Localising the European Semester

Joint CEMR-EPSU project

Background report

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Abbreviations

AGS  Annual Growth Survey
COR  Committee of Regions
CSR  Country Specific Recommendations
EPL  Employment Protection Legislation
ESO  European Semester Officer
JER  Joint Employment Report
LRG  Local and regional government
MIP  Macro-Economic Imbalance Procedure
MOU  Memorandum of Understanding
NRP  National Reform Programmes

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Aims of the background paper

This is the first deliverable in the joint EPSU-CEMR project “Localising the European Semester”. The focus of the background paper is threefold:

- To present an overview of the development, content and process of the European Semester;
- To analyse the available evidence on the involvement of local and regional governments (LRG) and social partners of the local and regional government sector in the European Semester;
- And to highlight any gaps in the literature, and issues arising for the joint sectoral social partner project.

This report presents the state of the art on this subject, taking into account the existing literature and reports produced by scholars and European institutions and bodies. The report aims to support the discussions to be held as part of the project, including in the opening seminar in Namur, Belgium, on 23 March 2018. An important element of this report is to establish the extent to which social partners in the LRG sector have the capacity and are able and already participating in the European semester process at the national level, as well as the impact that their inputs are having.

The report is structured as follows:

- Section 1 describes the key features of the European Semester in a succinct way;
- Section 2 reviews the role of social partners and local and regional government in the European Semester;
- Section 3 provides an overview of the involvement of LRG stakeholders and social partners in the European Semester process;
- Section 4 provides initial conclusions and pointers for the project.
- It is accompanied by three annexes, Annex 1 summarises the most recent CSRs, Annex 2 (a separate document) provides an overview of CSRs since 2014 and Annex 3 provides a list of European Semester officers in the European Commission delegations.

1. What is the European Semester?

The European Semester process was introduced in 2010 in the context of 2008 economic crisis with the aim to ensure that the national economic, financial, employment and social policies are coordinated in an efficient and systematic manner to help achieve the Europe 2020 strategy goals to deliver smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, the aims of the Stability and Growth Pact (SGP) and the national reform priorities.

The Semester is an annual cycle of complex policy interactions, involving the European institutions, national governments, social partners and other stakeholders at the EU and national levels. The European Semester process aims to encourage Member States to align their budgetary, economic, social and employment policies with the objectives and rules agreed at EU level, within the targets of Europe 2020 and the SGP.

The EU Member States participate in the policy coordination cycle of the European Semester. However, euro area members, which have the Macro-economic Imbalance Procedure (MIP) in place, can also be subject to the sanctions under the corrective arm of the MIP and the SGP. In principle, there are no sanctions for not

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1 Member States which have signed a Memorandum of Understanding in the framework of SGP do not submit separate NRPs or receive specific CSRs, their policy coordination process is oriented towards the implementation of the agreements in the MoU.
implementing the structural reforms which do not explicitly fall under MIP and SGP procedures in the European Semester process.

The European semester is based on an annual coordination process with fixed calendar deadlines (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1: The annual timetable of the European Semester process**


Source: European Commission.

The key milestones in the annual cycle of the European Semester are as follows:

In the **preparation phase**, the European Council sets the annual economic policy priorities on the basis of a European Commission proposal in the form of the **Annual Growth Survey**. This typically provides the foundation to derive Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs) on budget policy (to develop the national stability and convergence programmes) and economic, employment and social policy (to develop the National Reform Programmes). This is an annual document, prepared by the European Commission and released in November, launching the yearly European Semester by setting out the broad EU economic priorities for the year to come and for Europe 2020, and inviting Member States to take these into account when devising their
National Reform Programmes (NRPs). The latest AGS in 2018\(^3\) included the following thematic priorities (see Figure 2):

- Boosting investment to support recovery and increase the long-term growth
- Structural reforms for inclusive growth, upward convergence and competitiveness;
- Responsible fiscal policies to support the sustainability and convergence.

The Annual Growth Survey priorities are debated by the Council of Ministers and the various sub-committees before the European Council in March, which then sets the priorities for the national economic and budgetary decisions.

The draft **Joint Employment Report**, attached to the AGS, assesses the social and employment situation in the EU.\(^4\) The JER has a legal basis in Article 148 TFEU and provides an annual overview of the main employment and social developments in the EU as a whole, as well as the Member States' reform actions in line with the Employment Guidelines. In addition, the Joint Employment Report 2018 for the first time monitors Member States' performance in relation to the European Pillar of Social Rights.

The Alert Mechanism Report (AMR) is a screening device, based on a scoreboard of indicators, which identifies countries that may be affected by economic imbalances and for which the Commission should undertake further in-depth reviews. The AMR launches the annual Macroeconomic Imbalances Procedure (MIP), which aims to prevent or address imbalances that hinder the smooth functioning of national economies, of the eurozone or of the EU as a whole.

In the **implementation phase**, Member State governments submit to the Commission their medium-term NRPs\(^5\) along the lines of these target recommendations. These programmes 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. The Member States present their National Reform Programme to the Commission\(^6\). In addition, Euro area countries present their Stability Programme, which is a

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\(^3\) Available at [https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/2017-comm-690_en_0.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/2017-comm-690_en_0.pdf)


three-year budget plan. Non-euro area countries present their Convergence Programme which is also a three-year budget plan. The Commission assesses the plans and proposes how the Council should vote on them.

The European Commission and the European Council provides country-specific policy advice on general economic policy and budget policy in the form of CSRs which should provide the focus for national level reforms. The recommendations are 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. The CSRs are proposed by the Commission based on an assessment of the challenges, risks and policy gaps in the country concerned and are aimed to support the achievement of Europe 2020, Stability and Growth Pact and other strategic goals in the country. The recommendations are meant to focus on the structural reforms which can realistically be achieved by the Member States over the next 12-18 months. The recommendations proposed by the Commission are discussed among national governments in the Council, endorsed by EU leaders at a summit in June and formally adopted by the national finance ministers in July. This is intended to allow for sufficient time for national governments to incorporate the recommendations into their reform plans and national budgets for the following year. For eurozone countries, national governments must submit their Draft Budget Plans for the following year by 15 October. The Commission assesses these plans against the requirements of the Stability and Growth Pact. The Commission issues a formal opinion on each plan in November, so its guidance can be taken into account when the national budgets are finalised. Eurozone finance/economy ministers discuss the Commission's assessment of the plans in the ECOFIN Council.

In the analysis and follow-up phase, the Commission’s country reports in the following year assess how well these CS have been implemented and what remaining / new reform priorities are emerging for each Member State. In-depth assessments of each Member State’s implementation progress against the previous year’s CSRs have been an integral part of the Commission’s European Semester work. The reports cover all areas of macroeconomic or social importance and take stock of the country’s budgetary situation. The Commission’s assessment is based on the joint analysis of an interdisciplinary team of country analysts of all relevant measures that the country has taken or announced, cross checked against a horizontal assessment framework per policy area. As the reform progress is often not directly measurable and the scope of challenges differs across countries, the progress assessment is mostly qualitative. They assess the progress made by each EU country in addressing the issues identified in the previous year’s EU recommendations.

Although the impact of the European Semester process is subject to much debate and discussion, the process does influence the legislative and policy development at national level in a range of policy fields, including public expenditure, employment, education, and social care.

The European Semester has also undergone a number of significant reforms since 2010, both in terms of contents, approach and timing.

In 2015, the European Commission has introduced a number of innovations in the Semester process aimed at ‘streamlining’ the process, increasing its political ownership and improving the involvement of social partners in the procedure. These include:

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8 Ibid. Member States subject to the MoU do not present a separate NRP.
10 https://ec.europa.eu/info/publications/2017-european-semester-country-reports_en
• The Commission now publishes the country analyses already at the beginning of the year, to give Member States more time for discussion, including with social partners;
• an invitation to Member States to ‘refocus’ their NRPs and to specifically involve national Parliaments and social partners in the elaboration of the NRPs, also allowing more time for this, and extending the timeline from six to 12 months\textsuperscript{11};
• The early presentation of the Country Reports, so as to allow more time for examining and discussing the EU level recommendations. The new timeline was adopted extending the six-month cycle to an annual process to allow the organisation of bilateral meetings with Member States and ‘fact-finding missions’ on the ground for the Commission as well as allowing more time for involvement of national parliaments and social partners at the national level;
• To increase the engagement with other important actors in the process, namely the European Parliament and the EU level social partners;
• The function of the European Semester Officers was introduced in each Member States, to provide a focal point at the national level for interactions between the Commission and the national level stakeholders;\textsuperscript{12}
• Focussing the CSRs on fewer, key areas of action and structural reforms which resulted in the declining number of CSRs issued (see also Annex 2);

In 2017, after a wide consultation on the draft \textit{European Pillar of Social Rights} held during 2016, the European Commission published the final version of the Pillar on the 26 April 2017.\textsuperscript{13}

The publication of the Pillar is part of a wider set of initiatives concerning the future of the European Union and the strengthening of its social dimension, including the publication of a ‘White paper on the Future of the European Union’\textsuperscript{14} and of a ‘Reflection paper on the Social Dimension of Europe’\textsuperscript{15}. The Pillar primarily concerns the euro area but is applicable to all EU Member States wishing to take part, and consists of a list of 20 ‘key principles’, framed as ‘rights’, organised around three chapters:

1) Equal opportunities and access to the labour market;

2) Fair working conditions;

3) Social protection and inclusion.

The Pillar is accompanied by a Social Scoreboard, made up of 14 headline indicators and a number of secondary indicators, serves as a reference framework to monitor social progress, in a tangible, holistic and objective way, which is intended to be easily accessible and understandable for citizens. It aims to identify the most significant employment and social challenges facing the Member States, the EU and the euro area, as well as progress achieved over time on implementation of the Pillar. The Pillar is a non-binding initiative to be mainly implemented through non-binding policy instruments, primarily the European Semester (e.g. the CSRs). Having said that, the Pillar has also been accompanied by a proposal for legislative measures on work-life balance and social protection for all types of jobs.

\textsuperscript{11} In its original design in 2010, the Semester was a six-month coordination cycle, ranging from March to September of each year, the period that corresponds to the preparatory phase of budget law in most countries. This was very much in line with the idea of a mechanism to coordinate the national budgetary policies ex-ante at the European level.


\textsuperscript{13} \url{https://ec.europa.eu/commission/priorities/deeper-and-fairer-economic-and-monetary-union/european-pillar-social-rights_en}

\textsuperscript{14} Available at \url{https://europa.eu/european-union/sites/europaeu/files/whitepaper_en.pdf}

\textsuperscript{15} Available at \url{https://ec.europa.eu/commission/publications/reflection-paper-social-dimension-europe_en}
2. The role of social partners and local and regional government in the European Semester

The previous sections of this report described the development, content and component parts of the European semester process. Against this background, this section discusses:

- The rationale for the involvement of social partners and local and regional government in the European semester process (the ‘why’);
- The process for involving them in different Member States and its evolution (the ‘how’); and
- The quality of this involvement, as well as some good practice lessons (the ‘how well’).

The concluding section of this report then discusses some key dimensions and questions to be discussed and elaborated further as part of the joint CEMR-EPSU project.

2.1 Rationale for the involvement of social partners

The rationale for the involvement of social partners in the European Semester process can be found both at European and national level. It is linked to the policy content decided as part of the Semester process and the role accorded to the social partners both at EU and national level in shaping policy in these areas.

Viewed from a specific policy perspective, the European Semester covers some issues closely related to the direct interests and remit of employer and trade union organisations. With regards to the core role of social partners of collective bargaining\(^\text{16}\), the Semester covers and has resulted in CSRs being issued with regard to policies and legislation governing working conditions, including – for example – employment protection legislation (EPL). Although the EU does not have a remit in relation to pay, in recent years CSRs pertaining to (minimum) wage setting and the interaction between wages, benefit systems and ensuring adequate living standards have not been uncommon. While such recommendations have most significantly affected countries subject to the Memoranda of Understanding (and thus, during those times, being located outside the European Semester process), recommendations directly or indirectly impacting on wage setting have not been limited to MoU countries. This has led to some criticisms of interference by the European institutions in the collective bargaining autonomy of the social partners.

Viewed from a wider policy perspective, the Semester regularly impacts on policy making in the employment and social policy sphere\(^\text{17}\), where social partners at the national level often make important contributions\(^\text{18}\) and where social partners at the European level have a specific role in policy making according to the EU Treaties\(^\text{19}\). Furthermore, as economic and social policies are increasingly recognised as being inextricably linked, there was – after the first few years of the formal European Semester process – a recognition that the planning, implementation and monitoring of the whole of the European Semester Cycle was likely to be less successful without the strong involvement of the social partners at European and national level.

\(^{16}\) Clearly, the specific involvement of social partners in collective bargaining differs from country to country, with some partners involved in collective bargaining at national and/or sectoral level, while others mainly play a role in negotiations at company level. Depending on the nature of national industrial relations systems, such negotiations will cover different matters linked to pay and working conditions.

\(^{17}\) Assessments as to the number and share of CSRs addressing social and employment policy issues differ depending on the definitions being used (see for example Clauwaert (2014) and Bekker (2015)) but are generally judged to be in a region close to 50% of CSRs.

\(^{18}\) The level of involvement in policy making again differs depending on national industrial relations structures but can also be influenced by economic and political developments.

\(^{19}\) This role is enshrined in Article 151 TFEU.
In 2013, ETUC, BusinessEurope, CEEP and UEAPME issued a joint declaration on social partner involvement in European economic governance and stated that

“\textit{Involving social partners in the elaboration and implementation of policies affecting directly or indirectly employment and labour markets all along the different steps of the European Semester is essential with the view of taking into account their position. Social partner consultations should be timely and meaningful, allowing the necessary analysis and proposals fitting within decision making processes}^{20}.

In its \textit{Communication on Strengthening the social dimension of Economic and Monetary Union}^{21}, the European Commission also acknowledged that there was room for improvement in the involvement of the social partners in the European Semester. The Communication therefore proposed to take a number of practical steps to improve the involvement of social partners at European and national level by introducing more regular meetings prior and following the adoption of the AGS and Joint Employment Report, as well as encouraging Members States to discuss all the reforms linked to the CSRs with their national social partners.

Furthermore, in March 2015, in the context of the relaunch of the social dialogue process, Commission Vice-President Dombrovskis emphasised that yet more remained to be done at EU and national level to involve the social partners in the European Semester process. The Communication therefore proposed to take a number of practical steps to improve the involvement of social partners at European and national level by introducing more regular meetings prior and following the adoption of the AGS and CSRs. More effective involvement was also to be ensured by the earlier publication of country reports, allowing more time for preparation and consultation.

In 2016, a quadripartite statement on a ‘New Start for Social Dialogue’ was signed which further emphasised the role of the social partners in the European Semester process\textsuperscript{22}. In this statement, the Commission commits itself to ‘enhance the involvement of Union level social partners in economic governance and the European Semester, whereas the Council asks all Member States to ‘ensure the timely and meaningful involvement of national social partners, while fully respecting national practices, including through the European Semester, in order to contribute to the successful implementation of Country Specific Recommendations’. The cross-industry social partners undertook to organise two seminars to exchange information and good practices to foster a stronger role of social partners in the European semester process.

This importance of the role of the social partners in the Semester process was again re-stated in the European Pillar of Social Rights proclaimed at the European Council in Gothenburg on 17 November 2017\textsuperscript{23}.

\subsection*{2.2 Rationale for the involvement of local and regional authorities}

At the national level, local and regional authorities are also expected to play a significant role in the European Semester process, alongside the national parliaments. The local and regional authorities are expected in particular to:

\begin{itemize}
  \item Provide active inputs into the government’s development of the national reform programmes / national stability and convergence programmes by giving their views, advice, experiences and contributions to the national central government departments when they are developing a national response in the European Semester process; particularly focussing on how best the country-specific recommendations are best addressed at the national level (e.g. which policy levers should be changed, which stakeholders should be involved).
\end{itemize}

\textsuperscript{20} ETUC, BusinessEurope, CEEP, UEAPME (2013), Social partner involvement in European Economic Governance, Declaration of the European social partners, Brussels

\textsuperscript{21} European Commission (2013), Strengthening the social dimension of Economic and Monetary Union, COM(2013) 690

\textsuperscript{22} https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=15738&langId=en

• Reviewing and critically appraising the central government’s proposed national reform programmes / national stability and convergence programmes in the existing dialogue structures, by giving a critical perspective on the choices of reforms, their contents and implementation arrangements so that the most appropriate and effective policy responses are articulated in the national responses in the European Semester process.

• Contributing to the implementation of the national reform programmes / national stability and convergence programmes as the local and regional authorities act as the key level of policy implementation in many national reform areas.

Crucially, the reasons for this expected involvement is that the local / regional dimension is present in the CSRs issued for each country, both in relation directly to the relationship between the central and local governments as well as the policy areas where the regional / local governments play a key role (such as public finance, taxation, health and social care, education, environment etc24). The number of CSRs relating both to the LRG sector itself and the policy areas covered by the LRG stakeholders has been relatively high.

An annual report prepared by the Committee of the Regions (CoR)25 relating to the 2017 European Semester considers that 76% of CSRs are territory related as the highlight regionally differentiated challenges and their implementation relies on the activities of regional and local authorities. This is a significant increase from the 56% of CSRs considered to be territory related in 2015. These CSRs mainly relate to labour market, education and social policies, as well as public administration and the business environment.

In addition, recommendations directly addressed to LRG have also increased from 23% in 2015 to 62% in 2017.

For the purposes of this report, particularly emphasis was placed on recommendations addressing LRG directly (in terms of public administration reforms) and focused on policies at the heart of LRG responsibilities in many Member States (e.g. labour market policy, education and social policies). This leads to a somewhat lower estimation of CSRs relevant to LRG.

The most recent set of CSRs relate to the 2017-2018 period (see their overview in Annex 1). Eight out of 28 Member States received CSRs related directly to the relationship between the local and regional governments and the central governments or local and regional government sector directly. This includes a range of reforms called for, for example actions to improve the spending across various government levels, improve the coordination between the government levels and improve the efficiency across the government (see Table 1).

Table 1: 2017-2017 CSRs directly relevant to the LRG stakeholders

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MS</th>
<th>CSRs relevant to the LRG sector directly</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>Accelerate public investment at all levels of government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>Address regional disparities in education and income, and reinforce the coordination between regional employment services, social services and employers, to better respond to jobseekers’ and employers’ needs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

24 The roles and responsibilities of local and regional government differ in the Member States. For more information, see for example Council of European Municipalities and Regions, Local and Regional Government in Europe: Structures and Competences, 2016 http://www.ccre.org/docs/Local_and_Regional_Government_in_Europe.EN.pdf

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Recommendation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Croatia</td>
<td>Reduce the fragmentation and improve the functional distribution of competencies in public administration, while enhancing the efficiency and reducing territorial disparities in the delivery of public services.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cyprus</td>
<td>Adopt key legislative reforms aiming to improve efficiency in the public sector, in particular on the functioning of public administration, governance of state-owned entities and local governments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latvia</td>
<td>Increase efficiency and accountability in the public sector, in particular by simplifying administrative procedures and strengthening the conflict-of-interest prevention regime, including for insolvency administrators.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malta</td>
<td>Expand the scope of the ongoing spending reviews to the broader public sector and introduce performance-based public spending.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>Rationalise and streamline competencies across the various layers of government and align their financing and spending responsibilities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romania</td>
<td>Adopt legislation to ensure a professional and independent civil service, applying objective criteria. Strengthen project prioritisation and preparation in public investment. Ensure the timely full and sustainable implementation of the national public procurement strategy.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Own analysis of CSRs.

A high number of Member States also have received CSRs in the policy areas where the local / regional government plays a significant role:

Improvements to the management of the public finance are called for in 15 Member States, including the Czech Republic, Germany, Estonia, Ireland, France, Croatia, Italy, Cyprus, Latvia, Hungary, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Slovakia, the UK.

- Improvements in employment and education policy were noted in 23 Member States, including Belgium, Bulgaria, Germany, Estonia, Ireland, Spain, France, Croatia, Italy, Cyprus, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Hungary, Netherlands, Austria, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Slovakia, Finland, the UK.
- Improvements in healthcare area in 10 Member States including Bulgaria, Cyprus, Latvia, Lithuania, Austria, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia and Finland.
- Infrastructure / housing in five Member States, including Belgium, Germany, Ireland, Poland, Portugal.

This means, with the exception of Denmark, all Member States have in 2017 received CSRs which implementation involves the regional and local government stakeholders.

A similar picture emerges after the analysis of the CSRs in the last three annual cycles since 2014 (see Annex 2). In this period, almost half (or 13 out of 28) Member States received one or several CSRs which related directly to the changes in the LRG sector. This related to the following Member States (see Table 2).

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26 It received only one CSR to Foster competition in the domestically oriented services sector.
### Table 2: CSRs since 2014 directly related to the LRG stakeholders

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MS</th>
<th>CSRs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Belgium</td>
<td>To agree on an enforceable distribution of fiscal targets among all government levels.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belgium</td>
<td>In 2016: Improve the design of federal fiscal relations with a view to increasing public investment, especially at municipal level; in 2014 to Improve the design of fiscal relations between the federation, Länder and municipalities also with a view to ensuring adequate public investment at all levels of government.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estonia</td>
<td>In 2016: by adopting and implementing the proposed local government reform and in 2014: Better balance local government revenue against devolved responsibilities. Improve the efficiency of local governments and ensure the provision of quality public services at local level, especially social services complementing activation measures.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>In 2016: coordination of procurement policies across government levels and in 2015: Strengthen transparency and accountability of regional public finances and in 2014: Implement at all government levels the recommendations of the committee for the reform of the public administration. Strengthen control mechanisms and increase the transparency of administrative decisions, in particular at regional and local levels.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>In 2016: Reinforce independent public policy evaluations in order to identify efficiency gains across all sub-sectors of general government; in 2015: Step up efforts to make the spending review effective, continue public policy evaluations and identify savings opportunities across all sub-sectors of general government, including on social security and local government. Take steps to limit the rise in local authorities' administrative expenditure; in 2014: Set a clear timetable for the ongoing decentralisation process and take first steps by December 2014, with a view to eliminating administrative duplication, facilitating mergers between local governments and clarifying the responsibilities of each layer of local government. Reinforce incentives to streamline local government expenditure, by capping the annual increase in local government tax revenue while reducing grants from the central government as planned.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Croatia</td>
<td>in 2016: By the end of 2016, start reducing fragmentation and improving the functional distribution of competencies in public administration to improve efficiency and reduce territorial disparities in the delivery of public services. In consultation with social partners, harmonise the wage-setting frameworks across the public administration and public services; in 2015: Reduce the extent of fragmentation and overlap between levels of central and local government by putting forward a new model for functional distribution of competencies and by rationalising the system of state agencies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>in 2016: Implement the reform of the public administration by adopting and implementing all necessary legislative decrees, in particular those...</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
reforming publicly-owned enterprises, local public services and the management of human resources; in 2015: Adopt and implement the pending laws aimed at improving the institutional framework and modernising the public administration; in 2014: As part of a wider effort to improve the efficiency of public administration, clarify competences at all levels of Government.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Note</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cyprus</td>
<td>In 2016: to implement the reform of local governments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>In 2016: to simplify, rationalise and streamline fiscal relations and responsibilities across the various layers of government and in 2014: to further streamline fiscal relations between layers of government, for example by simplifying the organisational setting and aligning spending and funding responsibilities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portugal</td>
<td>In 2016: a comprehensive expenditure review and strengthen expenditure control, cost effectiveness and adequate budgeting at all levels of public administration and in 2014: to maintain tight control of expenditure in central, regional and local administration and Continue to rationalise and modernise central, regional and local public administration.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romania</td>
<td>In 2016: Strengthen the independence and transparency of human resources management in the public administration and Improve access to integrated public services, extend basic infrastructure and foster economic diversification, in particular in rural areas and in 2014: Step up efforts to strengthen the capacity of public administration, in particular by improving efficiency, human resource management, the decision-making tools and coordination within and between different levels of government; and by improving transparency, integrity and accountability.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slovenia</td>
<td>In 2016: To take measures to modernise public administration and in 2014: to launch a comprehensive review of expenditure covering state and local government levels.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Own analysis of CSRs.

Importantly, several Member States (e.g. Germany, Spain, Croatia, France, Portugal, Romania) received similar CSRs calling for reforms in the LRG sector over several areas, indicating the continuing importance attached to this area as well as the lack of progress to address the relevant challenges.

Finally, all Member States since 2014 have received one or several CSRs in the policy areas such as public finance, education, health and social care or employment policy where LRG stakeholders have a significant responsibility (see Annex 2).

Peña-Casas R.; Sabato S.; Lisi V. and Agostini C. (2015) have analysed the CSRs in the 2012-2015 period, issued with the view of modernising the public administration (MPA). They found that since 2012, the European Semester cycles have extensively addressed modernisation of public administration. Despite the overall decreasing number of CSRs issued over the years, the number of those directly related to modernisation of public administration has remained rather stable, thus showing an increasing trend in the importance given to the topic. The majority of Member States have repeatedly been the object of CSRs on MPA since 2012, or at least in three of the four years. Only a small group of countries have not received any
CSR on MPA since 2012 (LU, NL, SE). Furthermore, CSRs moved from a broader notion of ‘public services’ in 2012 to a narrower concept of ‘administrative modernisation’ in 2015. However, the focus on ‘(smart) regulation’ remains a constant feature of CSRs related to modernisation of public administration across the whole period.

Their more detailed overview of the CSRs issued in 2015 shows the highest concentration of recommendations on the modernisation of public administration related to the dimension ‘governance organisation and institutions’ (20 out of 37). Conversely, the number of CSRs concerning the ‘reduction of the administrative burden on businesses’ – usually extensively targeted over the years – declined steeply, despite being the dimension most closely related by far to competitiveness. As for the other categories of MPA, they have also been subject to CSRs to a substantially lesser extent than the dimension concerning governance.

No fewer than 16 EU countries are engaged in reforms aimed at improving the scope and efficiency, in economic terms, of the tax systems. This is a policy field of utmost importance within the European Semester, as it touches on the funding capacities of States, but also on potential budgetary savings. However, ‘reducing the administrative burden on businesses’ is the dimension of MPA for which the highest number of reforms has been identified in the 2015 NRPs. Reforms concerning this dimension (42 in total) were undertaken in all but 5 countries (DK, EE, LU, NL, PL).
3. Assessment of the current state of play: the involvement of local and regional authorities and social partners in the European Semester at national level

This section discusses the available information on the involvement of social partners and local and regional authorities in the European Semester process at national level. It is important to note that there is a lack of literature regarding the involvement of sectoral social partners in the local and regional government sector in the Semester process. The following therefore focusses on the available evidence solely on the role of national level social partners (the peak level organisations) and the local and regional authorities. The latter can of course directly act as employers, but the comments on their involvement are not specifically relating to their role as employers or of local government employers’ organisations.

3.1. Involvement of the national social partner organisations in the European Semester process

While academic literature is largely silent on the analysis of local and regional government involvement in the European semester process, studies and analyses are available on the role of the national parliaments (Hallerberg, M., Marzinotto, M.B. and Wolff, G.B. (2018), civil society organisations or the role of the social partners in the European Semester

Overall, available evidence appears to indicate a move towards increased involvement of social partners and other stakeholders as a means of decentralisation and to increase the level of domestic ownership of reforms (Darvas and Leandro (2015). But this tendency depends very much on the country context (EMCO 2016) and primarily on existing industrial relations traditions and the overall involvement of social partners in policy making in the national context.

Peña-Casas R.; Sabato S.; Lisi V. and Agostini C. (2015) found that during the 2010-2014 period of implementation of the European Semester, the social partner’s participation (in particular, that of trade unions) has been weak. At national level, their analysis of the country case studies provided evidence of different degrees of trade union involvement in the European Semester, also very much related to the features of collective bargaining in the specific country. The procedures for the elaboration of the National Reform Programmes are considered to be inadequate and social partners generally do not succeed in having an impact on the contents of the NRPs. This said, in some cases (FI, FR) the process of involvement appears relatively better organised, while in other cases (notably, IE) peculiar economic situations and budgetary constraints have led to almost non-existent involvement of social partners in policymaking, particularly during the years during and immediately following the crisis. In most cases (CZ, FR, IT), the national economic and social committees are the key fora for the consultation of social partners. During these consultations, trade unions are often represented by confederal organisations.

Similarly, Sabato, S. and Vanhercke, B. with Spasova, S. (2017) also found an increasing tendency to involve social partners in the European Semester process at the national level. In most cases, national social partner involvement consists of information or consultation, even though sporadic cases of genuine participation (the ability to influence the Semester process) have been found. The features of national social dialogue have important implications for the characteristics of social partner involvement in the Semester, as do the differences in the resources of national organisations.

An ETUC (2015) report also noted the Semester decision-making process had not taken into account the inputs expressed by social partners. In other words, the semester was characterised by a lack (or insufficient)

involvement of trade unions when the ETUC members were surveyed in 2014. Specifically, in many countries the social partners were not consulted at all (Slovenia, Bulgaria, Ireland and Cyprus) or the methodology for collecting their opinion was totally inadequate (Spain). In some cases, though social partners were involved, the consultation was either informal (Italy), or formal but ineffective/insufficient (Netherlands, Poland and Hungary). Only few countries had reported a well-structured social dialogue with regard to the European Semester (Germany, Denmark, Sweden, France and Belgium). However, even where there had been an organised dialogue, it was not necessarily effective. Indeed, it often did not adequately meet the criteria of timeliness and complete information. Especially in Germany, timeliness was inadequate. In Denmark the national economic performance was excluded from the discussion. In France the consultation took place after the passage through the parliament and so only when the decision was already taken.

A study carried out by Eurofound (2016) covering the period between 2011-2014, found that social partners are involved in the elaboration of NRPs in most Member States (Croatia, Hungary and Romania are considered to be the exceptions where there was seen to be no social partner involvement in the elaboration of the NRPs). However, the nature and quality of this involvement differs significantly. In terms of the nature of the involvement, the majority of countries organised tripartite meetings, with some Member States using other form of involvement (see table 3).

Table 3: Forms of social partner involvement in the preparation of NRPs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tripartite meetings</th>
<th>Other forms of involvement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Standard tripartite body</td>
<td>Specific ‘European Committee’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BG, DK, FI, FR, PL, SE</td>
<td>AT, BE, CY, ES, IT, LV, UK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DE, EE, IT, LU</td>
<td>ES (up to 2014), LT</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Eurofound (2016).

As shown above very few (6) Member States make specific provisions regulating the involvement of social partners in the European Semester (see Table 4).

Table 4: Specific social dialogue structures for the European Semester/Europe 2020

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MS</th>
<th>Structure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bulgaria</td>
<td>Europe 2020 Working Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>Contact Committee for Europe 2020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>Procedure for co-ordinating EU affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>Committee on Social Dialogue and International Affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>Inter-ministerial Committee for Europe 2020 Strategy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>Formal structure for matters regarding the Europe 2020 strategy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Eurofound (2016).
In other countries, such consultations take place through existing social dialogue structures and frameworks. In and of itself, this is not a negative, as many countries have strong existing tripartite bodies or consultation arrangements, in which the overall national reform processes are discussed, which includes reforms linked to CSRs.

The report found that regular consultations relating to the European semester only take place in 10 Member States, with enough time for information and consultation (see Table 5). In a further seven countries, while consultation is regular, it is considered that insufficient time is provided for meaningful consultation. In a further five countries, consultation is considered to be too irregular and unpredictable to be effective and meaningful.

Table 5: Frequency and time allotted for consultation of social partners and involvement in NRPs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency of consultation</th>
<th>Time allotted for information and consultation (social partner perception) and number of meetings</th>
<th>Balance of consultation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Regular and predictable</td>
<td>Enough time for information and consultation</td>
<td>On an equal footing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irregular/ad hoc</td>
<td>Insufficient time for I&amp;C</td>
<td>Unbalanced</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| AT, BE, BG, DE, DK, EE, FR, LT, VL, MT, NL, PL, SE (since 2013), SI, SK AT, BE, CY, CZ, DE (EO), DK, EE, FI, LT, MT, NL, PL, SE, SK, UK BG, DE, (TU), ES, FR, IT, LU, LV, SI BG, DE, ES, FI, FR, LU, VL, MT, NL, SI, UK AT, BE, CY, CZ, DK, EE, IT, LT, PL, SE, SK AT, BE, CZ, DE, DK, EE, ES, FI, FR, IT, LT, LU, LV, MT, NL, PL, SE, SI, SK, UK | BG, CY |

Source: Eurofound (2016).

As a result of this information collection, the report attempts an assessment of the level of influence wielded by social partners over the content of the NRPs and found the following:

- In five countries, social partners have a strong influence over the content of the NRPs;
- In 13 countries they have limited or very limited influence;
- In six countries they have no influence.

The Eurofound study also showed that in only 10 countries are social partners involved in some way in the definition or implementation of CSRs (BE, BG, CZ, FI, FR, LU, MT, NL, SI, SE). Due to the specific autonomous role of the social partners in Sweden, this has even allowed for the modification of CSRs drafted by the European Commission by the social partners (this related to the level of initial salaries and the EPL). In general, the role of social partners in the implementation of CSRs relates to areas of their specific competence, such as involvement and consultation regarding the drafting or revision of labour legislation. In France, for example, a CSR urging increased adult participation in lifelong learning, led to an inter-professional social partner agreement on lifelong learning in 2013.
In all other countries it is considered that important labour market and economic reforms have been implemented without the involvement of the social partners, where CSRs have been directed at areas of competence or involvement of social partners.

3.2. Involvement of local and regional authorities in the European Semester process

The Committee of the Regions (COR) adopted a Code of Conduct for the involvement of the local and regional authorities in the European Semester in May 2017. Against this backdrop, the CoR has been assessing the involvement of LRG in the national European Semester process. It is important to note that this report is based on how this role is described in the NRPs and is not based on a survey of representatives of LRG regarding their own perception of the nature and quality of their involvement.

Figure 2 summarises the assessment of the scale of involvement of LRG in the European Semester process. This shows a significant diversity with some countries among the Northern and Central European EU15 characterised by strong and relatively high-quality involvement of LRG the process. This includes countries with strong traditions of regional self-government, including federal states such as Austria, Belgium and Germany, as well as Italy and Spain, which also have strong regional government responsibilities. Other countries considered to have strong LRG involvement in the preparation, implementation and assessment of NRPs are the Netherlands, Sweden and Latvia.

Responsibilities of LRG in the implementation of NRPs are most frequently cited in relation to policies to tackle social inclusion. Other frequently mentioned territorial topics are education, health care, employment, housing and social policy initiatives (as already highlighted above) and improvements to the business environment.

In summary:

- 15 NRPs make specific reference to the involvement of LRGs in the development of NRPs, with the most detailed descriptions provided in the Germany, Danish, French, Dutch and Swedish NRPs;
- All NRPs reference the role of LRG in the implementation of NRPs, primarily in relation to social inclusion measures (14), budgetary, fiscal and administrative issues (13), employment policy (10), economic/business development policy (8) and education (7);
- Only nine NRPs make specific reference to the role of LRG in the evaluation of previous NPRs (BG, CZ, EE, ES, HR, HU, LU, PT, SI, SK).

Another report prepared by the CoR highlights some examples of good practice regarding LRG involvement in the European Semester. These experiences are drawn from a sample of in-depth case studies in six Member States and are therefore not exhaustive or intended to be representative of existing practices. The boxes below summarise relevant examples from three countries showing diverse experiences.

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29 The methodology seeks to assess the presence at national level of various elements included in the Code of Conduct, for instance, whether NRPs reflect territorial discrepancies and challenges and the impact of various policy measure at territorial level; the involvement of LRG in the preparation, implementation and evaluation of NRPs; institutional capacity of LRG and partnership and multi-level governance models.

30 Committee of the Regions (2017), Improving the European Semester by involving local and regional authorities: Overview of good practices.
In **Sweden**, LRG are treated as a full partner in the Semester process and are afforded a range of opportunities to contribute throughout the Semester cycle. They are underpinned by a written agreement between the social partners on the scope, format and timing of the consultation process.

A high number of examples of relevant practices in the implementation of NRP priorities are also showcased in the annex of the NRP, highlighting the close involvement of LRG across the process.

The co-ordination process has now been stable for a number of years and is considered by stakeholders to function well.

In **France**, LRG have an official status and are recognised as partners in the European Semester process. They are involved to briefings and informal meetings organised across the cycle, both by the national government and the Commission’s European Semester Officers.

In **Italy**, the involvement of LRG in the process has also been stable for some time and LRG
representatives see themselves as important partners.

However, in both countries LRG actors have suggestions for improvements to these processes and while in Italy is considered that many of the elements included in the CoR Code of Practice are already included in the process, in France it is considered that more work is to be done in this regard and LRG argue that their have limited impact on the preparation of NRPs.

Academic studies generally agree that, at the national level, the European Semester process is tightly controlled within the central government, typically a ministry of finance or prime minister’s office or other ministry charged with the overall responsibility for the file. Involvement of actors outside the central government varies depending on the country context.

Sabato, S. and Vanhercke, B. with Spasova, S. (2017) identified several changes for the effective involvement in the Semester of EU and national social partners:

- the multiplication of mechanisms for involving a variety of players sometimes makes it difficult for the social partners to understand who does what and when.
- the key players have differing expectations as to the kind of contributions social partners are expected to provide and the impact these should have on decision-making.
- business and trade union representatives hold different views on the next steps to increase social partner involvement in the Semester, which decreases its effectiveness.
- the link between the Semester and regular (national and European) social dialogue is still unclear and sometimes contested: trade unions and employers have different views on how to link the two dynamics.
4. Conclusions regarding gaps in the knowledge base and issues to be addressed as part of the joint project

A substantial strand of academic research focusses on the extent to which the European Semester has an influence on the national policies and reforms. A number of sources focus on the degree and reasons for the variation in the national implementation of CSRs (Alcidi and Gross 2015, European Parliament reports, Darvas and Leandro (2015), Deroose and Griesse 2014) but none investigate whether the CSRs and structural reforms suggested to countries in the process of the European Semester are more likely to be implemented where the social partners and LRGs have been involved, although this is clearly implied as a rationale for strengthening this involvement in statements of the social partners and in the Code of Practice by the CoR. This is an element which could be assessed further as part of the project to build the case for stronger LRG and LRG social partner involvement in the European Semester process.

An interesting body of literature exists analysing when countries are likely to follow the Semester directions and change policies as recommended (Deroose and Griesse 2014). Academic experts found this to be the case when:

- Countries are in the electoral cycle and looking for new ideas / support to the political programmes
- Smaller countries are more likely to take heed of the European advice as large countries are too self-centred to pay attention
- Market pressures are so great as to require imminent policy response (examples of banking reform)
- CSRs are backed with EU regulation powers (on public finances).

It could also be interesting to assess whether in such reform situations the involvement of LRGs and social partners is likely to be more significant than “normal”, and hence LRGs should be “looking out” for such opportunities.

One clear gap in the existing literature relates to the assessment of the role of social partners in the LRG sector in the European semester. While employers can be directly represented by LRG, particularly in countries where specific employers’ organisations for the sector exist, this involvement may not be particularly with a view to the role of LRG as employers. It also means that little is known about the involvement of trade unions in the sector. From the available evidence it appears clear that the social partners involved in such processes at the national level tend to be peak social partner organisations. They extent to which these organisations consult with their membership when feeding into the European semester process is unknown. It therefore remains to be established a) to what extent sectoral LRG trade unions and employers’ organisations are directly involved in European Semester processes and b) if they are not directly involved, to what extent there are consulted by their peak organisations to be able to feed into national consultation processes.

Overall, the picture regarding the involvement of LRG generally appears to be more positive than the picture on the involvement of social partner organisations. However, it is important to establish the extent to which experiences in this area are purely or mainly linked to existing dialogue structures and the degree of decision making autonomy accorded to LRG. Furthermore, it will be important to review whether some specific measures have been taken at national level to improve the involvement of relevant actors in Semester processes. This should encourage learning from good practices and provide lessons on whether the frequent re-iterations of the importance of such involvement from European level is having an impact in more recent years. Of particular interest are the lessons regarding the structure, timing, frequency and stability of this involvement and its actual impact on the drafting and implementation of NRPs.
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Annexes

Annex 1: CSRs 2017-2018

In bold are the CSRs directly relating to the LRG stakeholders
Underlined are the CSRs covering the policy areas where LRG stakeholders have an important role

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Member State</th>
<th>Country specific recommendations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Belgium</td>
<td>Pursue a substantial fiscal effort in 2018 in line with the requirements of the preventive arm of the Stability and Growth Pact, taking into account the need to strengthen the ongoing recovery and to ensure the sustainability of Belgium’s public finances. Use windfall gains, such as proceeds from asset sales, to accelerate the reduction of the general government debt ratio. <strong>Agree on an enforceable distribution of fiscal targets among government levels</strong> and ensure independent fiscal monitoring. Remove distortive tax expenditures. Improve the composition of public spending in order to create room for infrastructure investment, including on transport infrastructure. Ensure that the most disadvantaged groups, including people with a migrant background, have equal opportunities to participate in quality education, vocational training, and the labour market. Foster investment in knowledge-based capital, in particular with measures to increase digital technologies adoption, and innovation diffusion. Increase competition in professional services markets and retail, and enhance market mechanisms in network industries.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bulgaria</td>
<td>Further improve tax collection and tax compliance, including through a comprehensive set of measures beyond 2017. Step up enforcement of measures to reduce the extent of the informal economy, in particular undeclared work. Take follow-up measures on the financial sector reviews, in particular concerning reinsurance contracts, group-level oversight, hard-to-value assets and related-party exposures. Improve banking and non-banking supervision through the implementation of comprehensive action plans, in close cooperation with European bodies. Facilitate the reduction of still-high non-performing corporate loans, by drawing on a comprehensive set of tools, including by accelerating the reform of the insolvency framework and by promoting a functioning secondary market for non-performing loans. Improve the targeting of active labour market policies and the integration between employment and social services for disadvantaged groups. Increase the provision of quality mainstream education, in particular for Roma. Increase health insurance coverage, reduce out-of-pocket payments and address shortages of healthcare professionals. In consultation with social partners, establish a transparent mechanism for setting the minimum wage. Improve the coverage and adequacy of the minimum income. Ensure efficient implementation of the 2014-2020 National Public Procurement Strategy.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Czech Republic | 1. **Ensure the long-term sustainability of public finances**, in view of the ageing population. Increase the effectiveness of public spending, in particular by fighting corruption and inefficient practices in public procurement.  
2. Remove obstacles to growth, in particular by streamlining procedures for granting building permits and further reducing the administrative burden on businesses, by rolling out key e-government services, by improving the quality of R & D and by fostering employment of underrepresented groups. |
| Denmark      | 1. Foster competition in the domestically oriented services sector. |
| Germany      | 1. While respecting the medium-term objective, use fiscal and structural policies to support potential growth and domestic demand as well as to achieve a sustained upward trend in investment. **Accelerate public investment at all levels of government**, especially in education, research and innovation, and address capacity and planning constraints for infrastructure investments. Further improve the efficiency and investment-friendliness of the tax system. Stimulate competition in business services and regulated professions.  
2. Reduce disincentives to work for second earners and facilitate transitions to standard employment. Reduce the high tax wedge for low-wage earners. Create conditions to promote higher real wage growth, respecting the role of the social partners. |

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Recommendations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Estonia** | 1. Pursue its fiscal policy in line with the requirements of the preventive arm of the Stability and Growth Pact, which entails remaining at its medium-term budgetary objective in 2018. Improve the adequacy of the social safety net. Take measures to reduce the gender pay gap, in particular by improving wage transparency and reviewing the parental leave system.  
   2. Promote private investment in research, technology and innovation, including by implementing measures for strengthening the cooperation between academia and businesses. |
| **Ireland** | 1. Pursue a substantial fiscal effort in 2018 in line with the requirements of the preventive arm of the Stability and Growth Pact. Use any windfall gains arising from the strong economic and financial conditions, including proceeds from asset sales, to accelerate the reduction of the general government debt ratio. Limit the scope and the number of tax expenditures and broaden the tax base.  
   2. Better target government expenditure, by prioritising public investment in transport, water services, and innovation in particular in support of SMEs. Enhance social infrastructure, including social housing and quality childcare; deliver an integrated package of activation policies to increase employment prospects of low-skilled people and to address low work intensity of households.  
   3. Encourage a continued and more durable reduction in non-performing loans through resolution strategies that involve write-offs for viable businesses and households, with a special emphasis on resolving long-term arrears. |
| **Spain**   | 1. Ensure compliance with the Council Decision of 8 August 2016, including also measures to strengthen the fiscal and public procurement frameworks. Undertake a comprehensive expenditure review in order to identify possible areas for improving spending efficiency.  
   2. Reinforce the coordination between regional employment services, social services and employers, to better respond to jobseekers’ and employers’ needs. Take measures to promote hiring on open-ended contracts. Address regional disparities and fragmentation in income guarantee schemes and improve family support, including access to quality childcare. Increase the labour market relevance of tertiary education. Address regional disparities in educational outcomes, in particular by strengthening teacher training and support for individual students.  
   3. Ensure adequate and sustained investment in research and innovation and strengthen its governance across government levels. Ensure a thorough and timely implementation of the law on market unity for existing and forthcoming legislation. |
| **France**  | 1. Ensure compliance with the Council recommendation of 10 March 2015 under the excessive deficit procedure. Pursue a substantial fiscal effort in 2018 in line with the requirements of the preventive arm of the Stability and Growth Pact, taking into account the need to strengthen the ongoing recovery and to ensure the sustainability of France’s public finances. Comprehensively review expenditure items with the aim to make efficiency gains that translate into expenditure savings.  
   2. Consolidate the measures reducing the cost of labour to maximise their efficiency in a budget-neutral manner and in order to scale up their effects on employment and investment. Broaden the overall tax base and take further action to implement the planned decrease in the statutory corporate-income rate.  
   3. Improve access to the labour market for jobseekers, in particular less-qualified workers and people with a migrant background, including by revising the system of vocational education and training. Ensure that minimum wage developments are consistent with job creation and competitiveness.  
   4. Further reduce the regulatory burden for firms, including by pursuing the simplification programme. Continue to lift barriers to competition in the services sector, including in business services and regulated professions. Simplify and improve the efficiency of public support schemes for innovation. |
| **Croatia** | 1. Pursue its fiscal policy in line with the requirements of the preventive arm of the Stability and Growth Pact, which entails remaining at its medium-term budgetary objective in 2018. By September 2017, reinforce budgetary planning and the multiannual budgetary framework, including by strengthening the independence and mandate of the Fiscal Policy Commission. Take the necessary steps for the introduction of the value-based property tax. Reinforce the framework for public debt management, including by ensuring annual updates of the debt management strategy.  
   2. Discourage early retirement, accelerate the transition to the higher statutory retirement age and align pension provisions for specific categories with the rules of the general scheme. Improve coordination and transparency of social benefits. |
<table>
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<tr>
<th>3. Improve adult education, in particular for older workers, the low-skilled and the long-term unemployed. Accelerate the reform of the education system.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4. Reduce the fragmentation and improve the functional distribution of competencies in public administration, while enhancing the efficiency and reducing territorial disparities in the delivery of public services. In consultation with social partners, harmonise the wage-setting frameworks across the public administration and public services.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Speed up the divestment of state-owned enterprises and other state assets, and improve corporate governance in the state-owned enterprise sector. Significantly reduce the burden on businesses stemming from costs of regulation and from administrative burdens. Remove regulatory restrictions hampering access to and the practice of regulated professions and professional and business services. Improve the quality and efficiency of the justice system, in particular by reducing the length of civil and commercial cases.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Italy**

1. Pursue a substantial fiscal effort in 2018, in line with the requirements of the preventive arm of the Stability and Growth Pact, taking into account the need to strengthen the ongoing recovery and to ensure the sustainability of Italy's public finances. Ensure timely implementation of the privatisation programme and use windfall gains to accelerate the reduction of the general government debt-to-GDP ratio. Shift the tax burden from the factors of production onto taxes less detrimental to growth in a budget-neutral way by taking decisive action to reduce the number and scope of tax expenditures, reforming the outdated cadastral system and reintroducing the first residence tax for high-income households. Broaden the compulsory use of electronic invoicing and payments.

2. Reduce the trial length in civil justice through effective case management and rules ensuring procedural discipline. Step up the fight against corruption, in particular by revising the statute of limitations. Complete reforms of public employment and improve the efficiency of publicly-owned enterprises. Promptly adopt and implement the pending law on competition and address the remaining restrictions to competition.

3. Accelerate the reduction in the stock of non-performing loans and step up incentives for balance-sheet clean-up and restructuring, in particular in the segment of banks under national supervision. Adopt a comprehensive overhaul of the regulatory framework for insolvency and collateral enforcement.

4. With the involvement of social partners, strengthen the collective bargaining framework to allow collective agreements to better take into account local conditions. Ensure effective active labour market policies. Facilitate the take-up of work for second earners. Rationalise social spending and improve its composition.

**Cyprus**

1. Pursue its fiscal policy in line with the requirements of the preventive arm of the Stability and Growth Pact, which entails remaining at its medium-term budgetary objective in 2018. Use windfall gains to accelerate the reduction of the general government debt ratio. By the end of 2017, adopt key legislative reforms aiming to improve efficiency in the public sector, in particular on the functioning of public administration, governance of state-owned entities and local governments.

2. Increase the efficiency of the judicial system by modernising civil procedures, implementing appropriate information systems and increasing the specialisation of courts. Take additional measures to eliminate impediments to the full implementation of the insolvency and foreclosure frameworks, and to ensure reliable and swift systems for the issuance of title deeds and the transfer of immovable property rights.

3. Accelerate the reduction of non-performing loans by setting related quantitative and time-bound targets for banks and ensuring accurate valuation of collateral for provisioning purposes. Create the conditions for a functional secondary market for non-performing loans. Integrate and strengthen the supervision of insurance companies and pension funds.

4. Accelerate the implementation of the action plan for growth, focusing in particular on fast-tracking strategic investments and improving access to finance, and, by the end of 2017, resume the implementation of the privatisation plan. Take decisive steps towards the ownership unbundling of the Electricity Authority of Cyprus and, in particular, proceed with the functional and accounting unbundling by the end of 2017.

5. Speed up reforms aimed at increasing the capacity of public employment services and improving the quality of active labour market policies delivery. Complete the reform of the education system to improve its labour market relevance and performance, including teachers' evaluation. By the end of 2017, adopt legislation for a hospital reform and universal healthcare coverage.

**Latvia**

1. Pursue its fiscal policy in line with the requirements of the preventive arm of the Stability and Growth Pact, which entails achieving its medium-term budgetary objective in 2018, taking into account the allowances linked to the implementation of the systemic pension reform and of the structural reforms for which a temporary deviation is granted. Reduce taxation for low-income earners by shifting it to other sources that are less detrimental to growth and by improving tax compliance.

2. Improve the adequacy of the social safety net and upskill the labour force by speeding up the curricula reform in vocational education. Increase the cost-effectiveness of and access to healthcare, including by reducing out-of-pocket payments and long waiting times.
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Measures</th>
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| Lithuania| 1. Pursue its fiscal policy in line with the requirements of the preventive arm of the Stability and Growth Pact, which entails remaining at its medium term budgetary objective in 2018, taking into account the allowances linked to the implementation of the systemic pension reform and of the structural reforms for which a temporary deviation is granted. Improve tax compliance and broaden the tax base to sources that are less detrimental to growth. Take steps to address the medium-term fiscal sustainability challenge related to pensions.  
2. Address skills shortages through effective active labour market policy measures and adult learning and improve educational outcomes by rewarding quality in teaching and in higher education. Improve the performance of the healthcare system by strengthening outpatient care, disease prevention and affordability. Improve the adequacy of the social safety net.  
3. Take measures to strengthen productivity by improving the efficiency of public investment and strengthening its linkage with the country’s strategic objectives. |
| Luxembourg| 1. Strengthen the diversification of the economy, including by removing barriers to investment and innovation. Remove regulatory restrictions in the business services sector.  
2. Ensure the long-term sustainability of the pension system, limit early retirement and increase the employment rate of older people. |
| Hungary  | 1. Pursue a substantial fiscal effort in 2018 in line with the requirements of the preventive arm of the Stability and Growth Pact, taking into account the need to strengthen the ongoing recovery and to ensure the sustainability of Hungary’s public finances.  
2. Complete the reduction of the tax wedge for low-income earners and simplify the tax structure, in particular by reducing the most distortive sector-specific taxes. Strengthen transparency and competition in public procurement, by implementing a comprehensive and efficient e-procurement system, and strengthen the anti-corruption framework. Strengthen regulatory predictability, transparency and competition in particular in the services sector, notably in retail.  
3. Better target the public works scheme to those furthest away from the labour market and provide effective support to jobseekers in order to facilitate transitions to the labour market, including by reinforcing active labour market policies. Take measures to improve education outcomes and to increase the participation of disadvantaged groups, in particular Roma, in inclusive mainstream education. Improve the adequacy and coverage of social assistance and the duration of unemployment benefits. |
| Malta    | 1. Expand the scope of the ongoing spending reviews to the broader public sector and introduce performance-based public spending.  
2. Ensure the effective national supervision of internationally oriented business by financial institutions licensed in Malta by strengthening cooperation with the host supervisors in the countries where they operate. |
| Netherlands| 1. While respecting the medium-term objective, use fiscal and structural policies to support potential growth and domestic demand, including investment in research and development. Take measures to reduce the remaining distortions in the housing market and the debt bias for households, in particular by decreasing mortgage interest tax deductibility.  
2. Tackle remaining barriers to hiring staff on permanent contracts. Address the high increase in the self-employed without employees, including by reducing tax distortions favouring self-employment, without compromising entrepreneurship, and by promoting access of the self-employed to affordable social protection. Based on the broad preparatory process already launched, make the second pillar of the pension system more transparent, inter-generationally fairer and more resilient to shocks. Create conditions to promote higher real wage growth, respecting the role of the social partners. |
| Austria  | 1. Pursue its fiscal policy in line with the requirements of the preventive arm of the Stability and Growth Pact, which entails achieving its medium-term budgetary objective in 2018, taking into account the allowance linked to unusual events. Ensure the sustainability of the healthcare system and of the pension system. Rationalise and streamline competencies across the various layers of government and align their financing and spending responsibilities.  
2. Improve labour market outcomes for women through, inter alia, the provision of full-time care services. Improve the educational achievements of disadvantaged young people, in particular those from a migrant background. Foster investment in the services sector by reducing administrative and regulatory barriers, easing market entry and facilitation. |
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| Poland  | 1. Pursue a substantial fiscal effort in 2018, in line with the requirements of the preventive arm of the Stability and Growth Pact, taking into account the need to strengthen the ongoing recovery and to ensure the sustainability of Poland’s public finances. Take steps to improve the efficiency of public spending and limit the use of reduced VAT rates.  
2. Take steps to increase labour market participation, in particular for women, the low-qualified and older people, including by fostering adequate skills and removing obstacles to more permanent types of employment. Ensure the sustainability and adequacy of the pension system by taking measures to increase the effective retirement age and by starting to reform the preferential pension arrangements.  
3. Take measures to remove barriers to investment, particularly in the transport sector. |
| Portugal| 1. Ensure the durability of the correction of the excessive deficit. Pursue a substantial fiscal effort in 2018 in line with the requirements of the preventive arm of the Stability and Growth Pact, taking into account the need to strengthen the ongoing recovery and to ensure the sustainability of Portugal’s public finances. Use windfall gains to accelerate the reduction of the general government debt-to-GDP ratio. Step up efforts to broaden the expenditure review to cover a significant share of general government spending across several policies. Strengthen expenditure control, cost effectiveness and adequate budgeting, in particular in the health sector with a focus on the reduction of arrears in hospitals and ensure the sustainability of the pension system. To increase the financial sustainability of state-owned enterprises set sector-specific efficiency targets in time for the 2018 budget, improving state-owned enterprises’ overall net income and decreasing the burden on the state budget.  
2. Promote hiring on open-ended contracts, including by reviewing the legal framework. Ensure the effective activation of the long-term unemployed. Together with social partners, ensure that minimum wage developments do not harm employment of the low-skilled.  
3. Step up efforts to clean up the balance sheets of credit institutions by implementing a comprehensive strategy addressing non-performing loans, including by enhancing the secondary market for bad assets. Improve the access to capital, in particular for start-ups and small and medium-sized enterprises.  
4. Implement a roadmap to further reduce the administrative burden and tackle regulatory barriers in construction and business services by the end of 2017. Increase the efficiency of insolvency and tax proceedings. |
| Romania | 1. In 2017, ensure compliance with the Council Recommendation of 16 June 2017 with a view to correcting the significant deviation from the adjustment path toward the medium-term budgetary objective. In 2018, pursue a substantial fiscal effort in line with the requirements of the preventive arm of the Stability and Growth Pact. Ensure the full application of the fiscal framework. Strengthen tax compliance and collection. Fight undeclared work, including by ensuring the systematic use of integrated controls.  
2. Strengthen targeted activation policies and integrated public services, focusing on those furthest away from the labour market. Adopt legislation equalising the pension age for men and women. Establish a transparent mechanism for minimum wage-setting, in consultation with social partners. Improve access to quality mainstream education, in particular for Roma and children in rural areas. In healthcare, shift to outpatient care and curb informal payments.  
3. Adopt legislation to ensure a professional and independent civil service, applying objective criteria. Strengthen project prioritisation and preparation in public investment. Ensure the timely full and sustainable implementation of the national public procurement strategy. |
| Slovenia | 1. Pursue a substantial fiscal effort in 2018 in line with the requirements of the preventive arm of the Stability and Growth Pact, taking into account the need to strengthen the ongoing recovery and to ensure the sustainability of Slovenia’s public finances. Adopt and implement the proposed reform of the healthcare system and adopt the planned reform of long-term care, increasing cost-effectiveness, accessibility and quality care. Fully tap the potential of centralised procurement in the health sector. Adopt the necessary measures to ensure the long-term sustainability and adequacy of the pension system.  
2. Intensify efforts to increase the employability of low-skilled and older workers, particularly through targeted lifelong learning and activation measures.  
3. Improve the financing conditions, including by facilitating a durable resolution of non-performing loans and access to alternative sources of financing. Ensure the full implementation of the bank asset management company strategy. Reduce the administrative burden on business deriving from rules on spatial planning and construction permits and ensure good governance of state-owned enterprises. |
### Slovakia

1. Pursue a substantial fiscal effort in 2018 in line with the requirements of the preventive arm of the Stability and Growth Pact, taking into account **the need to strengthen the ongoing recovery and to ensure the sustainability of Slovakia’s public finances.** Improve the cost-effectiveness of the healthcare system, including by implementing the value-for-money project.

   2. Improve activation measures for disadvantaged groups, including by implementing the action plan for the long-term unemployed and by providing individualised services and targeted training. Enhance employment opportunities for women, especially by extending affordable, quality childcare. Improve the quality of education and increase the participation of Roma in inclusive mainstream education.

   3. **Improve competition and transparency in public procurement operations and step up the fight against corruption by stronger enforcement of existing legislation.** Adopt and implement a comprehensive plan to lower administrative and regulatory barriers for businesses. Improve the effectiveness of the justice system, including a reduction in the length of civil and commercial cases.

### Finland

1. Pursue its fiscal policy in line with the requirements of the preventive arm of the Stability and Growth Pact, which entails achieving its medium-term budgetary objective in 2018, taking into account the allowances linked to unusual events, the implementation of the structural reforms and investments for which a temporary deviation is granted. Ensure timely adoption and implementation of the administrative reform to improve cost-effectiveness of social and healthcare services.

   2. **Promote the further alignment of wages with productivity developments,** fully respecting the role of social partners. Take targeted active labour market policy measures to address employment and social challenges, provide incentives to accept work and promote entrepreneurship.

   3. **Continue to improve the regulatory framework and reduce the administrative burden to increase competition in services and to promote investment.**

### Sweden

1. **Address risks related to household debt,** in particular by gradually limiting the tax deductibility of mortgage interest payments or by increasing recurrent property taxes, while constraining lending at excessive debt-to-income levels. Foster investment in housing and improve the efficiency of the housing market, including by introducing more flexibility in setting rental prices and revising the design of the capital gains tax.

### UK

1. Pursue a substantial fiscal effort in 2018-19 in line with the requirements of the preventive arm of the Stability and Growth Pact, taking into account the need to strengthen the ongoing recovery and **to ensure the sustainability of the United Kingdom’s public finances.**

   2. Take further steps to boost housing supply, including through reforms to planning rules and their implementation.

   3. **Address skills mismatches and provide for skills progression,** including by continuing to strengthen the quality of apprenticeships and providing for other funded ‘further education’ progression routes.
Annex 2: CSRs since 2014

Provided separately.

Annex 3: List of European Semester officers in the European Commission delegations in the national capitals

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About this project

The CEMR-ESPU joint project “Localising the European Semester” looks at new ways to establish or reinforce existing channels that allow the involvement of social partners in the yearly mechanism of the European Semester.

The overall goal of this project is to strengthen the role of European and national social partners of local and regional governments in the decision-making process of the European Semester and to increase their involvement in the discussion concerning different outcomes of the Semester – Annual Growth Survey, Country Reports, National Reform Programmes, and Country Specific Recommendations – more homogenous across Member States, while respecting national practices and features.

This project receives the financial support of the European Commission, DG Employment, Social Affairs & Inclusion, call for proposals VP/2017/001.

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