



ECB needs to finance Corona budget deficits

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The coronavirus pandemic has triggered a combined negative supply and demand shock of unprecedented intensity. Both are having a significant impact on the production of goods and services, and because everyone's income ultimately derives from production, household incomes are quickly falling. With many economies already in a downward spiral and heading toward recession, the danger is that the downturn will become a self-perpetuating and ever-deepening rout.

The twin supply and demand shocks are likely to trigger many 'domino effects'. Companies with large fixed costs that suffer a sudden fall in income are facing financial difficulties, or even bankruptcy. When that happens, the banks and other entities that have lent money to these companies will also be in trouble. That is why massive economic shocks can often lead to banking crises.

But the dominoes don't stop falling there. Governments, too, can face fiscal dangers when they step in to mitigate the crisis. In the case of the current pandemic, national governments will need to save businesses from bankruptcy by granting financial support and subsidies, assist workers by funding temporary unemployment schemes, and possibly even come to the rescue of large banks. Worse, all of this must be done at a time of declining tax revenues, which means that government deficits and public-debt levels will skyrocket.

We saw how these domino effects work during the 2007-2008 financial crisis. The difference now is that the initial shock did not start in financial markets and then spill over into the real economy. Rather, today's shocks emerged from the real economy and are toppling financial markets. But, as in the past, this crisis demands urgent measures to put more space between the falling dominoes. Think of it as macroeconomic 'social distancing'.

What would this look like in practice? First, national governments must intervene on a massive scale to provide financial support for distressed companies and households whose earnings are at risk. Most European governments already seem to be willing to do this. The problem is that large-scale fiscal expansions by eurozone member states could prove tricky, even if the Commission has tabled the activation of the general escape clause of the Stability and Growth Pact (SGP). It is thus critical that the European Central Bank step in to prevent the last domino – member-state governments – from falling.

Because they have no choice but to support failing companies, illiquid banks, and struggling households, national governments could be entering dangerous territory. The more their debt increases, the greater the risk that their bondholders will panic, as we saw during the 2010-12 sovereign debt crisis. And the countries experiencing the largest debt increase as a result of the 'corona crisis' – Italy, Spain, and France – are among the four largest eurozone economies.

To head off the risk of a bond-market panic, the ECB announced its readiness to buy up distressed governments' bonds. During the 2012 crisis, the ECB laid the groundwork for such a response with its outright monetary transactions program (OMT). The ECB went a step further this week by dropping all conditionality attached to the use of OMT. This was the correct decision. Yet it is insufficient. The ECB must go further, by preparing to buy government bonds in *primary* markets, effectively issuing money to finance member states' budget deficits during the crisis.

The virtue of such a monetary financing is that it spares national governments from having to issue new debt. Because all new debt would be monetised, the crisis would not increase government debt-to-GDP ratios. For those countries suffering the worst of the pandemic, the threat of a bondholder panic will have been removed from the equation. In addition, when the epidemic disappears it will not have left a permanent legacy of unsustainable levels of government debt.

The monetary financing of Corona-induced budget deficits is a form of 'helicopter money', i.e. the central bank provides cash to firms and households using the government budget as intermediary. This is also the appropriate way to organise the distribution of helicopter money. It relies on the government to decide which households and which firms will receive the cash. The government is the appropriate institution as it is vested with the democratic legitimacy to organize such a distribution of cash. It is certainly a superior way to organise this distribution of money than the many proposals that are being made today whereby each citizen would receive the same amount of cash (€1,000, for example). Such a cash distribution would be very ineffective to counter the deflationary spiral because most of the cash would go to households that have not seen their revenues decline. They would likely hoard the largest part of the cash handout. Those who are in greatest need, however, e.g. the temporarily unemployed, and who are now forced to reduce their consumption would not receive a sufficient amount of cash. A uniform cash handout would be hugely expensive in budgetary terms with weak effectiveness in stopping the deflationary dynamics.

One could raise many objections to this proposal of monetary financing. As a legal matter, the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union forbids the ECB from engaging in monetary financing of national budget deficits (i.e. subscribing to newly issued bonds in the primary markets). One way to satisfy this legal constraint consists in national governments issuing perpetual bonds with zero interest rate which would be presented in the primary market and bought by financial institutions. The latter would then sell them to the ECB after a short delay in the secondary markets. The important thing is to realize that in existential crises situations governments should use all instruments available to avert catastrophes. Or as Cicero put it: “Salus populi, suprema lex” (the welfare of the people is the supreme law).

One also might object on the grounds that monetary financing would produce inflation. Yet under the current circumstances, the inflationary risks are non-existent. If anything, Europe is now facing a deflationary spiral; monetary financing of budget deficits is the only way to stop this spiral. As soon as the deflationary dynamic had been stopped, the ECB will surely halt its monetary financing.

Sooner or later, the ECB must accept that monetary financing in support of deficit spending is a necessity not just for mitigating the corona crisis, but also for averting a downward deflationary cycle that could pull the Eurozone apart. It is time to think outside the box and to set aside dogmas that may be appropriate in normal times but not when we face an existential crisis. ■

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*Prior to joining LSE, **Paul De Grauwe** was Professor of International Economics at the University of Leuven, Belgium. He was a member of the Belgian parliament from 1991 to 2003. He is honorary doctor of the University of Sankt Gallen (Switzerland), of the University of Turku (Finland), the University of Genoa, the University of Valencia and Maastricht University. He obtained his PhD from the Johns Hopkins University in 1974. He was a visiting professor at various universities- the University of Paris, the University of Michigan, the University of Pennsylvania, Humboldt University Berlin, the Université Libre de Bruxelles, the Université Catholique de Louvain, the University of Amsterdam, the University of Milan, Tilburg University, the University of Kiel. He was also a visiting scholar at the IMF, the Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve, the Bank of Japan and the European Central Bank. He was a member of the Group of Economic Policy Analysis, advising President Barroso. He is a research fellow at the Centre for European Policy Studies in Brussels and the Centre for Economic Policy Research, London.*



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