



Eurogroup
The President

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To the members of the Eurogroup

Subject: Eurogroup of 20 March 2017

Dear colleagues,

I would like to share with you the main content and course of our discussions at the Eurogroup meeting of 20 March in Brussels. Our meeting was attended by Commissioner Pierre Moscovici, ECB's Executive Board Member Benoît Coeuré and ESM Managing Director Klaus Regling. We were also joined by Poul Thomsen, Director of the IMF's European Department, for the discussion on Greece.

1. Greece – State of play

We were debriefed by the institutions and the Greek authorities on the state of play of the second review, following the recent mission to Athens. Progress has been made on a balanced fiscal package, both for the programme and the post-programme period and a number of key reforms, notably in the financial sector to deal with the high level of Non-Performing Loans. The Greek authorities remain committed to progress swiftly towards a successful conclusion of the review on the basis of the agreement reached at the last Eurogroup.

It was concluded that talks between the Greek authorities and the institutions will intensify in the coming days in Brussels, at the appropriate level, focusing on the key outstanding issues and in order to find an agreement on the policy package as soon as possible.

2. Annual ex-ante reporting on issuance plans

We took note of the third annual ex-ante reporting on issuance plans, which helps foster better coordination in the planning of national debt issuance by euro area Member States. We concluded that in the future reporting to the Eurogroup on ex-ante issuance plans will be done in general in writing and will be included on the agenda only if there are sensitive issues to be discussed.

3. SGP implementation for euro area Member States and DBP follow-up

We followed-up on the implementation of draft budgetary plans and the commitments contained in our Eurogroup statements of 5 December 2016 and of 26 January 2017. According to the Commission assessment, the projected deficit level and the economic performance in the euro area is largely unchanged since the previous assessment, reflecting inter alia the absence of significant deficit-reducing measures; a number of Member States were still found to be at risk of non-compliance with the requirements of the Stability and Growth Pact. Several ministers announced that additional measures were being prepared. We will follow-up again when the 2016 out-turn data and the Commission spring forecasts are available.

We also discussed the DBP process and value of the peer review within the Eurogroup. Several Ministers stressed the usefulness of the DBP process. Others underlined the importance of sound data and analysis for the conduct of fiscal policy over the economic cycle. Still others expressed the view that the surveillance exercise should be reinvigorated as an effective surveillance tool. We agreed that we should continue to ensure that our processes provide support to achieving the objective of ensuring public finance sustainability in the euro area. Against this background we concluded to continue work to further enhance the efficiency of the DBP process and improve the commonly agreed methodology for calculating output gaps.

4. Thematic discussion on growth and jobs – Pensions (benchmarking)

In the context of our regular thematic discussion on growth and jobs, we exchanged views on benchmarking pension sustainability. Ensuring that pension systems are fiscally sustainable, while at the same time safeguarding the adequacy of old-age incomes, is a major policy priority notably in view of the challenge posed by population ageing.

The Commission put forward a framework for benchmarking based on policy and performance indicators to provide further support and stimulus to Member States' reforms in this area. We welcomed and broadly agreed with the Commission's analysis.

Based on the principles agreed on in June 2016, we agreed on a framework for benchmarking the sustainability of Member States' pension systems against the best performers of the euro area every three years, starting in 2018. We will rely mainly on two key fiscal sustainability indicators but will also draw on a few flanking indicators that will help to provide a comprehensive and balanced view, taking due account of country specificities. The benchmarking exercise will take place within the context of existing process and surveillance mechanisms, in particular the Ageing Report. We endorsed a Eurogroup statement (see annex) to communicate the outcome of our discussions.

Yours sincerely,

Jeroen DIJSSELBLOEM

Annex I

Eurogroup statement

Structural reform agenda - thematic discussions on growth and jobs: *benchmarking pension sustainability*

Following our agreement in June 2016 on common principles guiding euro area Member States' reforms to strengthen pension sustainability, the Eurogroup has discussed benchmarking as a tool to provide further support and impetus to reforms in this area, so as to foster the fiscal sustainability of pension systems and economic convergence.

The Eurogroup recalls that in times of high public debt, the importance of pension sustainability from a financial, economic and social point of view renders developments in this field a matter of common concern in the euro area. The Eurogroup considers that significant progress has been achieved in improving pension sustainability in the euro area. However, it also acknowledges that considerable risks remain in many Member States and that further policy action is needed. Against this background, the Eurogroup considers benchmarking to be a useful tool for highlighting the possible need and scope for further reform in this field.

Today the Eurogroup has agreed to benchmark the fiscal sustainability of euro area Member States' pension systems against the best performers of the euro area according to the indicators presented in the table below. Such benchmarking will rely as a matter of priority on two commonly agreed indicators measuring the gap to a sustainable fiscal position, including the impact of pension spending. These benchmarks are measurable and under the control of policy makers. In order to have a comprehensive and balanced view, they will be complemented by the following flanking indicators: the comparative level and evolution of the legal and effective retirement age, the coverage ratio and the pension benefit ratio.

While acknowledging the competences and the work carried out by other Council formations, in particular EPSCO, the Eurogroup will conduct every three years starting in 2018 this benchmarking exercise within the context of existing processes and surveillance mechanisms, in particular the Ageing Reports and the assessment of the Stability Programmes.

As the key features of pension systems interact with labour market institutions and social safety nets, the approach needs to be comprehensive. Pension sustainability also needs to be examined in its full country-specific policy context, including the existence of automatic adjustment mechanisms. The resilience of pension systems to adverse macroeconomic and demographic prospects and their social adequacy should also be taken into account in the overall benchmarking exercise, in line with the common principles adopted in June 2016.

Table: List of indicators for the pension sustainability benchmarking exercise of the Eurogroup

<p>Key fiscal sustainability indicators</p> <p><i>The S1 and S2 indicators provide the backdrop to the benchmarking exercise. They are used in annual multilateral surveillance of fiscal sustainability under the Stability and Growth Pact and are based inter alia on the projections in the Ageing Report jointly prepared by the European Commission and the Economic Policy Committee. They measure medium-term and long-term fiscal sustainability risks, respectively. They are influenced by a number of parameters and technical assumptions. Hence they should be accompanied by an economic reading.</i></p>
<p>S1 with a focus on the contribution of pension expenditure</p> <p>The S1 indicator shows the upfront adjustment effort required, in terms of a cumulated improvement in the structural primary balance over 5 years (starting from the year after the forecasts, currently 2019), and then sustained for 15 years (currently 2031) to bring debt ratios back to 60% of GDP, including financing for any additional expenditure arising from an ageing population. Explicitly focussing on the contribution from pension expenditure allows identifying the extent to which it contributes significantly to the fiscal gap over the projection horizon.</p> <p><i>Sources:</i> Commission services, 2015 Ageing Report, 2015 Fiscal Sustainability Report, Commission forecasts.</p>
<p>S2 with a focus on the contribution of pension expenditure</p> <p>The S2 indicator shows the adjustment to the current structural primary balance required to fulfil the infinite horizon inter-temporal budget constraint, including paying for any additional expenditure arising from an ageing population. Explicitly focussing on the contribution from pension expenditure allows identifying the extent to which it contributes significantly to the fiscal gap over the projection horizon.</p> <p><i>Sources:</i> Commission services, 2015 Ageing Report, 2015 Fiscal Sustainability Report, Commission forecasts.</p>
<p>Flanking indicators</p> <p><i>The flanking indicators are intended to complement the key indicators for a more comprehensive assessment of pension systems in individual euro area Member States, taking account of country-specific situations. They should also be accompanied by an economic reading.</i></p>
<p>Comparative level and evolution of legal and effective retirement age</p> <p>The legal retirement age measures the age, by gender, for taking up a standard pension according to current legislation in place.</p> <p><i>Sources:</i> Commission services, 2015 Ageing Report.</p> <p>As a proxy for the effective retirement age, the average age at which people, by gender, leave the labour force in the age group 51-74 is chosen. When available for all euro area countries administrative data for taking up a pension will be used.</p> <p><i>Sources:</i> Commission services, 2015 Ageing Report, Information provided by Member States.</p>
<p>Coverage ratio, level and evolution</p> <p>The indicator shows the ratio of pensioners relative to persons aged 65 or more.</p> <p><i>Sources:</i> Commission services, 2015 Ageing Report.</p>
<p>Pension benefit ratio, level and evolution</p> <p>The indicator measures the average pension (public and where relevant and available private) in relation to the average wage. A high value suggests a relatively generous system, while a low value indicates the opposite.</p> <p><i>Sources:</i> Commission services, 2015 Ageing Report.</p>

