The Financial Crisis in Ireland and Government Revenues

Rónán Hickey and Diarmaid Smyth[1]

Abstract

This paper examines trends in government revenues during and after the financial crisis. On taxation, it highlights the strong increase in income tax receipts in recent years. Relying on stable sources of revenue—rather than cyclically sensitive ones—appears desirable from a public finance perspective and reduces a key vulnerability that developed in Ireland in the mid-2000s. There has also been a sharp increase in non-tax revenues since the crisis, partly due to measures introduced by the Government to assist the financial sector. Managing the transition to lower, more normal, non-tax revenues will be a challenge. This financial support has significantly added to the public debt ratio, the high level of which remains a key vulnerability for the economy. Accordingly there would appear to be a strong case that unexpected or windfall gains from these sources be used to exclusively reduce public debt.

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1. Introduction

The past decade has been a turbulent one for the public finances. Ireland's large budgetary surplus in the middle of the last decade quickly reverted to sizable deficits with the onset of the crisis. This culminated in entry into an Excessive Deficit Procedure (EDP) in 2009 and entry into an EU-IMF assistance programme in 2010. A significant budgetary adjustment was required to put the public finances back on a more sustainable footing, with consolidation measures of around €30 billion being introduced between 2008 and 2014. With the General Government (GG) deficit expected to fall below the critical 3 per cent EDP threshold this year, this paper examines the evolution of government tax and non-tax revenues, over the past few years. A number of important features emerge. On the taxation side, there has been a clear movement away from cyclically sensitive tax heads (such as capital gains tax and stamp duty receipts) to more stable taxes, particularly income tax (including the Universal Social Charge). Relying on more stable sources of revenue appears desirable from a public finance perspective given the problems that arose in the last decade when the State became overly reliant on housing related taxes.

At the same time, non-tax revenues in Ireland have increased significantly both in an absolute sense and also relative to the EU. Much of this reflects income accruing to the Government as a result of financial assistance measures. A large proportion of this income can be considered to be transitory and should unwind as the effects of the crisis dissipate. Furthermore, receipts from non-tax related sources have significantly exceeded expectations in recent years creating what we term 'non-tax windfall gains'. Managing these windfalls and the transition to lower levels of non-tax revenues poses a significant challenge. Any windfalls accruing to the Government from financial crisis assistance measures should be used to pay down debt for two reasons. First, the overall stock of government debt remains high and needs to be reduced to safer levels. This would help with compliance with the fiscal rules while also creating a larger buffer in the event of a negative shock to the economy. Second, financial crisis measures added significantly to the level of debt. Hence, revenues accruing as a result of those same assistance measures should be used to pay down debt. Such a course of action is prudent from a fiscal policy perspective while also ensuring that Ireland avoids the mistakes of the past decade - when transitory revenue streams were relied upon too heavily.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 examines trends in Exchequer taxes since 2007. Section 3 outlines developments in non-tax revenues and their increasing importance. The paper also takes a closer look at the impact on government finances arising from crisis related assistance measures. Finally Section 4 presents some conclusions.

2. Recent Trends in Tax Revenue

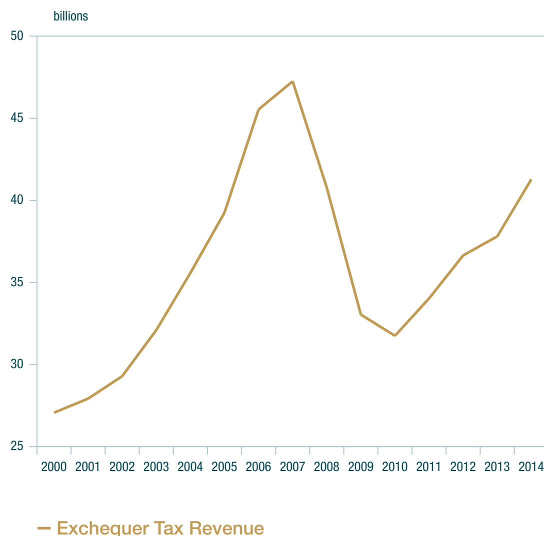
The first half of the 2000s saw the introduction of policy measures which had a profound impact on the structure of tax revenue in Ireland. While overall tax receipts accelerated at a rapid pace during the period, growing by 75 per cent between 2000 and 2007 (see Figure 1), the proportion coming from relatively stable sources such as income tax steadily declined to be replaced by more cyclically sensitive tax heads.[2]

The contribution from income tax went from representing one-third of total tax revenue in 2000 to just one-quarter in 2006, as large numbers of workers were removed from the tax net. Income tax developments over this period are discussed in more detail by Cronin et al (2015), Honohan (2009) and O'Connor (2013).[3] The contribution from stamp duty and capital gains tax, by comparison, doubled in the first half of the decade against the

2 It should be noted that, in Exchequer terms, PRSI receipts are treated as an appropriation-in-aid and are netted off government expenditure. Accordingly they are not represented in the tax or non-tax data presented here.

3 Cronin et al highlight the important role that increasing tax credit measures played in reducing receipts, while Honohan illustrates the considerable drop in the average income tax rates that occurred across all income thresholds. O'Connor examined the structure of the Irish taxation system including options for reform.

Figure 1: Exchequer Tax Revenue, 2000 to 2014



Source: Department of Finance.

Figure 2: General Government Revenue as Percentage of GDP

Source: CSO.

backdrop of the booming housing market, while VAT receipts grew sharply, again partly reflecting activity in the housing sector (see Addison-Smyth and McQuinn, 2010). This resulted in a significant rise in the broader General Government (GG) revenue to GDP ratio in the 5-year period to 2006 (Figure 2), reversing the declining trend of the previous five years.[4]

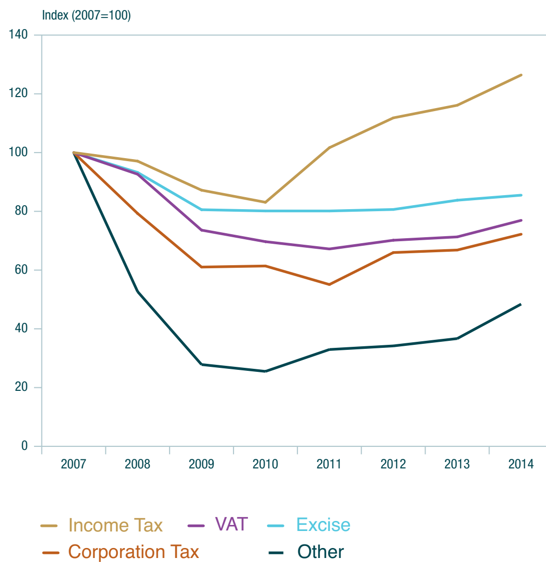
The increasing reliance on property dependent taxes (VAT, stamp duty and capital gains tax) meant that the sensitivity of revenues to cyclical conditions in the economy became unusually high. This left the Irish tax base increasingly vulnerable to both internal and external economic shocks and ensured that the housing market crash, and subsequent movement into recession, had a much bigger impact on the fiscal position than would have otherwise been the case. Tax revenues contracted dramatically between 2007 and 2010, falling by one-third to €32 billion, while the share of GG revenue as a percentage of GDP declined by around 3 percentage points to 33.6 per cent. Figure 3 takes a closer look at the major tax heads to see how they have evolved since the start of the downturn, taking 2007 as a base year.

All tax heads contracted sharply with the onset of the financial crisis, with the decline in 'other' taxes (mainly composed of stamp duties and capital gains tax) especially severe at 75 per cent in 2010, reflecting the collapse in the property market. By comparison, the contraction in income tax was smaller at 17 per cent over this period. Even if the introduction of the income levy in 2009 is excluded, the 28 per cent decline in income tax was amongst the lowest of all the major tax heads. This was in spite of a 15 per cent drop in employment over the same period, highlighting its important role as a relatively stable source of revenue.

The recovery in tax receipts since 2010 has reflected a combination of policy measures and stronger economic activity, with total tax receipts surpassing the €40 billion threshold for the first time in six years in 2014 (they nevertheless remained some 13 per cent below their peak, highlighting the magnitude of the contraction that occurred during the crisis). While the taxation measures introduced

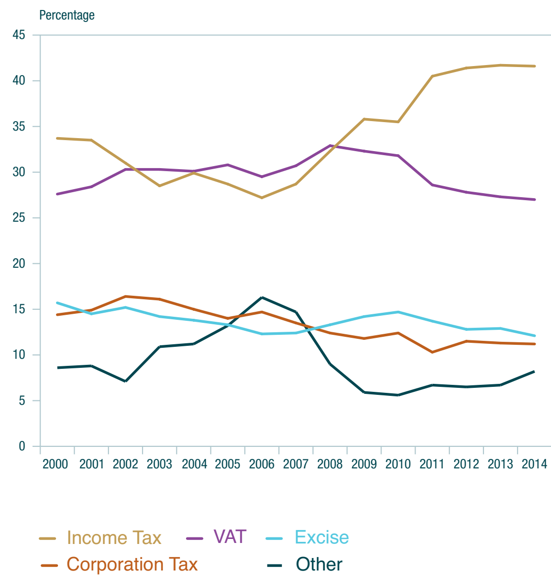
4 GG aggregates provide a more accurate depiction of fiscal performance as they encompass all arms of government.

Figure 3: Change in Major Exchequer Tax Heads, 2007 to 2014 (2007=100)



Source: Department of Finance.

Figure 4: Composition of Exchequer Tax Receipts, 2000 to 2014



Source: Department of Finance.

were primarily an emergency response to the crisis, they also served as steps to correct the structural problems. Figure 3 shows that the recovery in revenues has been driven by developments in income tax, which is the sole tax head to have surpassed its pre-crisis level. In fact it has done so significantly, growing by 26 per cent since 2007. The introduction of the Universal Social Charge (USC) in Budget 2010 has played an important role in this recovery. Data from the Revenue Commissioners reveals that the USC was responsible for 20 per cent of the €17 billion of income tax generated in 2014, and almost 40 per cent[5] of the increase between 2010 and 2014. Changes in PAYE, by comparison, drove half of the increase over this period. 'Other' taxes, meanwhile, have experienced the weakest recovery and were still less than half of their 2007 value in 2014. This figure would have been even lower but for the contribution made by the levy on private pension funds to stamp duty in recent years, and the introduction of the property tax.

As Figure 4 shows, these recent developments have ensured that the more stable income tax head is now providing a much larger proportion of total taxes. Following the introduction of the USC, its share increased to 41 per cent and has remained broadly stable since. Interestingly VAT and 'other' taxes are now broadly back to their share of total revenue at the start of the 2000s, while corporation tax and excise duties have experienced small declines. Recent years have also seen a pick-up in the GG revenue to GDP ratio, although at 34.9 per cent in 2014 it remained below both the peak in 2006 and its value at the start of the decade (36.9 and 35.9 per cent respectively). This partly reflects the composition of the fiscal consolidation measures introduced; approximately two-thirds of the consolidation has been expenditure driven.[6]

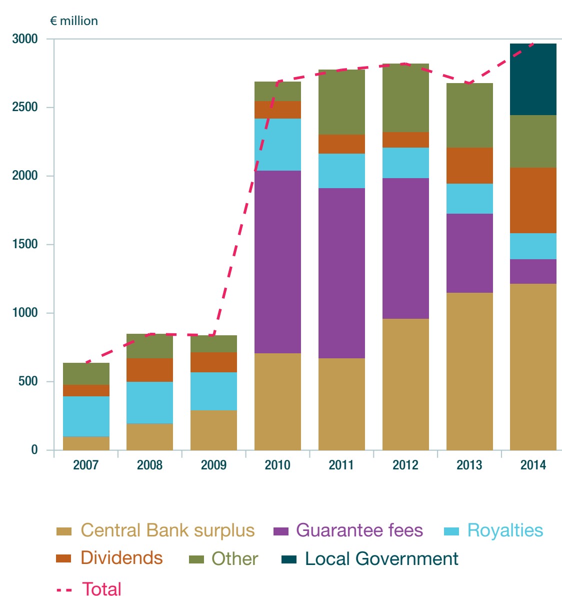
3. Recent Trends in Non-Tax Revenues

In recent years non-tax revenues have become an increasingly important source of income for government. On an Exchequer basis, non-tax revenues increased from €0.6 billion

5 This includes the income levy - the precursor to the USC. Between 2010 and 2014 income tax increased by €5.9 billion. The USC/income levy generated €2.2 billion of this change while PAYE generated €3 billion.

6 See Department of Finance (2011).

Figure 5: Composition of Exchequer Non Tax Revenue, 2007 to 2014



Source: Department of Finance.

in 2007 to €3.0 billion in 2014 (1.3 to 6.7 per cent of overall Exchequer current revenue[7]). These receipts incorporate a broad range of items, including interest and dividend revenue. However as Figure 5 shows, the most important items in recent years have been bank guarantee fees and, increasingly, Central Bank surplus income.[8] This primarily reflects revenue stemming from support provided to the financial sector during the crisis, which is discussed in more detail below.

The Impact of the Financial Crisis on the Fiscal Position in Ireland

Much of the increase in non-tax revenues reflects monies accruing to the Government as a result of assistance provided to the financial sector. While the costs associated with these financial support measures have, quite understandably, received significant attention, receipts arising from the assistance are less well known. Due to the size, complexity and intricacies of both sets of transactions, it is useful to examine them in more detail here, using Eurostat's database of financial assistance measures (created during the crisis and summarised in Table 1).[9]

Focusing first on revenues, the CSO has estimated that measures taken to support financial institutions resulted in inflows of €12.9 billion between 2008 and 2014. This mainly consisted of bank guarantee fee income (€4.3 billion), interest income (€5.3 billion) and dividends (€2.3 billion - primarily that proportion of Central Bank income directly attributable to financial crisis measures).

The bank guarantee or the Eligible Liabilities Guarantee (ELG) scheme was introduced in 2009 and was closed to new liabilities in March 2013. It provided an unconditional State guarantee for certain eligible liabilities (including deposits) of up to five years in maturity. Participating institutions were charged a fee, with this intended to cover any increase in government interest expenditure caused by the scheme. As Figure 5 shows revenue generated from these fees has declined over time as the magnitude of liabilities guaranteed has fallen, and it is expected to have only a marginal impact on Exchequer revenues this year.

Interest income incorporates payments received from investments made in financial institutions during the crisis, such as interest from preference shares and contingent convertible bonds. It also includes interest income related to Irish Bank Resolution Corporation (IBRC) which became part of general government in 2011. A rundown of IBRC's activities, coupled with the sale of some bank investments, explains the decline in interest income in recent years.

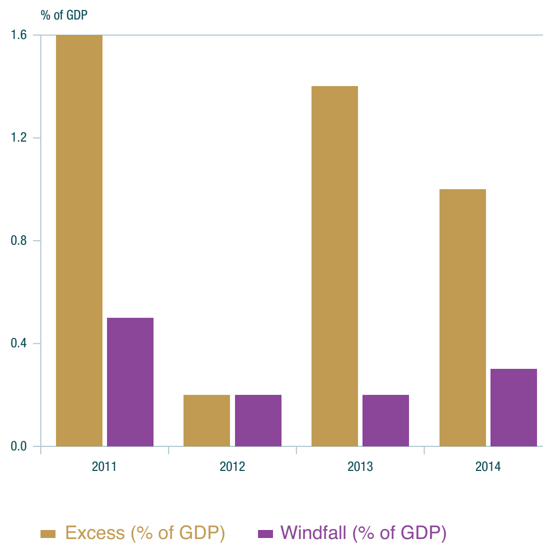
There has been a twelve fold increase in Central Bank surplus income since 2007.

7 Exchequer current revenue refers to tax and non-tax Exchequer receipts discussed in this paper. In 2014, there was a transfer of funds from local government to Exchequer non-tax revenues amounting to €520 million. The Exchequer also benefits from capital receipts; these have increased sharply in recent years due to bank transactions and inter-governmental transfers which do not affect the GG position.

8 Approximately 80 per cent of Central Bank surplus income is remitted to the Exchequer. From a GG perspective, surplus income is classified into current and capital government receipts with only the former used to reduce the GG deficit.

9 In 2009, Eurostat required that governments provide information on the fiscal impact of financial crisis measures. These data are reported twice a year as part of the EDP reporting framework.

Figure 6: Fiscal Over-performance Relative to the EDP and Non-Tax Windfall Revenues



Source: Department of Finance, Central Bank of Ireland Calculations

Initially this was driven by higher interest income related to the provision of Exceptional Liquidity Assistance (ELA).[10] More recently, Central Bank profits have been boosted by income earned on the bonds that were used to replace the promissory notes as part of the liquidation of the Irish Bank Resolution Corporation (IBRC) - referred to as the Special Portfolio.[11]

Turning to expenditures associated with financial assistance, these are estimated to have amounted to €57.5 billion (34 per cent of GDP) between 2009 and 2014. The largest impacts were felt between 2009 and 2011, mainly as a result of capital injections provided by the Government to the banking sector (predominantly Anglo Irish Bank). Cumulatively these injections amounted to 28 per cent of GDP (peaking in 2010). The other main cost arose from higher interest payments on government borrowing directly attributable to financial crisis assistance measures (amounting to 6 per cent of GDP).

Receipts have been dwarfed by expenditures for the period as a whole. In net terms, Table 1 shows that the financial crisis added 2.2 per cent, 21.6 per cent and 3.7 per cent of GDP to the GG deficit in 2009, 2010 and 2011, respectively. More recently, however, they have actually had a positive impact on the GG balance, boosting the position by an average of 0.2 per cent of GDP per annum since 2012.[12]

Reflecting the above, financial assistance measures have also had a negative net impact on GG debt, although the overall magnitude is complicated somewhat by the fact that the Government relied heavily on existing assets (principally the National Pension Reserve Fund and cash balances) as well as new borrowings to fund financial crisis measures. We estimate that around one-fifth of gross GG debt in 2014 was due to financial assistance measures.[13] In addition, the composition of government assets has changed significantly as a result of the banking related interventions.[14]

Looking ahead, and as noted above, income from non-tax related sources in Ireland is expected to decline significantly as the effects of financial crisis measures dissipate. The most recent draft Stability Programme Update (April 2015) projected that non-tax revenues will decline to €2.1 billion in 2020 from a peak of €3.4 billion in 2015. Given the transitory nature of many of these revenue streams, managing the transition to lower and more 'normal' levels will pose a particular challenge.

10 ELA was provided to the banking system from 2009 to 2013. Interest earned on ELA rose from €0.2 billion in 2009 to a peak of €1.6 billion in 2010 before declining to zero in 2014.

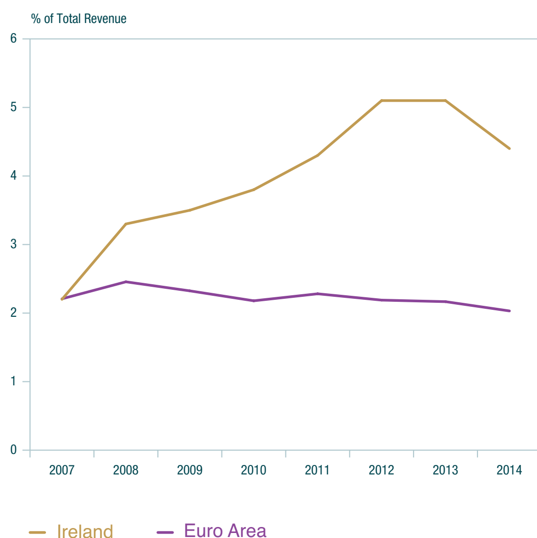
11 The liquidation of IBRC and subsequent restructuring significantly altered the composition of the Central Bank balance sheet. The composition of assets changed, as ELA (amounting to €39.5 billion) was eliminated and replaced primarily with a portfolio of long-dated Irish Government bonds and short-dated NAMA bonds. These amounted to €25.0 billion in Government floating rate notes, €13.7 billion in Government guaranteed NAMA bonds, a €3.5 billion Irish 2025 Government Bond and some additional collateral of €0.4 billion.

12 Due to the exceptional nature of the crisis, Eurostat distinguish between the GG balance and the underlying GG balance - the latter excludes financial crisis measures.

13 The GG debt ratio increased from 43 per cent of GDP in 2008 to 123 per cent in 2013, but declined to 110 per cent in 2014.

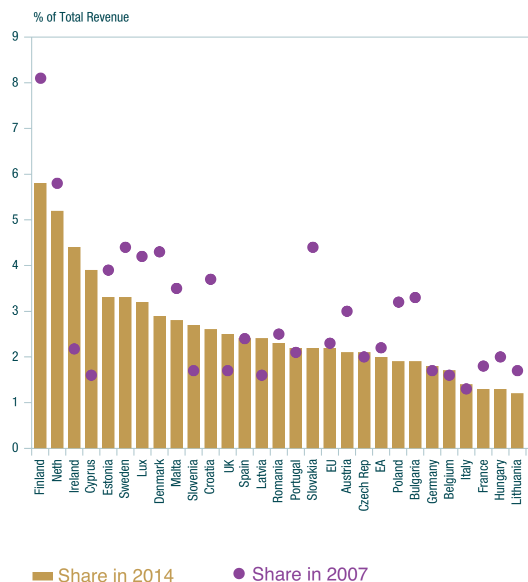
14 For more details on the changing composition of government financial assets (and liabilities) see Barnes and Smyth (2013).

Figure 7: General Government non-tax Revenue as a share of Total Revenue : Ireland relative to the Euro Area



Source: Eurostat.

Figure 8: General Government Non-tax Revenue: Cross Country Comparisons



Source: Eurostat.

Non-tax Revenue Windfall Gains

Looking at the period since 2007, non-tax revenues have consistently over performed relative to Budget expectations (see Table 2 at the end of the Paper). We classify the over performance as 'non-tax windfall gains', that is, the difference between the actual outturn for non-tax revenues and what was anticipated at Budget time. These windfalls peaked in 2011, with receipts €0.8 billion ahead of Budget expectations, while in 2014 the windfall was close to €0.5 billion.[15] These windfalls have undoubtedly helped to cushion the marked decline in other sources of income over the crisis period. They have also helped to ensure that fiscal targets under the EDP have been complied with. As a means of highlighting this, in Figure 6 we plot non-tax windfalls against the EDP over performance.

Non-tax Revenues and Financial Assistance Measures in Context

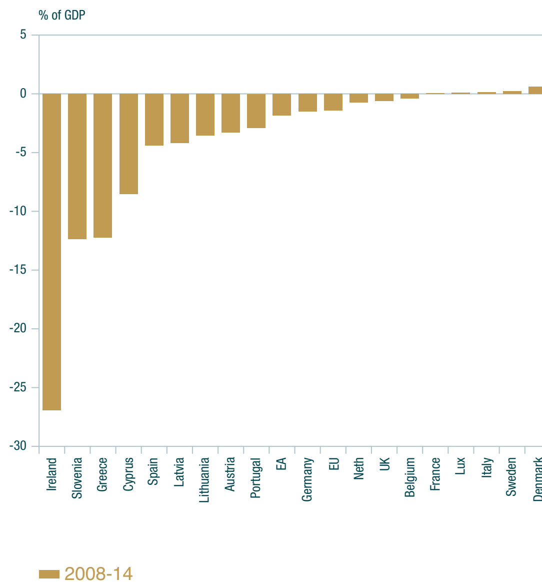
It's useful to put recent developments in Irish non-tax revenues in context by considering trends in broader GG revenues across countries. In Figure 7, we show the share of overall GG revenue accounted for by non-tax revenues in Ireland and in the Euro Area.[16] This is further illustrated in Figure 8 where we plot non-tax revenues across a range of countries in both pre-crisis 2007 and as of end-2014. Both figures highlight the increasingly important role played by non-tax revenues in Ireland both in an absolute sense and relative to the EU.

Taking the cross-country comparison a step further, Table 3 compares the GG impact of the financial crisis measures in Ireland with a selection of European countries. On average, crisis related measures added 0.3 per cent of

15 Local government receipts of €520 million are excluded from both Figure 6 and Table 2 as this is not considered to be a windfall but rather is viewed as a transfer within government.

16 We classify GG investment income (predominantly dividend and interest income) as non-tax revenue.

Figure 9: Net Revenue Impact of the Financial Crisis from 2008 to 2014: Cross Country Comparisons



Source: Eurostat.

GDP per annum to deficit ratios in the Euro Area, with the impacts largest in 2010 and 2012.[17] In terms of country specific losses, Ireland stands out followed by Slovenia, Greece, Cyprus and Spain (Figure 9).[18] In some limited cases (notably in Ireland, Denmark and Lithuania), the GG effects of financial crisis measures have turned positive as countries have managed to either divest of banking stakes and/or earn return on investments

4. Conclusion

Developments over the past decade have highlighted the susceptibility of the Irish economy to shocks. They have also emphasised the importance of relying on stable sources of government revenue and the risks associated with high public debt. With this in mind, two important trends in government revenue developments were discussed in this paper.

On the taxation side, there has been a strong recovery in income tax, which now represents around 40 per cent of tax revenue, up from just 26 per cent in 2007. Relying on solid, stable sources of tax revenue — rather than more cyclically sensitive sources — is desirable from a public finance perspective as it reduces a key vulnerability that developed in Ireland in the mid-2000s. Accordingly taking measures that reverse such trends would require careful consideration.

On the non-tax revenue side there has been a fourfold increase in inflows since 2007, partly due to the assistance government has provided to the financial sector. As the effects of the financial crisis dissipate, the impact on the public finances should become smaller and managing the transition to more 'normal' levels of non-tax related revenue receipts will be a challenge.

Furthermore, given that supporting the financial sector has added significantly to the stock of public debt — we estimate that around one-fifth of gross GG debt in 2014 relates to financial assistance measures — there would appear to be a strong case that any unexpected or windfall gains from these sources be used exclusively for debt reduction purposes. Similar arguments could be made in relation to any future income receipts arising from either the IBRC related Special Portfolio and the expanded Asset Purchase Programme.

The overall stock of government debt remains high and needs to be brought down to safer levels. While 2014 saw Ireland's GG debt ratio decline for the first time in nine years, the European Commission still expect it to be the sixth highest in the region in 2016 (see European Commission 2015). There are obvious reasons for wanting a lower debt ratio; there is evidence that high public debt is associated with lower GDP growth (see Cecchetti et al 2011), while it requires

17 A recent paper (Maurer and Grussenmeyer 2015) estimated that the overall financial cost of the financial crisis in the Euro Area up to 2013 was 5.1 per cent of GDP - this includes deficit and non-deficit impacting factors.

18 Most of the costs arose out of measures taken to support domestic banking systems principally capital injections and/or the nationalisation of certain banks.

a larger proportion of a country's resources go on servicing interest payments rather than being put to better use elsewhere. A quicker decline of public debt would also further reduce Ireland's vulnerability to shocks by providing more fiscal space to deal with cyclical fluctuations and limiting the risk of debt sustainability or funding problems emerging once again.

Finally, many governments now find themselves as significant holders of financial assets. Securing the best possible return on these assets while striking the appropriate balance between meeting the demands of the market (to be creditworthy) and the demands of the electorate will be a further challenge.

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Table 1: Impact of the Financial Crisis on GG Aggregates in Ireland

€ millions	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Revenue	**884**	**1,744**	**3,065**	**3,033**	**2,365**	**1,678**
Guarantee fees	437	1,074	1,215	934	421	155
Interest	387	508	1,041	1,539	1,092	712
Dividends	–	32	333	502	736	735
Other	60	130	476	59	117	77
Expenditure	**4,651**	**37,286**	**9,435**	**2,538**	**1,902**	**1,656**
Interest	651	1,893	2,142	1,905	1,715	1,432
Capital injections	4,000	35,393	7,121	280	–	–;
Calls on guarantees	–	–	0	0	0	0
Other	–	–	172	353	186	223
Impact on GGB	**-3,767**	**-35,543**	**-6,370**	**495**	**464**	**22**
Underlying GGB[19]	**-19,673**	**-18,134**	**-15,434**	**-14,560**	**-10,616**	**-7,651**

Source: CSO.

Table 2: Non-Tax Revenues: Outturn less Budget Day Expectations

€ millions	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Budget Day Expectation	565	684	726	2,355	1,970	2,495	2,360	1,980
Outturn	638	847	838	2,687	2,774	2,819	2,676	2,446*
Outturn less Expectation	73	163	112	332	804	324	316	466
Outturn less Expectation, %	11.4	19.2	13.3	12.4	29.0	11.5	11.8	19.0

Note: The Budget day expectation refers to the year-ahead projection for Exchequer non-tax revenues from successive Budgets. For example, Budget 2014 (published in October 2013) projected that non-tax revenues would be €1,980 million in 2014.

*Receipts from local government into non-tax revenues in 2014 are excluded.

19 This refers to the GG balance less financial crisis measures.

Table 3: Impact of the Financial Crisis for Selected Countries: Net Revenue

% of GDP	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Belgium	-0.0	-0.0	0.1	-0.1	-0.5	0.2	-0.0
Denmark	0.0	0.1	0.2	-0.1	0.2	0.1	0.1
Germany	-0.1	-0.1	-1.3	0.0	-0.1	0.0	0.0
Ireland	–	-2.2	-21.6	-3.7	0.3	0.3	0.0
Greece	-0.0	0.2	0.4	0.3	-2.7	-10.5	0.1
Spain	-0.0	0.1	0.1	-0.3	-3.6	-0.5	-0.1
France	0.0	0.1	0.0	0.0	-0.1	0.0	0.0
Cyprus	–	0.1	0.1	0.1	-0.2	-0.2	-8.5
Latvia	0.0	-1.0	-2.2	-0.3	-0.5	0.1	-0.3
Lithuania	–	–	-0.1	-3.7	-0.2	-0.7	1.1
Netherlands	0.0	-0.4	-0.2	-0.0	-0.0	-0.1	0.0
Austria	0.0	-0.9	-0.1	-0.1	-0.4	-0.4	-1.3
Portugal	0.0	0.0	-1.2	-0.5	-0.6	-0.4	-0.2
Slovenia	–	0.0	0.0	-0.6	-0.2	-10.2	-1.4
UK	-0.3	-0.5	0.1	0.1	0.1	-0.1	-0.0
Euro area	**-0.0**	**-0.1**	**-0.7**	**-0.1**	**-0.5**	**-0.3**	**-0.1**

Source: Eurostat.