



How can organised civil society's participation in the European semester be strengthened?



Organisers of this roundtable

- [The French Economic, Social and Environmental Council \(French ESEC\)](#)
- [European Economic and Social Committee](#)

This round table was organised as part of the consultation carried out by the EESC's [European Semester Group \(ESG\)](#) in preparation for an own-initiative opinion entitled "The EESC's recommendations for a solid reform of the European Semester" ([ECO/600](#)). With this opinion, the ESG is continuing the work it started in 2021: consulting national economic and social councils, social partners and civil society organisations in the EU Member States on the key topic of the European Semester. This includes the Recovery and Resilience Facility, country reports, national reform programmes and country-specific recommendations, all within the framework of European economic governance. The aim of this consultation is to determine how to streamline the European Semester so that it is more participatory, with greater ownership at national level and closer involvement of organised civil society. The consultation is being carried out through a questionnaire and seven country visits (organised in cooperation with national economic and social councils and relevant stakeholders). The adoption of this opinion is planned for April 2023.

The following topics were covered during this roundtable:

- **Consultation of the social partners and civil society organisations on the European Semester:**
- **Which pillars of the European Semester should be strengthened as a priority?**

14:30 – 14:45 Opening speech

- Presentation of this consultation exercise by Mr Bollon and Mr Meynent, members of the European Economic and Social Committee.

14:45 – 15:45 Debate

- Consultation of the social partners and civil society organisations on the European Semester:
- Which pillars of the European Semester should be strengthened as a priority?

15:45 – 16:00 Conclusion

Consultation of the ESEC by the Commission/French government

- We have very good cooperation with the European Commission Representation in France. We initiate this cooperation and associated exchanges, and the Permanent Representation of France to the EU is always available to come and discuss matters related to the European Semester with us (presentation of the recommendations, the autumn package, etc.).
- We appreciate the fact that the General Secretariat for European Affairs (SGAE) comes and works with us on key topics related to the European Semester, such as the national reform programme (NRP). However, after such consultations, we do not receive feedback on what has and has not been taken into account and why. **There is, for example, *ex ante* contact while the NRP is being drafted, but there is not enough discussion and feedback on how the recommendations made have been taken into account.**
- We would like **the government and the Commission** to systematically **inform us of major deadlines**. At present, it is always up to us to come to them for information. Regular exchanges with the government and the Commission are good practice and should be continued and deepened. **There should be an internal working group dedicated to the European Semester to increase this cooperation.**

Calendar

- We ourselves have **tight schedules with very short deadlines, and then there are the deadlines set by the French government**. The timetable for consulting the French ESEC on the government's draft NRP is very tight and this year was to be spread over two to three weeks. This has a negative impact on our work. For example, when we are asked to give an opinion on cross-cutting issues, **in order for this contribution to be as relevant and useful as possible, we need to do work that goes beyond providing general information**. We need to put the information into perspective in relation to the work done in the other commissions (working groups) of the French ESEC. **However, the shorter the deadlines, the more the result will simply be a juxtaposition of the positions of the various French ESEC committees, without us having had the time to argue further and put the subject into perspective and thereby flesh out our opinion. It becomes more of a box-ticking exercise, and the result is not comprehensive enough.**
- This year, after a "relaxation" of the timetable in 2022, there has been a change to the calendar: a hearing on the content of the finalised NRP with the Deputy Secretary for European Affairs was scheduled for 9 March. However, this has been cancelled as the plan has not yet received final approval from the prime minister. We will therefore discuss the matter with the SGAE on 15 March and then submit our contribution at the end of March. **It is true that the European Semester has a set timetable, but the already tight schedule is often subject to unforeseen circumstances. This year we will therefore have**

15 days of consultation. The nine working groups of the French ESEC are being asked to participate in this exercise. The time frame for consultation and for providing a considered contribution is very tight. We are therefore counting on being able to exert some influence in the discussions held before the NRP is drafted. We must therefore anticipate the government's work through a **working group dedicated to the NRP within the French ESEC**: each of the commissions and working delegations has appointed a contact person and the nine contact persons meet regularly as soon as the European Semester starts. However, until we have the precise content of the government's responses and know how to approach the issue, this is of limited use: we approach the issue only from the angle of the plan, i.e. the theme, with a little less information on the substance. This makes our response 15-20% less relevant and detailed than it would otherwise have been. **The more detail we can go into, the more useful our response will be for the Commission and the government.**

- **Thirty days is the bare minimum for a reasonable consultation period.**

How national authorities consult organised civil society on the main documents of the European Semester (annual sustainable growth survey, national reform programmes and stability or convergence programmes, recommendations for the euro area, country reports, draft country-specific recommendations, etc.)

- We have discussions with representatives of the French government and the Commission on the country-specific recommendations and the country report. **However, the government does not involve the French ESEC in any way in providing proposals on the content of these documents.** We are **only consulted on parts III (Challenges), IV (SDGs) and V (Structural Funds) of the government's draft NRP**, for which we send the government a contribution. Then the General Secretary for European Affairs comes to the French ESEC plenary to give an oral response (only), though this practice only started recently. **However, the government should be more accountable to organised civil society after the consultation.**

Harmonising the consultation of organised civil society through a European legislative act

- The way in which representatives of organised civil society in the EU are consulted differs greatly from country to country and we need a **European legal act to stabilise this and allow for uniformity in consultation, while respecting national traditions.** This should be based on the idea **that, in all Member States, organised civil society should benefit from the same degree of involvement and consultation.** This should ensure the real involvement of organised civil society. **This is a pillar of the European Semester that should be strengthened.**
- **The sharing of good practices is a step forward, but it is not enough.** If this list of good practices is not translated into a European legislative act (e.g. a directive), which would impose the implementation of these good practices, a minimum required degree of consultation will not be guaranteed in all Member States. **A common framework is imperative.**
- In the case of the French ESEC, this idea goes hand in hand with the establishment of a permanent group of contact persons who can work together in depth on issues related to the European Semester.

Increasing the role of the European Parliament and national parliaments

- It is also **crucial to guarantee and increase the central role of the European Parliament in setting and evaluating priorities** within the European Semester. It is also necessary to **involve national parliaments more throughout this cycle.**

Communication and transparency

- Furthermore, the lack of access to systematically translated documents from the European institutions makes the European Semester less transparent and harder for the public to understand.

A position statement by organised civil society on the country-specific recommendations

- Internally, we have already discussed **the possibility of being consulted in advance on the Commission's specific recommendations for France** (in addition to the consultation of the French ESEC on the draft national reform plan). This would enable us to issue an opinion on the recommendations made in the summer. **This would allow for substantive work and coordination on the French ESEC's position on issues where consensus is difficult to achieve (pension reform, etc.).** The French ESEC Bureau has yet to take a position on this possibility. If this happened, **it would require additional resources and sufficient time.** Moreover, it would change our way of working and **would structure in advance all the work** of the French ESEC **so that our responses could be well argued and validated and the result of a general consensus within the Council.** This would make it possible, for example, to draw up a robust opinion for each recommendation (which could be broken down into sub-themes) within a longer time frame.

The Commission's remarks

- One change in the timetable of the European Semester concerns the diagnosis made in the country report: **now that we publish the country report at the same time as the country-specific recommendations, stakeholders are no longer able to give their opinion on the Commission's diagnosis.**
 - In the course of the stakeholder consultations carried out as part of the Semester, European Semester missions took place in France, generally in autumn. During these, we met with the government and stakeholders. Because of the implementation of the Recovery and Resilience Facility, the autumn mission in France was focused on the second payment request. Discussions with the government and stakeholders (consulted separately) on the other reforms were postponed and took place 2-3 weeks ago. During this phase, which helps the European Commission to draw up the country report, and in parallel to this separate consultation of the various stakeholders, we could consult the French ESEC as well if this is deemed useful.
 - The European Commission's European Semester officers for France are available to listen to the French ESEC and report on what the Commission is doing and the opinions it is gathering. More senior representatives of the Commission could also get involved.
 - **Response from the French ESEC:** It would indeed be useful for us to meet with the European Commission during this phase. We have a compulsory exercise, "the annual state of France report", adopted in autumn, in which we examine data and can make our point of view known. For example, we identify weak signals. This can be useful for the country report. **We think that discussing these matters with the Commission in advance of the autumn package, i.e. well in advance of the government's draft national reform programme, is a very good idea, as we would be able to directly share our views on the European Commission document.**
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Participants

For the French Economic, Social and Environmental Council:

- Catherine Pajares y Sanchez (member)
- Patricia Blancard (member)
- Olivier Mugnier (member)
- Jean-Marc Boivin (member)
- Pierre Marie-Joseph (member)
- Florent-Serge Stora (director of European and International Relations)
- Emmanuel Viaud (deputy administrator)
- Guénaël Varron (deputy administrator)
- Marion Thomas (deputy administrator)

For the European Economic and Social Committee:

- Pierre Bollon (member)
- Denis Meynent (member)
- Colombe Grégoire (secretariat of the EESC's European Semester Group)

For the European Commission:

- Isabelle Maquet (European Semester officer for France)