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\* Views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect official positions of De Nederlandsche Bank.

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# The impact of sovereign debt ratings on euro area cross-border holdings of euro area sovereign debt\*

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## Abstract

This paper documents how sovereign debt ratings shape euro area cross-border holdings of euro area sovereign debt, using granular sectoral security holdings statistics for the period 2009Q4 until 2016Q1. Credit risk is the main risk for bond investors when investing in bonds that are issued in the same currency as the currency of the investor's home country. Sovereign debt ratings provided by rating agencies give investors key information on the creditworthiness of governments. The results in this paper show that investors respond differently to credit ratings. In particular, we find that investors from core euro area countries respond more to credit ratings than investors from peripheral euro area countries. The results show that banks, insurance companies, pension funds and investment funds in core countries all significantly increase their bond holdings when credit ratings improve. In peripheral countries we document only a positive effect for pension funds and find no relationship between ratings and bond holdings for the other investor sectors. Finally, we find non-linearities in the relationship between bond holdings and credit ratings.

**Keywords:** euro area; asset allocation; sovereign debt, sovereign debt rating.

**JEL classifications:** F3, G11, G15, G2.

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## 1. Introduction

The European sovereign debt crisis of 2010-2012 shocked the sovereign bond markets in the euro area. Interest rates on government bonds issued by the so-called peripheral countries, or GIIPS (Greece, Ireland, Italy, Portugal and Spain) countries, surged to levels not seen since the start of EMU (Figure 1, panel A). The increases in interest rates only stopped after ECB president Mario Draghi said that the ECB will do “whatever it takes” to save the euro. During the sovereign debt crisis, rating agencies revised their sovereign ratings multiple times and mostly downwards for these peripheral countries (Figure 1, panel B). Only since 2014 we observe upgrades again.

[Figure 1]

Figure 1 suggests a link between bond yields and bond ratings. Theoretically, when ratings reflect the riskiness of bonds, this riskiness is reflected in yields (i.e. the credit risk spread). A range of studies empirically documents the link between sovereign ratings and yields or yield spreads (e.g., Afonso et al., 2012; De Vries and De Haan, 2016; El-Shagi and Von Schweinitz, 2018). These studies indeed confirm a strong link between ratings and yields. In contrast, Boffelli and Urga (2015) find no significant role for rating agencies during the European sovereign debt crisis. Another line of research examines whether yields reflected fundamentals during the crisis (e.g., De Haan et al, 2014). Other researchers examine the determinants of sovereign ratings and find that ratings are determined by economic fundamentals such as economic growth (e.g. Cantor and Packer, 1996; Mellios and Paget-Blanc, 2006; Brůha et al., 2017; Reusens and Croux, 2017).

A parallel literature studies the holdings of sovereign bonds (e.g. Andritzky, 2012). However, only few papers link the sovereign bond holdings to ratings. A notable exception is Arslanalp and Tsuda (2014), who study the holdings of sovereign debt across countries and distinguish between domestic and foreign holdings. The authors document graphically a strong decrease in the foreign holdings of Ireland and Portugal after these countries received several rating downgrades during the sovereign debt crisis.<sup>1</sup> The authors find that in many cases domestic

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<sup>1</sup> Brutti and Sauré (2015) do not explicitly focus on ratings, but also document a shift from foreign to domestic investors during the euro area sovereign debt crisis.

banks or official institutions filled the gap that arose when foreign investors left. However, the authors do not address the magnitude of the impact of rating downgrades on foreign holdings.

Orpiszewski (2015) comes closest to our paper by empirically examining the impact of sovereign ratings on non-resident sovereign bond holdings of a sample of 8 euro area countries, 5 developed economies outside the euro area and 17 emerging economies during 2001-2011, thereby differentiating between sector holdings, as we do. He finds that non-resident investors diminished their holdings of peripheral sovereigns after downgrades.<sup>2</sup>

Our approach is different from Orpiszewski's (2015) in several dimensions. First, Orpiszewski (2015) analyses the aggregate foreign holdings of a country's debt, while we study the foreign holdings of each country in another country's debt. In other words, we have a two-dimensional panel at the holder country – issuer country level, while Orpiszewski (2015) has a one-dimensional panel at the issuer country level. Second, in our empirical approach we rescale the dependent variable by the total holdings of a holder country, while he considers the log of total holdings. Our rescaling procedure should limit non-stationarity problems when considering longer time series. Third, we focus solely on euro area countries and euro denominated debt. This allows us to abstract from other investor preferences, e.g., regarding the currency denomination of bonds (see e.g. Boermans and Vermeulen, 2016; Burger et al., 2018; Maggiori et al., 2018). By analysing only euro denominated bonds we are better able to isolate the effect of ratings on investment choices.

This paper contributes to the literature by examining the impact of sovereign debt ratings on euro area cross-border holdings of euro sovereign bonds. We consider differences between core versus periphery investors, in order to provide insight into the question of whether the euro capital market is a single capital market or a fragmented one. We examine holdings at the country level and distinguish between financial sectors, i.e. banks, pension funds, insurance companies, and investment funds.

The main results are: ratings determine cross-border sovereign bond holdings. There are striking differences between investors from core and periphery countries: investors from core countries (notably banks) react strongly to ratings by selling low rated bonds, while investors

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<sup>2</sup> Gande and Parsley (2014) examine the response of international *equity* (i.e., stocks, not bonds) investments of mutual funds to sovereign rating changes during 1996-2002.

from peripheral countries, notably insurance companies, hardly respond to ratings or even acquire more bonds with low ratings.

The plan of the paper is as follows. Section 2 discusses the data on holdings and ratings. Section 3 presents our hypothesis and methodology. Section 4 presents the results, followed by a robustness test in Section 5. Section 6 gives an interpretation of the results after which Section 7 concludes.

## **2. Data**

### *2.1 Euro area cross border sovereign bond holdings*

We use detailed security holdings statistics to investigate changes in euro area government bond holdings by non-domestic euro area investors. The ESCB's Security Holdings Statistics provides detailed information on the holdings of investors in individual government bonds. This holdings data is disaggregated by holder country and holder sector. For example, the data shows at the quarterly frequency the holdings of German banks in individual Spanish government bonds.

We consider private sector holdings of cross border government bonds and distinguish between four broad holder sectors: banks, insurance companies, pension funds and investment funds. Information on holdings by other sectors such as households and governments is available as well, but these holdings are relatively small in comparison to those of the other four sectors. Central bank holdings of government debt have become large, especially since the Public Sector Purchase Program (PSPP) started in 2015. However, as we consider private investor behaviour we do not consider these holdings.<sup>3</sup>

The data quality is very high since there is a mandatory reporting requirement for all euro area residents. Data is available at the quarterly frequency as of 2009Q4; however, domestic holdings are incomplete before 2013Q4.<sup>4</sup> For the research question of this paper this is not an

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<sup>3</sup> Note that central banks already held government bonds before the PSPP started as part of their reserve management.

<sup>4</sup> Since 2013Q4 SHS data is collected under a legal mandate (Regulation ECB/2012/24), while data covering 2009Q4 up to 2013Q3 is constructed based on available data collections and the coverage and data quality is necessarily limited. Generally, the coverage of foreign holdings is of high quality during this period.

issue because we study the non-domestic holdings of euro area investors. The sample runs from 2009Q4 until 2016Q1. The holdings by non-euro area investors are also incomplete, so we do not consider the holdings of non-euro area investors (e.g. US, Japan, UK) in this paper.

Our sample contains the eleven (in terms of GDP) largest euro area countries. These are Austria, Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal and Spain. The smaller euro area countries are excluded since their own government's debt markets are relatively small and not always liquid. These countries are Cyprus, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Slovenia and Slovakia.

In the sample we consider all government bonds issued by the eleven countries denominated in euros and with an original maturity larger than one year. We measure the holdings of investors in terms of nominal value.<sup>5</sup> The total nominal value of sovereign bonds outstanding amounts to over EUR 6 trillion. Hence, we cover some two-thirds of total euro area debt with the current country selection. Short-term bills and loans are not included in the sample. An important advantage of including only euro denominated bonds is that we do not need to consider currency risk when explaining investor choices by credit ratings.

Figure 2 shows how the cross-border holdings of euro area debt have evolved. At the start of our sample period (2009Q4), euro area investors held about 24% of the outstanding amount of debt issued by other euro countries. This amounts to roughly EUR 1.5 trillion. This share dropped to 15% mid-2012 and, after the “Whatever it takes” speech of Draghi, it recovered slightly to 18% in 2016. To illustrate the magnitude of this drop from 24% to 15%: about 600 billion euro had to be financed by other investors.

[Figure 2]

Banks, insurers and investment funds are the main cross border holders (Figure 3). During 2009 the holdings of all sectors increased, but with the start of the Greek sovereign debt crisis late 2009 we observe a strong decrease, in particular for banks. The graph shows that banks decreased their cross border holdings earlier than insurers and investment funds, but also much

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<sup>5</sup> Note that the choice for measurement of holdings based on either nominal or market value is not important since we calculate the fraction of a bond an investor holds; as long as both the numerator and denominator is either in nominal or market value the fraction is identical.

stronger. By late 2009, cross border holdings of banks were well above those of insurers and investment funds, but during mid 2012 the holdings of banks were quite a bit lower. Since early 2013, all sectors expanded their cross border holdings again. In nominal terms, insurers, pension funds and investment funds all have higher cross border euro area sovereign debt holdings at the end of the sample compared to the beginning of the sample.

[Figure 3]

Figure 4 shows that the proportion of government bonds held by non-domestic euro area investors differs widely across countries. At the start of the sample in 2009Q4, it ranges from slightly less than 20% for France and Germany to 60% for Portugal. Greece and Ireland also have about half of their sovereign debt owned by non-domestic euro area investors at the start of the sample. During 2010-2012, the proportions of non-domestic holdings of Greek, Irish and Portuguese debt dropped strongly. The graph shows that the proportion of Greek debt held by non-Greek euro area investors dropped from 50% in 2009 to 0% in 2012. At the end of the sample non-domestic euro area ownership ranges from about 5% for Greece to around 40% for Austria, Belgium and Finland.

[Figure 4]

## *2.2 The role of ratings in explaining investment patterns*

Sovereign bond ratings are an important input in investors' portfolio decisions. In many cases, internal rules for portfolio investments by, for example, banks and pension funds are based on bond ratings. There are three major rating agencies (S&P, Moody's and Fitch) which provide unsolicited ratings for government debt. In general, the ratings are very close to each other (see Alsakka and Gwilym (2010)). In this paper we use Standard & Poor's (S&P) long-term domestic currency debt ratings, which are arguably the most widely used ratings when considering sovereign debt. The S&P ratings range from AAA down to D, when there is a default. These ratings are often accompanied by an outlook, which can be positive, stable or negative.

Following Gande and Parsley (2014), we convert each country's rating in a Comprehensive Credit Rating (CCR) that takes both the rating itself and the outlook into account. In the first



step we convert the actual rating on a scale from 0 until 23, where 0 is the lowest rating (Default) and 23 the highest (AAA). Each notch in between the extremes is assigned an integer. 1 is added to the rating value when a country has a positive outlook and 1 subtracted when the outlook is negative. In case of credit watches 0.5 is added when there is a positive credit watch and 0.5 subtracted in case of a negative credit watch. Panel B of Figure 1 already showed the development of the CCR for every country in our sample.

Figure 5 puts both bond holdings and ratings together. Panel A shows bond holdings of investors from core euro countries, panel B those for investors from periphery countries. Overall, there is a strong and positive relationship between holdings and ratings. However, there are some striking differences between investors from the core and the periphery. While investors from the core (Panel A) diminished their holdings of Spanish, Italian and Portuguese bonds in line with the lowering of ratings for these countries, investors from the periphery increased their holdings of Spanish, Italian and Portuguese bonds, contrary to what one would expect considering the ratings for these countries.

[Figure 5]

For the sake of brevity, in the following we denote investment behaviour where investors invest less in lower rated bonds and more in higher rated bonds as ‘search for quality’ investment behaviour, while denoting the opposite investment behaviour (where investors invest more in lower rated bonds and less in higher rated bonds) as ‘search for yield’ investment behaviour.

### **3. Hypothesis and methodology**

The figures discussed above suggested that investors from core countries exhibit search for quality investment behaviour, whereas investors from peripheral countries exhibit search for yield investment behaviour. The main difference between core and periphery countries is the yield on their domestic governments’ bonds. Yields on domestic sovereign bonds in core countries are lower than in peripheral countries. This yield difference reflects the difference in sovereign credit risk between the core and the periphery. Hence, our hypothesis is that the different investment behaviour between core and periphery reflects differences in domestic

sovereign risk and risk attitude. In this section, we proceed by testing this hypothesis formally using regression analysis.

### 3.1 *Dependent variable*

We start by defining the dependent variable for the regressions. The dependent variable should capture the under- or overweighting of a country in the investor's portfolio relative to a benchmark strategy. We follow Arslanalp and Tsuda (2014) by defining the benchmark strategy as a strategy where the investor spreads his portfolio according to each country's share in total issued debt.<sup>6</sup> Specifically, we define "ratio" as the share of country  $j$  debt in total cross-border holdings of investors from country  $i$  (the so-called 'holdershare') divided by the share of country  $j$  debt in total euro area sovereign debt excluding debt issued by country  $i$  (the 'issuershare'):

$$Ratio_{ijt} = \frac{Holdershare_{ijt}}{Issuershare_{ijt}} = \frac{Holdings_{ijt}/\sum_{j \neq i} Holdings_{ijt}}{Debt_{ijt}/\sum_{j \neq i} Debt_{ijt}} \quad (1)$$

When *ratio* equals 1, the investor follows the benchmark strategy. For example, if all countries jointly excluding country  $i$  issued EUR 5 trillion debt and country  $j$  issued EUR 1 trillion debt, the representative investor will invest 20% of his portfolio in country  $j$  debt. Suppose investors from country  $i$  hold 40% of their portfolio in country  $j$  debt the variable *ratio* will be equal to 2.<sup>7</sup>

An advantage of the variable *ratio* for holder country  $i$  in issuer country  $j$  is that it is, ceteris paribus, independent of the other countries' investment choices. Assume that country  $j$  debt is 40% of investor  $i$ 's portfolio and country  $j$ 's share in total nominal debt is 20%. As long as country  $i$  investors do not change their portfolio and country  $j$  does not change the outstanding amount of debt, the variable *ratio* will not be affected by the actions of other countries.

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<sup>6</sup> This benchmark strategy is consistent with the I-CAPM in Solnik (1974). See e.g. Fidora et al. (2007) and Sorensen et al. (2007) for applications of this benchmark strategy in the bond home bias literature and De Santis and Gerard (2009) for bilateral bond holdings.

<sup>7</sup> Instead of using the ratio of holder share to issuer share, Arslanalp and Tsuda (2014) take the difference in their graphical analysis (however, they do not perform regression analysis on this variable).

Figure 6 shows the development of *ratio* per issuer country for (in view of space considerations) a selection of three holder countries: two periphery countries Italy and Spain and one core country The Netherlands. The difference in investment behaviour between core and periphery (as reported in Section 2) also clearly shows up in these examples. Spanish investors increased their holdings of Italian, Greek and Portuguese bonds although ratings went down. Italian investors also increased their holdings of Spanish and Portuguese bonds. On the other hand, Dutch investors brought down their holdings of Italian, Greek and Portuguese bonds.

[Figure 6]

Instead of extending the number of panels in Figure 6 to eleven (the number of countries in our sample) to determine the generality of our conjectures, we proceed with regression analysis.

### 3.2 Empirical model

For the first regression, we specify *ratio* as a function of *rating*:

$$ratio_{ijt} = a_0 + a_1 rating_{jt} + \mu_{ij} + \delta_t + \varepsilon_{ijt} \quad (2)$$

where *ratio* is as defined in (1) and *rating* is the comprehensive credit rating (CCR) of issuer country *j*. Term  $\mu_{ij}$  represents country fixed effects explaining time-invariant factors determining differences in bond holdings between holder countries *i*. Time fixed effects ( $\delta_t$ ) are included to capture common shocks. We expect  $a_1 > 0$  in case of search for quality investment behaviour and  $a_1 < 0$  in case of search for yield investment behaviour.<sup>8</sup>

As our hypothesis is that the different investment behaviour between core and periphery reflects differences in domestic sovereign risk (as reflected in the level of the yield on domestic government bonds), we define:

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<sup>8</sup> We do not pose any lags, as we use data with a quarterly frequency, whereas investments flows are known to respond within a few days (see e.g. Ismailescu and Kazemi (2010)). We also tested for exogeneity of rating, using the Davidson-MacKinnon test. Exogeneity could not be rejected with a  $p$ -value = 0.7689.

$yielddif$  = yield on sovereign bonds of issuer country minus yield on sovereign bonds of holder country (3)

The yields are the interest rates on 10 year government bonds. We define a categorical variable  $yielddif\_cat$  which categorizes the observed values for  $yielddif$  into four categories:

$$yielddif\_cat = 0, 1, 2, 3, \quad (4)$$

where each category represents 25% of the sample.  $yielddif\_cat = 0$  contains the 25% lowest values,  $yielddif\_cat = 3$  the 25% highest. Using  $yielddif\_cat$  as interaction variable, we specify the following interaction model:

$$ratio_{ijt} = a_0 + a_1 rating_{jt} + \sum_{c=0}^3 a_{2c} rating_{jt} \times yielddif\_cat_{ijt} + \sum_{c=0}^3 a_{3c} yielddif\_cat_{ijt} + \mu_{ij} + \delta_t + \varepsilon_{ijt_i} \quad (5)$$

For ease of interpretation of (5), we calculate marginal effects  $\frac{\partial(ratio)}{\partial(rating)}$  at the mean for each category (Figure 7).

[Figure 7]

For the marginal effects, we expect  $\frac{\partial(ratio)}{\partial(rating)} > 0$  in case of search for quality investment behaviour and  $\frac{\partial(ratio)}{\partial(rating)} < 0$  in case of search for yield investment behaviour. Further, we expect to find quality investment behaviour ( $\frac{\partial(ratio)}{\partial(rating)} > 0$ ) more often in case  $yielddif\_cat$  contains positive values, i.e. when the yield of the issuer country is higher than the yield of the holder country. Vice versa, we expect to find search for yield investment behaviour ( $\frac{\partial(ratio)}{\partial(rating)} < 0$ ) more often in case  $yielddif\_cat$  contains negative values, i.e. when the yield of the issuer country is lower than the yield of the holder country.

## 4. Results

In this section fixed effects panel regression outcomes for equations (2) and (5) are presented, respectively. Our sample contains 11 countries, so each panel regression has  $n(n - 1) = 110$  holder/issuing country combinations, or ‘groups’. Our sample period comprises 29 quarters, so we have  $29 \times 110 = 3,190$  observations in each panel regression. Table 1, panel A, column (1), gives the estimated coefficient  $a_1$  of equation (2) and the four marginal effects derived from equation (5), together with their statistical significance<sup>9</sup>, for all holder countries in both the core and periphery. Columns (2) – (5) present the results differentiated by holding sector (banks, insurance companies, pension funds, investment funds).

[insert Table 1]

The results for Eq. (2) for all holders (Table 1, Panel A, column 1) suggest that investors invest more in sovereigns with higher ratings and vice versa (coefficient  $a_1 > 0$ ). Coefficient  $a_1$  is 0.047 for the Eurozone. We also estimate the equations for two subsamples of euro countries, namely countries whose sovereign yields surged during the euro debt crisis, the so-called periphery, and countries whose sovereign yields remained relatively low during the crisis, the so-called core. Panels B and C give the results for holders in the core and periphery, respectively. The results show that coefficient  $a_1$  is also positive (0.102) and significant for the core, but not for the periphery (-0.028 and insignificant).

The estimation results for the interaction model, Eq. (5), for all holders (Table 1, Panel A, column 1) show that if the yield on government bonds of the issuer country is substantially higher than that of the holder country ( $1.2 \leq \text{yielddif} < 32.0$ ), investors in the holder country have smaller exposures to issuer countries with the lowest ratings and vice versa (the marginal effect is 0.072). On the other hand, if the yield on government bonds of the issuer country is substantially lower than that of the holder country ( $-32 \leq \text{yielddif} < 1.2$ ), investors in the holder country have smaller exposures to issuer countries with the highest ratings and vice versa (the marginal effect is -0.073). These results provide mixed messages and question the poolability of the sample. Therefore, to test our hypothesis further, we estimate the equations for the periphery and the core separately. For the core (panel B) three out of four yield difference

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<sup>9</sup> For ease of interpretation, we denote statistical significance at conventional 1% and 5% levels only, depicted by \*\* and \*, respectively.

classes contain positive values, whereas for the periphery (panel C) three out of four yield difference classes contain negative values.

Panel B, giving the results for the core, suggests that search for quality behaviour is significantly present among investors in the core holder countries.  $a_1$  is 0.102 in Eq. (2). Marginal effects of Eq. (5) are significantly positive (0.074 and 0.099, respectively) for two yield difference classes in which holder countries have lower yields than issuer countries.

Panel C, column 1, gives some indications that investment behaviour by investors in the periphery is search for yield rather than search for quality:  $a_1$  is -0.028 but not significant in Eq. (2). The marginal effects of Eq. (5) are negative for all four yield difference classes. For two yield difference classes (-3.9 to -1.4 and -1.4 to -0.3) the marginal effect is significantly negative (-0.124 and -0.102, respectively).

The sector results (columns 2 to 5) indicate that all investor sectors in the core have significantly positive coefficients. The estimated coefficient from Eq. (2) show that search for quality is most prominent among banks and to a lesser extent for insurance companies, pension funds and investment funds. The significantly positive marginal effects in Panel B columns 2-5, based on the estimation of Eq. (5), are in line with these results, with the exception of investment funds from core countries. The search for yield behaviour in the periphery is most prominent among insurance companies, while for pension funds in the periphery there is evidence for search for quality behaviour.

## 5. Robustness

In the previous section we used the differences in sovereign yields as proxy for the credit worthiness of the issuer country. Another proxy for credit worthiness are CDS premiums. CDS premiums generally exhibit the same developments over time as sovereign yields, which are inversely related to ratings (see Figure 1). Therefore, as a robustness check, we also define differences in credit worthiness between issuer and holder countries using CDS premiums:

$$\text{CDSdif} = \text{CDS premium issuer country} - \text{CDS premium holder country} \quad (6)$$

The correlation of CDSdif with yielddif is 0.558. We define four difference classes for CDSdif:

$$CDSdif\_cat = 0, 1, 2, 3, \tag{7}$$

We re-estimate Eq. (5) substituting yielddif\_cat by CDSdif\_cat. The results are presented in Table 2.

[insert Table 2]

The results in Table 2 confirm the results in Table 1. The marginal effects, when significant, are positive for investors from the core and negative for investors from the periphery, indicating search for quality behaviour for investors in the core and search for yield behaviour for investors in the periphery, respectively. The only exception are pension funds from peripheral countries, where the results suggest search for quality behaviour.

## **6. What explains the differences between core and peripheral investors?**

In this section, we propose several potential explanations for the striking difference in investment behaviour between investors from core and periphery countries.

### *6.1 Sovereign-bank nexus*

One potential explanation concerns the sovereign-bank nexus, i.e. the government's dependence on funding from banks and banks' dependence on bailout guarantees from the government. For example, Alsakka et al. (2014) find that rating downgrades of governments also lead to rating downgrades of domestic banks during the sovereign debt crisis. Recent research suggests that banks were "persuaded" to invest in their domestic sovereign's debt during the sovereign debt crisis. In fact, a number of papers find evidence suggestive of "moral suasion" (e.g., Battistini et al., 2014; Acharya and Steffen, 2015), while empirical evidence showing that banks were "persuaded" to invest in their domestic sovereign's debt during the sovereign debt crisis is given by Ongena et al. (2016). A theoretical explanation for increased domestic sovereign bond holdings is provided by Broner et al. (2014) who develop a model showing that creditor discrimination arises because, in turbulent times, sovereign debt offers a

higher expected return to domestic creditors than to foreign ones. This creditor discrimination arises because governments are more likely to default on foreign lenders than domestic lenders in crisis periods. Such credit discrimination provides incentives for domestic purchases of debt. The above reasoning would explain why banks hold more domestic sovereign debt. However, it does not explain why banks in the periphery would hold more debt issued by governments in other countries in the periphery.

When considering cross border holdings, Acharya and Steffen (2015) argue that before the sovereign debt crisis, European banks' equity returns loaded positively on peripheral government bonds and negatively on German government bonds. These authors coin this finding "the greatest carry trade ever". During the sovereign debt crisis, this relationship changed when in particular banks from core countries reduced their positions in the periphery. The reduction of core banks' holdings in peripheral countries is consistent with our findings and also documented by earlier studies (see e.g. Buch et al. (2016) for evidence on German banks).

It is also less likely that a government would be able to convince a foreign bank to hold its debt. Hence, the increase in home bias, which has been stronger in the periphery than in the core as documented by among others Battistini et al. (2014), is unlikely to explain the observed patterns. So, this reasoning seems unlikely to explain the cross border patterns we observe where peripheral countries hold more sovereign debt issued by other peripheral countries.

## *6.2 Regulatory influence*

Another potential explanation for the observed patterns is regulation. More specifically, did regulators in core countries push banks, insurers and pension funds to sell downgraded government bonds, while regulators in peripheral countries did not? Although this channel would be consistent with the observed patterns, it is extremely difficult to identify. Moreover, it is unclear why supervisors in core and peripheral countries would act differently.

Regulation does not yet distinguish between core and peripheral debt. For example, all debt issued by European Union countries receives a zero risk weight in the Basel capital regulations for banks. This preferential treatment of government bonds in capital and liquidity regulations has strong positive effects on banks' demand for government bonds (Bonner, 2016). However,



financial institutions' own risk models may attach different risk weights, e.g. by using the ratings of countries.<sup>10</sup> So, the observed behaviour of core financial institutions could be consistent with internal investment decisions based on risk. However, identifying regulatory influence is very challenging in an empirical framework.

Shortages in capital adequacy ratios (CAR) are reported to have led to shrinking of bank balance sheets and flight from high-risk-weighted corporate lending into low-risk-weighted sovereigns (e.g. Van der Kwaak and Van Wijnbergen, 2014). As banks in the periphery had lower capital ratios than in the core (Figure 8, panel B), this might explain part of the patterns we observe.

### 6.3 *Risk shifting*

Another explanation could be risk shifting. The risk shifting argument is based on the premise that managers of leveraged firms have incentives to increase the riskiness of the firm's business to boost profits. Asset managers would do so by substituting safe assets with risky assets. Doing so maximizes shareholder value at the expense of debt holders. Several studies document that banks used funding provided by the ECB to purchase riskier sovereign debt during the sovereign debt crisis (see e.g. Acharya and Steffen (2015), Popov and Van Horen (2015) and Drechsler et al. (2016)).

As banks and insurance companies in the periphery were more levered than in core countries during our sample period (Figure 8.a), the incentives to engage in risk shifting may also have been higher. Since funding could be obtained at relatively low costs, the incentives for peripheral banks to acquire government bonds in other higher yielding peripheral countries could have been stronger as well. The lower leverage for core banks and insurers created a smaller push to shift to higher yielding assets, reinforced with profitability that was also better in general.

[Figure 8.a and 8.b]

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<sup>10</sup> Note that capital regulations that are solely based on credit rating may also lead to undesirable effects. For example, Becker and Ivashina (2014) show for US insurers that capital requirements based on ratings cause insurers to "reach for yield" by holding the most risky bonds in a certain rating class.

Figure 8.b shows that the share of non-performing loans (NPLs) as a percentage of total loans quadrupled between 2008 and 2014 for banks in the peripheral countries. On the other hand, banks in core countries barely experienced an increase in NPLs. This high fraction of NPLs is a further motivation for risk shifting in peripheral countries in order to increase profitability. A more detailed analysis using bank level data would provide a more rigorous test for the role of NPLs. Unfortunately, we lack the data to conduct this exercise.

#### 6.4 *Market segmentation*

Another potential reason for differences between core and peripheral investors could be market segmentation. Segmentation implies that there is not a single euro area government bond market, but that the euro area government bond market is fragmented instead. One can roughly split the bond market in “safe” core government bonds and “risky” peripheral bonds.<sup>11</sup> Investors will then have different demand for bonds from each market and this demand differs per country based on investor preferences.

At the country level, a financial institution will view the interest rate its government pays as the risk free interest rate. From the perspective of a core investor, the domestic interest rate is the relevant benchmark. While the peripheral bond offers a higher return, this goes with increased risk from the core investor’s perspective. Only a fraction of the core investors are willing to increase their risk profile. Since other core countries’ government bonds have a similar risk profile as the domestic government bonds, core investors can achieve diversification benefits but retain a similar risk profile when investing in other countries’ government bonds.

The perspective of the peripheral investor is different. He can hold domestic government bonds, which he considers as a safe asset within his own country (cf. Broner et al., 2014). By investing in other peripheral countries he is able to retain a similar risk profile, obtain similar returns and obtain diversification benefits. Core bonds offer a lower return but can be considered to be safer. However, is it really safer from the perspective of a peripheral bank to hold core

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<sup>11</sup> Battistini et al. (2014) argue that one needs to control for credit risk when aiming to identify market segmentation using yield data. When referring to market segmentation in this paper we focus on different investor clienteles for core and peripheral bonds, credit risk may be an important reason for differences in investors holding the bonds.

government debt instead of domestic government debt? It would diversify risks, but since a large part of the banks' portfolio is connected to the domestic economy (mortgages, corporate loans), holding foreign bonds will not shield the bank from problems when the domestic sovereign comes into trouble.

Another argument why levered peripheral investors do not increase their positions in core bonds is related to funding costs. The yield on assets needs to at least cover the funding costs, which are higher for peripheral banks and insurers. So, by purchasing a low yielding German government bond, they would make losses on the investment.

## **7. Conclusion**

This paper documents an important role for debt ratings in explaining cross-border sovereign debt holdings. We use cross-border holdings of euro area government bonds by euro area investors from the ESCB's Security Holdings Statistics during 2009 until 2016 to establish these findings. The results show that the effects of ratings are heterogeneous across countries and non-linearities exist. First, we find important differences between investors from core and peripheral euro area countries. Core investors react strongly to ratings by selling low rated bonds. This effect is strongest for core banks. In contrast, investors from the periphery barely react to ratings. If anything, peripheral insurers acquire more bonds with low ratings. The only exception being pension funds from peripheral countries. These results survive a robustness check as documented in Section 5. Second, for investors from core countries the effects of credit ratings are strongest when foreign country bonds offer a higher yield than domestic bonds. The effect of ratings on portfolio choice is generally not significant when the yield on foreign bonds is lower than domestic bonds. In contrast, for investors from peripheral countries, in particular insurance companies from these countries, we find a shift away from higher rated sovereigns when the yield is lower than the yield on domestic bonds.

We discuss four potential explanations for the differences between core and peripheral investors: 1) Sovereign-bank nexus, 2) Regulatory influence, 3) Risk shifting and 4) Market segmentation. The first explanation seems unlikely to be valid because we investigate cross border holdings. It would seem farfetched to assume that foreign governments would be able

to persuade foreign banks to hold their debt. The incentives for banks and other investors to agree to this would also be small.

The case for risk shifting is stronger, since risk shifting incentives are larger for the more levered peripheral investors and in particular peripheral investors faced strong increases in their funding costs. This reduces the incentives to hold core debt. For core investors the increase in risk signaled by downgrades trigger a shift to safer core bonds. Next, identification of the influence of regulators on core holdings of riskier peripheral bonds seems challenging. Nevertheless, this potential explanatory factor needs to be taken into account. Finally, market segmentation may play a role since bond markets have become more fragmented in the euro area. It may well be that core government bonds serve a different investor clientele than peripheral government bonds. A good example are bond investment funds that only invest in AAA- and AA-rated government bonds.

Our results show the importance of ratings in the foreign investment decisions of private investors, especially from core countries. Since 2015, the European Central Bank (ECB) has bought close to EUR 2 trillion in government bonds of euro area countries. The ECB does not base its purchases on the ratings of specific countries, apart from the rule that it does not acquire bonds with a non-investment grade rating. The importance of ratings for private investors may become more visible when the ECB decides to shrink its balance sheet again, potentially leading to increasing spreads between countries with high and low credit ratings.

The findings in this paper relate also to recent discussions on whether prudential risk weights need to be applied to sovereign debt. Despite a zero risk weight in Basel capital regulations, core banks still sold many peripheral government bonds. When deciding on whether to apply risk weights in new regulations, it is important to take into account which investors are affected and which ones not. It is also important to ensure that risk weights do not introduce increased pro-cyclicality in the financial system, which may happen if these risk weights would be based on credit ratings.

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## TABLES

**Table 1** Marginal effects of  $j$  issuing countries' ratings on cross-border sovereign bond holdings of holder countries  $i$

	Total (1)	By holder sector:			
		Banks (2)	Insurance companies (3)	Pension funds (4)	Investment funds (5)
<i>A. Holder country in Core + Periphery</i>					
Equation (2)	0.047**	0.069*	0.013	-0.006	0.004
Equation (5), Yield difference class:					
1) -32 < -1.2	-0.073*	-0.024	-0.032	0.061	-0.056
2) -1.2 < 0.0	-0.068	-0.052	0.015	0.094*	-0.112**
3) 0.0 < 1.2	-0.046	-0.053	0.055	0.081*	-0.122**
4) 1.2 < 32.0	0.072**	0.107**	0.075**	0.063**	0.036*
#Observations	3190	3190	3190	3190	3190
#Groups	110	110	110	110	110
R <sup>2</sup>					
<i>B. Holder country in Core</i>					
Equation (2)	0.102**	0.158**	0.107**	0.095**	0.058**
Equation (5), Yield difference class:					
1) -2.5 < 0.0	-0.054	-0.115	0.018	-0.162	0.120
2) 0.0 < 0.5	0.019	0.022	0.165*	0.121	-0.061
3) 0.5 < 2.0	0.074**	0.127**	0.111**	0.044	-0.030
4) 2.0 < 32.0	0.099**	0.172**	0.099**	0.057	0.055**
#Observations	1740	1740	1740	1740	1740
#Groups	60	60	60	60	60
R <sup>2</sup>					
<i>C. Holder country in Periphery</i>					
Equation (2)	-0.028	-0.037	-0.010	0.065*	-0.041
Equation (5), Yield difference class:					
1) -32.0 < -3.9	-0.061	-0.081	-0.069*	0.059	-0.015
2) -3.9 < -1.4	-0.124**	-0.050	-0.094*	-0.020	-0.051
3) -1.4 < -0.3	-0.102*	-0.090	-0.059	0.057	-0.086
4) -0.3 < 28.7	-0.001	0.009	0.051	0.071*	-0.063
#Observations	1450	1450	1450	1450	1450
#Groups	50	50	50	50	50
R <sup>2</sup>					

Explanatory note. All panel regressions contain both country and time fixed effects. Marginal effects =  $dx/dy$  where  $x$  = holdership and  $y$  is rating. Ownership = Ratio of holders' share to issuers' share. Yield difference = yield issuer minus yield holder. Groups = number of holder/issuing country combinations. Core countries = Austria, Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Netherlands. Periphery countries = Greece, Ireland, Italy, Portugal, Spain. Groups = number of holder-issuer country combinations. R<sup>2</sup> = overall R-squared. \*\*, \* = 1%, 5% significance levels based on robust standard errors.

**Table 2** Marginal effects of  $j$  issuing countries' ratings on cross-border sovereign bond holdings of holder countries  $i$

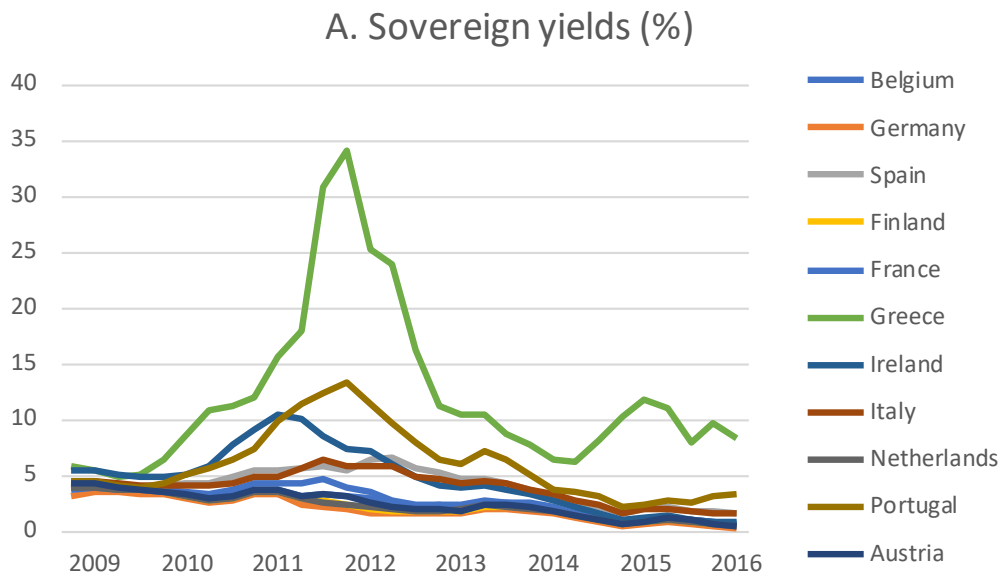
	Total	By holder sector:			
	(1)	Banks (2)	Insurance companies (3)	Pension funds (4)	Investment funds (5)
<i>A. Holder country in Core + Periphery</i>					
Equation (2)	0.047**	0.069*	0.013	-0.006	0.004
Equation (5), CDS difference class:					
1) -370.1 < -1.0	-0.055	-0.016	-0.024	0.076	-0.044
2) -1.0 < 0.0	-0.049	-0.064	0.012	0.088	-0.084
3) 0.0 < 1.0	-0.033	-0.016	0.057	0.084*	-0.115**
4) 1.0 < 370.1	0.070**	0.113**	0.068**	0.063**	0.036*
#Observations	3190	3190	3190	3190	3190
#Groups	110	110	110	110	110
R <sup>2</sup>					
<i>B. Holder country in Core</i>					
Equation (2)	0.102**	0.158**	0.107**	0.095**	0.058**
Equation (5), CDS difference class:					
1) -2.4 < 0.0	0.074	0.103	0.078	0.029	0.049
2) 0.0 < 0.4	0.062*	0.117**	0.178**	-0.041	-0.061*
3) 0.4 < 1.8	0.065*	0.129**	0.097*	-0.006	-0.029
4) 1.8 < 370.1	0.101**	0.170**	0.103**	0.069**	0.056**
#Observations	1740	1740	1740	1740	1740
#Groups	60	60	60	60	60
R <sup>2</sup>					
<i>C. Holder country in Periphery</i>					
Equation (2)	-0.028	-0.037	-0.010	0.065*	-0.041
Equation (5), CDS difference class:					
1) -370.1 < -3.8	-0.106*	-0.113	-0.117**	-0.007	0.015
2) -3.8 < 1.1	-0.078	-0.045	-0.074	0.068	-0.088
3) -1.1 < -0.2	-0.096*	-0.107	-0.069	0.059	-0.095
4) -0.2 < 369.8	-0.003	0.017	0.045	0.075**	-0.067
#Observations	1450	1450	1450	1450	1450
#Groups	50	50	50	50	50
R <sup>2</sup>					

Explanatory note. All panel regressions contain both country and time fixed effects. Marginal effects =  $dx/dy$  where  $x$  = holdership and  $y$  is rating. Ownership = Ratio of holders' share to issuers' share. CDS difference = CDS premium issuer minus CDS premium holder, in percentage points. Groups = number of holder/issuing country combinations. Core countries = Austria, Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Netherlands. Periphery countries = Greece, Ireland, Italy, Portugal, Spain. Groups = number of holder-issuer country combinations. R<sup>2</sup> = overall R-squared. \*\*, \* = 1%, 5% significance levels based on robust standard errors.

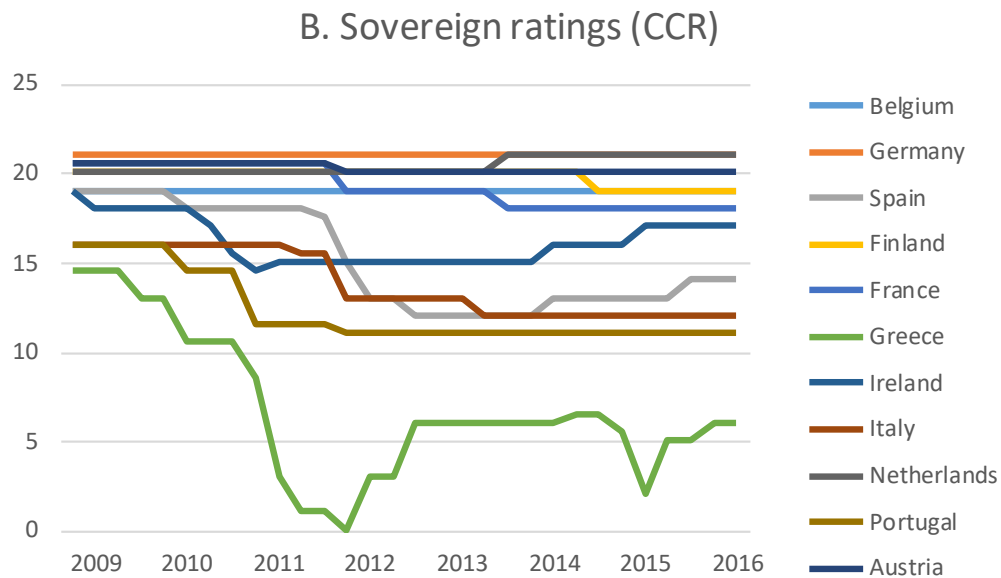


## FIGURES

**Figure 1.** Sovereign yields and ratings



Source: Datastream.



Source: Standard & Poors. Comprehensive Credit Ratings (CCR) defined as in Gande and Parsley (2014).

Figure 2. Total share of euro area government bonds held by non-domestic euro area investors

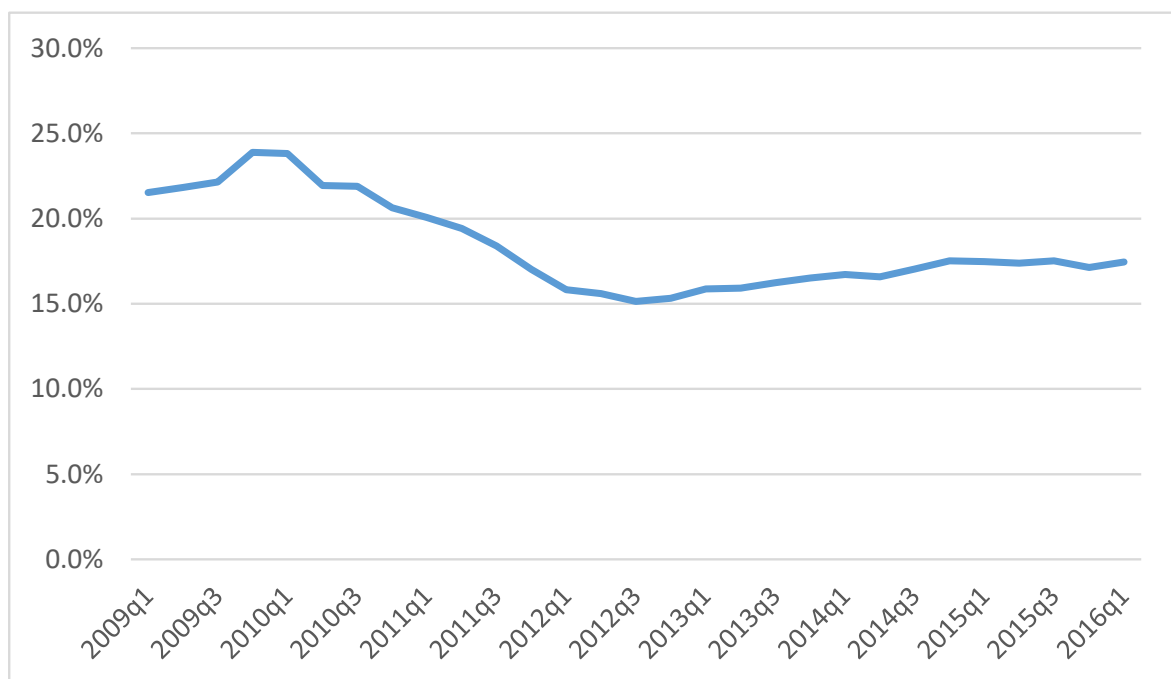
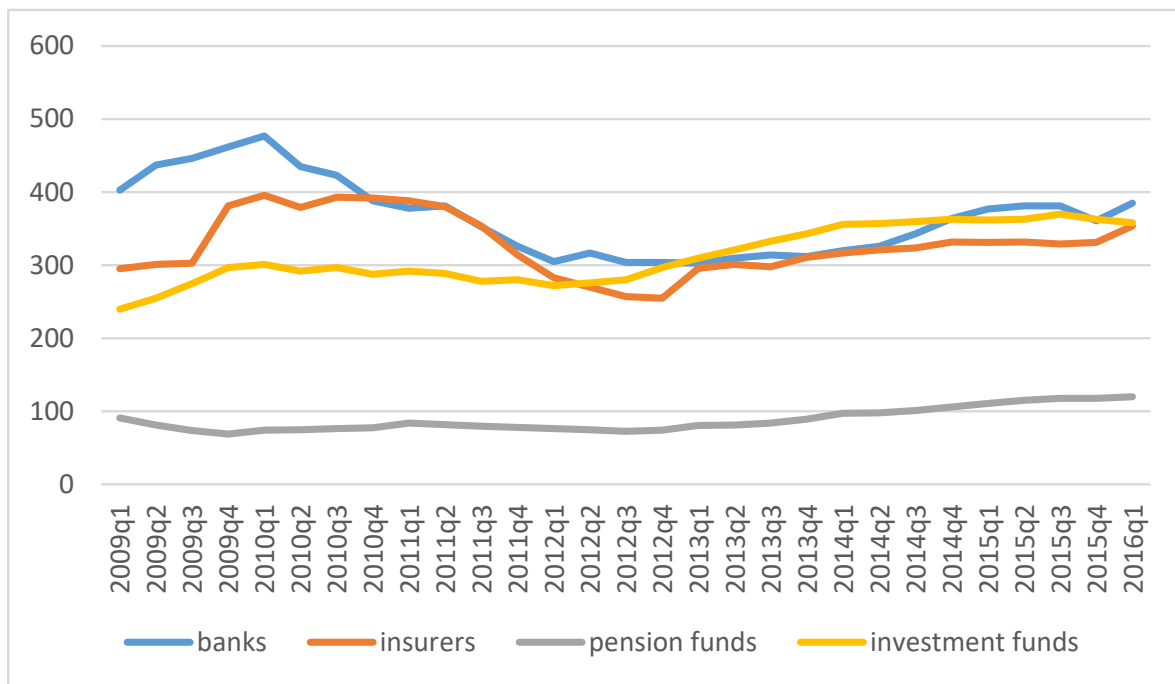
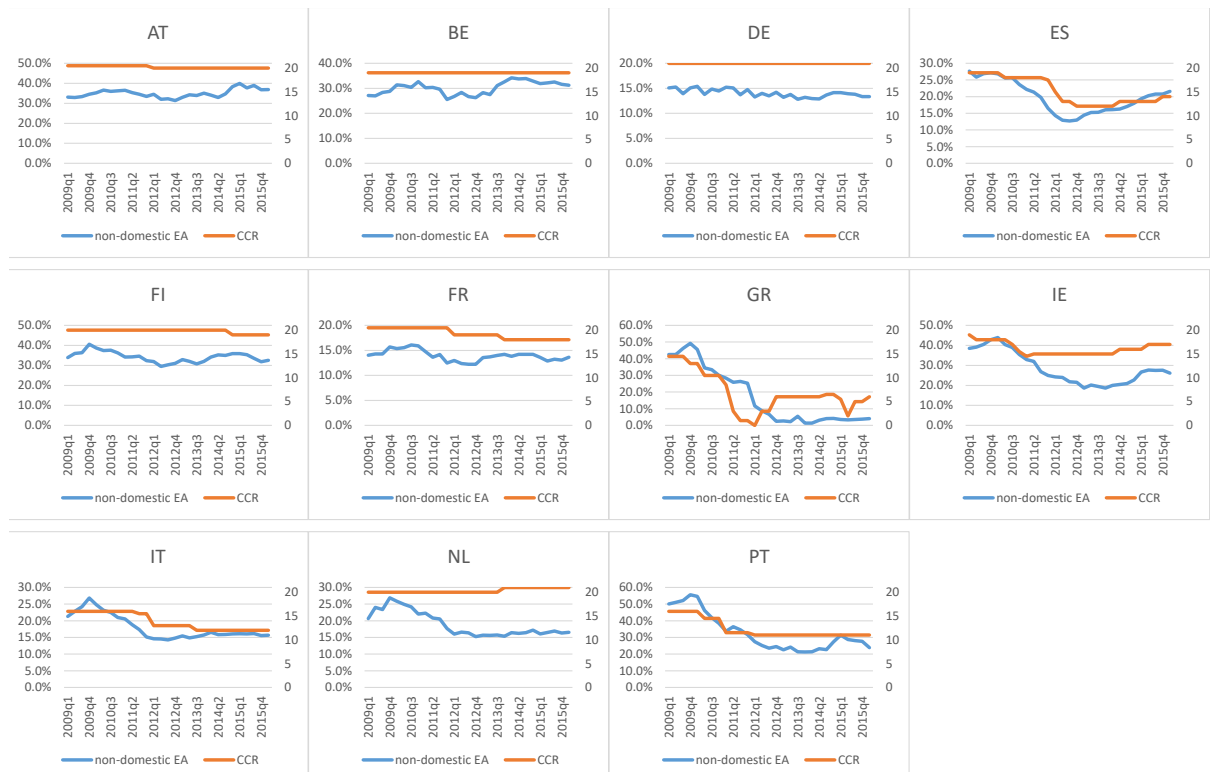


Figure 3. Euro area government bonds held by non-domestic euro area investors, by holder sector (in EUR billion)



Source: ESCB Securities Holdings Statistics and own calculations.

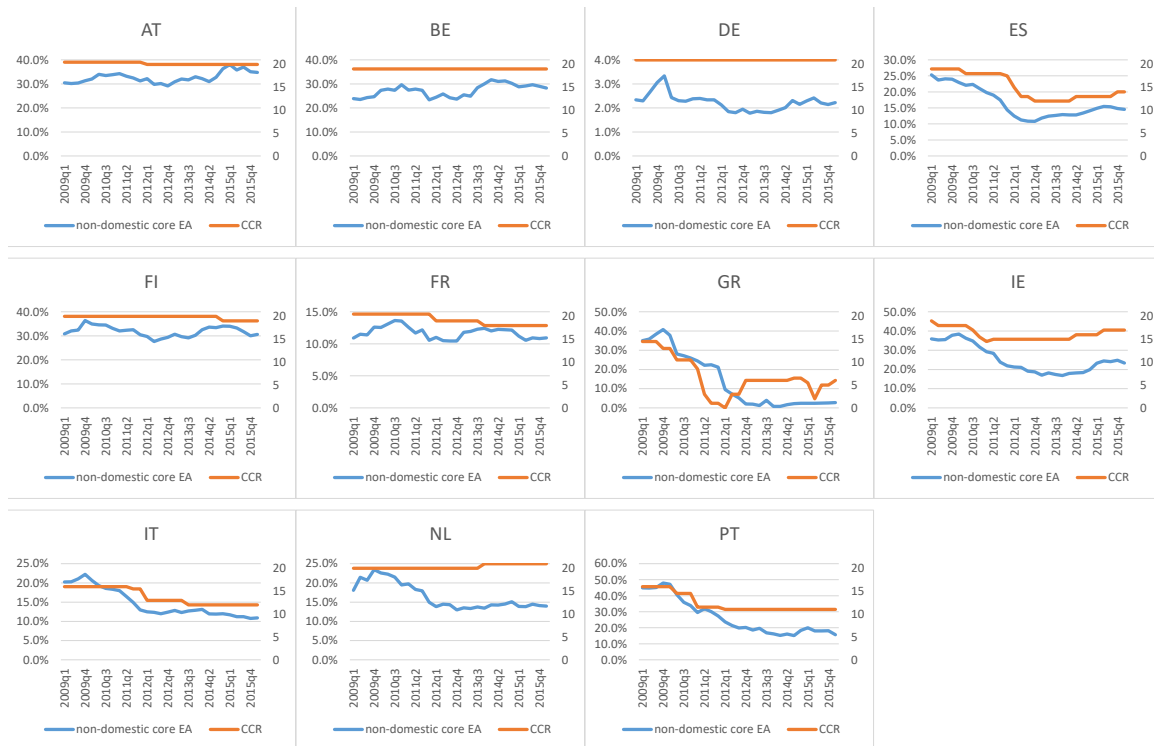
Figure 4. Share of euro area government bonds held by non-domestic euro area investors by issuer country



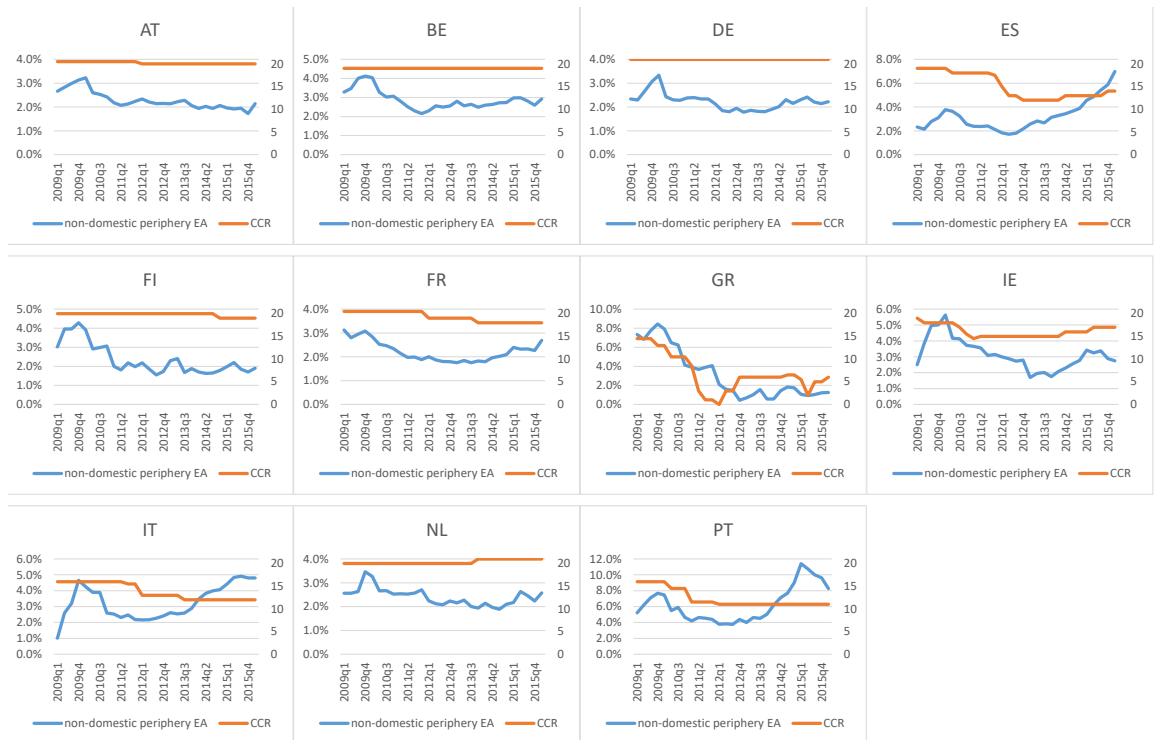
Source: ESCB Securities Holdings Statistics and own calculations.

Figure 5. Fraction of government bonds held by non-domestic EA investors from core and periphery

A. Non-domestic investors from core



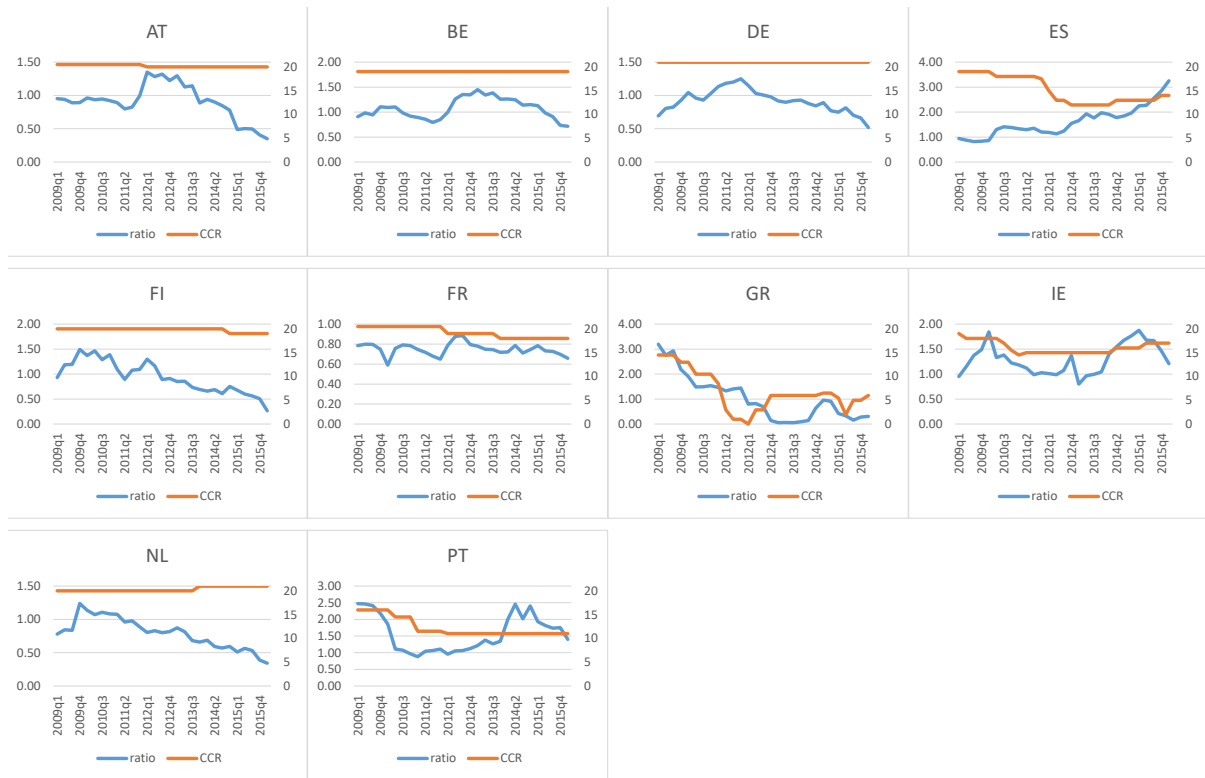
B. Non-domestic investors from periphery



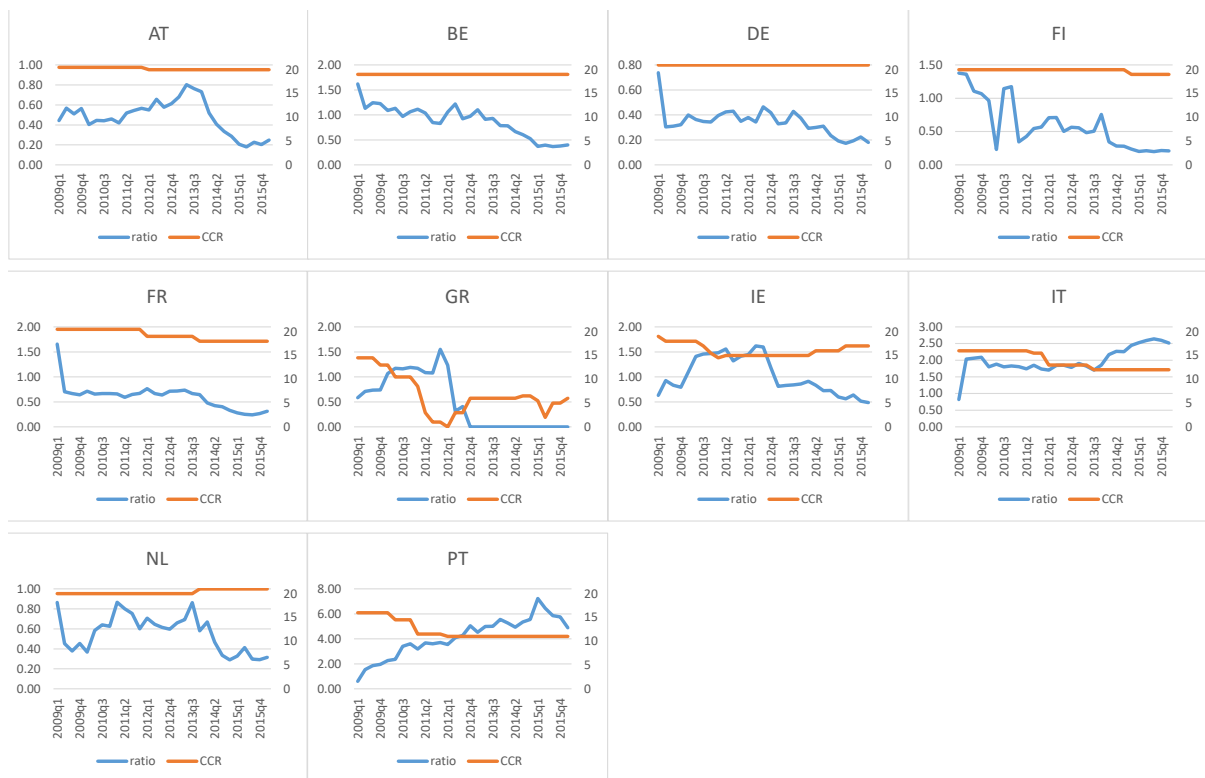
Source: ESCB Securities Holdings Statistics and own calculations. The blue line represents the value of ratio (left axis) and the orange line the comprehensive credit rating (right axis).

Figure 6. Ratio and ratings for Italy, Spain and The Netherlands

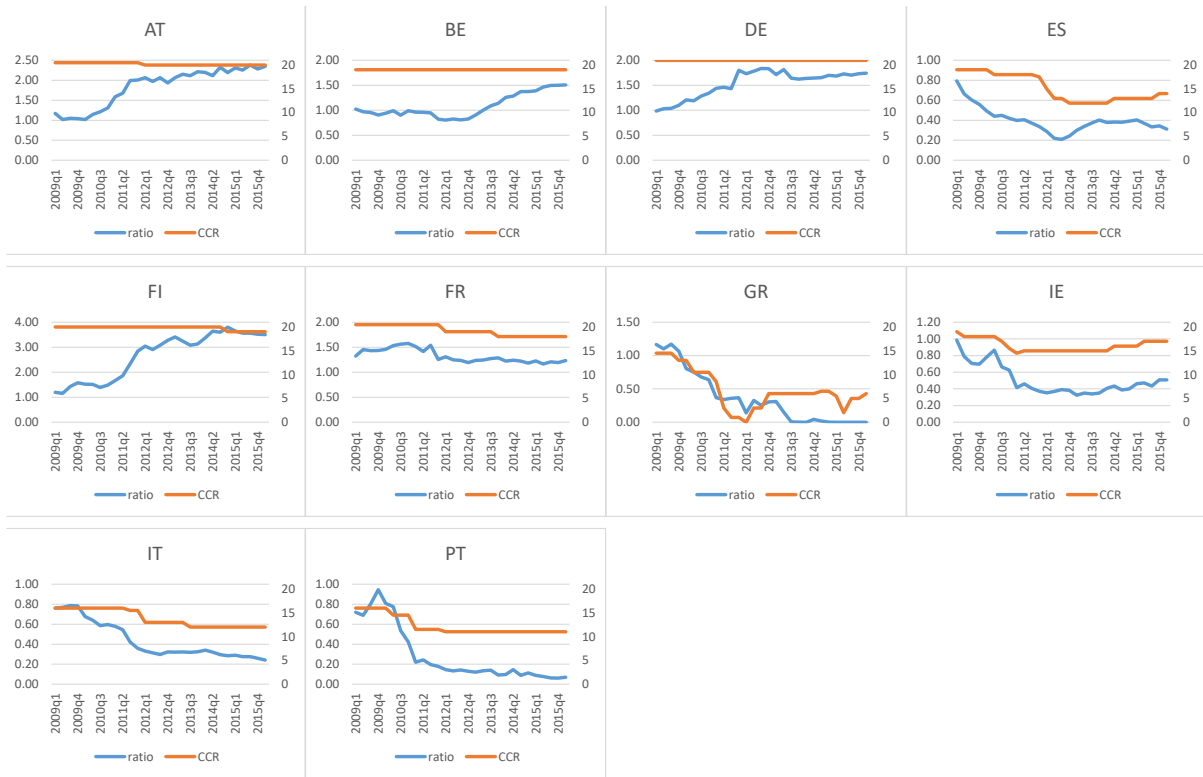
A. Italian investors



B. Spanish investors



### C. Dutch investors



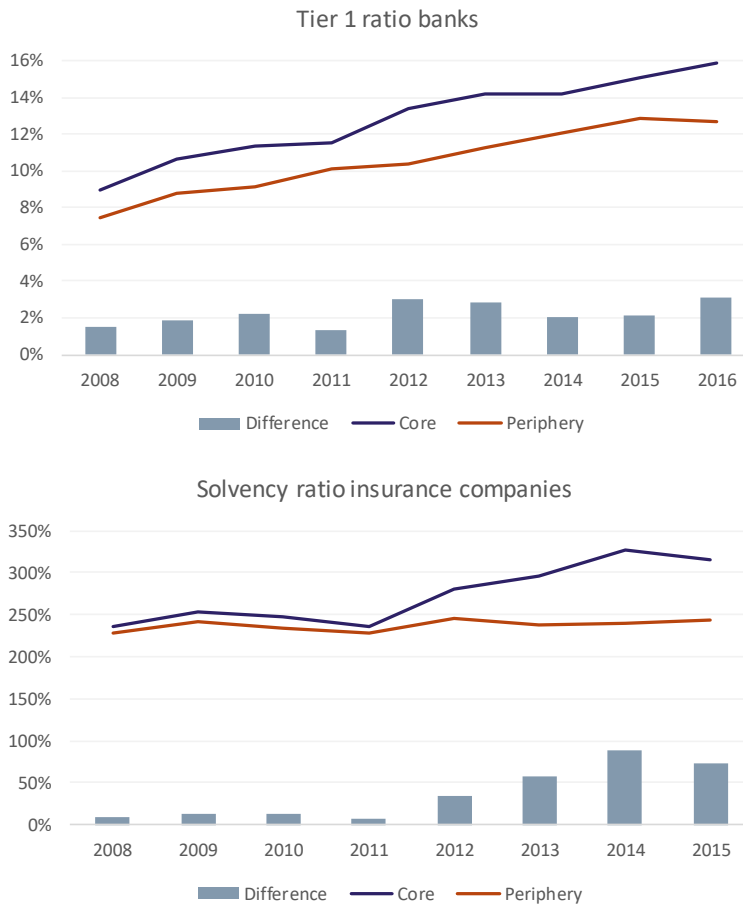
Source: ESCB Securities Holdings Statistics and own calculations. The blue line represents the value of ratio (left axis) and the orange line the comprehensive credit rating (right axis).

**Figure 7** Marginal effects

<i>Yielddif_cat</i>	$\frac{\partial(\text{ratio})}{\partial(\text{rating})}$
0	$a_1$
1	$a_{21} + a_1$
2	$a_{22} + a_1$
3	$a_{23} + a_1$

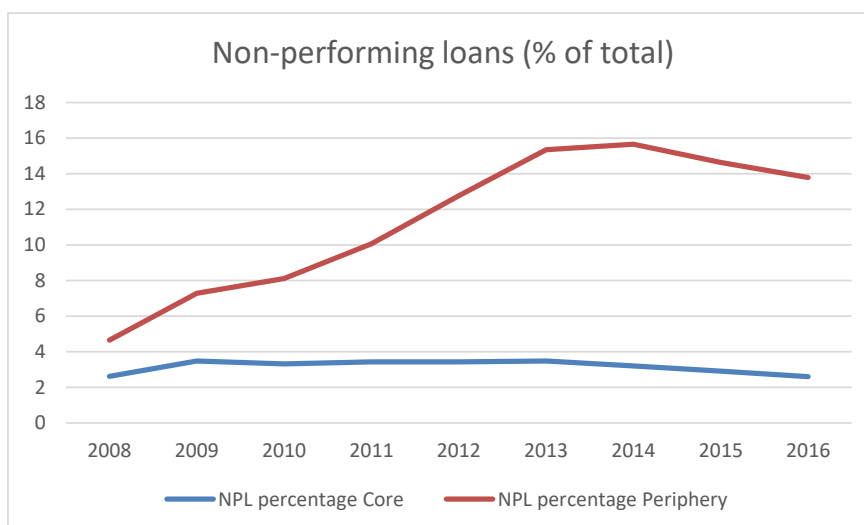


Figure 8.a. Capital ratio banks and solvency ratio insurance companies, core vs. periphery



Source: IMF Financial Stability Indicators and own calculations.

Figure 8.b. Non-performing loans (% of total), core vs. periphery



Source: World Bank World Development indicators and own calculations.

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