

# Practical Guide for an Effective Involvement of Education Trade Unions in the **European Semester** on **Education and Training**

Updated version - 2023



*Building knowledge to better influence  
education reforms and investment  
in your country*

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# Preface

The European Economic Governance coordination, referred to as the European Semester, and in particular the Country Specific Recommendations and the national Recovery and Resilience Plans, have become crucial for national reforms and financing of public education systems across Europe. In the last few years, some trends have emerged in the education and training policy coordination and making, which require trade unions in education to take further actions and to strengthen their involvement in the European Semester.

Domestic politics, the dramatic impact of the economic recession, the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, and EU budgetary constraints have contributed to accelerating reforms by means of the European Semester. The economic situation resulting from the post-pandemic scenario, and the continuous demands to bring down public debt and to pursue fiscal consolidation in the framework of the European Semester, has led to deep cuts in public education and training. The strict economic coordination and budget surveillance has also encouraged governments to look for other ways of financing education, e.g. by promoting public-private partnership in education or by widening the space for private, commercial, and financial actors in education. In that context, ETUCE is committed to do everything in its power to ensure that European and national policymakers adopt and implement appropriate policies to fully guarantee European citizens' human right for education by developing high quality, equitable and sustainable education systems in Europe.

This handbook fits the purpose of supporting ETUCE member organisations' national strategies to influence the various phases of the European Semester. It is intended as reference and resource for education trade union officers. It is not, however, a one-size-fits-all recipe book which can be used without taking into further consideration national sets. We believe that through a meaningful involvement in defining the objectives of budget allocations for education and training and in all stages of the education and training reform process within the European Semester, education trade unions could reassert their character of collective representation of the interests of teachers and educators. Thanking all member organisations for their contributions, we hope you find the handbook useful and wish you every success in your efforts to strengthen your meaningful involvement in the European Semester on education and training.

Susan Flocken  
ETUCE European Director

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## 1

# What is the European Semester?

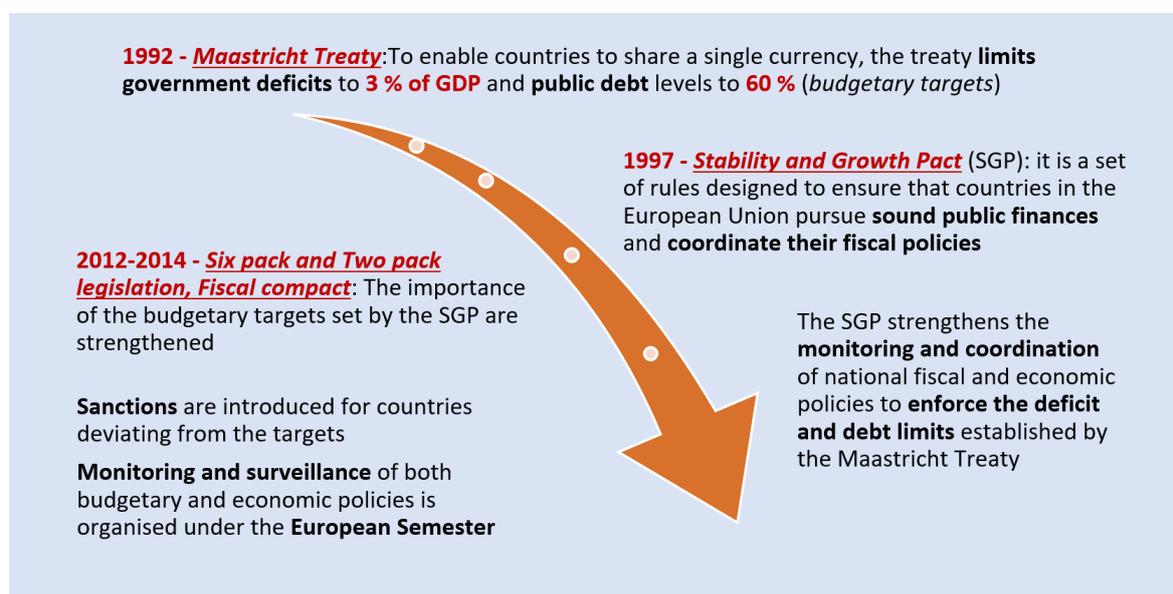
Introduced in 2011 following the Eurozone crisis, The European Semester is the 'European Union's framework for the coordination and surveillance of economic and social policies'.

The European Semester ensures that Member States discuss their economic, social, and budgetary plans with their EU partners at specific times in the first half of the year - hence the term Semester - so that national action can be accordingly taken in the second part of the year, notably with the adoption of the budgets for the subsequent year. This early interaction allows them to comment on each other's plans and monitor progress collectively. It also allows them to take better account of common challenges.

Through the various phases of the Semester, each year, the EU institutions scrutinize and guide national economic, fiscal, and social policies, especially within the Euro Area, however, all EU-Member States are affected by the process and, to a smaller extent, also EU-candidate countries.

The EU's key rules relating to fiscal policy and deficit management were established by the Stability and Growth Pact (SGP) in 1997. Since the 2009 economic crisis, more attention has focused on enforcing these rules, and creating the legislative and governance structures to manage this process. For example, legislative packages known as the Six Pack (2011), Two Pack (2013) and the Treaty on Stability, Coordination and Governance in the Economic and Monetary Union (2012) have all strengthened the mechanisms to ensure budgetary targets are met, with the possibility of sanctions if SGP rules are transgressed. However, as a reaction to the pandemic crisis, some of these budgetary rules have been temporarily lifted and they are being revised by the European Commission, which has published in October 2022 a proposal for a reformed EU economic governance system, to be discussed and agreed with Member States.

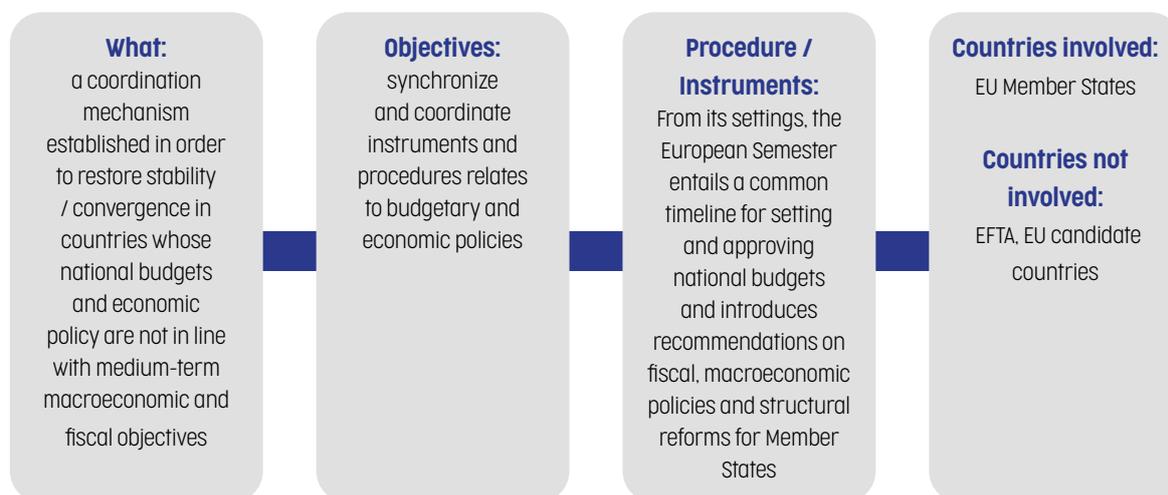
Figure 1 - Budgetary surveillance within the European Semester



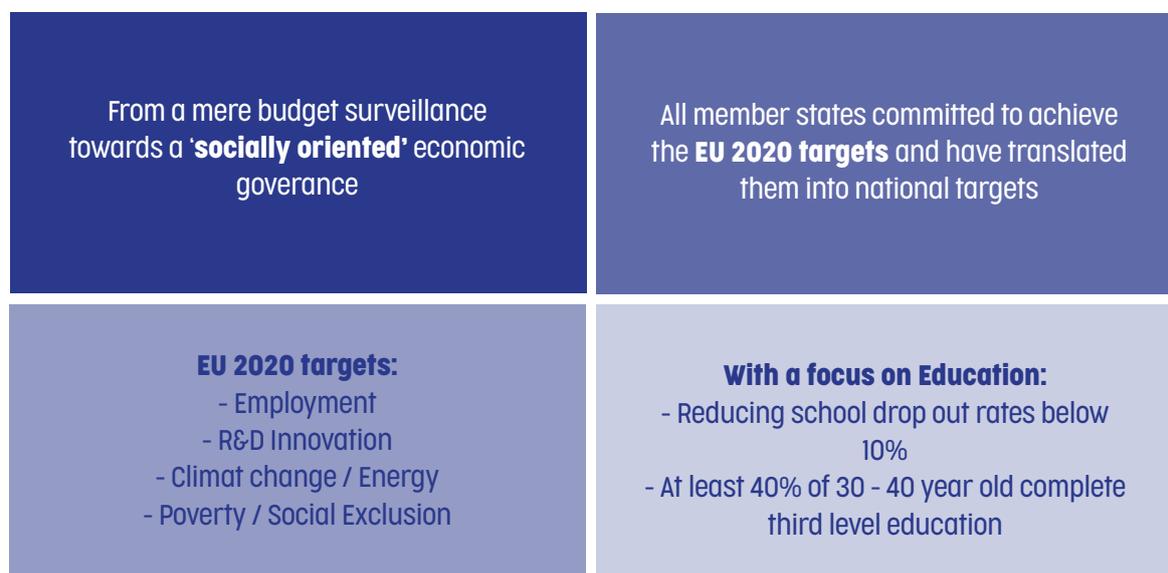
# 2 Evolution of the European Semester

Initially driven by the Europe 2020 objectives, the European Semester has gone through multiple phases to adapt to the emerging challenges the EU has had to face in the past 10 years. The following section summarises its past forms and consider its new status, notably with the introduction of the **Resilience and Recovery Facility**, the key instrument at the heart of **NextGeneration EU**.

## 2011 – 2014



## 2014 – 2020

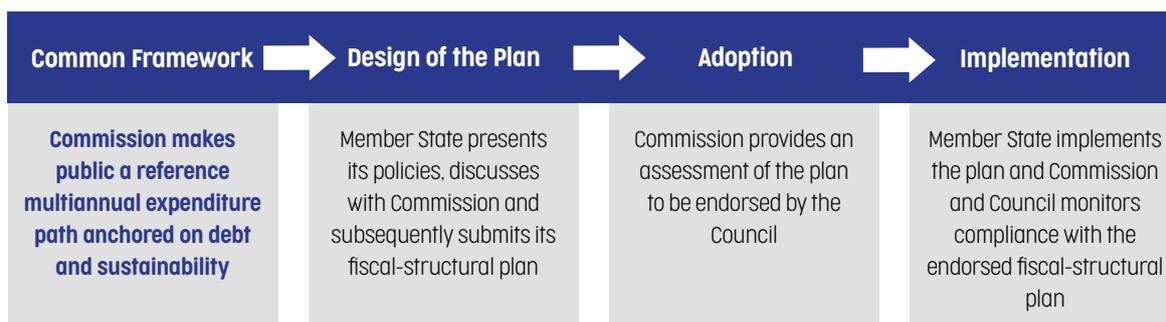


## 2021 – present

Following the Covid-19 pandemics, the European Commission decided in March 2020 to activate the **general escape clause** of the Stability and Growth Pact, a clause which allows Member States to deviate from the usual government deficit-to-GDP and government debt-to-GDP limits on a temporary basis to be able to provide the required massive fiscal response to counter the adverse effects of the pandemic. This decision was also recently supported by the publication of a [communication by the Commission in November 2022](#) on the revision of the EU economic governance framework. In short, the Commission aims to define a simpler architecture for macro-fiscal surveillance to ensure debt sustainability and promote sustainable and inclusive growth. And, although the Treaty reference values of 3% of GDP budget deficit and 60% debt-to-GDP ratio remain unchanged, the Commission suggests the following revised fiscal framework:

National ownership embedded in EU framework	Simplification and focus on fiscal risks	Enforcement
<p><b>0. Commission puts forward reference adjustment paths</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Member States propose medium-term fiscal-structural plans</li> <li>2. Annual budget will commit to follow the fiscal trajectory and ensure that debt will start converging to prudent levels within the adjustment period</li> <li>3. Member States can request a longer adjustment period underpinned by reforms and investments</li> <li>4. Council endorsement of the plan</li> <li>5. Stronger role of national IFIs</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Net expenditure path anchored on debt sustainability and agreed by Council will be the single fiscal indicator</li> <li>2. Surveillance and enforcement will be risk-based</li> <li>3. Debt reduction benchmark, benchmark for reduction in structural balance, significant deviation procedure and matrix of requirements no longer exist</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Deficit-based EDP (3% of GDP threshold) maintained</li> <li>2. Debt-based EDP will be operationalised and strengthened, as a tool to ensure compliance with the agreed net expenditure path</li> <li>3. Financial sanctions toolbox will be enriched with smarter sanctions</li> <li>4. Macroeconomic conditionality will be maintained</li> </ol>

The main novelty resides in the introduction of **medium-term fiscal-structural plans**. Member States would have to present medium-term plans that set out country-specific fiscal trajectories as well as priority public investment and reform commitments that together ensure sustained and gradual debt reduction and sustainable and inclusive growth. All Member States would be required to address the priorities identified in country-specific recommendations (CSRs) issued in the context of the European Semester. This medium-term approach allows for differentiation between Member States and aims to ensure a sustainable debt reduction through a gradual consolidation of reforms and investments.



Another key change is the introduction of **NextGeneration EU**, driven by 5 objectives identified by the European Commission:

1. **IGreen**: Building on the European [Green Deal](#), aiming to make Europe the first climate-neutral continent by 2050.
2. **Digital**: among other objectives, making e-education more accessible, funding online training courses so that everyone can improve their digital skills.
3. **Healthy**: to modernise European health systems, invest more in research and innovation to develop vaccines and treatments.
4. **Strong**: to encouraging young people to study science and technology to support the digital and green transition, boosting support for tourism, culture, and the arts across the Union.
5. **Equal**: to ensuring equal opportunities for all, celebrating diversity in all its forms, promoting gender equality and women's empowerment protecting the rights of the LGBTIQ+ community.

To implement these changes, the Commission introduced the **Resilience and Recovery Facility (RRF)**, a recovery instrument which aims to raise funds to help Member States implement reforms and investments that are in line with the EU's priorities and that address challenges identified in country specific recommendations. In this context, the newly revised European Semester has been aligned with the RRF cycles to improve efficiency and accelerate the transitions. It is also accompanied by the [RRF Scoreboard](#), a scoreboard which aims to give an overview of how the implementation of the RRF and the national recovery and resilience plans is progressing. It also displays the impact of the RRF on the six policy pillars<sup>1</sup> set out by the RRF regulation.

In parallel, the European Commission also launched **RePower EU**, a plan to rapidly reduce dependence on the Russian fossil fuels and fast forward the green transition. Obviously linked to the Russian invasion in Ukraine, the plan aims at addressing the double urgency to transform Europe's energy system by ending the EU's dependence on Russian fossil fuels, which are used as an economic and political weapon and cost European taxpayers nearly €100 billion per year, and tackling the climate crisis.

<sup>1</sup> Green transition, Digital transformation, Smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, Social and territorial cohesion, Health, and economic, social and institutional resilience, and Policies for the next generation.

# 3 The newly revised European Semester

## Key actors

In order to fully understand the European Semester, its core elements and to be able to fully and meaningfully engage with it, we need to identify all the stakeholders involved in the decision making process and understand their various interests.

**European Council.** The European Council is constituted of the 27 EU Member States' Heads of State or governments. The EU Council is a steering political body within the process of policy-making in the EU, as it defines the general political orientations. In the context of the European Semester, the European Council provides the policy orientations on fiscal, macroeconomic and structural reforms in March. In that period, it also adopts the economic priorities based on the Annual Sustainable Growth Survey. In July, the European Council formally endorses the Country Specific Recommendations.

**Council of the European Union.** The Council of the EU (or the Council) is an Institution comprising the 27 Member States national ministers of various portfolios. The Council is divided into ten thematic formations. The ECOFIN Council, for instance, unites the 27 ministers of economic and financial affairs, in order to decide on issues regarding these topics. Consequently, the ECOFIN Council is the main lead in the Council's actions related to the European Semester. In November, it discusses the European Commission's opinions on Member States budgetary plans. It adopts conclusions on the Annual Sustainable Growth Survey and the Alert Mechanism Report, as well as the Euro-area recommendations in December. The Council also discusses the Commission's Country Specific Recommendations drafts in June, and adopts them after the endorsement of the European Council.

**European Commission.** The European Commission is the independent institution that holds the monopoly on EU legislative initiative. As such, it is regarded as one of the most important European institutions, and undertakes a key role in the shaping of the European Semester. Each Autumn, the Commission delivers a detailed analysis of each country's plans for budget, macroeconomic and structural reforms. On the basis of these documents, it publishes the Annual Sustainable Growth Survey and the Alert Mechanism Report in November, and conducts fact-finding missions in the Member States in December and January. The data collected is used to issue the Country reports in February. Finally, in May, the Commission publishes the Country Specific Recommendations valid for the next 12 to 18 months. In case of Member States' non-compliance, it can issue warnings.

The Commission has a European Semester Officer (ESO) in each Member State. This person is line managed from the EC's Secretary General's office, but is based within the country for which they are responsible. Their role is to support the work of the country team based in Brussels. The ESO can be considered as the 'ear on the ground' of the country team. They provide a two-way communication between the Commission and Member State government, as well as liaising with social partners and stakeholders, for example organising meetings with country team representatives.

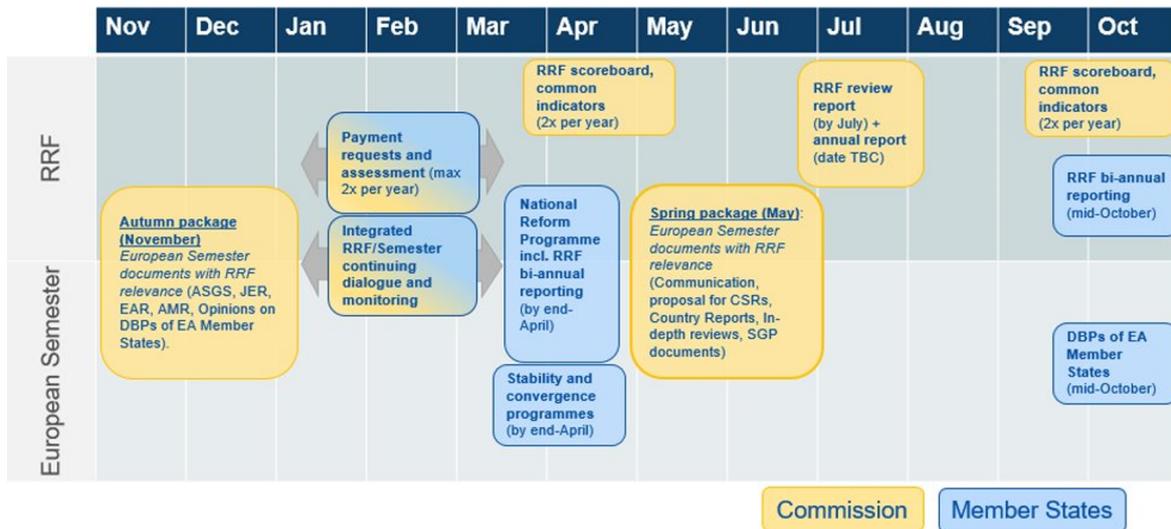
**European Parliament.** The European Parliament is the co-legislator on most European legal decisions along with the Council of the EU. In the process of the European Semester, the Parliament is involved through the economic dialogue. It conducts various discussions in parallel to key events throughout the European Semester process: in November

and December, at the occasion of the Annual Sustainable Growth Strategy, and in May and June, at the occasion of the proposal of Country Specific Recommendations. The Parliament also organises debates and publishes resolutions on the European Semester and the Country Specific Recommendations in the month of September, period during which it also starts a dialogue on the upcoming Annual Sustainable Growth Strategy for the next cycle.

**National governments.** National Governments are the recipients of the policy recommendations issued during the European Semester. Therefore, they are invited to submit their National Reform Programmes and Stability/Convergence Programmes in the months of March and April to the European Commission. The national governments are also expected to incorporate their Country Specific Recommendations into their reform plans and national budgets for the following year from August to October.

**Social partners.** National and European Social Partners have been increasingly involved in the process of the European Semester. It is however important to note that the part played by social partners has never been formally defined. Consequently, the degree of involvement of social partners varies greatly depending on the willingness of Member States and the quality of the tradition of social dialogue in each country. Theoretically, social partners are to be consulted by the European Commission, through its Representations in each Member State, ahead of the publication of the Annual Sustainable Growth Strategy in November, as well as the Country Reports in January/February and Country-Specific Recommendations in May/June. Social partners are additionally expected to be involved by national governments in the process of designing the national reform and stability/convergence programmes in March/April.

## Timeline



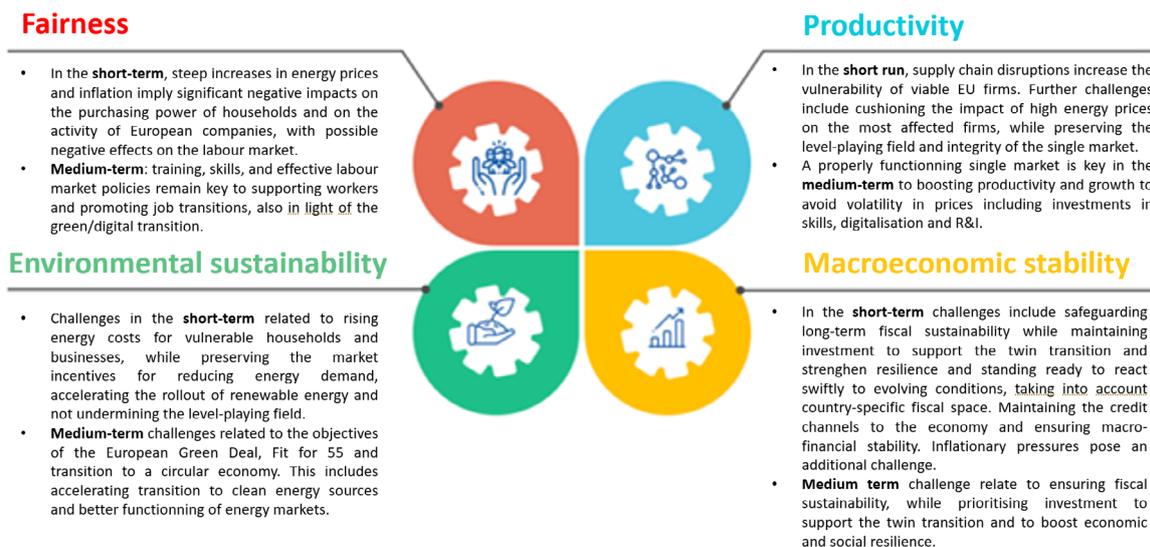
### Phase 1: State of the Union and 'Autumn Package'

In September each year, the President of the European Commission delivers the State of the Union address to the Parliament. The address takes stock of the achievements of the past year and presents the priorities for the year ahead. The President also sets out how the Commission will address the most pressing challenges the European Union faces and ideas for shaping the future of the EU.

The European Semester cycle starts with the publication of the so-called Commission's 'Autumn Package', which includes the [Annual Sustainable Growth Survey \(ASGS\)](#), the [Alert Mechanism Report \(AMR\)](#), the proposal for a [Joint Employment Report \(JER\)](#), the proposal for recommendation for the euro area and Commissions opinions on the draft budgetary plans of euro area Member States.

- **Annual Sustainable Growth Survey.** This document sets out the general economic and social priorities and provides Member States with policy guidance for the following year. Since the 2020 cycle, the ASGS is structured around four dimensions that encompass the EU objective of competitive sustainability: fairness, productivity, environmental sustainability, and macroeconomic stability.

These four key dimensions are crucial in implementing the [Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\)](#).



According to the Commission's communication, integrating the objectives of the SDGs in the European Semester, with a specific focus on the economic and employment aspects, provides a unique opportunity to put people, their health, and the planet at the centre stage of economic policy. In today's geopolitical context, putting the SDGs at the centre of the Union's policymaking and action also sends a strong message about Europe's commitment towards sustainability.

- **Alert Mechanism Report.** It is the starting point of the annual Macroeconomic Imbalance Procedure (MIP). The MIP aims to identify potential risks, prevent the emergence of harmful macroeconomic imbalances and correct the imbalances that have already materialized.
- **Joint Employment Report.** It analyses the employment and social situation in the EU, related challenges and the policy responses by Member States. The JER includes in its annexes the Social Scoreboard.
- **Social Scoreboard.** The Scoreboard analyses through 35 indicator the principles associated with the [European Pillar of Social Rights](#) and provides an interactive tool to compare countries and time periods. The datasets presented in the Social Scoreboard are available on the Eurostat website ([here](#)). The Scoreboard tracks trends and performances across EU countries evaluates national contexts based on the obtained indicators and the progress made in comparison with the previous year.

## Phase 2: Education and Training Monitor and 'ETM country reports'

The Education and Training Monitor (ETM) is a report published each year around November. It presents the European Commission's annual analysis of how education and training systems evolve across the EU. It brings the latest available data alongside updates on national policy measures to contribute towards the monitoring of the European Education Area strategic framework. The ETM is produced by DG Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (EAC) and it is likely that the Education Desk Officer within the Semester Country Team is also involved in the production of the ETM. The ETM consists of the following parts:

- **Comparative reports:** progress towards EU-level targets: the reports complement the 7 EU-level targets with supporting indicators to shed light on context and possible policy levers.
- **ETM country reports:** these reports provide more in-depth insights into the performance of countries with regard to the EU-level targets agreed as part of the EEA strategic framework.
- The European Education Area strategic framework was put in place to structure collaboration between European Union (EU) Member States and key stakeholders to achieve their collective vision. The framework does so by:
  - strengthening means of policy cooperation and reaching out to stakeholders to encourage their engagement with the initiative,
  - enhancing synergies with other relevant initiatives, including the European Research Area and the Bologna Process,
  - identifying targets and indicators to guide work and monitor progress towards achieving the EEA, and fostering the integration of education and training into the European Semester process
- **Monitor Toolbox:** it provides an overview of the key indicators used in the ETM and puts a spotlight on the context that the EU-level target and indicator domains are embedded in.

## Phase 3: National Reform Programmes & Stability and Convergence Programmes

In April, Member States submit their National Reform and Stability and Convergence Programmes to set out their economic and fiscal policy plans. The programmes detail the specific policies each country will implement to boost jobs and growth and prevent or correct imbalances, and their concrete plans to comply with the EU's country-specific recommendations and general fiscal rules. The main novelty in the 2022 cycle is that the National Reform Programmes (NRP) now play a dual role. Besides being part of the usual European Semester cycle, the **NRPs now also fulfil the role of bi-annual reporting requirements of Member States under the Recovery and Resilience Facility for their national Recovery and Resilience Plans (nRRPs).**

## Phase 4: 'Spring Package', Country Specific Recommendations & Country Reports

**Country Reports.** The Country Reports take stock of implementation of the Recovery and Resilience Plans, analyse the economic and social developments and challenges facing Member States and provide a forward-looking analysis of their resilience. The overview includes an assessment of progress on the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights as well. Based on this analysis, the country reports have identified those challenges which have not been sufficiently addressed by the Recovery and Resilience Plans. Where applicable, the Reports also include a summary of the findings of the in-depth reviews under the Macroeconomic Imbalances Procedure.

**Country Specific Recommendations.** The Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs) represent the key action points of the European Semester. It is identified by Commission officials as the third point in the formal Semester cycle where the Commission commits to promoting social dialogue (the other two points being the ASGS and the Country Reports). These are formal outcomes from the Commission-driven element of the Semester and they constitute the expected actions Member States are expected to implement over the next 12-18 months. Recently a formal decision has been taken to limit the number of CSRs made, and these are now typically three per country.

Initial discussion about the CSRs takes place within the Commission's country teams, taking account of the responses received to the Country Reports and the content of the NRPs. There can be no CSR which does not feature in the Executive Summary of the relevant Country Report. However, there is obviously an intense period of discussion in which all potential CSRs are prioritised in a short-listing process. During this process, different European Commission's DGs seek to protect and advance the agendas of their own Directorate General. Protocols exist for conducting these discussions. As the fine detail of the short list is refined, and reflecting the political importance of the CSRs, the level of decision-making is escalated, with final 'sign off' at the highest level of the Commission.

CSRs are discussed with Member States in the Council, and the Council makes a formal endorsement in July. In many ways the CSRs can be seen as the quintessential expression of the European Semester's 'soft governance'. There is no legislative (hard) power to direct Member States in the Semester. There are powers to direct specific economic policy actions, or to sanction those who transgress rules on deficit management. However, these sit outside the Semester itself, which is a form of governance. On issues outside these prescribed areas the Commission has no power to direct. There are no sanctions for those who do not implement their recommendations and no visible 'naming and shaming'. However, the CSRs are presented as being 'co-produced' between the Commission and Member States and are conceived as 'shared priorities'. There exist forms of conditionality linked to the distribution of European funds and the access to resources allocated under the Recovery and Resilience Facility.

# 4 Why should education trade unions get involved in the European Semester?

The European Semester can look like a cycle of big set piece events, with few opportunities for education trade unions to be involved. Education trade unions should make every effort to 'push the door open' early in the process. Developing relationships with the European Semester Officer is a keyway to make sure that the views of education trade unions are known, and that unions are invited to be involved at all the key points.

The European Semester has a sharp focus on economic policy priorities and monitoring the fiscal performance of Member States. However, education policy features prominently in the process, and there is the potential to have a considerable influence on policies that impact students and teachers across all phases of education. Below are some of the reasons education trade unions need to be able to influence the Semester process.

- The Semester's focus on fiscal policy in Member States has a considerable impact on public investment levels. This impacts public expenditure on education, with all the consequences for providing quality education for all. The Semester provides a chance to make the case for increased public investment, particularly in education services.
- The Recovery and Resilience Facility has key education targets, and these are also reflected in the recommendations presented to Member States through the Semester process. Education-related recommendations feature very prominently in the European Semester. Recommendations can range across every sector of education, from Early Childhood Education through to Higher Education and Research. The Semester represents an opportunity to make the case for education policies that are a priority for education trade unions to become recommendations to Member States.
- Education-related recommendations need to reflect the voice of educators and the professional expertise of teachers and associated education workers. It is the nature of the Semester process that many education-related recommendations are general in nature.

In summary, it is important for education trade unions to engage with the European Semester because it is a key policy process with the potential for considerable impact on education policy in Member States. The Semester process provides an opportunity, a 'policy space' to shape the education policy discourse in Member States. This is not necessarily easy, and there are many reasons why the involvement of education trade unions in social dialogue relating to the Semester is not as embedded as it might be. However, there are opportunities to make an important impact on policy. The purpose of this Toolkit is to help education trade unions maximise that opportunity.

# 5 Making a difference in the European Semester

In the aftermath of the economic crisis the European Semester appeared adversarial and punitive. The Commission has since committed to a 'new start' for social dialogue in which social partners are integrally involved in policy development. What this 'new start' amounts to in reality is, as yet, unclear, and several aspects of the revision of the European social dialogue planned in 2023 does not seem to go in the right direction. But it is undoubtedly an opportunity for education trade unions to make sure that their voice is heard at all the key points in the European Semester process.

The European Semester is an important process, with significant implications for all aspects of education across every Member State. It is essential for education trade unions to engage with this process in order to shape it. This toolkit is focused on supporting ETUCE member organisations to channel their efforts to be able to make a difference in the Semester process. Before presenting practical steps to achieve this, we set out the various ways in which the European trade union movement, in particular the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) and ETUCE, seek to influence the process at a European level. Here are several examples to illustrate the kind of involvement and contribution:

The yearly actions of [European Trade Union Confederation \(ETUC\)](#)

- Every Autumn, ETUC publishes a position document on the assessment of the ASGS, providing input to the ASGS, which sets the priorities of the European Semester of the following year. The European Commission organises a social partners hearing ahead of the publication on the ASGS.
- Twice a year, the ETUC takes part in the Tripartite Social Summit, which is a forum for dialogue between the EU Institutions' Presidents and European social partners. The Tripartite Social Summit is the occasion for representatives of trade unions and employers' organisations to meet and exchange views with European decision-makers on a wide range of matters concerning socio-economic policies in Europe.
- The Country Reports and the Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs). In this regard, ETUC works at both national and European level to represent the voice and interests of workers: ETUC firstly supports its affiliates in terms of their exercising of influence on the drafting of Country Reports and collects national inputs for the "Report on Trade Union Inputs for Early-Stage Consultation on Country Reports". National trade union confederation then provide their views to the ETUCE on the CSRs in light of their national experiences and contexts. ETUC then uses its platform to raise awareness amongst national and European decision-makers to the views of national member organisations on the published Country Reports and CSRs and their implementation by national governments.

The yearly actions of the [European Trade Union Committee for Education \(ETUCE\)](#)

- Providing ETUCE views on the ASGS for the forthcoming year embedding analysis of main challenges and policy priorities which could affect the education sector across Europe.

- Participating to the High-level Social Dialogue with the European Commission, DG EAC, on the Education and Training Monitor, which includes policy priorities for the EU to reach the targets of NextGeneration EU and national country reports on education and training.
- Calling ETUCE member organisations to participate to consultative meetings with desk-officers from the European Commission, DG EAC, in charge of drafting country reports on education and training in the frame of the Education and Training Monitor report.
- Calling ETUCE member organisations to arrange consultations with the relevant officers in charge at national level from the Ministry of Education in charge of contributing to the National Reform Programmes and implementation of the CSRs.
- Calling ETUCE member organisations to coordinate with national trade union confederations consultation and meetings with the European Semester Officer at national level on the general priorities including those on education and training.
- Advocating for sufficient, effective and sustainable public investment in education to be excluded from the rules of the Stability and Growth Pact (SGP) - the 'golden rule for public investment' - and the future EU economic governance, therefore advocating for alternative measures to austerity and fiscal consolidation policies.
- Coordinating and discussing relevant policy initiatives with ETUC in the frame of the ETUC Working Groups.
- Coordinating and discussing the relevant policy initiative in the frame of the European Semester which have sufficient common ground for discussion with the European Federation of Education Employers (EFEE) in the frame of the European Sectoral Social Dialogue in Education (ESSDE).
- Building alliances at European level with other Trade Union Federations and civil society organisations who advocate for a more democratic European Semester, the need to protect public goods and for public investment as well as quality education for all.

However, if this process is to be really effective then the work outlined above must align with, and be complemented by, the work of education trade unions at Member State level.

In the following section we identify five formal points at which education trade unions can shape the Semester process:

1. **The Annual Sustainable Growth Survey.** From a social dialogue perspective ETUC can be considered as the principal policy actor representing workers' organisations, with national confederations feeding into this debate. This discussion, and some of its concerns, can seem remote from the interests of teachers and their unions but its importance should not be underestimated. The ASGS can be considered to set the parameters within which subsequent Semester processes are framed. Hence, in recent years, both social partners, employers' and workers' organisations, have highlighted the need for public investment to drive the recovery, and there is evidence of this being acknowledged in the President's State of the Union speech and the subsequent ASGS. ETUCE member organisations should be aware of the key elements of this process (the 'State of the Union' address, as well as the ASGS) and be in communication with both ETUCE and their own confederations to make sure their views are represented.
2. **Education and Training Monitor.** Certainly the ETM provides a key data source for the Semester's Country Report. The Commission will often call meetings in Member States, to discuss the ETM for that country. Such meetings may not be part of the Semester's formal social dialogue processes, however, they are opportunities to shape the discourse around education policy priorities within Member States; these discourses, in turn, impact discourses within the Semester process. Engaging with such meetings, and thinking carefully about how to approach them (deciding on key messages, formulating strong evidence based arguments), were identified in the research as important by EU officials.

3. **Country Reports.** The formal opportunity to influence this is when members of the country team make in-country fact-finding visits (usually December). These are short visits, attended by different members of the country team where the team meet the various Member State government officials, but also meet with stakeholders. This will usually include meeting with social partners, but this may not extend to meeting beyond the national union confederation(s). Education trade unions may, or may not be invited, depending on the local issues, and sometimes on the extent to which they are pro-active in seeking an invitation. Securing involvement in this part of the process is key, bearing in mind that country specific recommendations always emerge from the Country Reports.
4. **National Reform Programmes.** In the research, it emerged as a part of the Semester process with only limited social partner engagement. It comes across as a bureaucratic and technical exercise in which national government civil servants are required to draft a response to the Country Reports. Even with earlier publication of the Country Reports, as is now the case, civil servants in Member States are under considerable pressure to produce a complex response in a short period of time. Social partners appear to be either forgotten in this process, or intentionally side-lined. Given the potential importance of the NRF in terms of setting out the Member State response to the Country Reports it would seem to be an important opportunity for social partners to be involved in process. We identified some examples of where this has happened (see individual country case studies), although these tended to be limited.
5. **Country Specific Recommendations.** Following publication of draft CSRs there is further opportunity to discuss these and influence content. However, the research highlighted that at this point these are high level and high stakes discussions where it is difficult for those outside of national governments and the European Commission to affect change. Much effort, including managing political expectations, has already been expended, and there is a reluctance to make any changes other than those considered absolutely necessary to secure safe passage through the Council. Social dialogue at this stage appears to be more about communicating messages, than about listening and responding. Input from education trade unions is possibly best considered as about placing a tactical marker for the next round of the Semester, which, behind the scenes, is already getting underway.

In addition to all of the above it is important to emphasise the need to develop informal networks and channels of communication. This may not always be possible, and personalities can play a key role here. However what emerged as a strong message from the research informing this toolkit was the need to develop on-going informal relationships with key actors in order to communicate key messages. In this process the European Semester Officer (who organises the local stakeholder meetings) and the Desk Officer representing the Directorate-General for Education and Culture (DG EAC) were both identified as key personnel with whom it was important to build relationships.

The stakeholder meetings (such as fact finding mission meetings) are an important formal part of the process, but they are necessarily limited in impact. They are quite brief, and as one Commission representative said, 'we already know the key issues before we arrive'. By this time it is likely that Desk Officers are looking to 'test' their ideas and assessments rather than look for new agendas. Influencing the Country Report requires early, on-going and often informal contact. Alliances are important, and sometimes unusual. In our study from 2016, we already observed how an education trade union worked with their Education Ministry, and used recommendations from the Semester, to put pressure on the Finance Minister to increase investment in education. Semester recommendations can be as much an opportunity as a threat.

# 6 Developing Social Dialogue in the European Semester: Key points for Education Trade Unions

- **Shape the discourse:** the European Semester is more a process of agenda shaping than traditional collective bargaining. Education trade unions need a clear narrative and a long-term vision with clarity of messages. In education policy terms the Semester is often concerned with the big picture, rather than small detail. Education trade unions need to frame their work accordingly.
- **Have a plan:** it is important to see the Semester as a long-term process. Education trade unions need to have a clear plan about when and how to intervene in the process, seeing the cycle in the whole rather than intervening in a piece meal and ad hoc way.
- **The European Semester:** focus on the beginning: the 'direction of travel' of the European Semester is set at the beginning of the process. The key content of the Country Report is probably formed in the Autumn preceding the year the Country Report is published (in February). Putting effort into influencing CSRs is far too late. Education trade unions need to try and assert maximum influence as early as possible. As soon as one Country Report is published, it is time to start thinking about influencing the next one.
- **Social dialogue:** take the opportunities and make the opportunities: the European Commission often provides opportunities to discuss key issues impacting education policy, and to which social partners are invited. This includes meetings to discuss the Education and Training Monitor. These are important opportunities to ensure that the voice of education trade unions is heard, but not all education trade unions attend when invited. Where such meetings do not take place, then unions should request them. This is best achieved through the European Semester Officer and building a relationship with this individual should be a key priority. Informal relationships are as important as formal opportunities.
- **Allocate resources:** there can be no denying that engaging with the European Semester requires commitment. The European Semester is a responsibility that needs allocating to an appropriate individual with sufficient seniority to represent the organization as necessary. Such a person needs time to build up expertise and resources to engage in networking etc. In some instances, this work may be helped by sharing responsibilities or resources across multiple unions in the same jurisdictions.
- **Create alliances:** The European Semester is a political process and is subject to political pressure. Although appearing as a 'technical process' often carried out by civil servants (and therefore one that is not transparent and democratic) the Semester is open to political pressures in the same way as other political processes. Working with labour movement and civil society organisations makes it possible to amplify the arguments for public investment and quality education for all.

- **Communicate internally:** The European Semester is a technical process that can seem obscure to education trade union officers and members alike. It is important that the wider union leadership are aware of Semester issues if they are to allocate sufficient resources to engaging with it. Educating members can be more challenging, especially when the processes and issues may seem so remote. However, 'opening up the Semester' must be located within a wider project of opening up the European Union to greater citizen involvement and making education trade union members aware of these wider issues should be seen as part of this process.

