



'What Europe says matters': the European Semester as a catalyst to overcome national social dialogue blockages?

Case study Bulgaria

Executive summary

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This OSE Research paper describes the most important developments in the way Bulgarian trade unions have been involved in the 'European' and 'national' cycles of the European Semester in the period 2014-2018. It explores the specificities of national trade unions' involvement, including access channels, strategies followed as well as the resources available and exchanged. It also qualifies trade union's influence on the national agenda setting as well as on the outputs and outcomes of the Semester. The paper includes an in-depth case study illustrating the link between the European Semester and national social dialogue. It concludes by proposing recommendations for improved trade union involvement.

The study uses qualitative research methods. In addition to a documentary analysis of existing national and European research as well as European, national and trade union documents produced in the context of the Semester, 15 semi-structured interviews were conducted with representatives of the Bulgarian social partners, national government and the European Commission (henceforth "Commission"), all involved in the Semester process. The lack of national research on stakeholder involvement in the Semester since its launch in 2011 limits to some extent the possibility to outline its dynamics and the changing role played by trade unions at different stages of the process.

Bulgaria can be characterised as a country with a "moderate" degree of EU pressure, low levels of trade union representativeness (in terms of membership), and which belongs to the Central-Eastern cluster of industrial relations' systems. The documentary analysis shows that in the period under review, the Country-specific Recommendations (CSRs) have decreased in number as well as in scope. However, the Commission points to a relatively low CSR implementation level.

The period 2014-2018 was marked by political instability and civic and trade union protests in Bulgaria. The frequent changes of governments and constant internal contradictions in the ruling coalitions created a difficult context for social dialogue. Although there is a well-established institutional framework, the social partners are only formally involved in the policy-making process and their views are often ignored. Tensions between the government and

social partners due to the government's frequent unilateral decisions on issues related to labour and social policy as well as tensions among the social partners themselves, further aggravated the environment for social dialogue. This situation hinders the effective involvement of social partners in the national Semester cycle.

The desk research and analysis of interviews show that: a) Bulgarian trade union involvement in the European Semester has improved in the period under scrutiny, particularly at European level; b) the Bulgarian social partners' awareness of the main Semester documents and commitment to participate has increased, especially since 2015; c) trade unions consider many of the messages and recommendations coming from the Semester in the field of labour market and social policy as largely relevant and corresponding to their priorities.

The Research paper identifies various co-existing venues and channels for formal and informal involvement of the social partners at national and European level, including: specific structures for formal consultation between social partners and the government on issues related to the Europe 2020 Strategy and the European Semester; the Economic and Social Council; national tripartite bodies, including the National Council for Tripartite Cooperation and a number of tripartite management bodies of important institutions; parliamentary debates and lobbying; written contributions and direct contact with the Commission. Written opinions, positions and analyses by the two trade union confederations are the most commonly used channels for direct involvement in the Semester at both national and European level.

While trade unions consider their involvement at national level as ineffective and formal, with only a limited impact on outcomes, direct communication at European level, including with the Commission and the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), is viewed as the most successful channel for involving national trade unions in the Semester process. Direct contacts with the Commission are highly valued and are seen as a channel through which trade unions can strengthen their position, overcome national 'blockages' in social dialogue and attract Commission attention to important national labour and social issues. The mutual exchange of resources is seen as beneficial by both the trade unions and the Commission. Since 2016 this involvement has improved with the appointment of ETUC "Trade Union Semester Liaison Officers" (TUSLOs).

The establishment of national institutional fora and improved direct contact with the Commission has encouraged insider strategies targeting policy-makers. At the same time, the shortcomings of the institutionalised involvement at national level and the impression of imposed EU reforms in some areas have caused the unions to adopt outsider strategies, or a combination of both, to exert pressure on government. However, both the trade union confederations and the employer's organisations have faced difficulties in coordinating their Semester-related activities.

Despite the formal obstacles to their involvement at national level, Bulgarian trade unions created genuine leverage and channels of influence. They have the organisational, cognitive and human resources needed to participate in the European Semester and to impact to some extent the Semester documents, at least to 'fine-tune' messages in the Country Reports (CRs) and CSRs. This is also acknowledged by the Commission representatives.

In spite of the difficult context for national social dialogue, this Research paper presents some examples of successful social dialogue on issues stemming from the CSRs and the National Reform Programme (NRP). The in-depth case study on trade union involvement in establishing a transparent mechanism for minimum wage setting, as addressed in consecutive Bulgarian

CSRs, shows the potential of the social dialogue in reaching compromise and agreement on national priorities. The CSR indeed played the role of a catalyst in the processes that were already on the social dialogue agenda. A successful conclusion of the negotiations would further increase confidence in the benefits of addressing CSRs through social dialogue.

The paper concludes that Bulgarian trade union involvement in the European Semester has improved in the period under scrutiny, particularly at European level, due to a range of factors at national and European level that act as a catalyst to the processes. However, there is a need to further improve the institutional and organisational framework in order to enhance social partner involvement.

Thus, inter-organisational coordination between the national social partners, including between the two trade union confederations, should improve in order to motivate national governments to effectively involve the social partners in the Semester and provide for higher influence in decision-making. Equally important in this respect is capacity building, and increasing the resources and expertise of the social partners.

The European Semester and the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) should be linked more closely and become a common "European Economic and Social Semester" in the coming years. The EPSR is considered as an opportunity to push for a more social agenda of the Semester, an enhanced role of trade unions in the processes and a more structured and efficient national social dialogue. A further inclusion of EPSR Principles in the CSRs would substantially improve the link between the Semester and the national social dialogue.

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