

# THE FINANCIAL AND ECONOMIC CRISES: A THREAT TO THE SOCIAL MARKET ECONOMY?

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Both the financial crisis and the Social Market Economy are the subject of countless articles in the press, speeches and essays. The Konrad Adenauer Stiftung also hopes to shed some light on the matter with its recent publications and conferences. This paper draws on this motive and creates a link between the two topics – the financial crisis and the Social Market Economy – in an effort to answer the key questions of today, namely: Do the financial and economic crises pose a threat for the Social Market Economy? And, what conclusions can be drawn?

Without wanting to forestall a more sophisticated answer, one thing can be said with certainty: the German economic system (popularly described as the “Social Market Economy”) together with the financial and economic policies of the Federal Government are now facing enormous challenges. Challenges, which will characterize the next legislative period. These are predominantly the result of an unusually deep recession, in which the global economy found itself during the spring of 2009 and from which it is now gradually recovering, and the need for reform for individual political

areas (e.g. fiscal or social security system). If the important early economic indicators are to be believed, then the economic downturn has now been overcome; however, academics cannot agree about the forthcoming recovery scenario. Quite apart from whether the economic recovery will turn out to have a W, V or U shape, there are certain observations, which can be made now. The main assumption is that there is a need to overhaul the financial markets, so as to ensure that money and capital once again play a helpful role for human beings.

## **2. CAUSES AND FISCAL IMPACT OF THE FINANCIAL CRISIS**

The scale of the current crisis is due to the co-occurrence of several factors: The financial crisis, an economic downturn and an international structural crisis in certain markets (e.g. the automotive industry and suppliers, who have to reduce surplus capacities) – three economic phenomena which feed off each other.

Significant macroeconomic imbalances, inefficient regulatory structures and flawed incentive mechanisms in the banking system have been identified as the starting point for the banking, or rather financial crisis, as has failed American social and monetary policy, which encouraged a real estate bubble and, ultimately, led to this bursting. This caused several financial institutions, which were linked to each other, to get into difficulty and culminated in the collapse of the investment bank, Lehman Brothers, on September 15, 2008. As a result of this unexpected shock, the inter-bank market came to a near standstill. The consequence of this was that the cost of borrowing soared, lending was reduced, markets were compartmentalized and there was a huge loss of confidence about the fate of the economy (evident from the stock market crashes). In turn, this led to massive economic problems, which placed the greatest strain yet on the Eurozone; and tensions continue to grow within the single currency area. The effects of the financial and economic crises are being compounded in countries such as Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain due to certain economic failures. In the past, these countries all lived beyond their means, which aggravated their individual problems during the crisis and made wage and price adjustments in the real economy a necessity.

Citizens and businesses alike have experienced firsthand how interconnected economies – which, without a doubt, are advantageous for Germany – can also transfer shocks throughout the system. When the world economy slows down as the result of a shock, then the (former) leading export nation is subject to the full force of the situation. Economists are referring to an “imported recession” in the case of the current crisis, which, of course, affects growth and employment. That is precisely why the new Federal Government must show a keen interest in coming to terms with the crisis and in improving international regulation. However, contractions in an economy based on the division of labour are not distributed symmetrically: Some sectors, mainly regional ones such as the capital goods industry, have been hit much harder than others. This confusion in certain sectors can be explained because the crisis has not reached them yet. Only when the situation becomes wholly apparent, with wage cuts, short time or unemployment, will many people fully appreciate the extent of the dislocation. From a macroeconomic perspective, these dislocations are undeniably large, which is why industrialized nations strove to cushion the drop in demand through concerted efforts.

### 3. EFFECTS ON THE “REAL ECONOMY”

In spite of these measures, the Federal Government expects GDP to fall this year by 5.0 per cent in real terms. The Federal Statistics Office published figures in May 2009 that showed that economic output had fallen by 3.8 per cent in the first quarter (in the second quarter, the economy grew slightly by 0.3 per cent). Never before has there been such a sharp decline in the Federal Republic’s sixty year history. As a consequence, there is an increasing number of insolvencies and a rise in the average annual number of unemployed people, a delayed indicator for the state of the “real economy”. The Institute for Employment Research (for: *Institut für Arbeitsmarkt- und Berufsforschung, IAB*) calculated the average number of unemployed people to be 3.5 million in 2009. The average annual figure for 2010 is expected to reach 4.1 million.<sup>1</sup>

Of course, the worsened conditions also impact on the public purse. On the income side, the results of the May tax estimate for 2009 to 2012 show a reduction in tax receipts of 316 million Euros (nevertheless, forecasts show that this year will see the third highest tax revenues ever – only in 2007 and 2008 were higher tax revenues collected). Around

two-thirds of the losses are linked to the worsened overall economic situation; the remaining third is due to fiscal reform.

The erosion of income, as well as additional burdens on the expenditure side (such as employment and economic stimulus packages) will shape the national finances over the coming years. It is already clear that the deficits expected for 2009 and 2010 will exceed those seen after reunification. Adhering to the European Growth and Stability Pact has faded in importance, since redressing the structural deficit is not something that can be achieved quickly. The fact that this task must be made a priority for the coming legislative period arises from the debt brake stipulation rooted in the constitution.

#### **4. CHALLENGES FOR GERMAN ECONOMIC POLICY**

Talk of “economically challenging times” seems well founded; they are challenging because we face the worst economic crisis since the great depression of the 1930s and we do not have a regulatory “formula for success”. Furthermore, the current crisis is more complex, on a more global scale and more synchronous than the one of 80 years ago. However – and this is the crucial difference – central banks have reacted more prudently, today. The mistake the central banks made then of reducing the money supply has not been repeated. In addition, the times are challenging because social insecurity – evident in the decline in approval for the Social Market Economy – coincides with the “triumphant shouts” of left-wing populism, a group that has always been skeptical towards the market economy and an open society. One could almost say that state interventionists’ elation knows no bounds during this economic crisis. One does not have to listen to all the gloom about the disaster that has befallen the market economy and the end of liberalism. One can quite simply refer to the economist Joseph Schumpeter, who once wrote: “Capitalism stands its trial before judges who have the death sentence in their pockets.”<sup>2</sup>

However, the nascent criticism of the “market” misses the fact that the events we have witnessed are the product of human action. “The” market is not an autonomous entity, rather a guidance mechanism for the action of countless human beings within a regulatory framework. The state willingly carries the responsibility for this framework, for economic rulemaking and for the results – be they positive or negative – of

the market. Against this backdrop, it is unfair to lay the blame for the economic and financial crises at the foot of the market economy and its proponents alone. It is even less justified to accuse so-called ordoliberals (from the Latin *ordo*, meaning order), such as Walter Eucken, who have always seen the state as playing a constructive role. Who were these ordoliberals?

## **5. TAKING THE PRINCIPLES OF A SOCIAL MARKET ECONOMY SERIOUSLY**

Seeing as it would be sensible to consider the writings of the master-minds of the Social Market Economy, so as to deal with the current global economic crisis, we should start by looking at the Freiburg School. A year after the banking crisis of 1931, at the nadir of the global crisis, the ordoliberals pleaded for “a strong state, a state above the economy” to oppose the “swamp of capitalism”.<sup>3</sup>

Even then, the role of the state was, therefore, not only to exist in guaranteeing property rights and security, but should first and foremost create a new economic order through the constituent and regulating principles of competition, i.e. the market: “This seems to be one of the most important points where the state must intervene, so as to implement market rules and to overcome the frictions which prevent these rules from being fulfilled.”<sup>4</sup>

Back then it was nothing more than a rehashing of liberalism: In the 1930s, the ordoliberalists pointed out that the market did not generate order from itself, as classical liberalism would have it. The state, as the ultimate guarantor of economic order, plays a particular role. Over the past few years, politicians and certain market agents seemed to lose sight of the state's priority towards the economy – as required by the pioneers of the Social Market Economy – namely, the maintenance of a clearly regulated and structured market economy. Accordingly, state and market failure went hand in hand.

Remember, the central tenet of the Freiburg School was a free market economy with a functioning price system. Private property, contractual freedom, as well as clearly defined, secure property rights are prerequisites for allowing human beings to act freely and responsibly. At the same time – and this is important – the state must give the market a

framework and follow certain principles. Walter Eucken summed up the fundamentals of this in his paper – which still rings true today – entitled *Grundsätze der Wirtschaftspolitik (Principles of Economic Policy)*<sup>e</sup>:

- It is crucial to protect competitiveness; companies tend to inhibit competition, through acquisitions or price-fixing, for example. Therefore, the state must guard against monopolies or cartels and keep markets open for potential competitors to enter. Only competition's "whip" can produce cost efficiencies and the pressure to innovate.
- Furthermore, there must be clear rules on liability, so as to ensure that an aggrieved party is not lumbered with the cost it has incurred and that actors do not take excessive risks.
- The central bank must ensure sufficient monetary stability, in order to prevent the pricing system from sending out distorted signals and triggering bad investments.
- So as to improve long-term planning, economic policy should be geared towards reliability, consistency and predictability.

If one goes against these principles, which represent the central points of the Social Market Economy, then it supports the following conclusion: Today's financial and economic crises are not proof that the Social Market Economy has failed. Rather, they emphasize the validity and the essential value of its universal principles, such as monetary stability, liability, scale, powerful competition and the renouncement of partial interests.

In reality, the observed market exaggerations were direct consequences of misguided policies in the past. People went against the regulatory principles of the Social Market Economy. In the USA, attempts were made to finance the economy on the basis of low interest rates and private debt was encouraged by the state. This was one cause for the enormous monetary escalation. If money and goods are misaligned, then stable prices are jeopardized. Although it did not result in excessive inflation in the USA, this immense liquidity did contribute to the growth of a real estate bubble. Furthermore, several banks rid themselves of their risks of loan defaults and, consequently, their liability for particular business by bundling up ("securitizing") their mortgage lending and selling these on the markets to other banks, financial institutions or private investors (without being forced to retain co-liability by regulators). The direct lender-borrower relationship was abandoned in favor of an anonymous, opaque liability structure, which proved to be unsus-

tainable in the end. In addition, the concentration process in the banking sector – which was of global proportions and continued with almost no regulation – lead to the problem of institutions being “too big to fail”. Furthermore, blatant misincentives amongst ratings agencies and weaknesses in international accounting rules became apparent.

## 6. WHAT LESSONS CAN BE LEARNED FROM THE CRISIS?

In partial answer to this question, one can say that the financial crisis has not jeopardized the idea – “idea” being the key word – of the Social Market Economy. Rather it has served to emphasize its key elements! However, and this is the main lesson to be drawn from the crisis, the state – both in America and in Germany – failed to take the idea seriously enough and to deal with the correct regulatory issues (e.g. effective financial market regulation), instead, getting bogged down in the details of particular policy areas.

Now, there is the real danger that the state – motivated and ideologically fired up by the current crisis – will continue down this interventionist route and place freedom and prosperity at risk further down the line. The distorting competitive impact of the car scrappage scheme, which the Grand Coalition introduced, is a good example. Any ordopolitician will be unnerved by statements, such as those in § 3 Paragraph 1 of the amended *Financial Market Stabilization Act*: “The Federal Finance Ministry is responsible for carrying out expropriation procedures”<sup>6</sup> – particularly since the act was only designed to deal with the case of the Hypo Real Estate Bank.

And so we cannot be accused of misinterpretation, it was necessary in those exceptional circumstances, which now seem to have been overcome, to protect the financial markets from collapse using the special financial market stability fund. The economic stimulus packages – as the second measure – should not be dismissed per se: On the one hand because of the limited effectiveness of monetary policy and, on the other, to ensure stability of economic expectations. This approach involved the slow-acting economic stimulus packages I and II, the total volume of which was around 80 million Euros. However, the main point is – and this is the challenge for the coming legislative period – not to lose sight of regulatory principles completely and to redress the balance between the state and the market.

As a result, the regulatory test is yet to come, where state interventions – which, in the case of market failure, are also an integral part of the Social Market Economy – must be aligned with market principles and the withdrawal of the state from the economy must be cleverly achieved.

It seems presumptuous to derive the basic need for comprehensive Keynesian measures, i.e. higher, debt-financed state expenditure or new economic stimulus packages, from state emergency aid and to hazard further economic intervention. Especially in light of the exorbitantly high levels of state debt – in the region of 1.6 billion Euros (this does not take into account implicit promises by the state), which limits future leeway for policymaking. And irrespective of the debt problem, the state cannot control the extent of its interference in economic activity or act in time, as history has shown. Furthermore, households and companies react – sometimes in an undesirable way – to state intervention (e.g. drop in consumer demand/investment). Therefore, the influence of economic policy on economic development is, and remains, limited.

In addition, the state's contribution to the global crisis cannot be ignored. After all, it was the US central bank that promoted national, as well as global, economic growth thanks to its policy of low interest rates, and, therefore, paved the way for the overheating of the US economy. "Market failure", which is so often mentioned, must be seen in conjunction with the potential "failure of the state".

It is important that the new Federal Government remains committed to an economic regulatory policy, which sees and treats the economic stimulus program as a solution to a very particular exceptional situation. This is distinguished by the fact that normal market forces also negatively affect those companies, which may necessarily be healthy, but are capable of surviving. And these may end up fighting for their existence as a result of this special form of crisis – a situation, which it was, and is, not possible to rule out in the current crisis. This viewpoint, namely regulation and liberal interventionism, is concordant with the pragmatic variant form of economic policy, which Ludwig Erhard implemented with the Social Market Economy.

Nowadays, unfortunately, Ludwig Erhard's Social Market Economy is equally culpable for the excesses of the global economy due to kin liability. There is a great difficulty when the two are equated – some-



thing, which is unreflective but not unpopular; this could even be called the “original challenge” for convinced followers of the Social Market Economy. From an economic perspective, one must differentiate between the idea of the original creators, Alfred Müller-Armack and Ludwig Erhard, and the partially implemented version. For, right from the start, whole sectors of the economy (e.g. agriculture, energy, transport or housing) were excluded from the force of competition, the “core” of the Social Market Economy. This shows that the constitutional economic reality of the Federal Republic never represented the “true” form of the Social Market Economy.

However, these observations fall on deaf ears: Blanket criticism of capitalism is en vogue and the system has been unexpectedly called into question again. The reason for both phenomena is that there has been an accelerated loss of confidence in our economic system and this is embedded in a particular liberal model of society. At the same time, people have forgotten or suppressed the fact that other economic systems are not free from scandal and social problems. There have been countless surveys which have shown - even before the financial crisis started - a loss in confidence. They also claim, indirectly, that the Social Market Economy, taken to mean the economic order that was established after the Second World War, has increasingly lacked social cohesive force.

## **7. STRENGTHENING THE SOCIAL COHESION OF THE SOCIAL MARKET ECONOMY**

All responsible actors must interpret the signals linked to this erosion in confidence, and question why the German model has seemingly lost its integration force and its ability for people to identify with it over the past sixty years. The last economic boom (2005 to 2007) may provide an answer to this question.

What might sound paradoxical, is, in fact, statistically proven: By no means all of the population benefited from the last economic boom in Germany. The linear relationship between growth and personal wealth, between corporate success and individual welfare, which had been valid for years, was broken for many people, especially those in employment. As a result, doubt was cast on life security and certainty; the fear of decline now reaches deep into the heart of society. Social problems, such as selective education, increased risk of pension poverty or unstable

employment must also be considered. However, these cannot be solved if market mechanisms are ignored or the “power of the market” is only affirmed from one side.

The impression that increased corporate profits cannot secure individual job security and that mass unemployment can stimulate the stock market creates distrust in a market economy and strengthens calls to abandon the Social Market Economy. Irresponsible action by senior executives in the wake of the financial crises increases the pace of this. Recently, Wolfgang Schäuble spoke of the “grave diggers of the Social Market Economy”.<sup>7</sup>

A second partial answer to this question can also be seen in the issue that the financial crisis erodes confidence in the economic order, which is commonly described as the Social Market Economy, because its central claim, namely “prosperity for all”, has now been called into question. It is of utmost importance to overcome this mistrust for the sake of future opportunities in the economy, for the political climate within the Republic and for the success of the new Federal Government.

If one intends to defend a proven, successful economic system, one must face up to its downsides and, at the same time, name “external” challenges, which must be overcome. Thus, there is now a double dilemma: Whilst acceptance of the German economic model is being undermined and certain individuals are trying to discredit it “from within”, the Social Market Economy must stand up to global competition amongst the different economic ideologies.

This is only possible if politicians push the guiding principles of the Social Market Economy on the international stage. This must include the much called for “state retreat” – in spite of the conspicuous difficulties in regulation. Finally, a national model for economic order, such as the Social Market Economy, hits a brick wall if other countries do not feel bound by its competitive principles.

If one were able to see other images of humanity and foreign state understanding with sufficient liberality and distance, then, in a world of free trade, national economic systems would not be subject to disruption. Sport provides a good allegory: If a referee does not insist that players observe the same rules, then play turns rough. A game has begun on a

global scale, without a competent referee having been chosen. The consequences of the current crisis are clear in terms of the financial markets. One must not forget, however, the commodity markets, the current infringements of property rights, environmental problems, child labour or external foreign economic inequalities. Even these phenomena are the product of a global regulatory vacuum and distort fair competition between companies.

In reality, everything that seems important to a citizen in the Federal Republic, for example a social framework for employment or individual performance and its place within the competition system guaranteed by the state, is often ridiculed on an international level. If one takes the ordoliberal approaches of key thinkers, such as Walter Eucken, Wilhelm Röpke, Alfred Müller-Armack or Ludwig Erhard, these points constitute the Social Market Economy and must be strengthened internationally. Wealth with values – which is not just defined in quantitative terms – is the aim. Even, or especially in a globalized world.

The opportunities for global economic and social reform are certainly there. On the one hand, the Americans and the British are questioning their economic models as a result of the crisis - that makes it easier to achieve international consensus. On the other hand, the *Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung* has seen an increased interest in the Social Market Economy. Particularly young democracies or governments in peril are prepared to enter into a discussion about regulation. Furthermore, the importance of constitutive and regulatory principles for a functioning global economic system in the wake of the financial crisis is also visible on an international level. Germany's experiences legitimize the case for strengthening these principles in and throughout Europe (EU). What is true for the individual nation state is also important for the global economic community and centers around the core requirement of ordoliberalism: "Freedom needs order".

## 8. OUTLOOK

At this point, we might venture a few comments about the road ahead. Presumably, the financial markets will become more transparent after the crisis; bank managers will receive more appropriate salaries and bank regulation will be reformed. The decisions of the G20 summit in Pittsburgh in 2009 do go some way towards this, even if they have not

been implemented in national law yet. However, even complete implementation would not be sufficient. After all, this will only make the “hidden problems” of the German economic and social systems clearer. When compared to the challenges, which we face on a global scale, these are easier to overcome. However, even these require political strength and efforts. These challenges principally include:

- Ensuring the state's financial ability to act (demographic pressures on public spending, increased debt);
- Reforming tax and benefit systems;
- Improving education;
- Taking climate change and energy security into account;
- Following the economic structural change and identifying new distribution issues.

This list is not intended to produce fear; there are solutions to the aforementioned problems. They have to be bravely carried out, however. Admittedly, the challenges are complex. Just tackling them with the phrase “Social Market Economy” is insufficient. Responsible actors must convince fellow human beings of the value and the strength of the German system. Perhaps this has been done too little in the past. The Social Market Economy has always been a “progressive way of thinking”.<sup>8</sup> Although, occasionally, it makes light of political interests. However, this is the very reason why it can be revived! It must be reconsidered in light of new framework conditions. These include taking increasing account of its central values of equality of opportunity and performance.

Here, one must make two observations: Firstly, wages, which are considerably higher than the average income, cannot be justified by equality of performance; secondly, the main task for government social policy is to improve opportunity, i.e. to give every human being the opportunity to use his or her skills in society through education, politics and integration. One must also mention two other values of the Social Market Economy: Scale and responsibility. These are not old fashioned; rather they are fundamental for reform to ensure freedom. There is the explicit assumption that a market economy requires an ethical base. Without virtue, decency and weighing up the consequences of one's actions, it is not possible to live together in harmony. Wilhelm Röpke spoke of this relationship several years ago.

The Social Market Economy provides the regulatory superstructure to deal with the domestic challenges that have been mentioned. For several reasons, it is still a contemporary ideology:

- Firstly, compared to other economic models (state-authoritarian capitalism, free market capitalism), the Social Market Economy is based on anthropological findings and is, thus, much more than a mere economic system. It is a model for society. The main tenet of this model is the personality of human beings, whose powers of judgment and decision-making can be trusted. This Christian understanding gives rise to an ethical framework for commerce and trade; criteria for equality are explicitly included and taken to be part of a right to participate.
- Secondly, the Social Market Economy is correct, because it places the market mechanism at the center. One must not forget that the current crisis is the product of the failure to observe these market mechanisms. The ability of the market to generate wealth on a broad scale has not been achieved. For this, there is a need for institutions, property, contractual freedom, self-interest, market, price control and competition. A competitive economy is the most efficient and democratic economic system, since it creates equality not by force, but through market coordination.
- Thirdly, only the Social Market Economy ensures the state plays a constructive and suitable role. It does not try to minimize it, but also does not exaggerate it. The state must act as the guardian of a functioning economic order and, thus, enters into a productive relationship with the market. Especially today, people are all too aware of this need.
- Fourthly, the subsidiarity principle is available as a guide, towards which state action should be oriented, particularly in terms of social policy. Failure to observe this principle has a negative impact on the well-being of humans and discredits responsible citizens.
- Fifthly, the Social Market Economy is not a doctrine, rather it is a "progressive way of thinking".<sup>9</sup> For this reason, it can be adapted and implemented internationally.

These points briefly illustrate why the Social Market Economy has encountered problems in light of the financial crisis. It must try to revitalize its central values and principles (freedom, subsidiarity, solidarity) and build on them to connect – as Alfred Müller-Armack said<sup>10</sup> – the performance of the market economy with a suitably market-oriented policy of social equality. Now more so than ever, politics must show its communicative abilities, its leadership power and its world view.

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1| See Bach et al. (2009).

2| Schumpeter (1950), p. 233.

3| Cf. Rüstow (1932).

4| Alexander Rüstow on April 3, 1930 to Walter Eucken; cited according to Vogt (1997), p. 265.

5| Cf. Eucken (1952), pp. 254-291.

6| Gesetz zur weiteren Stabilisierung des Finanzmarktes.

7| Schäuble (2009).

8| Müller-Armack (1966), p. 12.

9| Cf. Müller-Armack (1966).

10| Müller-Armack (1966), p. 245.