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Research Report

Monitoring the quality of public consultations with trade unions on implementation of the National Recovery and Resilience Plans

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Sebastiano Sabato, Angelina Atanasova,
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1. Introduction

1.1 The Recovery and Resilience Facility and the national Recovery and Resilience Plans

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the European Council agreed to provide major financial support to Member States. Drawing on a combination of the EU's long-term budget (2021–2027) and an additional temporary support system known as 'NextGenerationEU' (NGEU), the EU has been providing funds to help Member States with the fall-out from the Covid-19 crisis. The so-called 'Recovery and Resilience Facility' (RRF), at the core of the NGEU, provides financial support to Member States, notably through a combination of grants and loans (European Parliament and Council of the EU 2021). Resources made available through the RRF amount to 672.5 billion euros (360 billion euros in loans and 312.5 billion euros in grants – in 2018 prices).

To access the RRF funds, Member States submitted detailed national Recovery and Resilience Plans (RRPs), in which they set out reforms and investments to be completed by 2026. In particular, RRP are supposed to identify measures in policy areas of European relevance, structured in six pillars, deemed as key to achieving recovery from the Covid-19 crisis and to enhancing the long-term resilience of the EU and of its Member States (European Parliament and Council of the EU 2021: recital 10): (i) green transition; (ii) digital transformation; (iii) smart, sustainable and inclusive growth; (iv) social and territorial cohesion; (v) health, and economic, social and institutional resilience; and (vi) policies for the next generation, children and young people. In order to assess the adequacy of the RRP, a set of criteria have been established, including their contribution to the green and digital transitions and to the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR), as well as their consistency with the European Semester Country-specific Recommendations (CSRs) which the Member States received in previous years (European Parliament and Council of the EU 2021: recital 42).

Reforms and investments linked to the RRF's 'social and territorial cohesion' pillar are expected to help strengthen social dialogue in the Member States (European Parliament and Council of the EU 2021: recital 14); more generally, in drafting their RRP, the Member States have been asked to report on how they conducted consultations with relevant national stakeholders, including the social partners and civil society organisations.

1.2 State of the art: social partner involvement in the preparation of the national Recovery and Resilience Plans

The European Semester is intended to be a key institutional vehicle for implementation and monitoring of the Recovery and Resilience Facility at the EU level. The need to adapt the process to the features of the RRF, however, has entailed important changes to the Semester, including the temporary suspension of key elements of the process during the 2020 and 2021 cycles. Vanhercke and Verdun (2021, 2022) argue that the changes introduced in the 2021 Semester cycle have altered the roles of and the power balance between the (institutional and societal) players traditionally involved in the Semester at EU level. New players have subsequently emerged, while institutional EU ‘social actors’ – notably the European Commission’s Directorate General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion (DG EMPL), the Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council formation (EPSCO), the Employment Committee (EMCO) and the Social Protection Committee (SPC) – have to a large extent been sidelined (at least formally) from the initial governance of the RRF (Vanhercke *et al.* 2021). These actors, as well as the European social partners, were able to (re-)gain a role only at a later stage, partly by appealing to practices and procedures institutionalised in the Semester over the past decade. By contrast, EU civil society organisations and domestic social stakeholders remain largely sidelined in the new process (*ibid.*).

Available evidence on the involvement of domestic social stakeholders (both social partners and civil society organisations) in the preparation of the RRFs shows significant country-variation. Overall, however, a problematic situation seems to have emerged. Thus, drawing on an EU-wide survey (January 2021), the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) concluded that in most Member States, consultation processes with social stakeholders were ‘far from satisfactory in relation to the justified demands of civil society and even in relation to the terms set out in the RRF Regulation’ (EESC 2021: 5.1), although it is ‘acknowledged that progress has been made compared to the usual European Semester procedures’ (*ibid.*: 1.8). In a joint opinion, EMCO and SPC (2021: 14) also acknowledge that ‘significant concerns remain as regards practical aspects of social partners’ consultation in terms of transparency, timeliness, and meaningfulness, as well as with regard to its real impact on policymaking’. Importantly, a vast majority of BusinessEurope’s member federations in the Member States report that their involvement in the design of their countries’ national RRFs was somewhat insufficient, or even extremely limited (BusinessEurope 2021 cited in Vanhercke *et al.* 2021).

Based on the Commission assessments of RRFs, an ‘in-depth’ analysis of the involvement of stakeholders produced by the European Parliament (2021) confirms that all Member States undertook a public consultation, at least to some extent, during the preparation of their RRFs. The intensity and breadth of these consultations varied a great deal, however. The Commission Staff Working Documents (SWD) on the RRFs suggest that many Member States (such as Austria, Belgium, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Latvia,

Lithuania, Malta, Portugal and Slovakia) reported quite an extensive formal consultation process. Fewer Member States, however, point to specific proposals from stakeholders that are reflected in the RRP (but see Austria, Cyprus, Czechia, Germany, Latvia, Portugal and Slovakia). The EMCO and SPC (2021: 14) therefore suggest that ‘consulting social partners, governments could also systematically provide feedback as to how their proposals have been addressed’.

A recent report by Eurofound (2022) flags some new features of the RRP consultation process as distinct from previous National Reform Programme (NRP) consultations: different national authorities were involved, various meetings were organised and new mechanisms such as online consultation platforms were developed in order to involve the social actors. The same Eurofound study that assessed effective national social partner involvement in the preparation of the RRP nevertheless suggests that there is little room for optimism: generally speaking, there has been poor involvement of social partners in the drafting of the RRP, even in countries with strong social dialogue structures. Drawing on interviews (carried out by Eurofound’s network of national experts) with no less than 143 national social partner representatives (trade union and employer organisations) and government representatives, the EU agency identified only four countries in which both social partners stated that they were satisfied or partially satisfied with the outcome of their involvement in the development of measures. The quality of the involvement, as reported mainly by the social partners, was uneven and fairly weak in a relatively high number of countries. Thus, in most countries (15 in total), both employer organisations and trade unions said that they had not received an adequate response from the national authorities (Eurofound 2022: 32).

Clearly, this crucial aspect of the governance of the RRF needs to be studied more carefully: evidence of stakeholder involvement at the national level is patchy, at best. This is even more surprising in view of the wording of the RRF Regulation, which is rather ambitious, requiring:

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

At the same time, it should be underlined that the RRF Regulation refers to consultation ‘in accordance with the national legal framework’; in addition, the emphasis is on consultation during the preparation of the RRP: when it comes to their implementation, a summary of the consultation process is required only ‘where available’. The language is also quite flexible (for example, the way in which the consultation should be organised is left open) and enables a mix of speed and tailoring to different national circumstances: not all Member States have equally institutionalised roles for social partners and other stakeholders.

All in all, while some evidence exists of the involvement of national social partners in the preparation of the RRP, there is no research on their involvement in the implementation of the plans, also for obvious (timing) reasons. And yet, as reported by Eurofound (2022: 32), national social partners are strongly committed to improving the quality and intensity of their involvement in the implementation stage of the RRP. Accordingly, further analysis is needed with a view to properly monitoring such efforts.

1.3 The research: conceptual and methodological aspects

Against this background, the European Social Observatory (OSE) was asked by the European Trade Union Institute (ETUI) to conduct research investigating the quality of public consultations with trade unions regarding the implementation of the national Recovery and Resilience Plans of selected Member States. This is being done with a view to developing a framework to monitor the involvement of trade unions in the implementation of the RRP in the EU27.

To build an analytical framework for the present research, we draw on the findings of the Commission-funded project ‘Involvement of Trade Unions in the European Semester’ (INVOTUNES 2018-2019), in which the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) was an associate partner. The objective of INVOTUNES was to examine the involvement of national trade union organisations in both the European and national cycles of the European Semester. This analytical framework is adapted to the specificities of the RRF. Compared with the traditional Semester process, three features of the RRF appear particularly important to the present research and will probably affect the involvement of national stakeholders (including trade unions) in the implementation of the RRP. These features are as follows: (i) the availability and relative ‘weight’ of funds made available by the EU; (ii) the presence of strict timelines for implementing reforms and investments (with precise targets and milestones to be achieved); and (iii) the strong conditionality attached to funding (that is, the link between payments and the achievement of milestones and targets).

Besides these key novelties, however, important elements of continuity can be detected with the pre-RRF governance framework. These include, in particular: (i) the importance of the (renewed) European Semester as a vehicle for the implementation and monitoring of the RRP, together with implementation through ‘ordinary’ national policymaking procedures (including social dialogue); (ii) the close interaction between different levels of governance (EU and national levels); and (iii) the coexistence of ‘technical’ (evidence-based) and political elements in the drafting, implementation and assessment of the RRP.

These elements of continuity mean that the conceptual and analytical work done in INVOTUNES is still relevant as a baseline for the present research. This allows us to use some elements of the INVOTUNES analytical framework. This is notably the case for: (i) the definition of involvement and types of involvement; (ii) the

key dimensions affecting the involvement process; and (iii) several explanatory variables.

We adopt a specific definition of social partners' involvement, that is: 'a process entailing stakeholders' access to decision-making venues and procedures and an exchange of resources with policymakers (at least, information), possibly leading to an influence on the agenda setting, the outputs and outcomes of the policy process' (Sabato 2018: 7, bold in the original removed). Starting from that definition, we identify three types of involvement dynamics characterising interaction between public authorities and the social partners in settings such as the European Semester or the RRF (besides the possibility of a total lack of involvement):

- (i) *information exchange*, that is, the simple sharing of information and knowledge, which is a prerequisite for all other forms of involvement;
- (ii) *consultation*, that is, the possibility to express views on a proposal *before decisions are taken*, thus possibly contributing to the final output, but without being expressly tasked with making that decision (that is up to policymakers);
- (iii) *negotiation*, that is, the possibility to directly influence a decision, being among the actors tasked with decision-making and/or implementation.

Similarly, we will use as key dimensions for the present analysis a number of variables that, in INVOTUNES, proved particularly useful in order to understand the involvement of trade unions in the European Semester, and the quality of the process. These dimensions still appear relevant to an analysis of involvement in the implementation of the RRP, with due adaptations. Key dimensions for involvement are:

Actors and resources. The present research focuses on national trade union organisations at the confederal or sectoral level. Importantly, these actors may have access to varying types of resources, including (Spasova *et al.* 2020): (a) political and institutional resources; (b) organisational resources; (c) cognitive resources; (d) economic and financial resources; and (e) legal resources. In addition, while the focus is on national trade unions, it is important to consider that these organisations are coordinated at the EU level through the ETUC and are supported by the latter in their activities related to EU processes, such as the Semester and the RRF.

Interlocutors. National trade unions could be involved in the process of RRP implementation by both political and/or bureaucratic actors, at both the national (incl., regional/local) and European levels. Reaching the right interlocutor is obviously a key factor affecting the quality and meaningfulness of the involvement process and a key requisite for affecting RRP implementation.

Stage of the process. Besides key stages of the European Semester process, other activities monitoring the RRP implementation at the EU level include the annual Commission report on RRF implementation and the Recovery and Resilience Scoreboard. The implementation of specific measures included in national RRP follows an independent timeline: the calendar for achieving milestones and targets

has been agreed between EU institutions and the Member States and has an impact on the timing of the policy process at the domestic level. In addition, the procedures for approving the measures in the plans (and thus the actors involved) vary across Member States and, within Member States, across policy areas, depending on the distribution of competences and domestic institutional frameworks. All this adds an important element of complexity when trying to identify ‘the right stage’ of the process in which actors should be/seek to be involved.

Access channels. These are the venues and procedures where involvement takes place. In the Semester, national trade unions have (in most cases) access to various venues at both national and EU level. Recent analysis (Eurofound 2022) shows that, in many cases, venues and procedures for involvement already used in the framework of the Semester were also used to involve (consult or just inform) the social partners during the preparation of the RRP. In other cases, new venues and procedures were created for this purpose (*ibid.*). In addition to Semester-related access channels, implementation of RRP will take place through venues and procedures related to national policymaking, including social dialogue. The functioning of these access channels is key to the quality and effectiveness of trade unions’ involvement in the process. A number of aspects related to access channels appear particularly important in this respect, including time available to prepare consultations, the stated objectives of the iterations, the number and type of participants, and the resources that the various actors want to/can invest.

Impact of the involvement. In INVOTUNES, we started from the premise that the social partners’ objective in being involved in the Semester was to influence the process. Then, diving deeper into the notion of ‘influence’, we hypothesised that they could seek to influence three dimensions of the process: (a) agenda setting; (b) outputs; and (c) outcomes. With regard to RRP implementation, we can assume that agenda-setting will already have taken place: overall objectives have been defined at the EU level and the measures to be implemented are already in the RRP. This circumstance should be taken into consideration in this analysis insofar as it is likely to affect the involvement process and, in particular, the expectations and room for manoeuvre of the actors involved. Adding a further element of complexity, we also need to distinguish between influence on the overall implementation of the RRP and influence on the implementation of specific measures.

Finally, in INVOTUNES, several explanatory variables were used in order to understand the involvement dynamics, the quality of involvement and its consequences (Sabato 2020). In the present research, some of those variables still appear particularly relevant and can be used as contextual variables.¹ To assess national trade unions’ involvement in the implementation of the RRP, however, we also need other variables more specifically related to the RRP. In this respect, we will consider: (i) influence of trade unions on the development of RRP; and

1. These variables are related to the institutional settings for involvement, notably: (i) access points to the Semester (at national and EU level); and (ii) access points to national policymaking (including, crucially, the state of social dialogue).

(ii) relative importance of EU funding from the RRF at the national level (funding allocated to each endorsed RRP as a share of a Member State's GDP).

We used these two variables in order to select case studies for more in-depth analysis. Notably, in order to allow some degree of generalisation, we selected countries showing differences in these variables. The most comprehensive information on the first variable is provided by Eurofound (2022: 14-15) which classifies the self-assessments by national social partners (trade unions and business organisations) and the national authorities. These assessments may be different for the various actors in some countries. We base ourselves on the Eurofound classification, reflecting assessments of social partner influence with which the national trade unions involved in the Eurofound research agree. As for the second variable, we rely on data provided by the European Commission in the Recovery and Resilience Scoreboard (European Commission, n.d.), reporting up-to-date data on RRF funds allocated to each endorsed RRP, both in absolute terms and as a share of Member State GDP. Combining the two variables, we obtain the matrix in Table 1 which allows us to proceed to case study selection.

Table 1 Case study selection: social partner influence and importance of RRF funding

Importance of RRF funding	Social partner influence		
	Significant	Limited / relative	No influence
More than 6% of GDP		BG, PT, (PL)	HR, RO, SK
Between 3% – 6% of GDP		CY, CZ, (HU), EE, ES, LT, LV	(HU)
Below/equal to 3% of GDP	DK, FI, MT	BE, FR, SE	AT, DE, IE, LU

Notes: Only countries for which information was available in Eurofound (2020) and European Commission (n.d.) have been included in this table. Consequently, the following countries are not included: Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, and Slovenia. Hungary appears in two categories because Hungarian trade unions involved in the Eurofound research have expressed different opinions. Hungary and Poland are in brackets because the respective RRFs had not been endorsed at the time of the submission of the present research proposal.

Source: Authors' elaboration based on Eurofound (2022) and European Commission (n.d.). (On the basis of data available on 13 May 2022.)

Trying to obtain maximum variation alongside the two dimensions reflected in the table – while considering the presence of different models of industrial relations, as well as the language competences of the research team – we have identified the following countries for in-depth analysis: Bulgaria, Denmark, France, Germany, Slovakia and Spain. In addition to these six countries, it appears particularly interesting to add Italy, given the size of the country and the high RRF funding received.²

For each of the seven countries identified, in-depth analyses have been conducted using qualitative research methods, mostly the analysis of policy documents produced by EU and national authorities and the social partners themselves and of relevant scientific and secondary literature dealing with stakeholders'

2. Indeed, the country does not appear in Table 1 because no information on the specific aspect of social partners' influence on the development of the national RRP could be detected in the Eurofound (2022) study.

involvement in the preparation and implementation of the RRP. In addition, we have conducted a number of interviews with key players at both national and EU level.

When collecting evidence and mapping national practices of national trade union involvement in the implementation of the RRP, it is important to consider that these plans include a multitude of measures (reforms and investments) in different policy domains. While in the analysis of the seven country-case studies we focus on involvement in overall implementation of the whole RRP, information on involvement in the implementation of specific policy measures has also been reported, when relevant.

1.4 Structure of the report

The remainder of this paper reports on the results of the empirical analysis. Notably, for each of the seven countries selected, we provide:

- a description of the main elements of the national RRP;
- an overview of national social partners' involvement in the preparation of the RRP (with a focus on trade unions);
- an overview of the planned venues and procedures for the implementation of the RRP and an assessment of their functioning, with a focus on arrangements for the involvement of the social partners; and
- a summary of the main country-specific findings.

The final Section draws some general conclusions, based on a comparative reading of the findings of the seven case studies.

The empirical work for this study – based on desk research and semi-structured in-depth interviews – was conducted between June and December 2022. The key documents analysed for the research include national RRP, the Commission Staff Working Documents assessing the RRP of the seven Member States, a report by Eurofound (2022) on the 'Involvement of social partners in the national Recovery and Resilience plans', and a Resolution of the European Economic and Social Committee on the 'Involvement of Organised Civil Society in the National Recovery and Resilience Plans' (EESC 2021). In addition, our analysis refers to 18 interviews with 23 key players knowledgeable on the topic of this research,³ including representatives of national trade unions (11 respondents), officials from national ministries (six respondents), and European Commission officials (six respondents) (see Table 2).

3. In some cases, more than one person was interviewed at once: (i) two trade unionists for the Danish case study; (ii) two national officials for the German case study; (iii) two trade unionists and two Commission officials for the Italian case study; and (iv) two national officials for the Slovak case study.

Table 2 List of interviews with trade union representatives

Country	Code in the text	Institution/organisation	Date
Bulgaria	Interview – TU1	National trade union	18/10/2022
Bulgaria	Interview – EC1	European Commission	28/10/2022
Denmark	Interview – TU2	National trade union	28/12/2022
Denmark	Interview – TU3	National trade union	28/12/2022
Denmark	Interview – ADM1	National Ministry	15/12/2022
France	Interview – TU4	National trade union	26/07/2022
France	Interview – TU5	National trade union	28/07/2022
France	Interview – TU6	National trade union	01/09/2022
France	Interview – EC2	European Commission	06/12/2022
Germany	Interview – TU7	National trade union	20/07/2022
Germany	Interview – ADM2	Federal Ministry	04/11/2022
Germany	Interview – ADM3	Federal Ministry	04/11/2022
Italy	Interview – TU8	National trade union	30/08/2022
Italy	Interview – TU9	National trade union	30/08/2022
Italy	Interview – EC3	European Commission	14/12/2022
Italy	Interview – EC4	European Commission	14/12/2022
Slovakia	Interview – TU10	National trade union	01/09/2022
Slovakia	Interview – ADM4	National Ministry	02/11/2022
Slovakia	Interview – ADM5	National Ministry	02/11/2022
Slovakia	Interview – EC6	European Commission	03/11/2022
Spain	Interview – TU11	National trade union	12/09/2022
Spain	Interview – EC7	European Commission	05/12/2022
Spain	Interview – ADM6	National Ministry	13/12/2022

Overall, the number of interviews conducted varied between the countries in our sample. We conducted: (i) two interviews with two respondents for Bulgaria; (ii) two interviews with three respondents for Denmark; (iii) four interviews with four respondents for France; (iv) two interviews with three respondents for Germany; (v) two interviews with four respondents for Italy; (vi) three interviews with four respondents for Slovakia; and (vii) three interviews with three respondents for Spain.

Triangulating the views of these different actors and the findings from the desk research, we can provide a sufficiently comprehensive illustration and assessment of the situation in the seven countries analysed.

2. Bulgaria

Bulgaria will be one of the largest beneficiaries of the RRF, at an estimated cost of 6.9 billion euros. The country submitted its RRP in October 2022 while most of the Member States submitted their plans in April–May 2021. This is largely because Bulgaria went through a period of political instability.⁴ This situation obviously has an impact on the results of this research, as Bulgaria has not yet started implementing its RRP and our interviewees have provided only estimations on how this process will unfold. Although these are only expectations of trade union involvement in RRP implementation, they can be considered of high relevance as they correspond to the pattern of involvement during the Covid-19 pandemic and in the preparation of the RRP. Moreover, Bulgaria has a highly institutionalised system of consultation with the social partners through the National Council of Tripartite Cooperation (NCTC) – although there have been political tensions in the past (Spasova and Tomini 2013; Spasova 2023) – and this is expected to guarantee the involvement of the social partners.

In the rest of this Section, we first provide some general information on the measures included in the Bulgarian RRP and especially on those concerning areas within the remit of the trade unions (for example, labour market and social policies). Second, we look at how the trade unions were involved in the preparation of the RRP. Third, based on our interviews and on involvement in the period preceding the submission of the RRP (keeping in mind that implementation of the plan has not yet started) we present our expectations concerning the future involvement process.

2.1 Background: key elements of the Bulgarian RRP

As already mentioned, the funding allocated to Bulgaria through the Recovery and Resilience Facility amounts to 6.9 billion euros, corresponding to 9.23 per cent of GDP in 2021 (European Commission 2022). In this respect, Bulgaria is among the most significant beneficiaries of the RRF. The national RRP is ambitious and comprehensive, geared towards addressing the long-standing challenges and systemic weaknesses of Bulgaria's economy (European Commission 2022). The plan is designed to have a long-lasting impact and builds on the national development programme 'BULGARIA 2030', which sets strategic objectives

4. Legislative elections were held three times in 2021 and once in 2022 (Central Committee of Elections: <https://results.cik.bg/>). There were four changes of government during the period 2021–2022.

such as accelerated economic development, demographic increase and tackling inequalities (*ibid.*). The RRP also highlights clearly that the measures are aimed at addressing key Country-specific Recommendations from the previous European Semester cycles, linked to decarbonisation of the economy, creating a sound business environment, fighting corruption, fighting poverty and social exclusion and striving to upskill the population and the labour force in light of the digital transition (Council of Ministers of Republic of Bulgaria 2022). As far as the RRF targets are concerned, the plan goes beyond the climate target, because this area receives 58.9 per cent of the funding (compared with the RRF target of 37 per cent). It also exceeds the digital objective of 20 per cent, proposing measures accounting for 25.8 per cent (1.6 billion euros) (Council of Ministers of Republic of Bulgaria 2022; European Commission 2022). The plan also has an important social aspect aimed at addressing key challenges (see below).

The Bulgarian RRP is structured around four policy pillars: (i) innovation; (ii) green transition; (iii) connectivity; and (iv) fairness. It contains more than 100 measures (investments and reforms), grouped in twelve components (European Commission 2022). There will therefore be several measures for the trade unions to follow closely and, more generally, this plan (if implemented as described) would bring major changes in Bulgarian economic, social, and judicial policies.

In the key area of the green transition, it should be noted that Bulgaria has the most energy-intensive economy in the EU. Energy efficiency will become more important in the process of decarbonisation. Moreover, the phasing-out of coal is expected to have a huge socio-economic impact. For the moment, 43 per cent of electricity is produced by indigenous lignite and brown coal-fired power plants; this means that an important pool of workers will be affected by the phasing-out, which is of vital importance for the trade unions (European Commission 2022) because they have a large pool of members and high collective bargaining coverage in mines. Both Bulgarian trade union confederations have been very active on this matter and have strongly emphasised the need to prepare for a just transition to a low-carbon economy, the issue of access to the latest technologies at European level, as well as the creation of a flexible set of state aid rules linked to investments to achieve the objectives of the European Green Deal (Spasova 2023). The measures in the plan on reskilling and job creation will be extremely important for the trade unions, and the social partners in general.

The Bulgarian RRP also highlights several reforms in the social policy area that closely concern the trade unions, such as those aimed at improving the adequacy and coverage of the minimum income scheme, and measures to move forward the integration of employment, social and long-term care services, development of the social economy and inclusion of people with disabilities. Moreover, the plan also aims at modernising the Agency for Employment and the Agency for Social Assistance (Council of Ministers of Republic of Bulgaria 2022).

The Bulgarian RRP also contains measures to enhance education and skills, lifelong learning and vocational training, linked to the digital target.

2.2 Involvement of Bulgarian trade unions in the preparation of the RRP

In Bulgaria, consultation of the social partners on the preparation of the RRP took place mainly through well-established institutional settings, such as the NCTC, at least during some phases of the elaboration process. According to the European Commission's (2022: 33) assessment, the Bulgarian government held consultations with a wide range of stakeholders and civil society organisations while drafting the RRP. For the first draft of the plan, the Bulgarian government gathered more than 90 written positions from a broad spectrum of actors, including social partners. The government conducted a second round of consultations on more targeted issues, at which stage social partners were more involved than in the previous round and provided valuable input to the plan regarding labour market and social inclusion (*ibid.*). The Commission also notes that a bottom-up approach was taken in drafting the plan. Various stakeholders participated in the meeting with the government and shared written comments on the structure of the RRP (European Commission 2022: 74). In addition to the consultation carried out by the government, the Bulgarian Parliament was very active in exchanging viewpoints with civil society, entrepreneurs and social partners.

Eurofound's (2022: 6) assessment reaches similar conclusions. Bulgarian social partners were involved in elaborating the RRP through 'well-established' institutional venues. National trade unions report that they were involved in the consultation from the beginning. In the end, social partners were 'very satisfied' with the time allotted and 'partially satisfied' with the quality of the process (Eurofound 2022: 9). But while some trade unions gave overall positive feedback on the quality of the process, the employer organisations found the process unbalanced (*ibid.*: 13). The Eurofound report highlights that the trade unions were more involved than employer associations during the consultation (*ibid.*: 17).

Although the social partners were involved in the consultation process, they agree that they had limited influence on the preparation of the RRP, and especially that they did not receive any feedback from the authorities on their proposals. As highlighted by Eurofound (2022), however, it should be noted that the national RRP were produced with some urgency, encouraged by the Commission (*ibid.*: 31). This circumstance did not give enough leeway and time for the consultation process. Moreover, the unstable political situation in Bulgaria was an additional challenge.

At the same time, several trade union proposals were included in the final draft of the Bulgarian RRP. It is indeed reported that, for the first time, a significant number of the social partners' proposals for improving the plan are reflected in the final version. This finding seems consistent with the results of previous research showing satisfactory involvement of the social partners in the European Semester (Eurofound 2022: 24, Tomev *et al.* 2019). The European Economic and Social Committee confirms these findings, ranking Bulgaria among the countries in which social partners and civil society stakeholders had an impact on the final draft of the plan (EESC 2021: 4).

In some countries, the preparation of the RRP led to some new features compared with the process of drawing up the Semester's National Reform Programmes, including in Bulgaria. The Bulgarian government widened the consultation to a larger range of stakeholders beyond the social partners, and these consultations took place through government e-platforms. Additionally, the social partners have reported some changes in the discussion procedures compared with the processes for drawing up the NRPs (Eurofound 2022).

It should be highlighted that trade unions in Bulgaria are open to working with civil society organisations. Bulgarian union confederations always emphasise their own significance not only as workers' organisations, but also as broader organisations playing an important role in civil society. For instance, the president of CITUB often underlines that it is the largest 'non-governmental/public organisation' in Bulgaria. What is more, CITUB has accepted associate member unions that represent a wide range of interests, from craft, small 'entrepreneur unions' such as hairdressers and artists to civil society organisations representing, for example, disabled people and, since 2019, a union representing the financial sector.

2.3 Involvement of Bulgarian trade unions in implementing the national RRP

As already stated, the Bulgarian RRP was submitted after a significant delay compared with the rest of the Member States and the implementation of the plan has not yet started. At the time of writing,⁵ the authors had been able to conduct two interviews: one with a representative of a national trade union⁶ and one with an official of the European Commission. Before focussing on the findings of these interviews, we should briefly explain the governance of the RRP implementation process in Bulgaria. Four horizontal and complementary structures oversee the process. These structures complement each other and report to the Finance Ministry, which is in charge of the overall implementation of the RRF (European Commission 2022: 33):

- (i) the National Fund Directorate collects and reports data on the implementation of the RRF and works in conjunction with the European Commission;
- (ii) the Economic and Financial Policy Directorate reports on progress towards milestones in the context of the European Semester;
- (iii) the Central Coordination Unit Directorate is responsible for the development of the plan;
- (iv) the Audit of EU funds carries out the audit work under the RRF.

The national RRP is structured so as to complement projects financed through other EU funds. The Bulgarian plan thus describes complementarities and synergies with other EU funds, including ESF+, ERDF and the Cohesion Fund.

5. End of October 2022.

6. The representative of the national trade union gathered information from colleagues who were involved in the elaboration process of the Plan and normally will be involved in its implementation through the NCTC.

This is likely to have a significant impact on the Bulgarian economy, as the country is one of the main beneficiaries of EU funds, measured as a share of GDP, over the financing period 2021–2027. Several reforms and investments in the RRP are complementary to investments financed by the ESF+. ESF+ interventions are expected to focus on strengthening the quality and inclusiveness of education and training, as well as access to employment, upskilling and reskilling measures and on actions to improve the capacity and effectiveness of public employment services and social services, thus complementing a significant subset of measures in the RRP. Complementarities, then, are expected in the areas of education and training, provision of employment and social services, including long-term care, and health care, including the provision of outpatient care across the territory of Bulgaria. The RRP will also complement investments planned with support from the ERDF, the Cohesion Fund and the Just Transition Fund (JTF), notably in the areas of environment, transport, regional development, health and energy (European Commission 2022: 30–33).

The trade union representative interviewed for this research confirmed the Eurofound findings and the Commission reports on trade union involvement in the process of developing the RRP (see Section 2.2). The interviewee also highlighted that the trade unions, indeed, expect to be consulted through the well-institutionalised consultation process in NCTC on measures within their remit, such as climate-related measures which will have an impact on the workforce, those linked to fairness and social inclusion and upskilling and education in the digital area. The interviewee also explained that the social dialogue with the government is very good and has improved substantially over the years (Interview – TU1). It should be noted that during the Great Recession (and even before) the social dialogue within the NCTC suffered some significant political setbacks (see Bernaciak 2013; Spasova 2023). Besides this institutionalised channel, the interviewee also confirmed that there have been several informal meetings between the social partners/trade unions and the public authorities in charge and that the current context shows that such meetings will continue during the implementation phase. The trade unionist contacted for this research does not expect the political changes (a new government is currently under negotiation in October 2022) to have a significant impact, as the administration will most likely remain the same (Interview – TU 1).

The trade unions recognise that the RRP is of fundamental importance regarding the most significant social-economic and climate challenges facing Bulgaria, such as poverty, access to high-quality and adequate social services, improvement of the administration, judicial and business environment, reform of the health-care system, including fighting corruption, as well as the decarbonisation of the economy. In this respect, the unions have been very active in proposing measures and intend to be active in the implementation process. According to the trade union representative interviewed, one example that shows the trade unions' proactive attitude in the area of the green transition is the creation in February 2021 of the Institute for Sustainable Transition and Development (as part of Thrace University – Stara Zagora). According to our interviewee, the idea to create the Institute stemmed from the trade unions (Interview – TU1). This information has not been triangulated, but the trade unions have indeed initiated several

institutions in recent Bulgarian history (see Spasova 2015; Spasova and Tomini 2013; Spasova 2023).

The Institute will carry out research into new industrial technologies, biotechnologies, energy systems and security of supply, digitisation and smart networks in urban environments, mining, agriculture and forestry, and electromobility. Research groups will work on projects from national and international scientific programmes, prepare forecasts and strategies for the development of the regional and national economy. In this respect, the Institute is already involved in several European research projects. Its founding members include both trade unions, the two biggest employers' organisations (AIKP and BSK), the Ministry of Energy and the Ministry of Education and Science, Thrace University, the Technical University of Sofia, the Mining-Geological University 'SV Ivan Rilski', and others. The social partners, the ministries and the other institutions also have representatives on the steering committee. The external partners include Bulgarian research bodies, municipalities, several international structures working on climate and environmental issues, such as the International Renewable Energy Agency, as well as research structures, such as the Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS).

A Commission official we interviewed also confirmed that the trade unions exhibited a very proactive attitude during the preparation of the national RRP, especially on issues linked to the green transition, and that this has continued in preparation for consultations on implementation. The trade unions have been active in the media, with expert proposals, and have also been included in the Consultative Committee on the Green Deal⁷ of the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Bulgaria (Interview – EC1). The interviewee mentioned that the unions are willing to accept important changes linked to some of the measures on decarbonisation which directly impact their affiliates in the mines. More generally, the Commission official confirmed (from observation) that the social partners have been closely involved by the national authorities. As for the role of the European Commission, the Commission official highlighted that the process of drafting the RRP differed to some extent from the process of drawing up the National Reform Programmes during the European Semester, as the European Commission had to play a neutral role without intervening in the process. Thus, it could not conduct fact-finding missions, as in the context of the Semester. Our interviewee claimed, however, that the implementation process will be much more open: for example, there will be an annual event and a working lunch regarding implementation of the plan, during which the social partners will be able to express their views on measures of interest to them. More generally, the Commission official highlighted that she/he has good and long-standing collaboration with the social partners, follows their opinions in the public arena, and has regular meetings with them during the European Semester (see also Tomev *et al.* 2019). The official believed that the

7. This Committee was created in 2020 by the Council of Ministers as a forum for consultation on the measures linked to the Green Deal. It is made up of subgroups such as the Committee on Energy Transition and the Committee on Sustainable Mobility, and contains representatives of different ministries, the social partners and academic institutions. To date (October 2022), the Committee has met twice.

same process would continue in the following years during implementation of the plan (Interview – EC1).

2.4 Key findings

The available sources on the involvement of the Bulgarian trade unions in the preparation of the RRP emphasise that the unions are satisfied with the process and that they have to some extent even influenced the contents of some parts of the plan. The Bulgarian RRP does not mention explicitly any dedicated structures/procedures for involving the social partners in the implementation stage. But evidence from the elaboration process and interview findings lead us to believe that the following developments are to be expected.

First, the history of contemporary trade unionism in Bulgaria has revolved around Bulgarian trade unions building up institutions. They have done this in order to legitimise their role in Bulgarian political and economic life, often in reaction to hostile governments, and using the European level as an essential resource (Spasova 2015, 2023). The preparation of the RRP is proof of this, as the NCTC has been an essential channel for consultation, even in a context of political and economic instability and despite all the issues this institution has encountered during recent decades. In the case of implementation of the plan, the trade unions and (more broadly) the social partners will be consulted mainly through the NCTC regarding areas within their remit.

Second, similarly to the importance of the institutions, because the public authorities opened up the consultation process for preparation of the RRP to a large variety of stakeholders, the social partners – and especially the trade unions – are expected to collaborate with representatives of non-governmental organisations within the Economic and Social Council of Bulgaria, a consultative body bringing together the social partners and other third parties (such as NGOs). Moreover, some ad hoc alliances with NGOs are expected, as was the case regarding European Semester matters (see Tomev *et al.* 2019) and on other issues, such as pension reform (Spasova 2023).

Third, the trade unions are still actively involved with new institutions such as the Institute for Sustainable Transition and Development. This Institute is expected to provide not only expertise on the key challenges regarding the Bulgarian climate transition and the relevant measures in the plan, but it will also act as a forum for discussions between social partners, public authorities and other stakeholders (research and local decision-makers). Thus, by their involvement in such structures, the trade unions can provide ideas and exert influence on key challenges that concern their members directly, such as restructuring resulting from the decarbonisation process.

3. Denmark

3.1 Background: key elements of the Danish RRP

The Covid-19 pandemic affected Denmark less than other EU Member States: the pandemic hit at a later stage, and the Danish industrial and societal system proved remarkably resilient (European Commission 2021a: 6). According to the European Commission (*ibid.*: 2), the country's real GDP contracted by 2.7 per cent in 2020, while, in the same year, the unemployment rate increased to 5.8 per cent. Although the Danish government provided an efficient and timely fiscal stimulus to tackle the downturn triggered by the pandemic, in 2020 the country experienced the smallest budget deficit of the EU Member States, at 1.1 per cent of GDP (European Commission 2021a: 2).

To tackle the challenges presented by the pandemic, the Danish government received 1.5 billion euros for its RRP, corresponding to 0.46 per cent of the country's 2021 GDP (European Commission n.d.). The plan is built around three pillars: (i) accelerating the green transition through targeted investment in infrastructure, sustainable transport mobility, green tax, and research and development in renewable energies; (ii) supporting the digital transition; and (iii) increasing the resilience of the health-care system.

The Danish RRF is structured around seven components and consists of 39 measures intended to support the country's recovery. According to the European Commission (2021a: 3), the RRF addresses the Country-specific Recommendations made to Denmark and the structural problems of the Danish economy.

Moreover, the Danish RRP has established a 'digital partnership' made up of business managers, local authorities (municipalities and regions), academics and social partners to promote and develop a digital strategy for the country (European Commission 2021a: 27).

3.2 Involvement of Danish trade unions in the preparation of the RRP

In Denmark, the consultation process for preparing the RRP started in January 2021. According to information provided by the European Commission (2021a: 23), the Danish government consulted a wide range of actors at various stages of drawing up the plan. According to the investigation conducted by Eurofound,

the involvement process in Denmark took the form of ad hoc tripartite/bipartite consultations or discussions in specific working groups, where social partner sectoral organisations – and not national confederations – were involved in the consultation process (Eurofound 2022: 6). Discussions were held before the plan's final draft in well-defined settings: specific venues were established to obtain input from the actors involved, such as national 'restart teams' and climate partnerships (*ibid.*). An interviewee from the national administration has confirmed that the RRP was largely based on the ideas of the 'restart teams' covering the different policy areas. These ideas were compiled and a revised version was submitted to the Danish government for setting the national priorities (Interview – ADM1). This so-called Stimulus Package (a full list of the initiatives for the restart of the Danish economy) was further negotiated with the European Commission in terms of finance distribution (between national and EU funds). Thus, in the end, some of the suggested initiatives were financed with national funds, while others were financed from the RRF (Interview – ADM1).

The RRP took into account inputs from eight green restart teams, which included representatives from the business sector and the trade unions. According to the European Commission (2021a: 23), the teams debated possible initiatives and measures to be included in the plan. The RRP also drew on recommendations from 13 climate partnerships of enterprises and trade unions, tasked with providing green solutions and strengthening the competitiveness of Danish industry. Proposals from the 'restart teams' and climate partnerships helped the government draft the plan and were then discussed in the Danish parliament (Council of the European Union 2021: 23).

On top of that, the Danish government organised an event for civil society stakeholders and the social partners, in which the Commission representation in Copenhagen also participated. The European Commission paints a positive picture of the process of drafting the plan and the consultation, concluding that Denmark has fulfilled all the obligations of the RRF Regulation in this respect (European Commission 2021a: 23). Nevertheless, as it emerges from the Eurofound (2022) research, in Denmark, similarly to other EU Member States, different actors refer to a different number of meetings aimed at involving the social partners in the process. For example, while the public authorities state that three or more meetings were held, trade unions report only two meetings (Eurofound 2022: 10). Differences also emerge in national social partners' satisfaction with the time allotted for consultation: while employer organisations claimed that not enough time was provided for the consultations, the trade unions were satisfied with it (Eurofound 2022: 11).

The same report highlights that social partners significantly influenced the development and elaboration of the RRP (Eurofound 2022: 15). The national authorities interviewed by Eurofound also confirmed the impact of trade unions on elaborating the plan, indicating that the social partners had significant influence on the final draft of the RRP (*ibid.*). This is in line with trade unions' perception of their influence on development of the RRP, while information on the employers' perception is lacking (Eurofound 2022: 15). Furthermore, while Danish trade unions have expressed their agreement with the contents of the social and labour

measures in the national RRP, employer organisations have indicated only partial agreement. According to our interviews, the process of consulting trade unions largely took place at local level. This has also impacted the unions' perceptions of their involvement in the design process of the RRP, which depend on who you ask about the subject (Interviews – TU2, TU3, Interview – ADM1). Trade union criticisms include the point that insufficient priority was given to projects related to the labour market and education. The topics the trade unions would have liked to prioritise are indeed lifelong learning and the involvement of trade union representatives in the green transition and digitalisation (Interviews – TU2, TU3). One of the officials interviewed, however, highlighted the limitations of such thematic projects because of the ongoing costs which would be involved in sustaining projects related to the labour market and education, in which trade unions would naturally be more involved.

Last but not least, the European Economic and Social Committee draws a more nuanced picture of stakeholders' involvement in the preparation of the Danish RRP. According to the EESC (2021: 4), civil society stakeholders were not involved in the process.

3.3 Involvement of Danish trade unions in implementing the national RRP

The ministry in charge of implementation of the Danish RRP is the Finance Ministry, which will also oversee coordination between the different levels of governance and exchanges with European Institutions (European Commission 2021a: 22).

While the Finance Ministry will coordinate and monitor implementation of the whole plan, each ministry will take responsibility for implementation of specific components of the plan falling under their responsibility.

Besides this, however, the Danish RRP does not foresee any institutional channel or venues for implementation. The plan states that the relevant stakeholders will 'play a central role in the implementation of many aspects of the RRP', especially via discussions with civil society over the use of funds and their potential applications for project funding from the RRP, for which they are eligible applicants (Government of Denmark 2021: 232). The RRF funds are directly channelled into the ministries' annual budgets, which makes monitoring expenditure rather difficult (Interviews – TU2, TU3; Interview – ADM1). This is especially true because of the joint financing of projects (RRF and national funds). Twice a year in Denmark, there is an update on the progress of the European Semester, also involving business organisations and trade unions. This initiative has been coupled with updates on the status of the RRP.

During a roundtable held on 11 March 2022 in Copenhagen⁸ on the next steps for the implementation of the Danish RRP, the social partners and civil society stakeholders emphasised that the procedure for consultation in the framework of the RRP must interact with those in place for involvement in the European Semester. The Semester procedure is given as an example of a good opportunity for engaging in fruitful dialogue with organised civil society. Moreover, the participants noted that the consultation in the Semester process has worked better, with greater involvement, than the current system for the RRP.

3.4 Key findings

The available sources seem to agree that Danish trade unions were involved in the preparation of the RRP and that they may have influenced to some extent the content of some parts of the plan. They were involved through ad-hoc bipartite or tripartite venues, and an important role was played by thematic and sectoral ‘restart teams’, including social partner representatives. Trade unions and employers’ organisations have, however, expressed different levels of satisfaction with some key elements of their involvement in drafting the RRP, such as the time allotted for consultations, their impact and their satisfaction with the final contents of the plan. These diverging views are due, in part, to the nature of the funded projects (which required stronger involvement from business organisations than from trade unions) and, to a larger extent, to the decentralised consultation process, which has not reached all interested parties in an equal manner. Nevertheless, this in no way implies limited trade union involvement in the elaboration process: the features of this involvement range between what we have defined as consultation and negotiation.

Those social partners who are not satisfied in some way with the follow-up to the RRP progress have suggested that the European Semester process has so far worked quite well, hence, consideration should be given to further integrating the consultation and follow-up process for the RRP with the European Semester process. This has been the case in some ways, as the institutions are supposed to provide a progress report on the RRP twice a year, along with information on the European Semester.

Last but not least, the case of Denmark suggests that management of the funding depends a lot on its overall importance for the budget and the estimated bureaucratic burden. In addition, managing the RRP funding as part of the ministries’ annual budgets (so as not to create additional structures for it, thus avoiding an additional administrative burden) does not allow much scrutiny by the social partners of the spending of the RRF funding, over and above the system already in place for monitoring national funds. Finally, there was agreement on the fact that ‘the good experiences from the Semester process should also be used in the RRF process, especially as the RRF and the Semester are very closely

8. The roundtable was held between representatives of the EESC, the Danish employers’ side (Confederation of Danish Industry), the workers’ side, Diversity Europe and the European Commission. From the workers’ side, FH, HK, 3F and DLF took part in the roundtable.

linked' (Preliminary Conclusions, Notes, Minutes of the Copenhagen Round Table 11 March 2022).

4. France

4.1 Background: key elements of the French RRP

The stated objectives of the French Recovery and Resilience Plan are to pursue the green transition, foster competitiveness of the French economy and strengthen the social and territorial cohesion of the country. The French RRP has an estimated cost of 40.95 billion euros, corresponding to 1.57 per cent of the country's 2021 GDP (European Commission n.d.), and it is intended to pursue three key priorities (Government of France 2021: 14–15): (i) the green transition; (ii) competitiveness; and (iii) social and territorial cohesion. The plan is structured around nine components (Government of France 2021): (a) renovation of buildings; (b) environment and biodiversity; (c) green infrastructure and mobility; (d) green energy and technologies; (e) business support; (f) technological sovereignty and resilience; (g) digitalisation of the state, territories, businesses and support to the cultural sector; (h) employment support, young people, disability, professional training; and (i) research, health, and territorial cohesion. In particular, as noted by the European Commission (2021b: 3), four of these components are directly linked to environmental and climate action. Together, the components of the RRP are expected to address France's structural challenges, exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic.

The investments and reforms planned under the RRP are part of a broader recovery plan called 'France Relance', adopted by the French Parliament as part of the 2021 budget bill. The France Relance plan was developed in 2020 and was meant to constitute an immediate reaction to the Covid-19 pandemic, mostly through investment and subsidies to relaunch the French economy. The expected cost of the France Relance plan was 100 billion euros, of which 40 billion euros will then be refinanced through the RRF. While the overall priorities and action for the recovery were already set out in the France Relance plan, specific investment and reforms were included in the RRP. That said, although 40 billion euros for financing the national RRP are coming from European funds, a French trade unionist suggested that the French government communication focuses on the national dimension of the funds: 'While discussing in trade union circles, everybody knows that these funds are coming from European finance, but the government presents the plan itself as a national scheme' (Interview – TU4). Other trade unions confirmed this perspective: while recognising the importance for France of the funds from the RRF, French trade unions point to a lack of proper communication from the national government.

The fact that Next Generation EU is financed by the European Union through common debt is recognised as a significant step forward by French trade unions, coming after what is perceived as a decade of austerity messages from the EU. However, these trade unions insisted during the interviews on the need for more targeted investments in the French RRP: according to the trade unionists interviewed, greater involvement of the trade unions in the drafting of the RRP and a genuine social dialogue could have been helpful to guide the government in this respect.

Overall, trade unions were expecting to be more involved in the preparation and implementation of the plan. According to one of our interviewees, however, even if they had hoped for more genuine public dialogue, it was at least good to have the trade union position annexed to the plan. The interviewee stated that the government did not listen to the unions' demands, so the annex solution was at least a good compromise. That said, another interviewee had a more radical viewpoint, maintaining that while it was a good thing to include the views of the unions in an annex, this did not change their negative assessment of the overall quality of the process.

4.2 Involvement of French trade unions in the preparation of the RRP

According to various sources, the drafting of the French RRP involved several consultations with stakeholders from civil society and the social partners. A report published by Eurofound (2022: 6) concludes that French social partners were involved in the RRP through 'well-established institutional venues' (tripartite or bipartite bodies), 'at least during some phases of the consultation process'.

The French RRP was prepared by the Ministry of Economy, Finance and Recovery – in coordination with the Ministries responsible for policy areas developed in each component (European Commission 2021b: 26) – and the same Ministry conducted stakeholders' consultations on the plan (Government of France 2021: 720). When it comes, more specifically, to exchanges with the social partners, two institutional bodies played a key role (Government of France 2021: 721; Eurofound 2022: 6): (i) the Comité du dialogue social pour les questions européennes et internationales (CDSEI – Social Dialogue Committee for European and International Issues), a consultative body under the Ministry for Social Relations; and (ii) the Conseil économique, social et environnemental (CESE – Economic, Social and Environmental Council), a body whose powers are defined by the French Constitution and which is made up of 233 members representing social, civic, and environmental stakeholders. These interactions between the social partners and national authorities started from the initial stage

of the preparation of the RRP – that is, in 2020 – and involved more meetings than in other countries considered in the Eurofound (2022: 9–10) study.⁹

According to Eurofound (2022: 11), both trade unions and employers' organisations agree that the time allotted for participating in the assessment or development of the RRP was sufficient. According to the trade union representatives we interviewed, however, the trade unions did not have enough time to prepare properly for the meetings with national authorities, and not enough time was allotted to discussing their positions. Furthermore, Eurofound (*ibid.*) highlights the absence of a proper response from the government. This was confirmed by one of our interviewees, who explained that there was no further feedback from the government or further discussion following the initial consultations. All in all, the same Eurofound study reports a lack of genuine participation of the social partners: the exchanges between trade unions and the government took place only after decisions had already been taken (Eurofound 2022: 12).

Trade unionists interviewed for this research describe this situation as 'frustrating'. All French trade unions stated that it was difficult to enter into an appropriate dialogue with the government and monitor the development of the drafting of the plan. As one of our interviewees put it: 'We have been involved [in the preparation of the plan] but the question is how do you define involvement. In France we have a framework [for involvement], a very nice framework but, when you go beyond the [formal] framework, you can see that it's really difficult to have real involvement in the preparation of the plan and in the implementation' (Interview – TU4).

French trade union representatives stressed a number of shortcomings in the involvement process. First, they referred to a top-down process and claimed to have been consulted only once the political decision had already been taken. As one of our interviewees claims, there was '[a] consultation [with trade unions] on specific measures but not on the global architecture and general objectives of the plan' (Interview – TU5). Second, interviewees point out that the consultation process was very fragmented: there were different levels of involvement, with a lack of coordination and transparency. The decentralisation and multi-level governance of the plan made it very difficult for trade unions to interact with the government and have proper social dialogue. As one trade unionist highlights, 'the fragmentation and the lack of transparency of the process made it challenging to know what had been done at another level and by whom' (Interview – TU5). Third, there were shortcomings in the functioning of the access channels for involvement. Regarding the CDSEI (a structure that also deals with social partners' involvement in the European Semester), one of our interviewees underlined interactions between the public authorities and the social partners. The feeling was, however, that decisions were being taken elsewhere (notably, at the Ministry of Economy, Finance and Recovery) (Interview – TU4). In addition, the time given to the trade unions to analyse documents provided by the government ahead of the meetings

9. According to information provided by the French authorities (Government of France, 2021: 721), two meetings of the CDSEI were devoted to discussions with the social partners on the RRP (in December 2020 and February 2021). Furthermore, the CESE was consulted on the RRP four times between December 2020 and March 2021 (*ibid.*).

was considered too short to formulate a proper political and substantive reaction (Interview – TU4; Interview – TU6). The Economic, Social and Environmental Council is so broad in composition that some of the interviewees questioned whether it was possible to hold in-depth discussions on the RRP (Interview – TU6).

As noted by one of the trade unionists contacted for this research (Interview – TU6), the quality of social partners' involvement in the preparation of the RRP could have been affected by contextual circumstances such as the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic (which required a switch to online formats) and the fact that the administration was simultaneously working on the preparation of the French Presidency of the Council of the EU (which took place in the first half of 2022). The same trade unionist claimed, however, that these circumstances cannot fully justify the unsatisfactory dynamic of involvement in the preparation of the RRP, because the latter reflects more structural shortcomings of national social dialogue, as well as of social partners' involvement in the European Semester in previous years. Furthermore, one should keep in mind that the French RRP is strictly linked to the France Relance Plan. Consequently, the fact that France Relance was meant to be a rapid response to the Covid-19 pandemic entailed limited time for a broad stakeholders' consultation, and in any case most of the priorities and measures included in the RRP had already been decided while developing France Relance.

All in all, it emerges that, while trade unions participated in several meetings with the government on the drafting of the RRP, a lack of engagement meant that the unions' demands went unheard. The Eurofound (2022: 13) study indeed finds overall agreement among French social partners that their positions were not clearly expressed in the RRP submitted to the Commission. These findings are quite odd given the French authorities' insistence that, in preparing the RRP, a 'rigorous method of dialogue and consultation' was to be followed (Government of France 2020: 11; see also Government of France 2021: 720).

4.3 Involvement of French trade unions in implementing the national RRP

In its assessment of the French RRP, the European Commission (2021b: 27) stressed that, to ensure ownership by the relevant actors, it would be crucial to involve local authorities and stakeholders ('including social partners') throughout the implementation of the investments and reforms included in the plan.

When it comes to implementation, first, the French RRP foresees a national Monitoring Committee (Comité de suivi) on the RRP, to ensure political steering of the process at the highest level, driving and monitoring the implementation of the plan (European Commission 2021b: 26, 74). The committee is chaired by the Prime Minister, and is made up of representatives of local and regional authorities, heads of public institutions, economists, Members of Parliament, senators, members of the European Parliament and social partners (*ibid.*). Attached to the Prime Minister's office, there is also an Evaluation Committee (Comité d'évaluation), with the task of preparing and conducting an ex-post socio-

economic and environmental impact assessment of the RRP, focussing on a limited number of measures.¹⁰ Eight representatives of social partner organisations (trade unions and employers) are part of this committee.

Second, the General Secretariat of European Affairs (SGAE) coordinates the central administrations involved in the plan, supported by a newly established General Secretariat for the recovery and resilience plan, set up under the dual authority of the Prime Minister and the Minister of the Economy, Finance and Recovery. The General Secretariat has the task of monitoring the implementation of the RRF measure by measure, in close contact with the prefects of regions and the officials of each ministry (European Commission 2021b: 27).

Third, each ministry concerned is responsible for monitoring the effective implementation of specific measures in the RRP, while interministerial coordination is ensured by the SGAE (European Commission 2021b: 27).

Fourth, regional and local committees have been established to monitor progress on projects in the regions, and identify and resolve possible bottlenecks (European Commission 2021b: 27). These committees – under the authority of regional and local prefects assisted by deputy-prefects specifically appointed to monitor RRP implementation (*ibid.*: 75) – include state services and representatives of local authorities and social partners and are expected to submit, monthly, information on the progress of each measure in the plan to the Secretariat-General responsible for the RRF (*ibid.*).

When it comes to the trade unions' appreciation of the involvement process, several interviews conducted for this research highlighted the absence of actual and adequate involvement in the national Monitoring Committee. As one of our interviewees put it, '[while] trade unions [were] in the picture [in the preparation of the RRP] with all the limitations I told you, in implementing this plan we are not in the picture' (Interview – TU4). Involvement in the national Monitoring Committee is not the same as proper participation of the labour movement in the implementation of the plan: 'They [the government] take the decisions at the political level and then [...] inform trade unions: it is not a joint process' (Interview – TU4). According to our interviewees, the French government's lack of engagement confirms a general trend of inadequate social dialogue. Trade unionists contacted for this research maintain that in meetings with the government there is no scope for political discussion: the government presents its strategies and priorities, listens to the unions' demands but then there is no proper follow-up. Referring to monitoring of the implementation of RRF measures, national trade unionists claim that there is no political dialogue with the government but only technical discussions: 'The enforcement [of the RRF] is a fragmented process, a technocratic pilotage, [meaning] that the process is in the hands of the administration' (Interview – TU4). While being aware that there is limited scope for modifying the measures in the RRP, trade union involvement through social dialogue at the implementation stage would be useful to 'adapt' those measures in order to make

10. See <https://www.strategie.gouv.fr/comite-devaluation-plan-france-reliance>

sure that the RRP's overall objectives are actually met. According to one of our interviewees, however, this cannot happen in the national Monitoring Committee because most exchanges are technical discussions on the quantitative allocations of funds and achievement of targets, without any qualitative analysis of the effects and implications of the measures implemented (Interview – TU5).

According to some of the trade unionists contacted, things work better, on average, at the regional and local level, where in some cases trade union involvement is more and more efficient. At that level of governance, the trade unions are, it is said, more involved in implementation and have already pushed forward certain social and economic projects (Interview – TU4).

Another potentially useful venue for discussing RRP implementation is the CDSEI. In this setting, regular meetings take place just before milestones in the European Semester process. Although some of the trade unionists interviewed appreciate the structured exchanges taking place in this context, they do not consider this 'real social dialogue' but, at best, only an opportunity for 'technical discussions' (Interview – TU5).

According to one of our interviewees, recently the French government expressed – through the SGAE – a willingness to enhance trade union involvement in RRP monitoring and implementation through closer involvement in the biannual evaluation of implementation (Interview – TU6). According to the same respondent, a meeting took place in April 2022, but without any follow-up so far.

At the European level, the representatives from three trade union organisations agreed on the supportive role played by the European Commission through its Representation in the country. According to one of our interviewees (Interview – TU5), the Commission holds regular meetings with French social partners at least twice a year, at which they share positions and points of view on national social policies. Even without proper follow-up by the French government, the Commission encourages greater social partner involvement in the EU and in the national decision-making process.

French trade unions also highlighted the importance of the advocacy coalition set up at the European level within the ETUC, through the TUSLO network. The ETUC framework has enabled French trade unions to exchange with other trade unions and to share national experiences and good practices. In this regard, a French trade unionist claimed to have sent a letter to the government calling for open consultation, 'following the example of the German DGB' (Interview – TU6).

4.4 Key findings

Overall, in France, the quality of social partner involvement in the preparation and implementation phases of the RRP has been assessed by national trade unions as rather low: the fragmented decision-making process and the top-down approach affect the trade unions' capacity and ability to influence the RRP. Social partner involvement in the preparation of the national RRP took place through established

institutional venues, and consisted of several meetings with the French government and administration. According to the unions, however, these meetings should be understood at best as occasions for exchanging information and do not constitute a meaningful form of involvement. The impression is that decisions had already been taken elsewhere, especially during the development of the France Relance plan. Some contextual factors may explain the limited quality of the involvement process, including time pressure and multiple demands on the administration, confronted simultaneously with the Covid-19 crisis, the drafting of the RRP and the preparation of the French Presidency of the Council of the EU. The main reason, however, is linked to long-standing shortcomings in the functioning of the national social dialogue process. Consequently, French trade unions believe that they had no impact on the preparation of the measures included in the RRP: no feedback was provided on the use made of their proposals, while the only visible impact on the plan is the Annex summarising stakeholders' positions.

This research shows that the situation regarding RRP implementation has not changed. Here again, while multiple venues exist for social partner involvement at different levels of governance (some of them being RRF-specific, others linked to the European Semester), involvement with the national government/administration is depicted as a simple exchange of information. Exchanges often concern technical aspects of the implementation process, with no real political dialogue.

One example of the dynamics of ongoing social partner involvement given by the trade unionists interviewed concerned reform of the unemployment insurance scheme (*Assurance Chômage*), a measure included in the French RRP. According to the plan, this should have been implemented together with the social partners, in order to make the reform more effective, ensure the scheme's sustainability and provide better support for people returning to work (Government of France 2021: 23). According to the interviewees, however, things went differently: the main features of the reform had already been decided by the government, which somehow took advantage of the disagreement between the social partners to 'take control'.

According to some of the trade unionists interviewed, the multi-level governance of the RRF (national and local) has made the process less accountable and more fragmented. Trade unions have been more involved at the local level, however, focusing on core aspects of the plan, and pushing for a certain number of projects. As one trade unionist suggested, the territorial dimension of the plan could be further developed, in order to better involve trade unions in its implementation (Interview – TU4).

Finally, this research shows a fair degree of satisfaction among French trade unionists with the interaction with the European Commission, and an appreciation of the role played by the ETUC in coordinating/facilitating exchanges between trade union organisations in EU countries.

5. Germany

5.1 Background: key elements of the German RRP

Germany's RRP includes several priorities and measures to tackle the negative consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic. The plan promotes the twin (green and digital) transitions, but also aims to create a strong and resilient economy and society able to address future challenges.

The German RRP – made up of 40 measures – identifies six key priorities: (i) climate policy and energy transition; (ii) digitalisation of the economy and infrastructure; (iii) digitalisation of education; (iv) strengthening social inclusion; (v) strengthening a pandemic-resilient health-care system; and (vi) a modern public administration and reducing barriers to investment (European Commission 2021c: 21).

Germany is expected to receive 25.6 billion euros from the Recovery and Resilience Facility. About 42.4 per cent of the European financial contribution has been committed to investments and measures supporting the green transition (European Commission 2021c: 28). In addition, the government has surpassed the Commission target of 20 per cent of funds devoted to digital objectives, with 52.6 per cent of the financial contribution allocated to digitalisation (*ibid.*: 32).

That said, compared with other European countries, the financial contribution of the RRF to Germany is relatively low. Indeed, the German RRP equates to roughly 0.7 per cent of the country's 2021 GDP (European Commission n.d.). The national trade unions therefore had rather low expectations about their involvement in the preparation and implementation of the RRP. The German trade union representative interviewed for this research indeed highlighted that although the RRF represents a turning point for the European Union, among German trade unions it was quickly perceived as 'another structural fund' (Interview – TU7).

5.2 Involvement of German trade unions in the preparation of the RRP

According to the European Commission's (2021c: 26) assessment of the national RRP, the German government, when elaborating the plan, conducted several consultations with various stakeholders, from civil society (including environmental NGOs, youth organisations and social NGOs) to the social partners.

The government's main partners in working out the plan were the *Länder*. Their representatives attended several meetings with the ministries and worked with the German parliament on the plan's final draft. The *Länder* are also now involved in technical cooperation with the ministries. In a federal context, the *Länder* are expected to monitor and implement the plan (European Commission 2021c: 26).

According to the European Commission (*ibid.*: 25), the social partners' opinions were integrated into the components of the RRP concerning social inclusion, lifelong learning and digitalisation. But neither the German RRP nor the Commission's assessment of the plan specify how trade unions and social partners were involved in its development.

It emerged from our interviews that social partner involvement in elaborating the plan took place mainly through the Finance Ministry. There were no institutionalised channels for dialogue, nor defined procedures, but rather informal meetings with government representatives (Interview – TU7). In detail, exchanges between the federal government and the social partners started in November 2020, with a meeting during which the administration presented the social partners with the broad structure of the RRP (Interview – TU7). Then, in February 2021, the draft RRP was sent to the social partners (Interview – TU7). They reacted with written comments, which were 'taken into account' in drafting the final document (submitted to the European Commission in April 2021), while a few measures (for instance, related to apprenticeships) were elaborated 'in collaboration with the social partners' (Interview – ADM2).

In the view of trade unionists contacted for the present research, however, while these informal meetings were opportunities for exchanging information, with the government informing the unions about the structure and dimensions of the plan, they cannot be considered proper and effective involvement (Interview – TU7).

According to Eurofound (2022: 11), in Germany, the time dedicated to consultations with the social partners during preparation of the RRP was insufficient to have a proper dialogue. In particular, the time constraints seriously affected the quality of the process and the final outcome. In the absence of proper consultation and exchanges with the government, social partners contributed to the preparation of the plan through written comments (Eurofound 2022: 12): position papers and written opinions were shared with the government, but the social partners did not receive a proper response or feedback (*ibid.*).

Our interviews confirm this account. As one trade unionist put it: 'The German government promoted the consultation process on the RRP through written comments from the social partners. Trade unions welcomed this initiative, although the government didn't follow up on that or share any feedback' (Interview – TU7). The same trade unionist noted that the consultation process on the RRP was rather similar to consultations on the European Semester's National Reform Programmes. The interviewee, however, recognised this as insufficient for proper involvement in the RRP, a financial scheme aimed at shaping the country's next decade (Interview – TU7). According to officials from the German administration, although no structured procedure had been foreseen for social partner involvement

or to follow up on social partners' feedback on the draft RRP – also given the relatively limited time available to finalise the plan and submit it to the European Commission – there were consultations at technical and political level (Interviews – ADM2, ADM3). Additionally, there was a meeting with the social partners on the RRP at the end of 2021, and this was also a chance to discuss whether and how their comments on the draft RRP were taken into account.

During preparation of the RRP, German trade unions tried to coordinate in order to develop a common position, which would then be submitted to the government. In their view, however, the process lacked transparency because the government did not reply to the written comments and did not follow up on the trade unions' demands (Interview – TU7). Moreover, the trade unions claim they did not participate in the political debate on the RRP but were consulted only on technical issues.

5.3 Involvement of German trade unions in implementing the national RRP

The German RRP establishes a clear system of governance for implementation and monitoring. The Federal Ministry of Finance is the institution in charge of the plan. The Finance Ministry chairs a coordination unit (*Koordinierungsstelle*) in charge of monitoring and reporting on RRP implementation (European Commission 2021c: 26).

In the federal system, the *Länder* are supposed to implement specific components of the plan. In this context, the coordination unit works mainly at government level: no civil society stakeholders are expected to attend or participate directly in its executive work. According to our interviews with German officials, however, social partners and other stakeholders continue to be involved in RRP implementation through informal consultations, and also if major changes are made, such as new budgetary allocations (Interview – ADM3).

According to one of our interviewees, the European Commission noted that the German RRP did not refer explicitly to social partner involvement in the implementation and governance of the plan and therefore it asked the German government to increase the involvement of social partners and civil society stakeholders (Interview – TU7). According to the same interviewee, the Commission assessment created a window of opportunity to reshape the plan's governance (Interview – TU7). The German government responded to the Commission's demand with a second round of consultations. But the German RRP had already been approved, and there was little scope for making changes in the implementation phase.

And yet, according to a German trade unionist, at that time (March–April 2021), the Finance Ministry, responsible for the RRP, changed its approach and tried to gather more support from a broader spectrum of actors (NGOs and social partners). The government asked trade unions to look into the details of the plan and share positions. The procedure was not adequately institutionalised, however,

and the lack of transparency affected the effectiveness of the process as a whole. The trade unions' position on implementing the plan was shared with affiliates and the government at the end of 2021 but, since the appointment of a new Finance Minister following the general elections, no fruitful exchanges have taken place (Interview – TU7).

Trade union involvement through the second round of consultations is also seen as ineffective by the trade union representative interviewed: 'We cannot do so much at the implementation stage. It is more in the drafting stage that [we could have given] possibly valuable feedback' (Interview – TU7). A study by the European Economic and Social Committee confirms these findings, pointing out that, in Germany, the social partners have had limited capacity to influence the plan and its implementation (EESC 2021: 4).

More structured involvement is envisaged in the next stages of RRP implementation. While confirming that the scope for modifying the contents of the RRP is limited, the German administration considers continued consultations with social partners and other stakeholders to be important and valuable (Interview – ADM3). In this context, the federal administration considers social partners' involvement to be important, especially to gather feedback on progress/shortcomings in the implementation of specific measures (for example, in the social domain) (Interview – ADM2), and in view of the new priorities stemming from RePowerEU and new recommendations under the European Semester process. In more detail, social partner involvement in RRP implementation is expected to take place at two levels. First, they are to be involved at the level of line ministries responsible for RRF measures in specific budget lines: each of these ministries is expected to organise interactions with the social partners through their channels (such as conferences, consultations, ordinary social dialogue structures). Second, there is expected to be some involvement with the Ministry of Finance, which will organise two meetings per year in order to discuss implementation of the RRP with the social partners. These meetings should consist of both political and more technical discussions.

The German trade unionist interviewed for the present research claims to have frequently reached out to the European Commission during RRP preparation and implementation. Social partner involvement in the RRP was brought up several times in meetings with the Commission organised in Brussels through ETUC coordination and in meetings with the European Commission contact point in Berlin. The interaction with the Commission was considered to be quite positive by the interviewee, although the lack of binding EU guidance to ensure that national governments involve the social partners is felt to have restricted the effectiveness of those meetings (Interview – TU7).

5.4 Key findings

Overall, the German trade unionist interviewed for our research has given rather negative feedback on the quality of the public consultation concerning RRP preparation and implementation. According to a trade unionist, the consultation

process in the country was similar to the European Semester process. This process is considered insufficient to ensure a proper dialogue between social partners and government on the RRP, however, although the government tried to improve the procedures following the Commission's critical assessment. Exchanges with government and administration in the preparation of the RRP took place in written form, and no feedback was initially provided to the social partners on how their contributions were used, resulting in the trade unions' perception that they had had limited impact on the final plan. A more nuanced view emerges from interviews with German officials. The latter, while admitting that social partner involvement in RRP development was not exempt from shortcomings (including time constraints), stated that some of the proposals from the social partners were taken on board in the German RRP and a few measures were elaborated in collaboration with the social partners. All this considered, we conclude that the involvement of German trade unions in the preparation of the national RRP consisted mainly of information exchange, with some limited instances of consultation.

As for monitoring of plan's implementation, a more structured and regular involvement process could be helpful, although the scope for changing the contents of the RRP is limited. In the German case, however, the federal administration and the trade unions seem to have diverging expectations concerning the RRP. While trade unions wished to be actively involved and have a say in the overall plan (including the main underlying priorities), the administration focuses more on the value-added that could come from consultations with social partners on the implementation of specific measures (notably, social and employment policies). These divergent expectations may have affected trade unions' perceptions of their involvement in RRP implementation. But if major changes are made to the plan (such as new budgetary allocations stemming from RePowerEU), the federal administration seems willing to involve the social partners before the government's decisions are finalised, a circumstance that could lead to more in-depth exchanges.

This research also shows an overall appreciation by trade unions of exchanges taking place with the European Commission within the framework of the RRP and of the coordinating role played by the ETUC.

6. Italy

6.1 Background: key elements of the Italian RRP

For its RRP, Italy requested 191.5 billion euros: 68.9 billion in non-repayable financial support and 122.6 billion in loans, which is the maximum amount available under the RRF (European Commission 2021d: 2), corresponding to 10.79 per cent of Italy's 2021 GDP (European Commission n.d.). The Italian RRP (Government of Italy 2021) focuses on three strategic priorities: (i) digitalisation and innovation; (ii) the ecological transition; and (iii) social inclusion. It is made up of 16 components and structured around six areas of intervention, labelled 'Missions': (i) digitalisation, innovation, competitiveness, culture and tourism; (ii) the green revolution and ecological transition; (iii) infrastructure for sustainable mobility; (iv) education and research; (v) inclusion and cohesion; and (vi) health.¹¹

In addition, the promotion of equal opportunities for all citizens has been identified as a horizontal principle for implementation of the RRP, and, in particular, the plan identifies three horizontal priorities: (i) promoting gender equality; (ii) promoting new opportunities for young people; and (iii) reducing territorial divides (Government of Italy 2021: 33).

Italian trade unionists interviewed for this research underlined the paramount importance of the EU resources provided by the RRF, described as 'important if not crucial' to address the structural challenges confronting the country, especially to close Italy's long-standing investment gap (Interview – TU8). According to our interviewees, however, the impact of these resources could have been amplified by ensuring better complementarity with resources from the European Structural and Investment Funds. Besides investments, the Italian RRP includes many reforms with either a direct or indirect impact on workers and the labour market. Consequently, according to our interviewees, greater social partner involvement would have been needed in the preparation of the plan.

11. According to data provided by the Italian Ministry of Economy and Finance (MEF 2021), resources from the RRF have been allocated as follows: 32.05 per cent to the Mission 'green revolution and ecological transition'; 21.04 per cent to the Mission 'digitalisation, innovation, competitiveness, culture and tourism'; 16.13 per cent to the Mission 'education and research'; 13.26 per cent to the Mission 'infrastructure for sustainable mobility'; 10.37 per cent to the Mission 'inclusion and cohesion'; and 8.16 per cent to the Mission 'health'.

6.2 Involvement of Italian trade unions in the preparation of the RRP

According to the European Commission (2021d: 36), a variety of stakeholders were consulted during the preparation of the Italian RRP, including regional and local authorities, civil society organisations, social partners, academics and policy experts. While a first version of the plan was approved by the Council of Ministers in February 2021 (following the opinion of the Italian Parliament on the strategic guidelines proposed by the Conte II government), work on the RRP – as well as consultations with stakeholders – continued in the following months under the newly appointed Draghi government (European Commission 2021d: 36). In particular, the two Houses of the Italian Parliament (the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate of the Republic) held a series of hearings involving a variety of stakeholders, such as regional and local authorities, social partners, civil society organisations and institutional bodies, and approved ad hoc reports, together with resolutions intended to steer the finalisation of the plan (*ibid.*). The RRP was then redrafted by the government ‘also taking into account the remarks of the Parliament’ and ‘discussed’ with regional and local authorities, political parties and the social partners in April 2021 (Government of Italy 2021: 13, our translation from Italian). The RRP was then submitted to the European Commission on 30 April 2021 and, after a positive assessment by the Commission on 22 June 2021, it was adopted by the Council of the European Union on 13 July 2021.

According to available studies, the social partners were involved in the preparation of the Italian RRP through a series of ad hoc meetings with the government and formal hearings in Parliament (Eurofound 2022: 7). Interactions with the social partners on the RRP started at the very beginning of the elaboration process and, according to Eurofound, Italy ranks among the countries in which more meetings with social partners were held (Eurofound 2022: 8–9). A rather positive appreciation of the government’s willingness to involve the social partners in the preparation of the RRP emerges from the European Commission (Interview – EC4): the involvement process could have been stronger but it was satisfactory and more developed than in other Member States.

Although the social partners maintain that they did not receive proper responses or feedback from the government on the input they provided, they may have had some influence on certain measures eventually included in the RRP (EESC 2021: 3; Eurofound 2022: 12), notably through their participation in the hearings organised by parliamentary committees (Eurofound 2022: 12). Overall, however, the quality of discussions between the government and trade union organisations during RRP preparation has been described as ‘inadequate’ (Landini 2021: 3) by the Confederal Secretary of the biggest national trade union organisation, the Italian General Confederation of Labour (Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro – CGIL).

Our interviews with trade union representatives broadly confirm these findings. On one hand, interviewees stressed a lack of proper discussions with national government, under both the Conte II government (which drew up the guidelines for the plan and a first draft plan) and the Draghi government (which elaborated

the final plan). On the other hand, our interviewees confirmed that trade union representatives took part in no fewer than four parliamentary hearings on the RRP, resulting in Parliamentary Resolutions committing the government to specific points of the plan. Even though the time allotted for speeches by trade union representatives during these hearings was limited, our interviewees noted that some of the positions they expressed on these occasions can be found in the final text of the RRP, in relation to the three horizontal priorities of the plan (gender equality, new opportunities for young people, and reducing territorial divides) and in a few specific measures (Interview – TU8).

During the preparation of the Italian RRP – from Autumn 2020 to April 2021 – governance of the implementation of the plan emerged as a key challenge. This issue was raised as early as January 2021 by the National Council of Economy and Labour (Consiglio Nazionale dell'Economia e del Lavoro – CNEL), describing the lack of a clear governance model as a 'macroscopic flaw' of the first draft of the RRP (CNEL 2021: 6, our translation from Italian) and calling for, among other things, the setting up of 'structured and stable forms of consultation with the social partners' in the implementation of the plan (*ibid.*: 7, our translation from Italian). The issue of the plan's governance and the role to be allocated to the social partners in the implementation phase were among the key topics raised by Italian trade unions, which called for 'active involvement' of the social partners in both the implementation of RRP-related investments and reforms, and in the monitoring and evaluation of their economic and social impact (Landini 2021: 3). In the view of CGIL, this involvement should not be merely informative or technical, but should also be political and include ex-ante discussions and bargaining on investments and reforms (*ibid.*). In this respect, on 26 April 2021 the leaders of the three major unions (CGIL, CISL and UIL) sent a Note to the Italian President of the Council of Ministers calling for clarification of the social partners' role in RRP governance, highlighting the need for 'substantial and not just formal' involvement, and expressing their willingness to be involved at the highest level in the governance and implementation of the RRP (Landini *et al.* 2021).

6.3 Involvement of Italian trade unions in implementing the national RRP

According to information provided by the Italian government to the European Commission (2021d: 35), the implementation and monitoring of the national RRP is expected to take place through multi-level governance arrangements. These arrangements were set out in a legislative act, Law Decree no. 77 of 31 May 2021, then converted into law, with amendments, by the Italian Parliament in July 2021 (Law no. 108 of 29 July 2021). According to one interviewee, the latter act can be considered 'a watershed in the involvement of social partners in the governance of the RRP' (Interview – TU8). Indeed, among other things, in converting the original governmental decree into law, the Italian Parliament approved a unitary

amendment proposed by the three major Italian trade union organisations,¹² foreseeing the drafting of a national Memorandum of Understanding ('Protocollo d'Intesa') between the government and the most representative social partner organisations, to set up sectoral or territorial boards for implementation of the measures in the RRP involving the social partners (UIL 2021; see also below).

The governance structure that eventually emerged from Law no. 108 of 29 July 2021 has been described as 'an organisational model based on two levels of management' (MEF 2021: 27, our translation from Italian): (i) control and coordination; and (ii) implementation of measures.

With regard to (central) control and coordination, a number of bodies are to play a role in RRP governance. These include, first, a Steering Committee ('Cabina di regia') at the political level, linked to the Presidency of the Council of Ministers and involving the administrations responsible for specific parts of the plan. This Steering Committee has the task of steering and monitoring the overall implementation of the RRP. Importantly, before its establishment, Italian trade unions made the 'ambitious proposal' that they should be included in the Steering Committee, although this did not happen (Interview – TU8).

Second, a consulting body ('Tavolo permanente per il partenariato economico, sociale e territoriale' / 'Permanent economic, social and territorial stakeholders' Council') is expected to ensure the implementation and monitoring of the plan through social dialogue. This body is chaired by the President of the National Council for Economics and Labour and includes representatives of regional and local authorities, social partners and other stakeholders. Made up of representatives of more than 30 organisations, the Permanent Council has a consultative function on issues related to RRP implementation and can inform the Steering Committee of any circumstances relevant to implementation.

Third, a technical central coordination and monitoring structure established at the Ministry of the Economy and Finance and a technical secretariat established at the Presidency of the Council of Ministers are to support the activities of the Steering Committee and of the consulting body (European Commission 2021d: 35). The Ministry of the Economy and Finance holds key responsibilities for the monitoring and surveillance of progress in RRP implementation.

As for implementation of the measures (MEF 2021: 33–34), central responsible administrations (for example, national ministries) have created 'Mission units' made up of high-ranking officials and other structures to manage and monitor implementation of the measures for which they are responsible. Other bodies involved in the implementation of RRP-related measures (besides national ministries) are regions and local authorities, public and private entities. These implementing bodies operate in conditions of organisational autonomy, within the overall regulatory framework governing RRP implementation.

12. The Italian General Confederation of Labour (CGIL), the Italian Confederation of Workers' Unions (Confederazione Italiana Sindacati Lavoratori – CISL), and the Italian Labour Union (Unione Italiana del Lavoro – UIL).

In addition to this, as mentioned above, following an amendment to the July 2021 Law Decree proposed by the three most representative Italian trade unions and approved by the Parliament, it was agreed that the most representative social partner organisations would sign a Memorandum of Understanding ('Protocollo d'intesa') with the government on their ex-ante involvement in the implementation of the RRP measures. This Memorandum of Understanding was signed in December 2021 by the President of the Council of Ministers, Mario Draghi, and the Confederal Secretaries of CGIL, CISL and UIL. According to the Memorandum, each administration responsible for RRP measures (from national ministries to regions and cities) are supposed to set up Sectoral or Territorial Boards involving the most representative social partner organisations, in order to ensure information and ex-ante consultation on implementation of the measures (these were referred to by our interviewees as 'Tavoli preventivi di confronto' / 'Ex-ante discussion forums').

Because the central Steering Committee is a purely governmental body, our interviewees focussed in particular on trade union involvement through the permanent economic, social and territorial stakeholders' council and the sectoral and territorial ex-ante discussion forums, highlighting both (a few) positive points and (some) more negative ones. Regarding the permanent stakeholders' council, our interviewees highlighted a very active approach in terms of the number of meetings organised on various aspects of the RRP. The role of this body seems to be merely to serve as an occasion for the exchange of information, however (Interview – TU5): representatives of the administrations responsible for implementing RRP measures (for instance, ministers or high-level officials from various ministries) simply report on the initiatives they have taken to implement the measures, while the other participants react, offering their opinions. In the words of one interviewee, 'it is a notarial forum, not a bargaining forum. We just take note [of what administrations have planned to do]'. In addition, it seems that the importance of this body for effective involvement is limited for the trade unions, because of its broad composition.

Conversely, the Memorandum of Understanding setting out the establishment of sectoral and territorial ex-ante discussion forums raised significant expectations among the trade unions that they would be more closely involved in RRP implementation at various levels. According to one of our interviewees, however, only a few discussion forums have been set up so far and their development is at different stages. A few are already active, while others are still trying to agree on rules to determine how they will operate. Examples include discussion forums organised by three national ministries (for education, labour and social policies, infrastructure), by two regions (Apulia and Latium) and a few in big cities. In most cases, in the absence of established sectoral or territorial structures, such as discussion forums for trade union involvement, trade unions themselves take the initiative and contact the responsible administration to ask for meetings (Interview – TU8). The actual organisation of these meetings and their quality obviously depend on the specific administrations' 'political sensitivities' towards social dialogue. As a consequence, the situation appears rather fragmented, with the overall level of trade union involvement in RRP implementation deemed unsatisfactory and uncoded by trade unionists, and in any case highly variable

across administrations and territories. The performance-based financing model characterising the RRF (the close link between payments and respect for the timeline agreed for reforms and investment) may to some extent have affected the dynamics of social partner involvement in implementation of the plan. Political priority is being given, it seems, to achieving milestones and targets, sometimes at the expense of a broader and more effective involvement process.

Besides contacts with national authorities, the Italian trade unionists interviewed pointed to relatively frequent interactions with the European Commission after submission of the RRF. Notably, the Commission carried out three fact-finding missions to Italy and meetings were held with trade unions. The first mission, in autumn 2021, was specifically devoted to RRF governance and stakeholder involvement in both the preparation and implementation of the plan, while the second (spring 2022) focussed on inequalities. The third mission took place in November 2022. In addition, Italian trade unions took part in a meeting with the Commission's country desks in Brussels, coordinated by the ETUC. Our interviewees' assessment of these interactions with the Commission is quite positive. For the European Commission, meetings with national social partners are important opportunities to collect first-hand input on implementation of both the whole RRF and specific measures (Interview – EC4). The trade unions highlighted that the Commission delegations involved in the fact-finding missions are always high-level, and allow enough time for good quality, technical discussions, giving the impression that they are listening carefully to the views expressed (Interview – TU9). This interaction within the framework of the RRF builds on a longer tradition of direct – formal and informal – contacts between the European Commission and national social partners (at both the political and technical level) that has gradually developed over the past ten years, including in the context of the European Semester (Interview – EC3; see also Pavolini and Natili 2019). In the opinion of the trade unionists interviewed, however, the Commission should also do more to put pressure on the Member States to ensure that national social partners are duly involved in RRF implementation. In their view, binding guidelines should be drawn up, while a positive Commission assessment of the implementation of national RRFs (and the consequent decisions on disbursements) should be linked explicitly to the achievement of a satisfactory level of involvement of national stakeholders (Interview – TU9).

6.4 Key findings

The preparation of the Italian RRF – conducted by two different governments – included a number of ad hoc meetings between government and social partners. Trade unions' assessment of the quality of these interactions and of their impact on the contents of the final RRF is rather negative, however. But a more positive evaluation emerges of the consultations conducted with the trade unions through Parliamentary Committees.

Governance of the plan's implementation, including the role to be played by the social partners, was a key issue in the national debate on the RRF. Eventually, a multi-level/multi-venue setting was created, potentially allowing for social

partner involvement in the monitoring and implementation of the plan. A serious discrepancy has emerged from the present research, however, between how the arrangements to ensure stakeholder involvement are presented on paper, and how they actually function. This is particularly evident in the case of the sectoral and territorial ex-ante discussion forums, expected to be one of the key venues for meaningful trade union involvement in RRP implementation. While only a few such forums have been formally set up, even fewer are actually succeeding in fostering consultation dynamics around the RRP. Another potentially relevant venue for involvement – the permanent economic, social and territorial stakeholders' council – is for the moment playing only an information-exchange role. Hence, although governance of the implementation of the Italian RRP (including stakeholder involvement) has been enshrined in several legislative acts and binding initiatives, the actual level of trade union involvement appears to vary considerably, sometimes depending on the attitudes of the various administrations responsible for implementing specific measures. Besides this, the need to respect precise deadlines for the achievement of milestones and targets may be a factor limiting the time available for meaningful social partner involvement.

According to the findings of this research, the Italian trade unions' view of the interactions with the European Commission within the framework of the RRP is rather positive.

7. Slovakia

7.1 Background: key elements of the Slovak RRP

The main focus of the Slovakian RRP is on inclusive education, public governance and productivity-enhancing investment in the green and digital transitions, with specific measures to tackle important regional divergences (European Commission 2021e: 2). According to the European Commission (2021e), the plan is intended also to effectively address important structural challenges identified in the Country-specific Recommendations of 2019 and 2020; it is consistent with the euro area recommendation; and it will help to cushion the social-economic effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. Indeed, the pandemic plunged Slovakia's economy into a deep recession in 2020, with GDP declining by 4.8 per cent and the unemployment rate rising to 6.7 per cent (*ibid.*: 2).

The Slovak RRP comprises three pillars (innovation, sustainability, and health) with 18 sectoral components. A total of 43 per cent of the plan's expenditure is dedicated to climate objectives, while 21 per cent of the funds are allocated to digital measures intended to modernise society and the economy (European Commission 2021e: 4). As for the green transition, the measures in the plan are expected to help achieve the 2050 climate neutrality objective and the 2030 energy and climate targets, in line with the Slovak National Energy and Climate Plan. The green transition measures and investments are also expected to contribute to social and territorial cohesion, and create new job opportunities for all. With regard to measures for the digital transition, the plan identifies serious and long-standing challenges linked to the low quality and lack of inclusiveness of education, childcare and health care, as well as research, development and innovation. Comprehensive measures have been designed to address these issues. Investments in digital skills and tools are among the essential measures proposed in this area. Although inequalities are overall still higher than the EU average, Slovakia has performed relatively better in reducing inequalities (Sustainable Development Goal No. 10). The proposed reforms of the education system at all levels can enhance skills (including digital), while also supporting social inclusion. With regard to social inclusion measures per se, most of the measures set out in the green and digital targets are meant to increase inclusiveness and reduce inequalities, but there is no specific 'chapter' on social measures in the plan (European Commission 2021e).

The RRP was described as 'the biggest reform investment plan in the history of this country' by one of the interviewees (Interview – ADM4). Their words express the importance of the RRP and its financial investment for Slovakia. As our interviews show, three measures included in the RRP are particularly important for trade

unions, namely the proposed reforms of health care, education and pensions. A Slovak trade unionist interviewed for our research confirmed the importance of the European fund for workers and for the country. In their view, the RRP addresses crucial issues that trade unions have long highlighted, and the Slovak government has decided to bring forward long-awaited and long-debated reforms (Interview – TU10).

7.2 Involvement of Slovak trade unions in the preparation of the RRP

According to the European Commission (2021e: 27), the Slovak government conducted a wide range of consultations with various civil society representatives and stakeholders while drawing up the national RRP. The Covid-19 pandemic, however, hugely affected the consultation process and therefore consultations were mainly carried out online.

The elaboration phase started in June 2020. The government worked on a National Integrated Reform Plan that was published later that year, highlighting the crucial priorities that it wished to address (European Commission 2021e: 27). In this phase, however, the government did not seek the involvement of civil society or the social partners. According to the Eurofound report on the subject, Slovakia is one of the countries in which ‘social partners were involved at the very end of the RRP development process (March–April 2021)’ (Eurofound 2022: 9).

The Slovak government reports that it started consultations with civil society and the social partners earlier, however, in January 2021. The consultation took place through a dedicated online platform. The number of meetings with employer organisations and trade unions reported also differs. The national authorities report that six thematic roundtables were established, made up of government representatives, stakeholders from civil society, entrepreneurs and social partners (*ibid.*). A wide range of actors was thus asked to respond to the government’s 2020 reform plan. According to the European Commission (2021e: 27), several proposals from the roundtables were incorporated into the components of the RRP (for instance, in relation to climate change adaptation and measures addressing the social economy). Employer organisations and trade unions disagree, claiming that only one meeting was held (Eurofound 2022: 10).

National authorities, trade unions and employer organisations also disagree on the quality of involvement and the social partners’ impact on the development of the RRP. According to the Eurofound report (2022: 6), social partners in Slovakia were involved through ‘well-established institutional settings’, at least during some phases of the process. The fact that the social partners were consulted at the very end of the process affected the quality of the consultation and the social partners did not receive enough time or proper feedback on their proposals. The viewpoints of the national authorities, the employer organisations and the trade unions diverge greatly on the matter. While employer organisations and trade unions agree that their views were not summarised in the RRP, national authorities claim the opposite (Eurofound 2022: 14). Trade unions assert that they had no influence

on the development of the RRP, while employer organisations reported limited or relative influence. The national authorities, by contrast, claim significant influence on the part of trade unions and employer organisations on the preparation of the plan (Eurofound 2022: 15). Yet another source, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC 2021: 4) reports that stakeholders had no influence on the development of the plan in Slovakia (this information was reported on 24 and 25 February 2021).

According to a Slovak trade unionist (Interview – TU10), the online public consultation was part of a new procedure for draft legislation. The online platform was the primary tool for consultation and exchange between the government and social actors during the preparation of the plan. Each ministry put the government's strategies on the website and the social partners were asked to comment. Then the government invited the social partners to discuss their inputs to the RRP. A national official interviewed reported that 'several roundtables with a wide range of stakeholders, including representatives of social partners, were organised in the process of consultation for the RRP' (Interview – ADM4). According to additional information, however, the timing of the roundtables was rather late (one month before the adoption of the RRP). Moreover, according to one trade union representative, the government accepted the comments but did not follow them up (Interview – TU10). One interviewee, however, claims that communication between the national government and social partners is an interactive process, and thus both parties should have been active earlier in the process.

In parallel, there were also tripartite dialogues between employer associations, trade unions and the government. These took place only when the plan had already been adopted, however, when nothing more could be added. The trade unionist interviewed for this research nevertheless considers the tripartite dialogue to have been more useful than the online exchange with the government representatives (Interview – TU10).

7.3 Involvement of Slovak trade unions in implementing the national RRP

Slovakia has been described by a national official contacted for this study as 'the front runner' in implementing the RRP (Interview – ADM5/ November 2022), considering the prompt pace with which the government is progressing towards achieving its milestones and targets. The country has already submitted its second request for payments, including 16 milestones and targets, following the first request for payment in April 2022, made after achieving 14 milestones.

The Slovak plan foresees the creation of an RRP implementation structure, supervised by the government, to act as a steering committee. This structure is made up of: (i) the National Implementation and Coordination Authority (NIKA), with the power to implement and coordinate the plan; (ii) implementing bodies (mainly national ministries); (iii) intermediaries; and (iv) beneficiaries of the funds (European Commission 2021e: 25). In particular, NIKA will be the body in charge

of implementing the plan and coordinating the different levels of governance. This body will be accountable to the government's Steering Committee.

In parallel, according to the European Commission (2021e: 26), the government has set up an advisory body made up of various stakeholders and representatives of civil society. The task of this advisory body is to ensure the involvement of societal players in RRP implementation and to maintain a structured dialogue with civil society, social partners and business people.

This is confirmed by the information provided during an interview with a government official, according to whom consultations with social partners have been taking place in four main forums (Interview – ADM4):

- (i) the Government Council (also including the Prime Minister and various ministries) conducts consultations twice a year. On these occasions, the social partners and civil society receive updated information on the RRP. The Council goes through the milestones, and discusses the challenges faced during implementation of the RRP;
- (ii) regional coordinators not only answer questions concerning the RRP but also proactively organise information meetings;
- (iii) within the framework of the Strategic Council of the Prime Minister, several meetings were held with the ministries responsible for the reforms included in the RRP, and the social partners were invited to attend these meetings;
- (iv) last but not least, because the RRP envisages specific reforms in health care and education, social partners are included in the discussion of these reforms through the Economic and Social Council (in place since 1990), where every piece of legislation which goes to the Parliament is also discussed.

Additionally, the national officials responsible for the RRP report receive questions from civil society via email and social media, which are also taken into account.

That said, however, according to the trade unionist interviewed, trade union involvement in the implementation stage ultimately depends on the measures and reforms the government wishes to implement (Interview – TU10).

Hence, although Eurofound (2022) ranks Slovakia poorly regarding social partner involvement in RRP implementation, the Slovak trade unionist interviewed described social partner involvement as issue-specific, stating that it varies between specific reforms (Interview – TU10). Unlike the Eurofound assessment, the national officials interviewed for the present research state that, in their communications 'with Brussels', Slovak authorities were 'repeatedly praised' for their good work in involving social partners and civil society in the consultation process on the RRP. Nevertheless, the same officials express their awareness of the challenges of the involvement process and of the criticisms raised at domestic level. Furthermore, they highlight that not all social partners are well acquainted with the requirements and the process of implementing the RRP and thus, for example, when these organisations provide new ideas during the RRP implementation

phase, they often cannot be taken on board (because there is very little scope to change the approved plan).

7.4 Key findings

The governance of the implementation of the plan set out in the RRP seems to involve the social partners through several existing institutional venues.

The national officials interviewed highlighted the importance of social partner involvement in consultation during both the development and the implementation phases of the RRP. Nevertheless, although the RRP provides for these venues for involvement, one of the interviewed trade unionists (Interview – TU10) takes the view that actual involvement in RRP implementation is issue-specific and strongly dependent on the attitude of the government in office.

The Slovak RRP is an example of how differently the impact of the RRF has been perceived in the different EU Member States, depending on the size of the investment package, relative to the size of the national economy. In any case, RRP implementation involves considerable bureaucracy and national officials feel that their governments are somehow interposed between the European Commission and national stakeholders, giving them little time to react.

Overall, while RRP preparation included exchanges with social partners (through several roundtables), the late timing of these exchanges and their quality are questionable. On the other hand, the social partners have played a more active role in RRP implementation, exchanging views and experiences with the government on specific measures and reforms, via structured dialogue in institutionally defined channels.

8. Spain

8.1 Background: key elements of the Spanish RRP

For its RRP, Spain requested 69.5 billion euros of non-repayable financial support, corresponding to 5.77 per cent of 2021 GDP (European Commission n.d.). The objectives of the Spanish RRP are aligned with the six pillars of the RRF and the plan is structured around four cross-cutting axes: (i) the green transition; (ii) the digital transformation; (iii) social and territorial cohesion; and (iv) gender equality. In more detail, the Spanish RRP is made up of 30 components, each of them including investments and reforms.

The European Commission's assessment of the Spanish RRP is rather positive, because the plan is expected to help address a 'significant subset' of the recent Semester's Country-specific Recommendations (European Commission 2021f: 6) and to contribute to the recovery of the Spanish economy, in particular through the green and digital transitions (*ibid.*: 96). The Spanish RRP also includes labour market and pension system reforms. Interestingly, the final design of these reforms 'has been left open, as it is subject to the outcome of the process of social dialogue' (European Commission 2021f: 4, emphasis removed). In particular, details concerning reforms related to Component 22 (Care economy, equality and inclusion) and to Component 23 (Labour market) are expected to be clarified in agreement with and endorsed by the social partners (*ibid.*: 27).

8.2 Involvement of Spanish trade unions in the preparation of the RRP

At the stage of drawing up the RRP, the Spanish government did not carry out any public consultations on the plan as a whole, opting instead for targeted consultations on specific measures or policies (European Commission 2021f: 30).

Hence, besides peak-level meetings to develop general guidelines for the RRP (Eurofound 2022: 8), several consultations took place at the sectoral level to obtain input from the social partners and other stakeholders on specific measures (European Commission 2021f: 30). In particular, a dedicated Dialogue Forum for the RRP was created, allowing for interaction between the government and the social partners (*ibid.*: 32).

According to the Eurofound study (2022: 10), while in Spain the RRP consultation process with the social partners was fairly intense in terms of the number of

meetings organised, the limited time given to the social partners to analyse the documents prior to discussion made it difficult for them to prepare properly for these meetings. This said, the Eurofound study finds that the Spanish social partners were highly satisfied with the consultation process overall (Eurofound 2022: 10) and agree that the views they expressed during the consultations were explicitly summarised in the national RRP (*ibid.*: 13).

The view emerging from the only interview conducted with a Spanish trade union representative is quite different, however, pointing to a lack of meaningful interaction with the government. Trade unions were informed only after decisions on the RRP had already been taken. According to the interviewee, this may have been because of insufficient time for consultations, with the government under pressure from the evolution of the Covid-19 pandemic and aiming to finalise and submit the RRP to the European Commission as soon as possible (Interview – TU11). As other interviewees recognised, time pressure could indeed have affected the dynamics of social partner involvement in the elaboration stage, putting considerable pressure on the Spanish administration to deploy resources (including time and staff) to work out 70 billion euro plan in a relatively limited amount of time. Another factor potentially explaining the negative view of the involvement process among some Spanish trade unions is a mismatch between expectations of specific reforms and the type of investment that could be included in the plan under the RRF Regulation. All this said, however, the impression of European Commission officials contacted for the present research is that the involvement process in Spain can be considered satisfactory, also in comparison with other Member States (Interview – EC7).

8.3 Involvement of Spanish trade unions in implementing the national RRP

The national arrangements for implementation of the plan were set out in Royal Decree-Law 36/2020 of 30 December 2020 approving urgent measures for the modernisation of the public administration and implementation of the Recovery Plan (European Commission 2021f: 29).

According to information provided by the Spanish government to the European Commission (2021f: 6), while each ministry is responsible for the implementation of components within the scope of their competences, three bodies hold key responsibilities for the overall implementation and monitoring of the national RRP.

First, at the political level, there is the Commission for Recovery, Transformation and Resilience, chaired by the prime minister and made up of all ministers with responsibility for the RRP. This Commission for Recovery, already set up at a previous stage to draw up the general policy guidelines for the development and implementation of the RRP, will also monitor its implementation (European Commission 2021f: 30). In doing so, the Commission for Recovery is assisted by a Technical Committee made up of 20 members of the public administration and chaired by the Secretariat-General for European Funds (*ibid.*).

Second, a newly created Secretariat-General for European Funds of the Ministry of Finance acts as a coordinator for the plan and contact point with the European Commission. This new body encompasses two Directorates General: the existing European Funds Directorate General, and a new Directorate General for the RRP. The latter is expected to coordinate with the ministries, public procurement offices, autonomous communities and local authorities, as well as other national and Community entities involved in the RRP (European Commission 2021f: 88).

Third, the Comptroller General of the central government (Intervención General de la Administración del Estado – IGAE) will ensure overall supervision of RRP implementation. In particular, the IGAE is tasked with verifying compliance with milestones and targets before the submission of a payment request (*ibid.*).

Furthermore, a new Sectoral Conference for the plan has been set up to ensure cooperation between regions, local entities and central government in implementing the plan, while the government will report quarterly on progress in RRP implementation to the Joint Parliamentary Committee for the European Union (European Commission 2021f: 32).

When it comes more specifically to social partner involvement in the implementation and monitoring of the plan, firstly, the Dialogue Forum for the RRP is expected to be an important venue for consultations between government and social partners (European Commission 2021f: 32). Chaired, in principle, by the prime minister, the meetings of the Dialogue Forum usually take place every two months and involve peak social partner representatives (for trade unions, at the confederal level). These are seen by the administration as occasions to inform the social partners about implementation of the RRP and gather input from them (Interview – ADM6). Second, other, more technical roundtables are organised, chaired by the Secretary of State for the Economy. Third, social partners are usually listened to during the regular visits to the autonomous communities made by high-level (political and administrative) officials of the Ministry of the Economy to discuss the state of implementation of the RRP (Interview – ADM6). Finally, in more general terms, national *social dialogue* is expected to play a crucial role in RRP implementation. As already mentioned, the Spanish government emphasised in its RRP that a number of reforms included in the plan – especially concerning the labour market component – would be defined together with the social partners.

The only Spanish trade unionist interviewed for this research refers to limited trade union involvement in RRP implementation to date (Interview – TU11). Although meetings took place with the central government on specific RRP measures (especially on labour market reforms, pensions and fiscal policies), it seems that, in many cases, those meetings were an opportunity for the government merely to inform trade unions about what they had planned, with limited time devoted to trade unions' comments. For a number of RRP measures (for instance, those linked to the green transition), social partner involvement has been particularly low. According to our interviewee (Interview – TU11), this might be in part because the government considers that a proper consultation with the social partners would excessively prolong the decision-making process, with the risk that the milestones and targets linked to disbursement of the RRF funds might not be met. That said,

the importance of reaching agreements with the social partners on specific RRP measures, such as the labour market and pension reforms, has been highlighted by both the Spanish and the European Commission officials contacted, on the ground that this may have proven important in getting the legislation through Parliament.

Within the autonomous communities, the situation seems to be varied. Some exchanges of information take place in autonomous communities led by centre-left governments, while interaction is limited in those communities led by centre-right governments (Interview – TU11).

Importantly, according to one of our interviewees (Interview – TU11), it seems that activities in preparation for the Spanish Presidency of the Council of the EU (second half of 2023) are resulting in increased interaction between the Spanish government and national trade unions, including with regard to implementation of the RRP. The number of meetings is increasing and several roundtables have been established to monitor implementation of the RRP's Strategic Projects for Economic Recovery and Transformation (PERTES) involving the social partners. These settings are still perceived by some trade unions merely as opportunities to exchange information, however (Interview – TU11). There are ongoing contacts between the Spanish administration and the social partners in relation to amendments to the national RRP, in order to include both the additional 7.7 billion euros recently allocated to Spain and the new RePower EU chapters (worth about 2.6 billion euros). In this context, the administration contacted social partner organisations through a letter, to which they replied with ideas on how to draft the addendum to the RRP and mentioning measures they would find it useful to include (Interview – ADM6). As one of our interviewees stated, several trade union contributions have been taken into account in the preparation of the addendum (Interview – TU11).

Finally, the only Spanish trade unionist we reached referred to limited direct contacts between their trade union and the European Commission on the RRP (Interview – TU11). According to other sources, however, while there is an ongoing dialogue between the Commission and the national social partners through exchanges taking place within the framework of the European Semester, the RRP may have increased the Spanish social partners' willingness to take an active part in the process, including through discussions with the European Commission. Spanish social partners are regularly involved in meetings with Commission officials, including during Commissioners' visits to the country in relation to the RRP (Interview – ADM6). As confirmed by a Commission official, both government representatives and stakeholders were involved in the last mission to Madrid organised by the European Commission in September 2022 (Interview – EC7).

8.4 Key findings

In Spain, the social partners' involvement in elaborating the national RRP took place mainly at the sectoral level, through ad hoc venues. Evidence collected concerning the quality of involvement is somewhat contradictory. On one hand,

some accounts refer to a relatively intense consultation process (although with limited time allotted to the social partners), leading to the inclusion in the national RRP of a summary of the social partners' views. On the other hand, a trade union representative interviewed for the present research describes limited involvement of trade union organisations, basically consisting of a simple exchange of information with the government and the administration, without the possibility of having an impact on the priorities and contents of the RRP. This circumstance has been in part attributed to excessive pressure on the national administration to finalise the RRP.

Contacts between the social partners and the central government and administration on RRP implementation take place through several RRF-specific venues, allowing for both political and technical exchanges. Here again, assessments of the quality and outputs of these interactions vary. While, according to some national actors, these are only forums for exchanging information on implementation of the plan, other actors claim that some RRP measures were negotiated by the government with the social partners, before Parliamentary scrutiny. This is the case for instance with the labour market and pension reforms, in relation to which agreement with the social partners was an important condition, making approval by the national Parliament more likely. Contrasting views on the quality and impact of social partner involvement in RRP implementation may be explained by a mismatch of expectations, with the government and the administration more willing to involve the social partners in the implementation of specific measures related to social and labour market policies, and trade unions expecting meaningful involvement in the whole RRP. In addition, tight timelines for achieving RRP targets and milestones are recognised as a factor that may have affected the quality of the involvement process.

All this said, it is possible to detect in Spain some signs pointing to the development of a more regular and structured process of social partner involvement in RRP implementation. In order to understand the effectiveness of these developments, it would be important to investigate further the specific practices adopted for planned amendments to the RRP and for developing the RePower EU chapter.

Finally, while the only trade unionist interviewed for this research points to rather limited contacts between their union and the European Commission in relation to the RRP, other sources maintain that the social partners are regularly involved in meetings with Commissioners and Commission officials, including in country missions on the RRP. In this respect, the RRP seems to have resulted in more contacts than during the European Semester process.

9. Conclusions

This analysis of trade union (and, more generally, social partner) involvement in the preparation and implementation of national RRP shows a varied situation across the seven countries included in this research, together with a number of similarities.

During the *preparation* stage of the RRP, some interaction took place between national governments/administrations and the social partners in all the countries considered.

The ‘access channels’ identified for the social partners are varied, including ad hoc venues and procedures set up specifically for drafting the RRP, established institutional settings for social dialogue, and venues and procedures linked to the national cycle of the European Semester. These access channels consisted of both forums for bipartite or tripartite exchanges between the social partners and national governments, and multi-stakeholder settings involving a broader array of players (such as NGOs). In terms of interlocutors, interaction with the social partners usually happened at both the political and technical levels. While in some cases social partner involvement in the preparation of the RRP took place through in-person meetings, the context was heavily affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, and written or online exchanges were often held. In a few countries (such as Bulgaria and Italy), national Parliaments played a particularly important role in offering the social partners an opportunity to express their views on the draft RRP and to have an impact on parts of the final plans.

Concerning the content of exchanges, interactions dealt with the drafting of both the RRP as a whole and specific sections of the plans. In particular, national governments in Denmark, Germany, Slovakia and Spain opted for a more markedly issue-specific and sectoral approach to social partner involvement.

Regarding the type and impact of the involvement process, trade union assessments were in most cases rather negative. According to the trade unionists interviewed for the present research, interaction with national policymakers consisted merely of exchanges of information in countries such as France, Italy, Slovakia and Spain. In Slovakia, this was also due to the delayed start of the involvement process, with exchanges with the social partners taking place at a very late stage. In Germany, besides information exchanges, some limited instances of consultation were seen. Overall, however, in these countries, trade unions perceived that they had had a very slight impact (for example, in Germany and Italy) or no impact at all on the final contents of the RRP. Instances of consultation and, on some

issues, negotiations between national governments and the social partners in the preparation of the RRP were mentioned in Bulgaria and Denmark, countries where national trade unions felt they had had some influence on the contents of some parts of the national plans. In Denmark, however, the fact that consultations were mostly decentralised left some trade unionists with the feeling that they had not been sufficiently involved.

When it comes to social partner involvement in the *implementation* of the RRP, the Member States established a variety of governance structures to implement the plans (although in most cases a central role is played by ministries of finance), also depending on countries' institutional structure. Accordingly, a variety of access channels for social partner involvement can be identified, including ordinary national policymaking venues, social dialogue forums and newly established ad hoc settings. For instance, while in most countries the RRP is implemented through both ordinary policymaking and social dialogue settings and specific RRP-related structures, in Denmark RRP implementation is fully integrated into ordinary policymaking procedures.

As in the case of the preparation stage, access channels for social partner involvement in RRP implementation may involve bipartite or tripartite exchanges between the social partners and national governments and/or multi-stakeholder exchanges. The interlocutors usually include both political and administrative officials. When it comes to the content of exchanges, interactions may concern both the overall implementation of the RRP and, more often, the implementation of specific measures. While exchanges may focus on both political and technical issues related to the RRP, the trade unions consider that to achieve meaningful involvement it is important to strike a balance between the two dimensions. For instance, according to French trade unions, exchanges with the government on the implementation of the French RRP often concern technical aspects and discussions on (quantitative) progress in the achievement of milestones and targets. This does not allow for more in-depth political discussions on the measures implemented and the overall orientations of the RRP.

When it comes to the type and impact of involvement in RRP implementation, the situation appears more varied than in the preparation stage, as it is more strictly related to (and differs across) specific measures included in the plans. Similarly to the drafting of the national RRP, trade union involvement in France remains mostly information exchange (at least, vis-à-vis the national government). Despite the relatively high number of meetings, trade unionists claim that there is no meaningful involvement. While the quality of national social dialogue remains poor, some trade unionists claim that the French government may in some cases have used the national RRP as a way of bypassing the social partners (one example being reform of the unemployment insurance scheme). In Germany, Italy and Slovakia, involvement ranges between information exchanges and consultation, depending very much on the specific measures and territorial levels at which these measures are implemented. In Spain, the type of involvement ranges between information exchange, consultation and negotiation, here again depending on the specific RRP measures. In particular, the contents of some reforms included in the Spanish RRP (notably, the labour market and pension reforms) were negotiated

with the social partners during the implementation stage, and social partner agreement is considered a key factor facilitating the approval of these reforms by the national parliament. Implementation of the Bulgarian RRP is expected to involve consultations and issue-specific negotiations, while we do not have enough information on involvement in implementation of the Danish RRP, which is fully integrated into national policymaking channels (this makes it more complex to monitor implementation).

Looking at the main factors affecting the quality of involvement in the RRP, this research has identified a number of (sometimes interlinked) issues, influencing both the preparation and implementation stages.

First, the state of national social dialogue obviously has an impact on interaction between national governments and social partners. This is particularly evident, for instance, in the French case, where trade union representatives refer to the national government's unwillingness to enter into meaningful dialogue with the social partners.

Second, there may be a number of shortcomings in the functioning of the access channels and procedures. In a few cases (such as France and Italy), despite the relatively high number of meetings on the RRP involving the social partners, the trade unions' impression was that key decisions were actually taken 'elsewhere'. In this respect, the importance of access channels allowing for both political and more technical discussions on the RRP was often underlined.

Third, time pressure has affected the quality of social partner involvement in both the preparation and implementation stages. In particular, regarding implementation of the plans, the performance-based financing of the RRP (linking payments to the timely achievement of precise milestones and targets) is having an impact not only on social dialogue dynamics but also on more general decision-making processes in the Member States.

Fourth, in some cases a mismatch of expectations can be seen between the social partners and national governments on the nature of the involvement process. While trade unions wished to have a say in the preparation and implementation of the whole RRP (including general orientations and approaches), national governments are often more inclined to involve the social partners only on specific measures, usually those related to employment and social policies.

Fifth, shortcomings in communication may have affected trade unions' perception of their level of involvement and their impact on the RRP. Regarding the preparation stage, in virtually all the countries included in this analysis, trade unionists highlighted a lack of feedback (or unclear feedback) from national administrations on whether and how their contributions were eventually used in the preparation of the final RRP. This circumstance may, in part, explain cases in which the opinions of trade unionists and national officials differ significantly regarding the impact of the trade unions on the plan.

Sixth, insufficient resources (including time and staff) have in some cases affected social partners' involvement in both the preparation and implementation of the national RRP. These plans are usually made up of many measures, were drafted in a relatively short timeframe, and need to be implemented according to tight deadlines. Hence, both trade unions and national administrations should devote significant resources to the involvement process.

Seventh, the social partners' degree of satisfaction with the contents of the RRP plays a role in ensuring their commitment to and the features of the involvement process. In particular, trade unions' perception that they have only a slight impact on the RRP, or disagreement with its content, may affect their involvement in the implementation process, creating some frustration as there is limited scope for changing the plans at the implementation stage.

Finally, as hypothesised in Section 1, the relative importance of EU funding from the RRF in each country (the funding allocated to each RRP as a share of each Member State's GDP) may have an impact on domestic players' willingness to invest resources in the involvement process. In this respect, the situation in the countries considered varies, ranging from the considerable importance of RRF funds in countries such as Bulgaria, Italy and Slovakia to their relatively lower importance in countries such as Denmark and Germany. That said, we should not overestimate the significance of this factor, considering that, also in countries receiving a relatively lower amount of funds, significant commitment can be detected from both national administrations and the social partners. In Denmark, the comparatively limited funding from the RRF was topped up by national co-funding, thus increasing the importance of the measures implemented.

Overall, this research has described a range of situations regarding social partner (and, in particular, trade union) involvement in the preparation and implementation of the national RRP. While the initial stages were particularly difficult in most countries, with involvement consisting mainly of exchanges of information, some improvements can be detected in the implementation stage, although significant shortcomings remain. Willingness has been expressed in several countries in this analysis to enhance social partner involvement in the future, through more structured and regular interaction. Ongoing amendments to national RRP to include additional allocations and RePowerEU chapters will be an important test in this respect.

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