

Korean GDP pushes above pre-pandemic levels

Stronger than expected growth was led by business investment, though the consumer is no slouch either. The big unknown is, can Korea keep on top of its Covid-19 cases while its vaccination rollout struggles to get going - if it does, then 4% growth is achievable



Source: Shutterstock

1.6%

GDP QoQ%

Up from 1.2% in 4Q20

Better than expected

Better than expected growth

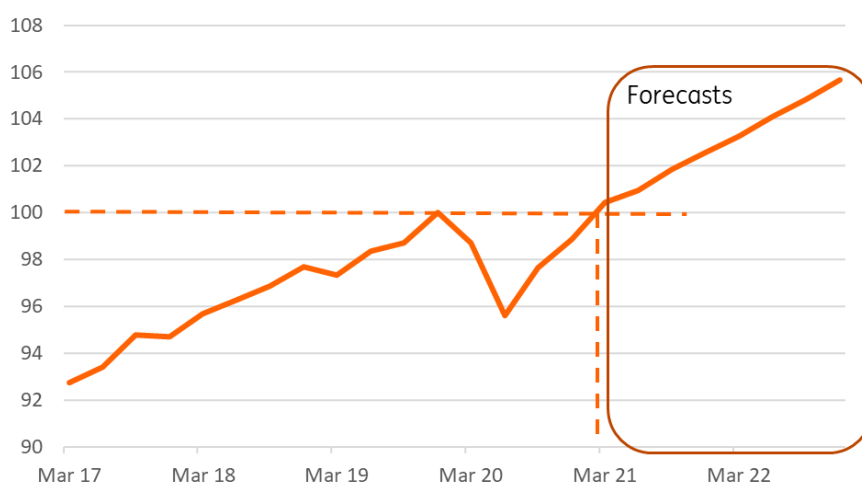
South Korea's GDP rose by 1.6% in 1Q21, stronger than the 1.1% expected, and up even from the solid 1.2% figures recorded for 4Q20 which was revised slightly higher from an initial 1.1% reading. That leaves GDP up 1.8%YoY, in other words, higher than a year ago, and also just higher than 4Q2019 pre-pandemic GDP levels too.

Korea's year-on-year gains will surge even higher next quarter as the comparison is boosted by

base effects since 2Q20 marked the big quarterly decline in Korean GDP after the modest 1Q20 contraction (-3.2% fall in 2Q20 after a -1.3% decline in 1Q20).

Focussing as ever on the QoQ percentage gains (year on year measures at a time like this are really just reflecting 2020 weakness, not what is going on now), and the latest growth figures were dominated by very strong growth in business investment (+6.6%QoQ). This makes it look like the 1.1% consumer spending gains are off the pace, but annualised, this is more than a 4.5% rate, and really is not bad at all.

Korean GDP as an index (4Q2019 = 100)



Source: CEIC, ING
Korean GDP levels

Growth could top 4% this year

Doing nothing at all to our existing forecast profile for 2021, today's surprise numbers could take Korean GDP to within a whisker of 4% GDP growth for the full year. But there are clearly two-way risks to where this actually goes. The underlying momentum of the economy is obviously stronger than we had thought, with strength concentrated in the electronics sectors and supporting industries, but also broadening out to industries like autos. Export strength remains supported by regional, in particular Chinese strength, and this could also gain more support as countries like the US and regions like Europe see further economic growth as their economies re-open.

But closer to home, rising daily case numbers in Korea, albeit still only around the 700-750 mark currently, are a worry. We have seen repeatedly how rising cases at a low level can lead rapidly to an out-of-control situation (NB India), and Korea's vaccine rollout has been slow, even by comparison with other Asian countries. So before we push through the entire forecast update implied by today's figures, we may wait a month to see how the pandemic and vaccine rollouts progress. 3.5% is a good starting point for a 2021 GDP upgrade this month. We can see if there is room for a 4% forecast next month if the vaccination rate picks up and Covid cases remain moderate.

BoK to remain on the sidelines

With growth surging, talk of earlier Bank of Korea (BoK) tightening will inevitably pick up, and this could provide some further support to the Korean won (KRW) which appreciated today on the GDP data.

But at the moment, with Korean unemployment still above pre-pandemic levels, we believe that such talk is premature, and we still do not see the BoK tightening policy until the second half of next year. However, further gains in GDP like that seen today as well as further progress in the labour market could encourage us to consider an earlier 2022 move, especially given the backdrop of strong house-price growth and rising household debt ratios.

Author

Olivia Grace

Editor

olivia.grace@ing.com**Julian Geib**

Junior Economist, Global Trade

julian.geib@ing.de**Zoltán Homolya**

Economic research trainee

zoltan.homolya@ing.com**Amrita Naik Nimbalkar**

Junior Economist, Global Macro

amrita.naik.nimbalkar@ing.com**Mateusz Sutowicz**

Senior Economist, Poland

mateusz.sutowicz@ing.pl**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@ing.com

Michiel Tukker

Senior UK & Eurozone 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

Senior Economist, Healthcare & Technology
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@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

Deputy Global Head of Editorial 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

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 Corporate 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

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@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, 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