Chapter 5
Are (some) social players entering European recovery through the Semester back door?

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Introduction[1]

In summer 2020, in an unprecedented move, the EU offered its Member States help to cope with the fall-out of the Covid-19 pandemic. To do so, it drew on the EU long-term budget (2021-2027) and created a new temporary support system referred to as 'NextGenerationEU' (NGEU). Formally established in February 2021, the so-called 'Recovery and Resilience Facility' (RRF) at the core of the NGEU provides financial support to Member States, notably through a combination of grants and loans (European Parliament and Council of the EU 2021). The EU has issued debt to finance this expenditure, the size and scope of which are unparalleled and break with longstanding taboos (Alcidi and Corti, this volume). Yet even so, not all scholars agree that this situation represents a sea change (e.g. Howarth and Quaglia 2021). The European Commission insisted on attaching strings to these funds, i.e., that they be spent on the digital transition, the energy transition and on stimulating social and inclusive growth benefiting the next generation. Member States need to submit detailed national Recovery and Resilience Plans (RRPs) to access the funds.

While some reporting templates are new, others draw on the European Semester (henceforth 'Semester') – the EU macro-economic policy coordination framework. Examining how and why the Semester became part of RRF governance, this chapter asks, *to what extent did this new set-up change the power balance among key players* (e.g., financial and economic players versus social affairs players)? The chapter distinguishes between 'EU institutional social players' and 'social stakeholders'. The former consist of the DG Employment, Social Affairs & Inclusion (DG EMPL) of the European Commission, the Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs (EPSCO) Council formation and the EU Employment and Social Protection Committees (EMCO and the SPC).[2] 'Social stakeholders' comprise both EU and national social partners[3] (representatives of worker and employer organisations) and civil society

1. This chapter builds on and further develops Vanhercke and Verdun (2022) and has been summarised in Vanhercke and Verdun (2021). The authors thank 32 key informants for their time for semi-structured interviews, conducted by both authors. Special thanks to Angelina Atanasova (OSE) for her key contribution in elaborating Section 3.3 and to Pietro Regazzoni (University of Milan) and Malcolm Thomson (University of Victoria) for their research assistance. Thanks also to Amandine Crespy (ULB), Edgars Eihmanis (University of Wroclaw), Slavina Spasova (OSE), Jonathan Zeitlin (University of Amsterdam) and five anonymous reviewers for constructive comments and detailed suggestions on earlier versions. The usual disclaimer applies.
2. For a discussion of the European Parliament's role, and notably its Committee on Employment and Social Affairs (EMPL), in the negotiations surrounding the RRF Regulation, see Vanhercke et al. (2021).
3. The European social partners are engaged in European social dialogue, as provided for under Articles 154 and 155 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU).

organisations (CSOs). Wherever relevant, we distinguish between players' involvement at EU and domestic level.

The research done for this chapter draws on extensive document analysis and 32 semi-structured high-level interviews conducted by the authors from October 2020 to November 2021. Interviewees hold senior positions, e.g. in various European Commission Directorates General (DGs) and European social partner organisations, or representing Member States in various EU Committees.[4]

This chapter is structured as follows. Section 1 examines how the RRF has been designed to work in the context of the Semester. Section 2 looks at how the Semester has been adapted to become part of the new institutional set-up. Section 3 discusses the extent to which RRF governance has given a prominent place to social affairs players, while Section 4 explores whether the Semester is set to become a bit 'harder' in the new RRF environment. The final section revisits the research question, reflecting on winners and losers of the revised macro-economic governance architecture.

1. The Semester as a 'Goldilocks' mode of governance for the Recovery Facility

1.1 Not too hot, not too cold: just the right temperature

The European Semester is a mode of governance integrating many societal players. Based on Country Reports and non-binding (even if Treaty-based) Country-specific Recommendations (CSRs) initially proposed by the European Commission, the final adoption of the latter remains formally in the hands of Member States through the Council. The Semester has evolved over time to be 'not too soft and not too hard', leaving ample room for manoeuvre regarding the choice of policies to be implemented. Countries of the 'North' and of the 'South' have been given different recommendations in this regard, with Germany and the Netherlands encouraged to increase wages whereas the recommendation for the 'South' is to keep tabs on wage increases (D'Erman et al. 2022).

Since its inception in 2011, the effectiveness of the Semester has been mixed, as witnessed by the modest compliance with CSRs (Hagelstam et al. 2019). It also has not been clear whether the EU has pushed for more or less state intervention or market orientation, or – as some have argued – for more fiscal discipline versus investment (Haas et al. 2020). It was therefore not immediately obvious to the authors of this chapter that the Semester would become the cornerstone of the new macro-economic governance architecture, even being identified as a mode of governance that seeks to achieve various

4. We refer to each interview with a dedicated code, adopting abbreviations to reflect the general institutional affiliation of the respondents, while guaranteeing confidentiality. The abbreviations are BUSINESS (BusinessEurope), COM (European Commission), CSO (Civil Society Organisation), EMCO (Employment Committee), EESC (European Economic and Social Committee), ETU (European Trade Union representative), MEP (Member of the European Parliament), NOF (National Official) and SPC (Social Protection Committee). See the Appendix for more details about the interviews (institutional affiliation, position, date and in-text code).

objectives. Verdun and Zeitlin (2018) point to achieving balances between economic and social objectives, between supranational and intergovernmental tendencies, and between technocratic and democratic governance modes. Some assessments of the Semester's effectiveness focus on particular issues tackled by the CSRs and provide case studies, whereas others take stock of overall compliance with the overarching CSRs (D'Erman and Verdun 2022). Direct causality remains difficult to establish – i.e. how much influence the CSRs have actually had on domestic policies (interviews COM6, NOF2, NOF3, NOF5, NOF7; D'Erman et al. 2022; van der Veer 2022). Ultimately, responsibility for domestic policies lies with each Member State, while the aim of the Semester is to guide EU-wide coordination.

We have argued elsewhere that the Semester served as a 'Goldilocks' (Mure 1831/2010) mode of governance (Vanhercke and Verdun 2022). In analogy to the children's story 'The Three Bears' – in which a young girl named Goldilocks tastes three different bowls of porridge and finds she prefers the one that is not too hot nor too cold, but has just the right temperature – the Semester provides structure and direction, while not being overly intrusive. Those more in favour of EU-level intervention find the Semester insufficient because it is *not stringent enough* (Bokhorst 2022); those more dismissive of top-down rule from the EU to the Member States find that the EU is *interfering too much* (Schout 2021).

In the context of RRF governance, the Semester is perceived as appropriately situated between these two extremes – allowing a balance to be struck between providing sufficient constraints, while leaving considerable leeway for Member States to choose and implement their preferred domestic policy options. The latter is essential, since many of the issues addressed in the context of the RRF are distinctly national competences and since a significant part of the newly available funding consists of loans to countries.

1.2 The Semester and the RRF: intrinsically linked

How has the alignment between the Semester and the RRF become institutionalised? The embedding of the RRF into the Semester can be understood through various EU documents. The European Commission paved the way in its May 2020 Communication on the CSRs, underlining that a 'close alignment between the EU budget and the Semester is essential' and pointing to the continued importance of the (refocused) Semester, notably to guide 'reforms and investments' (European Commission 2020d: 15-16). While the July European Council (2020) left unsettled the detailed governance of the recovery instrument (Fabbrini 2022), it played an important role in cementing the role of the Semester. Though not at all certain at the outset, the European Council (2020: §17) conclusions endorsed the stronger link between the EU budget and the Semester, but also the need for further implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights and equal opportunities for all. These views are reflected in the RRF Regulation of February 2021, which stipulates that 'At union level, the European Semester for economic policy coordination (European Semester), including the principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights, is the framework to identify national reform priorities and monitor their implementation' (European Parliament and Council of the EU 2021: recital (4)).

The alignment between the Semester and the RRF is explained in the Regulation as occurring along three lines. First, RRPs will contribute to addressing 'all or a significant subset of' challenges identified in the relevant CSRs or in other relevant documents officially adopted by the Commission in the Semester. Second, in order to streamline the content and the number of documents requested, Member States *may* submit their National Reform Programme (NRP) and their RRP in a *single integrated document*. Third, twice-yearly reporting on the progress made in achieving the investment and reform commitments will take place *in the context of the Semester* (European Parliament and Council of the EU 2021, emphasis added).

The final RRF Regulation also confirmed that the criteria related to a) the CSRs; b) the strengthening of growth potential, job creation and economic, social and institutional resilience;[5] and c) the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) 'should require the highest score of the assessment'. In addition, 'effective contribution to the green and digital transitions should also be a prerequisite for a positive assessment' (European Parliament and Council of the EU 2021: 21). Each RRP will have to include a minimum of 37% of expenditure related to climate and a minimum of 20% related to digital. By contrast, no explicit 'social' targets were included in the RRF Regulation agreed between the Council and the EP. This lack of explicit social targets occurred despite the EPSCO Council formation's request to set social targets, notably in the context of the Pillar Action Plan. The Social Platform (2020a), for its part, had called for the 'inclusion of a 25% earmarking for social investment, as well as bringing back the implementation of the EPSR to the forefront of the European Semester'.[6]

The *Annual Sustainable Growth Strategy* (ASGS) 2021 highlights why domestic and EU policymakers decided that the Semester and the RRF were to become 'intrinsically linked' (European Commission 2020a: 12): the Semester provides a well-established (i.e. predictable and encompassing) framework for the coordination of economic and employment policies to guide the EU and the Member States through the challenges of the recovery and twin transition (European Commission 2020a: 5). The Semester offers important informational and signalling advantages for the identification of priority areas when drawing up RRPs covering a wide variety of policy initiatives, while timeframes for identifying complex and multifaceted national reform agendas are very tight. As some interviewees argued, by building on Semester tools and practices, the Member States have a chance to get reform and investment priorities 'right' from the very beginning, especially given the one-off nature of the formulation of the RRPs (interviews COM5, ETU2, MEP1; see also Moschella 2020: 9; 20). It should be noted that the fact that *all* CSRs are deemed relevant further adds to the challenge that RRPs are expected to be consistent with multiple priorities, making it difficult for the

5. The RRF Regulation defines 'resilience' as 'the ability to face economic, social and environmental shocks or persistent structural changes in a fair, sustainable and inclusive way' (European Parliament and Council of the EU 2021: Art. 2 § 5)..

6. https://www.socialplatform.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Call-to-reinforce-the-social-dimension-of-the-European-Semester-the-RRF-and-the-NRRP.pdf

Commission to steer the planned reforms and investments (interviews COM6, EMCO2, ETU2, NOF4, NOF5). Thus, rather than inventing a totally new system to deal with macroeconomic coordination and country assessments, the instruments developed within the context of the European Semester were used.

1.3 Managing the EU's recovery: the European Commission in pole position

The above-mentioned EU documents provide a broad-brush view of how the RRF is managed in procedural terms. Implementation of the RRF and coordination of the Semester are steered centrally within the newly established Recovery and Resilience Task Force (RECOVER), established in August 2020 within the European Commission's Secretariat-General (SECGEN). Working in close cooperation with the Directorate General for Economic and Financial Affairs (DG ECFIN), the Task Force reports directly to the Commission President. A formal role has been assigned to the Economic and Finance Committee (EFC), even if much of the actual deliberations take place in the 'technical' Council preparatory bodies (Coreper II). The Commission is supposed to ask the opinion of the EFC, which has the right to pull the 'emergency brake' if a Member State has not achieved the milestones (linked to qualitative achievements) and targets (linked to quantitative results) set in its RRP – the basis for the assessment of payment requests. In this unlikely case, the matter may be referred to the European Council.

While the emergency brake can theoretically slow down disbursement of funds, some argue that the RRF 'has placed the [European Commission] in the driving seat to steer and monitor the use of funding' (Corti and Núñez Ferrer 2021: 4). One interviewee confirmed this: Member States 'will have to heavily, heavily rely on the Commission', as smaller countries in particular 'will have difficulties to really challenge the Commission assessment' (interview COM6), especially because the satisfactory achievement of milestones and targets will be the key to unlocking the money (interviews NOF6, NOF7, COM11). It would indeed seem that by a) encouraging Member States to 'interact with its services to informally and bilaterally discuss the draft plans' as early as possible when preparing them (European Commission 2020a: 13); and b) providing Member States with (initial and updated) guidance on how best to present their Recovery and Resilience Plans (European Commission 2020b and 2021a), the Commission immediately picked up the glove in a new context where it does much more than manage the practical implementation of RRF governance. The Commission can now raise funds and run a supranational economic policy, while its negative assessments (or a threat thereof) can block their disbursement. Some might argue that a negative assessment is very unlikely, as all parties involved want the RRF to be a success (and want to spend the money without delay) . Yet, the so-called Frugal Four started off criticising the disbursement of funds without some form of checks and balances. The Commission will need to remain sensitive to these opposing pressures (Lofven 2020; Verdun 2022).

This institutional set-up for managing the RRF has given rise to considerable concern among EU institutional players and social stakeholders alike. Many of our interviewees were worried about (a) the inclusion of social affairs players; and (b) the incorporation of social priorities in the key RRF decisions. The initial concern was that these gradual gains achieved during past Semester cycles had been abandoned in the initial RRF setup. However, by the end of 2020 the tide was turning, with various EU-level institutional social players managing to have their voices heard again in the Semester, and through it, in the RRF. As we discuss further in Section 3.3 below, the involvement of social stakeholders (social partners and civil society organisations) has been insufficient, especially at domestic level.

2. Temporary Semester adaptions to the RRF: EU economic governance 'on hold'?

How did the inclusion of the Semester in the RRF change economic policy coordination in 2020-2021? Some aspects of the Semester remained largely unaffected, whereas others were interrupted due to the pandemic. When they were implemented, it was not always clear to stakeholders whether these changes were temporary and would break with past practices or would eventually trend back to the usual processes.

2.1 Continuity: the Semester 2020 Autumn package

What remained the same was that the European Commission published its Semester Autumn Package, as planned, on 18 November 2020, basing it, as usual, on its Autumn 2020 Economic Forecast. The package includes the *Opinions on the Draft Budgetary Plans* (DBP) of Euro Area Member States for 2021 and the *Euro Area recommendation* (European Commission 2020c), adopted by the Council in January 2021. The Autumn Package provides policy guidance on the short-term priorities that Euro Area Member States should pursue in their RRPs to address the pandemic.

The Semester Autumn Package also includes the *Alert Mechanism Report* (AMR) with its finding that increased risks of imbalances are evident in the twelve Member States already experiencing imbalances before the Covid-19 pandemic. The package also contains a proposal for a *Joint Employment Report* (JER), which shows that the groups hardest hit by the Covid-19 crisis are young people – making up a major share of non-standard and self-employed workers – as well as women. Through its in-depth analysis, the JER has helped Member States identify priority areas for reforms and investment to include in their RRPs.

Multilateral surveillance between Member States, one of the slowly built cornerstones of the Semester, has, in the months following the announcement of the RRF in May 2020, been continued, albeit via a largely written procedure in very difficult (pandemic) circumstances. While more emphasis was put on bilateral dialogue between the Commission and individual Member States about the reforms and investments proposed in the framework of the RRF, there 'was a clear intention not to lose what had been built up in terms of multilateral surveillance during the previous years' (interview SPC1). Both the peer reviews organised in the context of the 'Mutual Learning Programme' of the European Employment Strategy and those relating to social protection and social inclusion (SPC) continued, even if stakeholders seem to have been given a less prominent role (CSO3). Figure 1 compares the timeline of the 2021 European Semester cycle with the usual cycle.

2.2 Temporary transformation: the end of the Semester as we know it

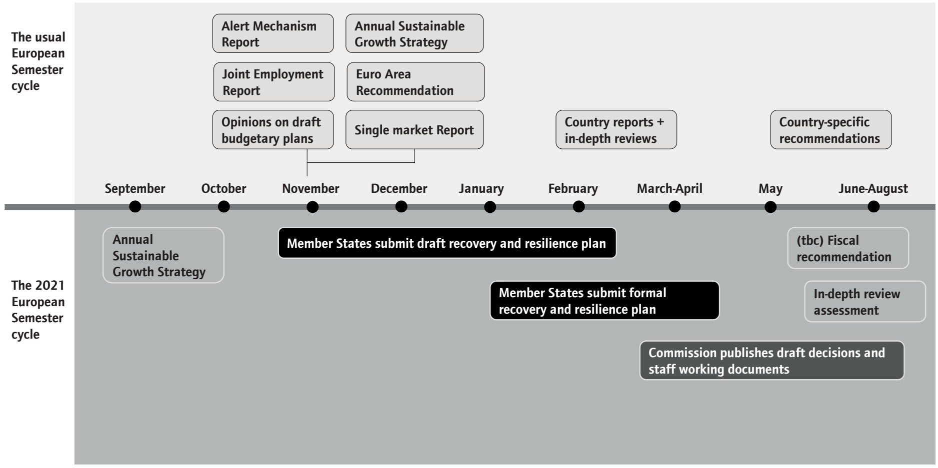
Some other components of the Semester, by contrast, were transformed very quickly, with a view to aligning them with the RRF. Consequently, many of our interviewees felt that key aspects of the Semester were 'on hold', 'frozen' or 'hanging in the background', while others referred to a 'lightening' or 'streamlining' (interviews COM5, COM6, SPC1, TU2) of the Semester to decrease the reporting burden for national and EU administrations, uphold consistency in the key messages coming from the EU, and channel the money to the Member States as soon as possible. For instance, the Annual Sustainable Growth Strategy (ASGS) 2021 was published two months earlier than scheduled (in September 2020, see also Figure 1 below), without the usual involvement of social players at national or EU levels. This lack of consultation caused tensions with, among others, the European social partners (interviews COM4, ETU1, BUSINESS), as it took many by surprise. As demonstrated above, the document was transformed into strategic guidance to the Member States for implementing the RRF (European Commission 2020a).

An even more significant change pertains to the *Country Reports*, which were not adopted by the European Commission in 2021, in the absence of the Semester 'Winter Package': Country Reports were replaced as the Semester's main analytical reference documents (also constituting the basis for the annual CSRs) by the Commission's assessments of the RRPs during summer 2021. Member States were asked to submit these reports between 15 October 2020 (draft plans) and 30 April 2021 (final plans), though the large majority submitted later. The assessments were published, in staggered batches,[7] in the form of Staff Working Documents, together with Commission proposals for Council implementing Decisions.[8]

Reflecting the Covid-19 pandemic circumstances, the most notable change in the 2021 Semester cycle is that no new Country-specific Recommendations (CSRs) were issued to Member States presenting an RRP, except on fiscal matters in the context of the Stability and Growth Pact (SGP).[9] For 2021, all earlier CSRs remain valid and are supposed to steer the reforms and investments proposed by the Member States in their RRPs. In practice, however, this process has its limitations: as the European Court of Auditors (2020) pointed out in its opinion on the RRF, 'in certain cases, the CSRs contain a mix of issues, and generally lack clear timeframes and costs'. It can be expected that Member States will endeavour to spend the new funds according to their domestic preferences, while the Commission will seek to ensure that each RRP

7. Depending on the respective delivery of the recovery and resilience plans and the finalisation of the Commission's assessments.
8. For the Commission assessment of the Recovery and Resilience Plans see: https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/recovery-coronavirus/recovery-and-resilience-facility/recovery-and-resilience-plans-assessments_en
9. The general escape clause remains in place for as long as it is deemed necessary to allow Member States to implement measures to contain the coronavirus outbreak and mitigate its negative socio-economic effects.

Figure 1 **Aligning timing: the 2021 European Semester cycle**



Source: European Commission (2021b).

contains the required expenditure related to climate (37%), digital transition (20%) and employment and social policies (i.e. linked to the EPSR Action Plan). Initial analysis of the RRPs indeed confirms that spending priorities have been closely linked to the last cycle of CSRs in several Member States (Corti et al. 2021; Pilati 2021). Several interviewees also pointed out that the EPSR Action Plan was published too late to impact the RRF objectives obtained by the EP during the negotiations on the Regulation (see Section 1.4): in the absence of quantitative social targets, Member States seem to have had a largely free hand to choose to what extent they also want to invest in social reforms and investments. However, ongoing research by Eihmanis (2021) suggests that the European Commission has been strategically using the RRF to push for long-term structural social reforms (*and perhaps bolster the scant welfare states?*), based on long-standing CSRs, in the economically liberal Baltic countries for instance in long-term care and health care.[10] In Latvia, for example, the European Commission seems to have been pushing for a higher guaranteed minimum income: the Commission's Staff Working Document analysing the Latvian RRP stipulates that

> '[d]espite the recent increase in 2021, the guaranteed minimum income remains significantly below the poverty threshold and lacks a clear indexation mechanism. As a result, the share of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion and the poverty gap both remain wide. Income inequality is associated with unequal access to healthcare, which is significantly more difficult for low-income groups, who cannot afford private healthcare' (European Commission 2021c: 10).

Another illustration of ongoing changes relates to *the players involved* in the Semester and the RRF. Both the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) and the Social

10. A very similar thing happened during Latvia's balance of payments (BoP) assistance programme (Eihmanis 2018 and private correspondence with Edgars Eihmanis).

Platform (2020b) were concerned about the lack of involvement of social stakeholders in the design and adoption of the RRPs. They pointed out that at national level prime ministers, finance ministers and ministers responsible for cohesion policy were the ones mainly steering RRP decision-making (while previous National Reform Programmes were largely bureaucracy-driven). Therefore, social stakeholders, including civil society representatives, needed to develop new national and EU networks – an undertaking that takes more time than was available under the tight deadlines of the newly created instrument (interviews BUSINESS, COM9, CSO1, CSO3, EESC, NOF 4, NOF5, TU2). This situation, in turn, made it attractive for powerful industrial lobbyists to seek to influence the drafting of the RRF Regulation (interview MEP2), while the European Parliament scrutinised the role of the 'Big Four' consultancy firms in providing 'technical assistance' to Member States to prepare structural reforms.

3. The Recovery Facility: social players strategically in search of a place at the table

As highlighted above, an element that raised concern following the summer 2020 European Council was whether those players traditionally involved in the Semester would now also be part of the renewed macroeconomic policy coordination. *Would social players perhaps have a smaller role to play?*

3.1 Initial fears: social affairs territory contested (again)

Nearly all our interviewees (for example, COM2, COM3, COM4, COM7, CSO1, CSO1, EMCO1, ETU1, NOF1, NOF5, SPC1) explained that, in the first weeks following the decision to launch the RRF, the 'social affairs players' felt that they had lost much of the voice they had acquired slowly but surely through the 'socialisation'[11] of the Semester (Zeitlin and Vanhercke 2018). Importantly, however, several of our respondents underlined that, in their view, the side-lining of social players was not the result of a deliberate decision to rule out social players, but rather the result of 'crisis policymaking' and 'improvisation' during a 'storm from all sides' when 'everything was happening at the same time' (interviews COM4, NOF4, NOF5). The fact that the 'territory' gained by social affairs players over the past decade again seemed to be contested is nevertheless striking, since the RRPs were supposed to 'contain measures that aim to strengthen social cohesion and social protection systems' (European Parliament and Council of the EU 2021: 6§2.3). This attention placed on social issues is also reflected in the RRPs approved by the Commission (interview COM9), the analysis of which shows that around 30% of their total expenditure will be directed towards social policy (Agence Europe 2021).[12] In other words, while RRPs include essential social investments and

11. Socialisation comprises a) a growing emphasis on social objectives in the Semester's policy orientations; b) intensified monitoring, surveillance and review of national reforms by EU social and employment policy players; and c) an enhanced role for these players relative to their economic policy counterparts in drafting, reviewing and amending the CSRs (Zeitlin and Vanhercke 2018).

12. The source of the 30 per cent seems rather elusive at the time of writing (see Vanhercke et al. 2021 for further discussion).

reforms that are, for some countries, linked to unprecedented EU funding,[13] social affairs players have so far obtained few formal entry-points to the RRF decision-making process.

3.2 Social affairs players' agency: getting a foot in the door through Semester practices

Despite the apparent side-lining of social players, in the summer and autumn of 2020 there were indications that the practices institutionalised during the past decade would, in the end, prove to be quite robust (see also Vesan et al. 2021). Some interviewees indicated that there had been an inclination to return to the more 'normal' Semester practices as of late 2020 and early 2021.[14] Most of our respondents hoped for a quick return to 'business as usual', even though they appreciated that key changes to the Semester need to be made (interviews COM4, COM5, COM11, NOF5, NOF7, EMCO2, ETU2 and SPC1).

Pushed by the federal Minister for Labour and Social Affairs (Hubertus Heil) and ultimately supported by the Minister of Finance (Olaf Scholz), both belonging to the Social Democratic Party (SPD), the German Presidency of the Council of the EU (July-December 2020) played a pivotal role in seeking to involve the EPSCO Council in RRF decisions. In their Council Conclusions of 23 November 2020, Social Affairs Ministers took the unprecedented step of explicitly invoking Article 148 TFEU. The Council 'tasks the Employment Committee to examine – pursuant to Art. 148(3) and 148(4) of the TFEU and in light of the employment guidelines – the implementation of the relevant policies of the Member States as set out in their National Reform Programmes, *including* their National Recovery and Resilience Plans, to cooperate with the Social Protection Committee where relevant, and to inform the Council of such an examination' (Council of the EU 2020: §20; italics added). By underlining that the Recovery and Resilience Plans are *part of* the National Reform Programmes – which both the Employment Committee (EMCO) and the Social Protection Committee (SPC) have reviewed in the past – the EPSCO Council is clearly attempting to leave its stamp on these strategic documents. Consequently, the EMCO Secretariat – which is provided by DG Employment, Social Affairs & Inclusion (DG EMPL) of the European Commission – used the annual review and update of its multilateral surveillance activities to ensure a place for EMCO, in collaboration with the SPC, in the RRF process (for a detailed discussion, see Vanhercke and Verdun 2022). Whether these committees, and by extension the EPSCO Council formation, will be able to have an actual impact on the new governance architecture remains to be seen.

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13. For Member States such as Bulgaria and Croatia, the financial contribution will be above 10% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), while for at least five other countries the injection will be between 5% and 10%.

14. The EPSCO Council formation, in November 2020, called on the Commission 'to propose appropriate arrangements for the return to a fully-fledged European Semester process as soon as possible, including its governance' (Council of the EU 2020: §19). The 2022 Annual Sustainable Growth Strategy (November 2021) will outline the governance framework of the upcoming European Semester cycle, which will probably be a move away from the one-size-fits-all Semester of the past decade, in view of the fact that the RRF means very different things, in terms of budget and timelines, for different countries.

The role of the Commissioner for Jobs and Social Rights (Nicolas Schmit) and his administration – DG EMPL – previously a key player in the Semester's 'Core Group' of four European Commission DGs (Zeitlin and Vanhercke 2018) – seems to have been significantly pruned, at least formally. Commissioner Schmit is not on the Steering Board of the European Recovery Plan, leaving his cabinet formally removed from access to the internal work of the Commission on this dossier.[15] Key respondents across the Commission confirm, however, that, in practice SECGEN and DG ECFIN work in close cooperation with their counterparts in DG EMPL – for example, in the 'RECOVER ECFIN Country Teams' made up (despite its name) of Commission officials from different DGs. DG EMPL also participates in the 'technical' bilateral meetings with Member States, even if these are chaired by counterparts from RECOVER or ECFIN. The reason is quite straightforward: DG EMPL's country intelligence (on social policy and labour market issues) is needed to assess the significant 'social' parts of Member State RRPs. Whether this kind of cooperation will be effective, and DG EMPL can re-establish its voice in the process, will largely depend on the RRF's *ad hoc* implementation and monitoring procedures.

DG EMPL's know-how in managing EU cohesion policy (through the European structural and investment funds, ESIF) should give the Social Affairs directorate additional leverage over the RRPs. Under Article 28 of the RRF Regulation these funds are being negotiated (between the Commission and the Member States) in a coherent package (in terms of planning and execution) that includes, amongst others, the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), the European Social Fund (ESF) and Cohesion Fund Operational Programmes.

3.3 Stakeholder consultation under the RRF: is the glass half-empty?

The European Commission's (2020a) initial RRP guidance stipulates that it 'will be crucial that Member States engage as soon as possible in a broad policy dialogue including social partners and all other relevant stakeholders to prepare their recovery and resilience plans'. The final RRF Regulation goes even further, requiring:

> 'for the preparation and, where available, for the implementation of the recovery and resilience plan, *a summary of the consultation process*, conducted in accordance with the national legal framework, of local and regional authorities, social partners, civil society organisations, youth organisations and other relevant stakeholders, and *how the input of the stakeholders is reflected* in the recovery and resilience plan' (European Parliament and Council of the EU 2021: Article 18 §4.q, emphasis added).

These rather detailed requirements contrast with the more general stakeholder consultation stipulations in force for the European Semester since 2011. Regulation (EU) No 1175/2011 on the strengthening of the surveillance of budgetary positions

15. The Steering Board is composed of the three Executive Vice-Presidents – Margrethe Vestager, Valdis Dombrovskis and Frans Timmermans – and the Commissioner for Economy, Paolo Gentiloni.

and the surveillance and coordination of economic policies (European Parliament and Council of the EU 2011) stipulated that 'relevant stakeholders, in particular the social partners, shall be involved within the framework of the Semester, on the main policy issues where appropriate, in accordance with the provisions of the TFEU and national legal and political arrangements' (Article 2a, §4).

The German Presidency of the Council of the EU and the EP, co-legislators of the RRF Regulation, both played important roles in ensuring that stakeholders would be heard in the RRF — at least on paper (interviews MEP1, NOF5). The above-mentioned RRF Regulation requirements go beyond the 2011 Semester Regulation in two important ways. First, Member States are not only asked to provide 'a summary of the consultation process', but also to report on 'how the input of the stakeholders is reflected in the recovery and resilience plan'. Second, while the 2011 Regulation only lists the 'social partners', the RRF Regulation considers a much broader group of stakeholders, including local and regional authorities, civil society organisations (CSOs), youth organisations and other relevant stakeholders (European Parliament and Council of the EU 2021). Our interviewees pointed out that, even if the practical effects of the consultation clause in the RRF Regulation so far seem strictly limited (also because it was not an assessment criterion of the RRPs), it should be considered an important step forward. The clause may indeed provide legal ground for stakeholders to obtain involvement in the monitoring and implementation of the RRP (interviews BUSINESS, ETU1, ETU2, ETU3, CSO1), even if others raise serious doubts in this respect (CSO2, CSO3).

These consultation requirements are 'more than has been achieved during the Semester' (interview ETU2), even if strong opposition from both Council and Commission prevented a stronger formulation of this requirement. For instance, the RRF Regulation (Article 18 §4.q) refers to consultation 'in accordance with the national legal framework'; while the emphasis is on consultation during the *preparation* of the RRPs: when it comes to their *implementation*, a summary of the consultation process is required only 'where available'. At the same time, the language is flexible (e.g. the way the consultation should be organised is left open), enabling a mix of speed and the ability to tailor RRPs to different national circumstances: not all Member States have equally institutionalised roles for social partners and other stakeholders (interviews BUSINESS, COM9, ETU1, ETU3). Whether this new clause in the RRF Regulation will have practical effects will depend on the existing channels which social partners and other social stakeholders possessed to influence the different stages of previous Semester cycles (see Sabato 2020).

Using this new opportunity, ETUC began to inform its affiliates about the most appropriate 'entry points' for national trade union organisations in the RRF and upgraded its 'Semester Toolkit 2.0' to include a 'Real Time Monitoring Tool' (RTMT) tracking trade union involvement in the drafting and implementation of RRPs[16] and

16. ETUC Real Time Monitoring Tool (RTMT): https://est.etuc.org/index.php. ETUC drew up an initial list of countries where, based on experience in the Semester, trade unions risk not being involved in the RRF. ETUC will actively support these countries.

'naming and shaming' low trade union involvement in the drafting of RRPs by national governments (e.g. Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia were flagged[17]). Several EU-level CSOs (e.g. Civil Society Europe,[18] the ERGO Network,[19] the European Social Network (ESN)[20] and Eurodiaconia[21]) followed a similar approach, producing guidance notes for their national members and partners with a view to enhancing their understanding of the RRF and the procedures to follow, and encouraging their proactive participation. The involvement of these EU-level CSOs themselves in the RRF process seems however to have been minimal: 'our consultation has been non-existent, *ad hoc* in places, occasionally strong but mostly weak' (interview CSO1). Another respondent confirmed this: 'at EU level, I don't think that there was any engagement with civil society [...]. I don't think there has even been an attempt to pretend as if we were involved' (interview CSO2). This is confirmed by another civil society respondent: 'only when we knocked on the door to highlight the concerns of our members, the Commission attended meetings. It seemed that they wanted to gain information from our members as to whether [and how] they were being involved in the national RRF process' (interview CSO3). Several factors can explain the lack of CSO involvement in the RRF: the compressed timeframe, the relative side-lining of DG EMPL combined with the lack of well-established ties (especially compared to corporatist players) with SECGEN and ECFIN, and the many procedural changes that occurred in the 2021 Semester cycle. Other explanatory factors are that social dialogue has stronger institutional foundations than civil dialogue, and the limited capacity (human resources) of CSOs to engage meaningfully in the process. Moreover, the process of planning the RRPs has taken place mainly at domestic level, providing EU-level umbrella organisations with fewer chances to have their say (interviews CSO1, CSO2, CSO3).

Did the timespan between the first formulation of RRPs and their official submission (as of April 2021) *effectively provide a window of opportunity for social and economic players to engage with the content of the draft RRPs?* ETUC (2021) has already announced that, despite the formal progress made, it will continue to advocate a binding rule for more structured consultations, looking towards a long-awaited reform of the EU's economic governance. As several interviewees highlighted, the consultation process was largely determined by the existing culture of consulting the social partners (at least in some Member States), and to a lesser extent CSOs (interviews NOF5, CSO1, CSO2, CSO3). This situation arose in part due to the fact that the consultations took place in a context of crisis management, with speedy action to tackle the consequences of the pandemic of utmost importance.

17. ETUC Recovery & Investment website: https://est.etuc.org/?page_id=42

18. Guidance notes for Civil Society Organisations to engage with national authorities on the preparation of the EU National Recovery and Resilience Plans, December 2020. https://civilsocietyeurope.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Guidance-Note-for-CSOs-to-engage-with-the-National-Recovery-and-Resilience-Plans_updated-1.pdf

19. https://ergonetwork.org/2021/02/support-note-on-engaging-with-the-national-recovery-and-resilience-plans-nrrps-2021/

20. ESN replaced its Semester Reference Group by an EU Funding Working Group and organised meetings between its members and the European Commission: it was felt that the Commission would engage in this way, in view of its interest to find out what was happening nationally.

21. https://www.eurodiaconia.org/2021/05/national-recovery-and-resilience-plans-where-are-the-roma/

The involvement of national social stakeholders in the 2021 Semester cycle and thus their overall impact on the RRF will probably be limited. Drawing on an EU-wide survey conducted in January 2021, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) concluded that formal RRP consultation processes with the social partners and CSOs had indeed taken place: while some mechanisms were new, 'Member States have also used and built on mechanisms established for consultation within the ordinary European Semester procedure' (§4.1.2).[22] The EESC held that, in most Member States, consultation processes with social stakeholders 'are far from satisfactory in relation to the justified demands of civil society and even in relation to the terms set out in the RRF Regulation' (EESC 2021 §5.1), even if it is 'acknowledged that progress has been made compared to the usual European Semester procedures' (ibid §1.8). Unsurprisingly the EESC report also found that 'the social partners are included on a more structured, institutionalised and permanent basis whereas the remaining CSOs are instead consulted in an *ad hoc* and informal manner' (ibid §4.2.1), even if some (mostly large) proactive national CSOs (e.g. from Italy, Portugal and Spain), presented themselves as spenders, securing significant RRF funding (interview CSO2, CSO3). In a joint opinion, EMCO and SPC (2021:14) also acknowledged that 'significant concerns remain as regards practical aspects of social partners' consultation in terms of transparency, timeliness, and meaningfulness, as well as with regard to its real impact on policymaking'.

Based on Commission assessments of RRPs, a recent 'in-depth' analysis of the involvement of stakeholders[23] produced by the EP (2021) confirmed that all Member States undertook a public consultation, at least to some extent, during the preparation of their RRPs. However, the intensity and breadth of such consultation varied greatly. The Commission Staff Working Documents (SWDs) on the national RRPs show that many Member States (including Austria, Belgium, Czechia, Germany, France, Cyprus, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Portugal, Greece, Croatia and Slovakia) reported a quite extensive consultation process. Fewer Member States, however, referred to specific stakeholder proposals being reflected in the RRPs (but see Austria, Czechia, Cyprus, Germany, Latvia, Portugal and Slovakia).

Preliminary results of ongoing research by Eurofound (2021 and 2022) about effective national social partner involvement (i.e. timely and meaningful consultation) in social dialogue does not provide grounds for too much optimism: generally speaking, social partner involvement in the drafting of the RRPs was weak[24] in many Member States, even in countries with strong social structures. Social partners were only marginally involved in Austria, for instance (Templ 2021). Drawing on interviews (carried out by Eurofound's network of national experts, mainly during May-July 2021) with no less than 143 national social partners and government representatives,[25] the EU agency

22. The mechanisms include submission of written proposals, high-level meetings with responsible ministers, evaluating purposely designed and returned questionnaires and round table discussions between representatives of the government and CSOs (EESC 2021: § 4.1.2).

23. Defined as relevant EU-level bodies, relevant national, regional and local authorities, social partners, CSOs, youth organisations and other relevant stakeholders, as per the RRF Regulation.

24. Eurofound looked at the specific involvement of social partners in 217 relevant policy measures in national RRPs.

25. Interviews with 60 trade union representatives, 48 employer organisation representatives and 35 government representatives.

positively assessed the quality[26] of the involvement solely in the Nordic countries, Belgium, Czechia and Spain and (to a lesser extent) Bulgaria, Cyprus and France. All other countries recorded only 'low-quality' social partner involvement, signaling shortcomings and deficiencies regarding timeliness and meaningfulness (lack of feedback) of the consultation during this exceptional 2021 cycle: complex structure of the RRP; different national authorities leading the process; variety of mechanisms, including e-consultation platforms (Eurofound 2021; for a detailed discussion of the need for quality involvement in the RRF, see Vanhercke et al. 2021).

Nevertheless, several of the trade union representatives interviewed for this study indicated that they felt that EU-level officials (in the various DGs of the European Commission) were in fact more receptive than before to social issues and social players' views. Such consultations took place at different levels of the European Commission – from the highest level (the Commissioners themselves) to the country desk officers (interview COM9). One trade union representative found it 'difficult to remember that level of involvement of senior Commission staff before, in any previous Semester cycle or physical meeting' (interview ETU3). Several pointed out that this change started under the Commission headed by Juncker (see also Sabato 2020). The online meeting culture of 2020-2021 further facilitated access and consultations – with a broader range of European Commission DGs and reaching more senior officials. This situation was leveraged by social partner representatives (interviews BUSINESS, COM9, ETU1, ETU2, ETU3). It should be noted, however, that several of our interviewees suggested that these outreach efforts and meetings were often lacking in actual content and did not involve CSOs consulted in previous Semester cycles (interviews CSO1, CSO2, CSO3).

In other words, more work is needed to ensure that such involvement is translated into operational practice and is not merely 'a kind of a ritual' (interview ETU2; Moschella 2020: 20-21). Whether and how social stakeholders will become involved in the monitoring and implementation of the RRF remains to be seen. It should be noted that, according to the European Parliament (2021: 3), several Member States (e.g. Denmark, Ireland, Croatia, Luxembourg and Austria) did not provide any information on how stakeholders would be involved or consulted during RRP implementation. Only a few Member States (e.g. Belgium, Cyprus and Greece) made a general commitment to continue to reach out to social partners and civil society during the implementation phase. The European Parliament will therefore have an important role to play in this regard, including in the context of the newly established 'Recovery and Resilience Dialogue' held every two months between the EP and Commissioners Dombrovskis and Gentiloni: this will allow for a high frequency of EP involvement in the process, even if the dialogue does not foresee any binding power for the EP.

26. Quality is measured against four main indicators based on social partners' and national authorities' assessments: a) time allotted for consultation; b) degree of consultation, understood as social partners' opportunities to contribute to the development of the RRP and receive feedback from the government; c) both social partners consulted on an equal footing; and d) transparency and visibility of the contributions made by social partners i.e. the extent to which RRPs include a summary of the consultation process and their views.

4. Carrots and sticks: hardening the Semester?

As a result of the linkage between the RRF and the Semester, the latter is likely to gain new prominence. Indeed, it may well fundamentally change in character from being a non-binding structure for policy coordination to a potent vehicle for driving Member State economies (Crum 2020; van der Veer 2022; D'Erman and Verdun 2022). As with the RRF's governance framework, domestic ownership of the Semester could be reinforced, allowing Member States to identify the relevant targets, milestones and timetables against which implementation efforts will be assessed and providing financial incentives for structural reforms (i.e., reforms as mentioned in the CSRs). These developments have the potential to increase CSR implementation, as the CSRs may be taken more seriously by Member States and stakeholders alike (interviews COM9, ETU2, NOF6, MEP1; see also Moschella 2020; Wieser 2020).

Given that the overall number of (implicit and explicit) 2020–2021 social CSRs is the highest ever registered (around 80% higher than usual),[27] this link with the RRPs should, in principle, provide the Commission and national stakeholders with a powerful new opportunity to combine the 'sticks' of past CSRs with the 'carrots' of significant funding, also for social and labour market policies. The RRF thus 'upgrades' the Semester, in that it offers financial incentives in return for a coherent package of public investments and (potentially painful) reforms, thereby giving European governments additional means to overcome domestic institutional resistance in the face of Semester tools and recommendations. The German trade union DGB pointed out recently that it felt that, with the new rules, the principle of 'money for reforms' seemed to apply, possibly further exacerbating the perceived lack of legitimacy of the EU's economic governance (DGB 2021).

Monitoring RRP implementation is jointly coordinated by the Recovery and Resilience Task Force (RECOVER) within the Secretariat General and DG ECFIN. In addition, the newly created DG REFORM[28] provides detailed technical support – to those Member States who request it – for drafting, implementing and monitoring the RRPs, inter alia through promoting the upscaling of existing policies and the exchange of best practices both among and within Member States (interviews COM8, COM11). *Do these bodies have the technical capacity and human resources to take care of monitoring and implementation, also in view of the risk of political pressure being put on the Commission?* Indeed, pressure to agree that there has been positive implementation may be significant (Wieser 2020: 8). Since EMCO, the EPC and the SPC have become key players in monitoring, reviewing and assessing national reforms within the Semester (Zeitlin and Vanhercke 2018), it would seem important to include them in the monitoring, alongside the Economic and Finance Committee (EFC). They could assist the Commission in its task of monitoring RRP milestones and targets (including judging whether sufficient progress has been made to warrant payment).

27. The proliferation of social CSRs is likely to be an effect of the EU Commission's reaction to the socioeconomic crisis triggered by Covid-19 (Rainone 2020: 4).

28. In January 2020, DG REFORM took over the mandate previously carried out by the Structural Reform Support Service established in 2015 within SECGEN.

Scholars have warned against rushing through the RRPs needlessly, risking waste and misdirected long-term investment: good projects are hard to find quickly, and national governments have limited capacity to channel very large amounts of public investment (Alcidi et al. 2020; Alcidi and Corti, this volume). Scrutiny of spending and reform plans is far from apolitical and therefore cannot be done in a mechanical way. By funding certain investments and reforms, and not others, the EU will get, in the words of one of our interviewees, 'under the skin' of the Member States, which may be 'extremely complicated' to manage (interviews COM5, COM6). In the absence of a clear negotiation mandate, the risk exists that the EU will become captured in national political discourses – especially when reform conditionality (i.e., reforms demanded in order to obtain loans or grants) is applied to sensitive policy domains –, while it cannot account for the consequences of the reforms.

Despite the end of April 2021 target date, not all Member States had submitted their recovery and resilience plans by late 2021.[29] Early assessments of those submitted (in terms of their contribution to 'green', 'digital', and 'other' spending) are not even easy to make, as the plans differ greatly (see for instance Darvas et al. 2021). Nevertheless, the European Commission has indicated that it will be flexible, with Member States being given until mid-2022 to submit their plans. While the 2021 timing has been aligned, this 'exceptional cycle' (European Commission 2021b) is set to end once economic growth returns to normal. The EU institutions will thus need to decide how to reintroduce their usual deadlines and procedures, thereby marking the gradual end of the exceptional period – although the autumn IMF *World Economic Outlook* still mentions 'the continued grip of the pandemic on global society' (IMF 2021: xiii). Indeed, assuming things get back to relative normality, scholars are starting to wonder what role there might be for national parliaments going forward (Bekker 2021; Woźniakowski et al. 2021).

Conclusion

This chapter has evaluated socio-economic governance in the EU in response to the Covid-19 crisis, in particular the establishment and operation of the Recovery and Resilience Facility. Although the novelty was to attract new funds in the financial markets, some of the older institutional structures were also deployed. To manage the RRF, the European Council used some existing institutional structures, namely the EU budget as well as the Semester. We contend that the latter was used as a foundation, in part because of its 'Goldilocks' characteristics (i.e., being *not too soft* and *not too hard*). We learned that the EU players did not want to reinvent the wheel, as the Semester was already doing what the Commission and EU Member States wanted to do going forward, namely to provide annual assessments and recommendations – linking them back to previous CSRs. In relying on this macroeconomic policy coordination instrument, it did not seem to matter that many assessments of the Semester pointed to low compliance with the CSRs.

29. The Netherlands held off submitting its plans due to ongoing government coalition negotiations, while Bulgaria was very late to submit.

We also examined to what extent the linkage between the RRF and the Semester might fundamentally change the latter – given the creation of a larger budget. We reviewed the path that led to the RRF, including its link with the Semester. In terms of the players involved, our assessment is that initially EU institutional players and social stakeholders lost some of the prominence previously gained in the Semester. Their role was not taken for granted when the RRF was launched: in the early stages much of the emphasis was on speed and thus on reducing the number of players involved. From late 2020 until the summer of 2021, some of these players managed to reclaim their position in the evolving architecture once the immediate urgency had subsided. EU institutional social players (DG EMPL, the EPSCO Council and its advisory Committees) gradually returned to adopting previous Semester practices, having stayed in position, ready to jump in at the first opportunity. This result confirms that the governance processes of the Semester continue to offer variegated opportunities and resources for strategic agency by contending groups of players, also with a view to reshaping pre-existing power balances (Zeitlin and Vanhercke 2018: 169).

EU civil servants were also willing to engage with the social partners (on both sides of industry), taking advantage of the online meeting opportunities presented by Covid-19. Elsewhere, we argue that, while the European Parliament obtained important substantive changes to the RRF Regulation, it remains excluded from the governance of the Facility (Vanhercke et al. 2021). EU CSOs have remained largely sidelined in the RRF process. Similarly, in most Member States, consultation with domestic stakeholders (social partners and CSOs) has been insufficient. To explain the limited effective consultation, we point to the lack of detailed requirements in the consultation process, combined with the change of 'driving seat' for the RRF, even in countries that had established avenues for consultation under the European Semester.

This study finds that the increased use of 'carrots' and 'sticks' might make the Semester more effective, as it becomes a 'harder mode of soft governance'. Given that earlier assessments of the Semester point to a lack of compliance with CSRs, in part because of their limited enforceability, embedding the RRF firmly into the Semester framework and having more carrots and sticks may significantly increase Semester effectiveness. Despite the increased potential of the Semester, Member States have however also gained opportunities. Using the national reform programmes and stability or convergence programmes, they may seek support for specific domestic needs. Finally, in terms of the inter-institutional division of power, the jury is still out as to who, in the end, will gain or lose most in terms of influence. The Semester may end up becoming more effective due to the changes invoked by the attempt to embed the RRF within an otherwise soft mode of governance that the Semester was before the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Such dynamic changes are even more important at a time when the European Commission has announced the relaunching of the European Semester with the 2022 cycle. This renewed use of the Semester includes the 'standard' autumn package (including the Annual Sustainable Growth Survey (ASGS) 2022 and the Commission proposal for the 2022 Joint Employment Report), resumed publication of 'streamlined' Country Reports, Country-specific Recommendations covering emerging challenges not covered by RRPs, and new bi-annual National Reform Programmes integrating reporting on RRPs and the EPSR. The 2022 Annual Sustainable Growth Strategy (ASGS) outlines the governance framework of the upcoming European Semester cycle. One can only hope that the ASGS 2022 will contain the necessary guidance to Member States, allowing social stakeholders to seize their legitimate place in the RRF, rather than having to sneak in through the backdoor of the European Semester.

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Appendix

Interview details

This chapter relies on extensive document analysis as well as 32 semi-structured high-level interviews between October 2020 and November 2021. We conducted five interviews with two respondents (rather than a single interviewee) and five follow-up interviews with the same respondents (conducted at the beginning and end of this one-year period). As can be seen in Table 1, most of them have senior positions (such as director, chair, confederal secretary, head of unit, principal advisor or rapporteur) in their organisations. Interviews lasted 45 minutes on average, ranging between 35 and 80 minutes.

Respondents work in different Directorate General (DGs) of the European Commission (DG ECFIN, EMPL, REFORM and SECGEN) and the Cabinet of Commissioner Nicolas Schmit, as well as with European social partner organisations: BusinessEurope, the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) and the European Public Service Union (EPSU). Other interviewees have institutional roles in the European Parliament (as (co-)rapporteur), the European Economic and Social Committee, the Employment Committee (EMCO), the Social Protection Committee (SPC), national (employment or social affairs) administrations or the permanent representation of their country to the EU.

All interviews took place through online video conference programs (e.g., Teams, Zoom), with most conducted jointly by the two authors. Many of them were recorded (after consent from the interviewee) and transcribed. Each interview was given a dedicated code, to which we refer in the body of the text as appropriate. We used abbreviations to reflect the general institutional affiliation of the respondents, while guaranteeing anonymity. The abbreviations are as follows: BUSINESS (BusinessEurope), COM (European Commission), CSO (Civil Society Organisation), EESC (European Economic and Social Committee), EMCO (Employment Committee), ETU (European Trade Union representative), MEP (Member of the European Parliament), NOF (National Official) and SPC (Social Protection Committee).

Table 2 **Interview details (in chronological order)**

No.	Institutional affiliation	Position	Date	Code
1.	Employment Committee (EMCO)	Member	20/10/2020	EMCO1
2.	DG EMPL, European Commission	Head of Unit	21/10/2020	COM1
3.	European Trade Union Confederation	Head of Institutional Policy	23/10/2020	ETU1
4.	Federal Public Service Social Security, BE	Advisor	28/10/2020	NOF1 (Nat. official)
5.	DG EMPL, European Commission	Policy officer	17/11/2020	COM2
6.	DG ECFIN, European Commission	Advisor	18/11/2020	COM3
7.	Dutch national parliament	EU advisor	9/12/2020	NOF2
8.	Eurogroup	Former Chair	26/01/2021	NOF3
9.	Cabinet of Euro Commissioner Nicolas Schmit	Member	12/02/2021	COM4
10.	DG ECFIN, European Commission	Advisor	5/03/2021	COM5
11.	European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC)	Confederal Secretary Head of Institutional Policy	10/03/2021	ETU2
12.	DG ECFIN, European Commission	Director	17/03/2021	COM6
13.	Employment Committee (EMCO)	Member; Secretary	18/03/2021	EMCO2
14.	Social Protection Committee (SPC)	Member	01/04/2021	SPC1
15.	European Public Service Union (EPSU)	Policy officer	11/05/2021	ETU3
16.	DG EMPL, European Commission	Head of Unit	17/05/2021	COM7
17.	BusinessEurope	Director	21/05/2021	BUSINESS
18.	European Parliament	Member	25/05/2021	MEP1
19.	DG REFORM, European Commission	Head of Unit	09/06/2021	COM8
20.	Recovery and Resilience Task Force (RECOVER), Secretariat General, EC	Director	23/06/2021	COM9
21.	Permanent Representation of Portugal to the EU	Counsellor Attaché	24/06/2021	NOF4
22.	European Parliament	Member	30/06/2021	MEP2
23.	Fed. Min. of Labour and Social Affairs, DE	Director; Advisor	05/07/2021	NOF5
24.	DG ECFIN, European Commission	Principal administrator	10/09/2021	COM10
25.	European Economic and Social Committee	Member Group II, Workers	14/09/2021	EESC
26.	DG ECFIN, European Commission	Director	20/09/2021	COM11
27.	Min. of Social Affairs and Employment, NL	Policy advisor	27/09/2021	NOF6
28.	Perm. Rep. of Portugal to the EU	Counsellor	30/09/2021	NOF7
29.	European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions	Research Manager	26/10/2021	EUROFOUND
30.	Platform of European Social NGOs	Secretary General Senior Policy and Advocacy Officer	26/10/2021	CSO1
31.	European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless	Director	27/10/2021	CSO2
32.	European Social Network	Chief Executive Officer	18/11/2021	CSO3

Source: Authors.