



# The Integrated Report 2017 **Organised Civil Society in the European Semester**



*European Economic and Social Committee*



## Table of contents

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<b>Foreword</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Background</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Executive summary</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Best practices concerning the process</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Issues concerning the process</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Best practices concerning the content</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>Issues concerning the content</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>2016 Integrated Report contributions</b>	<b>19</b>

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## Foreword

Dear reader,

The drafting of this report started in June 2016, when the European Economic and Social Committee sent a letter to all 23<sup>1</sup> National Economic and Social Councils<sup>2</sup>, asking the following five questions about the involvement of organised civil society in the National Reform Programmes and Country-Specific Recommendations in the EU Member States:

1. In what way and at what point in time are the social partners and other parts of organised civil society involved in the preparation of National Reform Programmes (NRPs)? What is the outcome of the consultation in your country? Please provide specific examples of best practices as well as areas where improvements are necessary.
2. Are the proposals of the social partners and civil society taken into consideration in the final NRP? Are there any problematic or relevant issues that are not properly reflected in the NRP or not reflected at all? Does involvement of organised civil society need to be reinforced and, if so, how? Please provide specific proposals.
3. Could you outline concrete proposals to improve the implementation and monitoring of CSRs, especially through deeper and wider involvement of social partners and other parts of organised civil society?
4. What are the main issues/challenges for social partners and other parts of organised civil society when looking at the national objectives of the Europe 2020 strategy?

5. In the framework of the European and national semester process, are social partners and organised civil society representatives taking own-initiative measures in cooperation with other relevant stakeholders? If so, what actions and with whom?

During the autumn of 2016, 18 of these Councils<sup>3</sup> replied to the five questions, and the results were then compiled into the present report.

The report consists of an Executive Summary, a list of key points taken from the contributions, and a table of contributions, broken down by country. It gives an overview of the involvement of organised civil society in the European Semester, highlighting the different ways in which organised civil society interacts with governments in the framework of the European Semester. The purpose is to make the Semester more democratic and more efficient, by identifying problem areas and disseminating best practices across the entire European Union.

We therefore hope that the report will be of use in your organisation's future Semester-related work.

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1. The following Member States do not have an ESC: Denmark, Estonia, Germany, Latvia, Sweden and the UK. However, Belgium has two.  
2. The Liaison Group, an NGO umbrella organisation, was also consulted.  
3. and the Liaison Group.



**Georges Dassis**  
EESC President



**Etele Baráth**  
Europe 2020 Steering Committee President





# Background

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In the EU, there are 23 National Economic and Social Councils (NESC)s across 22 EU Member States. In 2016 they were asked to contribute to this report by sharing best practices and issues from their own countries regarding the national reform programmes (NRPs), country-specific recommendations (CSRs) and the European Semester process in general. 18 NESC)s and the Liaison Group submitted contributions. They were analysed in a systematic way and several common traits were identified, indicated below.

When reading this analysis, it is important to note the following two cross-cutting aspects:

- *The experiences of the NESC)s with the European Semester process vary greatly from Member State to Member State, closely linked to the NESC)s size and resources.*
- *Many of the NESC)s have a tripartite model, in which NGOs and other third sector organisations are not represented. Those NESC)s are highlighted with asterisks (\*).*

## National contributions

**AUSTRIA**

**PORTUGAL**

**BELGIUM**

**ROMANIA**

**BULGARIA**

**SLOVENIA**

**CZECH REPUBLIC**

**SPAIN**

**FINLAND**

**FRANCE**

**LIAISON GROUP**

**GREECE**

**HUNGARY**

**IRELAND**

**ITALY**

**LUXEMBOURG**

**MALTA**

**NETHERLANDS**

**POLAND**

# Executive summary

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Following an analysis of the contributions received, the main conclusions to be drawn are as follows:

## Consultation process

The ESCs addressed several shortcomings in **the process for consulting civil society and social partners** at national level on the Europe 2020 objectives. One main issue raised was the **short timeframe** available for civil society to comment on the draft NRP and CSRs, a particular strain for organisations with limited resources.

Several ESCs also argued that the **relevance** of the consultations is limited, as many of the proposals and comments made by civil society and social partners on the draft NRP and CSRs are not taken into consideration in the final documents.

It has therefore been suggested that governments justify in detail why proposals made by civil society have been rejected. Other ESCs called for meetings with civil society to be more frequent and more structured. In contrast, some of the ESCs reported best practices for ensuring the relevance of the consultations, through the closer involvement of civil society at the various stages of the European Semester process<sup>4</sup>.

Another issue frequently raised was a **lack of information exchange** and access to information about the European Semester and the areas affected by the objectives of the Europe 2020 strategy<sup>5</sup>. Best practices addressing this issue include the organisation of meetings, conferences and seminars<sup>6</sup>, the dissemination of a list of government officials responsible for each NRP chapter<sup>7</sup> and the creation of national **shared platforms** and **public debates** on topics relating to the NRP and Europe 2020<sup>8</sup>.

## Content of the NRPs and CSRs

Regarding the **content of the NRPs**, national ESCs recognised that, following the establishment of Europe 2020 targets, progress has been made in certain areas such as education and training. According to the Liaison Group, the Europe 2020 strategy has been successful in creating **momentum for flagship initiatives** at EU level, although the repercussions of these initiatives in the Member States are sometimes unclear. In some Member States, there is an impression that the long-term objectives of the Europe 2020 strategy are not regarded as priorities by the national government.

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- <sup>4</sup> In Finland\*, the social partners' proposals are at the core of the negotiations on structural reforms, which in turn are reflected in the final NRP. In Hungary, according to the ESC, several pieces of legislation have been drafted on the basis of extensive public consultation. In the Czech Republic\*, social partners are consulted at various stages: preparation of the NRP, formulation of the opinion on the draft CSRs, and evaluation of their implementation.
  - <sup>5</sup> In Romania, the ESC sees this as a major challenge for stakeholders. A related issue was raised by the Belgian ESC, which argued that little information was provided at the kick-off meeting for the consultations.
  - <sup>6</sup> In Malta, various meetings, conferences and seminars with social partners provide information and consultation on the NRP and Europe 2020 targets.
  - <sup>7</sup> In the Netherlands\*, the NRP coordination presents a timetable and list of the names and addresses of the officials responsible for the various NRP chapters, thus facilitating the exchange of information.
  - <sup>8</sup> In Ireland, there are platforms for bilateral engagement with the government on different NRP policy issues, for example the Social Inclusion Forum. In Bulgaria, the ESC itself organises public debates on the basic challenges and policies set out in the NRP. In France, the Committee for Social Dialogue on European and International Issues (CDEI) was established to bring together social partners and public authorities. In Luxembourg\*, the European Commission's Deputy Secretary-General met with social partners to discuss the issues analysed in the 2016 country report.

There is also some concern that the **social dimension** may have been weakened by the growing influence of the European Semester process. On this basis, the French and Italian ESCs recommended the inclusion of wellbeing and sustainable development indicators alongside economic indicators.

Some of the national ESCs have noted that the **targets** set in the NRPs are not always appropriate, being either unrealistic or not ambitious enough<sup>9</sup>. NRP targets must therefore achieve a better balance between ambition and feasibility. Beyond the adequacy of national targets, ESCs have also expressed concern about a lack of **concrete measures and specific structural reforms** in the NRP. They are also concerned about the lack of a mechanism for **monitoring the progress** of the measures to be implemented<sup>10</sup>.

The main topics raised by the national ESCs and the Liaison Group with regards to the implementation of the Europe 2020 strategy and their participation in the NRPs and CSRs were the following:

- *The impact of Europe 2020 targets on national agendas varies from country to country;*
- *The timing of the European Semester should change, in order to facilitate participation of organised civil society;*
- *The involvement of national ESCs and civil society in the broader sense should be increased;*
- *The exchange of information about the NRPs should be improved at national and EU level (for example through the use of shared platforms).*

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9. For example, the Austrian ESC\* believes that there should be more ambitious plans for tackling poverty, whilst in Bulgaria, on the other hand, the education targets set in the NRP are considered unrealistic.

10. One best practice on this comes from Bulgaria, where each quarter the National Assembly issues a publicly accessible statement on the progress made in implementing NRP measures.



# Best practices concerning the process

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## *Contribution to the NRP and CSR*

- Social partners and civil society make contributions to the NRP before it is drafted, and then get to comment on the draft (Austria\*, Ireland)
- Following an initial meeting, the social partners received formal requests for contributions to the NRP (Belgium\*)
- Established process of regular dialogue between the ESC and the government team responsible for drawing up the NRP (Bulgaria)
- Social partners are consulted during the preparation of the NRP, formulation of the opinion on the draft CSRs and evaluation of their implementation (Czech Republic\*)
- Social partners are involved at the policy-making stage, in the preparation of legislation, programmes and other measures (Hungary)
- The social partners' proposals are at the core of the negotiations on structural reforms, which in turn are reflected in the final NRP (Finland\*)
- Earlier release of the country reports provided more scope for dialogue (Hungary)
- Social partners and civil society are invited to provide their feedback either through a meeting or written submission (Malta)
- Various meetings, conferences and seminars with social partners provide information and consultation on the NRP and Europe 2020 targets (Malta)
- Early in the year organisations are invited to brainstorm about the upcoming NRP (Netherlands\*)
- NRP coordination presents a timetable and list of the names and addresses of the officials responsible for the various NRP chapters, thus facilitating the exchange of information (Netherlands\*)
- Social partners write an annex to the NRP (Netherlands\*)
- In preparations for the CSRs, representatives of the Commission present and discuss the country report with the ESC (Netherlands\*)
- Discussions at the ESC and the committees of the National Assembly have been taken in to account *mutatis mutandis* in the final version of the NRP (Slovenia\*)
- Country reports include increasingly accurate and relevant information about the general employment and social situation in each country (Liaison Group)

## **Shared platforms**

- Bilateral engagement with the government on NRP policy issues, for example the Social Inclusion Forum (Ireland)
- The Committee for Social Dialogue on European and International Issues (CDSEI) brings together social partners and public authorities (France)
- An open consultation group was established, targeted at specific stakeholders such as artists, musicians and other categories that are not necessarily represented on the sectoral committees (Malta)
- Social partners and civil society are consulted through the social dialogue committees of the competent ministries for Europe 2020 objectives (Romania)
- Social partners and civil society are members of supervisory committees, operational programmes and the Partnership Agreement (Romania)
- Shared platforms have been established with the social partners, to jointly examine issues pertaining to mobility, training and internships (Belgium\*)
- There is a Tripartite National Council (TNC), another consultation tool related to the NRP, although its scope is not specifically the NRP (Romania)

## **Public consultations/debates**

- ESC organises public debates on the basic challenges and policies set out in the NRP (Bulgaria)
- Several pieces of legislation drafted on the basis of extensive public consultations, for example on the expansion of the use of online cash registers (Hungary)
- Ministry responsible for the NRP organises workshops on Europe 2020 and the CSRs; the views presented are included in the next NRP (Hungary)
- A civil society committee has been set up, allowing for a wider consultation process (Malta)
- ESC organises sessions covering several themes relating to the Europe 2020 strategy, such as the Working Time Directive (Malta)
- The European Commission's Deputy Secretary-General met with social partners to discuss the issues analysed in the 2016 country report (Luxembourg\*)

## Other

- Close involvement of social partners in other key milestones of the European Semester (Belgium\*)
- Once CSRs are published, the ESC informs social partners and civil society through a mailshot which summarises the main points of the recommendations (Malta)
- Government has adopted an amendment to its Rules of Procedure which has put more emphasis on the opinions of social partners during the settlement of possible disputes (Czech Republic\*)
- Strengthening the mechanisms for monitoring progress of the NRP: each quarter the National Assembly issues a publicly accessible statement on progress made in implementing NRP measures (Bulgaria)
- Each year, the NESC drafts an analysis of the implementation of the Europe2020 strategy (Spain)

# Issues concerning the process

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## *Contribution to the NRP and CSR – Timeframe*

- More time is needed between the publication of Commission proposals for the CSRs and the beginning of the committee meetings (Hungary)
- Only a very short time available between meetings for comments on the draft NRP and the CSRs (Austria\*, Belgium\*, Malta, France, Portugal, Luxembourg\*, Poland)

## *Contribution to the NRP and CSR – Relevance*

- Most comments on the draft NRP are not incorporated (Austria\*, France, Portugal, Luxembourg\*, Poland)
- ESC comments and proposals are frequently not taken into account during the legislative process (Italy)
- NRP was approved without the active participation of economic and social stakeholders (Spain)
- No formal consultation process on CSRs after they were presented by the Commission (Austria\*)
- Very limited scope to change the proposals made by the Commission on the CSRs, despite a meeting to examine them (Belgium\*)

## *Contribution to the NRP and CSR – Information*

- Little information provided at kick-off meeting (Belgium\*)
- Lack of information and access to information on the areas covered by the Europe 2020 objectives is a major challenge for stakeholders (Romania)
- The draft NRP was forwarded to the ESC in 2016 in incomplete form, with key information missing (France)
- Despite repeated requests, the ESC is not kept informed of what action the national and EU authorities take in response to its contribution (France)
- Government does not specify why certain proposals made by the ESC have been rejected (Poland)
- The European Semester and its documents are not commonly known in the country (Poland)



## Contribution to the NRP and CSR – Consultation

- No recognition of the compulsory nature of the ESC's advisory role (Italy)
- The ESC and social partners are not currently involved in the preparation of the NPRs (Greece)
- Participation of voluntary organisations could be improved through more regular and structured dialogue and consultation with civil society (Malta)
- Frequency of meetings with social partners and civil society on the implementation and monitoring of CSRs should be increased (Malta)
- Meetings could be more frequent and the participation of social partners in the meetings could be more active (Finland\*)
- It is necessary to strengthen the involvement of the social partners in the development of the NRP and the assessment of its implementation (Poland)
- Varying level of involvement of civil society in the European Semester depending on the Member State (Liaison Group)
- Failure of the EU to provide sufficient scope for structured dialogue with civil society that will make a tangible impact and contribution to the European Semester process (Liaison Group)

## Other

- Room for improvement in the dissemination of information by the ESC to the various NGOs (Malta)
- Limited resources available to organisations, limiting their role in the consultation process (Malta)
- Need to include a distinct regional dimension in the NRP, due to disparities for example between mainland Malta and Gozo (Malta)
- The ESC is undergoing a phase of institutional weakness and might be disbanded in the event of a victory in the upcoming constitutional referendum (Italy)
- There should be a committee formed of social partners and civil society representatives dedicated exclusively to the NRP (Romania)
- Need for a transparent specific CSR management system and a committee to supervise the CSR, with the involvement of the ESC (Romania)
- The lack of, or difficult access to, expertise affects the ability to offer high-quality input to stakeholders, because social partners are affected at least financially (Romania)

# Best practices concerning the content

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## *Employment*

- Government has set specific employment targets for older workers and has intensified its active labour market policy for this group (Austria\*)

## *Education/Training*

- Well-developed “dual education system”, where social partners play an active role in determining the content and general conditions for vocational training, thereby making companies more willing to recruit and train apprentices (Austria\*)
- Progress has been made on education and training in recent years, following the establishment of Europe 2020 targets (Liaison Group)
- The schemes for getting young people into work and the dual education system are the outcome of broad consultations and can be found in the NRP in the form proposed by social partners (Romania)

## *Economic/Financial*

- Government is taking specific measures to settle late payments by the state and to recover VAT from 2013 (Bulgaria)
- Government has decided to step up the activity of the Bulgarian Development Bank, with additional resources earmarked for loans to SMEs (Bulgaria)
- Government introduced certified cash registers and first measures to increase the efficiency of collecting public taxes (Slovenia\*)
- Competitiveness pact reported in the 2016 NRP was drafted with close involvement of social partners (Finland\*)

## *Social policy/Wellbeing*

- Government adopted a national strategy to reduce poverty and encourage social inclusion by 2020 (Bulgaria)
- ESC launched a study on fair and sustainable wellbeing to identify statistical indicators of quality of life (Italy)
- Pension reform reported in the 2016 NRP was drafted with close involvement of social partners (Finland\*)

## Horizontal

- The Europe 2020 strategy has been successful in creating momentum for flagship initiatives at EU level (Liaison Group)

## Issues concerning the content

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### Employment

- Social partners' opinions on the legal retirement age not taken into consideration in the NRP (Austria\*)
- Lack of concrete measures to reduce gender-specific segmentation in the workplace (Austria\*)
- Need to increase the employment rate (Finland\*)
- Absence from the NRP of measures that would increase employment and improve labour conditions (Portugal)
- Improving labour market participation, particularly for women and lone parents, and increasing the work intensity of households necessitates access to better quality, affordable full-time childcare (Ireland)
- Structural reform of the labour market and "viable jobs" are needed (Belgium\*)
- Reform of the 1996 law on wage setting (Belgium\*)
- In the NRP, there needs to be reconciliation between the supply and demand of labour and the minimum wage (Romania)
- Pension reform, including taking account of the arduousness of jobs in parallel with the higher legal retirement age and extended working life (Belgium\*)
- Demographic challenges, human resources and knowledge, including measures regarding pensions, health care, knowledge and skills (Slovenia\*)
- Demographic challenges to labour markets, declining employment rates in the 20-64 age group, job creation (Bulgaria)
- Link between birth rates and productivity and the need to adopt policies to support families with a view to boosting productivity (Italy)
- NRP should set achievable national goals for employment (Bulgaria)
- Stronger promotion of the Youth Guarantee programme and an improvement in the system supporting public workers entering the primary labour market (Hungary)
- Unemployment and lack of skilled workers (Austria\*)
- Employment for people living with disabilities (Bulgaria)
- NRP is not sufficiently tackling precarious employment, adequacy of state pensions and enhancing productivity (Malta)
- Decent jobs and full employment (Netherlands\*, Luxembourg\*)

## Education/Training

- Lack of more ambitious national plans for education (Austria\*)
- The 40% university target for 30-34 year-olds is problematic; excessive focus on university education is counterproductive (Austria\*)
- Percentage of population to have completed tertiary education is lower than the EU target (Italy)
- NRP should set achievable national goals for education (Bulgaria)
- Curbing early school leaving (Bulgaria, Italy)

## Economic/Financial

- Measures need to be taken to improve private productive investment (Greece)
- Productivity challenges that are impeding measures to strengthen investment, restructure taxation, and improve access to finance (Slovenia\*)
- Fragile revenue: need for sustainable and controlled public finances (Luxembourg\*)
- More investments at European and national level and elimination of financial bottlenecks, which is especially urgent for SMEs (Netherlands\*)
- Pessimistic expectations for growth in Bulgaria as set out in the 2013 NRP are a problem, the country is not aiming to catch up with the EU average for a series of indicators (Bulgaria)
- Relaunching competitiveness (Greece)
- Expansion of public investment is necessary (Austria\*)
- Economic recovery, social economy and social entrepreneurship (Bulgaria)
- NRP overemphasises financial consolidation and restrictive economic policies (Bulgaria)
- Need to substantially increase capital expenditure in economic and social infrastructure (Ireland)
- Restrictive manner in which the fiscal rules are being applied could undermine economic recovery (Ireland)
- Fiscal rules will not be met for 2016 (Austria\*)
- Stability and Growth Pact has a negative impact on public investment and public services (Liaison Group)
- Need to redefine economic policy coherently on the basis of new parameters, including wellbeing indicators (Italy)



## Social policy/Wellbeing

- Lack of more ambitious national plans for poverty (Austria\*)
- NRP does not sufficiently address inequalities and social cohesion (Portugal)
- Important to increase activity within municipalities, involve civil organisations and extend the economic development programmes in deprived areas in order to achieve permanent inclusion (Hungary)
- The refugee crisis needs a common European approach (Netherlands\*)
- Need for proper social dialogue and an economic and social pillar of equal importance (Netherlands\*)
- Fair labour migration is of crucial importance, including a revision of the Posting of Workers Directive (Netherlands\*)
- EU social policy coordination must focus more on poverty reduction, social inclusion and realisation of decent work for all (Netherlands\*)
- Failure of the EU to tackle poverty and social exclusion (Liaison Group)
- The social dimension has been weakened by the growing influence of the European Semester process (France)
- Rising xenophobia and intolerance all over Europe (Liaison Group)
- Europe 2020 is being sidelined in favour of the Jobs, Growth and Investment strategy (Liaison Group)
- Indicators complementary to GDP should be included in the European Semester, taking into account the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (France)

## Innovation

- More intensive involvement of scientific research into industrial development processes through tools for innovation, such as standardisation in R&D (Hungary)
- Expenditure on R&D and innovation as a percentage of GDP is lower than the EU target (Italy)
- Retention of innovation capital, shortage of IT specialists, teacher training, opportunities for dual training and digital skills (Hungary)

## Horizontal

- Measures not effective enough or not put into practice, for example on early school leavers, migration, consumer affairs (Malta)
- Need for more realistic indicators for the planned reforms in the NRP (Bulgaria)
- EU policy places new demands on the national policy and administrative system (Ireland)
- Democratic legitimacy for the EU institutions (Italy)
- The long-term objectives of the Europe 2020 strategy are not regarded as priorities by the national government (France)
- Need to place greater emphasis on modernising public administration (Portugal).

## Other

- Belgium's commitments regarding climate change and energy issues, as well as mobility (Belgium\*)
- Not enough attention is paid to environmental aspects in the political priorities of the NRP (France)
- Key weaknesses in housing, water, public transport and climate change mitigation capacity (Ireland)
- Employers remain concerned about administrative burdens for new businesses (Austria\*)
- Cutting administrative burdens for companies (Bulgaria)
- Better regulation is needed, but should not focus solely on reduction of administrative burdens (Netherlands\*)
- Operation of the public sector, including wage policy, institutional improvements and the judicial system (Slovenia\*)
- Repercussions of EU flagship initiatives in Member States are sometimes unclear (Liaison Group)
- Severe financial cuts and lack of cooperation mechanisms for civil society organisations (Liaison Group)
- NRP does not specifically establish the structural reforms to be implemented or the policies to be followed (Portugal)
- NRP makes almost no reference to the monitoring of the measures to be implemented (Portugal)

# 2016 Integrated Report contributions

## Best practices

### AUSTRIA\*

Social partners make contributions to the NRP before it is drafted and then get to comment on the draft.

Current government has set specific employment targets for older workers and has intensified its active labour market policy for this group.

Well-developed “dual education system”, where social partners play an active role in determining the content and general conditions for vocational training, thereby making companies more willing to recruit and train apprentices.

### BELGIUM\*<sup>11</sup>

Following an initial meeting, the social partners received formal requests for contributions to the NRP.

Close involvement of social partners in other key milestones of the European Semester.

Shared platforms have been established with the social partners, to jointly examine issues pertaining to mobility, training and internships.

### BULGARIA

Established process of regular dialogue between the ESC and the government team responsible for drawing up the NRP.

The ESC organises public debates on the basic challenges and policies set out in the NRP, attended by representatives from the government, parliament and the social partners, along with scientists and experts. Public debates are also held on issue affecting young people.

The last European Semester in Bulgaria saw a strengthening of the mechanisms for monitoring progress towards NRP goals and reforms. Each quarter, the National Assembly issues a publicly accessible statement on progress made in implementing NRP measures. These positive government measures reflect specific recommendations made by the ESC and other stakeholders.

Government is taking specific measures to settle late payments by the state and to recover VAT from 2013.

Government has decided to step up the activity of the Bulgarian Development Bank, with additional resources earmarked for loans to SMEs.

Government adopted a national strategy to reduce poverty and encourage social inclusion by 2020.

<sup>11</sup> Joint contribution from the National Labour Council (CNT) and the Central Economic Council (CCE).

### **CZECH REPUBLIC\***

Government has adopted an amendment to its Rules of Procedure which has put more emphasis on the opinions of social partners during the settlement of possible disputes.

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Social partners are thoroughly consulted during the preparation of the NRP, formulation of the opinion on the draft CSRs as well as on the evaluation and implementation of the NRP and CSRs.

### **FINLAND\***

An extended composition of the Committee for EU Affairs comprises representatives from various interest groups and other stakeholders including the social partners.

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NRP is presented to the social partners in connection with EU procedures. In addition, social partners are often closely involved in negotiating and preparing the actual reforms reported in the NRP. The social partners' proposals are at the core of the negotiations on structural reforms, which in turn are reflected in the final NRP.

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The pension reform and competitiveness pact reported in the 2016 NRP were drafted with the involvement of social partners as noted above.

### **FRANCE**

Social partners are kept informed on the European Semester through the Committee for Social Dialogue on European and International Issues (CDSEI), an informal advisory committee under the minister responsible for social relations that brings together the social partners and the authorities concerned.

### **GREECE**

Despite no formal involvement in the preparation of the NRP, the Greek ESC (OKE) has been steadily issuing opinions on every draft law sent by the government, as well as forming initiative opinions. On many occasions the proposals have been adopted and the opinions mentioned in parliamentary sessions.



## HUNGARY

The main stage when social partners are involved in the NRP is the policy making stage when the ministries responsible for the measures involve their partners in the preparation of certain legislation, programmes and other measures, through public consultations.

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Earlier release of the Country Reports provided more scope for dialogue.

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The preparation, adoption and promotion of Act CXLIII of 2015 on Public Procurement (PPA): the legislative process was based on extensive public consultations mainly on the basis of the provisions of the act on social participation. The draft PPA was published on the government's website, contributions and comments were received, the Prime Minister's Office reviewed the opinions received, reasons were given for rejecting any opinions, and a report was prepared which is published online and includes the list of referees.

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The expansion of the use of online cash registers was carried out in the same manner as above through public consultations.

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In the second stage of the consultation the ministry responsible for the NRP organises several workshops with NGOs and business associations, to present and discuss the consistency of the Europe 2020 targets and CSRs with the national policy measures and reforms. The views presented during the workshops are included in the next version of the NRP.

## IRELAND

Organisations are invited centrally by the Department of the Taoiseach (Prime Minister's Department) to offer their views in advance of preparation of the NRP, and are also invited to comment on a full draft of the NRP before it is submitted to the Commission.

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Further ongoing bilateral engagement with the relevant government departments on policy issues relevant to the NRP, such as through the annual Social Inclusion Forum.

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Contributions from stakeholders are considered, centrally and by individual departments, when preparing and amending the draft NRP. Efforts are made to reflect these contributions where relevant and appropriate.

## ITALY

The National Council for Economics and Labour (CNEL), along with ISTAT launched the Fair and Sustainable Wellbeing (BES) initiative to identify statistical indicators to highlight the long-term trends which have the greatest impact on quality of life.

## LUXEMBOURG\*

In addition to two meetings with the government organised by the ESC in connection with the European Semester, the social partners have decided to hold a further two dialogue-based meetings at which they will discuss amongst themselves the issues raised and compile the ESC's annual opinion.

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The European Commission's Deputy Secretary-General met with social partners to discuss the issues analysed in the 2016 country report for Luxembourg.

## MALTA

Social partners and civil society are invited to provide their feedback and possible recommendations for action either directly through a meeting or written submission.

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Sessions organised by the Malta Council for Economic and Social Development (MCESD) in relation to the Europe 2020 strategy during last year covered several themes, namely the Working Time Directive, Equality between Women and Men, Posting of Workers, Horizon 2020: Science with and for Society, poverty eradication and the European Consensus on Development.

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Various meetings, conferences and seminars with social partners held throughout the years have also provided information and consultation on the NRP and Europe 2020 targets.

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The setting up of the MCESD Civil Society Committee allows for a wider consultation process.

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An open consultation group was established, which is targeted at specific stakeholders such as artists, musicians, businesses, and other categories that are not necessarily represented on the sectoral committees.

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Once CSRs are published, the MCESD informs social partners and civil society through a mailshot which summarises the main points of the recommendations.

### **NETHERLANDS\***

Early in the year social partners, local governments and NGOs are invited to brainstorm about the content of the upcoming NRP. A timetable is presented, indicating how many days stakeholders have to give comments. Also, the NRP coordinator makes a list with the names and addresses of the officials responsible for the various chapters of the NRP. This facilitates the exchange of information.

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Social partners write an annex to the NRP, outlining their contribution to the Netherlands' Europe 2020 strategy.

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During the preparations for the CSRs, representatives of the Commission present and discuss the country report with the ESC. Social partners appreciate this interaction, since they feel the country report will be the basis for the CSRs later in the year.

### **POLAND\***

An interministerial team for the Europe 2020 strategy was created, led by the Ministry of Development with participation of civil society. The main tasks of the team include consulting on the draft NRP and other documents developed in connection with the implementation and monitoring of the Europe 2020 strategy in Poland, as well as monitoring the reforms.

### **ROMANIA**

Social partners and civil society are consulted through the social dialogue committees of the competent ministries for Europe 2020 objectives.

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The ESC, social partners and civil society are members of supervisory committees and part of the operational programmes and of the Partnership Agreement. The social partners and civil society hold 30% of the total number of votes. Each operational programme is an integral part of the Europe 2020 strategy.

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The Tripartite National Council (TNC) is another consultation tool related to the NRP. However, the scope of the TNC is not specifically the NRP or Europe 2020 strategy.

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The schemes for getting young people into work and the dual education system are the outcome of broad consultations and can be found in the NRP in the form proposed by social partners.

## **SLOVENIA\***

Discussions at the ESC and the committees of the National Assembly have been taken into account mutatis mutandis in the final version of the NRP.

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Government introduced certified cash registers and first measures to increase the efficiency of collecting public taxes.

## **LIAISON GROUP**

In relation to education and training, progress has been made towards both targets in recent years. The establishment of Europe 2020 targets in those areas has highlighted the importance of the topics.

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The Europe 2020 strategy has been successful in creating momentum for flagship initiatives at EU level (Communication on Opening Up Education influenced by the Digital Agenda, work on the EQF, ESCO, European Area of Skills and Qualifications in the framework of New Skills for New Jobs, EPAP stakeholders' platform).

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Country reports include increasingly accurate and relevant information about the general employment and social situation in each country, along with more ad hoc information about the situation of different vulnerable groups.

\* This national ESC only represents the social partners and not other groups from organised civil society.



## Issues

### AUSTRIA\*

Social partners' opinions on the legal retirement age not taken into consideration in the NRP.

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Lack of more ambitious national plans for poverty and education. Expansion of public investment is necessary.

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The 40% university target for 30-34 year-olds is problematic; excessive focus on university education is counterproductive.

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Lack of concrete measures to reduce gender-specific segmentation in the workplace.

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No formal consultation process for CSRs after they were presented by the Commission.

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Fiscal rules will not be met for 2016 (no budget-neutrality of the tax reform).

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Labour market issues: unemployment, lack of skilled workers.

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Only a very short time is available for comments on the draft NRP, and most of the comments are not incorporated.

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Employers remain concerned about administrative burdens for new businesses.

### BELGIUM\*

Structural reform of the labour market and "viable jobs".

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Reform of the 1996 law on wage setting.

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Pension reform, including taking account of the arduousness of jobs in parallel with the higher legal retirement age and extended working life.

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Belgium's commitments regarding climate change and energy issues, as well as mobility.

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Very limited scope to change the proposals made by the Commission on the CSRs, despite a meeting to examine them.

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The consultation process undertaken in 2016 lacked in several aspects: little information provided at the kick-off meeting, very short time frame for contributions to the NRP, etc.

## **BULGARIA**

Pessimistic expectations for growth in Bulgaria set out in the 2013 NRP are a problem; country is not aiming to catch up with the EU average for a series of indicators.

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Demographic challenges to labour markets, declining employment rates in the 20-64 age group, economic recovery and job creation, social economy and social entrepreneurship.

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NRP overemphasises financial consolidation and pursuing restrictive economic policies, which could result in failure to meet objectives for growth and employment, as well as for education, research, and combating poverty/social exclusion.

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Need for more realistic indicators for the planned reforms in the NRP. The NRP should set achievable national goals for education and employment.

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Curbing early school leaving; untapped employment potential of Bulgarian young people, as well as the higher risk of poverty they face.

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Employment for people living with disabilities.

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“Single Market Act II – Together for new growth”.

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Cutting administrative burdens for companies.

## **FINLAND\***

Meetings of the various sections of the government’s Committee for EU Affairs could be more frequent and the participation of social partners in the meetings could be more active.

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Increasing the employment rate: The social partners and other parts of organised civil society focus intensely on attaining a higher employment rate.

## FRANCE

The comments made in the French ESC's written contribution are not taken into account in the final document; the contribution is sent to the European Commission as an appendix to France's NRP.

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Extremely short timeframe for consultation of the French ESC (between two and four weeks in recent years), which does not allow enough time for a serious, reasoned analysis.

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The long-term objectives of the Europe 2020 strategy must be regarded as priorities by the government (NRP should be a policy positioned between the short and long term).

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Not enough attention is paid to environmental aspects in the political priorities of the NRP, for example biodiversity.

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Despite repeated requests, the French ESC is not kept informed of what action the French and EU authorities take in response to its contribution.

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The draft NRP was forwarded to the French ESC in 2016 in incomplete form, with key information missing.

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The social dimension has been weakened by the growing influence of the European Semester process.

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The Europe 2020 strategy should take account of the sustainable development goals (SDGs). Indicators complementary to GDP should be included in the European Semester.

## GREECE

The OKE and social partners are not currently involved in the preparation of the NRP.

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Timely notification of the government's draft laws and intended reforms should be ensured, so that the OKE can properly react and provide thorough consultation.

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The promotion of private productive investment, the reduction of all bureaucratic costs, the removal of barriers for the financing of SMEs, the acceleration in the implementation of EU Operational Programmes, support for exporting enterprises, tackling smuggling, the connection between research and the business world, as well as a strategy for investments in the sectors of culture, tourism, agriculture, renewable energy sources and maritime industries.

## HUNGARY

More time is needed between the publication of Commission proposals for CSRs and the beginning of the committee meetings.

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Stronger promotion of the Youth Guarantee programme and an improvement in the system supporting public workers entering the primary labour market are important.

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More intensive involvement of scientific research into industrial development processes, through well-designed application of tools encouraging innovation (standardisation in R&D, differentiated use of intellectual property management, tax regulation), and the improvement of the entrepreneurial knowledge of university students completing post-graduate studies (MA, PhD).

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Retention of innovation capital in Hungary, the shortage of IT specialists, teacher training, opportunities for dual training and the development of digital skills.

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Important to increase activity within municipalities, involve civil organisations, and extend the economic development programmes in deprived areas in order to achieve permanent inclusion.

## IRELAND

Need to substantially increase capital expenditure in economic and social infrastructure.

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Key weaknesses in housing, water, public transport and climate change mitigation capacity.

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The wide and complex nature of EU policy places new demands on the national policy and administrative system. Many of the issues that are pivotal to Ireland's long-term success — such as innovation, training, education, tailored services and activation — cannot be resolved only through the policy processes that were created to address fiscal stabilisation.

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Restrictive manner in which the fiscal rules are being applied — and fact that the 'methodology' used underestimates Ireland's growth potential and demographic trends — could potentially undermine economic recovery by restricting much-needed long-term investment in capital projects, public services and innovation.

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Improving labour market participation, particularly for women and lone parents, and increasing the work intensity of households necessitates access to better quality, affordable full-time childcare.

## ITALY

The CNEL's comments and proposals of constitutional relevance are frequently not taken into account during the legislative process.

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Recognition of the compulsory nature of the CNEL advisory role in its fields of competence should be ensured.

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Expenditure on R&D and innovation as a percentage of GDP (1.53% in Italy compared to the 3% EU target).

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Reducing early school leaving (15-16% in Italy compared to the 10% EU target).

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Increasing the share of the population to have completed tertiary or equivalent education (26-27% in Italy compared to the 40% EU target).

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At national level, the link between birth rates and productivity and the need to adopt policies to support families with a view to boosting productivity and, to that end, to reform the tax credits system and review public expenditure.

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At EU level, greater democratic legitimacy for the EU institutions; the revision of EU rules on tax policy; the reduction of public debt; the link between institutional and economic reforms, and the proper communication of economic measures.

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Need to redefine economic policy coherently on the basis of new parameters, including wellbeing indicators, at both development and monitoring stage.

## LUXEMBOURG\*

Issues of inequality and purchasing power and social security payments.

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Job quality, the job retention plan and unemployment.

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Access to housing.

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Fragile revenue: need for sustainable and controlled public finances.

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The proposals made by social partners and civil society are only partly taken into account.

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Owing to the timeframe of the European Semester, the various meetings are held too close together.

## MALTA

Room for improvement in terms of the time allowed for submitting feedback on the NRP. Longer deadlines would allow social partners more time during which to react to the draft plan.

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Room for improvement in the dissemination of information on the MCESD by civil society representatives to the various NGOs.

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Trade unions have raised concerns regarding the limited resources available, which limit their role in the consultation process.

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Need for the inclusion of a distinct regional dimension in the NRP. This is considered important due to the disparities that exist between mainland Malta and Gozo.

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The NRP is not sufficiently tackling precarious employment, the adequacy of state pensions or enhancing productivity.

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Measures were not effective enough or were not put into practice on the issues of early school leavers, financial literacy, migration, consumer affairs, employment and older citizens.

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The participation of voluntary organisations in the consultation process can be improved through more regular and structured dialogue and consultation with civil society organisations.  
The implementation and monitoring of CSRs requires improvements through deeper and wider involvement of social partners and civil society, i.e. increasing the frequency of meetings that address areas where progress is lagging behind.

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Employment rate, increase in R&D, energy efficiency and renewable energy and greenhouse gas emission reduction, early school leaving and tertiary education attainment, poverty.

## NETHERLANDS\*

European solidarity and cohesion are important. The refugee crisis needs a common European approach. European integration requires a proper social dialogue, and an economic and social pillar of equal importance.

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Europe needs economic growth for decent jobs and full employment, which requires more investment at European and national level; and the elimination of financial bottlenecks. This is especially urgent for SMEs.

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Fair labour migration is of crucial importance; revision of the Posting of Workers Directive.

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Better regulation (which should not focus solely on the reduction of administrative burdens).

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EU social policy coordination must focus more on poverty reduction, social inclusion and the realisation of decent work for all. The social dimension has to be better incorporated within the European Semester.



## **POLAND\***

As a result of the NRP consultations, the social partners and the government do not mutually agree on actions to be performed as part of the NRP. For this reason, it does not seem that in practice social partners co-create the NRP.

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The influence of socio-economic partners on the NRP (and its update) is limited.

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Very limited time available for giving an opinion, and the manner in which the team functions (e.g. it meets only a few times a year) and the number of members it has (several dozen people).

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The government does not specify why certain proposals made by social partners have been rejected.

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The European Semester and its documents are not commonly known in Poland.

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Social dialogue on the CSRs should be deepened when the CSRs are being prepared by the European Commission.

## **PORTUGAL**

Social partners became involved in the NRP process at a very late stage, with short deadlines for analysing proposals and developing alternatives.

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Despite discussions with social partners in the Standing Committee for Social Dialogue, very few amendments were made to the NRP.

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Absence from the NRP of measures that would increase employment and improve labour conditions, by dealing with such issues as the creation of quality jobs and the eradication of insecurity.

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NRP does not sufficiently address inequalities and social cohesion.

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Need to place greater emphasis on modernising public administration.

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Sustainability of public finances; reviving corporate investment; circular economy; urban regeneration.

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NRP does not specifically establish the structural reforms to be implemented or the policies to be followed. The NRP provides, in each pillar, a set of priorities and measures to be implemented; however, it does not always establish a hierarchy or relationship between them.

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NRP makes almost no reference to the monitoring of the measures to be implemented.

## ROMANIA

The absorption of European funds and the labour market need improvement. While the situation of European funds is mentioned in the NRP 2016, there needs to be reconciliation between the supply and demand of labour and the minimum wage.

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The lack of, or difficult access to, expertise affects the ability to offer high-quality input to stakeholders, because social partners are affected at least financially.

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Need for a transparent specific CSR management system and a committee to supervise the CSR, with the involvement of the ESC.

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There should be a committee formed of social partners and civil society representatives dedicated exclusively to the NRP.

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Lack of information and of access to information is another major challenge for stakeholders. Databases that are not integrated at public administration level and a great lack of transparency concerning the dissemination of information related to the areas affected by the objectives of the Europe 2020 strategy represent real problems for social partners and civil society.

## SLOVENIA\*

Productivity challenges that are impeding measures to strengthen investment, including the measures to restructure taxation, improve access to finance and the labour market, and remove administrative obstacles.

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Demographic challenges, human resources and knowledge, including measures regarding pensions, health care and long-term care as well as knowledge and skills.

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Strengthening capacities and management tackling the operation of the public sector, including the wage policy, institutional improvements and the judicial system.

## SPAIN

In 2015 the NRP was once again approved without the active participation of economic and social stakeholders.

## LIAISON GROUP

Failure of the EU to tackle poverty and social exclusion, a target where the situation has regressed since the strategy was launched. In Europe, one person in four is affected by the risk of poverty or social exclusion.

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Europe 2020 is being sidelined in favour of the Jobs, Growth and Investment strategy.

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Failure of the EU to provide sufficient scope for structured dialogue with organised civil society that will make a tangible impact and contribution to the European Semester process.

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The Stability and Growth Pact has a negative impact on public investment and public services.

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Repercussions of EU flagship initiatives in Member States are sometimes unclear (i.e. success and impact of the Youth on the Move national events).

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It is difficult for many civil society organisations in Europe to fulfil the role of bridging the gap between the EU and its citizens and create dialogue, owing to severe financial cuts and lack of cooperation mechanisms.

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Rising xenophobia and intolerance all over Europe.

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The level of involvement of civil society in the European Semester process at national and European levels is varied. Some Member States have been significantly more open to civil society in the development of the NRP than others.

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## Notes

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