



see money differently

A photograph of an open book with white pages, tied with a white string around the spine. The book is open to a blank page, and the string is tied in a knot.

## **Nedgroup Investments Contrarian Value Equity Fund**

Quarter One, 2020

## Nedgroup Investments Contrarian Value Equity Fund

Commentary produced in conjunction with sub-investment manager, First Pacific Advisers LP (FPA)

Indicator	3 months	1 year	Since Inception <sup>#</sup> p.a.
Portfolio*	-26.19%	-15.99%	-9.81%
MSCI ACWI Index	-21.37%	-11.26%	-5.54%

\* Net USD return for the Nedgroup Investments Contrarian Value Equity Fund, D class. Source: Morningstar

<sup>#</sup> 01 June 2018

### Portfolio Commentary

Stocks around the world declined on the back of the COVID-19 pandemic in the first quarter. Most businesses were ill-prepared for what was a near simultaneous and instantaneous shut-down of the global economy that swiftly destroyed supply and demand.

The stock market extended its long advance well into the beginning of the quarter – and then the correction hit like a Category 5 hurricane, entirely erasing (at least temporarily) those historic gains and then some. From peak to trough during the quarter, the S&P 500 Index declined about 34 percent, while the Nedgroup Contrarian Value Equity (“Fund”) declined 38 percent. For the S&P 500, this was the steepest decline of 30 percent or more in history, occurring more quickly than what previously were historic declines in 1929, 1931, and 1934.

On an early first quarter conference call on March 27, the FPA portfolio management team made three points that they hope their investors took away from that call and would like to reiterate in this commentary.

First, the world isn’t coming to an end. The impact on the Fund is largely a mark-to-market exercise in the midst of the most unsettling series of events that many of us have ever experienced. The FPA portfolio management team appreciates that it is unpleasant to have your portfolio decline in price – though not necessarily in value – and to share in a downside at the higher end of the Fund’s historical performance. With the companies the Fund owned and the cash it held, the FPA portfolio management team believed they were well-positioned for a normal to deep recession. They were certainly unprepared for the near instantaneous and simultaneous global destruction of supply and demand wrought by COVID-19.

Second, they put over 10 percent of the Fund’s cash to work during the quarter. The FPA portfolio management team added nearly a dozen new holdings and are genuinely happy with what they own overall, although they are not yet eager to get fully invested.

Lastly, they believe the Fund’s portfolio of securities at the end of this tumultuous quarter is attractive and interesting.

### Market Cycle Perspective

The FPA portfolio management team has often expressed the need to judge a manager over full market cycles, and so it is worth noting that we are still in the market cycle that started in 2007 as we can’t yet confirm that cycle has ended. As of April 30<sup>th</sup>, the market had recovered much of its losses and was *only* down about

8.5 percent for the year.<sup>1</sup> In short, we are not in a “bear market” yet, and it is too soon to tell if the cycle, let alone the correction caused by the pandemic, is truly over.

Periodic losses are inevitable, but only rarely did the Fund experience a permanent impairment of capital. Returns can be driven as much by what you own as by what you do *not* own. The Fund’s focus on good businesses with a wind at their backs rather than in their faces has protected it from getting caught in value traps, or in businesses that are statistically inexpensive for a reason, typically because they haven’t much in the way of prospective growth

Given how unsettling the recent market decline was, the FPA portfolio management team thinks it is important to unpack the Fund’s performance. The Fund captured about 85 percent of the stock market’s downside during the dip in February and March, exceeding its 62.8% average net risk exposure. This was largely due to two factors: investments made as the market fell and certain holdings more meaningfully affected by the pandemic.

Some of the companies in the portfolio declined significantly more than the market during the sudden recent collapse. As of March 31, the FPA portfolio management team continues to own all the companies referenced in the portfolio section below. The three main industries and/or companies that detracted most from performance – but whose stories have yet to be written – are: banks, particularly Citigroup and Wells Fargo; Howmet Aerospace (formerly Arconic); and, American International Group (AIG). In short, the dents in the Fund were not the result of any permanent impairments of capital but rather because the FPA portfolio management team stuck to its process.

## Portfolio Discussion

The world has changed over the last couple of months and with it, stock prices. There is no question that emotion drove much of the share price movement. Businesses owned by the Fund may have seen their *stock value* move 25% day-to-day, or even intra-day, but the FPA portfolio management team can assure you that the companies’ *business values* did not similarly change.

Contributors to and detractors from the Fund’s most recent quarter and trailing 12-month returns are listed below.

### Contributors and Detractors – Q1 2020

Contributors	Performance contribution	Percent of portfolio	Detractors	Performance contribution	Percent of portfolio
JD.com, Inc. Sponsored ADR Class A	0.46%	1.62%	Howmet Aerospace (formerly Arconic)	-3.16%	2.27%
NEXON Co., Ltd.	0.18%	1.58%	American International Group, Inc.	-2.94%	4.00%
Microsoft Corporation	0.17%	3.26%	CIT Group Inc.	-1.89%	2.83%
Alibaba Group Holding Ltd.	-0.04%	1.08%	TE Connectivity Ltd.	-1.48%	3.37%
NAVER Corp.	-0.04%	0.00%	LafargeHolcim Ltd.	-1.33%	3.67%
Total:	0.73%	7.54%	Total:	-10.80%	16.14%

<sup>1</sup> For simplicity we reference the S&P 500 as the ‘market’. Largest S&P drawdown periods: Since inception and Market Cycle 2 – 10/10/2007-03/09/09; Market Cycle 1 – 09/02/2000-10/09/2002.

Contributors	Performance contribution	Percent of portfolio	Detractors	Performance contribution	Percent of portfolio
Microsoft Corporation	0.90%	3.26%	American International Group, Inc.	-2.01%	4.00%
JD.com, Inc. Sponsored ADR Class A	0.75%	1.62%	Glencore plc	-1.59%	1.84%
Charter Communications, Inc. Class A	0.64%	3.87%	Howmet Aerospace (formerly Arconic)	-1.17%	2.27%
NAVER Corp.	0.22%	0.00%	Baidu, Inc. Sponsored ADR Class A	-1.14%	2.67%
Alibaba Group Holding Ltd.	0.11%	1.08%	Citigroup Inc.	-1.05%	2.83%
Total:	2.62%	9.83%	Total:	-6.96%	13.61%

One reason the FPA portfolio management team is excited about the portfolio right now is the compelling valuation of the banks the Fund owns, equal to 6.5% of the Fund, even after accounting for a potentially prolonged recession. Banks in the S&P 500 Index trade at some of the lowest valuations since either the financial crisis from 2008 into 2009 or the savings-and-loan crisis in the early 1990s. In general, banks not only have better loan portfolios today than they did in those crises, they also have capital ratios, or tangible equity-to-assets, two to three times greater than before the last recession.<sup>2</sup> The banks held by the Fund trade at an average 40 percent discount to book value. Assuming no growth and permanently reduced returns on tangible equity due to lower interest rates and/or upcoming loan write-downs, the FPA portfolio management team believes these banks should still be able to generate in the neighbourhood of a 10 percent return on tangible equity in a downside case. At just 0.6 times book value, that would equate to an owner earnings yield of 16.7%. The investment team finds this valuation math to be undemanding and therefore appealing.

During the initial market decline, AIG sank more than 60 percent, dramatically underperforming its peers in what the team believes will prove to be an overreaction. Life insurance companies were down 40 percent to 50 percent while their property and casualty, or P&C, peers were down 20 percent to 30 percent.<sup>3</sup> The conviction in AIG stems from several factors:

- The investment team does not think their life insurance business, which accounts for 40 percent of premiums, will be overly affected as we are seeing a flattening of the COVID-19 infection curve.
- Its P&C business, generating about 60 percent of premiums, does not cover pandemics. Some U.S. states have said they may try to force coverage of pandemics, but we are confident the U.S. Constitution does not allow such a retroactive revision. There also is a case to be made that reduced activity around the country will lower P&C claims.
- AIG has earnings power in the next few years of around \$6 per share.

Panicked selling caused the AIG stock price to trade as low as an unchallenging 0.3 times tangible equity. The Fund added to the position on this weakness.

It's important to remember that chaos creates opportunity. Like their Contrarian namesake, the FPA portfolio management team does not shy from market sectors that others avoid, too paralyzed by uncertainty to act. In late March, they put roughly 2.5 percent of the portfolio into the travel space, specifically into well-financed companies that have a long enough runway to get through a temporary shutdown or even longer delay in travel-and-leisure spending. They purchased Booking Holdings ("Booking") at what they believe are low double-digit multiples of enterprise-value-to-trailing-earnings. They did not take this position, however, simply because it was trading at a low multiple of our estimate of trailing or normalized earnings. Instead, Booking attracted them with, in their view, the long-term strength of its business and a strong balance sheet with net

<sup>2</sup> Source: Bloomberg, as of March 31, 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Source: Bloomberg, as of March 31, 2020.

cash, further complemented by several billion dollars of investments in various securities. They also expect Booking to pare its expense structure, albeit with some lag, to protect profitability. The FPA portfolio management team believes those attributes should more than sufficiently ensure that Booking emerges from the other side of this pandemic in a stronger position than its poorly financed peers. Regardless of what the new normal looks like, the FPA portfolio management team is highly confident that Booking, with excellent stewards of its business and capital at the helm, will emerge as a profitable company generating excellent free cash flow.

They also took advantage of market weakness to add roughly a dozen new positions in companies that have sat for years on their wish list and whose stock price declines finally afforded the team appealing opportunities to buy.

## The Long View

The portfolio management team enumerates below some significant drivers of performance relative to the indices over the last decade or so.

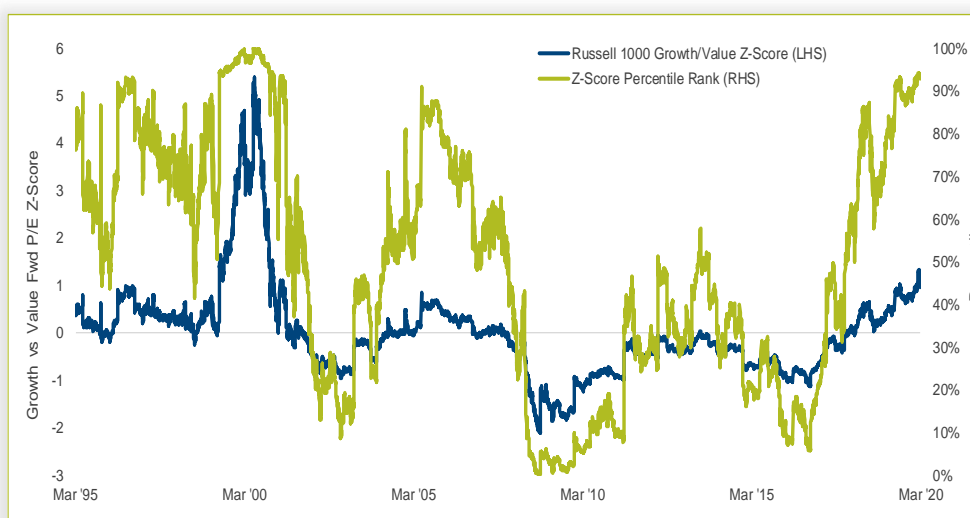
### 1. FPA are value managers, making investments that have an appropriate margin of safety.

Traditional value investors have sought such protection in a company's balance sheet. The FPA team prefers a margin of safety more predicated on the quality of the business – its returns on capital; the defensibility of its market position; pricing power; good management, and future top- and bottom-line growth potential; among other attributes. Since value received for a price paid does matter to them, they have all too frequently found themselves not owning businesses priced to perfection during this unprecedented market cycle.

Growth stocks have reigned supreme for a long time, and the Fund has held positions in growth businesses like Alphabet and Facebook (that were initially purchased when the market thought less of their investment merits). More traditional value names that are more cyclical on average have not performed as well, however, including the aforementioned banking and aerospace investments.

Growth's outperformance of Value has left Value appearing relatively inexpensive (Exhibit A). This cannot continue unabated unless Value fails to deliver even a modicum of growth. The Fund should benefit from some reversion to the mean to the extent that it holds positions that are clearly value names.

#### Growth v Value Relative Value



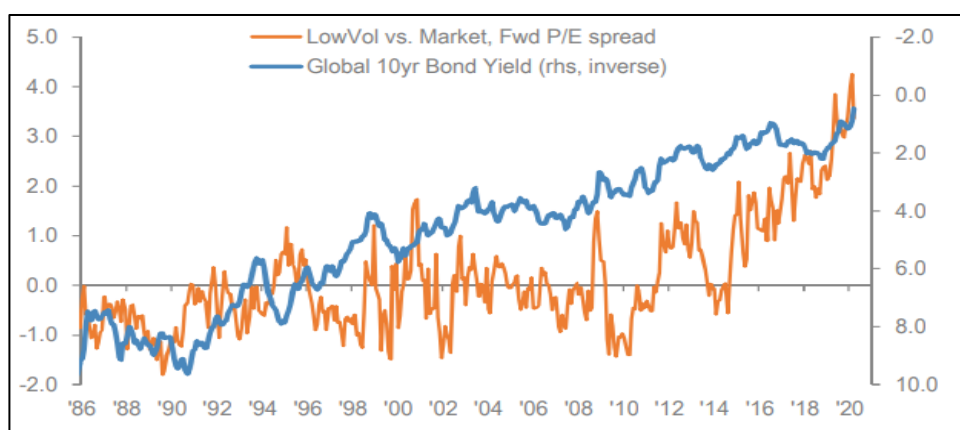
Source: Bloomberg, as of March 31, 2020. Chart data covers period March 31, 1995 to March 31, 2020. Uses the z-score of the ratio of the Russell 1000 Growth Index divided by the Russell 1000 Value Index.

## 2. Quality and low-volatility indices have outperformed for much of the last decade.

This has pushed prices to valuation levels too high to give us comfort that there are reasonable margins of safety (Exhibit B). Such indices have historically been populated by less cyclical businesses. The investment team is quite comfortable with *growing* cyclical businesses as long as they are paying an appropriate price for them. Just because some of these prices are lower today than when the Fund made its purchases does not mean it overpaid, although they are certainly more “appropriate” today than they were. As Warren Buffet has said, “I would much rather earn a lumpy 15 percent over time than a smooth 12 percent.”<sup>4</sup>

Many businesses of historically high quality but very low earnings growth now trade at price-to-earnings ratios exceeding 20 times, including many consumer product companies. Investors are currently more comfortable paying for the perceived stability of an earnings stream regardless of price. Paying a rich multiple for such a business, however, might prove no different than buying a long-dated bond at a yield that approaches zero.

### Relative Valuation of Low Volatility Stocks vs Broader Market



Source: J.P. Morgan U.S. Equity Strategy: Style Positioning, Value Squeeze, Winner Takes All, p4, as of April 3, 2020. “LowVol” is represented by JPM’s quantitative group metrics. Market is represented by the S&P 500 Index. Chart data covers period December 31, 1986 to March 31, 2020.

## 3. On average, foreign stocks have underperformed domestic U.S. stocks.

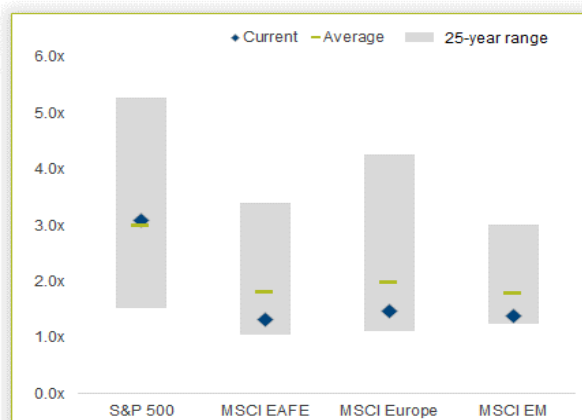
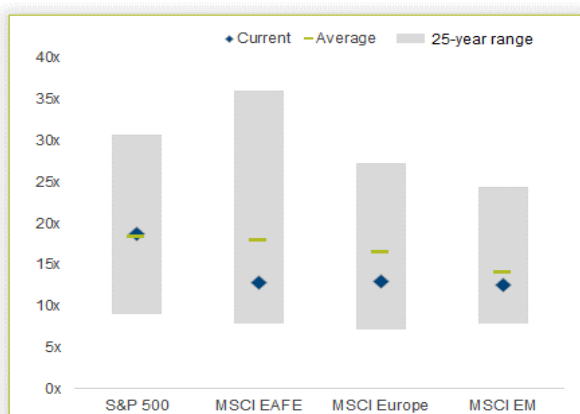
Both in local currency and, thanks to U.S. dollar strength, even more so in dollars. This has caused the Fund

### Price to Earnings Ratio: Trailing 12M

### Price to Book Ratio: Trailing 12M

to look suspect when compared to a U.S. benchmark

only. On the other hand, it appears more than competent in comparison to international benchmarks. How the Fund has done in recent years has become a matter of geographic perspective. **Global Valuations**



<sup>4</sup> Warren Buffet on Business: Principles from the Sage of Omaha, p72, Richard J. Connors, ©2010.



Source: Factset, as of March 31, 2020. Data is represented by the respective indices in the charts.

There are many wonderful businesses domiciled outside the United States with characteristics similar to their U.S. counterparts yet trading at discounted prices. The Fund's exposure to these companies has therefore increased from roughly 24% at year-end 2017 to roughly 37% today. Should investors once again become willing to pay similar valuations for similar businesses regardless of geography, then the Fund's exposure to international stocks should deliver nice returns.

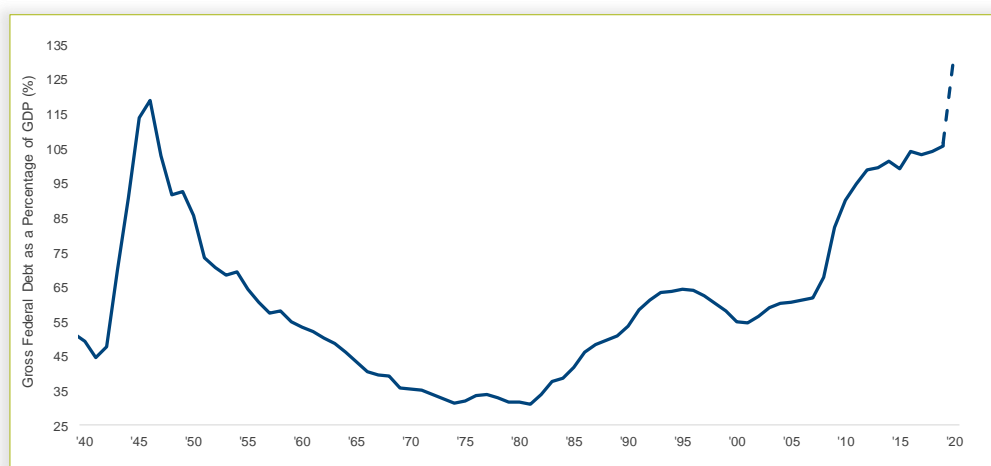
U.S. dollar strength also has proven a headwind for the investor in foreign securities. In dollar terms, the MSCI World's return is 0.61% lower than the return in its local currency during the current market cycle. Should the dollar weaken, the Fund's foreign exposure should look better still in dollar terms.<sup>5</sup>

#### 4. Cash had accumulated in the Fund as a result of finding few attractive risk/reward propositions.

This mattered more in this market cycle than the previous cycles for two reasons: First, the current market cycle is the longest in history, so standing on the side-lines caused the team to look more foolish than they believe they are. Secondly, when cash in the FPA Contrarian Value Strategy did build prior to 2008, it had the benefit of receiving attractive returns on cash, something that has not existed during an era of low and lower short rates.


There are two reasons that you can expect the Fund to run with less cash going forward. For one, cash offers an even lower yield than at the beginning of the last market cycle. Governments cannot afford to let rates rise, particularly in the wake of the deficits being created by the massive support packages to mitigate the economic impact of COVID-19. Central banks and sovereign treasuries will do everything in their power to keep rates low. U.S. government debt will shortly exceed \$25 trillion and is increasing at such a rate that the debt-to-GDP ratio will hit a level not seen since World War II. Even excluding \$6 trillion of intragovernmental holdings, the country still has \$19 trillion of debt. At that level, even a 1% increase in rates would increase the U.S. deficit by \$190 billion for that year and that doesn't consider continued growth of the U.S. national debt, which most certainly and dramatically will happen in the coming months, if not years.

#### Federal Debt (accumulated deficits)



Source: Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, as of Sept 30, 2019. 2020 year-end projection is calculated by adding at least \$4 trillion to the Gross Federal Debt levels and estimating that GDP will be 5% lower than at September 30, 2019 levels.

<sup>5</sup> For the period 10/10/07 to 3/31/20, the MSCI World (USD) returned 2.93% annualized; while the MSCI World (Local) returned 3.54% annualized.



Secondly, the investment team has posited over the last decade that we would eventually find ourselves on a deflationary path to inflation. Up to this point, governments have kept the economic party going, thanks in part to expansive fiscal and monetary policy. We expected more of the same when the next downturn hit. Given the suddenness and magnitude of this recent economic decline, however, the U.S. government felt obliged to act in an unprecedented (and unproven) fashion. The economy is the lab, apparently, and we the people its rats. The worse the economy, the greater the stimulus; and the longer the downturn, the longer the presses print money, which will eventually lead to inflation. That inflation may not be broad-based and may yet occur even amid general economic malaise – remember stagflation? – but stocks may nonetheless perform well nominally as there may be little alternative.

The Fund's investors should be keenly aware that the Fund will likely operate with less cash in the future, which will likely increase unit price volatility. The Fund's lower volatility has always been a by-product of its strategy, not a goal. The strategy will continually aspire to avoid any permanent impairment of capital and not be bothered with the ephemeral, and usually visceral, mark-to-market that the investments they own might have during their life-cycle in the Fund.

## Portfolio Activity<sup>6</sup>

The Fund had two increases, four decreases, 10 additions and three exits in the portfolio during the quarter. This quarter, the Fund increased its exposure to Howmet Aerospace (formerly Arconic), which was part of a spin off, and Nexon Co. Additionally, the Fund to reduce its positions in Arconic, Citigroup, JD.com, and Royal Bank of Scotland. The Fund saw exits from Mohawk Industries, Naver Corp, and Ally Financial. For Ally, a recent acquisition of a non-prime credit card and consumer finance lender, CardWorks, has created a cash obligation for a credit card book of business that makes the FPA portfolio management team less comfortable owning it. As for the additions, the Fund saw new names added such as Booking Holdings, Cie Financiere Richemont, LG Corp, Marriott International, NXP Semiconductors, Samsung C&T Corp, Softbank Group Corp, Swire Pacific LTD, Toyota Industries Corp, and WABTEC Corp.

## Portfolio Profile

There are currently 39 equity positions in the Fund, with the top five holdings comprising 26.2% and the top 10 comprising 46.1% of the portfolio. The top three sectors, based on GICS sector classification, are Communication Services, Financials, and Information Technology, which comprise over 60% of the Fund. The Fund has been able to find opportunity outside of the U.S. and, as a percentage of equity, currently has 39.8% non-U.S. exposure and 60.2% exposure in the U.S.<sup>7</sup>

## Summary

It's a bit surprising that from where we are today, the market is only off 13% from its February peak.<sup>8</sup> The world today is more than 13% worse than it was then, but the more pertinent question is what the future will look like. As emotion is wrung from the stock market, it tends to look forward to what the economy looks like on the other side.

Eventually we will have a COVID-19 vaccine that will also boost our ailing economy. Additionally, central banks are unlikely to raise interest rates for years to come – how many countries can afford to pay a higher rate for their burgeoning national debt? For better or for worse, the FPA portfolio management team believes central banks have set the state for inflation in risky assets, and since the FPA portfolio management team can't tell you when the show starts, they have to be in their seats in advance. If they successfully find a

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<sup>6</sup> The information provided does not reflect all positions purchased, sold or recommended by FPA during the quarter. It should not be assumed that an investment in the securities listed was or will be profitable. Increases and decreases represent securities whose position size changed by at least 25% over the period and represent greater than 0.50% of the portfolio. Any exited position mentioned was fully removed, regardless of its representative portfolio size.

<sup>7</sup> Portfolio composition will change due to ongoing management of the Fund.

<sup>8</sup> Source: Bloomberg, as of April 30, 2020. Market refers to the S&P 500 Index. The S&P 500 Index peak was on February 19, 2020.



sufficient number of investments with attractive risk-to-reward, this may mean greater volatility – but they see little alternative as they look out five to 10 years.

The investment philosophy hasn't changed, and the strategy although evolved remains largely unaltered. Sometimes you don't appear as smart as you are, and other times you look much smarter than you actually are. As we continue to focus on delivering good risk-adjusted returns, we suspect the clock will be right more than just twice a day.

The FPA portfolio management team appreciates your trust and patience. While unsettling, we hope for continued volatility in the equity and credit markets as we would love nothing more than to become even more fully invested. The team is excited about the opportunities that are destined to come. Let us consider how the six points mentioned above were relative headwinds in the last market cycle and could become tailwinds in the near future.

## Disclaimer

Nedgroup Investments Funds PLC (the Fund) is authorised and regulated in Ireland by the Central Bank of Ireland. The Fund is authorised as a UCITS pursuant to the European Communities (Undertakings for Collective Investment in Transferable Securities) Regulations 2011 (S.I. No. 352 of 2011) as amended from time-to-time.

Nedgroup Investment (IOM) Limited (reg no 57917C), the Investment Manager and Distributor of the Fund, is licensed by the Isle of Man Financial Services Authority.

Nedgroup Investment Advisors (UK) Limited (reg no 2627187) is authorized and regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority.

The Fund and certain of its sub-funds are recognised in accordance with Section 264 of the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000.

UK investors should read the Appendix for UK investors in conjunction with the Fund's Prospectus which are available from the Manager [www.nedgroupinvestments.com](http://www.nedgroupinvestments.com)

The Fund has been recognised under paragraph 1 of Schedule 4 to the Collective Investment Schemes Act 2008 of the Isle of Man. Isle of Man investors are not protected by statutory compensation arrangements in respect of the Fund.

The state of the origin of the fund is Ireland. In Switzerland, the representative is ACOLIN Fund Services AG, Leutschenbachstrasse 50, CH-8050 Zurich, whilst the paying agent is Banque Heritage SA, route de Chêne 61, 1211 Geneva 6, Switzerland. The prospectus, the key information documents or the key investor information documents, the constitution as well as the annual and semi-annual reports may be obtained free of charge from the representative. Past performance is no indication of current or future performance. The performance data do not take account of the commissions and costs incurred on the issue and redemption of units.

This document is not intended for distribution to any person or entity who is a citizen or resident of any country or other jurisdiction where such distribution, publication or use would be contrary to law or regulation.

The Prospectus of the Fund, the Supplement of its Sub-Funds and the KIIDS are available from the Investment Manager and the Distributor or from its website [www.nedgroupinvestments.com](http://www.nedgroupinvestments.com)

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### FEES

A schedule of fees and charges is available on request from Nedgroup Investments. One can also obtain additional information on Nedgroup Investments products on our website.

### NEDGROUP INVESTMENTS CONTACT DETAILS

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For further information on the fund please visit: [www.nedgroupinvestments.com](http://www.nedgroupinvestments.com)

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