

A Semester for People, Not Just for Markets

Civil society, social justice, and the 2026 European Semester cycle

Piotr Sadowski · Panel 1: Delivering the EU's priorities through a strategic European Semester · 30 June 2026

The Semester works for markets. Does it work for people?

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The DNA of the Semester is to focus on fiscal frameworks and reduce public spending. Social objectives remain advisory — and that asymmetry shows up in the results.

— Academic assessment of the European Semester, paraphrased

I want to make one argument today — not answer questions one by one.

The numbers tell us this is structural, not accidental.

93.3M

**people at risk of poverty
or social exclusion in the EU**

21.0% of the EU population — only marginal decline
from 95.5M in 2019.

1 in 5

**Europeans living
at risk of poverty**

Rising to 1 in 4 among children. ~1 million people
are homeless across the EU.

-15M

**the 2030 EPSR reduction target —
nowhere near on track**

The EU goal of lifting 15M out of poverty by 2030
needs a pace the current Semester is not delivering.

And roughly 1 in 3 social Country-Specific Recommendations achieve meaningful progress — the rest stall.

Three structural reasons the gap persists

01

Legal asymmetry

Fiscal CSRs are enforceable under the economic governance framework. Social CSRs remain advisory — with no consequence for non-delivery. So many governments quietly deprioritise them.

02

Civil society locked out at national level

The EESC's own assessments are clear: CSO involvement in national Semester processes lacks structured timelines, formal seats, and any feedback loop. Consultation happens — co-construction does not.

03

2026 is the gateway to the next MFF

This cycle's CSRs will shape the national and regional partnership plans that govern EU funding flows for the next seven years. Exclude civil society now — and the exclusion is baked into the funding architecture.

The stakes have never been higher.

Source: EESC opinions on Semester governance (2022, 2024); European Commission 2026 Spring Package, 3 June 2026

Not a barrier to efficiency — a condition for it.

EVIDENCE

Ground-truth evidence

CSOs translate the lived realities of poverty, housing, care, and exclusion into policy-relevant data that official statistics systematically miss.

LEGITIMACY

Democratic legitimacy

Meaningful participation is what makes economic reform politically durable, not just technically sound. Reforms without it don't survive electoral cycles.

DELIVERY

Implementation capacity

In many Member States, CSOs already plan, deliver, and monitor EU-funded programmes on the ground — long before official partners arrive.

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A stronger role for civil society is not a barrier to efficiency — it is a condition for it.

— EESC conference narrative, 2026

Three concrete demands for the 2026 cycle

1

Mandate CSO participation by regulation – not guidance

EU regulation should require structured civil dialogue at every stage of MFF-linked national plans, with documented feedback on how input shapes decisions. Not a tick-box — a genuine process.

2

Tie MFF disbursement to social milestones

Elevate social CSRs to binding milestones for fund payments — alongside fiscal compliance. Poverty reduction, the Child Guarantee, and housing adequacy must carry the same weight as deficit targets.

3

Recognise CSOs as eligible MFF implementation partners

The EU Civil Society Strategy (November 2025) opens this door. The next MFF must walk through it — building civil society into the architecture, not bolting it on as an afterthought.

If money follows fiscal rules, it must also follow social ones.

Source: EU Civil Society Strategy (Nov 2025), European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan, EESC opinions on MFF governance

This is a once-in-a-generation rewiring moment.



MORE MEMBER STATES

flagged for social imbalance risks in the 2026 Spring Package, compared to 2025.

The Semester is now the funding gateway

2026 CSRs will shape the national partnership plans that govern the next MFF — a multi-year funding architecture, not a one-year cycle.

Housing is in the spotlight

For the first time, the 2026 cycle places housing affordability at the centre of social recommendations — with a dedicated €43bn Affordable Housing Plan.

The political window is now

The Civil Society Strategy is fresh. The EU anti-poverty strategy is on the table. Civil society's institutional anchor is at its strongest in years.

Source: Social Convergence Framework finding via Commission Spring Package (3 June 2026); Affordable Housing Plan COM(2025) 1025; EU Civil Society Strategy (Nov 2025)

Competitiveness and social justice are not trade-offs. They are prerequisites for each other.

*A competitive Europe that leaves millions behind is not politically sustainable.
A socially just Europe that cannot fund itself is not economically viable.*

**Civil society is ready.
The question is whether the institutions are ready to let us in.**