

European Credit Focus

Trading HY credit in the age of QE infinity

- **To (QE) infinity and beyond!** — With inflation fast disappearing central bankers are back to making dovish noises with the potential for more QE in Europe this year. A flood of new liquidity will indeed buoy risk sentiment, but for investors it will be key to differentiate between systemic and idiosyncratic risk.
- **Be short idiosyncratic risk** — The widest names in Xover have continuously and significantly underperformed for the last 5 years. The grab for yield has simply not extended this far down the credit spectrum - and with good reason, given the steady trickle of defaults we have seen. Even if QE resumes we fear it will remain hard to prop up failing corporates.
- **Where are markets pricing this the most?** — We find that markets tend to be efficient when predicting default timing for names with small debt stacks, but not for large debt stacks. We analysed the degree of idiosyncratic risk inherent in the widest Xover names: PIZEXP, BOPRLN, COFP, CMACG, HEMABV, TTMTIN, MTNLN, HEMABV, ICELTD using our time-to-default indicator.
- **Be long systemic risk** — Better quality HY still has risk premia left. The tighter half of Xover names outperformed iTraxx Main during ECB's CSPP, and then some of this reversed in '18.

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See Appendix A-1 for Analyst Certification, Important Disclosures and non-US research analyst disclosures.

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To (QE) infinity and beyond!

It's been 12 years and \$10 trillion (worth of global QE) since the Great Recession, but the global economy still seems unable to reach escape velocity. Like astronauts who edged too close to an event horizon, we seem stuck in time, fighting but unable to escape the "black hole" of Japanification.

With inflation fast disappearing central bankers are back to making dovish noises. US treasuries are pricing in at least another 50bp of rates cuts by year end with the first cut coming perhaps next month. In Europe Mario Draghi seems keen to hand markets a parting gift in his final year as ECB president which might comprise of rate cuts and possibly even more QE ([Why re-visiting 33% is the big news](#))

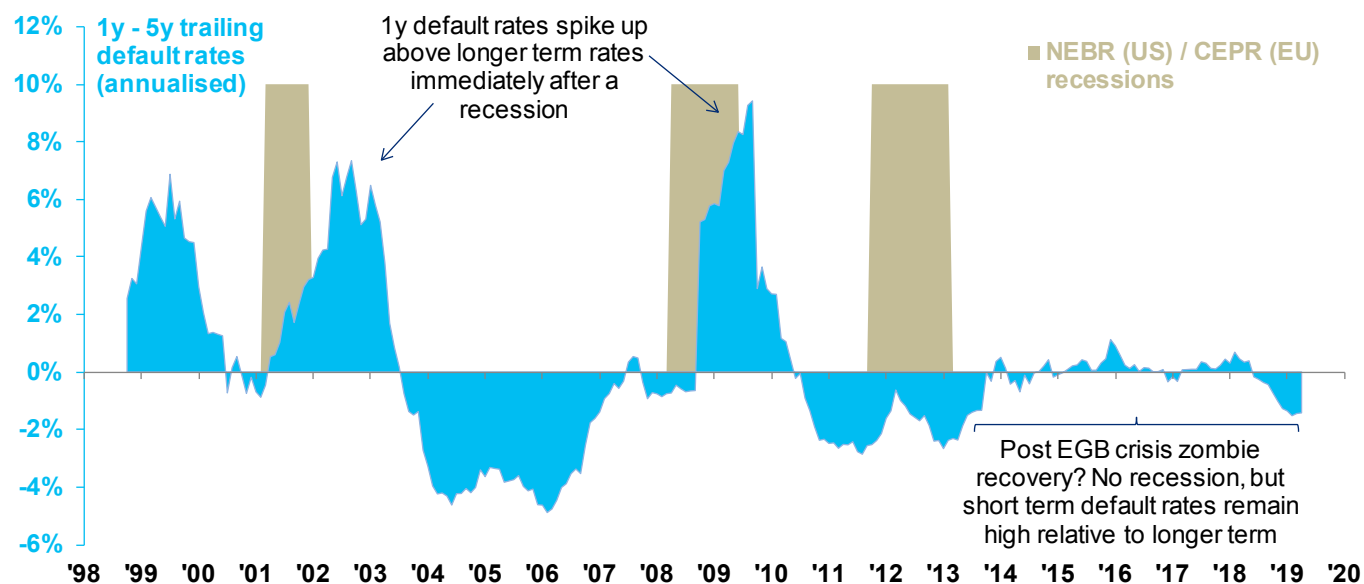
But what exactly will be different this time? Will the next trillion dollars of asset purchases be the boost that we need to break away from the Japanification event-horizon? Or the trillion after that? Personally, we doubt even QE-infinity will be sufficient to drag us away from "Japanification"; monetary policy has had its day. However, that is not to say that this next round of stimulus won't have any market effects at all (or social effects, but that's another story).

For markets, the key distinction will be between systemic and idiosyncratic risk. As always, the new flood of liquidity will buoy systemic risk, but we fear it is going to be harder this time around to prop up failing corporates. The last round of stimulus merely postponed the day of reckoning for faltering credits in Europe. Those defaults are coming through now, with 3 CDS auctions scheduled in Europe in the first 6 months of this year. Despite more QE, we expect this trend to continue driving further bifurcation in risk pricing across the credit spectrum. We recommend investors go long systemic risk while shorting select idiosyncratic risk in Xover.

Zombification; or the mystery of the flat default rate curve

Default is of course the end-game in credit and though infrequent, default rates pick-up shortly after periods of economic weakness. A recession typically sees defaults spike after about 12 months, while likewise a boom sees defaults drop, again after a lag (Figure 1)

Figure 1. European corporate default rate curve: 1y vs 5y trailing annualised default rates



Source: Citi Research, Moodys

The last few years however have been an anomaly. Post the Eurozone recession in 2012-13 there was no short term spike in default rates as usual. But as time passed neither did the usual normalization of the default rate curve materialize. Trailing 1y default rates remained elevated compared to longer term average, only beginning to normalize a little in 2019.

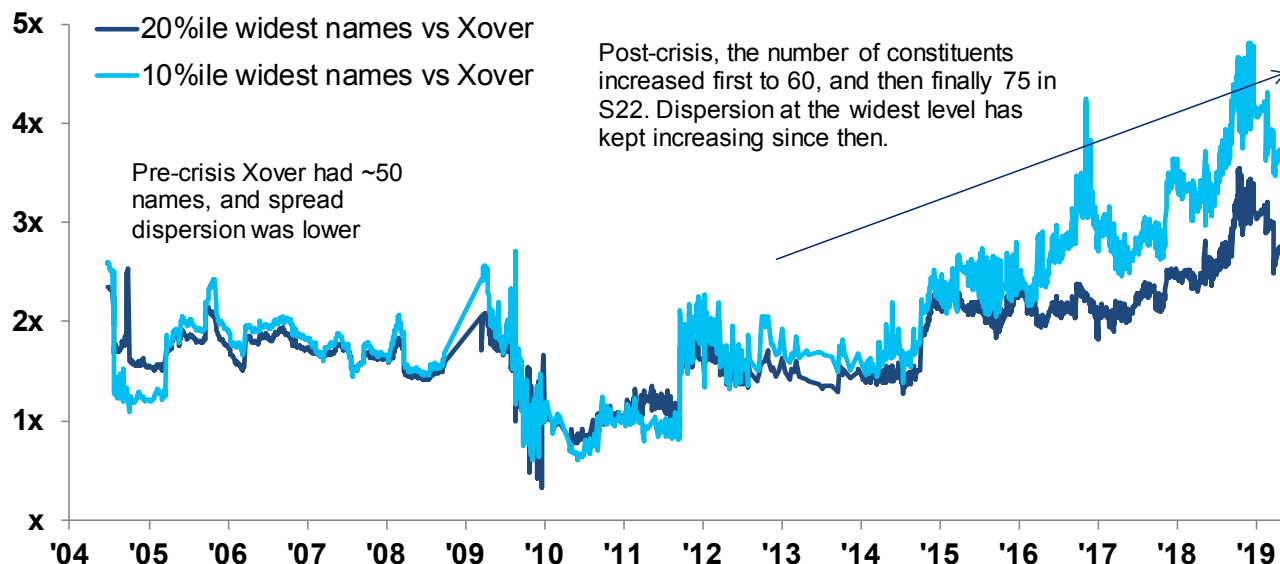
We believe it was the unprecedented amount of liquidity pumped into global markets (including ECB QE) that caused this change in dynamic. Cheap financing gave faltering corporates a lifeline which would not have existed in normal circumstances. This just delayed the inevitable and what would in past cycles have manifested as a spike in defaults just got spread out over time.

Be short idiosyncratic risk: underperformance to continue

Spread dispersion in European HY CDS tells a similar story. After 2014, the widest names in Xover started underperforming the rest and have continued to do so ever since. This is especially striking given that the rules based nature of Xover index construction means distressed or defaulted names are periodically swept out of the index (Astaldi, New Look, Isolux, Portel, Abengoa in the last 3 years). Thus the "widest names" basket for Xover is refreshed with better quality names every 6 months. Nonetheless the underperformance of this cohort (vs the rest) has continued unabated.

Quite clearly, the grab for yield has not extended this far down the credit spectrum - and with good reason given the slow but steady trickle of defaults of the last few years. We do not expect this trend to change any time soon.

Figure 2. Spread ratio of 10 & 20%ile widest names in iTraxx Xover vs the index itself



Source: Citi Research, Markit

So are the widest Xover names an indiscriminate "sell"?

The short answer is no. Of course, when trading credits at the distressed end of the spectrum, fundamental analysis is key and investors need to have strong views on the underlying credits before putting trades on whether long or short. We do not recommend investing in HY or distressed space merely on the strength of macro or

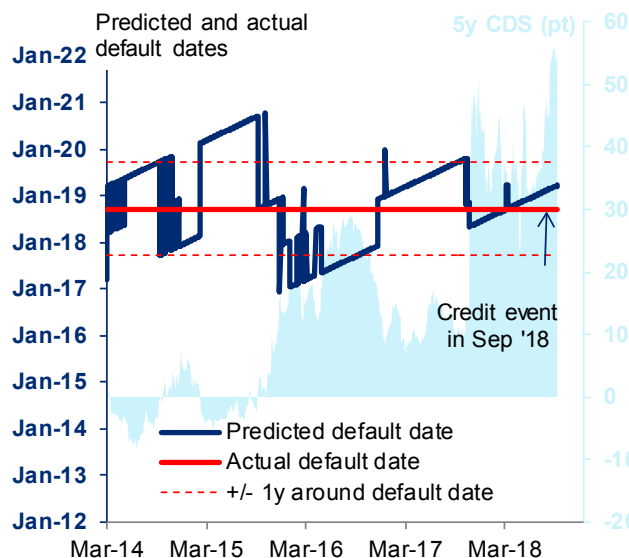
technical views. That said, for investors who have the requisite analytic bandwidth to consider investing in these names, we suggest paying attention to the CDS market, from which it is possible to extract useful, trade – relevant information.

Predicting default timing: what the CDS curve can tell us

In particular, an oft overlooked feature of the HY CDS market is that (a) names trading in points upfront can have meaningful liquidity across the curve (depending on debt maturity profiles), and (b) the steepness of the upfront curve signals where the inflection points are, i.e., when default is most likely to happen for a given credit.

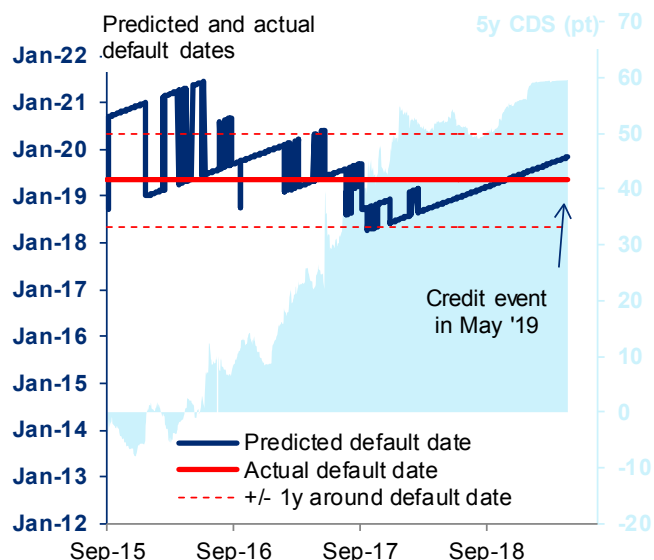
We give details of the methodology in the appendix, but a short summary is that we use the 1year forward default rates implied by CDS curves to pick the point where the maximum likelihood of default is priced in for a credit, and take this as the CDS market's "predicted" default date. Historically, this has been a good predictor of default dates for names like Astaldi and New Look which only have a light footprint in HY indices (Figure 3 and Figure 4). In both these cases, the CDS market, through the entire history of the credit priced the time of default to within +/- 1 year of the actual (eventual) date of default. Even more strikingly, this predictor stayed remarkably stable even as the credit traded across a wide range of spreads.

Figure 3. Astaldi, CDS-predicted default date vs actual (HY bond index weight: 0.2% before bankruptcy event)



Source: Citi Research, Markit, ISDA

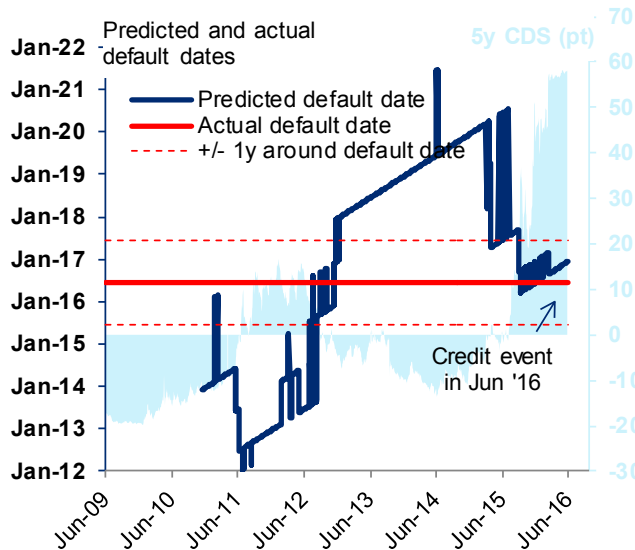
Figure 4. New Look, CDS-predicted default date vs actual (Index weight: 0.15% before Failure-to-Pay event)



Source: Citi Research, Markit, ISDA

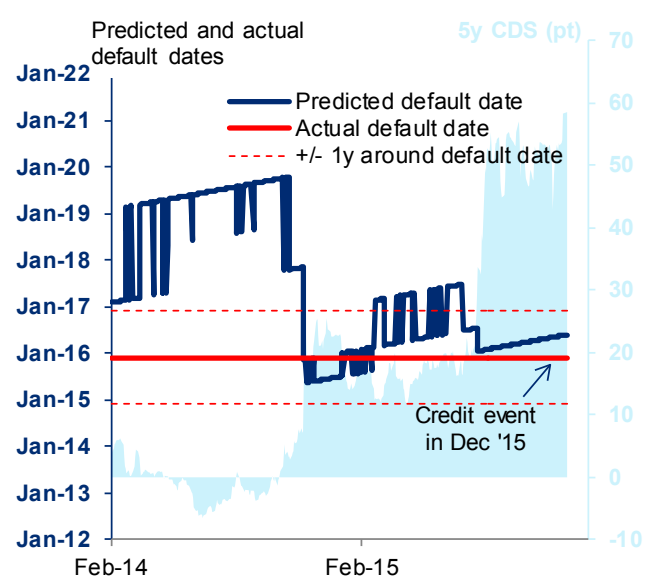
However, our analysis flagged up an important issue: this indicator is over-optimistic for names which have a larger than average weighting in the benchmark HY indices (with avg ~ 0.3%). We believe this is because the current hunt for yield means investors are inevitably compelled to have at least some exposure to names that have a large debt stack. This was the case for Abengoa and Portel in the past, where this default predictor did not do such a good job. For both names, leading up to default, the estimator was quite over-optimistic; i.e., there was not enough risk-aversion towards the short-dated maturities. However it is also important to note that for Portel, the indicator was too *pessimistic* at one point back in 2011, i.e., well before the current liquidity regime was in place.

Figure 5. Portel, CDS-predicted default date vs actual (Index weight: 0.68% around before bankruptcy event)



Source: Citi Research, Markit, ISDA

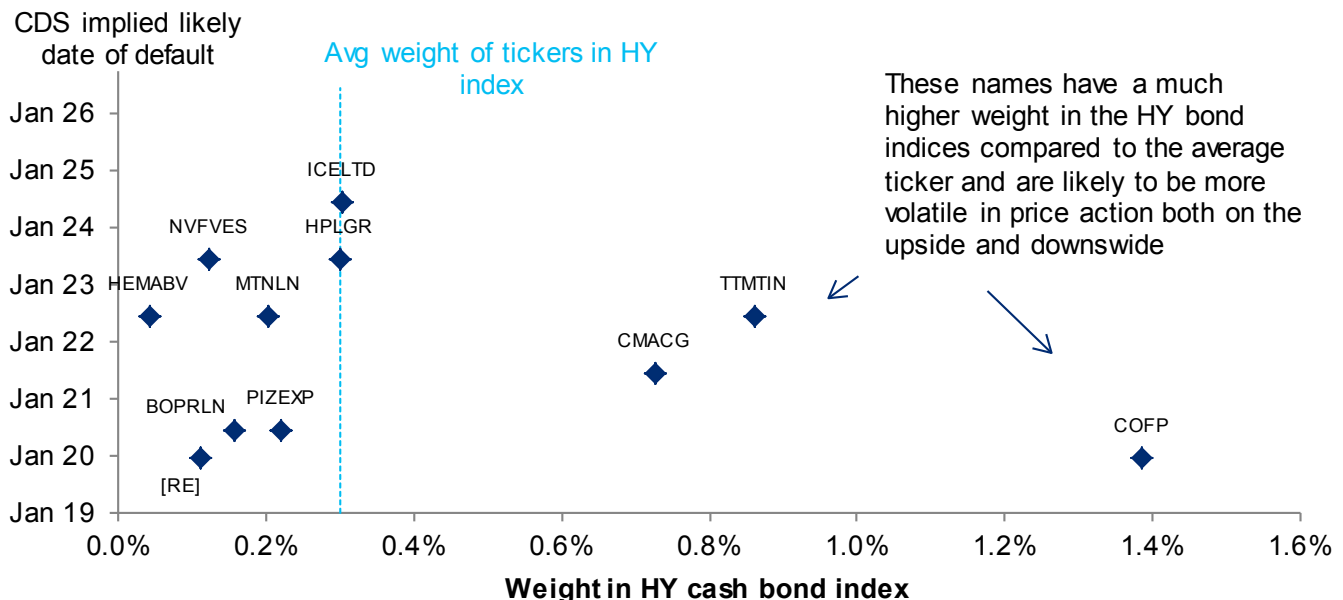
Figure 6. Abengoa, CDS-predicted default date vs actual (Index weight: 0.6% before Failure-to-Pay event)



Source: Citi Research, Markit, ISDA

So what does this mean for investors contemplating the current crop of names trading around or above 500bp as potential investments? We show below the CDS-implied likely dates of default for the widest names in Xover S31, versus the weighting of those names in the Bloomberg Barclays Pan European HY ex-Fin index.

Figure 7. CDS-implied likely time to credit event for widest Xover names plotted vs the average weight of the credits in the HY cash index



Source: Citi Research, Bloomberg. We denote the weights in the Bloomberg Barclays Pan European HY ex Fin index. [RE] stands for restricted

It is of course not surprising to see names like Pizza Express, Boparan and Casino (trading between 25 to 45pts at the 5y) priced by the market as being likely to default in the short term. However, the key takeaway comes from observing how the

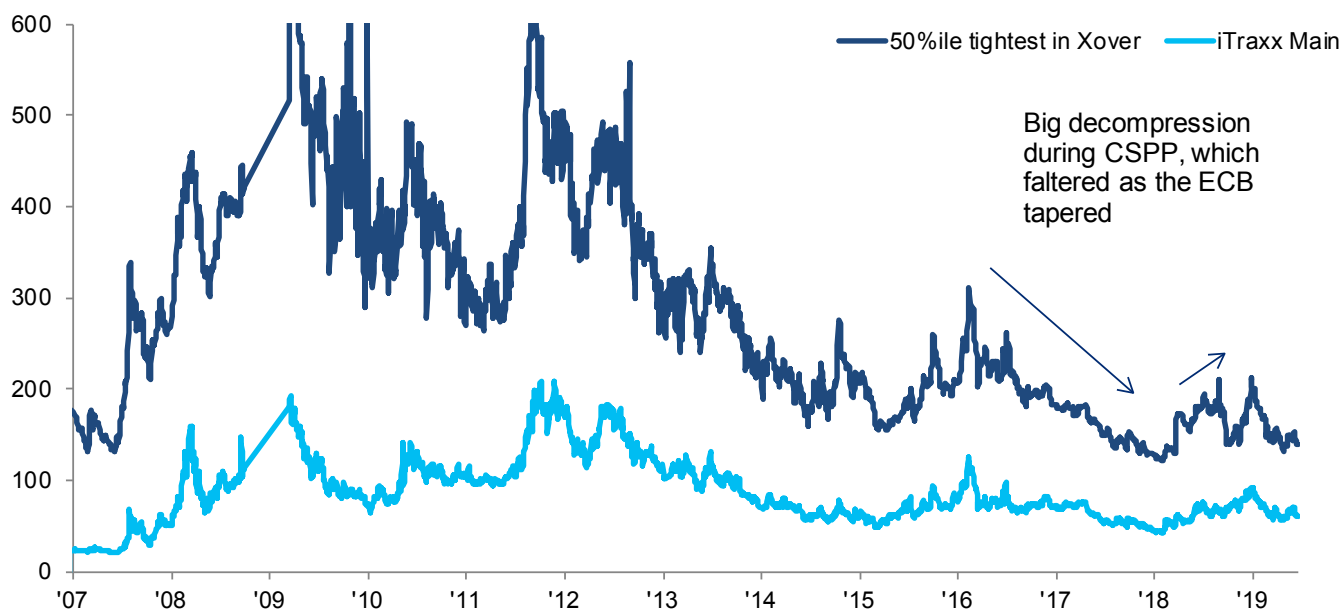
weighting of the names in the HY cash indices varies from the average. The market's probably doing a good job of pricing risk for the names on the left of the chart. The names on the very right are likely to be more volatile in price action to the upside and downside given their large debt stack.

Be long systemic risk: better quality HY credits still have some risk premia left

The other half of our trade is to be long systemic risk which we recommend doing through the tighter half of Xover constituents. Interestingly, in 2016, this basket of names rallied significantly on the back of ECB's CSPP, though these credits were not being bought by the ECB directly. Nonetheless, investors crowded out by the ECB's buying of IG corporates piled into these names. This technical reversed somewhat when the ECB started tapering its Asset Purchase Programme.

Now, with potentially a restart of the APP around the corner, we feel it's inevitable that investors will need to be overweight this part of the credit market to be able to deliver any returns at all.

Figure 8. Spread on a basket of the tightest 50%ile names in Xover vs iTraxx Main



Source: Citi Research

Of course, even here credit selection cannot be ignored completely, but investors should have a bit more breathing space, especially compared to names at the very widest end of the spectrum that we flagged in the previous section. The key point is that central banks are engaged in pushing liquidity through the financial system by trickle-down and likely to succeed. As the ECB buys bonds of IG corporates, current holders of those bonds will move on to riskier parts of the credit spectrum, but only up to a point. Thus better quality HY names will see more crowding of longs even as investors remain wary of taking risk at the very distressed end.

Appendix: using CDS curves to predict default timings

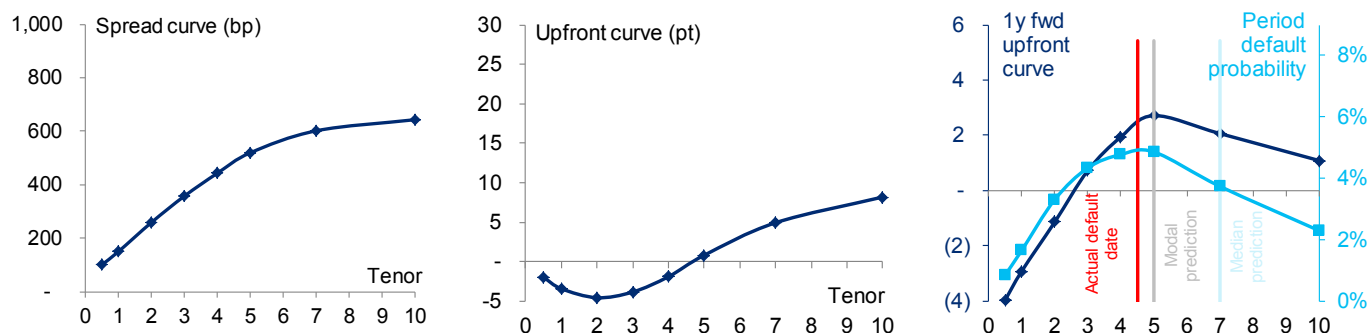
Standard CDS pricing models bootstrap a default probability density function (PDF) out of a CDS spread curve. Using these probabilities it is possible to come up with various metrics of CDS-implied time to default: expected, median and modal.

Our analysis shows that the first two measures tend to systematically, and until close to event significantly, over – estimate the final time to default for distressed credits. The fundamental reason for this is because CDS curves are generically steep in the current environment of uber-liquidity and thus display greater risk aversion over the long term. In other words markets tend to price that a struggling corporate will probably manage to refi in the short term and only go on to default later down the road. This of course works until it doesn't.

We find the third measure - the mode of the default PDF - has been the best predictor for when a distressed name is likely to suffer an actual credit event. There is again a fundamental and intuitive reason. The default PDF is closely linked to the *shape* of the upfront curve, i.e., how much more investors have to pay (in total) to hedge default for another year. In other words the mode, i.e., the point where the upfront curve is steepest, flags which part of the curve sees the biggest increase in price of protection. Most often this tends to be around a choke point, like a large maturity. Thus the most important metric for distressed names tends to be this modal measure.

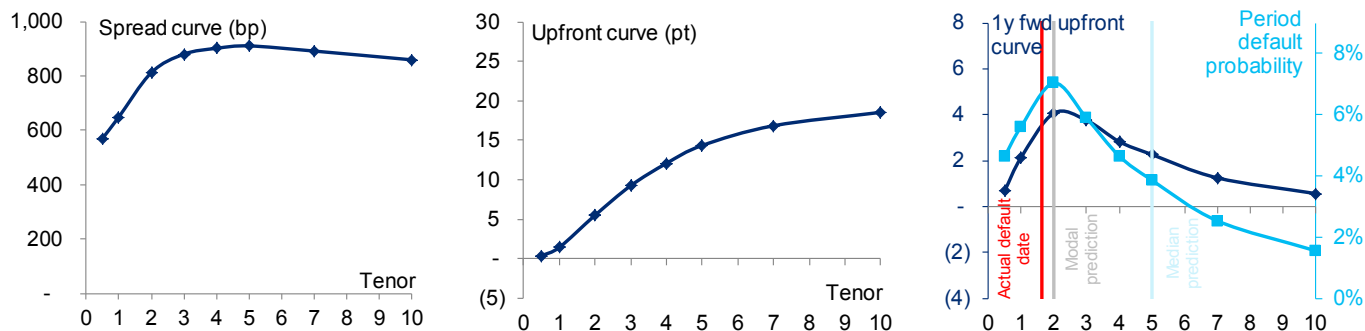
The next set of charts shows the evolution of the Astaldi CDS curve from 2014 till just before default in 2018. As is evident: (a) the mode of the PDF coincides closely with the steepest part of the upfront curve, (b) the mode does a pretty good job of predicting the final default date even as the spread and curve varies, (c) the median over estimates the final time to default until the curve gets really inverted and default seems imminent. This also holds true for the expectation which we have not shown in the charts for the sake of clarity.

Figure 9. Astaldi, Mar '14: spread, upfront, default PDF and 1y forward upfront curve



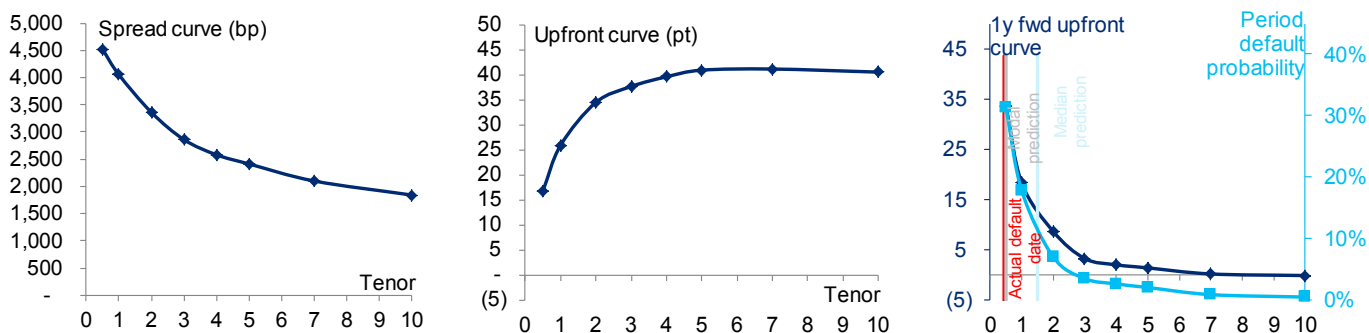
Source: Citi Research, Markit

Figure 10. Astaldi, Feb '17: spread, upfront, default PDF and 1y forward upfront curve



Source: Citi Research, Markit

Figure 11. Astaldi, Apr '18: spread, upfront, default PDF and 1y forward upfront curve



Source: Citi Research, Markit

Figure 12. Recent Publications

Date	Title
31 May 2019	Global Credit Focus - Italy again: "break glass" in case of emergency
29 May 2019	Third time lucky: New Look Credit Event
26 Apr 2019	Credit market liquidity: what trades in CDS and why
5 Apr 2019	How substantial is 'the ETF bid'?
29 Mar 2019	Clues from FX: What happens to credit if Brexit goes wrong?
21 Mar 2019	Trading European Bank Cap Structure through Indices: At1s the sweet spot, hedge with SenFin payers
08 Mar 19	A fix for the CDS market? ISDA proposes amendment to avoid 'manufactured' credit events
01 Mar 19	Keep on rolling
Feb 2019	The Ultimate Credit Derivatives Handbook - What Works In Real Life And Other Fun Stuff That No-one Ever Told You About
08 Feb 19	The downgrade effect
18 Jan 19	'Cliff-edge' Brexit – 8 practical questions for credit markets
Jan 2019	Swimming Against The Tide - Global Credit Derivatives Outlook 2019
16 Nov 18	Desperate for returns in a scary market? Take a look at options
19 Oct 18	European Credit Derivatives Focus - Astaldi: Why you should watch the auction
05 Oct 18	The end of CSPP: how much is in the price
21 Sep 18	Positioning for Q4: living on the edge of greed and fear
10 Sep 18	Back to fundamentals: What to avoid in IG
23 Aug 18	Now truly a 'Crossover' Index? What to expect from the S30 roll
10 Aug 18	I Know What You Did Last Summer (in Credit)
27 Jul 18	The taming of the skew (iTraxx version)
13 Jul 18	Main-IG: The case for compression
29 Jun 18	When's a good time to buy iTraxx protection?
15 Jun 18	Italian CDS — some contracts are more equal than others
31 May 18	Viva l'iTraxx!
18 May 18	Italy CDS: Quantos revisited
18 May 18	Interest rates and the "shape" of iBoxx
04 May 18	Credit and the monetary cycle
09 Apr 18	Pinning the tail on the market: how options drive iTraxx spreads
06 Apr 18	2018 Credit derivatives survey
23 Mar 18	Come fly with Main...
23 Feb 18	Everything you wanted to know about the iTraxx "roll" but were afraid to ask
02 Feb 18	The Italian election: A five star hedge
19 Jan 18	Is the future of CDS in doubt?
17 Jan 18	European Credit Derivatives Outlook 2018 Presentation

Source: Citi Research

Credit Derivatives Analytics ChartPack

Cross Asset Returns

Rolling cumulative returns for long risk positions across various cash and derivative instruments in credit, equities and rates.

Figure 13. Credit and Cross-Asset Returns*

CDS Indices

	1m	3m	12m
Main	0.7%	0.8%	2.2%
Sen. Fin.	0.9%	0.8%	2.4%
Xover	1.9%	1.4%	5.2%
SubFin	1.9%	1.9%	5.3%
CDX IG	0.9%	1.3%	3.0%
CDX HY	1.7%	2.2%	5.8%

iTraxx Main Steepeners (DV01-weighted)

	1m	3m	12m
3s5s	-0.1%	-0.1%	-0.3%
5s10s	0.1%	0.3%	0.6%

Sell Straddle Delta-hedged

	1m	3m	12m
Main 1m	0.0%	0.0%	0.5%
Main 3m	0.0%	0.0%	0.2%
Xover 1m	0.0%	-0.1%	1.5%
Xover 3m	-0.1%	0.0%	0.7%

Cash Indices

	1m	3m	12m
€ iBoxx IG Corp.	0.4%	0.8%	0.7%
€ iBoxx Senior Fins	1.0%	1.2%	2.6%
€ iBoxx HY Corp.	0.2%	0.5%	0.5%
iBoxx USD Corp	0.2%	0.4%	0.6%
\$ HY Market	0.8%	0.6%	1.3%

Equity indices

	1m	3m	12m
SX5E	3.38%	4.9%	4.5%
SX7E	-3.28%	-7.1%	-19.0%
SPX	4.19%	5.2%	9.3%

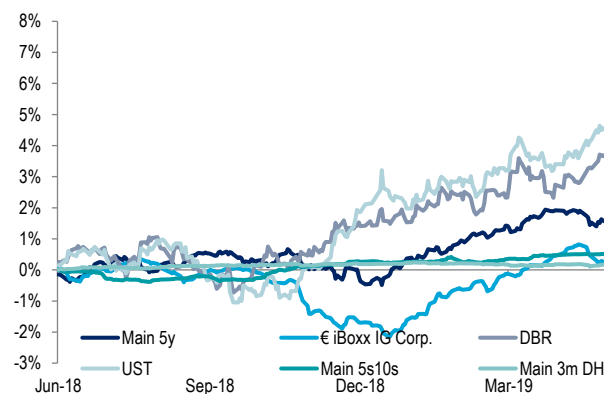
Rates

	1m	3m	12m
DBR	1.9%	3.1%	5.4%
UST	2.6%	3.8%	7.0%

*Note: Index: Excess returns, index rolled every 6m, 5y Index. Curves: DV01-neutral, OTR index. Options: ATM straddle, delta hedged daily, rolled every month. Cash indices: Total Index Returns. Equities: Total returns including dividends. Rates: Total Index Return

Source: Citi Research, Markit, Bloomberg

Figure 14. Cumulative Returns: 'Low Beta' Instruments



Source: Citi Research, Markit, Bloomberg

Figure 15. Cumulative Returns: 'High Beta' Instruments

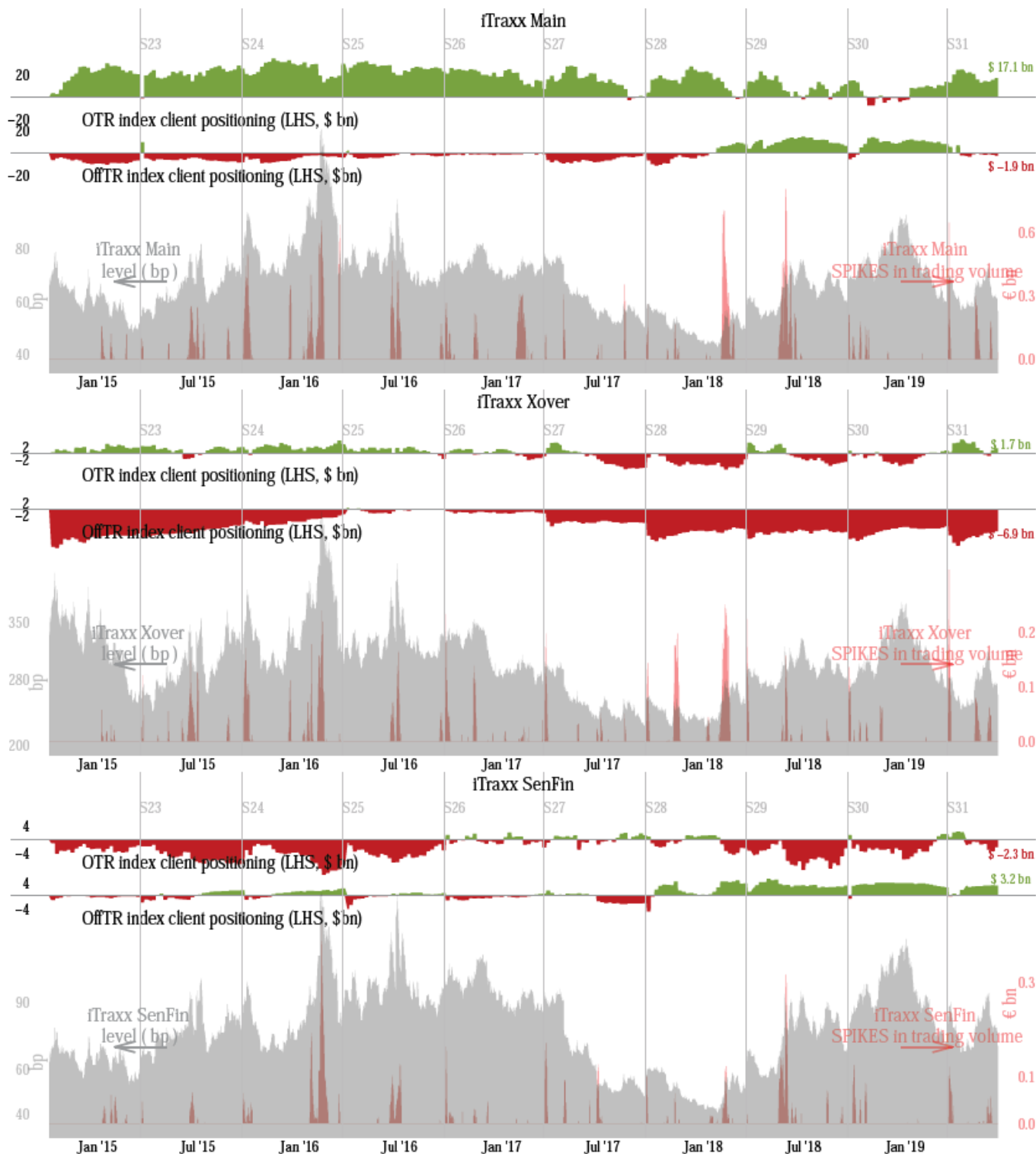


Source: Citi Research, Markit, Bloomberg

iTraxx trading spikes

We track “spikes” in iTraxx trading volumes on SDR as potential drivers of index spreads. For more details: [The Ultimate Credit Derivatives Handbook](#)

Figure 16. iTraxx indices: Trading Volumes (5 day cumulative), OTR indices

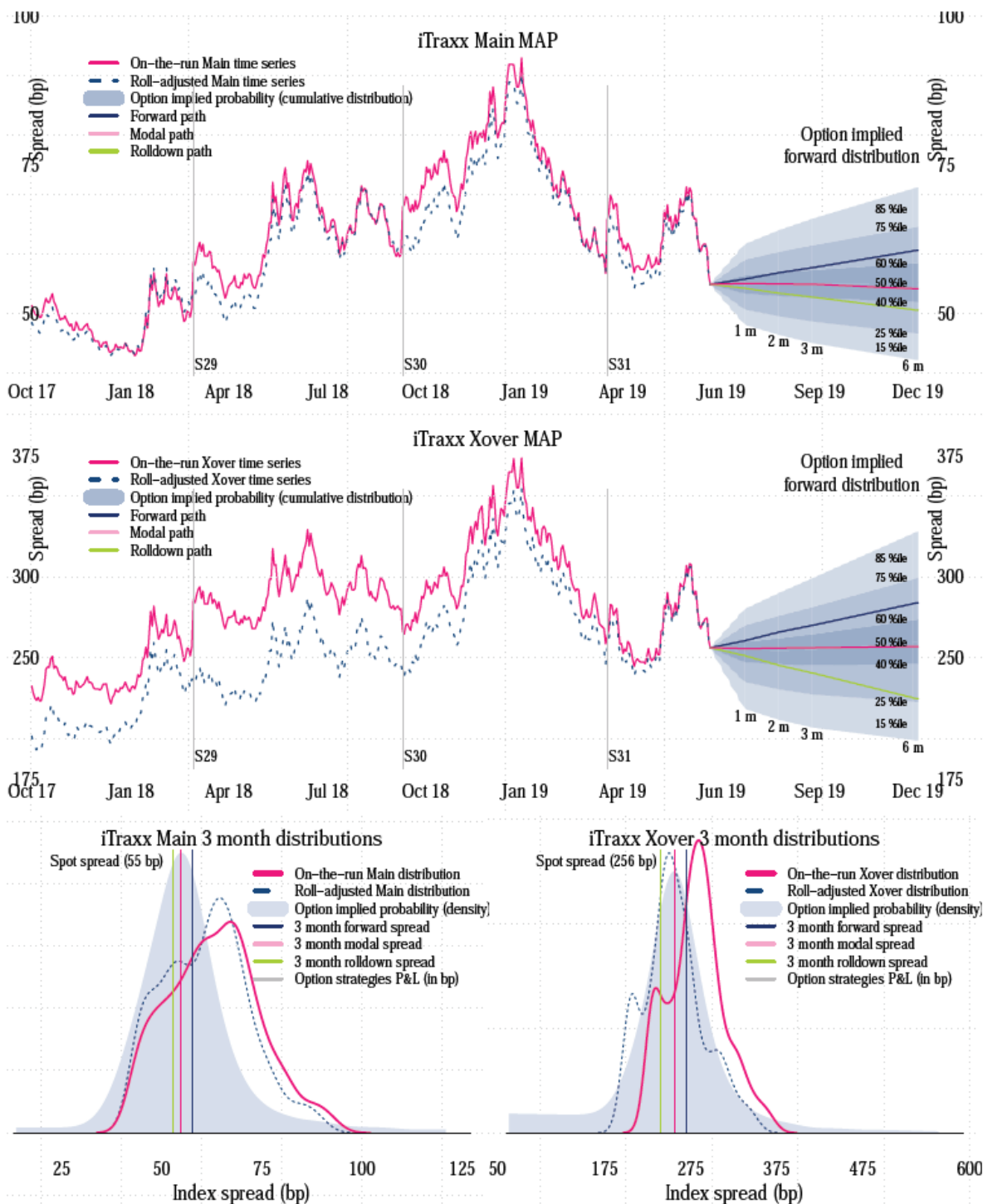


Source: Citi Research Markit, Bloomberg. Note: Volume spikes show deviation of short-term volumes over long term (3day median over 60day 70%ile trading volume, hourly periods)

iTraxx MAPs

These charts summarize historical and forward-looking market-implied information for the iTraxx indices. For more details: [Introducing Citi iTraxx Multi-Aspect Plots](#)

Figure 17. iTraxx spread forecasts (option implied and forwards) vs. historical



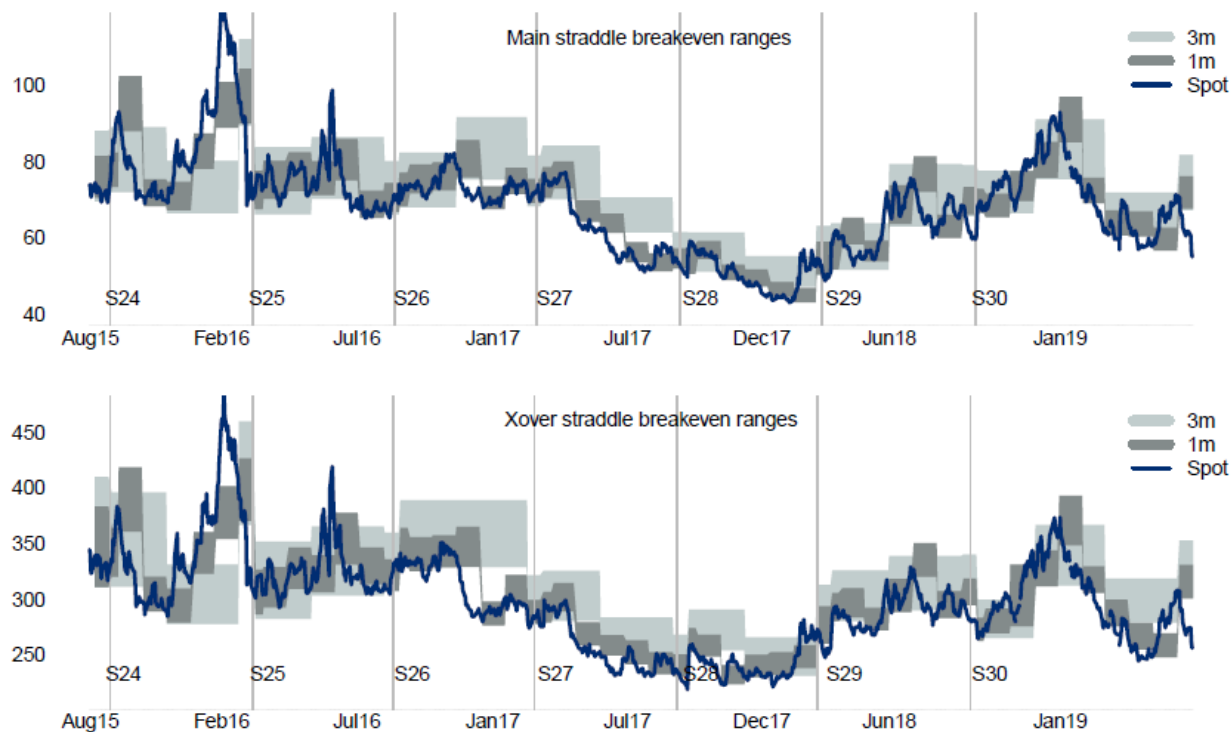
Past performance is no guarantee of future results. Options probabilities are based on current pricing and market conditions; as such, does not guarantee future performance. Calculations do not consider fees and other transaction costs.

Source: Citi Research, Markit, Bloomberg

Cross-Asset Volatility

The below charts show breakeven ranges on ATM straddles for iTraxx Main and Crossover, as well as our cross-asset volatility indices.

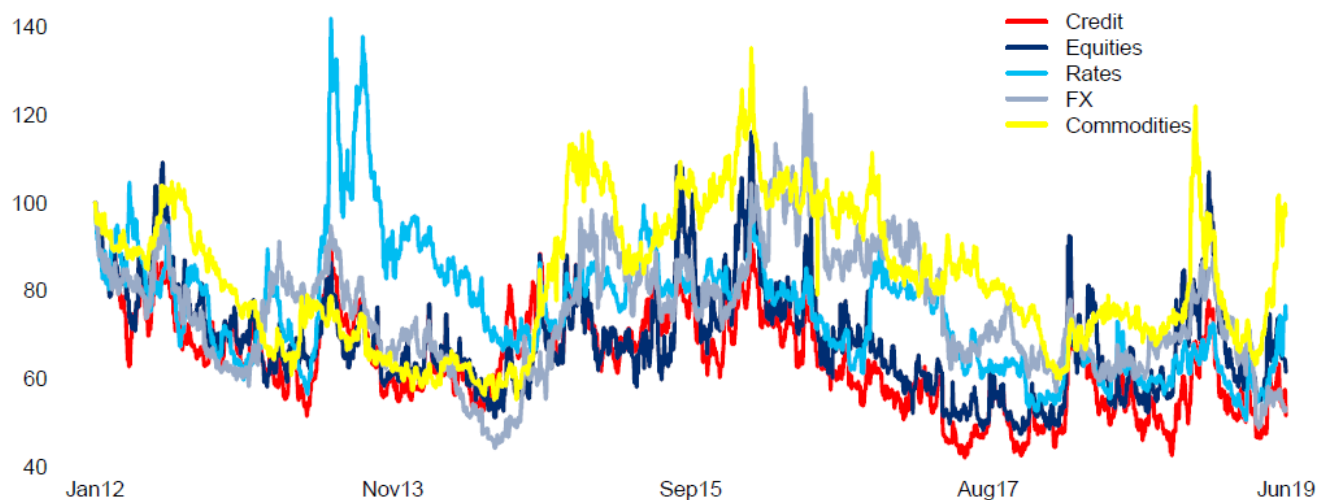
Figure 18. Credit ATMF Straddle Breakeven Ranges*



*Here, we plot the spot spreads along with breakeven ranges on 1m and 3m straddles, rebalancing at the same periodicity and also adjusting for the roll

Source: Citi Research

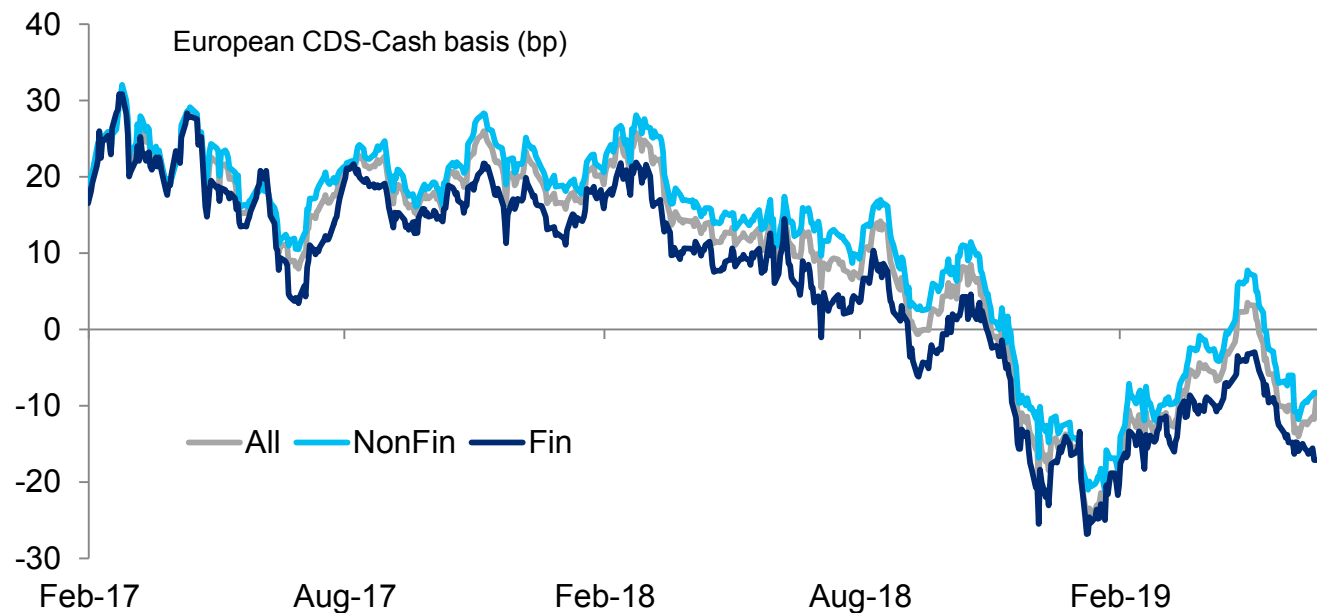
Figure 19. Global Cross-Asset Volatility Indices*



*Our Cross-Asset volatility indices reflect a weighted metric of ATM implied volatility in each asset class

Source: Citi Research

Figure 20. € cash-CDS basis, iBoxx Corporates, maturity-matched, bp



Source: Citi Research, Markit, Bloomberg

The Week Ahead

After all the excitement provided by the central banks this week, focus is likely to shift back towards politics next week. Hopes and expectations have waxed and waned around the G20 (Thursday). While it seems likely that Xi and Trump will meet, and that the meeting will be described as 'productive', a tangible change of course from the two economic powers may be more elusive. However, a long scheduled meeting (Tuesday) between Trump advisors and a number of America's Middle Eastern allies may be more immediately market moving depending on the level of pressure that it exerts on Iran. It comes in the same week as Iran says it will exceed its allowed stockpile of uranium under the JCPA.

Data is relatively light. The most significant, in our view, is likely to be the German IFO survey (Monday), which is forecast to show declines across the board. US data is predicted to be mixed: the positive signs from personal income and spending (Friday) may be balanced with what are forecast to be weak capital goods orders (Wednesday). There are plenty of Fed speakers too – watch Powell on Tuesday in particular for either any sign of dismay at the extent of the market's bullish reaction to the FOMC meeting, or conversely for reinforcement of it.

Figure 21. Economic Releases

Monday 24 June	Consensus Forecast	Last
Germany: IFO Business Climate - Jun	97.5	97.9
Germany: IFO Current Assessment - Jun	100	100.6
Germany: IFO Expectations - Jun	95	95.3
Germany: Import Price Index MoM - May	--	0.30%
Germany: Import Price Index YoY - May	--	1.40%
US: Chicago Fed Nat Activity Index - May	0.1	4.5
US: Dallas Fed Manf. Activity - Jun	1	-5.3
Tuesday 25 June	Consensus Forecast	Last
US: Conf. Board Consumer Confidence - Jun	132	134.1
US: Fed's Barkin Speaks in Ottawa		
US: Fed's Bostic Speaks on Housing		
US: Fed's Bullard Gives Welcoming Remarks at Lecture in St. Louis		
US: Fed's Williams Makes Opening Remarks at Finance Forum		
US: FHFA House Price Index MoM - Apr	--	0.10%
US: New Home Sales - May	685k	673k
US: New Home Sales MoM - May	1.80%	-6.90%
US: Powell Discusses Economic Outlook and Monetary Policy		
US: Richmond Fed Manufact. Index - Jun	7	5
Wednesday 26 June	Consensus Forecast	Last
Germany: GfK Consumer Confidence - Jul	10	10.1
UK: BOE's Carney, Cunliffe, Tenreyro and Saunders Speak		
US: Cap Goods Orders Nondef Ex Air - May P		-1.00%
US: Cap Goods Ship Nondef Ex Air - May P	--	
US: Durable Goods Orders - May P		-2.10%
US: Durables Ex Transportation - May P	0.10%	
US: Wholesale Inventories MoM - May P	--	0.80%
Thursday 27 June	Consensus Forecast	Last
China: Industrial Profits YoY - May	--	-3.70%
Eurozone: Consumer Confidence - Jun F	--	-7.2
Eurozone: Economic Confidence - Jun	104.9	105.1
Eurozone: Industrial Confidence - Jun	-3.1	-2.9
Germany: CPI EU Harmonized MoM - Jun P	0.20%	0.30%
Germany: CPI EU Harmonized YoY - Jun P	1.50%	1.30%
Germany: CPI MoM - Jun P	0.30%	0.20%
Germany: CPI YoY - Jun P	1.60%	1.40%
Germany: Retail Sales MoM - May	0.50%	-2.00%
Germany: Retail Sales NSA YoY - May	--	4.00%
US: Core PCE QoQ - 1Q T	--	1.00%
US: GDP Annualized QoQ - 1Q T	3.20%	3.10%
US: GDP Price Index - 1Q T	0.80%	0.80%
US: Kansas City Fed Manf. Activity - Jun	--	4
US: Pending Home Sales MoM - May	1.00%	-1.50%
US: Personal Consumption - 1Q T	1.40%	1.30%
Friday 28 June	Consensus Forecast	Last
Eurozone: CPI Core YoY - Jun A	0.80%	0.80%
Eurozone: CPI Estimate YoY - Jun	1.30%	1.20%
UK: Current Account Balance - 1Q	-31.6b	-23.7b
UK: GDP QoQ - 1Q F	0.50%	0.50%
UK: GDP YoY - 1Q F	1.80%	1.80%
UK: GfK Consumer Confidence - Jun	-11	-10
UK: Nationwide House PX MoM - Jun	--	-0.20%
UK: Nationwide House Px NSA YoY - Jun	--	0.60%
UK: Total Business Investment QoQ - 1Q F	--	0.50%
US: MNI Chicago PMI - Jun	54	54.2
US: PCE Core Deflator YoY - May	1.60%	1.60%
US: PCE Deflator YoY - May	1.50%	1.50%
US: Personal Income - May	0.30%	0.50%
US: Personal Spending - May	0.40%	0.30%
US: U. of Mich. Sentiment - Jun F	97.1	97.9
Source: Citi Research, Bloomberg		

Figure 22. Earnings Releases

Monday 24 June

BTG PLC

Tuesday 25 June

FedEx Corp, Lennar Corp, Micron Technology Inc

Wednesday 26 June

General Mills Inc, IHS Markit Ltd, Paychex Inc

Thursday 27 June

Accenture PLC, Conagra Brands Inc, Greene King PLC, Hennes & Mauritz AB, McCormick & Co Inc/MD, NIKE Inc, Walgreens Boots Alliance Inc

Friday 28 June

Constellation Brands Inc

Source: Bloomberg.

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