



From an 'intrusion' to a 'window of opportunity'? Influencing the national debate through the European Semester

Case study Italy

Executive summary

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The Research Paper aims at understanding the involvement of Italian trade union organisations (TUs) in both the domestic and European Union (EU) cycles of the European Semester (ES). It completes this analysis with more in-depth research on a specific policy choice: the introduction of the Inclusion Income (Reddito di Inclusione, REI), since implementation of this programme was a policy priority underlined in recent Country-specific Recommendations for Italy. For this task, the paper relies on quantitative data to describe the Italian context and uses a qualitative research methodology, drawn from a variety of sources: legislation, key document analysis and interviews with key informants.

Although Italy was not formally subject to a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), the need to finance its huge public debt at relatively acceptable interest rates has created a strong dependency on the EU institutions, in particular the European Central Bank. Therefore, since 2011, EU pressure has become increasingly strong and it has remained so over the years. Only since 2016-17 has pressure returned to a moderate level, thanks to several domestic reforms (mostly concerning pensions and labour market regulation) implemented partly on the basis of CSRs coming from the EU.

In terms of the EU 28, the representativeness of national TUs in Italy is at a medium level. In 2013, around 37% of employees belonged to a trade union. Italy has an industrial relations' system belonging to the group of so-called 'State-Centred' systems. In these systems, state intervention in industrial relations is frequent, the role of the social partners is not institutionalised and the latter are involved on an irregular, often politicised, basis. Moreover, collective bargaining is relatively widespread in Italy (around 80% of wage earners have the right to bargain) and it

has traditionally predominantly taken place at sectoral level, although in recent years, the company level has also become increasingly important. Since the 2000s, tripartite negotiations have become less common.

The relationship between the TUs and the ES has evolved over time. Awareness of the procedures and instruments of the ES is still limited – although it has increased when compared to the recent past – and restricted to some peak members of the TUs. While at the beginning of the present decade the ES was perceived almost as an ‘intrusion’ into the national policy-making process, today Italian TUs consider it as a ‘window of opportunity’.

Our research emphasizes the importance of distinguishing between participation in the Semester at the national level and at the European level. Between 2014-2018, no formal or informal consultation processes took place with the government to discuss the National Reform Programme (NRP) and/or the national documents reacting to European reports or recommendations. This is because Italian national governments were not particularly interested in exchanging resources with TUs. Therefore, the political resources (consensus – membership) available to TUs have been insufficient to foster a different model of interaction.

Only in one specific policy field – and at a time (2016-2018) when the Italian government was particularly weak – were Italian TUs able to strike a deal with the government, resulting in the introduction of a minimum income scheme. To do so, however, they had, first, to build a united front with other social actors and, second, to support a policy reform in line with the European Semester (ES) messages.

The situation at EU level has evolved significantly over time. In this context, Italian TUs could count on an important asset and a strategic opportunity. The important asset was ‘networking’, namely through the increasing role played by the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) in order to foster a TU agenda on the Semester. The opportunity was Juncker’s decision to invest more in social dialogue. Therefore, an exchange of resources has taken place in recent years at the EU level, with the Commission asking TUs to provide two types of resources: on one hand, information and expertise (Beyers 2004: 218); on the other, legitimation for the Commission itself and EU institutions in general, at a time of rising criticism of these institutions. In exchange, Italian TUs have obtained recognition of their socio-political role, at times when social dialogue was difficult to implement in Italy, as well as the chance to try to influence national policies through the EU institutions. Overall, national TUs, in Italy, have tried to use the ES debate at the EU level to attempt to influence the Italian national government’s agenda, and not the other way around.

The research presented highlights a set of policy recommendations useful for both TU involvement in the ES and the effectiveness of the latter, addressed to the Italian government, the EU institutions and the TUs themselves.

The Italian Government has been the most important absent party in the ES interaction with trade unions. It is very important that it returns to more effective discussions with TUs. This would also provide the TUs with greater incentives to invest their own resources in the ES.

There is a need for more continuity over time (in all the main ES phases) in the interaction between TUs and European institutions during the ES. Moreover, Country-specific Recommendations should be less succinct and more nuanced, in order to better explain concepts and views. The EU must put more pressure on national governments to involve the social partners in the ES discussion and process.

Finally, there are three aspects on which TUs should work in order to make their participation in the ES more effective. First, it is important to encourage, at EU level, more interaction among the national TUs and their Trade Unions Semester Liaison Officer (TUSLO), in order to exchange views and experiences. Second, it is necessary to strengthen the role of the TUSLO and, in general, to invest more in high-ranking TU representatives for the process. Third, TUs should work on documents to be presented during the ES process; these should be drafted in a more functional way.

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