

Babeş-Bolyai University

The Faculty of Economic Sciences and Business Administration

THE INFLUENCE OF THE TRANSMISSION
MECHANISM ON MONETARY POLICY

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Key words: monetary transmission mechanism; monetary policy, central bank.

PHD THESIS SUMMARY

Introduction and objectives

The world economic climate presently goes through a deep process of metamorphosis which affects all economic life, but especially the aspects regarding central banks and their monetary policy. In this context, the present paper sets out to determine the degree of central bank implication in the economy, focusing in this endeavor on the study of the monetary policy transmission mechanism and of the complex processes that ensure the transit of monetary policy decision effects towards the final macroeconomic variables. The monetary policy instruments represent one of the most powerful sets of forces that influence the economy, having the great advantage of being concentrated in the hands of independent institutions, thus representing an indispensable tool for modelling the economic environment. The potential force that these instruments have and the way in which central banks can use them poses two major issues, one regarding the effectiveness of the taken measures and the other linked to their efficiency, taking us to the inevitable question regarding the extent to which the central bank must interfere with the economy. In this context, the study of the monetary policy transmission mechanism becomes ever more important because its deep understanding can provide indispensable indications in finding an answer, as, what matters in the first place are the effects that monetary policy decisions (or the effects of their absence), and the link between such decisions and the economic reality is given by the structure and way of functioning of the monetary policy transmission mechanism.

Doctrine related issues

The capitalist economic governance of the last century has oscillated between the prescriptions of the great doctrines, which have decisively left their mark on the development of the world: Keynesism (interventionist) and monetarism (neoliberal). Having different views on the role of authorities in the economic life and implicitly on the optimal degree of intervention by the central bank, the two schools of thought have alternatively dominated the world economic stage, modeling its evolution.

The problem of the optimal central bank attitude regarding its involvement in the economy is put under a new light by the economic events of recent years, which have revigorated the academic dispute regarding the central bank's role. The neoliberal doctrine, principally based on the points described in Williamson's 1989 Washington Consensus and the monetarism of the University of Chicago, which dominated the monetary practice of the last decades by promoting a high degree of independence from influences exterior to the markets, is put under a heavy question mark as monetary authorities from around the world are modifying their strategies and completing their intervention arsenals with instruments that not long ago were regarded as highly unorthodox. This new attitude is strongly influenced by interventionist economic prescriptions that we generically identify as being neo-Keynesian in nature (in all its forms, from the neo-classical synthesis to the ideas promoted beginning with the 1980s by researchers such as Stanley Fisher, John Taylor, David Romer or Olivier Blanchard, and going so far as Minsky's post-Keynesist point of view, based on the role of money and positioned in antithesis with certain neo-classical beliefs), fact which shifts the doctrinarian dispute from the academic environment towards the area of monetary decision makers.

The Structure and Functioning of the Monetary Policy Transmission Mechanism. Implications on the Central Bank's Activity.

The discussion regarding the optimal level of central bank implication in the economy must transcend the doctrinarian polemic and be settled with arguments which, even if originating in economic philosophy, reach beyond it by orienting towards the ever changing mechanisms of

the real economy. In this idea, a first step is represented by the analysis of some general aspects which are characteristic for the economic environment, the interdependencies that are established between its defining factors and the central bank's monetary actions. The first observation is linked to the consequences of the use of monetary policy instruments depending on the time frame considered, more precisely the fact that monetary policy has more extended short term effects, affecting both production and financial market related variables such as the interest rate the exchange rates, the asset prices or the intensity of the financing process. The fact that the influence on the production level is annulled on the medium and long run because of the annulment of the effects of spending on the real production due to the intervention of price changes, indicates some limitations of the modeling power that the central bank holds, however without representing an argument against central bank actions, but just an indication regarding the way that objectives should be set. This supplementary short term power over production goes hand in hand with the findings regarding the superior efficiency of monetary policy actions during a recession, when, because of the increased sensitivity of companies to monetary market conditions generated by extra difficulties encountered during recession in the financing process and because of the intensification of the effects delivered through the transmission mechanism and caused by the asymmetric influences that monetary policy has over inflation and the production level (Peersman și Smets, 2004: 47).

Another aspect that matters when we speak about the level of central bank involvement in modeling the macroeconomic climate is linked to financial market depth, with an impact on the functioning of the transmission mechanism. The characteristics linked to the issue of market depth can produce a series of metamorphosis which either represent an obstacles in the way of an efficient monetary policy, either on the contrary, help the central bank have more control over the economic environment. From the first category, we are mentioning the higher difficulty of understanding the subtle mechanisms which ensure the functioning of the markets, the risen sensitivity of the economy to external destabilizing factors involved by developed markets, the extra resources that the central bank needs to use in order to diminish the market volatility and, last but not least, the higher degree of esoterism of financial products which determines the market evolution and the extra need to promote an adequate regulatory policy. In counterparty, there are also effects that are beneficial to monetary policy implied by deep financial markets. Among these, the wider arsenal of monetary instruments which the central bank can use, a better

absorption of capital flows which, instead of accumulating in the banking system, are distributed more uniformly in the economy, and a better control exerted by the monetary authority through changes in nominal interest rates due to the wider variety of saving and credit instruments, which strengthen the interest rate transmission channel (Singh, 2011).

The picture describing the need for action is completed by aspects regarding the homogeneity of the economy, in a mundellian understanding. Relevant are key elements like imperfections with regard to the work force mobility, territorial differences when it comes to adopting and applying fiscal policy, differences in legislation and different mentalities of economic agents for different areas linked to the ratio between consumption and savings, risk aversion and its impact on investments, social values, the structure of consumption expenses and the way expectations are being formed. The presence of territorial heterogeneity in these aspects puts pressure on the central bank, suggesting the need of using monetary policy for overcoming a lack of uniformity which can lead to suboptimal economic outcomes in different areas.

All these elements are modeling the monetary behavior of the central bank through the changes they bring in the structure and functioning of the transmission mechanism, thus altering the transformation function between monetary policy decisions and targeted macroeconomic variables. Even though these influences are diverse, it can be observed that, taking a broader view, they converge towards indicating the need of a more active role of the central bank. Such an interventionist role seems to be necessary especially during recessions, when, on one hand, the economy is suffering and does not have the required resources for a comeback without assistance, and on the other hand the central bank's monetary actions benefit from increased efficiency. Also, the presence of deep markets or of suboptimal monetary areas seem to request the necessity of an incisive monetary policy which, in an climate characterized by complex and often unpredictable interactions between the elements constituting the economic environment, can regulate economic activity, contribute to uniformization and promote measures meant to avoid the apparition of major shocks caused by late adjustments of over-liberalized markets.

Going further, we deconstructed the monetary policy transmission mechanism, concentrating on each of its constitutive elements. Within the transmission mechanism, we can identify five channels through which monetary policy decisions are being spread in the economy, affecting its diverse components with different speeds and intensities, eventually altering macroeconomic variables. These five channels are (Loayza, Schmidt-Hebbel, 2002: 4-6):

- the interest rate channel
- the expectations channel
- the credit channel
- the asset price channel
- the exchange rate channel

Each of these channels operate in different areas of the economic environment and imply their specific elements with the purpose of delivering monetary decisions towards macroeconomic variables, auctioning mainly towards changing relevant values regarding inflation, employment, production, consumption and investments.

At the level of the interest rate channel, the capacity of the central bank to transmit strong monetary impulses is conditioned by the strength of the relationship that links the nominal interest rate (directly controlled by the central bank) to the interest rates for different maturities that are formed in the market and which are the rates by which the economy functions. This means that the presence of a strong interest rate channel constitutes an argument for action, the central bank, by timely using the monetary policy instruments which are relevant and of adequate intensities will be able to influence the economy in the desired fashion. On the contrary, a weak interest rate channel will interfere with the monetary decisions' capacity to deliver, through the interest rate channel, the expected effects, being a signal that the monetary authority should take a step back and reconsider its options.

Focusing our attention on the expectations channel, the crucial role that it plays in modeling the behavior of economic agents and implicitly for monetary policy permits us to add to the list of central bank instruments another tool, even if an informal one, namely the signals transmitted to the markets. Through signaling the way monetary policy will be conducted in the future, the central bank prepares the ground, influencing the markets in the desired direction and preparing them for what is to come, an action which is often decisive for accomplishing monetary policy objectives, including for exiting what economic literature calls „the liquidity trap”. These actions need however to be directly correlated with the degree of credibility of the central bank, as the market reaction to its signals depends on the perception regarding the

monetary authority's capacity to act in conformity with what it declares and with the targets it sets. In this context, the efficient administration of economic impulses transmitted through the expectations channel represent a key element in the central bank's activity, being at the base of all other actions it undertakes. In consequence, the incapacity to use and control this channel invariably leads to a derouting monetary policy, its collateral adverse effects even being able to overcome the sought positive effects. This being said, when formulating the answer regarding the degree to which the central bank interferes with the economy, special attention needs to be given to the aspects linked to the expectations channel.

The credit channel probably constitutes the most direct link between monetary policy actions and the aspects of the private economic environment, transmitting central bank decision in the sensitive area of relationships that are being established between economic agents and the banking system, their main financing source. Through the credit channel, the monetary policy decision taken by the central bank affects both components of the financing transaction. The supply side is being modified through the effect of minimum reserve requirements on the quantity of funds available for financing and on the costs, real or of opportunity, which originate from the interest rates set by the central bank for different facilities, costs which are incurred by the commercial bank and which will reflect in the interest rates charged to the economic agents it finances. On the other hand, the capacity of companies to guarantee their credits affects the demand for financing through the banking system, as the demand that does not meet certain conditions dictated by the bank's risk policy can only be financed at higher interest rates, which changes the structure of the demand both from a quantitative and a qualitative point of view.

From this perspective, the spreading of monetary policy effects through the credit channel constitutes a sensitive point in formulating an answer regarding the optimal level of implication of the monetary authority in the economy, as it represents the way in which the central bank interferes with a financial market, in this case the credit market. In this way, the context for a doctrinal dispute regarding market efficiency and a predicted inferior outcome for un-totally free markets is being formed. Even so, the extreme solution in which the central bank entirely gives up its prerogatives in modelling the relationship between the economy and the banking system is unconceivable. More, if perfect competition is not present, the mediating role is one that needs to be seriously assumed, especially when the mediation is not strictly between the holder of funds and the entity using the funds, but is corroborated with the whole picture that

the central bank has over the economy and the dangers that over- or under-financing it pose. Consequently, the mechanisms that ensure the functioning of the credit channel plea for an active monetary policy which, in an unintrusive manner, can help the economy accomplish objectives that are broader than strictly obtaining an immediate profit.

The asset prices represent an important factor in unfolding economic processes, being in a tight connection with the generation of demand that translates in the rise of the investment and employment levels. The channel through which monetary policy decisions influence, by using the asset prices, these key macroeconomic variables can be divided in two components. The first such component is represented by the ratio between a company's market value and its replacement cost of capital (called Tobin's q Value), with all the implications that this ratio has over the activity on the mergers and acquisitions market and its alternative of green field investments, which generate extra consumption and workplaces. The second component is referring to the effect of wealth on consumption and entails a high degree of interaction with socio-cultural factors which shape households' economic decisions, reason for which it represents an important differentiating factor between economic areas. In fact, the asset prices are generally sensitive to a large series of local influences, many of these being generated by expectations, mentalities or other difficult to objectively evaluate factors. This state of fact implies on one hand a risen risk of going off the tracks due to unrealistic evaluations or expectations, and on the other hand it burdens the efficient functioning of markets in the sense proposed by Fama (1970). So, even if confronted by a complex and difficult to evaluate environment, the central bank can not afford to adopt a passive attitude, but on the contrary, conscious of the fact that not every action will have better consequences than inaction, must deeply understand the particularities of the asset price channel and find the monetary solutions which fit with every given scenario.

The fifth channel of the monetary policy transmission mechanism, which governs the effects delivered through the exchange rate offers the central bank more options for action. However in choosing its strategy, the central bank must take into consideration that actions like direct intervention on foreign exchange markets with the purpose of artificially increasing external competitiveness of the economy will have negative effects on the long term which will surpass the unsustainable short term benefits. This does not however mean that the central bank must never intervene on foreign exchange markets, as such an intervention may be justified in

the case in which it targets the removal of a competitive disadvantage which is considered to be unjustified from a fundamental point of view, as was the case of the Swiss Central Bank intervention from 2011. Besides the direct intervention on the foreign exchange market, the central bank can influence capital flows by controlling the interest rate, which represents a viable instrument as long as the altered interest rate level does not produce negative effects which are spread through other transmission channels which overpass the advantages delivered through the exchange rate channel. Last but not least, the weight that the interest channel has in the monetary policy transmission mechanism is broadly determined by the degree of openness of the economy, which means that, in an open economy, the central bank will have more reason to intensively use the exchange rate channel in order to accomplish its set objectives.

The Influence of External Factors

Beyond the processes that take place along its channels, a very important aspect regarding the capacity of the transmission mechanism to effectively and efficiently spread central bank monetary policy decisions is constituted by the influences exerted by external factors, i.e., the factors that fall outside the monetary authorities' area of control. Exogenous elements, as general changes in the global economy, shocks in the prices of many commodities, volatility of financial markets or the fiscal policy promoted by the national government (which influences the same set of macroeconomic variables targeted by monetary policy) can produce mutations in the way of functioning of the economy in general and the transmission channels in particular. This situation may often determine the central bank to adopt a defensive position, obliging it to respond through its monetary policy to negative pressures exerted by external factors on the economic environment. In consequence, in the context of an ever more pronounced global economic integration, the central bank needs to permanently monitor the apparition, evolution and consequences of external factors on the national economy, learning in the same time to constantly adapt its strategy to the modifications they induce.

Conclusions

After analyzing the monetary policy transmission mechanism, both in general and by studying each of its constitutive channels, we find little elements to plea for a strategy based, from a principles perspective, on a reduced central bank monetary activity. On the contrary, the high complexity of the way in which the third millennia's economies function, augmented by the ever rising exposure to the effects of stronger and stronger external factors, makes the auto-equilibrium achievement process of the economy, as seen by neoliberals in the second half of the 20th century, impossible to achieve. All these indicate the need of a more active central bank attitude, who needs to use an ever more generous (but also more esoteric) arsenal of monetary policy instruments in order to keep the economy on track.

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