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Poland: growth dividend not high enough for Maastricht fiscal criterion to be met

BY MACIEJ KRZAK*

According to the government programme 'Solidarne państwo'¹ and the 2005 update of the Convergence Programme² the government has set PLZ 30 billion as the annual nominal ceiling (deficit 'anchor') for the central government deficits³ through 2009. It claims that this cap will be

instrumental in reducing the general government deficit to GDP ratio to below the Maastricht threshold of 3%, calculated along the ESA-95 guidelines. In the following we intend to show that this goal will hardly be met and that the current government's full reliance on economic growth to automatically boost state budget revenues – instead of enacting reforms of expenditures and revenues – will not suffice to achieve a reduction of the public sector deficits. Therefore, Poland's entry into the eurozone by the end of 2010 is unlikely.

Deficit projections

A very simple simulation will provide a piece of evidence on how illusory the claim is that public sector deficits will be slashed below 3% of GDP – raising doubts as to whether the government indeed intends to comply with the Maastricht Treaty and reach that target by 2008. The summary of calculations is exhibited in Table 1. The 2005 Convergence Programme Update of the Polish Ministry of Finance is the source of various projections for 2006-2008, which will be used to

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¹ Council of Ministers (2005), 'Solidarne państwo' (A Solidary State – Action Programme of the Government), Council of Ministers of Poland, 9 November 2005, www.krmp.gov.pl.

² Ministry of Finance (2006), 'The Convergence Programme – 2005 update', Polish Ministry of Finance, 18 January 2006, www.mofnet.gov.pl.

³ In this text the notions central government deficit (budget) and state deficit (budget) as well as general government deficit and public sector deficit are used interchangeably.

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Table 1

2005 Convergence Programme

	2005	2006	2007	2008
real GDP growth, % change	3.3	4.3	4.6	5.0
GDP deflator, % change	1.3	1.1	1.7	2.1
general government balance, % GDP	-2.9	-2.6	-2.2	-1.9

Source: 2005 Convergence Programme Update, Tables 8 and 15.

Table 2

Projections of the general government deficit

	2005 est.	2006p	2007p	2008p	2009p	2010p
nominal GDP, PLN billion	967	1019.7	1099.2	1189.7	1292.6	1404.4
central government deficit, PLN billion	28.6	30.6	30.0	30.0	30.0	30.0
deficit, % GDP	-3.0	-3.0	-2.7	-2.5	-2.3	-2.1
local governments' deficits, % GDP	-0.2	0.0	-0.2	-0.1	-0.4	-0.4
net pension reform costs to the state budget, % GDP	-1.7	-2.0	-2.1	-2.2	-2.2	-2.2
general government deficit, ESA-95, % GDP	-4.9	-5.0	-5.0	-4.8	-4.9	-4.7
eligible deduction of pension costs, % GDP	1.7	1.6	1.3	0.9	0.4	0.0
general government deficit, % GDP	-3.2	-3.4	-3.8	-3.9	-4.5	-4.7
general govt deficit in the 2005 Convergence Programme, % GDP	-2.9	-2.6	-2.2	-1.9		

Source: GUS (Central Statistical Office of Poland), 2005; Convergence Programme; own calculations and projections.

estimate the ESA-95 general government deficits (see Table 2). However, the computations will be extended through 2010 in order to grasp the period when the implications of the recent reform⁴ of the Stability and Growth Pact⁵ will be fully phased out. Therefore, starting with 2009, the projections are those of the author and the justification for their choice will be presented in due course.

We should start – in order to calculate the deficit-to-GDP ratio – with the forecasts for nominal GDP, as they are not given in the 2005 Convergence Programme Update⁶. Suppose that real GDP growth will reach 6% per year through 2009 as the

election programme of the ruling party PiS (Law and Justice) has called for, with the exception of 2006, for which the government projection is taken. This is the only major – and at the same time optimistic – departure from the Programme in our assumptions, yet this is done on purpose since even higher economic growth will only emphasize the robustness of the presented findings. Should the economy grow at a lower rate than assumed in the Programme, then the deficit-to-GDP ratio would decline even less. One could claim that without further market reforms, adequate fiscal adjustment and the elimination of waste in the public sector such a strong economic performance represents wishful thinking: in 2001-2005, the average rate of growth in Poland was a mere 3.2%. However, let us bear with this overly optimistic assumption for the remaining part of the paper.

Let us further assume that inflation (GDP deflator) will behave as projected by the Programme through 2008 (Table 1) and will remain at 2.5% on average beyond 2008. There is no clue as to how

⁴ European Commission (2005), Council Regulation (EC) No. 1055/2005, 27 June 2005, www.europa.eu.int; ECOFIN (2005), 'Improving the Implementation of the Stability and Growth Pact', ECOFIN report endorsed by the EC on 23 March 2005..

⁵ European Commission (1997), Council Regulation (EC) No. 1466/1997, 7 July 1997, www.europa.eu.int; European Commission (1997), Resolution on the Stability and Growth Pact, 17 June 1997.

⁶ Abbreviated simply as Programme in the following.

the GDP deflator will behave in the future, but the CPI may serve as a proxy. Since the central bank has been targeting an inflation rate of 2.5% it seems convenient, if not rational, to assume that inflation will be in the vicinity of this target. The latter assumption leads to the result that the nominal rate of GDP growth will be around 8.5% per year in 2009-2010. Preliminary official estimates of nominal GDP in 2005 are used as a base for calculations of the nominal GDP figures for 2006-2010.

Now the deficit-to-GDP ratio can be calculated in each year. A quick look at Table 2 will suffice to find out that the decline in the central government deficit is slow, from 3% in 2005 to 2.1% in 2010. However, this has been only a narrow deficit so far. The Maastricht criterion pertains to a broader measure of the general government deficit.

Smaller central government deficits but larger general government deficits

There are two other key elements that along with the central government deficit sum up to the general government balance. These are: the local governments' balance and pension reform costs (open pension funds). The projections of their balances relative to GDP are taken from the Programme for 2005-2008. However, the deficits of the local governments seem to be fairly low in the projections of the Ministry of Finance as evaluated against past experience. In the years 2001-2003 the local governments ran deficits of 0.4% of GDP while in 2004 they balanced their books because they accumulated funds required to pre-finance and co-finance investment projects to be financed from EU structural funds. The local governments will be reimbursed by the EU for their expenses only later. The 2005 deficit of 0.2% of GDP does not seem representative either as the use of EU funds was below expectations due to bureaucratic impediments and cumbersome procedures while a large number of projects remained in the pipeline. In this light, the government projections with regard to the local governments' deficits from 2006 onwards seem overly optimistic. One should bear

in mind that their behaviour is hard to predict due to the shock caused by the accession to the EU. Discontinuity tends to invalidate the results of any extrapolation unless the latter are very rough, but the predictions of the Programme are counter-intuitive. In the future, local governments should contract more debt than in the past as they are among the main beneficiaries of structural funds flowing in from the EU, provided that they are able to co-finance the projects. Assuming that the current efforts by the government to eliminate the administrative bottlenecks will prove efficient, local governments will substantially raise their spending and their deficits may rise even further – particularly so as Poland has been assigned much larger structural funds in the new EU budget for 2007-2013 as compared to 2004-2006. This reasoning underpins the forecast displayed in Table 2: local governments will continue to book deficits in the order of 0.4% of GDP in 2009-2010 and beyond (and this is still a conservative estimate).

Finally, the costs of the pension reform should be accounted for. These consist of two elements: the state subsidies paid to the open pension funds each year and the net income that these funds are able to achieve. The Ministry of Finance predictions from the Programme are made until 2008, while later they are kept at the 2008 level – though they should probably be slightly increased in relation to GDP in order to adjust for potential profits of the pension funds. Adding up the three items we arrive at the general government deficit prediction (Table 2).

A final adjustment has to be made before the Polish ESA-95 general government deficits will be assessed against the Maastricht criterion. According to the reform of the Stability and Growth Pact⁷ from March 2005, countries involved in pension reforms are eligible for a deduction of a diminishing part of the reform costs by 20 percentage points each year, starting from 100% in 2005 and reaching 20% in 2009. Line 9 in

⁷ European Commission (2005) and ECOFIN (2005), op.cit.

Table 2 shows the allowed adjustment in the case of Poland; the subsequent line shows the deficit adjusted for the Maastricht evaluation. It is striking that the public sector deficit continues to rise through 2010, in contrast to what the government figures project (Table 1). It never ends up below 3% except for 2005, which is the starting point and a hard fact. The rate of the central government deficit decline is really slow, 0.2-0.3% of GDP each year.

The Programme projections are different as the public sector deficit would fall from 2.9% in 2005 to 1.9% in 2008, including the open pension funds in the public sector. The government puts great emphasis in the Programme on the projected reduction of the deficit by 2 percentage points of GDP between 2004 and 2008, i.e. an average 0.5 percentage points per year. However, the reason is transparent: the Stability and Growth Pact calls for a yearly fiscal adjustment of at least 0.5% of GDP while a country is subject to the Excessive Deficit Procedure. In the case of Poland, 1 percentage point out of the 2 points occurred in 2005, and to a great extent this result was due to sheer luck. First, state budget revenues were higher than expected as employment grew faster than projected and the 2004 tax base for corporate income taxes to be paid in 2005 was high due to strong corporate performance, with GDP growth reaching 6.5% in the first half of 2004. Furthermore, the state demanded high dividend payouts from corporations in which it holds shares. Last but not least, past GDP figures back to 1994 have been consistently revised upwards by the Central Statistical Office, adjusting them for the contributions of the financial institutions. The GDP revisions helped cut the central government deficit by a cumulative 0.3% of GDP in 2004-2005. Reforms on the expenditure side were absent, nor are they planned for 2006-2008. There are some vague pledges in the Programme about rationalizing the expenditure on administration and tightening the control on public expenditure, but no specifics are given (pages 16 and 28). No wonder that despite the downward revision of the 2004 deficit by 1.6 percentage points of GDP as

compared to the 2004 Convergence Programme, this dividend is projected to disappear almost entirely by 2007 (see Table 6 of the 2005 Programme).

Closing remarks

The calculations show that Poland, by merely relying on rapid economic growth which is supposed to drive up state budget revenues, will not be able to grow out of the deficit in a way that would allow the general government deficit to meet the Maastricht criterion in the medium run. The reform of the Pact is tentatively helping the calculations but when it is phased out, the deficit jumps back. Reforms of spending would be most desirable as Poland spends relatively too much for a country of its GDP level per capita and its tax burden is also relatively high, hence raising taxes would be counterproductive to growth.

The euro adoption is put off beyond 2010 unless early elections are announced producing a change in the government's sceptical attitude towards the euro: Poland is the only new EU member state that has not declared a date of the entry into the eurozone yet. The next regular elections should be held in 2009 but a new government, provided it were to treat it as a policy priority, would not be able to adopt the euro earlier than in 2012, assuming that it would commit itself to the ERM2 entry in the first half of 2010.

Market reform zeal is likely to suffer because of the watered-down target of the euro adoption. The latter could serve as a useful anchor and could mobilize the enactment of reforms in order to enhance economic competitiveness.

Fast growth in the Baltic countries continues

BY ADALBERT KNÖBL*

In 2005, the Baltic countries were the fastest growing economies amongst all member countries of the European Union (EU). Economic growth rose particularly strongly in Latvia and Estonia, with real GDP rising by about 10% during 2005. The strong growth was the result of both buoyant foreign and domestic demand. Exports of goods rose around 30% in all three countries. However, imports also rose strongly, if somewhat less, and the external current account improved somewhat in Estonia and Latvia and was nearly unchanged in Lithuania. Private consumption was supporting rapid economic growth, as consumer confidence was boosted by declining unemployment and fast growing incomes. Under the assumption of continued global economic recovery and no further sharp rise in oil prices, strong economic growth is expected to continue in the Baltics this year and next, albeit at somewhat lower rates.

The main economic issue is price inflation in all three countries. Consumer price inflation has been pushed up by external factors (mainly energy prices), domestic administrative price increases, and rapidly growing demand. Fiscal policy did nothing to reduce demand pressures. On the contrary, in particular in Estonia and Latvia, fiscal policy was eased in the recovery, and it is unlikely that Estonia and Latvia will meet the Maastricht inflation criterion in 2006, while it will be very difficult for Lithuania to achieve this.

Estonia

Preliminary estimates suggest that real GDP rose by 9.6% in 2005, the second highest rate after the 11% growth in 1997. As noted above, growth was broad based, and despite strong domestic demand, the external current account improved a little, its

deficit reaching about 11% of GDP (see Table 1). Confidence in companies and households has reached new highs, so that economic growth is expected to remain strong in 2006 and 2007, at around 8.5% and 7.5% respectively.

Exports rose very strongly in 2005, in particular to the Eastern Baltic region (Latvia, Lithuania, Sweden, Finland, and Russia). As the economic situation in that region remains good, exports are expected to continue to expand strongly this year and next, though perhaps not quite as fast as last year. Private investment, which rose by about 10% in 2005, is also expected to continue to rise strongly, perhaps by around 7% in 2006 and 2007. Private consumption was boosted by rising employment and strong growth of real wages (about 7.5%). With consumer confidence high, this development is unlikely to change much this year and next. Along with the recovery, employment has risen. Unemployment declined even more, to 6.5% by the end of 2005, reflecting also emigration to other EU countries.

Although fiscal policy was eased somewhat last year, with spending (in particular on pension outlays) rising faster than revenue, the general government has remained in surplus, of about 1% of GDP. Although there will be presidential elections this summer and general elections next March, it is not expected that economic policies will change significantly, and the general government budget may remain in small surplus in both 2006 and 2007.

With exports remaining buoyant, and despite strong domestic demand, the current account deficit may continue to improve slightly, to perhaps 9% of GDP in 2006 and 7.5% in 2007.

The Bank of Estonia is continuing with preparations for euro adoption, but it is doubtful that the Maastricht inflation criterion can be met this year (see below). Although consumer price inflation started to decline towards the end of 2005, the decline has been slow. Inflationary expectations have also improved somewhat, and barring

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additional external price shocks, consumer price inflation should decline from some 4% in 2005 to around 3.5% in 2006 and a similar rate in 2007.

Latvia

Of the three Baltic countries, Latvia showed the fastest economic growth last year, with real GDP rising by 10.2% in 2005. Similarly to Estonia, economic growth was broad based, with foreign and domestic demand rising strongly. The leading sectors were trade, transport, and construction. Strong growth is expected to continue, with real GDP projected to rise by some 8% in 2006 and perhaps slightly less in 2007. The driving forces of growth are expected to be similar to those in 2005.

Exports of goods, which expanded by over 30% in 2005, are likely to rise by another 20% in 2006, with export growth the strongest to the new EU members (in particular Estonia, Lithuania and Poland) and the CIS. Strong domestic demand will also continue to push up imports, and the current account deficit may remain at around the level of 2005 of about 11.5%.

Unemployment has declined significantly as a result of the recovery and some labour outflow, partly a consequence of EU membership. The rate of unemployment declined from 10.4% in 2004 to 9% in 2005. A further small decline is expected this year and next.

Despite the strong recovery, the general government deficit was little changed in 2005, remaining at about 1% of GDP, implying an easing of fiscal policy. The deficit is budgeted to rise to 1.5% of GDP this year, reflecting cautious revenue projections. However, given the general elections this October a supplementary budget is likely later this year, and the deficit is unlikely to fall below government projections.

The most worrisome development last year were rising inflationary pressures, with consumer prices up 6.7% in 2005. Little improvement is expected

this year, as inflationary expectations have risen and, although inflation might ease somewhat next year, there is little hope that the Maastricht inflation criterion can be met by mid-2007.

Lithuania

Although economic expansion was somewhat less pronounced in Lithuania as compared with Latvia and Estonia, the real GDP growth of 7.5% in 2005 was still quite impressive. The driving forces of economic growth were similar to those in the other two Baltic countries, with rapid growth in exports and buoyant domestic demand, especially private consumption. Economic growth is expected to remain strong, at about 6.5% in both 2006 and 2007. With imports also rising rapidly, the external current account deficit, at 7.8% of GDP, was little changed in 2005, and is projected to remain at about this level in 2006 and 2007.

Unemployment declined significantly, from 11.4% of the labour force in 2004 to 8.2% in 2005. The rise in domestic and external employment was the reason for the strong fall in unemployment. Unemployment is projected to decline somewhat further this year and next.

Contrary to Estonia and Latvia, in Lithuania the general government deficit declined slightly along with the economic recovery, from 2.5% of GDP in 2004 to 2% in 2005. It is expected that the deficit will be kept at between 1.5% and 2% in 2006 and 2007.

Consumer price inflation remained relatively modest at 2.7% in 2005, although there was a clear upward trend during the year. Even so, Lithuania seems to be closer to meeting the Maastricht inflation criterion than the other two Baltic countries, though it remains to be seen whether price pressures can be kept sufficiently in check from now.

Adoption of the euro

All three Baltic countries are aiming at adopting the euro soon, Estonia and Lithuania at the beginning of 2007, and Latvia one year later. In the following the Maastricht criteria for euro adoption, and the current (March 2006) positions of the Baltic countries, are discussed briefly.

The most important economic criteria under observation are long-term interest rates, the budget balance and public debt, the exchange rate, and inflation.

Long-term interest rates

An applicant country should have 'over a period of one year ... an average nominal long-term interest rate that does not exceed by more than two percentage points that of, at most, the three best performing Member States in terms of price stability'. Interest rates on long-term government bonds are used for Latvia and Lithuania. As Estonia has no similar financial instrument, new kroon-denominated loans over five years are used. All three countries are meeting this criterion.

Budget balance and public debt

These criteria imply that the deficit should not exceed 3% of GDP and the ratio of government debt to GDP should be less than 60%. Again, all three countries are fulfilling these criteria. Estonia has achieved a budget surplus in recent years, and Latvia and Lithuania are likely to continue to have deficits below 3% of GDP. For all three countries, public debt levels are well below 60% of GDP.

Exchange rate

A country seeking to adopt the euro should keep its currency fluctuating within 'the normal fluctuation margins provided for by the exchange rate mechanism of the European Monetary System (ERM 2), for at least two years, without devaluing against the currency of any other Member State'. Estonia and Lithuania have been members of ERM 2 since 28 June 2004, and Latvia since 2 May

2005, so the two-year requirement still has to be met.

The criterion implies to keep the currency within a band of +/- 15% from the central parity rates set when the country joined ERM 2.

Both Estonia and Lithuania have currency boards, with fixed rates to the euro. This implies that the kroon and the litas will remain without fluctuation margins in the ERM 2. Similarly, Latvia intends to hold the lats within the previous +/- 1% fluctuation band while being in the ERM 2.

Inflation

Inflation (measured with the 12-month average harmonized index of consumer prices (HICP)) should 'not exceed by more than 1.5 percentage points that of, at most, the three best performing Member States in terms of price stability'. Negative figures are excluded as not reflecting good economic performance. In December 2005, the criterion was calculated from the figures of Finland (0.8%), Sweden (0.8%), and the Netherlands (1.5%). All three Baltic countries exceeded the limit (2.5%): Lithuania (2.7%), Estonia (4.1%) and Latvia (6.9%). Although Lithuania was close to fulfilling the criterion, on present projections all three countries should have difficulties doing so over the next 18 months.

It is questionable whether the inflation criterion is the most relevant one for judging the readiness of transition economies to adopt the euro. As Balassa, Samuelson and others have pointed out, the tendency for productivity growth to be faster in the tradables sector will result in increases in the relative price of nontradables and an appreciation of the real exchange rate. With fixed exchange rates, this implies higher inflation in the Baltics compared with the EU-15 countries. This phenomenon could also be observed in Austria in the 1970s and 80s, when Austrian inflation was consistently above German inflation, without implying a loss of competitiveness. Even so, the EU Commission has indicated that it will not waive the inflation criterion.

Table 1

Baltic countries: selected economic indicators

	2004	2005*	2006 forecast	2007 forecast
Real GDP				
change, in per cent				
Estonia	7.8	9.6	8.5	7.5
Latvia	8.5	10.2	8	7.5
Lithuania	7.0	7.5	6.5	6.5
Consumer prices				
change, in per cent				
Estonia	3.0	4.1	3.5	3.3
Latvia	6.2	6.7	6	4
Lithuania	1.2	2.7	3	3.3
Rate of unemployment				
in per cent of labour force				
Estonia	9.6	8.0	6.5	5.8
Latvia	10.4	9.1	8.5	7.5
Lithuania	11.4	8.2	7.5	6.8
Exports, goods and services				
change, in per cent				
Estonia	17.2	22.4	17	15
Latvia	21.4	30.0	20	15
Lithuania	12.0	26.0	20	15
Imports, goods and services				
change, in per cent				
Estonia	16.9	21.3	14	14
Latvia	27.0	25.8	20	14
Lithuania	14.2	23.0	22	16
Current account balance				
in per cent of GDP				
Estonia	-12.7	-11.0	-9	-7
Latvia	-12.9	-11.6	-11.5	-12
Lithuania	-7.8	-7.8	-8.3	-8.5
General government balance				
in per cent of GDP				
Estonia	1.7	0.9	0.5	0.3
Latvia	-1.1	-1.0	-1.5	-1
Lithuania	-2.5	-2.0	-1.75	-1.5

*) Partly estimated.

Source: L. Podkaminer, V. Gligorov et al., 'Strong Growth, Driven by Exports in the NMS and by Consumption in the Future EU Members', wiiw Research Reports, No. 325, February 2006; Hansabank Markets, The Baltic Outlook, February 2006; own estimates.

European society and the welfare state

BY VLADIMIR GLIGOROV

Introduction

A number of studies comparing the United States of America (USA) and the European Union (EU) look for cultural and social differences to explain why the respective approaches to social welfare are so different.¹ These comparisons are between the US government and the member states of the EU. A comparison between the federal US government and the EU would, of course, paint a different picture because the EU's budget has hardly any money for social welfare in it. In terms of social welfare, the USA is a society, as are the EU member states, but the EU itself is not.

This observation leads to the question about what might be the macro-social instruments of social construction or of the construction of a society. The question is interesting because much of the sociological thought builds up societies from their micro-foundations: from social relations, emerging institutions and cultural values.² The macro-foundations of a society are much less treated.³ The micro-sociological way of approaching the issue seems to be so entrenched that as soon as social factors are sought for, it is the notions of institutions and culture that are brought up. It may be the case, however, that macro-social factors play a much larger role in the construction of a society and that not everything is due to culture,

¹ Recent contributions include Alesina, Glaeser and Sacerdote (2005) and Benabou and Tirole (2006). The former paper relies on the network effect of a common culture while the latter on the difference in the various belief systems about what constitutes the good or rather rewarding life. There are also cultural explanations of the social and economic characteristics of post-socialist societies; most recently by Alesina and Fuchs-Schundeln (2005).

² The classic overview of the origin of sociological thought in Parsons (1937) that details this micro-social approach is probably still the best. In economics, perhaps a pioneering paper is by Becker (1973, reprinted in 1976).

³ That approach is probably to be found in political philosophy, especially in the one that builds on Thomas Hobbes.

beliefs and micro-institutions. If that is the case, that perhaps offers an explanation why the social foundations of the EU are so weak.

Trust, solidarity and society

The micro-sociological approach is perhaps most clearly visible in the concept of social capital and the associated idea of network externalities that have become very popular.⁴ An economy will perform better, as will a state, if it is embedded in a society, i.e., if it can rely on significant social capital. That capital is built from the bottom up: it springs from common values and mutual trust that increase the predictability of individual behaviour. These voluntary relations are what societies are made up of.⁵ They, if they exist and are pervasive, make it easier for states to manage involuntary social relations, such as those that use fiscal transfers to finance social welfare, i.e., solidarity among people and between generations of a society – the idea being that tax collection will be more efficient if citizens as members of a society tend to honour their obligations in their interpersonal relations and thus have a habit not to evade taxes.

These voluntary social relations as well as the state-supported social solidarity are both based on a common culture, that is on shared values, practices or habits and institutions.⁶ Those can

⁴ The concept was introduced, at least to the current discussion, by two sociologists: Bourdieu (1986) and Coleman (1988). The literature by now is huge. The intellectual father of the concept and the comparative studies between the USA and the continental European, in fact French, state and society is, probably, Tocqueville with his books on democracy in America and the *ancient regime* in France.

⁵ For purposes of theoretical clarity, it is important to distinguish the reliance on micro-social factors from the much better known difference between communities and societies that is to be found in the formative sociological literature. Trust, which keeps communities together, is the opposite of contract, which keeps societies together.

⁶ An implicit assumption, in this way of sociological thinking, is that each and every society has its own different, or rather specific, culture; this can be called one society, one culture assumption. Reliance on culture is theoretically necessary in this set-up because voluntary social relations based on interest may not deliver social cooperation, e.g., may not

differ across societies. Sociologically,⁷ institutions have three elements: shared values, rules or norms, and physical structures. An example of an institution is religion: it consists of teachings that express certain values, it has rituals and churches. The same is true of any social institution: it is instrumental in the sense of being value-oriented, it has rules or norms that are to be followed, and it has common or public places where people interact. Specific institutions distinguish cultures from each other. They have different values, norms and habitats within which social life takes place. These cultural differences separate societies and their politics and policies.

So, the basic claim of this kind of social theory is that if societies differ in the level of intra- and inter-generational solidarity, i.e., in the extent to which individual welfare depends on social welfare, that must be because they have different cultures.

In that sense, the USA is more of a society than the EU, but certainly less of a society than the EU member states. That would imply that the EU does not have a shared culture or alternatively that the member states are culturally homogeneous while the EU is not. That would explain the different approaches to social welfare provision between the USA and the EU and between the member states and the EU, as well as between the member states themselves. The difference between the EU member states and the USA would have to be the consequence of their different cultures. This explanation, however, raises the question of how different the cultures need be to lead to different social practices, as Europe and America share the same culture on most usual accounts of what a culture is. In an anthropological sense, of course, all cultures are basically the same anyway as they all serve the same set of social functions.

deliver trust among social actors. So, culture is relied on to supply the needed cooperative element of social relations.

⁷ That is within Durkheimian sociology. This approach to sociology is quite different from the one based on voluntary social interaction. Most often, however, the two are conflated, as is done here, in something that may be called folk-sociology. As already mentioned, the most influential attempt to bring the two together within a general sociological theory is in Parsons (1937).

An alternative explanation could be based on macro-social rather than micro-social factors. It may be that societies are partly created by the extent to which their members depend on each other for their welfare, i.e., that redistributions create societies. Or, simply stated, no solidarity through redistribution, no society. Or, no social welfare, no society.

In that sense, the reason that the EU is not a society is not that it does not have a shared culture – i.e., values, rules and institutions – but rather that it does not supply social welfare. Individuals in the EU do not depend on each other via the EU fiscal system. They may have common values, follow the same rules and organize their physical spaces in the same way, but they do not support each other financially, they do not depend on each other for their welfare because there is no social welfare dimension to the EU.

Welfare and social conflicts

Why are welfare states larger in the EU than in the USA?⁸ The answer is to be found in the structure of their respective welfare systems. The EU member states redistribute more for health, pensions, unemployed, education and many other public and social services. There is clearly more demand for public and social services of all kinds in the EU member states than in the USA. Individuals and households depend on each other socially for many more aspects of their welfare than in the USA. Is this difference in the levels of solidarity in these societies present because of their different cultures (or belief systems) or is it that other factors may have had a decisive influence?

One analogy may be useful to start thinking about macro-social factors of different welfare systems. A conservative central bank may be such because of the experience with inflation in the past. It seems to

⁸ Some statistical evidence can be found in Figures 1-4. It is interesting to note (see Table 1), as the example of expenditures on health illustrates, that total, i.e., public and private, spending on social welfare may be as high in the USA as in the EU states, but the share of the public part is as a rule (health is an exception) much higher in the EU states than in the USA.

be the case that episodes of hyperinflation tend to influence the attitude that a central bank takes towards price stability. Indeed, the memory may last long and one can perhaps even speak of institutional or institutionalized memory, indeed of collective representation contained in social memory. In a more general sense, history may matter via the long-term memory of social, political or economic crises. There is no doubt that the American welfare system has been mainly developed as a response to economic crises and certain social conflicts. For instance, the idea of positive discrimination is a response to racial conflicts in the USA.

If that is true, maybe the explanation for the different levels and structures of social welfare in different countries should be found in their different histories of social conflicts rather than in their different cultures. In the EU member states, be they old or new, social conflicts have played quite a significant role in about the past two centuries. Those have been of different types. Some countries have come to the brink of civil war for social rather than political reasons. Some have seen repeated attempts at revolutionary change. Also, in some cases, e.g., in former socialist Eastern Europe, revolutions have been imported and imposed from above. Finally, politics based on class-conflict has played an important role in a number of countries and is still important, as can be seen from the frequency of social conflicts, for instance in the reliance on strikes in some EU member states as well as from the importance of class-based social and political organizations such as trade unions and parties.

It may, therefore, be the case that the greater reliance on the society to secure individual welfare is the consequence of the social history of Europe rather than to be found in some cultural differences between the USA and the EU member states. Society may be a way to resolve social conflicts rather than to institutionalize shared beliefs: solidarity may be an instrument of conflict resolution and social capital may be produced through redistribution rather than on the basis of micro-social relations that depend on trust.

Bargaining procedures

This idea can be formulated in a different way in order to emphasize differences in the systems of the determination of income distribution in different countries. Wage-bargaining can be organized in a number of ways, e.g., between individual employers and employees, between unions and employers in a firm, in a sector or at the national level, or it can be done centrally, within the system of social partnership. The decentralized, or market system, mostly characterizes social histories with few and dispersed social conflicts. Various systems with an important role of the trade unions characterize countries with significant social conflicts of the traditional class-type. Finally, centralized bargaining through, for instance, social partnership may be characteristic of countries with multifaceted social conflicts, as has been argued in some studies on the political sociology of corporatism.⁹

These different types of wage-bargaining may have different consequences for the social policies that may be needed to mitigate the different types of social externalities that they may generate. A decentralized procedure may create few externalities, thus it may not trigger a need for social welfare response. Other procedures of bargaining may have large social externalities, for instance in terms of levels of employment or unemployment or in other respects that have consequences for individual welfare.¹⁰ In any case, social conflicts, current or those that happened in the past, may have consequences for the institutions of bargaining that then determine the type and level of social externalities and influence the type and amount of public intervention. That may be the way in which society is constructed. In the case of the USA, as reflected in the level and structure of federal public expenditures, the

⁹ The classic political science study is Lijphart (1977). On the consequences of the different institutions of wage-bargaining on income distribution and on social welfare provisions there is a voluminous literature. A survey can be found in Layard and Nickell (1998).

¹⁰ The costs in terms of employment and growth are those most often studied; e.g., in Prescott (2004) and Mitchell (2005).

formative conflicts were the civil war, the great depression, and racial segregation and desegregation. In the EU member states, class conflicts have played a much stronger role and have led to the greater role for the more centralized forms of bargaining and thus to the greater role for public intervention in the domain of social welfare.

The EU as a society

From the point of view of micro-sociology, there is no reason why the EU would not be a society. It is based on shared values, it has harmonized its legal systems and has recognizable, not alien, public spaces. However, it is not a welfare state, but rather an extended common market and a currency union. There are no influential initiatives to increase the redistributive role of the EU in the area of social security.¹¹ Indeed, the leading proposal for budgetary reform in the EU, the Sapir report, would cut the redistributive items in the EU budget.¹² Thus, the EU does not have direct taxing powers and does not spend money on social welfare services. As a consequence, it does not attract significant political effort on the part of its citizens; they are not investing in EU-wide political parties and do not contemplate EU-wide institutions for income distribution. It is not the case that individuals in the EU depend on each other for their welfare, at least not socially.

An interesting observation is prompted by these facts. The EU does have a significant regulatory role, though not a fiscal role. Some put the share of laws that are decisively influenced at the EU level at around 60% of the total legislative activity. If it were the case that it is the rules governing behaviour that constructed societies, the EU should be a rather strong society. This, however, is not the case. Regulation is a poor substitute for mutual financial dependence. While common rules and institutions together with common values do increase social capital, the predictability of

behaviour and public trust, they do not by themselves construct societies. Indeed, the proliferation of rules seems not to be bringing the European societies together, rather to the contrary.

Looking at the EU from the macro-social point of view, it seems clear that it is more of an answer to political conflicts, indeed to the two world wars, that it is primarily a security arrangement rather than a social construct. It also follows the liberal insight, which goes back at least to Kant, Smith and Constant, that trade is the best antidote to war. The voluntary and spontaneous institutions of civil society that emerge from trade and other business relations and the common rule and even common legal system together may support economic growth and increase public trust but not necessarily social interdependence.

To put the point differently, two ideas of social interdependence could be contrasted. The older one is that societies are created to take advantage of the division of labour. The other is that societies are systems of distribution and indeed of redistribution. It is the second one that seems to be the necessary condition for the emergence of societies. If there are no redistributions, there are no societies. This observation may be given a theoretical representation: some sociological theories rely on the cooperative theory of games while others rely on the non-cooperative theory of games. It is the latter that are constitutive of societies.

In the case of the EU, rules are relied on more than fiscal redistribution. Of course, regulation has redistributive consequences also. But those are more removed from the citizens than the outright dependence on common taxes and budget transfers. To the extent that is true, the latter will dominate the former, and as social welfare is exclusively the competence of the member states, the social bonds within member states will be stronger than within the EU.

In the case of the USA, on the other hand, welfare transfers are centralized to a very large extent and thus the USA is more of a society than the EU.

¹¹ An interesting discussion of social protection in the EU that ends with very modest proposals for a greater role of the EU can be found in Atkinson (2004).

¹² Sapir (2004). The redistributive elements are subsidies for agriculture and cohesion, ie, the lion's share of the budget.

Most of the federal budget is spent on social security and on grants to the local governments. Also, most of the federal revenues come from income taxes. Thus, citizens in the US depend on each other for their welfare through the system of taxation as well as through social transfers.¹³

The limited role of rules in the construction of societies can be extended to cover the case of indicative planning, as is for instance used in the EU's Lisbon Agenda. Suggestions, prescriptions or quantitative targets tend to be much less effective than fiscal instruments. Indicative planning in the form of quantitative targets has to compete for resources with social and other rights and needs in the member states and it is a weak incentive to change the domestic fiscal strategy.

The USA has a better record in certain areas of education and also in the development of science because, among other reasons, it relies on fiscal instruments rather than on less direct means to achieve desired policy goals. What goes for the Lisbon Agenda, goes for other initiatives especially in the area of employment, the reform of the pension system and social welfare in general.

Rights and income

The history of social conflicts, it is argued here, influences the character of a society. The narrative and social debate in both cases may be the same, as it will inevitably be about equality. The instruments will be different, however. Again, it is often argued that Americans believe in equality of rights while the Europeans are more interested in the equality of income. These differences, to the extent that they exist, may not be the consequences of the different belief systems in these two polities, but may rather be the consequences of the types of social conflicts that have been characteristic of them. Much of social history of the USA has been determined by the equal rights movements, as the equality of rights across races especially has been the main social problem. The great depression has added the

concern for the fate of the disadvantaged – poor and old – and the two have shaped the redistributive system and the role of the federal state in it.

In Europe, the distribution of income has been the dominant issue. That has led to the greater role assigned to the notion of social justice. This has been the consequence and not the cause of the types of social conflicts that have been important in Europe. For the same reason, the belief in social justice has been the consequence not the cause of the social conflicts. The process of nation building has also played a role. Social justice and the responsibility for social welfare has been a vehicle of nation building. Finally, in both world wars there were strong elements of civil war and social strife and not only of inter-state war and thus the wars may be seen as instances of social conflicts as well as military conflicts. This has also influenced the increase of the welfare state that was strong after both world wars. Thus, it is the reliance on income redistribution that has been the main glue for nation building and for the construction of societies in the EU.

That may be the key difference between the USA and Europe. In the USA it is the equality of rights that influences income distribution, in Europe it is the equality or just distribution of income that has consequences for rights. Given that the EU relies on regulation rather than on redistribution, it represents an element of the Americanization of Europe that has failed to create a society so far, because it regulates rights with no or little direct effects on income distribution.

Rights and votes

The same reasoning may explain the deepening and widening of democracy. Initially, it emerges through a political conflict over rights, perhaps especially over ownership rights, but then increasingly over protection of rights in general. It spreads through social conflicts that tend to be over other issues of distribution and redistribution. In the case of constitutional democracies such as the USA, rights trump votes or there is at least a

¹³ On that see Laubach (2005).

tension between the two. In the EU democracies, votes and other types of social influence trump rights. The recent attempt to adopt an EU constitution failed partly because it would have pushed towards the emergence of constitutional democracy. This is not necessarily acceptable because rights may take an upper hand over votes while democratization has a long way to go in the EU given that the political interest in the EU is very low: there is not so much to vote for in the EU, its budget being very small and mostly pre-committed anyway.

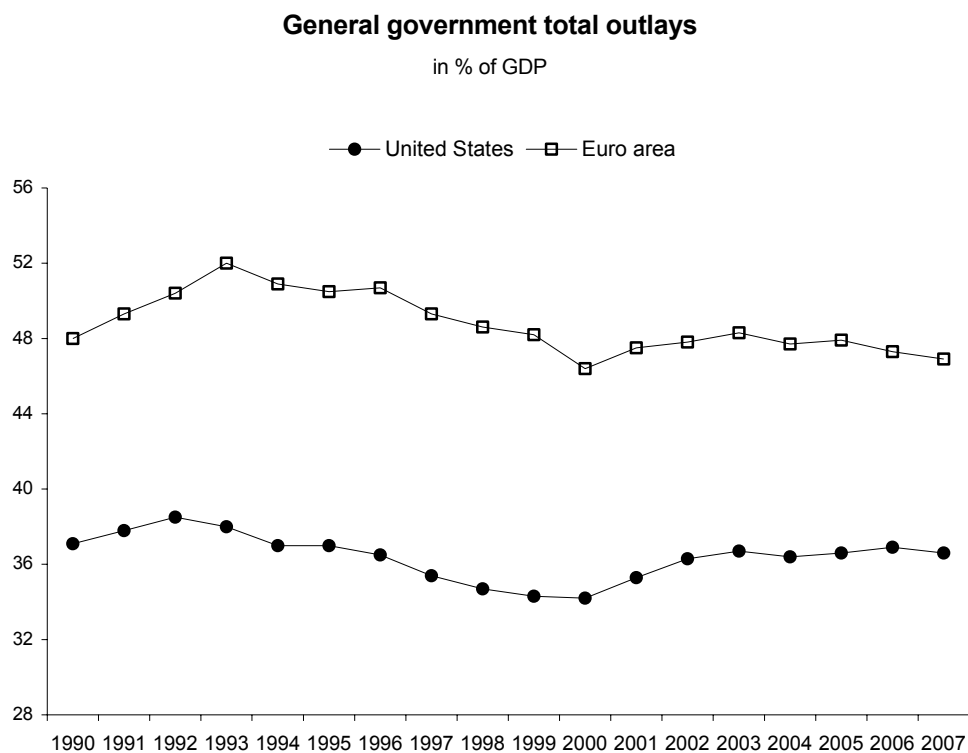
Conclusion

It is hard to expect that the EU will strengthen as a society without playing a greater role in income distribution and redistribution, i.e., without a larger EU role in supplying social welfare. Rules and regulations are not the proper substitute for that. Some have argued that increased globalization will lead to EU-wide effects on income distribution and thus to increased redistribution via the EU budget. A proposal to create a fund to compensate those that are losing out in the global competition goes in that direction. Similarly, ideas to supplement the indicative planning of the Lisbon Agenda with EU funds for education and research go in the same direction. The alternative is to increase protectionism on the national level. Inward migration may have a similar effect, i.e., it may either lead to an EU role in wage-bargaining and unemployment benefits or it may lead to protectionist regulation. Thus, conflicts over income distribution due to structural changes may lead to an increased demand for EU-wide solidarity and thus for the transfer of some responsibilities for social welfare to the EU, which would increase EU-wide solidarity and be constructive of EU society. In any case, it will be the ability of the EU to offer solutions to social conflicts over income distribution that may support an increase of its taxing and spending powers and thus of an increased interdependence of its citizens in different countries for their welfare.

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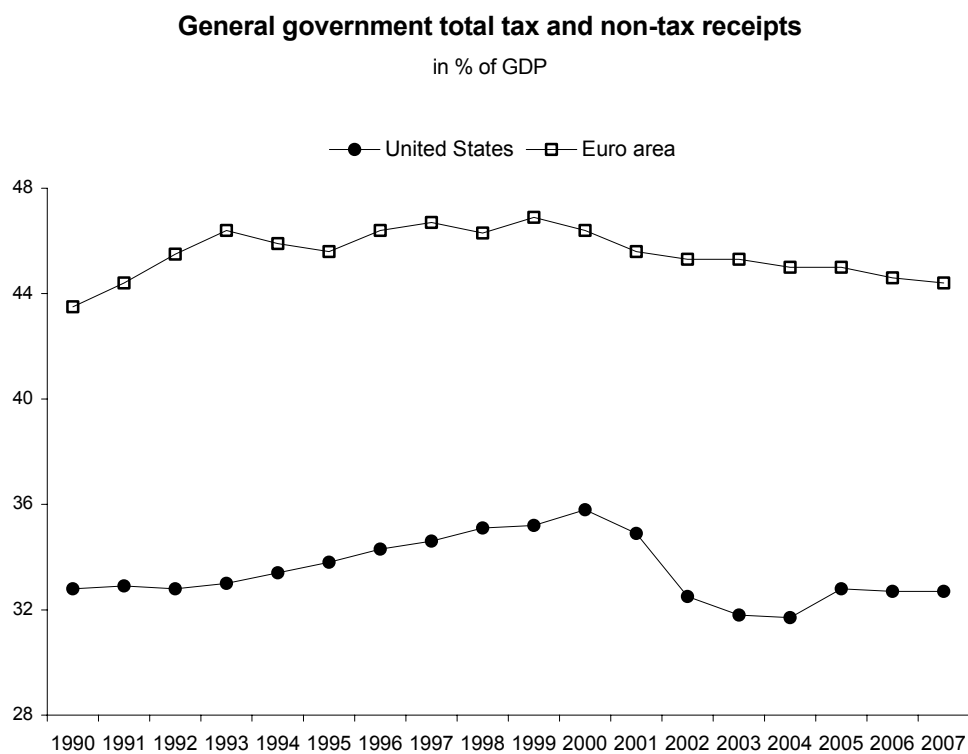
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Figure 1



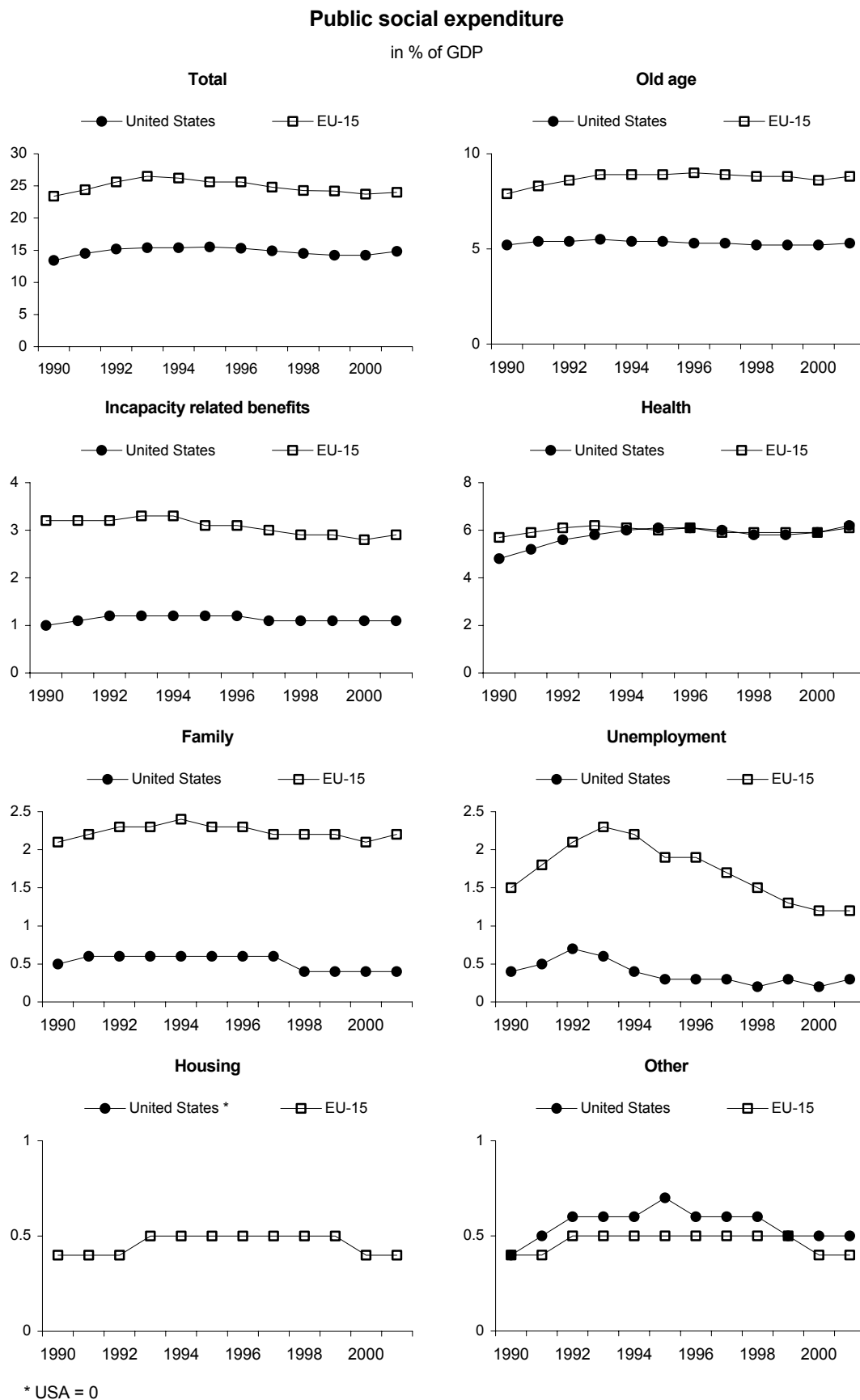
Source: OECD Economic Outlook 78 database.

Figure 2



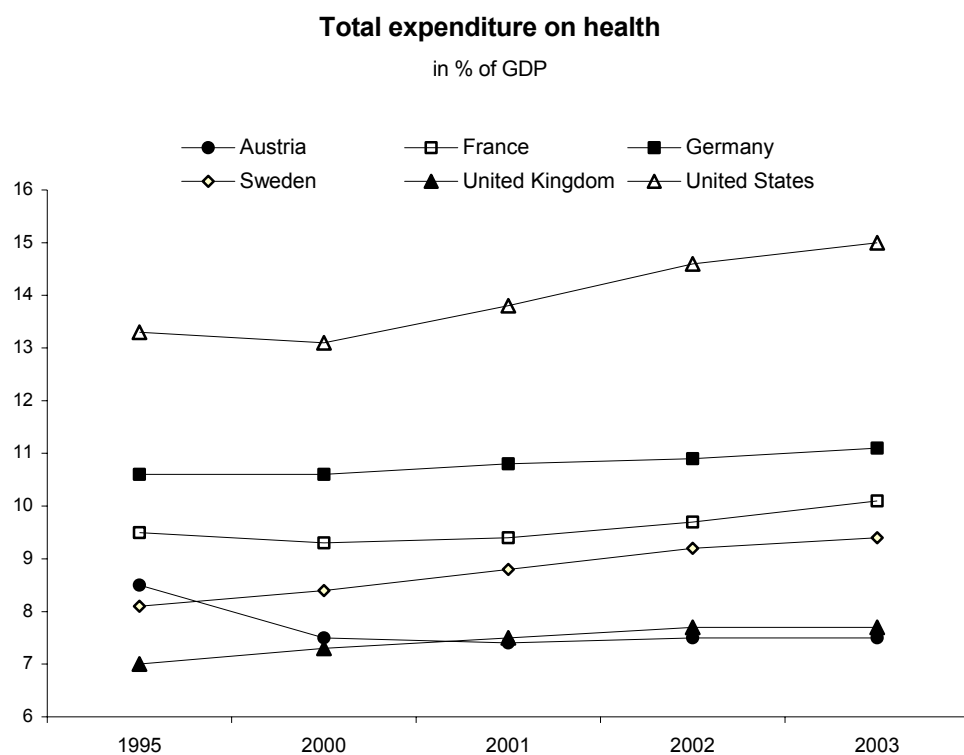
Source: OECD Economic Outlook 78 database.

Figure 3



Source: OECD (2004), Social Expenditure Database.

Figure 4



Source and methods per country: www.irdes.fr/ecosante/OCDE/500.html.

Table 1

Composition of total social expenditures in 2001 (% of GDP)

	United States			Western Europe*		
	Public	Private	Total	Public	Private	Total
Cash transfers	7.9	4.3	12.2	14.2	1.8	16
Pensions	6.1	3.8	9.9	8.5	1	9.5
Human services	11.9	7.2	19.1	15.1	0.9	16
Health	6.2	5	11.1	6.4	0.4	6.8
Education	5.1	2.3	7.3	5.4	0.4	5.8
Active labour market programmes	0.1		0.1	0.9		0.9
Total social expenditure	19.8	11.6	31.3	29.3	2.7	32

* Unweighted averages have been calculated for Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom.

Note that the figures for private health spending only cover private insurance programmes and exclude individual private health costs.

Source: OECD.

Conventional signs and abbreviations

used in the following section on monthly statistical data

.	data not available
%	per cent
CMPY	change in % against corresponding month of previous year
CCPY	change in % against cumulated corresponding period of previous year (e.g., under the heading 'March': January-March of the current year against January-March of the preceding year)
3MMA	3-month moving average, change in % against previous year.
CPI	consumer price index
PM	change in % against previous month
PPI	producer price index
p.a.	per annum
mn	million
bn	billion
BGN	Bulgarian lev (1 BGN = 1000 BGL)
CZK	Czech koruna
EUR	Euro, from 1 January 1999
HRK	Croatian kuna
HUF	Hungarian forint
PLN	Polish zloty
RON	Romanian leu (1RON = 10000 ROL)
RUB	Russian rouble (1 RUB = 1000 RUR)
SIT	Slovenian tolar
SKK	Slovak koruna
UAH	Ukrainian hryvnia
USD	US dollar
M0	currency outside banks
M1	M0 + demand deposits
M2	M1 + quasi-money

Sources of statistical data:

National statistical offices and central banks; wiiw estimates.

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