ANTI-CRISIS MEASURES OF ECONOMIC POLICY IN LITHUANIA AND IN OTHER BALTIC COUNTRIES

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Abstract:
The article deals with the economic situation and the state economic policy in Lithuania before and during the crisis. The pre-crisis period, i.e. 2004-2007 years, were the years of the fast economic growth in Lithuanian and other Baltic countries economies, which were unprecedented in postwar Europe. The growth Lithuanian economy was interrupted by global economics and finance crises, which appeared in Lithuania in 2008 year. The macroeconomic situation of Lithuania, the main factors influenced to economy situation of country and means of government economy policy before and in the period of crisis using statistic date are discussed. The anti-crisis policy of other Baltic countries is presented in the article. The statistic data showed that economic processes were similar without essential differences in all Baltic countries with exception the spheres of public finances where Estonia had obvious advantage in comparison with Lithuania and Latvia.

Key Words: Anti-crisis measures, economic policy, global finance crisis, macroeconomic processes

Introduction

The Lithuanian economics situation and state economics policy in the period after joined Lithuania the European Union, i.e. after 2004 year are analyzed in the article. The period under consideration includes pre-crisis and crisis periods. The pre-crisis period, i.e. 2004-2007 years, were the years of the fast economic growth in Lithuanian economy. Decreasing unemployment, increasing income, hard currency and financial support of EU were the main factors of the growth of Lithuanian economy. The growth Lithuanian economy was interrupted by global economics and finance crises. The current financial crisis that struck the world has affected the majority of world countries on a larger or smaller degree. Due to the economic crisis, the growth of economics in the EU countries considerably slowed down and the number of unemployed increased a great deal. The Baltic countries suffered perhaps most of all their economic depression was very painful. The onset of the current financial crisis is considered to be 2007, when the Federal Reserve System of the USA had to interfere and grant liquidity to the bank system (Soros, 2009). Famous American economist – J. Stiglitz (2006), (Felton, Carman, 2008) paid attention to a deteriorating economic situation of the country and wrote about a possible financial crisis in the USA before its onset.

The current global crisis is not the only worldwide crisis in the new history of humanity. We are aware of such economic crises that have affected more than one state and therefore they can be called as worldwide crises (Dash, 2001; Feldstein, 1991; Sylla, 2009; Davulis, 2012). The current global crisis stands out from the previous ones by its measures. It affected the majority of world countries. In this respect it surpassed even the Great depression of 1929-1933 (Eichengreen, O. Rourke, 2010). It should be stressed, that the severe lessons of the Great Depression were not in vain and the governmental response to economic recession was much more expeditions than in 1929 (Romer, 2009). For example, in 2008, the European Commission (Commission of the European Communities, 2009) prepared a restoration plan of economics which implies the increase of demand by enlarging the purchasing capacity of population and restoring the confidence of investors.

Regarding the causes of the current crisis we can enumerate a lot of them. We shall restrict ourselves only to two aspects that, in our opinion, are essential, namely, disorder in stock exchange caused by collapse of real estate bubble and globalization of the world economics. The two aspects distinguish the current global crisis from other crises. Modern financial markets characterizes by application of very complicated derivative financial measures. Though theses derivative measures were created namely to diversity and diminish the risk, because latest years showed that banks and investment companies assessed the risk insufficiently. It was one of causes of the current world crisis of finance and economy and the processes in the real estate market were the detonator that invoked the global crisis.

Another important peculiarity of the current global crises is the influence of globalization processes on the spread of economic problems in whole world. Globalization has both positive and negative consequences. The intensifying integration of financial markets is related with the growing risk and uncertainty. Therefore it is difficult to predict its consequences. On the other hand, with an increase of interrelations and dependences between global financial markets and economics, the risk of problem transmission increases as well.

In the article, the factors that influenced the fast growth of Lithuanian economy in the pre-crisis period, the main causes of the global financial crises as well as its effect on the Lithuanian economics and measures of economic policy of governments in the period under consideration are discussed. Based on statistical data, the macroeconomic state in Lithuania and other Baltic states is analyzed in the period after 2004 year. Such investigation has a sense for the sole purpose of avoiding the economic policy errors made in the future.

The macroeconomic situation in Lithuania before the crisis

2004-2007 were the years of the fast economic growth in Lithuania which, according the Rosenberg, (2008) were unprecedented in postwar Europe. In this period, the country‘s GDP was constantly growing and in 2007 its growth rate reseached up to 9.8 percents (Fig. 1).

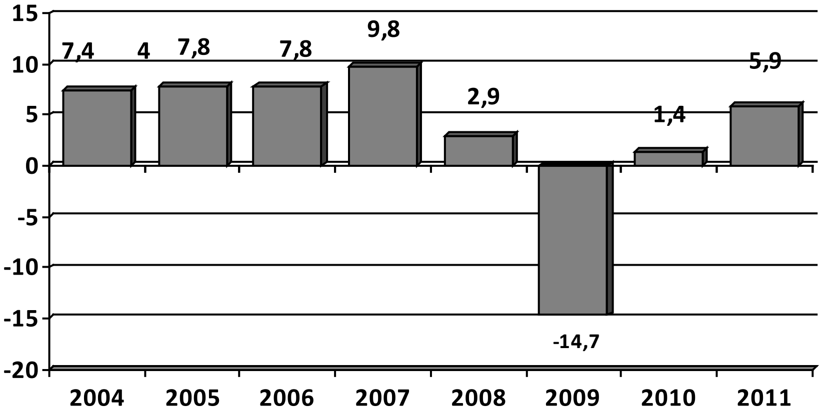

Figure 1. The yearly alteration of Lithuanian real GDP in 2004-2011 (in percent). Source: Lithuanian Department of Statistics

With the growth of economics from 2004 to 2007, unemployment also decreased constantly, the level of which diminished from 11.4 percents in 2004 to 4.3 percents in 2007 (Fig. 2).

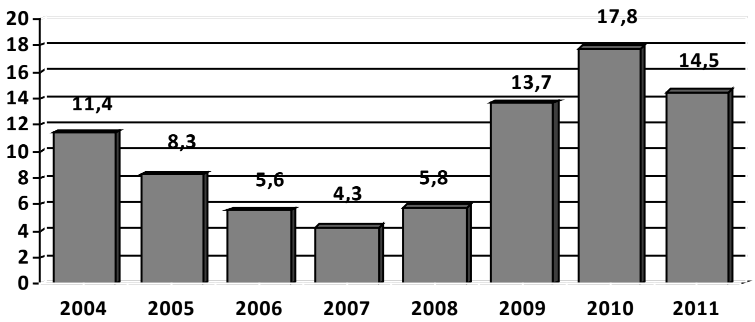

Figure 2. The level of unemployment in Lithuania 2004-2011 (in percent of GDP). Source: Lithuanian Department of Statistics

The improving economic situation in the country, increasing employment and wages, favourable prospects of the country's future slowed down emigration streams a little bit in 2004 – 2006 (Fig. 3).

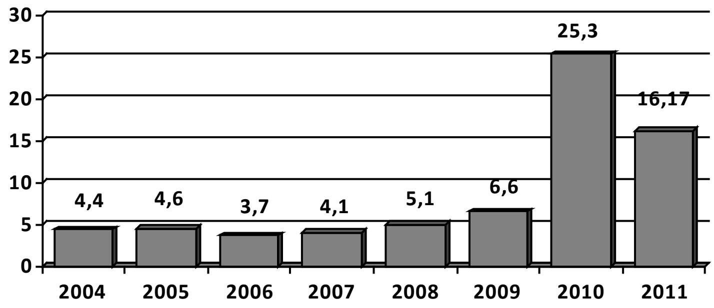

Figure 3. The dynamic of emigration from Lithuania in 2004-2011 (in thousands of peoples). Source: Lithuanian Department of Statistics

The growing country's economics, favourable conjuncture of the international market with the rising needs for importable production of other EU countries allowed us to uniformly increase the country's exported production volumes - in 2008, the country's export amounted up to 25.5 percent of its GDP level.

Thus, to onset of the crisis Lithuanian economic increases. Decreasing unemployment, increasing income, hard currency and financial support of EU were the main factors of the growth. These factors laid the basis, as it is evident at present, to cherish grounded hopes as to the future of the country. Guided by these hopes, both enterprises and households began borrowing for consumption and business ever more and all the more that the banks granted loans with engaging interests. The largest share of loans received by a household was aimed at the real estate market. This process was stimulated by state given tax privileges for lodgings loans which established conditions of forming a real estate bubble. According to the data of the Bank of Lithuania, the volume of loans to acquire lodgings has grown from 50 million Lt in 2004 up to 720 million Lt in 2007. Such an expansion of credit had a decisive influence to form a 'bubble' in the Lithuanian real estate market.

Thus from 2004 up to onset of the crisis Lithuanian economics was growing due to the growth of domestic demand, maintained by ungrounded future expectations. The growth of domestic demand stimulated increase of import as well. However the increase of import was not counterbalanced by an adequate export increase, i.e. export volumes lagyed behind from that of import until 2009 and thus the country's foreign trade balance was negative (Fig. 4). A constant foreign trade deficit also determined the growth of the current account deficit. In line with the data of the Bank of Lithuania, the current account deficit in Lithuania has grown from 2004 to 2007 almost 300% and exceeded 14 milliard Lt.

The global financial crisis the first signs of which appeared in the USA in 2007 before long reached Lithuania, too. As shown the statistical data (Fig. 1), the rate of the country's GDP growth that reached almost 10 percent in 2007, fell down up to 3 percent in 2008 and even 15 percent in 2009, thus pushing Lithuania among the states that suffered most from the crisis. Due to this reason the budget deficit in 2008 amounted up to 3,2 % and in 2009 nearly 9% of the country GDP, i.e. it exceeded the size set by the Mastricht agreement almost three times. Only in the years of recovery country's economy state budget deficit began to decrease and at the end of 2011 it reached 3.3 percent of GDP, i.e. it exceed Mastricht criterion slightly. With a downturn of production unemployment began to grow in the country which amounted up even to 13.7 percent in 2009 (Fig. 2), which become a serious problem of country's economics. Emigration from the country started increasing again too and reached more than 25 thousands of emigrants in 2010 according to official data of the Lithuanian Department of Statistics (Fig 3). Lithuania was not ready for such a situation, - its strategy for economic development was based on the macroeconomic stability and on assumption of a uniform growth of economics (Rakauskiene, Krinickiene, 2009).

Figure 4. The foreign trade balanse of Lithuania in 2004-2011 (in percent of GDP).
Source: Lithuanian Department of Statistics

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After the burst of the "bubble" in the real estate market of Lithuania, the credit interest, given by the banks acting in Lithuania, have grown as well. That affected negatively the subjects of Lithuanian economy and not so small part of enterprises went bankrupt. Only the processes in the county's real estate market could invoke economic depression, however, mostly the outside factors have affected our economics. Because the balance foreign trade (Fig. 4) and the current account of country, was in deficit, thus in such a situation, the economic growth was feasible only by borrowing in the international finance market to cover the deficit. However, due to the global crisis, increased interests stopped the flow of foreign credits and shook the economic growth basis of the country. On the other hand, the global crisis predetermined slowdown of economic growth and consumption decrease of many world countries. Decreasing consumption of foreign countries restricted the chances of Lithuanian export and that was one of the most important factors which determined the country's economic depression. The domestic market of Lithuania is too small to maintain the growth of economics and to compensate the decrease in export. With the revival of markets of foreign countries, Lithuanian possibilities have made better as well. The 2010 years became years of beginning the recovery of Lithuanian economy – all main macroeconomic indicates slowly but constantly began to increase. The 2010 years became years of beginning the recovery of Lithuanian economy – all main macroeconomic indicates slowly but constantly began to increase.

Though the signs of global crisis were evident rather early, Lithuania met the crisis quite rivready. Such a situation was predetermind by insufficient competence of our goverment, lack of responsibility, and maybe political reasons. As a result, Lithuania met the crisis with the chrome foreign trade and current account deficit, with debts of the state and private sector and without any reserves accumulated.

Opponents often reproached the former government that it ungroundedly raised salaries of state office employees as well as pensions of pensioners and did not accumulate any financial reserves for the solving most necessary problems arising during the crisis. In our opinion, opponents are right part. On the other hand the greatest errors of the goverment are not here. It was indispensable to increase salaries with the view of avoiding the loss of the last good specialists. This measure proved to be true: emigration was slackened and even decreased (Fig. 3). If we create the state welfare, pensioners also have the right to a certain level of wellbeing. Thus the decisions to increase salaries and pensions were necessary and they improved the state welfare indeed. On the other hand, when making these decisions the goverment did not provide for their constant financing taking into consideration a possible economic down turn.

Much more seriuos erros of this goverment were associated with public finances. Despite rather high rates of GDP growth in the country, year after year expenditure of the goverment sector in 2004-2008 exceeded its revenues, i.e there was a deficit state budget (Fig. 5).

Figure 5. The Lithuanian state budget balanse in 2004-2011 (in percent of GDP).
Source: Lithuanian Department of Statistics

Though the budget deficit before crisis was not so high, under the conditions of fast economic growth, it increases the economy overheat. On the other hand, the constant budget deficit increased the country's debt which is unacceptable under the conditions of the economic growth. Meanwhile budget surplus would not allow economy overheating and would establish conditions for accumulating the necessary reserves and financing the angmented state liabilities under the cyclic conditions of recession.

Another obvious error of the goverment is tax decreasing in the period of too rapid economy upturn, which is also contradicting economic principles. The tax policy of that period had to be contrary - an opportunity was missed to impose a real estate tax (of course, with on exempt minimum), luxury wealth tax as well as a progresssive tax sustem. All these measures could also accumulate the necessary finance sources to cover state expenses. Thus, the formation of deficit budget and tax disminishing in the years of a rapid economy upturn were the largest goverment errors that caused sore consequences in the crisis period.

The right step of this goverment was adoption of the fical discipline law in 2007, aimed at ensurance of financial stability and a stable development of economy. The law has set that the deficitive teh govermental sector in 2008 can not be larger than 0,5 % of GDP. Unfortunately, this law was passed too late and its requirements could not be realized with the onset of the crisis.

The Bank of Lithuania has also not estimated enough the scale of the pending crisis (Sharkinas, 2008). It stated that the direct impact of the global crisis on the finance system of country can not be considerable because it are not closely connected by economic and financial links with of the investment banks and other institutions of the USA. On the other hand after the Russian finance crisis in 1998, supervision of commercial banks of the country was intensified, which ensured the stability of the Lithuanian finance system. However the near future has shown that the Bank of Lithuania was not quite right- the superision of commercial banks was evidently insufficient (Jakeliunas, 2010).

Anti-crisis measures of Lithuanian institutions

In the presence of crisis in 2008 the Bank of Lithuania and Parliament of Republic of Lithuania have made decisions: to diminish the mandatory reserve norm from 6 to 4 percent and to increase the deposit insurance sum up to 100.000 Euro with a view to vivify the domestic market using additional financial resources. Though these decisions were correct and adopted in time, unfortunately, their effect seemed to be insufficient. To maintain the market activity a more intensive promotion of economics was necessary. However, due to an inadvertent and irresponsible budget policy persuaded in the years of economic rise progress, these were no resources to stimulate the economics. Therefore there remained nothing else to do but to take measures that are usually applied not in the period of depression, but in up growth of economics. The newly elected Parliament of the Republic of Lithuania and Government undertook to apply the measure of a restrictive fiscal policy: to decrease expenditure and increase taxes in order to stabilize state finances, which was persistently recommended by the European Commission.

At the end of 2008, decision were made to increase the rate of value-added taxes up to 19% (later on it was increased up to 21%), income-tax, excise duty on fuel, cigarettes and alcohol, as well as to eliminate the majority of reduced tariffs of the value-added tax. The so-called ‘night’ tax reform has come into force effect since January 1, 2009. This tax reform was aimed not so much with at neutralization of the crisis consequences to economics as at collection of more income to the budget with an expectation to stabilize the state finance system. However acording to the statistical data in 2009 much less income was collected to the state budget than in 2008. Certainly, such a result was mostly predestined by the economic downturn, however, there is little doubt that the night reform was not deliberate enough. Even the country‘s goverment acknowlidged that this reform was wrong in some aspects. Maybe there was some sence to increase the added-value tax tariff in the forever situation, however abolition of all privileges of this tax was a mistake: the budget lost not so small part of income that has left for the neighbouring countres. On principle the increase of the profit tax tariff was right, but it had to be differentiated according to economic branches and the volume of a company, which indeed has been done later on. The opponents‘ proposition that increase of the profit tax limits foreign investments is not so convurcing. The research has shown (Davulis, 2003) that tax privileges have, but a little influence on the volume of foreign investments in the country‘s economics. Attractiveness of objects to be invested in is much more important for inventors. Consequences of excise increasing are also not single-valued to economics.

Thus, the government had to decide on an undersubscribed decision – to pursue the so-called retrenchment policy, i.e., to diminish government expenses by lowering the employers and officeholders salaries, pensions, and social pays such a policy in assessed ambiguously. On the one hand, it allows diminishing government expenses, on the other hand, it decreases income of the population and thereby consumers demand. The decrease in demand weakens the home market even more. The domestic market will revive only if income of the population starts growing and consumers demand increasing. Straight forward decreasing of expenses for all spheres can yield only a short-term effect. Decreasing expenses for the spheres of activities that predetermine the science and technology progress or development of infrastructure can cause long-term negative consequences for the country. Thus, the retrenchment policy would be deliberate enough and balanced.

Though the macroeconomic situation in Lithuania started improving from 2010 years but in our opinion its improving not so which due to the actions of the goverment, as due to the improved situation in international markes and especially due to recovery in foreign countries that imported goods of Lithuanian producers.

Anti-crisis measures and macroeconomic situation in other Baltic countries

At the end of 2008 Latvian Saima approved the program of stabilization and revival of Latvian economics. The program obliged the government to pursue a strict fiscal policy decreasing the state budget deficit, to establish the stabilization reserve into which money could be transmitted in case of the budget is balanced and the growth of GDP exceeds 2%. The structural reforms were provided in the plan in order to decrease the expenses of the public management by 15%, while financing of social protection measures would not be decreased. Bank of Latvia was obliged to keep fixed ratio between Latas and Euro. In line with the program the government of Latvia plans to decrease the tariff of income tax of inhabitant from 2009 by 2%, to increase the rate of the value-added tax by 3%, to eliminate the majority of reduced tariffs of the value-added tax, to increase the excise duty of fuel, coffee and alcohol as well as to tax dwelling apartment of habitants from 2010. In 2010 the Latvian government submitted a new plan of economics revival to Saima. The stimulation of export, the manufacture of home commodities for replacing import, orientation production to manufacture commodities with high added values as well as stimulation of the economics sectors grounded on the knowledge and innovations have been provided in the plan.

In 2008 the International Monetary Fund, World Bank and finance institutions of EU granted a credit in amounting to 7.5 billion euro (1.7 billion euro fro which was granted by IMF) to Latvia to make reforms. Despite that creditors fixed a low interest for credit, but they required to fulfill strict conditions, i.e. to decrease the budget deficit of state up to 3% of GDP in three years, not to increase pensions, to decrease salaries, to set new taxes, to diminish the government management expenses not by 15 but 30%.

Thus, anti-crisis measures are similar both in Latvia and Lithuania. The revival of economics is grounded on the strict fiscal policy and saving in both countries.

Estonia began to execute a strict fiscal policy earlier than the other Baltic countries i.e. before the crisis began. In the years of the fast economics growth this country began to form a surplus state budget and to accumulate fiscal reserves. The accumulated reserves allowed Estonia to avoid of the necessity to borrow in the international finance markets paying high interest during global crisis. Despite that Estonia did not have a formal anti-crisis plan, because it hoped to overcome the economic difficulties in the natural manner, Estonia was forced to apply the saving mode, too. Estonian government has also made decisions to decrease the state expenditure, especially, in the sphere of health protection and education, pensions and salaries (by 15%), to increase the rate of value-added tax from 18 to 20%, the excise duty on tobacco products and alcohol and to introduce new taxes. Therefore the accumulated finance reserves permitted to gain obviously advantages for Estonia in comparison with other Baltic countries.

The tendencies of macroeconomic processes were similar in all Baltic countries. As was mentioned above for a number of years the Baltic countries were marked by a considerably faster economic growth than other EU states. According to date of the Eurostat database the maximal rate of GDP growth before crisis amounted almost 10% in Lithuania, almost 8% in Estonia and exceed of 12% in Latvia. However, as the global trade shrank as a result of world economic crisis, the export-oriented economics of the Baltic countries plummeted to an all-time low: in 2009 real GDP of these countries decreased by 14-18 % (14% in Estonia, 15% in Lithuania and 18% in Latvia) as compared to 2008 data. From 2010 the Baltic countries have already shown some signs of recovery in their economies.

Like many other EU countries, the Latvia and Lithuania were facing the budget deficit problem: proportion of fiscal deficits to GDP largely exceeds the limit of 3 % prescribed by the Treaty of Maastricht (9.2 % in Lithuania and 10.2 % in Latvia, but in 2010 their fiscal deficits decreased up to 7-8 % of GDP). In 2010 the proportion of government debt to GDP was equal to 44.7% in Latvia and 38% in Lithuania (in 2011 government dept slightly decreased until 42.6% for Latvia Lithuania and increased until 38.5% for Lithuania). Though these figures satisfy the Maastricht criterion, i.e. not exceeded 60% of GDP, but they were increasing very fast from 2009.

The situation in these spheres in Estonia is much better. Estonia has not any problems with budget deficit due to accumulated reserves. However, one must admit here that Estonia did manage to maintain its financial discipline at the level likely to be envied by other countries with much more economic power. In 2009 Estonian budget deficit stayed as low as 2 % of GDP. The Estonian budget was in surplus amounted to 0.2 % of GDP in 2010 and 1.0 % of GDP in 2011. It still did not exceed the limit of 3 % of GDP, in this way satisfying the Maastricht criterion. Moreover, according to data of the Eurostat database Estonian foreign debt, though it constantly increased during the crisis, constituted only 7,2 % of GDP in 2009, which is substantially less than is required for a country to be accepted to the euro zone. Therefore, Estonia is single state from all of EU states satisfying the Maastricht criteria. It allowed the country to join the European Monetary Union from 1 January of 2011. The most important factors which subsequently led to such remarkable achievements were a well thought-out economic policy, concentration of all national political powers upon one common aim and, as already mentioned, strict financial discipline. The support, which Estonia receives from the Nordic countries, cannot be underestimated either.

All the three countries – Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia – are coping with the problem of emigration. If emigration processes are not suppressed in these countries, they will face serious economic problems in the future. Moreover, in spite of intensive emigration unemployment has become a serious and large scale problem in the Baltic countries. According to date of the Eurostat database, unemployment rate in these countries has reached unprecedented heights during the crisis and amounts to 14-18 % (in 2010 - 16.9% in Lithuania, 16.9 in Estonia and 18.7% in Latvia. In 2011 unemployment rate in these countries decreased).

Conclusion

The domestic and external reasons have invoked the Lithuania economic crisis. Such a small countries of open economics as Baltic countries had no chance of avoiding the effect of the global crisis on its economics but deliberate economic policy of Government would allow to avoid the conequences of global crises for country‘s economy. The economic policy of Lithuanian goverments did not distinguish itself by foresight before and during the crisis. Formation of the deficit budget and tax decreasing under the conditions of a rapid economic growth contradict the economic logic and had bed consequences for the country's economy with the onset of the crisis. The limitng fiscal policy of the former goverment with a view to stabilize state finances under the current conditions is right in essence. However the measures to carry such a policy into effect are not deliberate enough and unbalanced. This kind of policy creates additional economic and social problems that could be avoided by realizing a deliberate and long-sighted economic policy of the country.

Despite the fact that Estonia pursued an expedient fiscal policy before the crisis and accumulated fiscal reserves, the character of macroeconomics processes in the all the Baltic countries was very similar and differed insignificantly. True, the accumulated financial reserves permitted Estonia to avoid additional difficulties in the sphere of public finances that the Lithuanian and Latvian economics confronted.

Politicians, economists and financial specialists should deeply study the lessons of the current crisis in order that the errors made could be avoided in future.

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