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The Social and Employment Situation in Ireland (Update February 2013)

Based on a study conducted for the European Parliament under contract IP/A/EMPL/IC/2013-015

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Link to the original study: http://www.europarl.europa.eu/committees/en/studiesdownload.html?languageDocument=EN&file=85210

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POLICY DEPARTMENT A
ECONOMIC AND SCIENTIFIC POLICY

Economic and Monetary Affairs

Employment and Social Affairs

Environment, Public Health and Food Safety

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THE SOCIAL AND EMPLOYMENT SITUATION IN IRELAND (UPDATE FEBRUARY 2013)

EMPL DELEGATION TO IRELAND

11-13 February 2013

NOTE

Abstract

This briefing paper provides an overview on the social and employment situation in Ireland. It sets out how the Irish government responded to the financial crisis. In this context, the key measures to combat poverty and social exclusion are presented. Similarly, the authors shed light on the policy priorities of the Irish EU Presidency, beginning in January 2013. Finally, the paper covers the topical issues discussed by the public in the field of employment and social affairs.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CAP	Common Agricultural Policy
CFP	Common Fishering Policy
EEA	European Economic Area
EGF	European Globalisation Adjustment
EPSCO	Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council
ESF	European Social Fund
FÁS	Foras Áiseanna Saothair (Training and Employment Authority)
FIS	Family Income Supplement
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
HRC	Habitual Residence Condition
ICTU	Irish Congress of Trade Unions
ILO	International Labour Organization
IMF	International Monetary Fund
MFF	Multiannual Financial Framework
NESC	National Economic and Social Council
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NMW	National Minimum Wage
OECD	Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
OPF	One-Parent Family Payment
PRSI	Pay Related Social Insurance
PSC	Public Services Committee
PSCI	Programme for Social Change and Innovation
SPC	Social Protection Committee

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The economic downturn following the financial crisis in 2008 had a massive impact on the Irish economy as one of the first Member States of the EU. As a result, GDP in Ireland declined strikingly by 6.7 % between 2008 and 2011. In the course of the crisis, the employment rate decreased steadily and the unemployment rate climbed up to 14.8% in August 2012. The young were affected disproportionally, as the youth unemployment rate increased from 9% prior to the crisis to 30% in the first half of 2012.

Consequently, the share of people at risk of poverty increased, while the total number of people immigrating to Ireland declined sharply in the aftermath of the crisis, reaching its lowest point in 2010. As a result of the collapse of the construction sector, the long-term unemployed are accounting for an ever increasing proportion of the unemployed. While in 2007, 30% of those unemployed were considered long-term unemployed, this number increased to 64% within the first half of 2012.

During that time, the general debt increased from, compared to other Member States, a relatively moderate rate of 25% in 2007 to 107% of GDP in 2011. Consequently, Ireland received a €67.5 billion bailout by a consortium of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the European Central Bank (ECB), and the European Commission.

Social partnership in Ireland was negatively affected by the impact of the crisis. The government unilaterally ended the system of centralised agreements within the public sector and pushed through noticeable pay cuts within the public sector. In return, the government committed not to implement compulsory redundancies - known as the Croke Park Agreement. The trade unions accepted the transformation programme and committed to maintaining industrial peace. The Croke Park agreement is currently under re-negotiation.

Ireland still has a very generous welfare system in particular with regard to the benefits of pensioners. However, in December 2012, the Irish government announced its budget for 2013 which included spending cuts to fulfil the suggestions made by the IMF. The policy approach to meeting the poverty targets are set out in the National Action Plan for Social Inclusion, aimed at protecting the most vulnerable from the worst impacts of the crisis. In the context of strong financial constraints, it will be very demanding for the government to reconcile its commitments with the EU 2020 poverty goals.

In January 2013, Ireland took over the EU Presidency. The programme prioritises the jobs and growth agenda and supports and promotes the Europe 2020 process. The EU Programme for Social Change and Innovation (PSCI), aiming at framing cohesion policy for 2014-2020 by supporting employment and social policies, is part of the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) which is currently being negotiated. In this context, Ireland supports the position of the European Commission and is aware of the amendments made by the European Parliament.

Nevertheless, and taking into account the urgent need to stimulate growth and create jobs, the Irish Presidency will be less likely to push issues regarding social affairs higher up the political agenda. In the past, the Irish Presidency has helped to finalise the Stability and Growth Pact and has made significant progress with regard to the Lisbon Treaty. That is why Ireland is strongly committed to performing well during its Presidency and gaining ground concerning its international reputation, as Ireland has been suffering from an intense reputational damage since the beginning of the financial crisis.

1. EMPLOYMENT AND SOCIAL SITUATION IN IRELAND

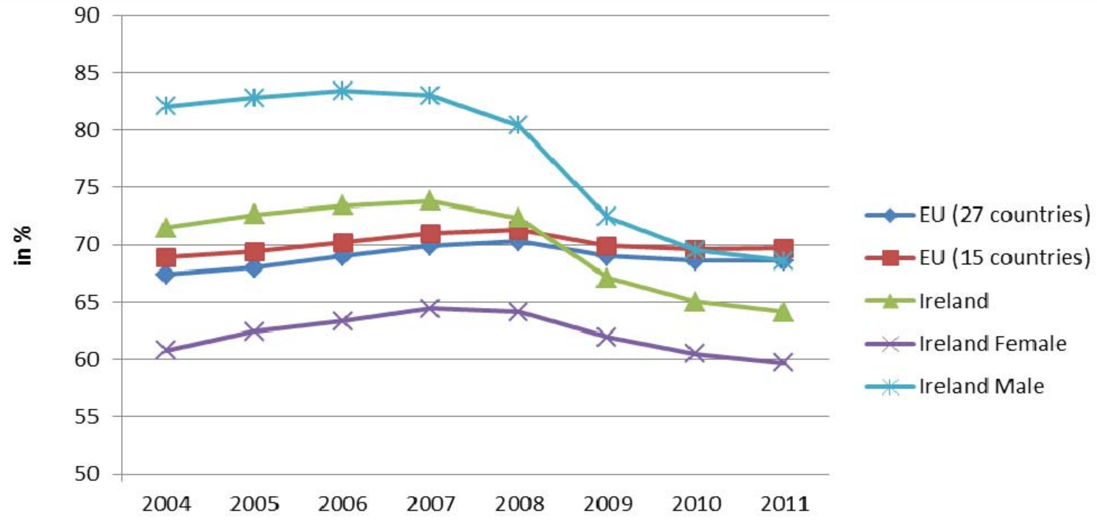
KEY FINDINGS

- Ireland has been hit hard by the financial crisis. Between 2008 and 2011, real GDP fell by 6.7%. Employment rates have been steadily declining since 2007. In 2011, the unemployment rate was 14.8%.
- Youth unemployment is particularly high, having increased from 9% in 2007 to 30% in the first half of 2012. At the same time, public debt soared. The general government debt increased from 25% to 107% of GDP between 2007 and 2011.
- The social partnership was negatively affected by the impact of the crisis. The system of centralised agreements broke down. However, unlike in other Member States, the Irish did not participate in strikes and social peace was maintained.

Ireland has been amongst those Member States of the EU which were hit badly during the financial and economic crisis. Between 2000 and 2007, the Irish economy grew on average (in real GDP) by 5.6% annually. As a result of the collapse of the construction and banking sector, **economic activity** dropped sharply and Ireland entered a deep recession from 2008 onwards. Between 2008 and 2011 real GDP fell by 6.7%. In the aftermath of the economic downturn, the employment situation for large parts of the Irish population worsened. Between 2000 and 2007, the unemployment rate was 4.5% on average.

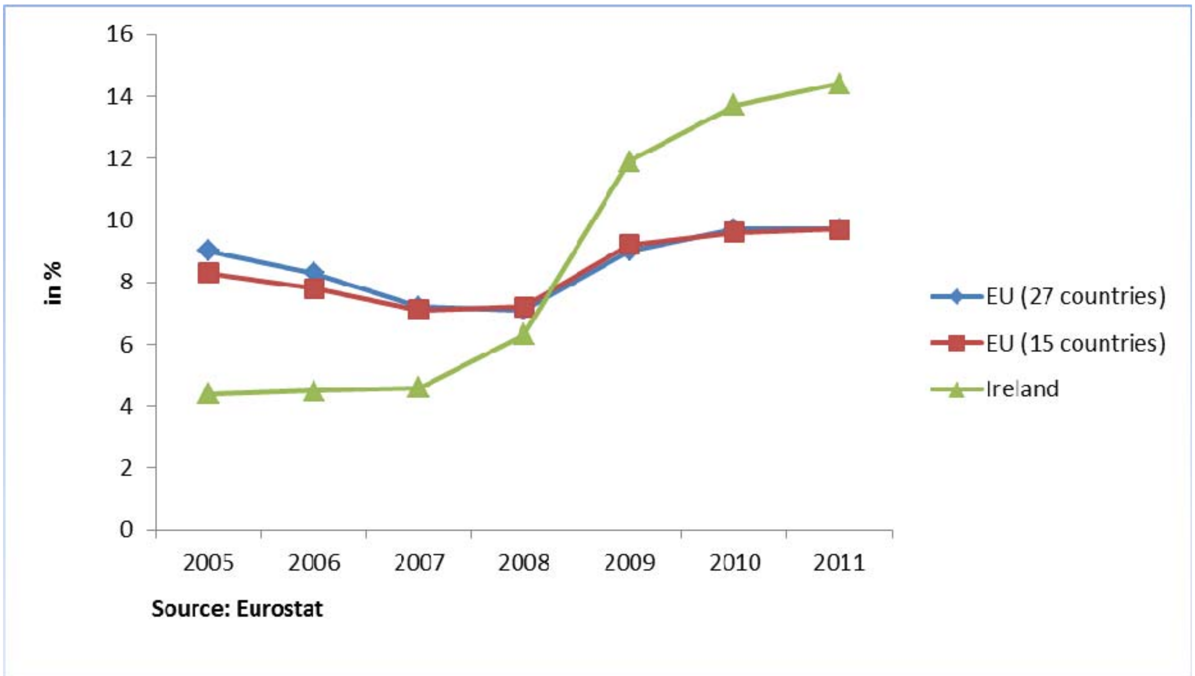
However, with the onset of the economic crisis, the employment rate fell back to 2004 levels and the rate of unemployment increased substantially. The fall in the participation rate on the labour market was higher for men than for women. A higher participation rate of women in the service sector and a higher participation rate of men within the construction sector may serve as a possible explanation for this observation. In 2011, the unemployment rate amounted to 14.4%. At the same time, public debt soared. The general government debt increased from 25% to 107% of GDP between 2007 and 2011 (according to the ESRI).

Figure 1: Employment Rate (Total)



Source: Eurostat

Figure 2: Unemployment Rate (Total)

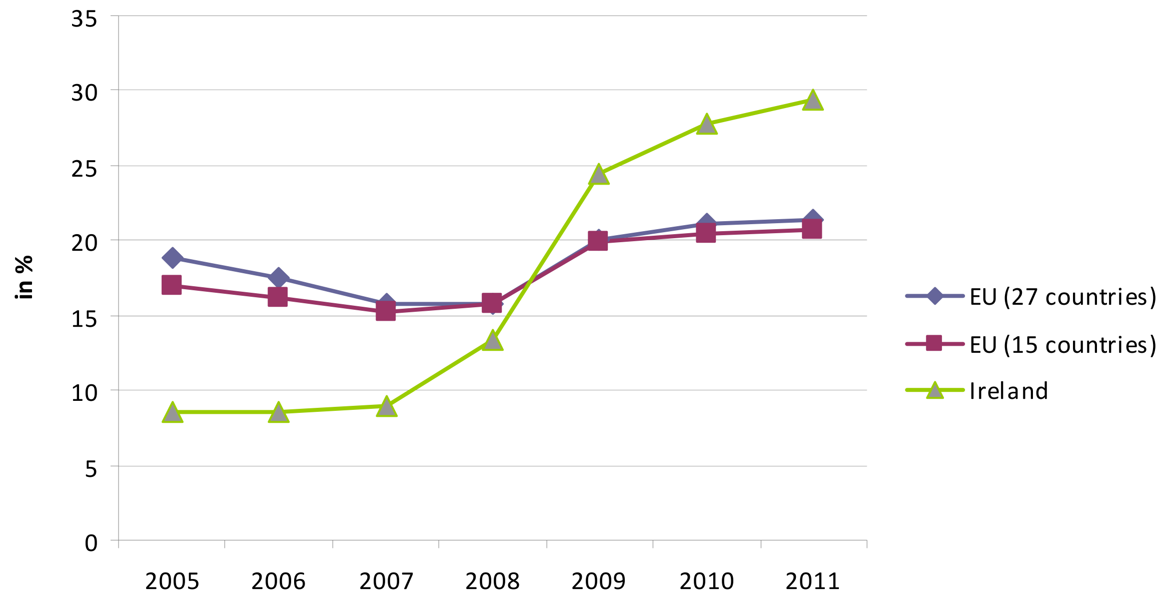


In 2010, **social partnership** was negatively affected by the impact of the crisis, as the system of centralised agreements broke down. Nevertheless, unlike in other Member States, the Irish population recognized the necessity of adapting to the changed economic environment. The reason for this is closely related to the cultural background including no long tradition of going on strike or self-activity of workers. The 20 years of social partnership led to a rather passive behaviour. Many workers have no experience of fighting for a pay claim as their wages have been settled nationally. Thus, little confidence and networks amongst worker groups exist.

The situation within the public sector was marked by the Croke Park Agreement. The Irish government avoided laying off workers and employees within the public sector, but at the same time carried out drastic pay cuts. The agreement included an industrial peace clause which prevents public sector workers taking industrial action related to the reform programme and which can be considered as a ban on strikes in the public sector (Gellis/Harrington 2010: 21-22). The government is currently in talks with union leaders to negotiate an extension to the Croke Park agreement, aimed at reducing the total public service pay and pension bill by a further €1 billion through pay cuts, increased working hours reduced overtime hours and changes to supervision and substitution payments of teachers.

In November 2010, debt problems forced Ireland to apply for a €90 billion **bail-out** by the European Union and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Since the beginning of the crisis, many employees and workers have been facing **unemployment**. The rate of unemployment has risen from approximately 6.3% in 2008 to over 14% in 2011. At the same time, wages and working conditions of employment deteriorated (Dobbins, 2011). As a result of the collapse in the construction sector, the amount of long-term unemployment increased significantly. Besides the high rates of youth unemployment in Ireland, around 30% in September 2012, the issue of high rates of long-term unemployment is put high on the political agenda. According to the Central Statistics Office in Ireland, the unemployment rate in Ireland totalled 14.8% in August 2012 (Central Statistics Office, 2012).

Figure 3: Youth Unemployment Rate under the age of 25



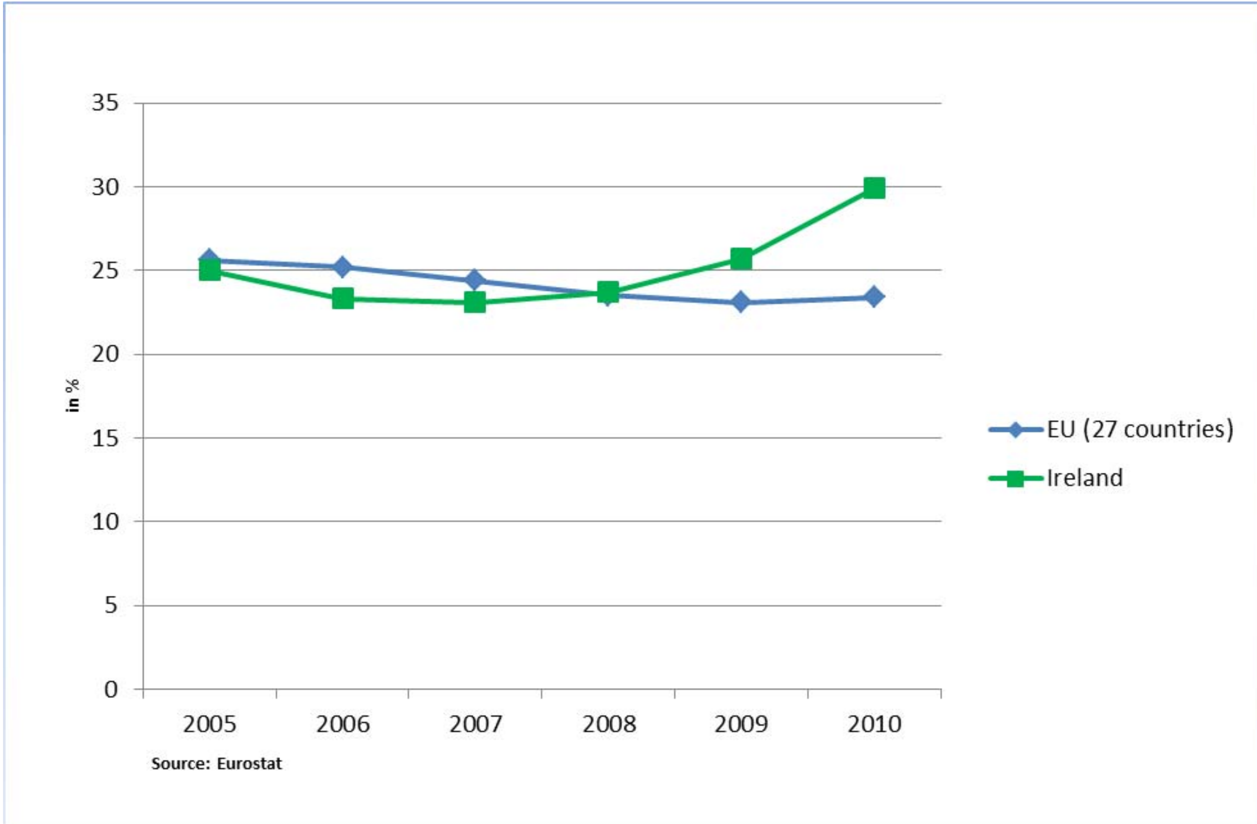
Source: Eurostat

Prior to the crisis, over 250,000 **young people** (under 25) were in employment but this number was reduced to 132,000 by Q1 2012. Amongst others, the reason for this is that young people, in general, suffer disproportionately from job losses in recessions as they have occupied their positions only recently and are likely to have temporary contracts. Likewise, young people are often employed in cyclically sensitive industries (Scarpetta et al., 2010).

The availability of job opportunities, in particular for those leaving schools or universities, are poor compared to the situation before the crisis started. This problem is acute in Ireland. Not only the 'insider-outsider' effect and the 'last-in-first-out' approach, but also the flexibility of the Irish labour market, where it is easy to lay off workers, contributed to the high rate of youth unemployment (DJEI, 2012: 1-2).

The share of **people at risk of poverty** in Ireland rose from 23% to 30% between 2007 and 2010, as figure 4 shows. However, compared to other Member States of the EU, Ireland still has a generous pensions and social welfare system, encompassing little change to pensions, child benefits, mortgage and rent allowances as well as medical cards since the beginning of the crisis (Mooloy/Weston, 2012). The medical card constitutes a means-tested social benefit in Ireland which allows the holder to receive specific health services for free. Prior to January 2009, every person aged over 70 was entitled to the medical card.

Figure 4: People at Risk of Poverty or Social Exclusion

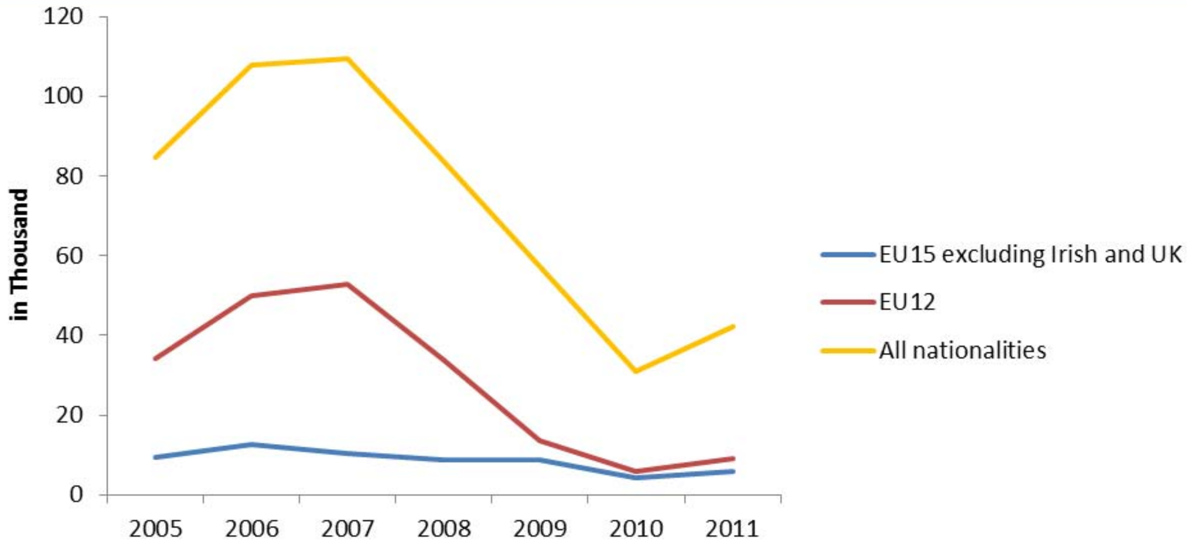


The late nineties and early noughties were characterised by high levels of immigration in Ireland. According to census figures, 12% of the Irish population were non Irish citizens in 2011. Most of them are of working age and come from the UK, followed by other EU Member States.

During the recession, sectors employing high rates of **migrants** were heavily affected, including construction, the hospitality sector (tourism, hotel and catering industries), retail, manufacturing and other industries. Consequently, migrants faced higher rates of unemployment. Due to the crisis, the number of migrants coming to Ireland has decreased significantly. During the past few years, the number of employment permits issued was reduced by 66%. Only some migrants have returned to their home countries while the vast majority has remained in Ireland. Migrants from EU Member States can work in Ireland without an employment permit (MRCI, n.y.: 3-4).

This includes migrants from Romania and Bulgaria, since the Irish Government lifted restrictions on people from Bulgaria or Romania entering the Irish labour market with effect from January 1st 2012. That is, nationals from both Member States no longer need an employment permit to work in Ireland (Citizens Information, 2012: 1). However, migrant workers often encounter problems accessing Social Assistance and Child Benefit payments because of the Habitual Residence Condition (HRC). The HRC constitutes a test to assess whether a person has an established connection to Ireland or not. It depends upon the length of residency, occupations in the past and family connections. As claiming social welfare has a negative impact on applications for Irish citizenship, many non-EEA migrants avoid claiming welfare (MRCI, n.y.: 5-6).

Figure 5: Estimated Population Immigration by Nationality



Source: Central Statistics Office

As figure 5 shows, until 2006/2007, the total number of people immigrating to Ireland grew constantly. However, according to data from the Central Statistics Office, over the course of the financial crisis, the total number of immigrants decreased strikingly and reached its lowest point in 2010. Since then, the amount of people immigrating to Ireland has been increasing slightly again.

2. SOCIAL AND EMPLOYMENT LEGISLATION AND POLICY

KEY FINDINGS

- The social welfare system in Ireland is divided into three main types of payment: social insurance payments, means-tested payments and universal payments.
- Ireland was one of the five countries in the EU where the rate of unemployment more than doubled during the current crisis. If emigration had not been so high over this period, the current unemployment figures would be higher.
- The Croke Park Agreement includes a four-year pay freeze and commitments by the government not to realise compulsory redundancies and to maintain existing pension arrangements. In return, the trade unions agreed to a 'transformation' programme, expected to yield increased productivity and efficiency, as well as a commitment to maintain industrial peace.
- The policy approach to meeting the poverty target is set out in the National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2007-2011. This action plan aims at protecting the most vulnerable from the worst impact of the crisis.

2.1. Employment legislation & working conditions

Under Irish law, certain terms and conditions of employment must be documented in writing within two months of the commencement of employment. Most employees (excluding members of the police service, defence forces, etc.) may not work more than an average of 48 hours per week, calculated over four months. There is also provision for minimum rest breaks. Workers over 18 are entitled to the National Minimum Wage (NMW) of €8.65 per hour. Sub-minimum rates exist for employees under 18 (70% of the NMW), employees in their first year of employment (80% of the NMW) and employees in their second year of employment (90% of the NMW). Legislation precludes part-time and fixed-term employees from being treated less favourably than comparable full-time employees. An employee has a statutory entitlement to paid annual leave (minimum four weeks for full-time employees).

A pregnant employee has a statutory entitlement to maternity leave, usually 26 weeks. There is an option of additional maternity leave of 6 weeks. An adopting employee has an entitlement to ordinary adoptive leave of 24 weeks and additional adoptive leave of 16 weeks. An employer is not obliged to pay an employee while on maternity/adoptive leave. An employee can take advantage of parental leave (14 weeks per child) and carer's leave (13 to 104 weeks), provided they satisfy certain statutory criteria. There is no obligation to pay employees on parental or carer's leave. It is at the discretion of the employer to decide his/her own policy on sick pay and sick leave, subject to the employee's contract or terms of employment. There is no obligation on employers to pay employees while they are on sick leave.[1]

[1] Information compiled from the Citizen's Information Board (www.citizensinformation.ie).

Trade unions first emerged in Ireland during the industrial revolution in the 1890's. The Irish constitution guarantees the right of citizens to form associations and become members of trade unions, although employers are not obliged to recognize a trade union or engage in collective bargaining with them. Almost 95% of the public sector is unionised while less than 50% of the manufacturing sector and 10% of the private white collar sector is unionised. Unionisation has been in steady decline in Ireland in recent years.[2]

The Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act 2005 applies to all employers, employees (including fixed-term and temporary employees) and self-employed people in their workplaces. The Act sets out the rights and obligations of both employers and employees and provides for substantial fines and penalties for breaches of the health and safety legislation. The main provisions of this act are that the employer has a duty to ensure the employees' safety, health and welfare at work as far as is reasonably practicable. In turn, the employee must take reasonable care in the workplace and not engage in any behaviour which might endanger their health or the health of others.

The social welfare system in Ireland provides for three types of payment: social insurance payments, means-tested (or social assistance) payments and universal payments. Since May 2004, individuals must be habitually resident to qualify for means-tested payments. Social insurance payments are made to those who satisfy specific contribution (PRSI) conditions in addition to the other eligibility conditions.[3]

As one of the **payments based on social insurance contributions**, the jobseeker's benefit is for those made redundant, laid off or suffering reduced working hours. There is also illness benefit intended for those with a short-term illness. Invalidity pensions are intended for those with a long-term incapacity. Maternity benefit is paid for 26 weeks to women on maternity leave from work and who have paid a certain amount of PRSI. The amount paid depends on earnings. Carer's benefit is guaranteed for those who leave the workforce to care for a person in need of full-time care. Like in all other Member States of the EU, contributory state pensions are guaranteed in Ireland. The qualifying age is currently 66 but it will rise to 67 in 2021 and 68 in 2028. Lastly, Widow's, Widower's or Surviving Civil Partner's Contributory Pension is paid to the husband, wife or civil partner of a deceased person.

Some **means tested payments** are designed for people who do not have enough PRSI contributions to qualify for the equivalent social insurance based payments. They include disability allowance, jobseekers allowance, carer's allowance and the non-contributory state pension. The qualifying age for the latter is currently 66. It will rise to 67 in 2021 and 68 in 2028. Additional means-tested benefits include the Family Income Supplement, which is a weekly tax-free payment available to employees on low pay with children. Further means-tested benefits include the One-Parent Family Payment (OPF) which is paid to men and women who are bringing children up without the support of a partner. If working, the parent can also get a One Parent Family Tax Credit. Likewise, Rent Supplement is paid to people living in private rented accommodation who cannot provide for the cost of their accommodation from their own resources. Of utmost importance is the medical card which entitles the holder and her dependents to free or heavily subsidised healthcare and is provided for the under-70's with low income and the over-70's (with a much higher income threshold and an exemption from the means test for those with expensive medical conditions). An individual can keep their medical card for three years after returning to employment from unemployment. Lastly, the Supplementary Welfare Allowance is a last resort benefit which provides a basic weekly allowance to eligible people who have little or no income.

2 Figures used here stem from Arthur Cox's Guide to Employment Law in Ireland.
3 Information combined from www.welfare.ie and www.citizensinformation.ie.

Universal payments are paid regardless of a person's income or social insurance record. They are dependent on the claimant satisfying specific personal circumstances e.g. child benefit. Generally, all of the social welfare payments are made up of a base payment plus supplements for a dependent spouse, civil partner or cohabitant and dependent children.

2.2. Employment and labour market policy during the crisis

Ireland was one of the five countries in the EU where the rate of unemployment more than doubled during the current crisis. The others were Spain, Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia (Rigney, 2012). Youth and long-term unemployment grew particularly fast during this period. Furthermore, it is likely that, if emigration had not been so high over this period, the current unemployment figures would be higher.[4] Under the National Employment Action Plan, prepared in 2003 against the background of a downturn in the world economy and slow economic growth, persons in receipt of the Jobseekers Benefit or Jobseekers Allowance who reach three months duration on the Live Register of unemployment were identified by the Department of Social Protection and referred to FÁS, the national training and employment authority for an activation interview which could lead to job search assistance or employment or training opportunities. In a recent analysis of this policy McGuinness et al. (2011) find that not all of those who needed to participate in an activation measure did so. They also find that those who participated in the referral process were less likely to become employed, although the FÁS training programmes did increase participants' employment prospects.

2012 saw the launch of the Action Plan for Jobs and Pathways to Work initiatives, which address some of the Employment Guidelines proposed by the European Commission in October 2010 and the poverty and employment targets of EU 2020. The Action Plan for Jobs involves a wide range of measures to incentivise, attract and support start-ups, to promote Foreign Direct Investment and, generally, to develop sustainable employment in Ireland. Pathways to Work prioritises more engagement with the unemployed; greater targeting of activation measures; incentivising the take-up of opportunities; incentivising employers to provide more jobs for the unemployed and reforming institutions to deliver better services to people who are unemployed. The Irish government has introduced six anti-crisis budgets since 2008. Spending on capital projects and infrastructure has been heavily curbed, restricting the capability of such projects to stimulate the economy. Also, cuts to income tax credits and a lowering of the income limit at which the income tax rate increases to the next level were carried out. In addition, the following measures have been taken with respect to tax and social protection:[5]

- the elimination of the Pay Related Social Insurance (PRSI) ceiling;
- the extension of PRSI to unearned income (e.g. rent, dividends etc.)
- a broadening of the tax base by the introduction of an Income Levy in 2009 and the replacement of this Income Levy, and the Health Levy which was previously included in PRSI payments, with a Universal Social Charge on income in 2011;
- reductions in Child Benefit;
- the introduction of the public sector pension levy (Pension Related Deduction);
- cuts in public sector pay producing overall reductions in salaries ranging from 5% at the bottom of the pay scale to 15% in the case of salaries up to €200,000;
- cuts to social welfare payments such as the One Parent Family Benefit, the Jobseekers Allowance, the Carer's Allowance and the Disability Allowance;
- a cut in the Irish minimum income (the Supplementary Welfare Allowance).
- a cut in the duration of the Jobseeker's Benefit from 12 to 9 months
- the introduction of taxation on maternity benefit

4 Figures were drawn from Eurostat.
5 Information compiled from the website of the Irish Department of Finance (http://budget.gov.ie).

Furthermore, the hourly NMW was cut by €1 per hour by the Fianna Fáil/Green Party coalition government in February 2011 in a move to increase cost competitiveness and create more jobs. However, the measure was reversed shortly thereafter in July 2011 by the new Fine Gael/Labour coalition government. Callan et al. (2012), in a study of the successive Irish budgets between 2008 and 2012, find that, over this 4 year period, the distributional impact is strongly progressive. The lowest income groups lose out by about 4 – 5% while the highest income group loses by almost 13%. However, this pattern is mainly driven by budgets 2008-2011. Budget 2012 decreases the income of the lowest earners by around 2% while the highest earners experience a decrease of around 1%.

Social partnership in Ireland brings government departments and representatives of society (including employers, voluntary and community organisations and trade unions) together to negotiate wages, industrial action, housing, transport, education and other issues relating to social and economic development. The latest social partnership agreement is Towards 2016: Ten Year Framework Social Partnership Agreement 2006 - 2015. The agreement was reviewed and amended by Towards 2016: A Review and Transitional Agreement 2008 - 2009. This agreement deals with the economy, the environment, infrastructure and social policy. It also sets out a framework on wages, working conditions and employment rights.[6]

Faced with worsening exchequer figures, Ireland's 22-year-old system of social partnership fell apart in 2009 when talks between the public sector trade unions, represented by the Public Services Committee (PSC) of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU), and the government on how to secure a €1 billion reduction in the public pay bill failed. One of the outcomes of this breakdown was a division between the procedures for pay bargaining in the public and private sector. Since late 2009 there are two separate systems of collective bargaining in Ireland. The framework for public sector pay bargaining is the Public Service Agreement 2010-2014 (the Croke Park Agreement). The agreement, which was negotiated at Croke Park, Ireland's Gaelic games stadium, imposes a four-year pay freeze and extracted a promise from the government to honour the existing pension arrangements and not to enforce redundancies. In return, trade unions committed to industrial peace, as well as a 'transformation' programme, which was expected to increase productivity and efficiency (Rigney, 2012).

The deal affects civil servants, health workers, teachers and other public sector workers. The IBEC-ICTU National Protocol for the Orderly Conduct of Industrial Relations and Local Bargaining in the Private Sector (the IBEC/ICTU Protocol) lays down principles for negotiation and dispute resolution in the (unionised) private sector.[7]

At the time of writing, the Irish government is in talks with trade union leaders about an extension to the Croke Park agreement. At this stage of the talk, public service management have proposed radical reforms, including pay cuts, increased working hours, reduced overtime rates and changes to supervision and substitution payments for teachers. These reforms, which have so far been rejected by unions, target an extra €1 billion in savings on the Government's pay and pensions bill.

[6] Information compiled from www.citizensinformation.ie.
[7] Oireachtas Library and Research Service Spotlight No. 4, 2011

2.3. Social policies and measures to combat poverty and exclusion

As figure 5 shows, the share of people at risk of poverty in Ireland rose from 23% to 30% between 2007 and 2010. The share of working people at risk of poverty (or the in-work poverty rate) increased from 5.6% to 7.6% over the same time period. Consistent poverty (which is targeted at 4% by 2016 and 2% or less by 2020 under EU2020 guidelines) has also increased from 5.1% in 2007 to 6.2% in 2010. The policy approach to meeting the poverty target is set out in the National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2007-2011.

This action plan aims to protect the most vulnerable in Irish society from the crisis. In Budgets 2012 and 2013, the nominal value of welfare rates was maintained. According to the action plan, minimum welfare payments (including the fuel allowance) in 2010 were equivalent to the at-risk-of-poverty threshold (measured as 60% of median equivalised disposable income) and social transfers were responsible for reducing poverty by 60%, one of the highest such figures in the EU (European Commission, 2012f).

The restoration of the value of the minimum wage in 2011 and the exemption, since 2012, of the lowest earners from the Universal Social Charge, are initiatives which target in-work poverty. Additionally, the level of the Family Income Supplement (FIS), which is targeted at low income working families with children, was increased in 2009 and 2010 and maintained thereafter. However, low awareness and take-up (estimated at around 1/3 of eligible recipients) of the FIS reduces the effectiveness of this measure (Bargain and Doorley, 2011). The increased focus on activation policy in Pathways to Work is a relevant initiative in this area.

3. IRELAND'S PRIORITIES FOR THE EU PRESIDENCY

KEY FINDINGS

- The Irish Presidency prioritises the stimulation of sustainable economic growth and job creation. Ireland also continues to support and promote the Europe 2020 process which provides a blueprint for growth across the EU by focussing on areas such as employment, innovation, education and social cohesion.
- The programme contains policy areas such as economic governance and the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) as well as legislative proposals which are able to stimulate economic recovery and job creation. A strong focus is put on strengthening the Single Market, in particular with regard to services.
- The Irish Presidency intends to promote active inclusion in the context of Europe 2020 and the poverty reduction targets. The main focus here is to identify measures in order to reduce unemployment across the EU.

On 1 January 2013, Ireland took over the Presidency of the Council of the EU and now takes responsibility for all central decisions to be taken by the EU. According to the Irish Prime Minister, Enda Kenny, the absolute priority is the stimulation of sustainable economic **growth and job creation** (Kenny, 2012b) during the Irish Presidency. In addition to this, Ireland aims to strengthen social cohesion. Ireland continues to support and promote the **Europe 2020 process** which provides a blueprint for growth across the EU by focussing on areas such as employment, innovation, education and social cohesion (Creighton, 2012b: 2).

In addition to the jobs and growth agenda, the Irish Presidency programme contains policy areas such as **economic governance** and the **Multiannual Financial Framework** (MFF). This includes legislative proposals which are able to stimulate economic recovery and job creation with prospects of succeeding in the legislative process. A strong focus is thereby put on strengthening the **Single Market**, in particular with regard to services (Creighton 2012a: 8). In October 2012, the European Commission proposed a second set of actions under the Single Market Act II to further develop the Single Market and unveil Europe's potential (European Commission, 2012). In doing so, the proposed actions shape the political agenda for the Irish Presidency (Kenny, 2012a: 2).

In addition to **social security, pensions and combating poverty**, the political agenda of the Irish Presidency focuses on the issues of **active inclusion** in the context of Europe 2020, including the poverty reduction targets which are closely related to the issue of employment. The main focus here is to identify measures in order to reduce unemployment across the EU. For this purpose, the education agenda, encompassing the up-skilling and quality of the workforce in the EU, forms a strong part of the European Semester process (Creighton, 2012a: 8-10; 2012b: 3).

Besides this, the Irish Presidency aims to increase **youth employment** significantly. The objective is to offer young school-leavers employment, continued education, an apprenticeship or a traineeship within a few months. The Youth Employment Package of the European Commission includes a so-called 'youth guarantee'. This recommendation for the EU Member States entails that each young person up to age 25 who becomes unemployed is guaranteed a job offer, an apprenticeship, training or combined work and training within four months.

The Irish Presidency supports the adoption of the Council Recommendation at the February EPSCO Council meeting to promote the **'European Youth Guarantee'** in order to decrease youth unemployment (EurActiv, 2012c).

All these measures can be financially supported by the **European Social Fund** (ESF) (Kenny 2012a: 3), since the ESF is a structural and strategic fund intended to promote employment throughout the Member States of the EU. It also aims to foster economic and social cohesion by decreasing differences in prosperity and living standards.

According to the Commission proposal, the **European Globalisation Fund** (EGF) shall be maintained within the next MFF as it serves as an important instrument of solidarity. Despite the fact that a significant number of Member States expressed their concerns regarding the future of the EGF (Council of the European Union, 2012: 13), Ireland can be considered a strong supporter of the continuation of both funds as a mean of solidarity (Department of Education and Skills, 2012: 10). The Irish Presidency seeks to obtain agreement on the Commission's current proposal (Irish Presidency of the Council of the European Union, 2013). Amongst others, the reason for this is that Ireland has been a great beneficiary of both funds since the beginning of the financial crisis. At the same time, Ireland intends to avoid a situation where these funds overlap. Moreover, safeguarding the implementation of concrete and demanding National Job Plans across Member States forms a crucial part of the European Semester process within the Irish Presidency (Kenny 2012b: 3). Against this background, the Presidency is working with the European Parliament for an agreement on this funding proposal (Irish Presidency of the Council of the European Union, 2013).

The **European Semester**, the new system of coordinating economic and budgetary policy within the EU, begins with the European Commission's Annual Growth Survey. It includes broad guidelines for Member States in order to meet the Europe 2020 targets. The survey has a significant impact on the sectoral Councils taking place during the first two months of the Irish Presidency. Similarly, the survey fed into the agenda of the EPSCO Council in June 2012, during which the employment package, launched by the European Commission in April 2012, was discussed. The basic objective of the employment package is to create jobs and allow for a job-rich recovery (Council of the European Union, 2012).

The EU economic governance reinforces the economic agenda in the EU and implies a closer EU surveillance of Member States to better coordinate policy across the EU (European Commission, 2012e). The latest measures in the field of economic governance, including the employment package, are in line with Irish interests in this regard (Bruton, 2012: 1).

The Irish economy was amongst those Member States hit hardest since the beginning of the financial crisis in 2007. GDP fell by 12-14% and resulted in a banking crisis as, essentially, all banks needed help from the government. The contributions made by the Irish Government, including financial aid from abroad, to rescue the banking sector amounted to nearly 60bn €, while Ireland's GDP totalled approximately 156bn € in 2011. From 2013 onwards, as a new element of the European Semester, a scoreboard is in place in order to record the Member States' progress in implementing their National Job Plans. This includes a stronger involvement of the EU and national social partners in employment policy and in the exchange of views with the social partners at EU level. Ireland is heavily engaged in those exchanges as part of the Irish Presidency (Bruton, 2012: 2).

In order to successfully manage this complex policy process, Ireland has to take into account all policy formations. Of utmost importance to the Irish Presidency is to ensure that a budget is agreed on. A new MFF for the budget cycle 2014-2020 has already been negotiated from mid-2011 onwards (Creighton, 2012a: 7). The MFF Regulation sets out the maximum annual amounts which the EU is allowed to spend on different policy areas including an overall ceiling for all expenditures (European Union, 2004-2011).

The **EU Programme for Social Change and Innovation** (PSCI), aimed at framing cohesion policy for 2014-2020 by supporting employment and social policies, is part of the MFF and is negotiated horizontally. The programme contains financial assistance for the EU's objectives with a view to generating higher employment, safeguarding social protection, combating social exclusion and poverty, and enhancing working conditions (Irish Presidency of the Council of the European Union, 2013). In this context, Ireland supports the position of the European Commission and is aware of the amendments made by the European Parliament. However, Ireland shares some concerns on the amendments, as the Employment and Social Affairs Committee intends to prioritise youth initiatives. The Irish position is in favour of the *status quo* of the PSCI, which should not be redesigned. The Commission's current proposal provides cross-border employee mobility and attempts to create recruitment/placement services in favour of job-seekers and employers. The Irish Presidency supports the adoption of the PSCI (Irish Presidency of the Council of the European Union, 2013). A particular emphasis, on the basis of a strong national interest of the Irish Presidency, is put on the reform of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). The reason for this is that Ireland remains a Member State with a strong agricultural background. In the context of the MFF, the Irish Presidency also points out that progress has to be made in terms of the reform of the common fisheries policy (CFP). Likewise, further steps shall be taken regarding Horizon 2020, the EU framework programme for research and innovation. Horizon 2020 serves as a financial instrument to complement the Innovation Union which is part of the Europe 2020 strategy intending to safeguard Europe's global competitiveness (European Commission 2012a; 2012c/Creighton, 2012: 6-7).

Lastly, the **EU Cohesion Policy** 2014-2020, or regional policy, also depends heavily on the future shape of the MFF. The current financial framework (2007-2013) is distributed in regional policy amounts of an average of €50 bn per year, which is 35.7% of the total EU budget (EurActiv, 2012a).

In June 2012 the Council was informed about ongoing work on a directive relating to minimum health and safety requirements regarding the exposure of workers to the risks arising from physical agents (**electromagnetic fields**). The new directive amends the directive from 2004, which has never been implemented (Council of the European Union, 2012: 14). With regard to the proposal setting out health and safety requirements for workers facing these risks, the Irish Presidency seeks to attain progress during the EPSCO Council in this respect (Irish Presidency of the Council of the European Union, 2013). Nonetheless, the relevant Irish Department concluded in its latest report that no adverse short or long-term health effects have been found resulting from signals of mobile phones and base station transmitters (Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government, 2007).

In June 2012, the Council endorsed as far as possible the report on **pension** adequacy (2010- 2050) which was issued by the Commission and the Social Protection Committee (SPC) (Council of the European Union, 2012: 16). Most pension systems in the EU encounter major sustainability and adequacy issues. However, according to the Minister for Social protection, Joan Burton, Ireland's pensioners have one of the lowest poverty rates (at 0.9%) across Europe and are also least likely to be at risk of poverty. Also, Ireland's overall pension policy is currently under examination by the OECD.

The awaited findings of this investigation might have an impact on Ireland's view on national and European pension policy (Department of Social Protection, 2012: 1-2). Since pensioners have several benefits such as free travel passes, medical cards, free television licences as well as cheap electricity and phone calls, the budget for 2013 includes cuts to the generous benefits for pensioners. Nevertheless, even the IMF states that the relatively generous pensions contributed to preventing poverty when the economy broke down (Molloy and Weston, 2012).

Furthermore, the Presidency works to remove obstacles to citizen mobility. The **Supplementary Pensions Rights** Directive implies the promotion of the freedom of movement and the workers' occupational mobility. Therefore, the Irish Presidency intends to achieve a general approach on the proposal concerning supplementary pension schemes during the EPSCO council meeting in June 2013. In addition to this, the Irish Presidency prioritises the 'New Enforcement Directive'[8] to enhance the existing rule in terms of the **posting of workers**, as this would provide clarity for service providers and secure the rights of posted workers. Against this background, the Presidency works to reach a First Reading Agreement on the proposal (Irish Presidency of the Council of the European Union, 2013).

In the past, the Irish Presidency has helped finalise the Stability and Growth Pact and has made significant progress with regard to the Lisbon Treaty. This is why Ireland is strongly committed to performing well during its next Presidency and gaining ground concerning its international reputation, as Ireland has suffered from an intense reputational damage since the beginning of the financial crisis.

[8] 'Proposal for a directive of the European Parliament and of the council on the enforcement of Directive 96/71/ECconcerning the posting of workers in the framework of the provision of services', COM(2012) 131final.

4. TOPICAL ISSUES IN EMPLOYMENT AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS

KEY FINDINGS

- In July 2012, the IMF examined Ireland's economic policies in light of the €67.5 billion bailout that the country received from the IMF, European Central Bank and European Commission and made a number of recommendations, some of which were incorporated into the Irish 2013 Budget.
- The recommendations included €2.25 billion in spending cuts, achieved largely through cuts on social spending and in pay, as well as an increase in taxes, totalling €1.25 billion. It may be difficult for the government to reconcile these austerity measures with the EU 2020 poverty goals.
- The consultation noted that maintaining expensive universal supports and subsidies is difficult to justify under current budgetary circumstances.
- The current government has expressed a wish to limit the influence of social partners and to engage in a more limited form of "social dialogue".

Until the beginning of the financial crisis in 2007, and for over 20 years, Ireland's social partnership was well established. The **social dialogue** which took place between employees' and employers' organisations during this time was close, including within the farming sector, which has always played an important role in Ireland. Pay deals were negotiated only in the public sector and were not binding for the private sector, but were generally adopted by the latter. The National Economic and Social Council (NESC) has been serving as a body to facilitate talks between representatives of business and employers' organisations, trade unions, farming organisations as well as other organisations such as heads of Government departments, NGOs etc. However, the social dialogue can be considered as the first victim of the crisis since the Irish government decided unilaterally to impose public service pay cuts in 2007 (Dobbins, 2011: 1). This led to a signing of the Croke Park Agreement in 2010 between the government and the public sector trade unions which included major pay cuts in order to avoid redundancies.

Amid public fears that social partnership was partly to blame for the depth of the Irish crisis by fixing wages at unsustainable levels, the current Irish government has re-assessed the model. Enda Kenny has expressed a wish to maintain a more limited form of social dialogue about issues pertaining to employment and social affairs, without returning to the social partnership model in place before the Croke Park Agreement.[9]

There have also been discussions at the government level with the social partners and other stakeholders on the development of Ireland's national reform programme under the Europe 2020 process. Against this backdrop, social partner representatives continue to participate in a large number of other governmental consultative fora and bodies.

While there is no current national level agreement covering the private sector, the Irish government remains supportive of engaging with employer representatives and trade unions in order to ensure a positive environment for the conduct of industrial relations.

[9] The Irish Times - Saturday, May 19, 2012, "Taoiseach underlines role of dialogue with unions".

The Irish Prime Minister has indicated that any framework for engaging with the **social partners**, beyond the mechanisms mentioned above, can evolve if they are seen to provide value in achieving shared objectives which reflect the needs of the country at this time. The Government's approach to social dialogue does not amount to a return to rigid social partnership structures of the past, but rather involves a more flexible, adaptable approach which can support change.The collapse of the Irish property bubble, combined with increasing unemployment, has resulted in many homeowners facing mortgage repayment difficulties. There have not yet been widespread home repossessions, such as those experienced in the UK. However, this constitutes a significant and lasting problem for a country where homeownership levels are historically high. The recent introduction of a household property tax has been a controversial measure in light of these difficulties.

In July 2012, the IMF examined Ireland's economic policies in the light of the €67.5 billion bailout that the country received from the IMF, European Central Bank and European Commission. This consultation made a number of recommendations, some of which were incorporated into the Irish 2013 Budget which committed to €3.5 billion in adjustments, made up of an increase in the tax take of €1.25 billion and a reduction in spending of €2.25 billion.

The spending cuts were achieved largely through cuts on social spending and in pay, while new taxes – including an extension of Pay Related Social Contributions (PRSI), motor tax, and the new property tax – totalled €1.25 billion. It may be difficult for the government to reconcile these austerity measures with the EU 2020 poverty goals.

The consultation between Ireland and the IMF noted that[10] maintaining expensive universal supports and subsidies is difficult to justify under current budgetary circumstances. It also set out that Ireland needs better targeting of child benefit, medical card spending, household benefits and non-means tested pensions. The IMF considers that these changes could generate significant savings whilst protecting the poor. The previous Fianna Fáil/Green party government already tried to means test the medical card for over 70's in Budget 2009. Since this plan caused a public outcry, the government partially backed down and introducing only a limited means test. In Budget 2013, the charges that medical card holders paid for prescribed medicine increased from 50c to €1.50 per item while child benefit payments were cut. The consultation also noted that unemployment payments, which are relatively high by international standards and are completely withdrawn upon finding full-time work, give little incentive for the long-term unemployed to return to work. The level of unemployment payments was not tackled in the latest Budget but the duration of payments was cut from 12 to 9 months.

Additionally, those getting rent supplements in addition to their social welfare payment are even more likely to get trapped in a life of relying on welfare. The IMF consultation also noted that systems of social housing provision and rent supplement for those with long-term housing needs need to be integrated into a new means-tested Housing Assistance Payment.

In November 2012, the Irish Department of Finance published an update to Ireland's memorandum of understanding with the European Union and the International Monetary Fund, which oversees the terms and conditions for the €67.5 billion bailout being received from the IMF, European Central Bank and European Commission (Department of Finance, 2013).

[10] 2012 Article IV Consultation with Ireland--Concluding Statement of the IMF Mission: http://www.imf.org/external/np/ms/2012/071812.htm.

The original memorandum, published at the end of 2010 (Department of Finance, 2010), sets out the policies that Ireland intends to implement in the context of its request for three years of financial support from the IMF. These include a reorganisation and downsizing of the banking sector (facilitating bank funding, separating good assets from bad, asset disposals, bank recapitalization, etc.) and a range of structural reforms to promote economic stability, enhance growth and create jobs. The latest update to the Memorandum confirms the government's commitment to €3.5 billion in adjustments in Budget 2013. The next update to this Memorandum is due in the first quarter of 2013.

The IMF's first deputy managing director, David Lipton, states that Ireland has met all of its targets up to now in the bailout program. However, GDP growth is projected to drop to 1.1 per cent in 2013, and 2.2 per cent in 2014. This may hamper the government's efforts to reach the debt-to-GDP target of 60% in the Stability and Growth Pact. This ratio is projected to be 122% in Ireland in 2013. Mr. Lipton, in a statement, said that "If next years' growth were to disappoint, any additional fiscal consolidation should be deferred to 2015 to protect the recovery."[11]

The IMF also issued a statement in January advising that Ireland's planned exit from the international bailout at the end of 2013 will "depend importantly on the delivery of European commitments […] particularly direct bank recapitalisation" (O'Brien, 2013). The Irish Taoiseach added, in a press conference, that a deal on bank debt and promissory notes (a €30bn high interest loan from the European Central Bank, used to recapitalise Irish banks) will also be required for Ireland to "successfully exit" the EU-IMF bailout programme this year (Fitzgerald, 2013).

[11] Compiled from The Irish Times, Kenny urged to follow IMF line, December 18, 2012 http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/breaking/2012/1218/breaking5.html#.UP7ELtNs8Pc.email

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NOTES

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