Q4 2023

UBAM – EMERGING MARKET DEBT OPPORTUNITIES

Quarterly Comment

For Professional Investors in Switzerland or Professional Investors as defined by the relevant laws.
The classification of the fund(s) as per the Sustainable Finance Disclosure Regulation (SFDR) is available on ubp.com or in the latest prospectus.

Market Comment

- Despite pressure early in the quarter, when rising bond yields and conflict in the Middle East weighed on emerging market (EM) returns, overall EM debt was strong in Q4 2023. Signs of a “soft landing” for the US economy and increased expectations for interest rate cuts in 2024 were supportive. However, China continued to be a drag on broad EM performance.
- In the US, lower energy prices and the strong jobs market gave households renewed confidence and underpinned consumer spending. However, sentiment in the manufacturing sector remained weak, with regional survey readings lower than expected and a manufacturing PMI of less than 50 (as opposed to 51.3 in the service sector). Headline inflation fell to 3.1% in November while core inflation remained at 4.0%. As expected, the Fed did not adjust its key interest rates in its final meeting of the year, but the FOMC is expecting to make three rate cuts in 2024 and Jerome Powell acknowledged that the governors have discussed when those cuts could begin, and this news was very well received by the markets triggering a continuation of US rates’ rally in December.
- In the eurozone, economic indicators remained depressed overall. Eurozone retail sales stabilised, but confidence indicators for the manufacturing and service sectors suggested that output was continuing to fall, and at an even faster rate in manufacturing. Weak demand and sharply falling energy prices meant that eurozone inflation continued to drop to 2.4% year-on-year in November, from 2.9% in October. The ECB kept its official rates at their record highs and stated that the Governing Council had not discussed rate cuts because inflation is still too high.
- The change in the Fed’s tone, along with some fairly encouraging economic indicators, boosted hopes that the US economy will see a soft landing, which would be helped by the aforementioned potential rate cuts in 2024. As a result, the November rally in bonds and equities continued into December. The US Treasury 10-year bond yield fell another 45 basis points to 3.88%, exactly where it started the year, after touching 5% in October. US sovereign debt therefore returned 3.4% in December and 3.9% in 2023 as a whole. December gains were similar in the eurozone (+3.6%) and even stronger in the UK (+5.8%).
- In China, economic indicators were mixed, although there was a slight acceleration in retail sales and industrial output. Credit spreads on corporate and emerging-market bonds tightened almost across the board in December, which meant that returns for 2023 as a whole were very solid. Equity markets gained over 4% on average in December, with the US market slightly outperforming and Japan underperforming. Overall, equities returned over 20% in 2023. The increasing probability that official US interest rates will be cut several times in the relatively near future was bad news for the dollar.
- The economic and geopolitical environment was helpful for gold, the price of which rose 1.3% in December after hitting a new all-time high of over USD 2,100 per ounce during the month. As regards oil, investor doubts about whether voluntary production cuts by OPEC+ members would materialise dragged down oil prices, with Brent crude falling by 7%.
- EM $ Government bonds index exhibited a positive total return of 4.7% (JPM EMBI Global Diversified) while EM Local Currency Government bonds index showed a positive total return of 3.2% (JPM GBI-EM Global Diversified).

Sources: UBP, Bloomberg Finance LP, JP Morgan

All performance figures are given net of fees. Past performance is not a guide to current or future returns. See full disclaimer at the end of the document.

Performance Review

- The fund returned 10.78% gross of fees.
- The main performance contributor was duration allocation, followed by the positive returns of the issuer selection and the carry spread.
- In terms of instrument types, the main contributors to performance were our sovereign holdings with 892bps, together with the returns perceived from the positions in credit and currency derivatives.
- In terms of countries, our holdings in Mexico, Hungary and Argentina performed best. Conversely, Ecuador, Ukraine and Uruguay impaired the overall positive effect.

Portfolio Activity

- In Emerging Europe, we increased exposure in the region namely in Hungary (Sovereign).
- In Africa, we reduced the positions in South Africa (Sovereign).
- In Latin America, we increased exposure in the region, especially in Brazil (Oil & Gas), Mexico (Sovereign) and Dominican Republic (Sovereign). Reduced in Ecuador and Argentina (Sovereign).
- We increased our duration, moving the modified duration of the portfolio from 3.5yrs in September to 6yrs at the end of quarter.
- Our main positions on the EMFX side towards the end of quarter were a long HUF (10.4%), MXN (7.0%) and BRL (6.6%).

Outlook

- We expect a Goldilocks environment that is encouraging for the EM asset class as we enter 2024. Since late Oct 2023 our call has been that global financial conditions have reached their peak and that there was no need of additional hikes from the US Fed or the ECB. These central banks will let higher real rates do the tightening job going forward as inflation expectations decline.
- The growth outlook for the US and the EU is for a slowdown. In such a Goldilocks environment ("not too hot, not to cold") EM corporate fixed income is set to thrive supported by stabilizing to moderately declining US Treasury rates, companies' much stronger credit metrics vs its US and European peers, and positive technicals as investors have been under allocated the asset class since the beginning of 2022 and will be attracted to lock-in the high yields that the asset class is offering now that US rates' hiking cycle is over. Our sensitivity analysis shows potential returns in the range of 6.5% to 7.5% for EM Corporate IG asset class, on the back of high carry, additional moderate declines in US Treasury rates and some moderate additional spread compression.
- On aggregate EM corporate credit metrics and fundamentals remain solid and going into 2024 will be supported by easing inflation pressures and gradually decreasing financial costs in the margin as various EM countries have already started easing monetary conditions or are expected to start lowering interest rates in the short term. Additionally, China stabilization is positive news for EM companies. China is flying on 1.5 engines, real estate bottoming, services and consumption bouncing and Chinese exports growth to continue to be restrained by nearshoring trend into Mexico and Latin America more broadly.
- Given the high intrinsic carry, the expectation of some additional spread compression and US base rates tightening, expect returns north of 6.5% for hard-currency EM IG corporate bonds.
- A clearer landscape of the US Fed and the ECB monetary policy paths shall entail reduced uncertainty and volatility in global and EM markets. Risk appetite has been muted throughout 2023 on the back of the uncertain monetary policy tightness coming from the Fed and the ECB. As the global environment becomes less volatile, investors shall be moving out of cash to chase high single digit returns.
- With DM slowing down into 2024, expect more demand for duration than equities. In a juncture of tightening monetary conditions, fixed income assets have been at the mercy of volatility and repricing. The current initial conditions of downward inflation expectations and slowing demand suggest that duration instruments should be the preferred asset class. Amongst FI assets EM debt has the strongest technical position as it has remained an underweight since Covid.

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