

October 2015: The European Semester and modernisation of public administration

This meeting was part of a project organised with the financial support of the European Commission

Introduction

The modernisation of public administration has been an important theme during the past three European Semesters, seen by the European Commission as one of the five most important areas of activity for Member States. EPSU set up this project in order to examine and discuss the impact that this has had on public services across Europe and the extent to which trade unions have been informed and consulted on the policies being adopted as a result particularly of the country specific recommendations published by the European Council.

EPSU commissioned the OSE research organisation to carry out some background research on the European Semester as well as look in more detail at five specific countries to see to what extent their public administrations were being affected by the European Semester. The meeting on 20 October in Brussels was an opportunity to discuss the findings of this research so far and make comments for the OSE to address in drafting the final report of the project.

Trade union views on and involvement in the European Semester

ETUC advisor, Marco Cilento, set out the Confederation's main concerns about the European Semester noting in particular that the Commission's emphasis on structural reforms meant that there was continuing pressure to decentralise collective bargaining, moderate wages and reduce employment protection. In contrast, the ETUC saw the priority as an urgent need to take action to boost what was a very weak economic recovery through investment and higher wage growth.

Marco also set out the main processes of the European Semester and the potential for intervention by trade unions at national and European levels. He noted that

there was consultation around the Annual Growth Survey but otherwise trade unions still had their work cut out to make their voices heard in relation to the country report, national reform programmes and country specific recommendations.

The Juncker Commission had made clear statements about the need to improve social dialogue in the European Semester and the ETUC was planning a new project which would involve training and advice for member organisations in relation to the Semester process and trade union intervention. He acknowledged that there was evidence in a small number of countries that national trade union confederations were being consulted, but that a lot more needed to be done to ensure this was real and effective consultation across many more countries.

In the discussion that followed a number of points were raised:

- Lack of visibility of EU2020 agenda in European Semester;
- Important of timing of trade union intervention and suggestion that initiatives in advance of the country reports would be most effective;
- Country reports were highly detailed and trade unions shouldn't aim to challenge them in major ways but could try to influence key elements which would then increase the possibility that these issues might find their way into the country specific recommendations;
- Extent to which privatisation was being promoted as a policy within the Semester;
- Uncertainty that the Juncker investment plan would deliver and problem that it was not really a common EU plan;
- Still a big question mark about the extent to which Member States were implementing country specific recommendations and whether they were manipulating the process to get recommendations which fit with their policy priorities; and
- Speculation about the Commission's proposals on a "social pillar" that were expected to be announced in early 2016.

Modernising public administration - what impact at national level?

- [Modernising Public Admin - OSE](#)

OSE researcher, Ramon Pena-Casas introduced the next session with an overview across all Member States of the kinds of country specific recommendations that relate to public administration. He then looked in more detail at five countries – the Czech Republic, Finland, France, Ireland and Italy.

In his overview Ramon emphasised that the notion of modernising public administration was overshadowed by the European Commission's "re-fit" agenda and so the emphasis would inevitably be on deregulation and the efficiency and costs of administration rather than the quality of service provision. He also noted that it was very surprising that there were hardly any references to e-government, particularly in the light of the major debate around digitalisation and the European Commission's promotion of the digital single market.

In examining the national reform programmes for the five countries, it was clear that they were not providing a full picture of developments in Member States. While they reported government policies linked to country specific recommendations, some failed to detail significant aspects of government policy such as budget and employment cuts, that also have a major impact on public administration.

Ramon highlighted some of the reforms in the five countries that had particular implications for public services and public service workers including the Civil Service Act in the Czech Republic with its provisions on a new wage setting mechanism and the restructuring of local and regional government in France.

The Semester process

- [OSE - socializing semester](#)

OSE Director Bart Vanhercke's presentation focused on the workings of the Semester and the measures being taken by the European Commission to streamline the process. He explained that the Commission was being a bit more transparent about the decision making process and noted that the lead directorates were the Secretariat General, Economic and Financial Affairs and Employment and Social Affairs.

Bart also clarified that the Commission was now trying put forward country specific recommendations could be implemented in a 12-18 month period and were

measurable. However, despite this increased transparency it was clear that there was still a very long way to go to ensure democratic accountability with feedback from Member States' parliamentary social affairs committees revealing that none claimed to have a real input into the Semester. Bart suggested that there was some indication that social and employment issues feature more in the last Semester and in 2016 they were also likely to be included among the indicators assessing whether Member States were at risk of macroeconomic imbalances.

The main points of the discussion that followed included:

- Concern that in many respects – public administration, pensions, collective bargaining – the European institutions were trying to influence policies over which they had no competence;
- In effect the only mandatory element of the whole process was the monitoring and assessment of public budgets;
- Continuing queries about how country specific recommendations emerge and why countries that might be facing similar challenges may get a different range of recommendations; and
- Along with the limited role for national parliaments there was also a very limited role for the European Parliament.

Influencing the Semester

In the final session participants discussed the practicalities of trying to influence the Semester process. At European level EPSU was working not only with the ETUC but also with a range of civil society organisations in an Alliance that was highlighting the democratic and social inadequacies of the process.

At national level the main issue was the extent to which unions at sector level could make their voices heard, with coordination with their national confederations an important element.

- [Union involvement in Semester I](#)

OSE reported on the results of a survey of EPSU affiliates which showed that knowledge of and active involvement in the Semester were still at low levels. EPSU was looking at ways that it could take up some important issues such as investing in childcare and increasing the fight against tax fraud which were among the more

positive measures that feature among the country specific recommendations.

- [Log in](#) to post comments

- [Printer-friendly version](#)

Policies

[Collective Bargaining](#)

Document types

[Presentation](#)

[Papers and publications](#)

[Report](#)