

The European Semester

Briefing Paper

WHAT IS THE EUROPEAN SEMESTER?

The "**European Semester**" (**ES**) is an annual cycle of *macro-economic, budgetary and structural policy coordination and surveillance* taking place at the EU level that was adopted in 2010 and started in 2011.

As its name suggests, its cycle is focused on the first six-months of each year, time during which Member States have to align their budgetary and economic policies with the objectives and rules agreed under the *Stability and Growth Pact* and the *Europe 2020 Strategy*.

WHY WAS IT CREATED?

It was created in reaction to the economic crisis which demonstrated a need for stronger economic governance and better policy coordination between the EU Member States. Its aim is to ensure convergence and stability within the EU. It is also a key instrument to implement the European 2020 Strategy.

KEY INSTRUMENTS:

The European Semester is based on three levels of coordination: *thematic coordination* (in areas such as employment, social inclusion, education) under the EU2020 Strategy, *macro-economic surveillance* and *fiscal surveillance*, under the Stability and Growth Pact.

Three documents are keys to this process:

- **The Annual Growth Survey (AGS)** - launches the ES and sets the basis for building a common understanding about the priorities for action at both national and EU level.
- **The National Reforms Programs (NRPs)** – based on the Stability and Convergence Programs (SCPs)¹, detail how the [targets of the EU 2020 Strategy](#) are being reached, which national policies will be implemented and how EU guidance has been taken into account, also according to previous CSRs and AGS.

¹ http://ec.europa.eu/economy_finance/economic_governance/sgp/convergence/index_en.htm

- **The Country-Specific Recommendations (CSRs)** – recommends a set of actions for each member state to take, according to its economic and social performance during the previous year and to the delivery of priorities set out in the AGS. These recommendations are based on the Country Reports, which assess the policies implemented by each government regarding the implementation of the previous year’s CSRs.

For 2015, NRPs and CSRs are available [here](#). You can also check directly the situation in your country, by clicking it on this interactive [map](#).

TIMEFRAME:

The Semester contains a clear **timeframe**.

PREPARATORY PHASE - Analysis of the situation and follow-up to the previous year	
November	The European Commission publishes the AGS presenting its view of EU policy priorities for the following year.
PHASE 1 - Policy Guidance at EU level	
January-February	The Council of the European Union (heads of states and/or governments) debates the AGS, formulates orientations and adopts conclusions. The European Parliament also discusses the AGS and can publish, on its own initiative, a report.
March	The Spring Council provides policy orientations. Member States are invited to take into account these orientations when preparing their Stability and Convergence Programs and National Reform Programs which outline their budgetary policies and promote growth and competitiveness ones.
PHASE 2 - Country Specific Objectives, policies and plans	
May	The European Commission evaluates national policy plans and presents draft CSRs. The Council of the EU discusses the draft and agrees on final CSRs, which are then presented to the European Council for endorsement
June	The Council of the EU adopts the CSRs and invites Member States to implement them

CIVIL SOCIETY’S INVOLVEMENT:

A partnership role within the European Semester has been given to stakeholders and to the civil society. According to Recital (16)² of the Employment guidelines, these actors should be involved

² [Employment guidelines](#), p. 9: *While these guidelines are addressed to Member States, the Europe 2020 strategy should, as appropriate, be implemented, monitored and evaluated in partnership with all national, regional and local authorities, closely associating parliaments, as well as social partners and representatives of civil society, who shall contribute to the elaboration of National Reform Programmes, to their implementation and to the overall communication on the strategy.*

in the elaboration and implementation of NRPs (and of NSRs), as well as in the overall communication on the strategy.

EASPD'S INVOLVEMENT:

In 2013 EASPD joined the [Semester Alliance](#), a coalition of European NGOs who jointly drafted together a [Report](#) on Alternative Country Specific Recommendations³, based on the inputs received by their members. These recommendations were presented during an event at the European Parliament on 14th May 2014 that stressed the need for a deeper involvement of civil society in the European Semester. Following the event, EASPD also advocated for the importance of including a disability perspective in the CSRs, bringing up this issue with the Disability Unit of the European Commission. The Semester Alliance has also developed a [toolkit](#) explaining how to best be involved in the European Semester process

As the Semester is becoming the key tool to implement important pieces of legislation, such as the Social Investment Package, joining this coalition is a mean to raise awareness on the importance of influencing the European Semester and to facilitate the participation of our members into this process.

HOW CAN EASPD MEMBERS CONTRIBUTE TO THIS PROCESS?

EASPD members can engage in the European Semester process, by:

- **Identifying who is responsible for the European Semester** – in each country, it is often the Economy or Finance Ministry, or the Prime Minister's Office who drafts the NRPs
- **Asking for information on the forms of engagement** – mobilise relevant contacts points, in order to be invited to participate to the stakeholders and civil society's consultation process. The objective is to build lasting platforms for dialogue and to ensure that meaningful consultations are put in place by the Government
- **Briefing partners and building common positions** – develop common positions with partners, organise capacity building sessions to analyse the actual social situation and build consensus on main policy changes that you think are important
- **Making your input, developing key messages** - compare country's draft NRPs with considerations and requirements that you consider fundamental and with previous cycle's documents. It is crucial to prepare key messages before having received a draft text or being offered to provide inputs on it
- **Reviewing CSRs for your country** - propose new alternative CSRs. Proposals should be sent to the Government, together with comments on NRPs, and they should be shared with EASPD
- **Disseminating your message and promoting public debate** - spread your message with the public, through engagement with press, politicians, other NGOs and social media

For more information on how to get involved in the European Semester, please read our [presentation](#) or the Semester Alliance's [toolkit](#).

KEY INSTRUMENTS FOR ENGAGEMENT

³ [Joint Report](#): Strengthening the democratic legitimacy of the European Semester: Civil Society Alternative Proposals for CSRs for a smart, sustainable and inclusive recovery, 2013

In order to ensure that the civil society organisations' perspective is taken into account during the whole process, the Semester Alliance has developed a [toolkit on how to engage with Europe 2020 and the European Semester 2014-2015](#). This can be seen as a mean to support the preparation and involvement of stakeholders and civil society organisations into next year's cycle, in order for them to contribute to the drafting of NRPs in line with their social objectives. The toolkit's main scope is therefore to stress the need for the European Semester to be reoriented towards social, educational and environmental targets, as set out in the EU2020 Strategy, with the aim to achieve a 'more democratic, social and sustainable Europe'. It will soon be made available in the following languages: FR, GER, IT, HUN, FI, BUL.

The European Semester in a nutshell:

- a governance instrument to ensure **better coordination** between Member States in the implementation of different EU policies and strategies (Stability and Growth Pact, EU2020 targets, Social Investment Package)
- a six-months cycle, taking place annually, during which Member States have to report on the reforms they will put in place to achieve the objectives set out in the AGS and on which they receive feedback and recommendations from EU institutions
- a process based on three pillars (economic, fiscal and social) with a particular emphasis on the need for economic and fiscal coordination and surveillance between Members States and little (but increasing) focus on social objectives
- Civil society should try to play an active role in this process, in order to have an impact on the policy making process at national level and claim for investments in the social services' sector, in line with the EU 2020 objectives.

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