

# COVID-19 and Small- and Medium-Sized Enterprises: A 2021 “Time Bomb”?<sup>†</sup>

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The global COVID-19 shock was unexpected, severe, and complex. The initial policy response, hastily cobbled together in the first quarter of 2020, was designed to curb the spread of the virus, contain financial panic, and limit the economic fallout. Some advanced economies deployed unprecedented levels of fiscal support, nearing up to 40 percent of their GDPs, to protect businesses and jobs.<sup>1</sup> Growing evidence suggests that these outsized fiscal packages helped keep businesses and markets afloat in 2020. In fact, some early estimates indicate that 2020 corporate failure rates are broadly comparable, and possibly *lower*, than pre-COVID failure rates.<sup>2</sup>

Support policies on such a massive scale are necessarily loosely targeted and temporary. As they come to an end, policymakers increasingly worry about a potential “*time bomb*” of business failures, especially among small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which may hamper a broader economic recovery (G30 Working Group on Corporate Sector Revitalization 2020). This time bomb could occur for three separate reasons.

- (i) Support policies in 2020 were too generous or targeted the “wrong” firms, thus only temporarily delaying inevitable bankruptcies.
- (ii) Support took many forms, with most governments offering cheap government-guaranteed loans. The resulting increase in firms’ indebtedness could push firms into insolvency in 2021.
- (iii) Withdrawal of fiscal support in 2021, or a tightening of credit conditions, could trigger liquidity problems among surviving and ultimately viable but fragile firms.

This paper assesses the prospects for such a 2021 SME time bomb.<sup>3</sup> We build on Gourinchas et al. 2020, which estimates the impact of COVID-19 on SME failures in 2020. In that paper, we construct a model-based estimate of a firm’s cash flow under COVID-19 by solving a short-run cost-minimization problem subject to a rich combination of sectoral and aggregate supply and demand shocks.<sup>4</sup> By combining this estimated cash flow with firm-level data from Bureau van Dijk’s Orbis, we can infer the impact of COVID-19 on SME failures and evaluate the cost and effectiveness of various government interventions designed to support businesses throughout 2020. The current paper extends our analysis through the end of 2021.

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<sup>1</sup>See the IMF Policy Tracker for the total cost of COVID fiscal support packages (IMF 2021).

<sup>2</sup>Real-time estimates of 2020 bankruptcies are still scarce due to reporting lags in firm filings and congested courts with regulatory freezes on proceedings (Díez et al. 2021). See Crane et al. (2020) for recent information for the United States.

<sup>3</sup>In the European Union, SMEs—firms with fewer than 250 employees—account for a striking 99.8 percent of all employer firms, 65 percent of private sector employment, and 54 percent of private sector gross output.

<sup>4</sup>See Baqaee and Farhi (2020), who emphasize the amplification of such shocks through input-output networks, and Guerrieri et al. (2020), who show the effect of negative supply shocks on demand shortages.

### I. Time Bomb Analysis

Specifically, we consider a baseline scenario in which the COVID-19 crisis requires two lock-down episodes in 2020. The first lock-down begins in week 9 of 2020 (end of February) and lasts 8 weeks, while the second lock-down begins in week 44 (end of October), lasts 6 weeks, and all shocks are two-thirds as intense as during the first lock-down. Throughout 2020 and 2021, aggregate demand evolves according to country-level quarterly GDP growth forecasts from the IMF’s June 2020 World Economic Outlook. During each lock-down episode, the economy also experiences sectoral labor supply, productivity, and demand shocks.<sup>5</sup> Once each lock-down episode ends, sectoral supply and productivity shocks immediately return to pre-COVID levels, while sector-specific demand follows an AR(1) with a quarterly autocorrelation of 0.5. We assume there are no additional lock-down episodes in 2021.

To evaluate firm failure, we impose a liquidity criterion that is evaluated at a weekly frequency. Focusing on a liquidity criterion rather than a solvency one is appropriate for SMEs, whose assets are difficult to value and whose means to raise fresh capital are very limited, especially during a pandemic. According to this criterion, firms fail when they cannot cover financial expenses out of current cash balances and (model-based) cash flow. Throughout 2020 we assume that firms can roll over existing loans but cannot obtain “fresh” financing to cover cash shortfalls.

We obtain data on 2018 firm revenue, labor, and material costs along with cash balances and financial expenses from Orbis.<sup>6</sup> Our analysis focuses on a subset of 13 countries for which Orbis, on average, covers nearly 60 percent of aggregate SME revenue—Belgium, the Czech Republic, Finland, France, Greece, Hungary,

Italy, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Spain.<sup>7</sup>

In the absence of government support, our baseline scenario generates a sharp increase in the SME failure rate of 9.84 percentage points (pp) relative to a counterfactual non-COVID year. In reality, policy support in 2020 has been quite generous in the countries we consider, dampening the impact of COVID-19 on SME failures.

To capture this reality, we simulate a program of public loan guarantees for SMEs broadly similar to that implemented in many countries. Under this program, all SMEs receive a zero-interest five-year *pandemic loan* with a government guarantee along the lines described by the European Central Bank (Falagiarda, Prapiestis, and Rancoita 2020). The terms are such that firms receive the maximum of 25 percent of their average weekly 2018 revenues or twice their average weekly 2018 wage bill during each week of lock-down. Should a firm find itself unable to repay its pandemic loan, the government bears 90 percent of the losses, with the remaining 10 percent accruing to the banking sector. Under this more realistic scenario, the model predicts that the 2020 SME failure rate under COVID would be similar to—0.03 pp below—the non-COVID rate.

With that central scenario in place we ask: what happens in 2021 once government support expires? Since we assume no additional COVID lock-downs in 2021, there is a tension between improving economic fundamentals and the legacy of 2020 COVID shocks that weakened the business sector.<sup>8</sup> We present our estimates of SME failures and resulting policy costs under two different financial environments for 2021.

- (i) Pandemic loan repayment: firms maintain access to credit markets to roll over pre-pandemic loans but must repay one-fifth of the principal on their pandemic loan.

<sup>5</sup>Sectoral shocks are defined at the four-digit NACE level. Sectoral labor supply shocks reflect each sector’s ability to shift to remote work (Dingle and Neiman 2020). Sectoral productivity shocks are calibrated using data from the American Community Survey on the pre-COVID prevalence of remote work by industry and the assumption that remote work is 20 percent less productive than on-site work. Sector-specific demand shocks reflect sectoral reliance on face-to-face customer interaction (O\*NET).

<sup>6</sup>2018 is the latest year for which firm-level data are available from Orbis. We assume that the distribution of firm variables remains unchanged between 2018 and 2019.

<sup>7</sup>The coverage statistics are based on the latest (2017) available official OECD data.

<sup>8</sup>While our analysis does not feature permanent sectoral reallocation (Barrero, Bloom, and Davis 2020), our sectoral demand shocks do persist into 2021 and act as a drag on firm recovery.

TABLE 1—2021 OUTCOMES RELATIVE TO NON-COVID-19

	2021 outcomes ( $\Delta\%$ )			2021 $\Delta\%$ failed decomposition	
	Strong (1)	Saved (2)	Failed (3)	Strong 2020 (4)	Saved 2020 (5)
Pandemic loan repayment	-8.66	10.61	1.88	-0.77	2.65
No rollover of pre-pandemic debt	-17.23	12.62	8.44	4.14	4.30

*Notes:* All columns reported as a share of firms alive at the end of 2020 under COVID and as the difference between the COVID and non-COVID scenarios. Columns 1–3 report the firms' 2021 outcomes (strong, saved, and failed). Columns 4 and 5 report the distribution of the failed 2021 firms (that is, column 3) across their firm type at the end of 2020 (strong 2020 or saved 2020). All values are first calculated at the one-digit NACE level for each country and then aggregated across countries using country  $\times$  sector gross value added from the OECD as weights.

- (ii) No rollover of pre-pandemic debt: credit markets tighten, and in addition to the principal due on their pandemic loan, SMEs cannot roll over maturing pre-pandemic financial obligations.

The first scenario reflects a situation where credit markets are unwilling to extend fresh credit to roll over pandemic loans but are otherwise comfortable with pre-pandemic debt levels. The second reflects a situation of financial stress where credit markets force SMEs to delever.<sup>9</sup>

Tables 1 and 2 report our estimates under each scenario. In each table, we start with the set of firms that are alive at the end of 2020. Our estimation allows us to sort these firms into two buckets: firms that would have survived 2020 even without fiscal support (labeled “strong 2020”) versus more vulnerable firms that needed fiscal support to survive in 2020 (“saved 2020”). Similarly, we can decompose the same set of firms based on our predicted 2021 outcomes: firms that would have survived without any fiscal support (“strong 2021”), firms that needed support (“saved 2021”), and firms that fail during 2021 (“failed 2021”). By comparing failure rates and pandemic loan disbursements across the different groups and scenarios, we can assess whether 2020 policies created a “time bomb” of failures for 2021 and whether 2020 policies targeted the right firms.

Table 1 reports the distribution of firms across 2021 outcomes (strong, saved, and failed)

<sup>9</sup>Empirical evidence suggests that when credit dries up, SMEs are first affected. Even if the immediate risk of mass failure (the focus of this paper) were mitigated, firms may still face insolvency risk from debt overhang. See Diez et al. (2021) and Chodorow-Reich et al. (2020).

relative to non-COVID in columns 1–3.<sup>10</sup> Columns 4 and 5 further decompose the change in failure rate in 2021 from column 3 according to the firm's 2020 status (i.e., strong or saved).

The first key result from Table 1 is that 2020 policy support does not, on its own, lead to a “time bomb” of 2021 SME failures. Column 3 indicates that the failure rate increases only modestly, by 1.88 pp relative to a non-COVID 2021. Meanwhile, the share of strong firms is 8.66 pp smaller (column 1), and that of saved firms is 10.61 pp larger (column 2).<sup>11</sup> Of the 1.88 pp increase in the 2021 failure rate, 2.65 pp comes from relatively weak firms that survived 2020 only thanks to fiscal support (column 5), while that of strong 2020 firms contributed -0.77 pp (column 4). Overall, although fewer firms would have survived on their own (column 1), many firms make it to the end of 2021 thanks to the support received in 2020 (column 2), and failure rates increase only modestly relative to a normal year (column 3).

Table 1, however, illustrates a potential vulnerability. Should the banking sector—the primary source of external funding for

<sup>10</sup>To construct non-COVID outcomes, we focus on the group of firms that survive COVID in 2020 and consider their outcome under a non-COVID scenario for both years. Since there would have been no fiscal support under non-COVID, these firms end up either “strong” or “failed” at the end of 2021.

<sup>11</sup>Columns 1–3 sum to 3.83 pp, which is the percentage of firms that survived COVID in 2020 but would have failed in 2020 under the non-COVID scenario. This group consists of firms that may have received overly generous fiscal support in 2020 and firms that experienced a strong COVID year, for instance, because they operate in essential sectors or faced an increase in relative demand.

TABLE 2—DISTRIBUTION OF POLICY SUPPORT, POLICY COSTS, AND MACRO OUTCOMES

	Funds disbursed in 2020				Policy-related costs			
	Total (1)	Strong 2021 (2)	Saved 2021 (3)	Failed 2021 (4)	Govt.'s share (5)	Banks' share (6)	NPL (7)	Jobs lost (8)
2020 firm group	(% of 2018 GDP)				(% of 2018 GDP)		(% SME loans)	(% 2018 empl.)
<i>Panel A. Pandemic loan repayment</i>								
Strong 2020	8.27	7.98	0.26	0.04	0.03	0.00	1.07	0.09
Saved 2020	1.05	0.00	0.81	0.24	0.20	0.02	2.64	1.07
Total 2020	9.32	7.98	1.07	0.28	0.23	0.03	3.71	1.16
<i>Panel B. No rollover of pre-pandemic debt</i>								
Strong 2020	8.27	6.80	0.79	0.68	0.54	0.06	24.59	2.30
Saved 2020	1.05	0.00	0.62	0.43	0.36	0.04	5.38	2.01
Total 2020	9.32	6.80	1.41	1.11	0.90	0.10	29.97	4.32

Notes: Columns 1–4 report the distribution of pandemic loans based on 2020 (rows) and 2021 (columns) classifications. Column 1 shows total funds disbursed in each scenario. Columns 2 to 4 show the distribution based on firms' 2021 outcomes. Columns 5 and 6 show the costs to the government and banks of writing off pandemic loans (net of any principal paid prior to failing) on firms that fail in 2021. Column 7 shows the share of all pre-pandemic SME loans that become nonperforming, and column 8 shows jobs lost as a share of total 2018 employment. Columns 1–6 are scaled by the ratio of country value added to total ORBIS value added. Similar scaling was done for column 8 based on the ratio of country employment to total ORBIS employment. Aggregated using GDP weights.

SMEs—tighten access to credit and prevent rollover of pre-pandemic SME maturing debts, failure rates would spike, with an increase of 8.44 pp relative to normal times. Moreover, nearly half of the SME failures would now arise from firms that did not need any support to survive to the end of 2020 (column 4). The analysis clearly illustrates that the main danger for 2021 resides in impaired access to credit markets.

Table 2, panel A, columns 1 to 4 report the distribution of pandemic loans outstanding at the end of 2020 as a percent of 2018 GDP across firms' 2020 (rows) and 2021 (columns) outcomes. Columns 5 and 6 report the cost of realized losses on pandemic loans.<sup>12</sup> Column 7 shows the share of preexisting SME loans that are nonperforming (NPLs) due to 2021 firm failures. Column 8 shows the share of jobs lost due to firm failures, as a percent of total 2018 employment.

Table 2 illustrates the policy trade-offs policymakers confront in 2021. Total outstanding pandemic loans at the end of 2020 represent

9.32 percent of GDP. Of this, we estimate that between 6.80 percent and 7.98 percent of GDP was disbursed to firms strong enough to survive both 2020 and 2021 on their own. This highlights the very imperfect targeting of 2020 support policies under COVID.

Since only 1.88 percent additional firms fail under our first scenario, the policy cost remains low, at 0.26 percent of GDP. NPLs and job losses also increase modestly, by 3.71 percent of SME loans and 1.16 percent of total employment, respectively. This leaves little scope or need for additional policy support in order to save SMEs in 2021.

The second scenario considers what happens when worried credit markets do not roll over maturing pre-pandemic debt. In that case, while policy costs increase only modestly (1 percent of GDP), NPLs (29.97 percent of SME loans) and job losses (4.32 percent of employment) balloon. These estimates confirm that financial risks in 2021 constitute a major concern for SME strength, more so than the repayment of government-supported loans. A serious worry is that public loan guarantees have overburdened SMEs with debt. This might adversely affect their solvency and future access to private credit. Increased indebtedness could also

<sup>12</sup>Ninety percent of the losses accrue to the government and 10 percent to the banks. These costs equal the amounts disbursed in 2020 to firms that fail in 2021, less any principal repaid in 2021 prior to failure.

worsen debt overhang problems, distorting capital expenditures.

This could justify additional forms of debt relief in 2021. Such relief should be targeted to firms that need it, primarily in the “saved 2021” category. According to Table 2, this would represent 1.07 percent of GDP under scenario (i). In addition, we estimate that this debt relief could help save an additional 0.91 percent of firms in 2021. To the extent that targeting is difficult to implement, debt relief could be provided against—for instance—a temporary higher tax on future profits. This would help claw back some of the relief disbursed to firms that don’t need it.<sup>13</sup>

## II. Conclusion

Our exercise reaches an important conclusion: we do not find that policies implemented in 2020 on their own create a 2021 “time bomb” for SMEs. Even if pandemic loans come due, business failures remain modest, and so do policy costs. By contrast, we find significant exposure to the risk of a credit contraction. Such a contraction would disproportionately impact firms that otherwise would not need fiscal support to survive COVID-19 in 2020. Even in that scenario, large business failures would not arise from excessively generous 2020 policies that just delayed the inevitable. Instead, they would be a new blow, coming from the contraction of credit to the corporate sector.

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<sup>13</sup>See G30 Working Group on Corporate Sector Revitalization (2020) for similar recommendations.