

Good MornING Asia - 1 September 2020

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Some Asian exceptions to the sell-USD theme

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Reports of the death of macro have been greatly exaggerated

Its good to see that macro does still have a role to play. There have been long periods in recent years when I have wondered why I bother, as markets have just gone and done their thing anyway - equities are still behaving a bit like that, though its interesting to note the late sell-off in US markets last night and a negative outlook from equity futures this morning, which may colour the usual, "buy stocks, sell USD, buy gold" mantra.

Yesterday saw some simply abysmal GDP data from India ([check out this note from Prakash Sakpal, plus his commentary below](#)). 2Q20 GDP fell 23.9% compared to a year ago, and yes, this did weigh on the INR, which finished weaker at 73.6 vs the USD. Add to these terrible GDP results,

which appear to be the worst in the region with only a few results to come in (Australia and New Zealand are not going to be worse than this), the likelihood of a -10% GDP result for the full year, plus some bad news on its deficit, which has exceeded its full-year target in just 4 months, and some further clashes with China in the Himalayas, and you might well question if this is one currency that may buck the general trend to strengthen against the USD over coming months.

Then there was the KRW, which stood out yesterday in terms of generalised weakness as the government announced an extension to the phase 2 social distancing measures in place to squeeze out the recent Covid-19 spike.

And let's not forget the IDR, which despite recent gains, is still on "double-secret probation" from the investment community, which stands by the rule that "EM countries shall not do direct deficit financing". There will need to be some trust won back here, but like India, the experiment with unorthodox policy highlights the limits these countries are reaching with fiscal policy, given that the central banks are all but exhausted.

And while we are at it, let's not let the NZD off the hook. It tends to follow the AUD more or less, but every now and then, will show some life of its own. Despite my recent cheese-buying frenzy, New Zealand milk prices, which will comprise a big chunk of the NZD terms of trade, have been dropping. After a good run, there is growing interest in a short-term pull-back for the Kiwi.

And if we're on the NZD's back, let's not let the AUD off the hook, with the RBA today (always a good opportunity to talk the AUD down) and GDP data out tomorrow (we reckon -5.5% for 2Q20 - a lot worse than our original thoughts thanks to the Victoria lockdown), perhaps there is some scope for a pullback here too.

So, yes, by all means, take a dim view on the USD on the back of the Fed's confirmed long-term dovishness, but don't lose sight of what's going on on the other side of the FX pair, because there is a lot of negativity there too.

Asia today

Its already been a busy day today, and it will remain so for much of the morning. Japanese employment data weren't very encouraging. The jobless rate for July crept up to only 2.9%, not as bad as feared, but the jobs-to-applicants ratio fell more sharply from 1.11 to 1.08 which is a more dismal forward-looking indicator for Japan's labour market.

South Korean 2Q20 GDP was revised to be slightly less negative than originally, at -2.7%YoY (from -2.9%), which still leaves South Korea in the top half of the APAC league table along with Taiwan, China, and likely when they are released, Australia and New Zealand. ASEAN fills all the bottom of the table, along with India.

Korean trade data for August have also been released. The 16.3%YoY fall in imports reflects the impact of the most recent social distancing restrictions on domestic activity, while the continued weakness in exports (-9.9% was marginally better than expected but worse than the -7.1% figure for July) indicates that global weakness is still preventing a stronger upturn here, even with strong demand for semiconductors.

PMI data is due out across the region this morning, along with China's Caixin mfg PMI index, which could shed some interesting light on the plight of China's export-facing smaller manufacturing

firms.

And as mentioned earlier, the RBA is also meeting today. There's no expectation of anything from them today from any of the sampled consensus of forecasters, but such occasions are still available for policymakers to wade into market pricing by suggesting future policy options are more live than markets had perhaps anticipated. As today marks the beginning of a new quarter, this would be the time to belt out such a message if the Reserve Bank of Australia felt it was needed. Potential downside risk for the AUD today then...?

Indonesian CPI today should be a bit of a non-event, given that Bank Indonesia's hands are tied in terms of further policy action by the IDR's weakness (which it generated). But some room for easing in the future might be created by continued price softness today.

Asia yesterday

And to finish off with today, here's a short summary of yesterday's execrable data releases from India (along with another link to Prakash's more detailed account). "

India: [The Indian economy crashed 24% YoY in the April-June quarter](#). The decline was broad-based, with a plunge in both domestic demand and exports, while the 10% + (in terms of GDP) fiscal stimulus package again wasn't apparent in government consumption.

This data has pushed our forecast for FY2020-21 growth further down to -10.3% from -8.6%. Without any more policy support, it could be even worse. The INR 8.21 trillion budget deficit in the first four months of the fiscal year has already exceeded the INR 7.96 trillion official projection for the whole year. The RBI announced measures to ease stress in the bond market. But we would expect any relief for the market to be short-lived given the persistent inflation threat and supply overhang. Yields came off only a bit yesterday, and the INR weakened. We expect the INR will remain an Asian underperformer over the rest of the year.

Author

Amrita Naik Nimbalkar

Junior Economist, Global Macro
amrita.naik.nimbalkar@ing.com

Mateusz Sutowicz

Senior Economist, Poland
mateusz.sutowicz@ing.pl

Alissa Lefebvre

Economist
alissa.lefebvre@ing.com

Deepali Bhargava

Regional Head of Research, Asia-Pacific
Deepali.Bhargava@ing.com

Ruben Dewitte

Economist
+32495364780
ruben.dewitte@ing.com

Kinga Havasi
Economic research trainee
kinga.havasi@ing.com

Marten van Garderen
Consumer Economist, Netherlands
marten.van.garderen@ing.com

David Havrlant
Chief Economist, Czech Republic
420 770 321 486
david.havrlant@ing.com

Sander Burgers
Senior Economist, Dutch Housing
sander.burgers@ing.com

Lynn Song
Chief Economist, Greater China
lynn.song@asia.ing.com

Michiel Tukker
Senior European Rates Strategist
michiel.tukker@ing.com

Michal Rubaszek
Senior Economist, Poland
michal.rubaszek@ing.pl

This is a test author

Stefan Posea
Economist, Romania
tiberiu-stefan.posea@ing.com

Marine Leleux
Sector Strategist, Financials
marine.leleux2@ing.com

Jesse Norcross
Senior Sector Strategist, Real Estate
jesse.norcross@ing.com

Teise Stellema

Research Assistant, Energy Transition

teise.stellema@ing.com

Diederik Stadig

Sector Economist, TMT & Healthcare

diederik.stadig@ing.com

Diogo Gouveia

Sector Economist

diogo.duarte.vieira.de.gouveia@ing.com

Marine Leleux

Sector Strategist, Financials

marine.leleux2@ing.com

Ewa Manthey

Commodities Strategist

ewa.manthey@ing.com

ING Analysts

James Wilson

EM Sovereign Strategist

James.wilson@ing.com

Sophie Smith

Digital Editor

sophie.smith@ing.com

Frantisek Taborsky

EMEA FX & FI Strategist

frantisek.taborsky@ing.com

Adam Antoniak

Senior Economist, Poland

adam.antoniak@ing.pl

Min Joo Kang

Senior Economist, South Korea and Japan

min.joo.kang@asia.ing.com

Coco Zhang

ESG Research

coco.zhang@ing.com

Jan Frederik Slijkerman

Senior Sector Strategist, TMT
jan.frederik.slijkerman@ing.com

Katinka Jongkind
Senior Economist, Services and Leisure
Katinka.Jongkind@ing.com

Marina Le Blanc
Sector Strategist, Financials
Marina.Le.Blanc@ing.com

Samuel Abettan
Junior Economist
samuel.abettan@ing.com

Franziska Biehl
Senior Economist, Germany
Franziska.Marie.Biehl@ing.de

Rebecca Byrne
Senior Editor and Supervisory Analyst
rebecca.byrne@ing.com

Mirjam Bani
Sector Economist, Commercial Real Estate & Public Sector (Netherlands)
mirjam.bani@ing.com

Timothy Rahill
Credit Strategist
timothy.rahill@ing.com

Leszek Kasek
Senior Economist, Poland
leszek.kasek@ing.pl

Oleksiy Soroka, CFA
Senior High Yield Credit Strategist
oleksiy.soroka@ing.com

Antoine Bouvet
Head of European Rates Strategy
antoine.bouvet@ing.com

Jeroen van den Broek
Global Head of Sector Research
jeroen.van.den.broek@ing.com

Edse Dantuma

Senior Sector Economist, Industry and Healthcare
edse.dantuma@ing.com

Francesco Pesole
FX Strategist
francesco.pesole@ing.com

Rico Luman
Senior Sector Economist, Transport and Logistics
Rico.Luman@ing.com

Jurjen Witteveen
Sector Economist
jurjen.witteveen@ing.com

Dmitry Dolgin
Chief Economist, CIS
dmitry.dolgin@ing.de

Nicholas Mapa
Senior Economist, Philippines
nicholas.antonio.mapa@asia.ing.com

Egor Fedorov
Senior Credit Analyst
egor.fedorov@ing.com

Sebastian Franke
Consumer Economist
sebastian.franke@ing.de

Gerben Hieminga
Senior Sector Economist, Energy
gerben.hieminga@ing.com

Nadège Tillier
Head of Corporates Sector Strategy
nadege.tillier@ing.com

Charlotte de Montpellier
Senior Economist, France and Switzerland
charlotte.de.montpellier@ing.com

Laura Straeter
Behavioural Scientist
+31(0)611172684
laura.Straeter@ing.com

Valentin Tataru

Chief Economist, Romania

valentin.tataru@ing.com

James Smith

Developed Markets Economist, UK

james.smith@ing.com

Suvi Platerink Kosonen

Senior Sector Strategist, Financials

suvi.platerink-kosonen@ing.com

Thijs Geijer

Senior Sector Economist, Food & Agri

thijs.geijer@ing.com

Maurice van Sante

Senior Economist Construction & Team Lead Sectors

maurice.van.sante@ing.com

Marcel Klok

Senior Economist, Netherlands

marcel.klok@ing.com

Piotr Poplawski

Senior Economist, Poland

piotr.poplawski@ing.pl

Paolo Pizzoli

Senior Economist, Italy, Greece

paolo.pizzoli@ing.com

Marieke Blom

Chief Economist and Global Head of Research

marieke.blom@ing.com

Raoul Leering

Senior Macro Economist

raoul.leering@ing.com

Maarten Leen

Head of Global IFRS9 ME Scenarios

maarten.leen@ing.com

Maureen Schuller

Head of Financials Sector Strategy

Maureen.Schuller@ing.com

Warren Patterson

Head of Commodities Strategy

Warren.Patterson@asia.ing.com

Rafal Benecki

Chief Economist, Poland

rafal.benecki@ing.pl

Philippe Ledent

Senior Economist, Belgium, Luxembourg

philippe.ledent@ing.com

Peter Virovacz

Senior Economist, Hungary

peter.virovacz@ing.com

Inga Fechner

Senior Economist, Germany, Global Trade

inga.fechner@ing.de

Dimitry Fleming

Senior Data Analyst, Netherlands

Dimitry.Fleming@ing.com

Ciprian Dascalu

Chief Economist, Romania

+40 31 406 8990

ciprian.dascalu@ing.com

Muhammet Mercan

Chief Economist, Turkey

muhammet.mercan@ingbank.com.tr

Iris Pang

Chief Economist, Greater China

iris.pang@asia.ing.com

Sophie Freeman

Writer, Group Research

+44 20 7767 6209

Sophie.Freeman@uk.ing.com

Padhraic Garvey, CFA

Regional Head of Research, Americas

padhraic.garvey@ing.com

James Knightley

Chief International Economist, US

james.knightley@ing.com

Tim Condon

Asia Chief Economist
+65 6232-6020

Martin van Vliet

Senior Interest Rate Strategist
+31 20 563 8801
martin.van.vliet@ing.com

Karol Pogorzelski

Senior Economist, Poland
Karol.Pogorzelski@ing.pl

Carsten Brzeski

Global Head of Macro
carsten.brzeski@ing.de

Viraj Patel

Foreign Exchange Strategist
+44 20 7767 6405
viraj.patel@ing.com

Owen Thomas

Global Head of Editorial Content
+44 (0) 207 767 5331
owen.thomas@ing.com

Bert Colijn

Chief Economist, Netherlands
bert.colijn@ing.com

Peter Vanden Houte

Chief Economist, Belgium, Luxembourg, Eurozone
peter.vandenhoute@ing.com

Benjamin Schroeder

Senior Rates Strategist
benjamin.schroeder@ing.com

Chris Turner

Global Head of Markets and Regional Head of Research for UK & CEE
chris.turner@ing.com

Gustavo Rangel

Chief Economist, LATAM
+1 646 424 6464

gustavo.rangel@ing.com

Carlo Cocuzzo

Economist, Digital Finance

+44 20 7767 5306

carlo.cocuzzo@ing.com

ASEAN Morning Bytes

Asian markets to turn defensive ahead of key data reports



EM Space: Regional PMI data to give direction for Tuesday

- **General Asia:** Asian markets may turn defensive on Tuesday, with regional PMI manufacturing data showing mixed trends with select countries remaining in contraction due to subdued economic activity. Covid-19 developments remain on investors' minds with cases picking up in some countries although US new daily Covid-19 infections continue to decelerate from the peak in the summer. A string of manufacturing and services sector data out from the region should give investors an indication of the status of respective economies post lockdown easing while the US is set to report labour market data later on Friday. Investors should take their cue from Tuesday's PMI manufacturing reports while also monitoring Covid-19 developments for additional colour for trading.
- **India:** [The Indian economy crashed 24% YoY in the April-June quarter](#). The decline was broad-based, with a plunge in both domestic demand and exports, while the 10%+ (in terms of GDP) fiscal stimulus package again wasn't apparent in government consumption.
- This data has pushed our forecast for FY2020-21 growth further down to -10.3% from -8.6%. Without any more policy support, it could be even worse. The INR 8.21 trillion budget deficit in the first four months of the fiscal year has already exceeded the INR 7.96 trillion official projection for the whole year. The RBI announced measures to ease stress in the bond market. But we would expect any relief for the market to be short-lived given the persistent inflation threat and supply overhang. Yields came off only a bit yesterday, and the INR weakened. We expect the INR will remain an Asian underperformer over the rest of the year.

- **Singapore:** Broad money (M2) growth further accelerated to 12.2% YoY in July from 11.0% in June. This was the fastest rate of growth since the 2009 global financial crisis. The record Covid-19 stimulus explains the surge in liquidity, though there are no takers for it just yet. Bank lending extended its slowdown for a fifth straight month and was down 0.3% YoY in July even as interest rates continued to grind lower. 3-month Sibor ended August with another 3 basis point fall on the month to 0.41%. Weak economic confidence suggests this state of affairs should continue through the end of the year.
- **Thailand:** As expected, the current account swung back to surplus in July as the wide goods trade surplus more than offset continued outflows on the services account. The \$1.8 billion of current surplus in the month was almost double the consensus estimate and was a sharp swing from a \$247 million deficit in June. This brings the year-to-date current surplus to \$9.9 billion. This is still down from \$19.7 billion a year ago, keeping our forecast of a near-halving of the annual surplus this year from 7.1% of GDP equivalent in 2019 on track. The THB has been an Asian underperformer so far this year and should remain so over the remainder of the year.
- **Indonesia:** Indonesia reports inflation data for the month of August with market players expecting inflation to remain subdued and dip to 1.4% as economic activity slows due to the pandemic. Inflation will be below the central bank's target of 2-4% as Covid-19 new infections in Indonesia remains elevated, sapping momentum from consumption activity on fears of catching the virus. Despite the below-target inflation, Bank Indonesia (BI) will likely refrain from easing monetary policy further given recent struggles of IDR and we only expect BI to cut policy rates again should IDR stabilize.

What to look out for: Regional PMI manufacturing and Covid-19 developments

- Regional PMI manufacturing (1 September)
- China Caixin PMI manufacturing (1 September)
- Indonesia inflation (1 September)
- Hong Kong retail sales (1 September)
- US ISM PMI manufacturing (1 September)
- US Factory orders and durable goods orders (2 September)
- Singapore PMI manufacturing (3 September)
- Regional PMI services (3 September)
- US initial jobless claims, ISM services and trade balance (3 September)
- Philippines inflation (4 September)
- Singapore retail sales (4 September)
- Malaysia and Thailand GIR (4 September)
- US non-farm payrolls (4 September)

Author

Nicholas Mapa

Senior Economist, Philippines

nicholas.antonio.mapa@asia.ing.com

China: PMI shows growth depends on domestic demand

China's manufacturing PMI stabilised in August while the non-manufacturing PMI showed faster growth. These outcomes stem from the low number of Covid-19 cases in China, providing an opportunity for economic growth



Source: Shutterstock

Passengers cheer up for Wuhan while waiting to take train K81 at Wuchang Railway Station in Wuhan, central China's Hubei Province, late April 7, 2020.

PMI shows growth continues to pick up

China's manufacturing PMI showed growth slowed just slightly in August (PMI edged lower to 51.0 in August from 51.1 in July). New orders (for domestic use) continued to experience faster growth, while new export orders kept shrinking, albeit at a slower rate.

China's non-manufacturing PMI rose significantly from 54.2 to 55.2 in August. Most of the growth came from new orders. This could be due to the strong demand for cross-provincial leisure trips as families spend summer holidays within Mainland China because overseas travel restrictions remain mostly unchanged.

Growing on its own

The growth engine is now clear. Overseas demand will only pick up slowly and travel restrictions will only be relaxed if Covid-19 cases subside overseas. Until then China will rely more on its own for economic growth.

Author

Iris Pang

Chief Economist, Greater China

iris.pang@asia.ing.com

Indian economy crashes 24% in April-June quarter of 2020

The last quarter was pretty much a write-off and so is much of the rest of the financial year as the Covid-19 pandemic continues to roar ahead with record daily cases. Where do we go from here?



Source: Shutterstock

Factory workers in India queue at Kapashera border after local police stopped them from crossing amid the lockdown on May 18, 2020 in Gurugram, India.

23.9%

India's GDP fall in April-June quarter

year-on-year

Worse than expected

From best to worst performer

Even as the pandemic started to hit the global economy in the first quarter of 2020, the Indian economy was still doing good with at least 3.1% year-on-year growth in that quarter. Things turned upside down as India became an epicentre of Asian and, as it currently stands, the global pandemic. The just released India GDP data for the April-June quarter, which is the first quarter of the country's financial year started in April (FY2020-21), showed the economy was the worst performer in Asia and probably in the world too.

GDP crashed by a 23.9% year-on-year in the reporting quarter, sharply undershooting our -17.8% YoY forecast for the period and the consensus of -18.0%. Of course, the nation-wide lockdown to break the Covid-19 chain, which started in late March and continued for much of the quarter, deserves the blame.

Nation-wide lockdown to break the Covid-19 chain deserves the blame

Probably, the chaotic implementation of the lockdown – it was announced just a few hours before its implementation, made the matter worse. The people weren't prepared for such an unprecedented closure of the economy, which subsequently caused panic and mass migration of workers from big cities to their native places.

Where did Covid-19 hit the economy hard?

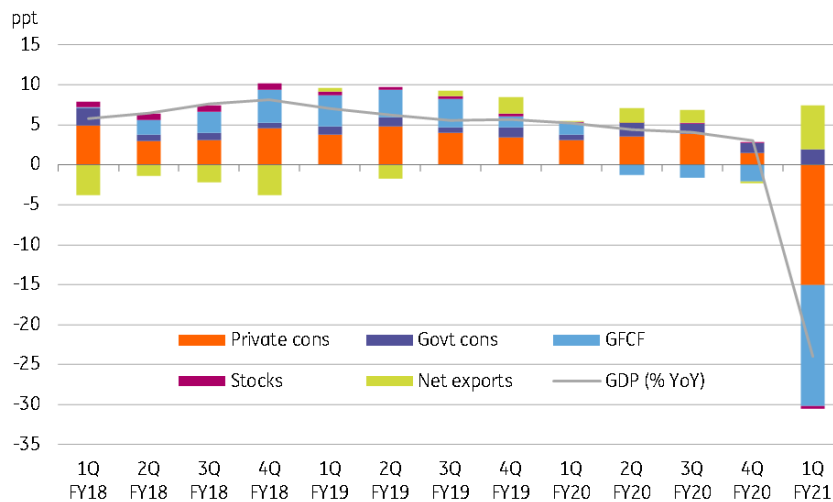
Construction and trade, hotel, transport and communication were the hardest hit sectors in the last quarter with their production halved from a year ago. Manufacturing and mining also took strong beatings with 39% YoY and 23% plunges in output, respectively. Public administration followed with -10% YoY and then utilities with -7%.

Agriculture was the lone bright spot with 3.4% YoY growth, which was despite natural disasters including typhoon Amphan in May and floods in some parts of the country.

On the demand side, investment was the hardest hit with a 47% YoY crash of gross capital formation. Consumption came next with -27% YoY and the goods and services exports with -20%. A much steeper fall in imports by 40% YoY, however, had net trade contributing positively to the headline GDP growth (see figure).

The all-touted fiscal stimulus worth 10% of GDP was also missing in action. Indeed, government consumption growth gained some traction, up to 16.4% YoY from 13.6% in the previous quarter. But its contribution to the headline GDP growth only improved marginally to 1.9 percentage point (ppt) from 1.2 ppt in the previous quarter.

Expenditure-side sources of year-on-year GDP growth (percentage points)



Source: CEIC, ING

Note: Bars may not stack up to total GDP growth due to statistical discrepancy.

Where is the macro policy headed?

Also released today, the government budget figures for July showed the cumulative fiscal deficit of INR8.21 trillion in the first four months of the fiscal year (April-July), already exceeding the INR7.96 trillion official projection for the entire fiscal year. This stems from the fiscal year-to-date revenue fall by 42% YoY and total expenditure growth of 11%.

This is unprecedented, indeed. Although the ruling government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been ramping up spending over the last couple of years, especially to support its re-election bid in the last year, the deficit in the same period a year ago was only 78% of the yearly target.

Additional fiscal stimulus is next to nil

And, against such a backdrop, the chance additional stimulus from the fiscal side is just next to nil.

The Reserve Bank of India's monetary easing has also reached its limit as can be judged from the central bank's decision to leave the policy rate unchanged last policy meetings in early August on the back of accelerating inflation. The supply disruption to food prices drove inflation past the RBI's 2-6% policy target range in recent months (6.9% YoY in July). The pro-cyclical measures such as a hike in excise duty on fuel prices was another contributing factor here. That said, the RBI continues to support the economy via other channels.

Where do we go from here?

There is no light at the end of India's Covid-19 tunnel just yet. The daily rise in cases reached a new record of 79,457 over the weekend, taking the total number of infections so far to over 3.6 million.

GDP growth may have passed the bottom

And, in its bid to revive the economy the government continues to ease movement restrictions. As such, GDP growth might have passed its bottom but the thriving pandemic provides little hope of a near-term recovery.

The policy stimulus has also hit a snag given stretched public finances and rising inflation. This means pretty much nothing can save the economy from continued deep GDP declines over the rest of the year. We recently cut our full-year FY2020-21 GDP growth forecast from -5.2% to -8.6%. The below-expected 1Q FY2020-21 growth nudges it further down to -10.3%. We would imagine it being much worse than that without any more policy support.

What all this means for the markets?

Just ahead of the GDP release today, the RBI moved to inject liquidity in the banking system via special open market and term repo operations. The goal was to maintain the “orderly and congenial” market conditions as the recent inflation spike stoked government bond yields higher. The central bank also moved to boost banks’ purchases of government bonds. While we believe any easing of upward yield pressure due to the latest RBI measures to be transitory, the persistent inflation threat and the supply overhang from the wide budget gap will continue to haunt investors in the Indian government bond for some time.

The weak US dollar environment has provided some cushion for the Indian rupee, though it's still an Asian underperformer currency so far this year with a 3% YTD depreciation against the USD. We expect it to remain so over the rest of the year. That said, we are reviewing our end-2020 USD/INR forecast of 76.50 for a downward revision in consideration of the recent rally (spot 73.6).

Author

Amrita Naik Nimbalkar

Junior Economist, Global Macro

amrita.naik.nimbalkar@ing.com

Mateusz Sutowicz

Senior Economist, Poland

mateusz.sutowicz@ing.pl

Alissa Lefebvre

Economist

alissa.lefebvre@ing.com

Deepali Bhargava

Regional Head of Research, Asia-Pacific

Deepali.Bhargava@ing.com

Ruben Dewitte

Economist

+32495364780

ruben.dewitte@ing.com

Kinga Havasi

Economic research trainee

kinga.havasi@ing.com

Marten van Garderen

Consumer Economist, Netherlands

marten.van.garderen@ing.com

David Havrlant

Chief Economist, Czech Republic

420 770 321 486

david.havrlant@ing.com

Sander Burgers

Senior Economist, Dutch Housing

sander.burgers@ing.com

Lynn Song

Chief Economist, Greater China

lynn.song@asia.ing.com

Michiel Tukker

Senior European Rates Strategist

michiel.tukker@ing.com

Michal Rubaszek

Senior Economist, Poland

michal.rubaszek@ing.pl

This is a test author

Stefan Posea

Economist, Romania

tiberiu-stefan.posea@ing.com

Marine Leleux

Sector Strategist, Financials

marine.leleux2@ing.com

Jesse Norcross

Senior Sector Strategist, Real Estate

jesse.norcross@ing.com

Teise Stellema

Research Assistant, Energy Transition

teise.stellema@ing.com

Diederik Stadig

Sector Economist, TMT & Healthcare

diederik.stadig@ing.com

Diogo Gouveia

Sector Economist

diogo.duarte.vieira.de.gouveia@ing.com

Marine Leleux

Sector Strategist, Financials

marine.leleux2@ing.com

Ewa Manthey

Commodities Strategist

ewa.manthey@ing.com

ING Analysts

James Wilson

EM Sovereign Strategist

James.wilson@ing.com

Sophie Smith

Digital Editor

sophie.smith@ing.com

Frantisek Taborsky

EMEA FX & FI Strategist

frantisek.taborsky@ing.com

Adam Antoniak

Senior Economist, Poland

adam.antoniak@ing.pl

Min Joo Kang

Senior Economist, South Korea and Japan

min.joo.kang@asia.ing.com

Coco Zhang

ESG Research

coco.zhang@ing.com

Jan Frederik Slijkerman

Senior Sector Strategist, TMT

jan.frederik.slijkerman@ing.com

Katinka Jongkind

Senior Economist, Services and Leisure

Katinka.Jongkind@ing.com

Marina Le Blanc

Sector Strategist, Financials

Marina.Le.Blanc@ing.com

Samuel Abettan

Junior Economist

samuel.abettan@ing.com

Franziska Biehl

Senior Economist, Germany

Franziska.Marie.Biehl@ing.de

Rebecca Byrne

Senior Editor and Supervisory Analyst

rebecca.byrne@ing.com

Mirjam Bani

Sector Economist, Commercial Real Estate & Public Sector (Netherlands)

mirjam.bani@ing.com

Timothy Rahill

Credit Strategist

timothy.rahill@ing.com

Leszek Kasek

Senior Economist, Poland

leszek.kasek@ing.pl

Oleksiy Soroka, CFA

Senior High Yield Credit Strategist

oleksiy.soroka@ing.com

Antoine Bouvet

Head of European Rates Strategy

antoine.bouvet@ing.com

Jeroen van den Broek

Global Head of Sector Research

jeroen.van.den.broek@ing.com

Edse Dantuma

Senior Sector Economist, Industry and Healthcare

edse.dantuma@ing.com

Francesco Pesole

FX Strategist

francesco.pesole@ing.com

Rico Luman

Senior Sector Economist, Transport and Logistics

Rico.Luman@ing.com

Jurjen Witteveen

Sector Economist

jurjen.witteveen@ing.com

Dmitry Dolgin

Chief Economist, CIS

dmitry.dolgin@ing.de

Nicholas Mapa

Senior Economist, Philippines

nicholas.antonio.mapa@asia.ing.com

Egor Fedorov

Senior Credit Analyst

egor.fedorov@ing.com

Sebastian Franke

Consumer Economist

sebastian.franke@ing.de

Gerben Hieminga

Senior Sector Economist, Energy

gerben.hieminga@ing.com

Nadège Tillier

Head of Corporates Sector Strategy

nadege.tillier@ing.com

Charlotte de Montpellier

Senior Economist, France and Switzerland

charlotte.de.montpellier@ing.com

Laura Straeter

Behavioural Scientist

+31(0)611172684

laura.Straeter@ing.com

Valentin Tataru

Chief Economist, Romania

valentin.tataru@ing.com

James Smith

Developed Markets Economist, UK

james.smith@ing.com

Suvi Platerink Kosonen

Senior Sector Strategist, Financials

suvi.platerink-kosonen@ing.com

Thijs Geijer

Senior Sector Economist, Food & Agri

thijs.geijer@ing.com

Maurice van Sante

Senior Economist Construction & Team Lead Sectors

maurice.van.sante@ing.com

Marcel Klok

Senior Economist, Netherlands

marcel.klok@ing.com

Piotr Poplawski

Senior Economist, Poland

piotr.poplawski@ing.pl

Paolo Pizzoli

Senior Economist, Italy, Greece

paolo.pizzoli@ing.com

Marieke Blom

Chief Economist and Global Head of Research

marieke.blom@ing.com

Raoul Leering

Senior Macro Economist

raoul.leering@ing.com

Maarten Leen

Head of Global IFRS9 ME Scenarios

maarten.leen@ing.com

Maureen Schuller

Head of Financials Sector Strategy

Maureen.Schuller@ing.com

Warren Patterson

Head of Commodities Strategy

Warren.Patterson@asia.ing.com

Rafal Benecki

Chief Economist, Poland

rafal.benecki@ing.pl

Philippe Ledent

Senior Economist, Belgium, Luxembourg

philippe.ledent@ing.com

Peter Virovacz

Senior Economist, Hungary

peter.virovacz@ing.com

Inga Fechner

Senior Economist, Germany, Global Trade

inga.fechner@ing.de

Dimitry Fleming

Senior Data Analyst, Netherlands

Dimitry.Fleming@ing.com

Ciprian Dascalu

Chief Economist, Romania

+40 31 406 8990

ciprian.dascalu@ing.com

Muhammet Mercan

Chief Economist, Turkey

muhammet.mercan@ingbank.com.tr

Iris Pang

Chief Economist, Greater China

iris.pang@asia.ing.com

Sophie Freeman

Writer, Group Research

+44 20 7767 6209

Sophie.Freeman@uk.ing.com

Padhraic Garvey, CFA

Regional Head of Research, Americas

padhraic.garvey@ing.com

James Knightley

Chief International Economist, US

james.knightley@ing.com

Tim Condon

Asia Chief Economist

+65 6232-6020

Martin van Vliet

Senior Interest Rate Strategist

+31 20 563 8801

martin.van.vliet@ing.com

Karol Pogorzelski

Senior Economist, Poland

Karol.Pogorzelski@ing.pl

Carsten Brzeski

Global Head of Macro

carsten.brzeski@ing.de

Viraj Patel

Foreign Exchange Strategist

+44 20 7767 6405

viraj.patel@ing.com

Owen Thomas

Global Head of Editorial Content

+44 (0) 207 767 5331

owen.thomas@ing.com

Bert Colijn

Chief Economist, Netherlands

bert.colijn@ing.com

Peter Vanden Houte

Chief Economist, Belgium, Luxembourg, Eurozone

peter.vandenhoute@ing.com

Benjamin Schroeder

Senior Rates Strategist

benjamin.schroeder@ing.com

Chris Turner

Global Head of Markets and Regional Head of Research for UK & CEE

chris.turner@ing.com

Gustavo Rangel

Chief Economist, LATAM

+1 646 424 6464

gustavo.rangel@ing.com

Carlo Cocuzzo

Economist, Digital Finance

+44 20 7767 5306

carlo.cocuzzo@ing.com

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