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The role and increasing weight of the Economic and Social Councils at national level

STUDY



European Economic
and Social Committee



The role and increasing weight of the Economic and Social Councils at national level

Study – Final report

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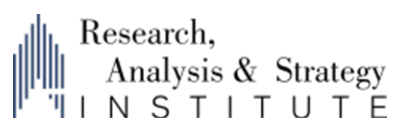
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AUTHORS *Dr Maria Mateeva-Kazakova
Dr Simone Poledrini
Dr Deolinda Meira
Dr Maria Elisabete Ramos*

CONTACTS *info@rasinstitute.com*

IDENTIFIERS

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Abstract

This study explores the evolving role and significance of National Economic and Social Councils (NESC)s in several EU Member States, specifically Belgium, Bulgaria, France, Italy and Portugal. The research aims to achieve four key objectives: providing an overview of NESC)s' roles, assessing their impact on national decision making, analysing best practices for involving them, and offering policy recommendations for enhancing cooperation between the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) and NESC)s. The study relies on extensive desk research and 25 semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders. Findings highlight that NESC)s in Belgium, Italy and Portugal possess broader competencies than the respective bodies in France and Bulgaria. Issues identified include challenges in civil society representation, financial constraints and a lack of cohesion. Recommendations include fostering EU-level collaboration, monitoring French reforms and balancing expert involvement with civic engagement in decision making. Enhanced cooperation and structured dialogue between NESC)s and the EESC are vital for advancing EU policy goals towards 2030 and beyond.



Executive Summary

The primary aim of this study was to provide a comprehensive overview of the role and increasing significance of National Economic and Social Councils (NESC) at national level, while also proposing a series of policy recommendations. Specifically, the study aims to deliver on four key objectives: Objective 1: provide a general overview of the NESC and the roles they play in the following EU Member States: Belgium (CNT and CCE), Bulgaria, France, Italy and Portugal; Objective 2: assess the extent of their involvement in, and impact on, decision making at national level; the study also examines how the NESC are involved in the implementation and monitoring of the National Recovery and Resilience Plans; Objective 3: analyse how NESC can be better and more constructively involved, identifying best practices in terms of participation mechanisms and useful lessons that could be applied at both national and EU level; Objective 4: provide policy recommendations to strengthen the EESC's relationship with NESC and its involvement as the EU's institutional bridge with civil society towards 2030 and beyond, including possible actions for future EESC work.

To prepare for this study, extensive desk research was conducted. This included a review of relevant legislation, NESC statutes, prior evaluations, official opinions, reports and resolutions, minutes of meetings and media coverage.

An interview programme was implemented, consisting of 25 semi-structured interviews with officials from the institutions studied. This programme targeted a sample of five officials per country, including key stakeholder groups within the NESC (employers, employees and civil society). Interviewees were selected based on their positions of responsibility or significant experience, such as presidents, commission presidents, vice-presidents and active members. This approach ensured that insights were gathered from individuals with a broad perspective on the functioning of the institutions.

Advisory role and competencies: The primary responsibility of the NESC in Belgium, Bulgaria, Italy, France and Portugal is their advisory role, which encompasses facilitating social dialogue. In Belgium, Italy and Portugal, NESC have more than advisory functions, possessing broader and stronger competencies. For instance, the advisory role of Belgium's Central Economic Council (CCE) has expanded over the years to include new legislative developments. The government is legally obligated to seek opinions from the CCE on specific issues. Furthermore, the National Labour Council (CNT-NAR) in Belgium has the authority to negotiate collective bargaining agreements. In Portugal, the Economic and Social Council (CES) has an arbitrating role during strikes and facilitates agreements between social partners through the Social Concertation Standing Committee (CPCS). Notably, Italy's National Council for Economics and Labour (CNEL) has the power of legislative initiative, a competency not observed in other NESC.

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Institutional composition: The Economic, Social and Environmental Council (CESE) in France is the largest of the NESCs studied, with 175 members post-reform (previously 233). The second largest is Portugal's CES with 76 full members. Italy's CNEL comprises 64 members (reduced from 121), Belgium's CCE has 54 members (with an equal number of alternates), Bulgaria's Economic and Social Council (ISS) has 37 members (including the chair), and Belgium's CNT-NAR has 26 primary members and 26 substitutes.

Operational structure: All the NESCs studied have a similar operational structure, which includes a presidency, plenary, committees and administration. A unique body within Portugal's CES is the Social Concertation Standing Committee (CPCS), which promotes dialogue and social concertation in order to reach agreements. It is part of the CES but operates independently of its authority and is presided over by the prime minister or a designated minister.

Policy impact: The NESCs of Italy and Belgium are relatively more empowered in terms of policy impact. In contrast, the NESCs in France, Bulgaria and Portugal typically respond to requests from other bodies rather than regularly initiating policy interventions. Although they have the right to issue own-initiative opinions, these tend to be less impactful than requested ones.

Transparency mechanisms: The primary mechanisms for transparency employed by the NESCs studied include annual activity reports, open plenary sessions and publicly accessible opinions. However, no regular external evaluations are conducted within the sample of NESCs analysed.

Political independence: In all the NESCs studied, presidents and some members are appointed by political authorities. However, Portugal is unique in having political representatives nominated as members within its NESC.

Budgetary considerations: The NESC with the largest budget is France, with EUR 45.1 million allocated in 2023. Italy follows with EUR 7.1 million for 2023. Belgium's Central Economic Council has a state subsidy of EUR 5.8 million for 2024 and the CNT-NAR has a budget of EUR 4.2 million for 2024. Portugal's CES had a total budget of EUR 2 million in 2023, and Bulgaria's Economic and Social Council has a budget of EUR 950 000 for 2024. Italy, Portugal and France reported financial constraints affecting their capacity to deliver optimal outputs, while Bulgaria reported no financial difficulties.

Periods of crisis and reform: Several NESCs, such as those in Italy and France, have experienced periods where their utility was questioned, leading to significant reforms to reflect the evolving structure of civil society.

Representation of civil society: A common issue among NESCs is effectively representing civil society, given that most institutions were established decades ago whereas civil society is constantly evolving.

Internal and external cohesion: Lack of internal and external cohesion has been identified as a barrier to optimising international cooperation among NESCs as well as at EU level.

Stability in political crises: NESCs are seen as sources of stability during political crises or when decision makers lack the expertise to formulate decisions. This observation was particularly emphasised in interviews conducted in France and Bulgaria.

Interaction with the EU level and the EESC: NESCs have been involved in the preparation of National Recovery and Resilience Plans. They would welcome further opportunities for thematic cooperation, and debate and structured dialogue at EU level are considered beneficial.

Recommendations: Enhanced collaboration: The EESC should offer more opportunities for collaboration and the exchange of good practices between the NESCs at EU level.

Monitoring French reforms: The recent French efforts to identify solutions for civil society participation should be monitored for potential transfer of best practices. Further analysis of lessons learned in the wake of the 2021 reform, including selection mechanisms, weighting their opinions, formulating tailored questions for optimal inclusion and integrating their opinions into decision-making processes, could be valuable.

Balancing expert involvement and civic engagement: with a view to advanced analyses and the potential implementation of new civic participation mechanisms, the EESC should consider balancing expert involvement with broader civic engagement. This pertains to a prospective analysis focusing on identifying potential methods for introducing novel forms of civic participation. A thorough examination is required to evaluate the integration of new mechanisms for engaging both individuals and experts. This will ensure that individuals and experts are able to interact in the joint decision-making process in an optimal manner.

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1. Introduction

This is the final report for the ‘Study on the Role and Increasing Weight of the National Economic and Social Councils at National Level’.

The aim of this study is to provide an overview of the role and growing significance of the National Economic and Social Councils (NESC) at national level, and to propose a series of policy recommendations.

There are four study objectives: Objective 1: provide a general overview of the NESC and the roles they play in the following EU Member States: Belgium (CNT and CCE), Bulgaria, France, Italy and Portugal; Objective 2: assess the extent of their involvement in, and impact on, decision making at national level; the study also examines how the NESC are involved in the implementation and monitoring of the National Recovery and Resilience Plans; Objective 3: analyse how NESC can be better and more constructively involved, identifying best practices in terms of participation mechanisms and useful lessons that could be applied at both national and EU level; Objective 4: provide policy recommendations to strengthen the EESC’s relationship with NESC and its involvement as the EU’s institutional bridge with civil society towards 2030 and beyond, including possible actions for future EESC work.

In this study, we focus on five countries: Belgium, Bulgaria, France, Italy and Portugal.

Belgium: This country has the National Labour Council (CNT-NAR) and the Central Economic Council (CCE-CRB). The CNT-NAR primarily focuses on providing opinions or formulating proposals on social matters for the Belgian government and/or Parliament. The CCE-CRB, on the other hand, is tasked with preparing opinions and proposals on questions pertaining to the national economy and presenting them in the form of reports.

Bulgaria: The Economic and Social Council of Bulgaria serves as a consultative and advisory body, bringing together representatives from diverse social and economic groups to facilitate dialogue and collaboration between the government and civil society on economic and social policy matters.

France: France has the Economic, Social and Environmental Council (CESE), a constitutional consultative assembly representing key economic, social and environmental stakeholders. It fosters cooperation among various socio-professional interest groups and ensures that they are included in the policy-making process.

Italy: Italy’s National Economic and Social Council (*Consiglio Nazionale dell'Economia e del Lavoro*, CNEL) operates as an advisory body, offering consultations on economic and social issues. It comprises representatives from various economic and social groups, including employers, trade unions and other relevant stakeholders.

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Portugal: The National Economic and Social Council (*Conselho Económico e Social*, CES) serves as an advisory body facilitating dialogue and cooperation between the government and various social and economic stakeholders. The Constitution of the Portuguese Republic grants the CES two roles: social consultation and social concertation.

Generally, economic and social councils can be categorised based on whether they are recognised by their respective country's constitution. This distinction includes councils specifically acknowledged in national constitutions, as in Portugal, France, Italy, Greece and Romania. Additionally, there are councils established solely through legal provisions and laws, as in Ireland, Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Malta, Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria and Finland.

The bodies studied represent two different sub-types of institutions in terms of legal nature: those specifically recognised in their country's constitution (Portugal, France and Italy) and those established by law (Belgium and Bulgaria).

For the preparation of this study, we conducted extensive desk research, which included a review of relevant legislation, the statutes of the NESCs, prior evaluations, official opinions, reports and resolutions, meeting minutes and media coverage. Additionally, we implemented an interview programme consisting of 25 semi-structured interviews¹ with officials from the institutions studied. This programme targeted a sample of five officials per country, selecting officials from key stakeholder groups within the NESCs (employers, employees and civil society). Interviewees were chosen based on their positions of responsibility or significant experience (e.g., presidents, commission presidents, vice-presidents and active members) to obtain insights from individuals with a comprehensive understanding of how the institutions work.

The information collected was systematically analysed using a pre-established evaluation matrix encompassing 14 primary meta-questions and several sub-questions. The meta-questions addressed the following areas: 1. Mandate and mission, 2. Structure and composition, 3. Functionality and operations, 4. Advisory role, 5. Stakeholder engagement, 6. Impact on policy, 7. Transparency and accountability, 8. Independence, 9. Resource allocation, 10. Public perception, 11. Evaluation of past recommendations, 12. Continuous improvement, 13. Experience in EU-related work, and 14. Relations with the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC). This analytical framework allowed for a thorough and nuanced evaluation of the NESCs' performance and contributions.

1

An overview of the interview programme is set out in the Annex.

2. Mandate and mission

The NESCs studied represent two different sub-types of institutions in terms of legal nature: those specifically recognised in their country's constitution (Portugal, France and Italy) and those established by law (Belgium and Bulgaria).

2.1 The common role of the NESCs

The NESCs in Belgium, Bulgaria, Italy, France and Portugal have two key functions: they facilitate social dialogue and advise national political bodies.

In **Belgium**, the Central Economic Council² is tasked with compiling all opinions and proposals concerning matters pertaining to the national economy. These are then presented in the form of reports, incorporating diverse viewpoints expressed by council members, and submitted to a minister or the legislative chambers. This process takes place either proactively or upon a request from the respective authorities. The organic law passed on 29 May 1952 delegates the following powers to the National Labour Council (CNT-NAR): the primary and most significant competency involves providing opinions or issuing proposals on social matters for the Belgian Government and/or Parliament; the secondary power involves offering opinions on conflicts of attribution that may arise between joint committees.

In **Bulgaria**, the Law on the Economic and Social Council³ establishes it as an advisory body, expressing the views of civil society bodies on economic and social development. The Economic and Social Council ensures that a wide range of civil society representatives are involved in social and economic life, upholding the principles of law, democracy and the welfare state. It serves as a permanent institutional forum for social and civil dialogue and for economic and social consultations between the President of the Republic, the National Assembly and the Council of Ministers and civil society bodies. It gives a voice to civil society bodies and expresses opinions and proposals on legislative and executive acts that affect those bodies' interests. It upholds the principles of democracy through direct participation, applying the experience of the European Economic and Social Committee and other related national and international organisations.

In **Italy**, the National Council of Economy and Labour (CNEL) is an institution established by Article 99 of the Italian Constitution. It has a consultative function with respect to the Italian Government, Parliament and regions with the power of legislative initiative. It also has the power to contribute to the drafting of economic and social legislation. The CNEL advises on economic, social and labour matters.

² <https://www.ccecrb.fgov.be/c/fr/22/presentation>.

³ <https://esc.bg/%d0%b7%d0%b0-%d0%b8%d1%81%d1%81/%d0%b7%d0%b0%d0%ba%d0%be%d0%bd-%d0%b7%d0%b0-%d0%b8%d0%ba%d0%be%d0%bd%d0%be%d0%bc%d0%b8%d1%87%d0%b5%d1%81%d0%ba%d0%b8-%d0%b8-%d1%81%d0%be%d1%86%d0%b8%d0%b0%d0%bb%d0%b5%d0%bd-%d1%81%d1%8a%d0%b2%d0%b5/>.

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It also participates in drafting economic and social legislation, through opinions, investigations and studies. It exercises its advisory role at the request of the Italian Parliament, government, regions and the autonomous provinces, as well as on its own initiative.

In **Portugal**, as outlined in Article 92 of the Constitution of the Portuguese Republic, the Economic and Social Council has two distinct competencies: an advisory role and social dialogue. As part of its advisory role, the council provides non-binding opinions for the relevant parties.

The Economic, Social and Environmental Council (CESE) in **France** is the third constitutional assembly of the French Republic. It is a pillar of French democracy. It advises the government and Parliament and participates in the development and evaluation of policies within its remit. The CESE advises the government and Parliament on policies in the fields of economic and social development as well as the environment. It promotes dialogue and cooperation with its regional counterparts (CESER).

Since the 2021 reform, the council has been entrusted with new missions, and its work is enriched by public participation. The CESE is an example due to the specific mechanisms for civic participation which are in place. The organic law of 15 January 2021 overhauled the tasks and functioning of the CESE, which had remained unchanged since the constitutional revision of July 2008. The reform increases the place of civil society in policy making by making the CESE the ‘crossroads for public consultations’ and the reference institution for public participation.

The reform introduces a significant democratic innovation: it enables the CESE to facilitate citizens’ conventions. This involves randomly selecting citizens to conduct consultations on topics within the council’s remit. The organic law establishes a legislative framework for this practice, effectively transforming the CESE into the chamber of citizen conventions. Public consultations can be initiated by the CESE itself or upon request of the government or Parliament. While these consultations may take the form of citizen conventions focusing on specific subjects, they may also incorporate randomly selected groups of citizens into commission proceedings or establish digital platforms for citizen engagement.

It strengthens the place of the CESE in public debate. This law enables organised civil society, strengthened by citizen participation, to play a stronger role in policy making.

The procedure for referring petitions to the council has been updated: the CESE can be officially contacted electronically. In total 150 000 signatures are necessary. Young people aged 16 and over can sign or launch petitions. This enables citizens aged 16 and over to influence public debate.

According to the statistics made available for the preparation of the CESE's study, since the January 2021 reform, more than 170 000 citizens have contributed to the work of the CESE through various citizen participation approaches. These include digital platforms (170 000 participants), draw (350 participants) and workshops (450 participants). This means that over 170 000 citizens have been involved in drawing up an opinion via one of the new mechanisms (not just by signing a petition).

The structural reform has strengths and weaknesses, according to the feedback collected. The institution became more 'horizontal' in terms of enabling citizens to be involved in drawing up opinions. However, it reduced the expert capacity of the organisation.

*'The 2021 reform brought significant changes. It reduced the number of members and advisors, which had a negative impact. However, it also increased public participation. We now utilize platforms, questionnaires, and random selection (drawing lots) more extensively. This reform has empowered us to request public participation, and we have improved our methods for selecting participants and framing questions. Sometimes, we even create internet platforms for broader engagement.'*⁴

*'The most notable change is the reduced presence of intellectuals and prominent personalities, while the institution has become increasingly accessible to NGOs.'*⁵

At the same time, there are difficulties in integrating citizens' opinions into the workflow of the CESE.

*'The reform strengthened the civic participation, with CESE experimenting with platforms and civic conventions. For instance, the council has drawn lots for selecting 15 citizens, but integrating them into the formal processes, like writing reports, has proven challenging. Citizens often express their opinions but lack the expertise to participate efficiently. Additionally, achieving consensus while incorporating individual citizen opinions creates a contradiction. Calls for participants are organized on online platforms, and while the invited citizens come from diverse educational backgrounds and are compensated for their time, they typically represent only themselves. The challenge remains in effectively including them in the decision-making process'*⁶.

⁴ Sylvain Boucherand, president, Commission on Environment, CESE, France.

⁵ Jacques Creyssel, president, Commission on Economy and Finance, CESE, France.

⁶ Marie-Pierre Gabriel, Social and Territorial Cohesion Commission, CESE, France.

2.2 NESCs with stronger powers

The NESCs in **Belgium**, **Italy** and **Portugal** have more than advisory functions: they have broader or stronger competencies.

In **Belgium**, since 1948, the Central Economic Council's advisory role has expanded to accommodate new legislative developments. In certain cases, the government must ask the council to provide opinions on specific issues. The legal obligation to be consulted is quite different from simply providing advice if and when decided by the political bodies. Since the law came into effect on 5 December 1968, the CNT-NAR also has the authority to negotiate collective bargaining agreements either across all sectors of economic activity or within specific sectors.

The Economic and Social Council in **Portugal** facilitates agreements between social partners. This is part of its social dialogue function, facilitated by the Social Concertation Standing Committee (CPCS).

The Economic and Social Council acts as arbitrator during strikes. It is responsible for organising and keeping up lists of arbitrators, selecting arbitrators when necessary, ensuring that arbitrators and experts are paid, and providing technical and administrative support for arbitration tribunal operations⁷. Arbitration geared to establishing minimum service during strikes in state-owned companies is carried out within the framework of the Economic and Social Council. However, this role functions independently of the council itself. Arbitration tribunals within the Economic and Social Council issue legally binding rulings for the parties involved in arbitration⁸.

In **Italy**, the CNEL has a consultative function with respect to the Italian government, Parliament and regions, with the power of legislative initiative. This is a defining characteristic of the Italian NESC. It also has the power to contribute to the drafting of economic and social legislation.

⁷ Decree-Law 259/2009, enacted on 25 September, governs mandatory and essential arbitration, as well as arbitration concerning minimum services during strikes, in accordance with Articles 513 and 538(4)(b) of the Labour Code.

⁸ <https://ces.pt/home-en/#arbitration>.

3. Structure and composition

In terms of number of representatives, the Economic, Social and Environmental Council in France is the largest institution, with 175 members. The number of members was even bigger before the reform of January 2021 (233). The second biggest NESC is the Economic and Social Council of Portugal, with 76 full members. The CNEL in Italy has 64 members (down from 121), Belgium's CCE has 54 (54 alternate members), the ESC in Bulgaria has 37 members (chair and 36 members), and the CNT-NAR in Belgium has 26 primary members and 26 substitute members.

Table 1: Number of members in national NESC

| | | |
|----------|---------|--|
| France | CESE | 175 members (down from 233) |
| Portugal | ESC | 76 |
| Italy | CNEL | 64 (down from 121) |
| Belgium | CCE | 54 (54 alternate members) |
| Bulgaria | ESC | 37 (chair and 36 members) |
| Belgium | CNT-NAR | 26 primary members and 26 substitute members |

The mandates are for between four and six years. The mandate of the members elected to the CCE in Belgium is the longest (six years), followed by the CESE in France and the CNEL in Italy (five years), and the CNT-NAR in Belgium and the ESCs in Bulgaria and Portugal (four years).

In **Belgium**, the CNT-NAR has 26 primary members and 26 substitute members. They are appointed by royal decree, with the option of renewal. Representation is evenly divided between labour and employer groups. Only primary members have voting rights.

The CCE functions as a collaborative advisory body with 54 primary members and 54 alternate members. The organisation is presided over by an individual from outside the administration or the organisations represented. Following consultation with the council, the president is appointed by the King. The president autonomously leads discussions within the council, the board and certain committees and working groups.

Assisting the president there are four vice-presidents, jointly selected by the plenary assembly. Each employers' and workers' group nominates two vice-presidents from among the council members.

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Representing industry, services, agriculture, commerce, crafts and the non-profit sector are 24 primary and 24 alternate members, proposed by the most representative organisations.

Additionally, 24 primary and 24 alternate members are appointed by the most representative worker organisations.

Experts are an important component. There are six primary members and six co-opted members recognised for their scientific or technical expertise. The co-opted members play a pivotal role in fostering a scientific network and can offer scientific guidance to secretariat staff if necessary.

In **Bulgaria**, the Plenary of the Economic and Social Council consists of a chair and 36 members, who are divided by representation into three groups of 12 members. The groups are employers' organisations, trade unions and the civil sector. The National Assembly elects the chair of the council on a proposal from the Council of Ministers, previously agreed with the groups, represented in the council. The first group consists of 12 members, selected by the governing bodies of the organisations representing employers at national level, recognised by the Council of Ministers in accordance with the Labour Code. The second group consists of 12 members, selected by the governing bodies of the organisations representing workers and officials at national level, recognised by the Council of Ministers in accordance with the Labour Code.

The third group consists of 12 members distributed as follows:

1. one representative of the organisations of agricultural producers;
2. one representative of the organisations of production cooperatives;
3. one representative of the organisations of craftworkers;
4. one representative of the professional associations;
5. one representative of consumer organisations;
6. one representative of women's organisations;
7. one representative of environmental organisations;
8. one representative of the organisations of people with disabilities;
9. one representative of pensioners' organisations;

10. one representative of the organisations supporting the socially disadvantaged, people with disabilities or persons in need of care;

11. two independent scientists - specialists in economic and social policy selected by the Council of Ministers on a proposal from the minister of the economy and the minister of labour and social policy.

The structure of the Economic and Social Council may potentially be changed in the future due to concerns about the mechanisms of representation of the third sector.

‘There is a problem – how much is structured the civil society; this is why many organizations outside of it are asking reasonable questions; therefore, we can consider probably legislative changes in the future;’⁹

The plenary session adopts the regulations governing the activities of the Economic and Social Council, approves the draft annual plans and activity reports and the draft annual budget, adopts the acts of the Economic and Social Council, approves the vice-chairs, elects the chairs and members of the permanent and temporary commissions, etc.

The session adopts decisions to approve opinions, analyses and resolutions prepared by the permanent committees of the council at the request of the President of the Republic, the Speaker of the National Assembly and the Council of Ministers. The ESC also draws up documents on its own initiative, when supported by at least one third of its members, by the permanent committees of the council, by the chair or by the chair’s council.

The council’s opinions are adopted by open vote and by a three-quarters majority of those present at the plenary session.

The meetings of the plenary session are open. In certain cases, the plenary session may decide to close the meeting or to hold them remotely; this is decided by the presiding council.

The ESC Law states that the acts of the council are adopted by a majority of not less than 75% of the members present, and the decisions of the chair’s council are adopted unanimously.

The Economic and Social Council^{10,11} in **Portugal** represents the following six socio-professional groups: government; employers; workers; representatives of regional and local government; sundry

⁹ Plamen Dimitrov, vice-president, Economic and Social Council, Bulgaria.

¹⁰ Article 3 of Law No 108/91 of 17 August.

¹¹ Economic and Social Council Law - Law No 108/91 of 17 August, as amended by Law No 80/98 of 24 November; Law No 128/99 of 20 August; Law No 12/2003 of 20 May; Law No 37/2004 of 13 August; Law No 75-A/2014 of 30 September; Law No 135/2015 of 7 September; Law No 81/2017 of 18 August.

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interests; individuals of renowned merit. It has the following composition: a president, elected by the Assembly of the Republic under Article 166.2(h) of the Constitution; four vice-presidents, elected by the plenary session of the Council; eight government representatives, appointed by resolution of the Council of Ministers; eight representatives of the organisations representing workers, appointed by their respective confederations; eight representatives of business organisations, appointed by national associations; two representatives of the cooperative sector, appointed by the cooperative confederations; two representatives appointed by the Higher Council for Science and Technology; two representatives from the liberal professions, appointed by the sector's associations; one representative of the state business sector, appointed by resolution of the Council of Ministers; two representatives of each autonomous region, appointed by the respective regional assembly; eight representatives of the mainland local authorities, elected by the regional councils of the areas of each regional coordination commission (one for the Alentejo, one for the Algarve) and two for each of the others; a representative of national consumer protection associations; three representatives of the social sector: one representative of private social solidarity institutions, one representative of the Mercy Societies (Misericórdias) and one representative of mutual associations (Mutualidades); a representative of family associations; a representative of universities, to be appointed by the Council of Deans; a representative of young entrepreneurs' associations; two representatives of organisations representing family farming and the rural world; one representative of organisations representing equal opportunities for women and men; one representative of each of the generically representative women's associations; a representative of national environmental defence associations; a representative of the women's organisations represented on the advisory board of the Commission for Citizenship and Gender Equality, considered collectively; one representative of organisations representing people with disabilities, appointed by their respective associations; two representatives of organisations representing the financial and insurance sectors; one representative of the Portuguese Confederation of Culture, Recreation and Sports Collectives; one representative of organisations representing immigrants; two representatives of the Council of Portuguese Communities; five persons of recognised merit in the economic and social fields, appointed by the plenary; a representative of the National Youth Council; a representative of the National Federation of Youth Associations; two representatives of organisations representing pensioners.

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- The Law on the Economic and Social Council lays down the constitutional rules of this body.
 - It regulates the competencies of this body, its composition, the procedure for appointing members, the respective bodies, the competence of the president, and the seat, and enshrines administrative autonomy.
Decree-Law No 90/92 of 21 May, as amended by the following laws: Decree-Law No 105/95 of 20 May; Decree-Law No 108/2012 of 18 May; Decree-Law No 61/2019 of 14 May.
 - Regulates Law No 108/91 of 17 August,
 - Declares the consultative nature of the Economic and Social Council,
 - Establishes its headquarters in Lisbon,
 - Regulates the Economic and Social Council's right of initiative, cooperation with similar institutions, the functioning of its bodies and financial aspects, including remuneration.

One characteristic of the Portuguese body is the existence of the Social Concertation Standing Committee (CPCS). The Rules of Procedure of the Social Concertation Standing Committee are as follows¹²:

- They stipulate ‘full autonomy from the Economic and Social Council’;
- They regulate the CPCS’s attributes, competencies, composition, functioning and financing;
- They establish that the Presidency of the CPCS is held by the ‘Prime Minister or by a Minister to whom he delegates’;
- They identify and regulate the bodies of the CPCS;
- They stipulate that the CPCS will meet every two months;
- They regulate the functioning of the CPCS (convening, agenda, meetings);
- They stipulate that the Economic and Social Council’s president has a seat on the CPCS and its specialised working groups. The chair may take the floor and speak in debates whenever they see fit, without the right to vote.

According to the feedback collected via the interview programme, the structure of the NESC in Portugal has some limitations, essentially due to the recent evolution of Portuguese society. Accordingly, reforms are envisaged:

‘It should be borne in mind that the composition of the Economic and Social Council was envisaged approximately 30 years ago. In the meantime, Portuguese society has evolved a lot and there are other groups, so it will be up to the legislator to review this item, through ordinary legislation, in light of what has happened in Portuguese society in the meantime, so that the body becomes more representative’¹³.

‘There have been enquiries of the need to adapt the standing committee to the current reality of the world of work. This duality between employers and employees, although relevant, should no longer be at the centre of the standing committee’¹⁴.

Similar to Bulgaria, there are concerns regarding the representation of the third sector:

‘The composition of the Economic and Social Council has not been adjusted to the new dynamics of society. This constitutional body was designed in a different historical context, and today, new forms of organisation are emerging; therefore, the ESC must incorporate these new dynamics; a sign of openness must be given by incorporating these new economic dynamics into the ESC. The composition of the ESC

¹² (CPCS) (Approved at the plenary session of 4 June 1993 and published in D.R., II Series, No 204 of 31.08.93).

¹³ Sara Falcão Casac, interim President of the Economic and Social Council (February to July 2024).

¹⁴ Manuel de Lemos, member of the Economic and Social Council. President of the Union of Portuguese Misericórdia, a position he has held since 2007, member of the Coordinating Council of the Economic and Social Council since 2010, President of the World Confederation of Misericórdias and Philanthropic Entities and President of the Portuguese Confederation for the Social Economy (CPES).

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*is back dated, and there are dynamics of the new generations of citizen participation that are not internalised in the ESC because there is too much of an institutional vision of the ESC that does not make it easy to open up to civil society, to universities and knowledge, to the new generations, to new work and business organisations*¹⁵.

*'The ESC has stuck to one composition and one set of institutionally significant organisations but is not very daring regarding new dynamics. However, the ESC plenary is already opening up to the human rights agenda, gender issues, the environmental agenda and migration issues. The ESC must be a forum for reflection and discussion but must have a broader membership*¹⁶. The interviewee knows organisations that applied to the ESC Plenary and were not accepted.

*'Overall, the composition of the Council is efficient, however there may be some doubts about the representativeness of the confederations that sit on the ESC. Why those and why only those? There is a lack of representativeness criteria among us, so one can always ask: who do these organisations represent, and who do their competitor organisations that are excluded from it (for example, the CNA in the case of agriculture) represent?*¹⁷.

*'The Portuguese Confederation of the Social Economy, which represents organisations with a large weight in terms of employment, is not part of that Council*¹⁸.

In addition, there are issues relevant to the capacity of the participating organisations to contribute to the work of the Economic and Social Council.

*'Some fragile organisations don't have much choice about who they appoint to the ESC because they work voluntarily. The problem lies in the unprofessionalism of some of these organisations and the fact that they don't have an effective selection of people because they don't have a choice*¹⁹.

¹⁵ Joaquim Ascensão Pequicho, member of the Portuguese Economic and Social Council. Member of the Plenary of the Economic and Social Council representing the Portuguese cooperative sector.

¹⁶ Joaquim Ascensão Pequicho, member of the Portuguese Economic and Social Council. Member of the Plenary of the Economic and Social Council representing the Portuguese cooperative sector.

¹⁷ João Carlos da Conceição Leal Amado, member of the List of Presiding Arbitrators of the Arbitral Tribunal. Presiding judge in several cases, such as case AO/23/2023 - SM.

¹⁸ Manuel de Lemos, member of the Economic and Social Council. President of the Union of Portuguese Misericórdia, a position he has held since 2007, member of the Coordinating Council of the Economic and Social Council since 2010, President of the World Confederation of Misericórdias and Philanthropic Entities and President of the Portuguese Confederation for the Social Economy (CPES).

¹⁹ Lina Coelho, member of the Economic and Social Council. Representative of the women's associations represented on the Consultative Council of the Commission for Citizenship and Gender Equality.

Within the CNEL in **Italy**, 10 members are distinguished experts in the economic, social and legal fields in Italy. Eight are nominated by the Italian president, while the remaining two are suggested by the Italian prime minister.

48 members represent various Italian production sectors:

- 22 represent workers (including three delegates for managers, both public and private executives);
- Nine represent self-employed workers;
- Seventeen represent companies;
- Six members represent organisations from the Italian third sector, appointed by the National Council of the Third Sector (CNTS), in accordance with Legislative Decree No 117 of 3 July 2017. The CNTS is a government body tasked with fostering and aiding Italy's third sector.

Members of the CNEL cannot concurrently hold positions as Members of Parliament, ministers or members of regional councils. Their term lasts five years, and they can be reappointed or removed at the request of the institutions or organisations that appointed them.

According to the feedback collected, there is a desire for improvement:

'It is a novelty of this legislature that the CNEL was mainly a place to hold conferences and give opinions. Now, instead, it has reached an operational value on the Italian territory of vital proximity with the territory. Because of this, it proposes legislative proposals to remedy situations of need and necessity.

'By creating these forms of interaction between CNEL and Italian citizens, we are trying to act in society. We are also preparing job opportunities for prisoners and former prisoners, setting up information desks at penitentiaries, and acting on the incentive for social cooperatives that will hire individuals in prison or former prisoners'²⁰.

The reformed Economic, Social and Environmental Council in **France** has 175 members appointed for a five-year mandate.

The split between the different socio-professional groups is as follows:

- 52 employee representatives;

²⁰ Paolo Pirani, representative of UIL (Italian Labour Union), a national trade union centre. CNEL, Italy.

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- 52 representatives of businesses, farmers, craftworkers, liberal professions, mutual societies, cooperatives and consular chambers;
- 45 representatives for social and territorial cohesion and community life;
- 26 representatives for the protection of nature and the environment.

France is the only country where representatives of nature and the environment are included.

They are appointed by intermediary bodies: associations, employee unions or employers' organisations.

Composed of 19 members and the president, the Bureau (the collegial decision-making body of the council) designates a working group responsible for each referral.



4. Functionality and operations

The NESCs studied have a similar operational logic at structural level, comprising a presidency, a plenary, a web of committees and an administration.

Belgium: The CNT-NAR has three hierarchical levels: the Plenary Council, the Executive Bureau and the commissions, facilitated by a secretariat providing logistical support.

Plenary Council: the CNT-NAR meets in plenary assembly at least once every quarter, convened by its president. In practice, it meets once a month. The meetings are typically scheduled for the first Tuesday of each month. During these sessions, collective labour agreements are finalised, and opinions and proposals are adopted. To approve collective labour agreements, at least half of the members must be present. Agreements require the representation of at least 90% of both employers and workers. Opinions and proposals are generally reached unanimously, but in the event of disagreement, conflicting positions are documented.

Executive Bureau: the Executive Bureau, comprising 10 members, including the president, four vice-presidents, four council-selected members and the secretary, oversees the operational aspects of the council. Its responsibilities include setting the agenda, preparing agenda items, defining procedures, implementing council decisions and proposing annual budgets. It typically meets on the second Wednesday of each month.

Commissions: the operational activities of the CNT-NAR are conducted through commissions, whose mandates are specified by the Executive Bureau. Both full and alternate council members take part in these commissions and may be supported by experts. The typical commissions include: Works Council Commission; Commission on Individual Labour Relations; Collective Labour Relations Commission; Social Security Commission; International Labour Organization Commission. Additionally, when addressing common issues alongside the Central Economic Council, joint commissions are established, with the participation of members of both councils and invited experts.

Secretariat: As per the law of 29 May 1952, the council is provided with the logistical support needed to deliver its remit, overseen by the secretariat. Currently, the secretariat has approximately forty staff members appointed by the council; however, the secretary and deputy secretary are appointed by the King. The responsibilities of this staff include ensuring the smooth running of the institution and providing essential documentary support for its activities. The secretariat is tasked with drafting meeting minutes, preparing briefing materials and crafting collective labour agreements, opinions and reports to be submitted to the council's plenary session. It also translates texts into the national languages (French and Dutch), as well as providing registry services, printing and staff administration.

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The CCE-CRB in Belgium has political and technical aspects.

Political bodies: Apart from the plenary assembly, consisting of CCE-CRB members, the Council comprises various other political entities. To this end, the CCE-CRB elects four vice-presidents from among its members, ensuring equal representation. These vice-presidents form a collaborative body responsible for defining strategic priorities in conjunction with the president, secretary and deputy secretary, with a view to facilitating the fulfilment of the CCE-CRB's remit. Furthermore, the CCE-CRB establishes an internal Bureau, presided over by the CCE-CRB president, comprising 12 primary members and 12 alternates. The vice-presidents serve as *ex officio* members.

The Bureau oversees the day-to-day operations of the CCE-CRB and its secretariat. While the management bodies of the CCE-CRB do not have political authority over the activities of the various specific consultative committees (CCS) (Council for Competition and Cooperation), the Bureau functions as the administrative management entity in relation to the secretariat. Although the CCE-CRB secretariat typically performs the secretariat duties for the various CCSs under its umbrella, the Bureau remains informed about the activities of these CCSs. The internal operations of the CCE-CRB are set out in greater detail in the council's internal regulations and other relevant regulatory documents.

Technical bodies: The work of the CCE-CRB (opinions, reports, memos, etc.) is prepared by various thematic commissions and sub-committees set up by the Bureau on a proposal from the secretary.

The tasks undertaken by the CCE-CRB, including preparing opinions, reports and memos, are carried out within various thematic commissions and sub-committees, set up by the Bureau on a recommendation by the secretary.

These commissions and working parties, comprised of council members, experts from organisations represented on the council, and professionals affiliated with other recognised institutions such as the Planning Board, university research institutes, the National Bank and international bodies, engage in preparatory work on opinions and reports.

There is a distinction between 'thematic' committees and working parties, and 'sectoral' commissions and working parties. Certain 'thematic' committees and working parties maintain a quasi-permanent status, including those on topics such as the WTO, Salary Scale Technical Report, Business Information, Policy Mix, Information Society, Competition, Environmental Policy and European and International Affairs. Additionally, there are joint committees such as Social Outcomes, Planning and Economic Climate, and Employment and Labour Costs, comprising members from both the Central Economic Council and the National Labour Council.

The specific consultative committees (CCSs) are tasked with providing opinions or proposals for ministers and the CCE-CRB concerning matters within their respective sectors. Members of these CCSs are designated jointly. The CCSs encompass various sectors, including metals and metal processing, textiles and clothing, construction, fisheries, chemicals, food, leather and paper.

The secretariat is tasked with picking up on signals from the fields of labour and business, developing the analytical capabilities needed to identify and structure the underlying concerns driving members' requests. It also facilitates the CCE-CRB's engagement in public discourse²¹.

Bulgaria: The plenary session has various responsibilities, including adopting the regulations for the activities of the Economic and Social Council, endorsing draft annual plans and activity reports, approving the draft annual budget and adopting the council's acts. Additionally, it approves vice-chairs, elects chairs and members of permanent and temporary commissions, among other duties. Members of the plenary session serve a four-year term and deliberate on approving opinions, analyses and resolutions drawn up by the council's permanent committees.

In Bulgaria, standing committees are set up within the Economic and Social Council, comprising council members. The plenary session, based on proposals from the groups represented, elects the chairs and members of these committees.

The commissions include:

- Committee on Economic Policy
- Committee on Macroeconomics, Budget and Finance
- Social Policy Committee
- Committee on Labour, Income, Standards of Living and Industrial Relations
- Committee on European Policies and the European Process
- Committee on Sustainable Development, Agriculture, Environment and Regional Policies
- Temporary committee.

The mandate of standing committees is aligned with the council's term, during which the plenary session retains the authority to adjust their type, number and composition. These committees, each consisting of six members, including the chair, maintain representation from the council's groups. Members may serve on a maximum of two standing committees and cannot delegate their participation. Furthermore, each member is eligible to chair only one standing committee. The standing committees are responsible

²¹ <https://www.ccecrb.fgov.be/p/fr/698>.

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for drafting opinions and analyses for the ESC, supported by experts from the council's administration and external specialists.

The work of the ESC is also supported by a permanent administration.

In **Portugal**, the council's bodies are²²: the president; the plenary; the standing committee on social dialogue; the specialised committees; the coordination council; the administrative board²³.

The President of the Economic and Social Council is elected by the Portuguese Parliament, by a majority of two thirds of the members present, provided the number of members present is above the majority of the members in office. The mandate of the council's president is in line with that of the Parliament, and is renewable without limitation.

The president represents the council at national and international level, in addition to presiding over and coordinating its bodies, namely the plenary, the coordination council and the administrative board. The president also has a seat on the Social Concertation Standing Committee, with no voting rights.

The plenary has²⁴ 76 primary members, known as advisors, which include the President of the Social and Economic Council who presides over plenary sessions and is appointed by Parliament. Additionally, there are four vice-presidents elected by the plenary to assist the president.

The plenary typically meets six times a year, with sessions scheduled every two months. However, extraordinary meetings may be convened on the initiative of the president or on the request of at least one-fifth of plenary members.

Coordination council²⁵

The coordination council assists the President of the Council. It has various roles, including approving the council's budget proposals, putting together the items on the agenda for each plenary meeting, and reviewing entities that apply to become members of the Social and Economic Council.

It is made up of the President of the Economic and Social Council, the four vice-presidents and the presidents of all the specialised committees (CEPES, CDROT and CEPIN).

²² Bodies of the Economic and Social Council (Article 6 of Law No 108/91 of 17 August).

²³ <https://ces.pt/home-en/#bodies>.

²⁴ <https://ces.pt/home-en/>.

²⁵ <https://ces.pt/home-en/>.

The main roles of the administrative board²⁶ are preparing the council's budget proposals and guaranteeing that the actions of the council – in administrative and financial matters – are in accordance with the law.

It is made up of the president of the council, the vice-presidents, the council's secretary-general and the head of the general administration of the Social and Economic Council.

Other committees incorporated within this structure are as follows:

the Specialised Standing Committee on Social and Economic Policy (CEPES)²⁷;

the Specialised Standing Committee for Regional Development and Land Planning (CDROT)²⁸;

the Specialised Interdisciplinary Standing Committee on Fertility (CEPIN)²⁹;

the Social Concertation Standing Committee³⁰.

The government and the social partners (i.e., the employers' representatives and the trade unions) are part of the Social Concertation Standing Committee (CPCS). The CPCS's main function is to promote dialogue and social concertation, with the goal of establishing agreements between the parties.

The CPCS also has the following roles:

- Issuing opinions on restructuring and socio-economic development policies, and on the implementation thereof;
- Issuing proposals for solutions for the proper functioning of the economy, taking into account their social and labour impact;
- Regularly assessing the country's social and economic situation;
- Assessing legislative proposals on social and labour matters, namely proposals on the labour law.

Arbitration³¹

Arbitration is a method for resolving collective conflicts on labour issues, under the oversight of the Economic and Social Council. Within this domain, the council is responsible for managing and

²⁶ <https://ces.pt/home-en/>.

²⁷ <https://ces.pt/home-en/>.

²⁸ <https://ces.pt/home-en/>.

²⁹ <https://ces.pt/home-en/>.

³⁰ <https://ces.pt/home-en/>.

³¹ <https://ces.pt/home-en/>.

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maintaining lists of arbitrators eligible for selection, carrying out the selection process when required, ensuring payment to arbitrators and specialists, and providing the technical and administrative support essential for the proper functioning of the arbitration tribunal.

Several valuable insights were collected during our interview programme:

'The CGTP-IN points out that a large part of the negotiations are done bilaterally, with no real negotiation taking place within the framework of the Social Concertation Standing Committee. It was also pointed out that, in the opinion of the CGTP-IN, there is a contradiction between negotiation and social dialogue and practice. The starting point is the imbalance in labour relations. Negotiations that go through social dialogue limit workers' actions in companies'³².

'The CGTP-IN notes that the time available to the working groups to carry out their work has been successively reduced. This jeopardises the outcome of the work and also the functioning of the plenary session of the Economic and Social Council. The plenary can function properly if the time taken to discuss issues and documents is respected. The CGTP-IN is open to making proposals'³³.

'In the opinion of the CGTP-IN, the resources available to the Economic and Social Council are generally sufficient. The situation is different regarding human resources working at the Economic and Social Council because it is necessary to provide better conditions for workers'³⁴.

'The Economic and Social Council lacks a structure. Even the services area has very few people: the Secretary-General of the Economic and Social Council, 2 technicians, 3 senior technicians, one of whom has just left, and 2 other support staff. This structure is not just for services, but also for support for social dialogue and arbitration, administrative and financial services'³⁵.

'This issue has been the subject of reflection, considering that it is justified for the Economic and Social Council to have resources that are part of the staff and also a kind of Observatory. In other words, qualified people who would support both the drafting of opinions and the Standing Committee on Social

³² Ana Isabel Lopes Pires, member of the Economic and Social Council. Member of the Social Concertation Standing Committee (CPCS); member representing the CGTP-IN (General Confederation of Portuguese Inter-Union Workers). Member of the board of the Trade, Office and Service Workers' Union of Portugal; Member of the executive committee of the national council of the CGTP-IN; employee of the Lisbon municipal car park company.

³³ Ana Isabel Lopes Pires, member of the Economic and Social Council. Member of the Social Concertation Standing Committee (CPCS), member representing the CGTP-IN (General Confederation of Portuguese Inter-Union Workers). Member of the board of the Trade, Office and Service Workers' Union of Portugal; Member of the executive committee of the national council of the CGTP-IN; employee of the Lisbon municipal car park company.

³⁴ Ana Isabel Lopes Pires, member of the Economic and Social Council. Member of the Social Concertation Standing Committee (CPCS); member representing the CGTP-IN (General Confederation of Portuguese Inter-Union Workers). Member of the board of the Trade, Office and Service Workers' Union of Portugal; Member of the executive committee of the national council of the CGTP-IN; employee of the Lisbon municipal car park company.

³⁵ Sara Falcão Casaca, interim President of the Economic and Social Council (February to July 2024).

*Dialogue itself, since it is important that when it meets it has regular and systematic up-to-date information on the country's economic and socio-labour situation*³⁶.

*'Economic and Social Council, which is not to be confused with the other specialised commissions, is also the one with the most political visibility*³⁷.

*'In short, there is a lot of voluntarisms and a lack of infrastructural and human resources to respond to all the work that the Economic and Social Council has to do*³⁸.

The president of the CNEL in **Italy** is appointed by the President of the Republic. The president leads and represents the CNEL and oversees its activities. The CNEL has two vice-presidents, elected from among its members. They assist the president and stand in for them when necessary.

General Assembly: the General Assembly is the main deliberative body of the CNEL. As already outlined, it consists of 64 members.

Committees and commissions: the CNEL operates through various committees and commissions that focus on specific areas such as labour, social policies and economic policies. These committees conduct studies, draft reports and provide recommendations.

Secretary-general: the secretary-general manages the administrative and technical services of the CNEL, implementing the decisions made by the General Assembly and the president.

Technical and administrative staff: the CNEL has a staff that supports its activities, including researchers, administrative personnel and technical experts.

Some of the issues identified concerning the CNEL's operational weaknesses involve external cohesion with Italy's political bodies:

*'The dialogue between CNEL and the Ministry of Labour could improve compared to the current situation. By way of example, the Ministry collects labour market flows by law since every company, when it hires a worker, is obliged to transmit information to the State. However, this flow of information, to date, is kept from the CNEL*³⁹.

In **France**, the CESE has comparable sub-structures.

³⁶ Sara Falcão Casaca, interim President of the Economic and Social Council (February to July 2024).

³⁷ Sara Falcão Casaca, interim President of the Economic and Social Council (February to July 2024).

³⁸ Sara Falcão Casaca, interim President of the Economic and Social Council (February to July 2024).

³⁹ Giovanni Di Cesare, representative of the CGIL (Italian General Confederation of Labour), a national trade union centre, CNEL, Italy.

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The plenary: Functioning similarly to parliamentary assemblies, the council meets year-round. Twice a month, plenary assemblies convene the council members to vote on opinions presented by the working groups. The Bureau sets the agenda for these meetings. Ministers, informed about relevant opinions, attend the plenary assemblies and participate in the debates.

The Bureau: this consists of the president and 19 members, each elected by secret ballot to represent one group. These members include 10 vice-presidents, 2 quaestors and 7 secretaries. As a collegial management body, the Bureau is responsible for keeping the council running.

Secretary-general: The CESE has 150 staff members supporting its members. Under the president's authority, the secretary-general oversees the CESE's services and coordinates the activities of its working groups.

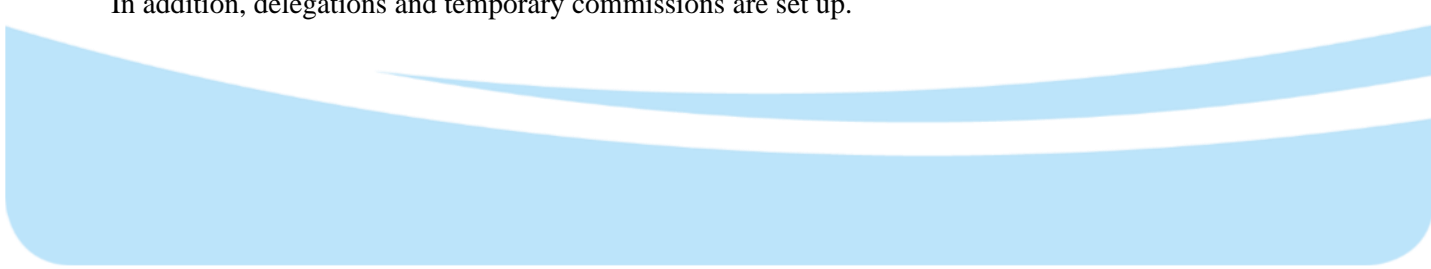
Groups: CESE members are divided into 18 representative groups and three main divisions, based on their backgrounds and areas of expertise. These divisions cover the economy and social dialogue, social cohesion and associations, and environmental and nature conservation.

Commissions: commissions are the standard working groups of the CESE. Each has 27-30 members appointed by the Bureau based on proposals from the groups and affiliated to those groups where possible.

The commissions are responsible for preparing studies and draft opinions within their designated fields, as determined by decree. They meet for one half-day session each week. These meetings are held privately to ensure that members can speak freely.

- Sustainable Management of Territories
- Economy and Finance
- Education, Culture and Communication
- Environment
- Agriculture, Fisheries and Food
- Economic Activities
- European and International Affairs
- Social Affairs and Health
- Labour and Employment

In addition, delegations and temporary commissions are set up.



A referral is the starting point for the work of CESE members. The council can be contacted by the government, the Parliament or by a public petition or may take up a topic on its own initiative in order to issue an opinion, a report, a study or a resolution. For each referral, the working group appoints one or more rapporteurs to organise and lead the debates. People specialising in the subject are interviewed in order to inform the debate.

Following the hearings, the debates during which common positions are discussed and defined and the drafting of proposals approved by consensus within the working group (by internal vote), the draft is presented for CESE advisors to vote on during the plenary assembly.

The members meet four times a month in plenary assembly.

5. Impact on policy

The NESCs of **Italy** and **Belgium** are relatively more empowered. The CNEL in Italy has the right of legislative initiative. Belgium's CCE-CRB must be consulted on certain issues. In addition, a technical report must be produced detailing the maximum allowable growth margin for labour costs, a crucial factor in collective bargaining negotiations.

Overall, in **France**, **Bulgaria** and **Portugal**, the NESCs respond to requests from other bodies rather than initiating policy interventions on a regular basis. They have the right to issue own-initiative reports but in general these are less impactful than those requested of them.

In **Belgium**, collectively, the CNT-NAR and the CCE-CRB serve as the overarching bodies within a negotiation/consultation framework that has evolved over time and operates across various tiers.

Another characteristic is that the leaders of workers' and employers' organisations meet regularly outside the established interprofessional platforms, in what is known as the 'group of 10'. Interactions within this group are crucial for fostering relationships among organisations and with the government.

Overall, the majority of the CNT-NAR's positions are reflected in legislation. This can be observed in the overview available for the governments led by:

Charles Michel (document from 2014)

<https://cnt-nar.be/sites/default/files/documents/fr/2014-10-09-Tableau-de-bord.pdf>

Elio Di Rupo (document from 2011)

<https://cnt-nar.be/sites/default/files/documents/fr/2011-12-01-Tableau-de-bord.pdf>

The CCE-CRB is actively involved in the policy-making process in Belgium, with a key advisory role. It must be consulted on the nature and extent of economic and financial data to be provided to business councils, certain administrative decisions stemming from the Act of 17 July 1975 regarding accounting and annual company reports, and the determination of employer contributions for workers' railway passes.

Under the Act of 26 July 1996 concerning employment promotion and safeguarding competitiveness, the Central Economic Council and the National Labour Council are mandated to prepare biannual reports on employment trends and labour costs, by 31 January and 31 July of each year. Additionally, by 30 September of each year, the Central Economic Council must produce a technical report detailing

the maximum allowable growth margin for labour costs, a crucial factor in collective bargaining negotiations.

The Act of 5 August 1991, concerning the safeguarding of economic competition, stipulated that a Competition Board be set up within the council. This Board, depending on the circumstances, draws up opinions for the government, relevant ministers or the Competition Council regarding the implementation of the aforementioned act, amendments to it and all matters related to competition policy in general.

In **Bulgaria**, policy makers express support for the work of the Economic and Social Council in public. According to the former President of the National Assembly of Bulgaria, Tzetzka Tzacheva, the positions of the Economic and Social Council are traditionally respected and taken into consideration⁴⁰.

'During these years, the Economic and Social Council was formed as the highest expert council with a combination of political experience, expert knowledge, different opinions that collide in a cultural and civilized way. This was said by Prime Minister Nikolay Denkov at the 20th anniversary of the Economic and Social Council of Bulgaria'⁴¹.

What is more, the institution has 'matured' over the years and built its capacity. There is an increase in requests for opinions. In some cases, two political bodies request an opinion on the same issue simultaneously.

'During the last 3-4 years there is a growing interest. The institutions are making more and more requests. Even now the President of the Parliament is asking us to analyse the pension scheme. The government want to make changes of the pension system. Therefore, two institutions requested an opinion from us'⁴².

'The Economic and Social Council (ISS) of Bulgaria is witnessing a significant rise in the number of requests for opinions from various state bodies. This increase reflects the growing recognition of the Council's expertise and the value of its opinions in shaping national policies.

⁴⁰ <https://esc.bg/%D0%BC%D0%B5%D0%B6%D0%B4%D1%83%D0%BD%D0%B0%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B4%D0%BD%D0%BE-%D1%81%D1%8A%D1%82%D1%80%D1%83%D0%B4%D0%BD%D0%B8%D1%87%D0%B5%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B2%D0%BE/%D0%BC%D0%B5%D0%B6%D0%B4%D1%83%D0%BD%D0%B0%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B4%D0%BD%D0%BE-%D1%81%D1%8A%D1%82%D1%80%D1%83%D0%B4%D0%BD%D0%B8%D1%87%D0%B5%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B2%D0%BE/>

⁴¹ <https://www.24chasa.bg/bulgaria/article/16437080>.

⁴² Plamen Dimitrov, vice-president, Economic and Social Council, Bulgaria.

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'Importantly, the requests from political bodies are substantive and go beyond mere formalities. These opinions are actively considered and integrated into the decision-making processes, highlighting the Council's influential role in policy formulation.

'Recently, the ESC of Bulgaria has undertaken in-depth analyses of crucial national issues, such as the pension, education and the healthcare system. These comprehensive studies demonstrate the Council's commitment to addressing pivotal social'⁴³.

At the same time, the organisation's impact depends on the expert capacity of the political bodies. In periods of political crisis, its role becomes stronger:

'The institution is getting more mature; at the same time the MPs are less and less competent in comparison to us; we changed 6 Parliaments in 3 years; they do not have knowledge and background. When there is no one dominating party – the civic sector is getting more and important.

'Concerning the own-initiative opinions – when the political system is more fragmented, we are more listened; also, when the Minister is more competent, they are listening to us. At the moment some Ministries have such a lack of knowledge, that they do not know how to formulate the question'⁴⁴.

In **Portugal**, under Article 2(1) of the Economic and Social Council Law, this constitutional body is responsible for the following:

- Giving its opinion on the preliminary drafts of the broad economic and social development options and plans before the government approves them, as well as on the reports on the implementation of these plans;
- Giving its opinion on economic and social policies, as well as on the implementation of them;
- Assessing Portugal's positions in European Union bodies in the context of economic and social policies and giving its opinion on the national use of EU, structural and specific funds;
- Giving its opinion on proposals for sectoral and spatial plans at national level and, in general, on the restructuring and socio-economic development policies that the government intends to submit to it;
- Regularly assessing the evolution of the country's economic and social situation;
- Analysing documents that reflect regional development policy.

⁴³ Milena Angelova, Economic and Social Council, Bulgaria, member of the EESC.

⁴⁴ Plamen Dimitrov, vice-president, Economic and Social Council, Bulgaria.

The ESC produces two types of opinions: opinions requested by the competent bodies and opinions drawn up on the ESC's initiative (own-initiative opinions).

Relevance of opinions (drawn up at the request of the competent bodies or on the initiative of the Economic and Social Council):

- This fulfils the requirements of the advisory role played by the Economic and Social Council, laid down in the Constitution of the Portuguese Republic and the law.
- Opinions constitute output that produces knowledge on the subject matter at hand.
- Opinions are a tool to support decision making by the competent bodies or to draw up public policies, on issues such as ageing, birth rates and social cohesion.

The impact of the Economic and Social Council also depends on the leadership in place.

'The latest leadership, particularly that of Francisco Assis, has given the ESC a new relevance. The opinions on the Major Options, the budget and the general state account are highly technical. A balanced opinion is reached between the various forces that make up the ESC; the opinions result from this balance'⁴⁵.

'Leadership quality is both an advantage and a weakness of the ESC. Because if the value of the ESC depends on the leadership quality, then we are dealing with a weakness. Francisco Assis has shown a high sense of mission and an unquestionable sense of democracy, and his political affiliation has never made sense. From an institutional point of view, there is a weakness because performance depends on the person leading the ESC at any given time'⁴⁶.

According to the observations of the interviewees:

'The opinions requested by various organisations increase the relevance of the ESC as an advisory Council to the Assembly of the Republic and the government. Consider, for example, the importance of opinions on productivity or the Socialist Party parliamentary group's request for an opinion on domestic violence and its relevance to public policy'⁴⁷.

⁴⁵ Joaquim Ascensão Pequicho, member of the Portuguese Economic and Social Council. Member of the Plenary of the Economic and Social Council representing the Portuguese cooperative sector.

⁴⁶ Lina Coelho, member of the Economic and Social Council. Representative of the women's associations represented on the Consultative Council of the Commission for Citizenship and Gender Equality.

⁴⁷ Joaquim Ascensão Pequicho, member of the Portuguese Economic and Social Council. Member of the Plenary of the Economic and Social Council representing the Portuguese cooperative sector.

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The will of the political majority must also be considered when assessing the impact of the Economic and Social Council in Portugal:

'As for the influence of opinions on the design of public policies in economic and social matters, this happens if the opinions are in agreement with the dominant political force. Despite the work put in by the rapporteurs in drafting the opinions, they often come up against this circumstance'⁴⁸.

'Regarding the relevance of own-initiative opinions to the Council's constitutional mission and whether there is any way of measuring the impact of these opinions on public policies or other matters, this impact measurement should be a mission of the Observatory, which it supports'⁴⁹.

One of the strategies for boosting the impact of the ESC in Portugal involves improving the visibility of the organisation, which is not optimal at the moment:

'There is a lack of communication about the ESC's work, which could be overcome if the ESC had more human and financial resources. It would be a lot to be gained if the ESC were more of an economic and social council and less of a political, economic and social council'⁵⁰.

The CNEL in **Italy** has the right to initiate legislation and may contribute to drafting economic and social legislation according to the principles and within the limitations laid down by law (Italian Constitution, Article 99)⁵¹. From 1967 to the present, the CNEL has drafted 47 pieces of economic and social legislation (data as of 3 April 2024)⁵². However, prestigious as this power may be, it has been mainly formal so far; in practice⁵³, it has had little impact. For example, in the last four legislatures (from 2008 to present), only three CNEL legislative proposals were approved^{54,55}:

- The first one abolished the ban on simultaneous enrolment in multiple universities (1924 chamber act)⁵⁶. Italian university students were not allowed to be enrolled in multiple universities at the same

⁴⁸ Manuel de Lemos, member of the Economic and Social Council. President of the Union of Portuguese Misericórdia, a position he has held since 2007, member of the Coordinating Council of the Economic and Social Council since 2010, President of the World Confederation of Misericórdias and Philanthropic Entities and President of the Portuguese Confederation for the Social Economy (CPES).

⁴⁹ Sara Falcão Casaca, interim President of the Economic and Social Council (February to July 2024).

⁵⁰ Manuel de Lemos, member of the Economic and Social Council. President of the Union of Portuguese Misericórdia, a position he has held since 2007, member of the Coordinating Council of the Economic and Social Council since 2010, President of the World Confederation of Misericórdias and Philanthropic Entities and President of the Portuguese Confederation for the Social Economy (CPES).

⁵¹ https://www.quirinale.it/allegati_statici/costituzione/costituzione_inglese.pdf.

⁵² <https://www.cnel.it/Documenti/Disegni-di-Legge>.

⁵³ <https://www.openpolis.it/parole/che-cose-e-come-funziona-il-cnel/>.

⁵⁴ <https://dati.camera.it>.

⁵⁵ The overview is based on the information made available by the CNEL at <https://www.cnel.it/Documenti/I-Documenti>.

⁵⁶ <https://www.camera.it/leg18/126?leg=18&idDocumento=1924>.

time, and the new law intends to strengthen students' freedom of choice. This was not possible due to Article 142 of Royal Decree No 1592 of 1933.

- In Italy, the condition of women in the labour market does not satisfy the requirements of equal opportunities⁵⁷. The gender gap is confirmed by the difference in unemployment rates (11.6% for women compared to 9.4% for men) and, above all, by the significant distance between inactivity rates (43.8% for women compared to 24.7% for men). The second legislative proposal introduced key changes to the code of equal opportunities between men and women (1925)⁵⁸;
- The last legislative proposal is Law No 193 approved on 7 December 2023⁵⁹, that regulates the prevention of discrimination and the protection of the rights of people who have been affected by cancer. In Italy, because they had had cancer, many people used to be discriminated against in terms of new job opportunities, being granted a mortgage or even adopting children. Nowadays, thanks to this law, that is no longer legal.

Another aspect worth mentioning is that in all the above cases, the CNEL's proposals were merged with other parliamentary or governmental proposals on the same topic. Therefore, it is difficult to say whether and to what extent the approved law corresponds to the CNEL's initial proposal.

The second aspect concerns the CNEL giving its opinion when requested to do so by the government, the Parliament or the regions. It has to be consulted before a new law is adopted on economic or social matters. In this case, the CNEL's opinion is not binding, but it might affect the institutions which asked for its opinion. Since 1958, the CNEL has given 194 opinions (data as of 3 April 2024)⁶⁰, including on all decisions relating to Italy's position on European Union initiatives, as established by Article 28 of Law No 234 of 24 December 2012.

The last, very important activity carried out by the CNEL involves a set of actions performed in Italy with the aim of bringing the institutions closer to the people and improving issues which affect the population as a whole. Examples include:

- All the initiatives carried out to promote the integration of immigrants through the ONC, the national body responsible for coordinating policies on the integration of foreigners (*Organismo nazionale di coordinamento delle politiche di integrazione degli stranieri*) (established by Law No 40, Article 40(3) of 6 March 1998, and Legislative Decree No 286 of 25 July 1998, Article 42(3)).
- The collaboration between the CNEL and several partners, including Censis, the European House – Ambrosetti, the Italian Department of Prisons (DAP) and the National Conference of Rectors'

⁵⁷ <https://documenti.camera.it/leg19/dossier/pdf/PP004LA.pdf>.

⁵⁸ <https://www.camera.it/leg18/126?tab=6&leg=18&idDocumento=1925&sede=&tipo=>.

⁵⁹ <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2023/12/18/23G00206/sg>.

⁶⁰ <https://www.cnel.it/Documenti/Pareri>.

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Delegates on the CRUI prisoners' university aims to address the issue of criminal recidivism among ex-prisoners by involving them in an educational programme while they are incarcerated⁶¹.

- The CNEL oversees a permanent Forum for the Culture of Responsible and Sustainable Consumption, established on 24 May 2023, which aims to promote and enrich the discourse on responsible consumption in Italy. The Forum fosters consumer awareness and advocates for legislative measures to protect consumers. It includes representatives of all Italian consumer associations⁶².

The feedback collected highlights some additional aspects concerning the internal mechanisms for integrating the CNEL into the policy-making process:

*'The CNEL expresses itself mainly through consultative tools that can be assimilated into actual bills, many of which have been transformed into laws. This is a tool to impact the political and legislative process concretely! Examples are the law on oncological oblivion and the tool of hearings with which the impact of the CNEL's work on public opinion and national institutions can be verified. Furthermore, we have created a conference on the issue of work in prisons to improve the employment of people with criminal convictions and reduce the risk of recidivism. This is to demonstrate that the CNEL affects the political mechanism and does so through autonomous initiatives'*⁶³.

*'We currently intend to give CNEL an active role in participating in the political scene and not just an advisory function. An example is the project I mentioned before, "Recidivism 0", in which the CNEL has an active and concrete role, also establishing relationships with other institutional subjects such as the Ministry of Justice, the Penitentiary Administration Department, and the regional and national Guarantors of prisoners'*⁶⁴.

The Economic, Social and Environmental Council in France aims to optimise its impact on policy mainly by generating public interest and developing efficient interaction with policy makers. This approach boosts its impact. It is founded on a strategy that incorporates the selection of topics for discussion and the engagement of media outlets. Topics of particular interest to the public have greater potential to amplify the council's influence. Furthermore, targeted interactions with the most influential media enhance the visibility of the positions taken by the CESE. The CESE is more effective at

⁶¹ <https://www.cnel.it/Comunicazione-e-Stampa/Notizie/ArtMID/1174/ArticleID/3721/CARCERI-I-DATI-PIU-SIGNIFICATIVI>.

⁶² <https://www.cnel.it/Sito-Archeologico/Le-Consigliature-precedenti/Consigliatura-X/Altri-Organismi-X/Forum-permanente-per-la-cultura-del-consumo-responsabile-e-sostenibile-X>.

⁶³ Giovanni Di Cesare, representative of the CGIL (Italian General Confederation of Labour), a national trade union centre, CNEL, Italy.

⁶⁴ Emilio Minunzio, representative of the National Council of the Third Sector and the National Civil Protection Commission, CNEL, Italy.

responding to requests from other bodies than at initiating policy interventions. Its own-initiative opinions have less impact within the decision-making process in France.

Opinions drawn up in response to requests have much more impact than do own-initiative opinions.

*'Most of the requests we receive (saisines) come directly from the government. These requests often translate into laws, showcasing our effectiveness and impact. For self-initiated inquiries (auto-saisines), we might have to wait between 5 to 10 years for an action or results.'*⁶⁵.

According to the feedback collected, the improved visibility of the organisation has resulted in greater impact:

'We have cultivated a significant amount of public interest, resulting in frequent consultations from the government. This frequent engagement is a clear indicator of our relevance and influence.'

In order to adapt and improve the council's impact, new strategies are being tested:

*'In the Environmental Committee, we are focusing on producing opinions that are shorter and more targeted towards current issues, aiming to increase our efficiency'*⁶⁶.

Similar to the Economic and Social Council in Bulgaria, interviewees said that the CESE in **France** is asked for support in times of crisis. For instance, when the political bodies are in a difficult situation with no obvious solution:

*'The CESE is highly respected for its expertise, and the government often seeks its advice when uncertain about how to advance on specific issues'*⁶⁷.

⁶⁵ Sylvain Boucherand, president, Commission on Environment, CESE, France.

⁶⁶ Sylvain Boucherand, president, Commission on Environment, CESE, France.

⁶⁷ Jacques Creyssel, president, Commission on Economy and Finance, CESE, France.

6. Transparency, accountability, continuous improvement

The main mechanisms for transparency utilised by the NESCs studied are annual activity reports; the plenary sessions are open and the opinions produced are available to the public. No regular external evaluations are performed in the sample of NESCs studied.

The information about the meetings of and decisions taken by the CNT-NAR in **Belgium** is public and available on its website⁶⁸. This information has been available for the last 23 years. Activity reports are published every two years. They provide more information about the issues on which the CNT-NAR issued opinions during the reporting period. There are also data about the degree of consensus. Opinions and proposals are, generally, adopted unanimously. When this cannot be achieved, divergent positions are recorded in the texts. An overview of voting outcomes throughout the reporting period is published in the reports. The data are available for the last 20 years (since 2004).

The institution conducts self-assessments. Every two years, it publishes a report of its actions. These have been available since 2004⁶⁹.

Further improvement of external evaluations is being considered:

‘Currently the institution does not have procedures in place of this type, but with the arrival of the new management there is the plan to carry out an evaluation of the functioning in order to strengthen the role’⁷⁰.

As regards the CCE-CRB, its old website⁷¹ has an open online archive of opinions and reports dating back to its establishment in 1990. However, the database has not been updated since 2018. The new website has a structure which gives access to opinions going back to 2009⁷². Although transparent sources are available, better integration of the databases would be helpful for reviewing the entirety of the documentary resources and fostering optimal transparency.

In **Bulgaria**, meetings of the plenary session of the Economic and Social Council are open. In certain cases, the plenary session may decide to close the meeting or to hold them remotely. Annual plans and activity reports are published by the council.

⁶⁸ <https://cnt-nar.be/fr/documents/rapports>.

⁶⁹ https://cnt-nar.be/fr/publications/rapports_dactivit%C3%A9s.

⁷⁰ Interview with Hilde Duroi, secretary, CNT-NAR.

⁷¹ <https://archi.ccecrb.fgov.be/presentation.php?menu=pres>.

⁷² <https://www.ccecrb.fgov.be/type/fr/1/avis/1>.

The council plans to improve the monitoring process:

‘Concerning the evaluations – there is a room for improvement. We tried something when the institution reached 10 years, then when it reached 20 years – however the evaluations are not systematic.

‘Rooms for improvement: the links between the different commissions; also, the connections between group 1, 2, 3. For this we will need additional resources. Also, we need to amend the Rules of procedures’⁷³.

In **Italy**, transparency is achieved by disclosing information on the CNEL and its activities. In particular, the CNEL promotes widespread oversight of its operations and use of public resources, with a view to preventing and combating corruption and maladministration.

Despite being enshrined in the Constitution with autonomy in terms of organisation, accounting and budget, since 2013 the CNEL has abided by the provisions on the obligations of disclosure and transparency (Legislative Decree No 33 of 14 March 2013, on the reorganisation of the regulations concerning the obligations of disclosure, transparency and dissemination of information by public administrations).

The CNEL website accordingly contains all the data on its administrative actions, specifically its organisation, performance, consultants and collaborators, tenders and contracts, balance sheets, real estate and asset management, controls and findings on the administration, services provided, grants, contributions, scholarships, subsidies, internships and economic advantages.

The CNEL follows Directive 2003/98/EC and Legislative Decree 36/2006 on the published personal data that can be reused only under the conditions established by this legislation.

Finally, it is important to point out that the CNEL runs the National Archive of National Collective Labour Agreements, officially recognised as a source of information on national collective bargaining by Article 17 of Law No 936 of 30 December 1986. This archive is a valuable resource for anyone seeking reliable and accurate information on labour agreements in Italy.

According to Law No 15 of 4 March 2009, the CNEL must:

- draft an annual report for the Italian Parliament and the government on the levels and quality of services provided by central and local public administrations to businesses and individuals;

⁷³

Plamen Dimitrov, vice-president, Economic and Social Council, Bulgaria.

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- collect and update the National Archive of National Collective Labour Agreements in the public sector;
- promote and organise an annual conference on the activities carried out by public administrations, with the participation of representatives of the economic and social categories, consumer and user associations, qualified scholars and information bodies, in order to discuss trends in public administration services and emerging problems.

At the Economic and Social Council in **Portugal**, voting at plenary sessions is public, unless the Social and Economic Council is deliberating on a request from sovereign bodies. The books, opinions, reports, studies and social dialogue agreements are published on the website of the Economic and Social Council (in Portuguese)⁷⁴.

According to Rule 60(8) of the Rules of Procedure of the Economic and Social Council (approved at the plenary session of 21 May 1993 and published in the Official Gazette, Series II, No 162 of 13.7.93): ‘The minutes of the Plenary shall be made public by the means that this body deems appropriate, namely through their inclusion in the annual report on the activities of the Economic and Social Council’.

However, according to the information provided by the Economic and Social Council’s services, the minutes of all the Economic and Social Council’s committees and plenary are not published anywhere and cannot be distributed. The minutes can be consulted at the headquarters of the Economic and Social Council in Lisbon.

The opinions of the Economic and Social Council are available on its official website (<https://ces.pt/publicacoes/pareceres/>), and some of them have also been published in book form. Here are the published volumes of opinions:

- Economic and Social Council, *Opinions and Meetings of the Economic and Social Council (September 1992 to February 1996)*, published in 1996, and freely available at <https://ces.pt/1996/04/01/livro-pareceres-e-reunioes-do-conselho-economico-e-social-setembro-de-1992-a-fevereiro-de-1996/>.
- Economic and Social Council, *Opinions of the Economic and Social Council, 2016-2019*, vol. I, Coimbra: Almedina, 2018, freely available at https://ces.pt/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/pareceres_i.pdf.

⁷⁴ <https://ces.pt/publicacoes/livros/>.
<https://ces.pt/concertacao-social/acordos-de-concertacao-social/>.

- Conselho Económico e Social, *Pareceres do Conselho Económico e Social*, 2016-2019, vol. II. Lisbon: Editorial do Ministério da Educação e Ciência, 2020, freely available at https://ces.pt/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/pareceres_ii.pdf.

The opinions of the Economic and Social Council are not published in the *Diário da República* (Official Gazette of the Portuguese Republic)⁷⁵.

The experts are not aware of any previous evaluations commissioned by the Portuguese Economic and Social Council. However, on the 30th anniversary of the Economic and Social Council, the following book was published: Pedro Tadeu, *Poder e fragilidade da sociedade civil. 30 anos do Conselho Económico e Social*, Lisbon: Conselho Económico e Social/Almedina, 2022 (<https://ces.pt/2023/01/27/livro-30-anos-de-conselho-economico-e-social/>). Among other contributions, this book comprises ‘27 interviews with government officials, trade unionists, leaders of employers' confederations, draftsmen of opinions, technical support staff for drawing up documents and members of the labour dispute arbitration team. Former presidents of the ESC were also interviewed’ (p. 16).

This study reaches the following findings:

- ‘Atrophy of the consultative function’ compared to the functions of social dialogue (Introduction by Francisco Assis, p. 13);
- ‘Structural deficiencies’ of the ESC (Introduction by Francisco Assis, p. 13);
- ‘The need to amend the ESC law and reshape several of its internal practices’ (Introduction by Francisco Assis, p. 13).

The interviews collected and documented in this book show continuing divergence in the role and value of the ESC (Pedro Tadeu, Introduction, p. 17). The negative assessment is reflected in the views of employers, who think that this body should not exist, government officials who confess that they have not read the opinions on major planning options drawn up by the ESC, trade unionists who accuse the institution of being neo-corporatist and of systematically harming workers, members of the ESC plenary who consider that the plenary meetings are pointless, and the authors of the opinions who feel undervalued by the political authorities.

The strengths identified include: the efficient debate that takes place within the ESC and enriches the proposals, business leaders who emphasise the conciliatory role of the ESC and its contribution to business success, trade unionists who feel that the ESC counterbalances the power of business, members

⁷⁵ www.dre.pt.

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of the plenary who feel that direct contact with political authorities is important, and authors of opinions who defend the ESC's contribution to a strategic vision for the country.

The book by Pedro Tadeu, *Poder e fragilidade da sociedade civil. 30 anos do Conselho Económico e Social*, Lisbon: Conselho Económico e Social/Almedina, 2022, brings together the opinions of 27 interviewees who, at different times and in different roles, took part in the Portuguese Economic and Social Council. In addition, the book includes written testimony from Aníbal Cavaco Silva (the prime minister who created the ESC in 1992) and António Costa (the prime minister in office when the book was published (2022)). The president of the ESC, Francisco Assis, who was in office when the book was published, declined to be interviewed. However, he contributed to the book by means of an introduction: in this, he refers to the 'atrophy of the consultative function' of the ESC and highlights the importance of and reservations regarding social consultation in Portugal.

The organisation publishes annual activity reports.

In general, the Economic, Social and Environmental Council in **France** is a transparent and accountable institution committed to ongoing improvement. It demonstrates this commitment by publishing comprehensive annual activity reports. These reports provide detailed insights into the council's performance, including the number and type of acts adopted, such as opinions, studies, resolutions and declarations. Additionally, they offer an overview of the council's engagement with various institutions, such as the National Assembly and the Council of Ministers, outlining the frequency and nature of interactions, including the volume of requests received. Furthermore, the reports elaborate on the key opinions drawn up over the year, offering thorough explanations and analyses of their implications and impact⁷⁶.

It is important to highlight that a new body has been set up within the institution which develops its mechanisms for internal control and improvement: the *Collège de déontologie du Conseil économique, social et environnemental*. Its first report was published in 2023⁷⁷.

⁷⁶ Please see the latest annual report available:

<https://www.lecese.fr/sites/default/files/articles/fichiers/Rapport%20d%27activit%C3%A9%20CESE%20-%202023%20-%20site.pdf>

⁷⁷ https://www.lecese.fr/sites/default/files/gestion/20230704_Premier-RA_college-deontologie_CESE.pdf

7. Independence

Within all the NESCs studied, the presidents and in some cases a percentage of the members are appointed by a political authority. The only country with political representatives nominated as members is Portugal.

In **Belgium**, the members of the CNT-NAR are appointed by royal decree for a period of four years. However, there are no government representatives within the organisation's governing bodies. At the CCE-CRB, following consultations with the council, the president is appointed by the King for a six-year term. An effort is made to form a leadership distanced from the interests of the participating organisations. The organisation is presided over by an individual who is external to the administration or the organisations represented.

In **Bulgaria**, the President of the Economic and Social Council is appointed by the National Assembly.

The council is independent of executive, legislative or any other type of public authority. There are no representatives of the Parliament, the government or any other state institution within its members.

The Economic and Social Council is also subordinate to the National Assembly. It adopts its annual budget. However, other than the President of the Economic and Social Council being appointed by the National Assembly, there are no political figures with voting rights among its members, and therefore political influence.

The Economic and Social Council of **Portugal** is not free of political influence. Unlike countries such as Belgium and Bulgaria, it is not only the president who is appointed by political decision.

The President of the Economic and Social Council is elected by the Portuguese Parliament, by a majority of two thirds of the members present, provided the number of members present is above the majority of the members in office. The council president's mandate is in line with that of the Parliament, and is renewable without limitation.

As regards the independence of the decision-making process, the Economic and Social Council of Portugal is most politically dependent. There are government representatives within the council.

There is also a direct link with the government in the social dialogue procedure. Social dialogue is still part of the Economic and Social Council's remit, but is managed autonomously because the prime minister (or the minister delegated by the prime minister) chairs the Social Concertation Standing Committee (CPCS).

The Rules of Procedure of the CPCS, approved at the Plenary Session of 4 June 1993 and published in D.R., II Series, No 204 of 31 August 1993):

- stipulate ‘full autonomy from the Economic and Social Council’;
- regulate the attributes, competencies, composition, functioning and financing of the CPCS;
- establish that the presidency of the CPCS is held by the ‘Prime Minister or by a Minister to whom he delegates’;
- identify and regulate the bodies of the CPCS;
- stipulate that meetings are held every two months;
- regulate the functioning of the CPCS (convening meetings, agenda, organising the meetings).
- stipulate that the Economic and Social Council president has a seat on the CPCS and its specialised working groups. The president may take the floor and intervene in debates whenever they see fit, without the right to vote.

The interim president of the institution shared the following observations:

‘We are therefore dealing with a body that functions autonomously and is chaired by the Prime Minister, who can delegate to another Minister. Normally, when this delegation is made, it is either the Minister of finance or the Minister of labour. This means that the President of the Economic and Social Council has a relatively passive role. She points out that, although the law stipulates that the President of the Economic and Social Council can take the floor, when he considers it appropriate, at social dialogue meetings, this is not always very well regarded’⁷⁸.

In **Italy**, there is explicit restriction of any overlap between a political position and CNEL membership. CNEL members are barred from simultaneously serving as Members of Parliament, ministers or regional council members. Their tenure lasts five years and may be extended or terminated upon the request of the appointing institutions or organisations.

In Italy, the CNEL acts more as an impartial institution. For example, the Italian prime minister said that the CNEL was the appropriate forum for discussion with the opposition on the issue of the minimum wage, giving the body 60 days to develop a proposal⁷⁹. This is an example of the Italian government formally consulting the CNEL on a major topic on the political agenda: clarifying whether the minimum wage has been established by law or by collective bargaining. The CNEL opted for the second possibility

⁷⁸ Sara Falcão Casaca, interim President of the Economic and Social Council (February to July 2024).

⁷⁹ <https://www.governo.it/it/articolo/salario-minimo-lettera-del-presidente-meloni-al-corriere-della-sera/23420>.

(and followed the Italian government's view) but shows that the Italian NESC is consulted and given a central role on issues of strategic importance.

Another essential aspect concerns the CNEL members' current need for compensation or reimbursement of expenses. The members see this lack of financial support as a significant issue because it makes their presence and work less effective and more problematic.

The CESE in **France** is intended to be independent of political influence. It serves as a consultative body that provides the government and the Parliament with advice and recommendations on economic, social and environmental issues. Its members are appointed from various sectors of society, including employers' organisations, trade unions and civil society groups. While it interacts with political institutions, its role is primarily advisory, and its recommendations are based on expert analysis and consultations rather than political affiliation. There is some inclusion of political figures in the debate.

Ministers, informed of the opinions that concern them, attend the plenary assembly and participate in the debates.

Resource allocation

In **Belgium**, the CNT–NAR is financed by the state. The total budget for 2024 amounts to EUR 4.2 million⁸⁰. The amount of the state subsidy for the Central Economic Council for 2024 is EUR 5.8 million⁸².

The Economic and Social Council of **Bulgaria** is financed by the National Assembly. Its budget increased from BGN 1.3 million (EUR 650 000) in 2021, to BGN 1.474 million in 2022 (EUR 730 000), BGN 1.8 million in 2023 (EUR 900 000) and BGN 1.9 million in 2024 (EUR 950 000)⁸³.

Despite the budget being relatively lower, the institution does not report any financial limitations that affect its capacity to fulfil its mandate:

‘We have enough resources for our work. The Parliament is giving us enough resources. In the past we were also returning money. Now we do not return that much resources because we hired more experts’⁸⁴.

In **Portugal**, under Article 17(1) of Law 108/91 of 17 August, the council’s technical and administrative support services are provided with staff who are included in a specific establishment plan laid down by joint order of the prime minister and the finance minister. In accordance with Article 14(2) of the same law, the financial resources necessary for the council to function are entered in the state budget. According to the Activity Plan 2024, published by the Portuguese Economic and Social Council, the total budget for the year 2023 was EUR 2 million.

Based on the feedback collected via semi-structured interviews, some financial limitations affect the functioning of the institution.

‘As a member of the ESC’s Coordination Committee, I can testify to the “gymnastics” that the President of the ESC has to do when there is a need to call on experts, who have very interesting profiles and who are less and less available to collaborate pro bono’⁸⁵.

⁸⁰ Budget Act of 22 December 2023: law laying down the general budget for expenditure for the 2024 budget year.

⁸² The institution also has own resources:

⁸³ https://www.parliament.bg/pub/parliamentarybudget/Doklad_Proekt_Budget_NS_2023.pdf.

⁸⁴ Plamen Dimitrov, vice-president, Economic and Social Council, Bulgaria.

⁸⁵ Manuel de Lemos, member of the Economic and Social Council. President of the Union of Portuguese Misericórdia, a position he has held since 2007, member of the Coordinating Council of the Economic and Social Council since 2010, President of the World Confederation of Misericórdias and Philanthropic Entities and President of the Portuguese Confederation for the Social Economy (CPES).

Also, *'a reinforcement of the resources is needed to support decision-making.'*⁸⁶.

The lack of resources and necessary facilities affects the speed of delivery of the council's tasks. It also has an impact on its prestige, which in turn could have an impact on its credibility:

*'The Economic and Social Council works in a building that is a family villa, which doesn't have enough space to hold a plenary session. When the plenary session is called, it is necessary to ask the Assembly of the Republic to give a room for this purpose, so they are dependent on the Assembly of the Republic being available to realise the opportune moment for this act to take place. There was an agreement with the previous government to resolve this situation and move the Economic and Social Council to the Laranjeiras Palace, but that this agreement has not yet materialised'*⁸⁷.

The capacity of the organisation is also affected because of the lack of resources within the organisations represented:

*'The weaknesses lie in the organisations that are represented. Many work voluntarily, and there is a lack of human and technical resources to enable them to intervene in the Council preparedly. The interviewee believes that the representation of women's organisations on the ESC is good. The intervention needed would be upstream to strengthen NGOs that are very fragile and sometimes play a decorative role because they lack the necessary resources to prepare their interventions at the ESC'*⁸⁸.

*'The resources available to the teams that draw up the opinions are insufficient, affecting the performance of the ESC's tasks. Increased resources will enable it to fulfil its advisory role better, and improving its output could make the ESC more effective in designing public policies and legislative solutions. The ESC does not have legislative power but can influence public policy. But it needs to be given the right resources'*⁸⁹.

'The ESC has extremely scarce resources. The interviewee considers it unacceptable that the members who draw up the opinions are not paid. The ESC only makes sense if it can contribute to substantiating the policy options that define the country's destiny. The interviewee emphasises that she is not part of the Social Dialogue. There is a Portuguese culture of little technical and scientific substantiation of the country's choices. The CES has no resources. The opinions are produced at the expense of voluntary labour by the people who take part, particularly the rapporteurs. There is an ESC administrative support

⁸⁶ Joaquim Ascensão Pequicho, member of the Portuguese Economic and Social Council. Member of the Plenary of the Economic and Social Council representing the Portuguese cooperative sector.

⁸⁷ Sara Falcão Casaca, interim President of the Economic and Social Council (February to July 2024).

⁸⁸ Lina Coelho, member of the Economic and Social Council. Representative of the women's associations represented on the Consultative Council of the Commission for Citizenship and Gender Equality.

⁸⁹ Joaquim Ascensão Pequicho, member of the Portuguese Economic and Social Council. Member of the Plenary of the Economic and Social Council representing the Portuguese cooperative sector.

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*team that organises meetings or establishes contacts, but the rapporteurs do everything else. These are very heavy and difficult tasks, and they are unpaid. It shouldn't be like this. It is absurd that rapporteurs are not paid for the opinions they draw up. It's a public service without payment*⁹⁰.

Therefore, the ESC in Portugal is looking for alternative sources of EU funding:

*'the Economic and Social Council is endowed with resources that are included in the state budget, which is its only allocation. A project is currently underway with the University of Salamanca, in which the Economic and Social Council is applying in partnership for European funds, but this funding is only for the execution of the project'*⁹¹.

The allocation from the government to the CNEL in **Italy** has gone from EUR 19 million in 2013 to EUR 7 million in 2023, a constant and significant reduction that has been ongoing since 2015, when the budget was reduced to EUR 8.7 million. The government allocation is established by Law 936/1986 relating to the establishment and functioning of the CNEL. In particular, the amount for 2023 is recorded in chapter 2178 of the Ministry of Economy and Finance, as 'Sums to be assigned to the National Council of Economy and Labour'. The all-inclusive cost of the CNEL is therefore today equal to 37.39% of that of ten years ago, a reduction of almost two thirds, in order to lessen the burden on the state by more than EUR 10 million.

In 2022, around 90% of the total budget went to personnel costs and administration costs connected to the headquarters owned by the state. 4.39% was spent on 'governance', linked to the president's staff structure and mandatory bodies such as the Board of Auditors. The rest, equal to 5.72%, went on scholarships and internships.

In the last decade, the CNEL's resources in **Italy** have been reduced by around 60%.

The reduced budget affects its capacity:

'The first thing to highlight is that some prerogatives of the CNEL have been weakened, such as the reimbursement of expenses and a form of compensation. Therefore, restoring financial reimbursement will guarantee greater participation in the future.'

⁹⁰ Lina Coelho, member of the Economic and Social Council. Representative of the women's associations represented on the Consultative Council of the Commission for Citizenship and Gender Equality.

⁹¹ Sara Falcão Casaca, interim President of the Economic and Social Council (February to July 2024).

'Another aspect is improving CNEL's reputation within public opinion. In fact, over the last few years, a series of political attempts to reform or even close CNEL have strongly compromised it'⁹².

Each year, Parliament votes on the budget of the Economic, Social and Environmental Council in **France**. In 2023, the budget allocated amounted to EUR 45.1 million, supplemented by own-resources totalling EUR 1.7 million, resulting in a total budget of EUR 46.8 million.

The monthly allowances for members are as follows:

A basic allowance equivalent to one third of the parliamentary allowance, totalling EUR 1 998.21 gross, including the residence allowance.

A retention system is implemented in the event of absenteeism. Members of the Bureau and presidents of work groups receive official compensation of EUR 1.4 million gross, while other members receive EUR 1 million gross⁹³.

The lack of funding was highlighted as one of the council's issues in the interviews conducted:

'Internally, we need more resources and members to bring diverse perspectives to the commissions. Additionally, we require more funding to promote our work across society. While the government is familiar with our efforts, we remain largely unknown to civil society. In the past, we had more members and experts, which we need to regain for greater effectiveness'⁹⁴.

⁹² Anna Lisa Guidotti, representative of Confapi, a national confederation of SMEs. CNEL, Italy.

⁹³ More information is available here: <https://www.lecese.fr/decouvrir-lecese/budget-du-cese>.

⁹⁴ Sylvain Boucherand, president, Commission on Environment, CESE, France.

8. Public perception

The organisations studied have a positive or neutral public image but moderate visibility.

Belgium: The CNT-NAR and the CCE-CRB are seen overall positively by the public. Recent media publications highlight the stability of the CNT-NAR leadership over the last 20 years⁹⁵. Its collective bargaining functions are also rated positively due to their positive social impact⁹⁶.

Bulgaria: Overall, the institution has a relatively good reputation, particularly compared with the low levels of trust observed in other public bodies. Despite this, it struggles with limited visibility among the general public. It is frequently linked with expert opinions, owing to the substantial academic expertise of a significant portion of its members. Moreover, its elected representatives are relatively established leaders within their respective sectors, contributing to the organisation's positive image.

The interviews conducted generally support the idea that the Economic and Social Council is a reputable and credible body, due to the intrinsic quality of its opinions and reports.

In the past, the CNEL in **Italy** did not receive much attention in public debate. However, in 2016, the Italian prime minister proposed to abolish it. Mr Renzi's constitutional reform had the objective of eliminating the CNEL⁹⁷, sparking widespread public interest. Despite significant support for the reform, the CNEL was not abolished, but its role continues to be controversial among Italians. The constitutional reform related to the powers of the regions raised four questions, one of them related to the proposal to eliminate the CNEL. However, this abolition was rejected by the public.

The perceived value of the CNEL and whether it justifies its operational costs continues to be a topical debate. Many continue to argue for its abolition. For example, in May 2024, Senator Renzi proposed a constitutional reform to eliminate the CNEL⁹⁸. Additionally, some contend that the CNEL is sometimes selected as a venue for discussing public issues not because of its institutional neutrality but due to its connection with the government⁹⁹.

⁹⁵ The president of the National Labor Council (CNT), Paul Windey, will retire on 1 May, after 20 years of presidency of the National Labor Council (CNT), <https://www.rtb.be/article/conseil-national-du-travail-bientot-un-changement-de-president-et-c-est-une-premiere-en-20-ans-10431793>.

⁹⁶ 'Un accord dégagé au sein du Conseil National du Travail (CNT) lundi soir prévoit un remboursement plus conséquent des déplacements en train entre son domicile et son lieu de travail, annonce Georges Gilkinet, le ministre de la Mobilité (écologie), mardi matin,' <https://trends.levif.be/a-la-une/mobilite/les-navetteurs-seront-mieux-rembourses-pour-les-trajets-entre-lieu-de-travail-et-domicile/>.

⁹⁷ <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2016/04/15/16A03075/sg>.

⁹⁸ <https://www.senato.it/leg/19/BGT/Schede/Ddliter/57030.htm>.

⁹⁹ <https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2023/08/13/salario-minimo-perche-meloni-si-affida-al-cnel-il-consiglio-e-contrario-e-la-pensa-come-il-governo-mette-in-secondo-piano-la-contrattazione/7259862/>.

Efforts are being made to forge stronger links with the public:

'This year, we have allowed Italian schools to suggest topics on which we will work at CNEL to improve relations between CNEL and citizens'¹⁰⁰.

In **France**, despite the ambitious 2021 reform, opinions regarding the effectiveness of the CESE, particularly concerning enhanced direct involvement of the public, are not universally positive. Recent academic analysis of the reform suggests that 'the CESE remains constrained by its inherent limitations, exacerbated by a contrived form of citizenship, which fails to empower citizens effectively'¹⁰¹. Recent media reports also underscore shortcomings, labelling the new democratic mechanisms as 'an unsuccessful endeavour of citizen democracy'¹⁰².

Even before the reform of 2021, there was significant criticism. The institution was considered 'useless' and 'expensive'¹⁰³.

According to the feedback collected:

'The 2021 reform came in response to criticism questioning the Council's necessity. This reform expanded CESE's competences, incorporating civic participation and granting the institution the ability to manage civic petitions.'¹⁰⁴.

At the same time, media publications (in media specialising in monitoring the social economy) point out that its role is getting more and more significant in the formulation of policies on major issues in France: 'Just one hundred years after its creation, and three years after the law which sought to dust it off, we are witnessing a real rise in power of the CESE, the third Assembly of the Republic enshrined in our Constitution, on all major social issues'¹⁰⁵.

In **Portugal**, the interviews conducted generally support the idea that the Economic and Social Council is a reputable and credible body, due to the quality of its opinions and reports.

João Leal Amado believes that the public perception of the ESC's activity is positive, even though the majority of the population is not sufficiently exposed to relevant information about its work and achievements. There is limited information about it as an institution dedicated to social dialogue.

¹⁰⁰ Paolo Pirani, CNEL, Italy.

¹⁰¹ Julien Padovani, 'La réforme du Conseil économique, social et environnemental : une citoyenneté en question', *La Revue des droits de l'homme*, 22, 2022, <http://journals.openedition.org/revdh/15278>.

¹⁰² <https://www.lefigaro.fr/politique/le-cese-une-tentative-manquee-de-democratie-citoyenne-20210106>.

¹⁰³ https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2019/04/13/le-cese-institution-meconnue-a-l-avenir-incertain_5449756_823448.html.

¹⁰⁴ Marie-Pierre Gabriel, Social and Territorial Commission, CESE, France.

¹⁰⁵ <https://www.mediatico.fr/journee-determinante-au-cese-la-chambre-de-participation-citoyenne/>.

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'The public perception of the ESC's activity is positive, even though the overwhelming majority of the population has no idea what the ESC is. Perhaps a vague idea of an institution dedicated to social dialogue, not much more'¹⁰⁶.

¹⁰⁶

João Carlos da Conceição Leal Amado, member of the List of Presiding Arbitrators of the Arbitral Tribunal. Presiding judge in several cases, such as case AO/23/2023 - SM.

9. Experience in EU-related work, relations with the EESC and other international initiatives

The NESCs are actively involved in EU and wider international activities.

In **Belgium**, the CNT-NAR, together with the CCE-CRB, is actively involved in the activities of the EESC. They have submitted several joint contributions over the years, such as: Joint contribution of the Central Economic Council and the National Labour Council to the report of the European Economic and Social Committee on the Europe 2020 strategy - October 2013; Contribution of the Central Economic Council and the National Labour Council (Belgium) to the integrated report of the European Economic and Social Committee on the Europe 2020 strategy - October 2012; Contribution from the CCE-CNT Secretariats - EUROPE 2020 (11.2011)¹⁰⁷. With these contributions, both organisations participated in the Piloting Committee Europe 2020 (set up by the EESC). Together with the CNT-NAR, the Central Economic Council is actively involved in collaboration with the EESC.

It was also particularly active in the implementation of the Recovery and Resilience Plan (PRR), again together with the CNT-NAR and with the Federal Council for Sustainable Development (CFDD)¹⁰⁸.

‘A good practice exchange could be one of the activities that the EESC can organize for the benefits of the NESCs. An example that could be discussed are the results of the recent reform in France in terms of increased civic participation’¹⁰⁹.

The establishment of the Economic and Social Council in **Bulgaria** is part of the reforms undertaken for its admission into the EU. The European Economic and Social Committee is even stated explicitly as a model. The country aims to ‘apply its experience’¹¹⁰ at national level.

According to the feedback collected:

‘It is entirely inspired by the EU model. We are unique at least in Eastern Europe including employers, trade unions and the third sector; concerning the third sector there are necessary areas of improvement’¹¹¹.

¹⁰⁷ <https://cnt-nar.be/fr/dossiers-thematiques/strategie-europe-2020>.

¹⁰⁸ <https://www.ccecrb.fgov.be/p/fr/1066/dialogue-avec-le-gouvernement-au-sujet-du-plan-national-pour-la-reprise-et-la-resilience/2>.

¹⁰⁹ Joint Interview: Benoît Bayenet, Luc Denayer, CCE, Belgium.

¹¹⁰ <https://esc.bg/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/esc-law-bg.pdf>

¹¹¹ Plamen Dimitrov, vice-president, Economic and Social Council, Bulgaria.

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The Economic and Social Council works in partnership with the European Economic and Social Committee, the Economic and Social Councils of the EU Member States and similar organisations of the countries in the Euro-Mediterranean region.

The Economic and Social Council is a strong supporter of the adoption of EU-related issues and reforms in Bulgarian public debate. It is campaigning for admission into the eurozone, and for an impact assessment of Bulgaria's strategy for the Green Deal and the efficient adaptation of the Recovery and Resilience Plans. The strategic priorities for 2021-2025¹¹² are geared toward active involvement of EU-initiated interventions.

The Economic and Social Council adopts opinions, resolutions and analyses. The council is getting more and more active. It adopted two opinions in 2004 and five in 2020. There were seven in 2005, six in 2006, six in 2007, two in 2008, four in 2009, six in 2010, three in 2011, four in 2012, one in 2013, three in 2014, three in 2015, one in 2016, two in 2017, five in 2018 and five in 2019.

The opinions are dominated by EU-related questions. In 2020, four out of five opinions produced were on EU issues.

In 2020 (the last year for which information is accessible), they were:

Proposals of the Economic and Social Council in connection with the preparation of the 'Recovery and Sustainability Plan of the Republic Bulgaria';

Opinion on 'Digital transformation in Bulgaria - challenges and opportunities in the context of Europe's digital future';

Opinion on 'Main priorities in the draft Strategic Framework of the EU on Safety and Health at Work - 2021 - 2027';

Opinion on 'The European Green Pact - economic, social and environmental challenges and possible solutions for Bulgaria';

Opinion on 'Possibilities and factors for the promotion of small and medium-sized enterprises in Bulgaria for the planning period 2021-2027'¹¹³.

¹¹² <https://esc.bg/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/presentation-2021-priorities.pdf>.

¹¹³ <https://esc.bg/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/%D0%A1%D1%82%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B8%D1%89%D0%B0-%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D0%98%D0%A1%D0%A1-2004-2020-1.pdf>.

The number of resolutions is relatively lower. In 2008, one resolution was adopted, four in 2011, two in 2012, eight in 2013, one in 2014, six in 2015, four in 2016, five in 2017, three in 2018, two in 2019 and one in 2020¹¹⁴.

The topics of the resolutions are also predominantly EU-related. During the last three years for which data are available, five out of six resolutions are on EU-related topics. For the last three available years, the topics were:

Resolution on the ‘Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, European Central Bank, European Economic and Social Committee and Committee of the Regions - Review of Economic Governance’(2020);

Resolution on the ‘Multiannual financial framework of the European Union for period 2021 - 2027’ (2019);

Resolution on ‘Challenges for Bulgarian citizens from the risks of the global digital environment’ (2019);

Resolution on ‘Economic dimensions for a stronger Europe’ (1) (2018);

Resolution on ‘Economic dimensions for a stronger Europe’ (2) (2018);

Resolution on the ‘Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council amending Regulations (EU) No. 596/2014 and (EU) No. 2017/1129 in relation to promoting the use of SME growth markets’ - COM(2018) 331 final 2018/0165 (COD) (2018).

The functions of the Economic and Social Council as a unit providing analytical output are also getting relatively more prominent. On average, the Economic and Social Council produces between one and six analyses on social and economic issues each year: one in 2007, none in 2008, four in 2009, four in 2010, one in 2011, none in 2012, one in 2013, one in 2014, one in 2015, two in 2016, none in 2017, none in 2018, none in 2019 and two in 2020¹¹⁵. However, the analyses are predominantly geared toward issues of national relevance. For example, during the last three years for which information is available, they are: Analysis of ‘New financial instruments for the development of lifelong learning in Bulgaria’ (2020),

¹¹⁴ <https://esc.bg/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/%D0%A0%D0%B5%D0%B7%D0%BE%D0%BB%D1%8E%D1%86%D0%B8%D0%B8-%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D0%98%D0%A1%D0%A1-2020-2004-%D0%BF%D0%BE%D0%B4%D1%80%D0%B5%D0%B4%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%B8.pdf>.

¹¹⁵ <https://esc.bg/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/%D0%90%D0%BD%D0%B0%D0%BB%D0%B8%D0%B7%D0%B8-%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D0%98%D0%A1%D0%A1-2020-2004-%D0%BF%D0%BE%D0%B4%D1%80%D0%B5%D0%B4%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%B8-1.pdf>.

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Analysis of ‘Problems of placing and paying night work in Bulgaria’ (2020), Analysis of ‘Long-term unemployment in Bulgaria’ (2016), ‘Trends in the migration attitudes of high school graduates education in Bulgaria’ (2016), ‘Migration attitudes of secondary school graduates youth in Bulgaria’, to be developed on the basis of an own study among students graduating from secondary education in 2015.

Bulgaria is a member of the International Association of Economic and Social Councils and related institutions and the *Union des Conseils Economiques et Sociaux et Institutions Similaires Francophones*. Bulgaria has also been elected as a member of the United Nations Economic and Social Council for the period 2021-2023.

‘We are part of the International network, also the NESC of France, Greece, Spain, Romania are our most close partners. We are looking for models for instance from France. They are also a Constitutional body – a good example to follow.

‘The EESC – the last Presidents are emphasizing that they want us to participate more for instance the European Semester, the Green Deal; The role of the NESC is to return the outputs of the policy-making back at national level in order to facilitate the implementation. Many stakeholders are worried about the expected speed of work on the key EU priorities.

‘Recovery and Resilience Plan – we did a lot. Many Bulgarian propositions were adopted in the EESC position.’¹¹⁶

In **France**, the CESE is actively involved in EU-related work. This is a key focus, demonstrated by the fact that there is a permanent Commission on International and European Affairs and that the opinions on EU issues are largely drawn up on its own initiative. In 2023, all four were own-initiative opinions. The members are clearly interested in this topic.

In 2021, the CESE was also particularly active in 2021 in the discussions on France’s National Recovery and Resilience Plan. An own-initiative opinion was published on *Consultation du CESE sur le Plan National de Relance et de Résilience / Programme National de Réformes*¹¹⁷.

The French CESE often engages in dialogue and information exchange with the EESC on matters of mutual interest, such as economic policies, social issues and environmental sustainability. They collaborate on joint initiatives, share best practices and coordinate positions on relevant European

¹¹⁶ Plamen Dimitrov, vice-president, Economic and Social Council, Bulgaria.

¹¹⁷ <https://www.lecese.fr/travaux-publies/consultation-du-cese-sur-le-plan-national-de-relance-et-de-resilienceprogramme-national-de-reformes>.

policies and legislation. The partnership is strategic for the CESE. Additionally, CESE representatives participate in meetings, conferences and working groups organised by the EESC in order to contribute to discussions and decision making at EU level.

Concerning the CESE's international involvement with other bodies, it leads or participates in organisations such as the *Union des Conseils Economiques et Sociaux et Institutions Similaires Francophones* (UCESIF) and the *Association internationale des Conseils économiques et sociaux et Institutions similaires* (AICESIS).

As regards **Portugal**, the organisation is part of the policy-making process on EU-related issues. Under Article 2(1) of the Economic and Social Council Law, this constitutional body is responsible for assessing Portugal's positions in European Union bodies on economic and social policies and for giving its opinion on the national use of EU, structural and specific funds.

Therefore, the Economic and Social Council has drawn up opinions related to European matters:

- Own-initiative opinion on the Lisbon Strategy (approved in Plenary on 24 May 2005, rapporteur: Councillor Adriano Pimpão);
- Own-initiative opinion on the future of the eurozone (adopted in Plenary on 26 July 2010, rapporteurs: Isabel Mota, J. Almeida Serra and J. Silva Peneda);
- Own-initiative opinion on the Recovery and Resilience Plan (adopted in Plenary on 7 February 2024, rapporteur: Councillor Susana Peralta), available at https://ces.pt/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Parecer-sobre-o-Plano-de-Recuperacao-e-Resiliencia_Aprovado-em-Plenario.pdf.

As far as the Recovery and Resilience Plan is concerned, a National Recovery and Resilience Plan Monitoring Committee has been set up.

According to Article 4 of Decree-Law 90/92 of 21 May, the Economic and Social Council can establish cooperation relationships and sign information exchange agreements with similar institutions in other countries and with international organisations competent in economic and social matters.

On 6 and 7 February 2024, the Portuguese Economic and Social Council (CES) held the third 'Erasmus for Organised Civil Society' programme in Lisbon, attended by several international delegations. During two well-attended sessions, members of the economic and social councils of the various countries had the opportunity to discuss strategic autonomy and reindustrialisation and the geopolitical changes underway. The event was opened by the Secretary of State for European Affairs, Tiago Antunes (see <https://ces.pt/2024/02/12/erasmus-da-sociedade-civil-organizada-em-imagens/>).

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Some opinions are published on CESLink - Online Cooperation of the Economic and Social Councils, <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/ceslink/en>, sometimes in Portuguese and English, sometimes only in Portuguese.

The ESC has an active relationship with its European counterparts:

'ESC's close liaison work with the European Union's Economic and Social Committee and some bilateral work with other European ESCs, particularly the Spanish Economic and Social Council, on ageing in the Iberian context'¹¹⁸.

There is some criticism and awareness of the need for further engagement:

'The ESC has limited involvement in these two dossiers. The ESC needs to be more relevant in its advisory and reflective role. Changing the CES's remit and entrustment with new tasks is necessary'¹¹⁹.

'The last opinion was on the Recovery and Resilience Plan (it refers to the own-initiative opinion on the Recovery and Resilience Plan (own-initiative opinion approved at the plenary meeting of 7 February 2024). The opinion is limited because the official public administration bodies at the presentation (who don't normally speak out) spoke out very strongly against the opinion because they felt affected. The problem is that the financial documents are irreproachable, but there is opacity about the beneficial owner, who they are and how many they are'¹²⁰.

'As for the ESC's role in monitoring the implementation of the recovery and resilience plan, this monitoring was more political than economic and social. The state did not engage in dialogue with other entities, so the CES did not have the opportunity to participate actively in this process'¹²¹.

'The Economic and Social Council is part of the Monitoring Committee. It therefore receives information on the implementation of the RRP'¹²².

¹¹⁸ Joaquim Ascensão Pequicho, member of the Portuguese Economic and Social Council. Member of the Plenary of the Economic and Social Council representing the Portuguese cooperative sector.

¹¹⁹ Joaquim Ascensão Pequicho, member of the Portuguese Economic and Social Council. Member of the Plenary of the Economic and Social Council representing the Portuguese cooperative sector.

¹²⁰ Lina Coelho, member of the Economic and Social Council. Representative of the women's associations represented on the Consultative Council of the Commission for Citizenship and Gender Equality.

¹²¹ Manuel de Lemos, member of the Economic and Social Council. President of the Union of Portuguese Misericórdia, a position he has held since 2007, member of the Coordinating Council of the Economic and Social Council since 2010, President of the World Confederation of Misericórdias and Philanthropic Entities and President of the Portuguese Confederation for the Social Economy (CPES).

¹²² Susana Peralta, member of the Economic and Social Council. She has a PhD in Economics from the *Université catholique de Louvain* and is an Associate Professor at Nova SBE. She is the coordinator of *Portugal, Balanço Social*, a joint initiative between the La Caixa

'Francisco Assis' European experience (he was a member of the European Parliament) was decisive in stimulating collaboration with other European Economic and Social Councils, but this experience is still not very consolidated. For example, the practice of finding out what is being done by the ESC's sister bodies is not institutionalised. And that, in her opinion, is a shortcoming. Francisco Assis has already stepped down as President of the ESC and that the functioning of the body should not depend on the person who, at any given time, occupies the position of president'¹²³.

Other insights regarding engagement with the EU are as follows:

'The most relevant initiatives are how the Economic and Social Council uses CESLink to project its activities in the European Union. However, this has been a concern. Participation in international associations, such as the International Association of Economic and Social Councils or similar institutions has been considered'¹²⁴.

'Greater collaboration and institutional interconnection would be desirable, through the representation of the Presidents of the various bodies at the European level'¹²⁵.

More meeting of the NESCs at the EESC would be appreciated:

'There is only one annual meeting of the Presidents of the Economic and Social Councils of the European Union and a more institutionalised link would be very welcome'¹²⁶.

In addition to that:

'The previous President had taken up the idea that it would be very important to have an institutional link within the CPLP (Community of Portuguese-Speaking Countries). During the presidency of Francisco Assis, there was an emphasis on institutional relations abroad, highlighting relations with the Economic and Social Councils of France and Spain'¹²⁷.

At the CNEL, in **Italy**, the Committee for the Examination of the Acts of the European Union was established by President's Decision No 376 of 24 February 2021, implementing Article 28 of Law

Foundation and Nova SBE. Rapporteur for the own-initiative opinion on the Recovery and Resilience Plan (own-initiative opinion approved at the Plenary Meeting of 7/2/2024).

¹²³ Susana Peralta, member of the Economic and Social Council. She has a PhD in Economics from the *Université catholique de Louvain* and is an Associate Professor at Nova SBE. She is the coordinator of *Portugal, Balanço Social*, a joint initiative between the La Caixa Foundation and Nova SBE. Rapporteur for the own-initiative opinion on the Recovery and Resilience Plan (own-initiative opinion approved at the Plenary Meeting of 7/2/2024).

¹²⁴ Sara Falcão Casaca, interim President of the Economic and Social Council (February to July 2024).

¹²⁵ Sara Falcão Casaca, interim President of the Economic and Social Council, (February to July 2024).

¹²⁶ Sara Falcão Casaca, interim President of the Economic and Social Council (February to July 2024).

¹²⁷ Sara Falcão Casaca, interim President of the Economic and Social Council (February to July 2024).

234/2012. Its purpose is to facilitate the involvement of the social partners from various industries in decisions concerning European Union legislation. It also governs Italy's interactions with the EU, aiming to enhance Italy's engagement in the European regulatory process and improve compliance with EU regulations implemented in Italy¹²⁸. Therefore, the CNEL is a crucial intermediary in Italy's legislative system. It facilitates communication and collaboration between the European Union and the Italian government, parliament and regional authorities.

Another essential function of the CNEL is facilitating meetings with European countries' National Economic and Social Councils. The fourth meeting of the Erasmus of Organised Civil Societies project took place in Rome on 27 and 28 June 2024¹²⁹. It focused on strategic rural development and the risk of depopulation in rural parts of the EU. Its aim was to develop common European approaches to this important issue. The meeting produced strategies and action plans to address rural depopulation. European National Economic and Social Councils, Italian institutions, local stakeholders, sector experts and civil society organisations from EU countries took part. All European NESCs were invited.

The CNEL also encourages mutual exchange and the sharing of best practices with several European National Economic and Social Councils, particularly those in close relationships, such as Spain¹³⁰, Portugal¹³¹, Hungary and Bulgaria¹³². For instance, the CNEL maintains direct links with these countries to exchange best practices and promote collaboration on various issues, including developing a trans-European network to acquire advanced skills in policy and identify innovative solutions to their respective national institutions.

Some of the members interviewed emphasised the importance of the EESC taking a more proactive stance in advocating for the creation of observatories focusing on a range of European and cross-cutting issues, including the economy, employment contracts and gender discrimination. The EESC could encourage the development of more shared interests for comparison at European level.

'I also dealt with abandoning agricultural land to protect the civilian population. We have collaborated with Portugal and most Eastern European countries, but now we would like to involve the other

¹²⁸ <https://www.cnel.it/Chi-Siamo/XI-Consiliatura/Commissioni/Commissione-Politiche-dellUnione-europea-e-cooperazione-internazionale>.

¹²⁹ <https://www.cnel.it/Comunicazione-e-Stampa/Notizie/ArtMID/1174/ArticleID/3742/SAVE-THE-DATE-FOURTH-MEETING-OF-THE-PROJECT-“ERASMUS-OF-ORGANIZED-CIVIL-SOCIETIES”-CNEL-%7C-ROME-27-28-JUNE-2024>.

¹³⁰ <https://www.cnel.it/Comunicazione-e-Stampa/Notizie/ArtMID/1174/ArticleID/3748/BILATERALE-CNEL-CES-DI-SPAGNA-IN-PREPARAZIONE-DEL-IV-INCONTRO-ERASMUS-DELLE-SOCIET192-CIVILI-ORGANIZZATE>.

¹³¹ <https://www.cnel.it/Comunicazione-e-Stampa/Eventi/ArtMID/703/ArticleID/294/Incontri-Italia-Europa-Italia-Portogallo-Europa>.

¹³² <https://www.cnel.it/Comunicazione-e-Stampa/Eventi/ArtMID/703/ArticleID/3092/Commissione-per-le-Adozioni-Internazionali-Incontro-istituzionale-con-Bulgaria-Ungheria-e-Autorit224-Centrale-Italiana>.

members of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC). On 27 and 28 June, we also organized a workshop in Rome on this very topic¹³³.

‘Still, the relationships with the other members of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) could be increased. For example, the dialogue of the discussion tables with the European working groups is an aspect that needs to be implemented. Currently, relations with international commissions pass through the third commission of the CNEL. Still, it would be helpful if each commission had the possibility of dialogue with its similar European body’¹³⁴.

‘The EESC is a vast body that includes many different forces. This means that the work carried out is not always linear because it reflects the differences of the parts that are represented. First, the EESC’s opinion is very often only consultative and, therefore, cannot directly influence change. However, this can also be an advantage because it means that the EESC is more accessible for expressing its points of view.

‘One aspect of the EESC that could be improved is its governance. This is too broad and should be reduced, although this is not easy, given that it is a European body. When the EESC presidency is not particularly charismatic, the entire organization is negatively affected’¹³⁵.

The Italian NESC was also involved in the preparation of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP). The CNEL’s president chaired the Experts’ Forum on the NRRP. He coordinated the input and views of civil society and the social partners regarding the NRRP. The Minister of European Affairs has also highlighted the importance of fostering collaboration with the CNEL. As a result, the CNEL is now committed to working closely with the government on matters related to cohesion policy and the NRRP, focusing on the national strategy for developing internal areas. These initiatives fall within the scope of the control room’s activities, as stipulated by Article 7 of Legislative Decree No 124 of 19 September 2023.

The CESE in **France** is actively involved in EU-related work. This is a key focus, demonstrated by the fact that there is a permanent Commission on International and European Affairs and that the opinions on EU issues are largely drawn up on its own initiative. In 2023, all four were own-initiative opinions. The members are clearly interested in this topic.

¹³³ Francesco Riva, representative of the *Confederazione italiana di unione delle professioni intellettuali* (Italian confederation of intellectual professions) (CIU- UNIONQUADRI), CNEL, Italy.

¹³⁴ Emilio Minunzio, representative of the National Council of the Third Sector and the National Civil Protection Commission, CNEL, Italy.

¹³⁵ Anna Lisa Guidotti, representative of Confapi, a national confederation of SMEs. CNEL, Italy.

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In 2021, the CESE was also particularly active in the discussions on France's National Recovery and Resilience Plan. An own-initiative opinion was published on *Consultation du CESE sur le Plan National de Relance et de Résilience / Programme National de Réformes*¹³⁶.

The French CESE often engages in dialogue and information exchange with the EESC on matters of mutual interest, such as economic policies, social issues and environmental sustainability. They collaborate on joint initiatives, share best practices and coordinate positions on relevant European policies and legislation. The partnership is strategic for the CESE. Additionally, CESE representatives participate in meetings, conferences and working groups organised by the EESC in order to contribute to discussions and decision making at EU level.

Concerning the CESE's international involvement with other bodies, it leads or participates in organisations such as the *Union des Conseils Economiques et Sociaux et Institutions Similaires Francophones* (UCESIF) and the *Association internationale des Conseils économiques et sociaux et Institutions similaires* (AICESIS).

According to the feedback collected:

'Currently, we have no contact with the National Economic and Social Councils (NESC) abroad, which could be highly beneficial. We are trying to interact more with regional Economic and Social Councils...

'The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) could potentially organize meetings. Currently, my contacts with the EESC are personal rather than institutional...

'There are issues relevant to the internal cohesion of the institution regarding the collaboration with EU and broader international level...

'Our international department collaborates with French-speaking countries, but the Councils are not involved in these efforts.

*'Some subjects, like biodiversity, water, and pollution, are better addressed at the international level due to their cross-border nature. Collaborative efforts would be advantageous in tackling these issues.'*¹³⁷

¹³⁶ <https://www.lecese.fr/travaux-publies/consultation-du-cese-sur-le-plan-national-de-relance-et-de-resilienceprogramme-national-de-reformes>.

¹³⁷ Sylvain Boucherand, president, Commission on Environment, CESE, France.

'It would be advantageous to discuss certain issues at the international level, rather than just nationally. These include ecological problems and challenges related to democratic development'¹³⁸.

The annual meetings of the Presidents of the Economic and Social Councils of the European Union provide opportunities for structured dialogue between the NESCs. The meeting in November 2023 focused on civil society's role in safeguarding the twin transition and participatory democracy. A subsequent meeting took place in July 2024. Officials from the institutions studied feel that more frequent structured debates are needed to enhance integration, exchange best practices and consult with civic and social structures at national level via the NESCs. The preferred format for these discussions is remote meetings, with a focus on sustainability and new mechanisms for civic engagement.

¹³⁸ Jacques Creyssel, president, Commission on Economy and Finance, CESE, France.

10. Conclusions and recommendations

Conclusions:

- The key competence of the NESCs in Belgium, Bulgaria, Italy, France and Portugal is to provide advice; NESCs also facilitate social dialogue.
- The NESCs in Belgium, Italy and Portugal do more than provide advice, and have broader or stronger competences: in Belgium, the CCE-CRB's advisory role has gradually expanded to accommodate new legislative developments. In certain cases, it is mandated to provide opinions on specific issues on which the government must consult it. The CNT-NAR also has the authority to negotiate collective bargaining agreements either across all economic sectors or within specific sectors. In Portugal, the Economic and Social Council acts as arbitrator during strikes and facilitates agreements between social partners. This is done through its social dialogue function, facilitated by the Social Concertation Standing Committee (CPCS). The CNEL in Italy has the power of legislative initiative, unlike the rest of the NESCs.
- In terms of number of representatives, the Economic, Social and Environmental Council in France is the largest institution, with 175 members. The number of members was even bigger before the reform of January 2021 (233). The second biggest NESC is the Economic and Social Council of Portugal, with 76 full members. The CNEL in Italy has 64 members, the CCE in Belgium has 54 (54 alternate members), the ISS in Bulgaria has 37 (chair and 36 members), and the CNT-NAR in Belgium has 26 primary members and 26 substitute members.
- The NESCs studied have a similar operational logic, with a presidency, plenary, committees/commissions and administration. There is a unique body in the Economic and Social Committee of Portugal: the Social Concertation Standing Committee (CPCS). Its main function is to promote dialogue and social concertation, with the goal of establishing agreements between the parties. It is part of the ESC but not subject to its authority. It is presided over by the prime minister or a minister nominated by them.
- Concerning the impact on policy, the NESCs of Italy and Belgium are relatively more empowered. In France, Bulgaria and Portugal, the NESCs respond to requests from other bodies rather than initiating policy interventions on a regular basis. They have the right to issue own-initiative opinions but in general these have less impact than the opinions the bodies are asked to draw up.
- The main mechanisms for transparency utilised by the NESCs studied are annual activity reports; the plenary sessions are open and the opinions issued are available to the public. No regular external evaluations are performed by the sample of NESCs studied here.

- As regards political independence, in all the NESCs studied the presidents and in some cases a percentage of the members are appointed by a political authority. However, the only country with political representatives nominated as members of the organisation studied is Portugal.
- The NESC with the biggest budget is France's CESE: in 2023, the allocated budget amounted to EUR 45.1 million; followed by Italy's CNEL, which had a budget of EUR 7.1 million for 2023. In Belgium, the state subsidy for the CCE-CRB Central Economic Council for 2024 is EUR 5.8 million¹³⁹, while the CNT-NAR's budget for 2024 is EUR 4.2 million¹⁴⁰. In Portugal, the ESC's total budget for 2023 was EUR 2 million. Bulgaria's ISS has a budget of EUR 950 000 for 2024¹⁴¹.
- The NESCs in Italy, Portugal and France reported financial limitations affecting the capacity to deliver optimal outputs. Bulgaria, the country with the smallest budget, reported a balanced assessment between needs and the funding available (until recently, funds were returned to the National Assembly).
- In some of these countries, the NESCs went through periods of crisis when there was a debate on whether they were useful (Italy, France). Therefore, profound reforms aiming to reflect the new structure of the civil society were performed.
- A common issue is the question of how to represent civil society; most of the institutions were designed several decades ago, whereas civil society changes constantly.
- Another issue identified is the lack of internal and external cohesion of the NESCs, which makes it impossible to optimise international cooperation.
- NESCs emerge as a source of stability in periods of political crisis or when decision makers are incapable of shaping policies due to a lack of expertise or when no scenarios are tabled for discussion. The interviews conducted in France and Bulgaria flagged up this problem.
- Regarding the interaction with the EU level and the EESC: NESCs were involved in preparing the National Recovery and Resilience Plans; they would welcome further opportunities for thematic cooperation and debate and structured dialogue.

Recommendations:

- It would be useful if the EESC could provide the NESCs with more opportunities for structured thematic collaboration and the exchange of best practices at EU level. The preferred format for

¹³⁹ The institution also has own resources.

¹⁴⁰ 'La loi du 22 décembre 2023 contentant le budget général pour les dépenses pour l'année budgétaire 2024'

¹⁴¹ https://www.parliament.bg/pub/parliamentarybudget/Doklad_Proekt_Budget_NS_2023.pdf.

these discussions is remote meetings, with a focus on sustainability and new mechanisms for civic engagement.

- France's efforts to promote new forms of civil society participation could be monitored for potential transfer of good practices. Further analysis of lessons learned after the reform of 2021 could be of interest. Mechanisms to be monitored: ways of selecting individuals and assigning the appropriate weight to their opinion given that they do not represent anyone; mechanisms designed to ensure optimal inclusion when asking questions and ways to integrate their opinions into the decision-making process.
- The advanced analysis and potential implementation of new mechanisms for civic participation implemented by the EESC should consider the balance between expert involvement and civic engagement. This pertains to a prospective analysis identifying potential methods for introducing innovative forms of civic participation. A comprehensive examination is necessary to evaluate how these new mechanisms can optimally integrate citizen and expert engagement in the joint decision-making process.

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11. Annex: Interview programme delivery protocol

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|----------------------|---|---------------------------------|
| Belgium | | |
| CNT-NAR | | |
| Hilde Duroi | Secretary | 16 May 2024 (written responses) |
| Christiaan Botterman | Member of employers' organisations (Soetkin Crabbe on his behalf) | 2 April 2024 |
| Olivier Valentin | Member of workers' organisations | 18 April 2024 |
| CCE-CRB | | |
| Benoît Bayenet | President | 9 April 2024 |
| Luc Denayer | Secretary-General | 9 April 2024 |
| Bulgaria | | |
| Zornitza Roussinova | President | 8 April 2024 |
| Smilena Kostova | Secretary-General | 8 April 2024 |
| Plamen Dimitrov | Vice-President (Group 2 - trade unions) | 29 March 2024 |
| Atanaska Nikolova | interim Director, Economic and Social Issues | 8 April 2024 |
| Milena Angelova | Member | 15 May 2024 |
| Italy | | |

The role and increasing weight of the Economic and Social Councils at national level

| | | |
|---------------------------|--|---------------|
| Paolo Pirani | Representative of UIL (Italian Labour Union), a national trade union confederation | 12 April 2024 |
| Giovanni Di Cesare | Representative of CGIL (Italian General Confederation of Labour), a national trade union confederation | 12 April 2024 |
| Emilio Minunzio | Representative of the National Council of the Third Sector and the National Civil Protection Commission | 24 April 2024 |
| Annalisa Guidotti | Representative of Confapi, a national confederation of SMEs | 29 April 2024 |
| Francesco Riva | Representative of the <i>Confederazione italiana di unione delle professioni intellettuali</i> (Italian confederation of intellectual professions) (CIU-UNIONQUADRI) | 3 May 2024 |
| Portugal | | |
| Joaquim Ascensão Pequicho | Member of the Portuguese Economic and Social Council. Member of the Plenary of the Economic and Social Council representing the Portuguese cooperative sector | 4 March 2024 |
| Lina Coelho | Member of the Economic and Social Council. Representative of the women's associations | 4 March 2024 |

| | | |
|-------------------------------------|---|---------------|
| | represented on the Consultative Council of the Commission for Citizenship and Gender Equality | |
| Ana Isabel Lopes Pires | Member of the Economic and Social Council. Member of the Social Concertation Standing Committee (CPCS), member representing the CGTP-IN (General Confederation of Portuguese Inter-Union Workers) | 19 March 2024 |
| João Carlos Da Conceição Leal Amado | Member of the List of Presiding Arbitrators of the Arbitral Tribunal. Presiding judge in several cases, such as case AO/23/2023 - SM | 20 March 2024 |
| Manuel de Lemos | Member of the Economic and Social Council. President of the Union of Portuguese Misericórdia, a position he has held since 2007; member of the Coordinating Council of the Economic and Social Council (CES) since 2010, President of the World Confederation of Misericórdias and Philanthropic Entities and President of the Portuguese Confederation for the Social Economy (CPES) | 4 April 2024 |
| Susana Peralta | Member of the Economic and Social Council. She has a PhD in Economics from the | 9 April 2024 |

The role and increasing weight of the Economic and Social Councils at national level

| | | |
|-----------------------------|---|---------------|
| | <i>Université catholique de Louvain</i> and is an Associate Professor at Nova SBE. She is the coordinator of <i>Portugal, Balanço Social</i> , a joint initiative between the La Caixa Foundation and Nova SBE. Rapporteur for the own-initiative opinion on the Recovery and Resilience Plan (own-initiative opinion approved at the plenary meeting of 7 February 2024) | |
| Sara Falcão Casaca | Interim President of the Economic and Social Council (February to July 2024) | 11 April 2024 |
| France | | |
| Catherine Pajares y Sanchez | Vice-president, Commission on European and International Affairs | 14 June 2024 |
| Jacques Creyssel | President of the Commission for Economy and Finance | 30 May 2024 |
| Henri Biès-Péré | President of the agriculture group | 11 March 2024 |
| Sylvain Boucherand | President, Commission on Environment | 30 May 2024 |
| Marie-Pierre Gabriel | Social and territorial cohesion representative | 3 June 2024 |



European Economic and Social Committee

Rue Belliard/Belliardstraat 99
1040 Bruxelles/Brussel
BELGIQUE/BELGIË

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