

Industrial relations  
**Involvement of social partners  
in policymaking during the  
COVID-19 outbreak**





# Involvement of social partners in policymaking during the COVID-19 outbreak



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## Country codes

AT	Austria	FI	Finland	NL	Netherlands
BE	Belgium	FR	France	PL	Poland
BG	Bulgaria	HR	Croatia	PT	Portugal
CY	Cyprus	HU	Hungary	RO	Romania
CZ	Czechia	IE	Ireland	SE	Sweden
DE	Germany	IT	Italy	SI	Slovenia
DK	Denmark	LT	Lithuania	SK	Slovakia
EE	Estonia	LU	Luxembourg		
EL	Greece	LV	Latvia	UK	United Kingdom
ES	Spain	MT	Malta		

# Executive summary

## Introduction

Since 2016, Eurofound has monitored the involvement of national social partners in the European Semester process and documented this process in a series of reports. For 2020, the analysis focused on the involvement of the social partners in policymaking in the context of the first months of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. The report also covers the involvement of the social partners in the development of the 2020 national reform programmes (NRPs) in the context of the European Semester. The study focuses on tripartite social dialogue at national level.

## Policy context

The COVID-19 pandemic has severely challenged economic and social activity, resulting in a change of priorities in the Member States' political agendas at EU and national levels. Policy measures adopted during the first months of the pandemic prioritised resilience of healthcare and preserving employment and business continuity. The involvement of social partners in the design of these policy measures was reduced, as policies were frequently adopted in emergency situations.

In addition, the cycle for European Semester 2020 underwent major changes. The EU Spring Package was reoriented to mitigate the socioeconomic impact of the crisis, and the country-specific recommendations (CSRs) endorsed by the Council in July 2020 mainly aimed to provide financial, economic, employment and social responses to the crisis.

## Key findings

- The COVID-19 pandemic has challenged national social dialogue and impacted on the existing frameworks and practices for the involvement of social partners in policymaking. In this context, in the majority of countries, a significant number of policy measures were adopted without timely and meaningful consultation with social partners.
- Time pressure in terms of exchanges and consultation in this difficult period is considered to be the main issue in the quality of social dialogue and, as a result, the involvement of social partners. In general, social partners recognise the exceptional circumstances and constraints imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted the standard involvement frameworks and institutions in place. Despite acknowledging these tough circumstances, social partners also take the view that the majority of governments could have done much better.
- The COVID-19 pandemic has shown that, where tripartite social dialogue is well established and permanent, the impact of the health crisis on the involvement of the social partners has been relatively limited. In some cases, the crisis even speeded up consultations, with some social partners reporting that their opinions were listened to more attentively.
- By contrast, in other countries, although social dialogue remained in place, it was severely restricted. In this regard, the health crisis has revealed the structural weaknesses of the social dialogue foundation in some industrial relations systems.
- The evolution of the pandemic has been variable and the quality of the involvement in policymaking has improved over time in some countries (such as France, Luxembourg, Malta, Poland,<sup>1</sup> Portugal and Slovakia). In these countries, while the first government measures were taken without adequate consultation, the consultation processes improved and in most cases social partners tended to be reasonably satisfied with the quality of the involvement.
- Social partners in a few countries (such as Belgium, Finland, Italy and Spain) took initiatives to agree joint actions to support businesses and society in response to the social and economic emergency. The governments mostly supported these joint initiatives.

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<sup>1</sup> This assessment has only been provided by one employer organisation.

- Beyond tripartite social dialogue at peak level, it has been reported that policy measures adopted at national level to tackle the COVID-19 crisis have most likely increased the social dialogue at sector and company levels. Discussions between employers and human resources managers to implement the measures have potentially led to constructive solutions. Health and safety at work and the implementation of telework are undoubtedly at the top of the agenda of employer and worker representatives, as well as in the collective bargaining negotiations in some sectors.
- Following the analytical framework applied in the study, the findings show that both trade union and employer organisations in just four countries (Czechia, Estonia, the Netherlands and Sweden) record high quality in the involvement of the social partners in the development of their 2020 NRPs. This means that both parties report that there is ample time for information and consultation, that they are satisfied with the feedback and responses that the government received, and that their contributions have been incorporated or reflected.
- In other Member States there is room for improvement in social partners' involvement in NRPs. By contrast, despite insufficiencies and weaknesses, social partners had more meaningful involvement in overall policymaking than in the development of the NRPs in the context of the European Semester.
- Unlike the global financial crisis, social partners, governments and European institutions have mostly shared their understanding of the policy responses needed to mitigate the effects of the pandemic and promote economic recovery. This common approach must continue, and governments should encourage cooperation with and trust in social partners to take part in implementing policy responses at the appropriate level. This applies especially in countries where social partners have stressed the lack of appropriate involvement in policymaking.
- Governments should ensure meaningful and timely involvement of the social partners in the revamped cycle for European Semester 2021. Given the changes introduced in the Annual Sustainable Growth Strategy, the participation of social partners in the design, monitoring and implementation of the recovery and resilience plans submitted along with the NRPs in a single integrated document in 2021 will be key for strengthening social dialogue and ensuring a fair recovery.
- When coordinating economic policies in response to the effects of the COVID-19 crisis, the European Semester should ensure that social partners are meaningfully involved and that national social dialogue fulfils its role in shaping the policy responses to the challenges stemming from the climate, environmental, social and digital priorities of the European Union, particularly in those countries where weaknesses and structural shortcomings have been repeatedly reported as hampering genuine social dialogue.

## Policy pointers

- The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted how effective social dialogue can be used to shape policy initiatives and find solutions to emergency situations affecting businesses, workers, the economy and society. The challenges resulting from the economic and social crisis should underline the valuable contribution social partners make in building social cohesion and supporting economic recovery.



# Introduction

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns created the biggest shock for the European Union since the founding treaties, severely challenging economic and social activity and societal life.

The COVID-19 pandemic altered the priorities in the Member States' political agendas at EU and national levels. Policy measures adopted during the first months of the pandemic prioritised the resilience of healthcare, and preserving employment and business continuity. The overall making of policy was challenged, as was the usual way of involving the social partners in the design of the policy measures adopted in emergency situations.

Similarly, the cycle for European Semester 2020 underwent major changes, starting from the 2020 country reports, which quickly became obsolete. In this emergency context, the EU Spring Package was reoriented to mitigate the socioeconomic impact of the crisis, and the majority of Member States submitted their national reform programmes (NRPs) in due time (30 April), although with various ways of presenting the policy measures adopted to address the crisis, considering the urgency and extraordinary circumstances in which they were prepared (Box 1).

The country-specific recommendations (CSRs) that the Council endorsed in July 2020 mainly aimed to provide rapid financial, economic, employment and social responses to the crisis. Emphasis was put on health-related policy measures to mitigate the health consequences of the pandemic. In addition to these mitigation and recovery policies, the CSRs held strongly to the longer-term priorities adopted prior to the onset of the COVID-19 crisis, namely digital transformation and climate change. Tellingly, the 2020 CSRs also incorporate the general escape clause under the Stability and Growth Pact, which allows for some temporary fiscal relaxation to address budgetary pressures that have been created by recovery efforts.

## Context of research

Since 2016, Eurofound has been closely monitoring the involvement of national social partners in the European Semester and has produced a series of annual reports with the results of this exercise (Eurofound, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019a, 2020a). Based on the guidelines for the employment policies of the Member States (the 'Employment Guidelines'), adopted by the Council of the European Union in July 2018 and updated on 19 October 2020,<sup>2</sup> as well as the European Pillar of Social Rights, the scope of the analysis was enlarged to cover involvement in overall policymaking within the framework of national tripartite social dialogue. Both key policy documents acknowledge and promote the involvement and consultation of social partners in the 'design and implementation of economic, employment and social policies according to national practices'.<sup>3</sup>

Against this backdrop, the Eurofound analysis has been refocused to examine the involvement of the social partners in policymaking in the context of the very first months of the COVID-19 outbreak. In this regard, the period under observation covers the challenging period from March to July 2020, a tough time for governments, social partners and citizens that in many Member States included lockdown and movement restrictions, which put a high number of business activities and jobs under threat.

This report focuses on the involvement of social partners in the formation and/or implementation of those policy measures adopted and implemented during the first months of the COVID-19 crisis. As a result, it also covers the involvement of social partners in the development of the 2020 NRPs in the context of the European Semester.

The study is mainly focused on tripartite social dialogue, whatever form it takes at national level. As has been reported many times, there is a wide variety of national types of and mechanisms for consultation and participation of social partners in policymaking. Most of them have been seriously challenged by the COVID-19 pandemic.

<sup>2</sup> Council Decision (EU) 2020/1512 of 13 October 2020 on guidelines for the employment policies of the Member States. Guideline 7 establishes that 'Building on existing national practices, and in order to achieve more effective social dialogue and better socioeconomic outcomes, Member States should ensure the timely and meaningful involvement of the social partners in the design and implementation of employment, social and, where relevant, economic reforms and policies, including by supporting increased capacity of the social partners. Member States should foster social dialogue and collective bargaining. The social partners should be encouraged to negotiate and conclude collective agreements in matters relevant to them, fully respecting their autonomy and the right to collective action.'

<sup>3</sup> Principle 8 of the European Pillar of Social Rights.

## Box 1: Far-reaching changes in the EU's economic and social governance

In response to the need to react to the health, social and economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, in May 2020 the European Commission presented a legislative proposal for a recovery and resilience facility (RRF). The RRF is a large-scale financial support package for public investment and reforms, which the European Council agreed in July 2020. According to the Annual Sustainable Growth Survey, this key funding instrument – within the NextGenerationEU recovery plan – reshapes the cycle for European Semester 2021 (European Commission, 2020a). Member States are to submit recovery and resilience plans (RRPs) alongside their NRPs in a single integrated document. It is expected that the RRPs will address, at least partly, the Member States' existing CSRs from the 2019 and 2020 European Semester cycles.<sup>4</sup>

The 2021 country reports will not be issued and will be replaced by Commission analytical documents assessing the RRPs, also released on a staggered basis depending on the timing of the national submission of each RRP. The Commission will also publish proposals for Council implementing acts. As a result of this profound change in the structure of the European Semester, there will not be non-fiscal CSRs and only those related to the Stability and Growth Pact will be issued.

In this new EU governance framework, the European Pillar of Social Rights remains valid and should inspire and provide guidelines for the implementation of employment and social policies to ensure equal opportunities and access to the labour market, fair working conditions, and adequate social protection and inclusion in the new context.

## Methodology and analysis of information

This report is based on information that the Network of Eurofound Correspondents collected on the views of social partners and government representatives in the Member States. It gathered a total of 143 responses, offering an overall picture of the degree of involvement of social partners.

Given the overall impact of the health, economic and social crisis, most of the views collected from social partners were from national peak-level organisations, such as confederations, although some sectoral organisations also provided comments.

As part of the analysis related to participation in policymaking, social partners and government representatives were asked to provide their views concerning the assessment of involvement in the design and implementation of the employment, social and, where relevant, economic policy measures adopted in the context of the COVID-19 outbreak that has had the greatest impact.

A breakdown of the types of stakeholders that provided the 143 responses is as follows:

- 51 from trade union representatives
- 48 from employer organisation representatives
- 40 from government representatives
- 4 from other stakeholders

Although the results cannot be totally representative of all national stakeholders, the views gathered do offer an overall picture of developments in social partner involvement at EU level. Not all social partners and government authorities contacted responded. The social partner organisations and national authorities contacted that provided responses as part of the research are listed in Annex 2 of this report.

As the number of policy initiatives has been considerable in many Member States, 105 relevant policy measures were selected from the cases reported to Eurofound's COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch database up to July 2020 (Box 2). The selection of the policy measures was done by the Eurofound Network of Correspondents (see Chapter 2 for an overview of the selection process). As part of the assessment of these measures, relevant social partners were asked to assess their satisfaction both with their involvement in the process of policymaking and with the outcomes of the selected measures. Unsurprisingly, the majority of the selected measures were aimed at protecting employment (mostly linked to short-time working) and incomes, and keeping businesses afloat, although most of them pursued a combination of these goals.

<sup>4</sup> These integrated documents will be submitted by national governments during 2020 and the first quarter of 2021 (final version in April 2021).

## Box 2: COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch

Eurofound's COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch database collates information on the responses of government and social partners to the crisis, as well as gathering examples of company practices aimed at mitigating the social and economic impacts. The aims are:

- to give an overview of policy measures introduced in Member States (as well as Norway and the United Kingdom, which also participate in the Network of Eurofound Correspondents)
- to create a shared pool of information for Eurofound, and its stakeholders and users
- to record selected examples of company practices
- to identify cross-country trends regarding policy measures as the crisis evolves

The Network of Eurofound Correspondents provided most of the data, with quality control carried out by Eurofound staff. COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch includes large-scale government measures and wider collective agreements, as well as regional and local initiatives and support measures for smaller groups of workers. For each case, basic information concerning the content of the measure is recorded, together with information on the role of social partners in designing and implementing the measures. As the situation is evolving, measures are newly implemented, changed, or cancelled and replaced at high speed. The database is updated at quarterly intervals and, once available, information on the uptake and efficiency of measures is added.

Data can be accessed from Eurofound's website: <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/data/covid-19-eu-policywatch>

The time span covered in this report is relatively short and intense. Considering that the pandemic situation has evolved over time, it is difficult in some cases to provide an accurate assessment of involvement, since consultations with social partners may have been mostly disturbed or interrupted during the first weeks of the health crisis. However, consultations and exchanges may have been restarted weeks later, either on the policy measures urgently adopted already or regarding new measures. This potential development and subsequent changes in the assessment have been acknowledged in the report, although it should be noted that the views provided were collected during the very first months of the pandemic and may not reflect the situation after summer 2020.

The analysis of involvement in policymaking is based on the views of the social partners – both as an overall assessment and following their experience of participation in specific measures. The analysis of the involvement in the development of NRPs is based on the social partners' assessments of quality standards that Eurofound defined previously. These quality standards are based on a normative framework designed to assess the quality of the social dialogue process. Accordingly, they define the ideal settings that should be used for consultation. Therefore, the assessment of the involvement of the social partners in the development of NRPs can be based on evidence (by applying certain predetermined standards). By contrast, the involvement of the social partners in

overall policymaking is a continuous process that takes place over a plurality of political and legislative initiatives. In this case, the assessment must be carried out taking into account both the general social dialogue framework – institutions and practices, the political will to involve the stakeholders and so on – and the specific nature of each reform and consultation, as well as the capacity of the social partners to be involved and their interest in doing so, among other conditioning factors.

As a rule, the analysis of involvement in policymaking gives greatest weight to views that employer organisations and trade unions share, and the assessments shared by all stakeholders interviewed (from employer organisations and trade unions, backed by national authorities) are deemed worthy of attention. Diverging views between employer organisations and trade unions are also mentioned when they represent strongly opposed views. In any case, caution is required, as the results are based on subjective views that single respondents provided on behalf of one organisation each.

This report uses the working definition of 'involvement' applied in Eurofound's previous reports: for consultation to be viewed as involvement, it should be genuine, timely and meaningful. However, the exceptional circumstances under which the participation in policymaking took place during the first months of the pandemic in 2020 have been taken into consideration.

This report comprises four chapters. After the introduction, Chapter 1 provides an overview of the main findings resulting from the analysis of the involvement of social partners in national policymaking during the pandemic outbreak. Chapter 2 goes into greater depth by describing the degree of satisfaction of the social partners with their involvement with regard

to some specific measures grouped into wide policy categories. Chapter 3 presents the findings corresponding to the involvement of the social partners in developing the 2020 NRPs, as instigated by the Employment Guidelines. Chapter 4 (Conclusions) discusses the key findings from the analysis and presents policy pointers based on the findings.

# 1 Overview of social partner involvement during the COVID-19 outbreak

The COVID-19 outbreak gave rise to tensions between the political and legislative decision-making procedures. Many Member States acted swiftly to adopt extraordinary legislative measures in this unprecedented context (Table 1). Governments in most Member States declared states of emergency or functional equivalents, or adopted fast-track legislative procedures. These extraordinary powers were used to adopt regulations to restrict citizens' freedom of movement, limit certain economic activities in various sectors and introduce measures aimed at securing social distancing. These regulations have had a significant impact on businesses and employees, and have also been used to adopt urgent social, economic and labour legislation, for example, short-time work measures or special provisions for workers' protection in critical sectors.

The scope and content of these states of emergency vary among countries and they were usually adopted for a limited period only, although many of them have been temporarily renewed, sometimes more than once. For example, in **Italy**, the government declared a state of emergency at the end of January 2020 for six months to address the COVID-19 pandemic and it was extended to 15 October 2020. In **France**, the emergency legislation gave extraordinary powers to the government for one month, although, as in other countries, it has been extended several times. It gives the power to make decrees and ordinances, to take quick measures. It allows the government to change labour law and take social measures without any consultation of social partners. In **Ireland**, certain lockdown measures required the implementation of restrictive measures (such as not being allowed to travel outside a certain

radius in kilometres) and this was achieved through new emergency legislation based on the Health Act of 1947. The other main legislation, the Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (COVID-19) Act, was also passed as emergency legislation.

Even though strictly speaking **Belgium** did not declare a state of emergency, as it is not stated in national legislation, the government was granted extraordinary executive powers, which meant that temporary legislation could be adopted by Royal Decree without passing through parliament. In addition, the possibility exists of taking extraordinary measures in economic and social crises by using the 'security councils', which consist of the relevant ministers and heads of national services receiving aid and advice from other scientific bodies and from the crisis management group. The social partners have seats on the crisis management group.

On the basis of the Constitution, the government in **Luxembourg** declared a 'state of crisis' for a period of three months. Parliament validated this decision on 22 March, and later it was unanimously extended by three months, since the Constitution provides for only a 10-day period for a state of emergency imposed by the government. In **Portugal**, the President of the Republic made the constitutional declaration of a state of emergency with the approval of parliament on 18 March. It contains rules that restrict workers' rights, such as the right to strike (as in other countries). The power referred to a specific list of matters mostly to manage the health crisis and confinement, including limitations of economic activity, but not covering economic and social support measures.

**Table 1: Extraordinary powers adopted to control the pandemic in Member States**

Specific declaration of 'state of emergency' or similar legal tools	Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czechia, Estonia, Finland, France, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Portugal, Spain
Fast-track legislative procedures	Denmark, Slovakia, Slovenia
Other crisis legislation	Sweden
No extraordinary powers	Austria, Croatia, Greece, Malta, Netherlands, Poland, Romania

**Note:** Information not available on Germany.

**Source:** Unless otherwise indicated, the tables are the authors' own compilation based on information provided by the Network of Eurofound Correspondents and interviews with national social partners

In **Hungary**, the first declaration of a ‘state of danger’, adopted on 11 March, lasted for 14 days and during this period the government was empowered to issue government decrees to tackle the health requirements and other issues connected to the extraordinary situation. Then parliament passed the Act of Authorisation, which gave the government special authorisation to override laws in order to control COVID-19 or eliminate its effects. As regards labour and social measures, certain clauses of collective agreements were repealed by government decrees, and the working time frame was increased to two years.

It is worth mentioning the situation in **Slovenia**, where a state of emergency was not formally declared, but the government, which took office the day after the epidemic was declared, had a basis for passing decrees in the Communicable Diseases Act. At the time of writing this report, some decrees are currently pending before the Constitutional Court, as some measures adopted clash with fundamental rights (for example, the restriction of movement) and should not have been approved without declaring a state of emergency.

In some cases, fast-track legislative procedures were added to extraordinary executive powers to manage the COVID-19 crisis. In **Denmark**, for example, all subsequent economic support measures were passed on a fast track unanimously in parliament.

In **Sweden**, even though a crisis law was enacted in April, the focus of the law was mainly on infrastructure – and not on social or labour market policy – and it has not been used.

By contrast, other governments did not enact extraordinary powers during the health crisis, although they gained a more prominent role in combating the crisis. For example, in **Greece**, the government did not enact any emergency powers, and urgent legislative procedures were carried out in accordance with the Constitution, which provides that in ‘exceptional emergency situations and unforeseen needs’ the Council of Ministers issues ‘Acts of Legislative Content’.

In **Romania**, according to the Constitution, the government may issue emergency ordinances, but they must then be submitted to parliament for approval.

## COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch findings

Eurofound’s COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch database maps policy measures, collective agreements and company practices by governments, social partners and others to cushion the socioeconomic effects of the COVID-19 crisis (Box 2). As at 5 November 2020, 659 cases had been published.<sup>5</sup> The database includes information on how trade unions and employer organisations have been involved in the design of the policy measures.

According to the information in the database, in half of the recorded cases<sup>6</sup> where a government passed legislation or made other (non-binding) texts, recorded between April and October 2020, social partners were involved in some way in the design phase of these measures beyond being informed. This means that they were consulted, had negotiated with the government or ultimately even agreed on the measure. The quality and intensity of these various types of involvement differ between countries and even within the same country, depending on each specific measure.

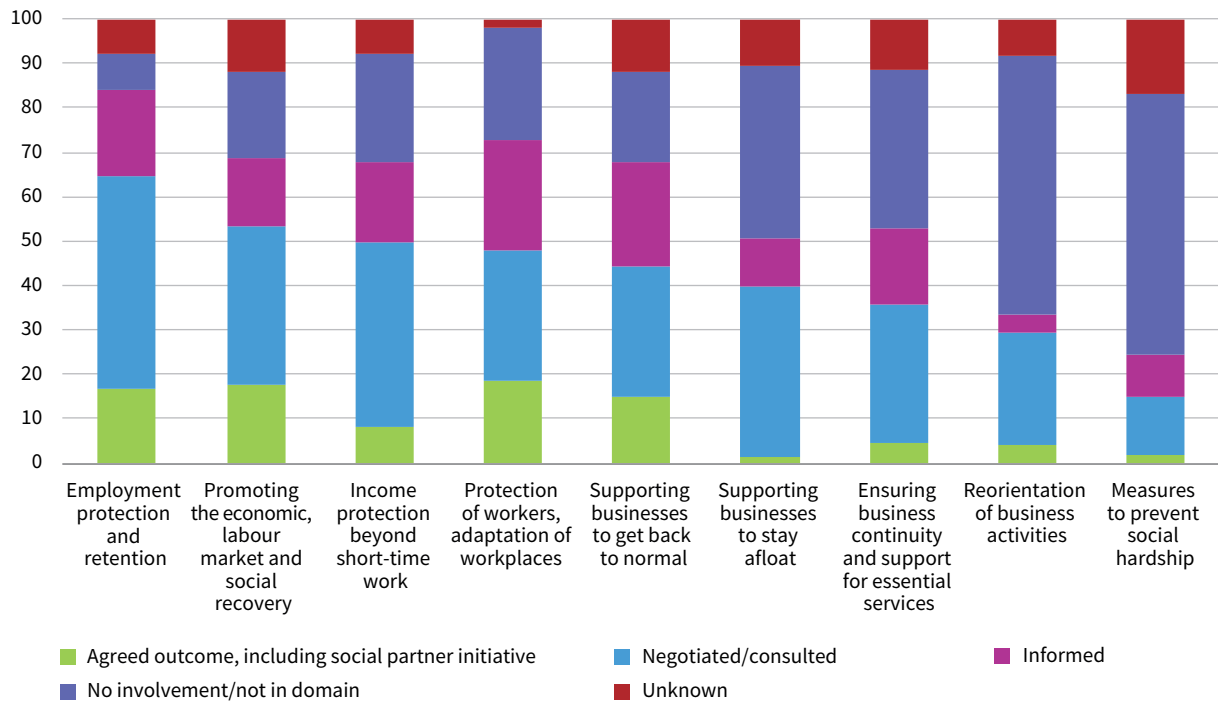
Figure 1 shows how this involvement varies by thematic area. The largest degree of social partner involvement was found in the area of employment protection and retention, which includes to a large degree the income protection schemes for employees (for example, short-time working schemes) and other income protection schemes beyond short-time work, but also in measures promoting recovery. The lowest degree of involvement was found in measures aimed at preventing social hardship (in this category, the majority of cases were deemed not to fall into the social partners’ domain).

<sup>5</sup> As the situation is evolving, measures are newly implemented, changed or cancelled and replaced at rapid speed. For this reason, the database is regularly updated and quality control checks are in place.

<sup>6</sup> For which information is available and that were considered to be in the social partners’ domain in principle.



**Figure 1: Form of involvement of social partners in the design of policy measures to cushion the socioeconomic impact of the crisis (%)**



**Notes:** Figure shows 659 cases of legislation/recommendations and tripartite agreements as at 5 November 2020.  
**Source:** Eurofound, COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch database

## Framing the results

The impact of the global health emergency has challenged national social dialogue institutions and practices. Since restriction in movements and economic activity led to widespread disruptive social effects, an unexpectedly high number of relevant decisions, legislation and policy measures were urgently adopted during the first months of the COVID-19 outbreak.

As Eurofound (2020b) noted, governments adopted measures mainly aimed at supporting businesses to stay afloat to ease the impact of full or partial closure and loss of revenue (through non-repayable grants, deferral of payments and eased access to state-backed finance) and to protect income, particularly through keeping employment, backed by various short-time working schemes. A wider approach to the policy responses included targeting groups not previously covered (such as the self-employed and workers on temporary contracts) and implementing a wide range of sectoral and social measures for organisations and people most directly affected by the effects of the health and economic crisis.

Like other aspects of political and societal life during the outbreak of the pandemic, the usual forms of participation of social partners and the functioning of institutional settings in policymaking were also challenged. Well-established social dialogue frameworks had to adapt to the new crisis scenario. In

this regard, the analysis of this special period cannot be compared to previous years and to former Eurofound findings on the same topic, although some continuity or correspondence can be found in the good quality or the weaknesses of social dialogue across the Member States.

Time pressure to conduct exchanges and consultation in such a difficult period was unquestionably a factor influencing the quality of social dialogue and the involvement of social partners. Time constraints and urgency to adopt decisions severely limited social partner participation in COVID-19-related policies during this period.

Governments had to come up with appropriate policy responses without the same type of consultation as they normally have. In these exceptional circumstances, the quality of the involvement should arguably be measured not according to established standards, but in the context of the disrupting effects stemming from the pandemic. Even the notion of genuine involvement conducted in a timely and meaningful way would need to be reconsidered in the light of the health emergency. Research findings show that in many Member States social partners report that they were simply informed and more rarely consulted about most of the policies put in place during the first months of the health emergency. Even though most of the social partners do not consider this to be a proper form of involvement, they display a certain degree of understanding given the

extraordinary situation. Furthermore, many of them also point out that they agree with the content of the policies that governments adopted, even in the absence of proper consultation.

Lockdown and restrictions have triggered online communication methods between and with the social partners. Overall, according to the majority of social partners interviewed, the COVID-19 constraints imposed by the emergency declarations did not seriously affect the capacity to communicate and exchange. In those countries where social dialogue is fluid and works well, social partners were frequently consulted – although under great pressure of time – on support measures on an ad hoc basis (by organising either separate or joint sittings, virtual meetings, and so on) and were given the opportunity to express their views and propose measures.

At the same time, some social partners also stress that extraordinary circumstances should have not impeded greater efforts to exchange views with them, particularly with some governments acting rather unilaterally. Even in these cases, however, many of them point out that they agree with the content of the policies that governments adopted, even without genuine consultation.

The social partners' perception of the quality of their involvement in policymaking changed over the course of the pandemic in some countries (France, Luxembourg, Malta, Portugal and Slovakia). Whereas the first government measures were taken without adequate consultation, the processes of involvement have improved along the way, and social partners tended to be relatively satisfied after some time had elapsed.

As stated in previous Eurofound reports, the assessment of the involvement that the national social partners report varies significantly among countries. Whereas in some Member States the social partners were satisfied or relatively satisfied with their involvement in the unusual COVID-19 period, social partners in other countries did not consider their involvement in policymaking to be effective. The level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction also varies among social partners in the same country. It should be noted that the involvement of social partners in policymaking in some countries may have been influenced by political developments, such as electoral processes, or caretaker or new governments coming into office in the period analysed (Ireland, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia). See Box 3.

### Box 3: Political changes disrupting the operation of institutional social dialogue

In some cases, political circumstances severely limited the involvement of the social partners. For example, a new government took office in **Slovenia** on 13 March – the epidemic was declared on 12 March – and social dialogue in the Economic and Social Council (Ekonomsko-socialni svet, ESS) could not start until 30 April, a month and a half later, when the new government appointed its representatives. In the meantime, according to the employer organisations, the ministries did not use the available means to facilitate social dialogue during the process of preparing COVID-19 measures. As a result, the first two packages of legislation addressing COVID-19 were adopted with very poor social dialogue, and the voice of the social partners reached the decision-makers mostly in writing in the form of requests or expectations. In the third anti-COVID-19 package, the inclusion of social partners was slightly better through the ESS, but still below the level that should be required to adopt measures with such a significant effect and potentially long-term consequences.

In **Slovakia**, the social partners were involved only to some extent or not at all in drawing up the economic and social policy measures with the greatest impact. Due to a new government coming into office on 21 March, there were changes in the composition of representatives in the tripartite Economic and Social Council. First, policy measures were adopted via shortened legal procedures without using the usual tripartite consultations and the cross-sector commenting procedure in the early phase of the COVID-19 crisis. On some proposed measures, such as amendments to the Labour Code, there were informal ad hoc tripartite consultations. The first tripartite consultations at the Economic and Social Council took place on 21 May 2020, two months after the first measures related to the pandemic were adopted.

In **Poland**, the electoral calendar and the considerable political tensions connected with the holding of the presidential elections also influenced the involvement of the social partners in the legislative process accompanying the response to the health crisis. According to the trade unions, the government invoked the threat of the pandemic as an excuse to avoid the existing procedures for consultation on relevant legislation.



**Table 2: Satisfaction in the involvement of the social partners in policymaking during the first months of the COVID-19 outbreak**

Group	Subgroup	Countries
<b>Social partners understand situation and are supportive and engaged</b>	Stable and effective involvement	Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Netherlands, Sweden
	Partially satisfactory involvement	Bulgaria, Cyprus, Estonia, Ireland, Luxembourg*, Malta*, Portugal*, Spain
	Mixed assessment of involvement due, at least in part, to time constraints or inadequate setting	Czechia, France*, Germany, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania
	Differing perceptions between social partners: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ unions more critical</li> <li>○ employers more critical</li> </ul>	Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Luxembourg Spain
<b>Social partners dissatisfied and critical</b>	Ineffective or poor quality of the involvement practices due to different factors	Croatia, Greece, Hungary, Poland*, Romania, Slovakia*, Slovenia

**Notes:** A country can be in more than one cell. \*Social partners acknowledged an improvement in the quality of involvement over time during the period covered.

**Source:** See Table 1

Given the specific nature of some of the 105 policy measures selected (see Chapter 2 for further detail), social partners were not necessarily expected to be involved in all of them. That is the case with some measures addressing financial support to business in which trade unions were not involved, or, vice versa, measures in the field of public employment in which employer organisations were not consulted. Moreover, trade unions in **Estonia** reported that they were not able to participate in the making of some policy measures for lack of resources and expertise.

Based on the information that the Network of Eurofound Correspondents collected, features influencing the involvement of social partners in the design of policies during the first months of the COVID-19 outbreak can be grouped as shown in Table 2 (more detailed explanations follow).

Overall, we can categorise the Member States by their quality of involvement into the two large groups shown in Table 2 ('Social partners understand situation and are supportive and engaged' and 'Social partners dissatisfied and critical'), noting that within each group there are subgroups and differences. The grouping is justified by the difficult circumstances for the decision-making process, which have tended to give rise to similar shortcomings in organising meaningful and above all timely involvement. It is not unusual for some of the social partners in both clusters to say they have not been formally involved or have been merely informed. However, the differentiating factor between the two groups lies rather in social partners' different levels of satisfaction – or dissatisfaction – and understanding between them, which are closely linked to previous experience, such as the existence of stable and effective social dialogue frameworks and practices.

Both combined criteria – replies from social partners and existing knowledge of the situation – have been used to organise the responses obtained in each country.

### Social partners understand situation and are supportive and engaged

In this group of countries (see Table 2), social partners acknowledge the exceptional circumstances for policymaking during the COVID-19 outbreak. Social partners in this group report either that they were involved to a varying degree during the first months of the pandemic outbreak or that the involvement was not fully meaningful. In all cases, the level of satisfaction with the quality of consultation notably varies between countries and between social partners within the same country. The social dialogue experiences in this large group of countries are far from homogeneous.

A key defining feature of this group is that, even in those countries where social partners may have not been properly involved, they show some understanding of government approaches under the exceptional circumstances. That said, these social partners would certainly like greater commitment from the government to involve them in the policymaking process. Nevertheless, these social partners show an overall understanding of the situation and not a profound dissatisfaction. Thus, social partners in this group of countries believe that governments needed to enact urgent decisions and adopt legislative measures, which meant a reduction in standards for social dialogue practices.

Significantly, in all these countries there are stable frameworks of social dialogue in place that guarantee the participation of social partners in the formulation of policies in the economic and social fields.

### Stable and effective involvement

In this subgroup, the significant involvement of the peak-level social partners in the design of all policies relating (even indirectly) to the labour market in the Nordic countries has not substantially changed as a result of the pandemic. Along with those in Belgium, and in the Netherlands, where the social dialogue is more institutionalised through bipartite and tripartite consultative bodies,<sup>7</sup> the social partners have had regular consultations with the governments regarding the policy measures to be adopted in the social and labour fields. In **Finland**, the social partners have had continuous dialogue with each other and with national authorities through a high-level working group, although the COVID-19 crisis significantly slowed down the work in the first months. In **Denmark**, the usual good dialogue between the government and the social partners has even intensified, leading to several tripartite agreements. The same feeling has also been reported in **Sweden**, although not unanimously. The social partners in the **Netherlands** have been closely involved – the Dutch government refers to weekly meetings and consultations – in drawing up the emergency measures developed and adopted in the context of the health crisis. Similarly, the government in **Belgium** consulted with the social partners on a regular and informal basis about those measures in the field of work and social security.

### Partially satisfactory involvement

A positive assessment of involvement is flagged by the social partners in **Estonia**, where tripartite meetings and discussions with the government took place, although they find that their opinions and suggestions were not sufficiently taken into account in the decision-making. As in other social dialogue systems, the tripartite framework in place has been relatively effective in periods of stable calm, but it has not been optimal in emergency situations or when swift actions are needed. Nevertheless, trade unions feel that trust between the parties has grown.

The COVID-19 pandemic presented an opportunity for enhanced social dialogue in **Ireland**, as all government, employer and union voices combined to form a cohesive response to the emergency. All social partners have expressed support for what an enhanced social dialogue can achieve. The COVID-19 emergency has certainly brought the social partners closer together and has led to a more structured partnership system going forward in response to the health crisis.

Social partners in Luxembourg, Malta and Portugal have reported positive developments after an initial lack of involvement. For example, even though the **Maltese** government implemented the first policy measures without adequate consultation with social partners, the consultation process improved subsequently. Similarly, whereas in the initial phase of the state of emergency the involvement of social partners in **Portugal** was limited to receiving information rather than being involved in a meaningful exchange, at a later stage policy measures benefited to a certain extent from the comments and views that social partners expressed in the regular consultation rounds. In that country, 13 tripartite online meetings of the Standing Committee for Social Concertation were held from 9 March to 14 July 2020, although the social partners highlight the lack of time for discussion and preparation. In **Luxembourg**, the assessment, particularly by the trade unions, improved with the first meeting of the Tripartite Coordination Committee (Comité de coordination tripartite) organised in July 2020, which had not happened for 10 years.

### Mixed assessment of involvement

Social partners in some countries gave a more mixed assessment of the functioning of social dialogue in this period and their involvement in policymaking. Social partners in these countries note that they were consulted either not at all or only at very short notice and with limited time for discussion for many policy measures. Governments point out the need for immediate and urgent responses to the effects of the pandemic and the constraining deadlines as the main reason for not properly involving social partners or for doing it at a later stage. Overall, social partners in these countries acknowledge these constraints and were not overly critical of the lack of social partner involvement in the policymaking process.

For example, according to the social partners, the experience has been somewhat ambivalent in **Italy**: except for some bipartite agreements between the social partners (see 'Bipartite joint initiatives' section), the government adopted almost all measures unilaterally, and only then opened bilateral consultations with the social partners to consider possible adjustments before implementation. The procedure did not allow proper involvement and could not be deemed a full-fledged social consultation. However, according to the trade unions, their involvement can be deemed satisfactory overall.

<sup>7</sup> The tripartite Social and Economic Council (Sociaal-Economische Raad, SER) and the bipartite Labour Foundation (Stichting van de Arbeid, STAR).

In **France**, the COVID-19 outbreak negatively impacted social dialogue and the government took most of the measures to deal with the pandemic without prior consultation with the social partners, at least in a formal way. Informal consultations with very short deadlines were held with some organisations and, later on, the social partners contributed a great deal to adapting the policies to the reality on the ground, so the public authorities listened to them when the measures were implemented. As a collateral effect, it has been reported that the deployment of these policy measures has increased and has led to better social dialogue at company level and in some sectors.

Similarly, social partners in **Germany** reported that serious time constraints negatively affected consultations. Although there is no institutionalised process of involvement in social and labour policymaking in Germany,<sup>8</sup> ministries kept in close touch with the social partners and maintained close working contacts. It has been noted that, because of the positive role social partners had played during the previous fiscal and economic crisis, the coalition government aimed to involve the social partners again in the handling of the COVID-19 crisis. Despite this background, at the beginning of the crisis the government took urgent decisions and adopted legislation giving the social partners an extremely short time to provide feedback. In **Czechia**, it has been reported that the need to respond quickly to the emergency situation did not allow proper involvement of the social partners in some cases, partly because they did not have the capacity to react to each suggestion in such a short period.

Social partners in Lithuania and Latvia have reported a disappointing quality in their involvement due to inappropriate settings or forms. Most consultations in **Lithuania** were made outside the tripartite body, as social partners differed on many issues. Even though both employers and trade unions in **Latvia** took part in meetings and were allowed to provide comments and proposals, social partners report that the effective participation in the decision-making process was small, since it was very hard to be heard among large groups of stakeholders. Moreover, policy measures adopted were not discussed separately with the social partners in the National Tripartite Cooperation Council or in another format.

### Differing perceptions between social partners

Social partners in several countries have given differing or even opposite opinions regarding the quality of their involvement in the measures taken during the first months of the COVID-19 crisis, although in general they

had opportunities to express their views in the process of policymaking through tripartite bodies (less often due to time constraints and urgency) and/or direct consultations with the government.

In **Luxembourg**, while the employer organisations say that the social dialogue has worked well, the trade unions report that the contacts during the first months of the health crisis were often very informal and unstructured. Trade unions have asked for tripartite meetings instead of separate ones with each stakeholder, until the government resumed the meetings of the Tripartite Coordination Committee.

Similarly, employer organisations in **Belgium** claim to have been involved in all major policy measures adopted, while trade unions have mixed views and complain that they were not properly involved in the return to work and recovery policy measures, although they feel satisfied with their participation in those measures directly related to temporary unemployment and health and safety in the workplace. Nevertheless, the National Labour Council and the Group of 10 intensified their online meetings and ensured rapid and effective results with the social partners proposing numerous adaptations to facilitate the implementation of urgent social measures during the COVID-19 emergency. Employer organisations in **Bulgaria** acknowledge the good work of the institutionalised social dialogue through the National Council for Tripartite Cooperation since the beginning of the COVID-19 emergency. Nevertheless, the assessments by trade unions show differing views: the Confederation of Independent Trade Unions of Bulgaria (CITUB) considers the involvement effective and useful for the successive packages of measures adopted and the Confederation of Labour Podkrepa (Podkrepa CL) assesses the outcome of the exchange with the government as unsatisfactory because of the unwillingness to accept Podkrepa CL's proposals for minimising the socioeconomic consequences of COVID-19.

Relatively different views between the social partners have also been collected in **Spain**, where the involvement of the social partners in policymaking has been fairly constant during the COVID-19 emergency. However, employer organisations and trade unions state that the involvement has been limited, as in most cases it has consisted in consultation and information rather than negotiation. Although the government adopted some policy measures without consulting on them, trade unions show an overall level of satisfaction with their engagement, while the Spanish Confederation of Employers' Organizations (CEOE) is much more critical.

<sup>8</sup> However, as far as cohesion policymaking is concerned, the social partners are closely involved in programme preparation and implementation at regional and federal levels of governance.

## Social partners dissatisfied and critical

In this group of countries, social partners report their dissatisfaction with the quality of their involvement and the role they played in policymaking during the first months of the pandemic. Although they also acknowledge the difficult times for consultation, the key feature in this group of countries is that a high degree of dissatisfaction of the social partners regarding their poor involvement in the discussion of the policy measures is combined with weak frameworks and/or deficient functioning of the social dialogue. Before the health crisis, social dialogue practices in these countries had already been assessed as not effective.

In **Greece**, the social dialogue during the COVID-19 crisis continued to be weak, as to some extent it had been before the pandemic. A first promising tripartite meeting of all national social partners and other bodies with the Ministry of Labour took place at the beginning of the pandemic (10 March). Thereafter, no tripartite meeting was held or convened, and the government adopted and implemented the policy measures unilaterally. The employer organisation the Hellenic Federation of Enterprises (SEV) points out that, during the first meeting, the social partners agreed with the priorities set. Nevertheless, social dialogue was limited to frequent communication and consultation between the Ministry of Labour and separate social partners aimed at implementing secondary legislation, and to actions that the social partners had developed without the participation of the government. A second online tripartite meeting of the social partners with the Prime Minister took place on 12 May, focusing on issues of health and safety at work.

Even more negative is the assessment in **Croatia**, where the social partners complain of having not been promptly and systematically involved in the overall policymaking. As in other countries, the government recognises these practices due to the nature of the various measures proposed as well as the time pressure. The social partners do not share that view and they believe that there was room for better quality in the involvement. However, both social partners are pleased that the Economic and Social Council has been reactivated through a tripartite agreement signed on 11 March 2020. This body represents the highest (institutional) form of tripartite social dialogue at the national level, and it provides an opportunity for social partners to have an important and active role in creating and implementing public policies.

In **Romania**, according to the social partners, they were not generally involved in proper and meaningful consultations with the government. Some of the policy measures proposed and adopted were brought to social partners' attention in a purely formal manner, with hardly any time for discussion. The Economic and Social Council, which has also worked with very tight

deadlines, submitted some of the projects for analysis after the event (already approved). The low quality of social dialogue in this country was repeatedly reported before the pandemic outbreak. Poor forms of consultation are recurrent, and mostly relate to communicating the measure or rules adopted rather than genuine consultation. For example, the time given to submit views on the 'state of alert' package was three hours.

By contrast, the government states that all measures in the area of labour were drafted after consultation with the social partners, and that their proposals were discussed both within the social dialogue committees of the relevant ministries and at the level of the Tripartite National Council.

According to the Employer's Confederation Concordia, one positive aspect is the growing dialogue it has had with some trade unions. Although this did not result in any agreement, the exercise was helpful in the process of rebuilding trust among the social partners.

Similarly, the already reported weakness of the social dialogue in **Hungary** (Eurofound, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019a, 2020a) has not changed much amid the circumstances of the COVID-19 crisis. The social partners agreed in a joint letter to call regular meetings of the Permanent Consultation Forum of the Private Sector and the Government (VKF) to voice their experience at the time of managing the impact of the crisis. The VKF is the best-functioning tripartite interest reconciliation forum that exists in the country, although it does not fully represent the private sector. On 6 April, the VKF decided to organise regular weekly online meetings to discuss the action plan for economic protection and decide on its details. Even though the forum suggested the possibility that social partners would be meaningfully involved in the design of the policy measures, this collaborative work soon turned into the government mostly informing the social partners in this forum about the new measures and the progress of crisis management, without meaningful consultation, like the functioning of the interest reconciliation forum in previous years.

The government announced a set of measures in the form of government decrees without previous consultations with the social partners. However, the early phase of the consecutive waves of announcements and refinements of the measures incorporated some of the comments that the social partners raised at the VKF, where the government's representatives are present. These include refinement of policy measures on short-time working and tax relief on labour for certain hard-hit target sectors. Other requests of the social partners regarding various urgent measures, raised at the VKF meetings and through other channels, were not taken into consideration.



Even more critical is the opinion of trade unions, which stress the negative impact of the COVID-19 crisis on social dialogue at country level, since most of the forums have had to stop functioning. Furthermore, they particularly rejected the early policy measure allowing new working arrangements due to the pandemic and enabling the employers to deviate from the Labour Code or from any part of an existing collective agreement to make flexible changes in work conditions to avoid layoffs as discussed in the COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch case study HU-2020-12/659 'Allowing new working arrangement due to pandemic'. According to the social partners, the extraordinary measures adopted had no influence on the pattern of social dialogue; on the contrary, they confirmed the deteriorating tendency.

In the social partners' opinion, the consultation process during the first months of the health crisis in **Poland** was far from meaningful. The government did not give the social partners opportunities to have a real impact on the legislative process, which it imposed in an extremely rapid manner. Both social partners emphasise that there was extremely little time for the consultation. An important factor in the overall sentiment among the social partners was the violation of their autonomy at the very beginning of the crisis by the introduction of legal measures that allowed the Prime Minister to dismiss representatives of trade unions and employer organisations sitting on the Social Dialogue Council (RDS). However, according to the employer organisation Lewiatan, the quality of the involvement of the social partners in policymaking seems to have improved during the first months of the pandemic and to have led to a better atmosphere of consensus since the adoption of the Anti-Crisis Shield Acts, with an important list of contributions that the government accepted.

## Bipartite joint initiatives

During the first months of the outbreak, social partners in a few Member States promoted bipartite joint initiatives to mitigate the effects of the pandemic. Due to the urgent and unprecedented scale of the impact, governments took the lead on policy initiatives. Nevertheless, some social partners also agreed joint actions to support businesses and employment in response to the social and economic emergency.

In accordance with the bipartite tradition in industrial relations, the social partners in **Belgium** have been actively involved during the pandemic. The social partners negotiated a national agreement that facilitates the (administrative) adoption of the temporary unemployment protection scheme (comparable to a short-time work scheme) at company level. Demands for temporary unemployment protection have to be declared to the federal agency

responsible for payment of unemployment benefits (Office National de l'Emploi – Rijksdienst voor Arbeidsvoorziening, ONEM/RVA). Shortly after, the government declared that all of them were related to *force majeure* and thus enlarged the scope of the measure.

In **Finland**, the peak-level social partners prepared a joint proposal, called the package deal, on 20 March 2020. It consists of 16 policy measures aimed at reducing job losses, improving the flexibility of labour legislation and improving social security measures to support employees who have been temporarily laid off or dismissed. According to representatives interviewed, the government adopted a majority of the policy measures proposed.

Substantial examples of autonomous social dialogue took place in **Italy**, where the social partners reached agreements in March (and in April on an updated version) on a 'Government and social partners protocol to ensure safe working conditions at the workplace' (IT-2020-11/457 – COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch) and the 'Agreement on the anticipation by banks of wage subsidies measures ex-COVID-19' (case IT-2020-14/646 – COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch). The government supported these agreements and subsequently each company implemented them in its own operational context (through second-level collective agreements).

The social partners in **Spain** signed a bipartite agreement on 11 March promoting 'Common proposals to face the COVID-19 crisis'. In **Latvia**, the social partners issued a joint statement 'on support for government action to limit the spread of COVID-19 and reduce the impact of the crisis on Latvian companies and workers'. In the statement both social partners provide support to their members and to the government's efforts.

Joint initiatives in occupational safety and health (OSH) aiming to provide guidelines to workers and employers for a safe return to work have been common (see section 'Involvement in the implementation of the policy measures'). In **Belgium**, the social partners (with support from the state administration and the office of the Minister of Work) developed a specific guide to protection and prevention measures to get back to work after the first lockdown in April. It was followed by a series of sectoral guides, negotiated in the official joint committees. In **France**, the representative social partners in the road transport sector and other sectors produced a handbook of good practices to prevent the spread of the virus, which the ministries of transport and labour adopted.

These examples of bipartite initiatives should be added to other tripartite agreements reached to mitigate the effects of the pandemic, for example, in **Denmark**, with the 'Tripartite agreement on wage compensation in the private sector' (case DK-2020-11/633 – COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch), or in **Austria**, where the modification of

the existing short-time work scheme was based on a tripartite agreement. In **France**, trade unions participated in the tripartite discussions to reform the health sector (Segur de la santé) as the COVID-19 crisis unveiled some structural weaknesses. Agreements concluded in this framework allow €8.2 billion to upgrade the staff of healthcare institutions and nursing homes and to enhance the attractiveness of public hospitals. In **Spain**, both trade unions and employer organisations reached two relevant agreements with the government: one addressing the improvement of unemployment protection and other measures related to the COVID-19 crisis (the ‘Tripartite agreement to extend the special unemployment protection scheme associated to temporary collective redundancy or short-time work regulation’ (case ES-2020-20/880 – COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch), which has been the basis of legislative action on social measures protecting employment); and the other one the ‘Tripartite agreement for economic reactivation and employment’ (case ES-2020-27/934 – COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch), which is perceived as a positive start to the new recovery phase, with a stronger role for social dialogue than in previous crisis episodes.

## Involvement in implementation of policy measures

In most Member States, social partners report having participated indirectly in the implementation of the policy measures adopted in the context of the COVID-19 crisis. Through this soft involvement, the social partners

have enhanced the effectiveness of the measures – many of them adopted without formal consultation – and supported the implementation of the various schemes put in place to help companies and workers. The participation has consisted mostly in providing information, advice and support to their members.

Social partners and governments in **Cyprus**, **France** and **Ireland**, among other countries, have reported that this practical involvement implies addressing shortcomings of individual measures and providing valuable feedback to better align the content of the policies to meet the needs of the largest possible number of businesses and workers. For example, in **Ireland** the social partner unions identified anomalies in the eligibility requirement for the wage subsidy scheme, since women who were on maternity leave during this time were, at first, excluded. The social partners addressed this anomaly and amended the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (case IE-2020-13/777 – COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch).

Collective bargaining has been pivotal in some countries such as **Sweden**, since several of the policies related to short-time working or new rules on work have been implemented entirely or partly through collective agreements. In addition, the social partners in **France** were directly involved in the implementation of changes related to working time or leave, and had to negotiate collective agreements at company or branch level.

In **Latvia**, the allowances for idle time may be paid in enterprises in which there is an effective collective agreement (Box 4).

### Box 4: Negotiation and outcome of the allowances for idle time in Latvia

The employer organisation was only partly satisfied with the outcome of the negotiation of the allowances for idle time. It supported the idea of partial idle time allowances, which are paid at the normal idle time rate. When workers can be employed, the allowance is not necessary. In other words, the employer organisation supported the general concept of short-time working, when, for instance, a worker is employed for six hours and receives idle time benefit for two hours when the employee does not have work. The Ministry of Finance rejected the employers’ proposal, arguing that a partial allowance might cause cheating regarding idle time.

Trade unions supported partial idle time and gained support from the government for applying this approach in enterprises that have concluded effective collective agreements that include partial idle time benefits, or in ‘deeper cooperation enterprises’. That means enterprises that have not contravened tax discipline and are in good standing with the State Revenue Service. For instance, a deeper cooperation enterprise or one with an effective collective agreement may have to employ its workers in two shifts, instead of three shifts as before the spread of COVID-19. In this case, two shifts are normally paid, and one shift is paid from the idle time benefits. The employer is allowed to employ staff depending on the current circumstances without changing the number of employees or amending employment contracts. The Free Trade Union Confederation of Latvia (LBAS) representative stressed that idle time benefits are especially appropriate in the unpredictable fluctuating economic situation.

Allowances for idle time for self-employed people were attained thanks to the efforts of the Minister for Culture, who supported artists and other cultural workers (cultural institutes were closed during the pandemic period and cultural workers left without any income).

Source: COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch – ‘Idle-time allowance for employees’ case LV-2020-11/301

On the other hand, the institutional participation of social partners, for example, in unemployment insurance funds (**Estonia** and **Sweden**) allows for the adjustment of regulations related to income insurance.

Social partners in other countries have played a central role in implementation. In **Austria**, the employer organisation the Federal Economic Chamber (WKO) makes and processes the applications to the hardship fund, and also organises paying out the subsidies ('Hardship case fund: Safety net for self-employed' case AT-2020-13/212 – COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch). Moreover, the Austrian Trade Union Federation (ÖGB) is involved in the implementation of the COVID-19 short-time work scheme, since the social partner agreement must be signed by a union representative, while the Chamber of Labour (AK) is involved in the implementation of funding through the COVID-19 family hardship fund, which the Federal Ministry of Labour, Family and Youth processes. Depending on the nature and scope of the measure, social partners were involved in the implementation of measures in some sectors. For example, the implementation of specific measures in the local administration sector was done in collaboration with the Association of Dutch Municipalities in the Netherlands.

As has been noted, the social partners in **Italy** are actively involved in the implementation of the 'Government and social partners protocol to ensure safe working conditions at the workplace' through the establishment of sectoral or regional committees to monitor its implementation, since it requires consultations at workplace level. For companies that cannot establish a workplace committee, the relevant committee will be created at regional level with the participation of the workers' regional health and safety representatives and the social partners.

Following the COVID-19 outbreak, OSH has probably been the area where collaboration between governments and social partners has been most intense and fruitful. The preparation of OSH guides has shown deep involvement of social partners, as in **Denmark** (Vejviser til COVID-19 Job-VEU modellen), **France** (Protocole national de déconfinement pour les entreprises pour assurer la sécurité et la santé des salariés) and **Ireland** (Return to work safely protocol) among others.

## Social dialogue beyond the COVID-19 crisis

National social dialogue has taken a hard hit by the COVID-19 pandemic. The crisis has changed both agendas and procedures, and reduced the scope and intensity of national social dialogue, particularly in the areas of labour market and social policy. Nevertheless, social dialogue continued in many countries throughout 2020, before and during the COVID-19 crisis.

An example is the unemployment insurance system reform in **Estonia**. Consultations started in January 2020 and the government approved it in May. In April 2020, **Germany** adopted the law on promotion of further and continuing training (Arbeit-von-morgen-Gesetz), which addresses the training needs of workers facing the upcoming transformation processes (digitalisation and climate change policies); as the social partners are represented on the boards of the vocational training system (including the Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training), they are always regularly consulted on the relevant draft legislation.

Other examples can be found in **Romania**, where the tripartite dialogue continued to amend the Law on Social Dialogue, and in **Finland**, which reformed parental allowances. An achievement in social dialogue was reported in **Spain** before the pandemic outbreak, with the tripartite agreement on the increase in the minimum wage for 2020, after the government had made unilateral decisions in 2019. **Belgium**, **Lithuania** and the **Netherlands** also offer examples of initiatives showing that the COVID-19 pandemic has not ended social dialogue. However, it is true that planned reforms were mostly postponed (for example, the setting of the minimum wage in **Greece**) or not conducted at all.





## 2 Involvement by categories of measures

Members of the Network of Eurofound Correspondents, who were largely responsible for populating the COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch database, were asked to select the measures with the greatest social and economic impacts from those already reported up to July 2020. The measures selected were double-checked with the social partners in each Member State to assess their level of satisfaction both with their involvement in the design and with the outcome, i.e. with the objectives and content of the final policy measure adopted.

As a result, a total of 105 policy measures were selected. Following the categories assigned in the database, as shown in Table 3, the largest share of the initiatives and policy measures selected were aimed at retaining employment (29) and keeping businesses afloat (27), as well as ensuring income protection beyond short-time work (30). Other categories were less represented, although all of them could be considered as closely connected, since they can pursue a variety of goals and have multiple target groups. For instance, measures designed to support businesses to stay afloat also contribute to safeguarding employment.

The categories and initiatives selected follow a logic that corresponds to the highest peak of the pandemic outbreak, the very first months of the health crisis. This explains their predominantly mitigating – and often short-term – nature, closely related to the shutdown of economic activity and businesses. The selection of measures does not mean that other responses are not equally important, for example, those that are more specialised (financial aid, loans at low interest rates

and state-backed bank guarantees) or adopted at sector level.

In order to deal with a significant volume of responses, we examine below the three categories with the highest numbers of measures. By contrast, due to the low numbers of initiatives in the four remaining categories (ensuring business continuity and support for essential services; promoting the economic, labour market and social recovery; supporting businesses to get back to normal; and measures to prevent social hardship), the assessments of these measures will not be discussed separately.

In each category, the analysis has been organised stressing the measures on which both employer organisations and trade unions agree that they are satisfied, partly satisfied or dissatisfied with their level of involvement. Opposite views between social partners are also highlighted when it happens, as are partial divergences, which are sometimes difficult to assess given the specific features conditioning the process of involvement at the time of the pandemic outbreak.

The same breakdown applies to organising the responses regarding the level of satisfaction with the content of the policy measure – usually legislation – irrespective of the degree of involvement in the design of the measure. Some social partners, particularly trade unions, occasionally have not assessed adopted measures that they were not consulted on. In some cases, social partners at peak level were not involved in the design of one specific measure, although social partners at sector level were.

**Table 3: Number of selected measures by category**

Category	Number of policy measures
Income protection beyond short-time work	30
Employment protection and retention	29
Supporting businesses to stay afloat	27
Ensuring business continuity and support for essential services	6
Promoting the economic, labour market and social recovery	5
Supporting businesses to get back to normal	4
Measures to prevent social hardship	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>105</b>

Source: Adapted from Eurofound's COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch database

It must be noted that more than one employer organisation or trade union may have provided their views regarding one measure, and these may be different. In those cases, results have been adjusted to proceed with the analysis. Finally, not all Member States are represented in each category, since the measures in question do not apply to every country.

The assessment provided below must be taken with caution and only as an illustrative example of the complex dynamics established during the first period of the COVID-19 outbreak. While one social partner or both may be satisfied with their involvement in the design of some policy measures in one specific category, they may be unsatisfied with their involvement in policies in other categories or even in the same category. Details matter when it comes to organising consultation procedures in a challenging and rapidly changing context on very sensitive topics.

The same applies to their assessment of the content of the policy measure: one social partner may be very unsatisfied with the quality of the involvement because the government acted unilaterally, but may mostly agree with the content of measures aimed at stabilising the economy and mitigating the negative effects of the pandemic in businesses and employment. Views concerning the content of the policy measure can be very nuanced, and often the social partners fully agree with the aims of the policy, although they show only partial satisfaction because they deem that the scope is too narrow, it is insufficient or the duration is too short.

## Income protection beyond short-time work

The severity of the pandemic obliged governments to set up or extend mechanisms to ensure income protection to those groups particularly hit by the crisis, supplementing other measures that are for labour or employment protection (Table 4). These initiatives frequently cover the extension of paid sick leave and family leave schemes – to cover both the requirements around self-isolation/quarantine and the challenges linked to the closure of schools and crèches – as well as other types of income support to (usually unemployed) workers not covered by any kind of protection scheme. We do not count in this category the measures adopted to prevent financial hardship (see Table 3), although they could be easily assimilated to this group.

Most of the social partners in the countries that have adopted measures included in this category express satisfaction (Cyprus, Finland, Ireland, Malta, the Netherlands and Sweden) or partial satisfaction (Bulgaria, Czechia, Germany, Greece, Lithuania, Portugal and Romania) with their involvement in the policymaking process. That does not prevent the existence of complaints and deficiencies, as mentioned in the previous chapter.

The assessments by the social partners show matching levels of satisfaction or partial satisfaction in most Member States with regard to participation in designing the measures in this category. Again, social partners in **Croatia** and **Slovenia** agree in their negative assessment regarding the quality of the involvement.

As in other categories, employer organisations and trade unions disagree in their assessment in **Austria**. In Austria, the WKO claims to have been consulted in the

**Table 4: Income protection beyond short-time work – Views of social partners**

Level of satisfaction	Assessment of involvement in the process of policymaking	Assessment of the outcome
<b>Shared views</b>		
<b>Satisfied</b>	Cyprus, Finland, Ireland, Malta, Netherlands, Sweden	Cyprus, Estonia, Finland, Ireland, Malta, Netherlands, Sweden
<b>Partly satisfied</b>	Bulgaria, Czechia, Germany, Greece, Lithuania, Portugal, Romania	Bulgaria, Czechia, Greece, Lithuania, Portugal, Romania
<b>Dissatisfied</b>	Croatia, Slovenia	
<b>Diverging views</b>		
<b>Strong divergence</b>	Austria	Austria, Ireland
<b>Partial divergence:</b>		
Employer organisations more satisfied		Croatia, Germany
Trade unions more satisfied	Romania, Spain	Malta, Slovenia, Spain

**Notes:** Results have been distinguished when more than one measure may have been adopted in one country. Results have been adjusted in cases of more than one social partner providing views on the same measure. Not all social partners provided views in both assessments.

**Source:** See Table 1

measure belonging to this category (special care time), while both the AK and the ÖGB show a low level of satisfaction with this measure – even though they should have been involved somehow – because both organisations would have preferred a legal right to special care time, the possibility of an extension and the full cost reimbursed.

In this category, trade unions in Romania and Spain show more satisfaction with the level of participation in policymaking. In **Spain**, trade unions perceive that the government has been in constant contact with social partners, and even that they have been informed or consulted in most cases, while acknowledging that many of the policy responses have not been negotiated formally and the government should have tried to involve the social partners more. Moreover, trade unions perceive that most of the policies enacted were in line with trade union proposals and approaches, as laid down in the document containing joint policy proposals to face the economic and labour emergency created by the COVID-19 crisis. That is not the perception of the employer organisation, which stresses that many pieces of legislation (royal decree-laws) have not been negotiated with the social partners. According to the employer organisation, the lack of real and effective social dialogue, in a process of continuous urgency, has been the main characteristic of the socio-labour measures adopted during this period of crisis. It recognises a true consultation only in relation to the minimum living income.

Similarly, employer organisations in **Romania** stress that there were no consultations on support measures on issues that directly affected employers during the pandemic or that imposed restrictions or obligations on employers. Some of the measures adopted were brought to their attention in a purely formal manner,

with too little time to be able to provide meaningful comments or have a real consultation. Trade unions also complain about the lack of involvement, although three sessions of the Tripartite National Council for Social Dialogue took place during the period. Both employers and unions stress that there were no consultations, negotiations and exchange of points of views in these meetings and that they just listened to how government representatives presented the measures they were taking. Nevertheless, both social partners say that they were partly involved in the adoption of measures such as the indemnity for technical unemployment and the extended right to medical leave and allowances for quarantine leave.

## Employment protection and retention

The use of short-time work arrangements as a way of preserving the employment relationship has been dramatically expanded as a core policy response to the negative effects of the pandemic. It follows and accentuates the trend noted during the last financial and economic recession, while extending income protection to those groups previously unable to access such support (such as atypical workers and the self-employed). In addition, for workers who lost their jobs in the short term, access to such benefits was eased in a number of countries, particularly for those with insufficient contribution records (Eurofound, 2020b).

The wide range of measures covered in this category have been adopted with a considerable degree of satisfaction (Austria, Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Sweden) or partial satisfaction (Bulgaria, France, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania and Portugal) on the part of the social partners regarding their involvement (Table 5).

**Table 5: Employment protection and retention – Views of social partners**

Level of satisfaction	Assessment of involvement in the process of policymaking	Assessment of the outcome
<b>Shared views</b>		
<b>Satisfied</b>	Austria, Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Ireland, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Sweden	Austria, Belgium, Cyprus*, Denmark, Estonia, France, Ireland, Sweden
<b>Partly satisfied</b>	Bulgaria, France, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Portugal	Bulgaria, Cyprus*, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Netherlands, Portugal
<b>Dissatisfied</b>	Croatia, Hungary, Poland	
<b>Diverging views</b>		
<b>Strong divergence</b>	Austria	Austria, Ireland
<b>Partial divergence:</b>		
Employer organisations more satisfied	Czechia, Luxembourg, Slovakia, Slovenia	Czechia, Germany, Hungary, Slovakia, Slovenia
Trade unions more satisfied	Belgium, Italy, Romania, Spain	France, Italy, Luxembourg, Romania, Spain

**Notes:** Results have been distinguished when more than one measure may have been adopted in one country. Results have been adjusted in cases of more than one social partner providing views on the same measure. Not all social partners provided views in both assessments. \*Social partners provided a range of views.

**Source:** See Table 1

Unsurprisingly, lessons learnt from the last financial and economic crisis showed the way, and short-time work schemes have been extensively used to protect jobs and ensure business continuity. New categories of (atypical) employment have been added to these schemes, which reflects employment status.

Social partners in some countries were only partly satisfied with their involvement mainly because they did not actively participate in the design of the first measures adopted. That is the case in **France**, where the social partners were not involved, although once the government adopted the measures their views were taken into account, mainly on an informal basis, to improve the effectiveness of the implementation through various regulations (decrees adopted to implement an ordinance, for instance) or to adapt the measures to unexpected difficulties. Furthermore, social partners were aware of the exceptional and challenging circumstances limiting the normal operation of the institutionalised social dialogue. They largely approved of effective measures such as the extension of short-time work and the partial activity emergency measures, even though they were not involved in the policymaking. Nevertheless, social partners are involved in the new scheme related to the latter – ‘reduced activity for job maintenance’ or ‘long-term partial activity’ – that started in July 2020 to maintain employment within companies in the long run.

Interestingly, the opinions of the representatives of the two trade union confederations in **Bulgaria** differ considerably, as do those of the two employer organisations. According to the trade union confederation CITUB, it has been actively involved in developing and discussing measures in this category – and also in the category of income protection, particularly income support for workers (the Law on Measures and Actions during the State of Emergency, or 60/40 scheme) – and against this background they are satisfied with their involvement. By contrast, according to the employer organisation Podkrepa CL, however, the Council of Ministers adopted without consultation the interest-free credit guarantee programme (up to BGN 4,500 (€2,302 as at 6 January 2021) for workers on unpaid leave and self-employed people), while parliament adopted the 60/40 scheme and did not consult the trade unions either. The Council of Ministers consulted with the social partners on its subsequent decree, but it only enforces the measures laid down in the above-mentioned law. On the employers’ side, both the Bulgarian Industrial Association (BIA) and the Bulgarian Industrial Capital Association (BICA) support the interest-free credit guarantee programme. However, while the BIA also supports the 60/40 scheme, the BICA is strongly opposed to it.

The government recognises that the above-mentioned measures are part of the first response to the crisis, the ‘emergency package’, and the involvement of the social partners was not adequate, although it states that in general the social partners were consulted during preparation and had the opportunity to comment on the measures.

Another country where social partners are only relatively satisfied is **Portugal**. Even though there was significant activity through frequent online tripartite meetings of the Standing Committee for Social Concertation (CPCS), according to the social partners they did not have the conditions for meaningful participation in the design and implementation of the economic and social measures. In particular, social partners highlight the lack of time for discussion and preparation, taking into account the significant workload, the urgency and the wide range of measures. While both employer organisations – the Confederation of Portuguese Business (CIP) and the Portuguese Commerce and Services Confederation (CCP) – agree with their assessment, as does the General Union of Workers (UGT), whereas the General Confederation of the Portuguese Workers (CGTP) considers that the involvement has been unsatisfactory.

Similar to the social partners’ criticism of the lack of involvement in **Croatia** and **Hungary** that has already been mentioned, both employer organisations and trade unions in **Poland** assess as unsatisfactory and negative their involvement in national policymaking during the first months of the pandemic. According to the social partners, the consultation process was profoundly unsatisfactory in this very first period and had a purely formal character. Employers complain about the lack of feedback on their proposals, and trade unions refer to the low level of trust due to unacceptable proposals for the labour movement that the government prepared during the draft of the ‘Anti-Crisis Shield No. 3’. The government points out the extraordinary circumstances stemming from the spread of COVID-19, and the urgent measures to be adopted in a short period to counteract the negative impact on the economy, claiming that the Ministry of Economic Development systematically analysed the proposals of social partners and held exchanges with the social partners by email. The employer organisation Lewiatan specifies that its involvement in policymaking improved during the development of the pandemic, to the point that it was much more satisfied with its participation and the acceptance of its proposals in subsequent months. Furthermore, social partners display relatively more satisfaction with the content of the measures adopted than the negative assessment of their involvement in the design of those policies and legislation.

There are not strongly opposed views between the social partners on the policy measures adopted in this category, although some slightly diverging views can be found, with either the employers (Czechia, Luxembourg, Slovakia and Slovenia) or the unions (Belgium, Italy, Romania and Spain) being more satisfied with their involvement.

Trade unions are relatively more satisfied than employer organisations in **Italy**, where, according to the latter, the involvement has been essentially after the event: the social partners could present their comments and views separately, without any systematic involvement in the process. It was more a technical consultation rather than genuine involvement in discussing the strategies underpinning the policies to address the COVID-19 crisis and foster recovery and growth. More optimistically, according to the trade unions, the involvement of social partners in defining the above-mentioned measures has been satisfactory. Nevertheless, both social partners highlight their collaboration to agree on the anticipation by banks of wage subsidy measures in this category, with the support of the government. Furthermore, the main area of joint action has been the above-mentioned protocol for OSH in the workplace, which envisages the definition of protocols at company level with the involvement of trade unions, and with initiatives at sectoral level.

Like the assessment of involvement in policymaking, social partners in most of the Member States agree (Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, France, Ireland and Sweden) or partly agree (Bulgaria, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands and Portugal) with the final outcome of the employment and labour market policy measures adopted in this category.

Interestingly, as explained above, satisfaction with the participation process does not necessarily imply satisfaction with the final content of the measure adopted, as shown in Table 5. The reasons for this divergence are very different in nature and can be attributed to the complexity of national industrial relations and social dialogue, and features related to the labour market, as well as the unique context in which policymaking has occurred.

## Supporting businesses to stay afloat

This category consists of a wide range of measures to help businesses that are fully or partly shut down to stay afloat, through mechanisms covering direct subsidies and various types of financial aids or indirect support, for example, allowing the deferral of payments. These survival measures are usually of a temporary, short-term, mitigating nature, although many of them have been extended on an individual basis during 2020 following the developments in the fight against COVID-19.

It should be noted that the measures grouped in the categories ‘Supporting businesses to get back to normal’ and ‘Ensuring business continuity and support for essential services’ are closely connected to this group and could easily be added to this category.

The analysis examines first the agreement or disagreement between the social partners regarding the level of satisfaction with involvement in the process of policymaking, and then, if they have been consulted, their satisfaction with the outcome of the consultation, that is, the policy measure finally adopted (Table 6).

**Table 6: Supporting business to stay afloat – Views of social partners**

Level of satisfaction	Assessment of involvement in the process of policymaking	Assessment of the outcome
<b>Shared views</b>		
<b>Satisfied</b>	Estonia, Finland, Malta, Netherlands	Finland, Malta, Netherlands
<b>Partly satisfied</b>	Latvia, Lithuania, Portugal	Germany, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Romania (partly), Slovenia
<b>Dissatisfied</b>	Croatia, Hungary, Slovenia	
<b>Diverging views</b>		
<b>Strong divergence</b>	Luxembourg	Germany
<b>Partial divergence:</b>		
Employer organisations more satisfied	Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia	Germany, Latvia, Portugal, Slovakia
Trade unions more satisfied		Bulgaria, Estonia, Luxembourg

**Notes:** Results have been distinguished when more than one measure may have been adopted in one country; for example, German respondents discussed four measures in this category. Results have been adjusted in cases of more than one social partner providing views on the same measure. Not all social partners provided views in both assessments.

**Source:** See Table 1



In general, social partners show satisfaction or at least partial satisfaction regarding their involvement in the design of this category of measures. That does not prevent the existence of complaints and deficiencies, as discussed in Chapter 1.

The less satisfactory levels of involvement may be due to multiple causes and specific details of the policy measure at stake. In most cases, the issues are related to lack of time to discuss the measure or insufficient information received – in other words, with formal deficiencies in the consultation procedure. When it is the usual institutionalised channel of consultation, the operational difficulties that tripartite consultation bodies have had in carrying out their work during the pandemic are also frequently cited.

By contrast, it is worth noting that in three countries (Croatia, Hungary and Slovenia) the social partners point to the lack of involvement in this category of measures. In **Hungary**, previous reports have repeatedly mentioned and documented the lack of involvement of social partners in social dialogue practices, and it has not changed in the context of the COVID-19 crisis. The government announced on 18 March immediate measures in the form of a government decree to alleviate the effects of the pandemic on the national economy, and tax relief on labour for certain target sectors hard hit by COVID-19 was included in this category (Government Decree 47/2020). There was no formal involvement of the social partners in the formulation of the policy measures in the first month of the COVID-19 crisis. Employer organisations and trade unions issued open letters and policy declarations reacting to the measures that the government had announced, and made protests and suggestions regarding specific policy measures adopted. Nevertheless, informal meetings, organised a very short time before announcing the measures, took place at which representatives of the government informed the invited employer and employee organisations about the policy measures, without any meaningful involvement in the process. The social partners have not provided assessments of the content of the policy measures adopted, since they were not involved in their formulation. However, their level of satisfaction regarding the impacts of various measures has been elicited through various channels, despite the lack of involvement in their formulation.

In the case of the measure adopted in **Croatia** addressing more favourable tax treatment of state subsidies, both employer organisations and trade unions state that they were neither sufficiently nor promptly and systematically involved in the overall policymaking, particularly in view of the huge adverse impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the economy and society.

Two measures in this category were adopted in **Slovenia**: deferred payments of borrowers' obligations; and a state guarantee of, and exemption from companies' obligation to pay pension and disability contributions and crisis bonuses. Although the social partners on both sides acknowledge the difficult times for consultation, they point out that the new government did not establish a social dialogue within the ESS immediately after taking power, but a month and a half later, and that ministries did not use available means to facilitate social dialogue during the process of preparing COVID-19 measures; for example, no technology was used to simplify and strengthen communication between social partners. While the three employer organisations stress that they were only allowed to add comments on the drafts already written, the trade unions highlight that deadlines were extremely short (a day or two) and they also did not receive responses to their proposals.

The reasons for the divergences between the social partners in assessing their involvement in the formulation of the measures in this group are also varied. Opposite views between the social partners were reported in **Luxembourg**, where trade unions state that they were not involved in the formulation of the policy measure aimed at providing financial aid for self-employed people to compensate for temporary financial troubles – a major desire of the trade unions to avoid too sharp an increase in unemployment. By contrast, the employer organisation stated that it had been consulted, as had the professional chambers.

Apart from the completely opposite assessments, we also find more nuanced differences of opinion between employers and unions. In these cases, the particularities of the national social dialogue are relevant and influence the assessment. In any case, the people interviewed may express subtle differences. We have grouped these differences according to whether the employers have shown more satisfaction than the unions – this is the case in **Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia** and **Slovenia** – or the unions have shown a higher degree of satisfaction than the employers.

In this and other categories it is worth noting the negative view that the Confederation of German Employers' Associations (BDA) expressed concerning its involvement in the process of policymaking in **Germany**. Four measures were adopted in this category: a KfW development bank entrepreneur loan; a deferral of tax payments; a KfW instant loan for medium-sized enterprises; and the Economic Stabilisation Fund. In all cases, the BDA recognises that it had the opportunity to provide input and comment on the legislative proposals, although the time was very short (in some cases, less than one day and over the weekend).

Nevertheless, in general, the BDA supports the content of the measures taken, although it criticised the design and criteria of the KfW loans that initially had a loophole that meant some small and medium-sized enterprises could not benefit. The Federal Ministry of Economics and Energy closed this loophole.

Finally, the employer organisations in **Germany, Latvia, Portugal** and **Slovakia** are more satisfied than the trade unions with the content of the measures adopted, while the trade unions in **Bulgaria, Estonia** and **Luxembourg** show more satisfaction with the final outcome of the policy measures adopted in this group.

Some interesting differences can be observed when comparing the level of satisfaction of the social partners with their involvement in the formulation of the measures and their satisfaction with the final content adopted during the first months of the pandemic outbreak. Overall, both national employer organisations and trade unions support the content and scope of the policies adopted, although this support is nuanced, as discussed above, and does not preclude dissatisfaction with their participation in the policymaking process.





# 3 Social partners' involvement in 2020 NRPs

## European Semester reorientation to address the COVID-19 crisis

The European Semester was launched in 2011 with a view to improving the coordination of employment and economic policies in response to the financial crisis that began in 2007. Not surprisingly, the outbreak of the health, social and economic crisis resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic led the European institutions to reorient the European Semester with a view to mitigating its effects. Nevertheless, this reorientation has affected only some aspects of the European Semester cycle, particularly the CSRs, as a result of the specificities of its calendar.

In line with the European Semester's iterative calendar, the Commission presented the country reports in February 2020. Because at that time the COVID-19 pandemic was in a very early stage and had not produced visible effects on the economy and labour markets, the country reports followed the same structure as in previous years and did not contemplate the crisis scenario. The country reports assessed the economic situation of the Member States prior to the COVID-19 pandemic's impact, the progress of each Member State in addressing the issues identified in the 2019 CSRs, and the medium- and long-term reform agenda. Compared with previous years, the main novelties were related to the assessment of new longer-term priorities related to the green transition (Just Transition Fund) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

With regard to the NRPs, the European Commission asked Member States for timely submission on 30 April 2020. This meant that for several countries (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, the Netherlands and Sweden), NRPs were drawn up before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and were mainly based on the guidelines of October 2019 as well as on the analysis and conclusions of the country reports presented in February 2020. In some of these countries (such as Belgium and Denmark), measures approved in response to the COVID-19 pandemic were only presented in an annex. In other countries (Cyprus and Poland), the government decided to modify the already prepared NRP to reflect the measures undertaken in response to the pandemic and also include those measures that were about to be implemented. Moreover, in a small number of countries (France and Spain), where the negative effects of the COVID-19 crisis started earlier than in other European countries, the NRPs were mainly focused on describing

the policy measures approved to mitigate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, it is worth noting the case of Italy, where the submission of the NRP was postponed due to the emergency situation. At the time of writing this report, the Italian NRP had not yet been published.

The European Semester Spring Package (ESSP) was reoriented to address the need to mitigate the socioeconomic impact of the COVID-19 crisis and to facilitate economic recovery. To this end, the CSRs were structured around two objectives: in the short term, mitigating the COVID-19 pandemic's severe negative socioeconomic consequences; and, in the short to medium term, achieving sustainable and inclusive growth, which facilitates the green transition and the digital transformation.

Having clarified how some aspects of the European Semester cycle have been adapted to deal with the effects of the COVID-19 crisis, the following sections analyse the role of national social partners. The chapter starts by describing the features of the institutional settings for involving the social partners and the main changes introduced as a result of the COVID-19 crisis. Then it studies the quality of the social partners' involvement. The quality is assessed based on the social partners' and national authorities' own assessments. It is analysed, first, in terms of the processes for an effective social dialogue (institutional setting, time for consultation, exchange of views and transparency); and, second, in terms of the outputs, understood as the impact of social dialogue on the policy content of the NRP. The chapter concludes by analysing social partners' assessments of the policy content of both NRPs and CSRs.

## Features of the institutional settings

As previously reported (Eurofound, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019a, 2020a), the involvement of the social partners in developing the NRPs takes place through a variety of settings, institutions and procedures. In some countries, social partners are involved in the design and development of NRPs through well-established institutional settings. This is the case in **Luxembourg**, for instance, where social partners' involvement takes place within the Social and Economic Council (Conseil Économique et Social), and **Malta**, where consultation happens within the Council for Economic and Social Development. This also applies to the **Netherlands**,

where the Labour Foundation, a bipartite institution representing most of the important social partners, prepares an account of the involvement of the social partners in the policy developments made in response to the CSRs and NRPs each year.

In other countries (such as **Denmark**, **Germany**, **Spain** and **Sweden**) social partners are involved in the European Semester through specific procedures. Generally, governments organise specific bipartite or tripartite meetings or specific working groups to discuss the NRP, which tend to be scheduled at similar dates year after year, in line with the European Semester calendar. This also includes specific interdepartmental government groups that partly involve social partners (for instance in **Bulgaria** and **Poland**). In addition, further procedures for consultation such as parliamentary debates, informal exchanges or ad hoc meetings (Eurofound, 2018, 2019a) show that social partners' involvement in the NRP may take place in different forms and at different levels. Examples of ad hoc meetings in 2020 were reported in **Germany**, where the Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Energy organised a half-day consultation meeting with the social partners in addition to the usual specific procedure for consulting them.

Existing procedures to discuss the NRP have remained stable in the majority of countries despite the impact of the COVID-19 crisis. In several countries, the main change was the replacement of face-to-face meetings with virtual meetings (for example, in **Latvia**, **Malta** and **Spain**) and/or electronic communication such as email (**Czechia**). It is also worth noting the case of **France**, where the government organised additional meetings to inform social partners of the changes introduced in the NRP as a result of the COVID-19 crisis.

In three countries (Belgium, Portugal and Slovakia), specific procedures for involving the social partners were cancelled or altered due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. In **Belgium**, the traditional oral exchange between the Prime Minister's Office and the social partners, to exchange views on the NRP, could not take place and was not replaced with a virtual meeting. However, the Central Economic Council and the National Labour Council were at least informed of the NRP and provided an assessment, which was incorporated in the NRP 2020. In **Portugal**, the standard procedure for consultation was suspended and the NRP was sent to the Economic and Social Council without opportunities for feedback or exchange of views. In **Slovakia**, the NRP 2020 was prepared outside the usual procedures of national-level social dialogue: cross-sector commenting and tripartite consultations at the Economic and Social Council. Instead, the relevant

ministers and deputy ministers prepared it and the government approved it. It is also worth noting the case of **Latvia**, which did not hold the traditional separate discussions with social partners.

Changes in these procedures also occurred because of electoral processes and changes of government. In **Ireland**, as part of the preparation of the NRP, the Oireachtas (Irish parliament) is consulted through the Joint Oireachtas Committee on European Affairs. This committee is traditionally invited to discuss the European Semester and to share its views on the country report, but that did not happen because of the general election held on 8 February 2020 and the subsequent negotiations to form a new government. In **Slovenia**, social dialogue through the ESS could not start until 30 April, when the new government nominated its representatives to the ESS (Box 3). The ESS met for the first time in its new composition on 15 May 2020. Therefore, it could not discuss the NRP document. Under those circumstances, the government only sent drafts of individual chapters of the NRP proposal to the social partners.

Institutional changes unrelated to the COVID-19 crisis and electoral processes happened in **Cyprus**. This country introduced a new consultation process on a pilot basis with a view to improving the effectiveness of the processes. Social partners were asked to submit their views directly to the relevant ministries or services at the initial stage of the preparation of the NRP. Their input was then to be taken into account when the ministries were preparing their contributions to the NRP.

## Quality and effectiveness of processes

This section analyses the quality of the processes for involving social partners in NRPs, based on the subjective assessments of the social partners and national authorities (Box 5). The Network of Eurofound Correspondents gathered this information, after contacting the main stakeholders in all Member States.

### Social partner satisfaction levels

According to the responses to the questionnaire that the Network of Eurofound Correspondents received, there is an overall low degree of satisfaction among social partners with regard to the effectiveness of the existing institutional settings (Table 7). First, it is worth considering that in six European countries social partners were not involved at all in the development of the NRP because of the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic (Belgium, Portugal and Slovakia) or based on political decisions (Finland, Greece<sup>9</sup> and Italy). Leaving

<sup>9</sup> In Greece, the NRP 2020 says that, when the document was drafted, each ministry was able to consult, at its discretion, with social partners regarding aspects of the policies described related to the respective ministry's work. However, the Ministry of Labour did not contact the social partners to discuss any policy in the field of employment or social policies.

### Box 5: National authorities' understanding of NRPs

NRPs play a central role at EU level, alongside the stability and convergence programmes (SCPs), in enabling the collective monitoring and multilateral discussion of policy challenges and reforms. NRPs allow Member States to respond to the Commission's analysis of the main macroeconomic challenges and imbalances. The European Commission sees NRPs as a key tool to further increase the national ownership and implementation of reforms. Based on this, it has called for stronger involvement of the national social partners in drawing up the plans.

As detailed in the report, national authorities have developed different institutional settings to involve the social partners in preparing NRPs. However, social partners report that they are unsatisfied with the effectiveness of existing settings in many countries, in contrast with the national authorities' overall positive assessment.

Differences between national authorities' and social partners' perceptions could be because of the different understanding or expectations that each stakeholder has of the NRP. In several countries (Austria, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Italy and Lithuania), national authorities describe the NRP as a government activity that mainly describes past or already approved measures, and highlight that actual social dialogue takes place during the legislative process of social, employment and economic policies.

In some cases (Belgium, Finland, Germany and Lithuania), national social partners contrast the positive and fruitful social dialogue in relation to the COVID-19 measures with the more bureaucratic and informative process related to the NRP. For instance, employer organisations in **Belgium** note that, although the process's impact on the NRP is almost nil, its outcome is the result of the ongoing consultation of the social partners on different social and economic topics during the whole year. In **Finland**, the questionnaire elicits the information that, although social partners report not having any direct role in the preparation of the NRP 2020 document, they had a significant role in the design of the policy measures with the greatest impact. In **Lithuania**, both employer organisations and trade unions report having had some indirect influence on the NRP 2020, as it incorporated a number of reforms and policies that social partners discussed at the sittings of the Tripartite Council or in various working groups and taskforces.

aside these six countries where there was no actual involvement, the study shows that only in six countries are both social partners satisfied with the effectiveness of the current setting to involve them in the NRP (Czechia, France, Malta, the Netherlands and Sweden). In the remaining countries, at least one social partner

criticises its effectiveness. In contrast, national authorities positively assess existing institutional settings in all the countries but one (Lithuania).

In 9 out of the 21 countries where there was some involvement, both social partners report being unsatisfied with the effectiveness of the current setting

**Table 7: Degree of satisfaction with the appropriateness of the institutional settings for effective involvement**

	Effective institutional setting	Ineffective institutional setting	No involvement
Employer organisations	Austria, Croatia, Ireland, Luxembourg, Romania	Estonia	
Trade unions	Estonia	Austria, Croatia, Ireland, Luxembourg, Romania	
Employer organisations and trade unions	Latvia	Bulgaria, Cyprus, Denmark, Germany, Hungary, Poland, Slovenia, Spain	
National authorities	Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Estonia, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Luxembourg, Poland, Romania, Slovenia		
All parties agree	Czechia, France, Malta, Netherlands, Sweden	Lithuania	
No involvement			Belgium, Finland, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Slovakia

**Notes:** Information not available for national authorities in Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Greece, Latvia and Spain. In Belgium, Portugal and Slovakia, specific procedures for involving the social partners were cancelled due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Source:** See Table 1

to involve them in the NRP: Bulgaria, Cyprus, Denmark, Germany, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, Slovenia and Spain. It is also worth noting that the trade union view is more critical. In 14 countries, trade unions disagree on the effectiveness of the existing institutional setting, compared with 10 countries in which employer organisations disagree on this.

As detailed in the following sections, social partners mainly criticise the functioning of existing institutional settings (lack of time, poor consultation, lack of visibility of their contributions and so on) rather than their formal design. In contrast, in Denmark, social partners regret that the committee where social dialogue related to the European Semester takes place (the Europe 2020 Committee) always includes other civil society organisations, which are not genuine social partners. They are in favour of a narrower forum exclusively made up of social partners.

National authorities tend to assess positively the appropriateness of the institutional setting for involving the social partners.<sup>10</sup> Only in Lithuania do national authorities assess the current setting as ineffective, in agreement with the social partners. This problem is currently on the policy agenda of the country. At the end of 2019, a bipartite social partner body, the Commission for Competence Building, was created under the Tripartite Council of the Republic of Lithuania (Eurofound, 2020a). The objective of this body is to foster social partners' capacity building with a view to improving their involvement in the European Semester.

## Time allotted to consultation

As in previous Eurofound reports, the lack of enough time for consultation is still an issue that social partners, particularly trade unions, raise as a critical point in many countries (Table 8). Only in 5 of the 21 countries where there was some involvement (Bulgaria,<sup>11</sup> Czechia, Estonia, the Netherlands and Sweden) do all the parties agree that the social partners had enough time in 2020 to participate in the assessment or preparation of the NRP.

Information gathered in the national questionnaires shows that in seven countries both social partners complain that time allotted for consultation was not enough (Germany, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovenia and Spain). From these countries, only the Lithuanian and Polish national authorities acknowledge, in agreement with the social partners, that there was not enough time for consultation.

Again, the trade unions are more critical: in 14 countries, trade unions report being unsatisfied with the time allotted for consultation, compared with 10 countries where employer organisations criticise this aspect (noting that employer organisations may have provided different assessments). Differing opinions between social partners were recorded in Croatia, Cyprus, France, Ireland, Luxembourg and Malta, where employer organisations are satisfied with the time allotted whereas trade unions complain. In contrast, in Denmark trade unions are satisfied but the employer

**Table 8: Time allotted for consultation**

	Enough time allotted	Not enough time allotted	No involvement
<b>Employer organisations</b>	Croatia, Cyprus, France, Ireland, Luxembourg, Malta	Bulgaria (BIA), Denmark, Latvia	
<b>Trade unions</b>	Denmark	Austria, Croatia, Cyprus, France, Ireland, Luxembourg, Malta	
<b>Employer organisations and trade unions</b>		Germany, Hungary, Romania, Slovenia, Spain	
<b>National authorities</b>	Austria, Croatia, Cyprus, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Luxembourg, Romania, Slovenia	France, Malta	
<b>All parties agree</b>	Bulgaria (BICA), Czechia, Estonia, Netherlands, Sweden	Lithuania, Poland	
<b>No involvement</b>			Belgium, Finland, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Slovakia

**Notes:** Information not available for national authorities in Belgium, Denmark, Greece, Latvia or Spain; for employer organisations in Austria; or for trade unions in Latvia.

**Source:** See Table 1

<sup>10</sup> Information was not available about the national authorities of Belgium, Finland and Greece (in which countries the national authorities prepared the NRP unilaterally, according to correspondents), Denmark, Latvia and Spain.

<sup>11</sup> In Bulgaria, one employer organisation (BIA) criticises the time allotted, while the other employer organisation consulted (BICA) reports being satisfied.

organisations complain about the time they were allotted. In Bulgaria, too, one of the two employer organisations consulted for the study (BIA) criticises the time allotted for consultation.

Overall, the study shows that, in most of the countries where there is a low degree of satisfaction with the time allotted for consultation, social partners perceive this as a recurrent problem and not as a direct consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, only in Poland was an explicit relationship established between the lack of time for consultation and the COVID-19 crisis. In this country, the problem with time allotted is explained by the government's difficulties in consulting the social partners on an updated version of the NRP, which aimed to reflect policies adopted in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, while respecting the time frame that the European Commission established.

### Feedback, exchange of views and visibility

As previous Eurofound reports noted, two key final indicators of the quality of the process are related: first, the extent to which social partners have the opportunity to make a contribution to the development of the NRP and receive a response or feedback from the government; and, second, the visibility of the social partners' contribution. Overall, the study shows that in very few countries are the social partners satisfied with the quality of both factors. According to the information gathered in the questionnaires, only in seven countries do both social partners agree that a proper exchange took place, allowing them to provide their views and get feedback during their involvement (Croatia, Czechia,

Denmark, Estonia, Latvia, the Netherlands and Sweden).<sup>12</sup> Similarly, only in 10 countries do both social partners say that their views were incorporated or to some extent reflected in the NRP (Belgium, Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain and Sweden).

Previous Eurofound studies have shown that social partners normally contribute to the NRP by providing written documents (Eurofound, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019a, 2020a). In most of the countries, trade unions and employer organisations provide written contributions separately. Most of the responses to the questionnaire reflect continuity in this regard (Bulgaria, Cyprus, Germany, Hungary, Lithuania, Romania and others). In some countries (such as Czechia), social partners say that written communication (by email) became more important as a result of the restrictions imposed on account of the COVID-19 crisis.

Nevertheless, in 10 out of the 21 countries where there was some involvement, both social partners appear unsatisfied with the government feedback and responses that they received (Bulgaria, Cyprus, France, Germany, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovenia and Spain; Table 9).

In these countries, social partners tend to assess their institutionalised involvement mainly as receiving information and to a lesser extent as consultation. Even if social partners are formally requested to send their comments and views, consultation is assessed as not meaningful because the national authorities do not give them any response or feedback (Box 6).

**Table 9: Feedback and exchange of views**

	Feedback or acknowledgement from the government		No involvement
	Yes	No	
Employer organisations	Austria, Bulgaria (BICA), Ireland, Luxembourg, Malta		
Trade unions		Austria, Ireland, Luxembourg, Malta	
Employer organisations and trade unions	Denmark, Latvia	Bulgaria (BIA), Cyprus, France, Germany, Hungary, Romania, Slovenia, Spain	
National authorities	Austria, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Luxembourg, Malta, Romania, Slovenia		
All parties agree	Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Netherlands, Sweden	Lithuania, Poland	
No involvement			Belgium, Finland, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Slovakia

**Note:** No information on feedback from national authorities in Bulgaria, Denmark, Greece, Latvia or Spain.

**Source:** See Table 1

<sup>12</sup> In Denmark and Latvia, information from public authorities was not available.



### Box 6: Examples of countries where social partners are not properly consulted

In several countries, social partners critically note that the governments do not respond to or consider their proposals. In **Bulgaria**, social partners report that they had the status of observer within the working group that dealt with the NRP 2020. According to an employer organisation (BIA), the government did not respond to or address the proposals it sent.

In **Cyprus**, employer organisations and trade unions say that, although they are asked to submit written comments, the process does not provide for any meetings and/or exchange of views and interaction. In **Germany**, the social partners (particularly the German Trade Union Confederation, DGB) point out that they did not receive any feedback on their written comments about the draft NRP.

In **Hungary**, consultation takes place through a website where social partners and other individuals and stakeholders can express their opinions. Beyond this, the corresponding minister may invite persons or institutions to express their opinions in a direct consultation. Social partners consider the public consultation rather formal with no influence on the NRP.

In **Romania**, national authorities electronically submitted the draft NRP 2020 for consultation to the attention of the social partners and other relevant institutional partners. However, no meetings or debates took place and, even though the social partners sent their contributions to the draft document for the 2020 NRP, no feedback was received on the inclusion of their comments in the final draft.

In most of these countries, national authorities differ from this assessment. However, there are two countries where national authorities agree with the social partners that there was not an actual exchange of views (Lithuania and Poland). In Lithuania, the national authorities acknowledge that social partners could provide comments and suggestions (with no feedback) on the draft NRP only when the legislation information system of the Office of the Parliament announced it publicly. In Poland, the government justified the lack of feedback because of time constraints related to the need to update the NRP to reflect the policies adopted in response to the COVID-19 crisis (see previous section).

It also worth considering those cases where, based on the social partners' own assessment, consultation appears to be unbalanced in favour of the employer

organisations. In Austria, Ireland, Luxembourg and Malta, employer organisations say they received a response or feedback from the government, whereas trade unions criticised the lack of dialogue.

In terms of the visibility of the social partners' contributions, the study finds that only in six countries did the government incorporate the views of both trade unions and employer organisations in the NRP (Belgium, Ireland, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain and Sweden; Table 10).

It is worth noting the case of Poland. In this country, social partners' views were annexed to the NRP but the report only presents their opinions in relation to the documents preceding the preparation of the NRP (Annual Sustainable Growth Strategy 2020 and Country

**Table 10: Visibility of social partners' views**

	Social partners' views reflected in the document		Social partners' views incorporated
	Yes	No	
Employer organisations	Austria, Luxembourg	Latvia	
Trade unions	Latvia	Austria, Luxembourg	
Employer organisations and trade unions	Belgium, Spain	Greece, Hungary, Romania, Slovenia	
National authorities	Austria, Hungary, Luxembourg, Romania, Slovenia		
All parties agree	Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Germany, Ireland, Netherlands, Sweden	Bulgaria, Cyprus, Denmark, Finland, Italy, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia	Belgium, Ireland, Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Sweden

**Note:** No information on visibility from national authorities in Bulgaria, Greece or Spain.

**Source:** See Table 1

Report – Poland 2020). Accordingly, the three parties agree that their views strictly related to the updated version of the NRP were not reflected in the document.

In addition, in Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands and Sweden, the social partners and national authorities agree that the NRPs reflect or include some of their views, at least in part.<sup>13</sup>

Employer organisations from Austria and Luxembourg, and trade unions from Latvia, also say that NRPs reflect their contributions to some extent. So do the national authorities from Austria, Hungary, Luxembourg, Romania and Slovenia.

## Classifying countries based on the quality of the processes

This section groups the Member States based on the quality of the processes for involving the social partners in NRPs. The quality is measured according to the social partners' assessment of three of the four factors discussed in the previous sections: time allotted for consultation; degree of consultation, understood as social partners' opportunities to make a contribution to the development of the NRP and receive a response or feedback from the government; and transparency and visibility of the contributions of social partners (Box 7). Table 11 summarises the information according to three categories: high, medium and low.

**Table 11: Quality of the processes for social partners' involvement in NRPs**

	High	Medium	Low
Employer organisations	Ireland	Austria, France, Luxembourg	
Trade unions		Ireland	Austria, France, Luxembourg
Employer organisations and trade unions	Czechia, Estonia, Netherlands, Sweden	Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Denmark, Germany, Latvia, Malta, Spain	Cyprus, Finland, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia

Source: See Table 1

### Box 7: Evaluating the quality of the processes for involvement in NRPs

The quality of the involvement of social partners in NRPs is measured based on the trade unions' and employer organisations' assessment of three factors: time allotted, degree of consultation, and transparency and/or visibility of the social partners' contributions.

Countries are classified in three categories:

- high quality – countries where either trade unions or employer organisations positively assess the three factors under consideration
- medium quality – countries where either trade unions or employer organisations positively assess at least one factor
- low quality – countries where either trade unions or employer organisations negatively assess the three factors under consideration

When interpreting the classification, two key aspects should be noted.

- **Consensus between or matching assessments by social partners:** The quality is measured based on the separate assessments by trade unions and employer organisations. Thus, a high or medium level of quality does not presuppose consensus between social partners on the quality of the factors. In **Croatia**, for example, trade unions and employer organisations disagree on the level of satisfaction with the time allotted for information and consultation. Furthermore, there are countries that record high or medium quality based on the assessment of employer organisations, and medium or low quality based on the assessment of trade unions (**Austria, France, Ireland and Luxembourg**).
- **Balance:** The extent to which both social partners are consulted on an equal footing has not been considered as a qualitative criterion for measuring the quality of the processes. However, information gathered may indicate some potential problems with unequal consultation in some countries. In **Austria, Ireland, Luxembourg and Malta**, employer organisations say they received a response or feedback from the government, whereas trade unions criticised the lack of meaningful dialogue.

<sup>13</sup> In Croatia, Chapter 7 of the NRP states which of the social partners' proposals have been accepted and which will be further discussed.

The findings reveal that only four countries have high-quality processes for involvement, as they record positive scores in the three factors measured (Czechia, Estonia, the Netherlands and Sweden). In these countries, both social partners report having ample time for information and consultation, being satisfied with the feedback and responses received from the government, and having seen their contributions incorporated (the Netherlands and Sweden) or reflected (Czechia and Estonia) in the report.<sup>14</sup> Based on only the employer organisations’ assessment, Ireland would also be included in this cluster.

A medium degree of quality in terms of processes is recorded in Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Denmark, Germany, Latvia, Malta and Spain. Each country in this group records a positive score for at least one factor. Accordingly, there is some variation in quality among these countries. While in some countries, such as Belgium, social partners assess only one factor positively (the transparency and visibility of their contributions), in other countries, such as Denmark, some social partners are more favourable. In addition, Austria, France and Luxembourg record a medium degree of quality based on the employer organisations’ assessments, and the same applies to Ireland considering only the trade union assessment.

Finally, the degree of quality in processes is low in Cyprus, Finland, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia. Relying only on the trade unions’ assessment, Austria, France and Luxembourg appear also in this cluster. In this group of countries, either both social partners or only the trade unions complain that time allocated for consultation was not enough; report being unsatisfied with the feedback and responses from the governments; and complain about the lack of visibility of their views.

## Social partners’ influence on NRPs

Having analysed the quality of the processes for involving the social partners in the development of NRPs (input), this section discusses the degree of social partners’ influence on the policy content of NRPs (output). Social partners’ influence on the output is measured based on their own perception, which is compared with the perception of the public authorities. These assessments and views should be viewed with caution, as they reflect subjective expectations, which several factors may influence (degree of satisfaction with general social dialogue and so forth). Overall, the findings reveal that in many countries social partners, particularly trade unions, are unsatisfied with the influence they exercise (Table 12).

**Table 12: Degree of influence of the social partners’ views on 2020 NRPs**

	Significant	Limited or relatively limited	No influence	No involvement
Employer organisations	Ireland, Malta	Austria, Cyprus (CCCI), Germany, Luxembourg, Slovenia	Denmark, Spain	
Trade unions		Denmark, Malta, Spain	Austria, Cyprus (PEO), France (CGT), Germany, Ireland, Luxembourg, Slovenia	
Employer organisations and trade unions		Estonia, Latvia	Bulgaria, Cyprus (OEB, SEK, PASYDY), Hungary, Poland, Romania	
National authorities	Austria, Denmark, Estonia, Hungary, Ireland, Luxembourg, Malta, Slovenia	Bulgaria, Cyprus, Poland, Romania		
All parties agree	Netherlands	Croatia, Czechia, France (CFDT), Lithuania, Sweden		
No involvement				Belgium, Finland, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Slovakia

**Notes:** In cases of more than one employer organisation or trade union in one country, the abbreviations of the organisation providing the view are in brackets. Refer to Annex 2 for list of social partner organisations and abbreviations. No national authority information was provided for Germany, Latvia or Spain.

**Source:** See Table 1

<sup>14</sup> Some doubts arise about this information for Czechia and Estonia. According to the national social partners, the NRPs make their contributions visible. However, social partners’ views and proposals are not incorporated in the NRP 2020, as they are in the cases of the Netherlands and Sweden.



The analysis of the degree of social partners' impact on the policy content of NRPs reveals that in only one country (the Netherlands) do both social partners report having had significant influence. In Ireland and Malta, the employer organisations also report having had significant influence.

In 15 countries, at least one social partner reports limited or relatively limited influence. This is the case in Austria, Cyprus, Germany, Luxembourg and Slovenia (employer organisations only); Denmark, Spain and Malta (trade unions only); Estonia and Latvia (both social partners); and Croatia, Czechia, France, Lithuania and Sweden (public authorities and social partners).

Finally, in 14 countries at least one social partner reports having no influence at all on the NRP: Denmark and Spain (employer organisations only); Austria, Cyprus (Pancyprian Federation of Labour, PEO), France (General Confederation of Labour, CGT), Germany, Ireland, Luxembourg and Slovenia (trade unions only); Bulgaria, Cyprus, Hungary, Poland and Romania (both social partners). Social partners' assessments contrast with the national authorities' views. National authorities rate the degree of social partners' influence from limited to significant in these countries (the views of national authorities in Germany and Spain were not available).

In the light of these findings, it can be concluded that the quality of the process for involving the social partners (time allotted, feedback and visibility) is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for the social partners to influence the content of NRPs. In most of the countries, a medium degree of quality in terms of input corresponds with limited or relatively limited influence. In addition, in two countries (Ireland and the Netherlands) a high degree of quality in terms of processes corresponds with significant influence

(for employer organisations). Nevertheless, there are also countries where high quality in terms of input corresponds with limited or relatively limited influence (Czechia, Estonia and Sweden), and countries where medium quality in terms of input corresponds with rather limited or no influence on the NRP (for instance Bulgaria).

## Social partners' assessment of policy content of NRPs and CSRs

This section analyses social partners' assessment of the policy content of both NRPs and CSRs. In contrast to the rather critical assessment by the social partners in many countries of the quality of their involvement in the European Semester, research findings show that social partners are generally satisfied with the policy content of both the NRP and the CSR (Table 13).

Overall, most of the social partners are generally positive about the content of their respective Member State's NRP. Only trade unions from Bulgaria, Ireland and Luxembourg report a negative assessment of its content. Thus, even in countries where social partners' involvement appears to be poorly institutionalised and they report having no influence on the NRP, they are generally satisfied with its policy approach. In some countries, this paradox is explained because social partners were involved in the design of most of the policy measures approved in response to the COVID-19 crisis. Indeed, in several countries (Belgium, Finland, Germany, Lithuania and Portugal), national social partners contrast the positive and fruitful social dialogue in relation to the COVID-19 measures with the more bureaucratic and information-based process related to the NRP.

**Table 13: Social partners' views regarding the social and labour contents of 2020 NRPs**

	Strong agreement	Overall agreement	Partial agreement	Overall disagreement	Strong disagreement
Employer organisations	Ireland	Austria, Belgium, Cyprus (CCCI), France, Greece (SEV), Slovenia	Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus (OEB), Denmark, Finland, Luxembourg, Romania, Spain		
Trade unions		Croatia, Denmark, Finland (SAK*), Romania, Spain	Austria, Cyprus, France, Greece, Portugal (CGTP), Slovenia	Bulgaria	Ireland
Employer organisations and trade unions		Czechia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Netherlands, Portugal (CIP, UGT)	Germany, Hungary, Poland		Luxembourg

**Notes:** Information not available on both social partners in Italy, Slovakia or Sweden. Information not available for trade unions in Belgium (they did not assess the content because they were not involved). In cases of more than one employer organisation or trade union in one country, the abbreviations of the organisation providing the view are in brackets. Refer to Annex 2 for list of social partner organisations and abbreviations. \*Out of the three peak-level trade unions, only SAK replied to this question. The question was posed to the other two trade unions, but they did not reply.

**Source:** See Table 1

**Table 14: Social partners' views regarding the social and labour contents of 2020 CSRs**

	Strong agreement	Overall agreement	Partial agreement	Overall disagreement	Strong disagreement
<b>Employer organisations</b>	Ireland	Cyprus, France, Germany, Greece (SEV), Malta, Portugal (CIP)	Croatia, Finland, Luxembourg, Romania	Bulgaria	
<b>Trade unions</b>		Croatia, Finland (SAK*), Romania	Cyprus (SEK, PASYDY), France, Germany, Greece, Malta, Portugal (CCP, CGTP, UGT)	Cyprus (PEO), Slovakia	Bulgaria
<b>Employer organisations and trade unions</b>	Estonia	Austria, Belgium, Czechia, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden	Hungary, Poland		Luxembourg

**Notes:** Information not available for either social partner in Denmark (there are no CSRs on social and labour contents), Italy and the Netherlands. Information not available for trade unions in Ireland or for employer organisations in Slovakia. Refer to Annex 2 for list of social partner organisations and abbreviations. \*Out of the three peak-level trade unions, only SAK replied to this question.

**Source:** See Table 1

Similarly, social partners in most of the countries agree, at least partly, with the CSRs on mitigating the socioeconomic impact of the COVID-19 crisis and facilitating economic recovery (Table 14). Only trade unions from Bulgaria, Cyprus (PEO), Luxembourg and Slovakia disagree with their content.

In a nutshell, the findings reveal that in most countries there is still room to improve social partners' involvement in the European Semester. The positive conclusion is that, in contrast with the global financial

crisis, there has been a shared understanding between national social partners, national governments and European institutions on the policy responses needed to mitigate the effects of the COVID-19 crisis and promote economic recovery. National authorities and social partners could take advantage of this overall existing consensus to stimulate further improvement in the social dialogue process related to the European Semester in the years to come.

# 4 | Conclusions

## Involvement in overall policymaking in the context of the COVID-19 outbreak

- The COVID-19 crisis has significantly reshaped and shifted the economy, the workforce and the way we work, as well as society and the way we live. It has been a severe test of national social dialogue, with varying impacts on the existing frameworks and practices for involving social partners in policymaking.
- In this emergency context, the majority of countries adopted a significant number of policy measures in the social and economic fields without timely and meaningful consultation with the social partners. Despite acknowledging the hard circumstances, social partners also consider that the majority of governments could have done much better.
- Time pressure on conducting exchanges and consultation in this difficult period has unquestionably influenced the quality of social dialogue and, as a result, the quality of the involvement of social partners. In these exceptional circumstances, the quality of their involvement should arguably be measured not according to established standards, but in the context of the disrupting effects of the pandemic.
- In general, social partners recognise the exceptional circumstances and constraints dominating the COVID-19 outbreak period, which affected the standard involvement frameworks and institutions in place. Consequently, consultation practices have been reduced accordingly, and governments have been forced to act more unilaterally, particularly at the beginning of the crisis.
- Overall, COVID-19 movement restrictions did not substantially affect the quality of the communication between government and social partners. On the contrary, in some countries the limitations have triggered online exchanges instead, which proves that more involvement and consultation would have been possible. Most social partners report time constraints as the main issue for proper involvement.
- Overall, social partners perceive that social dialogue has managed to continue in the exceptional circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic. The impact of the crisis on social dialogue relates rather to the need to adapt it to a new context.

## Quality of involvement in times of crisis

- The COVID-19 outbreak has shown that where tripartite social dialogue is well established, permanent and solid, the impact of the crisis on the involvement of social partners has been limited. In some cases, the crisis has even speeded up consultations, and social partners report that their opinions were heard more attentively.
- By contrast, the impact has been greater in other countries and, although social dialogue remained in place, it was severely restricted and blurred. In this regard, the COVID-19 crisis has uncovered the structural weaknesses of the foundations of social dialogue in some industrial relations systems.
- The evolution of the pandemic has been variable, and the quality of the involvement in policymaking has changed during the period in some countries (such as France, Luxembourg, Malta, Poland,<sup>15</sup> Portugal and Slovakia). Whereas the first government measures were taken without sufficient consultation, in most cases the consultation processes have improved along the way and social partners tend to be mostly satisfied with the quality of their involvement.
- Even though governments have taken the policy lead due to the urgency and unprecedented scale of the impact of the health crisis, social partners in a few countries (such as Belgium, Finland, Italy and Spain) agreed on joint actions to support businesses and society in response to the social and economic emergency. The governments mostly supported these joint initiatives.
- The support of social partners was and continues to be valuable in addressing and responding to crucial shortcomings on the ground and helping to implement short-term and far-reaching policies. While the social partners may have not been involved in the design of some COVID-19 measures, they have provided support to their members on how to navigate the crisis, and on which existing and which emergency measures they can use, as well as providing general information on their websites for non-members.

15 This assessment has not been confirmed by trade unions in Poland.

## Social dialogue continuing to deliver under pressure

- COVID-19 has seriously disrupted social dialogue developments. Many discussions and reforms were interrupted and postponed at the time of the outbreak. However, during and beyond the outbreak, social partners in most countries have continued their involvement in policymaking, to a various degree of intensity, regarding relevant reforms in 2020.
- Paradoxically, some social partners complain of the lack of sufficient involvement in the process of policy formation but show more satisfaction with the content of the measures finally adopted. The views of employer organisations and unions vary depending on the category of policy measure discussed, and no clear pattern can be found between the level of satisfaction with the involvement in the process of policymaking and the content of the measure.
- Beyond tripartite social dialogue at peak level, it has been reported that policy measures adopted at national level to tackle the COVID-19 crisis have probably increased the social dialogue at both sector and company levels. Discussions between employers and human resources managers to implement the measures have potentially led to constructive solutions. Health and safety at work and the implementation of teleworking are undoubtedly at the top of the agenda of employers' and workers' representatives, including the collective bargaining negotiations in some sectors.
- Aggregate and supranational analysis of the sample of measures adopted during the first months of the pandemic outbreak reveals that both national employer organisations and trade unions have generally supported the content and scope of the policies adopted. Even though this support is nuanced and does not preclude a certain level of dissatisfaction with the lack of proper involvement in the policymaking process, it becomes a promising starting point for the implementation of the necessary economic recovery measures in the post-COVID era.

## Quality of involvement in developing 2020 NRPs

- The outbreak of the COVID-19 crisis has led European institutions to reorient the European Semester with a view to mitigating its effects. However, this adaptation has mainly affected the CSRs, due to the specificities of the European Semester calendar. With regard to NRPs, some countries (such as Austria and Denmark) faced time constraints on updating the reports with the measures approved in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Accordingly, there are differences between countries in how NRPs describe and develop the economic and social policies designed to deal with the effects of the crisis.

- Existing procedures for discussing NRPs have remained stable in the majority of countries despite the impact of the COVID-19 crisis. In several countries, the main change was the replacement of face-to-face meetings with virtual meetings (for instance, in Latvia, Malta and Spain) and/or electronic communication, such as email (Czechia). In three countries (Belgium, Portugal and Slovakia), specific procedures for involving the social partners were cancelled due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Despite insufficiencies and weaknesses, social partners had more meaningful involvement in overall policymaking than in the development of the NRPs in the context of the European Semester. The findings reveal that there is still a lot of room to improve social partners' involvement in NRPs.
- Following the analytical framework applied in the study, the findings show that social partners in only four countries consider the quality of the process for involvement in NRPs to be high (Czechia, Estonia, the Netherlands and Sweden). This means that both social partners report having had ample time for information and consultation, being satisfied with the feedback and responses received from the government, and having seen their contributions incorporated or reflected. Drawing only on the employer organisations' assessment, this cluster would also include Ireland. Eight countries record a medium level of quality (Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Denmark, Germany, Latvia, Malta and Spain), and so do three countries based on the employer organisations' assessment (Austria, France and Luxembourg). This means a positive score in at least one factor. The degree of quality in terms of process is low in 11 countries (Cyprus, Finland, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia).
- Social partners' influence on the output has been measured based on the social partners' own perceptions. The findings reveal that in only one country (the Netherlands) do both social partners report having had significant influence. In Ireland and Malta, the employer organisations report having had significant influence. In seven countries, both social partners report having had limited or relatively limited influence (Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, France, Latvia, Lithuania and Sweden). In five countries, both social partners report having had no influence at all on the NRP (Bulgaria, Cyprus, Hungary, Poland and Romania). The social partners' assessments strongly contrast with the national authorities' views, which rate the social partners' degree of influence as from limited to significant in most of the countries.

- The social partners show a higher degree of satisfaction with the policy content of both NRPs and CSRs than with their involvement in the preparation of NRPs. Most of the social partners agree with the content of NRPs. Only trade unions from Bulgaria, Ireland and Luxembourg report a negative assessment of their content. The same is true in relation to the CSRs. Only trade unions from Bulgaria, Cyprus, Luxembourg and Slovakia disagree with their content.
- The social partners in several countries (Belgium, Finland, Germany and Lithuania) emphasise the difference between the fruitful social dialogue – whenever it takes place – in the discussion of the COVID-19 measures and the somewhat bureaucratic and information-based process of developing the NRP.
- Unlike in the global financial crisis, social partners, governments and European institutions have mostly shared their understanding of the policy responses needed to mitigate the effects of the pandemic and promote economic recovery. This common approach must continue, and governments should encourage cooperation with and trust in social partners to take part and implement policy responses at the appropriate level. This applies especially in countries where social partners have stressed the lack of appropriate involvement in policymaking.
- Governments should ensure a meaningful and timely involvement of the social partners in the revamped cycle for European Semester 2021. Given the changes that the Annual Sustainable Growth Strategy introduced, the participation of social partners in the design, monitoring and implementation of the RRP that will be submitted along with the NRPs in a single integrated document in 2021 will be key for strengthening social dialogue and ensuring a fair recovery.
- When coordinating economic policies in response to the effects of the COVID-19 crisis, the European Semester should ensure that social partners are meaningfully involved and that national social dialogue fulfils its role in shaping the policy responses to the challenges stemming from the climate, environmental, social and digital priorities of the European Union, particularly in those countries where weaknesses and structural shortcomings hampering genuine social dialogue have been repeatedly reported.

## Policy pointers

- The COVID-19 crisis has highlighted how effective social dialogue can be used to shape policy initiatives and find solutions to emergency situations affecting businesses, workers, the economy and society. The challenges resulting from the economic and social crisis should emphasise and validate the contribution of social partners to building social cohesion and economic recovery.





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# Annexes

## Annex 1: List of policy measures analysed by category

The COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch contained 659 published cases, including the 105 listed below, as at 5 November 2020. The database is available at <http://eurofound.link/covid19eupolicywatch>

### Income protection beyond short-time work

<b>Austria</b>	AT-2020-13/212	Hardship case fund: Safety net for self-employed
	AT-2020-12/545	Special subsidised care time for working parents and carers
<b>Belgium</b>	BE-2020-16/458	Replacement income for self-employed (bridging right)
<b>Bulgaria</b>	BG-2020-11/499	COVID-19: Assistance for parents taking unpaid leave due to a state of emergency
	BG-2020-15/501	COVID-19: Assisting artists and freelancers
<b>Croatia</b>	HR-2020-12/391	Support for persons in the sector arts and entertainment
<b>Cyprus</b>	CY-2020-12/296	Special paid leave for the caring of children
	CY-2020-12/343	Special scheme for self-employed workers
<b>Czechia</b>	CZ-2020-11/285	Compensation bonus for self-employed and certain shareholders
	CZ-2020-12/357	Care allowance during emergency period for homeschooling 6 to 13 year-old children
<b>Denmark</b>	DK-2020-11/624	Temporary compensation scheme for self-employed persons
<b>Estonia</b>	EE-2020-11/375	Sick leave compensation from the first day and online registration of sick leave
<b>Finland</b>	FI-2020-17/550	Temporarily shortened working requirement for unemployment benefit eligibility
	FI-2020-17/540	State-funded unemployment security during the waiting period
<b>Germany</b>	DE-2020-13/404	Basic income support for solo self-employed
<b>Greece</b>	GR-2020-12/695	Financial support for suspended and dismissed employees
<b>Ireland</b>	IE-2020-11/782	COVID-19 pandemic unemployment payment introduced
	IE-2020-11/783	Increased illness benefit for COVID-19 absences
<b>Lithuania</b>	LT-2020-12/314	Compensation for self-employed
<b>Malta</b>	MT-2020-11/272	Additional unemployed benefit
	MT-2020-11/273	New parental benefit to care for children during school closures
	MT-2020-12/276	Quarantine leave – Grants for employers
<b>Netherlands</b>	NL-2020-12/761	Temporary subsidy for self-employed
<b>Portugal</b>	PT-2020-11/397	Extraordinary extension of unemployment benefit and social benefit
<b>Romania</b>	RO-2020-12/767	Extended right to medical leave and allowances for quarantine leave
	RO-2020-16/372	Allowance for self-employed and non-standard workers
<b>Slovenia</b>	SI-2020-11/445	Monthly basic income for self-employed
<b>Spain</b>	ES-2020-12/504	Preference for remote work
<b>Sweden</b>	SE-2020-16/557	Temporary reinforcement of unemployment insurance
	SE-2020-14/562	Central government assumes sick pay responsibility

## Employment protection and retention

<b>Austria</b>	AT-2020-10/229	Corona short-time work scheme
<b>Belgium</b>	BE-2020-11/380	Extension of temporary unemployment due to force majeure
<b>Bulgaria</b>	BG-2020-16/498	COVID-19: Interest-free credit guarantee programme for individuals
	BG-2020-11/494	COVID-19: Income support for workers
<b>Croatia</b>	HR-2020-12/361	Support for preservation of jobs in sectors affected by COVID-19
	HR-2020-15/516	Government support to assist the sports sector in wage payments
<b>Cyprus</b>	CY-2020-11/327	Special scheme for complete suspension of business
	CY-2020-24/895	Special support schemes for workers and businesses
<b>Czechia</b>	CZ-2020-15/454	Antivirus employment retention programme
<b>Denmark</b>	DK-2020-11/633	Tripartite agreement on wage compensation in the private sector
<b>Estonia</b>	EE-2020-13/325	Temporary subsidy programme
<b>France</b>	FR-2020-11/741	Extension of short-time work to new categories of workers
	FR-2020-13/217	Emergency measures relating to short-time working
<b>Germany</b>	DE-2020-10/541	Easier access to short-time work
<b>Hungary</b>	HU-2020-18/640	Wage support programme for job retention – Kurzarbeit with training obligation
<b>Ireland</b>	IE-2020-13/777	Temporary COVID-19 wage subsidy scheme
<b>Italy</b>	IT-2020-14/646	Agreement on the anticipation by banks of wage subsidies measures ex-COVID-19
<b>Latvia</b>	LV-2020-11/301	Idle-time allowance for employees
<b>Lithuania</b>	LT-2020-12/311	Wage subsidies for companies declaring idle time due to quarantine regime
<b>Luxembourg</b>	LU-2020-12/303	Measures for short-time working in cases of force majeure related to the coronavirus
	LU-2020-12/435	New agreement on partial unemployment establishes minimum social wage for unskilled workers as new compensation floor
<b>Netherlands</b>	NL-2020-15/760	Temporary emergency measure for the preservation of jobs
<b>Poland</b>	PL-2020-14/526	Anti-crisis shield: Employment protection and wage subsidies
<b>Portugal</b>	PT-2020-13/297	Exceptional and temporary measure on layoffs to protect jobs in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic
<b>Romania</b>	RO-2020-12/373	Indemnity for technical unemployment
<b>Slovakia</b>	SK-2020-13/291	Broadening active labour market policy programmes – Supporting job retention
<b>Slovenia</b>	SI-2020-11/436	Temporary layoff scheme and reimbursement of related wage compensation to employers
<b>Spain</b>	ES-2020-14/838	Recoverable paid leave
<b>Sweden</b>	SE-2020-12/564	Short-term work allowance newly introduced

## Supporting businesses to stay afloat

<b>Austria</b>	AT-2020-12/474	Company subsidy for fixed costs
<b>Belgium</b>	BG-2020-16/495	COVID-19 measure: Business tax relief
<b>Croatia</b>	HR-2020-12/379	More favourable tax treatment of state subsidies due to special circumstances
<b>Denmark</b>	DK-2020-11/600	Compensation for corporate fixed expenses
<b>Estonia</b>	EE-2020-13/347	Emergency loan and loan guarantee
<b>Finland</b>	FI-2020-18/558	Temporary deductions to employers' pension contribution in the private sector
<b>Germany</b>	DE-2020-13/407	Deferral of tax payments
	DE-2020-13/349	KfW instant loan for medium-sized enterprises
	DE-2020-13/354	Economic stabilisation fund
<b>Hungary</b>	HU-2020-10/653	Relief of tax on labour for certain target sectors hard-hit by COVID-19

Latvia	LV-2020-11/613	Cancellation of the advance payments of the personal income tax
	LV-2020-14/618	Direct refund of the overpayment of VAT
	LV-2020-11/413	Allowances for idle time for self-employed
Lithuania	LT-2020-12/340	Compensation for interest on loan or lease payments
	LT-2020-16/359	Soft loans to provide liquidity in the most affected sectors
	LT-2020-15/353	Guarantees for business loans and leasing
Luxembourg	LU-2020-12/430	Financial aid for self-employed to compensate for temporary financial difficulties caused by the COVID-19 crisis
	LU-2020-12/469	State guarantee scheme for new bank loans for a maximum period of 6 years
Malta	MT-2020-12/278	Deferral of payment of taxes
Netherlands	NL-2020-12/763	Subsidy for entrepreneurs in affected sectors
Poland	PL-2020-14/662	Anti-crisis shield: Deferral of social security contributions for self-employed and micro companies
Portugal	PT-2020-13/345	Temporary exemption of payment of social security contributions due by employers – Exceptional and temporary measure to protect jobs
Romania	RO-2020-18/535	Temporary suspension of payment obligations for loans
	RO-2020-12/529	Secured loans for investments or working capital for companies
Slovakia	SK-2020-15/295	Postponement of the employers' deadline for payment of compulsory social security obligations
Slovenia	SI-2020-11/447	Deferred payments of borrowers' obligations and state guarantee
	SI-2020-11/443	Exemption from companies' obligation to pay pension and disability contributions

## Ensuring business continuity and support for essential services

Country	EU PolicyWatch ref.	Title
Belgium	BE-2020-13/861	Creating incentives for unemployed to work in horticulture and other essential services and flexibilisation of successive fixed-term contracts
Czechia	CZ-2020-14/358	Save jobs! – Employee sharing
Denmark	DK-2020-11/305	Jobsharing made more flexible
France	FR-2020-13/490	Temporary derogation from working hours in essential services
	FR-2020-13/491	Derogation from the taking of leave and rest breaks
Latvia	LV-2020-13/619	Postponement of tax payments

## Promoting the economic, labour market and social recovery

Finland	FI-2020-14/258	Temporarily shortened duration of employer–employee negotiations on lay-offs
Greece	GR-2020-12/667	Suspension of employment contracts
	GR-2020-12/696	Prohibition of dismissal of employees
Spain	ES-2020-20/880	Tripartite agreement to extend the special unemployment protection scheme associated to temporary collective redundancy or short-time work regulation
	ES-2020-13/598	Prohibition of objective dismissals

## Supporting businesses to get back to normal

<b>Denmark</b>	DK-2020-13/721	Guide to the COVID-19 'Job-VET-model'
<b>Netherlands</b>	NL-2020-27/984	The Netherlands keeps learning
<b>Portugal</b>	PT-2020-13/335	Extraordinary training plan – Exceptional and temporary measure to protect jobs in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic
	PT-2020-13/433	Extraordinary financial incentive to support the normalisation of business activity

## Measures to prevent social hardship

<b>Belgium</b>	BE-2020-12/459	Extension of meal, eco, gift and sports vouchers
<b>Italy</b>	IT-2020-9/411	Ordinary wage guarantees and new regulation of the exceptional wage guarantee fund
<b>Slovenia</b>	SI-2020-18/444	One-time solidarity allowance for retired persons, large families and other vulnerable groups
<b>Spain</b>	ES-2020-23/878	New minimum living income introduced

**Note:** For classification purposes, policy measures are grouped by categories according to the main aim pursued, although most of them pursued a combination of goals.



## Annex 2: List of social partner organisations and national authorities contacted

Member State	Employer organisations	Trade union organisations	National authorities
<b>Austria</b>	Federal Economic Chamber (WKO)	Austrian Trade Union Federation (ÖGB) Chamber of Labour (AK)	Federal Chancellery (BKA)
<b>Belgium</b>	Federation of Enterprises in Belgium (VBO/FEB)	Confederation of Christian Trade Unions (ACV/CSC)	
<b>Bulgaria</b>	Bulgarian Industrial Association (BIA) Bulgarian Industrial Capital Association (BICA)	Confederation of Independent Trade Unions of Bulgaria (CITUB) Confederation of Labour Podkrepa (Podkrepa CL)	Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (MLSP) Ministry of Finance (MF)
<b>Croatia</b>	Croatian Employers' Association (CEA)	Union of Autonomous Trade Unions of Croatia (UATUC) Independent Trade Unions of Croatia (ITUC) Matica – Association of Croatian Unions (Matica)	Prime Minister's Office
<b>Cyprus</b>	Cyprus Employers and Industrialists Federation (OEB) Cyprus Chamber of Commerce and Industry (CCCI)	Cyprus Workers' Confederation (SEK) Pancyprian Public Servants' Trade Union (PASYDY) Pancyprian Federation of Labour (PEO) Pancyprian Union of Government Doctors (PASYKI)	Ministry of Finance Ministry of Labour, Welfare and Social Insurance Directorate General for European Programmes, Coordination and Development (DGEPDC)
<b>Czechia</b>	Confederation of Industry of the Czech Republic (SP ČR)	Czech-Moravian Confederation of Trade Unions (ČMKOS)	Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs
<b>Denmark</b>	Confederation of Danish Employers (DA)	Danish Trade Union Confederation (FH)	Ministry of Employment
<b>Estonia</b>	Estonian Employers' Confederation (ETKL)	Estonian Trade Union Confederation (EAKL)	Ministry of Social Affairs Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications Government Office
<b>Finland</b>	Confederation of Finnish Industries (EK)	Central Organisation of Finnish Trade Unions (SAK) Finnish Confederation of Professionals (STTK) Confederation of Unions for Professional and Managerial Staff in Finland (Akava)	Ministry of Finance
<b>France</b>	Movement of the Enterprises of France (MEDEF) National Federation of Road Transport (FNTR) Union des Employeurs de l'Économie Sociale et Solidaire (UDES)	French Democratic Confederation of Labour (CFDT) General Confederation of Labour (CGT)	European and International Affairs Department (DAEI) General Directorate for Labour (DGT)
<b>Germany</b>	Confederation of German Employers' Associations (BDA)	German Trade Union Confederation (DGB)	Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Energy (BMWi)
<b>Greece</b>	Hellenic Federation of Enterprises (SEV)	General Confederation of Greek Workers (GSEE)	Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs
<b>Hungary</b>	National Association of Entrepreneurs and Employers (VOSZ)	Hungarian Trade Union Confederation (MASZSZ) Forum for the Cooperation of Trade Unions (SZEF) Democratic Trade Union of Crèche Employees (BDDSZ)	Ministry of Finance
<b>Ireland</b>	Irish Business and Employers Confederation (Ibec)	Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU)	Department of the Taoiseach
<b>Italy</b>	General Confederation of Italian Industry (Confindustria)	Italian Confederation of Workers' Trade Unions (CISL) Italian General Confederation of Labour (CGIL)	Ministry of Economy and Finance

Member State	Employer organisations	Trade union organisations	National authorities
<b>Latvia</b>	Employers' Confederation of Latvia (LDDK)	Free Trade Union Confederation of Latvia (LBAS)	Ministry of Economics Department of Labour Relations and Work Protection Policy
<b>Lithuania</b>	Lithuanian Confederation of Industrialists (LPK)	Lithuanian Trade Union 'Solidarumas' (LPS 'Solidarumas')	Ministry of Social Security and Labour
<b>Luxembourg</b>	Federation of Luxembourgish Industrials (FEDIL) Union of Luxembourg Enterprises (UEL)	Independent Luxembourg Trade Union Confederation (OGB-L)	Ministry of the Economy
<b>Malta</b>	Malta Employers' Association (MEA)	General Workers' Union (GWU)	Ministry within the Office of the Prime Minister
<b>Netherlands</b>	Confederation of Netherlands Industry and Employers (VNO-NCW)		Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment
<b>Poland</b>	Polish Confederation Lewiatan (Lewiatan) Polish Craft Association (ZRP)	All-Poland Alliance of Trade Unions (OPZZ) Independent Self-governing Trade Union Solidarity (NSZZ Solidarność)	Ministry of Economic Development
<b>Portugal</b>	Confederation of Portuguese Industry (CIP) Portuguese Commerce and Services Confederation (CCP)	General Confederation of the Portuguese Workers (CGTP) General Union of Workers (UGT)	Ministry of Labour, Solidarity and Social Security
<b>Romania</b>	General Union of Romanian Industrialists (UGIR) Employers' Confederation Concordia (Concordia)	National Trade Union Confederation (Cartel ALFA) Meridian National Trade Union Confederation (CSN Meridian) National Confederation of Free Trade Unions of Romania (CNSLR-Fratia) National Trade Union Bloc (BNS)	Ministry of Foreign Affairs Ministry of Labour and Social Protection
<b>Slovakia</b>	Federation of Employers' Associations of the Slovak Republic (AZZZ SR) National Union of Employers (RUZ) Association of Industrial Unions (APZ)	Confederation of Trade Unions of the Slovak Republic (KOZ SR)	Ministry of Finance Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family (MPSVR SR)
<b>Slovenia</b>	Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Slovenia (GZS) Chamber of Craft and Small Business of Slovenia (OZS) Association of Employers in Craft and Small Business of Slovenia (ZDOPS)	Association of Free Trade Unions of Slovenia (ZSSS) Confederation of Public Sector Trade Unions of Slovenia (KSJS) Confederation of Trade Unions of Slovenia PERGAM (KSS PERGAM)	Ministry of Finance Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities
<b>Spain</b>	Spanish Confederation of Employers' Organizations (CEOE)	Trade Union Confederation of Workers' Commissions (CCOO) General Union of Workers (UGT)	
<b>Sweden</b>	Confederation of Swedish Enterprise (SN) Swedish Agency for Government Employers (SAGE)	Swedish Trade Union Confederation (LO) Confederation of Professional Employees (TCO) Swedish Confederation of Professional Associations (SACO)	Prime Minister's Office

**Notes:** The social partners listed above were contacted in order to elicit their views on the topic in the preparation of the report. Other social partners were contacted but declined to participate in the study. In some cases, more than one person per organisation was interviewed. In addition, European Semester officers in some countries were also interviewed.

## Annex 3: Network of Eurofound Correspondents

### National correspondents who contributed to the study

Country	Correspondent	Organisation
Austria	Bernadette Allinger	FORBA
Belgium	Dries Van Herreweghe	HIVA-KU Leuven
Bulgaria	Lyuben Tomev	Institute for Social and Trade Union Research (ISTUR)
Croatia	Predrag Bejaković	Institute of Public Finance (IPF, Institut za javne financije)
Cyprus	Pavlos Kalosinatos	Cyprus Labour Institute (INEK-PEO)
Czechia	Soňa Veverková	Research Institute for Labour and Social Affairs
Denmark	Carsten Jorgensen	FAOS, University of Copenhagen
Estonia	Ingel Kadarik	Praxis Centre for Policy Studies
Finland	Amanda Kinnunen	Oxford Research AB
France	Frédéric Turlan	IR Share
Germany	Birgit Kraemer	Institute for Economic and Social Research, Hans Boeckler Foundation
Greece	Penny Georgiadou	GSEE Institute of Labour
Hungary	Nóra Krokovay	Kopint-Tárki Institute for Economic Research
Ireland	Andy Pendergast	IRN Publishing
Italy	Roberto Pedersini	Department of Social and Political Sciences, University of Milan
Latvia	Krišs Karnītis	EPC LTD
Lithuania	Inga Blaziene	Lithuanian Social Research Centre
Luxembourg	Franz Clément	Luxembourg Institute of Socio-Economic Research (LISER)
Malta	Manwel Debono	University of Malta
Netherlands	Amber van der Graaf	Panteia BV
Poland	Barbara Surdykowska	Foundation Institute of Public Affairs
Portugal	Maria da Paz Campos Lima	Friedrich Ebert Foundation (Lisbon)
Romania	Cristina Boboc	European Institute of Romania
Slovakia	Ludovit Cziria	Institute for Labour and Family Research
Slovenia	Barbara Luzar	Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana
Spain	Oscar Molina	Institute for Labour Studies, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona
Sweden	Anna-Karin Gustafsson	Oxford Research AB



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Since 2016, Eurofound has closely monitored the involvement of national social partners in policymaking as part of the European Semester cycle. In 2020, the focus was on their involvement during the first months of the COVID-19 outbreak. While the pandemic has presented a huge challenge to social dialogue, the results of the analysis highlight how social dialogue can be an effective tool in shaping policy initiatives and finding solutions to emergency situations affecting businesses, workers, the economy and society. It is clear that the participation of social partners in the design and implementation of national recovery and resilience plans in 2021 will be key in the recovery process and for strengthening social dialogue going forward.

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