriers to the required price adjustment should be removed.* Falls in wages and prices cannot be ruled out and in some cases may prove inevitable. *Structural policies have a key role in rebalancing economies.* In deficit countries, reforms can boost productivity and help to bring costs back in line. In surplus countries, structural changes could strengthen domestic demand and enhance productivity growth, notably in the non-tradable sectors.

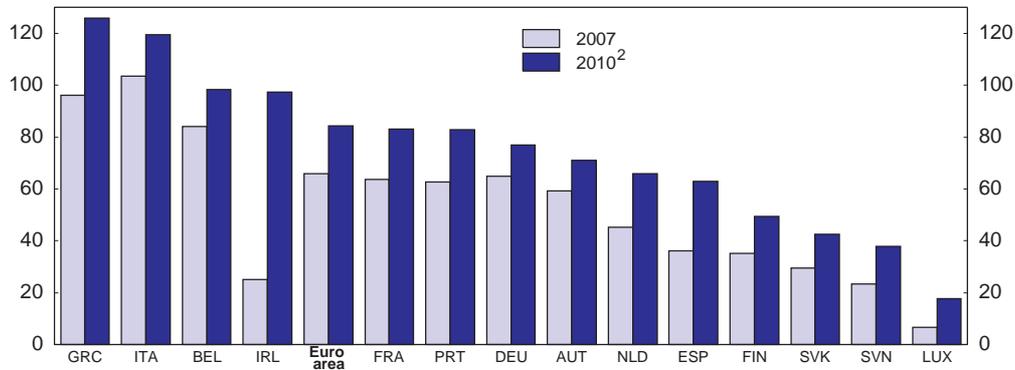
A cross-cutting approach is needed to avoid harmful imbalances

12. A new approach to economic and financial management is now required to stabilise national economies, alongside structural reforms to make economies more robust and balanced. The policy framework was not sufficient to prevent the emergence of national economic, financial and fiscal



**Figure 4. Government debt-to-GDP ratios have increased<sup>1</sup>**

Per cent of GDP



1. Maastricht definition.
2. OECD estimates.

Source: OECD, *OECD Economic Outlook 88 Database*.

15. To strengthen market discipline, a credible mechanism for fiscal crisis management is required. Reducing moral hazard and making conditionality a key element are essential features of any future crisis-management framework. For solvent countries facing liquidity pressures, *this should involve a permanent liquidity-support mechanism subject to strong conditionality. If conditionality is not fulfilled, financing support should be withdrawn and the framework should be prepared to deal with this eventuality. Sovereign risk should be fully reflected in financial regulations. The EU programme for Greece should be implemented as planned to achieve the high level of conditionality set out.*

16. The basic fiscal standards set by the EU Stability and Growth Pact (SGP) should be better enforced to protect euro area economies from weak fiscal positions. EU-level auditing powers have increased. *The monitoring of fiscal positions should be improved, especially in terms of debt and off-balance sheet positions, structural balances and debt management.* The “corrective arm” of the Pact should be enforced systematically by the Council, and *funds should be posted in a non-interest bearing account as soon as an excessive deficit is identified. An appropriate operational definition of the reduction in debt for countries with debt above 60% of GDP should be put in place so that the debt criterion can be applied effectively.* The “preventive arm” of the SGP needs to be enhanced. It should be overhauled so that it provides a system of sanctions applied early in the surveillance process along the lines of current legislative proposals that would be more credible than those currently provided under the SGP. *Sanctions should range from intrusive surveillance and warnings by the Council to financial sanctions. Monetary penalties should include the requirement that funds be posted to an interest-bearing account until corrective policies have been implemented. Sanctions should be applied quasi-automatically by reversing the voting majorities,* which would increase the likelihood that analysis and recommendations of the Commission are followed. These principles are reflected in a package of legislative proposals currently under consideration. *Consideration should be given to other measures to increase the costs of taking fiscal risks through non-compliance with EU fiscal requirements, such as making treatment in financial regulations less favourable.* The creation of the “European Semester” may help to co-ordinate fiscal with other policies and increase the integration with national budgetary processes. *The presentation of Stability Programmes should be further harmonised and based on independent forecasts.*

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*National fiscal frameworks should be stronger*

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17. National governments are ultimately responsible for their public finances. While a more effective Pact is essential to avoiding spillovers from fiscal instability, strengthening national frameworks within the Pact is crucial to achieving more sustainable public finances. *All euro area countries should adopt and abide by broad-based medium-term frameworks for the public finances based on multi-year paths or ceilings for both current and capital expenditures. Going beyond the*

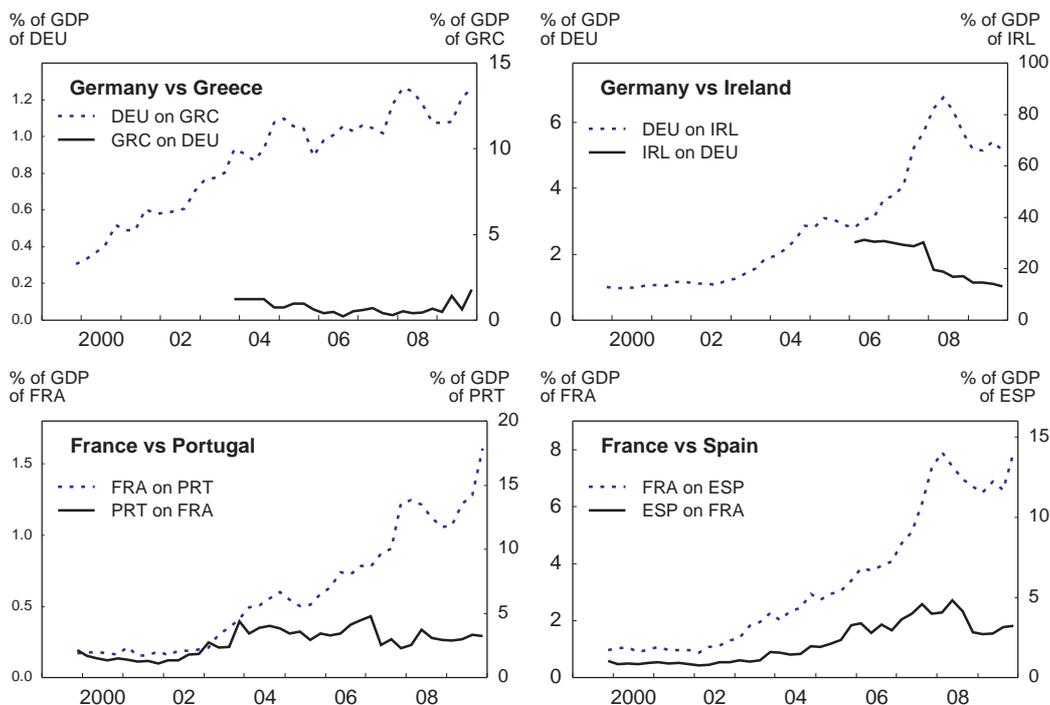
*minimum standards in the proposed EU Directive should be encouraged.* It is important that political will at national level supports the rules and that there is national ownership of the fiscal frameworks. *The establishment of well-designed independent national fiscal councils would be appropriate in many countries in order to set the official forecasts of the public finances and provide analysis and assessment of fiscal policy.* Political commitment to the independence of these institutions is crucial to improve the management of the public finances.

***Stronger bank regulations are needed for financial stability***

18. Upgrading regulation, reinforcing supervision and better aligning incentives within the banking sector would increase financial stability in the context of enhanced regulation of the financial sector more broadly. The boom in credit during the upswing was supported by easier bank lending standards, a low level of provisions and the rising leverage of large systemic banking groups. The rapid growth of cross-border banking in the wake of deepening financial integration after the creation of the euro channelled funds from banking systems with excessive liquidity into overheating economies with housing booms. During the financial crisis, a sharp reduction in cross-border lending added to the difficulties of borrower countries. *Stronger microprudential rules should be implemented in line with the Basel III capital accord, as planned by the EU authorities and as part of a global approach, and on-going EU reform initiatives.* This would include, among other measures, raising the size and quality of capital buffers, and implementing an overall leverage ratio as a backstop. *In addition, liquidity regulations and the risk-weighting system should be strengthened, as well as governance and risk management.* Limits to the integration of EU financial markets, especially in the retail sector, led to large concentrations of risks. *Supervisors should take a more systematic and harmonised view of the geographic concentration of risks when assessing regulatory capital.* Large complex financial institutions were a major conduit for cross-border activities and, by underestimating country and credit risks, became a major source of risk transmission and systemic risk during the crisis. *Consideration should also be given to stronger supervision, additional capital surcharges and levies for systemic institutions.*

**Figure 5. Selected bilateral consolidated banking claims**

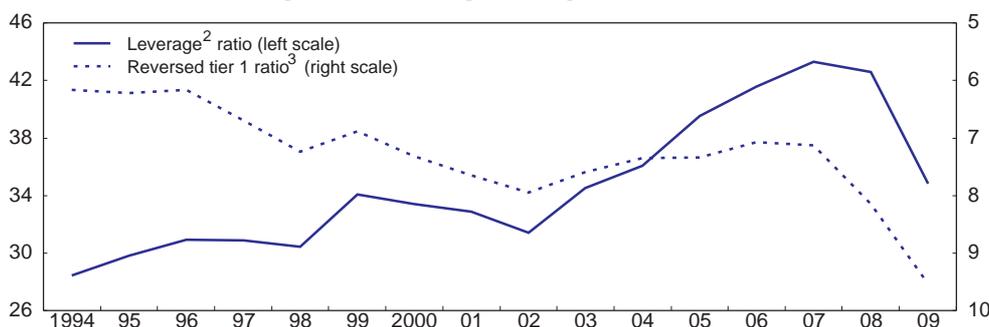
Claims of country X on country Y as a share of GDP of both countries in 2007



Source: BIS, Consolidated Banking Statistics Database and OECD, OECD Economic Outlook Database.

19. Macroprudential policy was generally little used in the run up to the crisis, even as systemic risks built up. Some financial regulations had a pro-cyclical impact. *Both macro- and microprudential supervision should be based on a through-the-cycle approach to risk. Microprudential supervisors should ensure that bank provisioning is forward-looking. A system of counter-cyclical capital buffers based on a simple numerical rule applied to national credit growth should be introduced as outlined in current EU consultation documents and international proposals.* The creation of the European Systemic Risk Board (ESRB) is a welcome development. *It is important that its decision-making is effective and that it plays a full role in achieving macroeconomic stability. EU-wide stress tests should continue to be undertaken on a regular basis and harmonised further.* Given the need to differentiate policies at national level to counter imbalances, *all euro area countries should have appropriate national macroprudential arrangements in place, alongside EU structures.*

**Figure 6. Leverage of largest EU banks<sup>1</sup>**



1. The 10 largest banks in the euro-area are selected based on their total assets in 2006, which is the last pre-crisis year, and include BNP Paribas, Crédit Agricole, Deutsche Bank, ABN AMRO, Société Générale, ING Bank, Banco Santander, UniCredit, Fortis and Commerzbank.
2. Ratio of total assets to tier 1 capital.
3. Ratio of risk-weighted assets to tier 1 capital.

Source: *The Banker Database* and OECD calculations.

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### *Weaknesses in cross-border supervision remain a risk*

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20. The system of financial supervision and crisis management remains organised on national lines, reflecting the national fiscal responsibilities, while banking activities are increasingly organised on cross-border basis. Although this has not been the primary problem during the financial crisis, it made it harder to apply consistent and harmonised standards and supervise banks during the upswing. The creation of the European Supervisory Authorities (ESAs) and extension of the system of supervisory colleges to all large cross-border banks is a major achievement. *The fiscal safeguard rules constraining the ESAs' powers should be narrowly applied. A common supervisory database with harmonised definitions of key variables should be created for large cross-border institutions.* A review of the new supervisory arrangements is foreseen after at most three years to determine whether further steps towards more integration are needed and whether a single supervisor would be more fit for the purpose. The burden on banking supervision is increased by the combination of some highly-integrated EU wholesale markets and segmentation in other sectors, which leads to large cross-border banking flows. *Subject to appropriate regulation, remaining obstacles to financial integration should be removed to encourage a more stable banking structure.*

21. Crisis management has been made more difficult by differences in legal structure across countries and the need to allocate costs. *Burden-sharing agreements should be in place at least for all systemic institutions and legal ring-fencing of assets should be limited where this complicates resolution. Operational arrangements for deposit guarantee schemes should be harmonised and their funding could be switched to an ex ante basis. Bank resolution funds financed by risk-based levies could be introduced.*

# Chapter summaries

## Chapter 1. Exiting from the crisis

*The euro area has experienced a financial crisis and severe recession, alongside other OECD economies, followed by a sovereign debt crisis in some euro area countries. The end of the global asset price and credit booms led to weaknesses in the financial sector that started to appear in 2007. This intensified in September 2008, following the failure of Lehman Brothers, leading to a full-blown financial crisis and a dramatic contraction of private demand and world trade. Considerable policy stimulus has helped to stabilise the economy through a rapid easing of monetary conditions, supportive fiscal policy and large-scale government support to the financial system.*

*Financial conditions have improved and a gradual recovery is now underway, although it remains fragile. However, the pace of recovery is likely to be held back by the necessary fiscal consolidation and the need to rebalance private demand. Monetary policy stimulus should gradually be withdrawn as soon as upward price pressures that would threaten price stability arise. Support measures for the financial system should be withdrawn as conditions allow. Fiscal consolidation should begin no later than 2011 and a sustained period of adjustment is required. Potential output is likely to be lower in the wake of the crisis, underlining the importance of structural reforms in labour and product markets to boost economic performance. Lessons should be drawn from the crisis to make the economy more robust and reduce the risks from economic, financial and fiscal instability.*

## Chapter 2. Resolving and avoiding unsustainable imbalances

*Some euro area countries accumulated large and persistent external imbalances during the upswing, revealing important weaknesses in the macroeconomic management of the monetary union. Greece, Ireland, Portugal and Spain ran large current account deficits by historical standards, while Finland, Germany and the Netherlands had substantial surpluses. Some of these deficits and surpluses were larger than appear justified by economic fundamentals. The massive debt accumulation made deficit economies vulnerable to shocks, complicated their recovery from the world financial crisis, and has challenged the stability of the euro area. In some countries, fiscal policy failed to counter and sometimes aggravated these pressures.*

*External imbalances were driven by underlying domestic economic, financial and sometimes fiscal imbalances. These were the result of a combination of a wide range of country-specific shocks and insufficient macroeconomic and financial stabilisation. Movements in real interest rates in some countries contributed to diverging borrowing and saving patterns, which fuelled credit booms and a weakening of competitiveness in some deficit countries. Weaknesses in financial regulation and over-optimistic growth expectations encouraged excessive risk-taking in both deficit and surplus countries.*

*Harmful imbalances can be characterised by a misallocation of resources and increased vulnerability. When the financial crisis hit, some deficit countries faced the combined problems of a sharp contraction in private demand, an impaired financial system and weak public finances. Unwinding large imbalances, in both deficit and surplus countries, will be a prolonged and difficult process.*

*A new and cross-cutting approach to economic and financial management in the euro area is required to ensure balanced development in the future. While the shocks that led to this build-up of imbalances may not recur, similar pressures are likely to arise within the monetary union in the future. Macroeconomic, financial and fiscal management should be strengthened in an integrated way, alongside structural reforms. This should aim to achieve the differentiation necessary to improve stabilisation of national economies, while ensuring that the euro area as a whole is protected from unsustainable developments in individual countries. Important legislative changes are underway at EU level to improve the surveillance of imbalances and to help ensure that the necessary corrective action is undertaken where risks emerge.*

## Chapter 3. Rebuilding the public finances and fiscal discipline

*The public finances are in poor shape following the crisis. There has been a large increase in government borrowing as a result of the operation of automatic stabilisers and discretionary fiscal stimulus. High government borrowing also reflects the end of buoyant revenues, related to the credit cycle, used to finance unsustainable spending increases. Support to the financial system has increased government liabilities in some countries, adding to already high overall debt levels. Credit spreads for many governments have widened substantially and confidence is fragile. Budgetary pressures have been particularly severe for countries unwinding excessive private or public borrowing.*

*A major consolidation effort will be required to meet commitments under the Stability and Growth Pact to stabilise and reduce the debt-to-GDP ratio. This is already underway in some countries. A tight budgetary position over many years will be required in many economies to return to prudent debt levels.*

*The current weak fiscal position partly has its origin in poor policy settings and the failure to achieve sufficiently sound fiscal positions in economic good times. The budgetary stance in most countries was too lax, leaving countries exposed to a sharp deterioration in public finances and without sufficient budgetary room for manoeuvre when the crisis broke. In countries with large imbalances, fiscal policy failed to counter these pressures and in some cases reinforced them. During the years of rich revenue growth, the opportunity to save to meet future ageing costs was wasted. The weak position going into the downturn meant that some countries had to tighten policy in the midst of severe downturns.*

*Weak enforcement of the Stability and Growth Pact, particularly of the preventive arm, failed to achieve prudent budgetary management. Fiscal discipline needs to be improved so that the public finances are put on a more sustainable footing and there is more room for manoeuvre in the face of future shocks. Upgrading fiscal institutions would help to make this process more credible. To improve market discipline, a permanent liquidity support mechanism is required to support countries that are solvent, subject to strong conditionality. Sovereign risk should be fully reflected in financial regulation, particularly the setting of capital requirements. Institutions at the EU level should be enhanced, primarily through measures to improve the enforcement of the rules. Major legislative changes are underway at EU level to address these issues.*

*However, national governments remain primarily responsible for the public finances. Within the basic EU rules, the strengthening of national fiscal institutions is crucial. Broad-based medium-term frameworks for the public finances should be in place in all countries based on paths or ceilings for expenditure. Furthermore, all countries should adopt independent fiscal councils to provide forecasts of the public finances and assessment of the fiscal stance. Political commitment to the independence and relevance of these institutions will be crucial to making them work.*

## Chapter 4. Minimising risks from imbalances in European banking

*The euro area financial system took excessive risks during the global credit boom, which in some countries led to an unsustainable increase in credit, higher asset prices and housing booms. This process helped to fuel large imbalances within the euro area. Banks played a key role in channelling funds from economies with large surpluses to deficit countries, leading in some cases to the accumulation of considerable risks for borrowers and lenders.*

*Weaknesses in the regulatory and supervisory architecture contributed to these problems in the euro area, as in other OECD economies. Gaps in microprudential regulation created an environment prone to excessive risk-taking: capital buffers were too small; the quality of capital was inadequate; banks' models underestimated risks; and risks were shifted off-balance sheet and beyond supervisory oversight. Liquidity risks were not adequately monitored. Systemic risks were allowed to build up as the authorities largely failed to counter the credit cycle. Some large systemic banks contributed to growing imbalances and vulnerability. The decentralised European supervisory architecture was not sufficiently effective in supervising large cross-border institutions. When the financial crisis hit, the co-ordination of cross-border rescues proved problematic and complicated efficient resolution.*

*Stronger regulations are needed to improve financial stability. Effective microprudential regulation is the first line of defence. This should be upgraded by implementing the Basel III capital accord, as has been announced by the EU authorities, and a range of related measures. Some consideration should be given to an accelerated phasing-in. Macroprudential regulation should be significantly developed to mitigate pro-cyclicality and reduce systemic risks posed by large cross-border banks. The creation of the*

*European Systemic Risk Board is welcome. To improve cross-border supervision, the European Banking Authority should have sufficient powers and resources to ensure that a system based on national supervision leads to coherent regulation and effective supervision. In addition, a cross-border crisis-management framework for Europe is needed. Overall, significant steps have already been taken by the EU authorities to address these issues and further reforms are underway.*

*This Survey is published on the responsibility of the Economic and Development Review Committee of the OECD, which is charged with the examination of the economic situation of member countries.*

*The economic situation and policies of the Euro Area were reviewed by the Committee on 28 October 2010. The draft report was then revised in the light of the discussions and given final approval as the agreed report of the whole Committee on 16 November 2010.*

*The Secretariat's draft report was prepared for the Committee by Sebastian Barnes and Artur Radziwill under the supervision of Piritta Sorsa. Research and editorial assistance was provided by Isabelle Duong.*

*The previous Survey of the Euro Area was issued in January 2009.*

### Further information

For further information regarding this overview, please contact:

Piritta Sorsa, e-mail: [piritta.sorsa@oecd.org](mailto:piritta.sorsa@oecd.org); tel.: +33 1 45 24 82 99; or Sebastian Barnes, e-mail: [Sebastian.barnes@oecd.org](mailto:Sebastian.barnes@oecd.org); tel.:

+33 1 45 24 94 21; or

Artur Radziwill, e-mail: [Artur.Radziwill@oecd.org](mailto:Artur.Radziwill@oecd.org); tel.: +33 1 45 24 93 56.

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