CONGRESS ASSET MANAGEMENT COMPANY

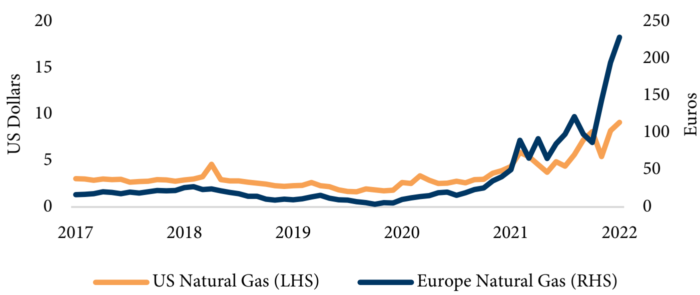
ECONOMIC AND MARKET OUTLOOK

Fourth Quarter 2022

Turbulence has been the prevailing theme of 2022. Investors are grappling with inflation and a drawn-out conflict between Russia and Ukraine, forces that have damaged asset valuations and stunted economic growth. While the summer months offered some respite, negative sentiment intensified in September. The downward trend of stocks accelerated and bond yields increased as the Federal Reserve (Fed) reinforced its commitment to taming inflation, even at the cost of a potential recession. Energy prices, driven up by international sanctions on Russia, have receded from their highs. However, the coming winter is unlikely to bring more relief, particularly as Europe faces energy prices that have been as high as 10x typical levels. Despite these headwinds, the US economy continues to show strength and the consumer remains fundamentally strong, in our view.

Europe is Facing a Costly Winter

Natural Gas Prices for the US & EU 2017-2022



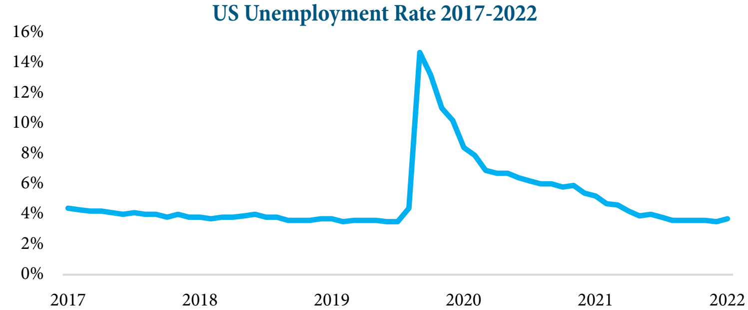
Source: Bloomberg as of 8/31/2022

On the inflation front, continued price increases have caused concern, particularly as inflation has broadened out to "stickier" categories like shelter. In response, the Fed is aggressively raising short term interest rates and shrinking its bond holdings. Bond yields reflect the Fed's vigor and the markets are anticipating a 2023 recession.

Market sentiment is undoubtedly negative, to the point that even "good news" is viewed in a negative light. For instance, August's unemployment rate of 3.7% is seen as inflationary. However, the US labor market is moving back into balance, with employment at pre-COVID levels and labor force participation creeping higher. An expanding labor pool is deflationary and may indicate the beginning of the end of the "great resignation." Help wanted signs hang from auto repair shops, restaurants, and health care facilities. With recent reports suggesting over eleven million unfilled positions, ample opportunity awaits those seeking employment.

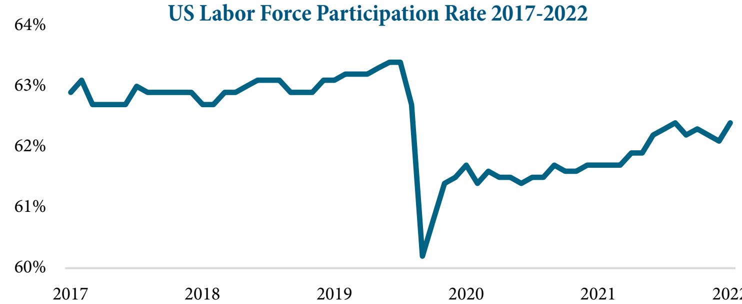
Is the "Great Resignation" Ending?

US Unemployment Rate 2017-2022



Source: US Bureau of Labor Statistics as of August 2022

US Labor Force Participation Rate 2017-2022

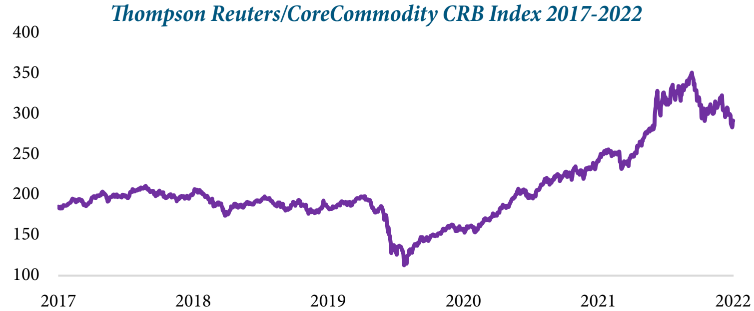


Source: US Beaureau of Labor Statistics as of August 2022

Improving supply chains and falling commodity costs indicate we are past peak inflation. Though shelter inflation remains at concerning levels, housing prices and apartment rent growth show signs of turning over. While markets believe the Fed will ultimately keep inflation in check, caution is warranted. Consumers are spending more money on food, fuel, and shelter than in the recent past.

Commodity Prices Falling, Yet Still Stinging Consumers

Thompson Reuters/CoreCommodity CRB Index 2017-2022



Source: FactSet as of 9/29/2022

While the domestic economy finds its footing, Europe faces a difficult winter. An over-reliance on Russian natural gas and a premature focus on green energy policies have left the Continent with exorbitant energy and utility costs. Government policies will lessen the out-of-pocket pain for their citizens, but the fundamental energy shortfall is not easily fixed. Elevated fuel costs are likely to dampen consumer discretionary spending and are already curtailing industrial production. U.S. companies with European exposure will feel the chill.

As economic challenges abound, attention has turned to corporate earnings. Doubts are mounting about companies' abilities to maintain margins either through price increases or operational efficiencies. Employment costs are rising and supply chain issues are forcing many companies to rely on higher cost options such as increasing inventory and/or moving operations closer to home. The prospect of higher costs and higher interest rates has increased market volatility and weighed on returns. So far this year the S&P 500 has lost 1% or more in a week 21 times, a grim milestone that has been exceeded only three times in the last 30 calendar years.

The immediate economic outlook is uncertain and stock market valuations and interest rate trends reflect this reality. The U.S. ten-year Treasury note now yields about 3.8%, up from 1.5% at year end. We believe the increased yield will be enough to dampen inflation to a more reasonable level in 2023. While the US consumer won't escape inflation unscathed, consumers, in general, are well-positioned to absorb price increases, and the strong labor market is contributing to rising compensation.

How hard or soft the coming landing will be is unclear, and the stock market is likely to react to a combination of corporate earnings and the U.S. ten-year yield. As such, market swings are expected to continue. Ultimately, intermediate- and longer-term economic prospects will be heavily influenced by the consumer and his or her spending priorities. Looking through the noise, we continue to believe that a portfolio of established growth companies offers the best prospects for long-term capital appreciation.

Investment Oversight Committee
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