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Power Imbalances and Structural Barriers to Democratic and Social Accountability in EU Economic Governance

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Executive summary

At a moment when smear campaigns are targeting civil society and the next Multi-annual Financial Framework (MFF) is being negotiated, the stakes for democratic participation in EU economic governance have rarely been higher. The European Semester, the EU's annual process for coordinating economic and social policy across Member States, increasingly shapes the conditions in which people live and work, yet it remains opaque, technically demanding, and structurally skewed in favour of economic over social priorities. Civil society organisations (CSOs) are indispensable to making the Semester more legitimate, more accountable and more responsive to citizens' needs; yet, the conditions under which they operate systematically undermine their ability to do so.

Drawing on five years of research combining qualitative content analysis, elite interviews, focus groups and qualitative comparative analysis, this paper identifies four interlocking challenges. First, the **resilience of the neoliberal economic paradigm** within the Semester: despite the commitments of the Social Investment Package, the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) and the Recovery and Resilience Facility, social objectives continue to be subordinated to fiscal and market-driven priorities, and CSOs have progressively abandoned systemic critique in favour of incremental gains. Second, **fragmented and inconsistent CSO engagement**: most organisations remain reactive and commentary-driven, unable to agree on a shared vision of change and to sustain the analytical presence needed to influence country-specific recommendations (CSRs). Third, **structural barriers and a mismatch in expectations**: CSOs advocating for social justice mainly engage with DG EMPL around the Semester. They lack, however, the more substantial economic expertise, resources and access to engage with the actors such as DG ECFIN or the Secretariat-General who actually drive Semester outcomes; the Commission expects robust, data-backed evidence from actors whose strength lies in evidence from the ground. Fourth, **'Semester fatigue'**: a resigned acceptance, on all sides, of a flawed consultation process, compounded by the Commission's recent return to less transparent practices and the simultaneous publication of country reports and CSRs, which leaves little time for meaningful input.

The COVID-19 pandemic illustrated how crises can open windows for CSOs to promote economic paradigm change; without prior preparation and strategic coherence, those windows close quickly. This paper offers two sets of recommendations: one for CSOs and allied actors, focussing on stronger coalitions, evidence-informed advocacy and proactive engagement with economic decision-makers; and one for European policy-makers, on structured consultation, reformed funding mechanisms and a genuine commitment to balancing the Semester's priorities.

The current arrangement - in which CSOs must satisfy themselves with the bones thrown, and the Commission ticks the consultation box without receiving the inputs it needs - is neither

democratically adequate nor functionally effective. Reimagining this relationship and potentially bringing it closer to the more structured and treaty-based process pursued with social partners is not a concession to civil society; it is a precondition for economic governance that is worthy of the citizens it serves.

Introduction

In an increasingly polarised world, civil society organisations (CSOs) play an even more vital role in bridging divides and fostering social cohesion. In the European Semester - the EU's annual process for coordinating economic and increasingly social and environmental policy across Member States - CSOs help policy makers better identify and make sense of the needs and challenges faced by citizens, especially by those who are underserved or experience inequality, exclusion and marginalisation. CSOs also monitor how economic and social policies affect people's lives, and contribute to critical reflections on the effectiveness of policy responses to 'wicked' (Head 2022), interrelated and complex challenges affecting social and economic welfare.

In recent months, smear campaigns by right-leaning parties in the European Parliament ⁽¹⁾ have sought to discredit CSOs, just as the next EU budget - the Multi-annual Financial Framework 2028-2034 - is being negotiated. These attacks aim to erode trust in civil society and cut CSO funding, placing additional pressure on already overstretched staff while further weakening their ability to act as democratic watchdogs. The European Semester - aimed at ensuring financial stability across Member States and improving the functioning of the single market and, in particular, the Eurozone - remains relatively opaque and complex, yet it increasingly shapes economic and social policy at Member State level, thereby directly affecting citizens. CSOs must be able to contribute meaningfully to the input, output as well as throughput legitimacy ⁽²⁾ (Schmidt 2013; Kröger 2019) of the Semester: their involvement is essential not only to ensure that CSRs are well-informed so that social and economic policy responses reflect citizens' needs, but also to make the Semester more transparent and democratically accountable.

The insights and recommendations presented in this paper are based on five years of in-depth research ⁽³⁾ on the interplay between EU-level CSOs advocating for social justice and equality,

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1. MO*, 2025. Ongezine aanval op Europees middenveld: 'Zonder middenveld geen democratie'. Accessed at: <https://www.mo.be/analyse/ongeziene-aanval-op-europees-middenveld-zonder-middenveld-geen-democratie>; The Greens/EFA, 2025. Press Release. EPP & Far-right institutionalising their campaign against NGOs. Accessed at: <https://www.greens-efa.eu/en/article/press/epp-far-right-institutionalising-their-campaign-against-ngos>; S&D, 2025. S&D to the EPP: 'Stop the witch-hunt on NGOs!'. Accessed at: <https://www.socialistsanddemocrats.eu/newsroom/sds-epp-stop-witch-hunt-ngos> (5 August 2025)
 2. Input legitimacy refers to the meaningful participation of those affected by policy in its making, including contributing information about the reality on the ground; output legitimacy refers to effective, evidence-informed policy that reflects citizens' needs; and throughput legitimacy to transparent, inclusive and accountable governance processes (Schmidt 2013).
 3. The research (Scherer 2025) was conducted between 2020 and 2025 and combined qualitative comparative and content analysis with elite interviews and focus groups involving CSO representatives, Commission staff and other key stakeholders. Data collection included: 103 position papers from six CSOs (EAPN, EWL, SOLIDAR, Eurodiaconia, Social Platform, AGE

their national members and the European Commission within the European Semester from 2011 to 2020. While the economic coordination process has evolved significantly following the COVID-19 crisis and the introduction of the Recovery and Resilience Facility, the findings remain highly relevant.

The revised Economic Governance Regulation, adopted in April 2024, now formally mandates the Commission to assess risks to upward social convergence and monitor progress on the EPSR as part of the Semester's integrated analysis; the Social Convergence Framework, piloted in 2024, introduces screening of Member States against headline indicators pointing to acute social risks. These developments are a meaningful institutional step, but may not automatically translate into CSRs to counter these risks; the structural gap between social monitoring and economic policy-making remains intact.

Against this backdrop, this paper argues that the barriers constraining CSO participation in the Semester are not procedural but structural: they reflect a deeper mismatch between a governance process designed around economic efficiency, and actors whose legitimacy is based on representing those most affected by its outcomes. Addressing this mismatch requires change on both sides of the relationship. The paper proceeds in four steps: it summarises the academic debate; it diagnoses the four interlocking challenges that define the current impasse; it examines the role of crisis moments as missed opportunities for more fundamental change; and it concludes with specific recommendations - for CSOs and for European policy makers - on what a reimagined relationship would require in practice.

The European Semester and civil society: state of the debate

The question of whether the European Semester has undergone meaningful socialisation has generated a substantial debate, which remains unsettled. Some argue that social objectives and actors have gained genuine ground: the progressive integration of employment and social inclusion targets, the reform of consultation processes during the Juncker Commission, and the adoption of the European Pillar of Social Rights are read as evidence of incremental but real change (Bekker 2018; Zeitlin and Vanhercke 2018; Vesan et al. 2021). Cavalieri and Karremans (2024) claim a paradigm shift - albeit fragile - associated with COVID-19 and NextGenerationEU. Others are more sceptical: for Copeland and Daly (2018), the Semester has reinforced rather than reversed the subordination of social to economic priorities; for Crespy and Schmidt (2017),

Platform), three social partners (BusinessEurope, ETUC, EPSU) and coalitions; 60 CSRs from six countries (BG, FR, LT, NL, SE, SI); 36 elite interviews (15 EC, 9 CSOs, 6 social partners, 3 SPC, 3 EESC); 27 expert country reports; and one focus group with five European-level CSO representatives.

structural reforms recommended to Member States consistently reflect a neoliberal core. Examining CSRs between 2012 and 2018, Haas et al. (2021) found that the number of CSRs favouring social protection remained consistently low, while Member States did not act on them (Jordan et al. 2021). What unites these accounts - despite their disagreements - is a shared recognition that the Semester's social dimension remains contested, unevenly implemented, and structurally subordinate; social objectives are accommodated at the margins of a process still driven by fiscal and market imperatives.

The literature on civil society participation in EU governance offers a complementary and equally sobering picture. Organised civil society has long been positioned as a potential bridge between technocratic EU governance and citizens, contributing to input, output and throughput legitimacy (Greenwood 2007; Schmidt 2013; Schmidt 2016; Greenwood 2017; Kröger 2019). In the Semester specifically, this potential has remained largely unrealised. Sabato et al. (2017) document persistent asymmetries between the more institutionalised engagement of social partners and the ad hoc, commentary-driven role of CSOs; Dür and Mateo (2016) show that organisations representing weaker groups are systematically caught between insider and outsider strategies, without the resources to sustain either effectively. During crises - precisely the moments when CSO voice could matter most - political opportunity structures tend to contract around economic actors and finance ministries, marginalising social and civil society perspectives (della Porta and Parks 2018). The risk of co-optation compounds the problem: CSOs funded by and engaged with the Commission over extended periods are prone to adapting their positions to what institutional gatekeepers find palatable, gradually eroding the critical distance on which their democratic legitimacy depends (Antonucci and Corti 2020; Elomäki and Gaweda 2022).

The following section draws on empirical research to examine precisely how these dynamics have played out in practice, and why they have proven so resistant to change.

Diagnosis: Challenges Facing CSOs in the Semester

Resilience of neo-liberal economic thinking

The launch of the Europe 2020 strategy in 2010 - with its headline target of lifting 20 million people out of poverty - created a fleeting sense of change and even optimism regarding a shift toward more socially inclusive EU policies. However, this period of economic rethinking was short-lived. As the financial crisis of 2008 morphed into a full-blown Eurozone sovereign debt crisis, the EU quickly reverted to austerity and fiscal discipline, despite strong warnings from trade unions and CSOs about the detrimental effects of such measures on already vulnerable or marginalised groups. The return to 'business as usual' illustrated the structural resilience of the neoliberal

economic paradigm - a characterisation that, as discussed in the previous section, remains debated but is confirmed by the empirical findings of this research - driven by institutional inertia, power asymmetries and the dominance of key actors, namely the Directorate General for Economic and Financial Affairs (DG ECFIN) and national finance ministries in the Economic Policy Committee. Although actors such as the Directorate General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion (DG EMPL), the Employment Committee and particularly the Social Protection Committee (SPC) have regained some ground in recent years - after having been sidelined in the early phase of the Semester, when DG ECFIN dominated the process in response to the financial crisis (Zeitlin and Vanhercke 2014; Graziano and Hartlapp 2015) - the scope for transformative change remains constrained.

When economic growth and employment began to recover, the 2013 Social Investment Package (SIP) helped introduce more progressive rhetoric (Cantillon and Van Lancker 2013; Hemerijck 2018). However, it lacked meaningful implementation and remained within the boundaries of the prevailing neoliberal focus on growth and jobs, rather than promoting well-being. Over time, many EU-level CSOs abandoned the more ambitious and systemic critiques voiced in the early Semester years - such as those by the Spring or the Semester Alliance - and instead settled for more pragmatic, incremental gains, notably the EPSR, about which they were extensively consulted. This consultation process, while welcome, came at a cost: interviewees reveal that CSOs felt compelled to adopt the economic language of the SIP - human capital, social returns on investment - and 'to temper the critique of the EU institutions and the Commission, because they were increasingly on our side' (CSO 3; CSO 6). Confrontation felt counterproductive - 'better not to wake sleeping dogs' (CSO 8) - eroding the critical distance on which independent advocacy relies. While some actors, such as the European Women's Lobby (EWL), continue to challenge the dominant paradigm more overtly, neoliberalism has become the broadly accepted default, even though the underserved groups represented by CSOs would benefit far more from a genuinely Keynesian economic policy shift prioritising public investment and redistribution.

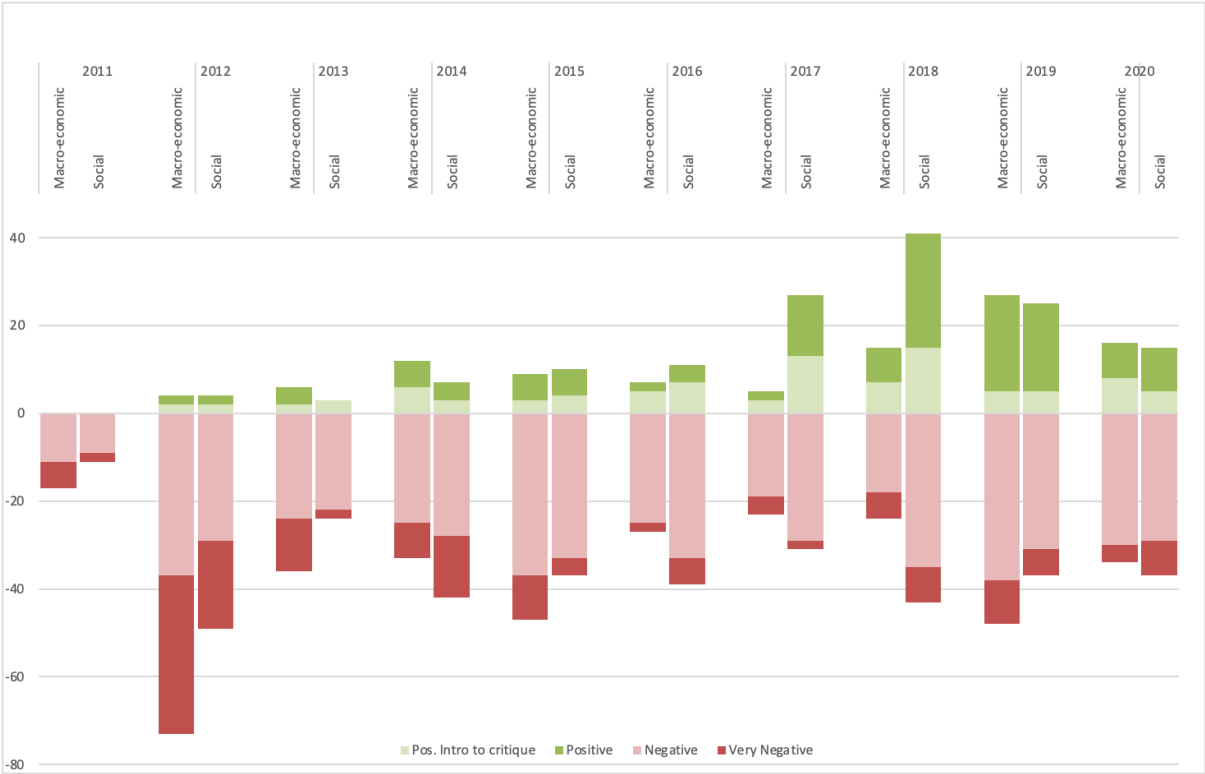
Fragmented and inconsistent CSO engagement

While CSOs interacted regularly with the Commission, their advocacy remained inconsistent and fragmented. Organisations like the European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN) exemplify best practices by publishing regular analysis of the Semester, albeit of varying depth and quality. However, most CSOs struggle to maintain a sustained and relevant presence, undermining their potential to become more routine actors in economic policy monitoring and recognised contributors to the Semester process, similar to the social partners.

In the early 2010s, CSOs and trade unions actively advocated for a more inclusive and sustainable economic paradigm, which at times strained their relationships with institutional allies, namely DG EMPL. Figure 2 tracks the distribution of attitude categories - from 'very negative' to 'positive'

- in CSO position papers on macro-economic and social policy themes across the period 2011 to 2020, showing how the balance shifted over time. Many CSOs moved to a more reactive and commentarial role, rather than proactively suggesting credible alternatives. One exception was the EWL’s ‘Purple Pact’ (4) which, despite its ambition, failed to reach more influential players in DG ECFIN and the Secretariat-General. Commission staff interviewed admitted to limited engagement with EWL, pointing to DG JUST which funds the organisation as its main interlocutor (EC 3; EC 14). More broadly, CSOs tend to engage with DGs more receptive to their concerns and providing funding, leaving the actors who actually drive the Semester largely out of reach.

Figure 1. Figure 2 Changes in attitude in relation to macro-economic and social policy related themes in CSO position papers on the European Semester (5)



4. EWL, 2020. Purple Pact: A feminist approach to the economy. Accessed at: <https://womenlobby.org/Purple-Pact-It-s-Time-for-a-Feminist-approach-to-the-Economy/?lang=en> (8 August 2025).

5. Both figures in this paper draw on a qualitative content analysis of 103 position papers published between 2011 and 2020 by six EU-level CSOs (Age Platform Europe, EAPN, EWL, Eurodiaconia, Social Platform and Solidar) and three social partners (BusinessEurope, ETUC and EPSU), including coalition documents. The sentence was used as the coding unit, with each unit assigned one of four attitude categories: positive, positive into critique, negative, and very negative. Intercoder reliability was tested and confirmed at a Kappa coefficient of 0.942.

Alternative CSRs were put forward by some organisations, but reactions within the Commission concerning their usefulness were mixed. This was often due to limited economic argumentation and a misunderstanding of the Semester's actual scope and function. A primarily reactive approach, however, weakens CSOs' ability to challenge prevailing economic paradigms and entrenched power structures, leaving them stranded between being effective insiders regularly engaging with key decision-makers, and influential outsiders capable of mobilising more public support (Dür and Mateo 2016).

Moreover, the Commission's inconsistent consulting of CSOs - particularly compared with the more structured and institutionalised engagement with the social partners - further undermines CSOs' ability to professionalise their internal structures and to produce more pertinent outputs, for instance by training-up staff on heterodox economic theory and setting up sustainable monitoring mechanisms to follow the Semester adequately and consistently. While professionalisation may enhance CSOs' impact on the Semester, it also raises concerns about conformity and the potential erosion of a critical stance - as seen during the consultations around the EPSR -, increasing the risk of co-optation and alignment with the Commission's dominant neoliberal paradigm.

Although past initiatives such as the Spring and Semester Alliances demonstrated the potential for collaboration between CSOs and trade unions, both have struggled to present a unified, long-term vision capable of challenging dominant neoliberal narratives. As one CSO representative reflected: 'The more dire things are, the more you band together because you feel excluded as civil society' (CSO 1) - a reactive solidarity that dissolves once the immediate pressure recedes. While the efforts of the Alliances may have contributed to policy shifts, the push for the EPSR - welcomed by all interviewees as a notable change in paradigm - is largely attributed to Commission President Juncker, his 'social heart' (EC 5), his team and his connections to influential stakeholders in the Member States (CSO 3, SP 2, EC 9, EC 11, EC 14), along with data demonstrating persistently high levels of poverty and youth unemployment.

Structural barriers and a mismatch in expectations

CSOs face persistent structural and resource constraints that limit their capacity to engage meaningfully and effectively with processes like the Semester. Analysing the Semester is a resource-intensive exercise; many CSOs and their members, but - as SPC members report - also ministerial staff, are ill-equipped to peruse an increasing volume of often abstract, highly technical documents. In essence, a significant disconnect exists between the often urgent realities on the ground and the complex nature of macroeconomic governance shaping the Semester. Lacking sufficient economic expertise and the resources needed to engage meaningfully and meet the data-driven expectations of DG ECFIN and other economic actors, CSOs are at a structural disadvantage.

As a result, CSO contributions often remain secondary, reinforcing their dependence on less powerful allies within the Commission, notably DG EMPL, to translate their concerns into actionable policy, leaving them subject to the priorities and preferences of more dominant players. This challenge is compounded by divergent expectations: the Commission looks to CSOs to educate their members, provide policy-relevant and robust evidence and promote EU action among grassroots organisations and citizens. One CSO interviewee described the Commission's ask in stark terms: 'All that we hear from the Semester is: please go and do our comms work for us, please popularise the Pillar, please teach governments about the Semester, please inform people at large about how it works' (CSO 1). CSOs, however, expect the Semester to address the fragmented social issues they represent. This is rooted in CSOs' own governance structures, driven by members' priorities and the commitment to authentically and fully represent the lived experience of a respective vulnerable or underserved group, e.g. people experiencing homelessness, people suffering from mental health issues, women, children, elderly people.

The Commission seeks early alerts and robust, data-driven insights, whereas CSOs often provide anecdotal evidence about the situation of their specific constituencies - partly because more granular social or poverty-related data are scarce at both national and EU level. This mismatch reflects a persistent dilemma: while CSOs offer critical insights into societal needs and emerging issues, they often lack the means to translate and combine this with economic analysis that could strengthen their influence in the Semester. CSOs speak in the language of rights, lived experience and social exclusion, while the Semester rather operates in the technocratic register of macroeconomics, fiscal imbalances and structural reform. Even where CSOs produce alternative country-specific recommendations and compelling evidence about people's lives, interviewees noted that these were falling short of sound economic argumentation and disconnected from the Semester's scope. This exposes broader systemic issues within the governance framework, where social actors are expected to conform to a process designed primarily for economic efficiency rather than participatory democracy, raising questions about the democratic legitimacy of the Semester. Without clear recognition and better support for CSOs' representational role, the ambition of inclusive and participatory economic governance will remain unmet.

Semester fatigue undermining legitimacy

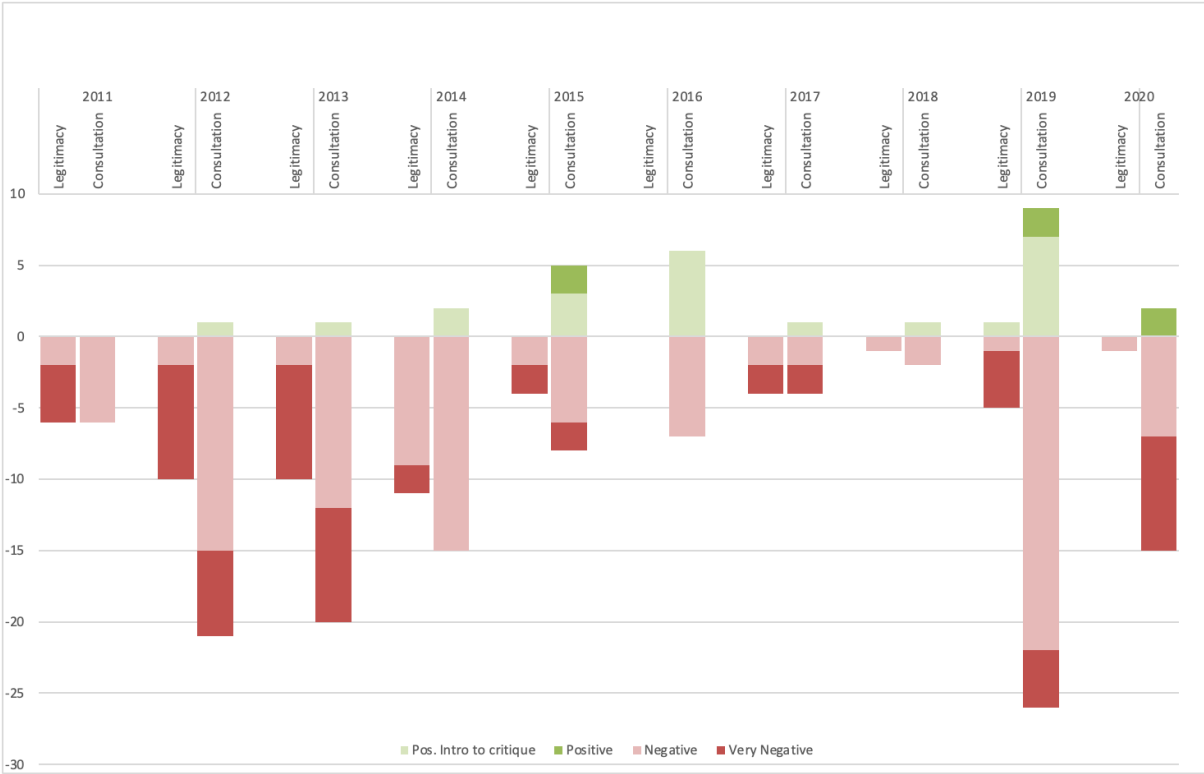
The Commission's failure to provide meaningful feedback on CSO contributions exacerbates the issue, particularly for national members who act as vital transmission belts for information from the grassroots. Although the Commission recognises in its programmatic documents on democratic participation that feedback is essential to sustain stakeholder engagement, its lack of tangible feedback, coupled with its output- and outcome-driven funding procedures,

undermines both the quality and relevance of CSO input. This not only further marginalises CSOs, but also introduces a bias in favour of larger and financially stronger service-providing organisations, somewhat mirroring power imbalances between economic actors, state authorities and civil society.

CSO participation in the Semester often appears futile, hindered by limited capacity, lack of strategic focus, and the modest tangible impact achieved by EU-level CSOs and their members. A worrying trend of ‘Semester fatigue’ (CSO 9) has emerged, reflecting stagnation of the consultation process, where all sides seem resigned to a flawed system. Notably, different actors at EU-level share strikingly similar perceptions, suggesting a possible echo-chamber effect within the ‘Brussels bubble’: actors may reinforce their own impressions and prejudices about one another, to the point where such narratives become self-fulfilling and further entrench the status quo. This dynamic is compounded by a fragile and inconsistent connection between EU-level CSOs and their national members. European Semester Officers (ESO) - introduced to bridge the gap between EU institutions and national stakeholders - engage unevenly with national CSOs: some maintain meaningful contact, while others focus mainly on social partners or remain largely inaccessible. One interviewee noted that ESOs functioned primarily as ‘the eyes and ears for ECFIN and SecGen’ (CSO 4), reinforcing the Semester’s economic rather than social intelligence function. Meanwhile, EU-level CSOs are frequently expected to transmit Commission messaging to the national level, inverting the representational logic of bringing voices from the ground and potentially ‘legitimising a horrifying process that is killing people’ (CSO 1).

This situation has been exacerbated by the Commission’s recent return to less transparent practices in CSR negotiations, sidelining CSOs and other actors such as the SPC once again. Figure 3 tracks the distribution of attitude categories in CSO position papers concerning the Semester’s legitimacy and consultation practices across the period 2011 to 2020, revealing how criticism intensified and receded in response to changing institutional conditions. Dissatisfaction with consultation processes resurfaced in 2019 and 2020, as shown in the figure. Outside the core research period, several interviewees observed that consultation processes related to the Recovery and Resilience Plans and their follow-up remain uncertain (CSO 6, CSO 9, SPC 1, SPC 2). Moreover, the simultaneous publication of country reports and CSRs now leaves even less time for CSOs and other actors such as the SPC to review and analyse these critical documents (CSO 1, CSO 6, CSO 7, CSO 9). These developments diminish input, output and throughput legitimacy, further undermining the trust in and effectiveness of economic and social policy-making - trust that had made a tentative return during the Juncker years (Copeland 2022).

Figure 2. Figure 3 Changes in attitude concerning the Semester's legitimacy and consultation practices in CSO position papers



Crisis as a missed opportunity

Policy change can occur incrementally over time, as well as at critical junctures (Lindblom 1959; Hall 1993); crisis, however, can open windows of opportunity and accelerate shifts that gradual advocacy alone cannot achieve (Kingdon 1993; Saurugger and Terpan 2016). Over the past two decades, Europe has grappled with overlapping crises: the global banking, financial and sovereign debt crises peaking between 2010 and 2012, the 2015-2016 migration crisis, Brexit, the escalating climate emergency, the COVID-19 pandemic, and recent geopolitical turmoil affecting the whole region. Such moments open windows of opportunity for policy and institutional adaptation that CSOs were poorly positioned to exploit. In such contexts, policy makers are tasked with sense-making and responding swiftly; CSOs are well placed to offer early insights into how people are affected before data becomes available, provide policy alternatives and serve as 'guardians of the public interest' (Greenwood 2007, p.341)

Yet, during a crisis, policy makers often narrow the circle of interlocutors (della Porta and Parks 2018) and lean heavily on economic experts, leading to lopsided or insufficient understanding of the full societal impact. Interviewees from CSOs, social partners, but also DG EMPL, confirmed that they were excluded from key discussions on responses to the financial and sovereign debt

crisis. While collaboration of CSOs - notably with trade unions and the European Parliament - was stronger and more strategic in the early 2010s, the failure to describe a strong, unified economic alternative remained a critical weakness of their advocacy.

The COVID-19 pandemic, which exposed the social and economic consequences of prevailing economic policy, again revealed this gap: CSOs were quick to identify emerging problems and propose short-term fixes for those at risk of poverty and exclusion. They fell short, however, of using the open window to promote coherent, programmatic and realistic alternatives combining social, economic and even environmental goals, to prevent a return to 'business as usual'. The EU's initial crisis responses incorporated Keynesian elements, allowing for countercyclical public spending by temporarily suspending the Stability and Growth Pact and launching the Recovery and Resilience Facility and NextGenerationEU, which channelled 750 billion euros of public investment into economic recovery. These were, however, driven mainly by political and economic dynamics rather than CSO advocacy. One Commission interviewee acknowledged that crisis management moved at a pace that excluded broader consultation: 'Everything was so fast and urgent' (EC 2), with the focus shifting to middle-class stability, more than support for vulnerable populations. In this situation, CSOs defaulted to their fragmented 'wish list' advocacy, prioritising internal consensus over strategic influence. As one SPC interviewee ⁽⁶⁾ observed, 'two-thirds of the position papers are more of the same, so that each national member organisation recognises itself', highlighting limited awareness of the unique opportunity that the COVID-19 pandemic offered to European-level CSOs and their members.

The lesson is not simply that CSOs must be better prepared for the next crisis. Sustained influence over EU economic governance requires EU-level CSOs to embrace a more strategic and intellectually rigorous approach; preparing realistic and persuasive economic alternatives well in advance - moving beyond the 'wish list' approach - would allow them to position themselves more strongly as indispensable players in shaping economic policies. This requires them to build members' support for broader strategic and future-proof alternatives over longer periods of time, addressing their constituencies' needs while driving systemic reforms for the benefit of all.

6. The identifier has been removed here to reduce the risk of identification through context.

Conclusions: Towards a More Legitimate and Balanced Semester

While calls for more structured consultation and quality guidelines have persisted throughout the period under investigation, CSOs must convince both key players and their institutional allies that enhanced consultation mechanisms are not merely ‘a nuisance’ (EC X) (7) but a precondition for and investment in more effective and inclusive governance of the European Semester.

Acceptance of the current status quo - whether to maintain a symbolic seat at the table or to tick the consultation box - risks being counterproductive for all involved. For the Commission, the interaction with CSOs does not fully yield the insights required for evidence-based policy-making or the support needed for genuine and critical reflection on alternative economic paradigms. Meanwhile, CSOs, constrained by limited recognition and resources, fail to secure meaningful outcomes for the groups they represent, in a technocratic process far too complex to follow. This mutually unsatisfactory arrangement underscores the need for a reimagined approach to the Semester consultation process - one that fosters genuine engagement at all levels, prioritises co-creation of solutions, and truly values diverse perspectives as essential inputs for shaping economic governance that serves the people.

Recommendations

The following recommendations address the main and interconnected deficits identified in the research underlying this paper: insufficient power resources of CSOs, their fragmented strategic capacity to derive a coherent counternarrative to the prevalent neoliberal paradigm, and structural barriers linked to the European Semester's governance framework, resulting in Semester fatigue.

For European civil society organisations and other actors aiming to influence economic policy

Stakeholders interacting with the European Commission, including CSOs, can aim to improve their engagement with European economic governance and reinforce their existing power resources to influence economic policy by focussing on the following:

- **Strengthen knowledge and develop a clear vision:** first and foremost, equip staff involved in the European Semester with a better understanding of alternative economic concepts and theories. Familiarity with economists such as Piketty (2014; 2020; 2022),

7. Idem.

Mazzucato (2015; 2021), Stiglitz (2012), Milanovic (2016; 2019) or Raworth (2017) - whose work addresses inequality, wealth distribution, mission-oriented public investment, the limits of GDP as a welfare measure and post-growth alternatives to the prevailing economic paradigms - would enable CSOs to present compelling alternatives based on credible economic theory, rather than on anecdotal evidence alone. Building on this knowledge, CSOs should express a clear and feasible vision of alternative policies, consulting progressive economists and think tanks recognised as credible experts by the Commission, to ensure that proposals are actionable and persuasive. For instance, initiatives such as the EWL's *Purple Pact* demonstrate how collaboration with academics could enhance advocacy, if such outputs are then used and shared more widely and systematically.

- **Build on stories and improve data-driven advocacy:** while anecdotal evidence is an important power resource which can highlight key challenges (at early stages) and sway hearts, it must be backed up more effectively by robust data if it is to gain credibility with policy makers and sway minds. While CSOs will struggle to compile data themselves - which is not their inherent role - they should leverage existing datasets from sources such as Eurostat, the OECD, and academic studies, and draw comparisons with similar economies, such as the US and Japan, to strengthen their arguments. Substantiating evidence with data ensures that CSOs overcome prejudices about their analytical rigour and gain more traction in the Semester process. In addition, even a small sample study could trigger the Commission to investigate further and procure more substantial investigation, as recent EU-wide research on homelessness and non-take-up of benefits demonstrates.
- **Engage strategically with policy makers:** adopt a targeted approach to policy-maker engagement, combining the following actions: a) produce well-researched position papers with concise executive summaries; b) build and maintain networks with influential players, including those in DG ECFIN and the Secretariat-General; c) cultivate charismatic and persistent advocates to increase visibility and memorability, as personalities often draw attention to an issue, even if their contributions are less substantial or appropriate. Strategic proactive engagement over and above consultation opportunities, including the use of informal channels, is critical for making an impact. There should be a critical shift from engaging primarily with DG EMPL or DG JUST as natural allies and funders, towards deliberately cultivating relationships with DG ECFIN and the Secretariat-General - the actors who actually shape CSRs - even where this requires moving beyond established comfort zones and funding relationships.
- **Foster alliances and solidarity:** strengthen collaboration with allies inside and outside the Commission. CSOs should: a) support more progressive forces within the EU

institutions, and particularly the Commission, by aligning priorities and providing timely, relevant inputs to bolster their positions in negotiations around Semester outputs; b) collaborate with social partners, overcoming tensions around representativity, to jointly propose sustainable and complementary civil and social dialogue and consultation processes to the Commission. Do not leave it to the institutions to mediate between actors that should be on the same side; c) build and participate in coalitions, following the example of the Semester Alliance, to pool resources and rally advocacy efforts behind a strong cross-sectoral vision. The lesson from the Semester and Spring Alliances is that coalitions assembled during a crisis dissolve with it; what is needed instead are permanent structures with cross-sectoral visions agreed in advance, so that when windows of opportunity open, a coherent collective position already exists. Even informal or issue-specific collaborations with less obvious actors, including business associations, on shared concerns such as labour shortages and the inclusion of migrants, could amplify impact.

- **Advocate for structured consultation and reform of funding:** continue to push for structured and regular consultation opportunities, but clarify how these will benefit both policy makers and CSOs. In consultations, prioritise three to four key issues, supported by strong stories and data. Avoid lengthy presentations and ‘wish lists’ that may satisfy a heterogeneous membership, but dilute focus and persuasive power. Additionally, advocate for reforms in EU funding mechanisms, prioritising long-term operational support over project- or output-based grants, to allow CSOs greater flexibility and stability in their advocacy efforts, while reducing the risks of coercion and co-optation.
- **Monitor the Semester and advocate proactively:** consider a shift from reactive annual contributions to a more forward-looking approach. Conduct in-depth analysis of Semester outputs every two years, e.g. to evaluate the impact of past CSRs on the ground with national members, and propose actionable CSRs to address any emerging challenges identified. Monitoring policy implementation consistently not only holds policy makers accountable but also strengthens CSOs’ ability to refine and professionalise their advocacy, while increasing the relevance of their contributions. Consider collaborating with other CSOs, trade unions or academia to pool resources for in-depth analysis of certain topics that are relevant in the Semester and have an impact on larger groups, e.g. pensions, health and care provision.
- **Leverage crisis moments and public engagement:** crises, such as economic downturns, public health emergencies, or environmental disasters, present unique opportunities to advocate for transformative change. CSOs should be prepared to use these moments to propose bold, evidence-based alternatives, such as Keynesian economic strategies, wealth taxation or social investment reforms addressing immediate

challenges as well as long-term systemic issues. Public mobilisation around these issues in collaboration with other key stakeholders at national and European level, complemented by digital advocacy campaigns, can increase visibility and put pressure on policy makers to act. Even if the outcomes remain contested, the recent protests by farmers in Brussels illustrate how crises and public mobilisation can compel policy makers to respond in policy areas that seem out of reach.

For European policy makers

As highlighted by academic research outlined in Section 0, the European Semester suffers from deficits in input, output and throughput legitimacy, and it is unclear whether it is truly becoming more social - with adverse consequences for the European project and for the groups CSOs represent. The recommendations below aim at enhancing the Semester's legitimacy: while some echo calls made elsewhere, they are based on fresh empirical data and offer concrete insights for policy makers seeking to strengthen engagement with CSOs and improve the Semester's social dimension. They are addressed primarily to the European Commission as the Semester's main institutional entrepreneur, while acknowledging that the Commission's room for manoeuvre is inevitably shaped by the broader political and institutional context it operates in.

- **Embrace diverse economic models:** to foster innovation and inclusivity, the EU institutions should actively explore alternative economic paradigms beyond the dominant neoliberal framework. Recent years have seen increasing engagement of progressive economists such as Piketty, Mazzucato or Raworth, through conferences and policy exchanges at EU level (see also first recommendation to CSOs). However, more sustained dialogue with these and other forward-thinking economists could provide valuable insights and foster greater policy diversity. Further incorporating ideas such as wealth taxation, public investment strategies, welfare state expansion or circular economy principles would not only counterbalance 'economic constitutionalism' (Gill 1998), which binds Member States to neo-liberal policies, but also address rising Euroscepticism fuelled by the impression that the EU cares primarily for markets.
- **Protect social achievements through strategic alliances:** policy makers who see themselves as part of 'centres of resistance' (Gramsci 1971; Koch 2022) within the European economic governance framework should actively seek the support of CSOs and social partners to safeguard policy advancements, such as the EPSR or the European Green Deal. These initiatives are increasingly at risk from the resurgence of austerity and free-market economics. By collaborating with CSOs and social partners, policy makers can support the building of broad coalitions to defend these progressive milestones, ensuring their implementation and resilience against rollback efforts. Such alliances are

essential for maintaining momentum on social and environmental goals amid shifting political pressures.

- **Address power imbalances:** the Commission must actively reflect on and address structural imbalances of power that favour economically dominant actors and marginalise social and civil society perspectives. Currently the Semester remains distant from citizens, although it affects them profoundly, while lacking transparency and accountability; this fundamental democratic gap requires deeper action. While CSOs can bridge this divide to a certain extent, consulting them on the Semester is only a temporary patch. Efforts should include: a) diversifying consultations to include smaller CSOs and grassroots organisations. European Semester Officers can facilitate this at Member State level and should be advised to do so systematically; b) further strengthening the role of the SPC and DG EMPL in shaping CSRs and other Semester outputs; and c) introducing mechanisms to better balance the influence of well-resourced stakeholders, social partners and CSOs.
- **Set realistic and concrete expectations:** the Commission should establish clear and achievable expectations for CSOs and other stakeholders involved in the Semester. Unrealistic demands, such as requiring extensive data collection, including from members on the ground, or in-depth analysis within short time frames without providing adequate support, undermine the quality and usefulness of inputs and the legitimacy of consultations. Ensuring meaningful, focused and feasible engagement requires clear communication about stakeholders' roles and contributions, both within the Commission and externally. This clarity will help maintain continuity of engagement and align expectations with stakeholders' resource constraints, including when there are changes in the staff responsible in the Commission.
- **Co-create consultation processes with stakeholders:** as has happened with social partners, the Commission should involve CSOs and the SPC in the optimisation of the consultation processes linked to the Semester. Co-creation ensures that these processes are inclusive, transparent and responsive to the needs of all participants. This collaborative approach could help align the format, timing and scope of consultations with the operational realities of stakeholders, fostering a sense of ownership and increasing the likelihood of meaningful engagement. Regular feedback loops should be established to refine this process over time; these will allow CSOs to become more professional and regular in their contributions, further contributing to the quality and accountability of their work.
- **Adopt a consistent consultation framework:** the Commission should establish a structured and transparent consultation process for CSOs and commit to it consistently across policy cycles. Ad hoc or frequently shifting processes create uncertainty and

diminish the effectiveness of stakeholder contributions. While informal channels are crucial and must remain intact, a more standardised, but flexible framework with clearly defined and more generous timelines and procedures would enable CSOs and other actors to plan, prepare, build capacity and engage more effectively. Additionally, the Commission should ensure that consultation outcomes are visibly reflected in the Semester outputs, or should provide clear explanations when they are not. This will reinforce the value of stakeholder input and prevent ‘Semester fatigue’ and the disengagement of CSOs, which further undermines the legitimacy of the process.

- **Reform funding mechanisms:** the Commission should rethink its funding models to prioritise longer-term operational support for CSOs, moving away from short-term and/or project-based grants. Restoring previous models of operational funding would enable CSOs to focus on strategic advocacy and coalition-building, rather than diverting resources to frequent grant applications. For processes like the Semester, multi-annual and more flexible funding options should be reconsidered, to enable sustained participation in economic governance, including contributions from national-level members. Such reforms would bolster CSOs’ ability to engage meaningfully and consistently over time, enhancing the quality of inputs. They would mitigate the risk of coercion and co-optation - however subtle - that arises from the need to remain on ‘good’ terms with the Commission in order to secure both access and funding.

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