

National Trade Union Involvement in the European Semester

Opening up the European Semester? Trade unions between 'Brussels' and domestic politics

Executive Summary

1. INVOTUNES in action: scope and partners

Involvement of Trade Unions in the European Semester (INVOTUNES) is a two-year (2018-2019) European Commission-funded research project aimed at examining the involvement of national trade union organisations in both the European and national cycles of the European Semester. The timeframe covered is the period between 2014 and 2018, while the analysis considers two social policy areas addressed in the Semester that are of particular relevance to trade unions: a) employment and wage setting; and b) social protection and social inclusion. The project focuses on eight countries: Belgium, Bulgaria, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Portugal and Sweden. For each of these eight countries, an in-depth case study was conducted by a country team, using qualitative research methods. In addition, with a view to gaining a broad picture of the situation across the European Union (EU), an online survey was carried out covering the 28 Member States.

INVOTUNES, coordinated by the European Social Observatory (Belgium), involved 10 partner institutions:

- three independent research centres: the Centre for Studies for Social Intervention – CESIS (Portugal); the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences¹ (IPS-BAS) (Bulgaria); and the Hungarian Academy of Sciences – Centre for Social Sciences (Hungary);
- three trade union-related research institutes: the European Social Observatory (Belgium); the Hans Böckler Foundation's Institute of Economic and Social Research – WSI (Germany); and the Institute for Social and Trade Union Research – ISTUR/CITUB (Bulgaria);
- three universities: the University of Macerata (Italy); the European Work Life research team at Uppsala University – SALTSA (Sweden); and the Department of Social Research, University of Turku (Finland);
- the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), which was an Associate Partner.

2. Objectives of the project: from research to awareness raising

INVOTUNES had six specific objectives: *first*, to identify the channels through which national trade unions have access to both the EU and national cycles of the European Semester; *second*, to shed light on the linkages between the Semester and 'ordinary' domestic decision-making procedures (in particular, national social

¹ Formerly the Institute for the Study of Societies and Knowledge – Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (ISSK-BAS).

dialogue); **third**, to identify trade unions' strategies for involvement and the determinants of these strategies; **fourth**, to highlight trade unions' actual influence on the agenda, the outputs and the outcomes of the process (if any); **fifth**, to provide recommendations to both trade unions and decision-makers on how to increase the effectiveness of the involvement process; and **finally**, to increase awareness of the importance of the European Semester among domestic trade unions and, more generally, social partner organisations.

3. Key findings: trade unions between 'Brussels' and domestic politics

Nine key messages emerge from the research.

First, while **access channels** allowing trade unions to participate in the Semester at the national level are available in all eight countries studied, in many cases their quality appears rather problematic. Their functioning often suffers from **a number of shortcomings**, including, in some cases, governments' unwillingness to promote meaningful involvement in the Semester.

Second, access channels for interaction with EU institutions in the Semester have multiplied over time, with interactions taking place both in national capitals and in Brussels. With a few exceptions, the quality of these **EU access channels to the Semester is considered satisfactory**. Importantly, the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) has, over time, improved its internal procedures aimed at promoting national trade unions' involvement in the Semester, by coordinating their actions and facilitating their interaction with EU institutions.

Third, national trade unions adopt different strategies for involvement in the Semester. Trade unions in countries where social dialogue is currently under strain are more prone to adopt **proactive strategies** for involvement, attempting to contact EU-level actors directly (e.g. Belgium, Bulgaria and Italy). Conversely, in countries where national social dialogue is strong and EU pressure from the Semester is rather low, trade unions opt for **responsive strategies** (e.g. Germany and Sweden). In these countries, trade unions prefer to be involved in the Semester through national channels, mostly as a reaction to possible EU interference in national social dialogue. In other countries, trade unions tend to adopt mixed strategies, simultaneously focusing on both the EU and national levels. The particular social issue being addressed in the Semester often determines the strategy the unions adopt: the closer the issue is to the unions' core business, the more proactive their strategy is.

Fourth, in some of the case studies, the **success of the trade union strategy** chosen is limited by a **lack of adequate resources**. Cognitive and organisational resources appear particularly important for effective involvement in the Semester, especially at the EU level. In some of the countries studied, trade unions have significant resources but, for strategic reasons, they choose to limit those invested in Semester-related activities.

Fifth, **coordination arrangements for inter-trade union cooperation** in the Semester have been **developed** in most countries studied in this project, while coordination between trade unions and employers or civil society organisations is sporadic or non-existent.

Sixth, we found several instances of **usage of the Semester tools and messages** in national policy-making, in particular in social dialogue. In some cases, national trade unions used Semester-related messages and recommendations as a 'policy sword' in order to overcome any impasses in national social dialogue (e.g. Belgium, Bulgaria, Hungary, Italy). In other cases, they used these messages and recommendations as a 'lubricant' for national reforms, i.e. to legitimise their demands, when negotiations were already ongoing at the national level (e.g. Bulgaria, Finland, Italy, Portugal). Finally, in countries such as Germany and Sweden, trade unions were interested in participating in the Semester above all to block EU initiatives that were potentially detrimental to their long-term objectives (containment strategies).

Seventh, we found that, at national level, **trade unions perceive their influence** on the outputs of the Semester (especially the National Reform Programmes) as **limited or non-existent**, while influence on the outcomes of national reforms varies from one country to another. At EU level, we have identified some instances in which trade unions may have been able to affect documents such as the European Commission's Country Reports or the Country-specific Recommendations (CSRs). Conversely, national trade unionists in virtually all the countries investigated claim that they have had **no impact at all on the overall EU agenda**, policy priorities or the focus of the Semester.

Eighth, we noted that **influence on EU documents** such as the Country Reports or the CSRs has usually been the **result of repeated interaction** and exchanges of information, data and analyses between trade unions and the Commission. Thus, we can conclude that, in an evidence-based process such as the Semester, the availability of cognitive resources is key in order to have an impact on decisions.

Ninth, politics does not disappear from the radar. On the contrary, **political considerations are important** upstream of the Semester involvement process, and crucially affect its features and dynamics. The decisions of policy-makers as to whether or not to involve trade unions in the Semester are indeed dictated by political considerations, and the same applies to trade unions' decisions as to whether, how and to what extent they wish to be involved in the process.

4. Policy recommendations for more effective involvement in the European Semester

A number of recommendations as to how to improve the involvement of national trade unions in the Semester emerge from INVOTUNES.

Recommendations for **trade unions** include: a) to strengthen their cognitive and organisational resources and to exchange good practices regarding involvement in the Semester; b) to promote cooperation between national trade unions in the same country, in order to establish more effective strategies for involvement; c) to enhance interaction with the European Commission, as this is a promising way to have some impact on the Semester; and d) to further clarify and enhance the role of the Trade Union Semester Liaison Officers (TUSLOs), including by better defining their position and responsibilities within national trade union confederations.

Recommendations for the **Member States** include: a) to facilitate trade unions' involvement in the national cycle of the Semester and, more generally, to strengthen national social dialogue; and b) to monitor trade unions' involvement in the Semester, including by regularly reporting on whether and how their inputs to the process have been taken into consideration.

Recommendations for the **European Commission** include: a) to support capacity-building for national trade unions, including through EU funding; b) to give trade unions a role in monitoring and evaluating the implementation of social and employment CSRs; c) to report regularly on whether and how social partner inputs to the process have been taken into consideration; and d) to put pressure on national governments to involve the social partners in the Semester and to regularly assess whether and how this is done.

These recommendations and the project's key findings have been discussed with a variety of policy-makers and social partner representatives during public roundtable discussions in Sweden (2018) and Belgium, Bulgaria and Portugal (2019). Each of these events helped to increase awareness of the importance of the European Semester among domestic trade unions and business organisations. All the presentations given at these events are available on the project [website](http://www.ose.be/invotunes/research_outputs.html): http://www.ose.be/invotunes/research_outputs.html

5. Research output

The eight national **case studies** and their executive summaries (in English as well as in their respective national languages) were published as OSE Research Papers during 2019. Three **analytical reports** – dealing with

a) access channels to the Semester; b) the interplay between the Semester and national social dialogue; and c) trade unions' strategies for involvement – have been published in English in the same working paper series. The **final report** of the project has been published in English, French and German. The present **executive summary** is available in 10 languages: Bulgarian, Dutch, English, French, Finnish, German, Hungarian, Italian, Portuguese and Swedish. For more details, see the project [website](#).

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