

The European Semester – the challenges for public service trade unions

SUMMARY REPORT

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intervention in the European Semester**



THE EFISTU PROJECT

Public service trade unions – effective intervention in the European Semester (EFISTU) was a project running from January 2018 to December 2019 co-ordinated by EPSU (European Federation of Public Service Unions) with partner organisations – University of Nottingham and European Social Observatory – and supported by the ETUCE (European Trade Union Committee for Education). The project was funded by the European Commission’s Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion (VS/2017/0436).

Introduction

The European Semester – the European Union’s annual process of economic and social policy coordination – has posed significant challenges for public service trade unions since its inception in 2011. The initial focus on fiscal consolidation has shifted but “fiscal responsibility” and the strictures of the Stability and Growth Pact remain at its core, with major implications for public investment and public finances.

The question has then been how the trade union movement at both European and national levels can ensure that the voice of public service workers is heard and listened to in this process. This is not just about trade union influence and involvement in the Semester itself but also about the relationship between trade unions representing public services and their national confederations and the European Trade Union Confederation which are the main direct participants in the process.

In order to help answer these questions, EPSU – the European federation for public service workers – the ETUCE European education workers’ federation, the University of Nottingham and the European Social Observatory (OSE) successfully applied for funding from the European Commission to run a two-year project – Public service trade unions: effective intervention in the European Semester.

This is the final summary report of the project highlighting the key conclusions. The project involved two major conferences in 2018 and 2019, a literature review, analyses of the 2018 and 2019 Semester cycles and five country case studies covering Denmark, France, Ireland, Italy and Latvia. All reports are available on the [EPSU website](#).

Public service trade unions – effective intervention in the European Semester

The final report of the project provides an in-depth analysis of the two cycles of the European Semester from 2017 to 2019 – drawing on five case studies and desk research. It clearly shows how education and health care in particular but public services more broadly feature as central themes. This therefore poses a major challenge for public service unions in relation to any direct role they have in the process or any indirect influence they try to achieve through their national confederations and/or European sector federations.

The study has found evidence of a continuing trend towards a more ‘socialised’ European Semester, both as regards the messages stemming from the Semester and the openness towards social stakeholders. At the same time, this type of research should not just be about a simple count of so-called ‘social’ Country-specific Recommendations (CSRs), but must be based on a careful analysis of both the content of CSRs and the wider economic framework within which they are located.

This continuing socialisation of the Semester has certainly been helped by the embedding of the European Pillar of Social Rights within the core of the Semester. In some respects, this highlights the dynamic nature of the process and the possibilities for further expanding its social – and ecological – dimension. Whether this becomes a reality will depend in large measure on the extent to which trade unions are able to engage in meaningful social dialogue in relation to Semester matters.

It will also depend on whether the European Commission and the Member States will adjust their priorities and allow for a real re-balancing of economic and social policies and give them more weight vis-à-vis the strict respect of fiscal rules.

As far as social dialogue is concerned, the evidence of the EFISTU project shows that there is still a long way to go, with many trade unions raising serious concerns about the extent of social dialogue and information and consultation in the Semester. Too often, even when dialogue takes place, it can feel superficial and tokenistic. The lack of real consultation in some countries calls for stronger European guidance (including possible legislation) to require national governments to establish a proper process of social dialogue within the semester.

However, there are also some good practices and improvements in some countries although problems remain particularly in relation to timing – the need for responses to detailed documents at short notice – and for some unions the limited resources available to produce in-depth input.

Some of the challenges are at national level with trade unions looking for improved consultation with national governments and/or specific ministries. In other cases, it is about ensuring that the message gets across to the European Commission where input into the annual Country reports can be crucial. This can again be about timing and resources to ensure effective intervention. However, some trade unions have also seen how coordination with other trade unions – and indeed civil society – can help in strengthening their arguments and making a more convincing case to the European Commission. Both the European Semester Officers and the European Trade Union Liaisons officers were found to play a key intermediary role.

For the trade unions organising in public services at sector level the key link is with the confederation. While that is often working smoothly, there is also evidence of a failure in effective communication. Improvements in this relationship are vital for ensuring that public service unions get their messages across.

Some of the main recommendations emerging from the EFISTU project are targeted at the different actors.

The European Commission should:

- ensure that the Semester is embedded in social dialogue processes, particularly in relation to the sector social dialogue at European level, potentially including an obligation to consult social partners;
- circulate draft versions of Country reports at an early stage for social partner feedback;;
- extend the process as far as possible to allow for more time for trade union input, taking account of the pressure they often face with limited resources; and
- look at how to increase funding to support the training and information needs of trade unions

National governments should:

- ensure meaningful consultation around the national reform programme and that it is a proper response to the issues raised in the Country report and CSRs rather than just a restatement of government policy;
- allow for direct contact with relevant ministries to address key sector issues;; and
- consider how to promote public debate around some of the key issues highlighted in the Country Report and National Reform Programmes

Trade unions – the sector federations and national confederations – should try to address the following:

- ensure that trade union confederations reflect the key concerns of their public service affiliates and/or involve these unions directly in the consultation process;
- aim to intervene effectively in the key stage of drafting the Country Report;
- take a more strategic approach and set out key demands rather than just react to what comes from the European Commission and national governments;
- don't miss out on issues and arguments raised by the European Commission that can help with the political arguments at national level (even if in some countries the Semester is felt as an "intrusion" in domestic affairs); and
- try to integrate semester work with other work and campaigns and not see it as something separate;
- try to open up the process where relevant and possible – using themes such as health spending or housing, that might connect with the public ; and
- work with other organisations – civil society – on common issues as this can help ensure greater impact and influence on the European Commission.

