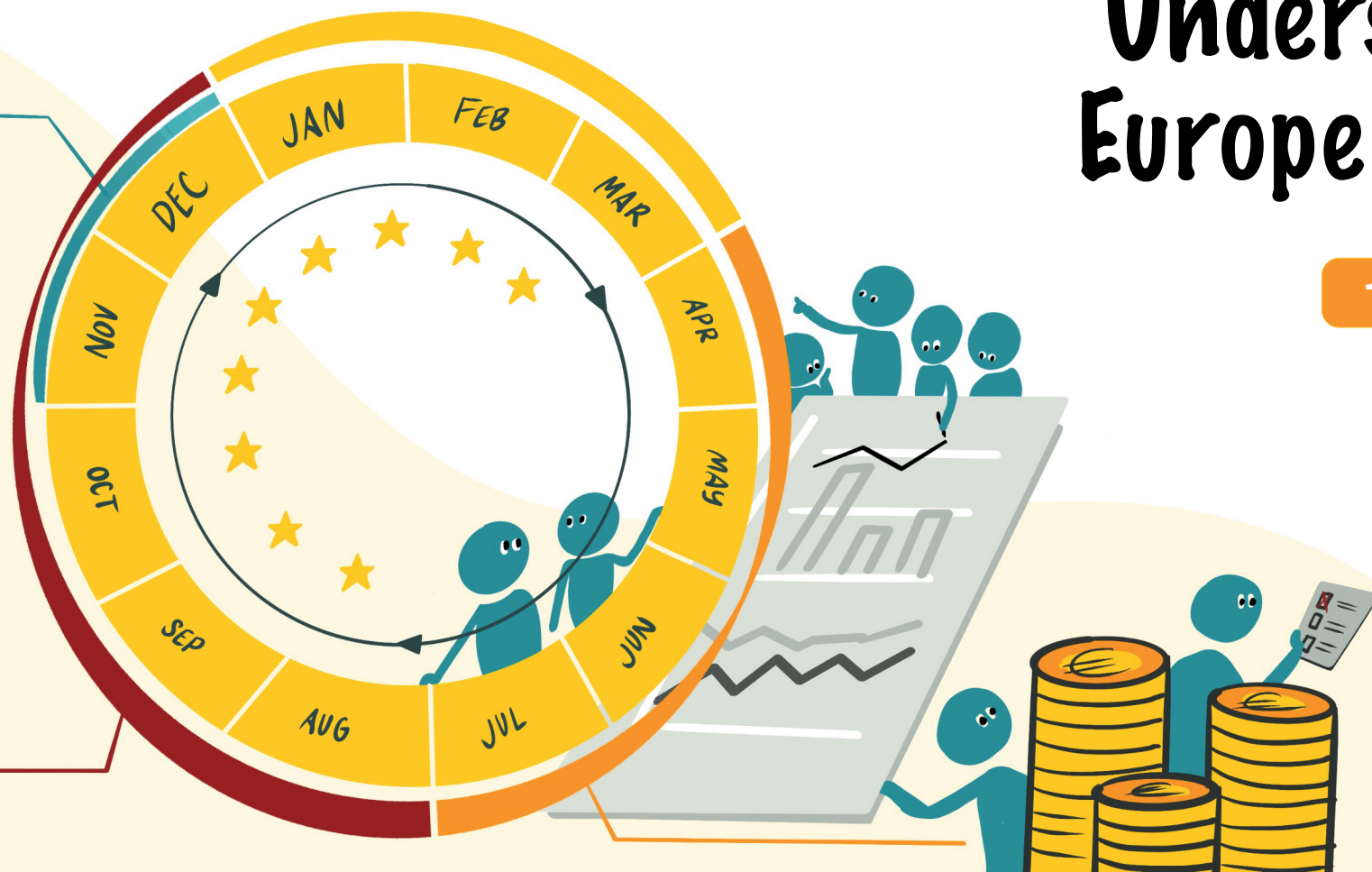


Training of Trainers

Understanding the European Semester

17 & 18 SEPTEMBER 2025



solidar
FOUNDATION

Introduction

Training of Trainers is an annual capacity-building opportunity for SOLIDAR & SOLIDAR Foundation members that aims to enhance their knowledge and engagement in EU-level policy topics related to social affairs, inclusion, and education.

This Training of Trainers focused on the European Semester as a key EU decision-making process, empowering members to understand and actively engage, thereby strengthening the voice of national CSOs.

The SOLIDAR Foundation, SOLIDAR's learning hub, played a key role in designing the training.

In 2025, it was co-organized with Samaritan International through its Brussels office.

This manual summarizes the training and offers resources and links to deepen your understanding of the European Semester.

Through **activities** and **summaries** you are encouraged to discover how to integrate your newly acquired knowledge in your advocacy work and learn how to engage with this fascinating EU decision-making process.

At the end of this booklet you'll find a list of **resources**.



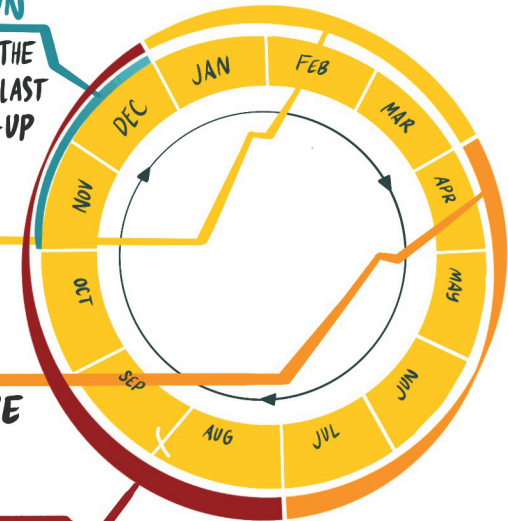
The Semester in a nutshell

↓ WHO DOES WHAT?

→ TIMELINE

PREPARATION

ANALYSIS OF THE SITUATION & LAST YEAR FOLLOW-UP



PHASE 1

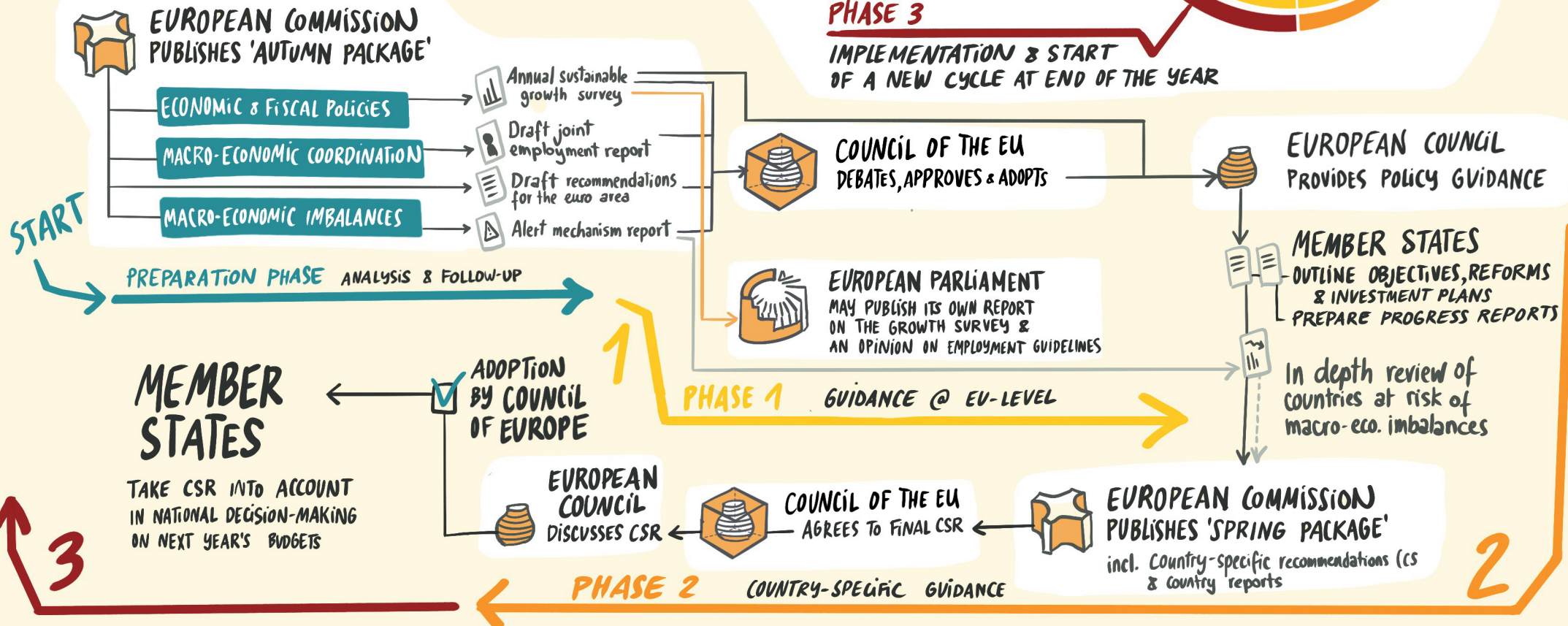
POLICY GUIDANCE @ EU LEVEL

PHASE 2

COUNTRY-SPECIFIC GUIDANCE

PHASE 3

IMPLEMENTATION & START OF A NEW CYCLE AT END OF THE YEAR



Understanding the European Semester

By **Amandine Crespy**, Professor in Political Science & EU Studies, Director of CEVIPOLE (Centre d'études de la vie politique), Affiliated with Institut d'études européennes (IEE), Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB), Visiting Professor at College of Europe (Bruges).

The European Semester is a broad policy framework including

- **Fiscal policy: level of deficit and debt**
- **Macro-economic policy: trade surplus, employment levels, inflation, etc**
- **Social policy: education, anti-poverty, social protection, etc.**

It is subject to hybrid governance with quasi hard law for fiscal policy and soft law for social policy areas. Procedures, legal bases and tools for enforcement greatly differ depending on the policy area as well as the level of constraint from the EU on Member States.

Finally, the European Semester is also a vehicle for investment, more specifically the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) 2021-2027. The Semester shapes national social and educational policies by fiscal discipline indirectly with effects mediated by national governments through:

- **sanctions (very rare, cf. France, Spain and Portugal in 2016)**
- **political pressure**
- **internalisation of constraints through common ideas with Ministries of Finance**

It also weighs on expensive policies by financial

rationalisation on e.g.

- **Pensions, Healthcare and Long-term care**
- **Other areas of social protection**
- **Public administration**

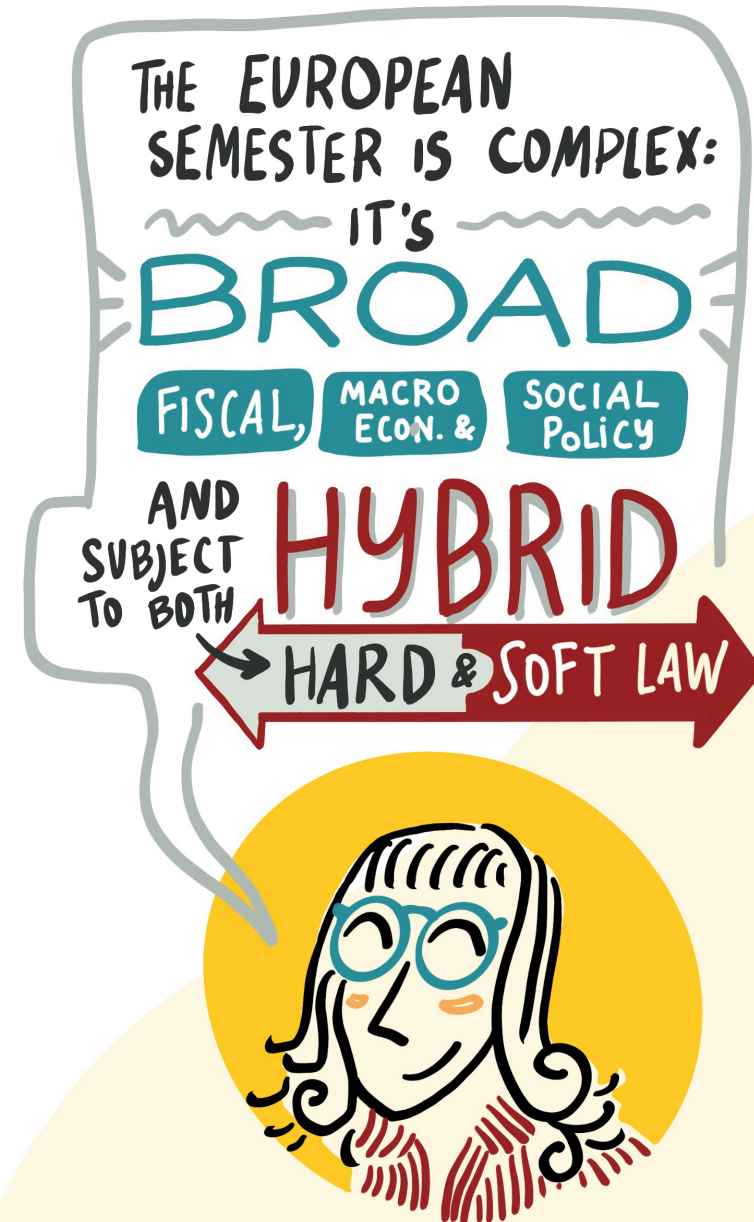
On the other hand, it shapes national policies through country specific recommendations on social investments and has increased compliance by coupling the money from the RRF in 2020.

It is debated if the European Semester has experienced a "socialisation" over time.

Though there is no doubt it originally had an austere agenda, it has been through some major changes, especially with the easing of fiscal discipline (in 2015) and increased presence of social policy actors and objectives. The last transformations being the Next Generation EU included in the Recovery and Resilience Facility as well as the Social Convergence Framework introduced in 2024 to further align the Semester with the European Pillar of Social Rights.

On the other hand all these structural reforms remain ambiguous, also focus on cutting expenditure and flexibilise labour markets. Many Member States have not fully embraced it and focus on labour markets (skills) rather than social integration through equality and rights.

Additionally, some argue that austerity might be back with a raising pressure for reducing public expenditure and missed opportunities during the 2024 Reform of the Stability and Growth Pact and its Fiscal Framework.



Understanding the European Semester

Summary

The European Semester remains ambivalent and complex, leaving large room to manoeuvre on national level.

It definitively has an austeritarian DNA and the same mood may be back since 2024. Although the Social Convergence Framework offers additional possibilities in another direction it remains a benign tool.

Furthermore, the entire process is inclined towards technocratic governance:

- empowering executives, but sidelining parliaments
- strong in the "Brussels bubble", but without political salience in national arenas
- limiting evidence-based policy making, and
- organised civil society is barely involved

The bypassing of civil society organisations can be seen as a curse as well as an opportunity. For sure, the European Semester will remain central in the future. The crucial question is whether socially minded actors will mobilise, organise and realise its social potential.

"The European Semester is here to stay, so let us engage, make use of the data it offers and use the Social Convergence Framework to advocate!"

Activity: Hold a Group Debate

Holding a group debate can be an energising and fun way to get acquainted with the European Semester, its history and transformations as well as the possible implications for civil society organisations when engaging with the process.

In this debate one group will advocate against engaging with the European Semester as civil society organisation another group will bring in the pro arguments:

Contra: "Progressive civil society should reject the European Semester, it can never serve their cause."

Pro: "Progressive civil society should engage with the European Semester, because it can help them weigh on policy making."

• Prepare your arguments

Split up into two small groups and prepare separately. Every group can research arguments pro or contra engaging with the European Semester online or use the resources in this guide.

• Debate together

Have fun debating and sharing arguments together. Make it a vivid discussion and learn from each other.

• Debrief the activity

Close the debate and share your learnings. Discuss insights for your (policy) work and organization.



A European Commission's Perspective

By **Alina van Brugena**, Policy Officer at the Directorate General of Employment and Social Affairs the the European Commission.

From a legal perspective the European Semester (ES) is first and foremost an economic and employment policy coordination tool. Within the EC however multiple DGs are involved, not only DG EMPL.

Sometimes DGs compete for inclusion of their specific recommendations internally within the European Commission. Not all recommendations end up in the Country-specific reports. In the recitals attached to the CSR often more details and leverage can be found. With this in mind, it is important to:

- think about when to advocate your causes and whom you are addressing (e.g. timeline p. 1)
- write recommendations with the reader in mind and use their language (e.g. indicators)
- bring facts to prove how certain content does not match your specific national reality

In terms of relevant documents, CSOs should focus on the following reports and documents:

- **Joint Employment Report (JER)** will always be delivered as it is the only Semester document embedded in the Treaty. If its content does not match national reality, CSOs can bring this to the attention of the European Commission.
- **Country-specific Recommendations (CSRs)** summarise the entire ES process. Look for details in the recitals and use the CTRL+Find function to filter out your areas of expertise.

- **Social Convergence Framework (SCF)** is also part of the Semester process.

The added value CSOs can bring to the Semester process and the European Commission in particular is highly dependent of the language that is used.

Tailored messaging and speaking the language of the Commission is important for success. This may include referring to indicators, headline targets and/or quality data. This way the European Commission can act as an ally for CSOs to foster agendas and topics and put strategic pressure on Member States through the Semester process.

*"Have data ready to back up your claim!
And respect the expertise of others: think
about how to advocate - not how to educate."*

To summarise there are two ways for CSOs to engage with the European Semester process through the Commission. In Brussels, network and platform organisations can act as a filter and make information from the national level readily available and useable for the Commission. This way the CSRs can become more relevant and accurate thanks to the input of CSOs. On a national level, CSOs can work with the EC representatives and with national ministries to follow up on the CSRs in each Member State.

Sound knowledge of the Semester process and a long-term focus on key topics can have a crucial impact on budgets and funding in the future.



European Platform's Examples

By **Katja Reuter**, Senior Policy Officer at the Social Platform and **Andrei Frank**, Advocacy and Policy Coordinator at the Lifelong Learning Platform.

Although both speakers work within European platform or network organisations, their engagement with the Semester is very distinct.

The Social Platform has no member organisations on the national level, hence its focus lies on the broader social dimension on European level. In the Semesters' Autumn Package the Social Platform will analyse if stakeholders were consulted, if the social dimension is addressed or if policy priorities are only framed in terms of competitiveness.

On the other hand the Lifelong Learning Platform keeps track of Country-specific Recommendations, also on national level. They have a track record of scanning Semester documents for everything related to education and training. They build capacity on national level with member organisations to prepare them to advocate and engage in stakeholder meetings and track issues raised over the years.

Some issues take over four years to show real change. Even if issues are successfully raised as priorities, they still require sustained effort. Depending on your resources it might be helpful to engage with the Semester process non a yearly basis even if it feels like you are not moving forward. In a way this will built your network and strengthen relationships with other stakeholders and with the representatives from the European Commission.

Actors to engage with include:

- **European Commission and its DGs in Brussels**
- **European Commissions Permanent Representations in Member States**, incl. education attaches, geo-desks and missions
- **European Parliament and its members** have a limited role but can help raise issues too
- **Semester officers/advisors** in the Permanent Representations of the EC in your country
- **Semester officers/responsible** within National Ministries in your country
- **Other Stakeholders and allies** to share information, advocate and rally together with.

If you only have limited capacity one first step could be to extract key ideas from your analysis of the CSR and sent these directly to the Semester officer at the Permanent Representation in your country.

"Start small and specific! It is indeed lots of reading and analysis, but it is enough to focus on your area of expertise and your country first!"

Unfortunately it is not always easy to find the Semester officers you need. There is no inventory or transparent contact list and hence it might be necessary to do research, dig into archives and network to find out who is your contact person.

However, if you know your network well, the European Semester will only grow in importance and it might be worth your time to invest in ways to integrate your work in the Semester process.



European Platform's Examples

Summary

National reforms and budget negotiations are connected to the European Semester. Advocacy should take that link into account and align national and European levels. CSOs can use reports and data they already produce to strategically feed it into the Semester process.

"Do: Integrate your existing advocacy work in the European Semester"

"Don't: adapt everything you do to the Semester"

Key moments in the Semester process to focus on as a Civil Society Organisation can be:

- **November** get ready and read the Joint Employment Report (JER) and the Annual Growth Survey. JER has small sections per country with priorities.
- **January** Prepare draft position and contact the European Commission and its Permanent Representations
- **February** Take a break, Country-specific Recommendations (CSRs) are being drafted right now, it is too late to engage at this point
- **March** Try to join consultative webinars and events on the European level and provide input
- **May - June** Analyse CSRs with keyword searches. Select and share relevant segments with your members. Prepare a reaction document with your own specific recommendations
- **September** Get back in touch with the European Commission and its Permanent Representations to follow up and highlight missing issues.

"Learn to live with disappointment and play the loooooooooooooooooong game of shaping the narrative to serve your causes."

Activity: Invite to a Breakfast Show

Staging a Breakfast (or Evening) Show can be a simple, smooth and interesting way to learn about engaging with the European Semester process from experts, partners or stakeholders within your network.

It offers an opportunity to learn from more experienced colleagues and (partner) organisations. Use this chance to find out how you could practically engage with the process and who could inspire and support you along the way.

"What are the key moments to focus on?"

"What actions can CSOs carry out?"

"Who are the key actors to keep in mind?"

This activity can also be nicely done online or in a hybrid way inviting experts from afar.



• Prepare the Show

Invite two or more experts and one moderator. Organize a room with cosy seating, including some snacks & drinks.

• Enjoy a good Conversation

The moderator should welcome everyone and have a set of questions prepared to keep the conversation flowing. Be sure to ask for specific examples and practical experiences.

• Hold a Question & Answer session

Close the show by engaging the audience in a Q&A session and thanking everyone.

A National Organization's Example

By **Andris Berzins**, Director of the Samaritan Association of Latvia.

The Latvian Samaritans is one of the countries largest NGOs working on social services, healthcare, and education. As its director Andris has been involved in founding several umbrella organisations to strengthen cooperation with other stakeholders, but also with municipalities, national Ministries and the Latvian Parliament.

As an organisation active on the national level they engage with the European Semester process via their contact in the Latvian Permanent Representation of the European Commission and through participation in stakeholder meetings.

Within their engagement, they aim to

- identify and discuss important issues for the **Country Report and Country-specific Recommendations**.
- contribute to monitoring the implementation of the **Country-specific Recommendations and other reforms linked to the Semester**

Although the organisations network is strong and widely spread, it is not always possible to push for social issues.

As an example in 2025 the European Semester stakeholder meeting in Latvia gathered over 130 participants to discuss a variety of topics, but none of them addressed the social dimension or were in other ways relevant to the current advocacy issues of the organisation.

Nevertheless, Andris strongly recommended to built the network that is needed to engage in the Semester process and get into stakeholder meetings.

A first step can be to connect with the national Permanent Representation of the European Commission, but apart from that advocacy is possible -and needed- on all levels, from the municipality up to the European umbrella organisations.

"Built on advocacy you are already doing on a national level. Feed this into the Semester process as your unique contribution!"



Solidar in the European Semester

By **Carlos Roldan**, European Social Policy Coordinator and **Martina Corti**, Social Affairs Policy Officer at the SOLIDAR Secretariat.

Depending on the outcome of the upcoming operating grant, SOLIDAR aims to

- Increase knowledge on the European Semester within the organisation and with members
- Build capacity to engage with and act upon the European Semester process
- Structure data, indicators and information in order to define key actions
- Ensure that advocacy messages in our work on the European Semester reflect both the Social Affairs (SAF) and the Education and Lifelong Learning (ELF) realm.
- strengthen collaboration and increase synergies between the SAF and ELF teams.

To engage with the Semester, SOLIDAR is not starting from scratch, but can build on its experience with producing tools, opinions and reports.

The next step is to connect that experience and knowledge in a way that can be fed into the Semester process.

"This is no rocket science. It is a matter of translating and sharing information."

What SOLIDAR has been doing so far:

- Produce reactions to the Autumn and Spring Semester Packages
- Share results and recommendations from the Social Rights Monitor (SRM)
- Gather and give input through umbrella and member organisations
- Participate in stakeholder seminars for CSO on the European Semester
- Link the Semester to the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR)

In the future SOLIDAR aims to focus on key documents and encourage its members to read these documents and jointly prepare reaction statements to feed into the Semester process.

"Let's choose wisely and rally together!"

SOLIDAR will create opportunities to hear from its members and make them heard at the European Commission.

"We are in it for the long run!"

SOLIDAR WILL FOCUS
ON KEY MOMENTS &
DOCUMENTS IN OUR
OWN
SHADOW
SEMESTER PROCESS

WE'RE IN IT
FOR THE
LONG RUN!



Solidar in the European Semester

Activity: Work on a Case Study

Working on a case study can be a challenging team-building activity. Good preparation and guidance are crucial for this activity to be as though provoking and insightful as possible.

Work with two groups engaging with respectively the ES Autumn and Spring Package. For every group you'll need to prepare a flip chart sized template and selected documents (see e.g. on the right side). Read, discuss and present:

Who are the actors involved? What is your (organisations') role? What is SOLIDARs role?

What actions might you/your organisation take from here?

What other documents will you look at? What are key topics? What is missing and/or surprising?

- **Read and discuss the documents**

Split up into working groups and take time to read the prepared documents.

- **Analyse and find answers together**

Have fun researching and answering the questions together. Use the template to keep track of and connect information.

- **Debrief the activity**

Close the working groups and share your learnings with the other groups. Discover how the different documents are linked and connected through the Semester process. Discuss insights for your (policy) work and organization.



TEMPLATE

CASE STUDY
AUTUMN PACKAGE

WHO ARE THE ACTORS?	HOW DOES YOUR TIMELINE LOOK?
WHAT ACTIONS WILL YOU TAKE?	WHAT DOCUMENTS WILL YOU ANALYSE?

60

Example of document selection to prepare for the working groups:

- The Spring Package group can analyse **Country-specific Recommendations (CSRs)** on one or more countries.
- The Autumn Package group can analyse the **Social Convergence Framework (SCF)** part in the Joint Employment Report (JER)

Resources

Useful Information & Examples

Free to use infographic on the European Semester by the Council of Europe:

<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/infographics/european-semester/>

Social Platform work on Socialising the European Semester, incl. updates & analysis:

<https://www.socialplatform.org/topics/european-semester/>

Eurochild 2023 sub report on the European Semester CRs and CSRs:

<https://eurochild.org/uploads/2024/05/European-Semester-Sub-report-2024.pdf>

European Trade Union Confederation work on the European Semester:

<https://etuc.org/en/issue/european-semester>

Lifelong Learning Platform reaction on European Semester CSRs:

<https://www.lllplatform.eu/files/ugd/043d912c7ff7003e3349df990c101f81daaeab.pdf>

Country-specific files

As for the 2025 Spring Package

Country-specific Recommendations by the European Commission can be found here:

https://commission.europa.eu/publications/2025-european-semester-country-specific-recommendations-commission-recommendations_en

Country reports can be found here:

https://economy-finance.ec.europa.eu/publications/2025-european-semester-country-reports_en

Jargon

ex ante investments with economic returns, like childcare, early education and lifelong learning

ex post compensation policies like traditional social protection

Abbreviations

CRs	Country Reports
CSOs	Civil Society Organisations
CSRs	Country Specific Recommendations
ES	European Semester
EC	European Commission
ELF	Education and Lifelong Learning
EP	European Parliament
EPSR	European Pillar of Social Rights
DG	Directorate-General of the EC
MO	Member Organisation
MS	Member State
NGOs	Non-governmental Organisations
PR	Permanent Representation
JER	Joint Employment Report
NGEU	Next Generation Europe
RRF	Social Affairs
SAF	Recovery and Resilience Facility
SCF	Social Convergence Framework
SRM	Social Rights Monitor
SGP	Stability and Growth Packs

SOLIDAR organizes its work for lifelong and life-wide learning for democratic participation through the SOLIDAR Foundation. The purpose of the Foundation is to advance our common policy and advocacy work while addressing internal learning needs in what we consider a learning hub for the network.

Through our member and partner organizations, SOLIDAR Foundation engages communities in EU decision-making processes, empowers people through lifelong learning, and voices their concerns to the EU institutions by carrying out active lobbying, projects of collective action, policy monitoring, research, and awareness-raising.

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