

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Macro-economic coordination and elusive ownership in the European Union

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The notion of ownership is well known in relation to global governance. In the realm of EU macro-economic coordination, it has become a buzzword since the revamping process of the European Semester in 2015. This article investigates how ownership by four types of domestic actors (governments, administrations, parliaments and social partners) manifests itself in the European Semester. We conceptualize three types of ownership, namely institutional, political, and cognitive. Using network analysis, semi-structured interviews, and a small-scale survey, we find that ownership is strongest among governments and administrations which are able to shape the outputs of the European Semester (institutional ownership) with little political disagreement (political ownership). While national parliaments display low levels of all types of ownership, employers and unions exhibit relatively strong cognitive ownership. We conclude that the European Semester remains a bureaucratic process contributing to building a multi-level administrative space rather than an arena for political debates.

1 | INTRODUCTION

The idea that recipients of a given policy ought to be involved in its formulation, management, or implementation is nothing new. Ownership has been a pervasive 'buzzword' in the fields of aid and development policy, peacekeeping operations and external policy for decades. In economic policy coordination in the European Union (EU), the notion of ownership is not confined to the recent period, either. In the mid-term review of the Lisbon Strategy, the European Commission stressed the importance of making 'the various players feel that the policies proposed concern them, and that they are truly involved in the decision-making and implementation process' for the success of the Strategy (European Commission 2005, p. 14). Likewise, the notion of ownership was at the centre of the preface to the Commission communication on the Europe 2020 Strategy under Barroso's Presidency (European Commission 2010). The problematic political indifference and lack of implementation in the domestic arenas of the policy orientations agreed at the EU level has yet again emerged as a leitmotiv in relation to the European Semester.

The Semester is a broad, complex governance framework which was set up in response to the destabilization of the Economic and Monetary Union by the 2008 financial crisis and the subsequent debt crisis. It can be seen as a hybrid type of governance aiming at better coordinating fiscal, macro-economic and social policy through a mix of regulatory binding instruments and voluntary-based coordination (Armstrong 2014). The main outputs of the Semester are the Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs) based on the analysis by the Commission of each country's issues in the respective Country Reports. It would be foolish to conceive of the Semester as a process where the Commission tells member states what to do. Rather, there is a more complex distribution of tasks (see Zeitlin and Verdun 2017). On the one hand, the Commission performs the analytical work within its own ideational framework focused on labour market flexibilization, the further liberalization of services and product markets, and the reform of public administration (Crespy and Vanheuverzwijn 2017). On the other hand, the Council—notably through its committees—performs the role of multilateral surveillance and endorses these orientations politically.

Since 2010, the Semester has undergone important changes, both in the substance of the ideas expressed and in the procedures through which those ideas are conveyed (Coman and Ponjaert 2016; Crespy and Vanheuverzwijn 2017; Zeitlin and Vanhercke 2017). At the height of the crisis, the EU was criticized for the incapacity of harsh austerity to re-launch growth in Europe while aggravating the social crisis in the countries severely hit by the recession. The Semester was seen as an example for the dominance of creditor countries imposing fiscal discipline and structural reforms through a 'rule-based' bureaucratic process (Schmidt 2015b) steered by a Commission empowered with increased surveillance powers (Savage and Verdun 2016). When Juncker was appointed President of the Commission in 2014, he claimed that the EU should deliver a 'social triple A'. Thus, the changes operated in the Semester aimed at responding to the legitimacy deficit of the EU's socioeconomic governance (Schmidt 2015a).

From a procedural point of view, the new Commission declared its intention to 'revamp' the Semester in order to improve the legitimacy and efficiency of the process, notably in terms of increasing the implementation rate of the CSRs (European Commission 2015, p. 3). Against this background, the notion of 'national ownership' was emphasized as a way to intensify the involvement of national political authorities in endorsing and implementing the reforms advocated in Brussels. The Commission's efforts materialized in several initiatives: a new calendar for the Semester that gives more time to national actors to provide expertise feeding the work of the Commission, a proposal to set up national productivity boards that would play a role in monitoring macro-economic developments in each country, and an improved functioning of the peer review process in the Council committees. Last but not least, new positions of European Semester Officer (ESOs) were created in 2013 in the Commission Representations in order to 'add weight to the Commission's capacity to conduct surveillance activities, assess policies, gather country-specific intelligence, and increase the compliance record on European Semester initiatives' (Munta 2017, p. 8).

Although more interest for this issue is developing within the scholarly community (Kreiling 2016; Coman and Sbaraglia 2017; Munta 2017), we still know little about how ownership is fostered in practice in the Semester. In this article, we take seriously the ubiquitous call for more national ownership of the European Semester and put forward our own definition of ownership to investigate its manifestations as well as limitations in actual political praxis. We therefore address two questions: How can ownership be conceived of in EU socioeconomic governance? How does it manifest itself in everyday practice in the framework of the European Semester? This article is structured in four parts. In the next section, we review three strands of literature that are relevant to our topic and shed light on the normative underpinnings and motivations for fostering ownership in the realm of the EU socioeconomic governance. In section 3 we then put forward our own threefold conceptualization distinguishing institutional, political and cognitive ownership, and present the methods used for the empirical analysis. Section 4 provides a basic network analysis that allows us to visualize the actors involved in the European Semester in three countries (Belgium, France and the Netherlands). Finally, section 5 presents the results of a survey conducted among ESOs in order to assess the relative importance of our three types of ownership.

2 | OWNERSHIP AND THE EUROPEAN SEMESTER

We locate the question of ownership at the intersection of three sets of issues and related strings of literature: ownership in global governance, the formation of a European administrative space, and the debates around the legitimacy of the Semester.

2.1 | Ownership in global governance

Ownership is a term that has animated the discourses of international organizations (IOs) for more than two decades. We often see IOs using the term as a corollary to their interference in the domestic affairs of a sovereign state. At its broadest, ownership is used figuratively to suggest that local populations are not passive witnesses of this interference, but rather take an active part in it. 'Owning' a policy means in this sense that a policy is not only imported from an external actor to the local level, but that the local level participates in reflecting on it (Coman 2017, p. 166). In the 1990s, the notion of ownership started to figure prominently in the development programmes of the World Bank (World Bank 1995, p. 6), the International Monetary Fund (Khan and Sharma 2001), the OECD (1992, pp. 53–54), as well as in the UN peace operation programmes (Wilén 2009, p. 340; von Billerbeck 2017). Just a few years later, the EU also used similar rhetoric in its external policies vis-à-vis accessing states (Kelley 2006; Bengtsson 2008; Coman 2017).

The overall rationale for developing ownership is twofold: ensuring the effectiveness and the legitimacy of the external intervention. First, involving local government, stakeholders and other target groups in the formulation and the implementation of a programme is seen as a guarantee of success. As put forward by Khan and Sharma (2001) in an IMF Working Paper:

When the program is owned by the country, decisions on such actions are likely to be made quickly and in support of the program, which makes it more likely that the program will succeed. (Khan and Shama 2001, p. 14)

In connection to this, as it became clear that tailor-made programmes were more likely to succeed than one-size-fits-all approaches, ownership was seen as a way to engage more with local actors so that the policies prescribed better reflected the realities on the ground. Second, Wilén demonstrated that the concept of ownership can also be used in a defensive way, in order to avoid criticism of undue interference from the outside (2009, p. 338). Similarly, the EU has also relied on ownership to enhance the legitimacy of its conditionality policy in the framework of the European Neighbourhood Policy (European Commission 2004, p. 8).

However, the literature on global governance has pointed out the inherent ambiguity of the ownership language. Ownership can refer to a wide variety of involvement practices of an even wider group of local actors. In the strongest sense of the term, 'owning' a programme means exerting actual controlling authority over the whole process (Chesterman 2007, p. 4). As expressed in a study of a Swedish International Development Agency, this 'strong' sort of ownership means 'the exercise of control and command over development activities' (Edgren 2003, p. 4). By contrast, ownership can be used in a much lighter way, to express passive forms of attachment to given policies (Chesterman 2007). In this sense, ownership means that a given country simply 'buys into' a programme that is formulated, and sometimes even implemented, by external actors.

These insights bear parallels with the Semester. Whereas budgetary policies are rooted in regulatory binding instruments, macro-economic and social reforms depend largely on the good will of national governments. From this standpoint, ownership is seen as a functional necessity for the Semester to give tangible results, especially in areas where it lacks enforcement instruments. As in the realm of global governance, ownership is supposed to reconcile the functional need to steer reform and the political need to preserve national sovereignty.

2.2 | The emergence of a European administrative space

A second string of literature that we draw on to explore ownership in the Semester relates to the Europeanization of national administrations and the progressive formation of a European administrative space. Scholars have tried to identify patterns of change and persistence in the ways in which national bureaucratic apparatus have adapted to the new tasks resulting from regional integration (Knill 2001). Early studies have emphasized the role of opportunity structures and institutional constraints in facilitating or impeding the endeavours of 'agents of change' (Bulmer and Burch 1998). Echoing the broader debate on Europeanization, a central question is whether the observed change brings about convergence among the member states.

A way to assess change from 'the bottom' is by looking at officials' everyday practices within distinctive national organizational cultures. A common observation in several studies is the gap between a relatively small circle of 'insiders' which are in contact with EU policy-making in their daily tasks, and thus familiar with the EU procedures and routines, and the wider number of 'outsiders' whose daily work remains marginally affected by transnational policy-making. This has been observed in a founding EU country such as the Netherlands (Mastenbroek and Princen 2010) as well as in 'new' member states (Meyer-Sahling and Van Stolk 2015).

In spite of the differentiated Europeanization of national administrations, a number of scholars claim that we are witnessing the progressive formation of a 'European administrative space', that is an 'area in which increasingly integrated administrations jointly exercise powers delegated to the EU in a system of shared sovereignty' (Hofman 2008, p. 671). More recently, Trondal and his colleagues have put forward the notion of a 'multilevel administrative order' with the European Commission at its centre. They see it as characterized by three principles: independence vis-à-vis member states, integration of administrative capacities via inter- and intra-organizational coordination within the Commission, and co-optation of auxiliary administrative units by the Commission (Trondal and Peters 2013; Trondal and Bauer 2017).

In several respects, the Semester sets the described administrative space in motion at different stages of the cycle. For example, national administrations provide input through expertise when the European Commission prepares its Country Reports in the winter. In spring, then, government machineries are involved in the political discussions surrounding possible amendments to the CSRs in the Council committees. The Semester also raises the question of the coordination of the process both within the Commission and between the Commission and member states' governments. In this regard, the strengthening of the role of the Commission Secretariat-General over time should be stressed (Kassim et al. 2013; Savage and Verdun 2016).

2.3 | The European Semester and legitimacy issues

Finally, the flourishing research on the Semester feeds the broader discussion over legitimacy issues surrounding governance in the multi-level EU. This perspective goes back to the depiction of the EU as a regulatory state based on the delegation of competencies to non-majoritarian institutions in order to establish and regulate the internal market (Majone 1994). Theorists of the regulatory state tend to assess EU governance on the basis of the quality of its policy outcomes. In this view, the regulatory state does not derive its legitimacy from the citizens' participation in the policy process (input legitimacy), but from its effectiveness in achieving the goals prescribed by the delegating authority (output legitimacy). Yet, this model seems too restrictive, not least because it overlooks the importance attached by the EU to other channels of legitimation, such as the mechanisms of 'throughput legitimacy', that is the openness, accountability, and efficacy of governance (Schmidt 2013). For instance, the 'Better Regulation' agenda championed by the EU is a good illustration of endeavours to reform public administration, notably along the lines of New Public Management (Radaelli and Meuwese 2009) as a means to achieve 'better' policy-making processes.

Furthermore, the EU's post-crisis economic governance seems to challenge the standard model of the regulatory polity. With the expansion of the EU regulation into core state competencies (Genschel and Jachtenfuchs 2013) such as fiscal and macro-economic surveillance, citizens have become increasingly uncertain about the degree of

responsiveness of their government to their aspirations. The combination of an intergovernmental decision-making process with an implementation process based on supranational discretion presents little value in terms of input legitimacy (Schmidt 2015b). In addition, given the persistent imbalances in terms of competitiveness across the EU, the continuing risks linked to the banking sector and the continuous rise of social inequalities across the board, output legitimacy is clearly insufficient to ensure the political foundations of the EU (Crespy and Schmidt 2017). Therefore, the recent emphasis on ownership in the Semester can be viewed as a partial response by the Commission to a threefold democratic deficit. By making the Semester more inclusive (throughput), the performance of the process is supposed to improve (output), thereby responding better to citizens' aspirations (input).

Against this background, the emergence of ownership as a key notion is the explicit recognition from within the EU institutions that the coordination of domestic policies should be accompanied by the corollary penetration of EU norms and practices in the everyday functioning of national administrations. But because the proposed reforms are likely to have far-reaching effects at the domestic level, ownership of the European Semester should not be circumscribed to officials and bureaucrats, but also include political and social actors such as elected parliamentarians and unions. In the following, we critically investigate to what extent these self-legitimizing claims are grounded on the basis of our own conceptualization of ownership.

3 | OBSERVING OWNERSHIP IN THE SEMESTER

3.1 | Conceptualization and operationalization of ownership

The three strands of literature sketched in the previous section have provided three main insights into what practical aspects of policy-making ownership refers to. Building on these insights, we have explored ownership in the Semester on the basis of three dimensions.

First, institutional ownership is the capacity of national actors to shape the outcomes of policy-making by providing input in terms of expertise or political arguments which may influence deliberations over the reforms advocated at the EU level. This stimulates and smoothens exchange of ideas and work practices among various departments across levels of government and results in the European socialization of an increasing number of civil servants. Thus, it contributes to the strengthening of a European administrative space and building pan-European policy-making capacities.

Second, political ownership reflects an agreement over policy objectives of the Semester and agents' willingness to work toward their implementation. This is related to the strategic use of EU governance by reform-minded domestic actors. By strengthening the consensus on the nature of the policies promoted, political ownership should respond to the perceived lack of legitimacy of the European Semester.

Third, cognitive ownership can be defined as the extent to which national actors are aware of the Semester and consider it in their daily routines. This points to the nature of ownership as an ideational device which should result in domestic actors considering policies promoted from outside as normal, as being their own. The ultimate objective here is to foster implementation on the ground.

These dimensions echo to a large extent the regulative (a), normative (b) and cultural-cognitive (c) mechanisms identified by scholars of organization theory (Scott 2013, ch. 3). Institutional change can broadly be seen as happening when actors act in conformity with new rules and procedures (a), when they respond to new normative principles which are perceived as appropriate (b), or when their behaviour shows conformity with new orthodox practices and routines (c). We should nevertheless underline that the regulative dimension in the European Semester rests on weakly coercive instruments. However, we consider that, in the daily working of the Semester, a number of actors have to submit input and expertise in the form of bureaucratic exchange and report drafting in the framework of increasingly institutionalized consultation procedures, thus fostering what we call institutional ownership.

The second step in our operationalization consists in identifying which national actors are targeted. Based on the October 2015 communication of the Commission, which explains the notion of ownership (European Commission 2015), we decided to focus on the four following actors: national governments (including cabinets), national administrations, national parliaments, and social partners (employers' associations and workers' unions).

3.2 | Methods

To investigate the manifestations of ownership in the Semester, we draw on three methods: the analysis of semi-structured interviews, a network analysis, and a questionnaire survey. Common to all three methods is the heavy reliance on ESOs. While we are aware that this can generate a bias (for example, their desire to overestimate ownership), we are confident that focusing on ESOs was the most efficient strategy in such an exploratory study as ours. The reason is that the function of ESOs within the Commission has been precisely created to enhance the visibility of the Semester within national arenas and intensify the relations between the Brussels executive and national political and administrative apparatus and 'stakeholders'. They have indeed proven to be key actors and important providers of information in relation to ownership.

First, we conducted a round of 22 semi-structured interviews with key EU and national officials involved in the operation of the Semester. For feasibility reasons, we limited ourselves to three countries of the EU Western 'core', namely Belgium, France, and the Netherlands. These countries have advantages in their contrasts and similarities. Regarding similarities, they all belong to the Western 'core' of founding states. They have not been subjected to Memoranda of Understanding or other financial assistance programmes. This, we believe, helps us to capture the 'routine' functioning of the Semester immune from dramatic economic or political circumstances. At the same time, these three countries have found themselves in different situations regarding their deficit and debt levels and thus subjection to excessive deficit procedure. Moreover, the three countries present highly contrasting political systems and administrative cultures ranging from centralization to stark decentralization. They also have different industrial relations traditions and organizational patterns. The questions we asked related mainly to the interviewee's role, the operation of the Semester and, crucially, to relations with the other actors involved. We expected the patterns of the respective network to reflect the above-mentioned differences.

Second, we used these 22 interviews to identify the network of actors involved in the European Semester in Belgium, France, and the Netherlands. The networks were generated on the basis of questions on the frequency of meetings between various actors. We coded 0 for no meetings/relationship, 1 for relatively infrequent (less than four times per Semester cycle) and 2 for relatively frequent interactions (more than four meetings per Semester cycle). Network diagrams were created using Visone v.2.17, while network metrics (degree of centrality and brokering score) were calculated using Ucinet 6 (Borgatti et al. 2002). This way, we are able to provide preliminary insights about the centrality of the various actors as well as the strength of their ties with other members of the network.

Finally, since our network analysis confirmed the pivotal role of ESOs, our final step was to conduct an email survey targeting all ESOs (42) based in the Representations of the Commission, asking them questions about their activities in relation to the notion of ownership. The questions concentrate on definitions of ownership, and the extent to which various types of actors are involved in the Semester in the country in which they are posted.

4 | THE NETWORKS OF THE EUROPEAN SEMESTER IN BELGIUM, FRANCE AND THE NETHERLANDS

In this first empirical section, we compare the structure of the networks of the European Semester in Belgium, France and the Netherlands. For each country, we combine a visual interpretation of each network with an analysis using two individual measures: degree of centrality and brokerage scores. Degree of centrality is a measure of how many ties a node has in the network (Borgatti et al. 2013, p. 176), whereas the brokerage score used here measures every

instance where a given node is brokering a relation between nodes of two different groups, that is, the EU-level actors and the national actors. We argue that these two measures, although imperfect, provide a good proxy for assessing the importance of actors in the network. Where relevant, we complete the analysis with insights from the interviews.

4.1 | Belgium

A first observation to make about the Belgian network is the apparent density of relationships between the Commission services and the national administration (see Figure 1). Although the network visualizations do not show cross-country differences in that regard, some of our interviewees pointed out that the geographical proximity and the appeased relationship with the EU facilitate regular and direct contacts between both levels (Interviews 1 and 17). While the ESOs play an important brokering role between the national and the EU-level groups (highest brokerage score), administrations on both sides are also directly related. These contacts, as is the case between officials from DG EMPL and their national counterparts, sometimes follow deep-rooted channels of communication that were already used in the framework of the Structural Fund programmes (Interview 21). The same goes for our

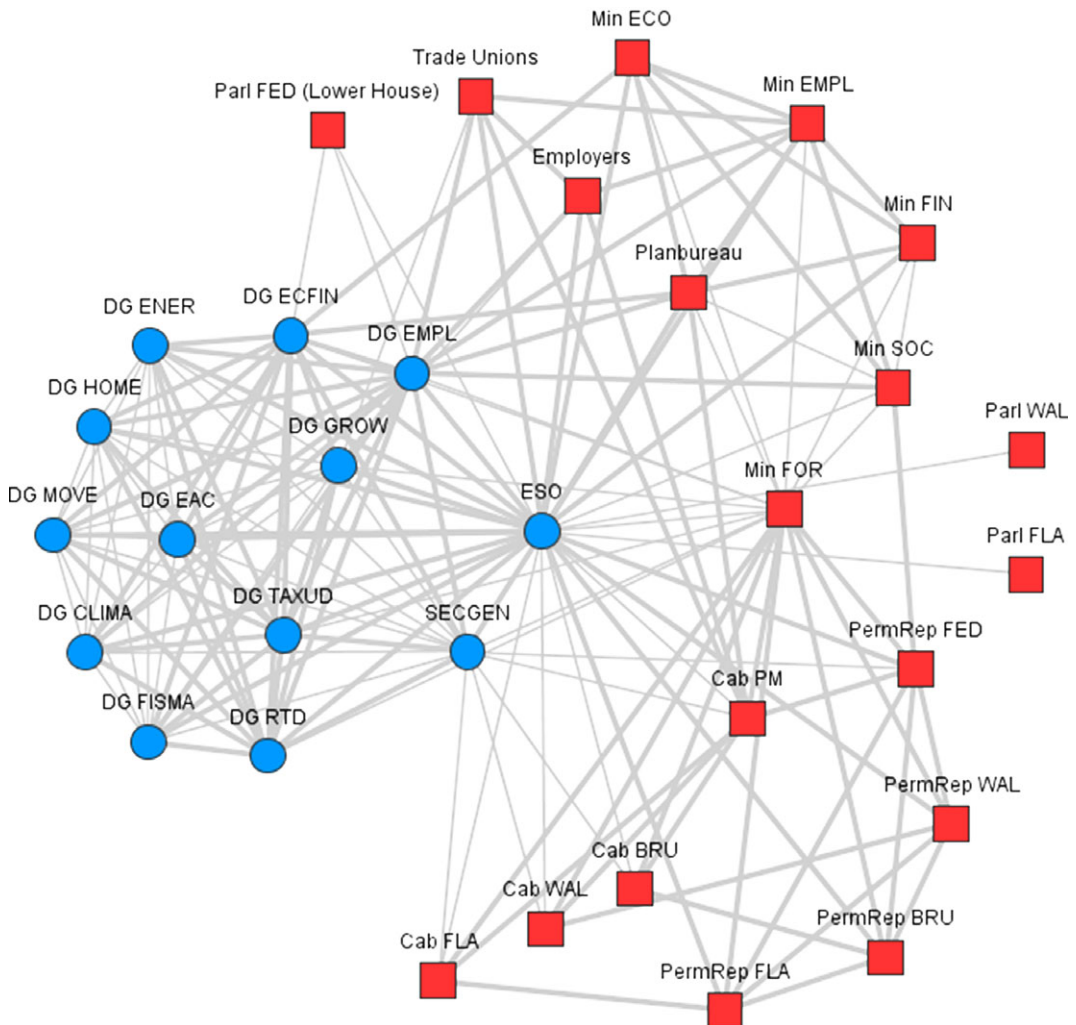


FIGURE 1 Network of the European Semester in Belgium

interviewees in the Directorate-General for Economic and Financial Affairs who are regularly in touch with Belgian experts from the *Federal Planbureau* and the National Bank. These contacts are all the easier to maintain since some of our interviewees at the Commission began their career in these institutions (Interviews 1 and 22).

Another particular feature of the Belgian network is the presence of regional actors: the Flemish Region (FLA), the Walloon Region (WAL) and the Region of Brussels-Capital (BRU). Interestingly, there seems to be an asymmetric involvement of the regional parliaments in the Semester. In contrast with the Parliament of the Flemish Region, which very soon realized its interest in getting involved in the Semester, the first invitation of a Commission delegation to the Parliament of the Walloon Region only goes back to 2016 (Interview 17). As for the Region of Brussels-Capital, our interviewees did not mention any official meeting between the Commission and the regional parliament. In these two regions, the Semester appears to be owned primarily by ministerial cabinets. Overall, ministerial cabinets have a strong presence in the network. In particular, the cabinet of the Prime Minister has an important steering role in the national dimension of the Semester. The process of drafting the National Reform Programme (NRP), that is, the response to the Commission's analysis in the Country Report, is a two-step process where the administration provides technical input and the PM cabinet has the final word (Interview 1). The cabinets' chiefs of staff (or their deputy for what concerns the regions) are, moreover, always present during the bilateral meetings between the Commission and the Belgian authorities organized at the political level. As confirmed by its relatively important degree of centrality and brokerage score compared to other national actors, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Min FOR), and especially the so-called 'DG E', also has an important coordinating role in the European Semester, just as in other areas related to the EU. It strives to get all the state actors involved in Belgium around the table several times a year. Finally, the social partners were quick to integrate the procedures of the Semester, and continued to get involved in EU economic policy coordination in the same way as they did in the framework of the Lisbon Strategy. ESOs, along with officials from the DGs, have regular contact with them and are generally invited before the *Conseil Central de l'Economie* (Central Economic Council) and the *Conseil National du Travail* (National Labour Council) to present the main documents published in the Semester.

4.2 | France

The French network (see Figure 2) shows relative similarity with the Belgian case. The most central actors as reflected by their degree of centrality are the ESOs and the *Secrétariat Général aux Affaires Européennes* (SGAE), which coordinates all ministries on EU policies. The latter also show the highest overall brokerage scores, meaning that they together constitute a central cluster located between the national and the European parts of the network. According to all officials interviewed, the Semester has become very structuring of the daily work of the French administration (Interviews 7, 8, 9 and 10). Detailed issues can be discussed notably during technical bilateral meetings, which involve several DGs of the Commission. The Semester generates a lot of informal contacts, exchange of information and written documents and is perceived as time-consuming. This is all the more true since France is subjected to an 'in-depth review' in the framework of the Macroeconomic Imbalance Procedure, which implies that more meetings between the Commission and the French administration take place. From the point of view of the Commission, the main partners are the SGAE and the Treasury Directorate-General within the Ministry of Finance (*Trésor*), a department which has been traditionally powerful and key in dealing with EU matters, is the best endowed French Department with staff dedicated to EU policy-making, and has its own relations with particular Commission DGs (Interviews 8, 9, 11 and 12). In contrast, the Ministry for Health and Social Affairs operates only via the SGAE and the Council committees (Interview 10).

Encouraging ownership among actors beyond government bureaucracy is the task of both the ESO and the SGAE, especially in the winter when the NRP is being prepared and coordinated by the latter. This generates a number of consultations, which should shape this document (Interview 9). As displayed in the network visualization, employers and unions, as well as both chambers of the parliament, are also part of the network, although they seem more peripheral (lowest degree of centrality) and have weaker ties, mainly to the SGAE and the ESO. The tasks of

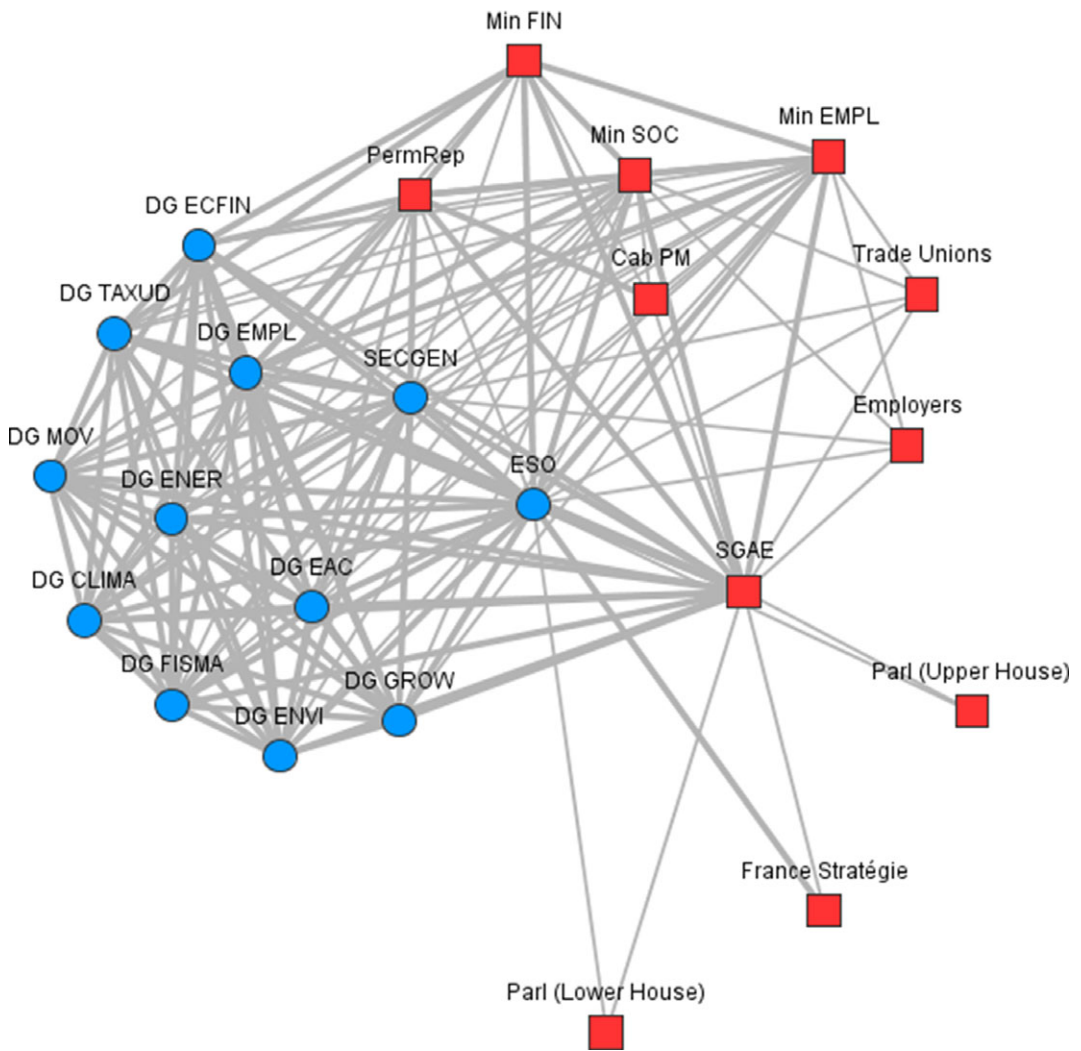


FIGURE 2 Network of the European Semester in France

the SGAE have thus been extended beyond inter-ministry coordination to acting as a facilitator of the contacts between the ESO and various French stakeholders. Beyond the parliament and the social partners, other stakeholders consulted include the French Economic and Social Committee, the *Comité de lutte contre l'exclusion*, the coordination of unions towards ministries responsible for social policies and various organizations representing subnational territories such as communes and regions. They are all asked to conduct an internal consultation and issue position papers on the future NRP. Regarding parliament chambers, they have been more recently involved in the process, just as in other countries, following the initiation of the yearly 'Semester visits' which involve high-level visits of one or several Commissioners to the *Assemblée nationale* and the *Sénat*.

4.3 | The Netherlands

The Dutch case (Figure 3) contrasts with the two previous countries, particularly when it comes to direct and informal contacts between the national and European groups of actors in the network. Except during the fact-finding missions and bilateral political meetings, Dutch and EU officials do not seem to be regularly in direct contact. However,

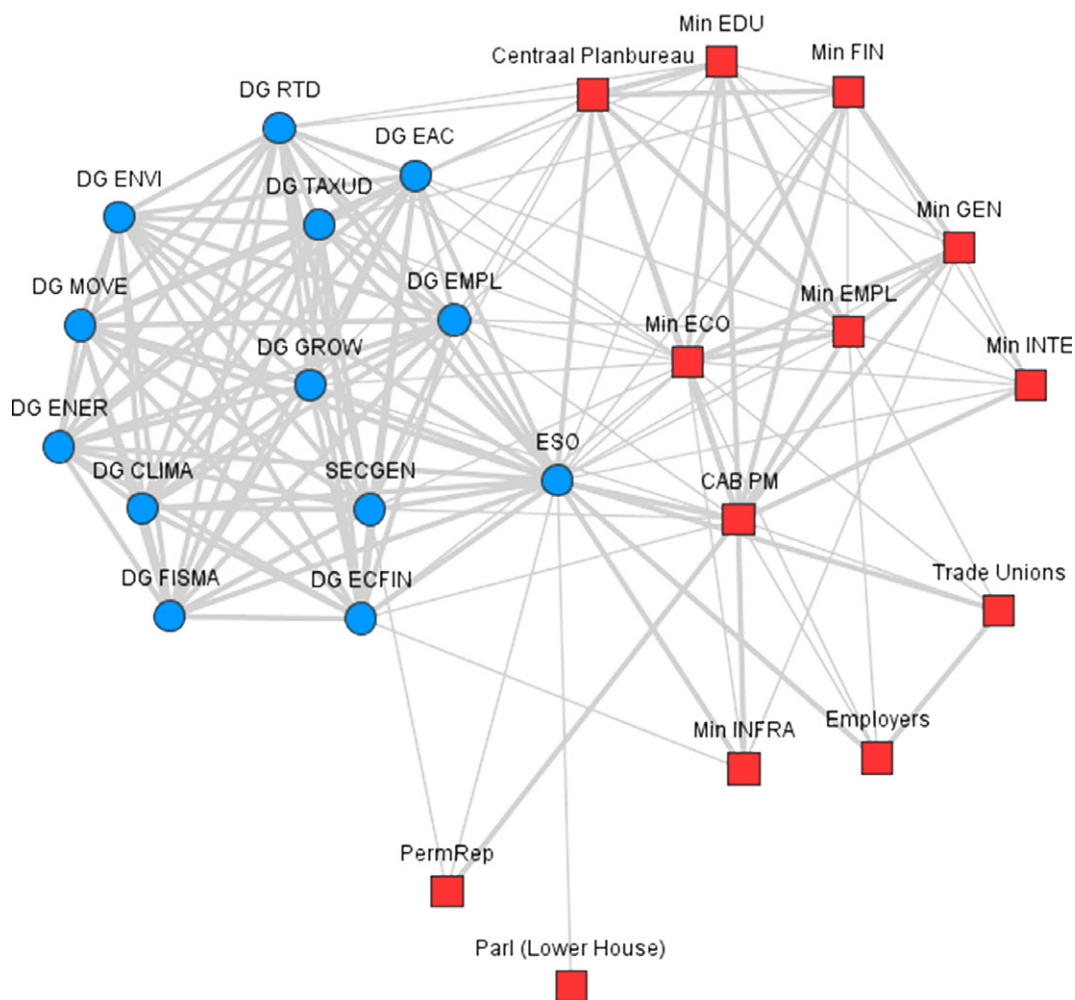


FIGURE 3 Network of the European Semester in the Netherlands

there may be circumstances when the Commission requires additional information, for instance during the elaboration of the Country Report, and therefore contacts national civil servants directly (Interviews 5 and 6). According to our interviewees, these demands mainly come from the EU level, not the other way around. From our interviews, it also appears that the Permanent Representation plays a relatively limited role in the Semester, mainly because the preparatory work for the Council committees involved in the Semester is handled by the Ministries. In the Dutch case, the Semester is primarily handled at national level by the services of the Ministry of Economic Affairs, under the oversight of the Cabinet of the PM. The importance of these two actors in the network is well reflected by their higher degree of centrality and brokerage scores. In practice, the Ministry of Economic Affairs coordinates the elaboration of the NRP with the other ministries and the *Centraal Planbureau*. Once a month they meet with the 'core group' of ministries that have a stake in the Semester: the Ministry of Economic Affairs, the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of General Affairs (PM administration), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Ministry of Social Affairs. On the EU side, the ESO is once again characterized by the highest degree of centrality, followed by the core DGs.

As for social partners, they are also consulted and informed by the ESOs on a regular basis. The ESOs, sometimes accompanied by colleagues from Brussels, usually present the Annual Growth Survey, the Country Report, and the proposals of CSRs before the *Sociaal-Economische Raad* (Socioeconomic Council) where social partners are gathered

to discuss socioeconomic priorities in the country and provide the government with consultative input. Similarly to Belgium, this Council's participation in national economic policy-making is well institutionalized, and its interest in EU policy coordination goes back to the Lisbon Strategy. For instance, it is a tradition that social partners along with civil servants from the relevant ministries gather in March to discuss economic priorities following the Semester (Interviews 5 and 6). Finally, regarding the relations between the EU and the national parliament in the framework of the Semester, they seem to be limited to a few presentations by the Head of the Commission Representation in The Hague before the *Tweede Kamer* at crucial moments in the Semester, as well as to the yearly visit by a Commissioner. In the past, there used to be a member of the parliament who assumed the responsibility of 'rapporteur' for the European Semester, who also acted as a point of contact for other members of the network. Interestingly, it seems that this position no longer exists today, which might point to the fact that the interest of parliamentarians in the Semester is decreasing. Overall, one of our interviewees pointed to the negative attitude of the Dutch towards the EU, and the European Semester in particular. According to one ESO, the European Semester is not very 'catchy' in the Netherlands (Interview 19), meaning that national political actors in general do not show much interest in the process. This disinterest could have been reinforced by the closing of the excessive deficit procedure.

All in all, the three networks show broad similarities regarding the centrality of the key actors involved in the workings of the European Semester, namely the prime minister and cabinet, the key ministerial resorts, the permanent representation to the EU, with the ESO playing the role of interface between those and the Commission's General Secretariat and key DGs. This indicates that the European Semester has become a relatively standard process. As expected, though, our exploration also reflects a number of national political and administrative peculiarities. For example, the pattern of interactions is more centralized via the SGAE in France, whereas in Belgium it is more decentralized and multidirectional due to the consociational nature of the country's institutions. At the same time, due to France's continuous submission to the excessive deficit procedure, interactions between the SGAE and the Ministry of Finance (and more specifically its powerful Directorate-General of the *Tresor*) prove quite dense. In the Netherlands and Belgium, the Economic and Social Committee, gathering together the social partners, plays a more prominent role. However, unlike their Dutch counterparts, the Belgian unions interact frequently and directly with key Commission services due to their proximity and traditionally important involvement in EU matters.

5 | INSTITUTIONAL, POLITICAL AND COGNITIVE OWNERSHIP IN THE EUROPEAN SEMESTER

As a next analytical step, we draw on a survey targeting all ESOs (42) in which we asked them questions about the involvement of four types of actors in the Semester: national governments (including cabinets), national administrations, parliaments, and social partners. While we cannot guarantee that two ESOs from the same country did not reply to the questionnaire, we are confident that, with 22 answers, the large majority of the 28 member states are covered. Although caution is warranted in the interpretation in view of the relatively low response rate to the questionnaire,¹ our survey sheds lights on several interesting elements.

As a reminder, we have conceived of ownership in the Semester as a three-dimensional concept referring to the control (institutional ownership), the acceptance (political ownership) and the awareness and internalization of the process (cognitive ownership) by national actors. Although not central to our analysis, we first asked the ESOs to indicate their preference for one definition of ownership among four, which were all pointing towards one of the three dimensions of the notion we identified. This was done to give us insight into how the notion was viewed by EU officials themselves. Interestingly, over half of the ESOs opted for the definition referring to the weaker form of

¹This low response rate can be explained by the fact that most teams of ESOs within the Commission Representations only filled out one questionnaire per country. Another explanation might also be that the questionnaire was first sent in late May 2017, which coincided with the holding of the annual ESO review in Brussels, for which ESOs also had to respond to a questionnaire on their activities for DG COMM.

TABLE 1 Indexes of ownership in the European Semester (%)

	Institutional ownership	Political ownership	Cognitive ownership
Government	.81	.79	.90
National parliament	.47	.64	.68
Administration	.85	.75	.86
Trade unions	.75	.61	.90
Employers	.76	.81	.90

Note: For each actor, we assigned values to the answers to the survey questions. We then summed these values, and calculated their average by dividing them by the number of questions used for each actor. Finally, for the sake of comparison, we transformed these averages into a number between zero and 1: zero means no ownership at all, whereas 1 indicates full ownership.

ownership, which is the cognitive one. By contrast, only four of them chose the 'institutional' definition, and the rest chose the 'political' definition.

That being said, the bulk of our explanatory analysis centres on the extent to which our three varieties of ownership manifest themselves in the Semester. In order to explore this issue, we computed indexes for each type of actor in our three dimensions, based on the ESOs' answers to our questionnaire. Although the sparsity of data requires caution in the interpretation, the overall scores displayed in Table 1 give interesting clues as regards ownership in the Semester.

A first point to make relates to the limited role of national parliaments in 'owning' the Semester. In line with what has been said in the literature (Auel and Höing 2015; Kreiling 2016), national parliaments seem to fall short of exerting real control over the process, when compared to other actors. Although ESOs along with officials from the core DGs are regularly invited by committees of national parliaments to present the Annual Growth Survey, the Country Report, or the CSRs (or any combination thereof), the upstream contribution of parliamentarians to these documents remains limited. Likewise, national parliaments rarely participate in the drafting process of the NRP, which remains largely in the hands of the government and its administration. However, whereas institutional ownership by the national parliaments seems low, meetings organized with the EU administration as well as the newly introduced 'Semester visits' from Commissioners have raised the cognitive ownership of the process among members of national parliaments. Finally, members of national parliaments seem also more likely to disagree with the output of the Semester, thus showing a lesser degree of political ownership than do other actors. This supports the view that the role of national parliaments as drivers of politicization of the Semester remains weak.

By contrast, ownership seems to be located primarily in governments and their administration. Not only can we assume that they show a greater degree of cognitive ownership due to the higher density of their interactions with the EU level, but also, more importantly, they seem to exert greater influence on the output of the Semester, that is, the Country Report and the CSRs. This is especially the case during the analytical phase of the Semester, when the Commission services gather expertise from the national administration to ensure the accuracy of their analysis (Interview 17). Two to four times a cycle, 'fact-finding' missions are organized, during which national civil servants reply to questions submitted in advance by Commission officials on technical matters. Because this field expertise is highly valued by Commission services, it can have an important impact on the Country Report (Interviews 7 and 15). However, institutional ownership is restricted by the limited ability to directly influence, or even amend, the proposals for CSRs in the Council, partly due to the prevailing voting system of the reverse qualified majority and the 'comply or explain' principle (Interview 7). It can nevertheless happen that institutional ownership is exerted through pressures occurring at the political level via contacts between national ministers' cabinets and Commissioners' cabinets (Interviews 9 and 11).

Yet, in most cases governments and their administration appear to retain full control over the national phase of the Semester, including the drafting process of NRPs, which explains their higher score on institutional ownership. Finally, whereas political ownership shows high values in the table for these actors, we observed some differences as

to how different administrations and governments perceive the output of the Semester. We can assume that political ownership over the process varies depending on the political colour of the governing majority/party and the administration. While political ownership of the government itself can be high, it is bound to the 'political costs' associated with the reforms which a given government has to bear. Thus, disagreement can arise over the implementation of reforms and their effects (Interviews 8 and 10).

Regarding ownership by the social partners, the picture is mixed. According to our survey and some of our interviewees, their knowledge on the ground is appreciated and often taken on board by the Commission. Their contacts with the EU level can take multiple forms: 'fact-finding' missions, presentations by the ESOs, or even political visits from a Commissioner. Their ability to shape the outcomes of the Semester generally stops at the analytical level, though. When the proposals for CSRs are prepared and then published, their institutional ownership is limited to a right of information that is top-down communication. At the national level, their involvement is dependent upon the existing traditions of industrial relations in the countries. However, our survey reveals that in a broad majority of cases, social partners are able to send their contribution to the government during the drafting process of the NRP (less often for the Stability Programme, though). Yet, it remains to be seen whether this contribution really feeds into the substance of the NRP (Sabato et al. 2017).

In addition, our interviews provided hints that, while formal meetings take place in an equal way with all social partners, informal contacts tend to be more intense with employers' representatives and those—'reformist'—unions who share the views and reform proposals promoted in the ES (Interview 11). In this regard, our survey also reveals that trade unions and employers' organizations do not show similar levels of political ownership in the Semester. While the former are generally more critical of the Commission's assessments, the latter are more likely to be in agreement with it. Finally, one can deduce from their numerous meetings with the EU officials that social partners must have a relatively good cognitive ownership of the Semester.

6 | CONCLUSION

This article has focused on the rise of ownership in EU socioeconomic governance. While the notion is well known by scholars of global governance, and it has been politically invoked by the Commission since 2015, it remains barely investigated by students of the EU. The literature on global governance stresses that ownership will enhance the acceptance and implementation of policy processes initiated from outside the domestic realm. Research in public administration provides insights on how a European administrative space is progressively emerging through the role of highly involved bureaucrats who are forming new networks and policy communities. Existing work on socioeconomic governance in the EU helps to understand why more ownership is needed to tackle the lack of legitimacy of the Semester in its input, output, and throughput dimensions.

Drawing from these three strands of scholarship, we have put forward a threefold conceptualization of ownership. Institutional ownership refers to the capacity of a certain actor to control the process and shape its outputs. Political ownership means that national actors accept and agree with the policy objectives promoted in the framework of the Semester and thus are more proactive in fostering implementation. Cognitive ownership is a thinner type whereby actors are aware of the Semester, know how it works, and have integrated it into their daily routine. Pursuing an essentially exploratory goal, we have used a variety of data and methods, namely interviews, network analysis and a survey, to investigate these three forms of ownership.

Our findings seem to indicate that national administrations have important institutional ownership of the European Semester on two levels. First, they provide valuable expertise for the Commission services, especially during the phase when the Commission produces its country-specific analysis. Many of the officials we interviewed stressed that the Semester is not a *deus ex machina*. In fact, the CSRs rarely come as a surprise, because their rationale is discussed at length between the Commission and the government cabinets and departments before their publication. However, these discussions seem more akin to a bureaucratic exercise, where disagreements arise over

analyses rather than fundamental political orientations. Cooperative discussions therefore tend to focus on the most relevant expertise rather than on political disagreements. The picture is more mixed about actors outside the state bureaucracy. While a vast body of literature has emerged about the role of national parliaments in EU governance, we see that their level of ownership of the Semester remains weak. While the—unequally strong—corporatist traditions across Europe are still a fertile ground for the involvement of social partners, cognitive ownership prevails. Moreover, institutional and political ownership seem stronger among employers than unions. Arguably, these findings show that the idea of ownership is mainly an instrument used to address the output and throughput legitimacy issues of EU socioeconomic governance, namely the efficacy of its daily functioning and its efficiency in terms of implementation of the CSRs. The institutionalization of procedures for making the empowerment of national political and social actors beyond state bureaucracy effective remains rudimentary.

Thus, the Semester appears to be mainly a bureaucratic process for coordinating reforms and contributing to strengthening the emerging European administrative space, rather than an institutional framework for solving the potential contention over political issues such as the need and modalities of fiscal discipline, or the nature of structural reforms needed in various countries, and the extent to which the said reforms are efficient for achieving certain objectives, especially stimulating growth through investment and tackling rising inequalities. These conclusions open fascinating avenues for future research on socioeconomic governance in the EU. As far as the Semester itself is concerned, future studies could focus on the unequal levels and modalities of ownership in various domestic areas and the explanations thereof. Another question pertains to the relationship between the different types of ownership we have identified. For example, does a higher level of political ownership necessarily mean a greater capacity to shape the Semester (institutional capacity)? Or, on the contrary, are actors and governments who disagree with the Commission's analysis most able to raise their voice and obtain changes in the type of reforms deemed appropriate? Is this a matter of political and administrative resources? Finally, if we admit that the Semester is mostly a bureaucratic process for administrative steering and coordination of reforms, this raises the questions as to where the 'real' political power is located in the architecture of the EU and where proper confrontations, if any, over the nature of policies take place.

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LIST OF INTERVIEWS

1. Belgium 1: Bureau fédéral du Plan, Brussels, February 2016
2. Belgium 2: Service public fédéral Emploi, Brussels, March 2016
3. Belgium 3 & 4: Service public fédéral Sécurité sociale, Brussels, March 2016
4. Belgium 5: Conseil central de l'économie, Brussels, March 2016
5. Netherlands 1: Ministerie van Economische Zaken, The Hague, March 2016
6. Netherlands 2: Ministerie van Economische Zaken, The Hague, March 2016
7. France 1: Permanent Representation, Brussels, February 2016
8. France 2: Secrétariat général des affaires européennes, Paris, February 2016
9. France 3: Ministère des Finances et des Comptes publics, Paris, February 2016
10. France 4: Ministère des Affaires sociales et de la santé, Paris, February 2016
11. EU 1: European Commission, Secretariat-General, Brussels, February 2016
12. EU 2: European Commission, European Semester Officer, Paris, February 2016
13. EU 3 & 4: European Commission, DG ECFIN, Brussels, March 2016
14. EU 5: European Commission, DG EMPL, Brussels, March 2016
15. EU 6: European Commission, Secretariat-General, Brussels, March 2016
16. EU 7: European Commission, European Semester Officer, London, March 2016
17. EU 8: European Commission, European Semester Officer, Brussels, February 2016
18. EU 9: European Commission, European Semester Officer, Brussels, February 2016
19. EU 10: European Commission, European Semester Officer, Brussels, February 2016
20. EU 11 & 12 : European Commission, DG EMPL, Brussels, March 2016
21. EU 13 & 14: European Commission, DG EMPL, Brussels, August 2015
22. EU 15 : European Commission, DG ECFIN, Brussels, July 2015

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