



EUROPEAN SEMESTER COMPASS

2018 COUNTRY REPORTS – ARE THEY SOCIAL ENOUGH?

A key policy document of the European Semester

On 7th March 2018, the European Commission has released the [Country Reports](#), which are the second step of the European Semester process. The package includes one Country Report per Member State as well as a [Communication](#), which provides an overview of the general state of the EU's economy, as well as a summary of the 28 reports. The single Country Reports are working documents which assess the state of health of each national economy through an in-depth analysis. **All of them are published in English, as well as in the national language.**

The Country Reports are based on a very wide range of statistical data, including data from Eurostat, but also other sources. This analysis is then used as basis for all following Semester documents, in particular the National Reform Programmes (NRPs) and Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs). **The executive summary is a key element, as its content provides an indication which CSRs the European Commission will present.**

National Reform Programmes (NRPs)

The NRPs are national responses to the EU-wide Annual Growth Survey (AGS) and the Country Reports. The Member States themselves set out national economic and social targets for the upcoming year, which take into account the Europe-wide priorities of the AGS. The NRPs need to be submitted to the European Commission by mid-April.

Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs)

The European Commission evaluates the different NRPs and formulates country-specific recommendations for each EU member state. These CSRs are intended to influence the overall policy direction your country is taking.

As the Country Reports are such an important document in the European Semester process, it is crucial that the analysis reflects as well as possible the reality on the ground. For this reason, **we strongly encourage all Eurodiaconia members to read their Country Report and assess whether it reflects adequately the situation in their country.** We will give you some more advice on how to do this at the end of this article.





What kind of information is provided?

Country Reports analyse the social and economic policies of individual Member States. Their contents vary significantly, but their structure is similar. Each of the 27 Country Reports for 2017 is composed of the following relevant elements:

- ✓ An **executive summary**, highlighting the key trends per country. It provides a reliable indication of the Commission's understanding of a country's key challenges, and as such, of the potential focus of future Country-Specific Recommendations (CSRs).
- ✓ An **economic outlook**. Unlike the title implies, this section also analyses labour market conditions and social policies.
- ✓ A description of progress made on the implementation of previous **Country-Specific Recommendations**. This section is particularly relevant for countries which have received social CSRs; Eurodiaconia members can use the assessment in their dialogues with national governments.
- ✓ **Reform priorities**. Of particular relevance is the subsection on 'labour market, education and social policies', which tends to vary in length between 5 and 10 pages.

What is positive this year?

The Country Reports have a stronger focus on social policies. Already in last year's Country Reports, the monitoring of social policies has become more prominent than in the years before. With the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) a new element has been added, as the European Commission had announced that its implementation would be monitored through the European Semester process.

There is an emphasis on the importance of investments. In the Communication on the Country Reports, there is a strong emphasis on the importance of investing in order to strengthen national economies and make them more resilient to shocks. Recommendations include among others investing in social safety nets and social infrastructure, including social housing.

The growing problem of in-work poverty is acknowledged. The Communication on the Country Reports states that "close to 10% of workers are classified under 'in-work poverty'" with an increasing trend. Therefore, the importance of quality employment is mentioned, although not consistently.

The Country Reports continue monitoring the inclusion of Roma populations. As it has been the case throughout the last years, the European Commission continues to be particularly attentive to the question of Roma inclusion in countries with important Roma populations.

The European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR)

On 26 April 2017 the European Commission has published the European Pillar of Social Rights. The EPSR consists of 20 social principles, which are building on existing EU law. Through a joint proclamation on 17 November 2017, the three EU Institutions, including all Member States, have demonstrated their strong commitment to this new framework.

The EPSR is accompanied by a **Social Scoreboard**, which is intended to monitor its implementation. With its 14 indicators, however, it fails to cover the whole EPSR.

You can read more about the topic [here in the Eurodiaconia Briefing for members](#) on the European Pillar of Social Rights.



What is worrying?

Monitoring the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) with the Social Scoreboard is misleading. When reading the Country Reports, one gets the impression that monitoring the implementation of the EPSR has been handled separately from the rest of the report. Furthermore, the implementation is measured with the help of the 14 indicators of the Social Scoreboard, which are not covering the entire EPSR. While those indicators capture relatively well the principles related to the labour market, they cover less well the other social principles. In addition, Member States' performance on the social scoreboard indicators is measured in comparison with each other (from low performers to best performers) and not compared to some benchmarks or targets. This way of monitoring makes it impossible to assess whether the situation in the country has improved or not.

The role of civil society is only partially acknowledged in the Country Reports. Eurodiaconia and other civil society organisations have been asking the European Commission to recognise the importance of civil society involvement in the design and monitoring of social and employment policies. Within the Communication on the Country Reports this recommendation has not been taken on board. Indeed, under the heading 'next steps' there is a paragraph concerning "the opportunity of a constant dialogue between the Commission, Member States, social partners and stakeholders at all levels", not mentioning civil society in particular. Concerning the development of National Reform Programmes (NRPs) by Member States, the Commission recommends that those "are drawn up with the support of (...) civil society organisations as appropriate" giving Member States a lot of room to manoeuvre not to engage civil society.

What is Eurodiaconia planning to do?

This year, Eurodiaconia will collect feedback on the Country Reports from its members with the aim of presenting a 'shadow report' to the European Commission. That Eurodiaconia Report will be shared with the responsible unit in the European Commission, including the Country Desk Officers. Later in the year, Eurodiaconia is also planning to collect input for the 2019 Country Reports, based on our members work and analysis.



How Eurodiaconia members can engage!

The Country Reports are the crucial moment for civil society organisations. Only if the Country Report of your country reflects adequately the situation in your country, you have chances that the NRPs and CSRs will also address those issues. Therefore, we strongly encourage all Eurodiaconia members to read their Country Report and get involved with the European Semester in the following way:

- **Share your assessment with the Eurodiaconia Secretariat [via this questionnaire](#).** The questionnaire contains some very simple questions that you can answer even when you don't have any experience with the European Semester. The aim of the questionnaire is to understand whether the social concerns that you consider most important in your country are reflected in the Country Report. We would like to know from you if something is missing or misrepresented.
- **Use your assessment in your national advocacy.** If possible, take part in the European Semester consultations of civil society in your country and use the opportunity to explain your assessment of the Country Reports and make recommendations for the NRPs. In case you can't attend the consultations, or they are not taking place, do not hesitate to send your assessment and recommendations in written form to the responsible ministry in your country.

European Semester Officers

In each Member State there is a representative of the European Commission, who has the role of European Semester Officer and is supposed to support you in your engagement with the European Semester. You can find the most up to date list here to contact your European Semester Officer.

Please do not hesitate to contact the Eurodiaconia Secretariat if you have any questions or need any help in your involvement with the European Semester.