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**‘Going European’:
domestic politics and
expertise matter.
National trade union
strategies for involvement
in the European Semester**



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Analytical Report Work Package 4

**Slavina Spasova, Sebastiano Sabato
and Mathis Porchez**



'Going European': domestic politics and expertise matter. National trade union strategies for involvement in the European Semester

Analytical Report Work Package 4

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European Social Observatory

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Introduction ⁽¹⁾

Does the European Semester matter to national trade unions? If so, what are their main strategies for involvement in the process? These are the main questions underlying this Research paper – written as part of the European Commission-funded project ‘National Trade Union Involvement in the European Semester’ (INVOTUNES). The INVOTUNES project focuses on social policy (employment, wage setting, social protection and social inclusion) during the period 2014-2018. This paper is mainly based on the findings of eight case studies ⁽²⁾ carried out by INVOTUNES country teams, which provide in-depth analysis of the involvement of national trade unions in the Semester process in Belgium, Bulgaria, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Portugal, and Sweden ⁽³⁾.

In particular, this paper aims to identify the strategies used by national trade unions in order to be involved in both the national and EU cycles of the European Semester. It also examines the factors determining the choice of such strategies by investigating the type of strategies these organisations actually adopt, the levels of governance and the actors they target, the resources they can use in order to implement these strategies, and possible ‘coalition building’ dynamics aimed at increasing the effectiveness of their involvement in the Semester.

The other two INVOTUNES analytical Research papers focus, respectively: a) on the channels through which national trade unions are involved in the Semester and their influence on the decision-making process (if any) (Kirov and Markova 2020); and 2) on the interplay between the Semester and the dynamics of national social dialogue, the latter emerging as an important determinant of national trade unions’ strategic choices in the Semester (Pavolini and Natili 2020).

The remainder of this Research paper is organised as follows. Section 1 outlines the analytical framework, focusing on the determinants and types of trade union strategy. It also sets up the main hypotheses. Section 2 presents the analysis of the eight case studies, testing the hypotheses. The conclusions summarise the main findings and include some forward-looking reflections.

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1. The authors would like to warmly thank Bart Vanhercke (OSE) and the colleagues from the INVOTUNES consortium for their meaningful comments and remarks on previous versions of this Research paper, which have been discussed at several project workshops. The usual disclaimer applies.
 2. Albert (2019), Jansson *et al.* (2019), Kangas (2019), Kraemer (2020), Pavolini and Natili (2019), Peña-Casas and Ghailani (2019), Perista and Perista (2019), Tomev *et al.* (2019). The case studies are published in the European Social Observatory (OSE) Working Paper Series: <http://www.ose.be/invotunes/index.html>
 3. In line with the methodological and analytical framework of the INVOTUNES project (Sabato 2018), these case studies used a qualitative methodology, including interviews with key informants.

1. Trade union strategies for involvement in the Semester: key notions and hypotheses

The European Union (EU) has been described as 'contested terrain' (Hyman 2005: 13) for involvement of the trade unions, and their attitudes towards EU integration have varied across countries and over time. In a nutshell, Nordic unions have been less keen on Europeanisation, while Continental, Southern, and, even more so, Eastern European unions have been more enthusiastic. However, as Hyman argues, there has more recently been some convergence of ideas on European integration, a process which owes a lot to the exhaustion of the old ideologies, with Europe becoming a '*new moral inspiration*' (Ibid: 20). In these circumstances, trade unions' involvement with the EU has largely shied away from contentious politics (Ibid: 35).

What about national trade union strategies within the new economic governance arrangements and, in particular, the European Semester (hereafter referred to as 'the Semester')? At the onset of the Semester, the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) and several national trade unions strongly criticised the process, not only in terms of its content but also because of its means of governance. Some observers highlighted that the new European economic governance made it even more difficult for the European trade unions and social movements to politicise European economic governance and practice contentious politics (Erne 2015). Although, in 2010, the ETUC spoke out strongly against the design of the new European governance regime in its submissions to national and European policymakers, it '*refrained from making it an object of contentious collective action*' (Erne 2015: 352).

Thus, both the ETUC and national trade unions had to deal with a new system of governance which was there to stay. The Juncker European Commission (2014-2019) has shown increased willingness to streamline the Semester as well as a commitment to involve the social partners in it by creating new venues and procedures. It is in this context that we examine *national trade union strategies for involvement in the European Semester* (4): how they have evolved, how the unions' views have changed, and what factors have determined their choices.

Trade union engagement with the EU level has, as a whole, been the subject of extensive research (for an overview see Hyman 2001, 2005; Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman 2013). However, in recent years very few studies have focused on the involvement of trade unions in the Semester, and in the new economic governance in general (but see Sabato *et al.* 2017; Erne 2015). Research on trade union involvement has highlighted certain main factors behind (lack of) involvement with EU matters. These include: overall participation/inclusion in the domestic policy-making process (embeddedness

4. We define involvement as '[...] a process entailing stakeholders' **access** to decision-making venues and procedures and an exchange of **resources** with policymakers (at least, information), possibly leading to an **influence** on the agenda setting, the **outputs** and **outcomes** of the policy process' (Sabato 2018: 7, italics and bold in the original).

in the institutional structure); degree of EU pressure; relations with domestic parties and governments; the resources available; and the salience of the policy issue to be addressed (Beyers and Kerremans 2012). Linked to these factors, with specific reference to national trade union strategies for involvement in the Semester, we identify four dimensions characterizing such strategies: a) type of strategies (proactive versus responsive); b) targets (insider versus outsider); c) level of governance (national or EU); and d) degree of cooperation between trade unions and other social actors. In the following section we identify four hypotheses linked to these dimensions.

Before focusing on our hypotheses, we define strategies as *'sets of actions consciously followed by actors in order to become involved in the various milestones of the policy process, with a view to influence its outputs'* (Sabato 2018: 10; for an overview of the literature on trade union strategies see Gahan 1998; Hyman 2007). The strategies depend on organisational resources, procedures and traditions *'which link knowledge to action through analysis of circumstances, evaluation of alternative options and planning of objectives and forms of intervention'* (Hyman 2007: 198).

As this Research paper is the final product of the two-year INVOTUNES project, the hypotheses are the product of a literature review and of multiple iterations between the theory and discussion of the eight national case studies. The factors most relevant to the *type of strategies* the trade unions pursue for involvement in the Semester are the degree of EU pressure, the issues at stake and the resources to be invested.

The degree of EU pressure from the Semester on the Member States, which differs significantly from one country to the next, seems to have an impact on trade unions' strategies (see Sabato *et al.* 2017; Sabato 2018). In order to measure this variable, we refer to Stamati and Baeten (2014: 15), who created an index of 'EU leverage'. The highest value of EU influence is attributed to countries that previously signed a Memorandum of Understanding but are now subject to the ordinary Semester procedures. The other Member States are classified in the remaining groups ('moderate' or 'weak' leverage), using factors such as the number and content of the Country-specific Recommendations they received, whether they are Eurozone countries, and whether they have been subject to an Excessive Deficit Procedure (EDP) or have signed an Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) (Sabato 2018).

In addition to the extent of EU pressure, the two other factors of prime importance are the policy issues as well as the (type) of resources available. As already stated, the INVOTUNES project examines the involvement of trade unions in the Semester in relation to social policy. We would clearly expect national trade union involvement to become stronger, the closer the EU messages come to the social policy area. Research on interest groups' venue shopping has indeed robustly confirmed the importance of the nature of policy issues as a key factor in the pursuit of active strategies for involvement at various levels of governance (Beyers and Kerremans 2012).

1.1 How actively do trade unions become involved in the Semester?

Banks (1999) draws a distinction between 'proactive' and 'reactive' strategies. While actors adopting reactive strategies take action only in response to specific policies which they perceive as a threat, those with proactive strategies seek to influence the creation of new policies or make improvements to existing policies in a more on-going and broader way.

Considering the empirical findings of the eight case studies, we would be inclined to distinguish between proactive strategies for involvement (specific actions seeking to influence the process) and responsive strategies (responding to the demands of policymakers without pursuing proactive involvement strategies). Our first sub-hypothesis with regard to the types of strategies is the following:

H1 Type of involvement: proactive versus responsive strategies

A) The stronger the EU pressure and the more important the policy issue for the trade unions, the more proactive is the strategy followed by the unions within the European Semester.

The second sub-hypothesis relates to trade union resources. These are assumed to play a key role in the interaction with policymakers. Indeed, the relationship between interest groups and decision-makers can be seen as an exchange of resources, where the former typically seek political influence and the latter have an interest in building relationships with groups which control valuable resources (Blom-Hansen and Daugbjerg 1999, quoted by Binderkrantz 2008: 178). In other words, in order to be involved in policy-making in general, and in the Semester in particular, trade unions must have the right resources, i.e. those needed by policymakers. Existing research categorises and labels resources in different ways, but most often resources are linked to their politico-institutional (Dente 2011; Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman 2013) and organisational power (Lévesque and Murray 2010; Müller and Platzter 2017).

'*Politico-institutional power*' comprises membership density, participation and representativeness in national decision-making bodies, as well as links to political actors. As regards '*organisational power*', research has most often focused on the organisational structure of the trade unions (vertical and horizontal coordination/cooperation with other trade union organisations, mobilisation capacity of their members) as well as the economic and financial resources at their disposal. Research has also considered the category of cognitive resources, which may include also 'narrative' (Lévesque and Murray 2010) and 'discursive' or 'communicative' resources (Müller and Platzter 2017). Cognitive resources refer to a broad set of elements, including ideologies and values, expertise, ability to take part in public debates etc. (for a classification of the trade union resources considered in this project, see Annex 1).

Resources are thus important, but research has also shown that in a situation of ‘multi-venue shopping’ (involvement at different policy levels), they seem not to be of primary importance in determining strategies and involvement (Beyers and Kerremans 2012). Some empirical findings from the eight INVOTUNES country case studies raise questions in this respect: *why do the Swedish trade unions, which have strong resources, not pursue proactive strategies for involvement in the Semester, while Italian unions, with declining resources, strongly pursue such policies?* To control this variable and to test and assess the importance of resources in trade unions’ strategic choices, as reflected in the eight case studies, we examine the following hypothesis:

B) The more resources the trade unions have, the more proactive their strategy is.

For the purposes of this Research paper, we distinguish between five types of resources that trade unions can draw on in order to be involved in the policy-making process. They are, first, political resources: links to political actors and institutionalised participation in the management of public bodies/schemes. Second, organisational resources: trade union density (organisational or political resources); vertical coordination of the trade union confederations with their affiliated members; mobilisation capacity of their members; horizontal coordination and cooperation (e.g. coalition building) with other trade union federations, with employers or with other stakeholders. Third, cognitive resources⁽⁵⁾. Fourth, economic and financial resources: the financial capacity of trade unions through membership, projects, subsidies etc. Fifth, legal resources, i.e. legal expertise/capacity, which is important for participation in the policy process (for more information see Box 1 in Annex 1).

It is not possible to carry out a precise measurement of the resources available. On the basis of trade unions’ self-assessment and of the analysis of the INVOTUNES national case studies, we find that the amount of resources available to trade unions in the countries under scrutiny differs to a large degree (see Table 1). This table serves as a basis for analysis, and for a discussion of the resources brought to bear in the European Semester in Section 2.1.

5. Within the category of cognitive resources, a distinction appears necessary between (Dente 2011: 173-174): information and data, cognitive theories and models, and knowledge of the policy process. To this list we also add human resources.

Table 1: Trade union resources in the national decision-making process

Resources	Political	Organisational	Cognitive	Financial	Legal
Level					
High	BE, FI, SE	BG, BE, FI, SE	BG, BE, DE, FI, SE	BE, FI, SE	BG, BE, DE, FI, PT, SE
Medium	BG, DE, IT, PT	DE, IT, PT	IT, PT	BG, DE, IT, PT	IT, HU
Low	HU	HU	HU	HU	

Source: authors’ own analysis, based on the INVOTUNES Country case studies (2019). The table does not aim to be exhaustive and is based on the unions’ perceptions for the period 2014-2018.

1.2 Who do trade unions target in the Semester process?

The second dimension of trade union strategies in the Semester process concerns their targets. The literature on interest groups usually distinguishes between insider and outsider strategies (Beyers 2004; Binderkrantz 2008; Binderkrantz and Krøyer 2012). Insider strategies consist of direct contacts with either bureaucratic or elected institutions/bodies, while outsider strategies involve media campaigns reaching the broader public or protest strategies requiring the mobilisation of members (6). As pointed out by Weiler and Brändli (2015), insider strategies aim to gain access (to policy-making circles), while outsider strategies aim to ‘go public’.

The European Semester is often considered as an evidence-based process. Of course, politics are still important but, in order to have an impact on the decisions taken in such a context, actors need to provide strong evidence justifying their stances (Zeitlin and Vanhercke 2018). Other authors consider the Semester as mainly a bureaucratic process, where a key role is played by bureaucrats – notably the European Commission and national officials – and which contributes to the building of a multi-level administrative space, rather than an arena for political debate (Vanheuverzwijn and Crespy 2018). We can therefore expect, given the bureaucratic and evidence-based nature of the Semester, that social partners will mainly adopt insider strategies. Our hypothesis in relation to the targets of strategies is the following:

H2 Target of strategies: insider versus outsider strategies

A) Given the evidence-based and technical character of the Semester, the unions will mostly adopt insider strategies, and target policymakers and civil servants.

However, it is legitimate to ask whether, during the years under scrutiny, the trade unions also adopted outsider strategies. Indeed, the evidence from the eight country case studies shows that

6. Binderkrantz (2005: 696) prefers to distinguish between ‘direct strategies’ (where groups approach public decision-makers) and ‘indirect strategies’.

there were social protests on several occasions. *Were the Semester messages alluded to as part of these outsider strategies?* In most cases, these strategies seem to reflect shortcomings in the national decision-making process, and in particular in social dialogue (see also Pavolini and Natili 2020). Thus, our second hypothesis is the following:

- B) If there are shortcomings in the participation of the trade unions in the national decision-making process, the trade unions will adopt outsider strategies linked to the Semester messages.*

1.3 At what level of governance do unions target their strategies for involvement in the Semester?

The third dimension of trade unions' strategies is the level of governance on which these are focused. In a multi-level context such as the Semester, trade unions, if they wish to become involved in the policy process, can choose to invest their resources at national or at European level (or at both levels simultaneously). The unions are per se focused on the national level, as they are among the main actors in the national decision-making process. So, the question which arises is: when do they focus their involvement on the EU level? The literature on the Europeanisation of trade unions shows that their involvement at EU level has often been motivated by a wish to have their voice heard, if it is being ignored in the national political arena (Hyman 2001; Bechter *et al.* 2017; Müller and Platzer 2017). The literature on interest groups' involvement with the EU level, in situations of multilevel venue shopping, also shows that the extent to which organizations are connected with the domestic political arena matters a great deal. Multilevel venue shopping, and appeals to the EU level, are a way to compensate for a lack of domestic access. Access of interest groups to domestic policy-making, and especially to domestic party politics, is of vital importance when it comes to understanding multi-venue shopping (Beyers and Kerremans 2012).

For the purposes of this project, we consider two main national institutional frameworks potentially affecting trade unions' strategic choices concerning the level of governance to target in order to be involved in decision-making: a) the process of national involvement in the Semester; and b) the features of national social dialogue. Our third hypothesis is thus as follows:

H3 Level of governance (national decision-making versus the EU level)

- A) Shortcomings in trade union involvement in the national policy-making process will push the trade unions to seek more proactive involvement in the EU cycle of the Semester.*
- B) Effective involvement in national decision making will keep trade union involvement mainly at national level.*

1.4 Which actors do trade unions cooperate with in the context of the Semester?

In the context of the Semester, national trade unions can opt for autonomous strategies, or they can seek to build coordinated strategies with other actors, such as other trade unions, employers' organisations, NGOs or political parties.

H4 Degree of cooperation/coordination

As mentioned in the introduction, the era of ideological opposition between trade unions has been drawing to an end (Hyman 2005). It is true that trade union federations and confederations still disagree on policies, ideas, trends to follow and specific issues. However, with regard to the Semester, and given how hard it often is to have their voice heard in the national arena (see Sabato *et al.* 2017), we would assume that they would cooperate/coordinate among themselves in order to have a greater impact.

A) In countries where the unions are proactively involved, the union federations will seek to jointly influence the Semester's main messages.

The second sub-hypothesis concerns cooperation/coordination with employers in the Semester and stems from the recognition that, in many EU countries, the state of social dialogue and collective bargaining deteriorated during the crisis and was still in a grim situation during the period 2014-2018. Empirical evidence from the eight country case studies also suggests that employers and trade unions often held opposing positions and did not cooperate with regard to the Semester. To test these assumptions, we formulate the following hypothesis:

B) The degree of cooperation/coordination with employers in the Semester will be issue-driven, as in the national policy-making process.

Finally, the third sub-hypothesis concerns cooperation/coordination with civil society organisations, and mirrors, to some extent, the previous sub-hypothesis. The love-hate relationship between trade unions and civil society organisations has been explored at length in the literature (Heery and Abbott 2012; Frege *et al.* 2005). Although, moreover, the literature on why interest groups form coalitions is still underdeveloped (Hanegraaff and Pritoni 2019), one of the most convincing explanations is that 'interest groups who perceive themselves as weaker (...) in the political arena (...) will increase cooperation' while 'in reverse, groups which perceive themselves as stronger (...) have fewer incentives to cooperate and therefore will be less inclined to actually cooperate with others' (*Ibid.*: 199). *Would the trade unions, which are recognised as social partners and take part in the national policy-making process, seek cooperation with NGOs?* The balance of power between them is, in any case, asymmetrical. Moreover, forming a coalition incurs substantial costs for them since 'they have to coordinate a network, must compromise on their demands, and cannot individually claim the credit for success to their members' (*Ibid.*: 202). Finally, trade unions represent the workers, while

civil society organisations may represent a broad spectrum of people. However, trade unions may coordinate and cooperate on various occasions, depending on the specific issues.

Thus, our last sub-hypothesis is the following:

C) Trade union cooperation/coordination with civil society organisations in the context of the Semester will be only sporadic and issue-driven.

2. Trade union strategies for involvement in the European Semester: types and targets

This section focuses on analysis of the core issue of the paper: trade union strategies for involvement in the European Semester. Guided by our four main hypotheses, we will analyse the types of strategies (proactive or responsive) which trade unions put in place for involvement (Section 2.1), their targets (2.2), the level at which these are targeted (national or EU) (2.3), and whether and with whom they coordinate/cooperate for involvement in the Semester (2.4).

2.1 Types of involvement: proactive versus responsive strategies ⁽⁷⁾

We assumed that the type of strategy used with regard to the Semester will depend to a certain extent on two factors: the degree of EU pressure on the country – in particular in relation to issues falling under the remit of the trade unions – as well the availability of strong resources.

2.1.1 EU pressure and issue-driven involvement

Pressure from the EU is a factor which determines the importance of the Semester in the eight countries under scrutiny, and therefore is expected to impact the activeness of the strategies followed by political and social actors within the Semester. We assumed that the stronger the EU pressure, the more proactive the strategies for involvement. And vice-versa, we assumed that the less EU pressure exists, the more the trade unions will have rather responsive strategies, i.e. responding to policymakers' requests or simply being involved in the formalised Semester process (e.g. attending meetings, providing opinions on the National Reform Programmes) but not seeking to be actively involved. In addition, we also assumed that, irrespective of the overall degree of EU pressure on a country, the most important factor is the issue being addressed: if the issue is important for the trade union, it will strive to become actively involved in the Semester.

7. There may be differences between the level of involvement of various trade union organisations in the same country. Given the restricted scope of the paper, we do not provide details on this, though we mention it in some cases. We invite the reader to check the respective INVOTUNES country reports, bearing in mind that these have only limited information on this issue.

Sweden and Germany: low EU pressure and issue-driven selective involvement

Sweden and Germany are typical cases of low EU pressure. Moreover, in Sweden especially there were barely any CSRs on social policy issues during the period under examination. Sweden is not part of the Eurozone, its economic recovery since the recession has been comparatively good, and it scores quite well in the Social Scoreboard linked to the European Pillar of Social Rights (Jansson *et al.* 2019). Similarly, Germany's economic situation is good and EU pressure is quite low. Germany's compliance with the Semester is selective: as an architect of the Semesters' governance architecture, it complies with the fiscal rules but is reluctant to comply with the Macro-economic Imbalance Procedure or to follow the EU-level recommendations. The drafting of the National Reform Programme (NRP) is an administrative task of limited importance. The argument of the main trade union federation, *Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund* (DGB), is that involvement in the annual EU Semester cycles is not a top priority compared to other policy objectives (Kraemer 2020).

Most of the time, Swedish trade unions follow a rather sporadic and responsive, even reactive, strategy for involvement in the Semester (Jansson *et al.* 2019). In Germany, the trade unions always react to the consultation process on the Semester at national level as it is a routine procedure, i.e. they adopt a responsive strategy (Kraemer 2020). However, although it is not their priority, Swedish and German trade unions do not ignore the Semester. In addition to their formalised involvement in the Semester-specific channels and mechanisms (e.g. meetings on specific deliverables of the Semester⁸), they monitor the process to check that it is not going against their long-term strategic interests. The issues conveyed by the Semester may come to be of vital importance. By way of an example, in 2012 the Commission issued a CSR to Sweden regarding wage bargaining; however, this happened before the period considered in this report, 2014-2018, and there have been no similar CSRs since. This was not well received by the trade unions, which viewed it as an attack on national dialogue and on the autonomy of the social partners. In reaction, they became involved in the Semester process by contacting and convincing the Minister of Finance to act. The minister, in turn, put pressure on the Commission – successfully, since this section of the recommendations was amended in the Council's 2012 CSR for Sweden (Jansson *et al.* 2019). In Germany, where the trade unions have campaigned for years for more public investment in infrastructure and education, the meetings held with the Commission in the context of the Semester were used to put across these demands. In contrast, the relevance of most social policy CSRs for national social dialogue is limited; the trade unions do not expect the national government to take on board those recommendations which are perceived as mostly in the trade unions' interest or are already addressed by tripartite initiatives. All in all, the CSRs are only of selective use for the trade unions (e.g. to enhance the

8. For more information on channels for involvement, see Kirov and Markova (2020).

conditions for wage growth, or the CSR on facilitating the transfer from mini-jobs to standard employment; Kraemer 2020).

Portugal: 'moderate to strong' EU pressure but mostly 'responsive' involvement

As already mentioned, between 2011 and 2014 Portugal was under a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) ⁽⁹⁾ on specific economic policy conditionality, and was thus subject to strong EU pressure. The European Semester has been seen by Portuguese social partners as a continuation of external intervention in Portugal. Several EU Semester messages made strong social policy points during the period 2014-2018. The trade unions sought involvement, in response to some of the EU's recommendations. In decisive moments and regarding key social policy reforms, the social partners were able to reach an agreement, even when these agreements were not in line with Commission recommendations. The opposite is also true: trade unionists explain that in relation to certain topics, they refer to messages deriving from the Semester. However, at least up until the change in government in 2015 (see also Section 2.3), the main strategy of the Portuguese unions was responsive rather than proactive: they responded to requests and questions from European or national administrations, or to the requirements stemming from participation in national social dialogue (Perista and Perista 2019).

In contrast to the examples of Sweden and Germany, most trade unions in four of the countries where EU pressure is medium (Belgium, Bulgaria, Finland) to strong (Italy) adopt pro-active strategies with regard to the various stages of the European Semester. One exception is Portugal, where strong EU pressure is not matched by proactive strategies for involvement. Hungary is another exception: in this country, moderate EU pressure and important social policy issues addressed in the Semester have not led to proactive trade union involvement. We will return to this particular case, which we see as an outlier, below.

Belgium, Bulgaria, Finland: moderate EU pressure and salient issue-driven involvement

In these three countries, the Semester has been relatively important with regard to social policies, with variations between countries and between stages of the Semester.

9. It should be noted that the degree of EU pressure was not constant during the period 2014-2018 for all countries. Given the limited scope of this report, we do not go into details for each country. However, it is important to consider the case of Portugal. For some of the period between 2014 and 2018, Portugal was under a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on specific economic policy conditionality (between 2011 and 2014) and was thus subject to a strong degree of EU pressure. Since then, the country has gained more autonomy *vis-à-vis* the EU but is still considered as a country subject to '*moderate to strong*' EU pressure (Sabato 2018).

The EU has exerted considerable pressure on Belgium in the CSRs in relation to various policy issues: the wage setting system, pensions, taxation, labour market participation of older workers and several others. The Semester messages to increase cuts in public spending were extensively conveyed in the government's discourse on reforms. Since the structural reforms in these areas affect core trade union business, Belgian unions have been strongly involved in the Semester process and have tried to influence it. The trade unions, as well as the employers, provide their respective opinions in a joint contribution via the National Labour Council; this paper is annexed to the NRP and is thought to give their views more prominence. In addition, the trade unions have taken the initiative to present a joint note written by the three main confederations – which could be perceived as an alternative Country Report – at bilateral meetings with the Belgian desk of the European Commission's DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion (DG EMPL). Some of the issues highlighted by trade unionists have been found over the years in Country Reports, which suggests that this proactive attitude may have been fruitful. Moreover, when possible, the trade unions use messages from the Belgian Country Report to support the arguments they put forward in the social dialogue, in order to better counter arguments from the government or from the employers (Peña-Casas and Ghailani 2019).

Similarly, in Finland during the difficult economic times at the beginning of the 2010s, the Sipilä government (2015-2019), following the CSRs, launched savings measures to balance the budget, and planned structural reforms to meet the future sustainability challenges for the welfare state. The measures concerned areas of core importance for the trade unions – including cuts and increasing conditionality in benefits, agreement on the Competitiveness Pact and on the pension reform. The trade unions proactively sought to be involved in discussion of these issues, even in cases where social dialogue was difficult due to the tense relationship with the government. As a result, and thanks to the social dialogue, several social policy agreements on structural reforms were reached (Kangas 2019). However, as in Germany, most of the issues addressed in the Semester are already on the national social dialogue agenda before they end up in the CSRs. In the case of the pension reform, for example, the process was very much in the hands of the social partners, which were in charge of the progress of the reform. Moreover, the social partners experienced EU pressure as being 'bossed around' when they were solving problems in 'their' pension scheme (Kangas 2019: 30).

In Bulgaria, during the period under review, the social policy CSRs decreased in number as well as in scope ⁽¹⁰⁾; this was perceived by the unions as partly due to their active engagement with the Semester. Since its launching in 2010, they have been proactive – either to support or to oppose messages stemming from the Semester – even in a context where the national government was reluctant or refused to consult with them. The Bulgarian trade unions are active at each stage of the

10. The number of CSRs on social policies fell from three to one from 2016 onward.

Semester; this is the perception not only of the trade unions themselves but also of the government and the employers. Social partners refer to the EU Semester's messages (mostly the CSRs) in their appeals and opinions to the authorities, to support their views. As one of the Trade Union Semester Liaison Officers puts it: 'in Bulgaria it is very important what "Europe" says, at least for politicians' (Tomev *et al.* 2019: 15). For instance, between 2014 and 2018, there was a CSR on the need to create a clear and transparent mechanism to set the minimum wage. This issue became one of the main battlefields of the unions, although sometimes they opposed the Commission's messages. It seems now that after four years of pressure from the Commission, the disagreements between the social partners will be overcome, and the framework agreement establishing transparent conditions for the setting of the minimum wage will be signed.

Italy: strong EU pressure and efforts to adopt issue-driven involvement

Although Italy was not formally subject to a MoU, the need to finance its huge public debt led to increasingly strong EU pressure, which remained up until 2017. Since then, the pressure has returned to a moderate level, as a result of several domestic reforms (mostly concerning pensions and labour market regulation) implemented partly on the basis of CSRs. The latter were very closely linked to areas of trade union competence (collective bargaining issues etc.). While at the beginning of the present decade the Semester was perceived almost as an 'intrusion' into the national policy-making process, today Italian TUs consider it rather as a 'window of opportunity', mainly because of their difficult relations with the successive Italian governments (Pavolini and Natili 2019). Between 2014-2018, no formal or informal consultation took place with the government to discuss the NRP and the national documents produced in response to European reports or recommendations. Given the problematic state of national trade union involvement in the policy-making process, the trade unions have become increasingly active in the Semester, in order to have their voice heard. One example of this was the introduction of a minimum income scheme: the unions united to support a policy reform in line with the Semester messages. Overall, national TUs in Italy have tried to use proactively the ES debate at the EU level to attempt to influence the national government's agenda (Ibid).

Hungary: an outlier: moderate EU pressure, Semester messages related to the social area and yet weak involvement of the trade unions

Hungary is subject to moderate EU pressure. With regard to social CSRs, the trade unions are generally quite satisfied with the EU recommendations regarding poverty reduction, wage-setting, social dialogue and several other issues. Nevertheless, their involvement is assessed mostly as responsive because of the particular political situation in the country. The unions consider that the government sees the social dialogue as a box-ticking exercise, and often informs social partners only *ex post*. The NRP is considered to be the document through which social partners' opinions could

potentially impact the Semester process (see also Kirov and Markova 2020). In general, unions agree with the contents of the Commission’s Country reports and the CSRs. As an example, in line with several Semester recommendations to Hungary – and also with long-held trade union goals – an agreement on the minimum wage level was reached in 2016. However, both the union organisations and the employers believe that their involvement was only a formality, and that their views were ignored by the government (Albert 2019).

To conclude, the above analysis shows that EU pressure and the reference to social issues in the EU Semester are important in determining the strategies adopted by trade unions for involvement. In three countries where EU pressure is moderate to strong and there are salient social issues addressed in the context of the Semester (Belgium, Bulgaria, Finland, Italy – and not Hungary or Portugal), trade unions adopt proactive strategies for involvement, notwithstanding the political situation and the state of social dialogue. In Sweden, and to a slightly lesser extent in Germany, EU pressure is considered to be low, and trade union strategies for involvement with Semester issues are mostly responsive: the unions respond to the processes when needed. However, when the Semester touches on their core work, the unions become proactively involved. Important issues can spur the unions into action even when they generally have a low degree of involvement in the Semester (e.g. the CSR to Sweden on collective bargaining in 2012, the mini-jobs CSR in Germany).

2.1.2 Usages made of trade union resources in the Semester

Our second sub-hypothesis refers to resources as a key determinant of strategies, i.e. the more resources the trade unions have, the more proactive will be their strategy for involvement in the Semester. One might think that if trade unions have strong resources at national level, their involvement in the EU Semester will be facilitated, and ultimately proactive. However, the use made of their resources in the European Semester process may depend on several factors. These include: a) the unions’ willingness to be involved (at the beginning of the Semester process, for instance, several TUs had reservations regarding it); b) the political context and institutional settings; and c) the degree of EU pressure and the particular policy message conveyed by the EU level (on the latter, see Section 2.1.1). In this section we focus on resources, and intend to show that although trade unions need resources in order to be involved pro-actively in the Semester, these resources are not necessarily enough.

What types of resources are needed for involvement in the Semester? As the Semester is mainly a bureaucratic, information and expertise-based process, the eight INVOTUNES country case studies show that, in most cases, political and cognitive resources seem to be essential for access to the Semester. Based on these case studies, we created a typology of the usages of unions’ resources in the European Semester (Table 2).

Table 2: Usages made of trade union resources in the European Semester (2014-2018)

Active usages of resources	Selective usages of resources	Constrained usages of resources
<p style="text-align: center;">BE BG IT PT</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">DE FI SE</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">HU</p>

Source: Authors' own elaboration, based on INVOTUNES Country case studies (2019).

Active usages of resources in the European Semester: Belgium, Bulgaria, Italy and Portugal

Belgium, Bulgaria, Italy and Portugal can be grouped together as countries where the trade unions have opted to use their resources, mostly cognitive resources, actively in the European Semester process. Like all categorisations, this one is not watertight, and the degree of usage may depend on the issue addressed, the political context etc.

In these four countries, as we saw in the previous section, EU pressure and the presence of social policy issues in the CSRs are the key drivers that trigger proactive strategies for involvement in the Semester. However, it seems that resources matter a great deal if unions are to pursue these proactive strategies. Moreover, in turn, in most of these cases, the pursuit of proactive strategies resulted in the renewal or reinterpretation of their political and cognitive resources, as well as the creation of new ad hoc Semester-linked resources. For example, the creation and the key role of the TUSLOs under the auspices of the ETUC, and investment of knowledge and expertise in the Semester process, have been reported in all these countries.

The Belgian trade unions are classified as having strong resources (see Annex 1 on classification of national trade unions' resources). The Belgian trade unions believe that, in general, they have all the political, organisational, cognitive and human resources they need to participate fully in the ES. Internally, for example, they have set up departments dedicated to following international and European issues. At the Confederation of Christian Trade Unions (CSC-ACV), the research department is made up of three advisors who follow European processes. They also quickly realised the importance of the TUSLOs, who became a significant Semester resource (Peña-Casas and Ghailani 2019).

Similarly, the Bulgarian trade unions – despite a decline in their political and organisational resources- used these proactively in the Semester. They also have considerable experience of 'creating' new resources by using Europe strategically and to justify their positions in the national arena (Spasova 2015). Their participation in the Semester shows a similar pattern. They relied mostly

on their cognitive resources, which were key to pursuing proactive strategies; this meant not only expertise and knowledge, but also a high level of interest, the willingness to understand and make use of the Semester tools. At the start of the EU Semester, CITUB's Institute for Social and Trade Union Research (ISTUR) quickly set up a team of experts in the areas relevant to the Semester themes, which prepares CITUB's positions on the AGS, CR, and CSRs. In 2014, ISTUR issued the trade union guide 'The Europe 2020 Strategy and Bulgarian Priorities', in which the Semester was presented in detail ⁽¹¹⁾. The situation of the other trade union confederation, KT Podkrepa, is a little different; they acknowledge that they have fewer resources to invest, so develop fewer positions on the Semester documents -nevertheless, they have also been aiming for proactive involvement in the Semester (Tomev *et al.* 2019).

In Italy, similarly to Bulgaria, the weakening of the unions' national political resources has led them to invest in new strategies to exert influence, namely through participation in the European Semester. Given the obstacles to involvement at national level, they have been developing their political and institutional resources at European level: networking and making the most of the increasing role played by the ETUC in fostering a TU agenda on the ES. Therefore, an exchange of resources has taken place in recent years at EU level; the trade unions have perceived that through this they have obtained recognition of their socio-political role and an opportunity to influence the Italian debate. In return, the Commission obtained information and expertise, but also a sort of legitimisation of EU institutions in general, at a time of rising criticism of these institutions (Pavolini and Natili 2019).

In Portugal, the most visible input provided by trade unions is to the Semester's national cycle. The Economic and Social Council (CES) is asked to issue an Opinion on the NRP, thus providing trade union confederations with significant cognitive and legal resources for involvement in the 'EU' and 'national' cycles of the European Semester. Although the unions perceive their national resources as limited, they still use them actively to get involved in the Semester. Moreover, the government formed in November 2015 provided more opportunities for engagement with the Semester; the unions were therefore more involved with the same level of resources, which did not change much over the period under scrutiny. However, in their view, their influence is actually low. Here the availability of resources seems to play a role, as the unions, and other actors, consider that more resources could foster more intense involvement (Perista and Perista 2019).

11. Semester-related information was also disseminated to affiliated unions and national institutions through the ISTUR Social Europe electronic system.

Selective usage of resources in the EU Semester: Germany, Sweden and Finland

In Germany, Sweden and Finland the trade unions have been assessed as having strong national resources. These, however, are only moderately and selectively used in the EU Semester.

The Swedish and Finnish unions can be classified as having strong resources. In the Swedish case, however, trade unions have chosen not to significantly use their resources in the ES process, mainly due to low levels of EU pressure and an absence of topics related to social policies in the EU CSRs. They focus their work, and especially their cognitive resources, on national decision-making processes. The Swedish unions are clear on this: they have the resources needed to be involved in the Semester and the potential to create new resources, but choose not to invest these given the low importance of the Semester to them (Jansson *et al.* 2019). In Finland, the largest unions have their own experts who specialise in EU issues. There is general satisfaction with and commitment to the present representation process for EU issues. The appointment of TUSLOs has improved the coordination of views between the trade unions, and has made it easier to answer all the inquiries coming from the ETUC. However, most of the work falls on them and time constraints have become an important issue (Kangas 2019).

Similarly to Sweden, the German DGB has, in general, good resources for involvement in the Semester. However, given the low salience of the Semester in Germany, union interest in the Semester is limited and thus they do not invest in using these resources and developing new resources with regard to the Semester. Their cognitive resources have systematically been strengthened, and thematic trade union experts follow European developments in their particular fields. The DGB has invested in staff to work on the EU Semester, but these share the opinion that over the past years the effort was not worth the outcome. Political resources are not sufficiently invested in the EU Semester process, and links with the SPD, the labour ministry and with NGOs are not used, since the ministry's interest and the potential outcome are perceived as limited (Kraemer 2020).

Constrained usage of resources in the EU Semester: Hungary

Hungary is a country where union resources are limited and their involvement in the Semester is perceived as weak. Given the difficult political and institutional context in which they operate, Hungarian trade unions make almost no usage or only very limited usage of their resources to become involved in the Semester; this is linked to the political situation under the Orban government. Moreover, their participation in the Semester process, including in-depth evaluation of its documents, is seriously hampered by insufficient resources: for financial reasons there are few full-time employees, very few experts, and the limited knowledge of foreign languages is also a problem

(Albert 2019). All in all, the usage of resources in Hungary can be qualified as constrained: by the limited resources they have and by the lack of opportunity to use and develop these.

With regard to our second sub-hypothesis, we can conclude that the degree of availability of resources does not influence per se whether proactive or responsive strategies are chosen vis-a-vis the Semester. Unions with strong resources may make only selective and limited usage of these because they view the EU Semester as of little relevance to social policy issues. On the other hand, unions with declining or limited resources may make active use of these – of their cognitive and political resources in particular – to get involved in the Semester.

Thus, the level of resources available is not a key determinant of the strategies for involvement in the Semester; what matters is the choice to make active usage of these resources. However, once engaged in a proactive strategy, unions need resources in order to be able to fully engage in the process. We should note that the INVOTUNES project did not look in detail into the resources of all the trade union confederations/federations in the eight countries. Resources may be limiting the scope of trade union involvement, and there are instances of organisations which wish to become even more involved but cannot do so because of limited resources (e.g. Podkrepa). In this respect, several trade unions which pursue proactive strategies regarding the Semester have even reinvented their intrinsic resources or created new resources in order to be able to adopt pro-active strategies towards the Semester.

2.2 Targets of strategies: insider versus outsider strategies

Our second set of hypotheses concerns the targets of the TUs' strategies. First, given the evidence-based and technical character of the EU Semester, we expected unions to mostly adopt insider strategies, i.e. strategies targeting policymakers and civil servants. Secondly, we supposed that if some unions follow outsider strategies, this is due to weak involvement in the national policy-making process (i.e. channels for involvement in the EU Semester and national social dialogue).

All the eight case studies confirmed our hypothesis that the unions use primarily insider strategies, i.e. they opt to directly target policymakers and autocratic bodies (insider strategies) rather than going public (outsider strategies) with regard to the Semester. Given the evidence-based and technocratic nature of the process, trade unions focus mostly on direct contacts with relevant national and European policymakers. We have already pointed out several times that in most of the countries under examination, involvement in the Semester takes place through national and EU level channels (including social dialogue), through which the trade unions target mainly policymakers (on the functioning of channels for involvement in the EU Semester, see Kirov and Markova 2020).

Very few examples of outsider strategies directly linked to the Semester have been reported in the eight country case studies. Some of the examples which are mentioned date back to before the

period under examination in this report (2014-2018). Almost none of the cases of outsider strategies can be linked directly to the Semester. They relate to the national policy-making process, and are mostly linked to dysfunctional social dialogue, and to trade union action within the national policy-making process. The only examples of outsider strategies directly linked to the Semester are from Germany and Bulgaria, and to a lesser extent Belgium. In Germany, the DGB has given up trying to influence the government with regard to the NRP; the umbrella organisation, together with the employer organisation, asked the government to make its comments on the NRP draft public, because they felt that their comments were not taken into account. The DGB uses this online publication to present its own policy views to an interested public (Kraemer 2020) ⁽¹²⁾. In Bulgaria in 2014, the unions went public, or at least beyond their constituency, and, together with several NGOs, formed a 'National Semester Alliance' as part of the 'EU Alliance: For a Democratic, Social and Sustainable European Semester'. The aim of this was to strengthen capacity building, and to enable trade unions and civil society organisations to become involved in a proactive and coordinated way, to improve their involvement and impact on the Semester process (Tomev *et al.* 2019; for more information see also Section 2.4.2). In Belgium, during the period under examination (under the coalition government led by Charles Michel), some aspects of the Belgian industrial relations system (such as the wage setting mechanism) came under strong and increasing pressure as regards its functioning, efficiency and legitimacy, with the government increasingly acting unilaterally. In this context, Belgian trade unions used outsider strategies, such as press statements issued when the CSRs went too far in attacking fundamental labour rights, or the publication of articles on issues concerning wage formation, as well as demonstrations denouncing certain measures (Peña-Casas and Ghailani 2019).

In other cases, the outsider strategies were not directly linked to the Semester, although the Semester messages were mentioned in the broader national social policy debate. During the period 2014-2018, the Bulgarian and Finnish governments, as in Belgium, increasingly took unilateral decisions regarding socio-economic issues, thus undermining the quality of social dialogue. Some of these decisions, were (at least discursively) justified by a reference to the messages stemming from the EU Semester. In Bulgaria, the only example of an outsider strategy indirectly linked to the Semester dates back to before the period under examination. In late 2011, the government refused to negotiate the pension reform in the National Council for Tripartite Consultation, and proposed legislative changes to the pension system in violation of the tripartite National Agreement on Pension Reform (2010). As a consequence, the two trade union confederations decided to withdraw from the NCTC and to organise a series of large national protests, which forced the government to start negotiations as part of the social dialogue. It is important mentioning that the government partly

12. The umbrella organisation, together with the employer organisation, asked government to make its comments on the NRP draft public because they felt that their comments were not taken into account. In response to this request, the federal ministry for economics publishes the statements by various employer and business organisations and by the DGB together with the NRP on the ministry's website.

justified their ideas in the pension reform by referring to the CSRs. Thus, clearly these protests were linked to the shortcomings in the national decision-making process, but also indirectly opposed the EU messages on the pension reform (Tomev *et al.* 2019). Similarly, in Finland there were some shortcomings in the national social dialogue during the period under examination. The issues involved were partly linked to messages given in the context of the Semester and which the governments used in their discourse to justify certain decisions. Therefore, the unions used outsider strategies and threatened political strikes on several occasions, or used strikes to try to change the government's plans or decisions. This process was only indirectly linked to the ES, and the Semester messages were not referred to as such during the demonstrations. In a number of cases the government was forced to retreat and put the issue to tripartite negotiations (Kangas 2019).

In Italy there is no evidence of trade union strategies attempting to politicize the ES topics through media campaigns, or by mobilizing members to organise protests specific to the topics discussed in the various phases of the process. However, there have been outsider strategies which were indirectly linked to the EU Semester, at a time when the social dialogue in Italy was dysfunctional (see also Pavolini and Natili 2020). An advocacy coalition, for example, was created to tackle poverty: the Alliance against Poverty (composed of unions and NGOs, see Section 2.4.2 for more information). This played a key role in the introduction of a national minimum income scheme. During this period, several CSRs also referred to this issue. Both the trade unions involved, CGIL and CISL, emphasised that the decision to support an anti-poverty benefit was due to internal dynamics and not a consequence of European input; nevertheless, the interviews show that the CSRs were used in TU discourse to support their arguments against the government, and 'confirmed that the path we had already decided to follow was the right one' (Pavolini and Natili 2019: 24).

In the cases of Hungary and Portugal, the hypothesis does not really hold. In Hungary, where the national dialogue and channels for involvement in the Semester are perceived by the unions as dysfunctional, no outsider strategies have been reported. Insider strategies also tend to be relatively ineffective. Outsider strategies are deemed not feasible, as trade unions do not feel they have enough power to implement these. Indeed, although they are dissatisfied with the state of social dialogue, they have limited scope for action, as there is no significant social opposition (Albert 2019). In Portugal, unions definitely use insider strategies, and as the Portuguese case is particular (strong EU pressure during the period 2014-2018 following a MoU), the Semester is often subsumed into the national context dealt with by policymakers, and thus not visible in the outsider strategies adopted by trade unions (Perista and Perista 2019).

As all the case studies show, TUs use mainly insider strategies to be involved in the European Semester, which is primarily an evidence and knowledge-based process occurring mostly behind closed doors, as is often the case with EU issues. However, as has been well put by Perista and Perista (2019), the Semester is often subsumed into the national policymaking process. Issues

addressed in the Semester are either used discursively by the government or are already being handled in the national policy-making process. Thus, in cases when trade unions go public, they do so mostly as part of the national decision-making process, opposing national governments and the shortcomings in national social dialogue. Although they may refer to EU Semester messages when pursuing outsider strategies, the Semester is not the trigger for these actions.

2.3 Level of strategies: national versus European channels

In our third hypothesis we claim that the state of social dialogue, and more generally the involvement of trade unions in the national decision-making process, is an important factor in determining whether they focus their involvement in the Semester at national or at EU level. We assume that a well-functioning social dialogue/involvement in national decision making will keep union involvement mainly at national level. In contrast, problematic functioning of social dialogue will push unions to seek to target their strategies at the EU level. Before focusing on this hypothesis, we should bear in mind that governments changed in some of the countries under review during the period 2014-2018 (in Italy, Portugal and Finland); in some cases, this brought about a change in union involvement in national decision-making.

Bulgaria, Italy and Hungary: dysfunctional social dialogue and channels for involvement at national level: strategies to go European

During the period under scrutiny (2014-2018), both Bulgaria and Italy experienced political instability. The social dialogue and channels for involvement were reported to be particularly dysfunctional during this period, though to very differing extents (see also Kirov and Markova 2020 and Pavolini and Natili 2020). In Bulgaria, although the trade unions are formally involved in the European Semester through a number of access channels, they consider their involvement at national level to be ineffective and formal. Their opinions are often not taken into account, consultation on the NRPs started only as of 2017, and in general their views seem not to be reflected in government documents or positions in relation to the Semester. According to the trade unions, therefore, direct communication with the Commission is currently considered the most successful means of involvement in the Semester: it strengthens their position, overcomes national blockages in social dialogue and attracts the attention of the Commission to important national labour and social issues. Such channels are perceived as an 'institutional support for the trade union involvement' (Interview TUSLO in Tomev *et al.* 2019). Bulgarian trade unions also recognise the essential role of the ETUC, and stress how important it is to actively use the ETUC as a channel for formal and informal involvement in the Semester. The interaction of Bulgarian trade unions with the ETUC and the appointment of the TUSLO are highly appreciated both at national and European level. This is seen by the unions as a good opportunity to refine not only the mechanisms of influence but also their targeting, and to indirectly impact the European Semester agenda and priorities (Tomev *et al.* 2019).

In Italy, the political and social dialogue situation seems even more difficult than in Bulgaria. During the late 2000s, tripartite negotiations became rare, with the government increasingly imposing unilateral measures especially after the onset of the Recession. Trade unions are not involved at all in the European Semester process, neither formally nor informally (Pavolini and Natili 2019). In this context, the trade unions have gradually developed strong contacts with EU institutions and bodies, in particular with the Commission, and now target their strategies regarding the Semester mostly at EU level. When looking at trade union involvement in the ES in the period 2014-2018, one notices a gradual improvement, though only in the European cycle-meetings with the Commission (fact-finding mission perceived as essential to union involvement) and strong involvement through the ETUC. For instance, under the auspices of the ETUC, they have developed a new strategy to influence the European Semester: a joint document containing the contribution of CGIL, CISL and UIL to the *ex-ante* consultation on the Country Reports. Moreover, the ETUC's role has been key in organising contacts between national TUs and the Commission in relation to the ES (Pavolini and Natili 2019).

Hungary could be again perceived as an outlier. The state of social dialogue has seriously deteriorated since the appointment of the FIDESZ-led Hungarian government (2010) (see above Section 2.1.1 and Pavolini and Natili 2020). The unions therefore consider that the most effective way to influence the Semester is to address the EU level: exchanges of information with the Commission during the fact-finding missions (especially concerning the Country Reports) may allow them to have some influence on the content of the CSRs. Thus, they use the 'Brussels way' as an attempt to indirectly influence the national agenda. The unions acknowledge that the ETUC plays a key role in providing access to the European institutions. BusinessEurope and ETUC have both made efforts to enable their Hungarian members to share with Commission representatives the topics they would have liked to see among the CSRs. According to the social partners, these efforts to reach the 'EU cycle' of the ES have had some impact, as some points raised by the social partners appeared in the 2017 Country report and some were featured in the 2018 CSRs (Albert 2019).

Belgium and Finland: strategies for involvement targeted at both the national and EU level

In Belgium and Finland, the dynamics are less clear-cut than in the Bulgarian and Italian cases; the unions seem to focus on both levels, depending on the particular policy. Both Finland and Belgium have a strong and long-standing tradition of social dialogue, institutions which function well, and good channels for involvement in the Semester. In both countries, during the period 2014-2018, there were constant confrontations between the government and trade unions on a number of issues, indicating that from the trade unions' point of view, and from their involvement at national level, they encountered several setbacks. Nevertheless, the well-established channels for involvement and effective social dialogue show that the unions are closely involved in the national

cycle, even when the political situation is not favourable to them. The Finnish trade unions frequently used the Brussels way to have their voices heard in the preparations for the European Semester. In order to gain influence at EU level, the Finnish trade unions have established their own lobbying organisation (FinUnions) in Brussels. At the same time, the unions are rather reluctant when it comes to the Commission's influence in the national decision-making process. Thus, Finnish unions actively focus their strategies on both the national and the European level, depending on the individual issue, but do so carefully (Kangas 2019). In Belgium, as mentioned above, the quality of social dialogue has deteriorated over the past decade. Against this background, unions increasingly have to use European channels in response to the new hostile political context which threatens the quality of social dialogue, and in order to preserve their influence over the European Semester. The main barrier to TU involvement in the ES is the weak involvement at national level, especially since the previous government coalition (2014-2018) took office. The unions consider that it is more effective to target strategies at the EU level, since they perceive that the Commission representatives listen to their input and take some of their priorities and corrections into consideration when drafting the Country Report (Peña-Casas and Ghailani 2019).

Portugal: Strategies mainly targeted at national level, some suspicion of the EU level?

In Portugal, we see the opposite situation; national social dialogue is improving, although it is still assessed as being merely formal at some stages, and at the same time the unions do not perceive that they are fully involved at EU level. In 2015 a centre-left government was appointed, which, in 2017-2018, implemented measures aimed at relaunching the social dialogue. Importantly, the adjustment programme has been perceived by both the government and the social partners as an intrusion into the national policy-making process. The trade unions feel that an attempt was made by the European Commission to interfere in national social dialogue. Trade unions interact with the Commission both in Brussels and in Lisbon, but they also question the usefulness of these interactions, since they see them as only an occasion to receive information from the Commission. They feel that they are consulted by the Commission too late, after key decisions have already been taken (Perista and Perista 2019).

Germany and Sweden: well-functioning formal national involvement and social dialogue, strategies targeted at national level

In Sweden the social dialogue works well. The unions target their strategies at national level, and their interactions with the EU level consist mostly in using the social partners' annex to the NRPs to show the Commission their important role in the Swedish social policy-making process. However, in general, interactions at EU level are restricted to some ad-hoc meetings, i.e. contacts with Commission representatives (including during fact-finding missions) and regular participation in meetings and seminars organised by the Commission representation in Stockholm; they do not

attend meetings with the Commission in Brussels. The Swedish unions delegate part of their involvement in the EU cycle of the Semester to the ETUC (Jansson *et al.* 2019). Similarly, for the DGB in Germany, involvement in the annual European Semester cycles is not a top priority compared to other policy objectives. But the confederation sees a need to engage in the annual ES processes so as not to miss any opportunity to influence European and national policies, to avoid leaving the policy field to the employers, and for reasons of European trade union cooperation – this despite poor outcomes of their involvement at national level. The EU Commission and the national government both proactively approach the DGB (Kraemer 2020).

National institutional contexts seem to be an important factor for trade unions in deciding the level at which they should target their strategies. In countries with challenging functioning of social dialogue and channels for involvement in the Semester, trade unions proactively seek to have their views heard at the EU level. Over time, the ETUC, but also the Commission, have started to more proactively involve the trade unions, providing them with opportunities to express their views. In countries where the unions have had difficult relations with the government, but the social dialogue institutions and channels for involvement are still functioning, the unions target both levels as important, though when the national policy-making process deteriorates, unions quickly turn to the EU level in order to have their voice heard. In countries where the national dialogue functions well, unions mainly target their strategies at national level; any strategies aimed at the EU level either tend to be linked to the Commission and ETUC initiatives to involve the unions, or may concern a particular issue for which the unions need to approach Europe, but only sporadically.

2.4 Strategies for coordination/cooperation between trade unions and other actors

Last but not least, our fourth hypothesis focuses on the strategies for cooperation/coordination among social partners and with civil society organisations. Our first sub-hypothesis assumes that in countries where there is a strong involvement in the Semester, unions seek to jointly influence the Semester's main messages. Our second sub-hypothesis states that the degree of cooperation with employers is not influenced by the Semester but is issue-driven, as in national policymaking. The third sub-hypothesis mirrors the previous one: the sporadic union cooperation with civil society is issue-driven: involvement in the Semester will strengthen cooperation between trade union organizations within a country.

2.4.1 Cooperation/coordination among trade unions

In this section, we only consider countries which have several trade union organisations (in order to consider possible cooperation between these), and which have proactive strategies regarding the Semester (13).

In most of the countries where the unions provide their opinion on the Semester documents, they do so jointly in order to have a bigger impact. The same is true for meetings with EU representatives. In general, unions act jointly. They may still have differences of view regarding specific issues, as unions have different identities and constituencies. The situation can also vary according to the issues discussed in national social dialogue.

In Belgium, Italy and Finland, the unions cooperate and coordinate with regard to the Semester. In Italy, the three major Italian trade union confederations coordinate and interact, although they often hold differing views. For instance, they draft a document that is presented to the government and the EU, and which states their preferred priorities for the ES (Pavolini and Natili 2019). In Finland, there is some interaction concerning the Semester between trade union confederations, even though this is rather ad-hoc and issue-specific. On most questions, the main central confederation reaches an agreement, but due to different membership profiles there may be differences in emphasis on how to proceed. Sometimes these differences may cause tensions. Whereas Akava represents academic upper white-collar occupations with right-of-centre political views, SAK members are blue-collar workers with traditionally a left-leaning political orientation. Akava does not take part in FinUnions' activities in Brussels. Instead, they have their own lobbying office in Brussels (Kangas 2019). In Belgium, the three union confederations prepare a common coordinated document reflecting their positions on the Semester topics, in particular with a view to influencing the Country report (see also Section 2.1.1). There are, however, no formal mechanisms for coordination between them, and collaboration, which has been in place for several years, is quite informal (Peña-Casas and Ghailani 2019)

The Bulgarian situation is rather different from the previous three. When there is a need to resolve specific problems through social dialogue, the positions of the two trade union confederations are usually coordinated at expert level or in the Joint Consultative Council, and are presented as a common platform. However, when it comes to the ES process, 'coordination between the two union

13. In the rest of the countries under scrutiny, the situation varies. In Germany there are three trade union confederations (DGB, DBB and CGB) but only the largest one (DGB) is involved in the ES process by the EU Commission and the national government. There is no cooperation between the DGB and other confederations. In Hungary, the cooperation is sporadic, and is difficult because some unions have views close to those of the government. In Sweden, coordination between the various social partner organizations is better than that between the different levels within these organisations, for example through the jointly written annex to the NRP.

confederations at national level on the Semester is not effective' (Tomev *et al.* 2019: 18). Nevertheless, interviewees from both confederations acknowledge that both internal and external coordination in the Semester improved with the appointment of Trade Union Semester Liaison Officers (TUSLOs) in 2016. (Tomev *et al.* 2019). In Portugal, besides the fora where they are formally represented (e.g. the Economic and Social Council), the unions do not cooperate regarding the European Semester. There are only some sporadic contacts (Perista and Perista 2019).

Our hypothesis concerning cooperation/coordination among union organisations seems to only partially hold. In Belgium and Italy, they do indeed cooperate and provide joint documents in the Semester in order to have a bigger influence. However, the existence of proactive strategies in the Semester does not automatically imply cooperation/coordination between unions (e.g. Bulgaria, Finland).

2.4.2 Cooperation/coordination with the employers: business as usual

In several of these countries, the unions' perception was that during the period under examination, the successive governments were much closer to the employers, and that the employers' views were better reflected in national social dialogue and the European Semester.

In the case of Bulgaria, the trade unions report that the joint meetings with the employers and the Commission on Semester matters are not very useful. The information that can be obtained during bilateral meetings (i.e. separate meetings with the trade unions and with the employers) is more specific and useful. The process of coordination with the employers' organisations is complicated due to their opposing views on certain topics. Nevertheless, both the trade union and employer representatives interviewed recognise that in some cases they overcome disagreements and adopt common statements. The unions believe that the employers are more successful in influencing the government and the Commission, and the employers' representative interviewed does not deny their possible impact on the CR and CSR. However, the employers also acknowledge that it is impossible to succeed in labour issues without good cooperation with the trade unions. One example of such cooperation was on the CSR on the minimum wage, which was supported by both employers and trade unions and which accelerated ratification of ILO Convention 131 (Tomev *et al.* 2019).

In the case of Italy, there is no cooperation between trade unions and employers specifically triggered by the Semester. All the interviews with the trade unions also show a general perception that the employer associations have greater opportunities to participate effectively in the Semester. These views are shared by the employers and the European Commission country desk. The latter indicated that the greater economic and logistical resources of Confindustria allow for a more structured dialogue; the European Semester Officer also underlined that business associations are

frequently in a better position to exert pressure in various ways on the European institutions, because of their greater means and capacity for lobbying (Pavolini and Natili 2019).

In Belgium, similarly to Bulgaria and Italy, the trade unions are suspicious and bemoan the obvious influence of the employers' organizations, whose interests are perceived by them as clearly supported by the current government and by EU policy. With the exception of the institutionalized coordination within the National Labour Council/Central Economic Council, the trade unions do not coordinate with the employers' organizations, as they believe that their interests and views on key issues related to social affairs, employment, and the budget are too far apart. The lack of consensus between employers' organizations and unions also diminishes their influence (Peña-Casas and Ghailani 2019). In Finland, the trade unions also perceived that the previous government (May 2015-June 2019) made important concessions to the employers, including on issues related to the Semester. However, since the national social dialogue functions well, the unions and employers cooperate in that context (Kangas 2019). In Portugal, interviewees agreed that trade unions and employers' confederations usually hold very different, even antagonistic, views regarding the European Semester and the measures included/deriving from it, thus hampering any possibilities for other types of interaction. However, both trade unions and employers' organisations agree that the themes of the European Semester are important, but that they should be adjusted more by the EU Commission to national dynamics (Perista and Perista 2019).

Hungary again seems to be a specific case, due to the particular political situation. Both trade unions and employer organisations agree that the weak cross-sectoral bargaining system has been depleted even further by the changes initiated by the government since 2010. Although institutions exist, the stakeholders are only formally involved in the policy-making process; they themselves consider that they have no influence on the decisions taken. Moreover, the lack of resources is also perceived, as they state during interviews, as impacting coordination, not only between trade unions and employers' organisations, but also in general among trade unions, or between social partners and other stakeholders (Albert 2019).

The Swedish case is the only one where good cooperation has been reported; the trade unions and the employers' organisations have pretty good relationships when it comes to the European Semester and write the annex to the NRPs together, in friendly and efficient writing sessions. Again, this cooperation should be placed in the Swedish context, where national social dialogue functions well (Jansson *et al.* 2019)

Thus, the Semester is not a vector to foster cooperation between trade unions and employers. In most of the countries, it seems to be business as usual: while employers focus mainly on improving the business environment and competitiveness, trade unions emphasise social issues.

2.4.3 Cooperation/coordination between trade unions and civil society organisations: the Semester is not a game changer

As outlined in Section 1, in general trade unions are reluctant to engage with civil society organisations, the main reason being the nature of their respective constituencies. The unions represent the workers while civil society organisations may represent a broad range of people. However, trade unions may sometimes coordinate and cooperate, depending on the issue. In the eight case studies under examination, there are only very few examples of cooperation/collaboration on issues linked to the Semester process.

The Bulgarian case is particular, with its National Semester Alliance (see also Section 2.2). The trade unions are happy with this cooperation, particularly since they were already cooperating with many of these NGOs in the Economic and Social Council (Tomev *et al.* 2019). In Belgium, the social partners coordinate with NGOs in the Federal Council for Sustainable Development, which includes representatives of environmental and development cooperation NGOs and youth organisations, and which provides an opinion annexed to the NRP (Peña-Casas and Ghailani 2019).

In Italy and Hungary, there has been collaboration on some issues reflected in the Semester, but this collaboration has not been *per se* linked to the Semester. In early 2014, a broad advocacy coalition, the Alliance against poverty in Italy, was formed, including the three trade union confederations and several NGOs. This was a turning-point, as for the first time they actively lobbied for the introduction of a national minimum income scheme – an important message in several CSRs. This was particularly important for the Alliance Against Poverty, and both use of European structural funds and references to the European Semester (i.e. the CSRs on the need to establish a national minimum income scheme) were important in negotiations with the government to obtain additional funds (Pavolini and Natili 2019).

Against these examples, it should be underlined that unions are reluctant to work together with NGOs on their core business in meetings organised by the Commission. Even in the case of Bulgaria, where the unions praise the cooperation within the Bulgarian Semester Alliance, they still highlight the disadvantages of broad-ranging meetings with the Commission, which include a wide range of NGOs with differing and even divergent interests and views on issues important for the social partners. In their view, broad participation blurs the issues, and social partners report that there is not enough time for them to present their positions (Tomev *et al.* 2019). Similarly, in Finland there has been some fledgling collaboration between third sector organisations, e.g. between the trade union movement and EAPN Finland and the Finnish Federation for Social Affairs and Health, but despite general agreement on macroeconomic and social policy goals, there are differences in opinion on priorities and means. While the unions emphasise labour market questions and income-

related benefits, third sector actors emphasise basic social protection for those who are outside the labour market (Kangas 2019).

In the case of Germany, officials on the EU Commission's Berlin-based representation desk have experimented with various forms of multi-stakeholder, tri- and bilateral European Semester meetings in order to improve information exchange with the social partners. In 2015/2016, the DGB and the Federal Confederation of German Employer Associations (BDA) jointly objected to a multi-stakeholder meeting, and asked to be invited to a separate trilateral meeting. Coordination with the second largest – and competing – trade union confederation, the DBB, with the European Semester Alliance or with civil society actors has not been considered a strategic option by the DGB; this is because of the limited relevance of the Semester for national policies, and because the DGB, for pragmatic reasons, has preferred a classic social partnership approach with the employers' organisation, the BDA (Kraemer 2020). Similarly, in Sweden, the social partners have very little or no contact with other actors, such as social NGOs, concerning the Semester. Overall, trade union representatives express opinions of NGOs which range from indifference to strong criticism. When the social partners have meetings with the government or with representatives from the Commission, they never meet them together with representatives from other NGOs. They do not want or, they say, need to collaborate with such organisations with regard to labour market issues, and even openly questioned the representativeness and legitimacy of such organisations (Jansson *et al.* 2019). In Portugal, as well, no interaction between trade union confederations and other actors regarding the Semester was reported, partly because there is an understanding in the trade unions that social dialogue should concern social partners only (Perista and Perista 2019).

Our assumption that cooperation/coordination with NGOs would be issue-driven and sporadic is confirmed by the eight case studies. The situation is even more marked: except for the case of Bulgaria, there is no evidence of cooperation between trade unions and NGOs specifically driven by the Semester.

Conclusions

Does the European Semester matter to national trade unions? Do trade unions become involved in the EU Semester and, if so, through what type of strategies? Whom do they target and with whom do they cooperate? These were the initial questions which the present Research paper aimed to answer. An analysis of the eight case studies under examination in this report leads us to the following conclusions.

What strategies to adopt? EU pressure and the nature of issues matter.

First, our analysis confirms that EU pressure is an important explanatory factor for the type of strategy – proactive or responsive – adopted by national trade unions in order to become involved in the Semester process. Clearly, in countries with low EU pressure, such as Sweden and Germany, where the national governments have relatively little interest in the CSRs, and in Sweden where there are almost no CSRs related to social issues, trade unions have mostly adopted ‘responsive’ strategies, i.e. they respond to the set consultation procedures from public authorities regarding issues related to the Semester. By contrast, in countries with moderate to strong EU pressure, unions follow proactive strategies (except for Hungary and Portugal) in order to become involved in the Semester. These proactive strategies are mainly targeted at the initial stages of the Semester, i.e. the NRPs. They mainly take the form of meetings, joint contributions and in some cases, innovative practices such as, in Belgium, presenting a joint note written by the three main trade unions which could be perceived as an alternative Country Report.

However, EU pressure is not by itself enough to explain the unions’ engagement with the Semester. Another powerful explanation, confirming some of the hypotheses in the literature on interest groups’ multilevel shopping, is the relative importance of the issue for the unions. Even in countries with low EU pressure, if the topic addressed in the Semester is relevant for the unions, they put in place proactive strategies. In this respect, our analysis shows that an additional factor plays an important role: the government’s discourse and the placing on the agenda of a particular issue, which drive trade unions’ proactive strategies. The motivation to become involved in the Semester is even stronger when there are important shortcomings in the national decision-making process and the unions wish to influence a particular policy. These proactive strategies can be brought to bear in favour of or against the Semester’s recommendations. The only outlier in our analysis is Hungary where, although there is moderate pressure from the EU and the relevance of the EU’s social policy messages is high, the trade unions barely adopt any strategies to try and become involved. This attitude, however, is linked to the particular political situation and to a lack of resources for involvement.

This leads us to the importance of resources in proactive union involvement.

The half full or half empty glass: availability of resources matters, but how they are used matters even more

With regard to resources, we can conclude that their degree of availability does not influence per se whether proactive or responsive strategies are chosen *vis-a-vis* the Semester. However, if unions commit to proactive strategies, they need sufficient resources, mostly political and cognitive. All the case studies confirm that investment of knowledge and expertise, but also networking (especially with the ETUC), are key resources needed for participation in the Semester.

The overall findings on resources are in line with certain assumptions made in the literature on interest groups and multivenue shopping: adequate resources are necessary, but are an insufficient explanatory factor to foster multilevel engagement of interest groups. Groups with low levels of resources may act proactively to seek resources at levels other than the national level.

Our analysis shows that the usage the unions make of these resources is key for involvement in the Semester. On the one hand, unions with strong resources may make only selective and limited usage of these because they see the EU Semester as of little relevance to social policy issues. On the other hand, unions with declining or limited resources may make active usage of these in their attempts to be involved in the Semester. What is more, in most of these cases we see a creative appropriation, renewal or reinterpretation of existing political and cognitive resources, as well as the creation of new Semester-related *ad hoc* resources, such as the TUSLOs, falling under the auspices of the ETUC.

The EU Semester: insider strategies for involvement, no scope for going public?

Given the evidence-based and knowledge-driven nature of the Semester, unions in all the countries under scrutiny mainly adopt insider strategies, notably targeting policymakers and civil servants. In some cases (Bulgaria, Belgium and Germany), they may also go public, i.e. adopt outsider strategies.

When they have done so, it is as part of the national decision-making process, in opposition to national governments and due mostly to the shortcomings in national social dialogue. Although the unions may take into account the Semester's messages when pursuing outsider strategies, the Semester is not the trigger for these actions and is not in general appealed to in public discourse.

In line with messages from previous research (see Section 1), the European Semester does not (at least directly) trigger politicisation or contentious politics. These arise when the Semester messages are taken up in national discourse and/or policy reforms.

What level of governance do strategies target? The national level matters when it comes to 'going European'

National institutional contexts and political situations seem to be a powerful factor for trade unions in deciding the level – national or European – at which they should target their strategies. This finding comes close to those of previous research (see Section 1), which showed that interest groups are frequently constrained in achieving their political objectives by the institutional context and political relationships in which they operate. These constraints drive them to seek involvement at other levels of governance than the national one. Our research clearly shows that in countries with problems in the functioning of social dialogue and few channels for national involvement in the Semester, trade unions proactively seek to have their views heard at EU level. In these circumstances, trade unions try the Brussels way, i.e. through interaction with EU institutions, they try to influence the national policy agenda. In these cases, exchanges of resources are quite complex. On the one hand, trade unions provide the Commission with information and data (cognitive resources) that the Commission uses in order to fine-tune its analysis of national situations (especially in the CSRs). In doing so, trade unions hope to influence the Commission's recommendations and adjust them to their preferences. Then, if this attempt is successful, they use this EU leverage to put pressure on their national government.

In the cases where the unions invest strongly in the European cycle of the Semester, we can see them making both cognitive and strategic usages (Woll and Jacquot 2010) of the Semester messages, to support their views and ideas (e.g. to present their own findings and evidence, political messages) and/or to react to certain ES messages and even build coalitions. In the case of Italy, and to a slightly lesser extent in Bulgaria, the unions even make legitimising usage of the Semester's messages in order to insist on their role as social partners and to try to ensure that their voice is heard by the government in a context of deteriorating social dialogue.

Our research also confirms findings showing that domestic politics (and in particular the relationship with political actors) is of great importance in the choice of how to be involved at different levels of governance. In countries where the unions have had difficult relations with the government, but the social dialogue institutions and channels for involvement are still functioning, the unions target both levels as important, though when the national policy-making process deteriorates, unions quickly turn to the EU level in order to have their voice heard. Clearly, when the political situation changes, new perspectives for involvement may open up (e.g. Portugal, Finland).

We also saw certain patterns described in the literature on national union involvement at EU level (see section 1) – some clearer, some less clear – regarding general involvement of the unions at EU level. Nordic unions – Swedish and Finnish, together with the German unions – are, with regard to

the Semester, much more reluctant (although to differing extents) to engage with the EU level than the Belgian and Bulgarian unions.

Another finding is that involvement in the EU cycles of the Semester is an interactive process. Not only did the unions pursue proactive strategies for involvement in the EU cycles over the period under examination, but the role of the ETUC and the EU Commission also evolved substantially. They invested in attracting the attention of the trade unions at EU level and started to proactively involve them, providing them with opportunities to express their views.

Strategies for cooperation/coordination with other actors: business as usual

With regard to strategies for cooperation/coordination between trade union organizations within a country, the results of our analysis are not clear-cut. When unions provide their opinion on the Semester documents, they tend to do so jointly in order to have a greater impact (e.g. joint contributions to the NRPs). The same is true for meetings with EU representatives; these foster cooperation and – in some cases, especially when the unions are not sure of being involved in the national decision-making process – joint preparation. However, when it comes to EU messages discussed in the national social dialogue, the cooperation/coordination is rather ad-hoc and issue-specific.

When examining the eight case studies, it becomes clear that the interaction between the employers and the trade unions is similar to the interaction in the national decision-making process (and also depends on national industrial relations systems): the employers pursue their own strategies and may cooperate/coordinate, depending on the issues. During this period, the unions' perception was that in many countries, the employers had better access to the Semester channels, and that their demands were more readily taken account of by governments.

Strategies for cooperation/coordination with civil society organisations, as a part of the Semester, are almost non-existent. The case studies show that trade unions are reluctant to engage with civil society organisations, the main reason being the nature of their respective constituencies and the divergence of views on various issues. In the rare cases where strategies for cooperation/coordination were reported, these were mostly linked to the national decision-making process, in which Semester messages were also involved. The sole exception is Bulgaria, where the unions and NGOs have formed a National Semester Alliance as part of the EU Alliance: For a Democratic, Social and Sustainable European Semester. This forum can be perceived as a mechanism for ideas/policy diffusion by mimetics, as has often been the case with the Bulgarian trade unions, which make legitimising usage of EU messages in the national political context (Spasova 2015, on the Bulgarian context see also the insightful chapter by Gradev 2001).

More generally, an analysis of the trade union strategies in the EU Semester during the period 2014-2018, leads us to **three main conclusions**.

First, **national trade unions clearly played the game** (or tried to) and became involved – to differing extents – in the Semester. In any case, they are involved formally in the channels dealing with the Semester. Some questions for further research may arise. As we saw, the relative importance of specific issues is crucial for the involvement of the unions in the Semester. However, given the broad scope of this project, we focused on some selected issues addressed in social dialogue. A closer examination of the difference between economic and fiscal CSRs and social CSRs in social policy would allow us to grasp better the complexity of union involvement. And what about the CSRs purely related to economic and fiscal policies?

Second, the national **political and institutional context is extremely important**, impacting the level – national or EU – at which the trade unions target their strategies. During the period under examination – the years following the recession – the unions were clearly under siege in several of the eight countries covered by the case studies; this pushed them to seek involvement at EU level.

Third, the ETUC and the Commission are clearly increasingly committed to involving the unions in the Semester process; this fosters the usage and the development of the mainly cognitive resources required for participation in the Semester. They have been incentivised by the EU level to do so. In this context, EU 'influences can weaken but under certain circumstances also strengthen these national power resources' (Müller and Platzer 2017). Overall, their involvement in the Semester has strengthened their expertise and communicative resources (e.g. the role of TUSLOs). Politicisation and contentious politics are not part of union strategies in the context of the Semester.

During these years, access – at least formal access – to the Semester improved for both the national and EU cycles, thanks to the ongoing work of the ETUC and the outreach to the unions by the Juncker Commission. However, one question remains: what about the 'alternative policies and a counternarrative that supports the trade union strategies' within the new economic governance (Müller and Platzer 2017)?

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Annex 1: Trade Union’s resources in national decision-making processes

This annex looks into the availability of Trade Union’s resources based on the eight case studies under scrutiny. In order to analyse how the trade unions use their resources in the Semester, we first need to classify them. Table 1 in the main text has been elaborated based on the following list of criteria (Box 1).

Box 1. *Typology of trade union’s resources in national decision-making processes*

Political and institutional resources

Trade union density
 Links to political parties, irrespective of the political context and the government in office
 Institutionalised participation/consultation in the national decision-making process and in the management of public bodies/schemes

Organisational resources

Degree of vertical coordination of the trade union confederations with their affiliated members
 Mobilisation capacity
 Horizontal coordination and cooperation (coalition building etc.), with other trade union federations, with employers or with other stakeholders

Cognitive resources

Availability of information and data
 Available human resources
 Knowledge and expertise on the policy process
 Access to cognitive theories and models

Economic and financial resources

Financial capacity of trade unions, through membership, projects, subsidies etc.

Legal resources

- Legal expertise/capacity to participate in the process

Source: authors’ own elaboration.

Political and institutional power resources in the national decision-making process

The category ‘institutional power resources’ refers to the ‘securing of influence in institutional arrangements’ in the country (Müller and Platzer 2017). We add to this notion, defined in the literature, a concept of political resources. In our view, they are strongly linked. In general, membership is the condition sine qua non for institutional representativeness and political influence in the national decision-making process. Moreover, institutional power is strongly ‘sensitive to legislative intervention’ (Lehndorff *et al.* 2018).

For the purpose of this analysis, when considering political resources, we refer to collective bargaining coverage but also two other factors which undeniably impact unions’ political weight:

links with the political actors in the country, as well as trade union participation in institutions of social dialogue and the management of public social security bodies/schemes.

We classified the Belgian, German, Finnish and Swedish trade unions as having strong political and institutional resources, according to these criteria. First of all, they all have significant union density. Second, in Finland and Sweden, trade unions have long-standing historical relationships with the left and agrarian parties. As highlighted by Tsarouhas (2007) *'[...] the Swedish Model of labour concertation and social partnership has survived the turbulence of the 1990s, and the main reason for that is the salient power resources that unions and social democrats have retained'*. Similarly, in Finland the trade unions have the closest links with the SDP (social-democratic party). The political strength of the Finnish, Swedish and Belgian trade unions is also closely linked to their participation in the management of unemployment funds (the so-called 'Ghent system') and other social protection schemes. In Finnish social policy, there is one specific aspect that increases the societal power of social partners: the employment-related pension scheme is financed by employers and employees, and is run by semi-private pension insurance companies (Kangas 2019). The social partners thus have strong power resources. In the case of Germany, the political strength of the unions is due to a number of factors: links with the SPD party; the corporatist nature of the German system, meaning that the trade unions and employers are represented on the boards of the social security institutions; and finally the strength of the collective bargaining partners in wage-setting and the relatively low level of state intervention in industrial relations (Kraemer 2020).

We placed Bulgaria, Italy and Portugal in the group of countries with a medium level of political and institutional resources: in these countries, trade union density has been falling steeply over the past 10-15 years, the past relationships with political actors have been deteriorating and finally, their role in national social dialogue has been vulnerable over the past decade, especially in the context of the economic and social crisis.

Finally, in Hungary, the political power of the trade unions has been much restricted by the rule of the Orban government. This government does not value social dialogue, is not committed to meaningful consultation, and furthermore, the criteria for participation in the national social dialogue are not transparent. Governments (not only the present one), seeing the decline in the interest-representation potential of trade unions, have focused on merely formal consultations, rather than substantial cooperation. Moreover, the changes made to the legal regulations on strikes and the new Labour Code (introduced in 2012) have further limited the room for manoeuvre of trade unions and their representatives, which seem *"squeezed out from the policy-making processes"*(Albert 2019).

Organizational resources in the national decision-making processes

Organisational resources consist in the organization of members, as well as in the way the unions coordinate and work together with other trade union federations. In terms of coordination, clearly the Finnish, Swedish, Bulgarian and Belgian trade unions have good organisational resources: well-established hierarchical structures and internal decision-making processes as well as the capacity to mobilise their members for trade union actions. Moreover, despite differences in views and positions on certain policies, in general there is good horizontal cooperation – including meetings, debates and common positions – between trade union federations in the country.

With regard to cognitive, financial and legal resources, unsurprisingly, the countries in these three groups are in almost the same situation. The Bulgarian, Italian, German and Portuguese unions are, in general, evaluated as having medium levels of organisational resources: both in terms of strength in mobilising their members and horizontal coordination with other unions. In Italy, for example, the unions are mostly focused on collective bargaining (partly due to the deterioration of their relations with the successive governments and hence of social dialogue). Since the 2000s, tripartite negotiations have become less common, and the trade unions' positions have diverged more, as governments have increasingly imposed unilateral measures.

The Bulgarian and German trade unions have been placed in the 'strong' group as regards cognitive and legal resources. For instance, CITUB (and to a much lesser extent KT Podkrepa) in Bulgaria has very strong expertise at the federal and sectoral levels, fostered by their Institute for Social and Trade Union Research (ISTUR). They also derive expertise and financing from their robust involvement in projects at European level. As Tomev *et al.* (2019) describe, the shortage of financial resources, for both confederations, is offset to a certain extent by the implementation of projects with national (under the National Employment Action Plans – NAPs) and European funding (from EU Operational Programmes).

Finally, Hungary has been placed in the 'low' organisational resources group due to the political context and the Orban government. In the country, trade unions have, in some cases, held diametrically opposite views, some of which are pro-government. As the Hungarian country report highlights, the trade unions have low levels of organisational, financial and cognitive resources (Albert 2019). The strong governmental presence in the media, together with the low mobilising capacity and the underfinanced position of the trade unions, significantly inhibit effective reconciliation of interests. Another problem linked to resources, which seems to be a very sensitive topic in some interviews with Hungarian respondents, and is linked to their capacity to coordinate horizontally, is that the government provides financing for organisations participating in the new national tripartite 'Permanent Consultation Forum of the Industry and the Government' (PCFPSG); this is also a means of suppressing more critical voices (Ibid).