

Jean Pisani-Ferry: The great macro divergence

Ten years ago, nearly all advanced economies fell off the cliff simultaneously. Nowadays, they are neither structurally nor cyclically aligned, and they are unevenly vulnerable to recession, which makes international policy coordination both more necessary and more difficult, **writes Jean Pisani-Ferry**



Where are we in the economic cycle?

“The global expansion has peaked,” the OECD warns in its latest economic outlook, and performance could be weaker if downside risks materialise. The party is not over yet: global growth is expected to continue in 2019 and 2020, though at a slower pace. But forecasters are notoriously bad at spotting macroeconomic turning points, and the road ahead is hard to read.

Potential obstacles abound: more aggressive monetary tightening, especially in the United States; a further escalation of protectionism; a harder-than-expected economic landing in China; and a return of tensions in the eurozone, triggered by concerns over the fate of Italian finances. All or any could intensify a slowdown that has started already.

A US recession would frustrate President Donald Trump as he seeks re-election in 2020, but it

would not be at odds with established patterns. The expansion officially started in June 2009, and by July 2019 it will be the longest in US economic history. Unemployment is at its lowest level since the 1960s.

Challenging times, not least for the US

In such conditions, the Trump administration's policy mix of massive tax cuts and spending increases – a fiscal stimulus as significant as the one used in 2009 to ward off an impending depression – makes no economic sense. It leaves the Federal Reserve only two choices: raise interest rates more aggressively to offset an ill-timed stimulus, or capitulate. Such an irresponsible game of chicken between America's fiscal and monetary authorities heightens the risk of instability for the rest of the world, given global sensitivity to the US interest-rate cycle.

A global recession would be more than premature for countries whose post-crisis recovery has been delayed

A global recession would be more than premature for countries whose post-crisis recovery has been delayed, feeble, or both. Greece, where growth resumed only in 2017 and unemployment is still close to 20%, is an extreme case. But it is not alone. In Italy, per capita GDP is no higher than it was in the mid-1990s. And in Spain, France, South Korea, and elsewhere, unemployment is still significantly above pre-crisis levels.

The challenge there is to reintegrate into the labour force workers who have been unemployed for a prolonged period and are at risk of skills erosion. To avoid permanent socioeconomic damage, these countries need faster growth. An auspicious international context alone would not solve their problems. But it would help maximise the benefits of domestic reforms.

At the other extreme, Germany's labour market is in far better shape than in it was 2007. Full employment prevails in the Western Länder, and economic growth relies more and more on immigration: in 2017, the net inflow – not refugees anymore, but largely fellow Europeans – totalled no fewer than 400,000 persons. Japan, the United Kingdom, and Poland have also enjoyed a job-rich recovery. Citizens complain about income, inequality, or rising house prices, not about the lack of jobs.

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Ten years ago, nearly all advanced economies fell off the cliff simultaneously. Nowadays, they are neither structurally nor cyclically aligned. This is a concern because the global economy's approaching slowdown comes at a time of heightened political fragility. Trust in governments and policymaking institutions remains – understandably – very low. Collective economic mismanagement would only dent it further and fuel already-rising economic nationalism.

3 things to be done

What should be done? The agenda starts at home. In many places where the labour market remains out of balance, domestic action is required to strengthen economic potential and improve access to employment. Despite 9% unemployment and President Emmanuel Macron's reforms, employers in France report skilled labour shortages. This calls for a major training effort, support for mobility, incentives to accept job offers, and the opening of sheltered sectors. This is actually being done. But in Italy, the ruling coalition has embarked on a fiscal stimulus while proposing measures that will reduce labour-force participation. These include repealing the 2011 pensions reform and creating a "citizen's income" which, if poorly designed or implemented, will result in more people falling into inactivity. It is this policy inconsistency, more than Italy's departure from the European Union's fiscal rules, that is a serious cause of concern.

The collective cost of a temporary inflation overrun is dwarfed by that of a premature recession

The second priority is to get the balance of risks right. A debate has been mounting for some time between policy hawks, who warn that central banks' asset purchases and near-zero interest rates fuel financial instability and inflation risks, and doves, whose main fear is deflation. Both concerns are real, yet there is more to say for the second than for the first. Real-estate bubbles can be contained through regulatory means, such as loan-to-value or loan-to-income ceilings for housing loans. As for inflation, forecasts have consistently been confounded. Wages so far have responded slowly to lower unemployment. There is a legitimate fear that they could start rising abruptly; but, after so many years of inflation undershooting, it is a risk worth taking. The collective cost of a temporary inflation overrun is dwarfed by that of a premature recession resulting in permanent scars and a political backlash against economic orthodoxy.

The third priority, international coordination, is by far the most difficult to achieve, especially in the eurozone, where the European Central Bank is running a single policy for disparate economies. The standard prescription would be to let the ECB target the average inflation rate and to rely on national fiscal policies to fine-tune the macroeconomic stance. But, because of elevated debts or remaining deficits, countries in need of further growth are also those that lack fiscal space. Neither Greece nor Italy nor even Spain or France can currently contemplate a meaningful fiscal stimulus.

New kinds of risks

Absent cross-country transfers (which the recent Franco-German agreement on a mini-eurozone budget is not meant to deliver), this is a further reason why the ECB should err on the side of audacity. It would leave to the governments of countries at risk of overheating the task of using fiscal means to cool down their economies – and to those of the still-struggling countries the task of unlocking their economic potential.

There are plenty of reasons to doubt that it can be done. But policymakers' job is to manage risks, and those they are facing today are not the usual ones. What is at stake is the resilience of the global economic system. Cracks have appeared, despite a benign context. They should not be allowed to turn into fractures.

This article first appeared in [Project Syndicate](#)

Author

Alissa Lefebre

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
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

Robert Carnell

Regional Head of Research, Asia-Pacific

robert.carnell@asia.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