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Economic & Market review – September 2021

US equities notched up a small positive return in Q3. Strong earnings had lifted US stocks in the run up to August, when the Federal Reserve seemed to strike a dovish tone, confirming its hesitance to tighten policy too fast. However, growth and inflation concerns late in the quarter meant US equities retraced their steps in September.

The Fed stated in September that tapering of quantitative will be announced at the November meeting, as expected, and will finish by mid-2022. Meanwhile, the fed funds rate projections now show a faster rate hiking schedule than they did in June. The median rate expectation for 2023 moved up to three hikes from two in June, with three additional hikes in 2024. The shift comes in the context of revised real GDP growth - down to 5.9% for 2021 from the 7% growth estimated in the last meeting - while inflation has risen. The Fed now sees inflation running to 4.2% this year, above its previous estimate of 3.4%. The Fed raised its GDP projections for 2022 and 2023 to growth of 3.8% and 2.5%, respectively.

On a sector basis, financials and utilities outperformed. At the other end of the spectrum, industrials and materials struggled, although September's sell-off hit almost all sectors. Energy was an exception, rising as supply constraints drove prices to highs, particularly Brent crude.

Eurozone equities were flat in Q3. The energy sector was one of the strongest performers, as was information technology with semiconductor-related stocks seeing a robust advance. Consumer discretionary stocks were among the weakest for the quarter, with luxury goods companies under pressure amid suggestions that China could seek greater wealth redistribution, which could hit demand.

The quarter had started with gains amid a positive Q2 earnings season and ongoing economic recovery from the pandemic. The Delta variant of Covid-19 continued to spread but most large eurozone countries have now fully vaccinated around 75% of their population against the virus, enabling many restrictions on travel and other activities to be lifted.

However, as the period progressed, worries emerged over inflation due to supply chain bottlenecks and rising energy prices. Annual inflation in the eurozone was estimated at 3.4% in September, up from 3.0% in August and 2.2% in July. The European Central Bank said that it would tolerate any moderate and transitory overshoot of its 2.0% inflation target.

The end of the period saw a surge in power prices as a result of low gas supply and lack of wind over the summer, among other factors. High power prices should be positive for utility firms. However, the sector, particularly in southern Europe, is susceptible to political intervention as evidenced by announcements of price caps in Spain and other countries. The utilities sector was a laggard in the quarter.