Flanders and the European Semester.
A regional perspective

ECPR TRENTO: first draft (10/06/2016) – please do not cite or circulate

Joeri De Blauwer
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

0. Introduction .................................................................................................................. 3

1. THE EUROPEAN SEMESTER (ES) .................................................................................. 3
   1.1 Governance in the context of the ES ......................................................................... 3
   1.2 A dynamic ES ........................................................................................................... 4
       1.2.1 The 2010-2014 time period ............................................................................. 4
       1.2.2 The Juncker Commission ................................................................................. 4

2. Political-institutional context in Belgium and Flanders ..................................................... 6

3. Theoretical considerations ............................................................................................... 7
   3.1 Intra-state and extra-state route ................................................................................ 7
   3.2 Impact of the ES on Flanders and the Federal-Flemish interplay ................................. 9
   3.3 (Regional) governance within the context of the ES ................................................ 12
   3.4 Conclusions ............................................................................................................. 15

4. Governance of Flanders within the context of the ES ....................................................... 15
   4.1 The 2010-2014 time period ..................................................................................... 15
   4.2 The 2014 transition year: towards a strengthened embedding of the ES within the Flemish Government and Flanders .................................................................. 17
       4.2.1 The 2014-2019 Flemish coalition agreement ..................................................... 17
       4.2.2 The midterm review of the Europe 2020 strategy ............................................. 18
       4.2.3 Enhanced semester governance within the Flemish administration .................. 19
       4.2.4 A more effective FRP ...................................................................................... 21
       4.2.5 The extra-state route ....................................................................................... 25
       4.2.6 Heightened focus on the ES ............................................................................ 26
   4.3 Challenges .............................................................................................................. 27

5. The ES interplay between the Federal Government and the C&Rs .................................... 29
   5.1 From source to estuary: a look back on five years of interfederal ES interplay ............ 29
       5.1.1 DGE .............................................................................................................. 29
       5.1.2 The Drafting Committee and the Policy Monitoring Committee (PBC) ............. 30
       5.1.3 Inter-cabinet working groups on the SP ........................................................... 39
       5.1.4 Other cooperation initiatives ............................................................................ 40
   5.2 Challenges .............................................................................................................. 42
       5.2.1 General .......................................................................................................... 42
       5.2.2 Specifically: amending the 1994 Cooperation Agreement .................................. 42

6. Conclusions .................................................................................................................... 46
0. Introduction

The aim of this paper is primarily to explain how Flanders as a federated state within Belgium deals with the European Semester from a practice-based perspective. The paper builds on two articles BONNE & DE BLAUWER (2012) and DE BLAUWER (2014) which were previously published in the Vlaams Tijdschrift voor Overheidsmanagement (Flemish Journal for Public Management) on the topic of the European Semester (including the Europe 2020 strategy).

This paper outlines how Flanders deals with the rising impact of the European Semester. In doing so, the paper focuses in particular on the governance set up within Flanders (both within and outside of the Government of Flanders), the cooperation mechanisms with the Federal Government and the consultation efforts in the broader sense with European institutions, committees and other relevant authorities and stakeholders. Both the time period 2010-2014 and 2015-2016 (streamlining of the European Semester) are discussed.

1. THE EUROPEAN SEMESTER (ES)

1.1 Governance in the context of the ES

The Europe 2020 strategy, which was designed in 2010, seeks to ensure smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. Five main objectives (employment, research and development, education, climate and energy, poverty and social exclusion) were laid down and underpinned by figures. These target levels were established at EU level, but the Member States (MSs) each separately set out their own target levels, as a move intended to enhance the sense of ownership of the strategy. In order to help achieve these objectives, a further seven key initiatives were launched at EU level. There are also 10 integrated guidelines. The Europe 2020 strategy is in keeping with the EU’s new economic governance model, with the ES - an annual economic policy coordination cycle – as its centrepiece. The economic downturn hit home the need for the EU and the MSs to align their economic policies and efforts to secure greater growth and employment. The ES has acted to strengthen the EU’s economic governance and has integrated various components of the economic and budgetary surveillance. In other words, the ES is where the Europe 2020 strategy and macroeconomic and budgetary surveillance join up.

The ES is kicked off in November of each year with the Annual Growth Survey (AGS), in which the EC sets out the EU priorities for economic growth and employment for the year ahead. In the Alert Mechanism Report (AMR), which is published at the same time as the AGS, the MSs are audited by the EC for macroeconomic imbalances. The EC delivers an opinion on the Draft Budgetary Plans (DBPs) of the MSs, which are also discussed by the euro area’s Ministers of Finance, to the effect that the budgets can subsequently be adopted by the MSs. Based on the AGS, the Spring Meeting of the European Council helps shape the tenor of the policy that is to be incorporated by the MSs in their National Reform Programmes (NRPs). In the spring, the EC also announces the results of the in-depth assessments as part of the macroeconomic imbalances procedure. In mid-April, the MSs must provide the EC with their stability and convergence programmes as well as their NRPs. These programmes are to be submitted simultaneously in order to ensure maximum consistency between the structural socioeconomic reforms (NRPs) and the budgetary component (SCPs (stability and convergence programmes)). In these NRPs, the MSs essentially set out which measures they will be putting in place to implement the CSRs and to achieve their Europe 2020 objectives.

Traditionally, the EC publishes its proposals for CSRs around late May/early June (period 2010-2014), which are then approved at the June meeting of the European Council before they are formally adopted by the Economic and Financial Affairs Council (ECOFIN) at the beginning of July. This formally concludes the ES. It is then for the MSs to roll out the relevant measures in implementation of these CSRs.
1.2. A dynamic ES

1.2.1. The 2010-2014 time period

Under the Cypriot Presidency (July–December 2012), the strengths and weaknesses of the ES 2012 were put under the magnifying glass. This was not entirely coincidental and came about, among other things, because a number of MSs, including Belgium, held out reservations as to the method adopted for preparing the CSRs (see 5.1.2.). In a synthesis report from the Presidency, four recommendations for the ES 2013 were put forward: ownership and implementation, a multilateral approach, a holistic approach and timing and procedures. In doing so, enhanced consultation between the EC and the MSs during the ES was deemed to be desirable, along with multilateral supervision by the committees involved in the ES, notably the Economic Policy Committee (EPC), the Economic and Financial Committee (EFC), the Employment Committee (EMCO) and the Social Protection Committee (SPC). Enhanced dialogue (three bilateral meetings) between the EC and the MSs clarified to the MSs the direction the EC has in mind in drafting the CSRs, enabling them to take this into account in their NRPs. The EC was also hoping to avoid unduly major changes being brought to the proposals for CSRs.

The EC expressly recognised the importance of the contribution from local and regional authorities (LRA’s) and stakeholders. In the EC’s interpretative document on the Europe 2020 strategy (March 2010), this was clearly set out. At the EC’s Europe 2020 web page too, emphatic reference is made to the role of the LRAs in the Europe 2020 strategy. In the guidelines provided by the EC each year in relation to the NRPs, the MSs were asked to include a chapter on ‘governance’ in their NRPs, relating to institutional issues and the participation of institutional actors (including LRAs) and stakeholders. The same message on the involvement of LRAs was also included in the EC Communication of 5/03/2014, which contained a status update with regard to the Europe 2020 strategy and which marks the start of the midterm review of the 2020 strategy.

In the aforesaid Communication, the EC refers to the fact that it has amplified its representations in the MSs in order to enhance contacts with the authorities and the stakeholders in the MSs. In the spring of 2013, ‘European Semester Officers’ (ESOs) were appointed for the various MSs. These policy experts who work for the EC are there to help clarify the economic governance to stakeholders, to gain a balanced perspective on the degree of congruence between the CSRs and the realities on the ground, and to cement collaboration with various levels of government and other stakeholders. For Belgium, among other things, the ESOs also maintain close contacts with the C&Rs (on a political and administrative level), thereby providing the EC with a fuller picture of the measures which the Federal Government and the C&Rs are putting in place as part of the ES.

The EC also deems it desirable for the CSRs to be broadly publicised and communicated in the MS and for a debate to take place on the subject. Since 2011, the EC Representation in Belgium has been organising annual clarification sessions (in June) to which the Federal Government, the regional authorities, representatives of community organisations and other parties are invited. Treated topics are the CSRs, the start of the ES, the publication of the country reports, et cetera.

1.2.2. The Juncker Commission

Under the Juncker Commission, the ES was redesigned and updated. For instance, from the 2015 ES onwards, detailed country reports (the integration of the staff working document and the in-dept review) are being published some 3 months ahead of the CSRs. The idea is to foster greater dialogue on these country reports between the EC and the MSs, but also for these country reports to be a topic of discussion within the MSs themselves. The 2016 ES continued to build on these innovations. One of the new elements in the streamlined ES was that the recommendations for the euro area from now on to be published at the start of the ES, as they are also relevant to the MSs as such, and accordingly are meant to result in the enhanced integration of the euro area dimension and the national dimension. The restyled ES also continued to focus on greater involvement of the parliamentary assemblies and the social partners at a European and national level. Another important element that was the strengthening of the political
dialogue between the EC and MSs. As regards Belgium there’s an annual meeting between a European Commissioner and several ministers of the federal government and the governments of the C&Rs. The EC also brought the boundaries into sharper focus by substantially driving down the number of recommendations and only tackling the important priority topics of macroeconomic and social relevance. Doing so allows for topics relating to energy, for instance, to be included as part of the governance that has been set up in relation to the Energy Union. The above elements also had an impact on the preparation of the Reform Programmes. The latter were required to set out a more significant ‘forward-looking dimension’, whereby the Reform Programmes would act in response to the country reports and would also include future policy initiatives. In addition, efforts needed to be brought to strengthen broad-based support by involving the social partners more closely in the preparation of the Reform Programmes. Other elements of the streamlined ES are the stronger focus on employment and social performance, promoting convergence by benchmarking and pursuing best practices, and the support to reforms from European Structural and Investment Funds and technical assistance.

Figure 1: Timeline of the ES 2016 (source: European Commission)

Another schematic representation shows the 3 components of the ES: the Europe 2020 strategy, macroeconomic surveillance and budgetary surveillance.

Figure 2: the ES (Source: EC)
2. Political-institutional context in Belgium and Flanders

In order to better put the impact of the ES on Belgium and Flanders into context, a brief description of the political-institutional context is needed.

As a result of five state reforms in the period between 1970 and 2003, Belgium evolved from a unitary state into a federal state, as is apparent from article 1 of the Belgian Constitution: "Belgium is a federal state, composed of the Communities and the Regions". The first line of importance in the context of the reform of the state relates to the Communities. The term "community" is in reference to the people who make up a community and the ties that bind these people, i.e. their shared language and culture. As a result of this, Belgium is home to three Communities: the Flemish Community, the French Community and the German-speaking Community. As such, these Communities accord with the sections of the population; community powers pertain to personal powers. The second line of the state reform was historically inspired by economic interests. There are three regions: the Flemish Region, the Brussels Capital Region and the Walloon Region. The regional powers pertain to local powers.

Belgium is marked by a centrifugal federalism: over the years, powers were increasingly devolved from the Federal state to the C&Rs. Since 1993, this process has continued unabated, with another - fifth – round of state reform following in 2001. However, it was the sixth state reform round (2012-2014) which transferred substantial clusters of powers to the Communities and the Regions. A second important characteristic is that Belgium has more of a dual federalism, whereby the C&Rs are entirely autonomous in respect of the powers they have. Consequently, their decrees promulgated by the C&Rs are not in any way subordinate to Federal statute laws. As such, the Communities have exclusive power when it comes to education. Nevertheless, various institutional mechanisms were put in place to enable the Federal Government and the Governments of the C&Rs to cooperate. Several of these cooperation mechanisms also have a major role within the context of the ES.

First and foremost, reference should be made to the Consultation Committee, the main inter-governmental consultative body. The Consultation Committee is the forum where conflicts of interest between the various governments are discussed. In addition, the Committee comes into play when conflicts of authority emerge. The Consultation Committee promotes mutual policy alignment, the finalising of major cooperation agreements, discussions on financial defrayals, the discussion of draft laws and regulations for which the special laws demand cooperation. The Consultation Committee is chaired by the Federal Prime Minister and is made up of Ministers from the Federal Government and the Governments of the C&Rs. It is constituted according to double parity: Dutch/French and Federal/Federated entities. The Government of Flanders is represented by the Minister-President and a Minister (usually a Vice-Minister-President), and accompanied by the competent Minister(s) as applicable.

The link with the ES is clear. As a result of the transposition of the Treaty on Stability, Coordination and Governance, it was decided that the stability programme (SP) should be brought before the Consultation Committee. Similarly, in 2015 and in 2016 the National Reform Programme (NRP) was submitted to the Consultation Committee.

Alongside the Consultation Committee, there are numerous interministerial conferences (such as the Interministerial Conference on Foreign Affairs for instance, see 5.2.2.) where sectoral consultations are held.

There is also the instrument of the cooperation agreement with a view to the joint exercise of powers (for instance where the division of power is intertwined). The cooperation agreements are therefore supplementary to the principle of the exclusive division of power. In order to be able to conduct a consistent policy in certain areas (employment, for instance), the Federal Government and the C&Rs may conclude mutual cooperation agreements. The fact that the Federal Government is qualified for wage formation, and - since the sixth state reform round - the Regions are qualified for labour market policy
(target groups, monitoring of job seekers, etc.), and the Communities for education, soon makes it clear that if efforts need to be put in place to achieve the Europe 2020 target on employment, for instance, cooperation between the different levels of government will prove necessary. In that case, specific components may be set out in a cooperation agreement.

The above division of power also comes with a number of major implications at international level. The ‘in foro interno, in foro externo’ principle means that the division of power in Belgium also extends to the area of foreign policy. In other words, Flanders is free to act at international level on all matters for which it is qualified internally. As a consequence Belgian R&Cs are via the permanent representation directly involved in the Council activities. The cooperation agreement allows all Belgian governments to co-decide on EU policies as well as to represent Belgium within the Council of the EU – an absolutely unique system in Europe.

Both the C&Rs have their own institutions. In Flanders, it was decided to amalgamate the Community and Regional institutions, to the effect that Flanders has one Flemish Parliament and one Government of Flanders, which are qualified to devise and implement policy for community as well as regional matters. Another important aspect is that both the federal Ministers and the Ministers of the C&Rs have ministers’ offices. This is also the case in Flanders. These ministers’ offices (‘cabinets’) work in support of the Ministers, and in Flanders among other things their duties are: (1) to deliver opinions on the policy areas for which the Minister is responsible and on those aspects of Government policy on which the Government decides as a collegiate body; (2) to deliver opinions on the substance of proposals from the administration in the area of policy support and the steering and follow-up of policy implementation; (3) to deliver opinions on matters that could have an impact on the general policy of the Government of Flanders or on the activities of the Flemish Parliament; (4) to operate as the Minister’s secretariat and (5) to handle the Minister’s press relations and act as the Minister’s spokesperson.

Another key feature of the Belgian situation is the fact that the major ‘traditional’ political families (Christian Democrats, Socialists, and Liberals) have no ‘national parties’. At most, they have an ideological ‘sister party’ on the other side of the linguistic border. The May 2014 elections rearranged things in such a way that the Federal Government, the Government of Flanders, the French Community and Walloon Regional Governments, and the Government of the Brussels Capital Region now have a different political composition. The May 2014 elections meant that the N-VA (Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie or New Flemish Alliance) became the largest political formation in Belgium, and took part in the Federal Government. In Flanders, Geert Bourgeois (N-VA) became the Minister-President of Flanders in a coalition government with the Flemish Christian Democrats and the Flemish Liberals. The government coalition agreement (2014-2019) of the Government of Flanders also had major implications for the policy areas of the Flemish administration, with efforts being made towards greater efficiency. In 2015, within the Flemish administration this would result in, among other things, the amalgamation of the policy areas ‘Services for the General Government Policy’ and ‘Public Governance’ policy areas into the ‘Public Governance and the Chancellery’ policy area.

The Department ‘Public Governance and the Chancellery’ of the Flemish administration supports the Minister-President in his general coordination duties within the context of the ES, both at Flemish level and in the area of the Flemish contribution to the Federal Government and the European Union (EU). The main thrusts of the Government of Flanders in respect of the ES are set out in the 2014-2019 Flemish government coalition agreement, the Flemish Minister-President’s 2014-2019 policy memorandum and the annual policy papers on general government policy.

3. Theoretical considerations
3.1. Intra-state and extra-state route
European policy was becoming increasingly more relevant to Flanders as the power of Flanders amplified over the course of the successive state reforms. As a result of the integration process the EU went through, powers were also increasingly being transferred from national to European policy level. The emergence of
the sub-national level with its own regulatory powers brought a new perspective of the concept of ‘European integration’. ELIAS put it as follows (2008:485): “Instead, an alternative conceptualization of European integration was proposed, whereby power and authority are dispersed gradually across multiple levels of governance, rather than being retained in, and monopolized by, sovereign state”. The layered nature of governance, which was the upshot of this transformation, was indicated by the term ‘multi-level governance’. According to AALBERTS (2004), states are merely one among many actors that have an impact on the decision-making process but they no longer by definition have the final say. In other words, power is distributed across European, national and sub-national authorities. According to BEYERS and KERREMANS (2011), the fact that actors who are involved in at least two policy processes, i.e. a domestic and a European policy process, and who consequently also have multiple channels of influence, is the basic principle of multi-level governance. Alongside this vertical layering of different levels of government, the governance (horizontal dimension) is also relevant. On this topic, BEYERS and KERREMANS (2001:104) posit that: “(...) policy not only comes into being as a result of the steering action of a central government, but equally through cooperative relations between a wide and diverse range of public and private actors”.

Because of the combination of these two developments –national decentralisation and European integration–the influence of European regulations on the national as well as the regional legal system increased systematically. In everyday practice, Flanders became increasingly exposed to decisions taken at EU level (such as the transposition of European guidelines into decrees). It followed that regions with legislative powers, such as Flanders, now had every interest in influencing European decisions at the earliest possible stage.

HOOGHE and KEATING (2006:271) posit: “European integration has further enhanced the importance of regions, in the political and economic domains, and produced a new dynamic.” Many authors (HOOGHE and MARKS 1996 and 2001, HOOGHE and KEATING 2006, TATHAM 2008, VAN DEN BRANDE, HAPPAERTS and BRUYNICKX 2009 and 2011) have endeavoured to bring the strategies into focus as adopted by regions in their bid to exert influence over the European decision-making process. According to TATHAM (2008) for instance, the regions have six channels available to them to defend their European interests: 1) the EC, 2) the Council of Ministers, 3) the Committee of the Regions (CoR), 4) the European Networks and Associations, 5) the European Parliament and 6) the Brussels-based regional offices. Moreover, regions are able to approach these channels directly or they can seek to exert influence through the national government as a ‘conduit’. VAN DEN BRANDE et al. (2009) state that regions can use mechanisms within their own country as well as mechanisms that circumvent their national governments (such as inter-subnational networks). KEATING and HOOGHE (2006) too indicate that regions can operate through their national governments and/or through direct routes to exert influence. Not only their finding (2006:274) that “there is not, nor can there be, a single mode of representation of ‘regional’ interests in the EU”, is important. Equally important is that (2006:283) “regions have continued to seek a role in Europe, but access and influence are unevenly distributed”. TATHAM (2008) posits that regions are better off combining the intra-state and the extra-state route to wield the utmost influence. Environment is a good example; it has long been a regional power with considerable set of EU regulations. Also in Belgium there is since 1995 a cooperation agreement on the European / international environmental policy.

The latter leads us to the conclusion that the classification put forward by TATHAM for instance, may be interesting as a general overview of the channels of influence which regions can resort to in the EU, but that for Flanders - as a region with a high degree of self-rule - the analysis framework provided by VAN DEN BRANDE, HAPPAERTS and BRUYNINCKX (2009, 2011) is a more appropriate choice. These authors put forward four routes which are open to regions to have an impact on the multilateral decision-making process (in the area of sustainable development). The routes are based on a dual distinction between the intra-state or extra-state route on one hand and the intra or extra-European route on the other. In which case the intra or extra dimension respectively relates to an indirect or a direct route to get involved in multilateral decision-making. As the multilateral dimension is irrelevant in the context of the ES, for the
purpose of this paper we will revert to the distinction between the *intra-state versus the extra-state route* to wield influence over the European decision-making process. BONNE and DE BLAUWER (2012) explained how Flanders is endeavouring to exert influence in a multi-level governance environment over the decision-making and implementation process of the Europe 2020 strategy, and is following an intra-state (contribution to the NRP and involvement in consultations with the EC, et cetera) as well as an extra-state route (providing the EC with the FRP, the proposals of the FRP within the CoR, et cetera).

### 3.2. Impact of the ES on Flanders and the Federal-Flemish interplay

As described under 1, the ES has a major impact. This impact can relate to the policy dimension (e.g. acting in response to the CSRs) as well as to the governance dimension (coordination within and between levels of government).

To date, studies on the impact of the ES on regional authorities are few and far between. Which is hardly surprising given the fact that the ES was launched as recently as 2010. BURSENS (2012) provides a good summary of the literature with respect to Europeanisation and sub-national authorities. With respect to the Europeanisation of sub-national authorities, he makes a distinction between policies, politics and polity. BURSENS (2012:399) posits: “The most important conclusion covering all dimensions of Europeanization is the limited and differential impact of European integration.” Within the context of this paper, the ‘politics’ and ‘polity’ dimension are very important. On this topic, BURSENS states (2012:399-400): “With respect to various aspects of the politics dimension, the EU seems to have a clear differential impact. Comparative analyses of national EU policy coordination mechanisms reveal an increased involvement of SNAs, with especially strong regions having been able to conquer an influential role in domestic EU policy formulation. In terms of EU impact on the internal relations between domestic policymaking actors, both a vertical and a horizontal effect can be discerned: both SNAs and private actors have become more involved in domestic politics. Many authors point out, however, that more involvement or participation does not necessarily mean increased impact or enhanced influence, the latter being only the case for regions that already had a strong position in the domestic constellation. A last aspect of the politics dimension points to cognitive learning process of SNAs: the literature describes several examples of regions and regional actors changing their preferences (cf. Belgium) or using the EU in a strategic way (cf. the UK).”

With respect to the polity dimension, BURSENS (2012:400) states that: “all empirical findings conclude that already strong regions seem to be even further empowered by the European context they operate in.”

With partial financial support from the Government of Flanders, the Steunpunt Bestuurlijke Organisatie – Slagkrachtige Overheid (Policy Research Centre – Governmental Organization – Decisive Governance), had a doctoral study carried out through MAES (2012 -2016), in which it probed the impact of Europe 2020 on regional governance structures. In this, the governance structures of Flanders in the areas of education, energy and poverty (three Europe 2020 objectives) were compared with Catalonia and Scotland. The choice made for those three regions was no coincidence, since in addition to Flanders also Scotland and Catalonia are regions with extensive legislative powers and are also committed to the Europe 2020-strategy. The three regions also obtained high scores with regard to institutionalized regional involvement in the domestic EU policy-shaping process (Tatham,2011). Additionally, there is also the fact that, as regards Scotland, like Flanders, it also draws up its own reform program and by doing so it contributes to the national reform program (NRP) of the United Kingdom. In the Scottish NRP the added value is explicitly mentioned30: “However, in order to highlight the unique characteristics of Scotland, and the distinct approach to Europe 2020 ambitions that we are taking forward within the UK, the Scottish Government is continuing to produce a Scotland-specific NRP. This approach, which has been welcomed by both stakeholders and the Commission, helps emphasise Scotland’s positive engagement with the European Union. It also provides a valuable opportunity to highlight particular areas where Scottish actions are making an important contribution to delivering the priorities of Europe 2020, and to share good practice with other EU countries.” Catalonia also has a program Catalonia 2020 Strategy (ECAT 2020)”31 that is closely linked to the Europe 2020 Strategy.
In its conclusions, MAES reported that the pressure from the EU has a big impact on the way in which regional governance structures (lead-organisation governed, shared participation governance, mixed network) are organised, but that this influence from the EU is only part of the story. MAES posits that this European pressure is mediated by the fact that regional powers and administrative capacity impact on the extent to which a governance structure is steered. For Flanders, MAES concludes (2016:115): “(...) that the administrative capacity to lend direct support to Europe 2020 in a policy area therefore increases as the regional powers over a field of policy increase. Because of this amplification in terms of powers as well as administrative capacity, the steering of the governance structures is strengthened and centralised. The more forceful steering of the governance structures also raises the level of support among the actors involved for the policy initiatives and policy coordination in pursuing the realisation of the Europe 2020 strategy. Here we are therefore faced with another causal relation. It is not the support that determines the type of network (as the hypothesis and the underlying literature would suggest), but rather the type of network and more specifically the way in which the policy is steered that impact the level of support for the policy measures. This causal chain again highlights the importance of the manner of steering to the performance of the policy.” The comparative analysis (with Catalonia and Scotland) failed to confirm this conclusion for Flanders, namely the link between the strength of a regional competence and the increasing administrative capacity for direct support of Europe 2020. MAES (2016:116): “Even though the extent to which Flanders is qualified for a policy area shows a link with the administrative capacity in that area, no such link could be corroborated for the Scottish and Catalan cases, as only one policy area was included in this study for both regions. In addition, the effect of the regional involvement with respect to European policy on the steering of governance structures with respect to Europe 2020 remains unclear. For one thing, the position Scotland and Catalonia find themselves in is not quite as strong as the position held by Flanders in determining national positions vis-à-vis European policy. Nonetheless, Scotland and Catalonia play a major role in the adoption of national positions and they are also pursuing greater involvement with respect to European policy. In order to further explore the role of the involvement of regions as an intervening factor in greater depth, it would be advisable for further research to be conducted which would also include regions that are not, or hardly, involved in the adoption of national positions.”

MAES’ study mainly related to the impact of Europe 2020 on regional governance structures. Looking at the impact of the EU on the governance mechanisms between federal governments and their intra-state regional governments, reference should be made to BEYERS and BURSENS (2013) who examined the impact of Europe on the design of the Belgian federation. In doing so, they found contrasting trends: increased cooperation (as a result of the institutional embedding of Belgium in the EU) and the erosion of the federation (as a result of economic integration). They reported that (2013:271): “(...) the EU clearly affects territorial politics in Belgium, but, as the European causes are multidimensional, that also the effects, albeit substantial, will be diverse.”

In their analysis of what they refer to as ‘political-bureaucratic intertwining’, BEYERS and BURSENS (2013) find that European integration encourages both the federal and regional level to set up cooperation mechanisms and that Europeanisation as such seems to be successful in mitigating the dual and competitive nature of Belgian federalism and in fostering gradual moves towards more collaborative forms of (in)formal governance. Looking at the ES, the authors posited (2013:286): “Hence, the more the EU raises its activity in the sphere of economic governance, the more pressure will be put on the different governance layers within Belgium to co-operate and co-ordinate in order to comply with EU requirements.”

A recent study by COLE, HARGUINDEGUY, PASQUIER and DE VISSCHER (2015) examined policy convergence and divergence in four European regions (Andalusia, Brittany, Wales and Wallonia) at a time of economic crisis and political decentralisation. One of their conclusions (2015:315) was that “Our survey of four European regions indicated a trend toward a harder, normative Europeanisation, tighter central control over budgetary settlements, and (in at least two of our cases) enhanced instruments of central steering.”
The increase of interdependence in federal relationships took place in the sense that in Belgium, Germany and Austria federal and federated orders become mutually dependent on each other’s resources in those domains of activity which were originally exercised exclusively by the federated entities.

The above studies not only show that the EU impacts on the policy of MSs, it also demonstrates that there is an influence on the creation of cooperation mechanisms between the Federal Government and the C&Rs. Within the context of the ES in a general sense and the Europe 2020 strategy in particular, it is only logical for the Federal Government and the C&Rs to be interconnected. For instance, with reference to the Europe 2020 educational objectives, it is the Communities that are qualified. To accomplish the other Europe 2020 objectives, measures by the Federal Government and the C&Rs are required. Beyers and Bursens (2013:286): “The European Semester requires member states to draft national reform plans discussing the policies they intend to implement in the area of labour market, innovation, research and social policies. Many of these areas belong partly or even exclusively to the realm of the regional level, therefore also triggering regional reform plans and, important for our argument, co-ordination of the reform plans between the regional and the federal level before they are sent to the Commission. Hence, the more the EU raises its activity in the sphere of economic governance, the more pressure will be put on the different governance layers within Belgium to co-operate and co-ordinate in order to comply with EU requirements.”

The fact that cooperation and consultation structures are put in place to properly streamline a number of things is in line with expectations. Yet, HAPPAERTS, SCHUNZ and BRUYNICKX (2011:1) state that the impact of the EU is not all-embracing: “In the complex Belgian setting, the EU is often the number one reason to bring the different governments around the same table. Intergovernmental relations on climate change policy in Belgium are triggered by formal requests by the EU to take a stance or deliver certain policy outputs on specific issues. Yet international requirements and deadlines are unable to break domestic gridlock due to political stalemates.” HAPPAERTS continues to build on this and posits (2015:13): “We studied the impact of the main characteristics of Belgian federalism – the exclusive division of competences, the principle of no hierarchy and the Europeanization of inter-governmental relations, as well as the various institutional mechanisms that have been set up as a consequence of these – on the climate policies of the subnational governments. In the analysis, the overall low political ambition for climate policy emerged as an intervening variable. It was found that the Belgian subnational governments cannot be considered as loci of bottom-up policy innovation. This is mainly due to a lack of political will for far-reaching measures to reduce GHG emissions, but it is strengthened by the characteristics of Belgian federalism, especially the principle of no hierarchy and the exclusive division of competences.” With regard to political will, HAPPAERTS posits (2015:13): “First, although it is not considered a political priority, climate change is a very sensitive political issue, also in Belgium. The reason is that it touches upon core issues such as the organization of the regional economy, the future of the industry, transport, energy, etc. In such domains very often ideological confrontations arise, for instance between centre-right and centre-left parties, and those can turn into intergovernmental conflicts when governments are ruled by asymmetrical coalitions. Negotiations on climate measures are then easily blocked before elections and during periods of coalition formation. The political sensitivity of climate change in Belgium is illustrated by the fact that the Deliberation Committee had to intervene to strike a deal in 2004, and by the fact that Europeanization pressures are not strong enough to push the governments towards an agreement.” With respect to multi-level governance, HAPPAERTS states (2005:13): “Second, the analysis confirmed the multi-level character of climate governance. But in that multi-level structure, this article only identified top-down dynamics. Action in Belgium is exclusively triggered by EU requirements, which follow from the global negotiations. Within Belgium, the subnational governments adopt a wait-and-see attitude. They take up a very defensive position vis-à-vis the commitments that come from higher levels of governance.”

In their study about the implementing CSRs in the MSs in the period 2011-2014, DEROOSE and GRIESE (2014:1) stated that the implementation: “(...) (i) was weaker for the 2013 vintage of recommendations than for the 2012 one; (ii) appears to vary with the electoral cycle in Member States; and (iii) is stronger in
policy areas where market pressure requires an imminent policy response (banking sector reform) and/or where the recommendations are backed by EU rules with enforcement powers (public finances).”

BURSENS, HIELSCHER, VAN KEULEN (2014:189-190): “We argued that the requirement to speak with one voice at the European level, and typical EU-features such as cross-sectoral policies, triggered a spill-over of consensus politics into EU policy coordination. (...) In addition, the enduring low level of attention for EU politics in Belgium and Luxemburg has facilitated consensus seeking practices by keeping administrative actors at the core of EU policymaking.” It is interesting to see that the authors also note that a number of European developments exist which act to somewhat moderate these consensus-seeking practices. One of these developments is to do with the time schedules adopted by the EU. The authors posit (2014:178): “The more the EU uses severe deadlines in more policy areas (e.g. the European semester), the more a broadly organized domestic consultation process comes under pressure.”

For another nuancing, reference is made to BEKKER (2013, 2014) who stated that stricter EU rules do not necessarily result in altered policy responses from the MSs. Based on the NRPs (2009 and 2011) of 4 MSs (Germany, Poland, Spain, United Kingdom), they found that, even though the CSRs were becoming more detailed, this additional refinement did not show up in the NRPs themselves. The MSs are therefore left with scope to respond to EU requests, as was the case when the main quantitative Europe 2020 objectives were established. In his study with regard the implementation of CSRs in Belgium, VANDEN BOSCH (2014:15) stated that: “The European Semester still resembles a bureaucratic exercise with little capacity to induce structural reforms at national level. If a country undertakes structural reform, this mostly stems from the willingness and capacity of that country to do so, rather than from any (non-binding) EU recommendation.”

BEKKER (2014:4) posits that the ES is still under development: “As such, it remains important to view the ES as a coordination process that is still in development and that may be adjusted to the particular situation within the EU and its separate member states.” VANHERCKE (2013) comments that, with respect to social policy, the decision-making process has become more mature within the context of the ES in recent years, with the policy instruments (multilateral supervision and monitoring) being tightened, although he goes on to say (2014:113): “Indeed, three years after its launch, Europe 2020 is by no means ‘set in stone’.”

3.3. (Regional) governance within the context of the ES

As reported above, the ES went through a considerable number of changes in recent years. Quite soon after the introduction of economic governance within the MSs, the inadequate degree of support for the ES gradually became clear. Various authors (HALLERBERG, MARINZOTTO, WOLF, 2011), (HÖING and NEUHOLD (2013)), (LARUFFA, 2014), pointed out the limited degree of involvement of the parliamentary assemblies. An analysis by the European Parliament concerning the involvement of the national Parliaments in the NRPs and the SCPs (2014-2015) concluded that32: “As regards to 2015 SCPs and NRPs, out of the 54 programmes, 27 make a reference to the involvement of national parliaments. In total, half of the programmes contain no reference at all concerning this subject. For 2014 a reference to the involvement of national parliaments is included to 28 programmes out of the 51. In total, 23 programmes contain no such reference.”

VANDEN BOSCH (2014: 14) referred to limited national ownership of the ES and stated: “Moreover, the sense of a lack of control, and the resulting limited national ownership is only further reinforced by the overall technocratic dimension of EU economic governance. The coordination process is indeed dominated by bodies that are essentially executive: the Commission and the Council, and more precisely their financial arm, the Directorate General for Economic and Financial Affairs and the ECOFIN Council. And despite the fact that the European Parliament was a co-legislator on the main regulations that reformed the economic governance (the Six-pack and Two-pack), its role in the European Semester is limited to an ‘economic dialogue’ that does not involve any decision-making powers. The technocratic flavour of the whole process certainly adds to the feeling that the EU recommendations are both illegitimate and biased.”
As part of the further ‘streamlining’ of the ES, under the Juncker Commission, the need to involve the parliamentary assemblies (European Parliament and national parliamentary assemblies) and the social partners much more closely, was also brought into focus. The Five Presidents Report on the completion of Europe’s Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) already highlighted key elements. These adaptations should be seen as an attempt to secure greater support for the ES and are seen as a forward step by a number of authors (COENEN, HERINGA, NGUYEN, WOLF) (2015).

The same critical observation was made by other authors such as BUDD (2013), RENDA and the European Parliament in respect of the involvement of regional and local authorities in the context of the Europe 2020 strategy. BUDD (2013:276) stated: “The essential problem is that the lack of an explicitly regional dimension to Europe 2020 may constrain the achievement of its three priorities. The role of regional intermediaries then becomes one of the crucial agencies in delivering its priorities.”

As part of the midterm review of the Europe 2020 strategy, RENDA brought numerous shortcomings to light. One of these shortcomings had to do with the poor degree of ownership of the strategy within the MSs. With regard to the 2020 strategy, RENDA found an inadequate degree of ownership among LRAs and stated that (2014:13): “The limited ambition of the strategy today (in stark contrast to the resounding statements of 2010) is easily observed: in the current debate, the fact that Europe 2020 was adopted as a “reference framework” by some regional governments when deciding how to design their annual reform plans and how to spend EU cohesion funds was hailed as a success.” He proposed a number of tracks to turn the Europe 2020 strategy into a success, whereby the involvement of regional and local actors was a factor of importance: “The content of the strategy should be revised to include initiatives on infrastructure, the internal market and administrative capacity at all levels of government.” With regard to the involvement of local and regional authorities, among other things he stated that (2014:1): “(...) Member states should break down the objectives at the sub-national level and coordinate regional reform plans (where appropriate).”

The European Parliament, too, attached increasing importance to the ES. In its resolution of 28/10/2015 on cohesion policy and the revision of the Europe 2020 strategy, the European Parliament stated: “Recalls that, in accordance with Member States’ institutional and legal frameworks, regional and local authorities are also responsible for public investment and should therefore be acknowledged as key actors in the implementation of the strategy;” (…) “Suggests, moreover, that the commitment by LRAs and stakeholders in the Europe 2020 strategy project should be renewed in the form of a pact between those partners, the Member States and the Commission, in order to ensure ownership and participation and that a code of conduct similar to the one on partnership, introduced by cohesion policy 2014-2020, should be adopted (…) takes the view, moreover, that tailor-made Europe 2020 voluntary regional targets should be possible and should be discussed at regional level without adding to the bureaucratic burden on the ground; stresses that such tailor-made voluntary regional targets should be consistent with the strategy’s overarching architecture and be comprised within the pre-defined targets (…)”.

Even the EC, in its Communication (March 2014), on the midterm review of the Europe 2020 strategy, was of the opinion that the involvement of cities and regions in the Europe 2020 strategy is important: “Experience has also shown that the active engagement and participation of regions and cities – which are responsible for delivering many EU policies – has been crucial in pursuit of Europe 2020 objectives.”. It was therefore no coincidence that this was one of the outcomes of the enquiry, referring to the fact that: “There is scope and a need to improve the delivery of the strategy through enhanced ownership and involvement on the ground.”

The CoR too has been advocating the structural involvement of the LRAs in the Europe 2020 strategy since it was launched in 2010. The CoR’s Lisbon platform (consisting of LRAs) was transformed into a Europe 2020 platform and has played a key role in this regard. Gradually, the scope of the CoR was amplified, not only by responding to the Europe 2020 strategy, but also by focusing on the involvement of local and regional authorities in the context of the ES. In its annual monitoring reports on Europe 2020 and the ES,
this involvement is brought into focus. In the Declaration of Athens (March 2014) on the midterm review of the Europe 2020 strategy, the CoR argued in favour of: “a renewed Europe 2020 strategy be based on stronger partnership and ownership by all levels of government, introducing a territorial dimension, more transparency and accountability and multi-level governance” and launched 8 concrete proposals.

Over the years, the CoR has come up with proposals for “territorial pacts” and “codes of conduct” between the various levels of government in the context of the ES, although this had little to no impact on the governance structures designed by the EC in the context of the ES. The structural involvement of local and regional authorities in the ES remained suboptimal.

In recent years, a number of research institutions conducted research commissioned by the CoR into the involvement of regional and local actors in the Europe 2020 strategy.

SREBOTNJAK et al (2014) stated that (2014b:57): “This diverse reality calls for a more flexible approach in introducing the territorial dimension in Europe 2020 – an approach, where regions that have the capacity and willingness to do so, can voluntarily set their regional targets and the ones, which cannot – follow a “path to change” approach until they have built up the necessary capacities. In Member States with federal, quasi-federal or devolved structure such as Austria, Germany, Belgium, the UK, where sub-national governments have a lot of administrative and legislative power and in some Member States where regional capacities are well-developed (e.g., Sweden, Denmark, Finland), a more bottom up approach of regional target setting will be more easy to implement. In fact, some regions have already initiated such processes by developing their own Europe 2020 agenda and setting their own regional targets (for instance, the Catalonia 2020 Strategy, the Flemish Reform Programme Europe 2020 launched in Flanders (Belgium), the International Innovation Strategy in Scania (Sweden), and the Styria Economic Strategy 2020).”

SREBOTNJAK et al (2014a:100) reported the fact that a number of regions were responding to the Europe 2020 strategy: “A couple of LRAs seem to have been able to use the Europe 2020 strategy (or some of its priorities, targets or flagship initiatives) for their own purposes. However, on the one hand these appear to be regions that were already acquainted with the work at the EU level, and, on the other hand, regions that were already leaders in specific fields before the adoption of Europe 2020 (such as Flanders, Brandenburg or Bavaria). In the latter case, this means that regions have taken up Europe 2020 as an opportunity to continue what they were doing before. Moreover, it is unclear to which extent a few regions may have used their “response” to the strategy (such as the creation of a regional Europe 2020 strategy) as a means for supporting their own regional agenda (that sometimes goes counter the interests of the respective national government).”

PUCHER and MARTINOS (2015) refer to the fact that the territorial dimension remains insufficiently addressed in the principal documents in the context of the ES, going on to provide a number of examples (2015: 24): “The insufficient territorial focus of the Semester is also evident in the CSRs. All the recommendations are addressed to the Member State, even if the LRAs have relevant competences, and all the issues are always treated as applying equally throughout the territory of the country to which the recommendations apply.” They put forward two reasons for this (2015:24): “First, a view that the treaties are with the Member States and thus, even in the case of federal states, the Commission cannot address recommendations to the regions. This is a highly legalistic point and most of the stakeholders consulted have felt that the Commission finds ways to address various policies and issues beyond the narrow confines of the treaties if these matters are considered important, e.g. pensions policies. Second, a view that this is an issue of MLG and that a recognition and facilitation of the role of sub-national authorities (and even of the non-public sector) is essential for achieving results.” Both authors argue in favour of a Code of Conduct on partnership and territoriality in the ES, referring to the role of the regional level and regional analyses and data accompanying the key documents of the ES (AGS, country reports, NRP, CSRs, etcetera).
The “Multi-level Governance and Partnership” report by former Minister-President of Flanders and former CoR Chairman VAN DEN BRANDE (2014) also discussed the ES. The report underscored the pivotal role the ESOs could fulfil (2014:21): “Similarly, the European Semester Officers within the Commission’s country delegations should serve as a liaison with national parliaments, regional and local authorities on the one hand, and social partners and societal actors on the other. Once adopted by the Council, the Commission’s European Semester Officer could explain the annual country recommendations vis-à-vis these actors.” Given VAN DEN BRANDE’s in-depth understanding of the Belgian institutional situation, it was hardly surprising that, with regard to the ES, he also referred to the regional practices (2014:25) “Besides the conclusion of PAs at Member State level, in the future the Regulation governing the ESI Funds could also provide for the possibility for RLAs to elaborate their own “Regional” PA as an integrated part of the general PA (cf. the current practise in Belgium to have regional NRPs as an inherent part of the Belgian NRP under the European Semester reporting).”

3.4. Conclusions
The theoretical considerations cited three elements which will be important to better clarify the Flemish governance in the context of the ES. The first of these elements relates to the distinction which can be made with regard to the wielding of influence by the regions, contrasting the intra-state and extra-state route. The second key element is the impact of the ES on the governance mechanisms within regions and inter-governmental consultation mechanisms. The third element relates to the degree of involvement of regional authorities in the ES.

4. Governance of Flanders within the context of the ES
Looking back on the Flemish governance in the context of the ES, it is safe to say that a great many aspects of governance were already in place during the 2010-2014 time period. It is also clear that, from the time the new Government of Flanders (2014-2019) took up office, things shifted up a gear, with a stronger focus on the extra-state route.

4.1. The 2010-2014 time period
Since 2011, Flanders has established its own Flemish Reform Programme (FRP), which at the time was embedded as part of the then 2020 future strategy of the Government of Flanders, called ‘Flanders in Action’39. Based on the 2020 Pact40 (20 objectives), each year the Government of Flanders checks to see if Flanders is on course to assume a position among the leading European regions by 2020. In the 2010-2014 time period, the Europe 2020 strategy was monitored within the Flemish administration by the Europe 2020 working group, chaired by the Government of Flanders Executive Office of the Department of the Services for the General Government Policy. Each year throughout this time period, the working group - consisting of all thirteen departments of the Flemish administration and the Research Centre Agency of the Government of Flanders (GF Research Centre Agency) - would prepare the draft FRP on the instruction of the Cabinet of the Flemish Minister-President. This draft version would then be finalised at meetings at political level (so-called Inter Cabinet Working Groups, ICWs), which would also see the social partners involved as part of the ‘Vlaams Economisch en Sociaal Overlegcomité’ (VESOC) (Flemish Economic and Social Consultative Committee). Each year (at the end of March), the Government of Flanders duly acknowledges the FRP which is subsequently clarified (in May or June) by the Flemish Minister-President at the Economy Committee of the Flemish Parliament and a copy is also dispatched to the EC.

With regard to the involvement of other stakeholders, in the spring of 2011 six strategic advisory councils delivered an opinion on the first FRP draft. Even though the (supra) local authorities were involved in a round table conference (22/02/2011) in preparation of the FRP 2011, no immediate further follow-up was put in place. Although the 2011 and 2012 FRPs included a number of measures on which the Government of Flanders and the (supra) local administrations worked together in the context of the Europe 2020 strategy, this did not adequately address the demand from the (supra) local authorities for greater structural involvement. This demand was again raised by the Strategische Adviesraad
International Vlaanderen (SARIV) (Flemish Advisory Council for Foreign Affairs), the Vlaamse Adviesraad voor Bestuurszaken (VLABEST) (Flemish Advisory Council for Administrative Affairs) and the Vlaams-Europese Verbindingsagentschap (VLEVA) (Liaison Agency Flanders-Europe) at its round table meeting of 7/03/2013 on Europe 2020 and the FRP41, which later on prompted the SARIV and the VLABEST to put out an own-initiative opinion. Among other things, this resulted in a separate section being included as part of the 2013 and 2014 FRPs, in which the Vereniging van Vlaamse Steden en Gemeenten (VVSG) (Association of Flemish Cities and Municipalities) and the Vereniging van Vlaamse Provincies (VVP) (Association of Flemish Provinces) put forward examples of measures implemented by (supra) local authorities in Flanders in respect of the Europe 2020 strategy.

Over the 2010-2014 period, the Government of Flanders Executive Office acted as the driving force, providing further impetus to ensure gradual broader embedding of the Europe 2020 follow-up across the board within the Flemish Government. In particular, the following elements can be noted:

- **cross-policy area**: the ES and the Europe 2020 strategy were discussed at the meetings of the SG (Secretaries General) forum42, the ‘Strategisch Overleg Internationale Aangelegenheden’ (SOIA) (Strategic Consultation Platform for International Affairs)43, coordinated by the International Flanders Policy Area, and at the General Representation of the Government of Flanders to the EU (AAVR EU). Each month, the IV Department (DiV) also coordinates the communication to the Government of Flanders which contains a summary of developments at EU level, as well as the six-monthly communication on the occasion of the incoming EU Council Presidency. Both communications, which – further to acknowledgement by the Government of Flanders – are also dispatched to the Flemish Parliament, make the link with the ES (with the inclusion of the Europe 2020 strategy)44;

- **policy memorandums and papers**45: The Europe 2020 dimension was also featured in the policy memorandums and papers of the Flemish Ministers (2010-2014)46, albeit not always routinely. DE BLAUWER (2014) reports that in 19 of the 30 policy papers produced over the 2010-2014 period, the link with the Europe 2020 strategy was expressly referenced on at least one occasion. The policy papers that did not expressly link with the Europe 2020 strategy on the other hand also often included policy which aspired to the same objectives as, or which acted to implement, the Europe 2020 strategy47;

- **involvement of the Flemish Parliament**: interest among the members of the Flemish Parliament for the Europe 2020 strategy was growing. On 23/02/2011, an exchange of views was held on a new management structure of the EU’s Europe 2020 strategy and Stability and Growth Pact48. On 18/05/2011, the Flemish Parliament adopted a reasoned motion49 on the Flemish input into the NRP and the document produced by the Government of Flanders on this matter, among other things requesting the Government of Flanders to ensure effective implementation of the ambitious plans and objectives for Flanders under the FRP. Fairly early on, within the context of the ES the practice was installed whereby the Flemish Minister-President provides clarification at the Economy Committee of the Flemish Parliament on the FRP and the Flemish input into the NRP. However, this clarification, which was provided during the course of May or April, was put forward after the FRP and the NRP had been adopted50 51 and the Flemish Parliament itself was no longer in a position to have any impact on the FRP. Which is why, in the autumn of 2013, the Flemish Parliament let it be known that the current timing of the clarification at the Economy Committee of the Flemish Parliament was not exactly ideal for organising involvement of the Flemish Parliament in respect of the FRP/NRP. In the end an article was to be included in the Flemish Parliament’s Rules52 requiring the Government of Flanders to provide the Flemish Parliament with the draft FRP on the last Friday of March of each year, to enable the draft to be discussed at the relevant committee. The article was also meant to put in place the same kind of
involvement of the Flemish Parliament in the Flemish DBP, which is referred to the Finance and Budget Committee to be discussed on 7 October at the latest.

- ‘identity politics’: the Government of Flanders Executive office worked hard on maintaining good contacts with the CoR (Europe 2020 platform), with a strong focus on demonstrating the Flemish governance of a Flemish FRP. To lend added weight to these efforts, on 21/06/2012 a conference was held (*Flanders in Action and the Europe 2020 dimension*) to which other major European regions as well as the EC and the CoR were invited. In doing so, Flanders sought to highlight its Europe 2020 activities on a Europe-wide level (‘identity politics’ by way of an extra-state route). To lend added European elan to the conference, then European Council President Herman Van Rompuy introduced the day’s events. As part of the ‘Flanders in Action’ future project, a webpage was created which clustered the information relating to the follow-up of the Europe 2020 strategy;

- link between policy and budget: by 15 October of each year, every MS must submit an internally coordinated DBP for the following year to the EC. This plan should specify how the discretionary measures and reforms set out in the DBP comply with the CSRs and the realisation of the Europe 2020 objectives. The link with the Europe 2020 objectives and the CSRs was structurally included at Flemish level for the first time in the preparation of the 2015 budgetary instructions.

4.2. The 2014 transition year: towards a strengthened embedding of the ES within the Flemish Government and Flanders

4.2.1. The 2014-2019 Flemish coalition agreement

Paragraph 4.1. shows that the Europe 2020 strategy has become properly embedded within the Government of Flanders in recent years: since 2011, an annual FRP is prepared which is presented by the Flemish Minister-President before the Flemish Parliament; the Europe 2020 strategy is featured in the policy papers of the Flemish Ministers; as part of the Flemish budgetary preparation, the link was established with the Europe 2020 objectives and the CSRs, et cetera. During the 2010-2014 period, Flanders focused on strengthening support for the Europe 2020 strategy: each year the draft FRP is provided to VESOC and since 2013, the VVSG and the VVP are structurally involved in the FRP. The latter was welcomed in the own-initiative opinion put forward by the SARIV and VLABEST (25/09/2013) on Europeanisation in a multi-layered governance context, although the opinion did make it clear that it was ‘definitely not an adequate step towards giving the local and provincial administrations a fully fledged role in the FRP’. The own-initiative opinion also noted that “Citizens, businesses and community organisations are important and necessary partners for the realisation of the EU 2020 objectives, and their commitment to these objectives must be secured.”

In the spring of 2014, a number of potential impulses were delivered that were intended to ensure that under the new Government of Flanders (2014-2019), the ES would be assigned an even more prominent position. In the contribution of the Flemish administration to the coalition agreement of the Government of Flanders (2014-2019) the 10 priorities proposed by the Flemish administration were closely in keeping with Europe 2020 and the CSRs. In the spring of 2014, the Flemish administration also developed proposals to adapt Circular 11 (Flemish Parliament - Government of Flanders cooperation, which, among other things, sets out guidelines for preparing policy memorandums/policy papers). Another major challenge which presented itself was the fact that the 2015 FRP also had to include the new pertinent powers (e.g. labour market policy, etc.) as part of the sixth state reform.

The Federal and Regional Parliamentary elections of June 2014 ushered in a new Government of Flanders led by Minister-President Geert Bourgeois (N-VA). Various chapters of the 2014-2019 Flemish coalition agreement highlighted the importance of the FRP and several of the Europe 2020 strategy objectives. “We will use quantified and supported long-term objectives, which are comparable on an international level, as a compass for policy. We will continue to strive to achieve our commitments regarding the Flemish Reform Programme Europe 2020 and the Pact 2020. (...) We will use all existing and new powers in a coherent and
effective manner in order to effectively achieve the ambitious employment rate target of 76% by 2020. (...) We will also connect entrepreneurs and the government with the aim of achieving the 3% standard for R&D by 2020. (...) Our ambition is still to achieve the 3% norm for R&D by 2020; therefore we will strive for 1% public expenditure.” Chapter 23 ‘Foreign and Development Cooperation’ of the Flemish coalition agreement focused on a strong Flanders in a strong Europe. Against this backdrop, and among other things, the following elements were proposed60: “We will increase interaction between Flemish and European institutions. First and foremost we will formulate and communicate our positions and vision about the EU more clearly and in a more targeted manner. This means, among other things, that we will report directly to the EU as much as possible. Vice versa we will ask the EU to provide information directly to Flanders where possible. We will request the EU to assess Flemish programmes and plans for structural reforms (as in the reform programme and the stability programme) separately and to issue separate recommendations.”

VAN HECKE, BURSENS and BEYERS (2013) state that the European institutions, with the EC, are chiefly looking for three important elements, i.e. expertise, legitimacy and implementation capacity, and that regions are capable of delivering these elements. The authors specify two important enabling preconditions: (1) personnel and organisation and (2) reliability and organisation. VAN HECKE, BURSENS and BEYERS (2013) posit that the greater the regional authority of a region and the greater the institutional involvement of a region in the European policy-making process, the greater the impact of that region on that same decision-making process. To the EC, what is important is the quality of the input. Flanders must therefore be able to bring something to the table of the EC. Which explains why Flanders attaches very great importance to the processes that will make it clear to the EC that the considered input of Flanders also constitutes added value for the EC. Obviously Flanders benefits from the institutional structure of Belgium and the division of powers in this respect. Education, for instance, is an exclusive competence of the Communities. If the EC wants to learn more about the education systems in Belgium, it will need to speak directly to the Communities.

It is clear that with these provisions in the Flemish coalition agreement, the Government of Flanders was looking to place extra emphasis on the extra-state route within the context of the ES. The passages concerned clearly attested to the great ambition on the part of the Government of Flanders to enter into dialogue directly with the EC and to conduct an assertive (communication) policy on the matter. As shown above, the Flemish administration had already organised itself in such a way that it had actuated internal as well as external mechanisms meant to show that it would be rewarding for the EC to closely monitor the Flemish policy level in the context of the ES. As the new Flemish coalition agreement clearly shows, Flanders’ ambitions went further and so new initiatives were launched within the Flemish administration.

4.2.2. The midterm review of the Europe 2020 strategy

On the occasion of the consultation on the midterm review of the Europe 2020 strategy, the Government of Flanders adopted a position on 3/10/201461, putting forward 8 concrete proposals relating to the governance as well as the substance with regard to the Europe 2020 strategy: (1) strengthening the visibility of the Europe 2020 strategy in the ES, (2) strengthening support for the strategy (including, among other things, the involvement of regions and the use of Regional Reform Programmes, (3) the CSRs (including the regional dimension), the NRPs (also concerning their design), (5) substantive challenges (including putting the strategy centre stage in the European policy), (6) the Europe 2020 main objectives and pertaining indicators (supplementary objectives with respect to industrial policy, entrepreneurship, lifelong learning, digitisation rate, use of sub-objectives), (7) core initiatives / flagships (including the importance of a mobilising effect) and finally (8) flanking and supporting policy (including the need for adequate resources). Adopting this position, they were also pre-empting a future DGE meeting at which Belgium was to determine its position on the Europe 2020 strategy (see 5.1.1.). On 19/11/2014, Minister-President Bourgeois represented Belgium at the General Affairs Council (GAC) which was entirely devoted to the cohesion policy. With regard to the review of the Europe 2020 strategy, among other things, he proposed 62: “(...) Since the start of this strategy, it has been high on the political agenda of the federated states. After all, in Belgium, it is the federated states that are qualified for accomplishing the majority of the
Europe 2020 objectives. (...) Our experience has taught us that the Strategy is at any rate an excellent frame of reference to situate one’s own federal and regional policy within broader Europe-wide priorities. The concrete objectives constitute a benchmark enabling you to compare your own policy and results with other countries and regions. In addition, we are confident that only a commitment engagement between all levels of government will produce good results in promoting growth and employment: the ‘governance’ of the revised Europe 2020 Strategy is intended to further the ‘multi-layered governance’ between the EU, the Member States as well as the regions. The greater, direct and structural involvement of the regions in the Europe 2020 Strategy in our eyes is crucial, as regions have a substantial investment capacity and hold major socioeconomic levers within various Member States. The Committee of the Regions too is able to assume a greater role in this respect by preparing a progress report, addressed to the European Council on the policy of the regions. In Belgium, the federated states are preparing Regional Reform Programmes, which are included as part of the National Reform Programme. Through this good practice, the Belgian federated states are demonstrating that they are wholly committed to the Strategy, which also benefits the sense of ownership. This enables the Member State of Belgium and its federated states to clarify specific regional policy emphases in their communication with the European institutions. In this context, I would also like to mention the 6th Cohesion Report, which brings the “territorial dimension” of the Europe 2020 Strategy into focus. Doing so also renders visible how regions are performing in achieving the objectives. More and better comparable regional data at EU level is something we have always attached great importance to. We are of the opinion that Eurostat should be encouraged to reflect on the added value of a regional declination of the Europe 2020 statistics."

The Flemish Minister-President’s General Government Policy (2014-2019) memorandum specified the proactive preparation, support and coordination of the Europe 2020 strategy as one of the general policy’s spearheads. This was centred around three main thrusts: (1) Flanders will also roll out further initiatives to raise the level of support for the implementation of the Europe 2020 strategy in Flanders, (2) Flanders will make every effort to amplify the interaction between the Flemish and the European institutions and (3) An even greater focus will be placed on consultation with the Federal Government and the other C&Rs.

4.2.3. Enhanced semester governance within the Flemish administration

First and foremost it should be pointed out that within the newly formed Public Governance and Chancellery department (DKB) an even greater focus will be placed on the European dimension. This reinforced focus is in keeping with the very substantial level of attention brought to ES by the Flemish Minister-President and his Cabinet. The support delivered by the DKB is broad-based. As the Chair of the ES working group, within the Flemish administration, DKB coordinates the draft of the FRP, supports the Cabinet of the Minister-President with 1) the Inter-cabinet Working Groups with respect to the draft FRP 2) with the clarification of the FRP by the Minister-President before the Flemish Parliament, 3) the discussion at the VESOC meetings, 4) the draft input for the policy memorandum and papers, et cetera.

It is no coincidence that the follow-up of the Europe 2020 strategy and subsequently the ES were again placed with the Public Governance and Chancellery department (DKB). Within the Government of Flanders, the DKB sets itself up as a Centre of Government (VANHEE, ERAUW and DE BLAUSER 2014) and the broad-based follow-up of the ES (with the inclusion of the Europe 2020 strategy) is perfectly in keeping with this. This also fits in with findings made by Davis among others (2014:38): “A prominent example of a strategic plan linked closely to implementation and monitoring systems is provided by the EU’s Europe 2020 – Strategy for Growth. This is a comprehensive cross-national effort to use strategic planning to orient and reorient public policies and to monitor implementation towards targets that are national in scale but that contribute to EU-level objectives as well. This is currently one of the key drivers leading member countries to strengthen the role of the Central agencies in EU policy matters. The Europe 2020 framework is so broad and structured that effective management of the system requires an exceptionally good overview of actions and outcomes by line ministries, a vision that is likely to be best located within the Centre of Government.”
A major role has been set aside for the regional representations partly to bridge the gap between the regional level and the EU. The 2014-2019 Flemish government coalition agreement assigned a key role to the AAVR (EU)64. In the operationalisation thereof in the memorandums addressed to the Government of Flanders (see the memorandums addressed to the Government of Flanders with respect to reinforcing the EU reflex65 in Flanders and the evolution towards a Flemish Ministry of Foreign Affairs66), the need for a stronger representation is also clearly acknowledged. In part as a result thereof, DKB seconded two members of staff to the AAVR EU on a part-time basis within the context of the ES. As a result of these and other additional reinforcements, the AAVR EU has since developed into a large 26-strong team (AAVR, a director, 19 attachés and 5 support staff). With these two secondments, with respect to the ES the idea is to respond even faster to (in)formal contacts with the EC in particular and to further raise Flanders’ profile with the European institutions. The two attachés also have numerous contacts and discussions with their colleagues at the AAVR EU with regard to the ES, so that elements concerning the ES can be communicated by both attachés to their fellow attachés and information is accordingly taken and presented at relevant Council working groups and committees concerning the ES in which the attachés involved participate or are effectively involved in the preparations. The AAVR EU also takes the lead with regard to the monthly communications67 to the Government of Flanders on the developments at EU level, as well as the preparation of the memo to the Government of Flanders on the priority areas to be determined for Flanders based on the annual Commission work programme. For example, based on the 2016 Commission work programme, on 29/01/201668 the Government of Flanders approved seven dossiers to be monitored as a matter of priority. In particular, reference is made to the dossier on ‘next steps for a sustainable European future’. This is about setting out a new approach to ensure economic growth and social and ecological sustainability in Europe post-2020, taking into account the review of Europe 2020 and the internal and external implementation of the sustainable development objectives of the United Nations69.

The DKB has also continued to build on the initiative, adopted in the spring of 2014, with respect to Circular 2014/11 (Cooperation with the Flemish Parliament). This Circular is the first official document to emphatically make the link with the Europe 2020 strategy and the CSRs with regard to the preparation of the Ministers’ policy memorandums and policy papers. These proposed amendments to the Circular were intended to structurally anchor the increased focus for the ES in the policy of the Government of Flanders and the Ministers. It also served as an important signal that the Government of Flanders takes the ES very seriously and is wholly committed to the ES. As the coordinating Minister for the Europe 2020 strategy, the role of the Minister-President is important in this regard.

In a screening conducted in 2015, the DKB established that out of the 26 policy memorandums issued by the Government of Flanders, 11 made a clear link with the Europe 2020 strategy (and/or the CSRs). Two other policy memorandums established the link with the Europe 2020 objectives (without expressly labelling this as such). Accordingly, 13 out of the 26 policy memorandums either expressly or implicitly linked up with the Europe 2020 strategy. The majority of these references are obviously made in the General Government Policy memorandum70 (which comes under the Minister-President), but the Poverty Reduction policy memorandum too very emphatically links up with the Europe 2020 strategy.

At the initiative of the DKB, in the autumn of 2015 the Europe 2020 working group submitted various proposals to further develop ES-centred thinking to the Board of Chairmen, the top civil service body of the Flemish administration. On 17/11/2015, the Board of Chairmen got behind 8 proposals from the ES working group that were intended to contribute to strengthening and intensifying the ES within the Government of Flanders and Flanders: (1) The establishment of a new ES working group, (2) clarifying the roles of the prime movers in the preparation and follow-up of the ES, (3) reinforcing the role of the Board of Chairmen with regard to the ES, (4) strengthening ES-related activities in the policy areas directly involved, (5) strengthening our capacity for macroeconomic analysis, (6) preparing the successor of the Europe 2020 strategy, (7) strengthening the support for the ES within Flanders, (8) raising visibility of the ES follow-up at European level. This decision by the Board of Chairmen meant that the general cross-policy area coordination around the ES within the framework of the ES working group will be assumed
under the chairmanship of the DKB. For the budgetary aspects of the ES, the Finance and Budget Department (FB) assumes cross-policy area coordination. For certain components it can rely on the support of the ES working group.

This increased level of interest and attention from the Board of Chairmen for the ES first came very clearly to the fore on 17/03/2016. On this date, a meeting was held at the official residence of the Government of Flanders at which ESO Steven Engels expounded on the country report, followed by an exchange of views with the members of the Board of Chairmen. This follow-up at the highest level of the Flemish administration also resulted in contacts with the ESOs being strengthened and additional initiatives with regard to the ES being undertaken within other policy areas of the Government of Flanders. On 27/04/2016, at the proposal of the policy area LNE, an information session on the country report was held. On 28/04/2016, a similar initiative was undertaken by the policy area EWI71. Also within the policy area WSE a reinforced (process) governance of the ES was further deployed, which, inter alia, builds on the existing governance. Within WSE this governance was already built solid and thereby can be referred inter alia to the strong statistical monitoring of the overall employment figures and those of the disadvantaged groups as well as its publication. There’s an annual meeting between the EC and the FOD WASO/regions. There may also be referred to the follow up by the VDAB of the ES; a concrete example in this field is the close follow-up of the Youth Guarantee, a theme that also within EMCO within the framework of the multilateral surveillance is closely monitored72: “VDAB plays a Coordinating leading role in the implementation of the Youth Guarantee. It has set up projects with partner Organizations reach out to young people not in education employment or training”. The policy area WSE is also currently reflecting on the launch of an EU-newsletter during 2016 with news concerning policy and research. This can be an important channel for communicating the policy measures taken within the policy within the framework of the ES, more broadly to the European level. Also within the policy area OV, there are regular contacts with the responsible country-officer(s) within the EC and there’s a participating of the ESO’s in these meetings.

The above initiatives launched by the policy areas of the Flemish administration serve as further illustration of the fact that the ES has taken increasingly deeper root, which was one of the DKB’s endeavours. The fact that the DKB is assuming the general coordination of the ES within the Government of Flanders is reflected in an organisational sense in the fact that the DKB has seconded two part-time attachés for the ES to the AAVR EU, the fact that one of these part-time attachés assumes the chairmanship of the civil service working group ES, and the other part-time attaché is part of the SOIA. In conclusion, the fact that the Board of Chairmen is headed by the Secretary-General of the DKB ensures that the ES is rooted within the Government of Flanders across the board. Substantively, the ES working group, under the chairmanship of the DKB, is the driving force behind the semester activities 1) within the Flemish administration for the policy cycle, 2) as part of the inter-state dimension (contributions for the FRP and official enquiries from the EC and the CoR, the FFMs EC Flanders, etc.) and as part of the intra-state dimension (NRP, DBP, FFMs EC-Belgium, DGE, etc.). Annexe 1 visualises the central role of the DKB and the ES working group within each of these dimensions.

4.2.4. A more effective FRP

The additional initiatives launched within the Flemish administration were closely in keeping with the top priority given to the ES by Minister-President Bourgeois. In the 2015 September Statement73, the Flemish Minister-President said74: “In the short term we will continue to work on the Flemish Reform Programme in which we lend concrete substance to the 2020 Pact.” During the visit by European Commissioner Marianne Thyssen to the Flemish Parliament (January 2016), the Minister-President said:75 “Ladies and gentlemen, Madam European Commissioner, you will be aware that this government means to be a government that invests. Invests in addressing urgent societal needs, as well as in the kind of major and sustainable infrastructure we require as a logistical hub, and as a knowledge region within the European Union. To do so,
we mean to lay down a solid foundation of sound public finances and structural reforms. The European Semester and the Flemish Reform Plan are the perfect framework to this end."

In the autumn of 2014, it was decided by joint agreement between the DKB and the Cabinet of the Flemish Minister-President, to make the FRP into a document that has a more forceful impact and to use the FRP to send a number of messages to the EC. In 2010, the FRP was a very comprehensive document consisting of over 100 pages which concentrated more on completeness rather than the strategic importance of the measures. A second important element was the requirement to properly integrate into the FRP the powers that were being transferred to Flanders as part of the regionalisation. As a result of the climate protocol concluded between the various Ministers at Federal and Regional level (December 2015), the FRP was also made to incorporate the climate and energy objectives for the first time. This means the 2016 FRP will now cover all Europe 2020 objectives in full. The idea was for the FRP to be included in its entirety as an annex to the NRP from 2015 (see 5.1.2.).

The 2016 FRP seeks to tie in as closely as possible with the guidelines of the EC on the design of the NRPs. With regard to these guidelines, various points of focus can be formulated in consideration of the Flemish practice. For instance, in the 2015 ES the EC adopted the country reports as a new instrument, although no changes were brought to the guidelines on how to prepare the NRPs, which required the MSs to resort to the EC’s guidelines from October 2013. The guidelines for preparing the 2016 Reform Programmes also took a long time to be published (December 2015). What was notable was that important messages set out by the EC in certain documents were not always duly reflected in these guidelines. One concrete example related to the Europe 2020 strategy. Flanders always attached great importance to this (see also the position of the Government of Flanders on the midterm review of the Europe 2020 strategy). In this respect, the EC’s message in its AGS was clear: “Following this review, the Commission will make the best use of the existing strategy and its tools by improving its implementation and monitoring in the context of the European Semester. On this basis, the Commission has adjusted the guidance to Member States on the preparation of their National Reform Programmes to make sure that the Europe 2020 strategy continues to play a prominent role.” Looking at the EC’s guidelines for the 2016 Reform Programmes, two pages are devoted to the Europe 2020 objectives, whereas the previous instructions (October 2013) had 5 pages on the same topic. Significant reservations might be held concerning the timing: barely 8 weeks separate the publication of the country report and the submission of the NRP. Preparing an NRP as well as an FRP in such a short space of time is a huge challenge. For Flanders, the streamlining of the ES with a greater focus on governance and ownership was in fairly close keeping with Flemish practice. The EC is aiming for a stronger parliamentary dimension (European and national parliamentary assemblies) and greater involvement of the social partners. This closely fits in with the established Flemish practice whereby the Flemish Parliament and the social partners (VESOC) are involved in the preparation of the FRP. Also the forward-looking dimension of the reform programmes, as requested by the EC, was integrated in the FRP 2016. Also for the EC itself the FRP could be an added value, because it can broaden the governance and ownership for the ES. The EC also receives more detailed information with regard to the measures taken by the Government of Flanders.

Taking a closer look at the content of the FRP, the two most central chapters of the FRP consistently relate to highlighting measures put in place by Flanders with regard to the implementation of the CSRs and the accomplishment of the Flemish Europe 2020 objectives.

With regard to the implementation of the CSRs in particular the measures taken by the Flemish Authorities concerning the labour market play a key role. As stated above (1.2.) this has also to do with the new powers transferred to Flanders as a result of the sixth state reform of Belgium in July 2014. With these powers (target group policy,...) Flanders is developing and implementing its own policy in order to achieve the Flemish employment rate of 76% in 2020.

Although the Europe 2020 dimension receded into the background somewhat in recent years in the context of the ES, Flanders continues to emphasise the visibility of the Europe 2020 strategy in its FRP.
This is no coincidence. The Flemish Europe 2020 objectives were integrated as part of the Pact 2020, whereby Flanders was signalling, both internally and externally (towards the EC) that it had its own regional Europe 2020 objectives and was able to act wholly independently in the ES. Incidentally, this was a point of difference with, for example, Wallonia and the Brussels Capital Region, which also added their ‘Regional Reform Programmes’ to the NRP (see 5.1.2.), although neither contained any Europe 2020 objectives of their own. This is also a difference with the NRP of the United Kingdom that makes several concrete references to regional targets and figures of England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. In order to stress the importance of regional figures in the NRP, at the suggestion of Flanders, the following passage was included in the introduction of the NRP: “The reform programmes of the Communities and the Regions (enclosed as appendices 1 to 5) are an essential part of the National Reform Programme. They give more detailed explanations on the measures taken by the different Communities and Regions for implementing the country-specific recommendations. These programmes also review the progress towards achieving the regional Europe 2020 targets and the measures supporting them.”

To a great degree, the 2016 FRP addressed the recommendations set out in the Country report. The FRP always contains a chapter on the macroeconomic developments in the Flemish Region, providing data on Flemish exports, et cetera. This chapter is important to make it clear to the EC that Flanders has a lot of regional data which it is hoped the EC will take into account. However, there is room for improvement in this regard, which is also why the Board of Chairmen asked for the macroeconomic component to be given more focus. The ambition for the Government of Flanders within the context of the ES is to focus more on monitoring macroeconomic developments (one of the 3 ES cornerstones). As such, this FRP chapter is to be fleshed out with expanded macroeconomic data over the years ahead. The other chapters of the 2016 FRP relate to the contribution of the Structural Funds and the involvement of stakeholders. A major point of note was that the 2016 FRP paid much more attention to future policy initiatives, unlike previous years. In doing so the FRP responded to the EC’s instructions with regard to the forward-looking dimension of the Reform Programmes (see 1.2.1.).

The FRP and the governance set up around it is aimed at closely responding to developments in the ES, such as working with country reports. As indicated above, Flanders is increasingly using the FRP to send out important messages to the EC. The Minister-President put forward a number of key messages in the 2015 and the 2016 FRP alike. The 2016 FRP especially seized on the country report to move in favour of region-specific recommendations and a much greater focus on regional data and measures to be included in the Country reports. The cabinet of the Minister-President of Flanders also expressed the same message at the parliamentary discussion and at the bilateral meeting of 31/03/2016 for the benefit of the EC (see 5.1.2.). In his public address of 21/03/2016 before the Association for International Relations, the Minister-President discussed the importance of engaging in direct dialogue with policymakers, saying: “I am also tightening Flemish-European bond by putting together an annual Flemish Reform Plan of our own within the context of the ES, which is attached in full to the National Reform Plan and is also delivered directly.”

### Europa 2020-key-indicators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gross domestic expenditure on R&amp;D (%)</td>
<td>2.06</td>
<td>2.12</td>
<td>2.29</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>2.42</td>
<td>2.54</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.46 ppt Place 7 out of 28 (in 2013)</td>
<td>0.46 ppt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early school leavers (%)</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>2 ppt Place 8 out of 28 (in 2014)</td>
<td>2 ppt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 to 34-year-olds with higher education diploma (%)</td>
<td>43.6</td>
<td>43.1</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>42.3</td>
<td>45.3</td>
<td>45.1</td>
<td>44.8</td>
<td>43.2</td>
<td>47.8</td>
<td>4.6 ppt Place 14 out of 28 (in 2014)</td>
<td>4.6 ppt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment rate (aged 20-64) (%)</td>
<td>72.3</td>
<td>71.5</td>
<td>72.1</td>
<td>71.8</td>
<td>71.5</td>
<td>71.9</td>
<td>71.9</td>
<td>71.9</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>4.1 ppt Place12 out of 28 (in 2015)</td>
<td>4.1 ppt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-ETS greenhouse gas emissions scope 13-20m²</td>
<td>45,953</td>
<td>45,381</td>
<td>44,733</td>
<td>46,405</td>
<td>42,928</td>
<td>43,273</td>
<td>45,927</td>
<td>43,254</td>
<td>-15.7% greenhouse Place 17 out of 28 (in 2013)</td>
<td>-15.7% greenhouse</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1: Progress with respect to the Flemish Europe 2020 objectives

With regard to the Europe 2020 target for employment, it is important to point out that Flanders has also included sub-targets for disadvantaged groups (the elderly, people with occupational disabilities, people with a migration background) and that these figures are closely monitored. The figures are not only included in the FRP, they are also published on the website of the WSE policy area.

Another important feature of the progress on the Europe 2020 objectives is that Flanders compares itself against the MSs of the EU for each of these objectives. In general, it is safe to say that Flanders occupies a leading position in the areas of poverty reduction and social exclusion, ranks among the sub-top in terms of research and development, is a good mid-tier player with respect to education and employment, but lags behind in the area of climate and energy targets. If we look at the Flemish Europe 2020 targets itself, it must be noted that with regard to employment, education and poverty or social exclusion, these are more ambitious than those of Belgium and the EU.

With regard to the process of developing the FRP, after the draft FRP has been discussed by the Government of Flanders for the first time, it is immediately dispatched to the social partners and the Flemish Parliament. This is therefore a full response to the streamlining, which the EC put into effect since the ES was introduced, through increased involvement of the parliamentary assemblies and the social partners. With regard to the involvement of the social partners, the focus is on continuity. In practical terms, the Cabinet of the Minister-President (supported by the DKB) clarifies the FRP draft. The social partners are given the opportunity to propose amendments to the draft version as part of the discussion, enabling any such amendments to be included in the final version of the FRP. This dynamic method of operation somewhat derogates from the method adopted by the Federal Government in 2016, which does not allow for any dialogue meetings with the social partners which could result in prospective amendments of the draft NRP. Their input is included with the NRP as an annex.

As from the preparation of the 2015 FRP, the Flemish Parliament assumed a much more prominent role. During the preparation of the 2015 FRP and the 2016 FRP, the draft FRP was clarified by the Minister-President in the General Policy, Finance and Budget Committee of the Flemish Parliament. Steven Engels, one of the two ESOs for Belgium, was also closely involved in this. The idea is to include any comments and points of focus that emerge from this exchange of views in the final FRP. Having its own governance tools also enables the Government of Flanders to bring pressure to bear on the design of the NRP. The prime example in this regard is the involvement of the Flemish Parliament. As Flanders was the only federated entity to involve its Parliament and clearly mentioned this practise in the drafting process of the
NRP 2016, this also put pressure on the other entities to at least involve their parliamentary assemblies more closely in the Reform Programmes (see 5.1.2). This close involvement of the Flemish Parliament in the ES should be seen in the context of the European course the Flemish Parliament is steering. For instance, the Flemish Parliament frequently invites leading European actors. Steven Engels was thus able to provide a word of clarification upon the publication of the 2015 draft CSRs\textsuperscript{86} of the EC at the General Policy, Finance and Budget Committee. Reference can be made to the clarifications put forward by European Commissioner Cecilia Malmström\textsuperscript{87}, CoR Chair Markku Markulla\textsuperscript{88}, European Commissioner Marianne Thyssen\textsuperscript{89}, et cetera. This directly relates to Statement 51 (Statement from the Kingdom of Belgium concerning the national parliamentary assemblies) which was added to the Treaty on EU, which specifies\textsuperscript{90}: “Belgium wishes to make clear that, in accordance with its constitutional law, not only the Chamber of Representatives and Senate of the Federal Parliament but also the parliamentary assemblies of the Communities and the Regions act, in terms of the competences exercised by the Union, as components of the national parliamentary system or chambers of the national Parliament.”. The increased focus on the ES, not only in the General Policy, Finance and Budget Committee, but equally in other committees, has prompted critical questions from the Flemish Parliament regarding the insufficient attention brought by the EC to the institutional structure within Belgium and the fact that in country reports or CSRs, for instance, the regional dimension was inadequately featured.

With regard to the involvement of other stakeholders, Flanders largely continued to build on previous experiences. The involvement of VLEVA assumes an important place in this respect. VLEVA was established in 2006 to act as a bridge between Europe and Flemish local authorities, community organisations and the Government of Flanders. The VLEVA members (including the (supra) local authorities) were involved in the preparation of the 2015 and 2016 FRPs. They were given the opportunity to propose a number of best practice examples from within their organisation for the FRP. In June 2016 as in July 2014, the VLEVA and the DKB held a closed information session in which the VLEVA members, the members of the ES working group European Semester, Flemish Ministers’ cabinet workers and EC civil servants were able to engage in dialogue on the CSRs. In the autumn of 2015, the DKB explored new avenues to further enhance the support for the ES in Flanders. In this respect, mention must be made of the collaboration with the Association of Flemish Provinces (VVP) and ‘Europe Direct’ in the endeavour to stage information sessions on the topic of the ES in all 5 Flemish provinces in the autumn of 2016.

4.2.5. The extra-state route

With regard to the extra-state route, Flanders primarily focuses on maintaining close relations with the EC. A major role in this respect is assumed by the ESOs, who were appointed by the EC in the spring of 2013. Both the Flemish political and administrative level maintain good contacts with these EC officials. Reference may be made to 1) the fact that the FRPs are dispatched directly to the ESOs, 2) the clarifications of the ESOs before the Flemish Parliament following discussion of the FRP, 3) the clarifications of the ESOs before the former SG-forum (July 2014) and the Board of Chairmen (March 2016), 4) the participation of the ESOs in congresses, seminars, workshops, network events, et cetera, set up by the Flemish administration and VLEVA. 5) the contacts with the ESOs as part of Fact Finding Missions (FFMs), et cetera. Among other things, all of this is intended to further the exchange of information. The ESOs are thus able to pick up on signals communicated on an (in) formal basis by the Flemish political and administrative level, to the effect that these may be included where pertinent as part of the ES process.

This collaboration is also felt to be positive by the ESOs themselves. The ESOs state:\textsuperscript{91} “Our role is to deepen, widen and lend structure to the dialogue on the economic reforms in Belgium. We are keen to take part in the various formal consultations between the Commission’s services and the Belgian authorities. In addition, throughout the year we work closely with the ministers’ offices and administrations at Federal level and at the level of the Communities and Regions. Obviously we are happy to engage in dialogue with the social partners and the broad range of community organisations. The local knowledge and insights they
share with us are indispensable to arrive at underpinned policy recommendations that have broad-based support. It goes without saying that we are unable to simply adopt all positions and proposals, but I believe all parties involved consider this dialogue to be rewarding. (...) The collaboration between the European Commission and the various stakeholders in the Member States has only intensified over the years. The Commission has also made great efforts to conduct the dialogue on the reform priorities in the Member States as broadly as possible. (...) Over the past few years, we have seen Flanders and Belgium becoming increasingly more aware of the role Europe plays in setting the agenda and in coordinating policy. The national and regional parliamentary assemblies, the social partners and the wider community organisations are themselves asking to consult together on the reform priorities in European Semester.”

In addition, Flanders is committed to maintaining good contacts with the CoR, which more specifically contributes to the activities of the Europe 2020 monitoring platform. For Flanders, the CoR also constitutes an appropriate channel to give wider prominence to the governance assumed by Flanders in the context of the ES. In recent years, Flanders was not only invited by the CoR to clarify the Flemish semester activities at various seminars and workshops, etc., the Flemish semester governance was also held up as a good practice in several CoR publications. For all that, there is scope for further progress in a number of areas. The European Parliament for instance frequently puts out reports relating to the ES in a general sense or the Europe 2020 strategy in particular. These reports often discuss the governance dimension). The intention is to further explore, the EP’s activities in this regard, with efforts being made in respect of contacts with Flemish MEPs.

Flanders is working to amplify the impact of the regions within the context of the ES, which is why it is also endeavouring to work with other regions in this area. During the first phase, input was tendered to REGLEG (Conference of European Regions with Legislative Power), but this body has gradually lost much of its significance. Therefore Flanders decided to shift up a gear already in 2012, organising a workshop on ‘Flanders in Action and the Europe 2020 dimension’ in Brussels. Various regions, as well as the EC and the CoR, were present as a speaker or member of the panel (see 4.1.). Flanders agrees work programmes with various countries and regions whereby it designates areas for cooperation. The recent work programme between Flanders and Catalonia for instance is aimed at cooperation with regard to the ES.

4.2.6. Heightened focus on the ES

It is clear that a number of developments, including the appointment of the ESOs, have contributed to the ES being monitored at even closer quarters from 2014 forward, especially in Flanders. This turn of events is also confirmed by the two ESOs. In the discussion of the 2016 FRP draft in the Flemish Parliament, the ESO held up this involvement of the Flemish Parliament in the draft NRP as a best practice case. Through organising workshops, conferences, dialogue meetings, etc., the EC is seeking to create an environment in which (socioeconomic) stakeholders, the various level of government, the community organisations, etc., engage in dialogue in the context of the ES. Most actors and stakeholders in Flanders are acutely aware of the impact of the ES and the weight of the CSRs. In this regard, ZEITLIN (2014:60) posits: “In some countries, such as Belgium and the Netherlands, the CSRs make the evening news and are widely discussed, especially where they touch on hot-button issues like reform of wage indexation, pensions, or social housing, while in countries at the other extreme like the UK, where all messages coming from Brussels are politically suspect, the CSRs are largely ignored.” Even though the ambition of this paper is not to conduct a comparative study in this area, it should be pointed out that, especially upon the publication of the EC’s CSRs, these recommendations as well as the (political) debate in this regard were picked up by the Flemish media.

Particular attention was also often paid to the budget, as non-observance of the provisions of the SGP may attract fines, politically a very sensitive matter, which is why it made the (Flemish) press. As VANDEN BOSCH stated (2014: 14): “(...) that budgetary recommendations are of a different nature to the recommendations for structural reforms. The former carry more weight than the latter, which are non-binding recommendations.” VANDEN BOSCH (2014) referred to the ‘left versus right divide’ during this period and stated (2014:13) “First, the reception of the EU’s recommendations varied among political
parties in Belgium, depending on their position on the political spectrum. On the left, parties tended to reject the content of the recommendations. The Commission was generally depicted as a liberal-conservative body which lacked legitimacy. Several events illustrate this political stance. (...) On the other hand, the right has used the EU recommendations as an argument for authority. This was made clear in the Informateur note of 25 June 2014 that would form the ruling agreement basis for assembling a centre-right coalition for the federal government. The 2014 CSRs were listed as a starting point and summary of the reforms that the future government would have to undertake.” In the 2011-2014 period, statements by European Commissioner Ollie Rehn and the messages sent out by him addressed to Belgium frequently resulted in Belgium proposing measures in a last ditch attempt to avoid possible European fines. A concrete example of the latter was the fact that the Federal Government on 21/11/2014 sent the EC a letter, which listed the structural measures the former was set to implement and which would have an impact on the budget. After Belgium was removed from the EDP in 2015, tension again rose in the spring of 2015 when European Commissioner Marianne Thyssen, on the eve of her visit to Belgium as part of the ES, warned Belgium against its substantial national debt.

For completeness’ sake, it should be pointed out that at Flemish level, the number of press communications issued by the ministers’ Cabinets of the previous and present Flemish Minister-Presidents on the ES was fairly limited in the 2010-2016 period. Partly as a result, bar a few exceptions, the socioeconomic measures of the Reform Programme itself attracted fairly little press coverage. This is also to do with the fact that the measures set out in the Reform Programmes relate to the socioeconomic policy, and any shortcomings established therein by the EC weigh less than when the MSs trespass against the provisions of the Stability and Growth Pact.

Flanders is currently building a new website devoted to the ES, which will also ensure that the information on Flanders and the ES is picked up more readily at a European level by also providing the information in English, whereby communication via the AAVR EU website could prove to be an important channel.

4.3. Challenges
As shown above, a lot of questions were raised in recent years with regard to governance in the context of the ES. There is no getting around the fact that over the years the governance in the context of the ES has been strengthened, which is especially true of the developments seen over the last twelve months where efforts are being made at EU-level to involve the European Parliament as well as the social partners more closely in the ES. With regard to involvement of the regions, (in)formal contacts between the EC and Flanders have gone from strength to strength, a development in which the role of the two ESOs in Belgium has been paramount. For all that, the EC continues to struggle to come to terms with the structural involvement of the local and regional authorities in the context of the ES. Even though the EC’s guidelines on how the NRPs are to be prepared contain a chapter on institutional issues and the involvement of stakeholders, in recent years neither the EC’s staff working document nor the country report have discussed the way this involvement is to be lent shape. Consequently, no further progress has been made in this area, with the EC maintaining its stance that the MSs themselves should assume responsibility for this involvement, and that the EC itself takes no standpoint on the matter.

The 2014-2019 Flemish coalition agreement is committed to a strong Flanders in a strong Europe. In this context the coalition agreement states, as we have seen, “(...) the necessity of separate recommendations”. Flanders is also asking for the EC to put forward region-specific recommendations. This request has also been included in the position of the Government of Flanders on the midterm review of the Europe 2020 strategy (see 4.2.2.) and in several statements made by the minister-president of Flanders. Another important element is article 4 (2) of the Treaty of the EU: “The Union shall respect the equality of Member States before the Treaties as well as their national identities, inherent in their fundamental structures, political and constitutional, inclusive of regional and local self-government.” The importance of region specific recommendations was also mentioned by PUCHER and MARTINOS (2015).
Even though over the years the EC’s semester documents increasingly refer to the measures of the C&Rs (DE BLAUWER, 2014), this has not been extended to include the actual CSRs. Because the EC formulates recommendations which do not directly relate to any given federated state, at times these recommendations are worded in general terms and are sometimes unclear. This comes with the risk that no government is prepared to assume a sufficient degree of ownership for the recommendation concerned, which in turn means no or insufficient measures are put in place. One illustration of a case where matters were unclearly phrased was CSR 5 of 2014, which said: “*Restore competitiveness by continuing the reform of the wage-setting system, including wage indexation, in consultation with the social partners and in accordance with national practice, to ensure that wage evolutions reflect productivity developments at sectorial and/or company levels as well as economic circumstances and to provide for effective automatic corrections when needed; by strengthening competition in the retail sectors, removing excessive restrictions in services, including professional services and addressing the risk of further increases of energy distribution costs; by promoting innovation through streamlined incentive schemes and reduced administrative barriers; and by pursuing coordinated education and training policies addressing the pervasive skills mismatches and regional disparities in early school leaving.*”

Even though it is clear that Flanders is making progress in the area of early school dropout (figure 2014: 7% and consequently already surpassing Belgium’s Europe 2020 target of 9.5% or that of the EU, which is 10%), the above extract on regional differences in terms of early school dropout was open to interpretation, leaving the exact added value thereof unclear to Flanders, all the more so when the Flemish early school dropout figures are showing a downward trend. In this connection it should be pointed out that when it comes to the Europe 2020 objectives with respect to employment, education (early school dropout, higher education graduates), poverty and social exclusion, research and development that apply to C&Rs, only Flanders has set itself concrete Europe 2020 targets, which it has included in the FRP. The concrete result is that the target which Belgium communicated to the EC in 2010 for early school dropout (9.5%) is rather artificial from a twofold perspective: 1) Belgium has no powers in the area of education; as outlined above, only the Communities are qualified, and 2) as only Flanders has a concrete Europe 2020 target with respect to early school dropout, this begs the question as to the ownership of this target at federal and regional level. This also has major implications for the preparation of the NRP. The NRP chapter on the follow-up of the Europe 2020 objectives only mentions the progress at Belgian level. For the progress at regional level, reference is made to the Regional Reform Programmes. However, as appears from the above, the regional Europe 2020 objectives and status updates are only found in the FRP. No such data are seen in the reform programmes of the other C&Rs.

Another more recent example illustrates the discrepancy between general findings and the practice in Flanders. For instance, recital 13 with respect to entrepreneurship stated: “*Administrative barriers should be reduced and measures should be taken to promote entrepreneurship and unleash business dynamism. The very low start-up rate suggests a business climate that is unfavourable to new activities and expansion.*” These fairly general findings glossed over the broad range of measures which Flanders has been implementing in the area of entrepreneurship and which were clearly illustrated in the NRP and the FRP alike. For example, in 2014 the CoR had ranked Flanders as a “European Entrepreneurial Region (EER)”, which is at odds with the EC’s finding (see 5.1.2.).

The new instruments (country reports) that were introduced with the 2015 ES as yet also fail to sufficiently establish the link with the measures with respect to governance put in place by the C&Rs. The country reports for Belgium (2015 and 2016) for instance fail to make any mention of the Flemish governance dimension in the context of the ES, while containing only a limited number of references to the measures put in place by the federated states. In addition, the regional figures and data are underused in the reports, to the effect that the added value of these reports for the federated states is limited, thereby failing to promote the sense of ownership at federated state level. Unsurprisingly, the Government of Flanders remarked on this in the 2016 FRP. The same remark could be done for the CSRs 2015 and 2016. The Minister-President had also stressed the importance of region-specific recommendations before the
The Government of Flanders is of the opinion that this principle ought also to be applied to the implementation of the policy. For one thing, regional and local executives need to be involved more closely in the ES. This means that territorial cohesion and territorial consideration should be given a more prominent position in the Country-Specific Recommendations. These recommendations may be articulated pursuant to a consultation of the parties directly concerned, i.e. the European regions and the local authorities. The fact that the Minister-President put out this message for the benefit of the CoR and before the Flemish Parliament, was no coincidence. As previously stated, the Flemish Parliament has become a major player in the ES. The AAoVR EU provides feedback to the Flemish Parliament on a very regular basis, for instance concerning meetings of the Council. At one of these feedback meetings at the Economy, Employment, Social Economy, Innovation and Science policy Committee on 1/10/2015 on the European Council of the Ministers of Employment held on 18-19/06/2015, several members of parliament from all parties, government and opposition, proposed that the CSRs should take account of Flanders and the Flemish powers to a much greater degree. A reflection round was announced on the matter. In any case, it is evident that region-specific recommendations would involve a stronger regional ownership. In that case there is no possibility of hiding behind the responsibility of other levels of government.

Alongside Flanders’ requirement for the EC to put forward region-specific recommendations, MAES (2016) also pointed out that there is room for improvements within the Government of Flanders itself with respect to the follow-up of Europe 2020 and these are therefore relevant to policy. Even though MAES indicates that, concerning the Flemish governance on poverty reduction, a number of points of focus and challenges exist (the lack of clear direction from the leading actors, inadequate ownership of the Europe 2020 objectives), his findings as such are likely to be of interest to the Government of Flanders (2016:119): “It is therefore up to the Government of Flanders to avoid undermining the integrated policy framework as shaped by the ES, rather to grasp the integrated approach of European policy with both hands, if it means to uphold and strengthen its position as one of the strongest regions in the EU. This task mainly lies with leading actors such as the ministers’ offices and departments. (...) As such, it is the task of ministers’ offices and departments to embody the European reflex. The relevant resources and people need to be committed to this end. Leaving it up to operational agencies and community organisations undermines the steering and centrally coordinating capacities.”

5. The ES interplay between the Federal Government and the C&Rs
5.1. From source to estuary: a look back on five years of interfederal ES interplay
With regard to the collaboration between the Federal Government and the C&Rs in the context of the ES, both the activities of the Directorate-General Coordination and European Affairs (DGE) and the activities of the Drafting Committee and the Policy Monitoring Committee (PBC) are key, with Flanders signing up to the intra-state route in this respect. Annex 2 visualises the interplay between the Federal Government and Flanders in the context of the ES.

5.1.1. DGE
DGE, which is part of the FPS (Federal Public Service, i.e. Ministry) Foreign Affairs, is the coordinating body in which the Federal Government and the C&Rs come together to establish coordinated Belgian positions for the meetings of at the European Councils of Ministers and the European Council. The cooperation agreement of 1994 regulates the cooperation between the Federal Government and the federated states in European matters. Within the context of the ES too, the DGE has a key role. DGE meetings are mostly intended to record a number of messages regarding key semester documents such as the AGS and the AMR, which can be put forward by Belgium at the discussions on the documents concerned at the Specific European Council of Ministers. Meetings of the ad-hoc DGE are usually convened at very short notice after the AGS has been published, which sometimes encroaches on the preparation time for such meetings, including at Flemish level. In recent years, a number of Flemish messages with respect to governance (role of the regions), and substance (importance of industrial policy, etc.) were raised at the DGE.
When the Juncker Commission came into office, the AGS 2015\textsuperscript{110} focused on three priorities: (1) relaunching investments, (2) pursuing structural reforms and (3) responsible fiscal policies. These three priorities were reiterated in the AGS 2016\textsuperscript{111}. As part of the midterm review of the Europe 2020 strategy (2014), the DGE also convened to consult on a Belgian position. The Government of Flanders had already adopted a position as early as 3/10/2014. This allowed Flanders to have maximum impact on the Belgian position, all the more so as the Federal Government itself had been very late in acting. Various Flemish elements (including e.g. the importance of the regions) were incorporated in the Belgian position\textsuperscript{112}: “the regions’ direct and structural involvement in the Strategy is essential, given their major social and economic levers within several Member States” but on the sensitive issues such as the importance of regional reform programmes and regional recommendations, no consensus was reached at two DGE meetings; these recommendations were ultimately omitted from the Belgian contribution of 29/10/2014. The Flemish positions on the review of the Europe 2020 strategy were also articulated at meetings of the AAVR EU with the offices of a number of European Commissioners. During the preparation of the Spring Meeting of the European Council too, the DGE plays a key role.

5.1.2. The Drafting Committee and the Policy Monitoring Committee (PBC) for the NRP

The Drafting Committee and the PBC play a major role in the preparation of the NRP and the preparation of the bilateral meetings with the EC. The Drafting Committee (consisting of the representatives of the administrations of the Federal Government and the C&Rs) puts together a draft NRP which is then submitted to the PBC (chaired by the Cabinet of the Prime Minister and made up of the representatives of the ministers’ cabinets of the Federal Government and the minister-president’s cabinets of the governments of the C&Rs)\textsuperscript{113}. Usually, the PBC convenes to meet once or twice on the preparation of the NRP. As Flanders is part of both committees, the Flemish contributions is ensured. The administrative working group ES also plays an important role for the Flemish input in the NRP by the drafting committee.

The preparations of the NRP were somewhat improved compared to previous years. This confirms the findings of BURSENS, HIELSCHER, COLOGNE (2013) on the important role of administrative actors. Up to and including the NRP 2014, the principal Flemish policy measures were included in each chapter of the NRP and in a number of annexes. Moreover, all NRP contained a summary of the FRP in annexes\textsuperscript{114}. Under the new Federal Government (2014), the role of the C&Rs in the preparation of the NRP was increased, among other things reverting to the relevant provision in the 2014-2019 Federal coalition agreement\textsuperscript{115}: “The Government shall make particular effort to align the policy and the positions of the Governments concerned at the various levels of governance in our country. This applies in particular to the National Reform Programme and the interim assessment of the EU 2020 strategy. The Belgian programmes and plans to be submitted shall consist of a clustering of the federal and federated state programmes and plans.” Flanders tactically seized on this additional opening, to the effect that from the NRP 2015 forward, the FRP was added to the NRP as an annexe in its entirety. This practice was consolidated in 2016.

As regards the time dimension, over the last five years, the Government of Flanders invariably adopted the FRP in late March\textsuperscript{116}, whereas the Federal Government usually does not approve the NRP any earlier than 15 April\textsuperscript{117} before it is transmitted to the EC, i.e. usually after the preferred date of 15 April set by the EC. This is to do with the fact that the Federal Government is keen to submit the NRP and the SP at the same time, so that if one plan falls behind on schedule, this has a knock-on effect for the other plan. The fact that the NRP activities usually do not get under way until early February and everything needs to be ready within the space of two months is not conducive, whether in terms of the plan’s process or its substance. The pressure of time is one of the aspects that meant the NRP for 2012, 2013 and 2014 were not formally submitted to the Consultation Committee for final approval. Also the new Federal Government was unable to observe the preferred date of 15 April either, but the involvement of the Consultation Committee was sought. The NRP 2015 and the SP 2015-2018 for instance were submitted to the Consultation Committee on 29/04/2015 before they were dispatched to the EC. The NRP 2016 was submitted to and approved by the Consultation Committee meeting of 18/04/2016. The SP 2016-2019 was submitted to the
Consultation Committee meeting of 29/04/2016, convening by way of an electronic procedure. Both documents were dispatched to the EC on 29/04/2016.

Compared with the NRPs of various other MSs, the involvement of and the visibility of the measures of the C&Rs is therefore very significant. In many CoR studies, reports and seminars for instance, this strong impact of the C&Rs on the preparation of the NRP of Belgium is frequently referenced. The involvement of local and regional actors in preparing the NRPs is highly rated.$^{118}$ “The results of the 2014 analysis concerning the involvement of local and regional authorities (LRAs) in the National Reform Programmes (NRPs) show a mixed picture. On the one hand, it shows that the involvement of LRAs is strongest notably in countries with a federal structure, such as Belgium; countries with a system of devolved administration, such as the UK; and countries with a tradition of participatory democracy, such as Sweden. On the other hand, factors such as small geographical size and population, as well as a lack of historical and political traditions in the area of multilevel governance, (e.g. Greece, Estonia and Cyprus) may have resulted in an almost negligible involvement of LRAs in the preparation of NRPs.” The summary figure below from the CoR publication in question demonstrates Belgium’s high score:

![Figure 3: Comparison of 2014 NRP analysis with 2013, 2012 and 2011, according to country (Source: CoR$^{119}$)](image)

Over the years, the contributions of the C&Rs have continued to expand. 2016 saw also a contribution from the German-speaking Community included in the NRP. Remarkable was for the first time the fact that the contribution of Wallonia was split into two: a reform programme of the Walloon Region and a reform programme of the French-speaking community. A suitable balance is sought between the contributions of the C&Rs in Belgium. This is also reflected in the order of the annexes (since 2015, the order of the Regional Reform Programmes as annexes is changed each year) and in the measures included in the tables with respect to the CSRs and the Europe 2020 objectives (aiming for a balance between the measures of the Federal Government and the C&Rs). The inclusion of the C&Rs in the NRP is obviously to do with the institutional structure, but also with the assertive attitude adopted by Flanders in the preparation of the NRP and how Flanders is keeping a close eye on the visibility of the Flemish measures in the NRP. It is also interesting to see how Flanders, through its specific governance in respect of the ES, is also enabling other dynamics. Looking at the degree of involvement of the Flemish Parliament in the context of the ES, this is quite unique in Belgium and presumably within the EU. Only Flanders involves its Parliament in a previous stage in the preparation of its reform programme. As yet, this does not apply to the Federal Government and the other CSRs. In the preparation of the NRP 2016, Flanders thus put ‘pressure’ on the other governments to take steps to raise the involvement of their parliamentary assemblies in the context
of the ES. All of which means that regions are able to apply ‘innovative governance’ and bring pressure to bear. Unlike in previous years, the NRP 2016 now contained a chapter on the involvement of stakeholders. However, as neither the Federal Government nor the other C&Rs had the kind of highly developed governance Flanders had at this point, only a vague sentence was included in the NRP: “The governments of the federated entities also involve the different stakeholders in the drafting of their own programmes.” It should be noted that one of the ESOs also gave an explanation in the Walloon Parliament, albeit after the submission of the NRP 121.

Country reports and CSRs

The CSRs are the product of a comprehensive analysis conducted by the EC. Over the 2010-2014 period, the EC working document attached to each of the country reports (‘staff working document’) listed many points of focus for the MSs concerned. According to the EC, a number of these points of focus were of such import that they prompted CSRs. They were the tip of the iceberg, a sign for the relevant MS to give priority to this. Nonetheless, it would soon become clear that it was advisable to follow up on other points of focus in the working document, as in some cases they acted as an indication of possible CSRs for the years ahead. For Belgium, this was the case with regard to greenhouse gas emissions. The 2011 working document said:122 “In spite of the influence of the economic crisis, the recent trend in greenhouse gas emissions is not in line with the Europe 2020 national target (-15% lower than 2005 levels). The NRP does not provide a quantitative assessment of the sufficiency of existing and proposed emissions reduction measures in order to reach the 2020 targets.” Although this was an unambiguous message from the EC, it did not yet lead to a very concrete CSR in 2011. This did come in 2012, and CSR 7 focused on the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions and the impact of transport activities and buildings. As the EC felt insufficient progress had been made since 2012, in its proposal for CSR 6 of 2014 an additional passage was included which related to transport:123; “Make sure that the contribution of transport is aligned with the objective of reducing road congestion.” The reverse is also possible: after the insufficient labour mobility between the regions had been included in the CSRs for many years, the measures included by the regions in the NRP 2014 convinced the EC, so that this issue did not return in the CSRs for 2014 and later on. In some cases, it could be inferred from the recitals and the CSRs that the EC assessed the employment rate for older people more positively than those for people with a migration background.124

VANDEN BOSCH (2014) made an evaluation of the implementation of the CSRs in Belgium (period 2011-2014) and stated that (2014:1) “After four rounds of the European Semester process of EU economic coordination, Belgium has done relatively little to comply with EU recommendations.” He argued (2014: 15) that: “The first is that the CSRs do not necessarily result in reforms being enacted at national level. And when measures are enacted, the causal link between the recommendations and the reforms undertaken can seem rather tenuous.”

From the 2015 ES forward, country reports are used, which integrate the previous ‘in-depth reports’ and the ‘working documents’ put out by the EC’s services. By working with Country reports MSs already acquire States an important insight into the formulation of possible recommendations by the EC. This would, in principle, to any ‘surprises’ for MSs to lead.

The EC reports (the former in-depth reports and staff working documents, and the current country reports) not only discuss(ed) the powers of the Federal Government, but also the powers held by the C&Rs. Not only do they now sometimes incorporate regional data for the C&Rs, indicating differences in the situation in the three Regions (e.g. youth unemployment)125, but they also discuss measures the C&Rs did or did not put in place, while specifying how the EC rates these measures. In its reports, the EC did not hesitate to indicate that measures of a given Region were lagging behind or were ahead of the other Regions126 127. In 2014, the EC went a step further by including a reference to the regional differences with respect to early school leaving128 in its proposal for CSR 5, which - as appears from the working document - trained the spotlight on Wallonia and Brussels. The same comparisons were made in the 2016 Country report129.
Since the first working document of the EC (May 2011), the number of references to the policies of the C&Rs has routinely risen. This also applies to the country reports 2015 and 2016. This is an example of the fact that the exchange of information that takes place between the EC and Belgium, as part of the bilateral meetings, is effectively picked up and monitored by the EC. In the 2016 FRP the references to Flemish data and measures by Government of Flanders were certainly recognised, although it was said that generally speaking, the Government of Flanders is of the opinion that the EC still too often talks about the ‘Belgian’ situation. As a result, it is not always clear whether its analysis pertains to all or only some levels of government. Also, the EC’s specific analyses insufficiently elaborate on concrete figures at the regional level (for instance regarding the economic situation and prognoses). In other cases, it is unclear why regional figures are either given (early school leaving) or not (youth unemployment, long-term unemployment), despite the fact that the figures between the Regions reveal significant differences and education and labour market are very closely linked. Finally, the EC does not propose any potential customised policy solutions at the regional level, but often limits itself to giving general measures for all the policy levels together.”

It should be noted that the CSRs of 2015 and 2016 did not refer to the regional level. The streamlining of the ES (with less and more focused recommendations shorter) doesn’t contribute to specific references to the regional level in the CSRs.

Even though the CSRs themselves do not contain the kind of detailing mentioned above for the C&R, the CSR 2013 very expressly pointed to the need for collaboration between the different levels of government, which is obviously linked to the institutional dimension. The attention for a higher level of coordination between the levels of government has systematically increased. The EC’s 2011 working document shows that the topic of greater coordination was still largely confined to the labour market policy at the time. In the 2012 working document, mention was also made of the climate and energy policy, alongside the labour market policy. The 2013 working document pointed out that enhanced coordination between the Regional Governments and the Federal Government is crucial, going on to refer to public finance, competitiveness, labour and product markets and greenhouse gas emissions in this connection. In the recitals and in the 2013 CSRs (1, 5 and 7) themselves, the coordination issue was repeatedly mentioned. The same applied to the 2014 CSRs (1 and 6). In the 2014 working document and the recitals on the EC’s CSRs themselves, a number of opportunities and points of focus with regard to the sixth state reform were highlighted throughout the text. In the 2016 Country report too, the EC pointed to the inadequate degree of coordination between the various levels of government in a number of areas (public finance, research and development, education, social inclusion, immigration and integration).

Bilateral meetings

The PBC takes responsibility for preparing the bilateral meetings with the EC. With regard to the 2011 ES, no bilateral meetings on the implementation of the CSRs were planned at the time, as this semester was still wholly dominated by the design and preparation of the NRPs. The only bilateral meeting in the context of the 2012 ES took place on 26/01/2012. As stated above, the ES was strengthened in the autumn of 2012. The fact that the EC was serious about enhanced consultation between the EC and the MSs soon became apparent in the autumn of 2012. In mid-September 2012, the EC’s Secretariat-General addressed a letter to the Belgian Permanent Representation to the EU, announcing three bilateral encounters. It was notable that formal bilateral meetings (to follow up on the CSRs) sometimes prompted the organisation of technical ad hoc bilateral meetings, which often revolved around a specific issue. This was certainly the case in 2013, when a number of these ad hoc bilateral meetings had an (in)direct link with the sixth state reform. Since the 2015 ES, the number of formal bilateral meetings between the EC and Belgium has been restricted to two. Traditionally, the EC uses the first bilateral meeting of December to invite Belgium to present the measures with respect to the follow-up of the CSRs and the Europe 2020 objectives. In part based on the outcomes, the EC performs its analysis of the country report, which appears at the end of February.
Over the years, a certain practice has streamlined the meetings between the EC and Belgium. Based on an EC questionnaire (which usually comes two weeks ahead of the meeting), a brief preparatory interfederal consultation takes place at the Prime Minister’s Cabinet. This interfederal consultation is staged in the form of an extensive PBC, chaired by the Prime Minister’s Cabinet and attended by the Federal Ministers’ cabinets concerned, the representatives of the Ministers-President of the R&Cs and a representative from the Permanent Representation of Belgium to the EU. At this committee arrangements are made as to which government will be saying what at the bilateral meeting ahead. At this consultation, often the regions will make arrangements among themselves regarding their input at the bilateral meeting.

While the preparation for these bilateral meetings has become routine, the situation still leaves room for improvement. In the 2011-2014 period, the preparatory consultation meeting was usually held very shortly before the meeting itself, so that on occasion not enough time was left to properly align matters between the levels of government or to bring in additional information. This has improved since the new Federal Government came into office, but the fact remains that the way things work is not based on integrated documents, so that each level of government formulates its own input and the document is insufficiently integrated. In some cases, no actual integrated document is available containing the elements of answers to the EC’s queries. However, each bilateral meeting is followed by a report drawn up by the Permanent Representation of Belgium to the EU. On the Flemish side, the bilateral meeting is prepared by the ES working group, which provides the Cabinet of the Flemish Minister-President with the elements of the answers. In some cases, a preparatory Flemish inter-cabinet working group meeting is also held.

The Belgian delegation usually consists of at least one representative each for the Permanent Representation of Belgium to the EU, the Cabinet of the Prime Minister, the Cabinet of the Minister-President of Flanders, the Walloon Region/French Community and the Brussels Capital Region.

From the agenda and the queries from the EC, specific points of focus and concerns of the EC come to the fore with regard to the implementation of the CSRs. In this way, the EC indicates to the MS concerned the need to implement measures, in a bid to avoid new CSRs. The proposed agenda is not always followed to the letter. Because of the limited timeframe (1 hour), in most cases not all CSRs are dealt with. Sometimes they are bundled together, and some items have in the past been deferred to the next bilateral meeting or ad hoc consultation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ES Bilateral meetings (formal and ad hoc)</th>
<th>Number and substance CSRs (main thrusts)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EC – BE (Federal Government and C&amp;Rs)</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| 2011 | (1) budget (correction excessive deficit, etc.)  |
|      | (2) long-term sustainability of public finance (curbing age-related Expenditure, ...) |
|      | (3) address the structural weaknesses of the financial sector |
|      | (4) reform system of wage bargaining and wage indexation, |
|      | (5) increasing labour market participation / improve the effectiveness of active labour policies |
|      | (6) fostering retail industry competition / promoting competition on the gas and electricity markets |

<p>| 2012 | 26/01/2012 (formal) |
|      | (1) budget (correction excessive deficit, ...) |
|      | (2) long-term sustainability of public finance |
|      | (3) stimulate capital increase of the weakest banks |
|      | (4) boost job creation and competitive, reform the system of wage bargaining and wage indexation, ... |
|      | (5) pursue the initiated reform of the unemployment benefit system / Take advantage of the planned further regionalization of labour market competencies / extend existing activation efforts to all age groups |
|      | (6) furthering competition in the retail industry / network sectors |
|      | (7) reducing greenhouse gas emissions (significant contribution from |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Meeting Type</th>
<th>Key Topics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>19/10/2012</td>
<td>formal</td>
<td>(1) sustainability of public finance (excessive deficit correction, increase the transparency of burden sharing and accountability across government layers, …)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6/12/2013</td>
<td>ad hoc Belgian competitiveness</td>
<td>(2) public finance (retirement age, social security systems for the elderly, …)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5/02/2013</td>
<td>formal</td>
<td>(3) improving cost-competitiveness and wage formation, …</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>23/04/2013</td>
<td>formal</td>
<td>(4) competition in network sectors and service industry, …</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>14/05/2013</td>
<td>ad hoc Tax regimes and state reform</td>
<td>(5) shifting taxation from labour to less growth-disruptive taxation, …</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>29/11/2013</td>
<td>formal</td>
<td>(6) Further reduce disincentives to work/ increase interregional labour mobility/ ;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>16/01/2014</td>
<td>ad hoc State reform</td>
<td>(7) reducing greenhouse gas emissions (buildings and transport sector, clear division of efforts between the federal and regional authorities, …)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3/02/2014</td>
<td>formal</td>
<td>(8) budget (powerful 2014 budgetary measures, a balanced contribution by all levels of government to the fulfilment of fiscal rules, …)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7/04/2014</td>
<td>formal</td>
<td>(9) comprehensive tax reform, …</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12/12/2014</td>
<td>formal</td>
<td>(10) contain future public expenditure growth relating to ageing, …</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>22/04/2015</td>
<td>formal</td>
<td>(11) raising labour market participation, …</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>30/04/2015</td>
<td>formal</td>
<td>(12) restore competitiveness by continuing the reform of the wage-setting/ strengthening competition in the retail sectors/ removing excessive restrictions in services/ addressing the risk of further increases of energy distribution costs/ promoting innovation/ pursing coordinated education and training policies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>09/12/2015</td>
<td>formal</td>
<td>(13) reducing greenhouse gas emissions (buildings and transport, clear distribution of efforts and burdens between the federal and regional entities, …)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>31/03/2016</td>
<td>formal</td>
<td>(14) public finance and pensions (fiscal adjustment, linking statutory retirement age to life expectancy, enforceable distribution of fiscal targets among all government levels, …)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>22/04/2015</td>
<td>formal</td>
<td>(15) taxation (comprehensive tax reform, …)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>30/04/2015</td>
<td>Visit European Commissioner Dombrovskis</td>
<td>(16) improve the functioning of the labour market</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>09/12/2015</td>
<td>formal</td>
<td>(17) restore competitiveness (wages evolve in line with productivity, …)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>31/03/2016</td>
<td>formal</td>
<td>(18) innovation / Investments in transport infrastructure and energy generation capacity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Bilateral meetings EC – Belgium and CRSs (period 2011-2016)

The central topic at the formal meetings is almost always the implementation of the CSRs by Belgium. Which explains why topics such as the budget and public finance, competitiveness, labour and product markets, climate (greenhouse gas emissions), frequently featured on the agenda. From 2013 forward, the CSRs also vigorously called for enhanced coordination between the Federal and Regional levels of government. The keynote of the formal bilateral meetings of 2013-2014 was the degree of attention the EC brought to the sixth state reform and the importance of future policy consistency and coordination in this context. The focus was on labour market policy, but the EC also wanted to know which policy measures the regions would be taking after the transfer of powers regarding such things as energy policy (distribution system tariffs, etc.). To clarify the reform of the Belgian state and the ramifications thereof, during the 2013 ES (14/05/2013) and the 2014 ES (16/01/2014) ad hoc bilateral meetings were organised at Belgium’s suggestion. The fact that the EC’s drafts of the 2014 CSRs also highlighted the opportunities of the state reform serves to prove the added value of the bilateral meetings, among other
things with respect to supplying and clarifying information in this area by the Federal Government and the C&Rs. At the end of almost every bilateral meeting, elements deemed important by Belgium as part of the ongoing ES were briefly discussed. In this way, the MS was offered the opportunity to send a number of messages to the EC. During the 2011-2014 period, Belgium repeatedly asked for attention to be paid to the importance of industrial policy, the fact that - alongside budgetary orthodoxy - growth and jobs are also important, etcetera.

The introduction of the country reports in 2015 whipped up a new dynamic. Both at the second bilateral meeting during the 2015 ES and the 2016 ES, the point of departure was the Country report. Thus, the agenda for the bilateral meeting of March 2016 was prepared in mutual consultation between Belgium and the EC, featuring measures relating to the tax shift, the fiscal track and measures with respect to the labour market. As far as measures concerning the labour market were concerned, the regions were able to bring their main ones into focus at the bilateral meeting. From the 2015 ES forward, Flanders intensified the way it used these bilateral meetings to send the EC a number of important messages. For instance, the representative of the Cabinet of the Flemish Minister-President raised the issue of fostering a climate that is conducive to entrepreneurship at the bilateral meeting of April 2015. Flanders felt this matter was represented in an unduly negative light in the country report. In spite of this intervention by the Cabinet of the Flemish Minister-President, the matter was also included in the recitals to the 2015 C&Rs. Concerning the 2015 ES, both the fact that the bilateral meeting with the EC was planned late (end of April) and the fact that little to no account was taken of crucial comments at the bilateral meetings or in the texts of the NRP itself, were considered to be a major bottleneck by Flanders. This was also the case for the ES 2016. In the FRP 2016 a subchapter was included concerning investments in transport infrastructure and this was also raised by the minister-president in his presentation of the draft FRP in the Flemish Parliament; a meeting that also was attended by the ESO. Despite these clarifications CSR3 for 2016 contained “Address shortfalls in investment in transport infrastructure (...)”. This goes to show that there is also room for improvement in the flow of information within the EC concerning the information delivered by the MS and regions in the context of the ES.

The EC views the restyled ES as a key instrument for intensifying contacts with the MSs at high political level. On 30/04/2015, the Vice-President of the EC, Valdis Dombrovskis, and the person responsible for the euro and the social dialogue, visited Belgium in the context of the ES. This consultation included meetings with the Ministers of Finance and Budget of the Federal Government and the Governments of the C&Rs, and a meeting with the social partners represented in the National Labour Council and the Central Economic Council. European Commissioner Marianne Thyssen was scheduled to visit Belgium on 22/03/2016 in the context of the 2016 ES. During her visit, she was due to meet with representatives of the Federal Government and the Governments of the C&Rs and with the social partners, a fairly similar agenda to 2015. Owing to the terrorist attacks in Brussels, Mrs Thyssen’s visit was cancelled.

For completeness’ sake it should also be pointed out that, alongside the aforesaid formal meetings at political level (where the representatives of the ministers’ Cabinets of the Federal Government and the C&Rs wait in line), there are also a number of Fact Finding Missions (FFMs) made to the MSs by the EC, which tend to take place more at administrative level. These FFMs may vary in terms of scope and substance from one year to the next. The main aim of the FFMs is to gather (detailed) information for the EC which may be important for compiling reports, such as the country reports. One particularly important FFM is the one that relates to competitiveness. Within Belgium, a rotation system has been set up specifically for this FMM between the Federal Government and the C&Rs, whereby Flanders acted as the host for the 2015 meeting. Coordination within the Government of Flanders of the preparations for the FFM with respect to competitiveness is in the hands of the EWI Department, with the support of the ES working group. The 2016 FFM concerning competitiveness for Belgium was more limited in scope. An FFM was conducted between the EC and Flanders (EWI in this case) on innovation, research and development on 16/02/2016; a second FFM between the EC and Belgium (Federal Government and the C&Rs) into the economy took place on 23/02/2016. The fact that in February 2016 the EC also launched
an FFM into Flanders, is not without significance. It illustrates the EC's attention for developments at regional level. Recent years have also witnessed consultation meetings being held on a regular basis between the EC and the Federal Government and the C&Rs on employment as part of the ES.

**Consultation concerning the proposals of CSRs**

Based on the bilateral meetings with the MSs at political and administrative level and the NRPs and its own analysis set out in the country report, the EC compiles its draft CSRs and has been publishing them around mid-May since the streamlined 2015 ES. Compared with the 2010-2014 period, the draft CSRs are published two weeks earlier, because the broad outlines or prospective recommendations have already been included in the Country report. The aim is thus to exclude surprises as much as possible. ZEITLIN and VANHERCKE (2015:71) states: "The groundwork for the CSRs is prepared by Country Teams led by SECGEN, with bottom-up input from desk officers and support from horizontal policy units across a wide range of DGs (…)". It is also important to note that the EC also pays attention to some overall coherence of the CSRs between the different MSs and this is also a relevant factor during the discussions of the CSRs in the preparatory committees. The MSs are given a limited amount of time to provide the EC with amendments (stating reasons) to these CSRs, as applicable. This is important because further discussions can only take place at the preparatory committees concerned (EFC, EPC, EMCO and SPC) of the Council of the Ministers of Employment, Social Policy, Public Health and Consumer Affairs (EPSCO) and the ECOFIN Council based on these amendments. The committees (using the “comply or explain” principle) operate under multilateral supervision. Over the years agreements concerning the division of responsibilities between council formations and committees in discussing the CSRs were made.

With regard to the EMCO and the EPC, a preparatory interfederal consultation meeting is held, in which Flanders participates for EMCO and EPC (respectively the policy area WSE – and the policy areas WSE and WVG). For the other committees (EFC and EPC) there is no formal Flemish involvement. The European Councils of Ministers themselves are obviously also prepared via the DGE. Ultimately, the CSRs are approved at the June meeting of the European Council before they are formally adopted at the ECOFIN Council (July). Although the role of the aforesaid committees in the ES (including in multilateral surveillance, reviews, etc.) is very important, Flanders itself is not formally represented at the committees concerned (see 5.2.2.).

It is desirable to take this opportunity to briefly look back at the way in which Belgium dealt with the proposals set out in the EC’s CSRs. On 30/05/2012 the EC published its draft CSRs. Belgium put forward a number of proposed amendments. Belgium expressed reservations with regard to CSRs 2 and 4, stating that it did not challenge the aims of the recommendations, but did have a problem with the excessively prescriptive nature of the recommendations. At the European Council of 28-29/06/2012, Belgium made a statement on CSR 2 (pensionable age) and CSR 4 (wage indexation).

On 29/05/2013, the EC announced its proposed CSRs for 2013. While these recommendations were hardly a surprise to Belgium, it was notable that they were more detailed, with more emphasis on concrete and specific timing schedules and the acceleration of structural reforms. This meant that the EC was dissatisfied with the degree of progress made. In various recommendations, reference was made to the need for arrangements to be put in place between the Federal Government and the Regions (CSR 1, 7) and among the Regions themselves (CSR 6, regional labour mobility). This message from the EC did not come out of the blue, as we have seen earlier. What clearly came to the fore from the three bilateral meetings with the EC was that the EC placed a premium on policy alignment and policy consistency (link with the sixth state reform). The MSs had until 3/06/2013 to submit any amendments to the EC. Although the C&Rs were informed of this, the Federal Government did not set up an interfederal coordination meeting (Federal–C&Rs), which is common practice as part of the preparations for the bilateral meetings (EC–Belgium) with regard to the CSRs. The result was that only federal amendments were put forward on time, and the discussions were held in the aforesaid committees based on these. In 2013, this was a demerit in terms of the degree of support from the C&Rs for the amendments in question. Therefore, the
CSR amendment process was unable to take into account a Flemish finding with respect to recital 17 (a sub-passage on education)142 “These issues come to the fore with regard to taxation and the burden sharing of budgetary efforts including for education and social security, which, in general, requires more cooperation and coordination.” which later appeared not to be in reference to Flanders. On 9/07/2013, the ECOFIN Council formally adopted the 7 CSRs. Comparing these versions against the EC’s draft versions, a small number of substantive adjustments143 had been made to CSRs 2, 3, 4, 6 and 7. Belgium was especially looking to see CSR 2 amended, which is exactly where the main adjustments had been brought144. With respect to CSR 2, the EC’s proposal “by quickly phasing out early-exit systems” was ultimately replaced by “by pursuing the ongoing reforms to reduce the early-exit possibilities” and the passage “Accelerate the adoption of a decision to link the statutory retirement age to life expectancy” was replaced by “Increase the effective retirement age by aligning retirement age or pension benefits to changes in life expectancy.” Belgium was not alone in this, as pointed out by ZEITLIN and VANHERCKE (2014:82): “The key case in point in 2013 concerned pension reform, the flashpoint of conflict the previous year between the SPC, the Commission, and the economic policy actors. Thus for eight Member States (AT, BE, CZ, ES, FI, FR, LU, MT), an across-the-board injunction to ‘link the statutory retirement age to life expectancy’ was replaced by a recommendation to ‘increase the effective retirement age’”.

On 2/06/2014, the EC published its proposals for CSRs. Belgium received six. Compared with recent years, the MSs were given even less time (32 hours) to hand in their amendments. However, even though a number of arrangements had been made on the submission of amendments between the Cabinet of the Prime Minister and the cabinets of the Ministers-President, again no interfederal consultation meeting was held, to the effect that the amendments ultimately submitted were without Flanders’ agreement. At the meetings of the committees it emerged that very few of the proposed amendments submitted by Belgium were ultimately retained. An important amendment was introduced at CSR 3 (pension issue): the passage “(…)aligning the statutory retirement age and career length requirements to changes in life expectancy” was changed into “aligning the retirement age to changes in life expectancy (…)”145 and formally adopted by the ECOFIN Council meeting of 8/07/2014. The tight deadlines that were used by the EC, had a significant impact on the consultation between the federal government and R&Cs, something BURSENS, HIELSCHER, COLOGNE (2014:178) had already noted: “The more the EU uses severe deadlines in more policy areas (e.g. the European semester), the more a broadly organized domestic consultation process comes under pressure.”

This less than perfect Belgian coordination practice, with respect to formulating amendments to the CSRs over the 2011-2014 period, stands in contrast to the new method adopted by the Cabinet of the Prime Minister, i.e. the assigning of a prominent position to the PBC when it comes to formulating amendments to the CSRs. It should be said that the Prime Minister’s Cabinet was helped by the fact that, compared with the 2011-2014 period, the drafts of the 2015 CSRs had been published earlier, which – as already stated – had everything to do with the new governance in the context of the ES, in which country reports were used146. The draft CSRs 2015 appeared on 13/05/2015. The MSs had until 22/05/2015 to submit their proposed amendments. At a PBC meeting in May 2015, the prospective amendments to the CSRs were discussed. At Flemish level, an inter-cabinet working group meeting was held on 19/05/2016 to discuss the CSRs. The meeting mainly asked for attention to be paid to the importance of Regional Reform Programmes and the fact that entrepreneurship was represented in an unduly negative light in the recitals. Contrary to the previous years, no amendments were proposed for the actual CSRs; both the Federal Government and Flanders were able to identify with the CSRs to a fair degree. This also hinted at a certain break with Period 2011-2014. This is not surprising because the recommendations were more in line with the policy included in the federal coalition agreement and the coalition agreement of Flanders.

However, a number of amendments were proposed to the recitals themselves. Flanders was mainly aiming to have included the fact that the C&Rs had prepared Reform Programmes and that amendments were necessary regarding the negative description of the business climate. The Belgian representatives at the preparatory committees were instructed to defend these amendments. Even though the ultimate result was fairly meagre, they did manage to secure one amendment to the recitals, making the link with
the Regional Reform Programmes:\(^\text{147}\): “The various governments, in their agreements and their reform programmes make reference to the need for stronger links between education, training and employment actors so as to improve linguistic, vocational and educational training and develop alternative training for students and the unemployed.” In CSR 1 a slight adjustment was made.

A similar consultation process was used in the formulation of the draft CSRs 2016. The three recommendations for Belgium were published on 18/05/2016 and Belgium, like other MSs, had to formulate its amendments by 25/05/2016 at the latest. This time schedule allowed the federal government to start a consultation process with the C&Rs. Prior to the meeting of the PBC on 23/05/2016, a preparatory consultation meeting was organized between the federal government and the C&Rs at the administrative level. At the Flemish level, the PBC was prepared by a Flemish ICW. The Flemish general impression was that the measures included in the FRP 2016 were not taken into account. Since the EC in some cases (e.g., on education, transport infrastructure, ..) did not mention the regions, the result was that several generalizations were used which related to Belgium as a whole. The result was that the CSRs did not adequately reflect the information that Flanders had included in its FRP 2016 and the information given in the framework of the FFMs. The fact that the EC again made no reference to the regional reform programmes was a bummer. Tension exists between the analysis of the EC and the demand of Flanders for more customization of the CSRs (and recitals).

With regard to Belgium it’s obvious that, compared with the proposals of the EC, a lot of adjustments to the final LSA were done in 2012 and 2013. In this period almost every LSA has undergone a change. Since the streamlining of the ES, the number of CSRs is further limited. Notwithstanding the fact that a lot of CSRs underwent changes in the past few years (and especially in the period 2011-2013), it must be said that most of the approved amendments didn’t imply major substantive changes (they were often related to nuances and clarifications).

![Figure 4: number of CSRs 2011-2016 and number of CSRs that underwent changes (Belgium)](image)

5.1.3. Inter-cabinet working groups on the SP

With regard to the fiscal dimension of the ES, the SP plays a key role. Every April, the MS are required to lay out their fiscal plans for the next three years and this exercise is based on economic governance rules in the Stability and Growth Pact (SGP), which aim to prevent the emergence or exacerbation of fiscal difficulties.\(^\text{148}\)

It is safe to say that, as a result of the Treaty on Stability, Coordination and Governance (TSCG) in the EMU, the six-pack and the two-pack, there has been a significant additional impact. In particular the DPB was a new instrument introduced as a result of the two-pack. Flanders is involved in the preparation of both plans (SP and DPB). In this, the political level is able to draw on support from the Department Finance and Budget, which also participates in the ES working group. At Flemish level, the ES working group is involved in the preparation of some specific chapters of the DPB (i.e., those that relate to the link between the budget and the CSRs and the Europe 2020 objectives).
With regard to Belgium’s DBP, the contribution from the C&Rs is needed alongside the contribution from the Federal Government. For Flanders, the involvement of the Flemish Parliament is also a factor. As stated earlier, article B3 of the Flemish Parliament’s Rules sets out that the Flemish DBP (as the contribution to Belgium’s DBP) is to be discussed at the relevant committee by 7 October of each year at the latest. As with the FRP, the Flemish DBP is discussed at the General Policy, Finance and Budget Committee.

Article 2, §4, of the cooperation Agreement of 13/12/2013 on the implementation of article 3, §1 of the TSCG provides for a mechanism to share the budgetary targets among the various sections of the general government. This cooperation agreement also had a major impact on the High Council of Finance: from this time forward, the Division also had representatives from the C&Rs on board. In summary, it is fair to say that, as part of the update of the SP, the annual fiscal targets of the general government are distributed based on the opinion delivered by the High Council of Finance’s Borrowing Requirements Division. On the fiscal targets of the governments, prior consultation takes place at the Consultation Committee. The contracting parties undertake to make every effort to reach consensus. However, the reality is that there is usually greater disagreement over the distribution of the fiscal efforts between the parties (Federal Government and the C&Rs) involved than over measures included in the NRP. The fact that this is about fiscal matters may have something to do with it. Following the opinion from the High Council of Finance, interfederal inter-cabinet working group meetings are held with participants from the Federal Government and the C&Rs. For Flanders, these are representatives from the 3 political parties that make up the Government of Flanders (anyway always members of the ministers’ cabinets of the Flemish Minister-President and the Flemish Minister of Budget). With regard to the timetable too, there is a point of difference with the NRP, which gets under way earlier, i.e. the beginning of February. In 2015, the 2015-2018 SP failed to be approved by the Consultation Committee, which only acknowledged it. In 2016, this was also the case. The 2016-2019 SP was submitted to a meeting of the Consultation Committee held on 29/04/2016, convening by electronic meeting. It was also on the agenda of the Federal Government meeting of 29/04/2016 and submitted to the EC ahead of the 30 April deadline. Both the timeline and an element in the Prime Minister’s press release: “Further to consultation with the federated entities and the Consultation Committee, the Stability Programme has been referred to the European Commission”, and the difference with the NRP “At the proposal of Prime Minister Charles Michel, the Federal Government Cabinet approves the 2016 National Reform Programme”, show that tensions arose over the SP as submitted by Belgium and that it was therefore not formally approved by the Federal Government and the C&Rs.

5.1.4. Other cooperation initiatives
There is no doubt that the pressure from the EC (follow-up of the CSRs, submitting DPBs, et cetera) caused the Federal Government and the Regions to consult more intensively. This begs the question as to whether policy consequences can be attached here too. The Federal coalition agreement of 1/12/2011 underscored the importance of ‘collaborative federalism’ in the area of European programmes and targets and the role of the Consultation Committee in this respect. Alongside the cooperation in the preparation of the NRPs and the preparation of the bilateral meetings with the EC, reference can be made to a number of cooperation agreements concluded between the Federal Government and the C&Rs, such as the ones on budgetary stability, on the guidance and follow-up of job seekers, and a cooperation protocol for the institution of an Interministerial Conference of the Ministers of Education of the three Communities. Between the Regions too, a cooperation Agreement was concluded on the kilometre charge for lorries. Alongside these cooperation agreements, progress was also made in respect of the competitiveness issue highlighted in the CSRs and the in-depth analyses. In 2013, the then Flemish Minister-President put the competitiveness issue high on the agenda. Interfederal consultation resulted in an Interfederal Pact for Competitiveness, Employment and Recovery being approved at the Consultation Committee meeting of 17/12/2013, setting out measures in this area from the Federal Government and the C&Rs alike.
The fact that the Europe 2020 strategy occupies a central position in EU policy is also in evidence from the alignment of resources in the context of the EU cohesion policy and the Europe 2020 objectives. In April 2014, the Regions reached an agreement on sharing the cohesion resources in Belgium. On 23/04/2014, the Belgian Agreement was submitted to the EC.

Belgium used the bilateral meetings to apprise the EC of a number of points of focus. This was the case in the run-up to the bilateral meeting on 19/10/2012 for instance, when Flanders put the issue of industrial policy firmly on the agenda of the preparatory consultation meeting at the PBC. Flanders considered this to be a matter of top priority, in light of the close-down of Ford Genk which had just been announced (autumn of 2012). For one and a half years, the Flemish Minister-President assumed a pioneering role, seeking attention at European level for the importance of the industrial policy (Vanguard-Initiative\textsuperscript{153}).

Intensive consultations (at the DGE and elsewhere) also took place between the Federal Government and the Regions, and Belgium helped to put the industrial policy on the agenda of the 2014 Spring Meeting of the European Council\textsuperscript{154}.

However, this enhanced cooperation between the federal government and the R&Cs did not mean swift progress would be made on all scores, with the climate and energy targets as a case in point. In the preparation of the NRP (spring 2011), agreement was reached on the concrete targets for 4 of the 5 Europe 2020 objectives. Only for the climate and energy targets the burden had to be shared internally between the various Governments in Belgium. In spite of the clear wording in CSR 7 of 2013\textsuperscript{155} “Take concrete measures and agree a clear division of efforts between the federal and regional authorities to ensure progress towards reaching the targets for reducing greenhouse gas emissions from non- Emissions Trading Scheme activities, in particular from transport and buildings” and the queries put forward by the EC at the bilateral meetings as to the progress made in this respect, no breakthrough was reached during the Flemish Presidency of the National Climate Committee (since 1/01/2014) either. Or, as stated in the NRP 2014\textsuperscript{156}: “At present, the National Climate Commission is making the necessary arrangements to define a clear division of tasks between the federal and regional authorities in a cooperation agreement.” A political agreement failed to materialise before the Consultation Committee, partly because the parties failed to reach terms over the distribution of the revenues from emission rights. The Consultation Committee meeting of 19/03/2014 proved equally fruitless in this respect. This had not escaped the EC’s notice either. In CSR 6 of 2014\textsuperscript{157}, the matter was picked up again by the EC. Against the backdrop of the international conference on climate change in Paris (30/11–12/12/2015), the Federal Government and the C&Rs faced substantial pressure to reach a solid climate agreement at Belgian level (in light of the Europe 2020 objectives). After a first deal had been swept off the table, the Federal Government and the C&Rs eventually reached terms on 5/12/2015, i.e. during the actual climate change conference. At Flemish level too, this meant that Flemish targets were now in place for all Europe 2020 objectives, which were then included in the 2016 FRP (see 4.2.4.). The sharing of the Europe 2020 objectives with respect to climate and energy had been a very fraught process over the 5 previous years. This is illustrated by a number of findings which were also indicated by HAPPAERTS (2015). However, HAPPAERTS himself had already put forward an initial qualification (2015: ) “(...) the complex multi-level architecture actually allows them to maintain those low ambitions, and how it can even strengthen that tendency. (...) Nevertheless, recent developments in Wallonia indicate that the limiting effects and inertia of the Belgian system can be breached when a willing political actor comes forward. The formulation of the new Walloon climate plan will point out whether those dynamics can counter the conclusions outlined here, and come forward with ambitious policy measures. As for now, no ambitious climate policies have been adopted in Belgium for the post-2012 period. It should be pointed out that, since the Paris Summit, Flanders experienced a fresh dynamic with respect to climate policy. In part at the initiative of the Flemish Minister-President, on 19/04/2016 an inaugural Flemish Climate Summit\textsuperscript{158} was held, with an extra 300 million euros set aside for the Flemish climate policy up to 2019\textsuperscript{159}.

On the issue of sharing the budgetary efforts between the C&Rs too, little progress was made. Small wonder that this was picked up on in the 2016 Country report \textsuperscript{160}: “The existing budgetary coordination
mechanisms do not appear sufficiently effective, given the decentralized government structure, the absence of hierarchy between different levels of government, and the fact that there is no commitment to predefined targets.” In her study of the adaptation of the Flemish budget for 2016, the Belgian Court of Audit advocated for intensive discussions between the various governments to come yet to an agreement for the distribution of the fiscal efforts. The EC continuously stressed the importance of “an enforceable distribution of fiscal targets among all government levels.” VANDEN BOSCH (2014) too referred to the challenge of reaching a consensus in the Belgian federation concerning this issue.

5.2. Challenges
5.2.1. General
The above goes to show that the ES methodology has since taken root in the relations between the Federal Government and the C&Rs to a fair degree. With regard to the preparation of the NRPs, the preparation of the bilateral meetings with the EC and the drafting of prospective amendments to the CSRs, this cooperation is currently running fairly smoothly; the role assumed by the Drafting Committee at administrative level with regard to the NRP is partly responsible for this. However, it might be advantageous if the Drafting Committee and the PBC were able to convene on a more permanent and structural basis throughout the course of the year (from CSRs in year X to CSRs in year X+1) and the cooperation were not restricted to the time period of the bilateral meetings and the preparation of the NRP itself. The preparations of the bilateral meetings by the PBC too could be more dynamic. At most, a list is made of which government says what, but there is not enough deliberation on strategic positioning in relation to the EC. The good news is that, since 2014, progress has been made with the formulation of amendments to the CSRs. Whereas previously this process was not very transparent, in 2015 and again in 2016 a PBC meeting was held in which the ‘Belgian’ amendments to the CSRs were prepared. For the rest, it would be a good thing if the Heads of Delegation of the Regional Representations to the AAVR EU were able to take part in the bilateral meetings between the EC and Belgium.

Therefore, while there is certainly room for improvement, the pressure from the EC did result in increased consultation between the Federal Government and the C&Rs in the context of the ES. It also resulted in cooperation agreements being concluded on specific policy areas (including budgetary policy, labour market policy, the kilometre charge for lorries), joint policies being staked out on other topics (competitiveness pact) and items being put on the European agenda (industrial policy). For all that, the impact of European policy in the context of the ES is not all-embracing, as appears from the fact that, even though terms were ultimately reached (albeit after six years) on the internal sharing of the burdens in the areas of energy and climate, this deal came largely as a result of international pressure from the Paris Summit and the fear that Belgium would lose face if no internal burden sharing deal was reached. Also, the fact that the internal fiscal coordination mechanisms are still insufficiently effective has been an EC point of focus for several years, with insufficient progress being made in spite of this pressure.

5.2.2. Specifically: amending the 1994 Cooperation Agreement
The sixth state reform transferred substantial clusters of powers to the C&Rs, which is obviously also relevant to the ES. In 2014, a considerable number of powers (e.g. labour market policy with target group policy, activation of job seekers policy, etc.) were transferred to the Regions that are particularly relevant to the follow-up of the ES. DE BLAUWER (2014) indicated that it would be logical for the similar weight of the FRP itself and the input of the C&Rs into the NRP to gain importance, and that this would also be the case in respect of the need for coordination between the Federal Government and the C&Rs and an adapted classification of the categories of the European Councils of Ministers. DE BLAUWER (2014) referred to recommendations put forward by the Steunpunt Bestuurlijke Organisatie Vlaanderen (SBOV) (Flemish Support Centre for Administrative Organisation) in which Recommendation 26 stated: “Invest in the Belgian coordination mechanisms. Research shows that collaborative federalism pays. Ensure that Flanders is given access to the Belgian delegations to the ECOFIN Council and the European Council, so that it has greater impact on the EU’s economic policy and budgetary policy.”
For the representation of Belgium, a specific system has been designed in the Cooperation Agreement. The 22 Council configurations that existed in 1994 (at the time when the agreement was under preparation), are divided into six categories. Specific arrangements exist for each of these categories.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Councils</th>
<th>Information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1        | General Affairs  
Foreign Affairs  
Economic and Financial Affairs  
Justice and Home Affairs  
Budget  
Telecommunications  
Civil Protection  
Consumer Protection. | Exclusive federal representation |
| 2        | Transport;  
Energy  
Domestic Market;  
Employment and Social Affairs  
Public Health | Federal representation with assessor of the federated entities |
| 3        | Industry  
Research  
Environment | Empowerment of the federated entities with federal assessor |
| 4        | Culture and Audio-visual Affairs  
Education  
Youth  
Sport  
Tourism  
Spatial Planning  
Housing  
Regional policy (no formal council configuration) | Exclusive empowerment of the federated entities |
| 5        | Ficheries | Exclusive empowerment of a single Region or a single Community. Always represented by the competent Flemish minister |
| 6        | Agriculture | Federal representation, assisted by federated entities, to which the rotation system does not apply. A Regional minister seated within a specific Council configuration always represents Belgium, and as such expresses the unified Belgian position. The assessor may assist the sitting Minister on matters that fall under the authority of his/her governmental level. The assessor may also chair consultations with the sitting minister. For the regional assessorship, a rotating turn is agreed upon between the Communities and the Regions. |

Table 3: Cooperation Agreement and Council representation (Source: SPS Foreign Affairs, Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation)

The adaptation of the 1994 Cooperation Agreement was first put on the agenda of the Consultation Committee as early as April 2005. From 2013, things moved up a gear, although the Federal Government and the C&Rs have yet to reach terms. The federal coalition agreement (2014-2019) contained the following important passage: "We attach great importance to the review of the cooperation agreements with the Federated State Governments in connection with the representation at the diplomatic and consular posts of our country, and the consultation and representation as part of the European Union and the relevant international organisations. The review is a matter of priority and urgently needs to be adapted to the institutional reforms at a European and Belgian level. In this, account will be taken of the fact that the
The situation on the ground may impose a pragmatic approach in order to ensure our interests are defended in the best possible circumstances. The operation of the Interministerial Conference Foreign Affairs needs to be activated and energised. The existing coordination mechanisms which are managed by Foreign Affairs (DGE/Coormulti) will be upheld. Even more than before, the Government is looking to invest in these efficient consultation structures for the follow-up and implementation of decisions at European and international level both within the Federal Government and between the various levels of government, on an equal footing and in accordance with the powers of all entities. Upstream too, coordination should be improved, by ensuring that all the competent authorities are involved in the decision-making process at the earliest possible stage. As part of the review of the cooperation agreement on the statute of representatives of the federated states at the diplomatic and consular posts, the Government will provide a better statute to meet the needs of the federated states and, with this in mind, take the necessary steps in respect of the host states.”

The new Government of Flanders called for the Cooperation Agreement to be adapted. In its coalition agreement, the Government of Flanders stated\textsuperscript{170}: “We will urge the federal government to amend the cooperation agreement related to coordination and representation in the EU in a speedy and comprehensive manner. We want the categories of the European Councils of Ministers to be adapted to reflect the institutional reality. The amendments must be extended to informal councils, working groups and other meetings. The Flemish Permanent Representative to the EU must have the opportunity to be a structural part of the Belgian delegation in the European Council and the Councils of Ministers.”

The amendment of the Cooperation Agreement was raised both in the 2014-2019 Flemish coalition agreement\textsuperscript{171} and in the Flemish Minister-President’s policy memorandum\textsuperscript{172} and paper on Foreign Affairs, International Trade and Development Cooperation. This also applies to the July 2015 memorandum addressed to the Government of Flanders with regard to strengthening the EU reflex in Flanders.

From the autumn of 2015, negotiations between the Federal Government and the C&Rs were relaunched, so that account could be taken on the European playing field of the altered division of powers as a result of the sixth state reform. The amended classification of the categories of the European Councils of Ministers reflecting this new institutional reality is intended to ensure that Flanders is able to assume a more prominent role in the context of the ES. Within the ICBB (the Interministerial Conference on Foreign Affairs; comprised of Ministers of the Federal Governments and the Governments of the C&Rs) no progress was achieved on the amendment of the Cooperation Agreement. At its meeting of 18/04/2016, the Consultation Committee too failed to make a breakthrough in this regard\textsuperscript{173}. The main stumbling blocks related to the formalisation of the consultation practice ahead of the meetings of the European Council, the representation at the ES committees and the actual apportionment of the representatives at the Council configurations in consideration of the existing categories.

In conclusion, let us establish why the amendment of the Cooperation Agreement is so important to Flanders. We will not go into the positions assumed by the Government of Flanders at the actual negotiations, if only by because these positions have not been formally decided by the Government of Flanders. When met with parliamentary questions from members of the Flemish Parliament, the Minister-President doesn’t understandably, provide detailed information regarding the negotiating position of the Government of Flanders\textsuperscript{174}. In what follows, we will endeavour only to ascertain why the amendment of the Cooperation Partnership is necessary to Flanders on functional/content grounds, whereby we will focus on the ES.

The first important element is that, in light of the fact that the ES is all-embracing (Europe 2020, macroeconomic surveillance, fiscal surveillance), both the Federal Government and the C&Rs are directly involved, which makes it logical that this should be reflected in the relevant Council configurations. The second important fact is that, as a result of the powers transferred to Flanders (e.g. in the areas of labour market policy, rising fiscal autonomy, etc.) under the sixth state reform, changes will need to be brought to the category classification of certain Council configurations, the committees relating thereto, as well as the
category system and the division of powers as such. Which shape might such an amendment of the Cooperation Agreement take?

As to the *European Council*, this body has gradually gained importance. This became very clear in the approach adopted by the Heads of State and Government leaders in dealing with the financial-economic crisis. Also, the fact that the Spring Meeting (March) invariably has the ES on the agenda, is very important to Flanders. Considered from this perspective, the possible amendment of the Cooperation Agreement could relate to the inclusion of the Ministers-President of the federated states as part of the Belgian delegation to the European Council.

With regard to the *Council configurations*, let us focus on three European Councils of Ministers that are important within the context of the ES: ECOFIN, EPSCO and GAC. The *GAC* (General Affairs Council) plays a coordinating role between the various Council configurations and deals with more generic items on the agenda, which also have an effect at Flemish level. The GAC prepares the European Councils of Ministers. Together with the ECOFIN Council, the GAC is the lynchpin in the annually recurring ES and the formulation of the CSRs. Both the *ECOFIN* and the GAC Councils come under category 1, in other words an exclusively federal representation. Considering the substantial powers held by the C&Rs, it would be more logical if the GAC and ECOFIN Councils were moved to category 2. The *EPSCO Council* comes under category 2. This means that the Federal Government has the dominant position, with the federated states taking turns as an assessor. Taking into account the powers that were transferred under the sixth state reform (labour market policy, etc.), a strong case can be made for the EPSCO Council to be moved from category 2 to category 3.

As part of the multilateral supervision within the ES, the 4 ‘preparatory Committees’, i.e. the EPC, the EFC, the EMCO and the SPC play a very important role. The highly prominent position of the committees is also in evidence from various assessments and ‘lessons learned’ exercises conducted in respect of the ES in recent years. The increased significance of the EMCO and SPC preparatory Committees is also illustrated by ZEITLIN and VANHERCKE (2015).

In its positions on the midterm review of the Europe 2020 strategy (3/10/2014), the Government of Flanders had already pointed out the particular importance of the aforesaid committees: “We would also underscore the importance of Europe 2020 to be featured on a structural footing in all Council configurations (with general coordination handled by the General Affairs Council) and for these messages to be escalated to the European Council and the ES process. With regard to the latter, reference should also be made to the prominent role played by the preparatory committees (EPC, EFC, EMCO, SPC) in the ES. There is scope for the role assumed by these committees in the area of multilateral supervision to be strengthened given greater depth. For example, we consider it advantageous that a role has been set aside for the Education Committee within EMCO. The further intensification of the open coordination method is advisable.”

The C&Rs are not formally represented within the committees, which is a major discrepancy in the context of the ES, for which a solution is required. With the exception of the joint meetings between EMCO and the ‘Education Committee in the context of the ES (see further), there are always federal civil servants who are representing Belgium in the committees. Indeed, the current composition of the committees means that the C&Rs are insufficiently involved in the multilateral supervision within the ES, the C&Rs are insufficiently involved to tender any input in terms of (future) changes to the ES or the form and design of the NRPs, for instance; the C&Rs are insufficiently involved to adequately establish to what extent the amendments with respect to the CSRs are effectively followed up and defended by the Federal Government at the committees, and that the C&Rs are insufficiently involved to put forward any additional argument for the amendments to be brought at the discussions. Neither can the unique regional multi-level governance approach (the involvement of the Flemish Parliament, for instance) which Flanders has developed in respect of the ES, be broached at these committees. The Five Presidents Report expressly establishes the link with a restyled ES for 3 out of the 4 Unions for that matter, so that this topic will continue to feature prominently on the European agenda in the years ahead. Considered from this
perspective, it would be logical for the composition of these committees to be based on the amended category system and division of powers.

As things stand, the C&Rs are generally speaking too dependent on the goodwill of the federal civil servants when it comes to sharing information in the context of most of the preparatory committees. Although various federal colleagues share information with the C&Rs, which is a positive thing, this also comes with risks when people change posts and the structures themselves are left unchanged. For now, we can continue to build on the fact that good informal contacts have developed between the Federal Government and the C&Rs over the years and a number of forward steps have been made.

As aforementioned stated, however, an important clarification must be noted. For instance, a joint meeting between EMCO and the ‘Education Committee’ (Council working group) is held on a regular basis in the context of the ES. These meetings are held when multilateral surveillance is conducted for the previous year based around the CSRs (which also relate to educational matters). This allows the MSs to detail the kind of policy they have put in place since then. This may also be important further down the line, when prospective amendments need to be brought to the CSRs, and another joint EMCO – ‘Education Committee’ meeting is held. As any amendments to the CSRs require a qualified majority to be carried, it is of the utmost importance that reference can be made to possible measures put forward by the MSs themselves during the multilateral surveillance. As part of the restyled ES, the multilateral surveillance itself has been strengthened, with MSs evaluating one another’s policies. In mid-March 2016, a light review was conducted into CSR 3 with respect to labour market policy (whereby only the EC asks detailed questions and no specific MS is assigned to perform the review). In this setting, the 3 Communities in Belgium, including therefore the Flemish Community, were able to present their policy on how they tackle the skills mismatch, among other things. The committees also play an important role in formulating comments in respect of the country reports. Here too, the Federal Government had invited the C&Rs to put forward their comments if any, which the former was then able to pass on to the EMCO. The above example clearly shows that the involvement of the C&Rs in the activities holds added value and should be formalised for this reason.

6. Conclusions

It is clear that the impact of the EU, and the ES in particular, on the policy and governance of the MSs and the Regions has greatly amplified in recent years, which confirms a number of findings made by BEYERS and BURSENS (2013) and MAES (2016).

Even though the ES is developing apace, as posited, by BEKKER (2013) and VANHERGKE (2014) (and is shown in practice by the streamlining of the ES since 2015) and the impact of the EU is not comprehensive, as indicated by HAPPAERTS, SCHUNZ and BRUYNINCKX (2011), VANDEN BOSCH (2014), HAPPAERTS (2015) and MAES (2016) (and is shown in practice concerning the fiscal coordination in Belgium and the implementation of CSRs), we saw that the intensification of the ES had an increasing impact both on Flemish policy and governance and on the cooperation between the Federal Government and the C&Rs.

It must be noted that since 2014 several initiatives were taken by the Flemish Government to deepen the ES in Flanders and thereby responding to a streamlined ES. Conversely, the fact that Flanders devised a highly developed semester governance (e.g. in respect of the involvement of the Flemish Parliament), also brought added pressure to bear on the Federal Government and the other C&Rs to take the same direction.

With regard to the activities within the context of the ES, Flanders is adopting an intra-state as well as an extra-state route approach and this corresponds with the findings of TATHAM (2008). In doing so, Flanders is seeking to have the highest possible impact at federal and European level as well as endeavouring to publicise the activities it has deployed in the context of the ES to the largest possible extent. This makes the semester governance of Flanders a rather unique example within the EU.
With regard to the *extra-state route*, the importance of this avenue is also underscored in the 2014-2019 Flemish coalition agreement, with the request for more region-specific recommendations to be made, which also has the increasing support of the Flemish Parliament. Despite the fact that the country reports also refer to Flemish measures, this is not yet extended to the CSRs (or the recitals) itself. Also, it is not always very clear how the EC processes all the information Flanders makes available to the EC as part of the ES (bilateral meetings, FFMs, FRP, NRP and (in)formal information exchange). Is the information efficiently captured by the different DGs of the EC and used for the drafting of the CSRs in the country team for Belgium and what is the exact role of the ESOs in the drafting process leading to the CSRs? The streamlining of the ES involves the risk of a possible reduction of attention for the regional level and by doing so this can threaten the ownership at regional level. This is significant, because the lack of ownership is exactly one of the problems in the context of the ES (VANDEN BOSCH).

Notwithstanding the aforementioned point of attention Flanders is maintaining direct contacts with the EC at political as well as administrative level, in which the two ESOs play a significant role. Since they were appointed in the spring of 2013, these two Officers have gained importance as partner in dialogue for the Government of Flanders. Flanders is therefore keen to build and maintain good contacts with the ESOs, to enable it to communicate its interests and positions to the EC through these channels too. Due to the fact that in their MS, the ESOs have a comprehensive view with regard the positions and implemented measures of the different government levels and the positions of the relevant stakeholders, they are very good placed to play a important advisory role in the drafting process concerning the CSRs. In order to increase the visibility of the Flemish efforts in the context of the ES (‘identity-politics’), the FRP is translated into English and sent directly to the Chairs of the European Council, the European Parliament, the EC, the CoR and the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), and increased efforts are being made into the effectiveness of the FRP. Flanders also uses the consultations organized by the EC (f.i. the midterm review of the Europe 2020-strategy) to communicate its views.

Within the Government of Flanders, important measures with respect to governance and substance were taken, to act in response to the increased impact of the ES. With respect to governance, for instance, reference should be made to the strong involvement of the Flemish Parliament in the ES. In terms of substance, there is the fact that the sixth state reform has seen even more powers being devolved to the C&Rs, which is obviously particularly relevant in the context of the ES. This makes it all the more important for the EC to be aware of the measures put in place by the C&Rs, if only for monitoring purposes. It is therefore no coincidence that we are seeing a growing trend within the various policy areas of the Flemish administration itself of direct contact with the EC when it comes to their areas of competences. The reinforcement the AAVR EU with two part-time attachés with respect to the ES too is creating new opportunities for additional direct channels of communication with the European institutions. Contacts with the CoR are equally important for demonstrating the Flemish approach in the context of the ES and for exerting influence over any changes to be brought to the ES. Nevertheless, within the Flemish government there are still further measures possible to deepen the ES, as also MAES (2016) has indicated.

Flanders is not losing sight of the *intra-state route* either. Flanders is seeking to make maximum impact on the Belgian positions in the context of the ES, and here too the AAVR EU plays an important role. In any case, the weight of the C&Rs in the NRP has continued to rise and there’s also an increased involvement in the governance processes. Since 2015, the FRP is included in its entirety as an annexe to the NRP. The main challenge in this respect is undoubtedly to see the 1994 Cooperation Agreement amended, so that it can be brought more fully in line with the powers that have been transferred to Flanders under the sixth state reform. This is crucial if Flanders means to make its interests and positions in the context of the ES known in the Council working groups and the preparatory committees, thus closing the existing gap.
FRP to presidents EC, EP, ECO, CoR, ESC

Government of Flanders: final FRP
Cabinet MP: chairman
Flemish ICW: draft FRP

Government of Flanders: definitive position

Cabinet MP: chairman
Flemish ICW: draft FRP

Flemish Parliament: contribution FRP
VESOC: contribution FRP

Government of Flanders: Draft FRP
Cabinet MP: chairman
Flemish ICW: draft FRP

VLEVA-members (including supra)local authorities: contribution FRP

Informal consultation VLEVA-members with policy officers EC, members administrative working group ES, Flemish cabinets concerning draft CSRs

Ad-hoc: Events, workshops, ...

NRP to EC
Concertation Committee NRP
PBC NHP
Drafting Committee NRP (and subworking groups)

Flemish ICW

Contribution of the Government of Flanders concerning official consultations EC, CoR

Contribution for Policy memorandums and papers
Flemish ICW

Approval of Flemish Policy memorandums and papers

Bilateral meetings EC – Belgium (political)
Amendments CSRs

FFM EC - Belgium Competitiveness (administrative) coordination EWI

DBP (chapters CSRs and Europe 2020) coordination FB

AGS and AMR : contribution for DGE

PBC

Concertation Committee NRP

Informal consultation VLEVA-members with policy officers EC, members administrative working group ES, Flemish cabinets concerning draft CSRs

Working Group European Semester
(12 policy areas)

Board of Chairmen

DKB: chair

FB
EWI
IV
WSE
RWO
MOW
LNE
OVV
WVG
LV
CJSM

Contribution for Policy memorandums and papers

Approval of Flemish Policy memorandums and papers

Ad-hoc: Events, workshops, ...

Extrastate

Intraflemish

European Semester Officers

Intrastate
# List of Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AAVR EU</td>
<td>General Representation of the Government of Flanders to the EU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AGS</td>
<td>Annual Growth Survey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AMR</td>
<td>Alert Mechanism Report</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CJSM</td>
<td>Culture, Youth, Sport and Media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSR</td>
<td>Country Specific Recommendation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CoR</td>
<td>Committee of the Regions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C&amp;R</td>
<td>Communities and Regions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DGE</td>
<td>Directorate-general Coordination and European Affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DKB</td>
<td>Department Public Governance and the Chancellery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DPB</td>
<td>Draft Budgetary Plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EA</td>
<td>Euro Area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EC</td>
<td>European Commission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EER</td>
<td>European Entrepreneurial Region</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EESC</td>
<td>European Economic and Social Committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EMCO</td>
<td>Employment Committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDF</td>
<td>Excessive Deficit Procedure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECO</td>
<td>European Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECOFIN</td>
<td>Economic and Financial Affairs Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EFC</td>
<td>Economic and Financial Committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EMU</td>
<td>Economic and Monetary Union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EP</td>
<td>European Parliament</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EPC</td>
<td>Economic Policy Committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EPSCO</td>
<td>Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ES</td>
<td>European Semester</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESO</td>
<td>European Semester Officer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EU</td>
<td>European Union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EWI</td>
<td>Economy, Science and Innovation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FB</td>
<td>Finance and Budget</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GAC</td>
<td>General Affairs Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GF</td>
<td>Government of Flanders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FFM</td>
<td>Fact Finding Mission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FPS</td>
<td>Federal Public Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FRP</td>
<td>Flemish Reform Programme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PBC</td>
<td>Policy Monitoring Committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GAC</td>
<td>General Affairs Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICBB</td>
<td>Interministerial Conference on Foreign Affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICW</td>
<td>Inter Cabinet Working group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV</td>
<td>Flemish Foreign Affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LNE</td>
<td>Environment, Nature and Energy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LV</td>
<td>Agriculture and Fisheries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LRA</td>
<td>Local and Regional Authorities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MEP</td>
<td>Member of European Parliament</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MLG</td>
<td>Multilateral governance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MOW</td>
<td>Mobility and Public Works</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MP</td>
<td>Minister-president</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MS</td>
<td>Member state</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NRP</td>
<td>National Reform Programme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N-VA</td>
<td>Nieuw Vlaamse Alliantie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OV</td>
<td>Education and Training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PA</td>
<td>Partnership Agreement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PBC</td>
<td>Policy Monitoring Committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R&amp;D</td>
<td>Research and Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RWO</td>
<td>Spatial Planning, Housing Policy and Immovable Heritage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SARIV</td>
<td>Flemish Advisory Council for Foreign Affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SBOV</td>
<td>Policy Research Centre - Governmental organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SCP</td>
<td>Stability and Convergence Programme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SGP</td>
<td>Stability and Growth Pact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SOIA</td>
<td>Strategic Consultation Platform for International Affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SNA</td>
<td>Subnational Authorities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SP</td>
<td>Stability Programme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPC</td>
<td>Social Protection Committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TSCG</td>
<td>Treaty on Stability, Coordination and Governance in the Economic and Monetary Union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VDAB</td>
<td>Flemish Public Employment Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VESOC</td>
<td>Flemish Economic and Social Consultative Committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VLABEST</td>
<td>Flemish Advisory Council for Administrative Affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VLEVA</td>
<td>Liaison Agency Flanders-Europe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VVSIG</td>
<td>Association of Flemish Cities and Municipalities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VWP</td>
<td>Association of Flemish Provinces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WASO</td>
<td>Belgian Federal Public Service Employment, Labour and Social Dialogue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WSE</td>
<td>Work and Social Economy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WVG</td>
<td>Welfare, Public Health and Family</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
REFERENCES


FINAL NOTES

1Joeri De Blauwer (joeri.deblauwer@kb.vlaanderen.be) is senior adviser with the Department of Public Governance and the Chancellery and serves as an attaché with the General Representation of the Government of Flanders to the EU (AAVR EU). He’s chairman of the working group European Semester (Flemish administration) and member of the drafting committee concerning the national reform programme. He has authored the present article in his own name.

2http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/europe-2020-in-a-nutshell/flagship-initiatives/index_nl.htm
4http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/pdf/europe2020stocktaking_nl.pdf
5http://www.consilium.europa.eu/special-reports/european-semester/why-was-the-european-semester-created?lang=nl
6http://register.consilium.europa.eu/doc/srv?id=ST%2015674%202012%20INIT
7In 2013 too, a document was drafted with regard to the lessons learned from the European Semester 2013 - http://register.consilium.europa.eu/doc/srv?id=NL&f=ST%2014618%202013%20INIT
8More information about the committees:
   ▪ EPC (http://europa.eu/epc/);
   ▪ EFC (http://europa.eu/efc/index_en.htm);
   ▪ EMCO (http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=115);
14http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/making-it-happen/index_en.htm
18http://overheid.vlaanderen.be/intergouvernementele-organen
19Ibidem
20Ibidem
23http://overheid.vlaanderen.be/de-kabinetsmedewerkers-0
24http://www.geertbourgeois.be/
26The Flemish administration consists of 12 policy areas: Public Governance and the Chancellery (KB); Finance and Budget (FB); International Flanders (IV); Economy, Science and Innovation (EWI); Education and Training (OV); Welfare, Public Health and Family (WVG); Culture, Youth, Sport and Media (CJSM); Work and Social Economy (WSE); Agriculture and Fisheries (LV); Environment, Nature and Energy (LNE); Mobility and Public Works (MOW); Spatial Planning, Housing policy and Immoveable Heritage (RWO). In general, it can be stated that each policy area is composed of a department (responsible for the preparation and evaluation of the policy and regulations) and several agencies (implement the policy).
27http://www.vlaanderen.be/nl/contact/adressengids/diensten-van-de-vlaamse-overheid/administratieve-diensten-van-de-vlaamse-overheid/beleidsdomein-kanselarij-en-bestuur
29https://docs.vlaamsparlement.be/docs/stukken/2015-2016/g510-1.pdf
Within the Flemish administration, over the 2006-2014 period the SG forum acted as the consultative body in support of the Secretaries-General of the Departments in the implementation of their policy-supporting duties.

43 The SOIA, chaired by the DIv and consisting of representatives from the 12 policy areas, consults and aligns on European, bilateral and multilateral affairs.

44 See for example http://docs.vlaamsparlement.be/docs/stukken/2013-2014/g51-1.pdf

The Flemish coalition agreement gives rise to a number of other policy documents. At the start of the government’s term of office, each Minister produces one or more policy memorandums in which the Minister sets out how he or she intends to implement the coalition agreement in the policy areas for which he or she is responsible during the course of that office term. From the second year of the government’s term of office, each Minister submits one or more policy papers for the areas for which he or she is responsible. Among other things, the policy papers look back at the previous twelve months and set out the intentions for the year ahead with regard to the implementation of the coalition agreement and the policy memorandum (http://overheid.Flanders.be/de-policycle).


47 See for instance the policy papers on Education, which systematically focused attention on measures to counteract early school leaving (Europe 2020 main objective). The policy papers on Mobility and Public Works systematically featured efforts to drive down greenhouse gas emissions in the road haulage industry.

48 http://docs.vlaamsparlement.be/docs/stukken/2011-2012/g1283-1.pdf,


49 The clarification statements were made on 5/05/2011, 24/05/2012 and 27/06/2013.

http://docs.vlaamsparlement.be/docs/stukken/2011-2012/g1298-1.pdf,

http://docs.vlaamsparlement.be/docs/stukken/2012-2013/g1965-1.pdf

http://docs.vlaamsparlement.be/docs/stukken/2012-2013/g2143-1.pdf

50 http://docs.vlaamsparlement.be/docs/stukken/2014/g7-1.pdf


51 http://www.vlaandereninactie.be/over/eu-2020

52 Decision of the Government of Flanders of 9/05/2014


http://www.vlaandereninactie.be/over/eu-2020


http://www.vlaandereninactie.be/over/eu-2020


http://www.vlaandereninactie.be/over/eu-2020

55 Decision of the Government of Flanders of 9/05/2014


56 http://www.vlaanderen.be/nl/overheid/verkiezingen/bijdrage-van-de-vlaamse-administratie-aan-het-regeerakkoord-van-de-vlaamse-regering


61 http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/pdf/contributions/antwoordenvandevlaamseregeringopdevragenuitlijsteuropa2020bijlage0.pdf
Europe 2020 (Scope 13) was taken into account. Non-ETS greenhouse gas emissions are therefore expressed with consideration of this ETS scope expansion.

When determining the Belgian non-ETS target, the inclusion of additional emissions under ETS from the period 2013-2020 (Scope 13-20) was taken into account. Non-ETS greenhouse gas emissions are therefore expressed with consideration of this ETS scope expansion.


See a number of examples from the 2011-2015 period: “Vlaamse coalitiepartners schieten op mekaar in debat over Europese aanbevelingen” (Belga, 8/06/2011); “Europese aanbevelingen voor België blijven overeind” (Belga, 22/06/2012); “Langer leven, langer werken” (Trends, 14/06/2012); “Pensioenleeftijd op 65 gaat niet...
omhoog” (De Standaard, 4/06/2012); “Elio en de 7 werven” (Knack, 6/06/2012); “Europese aanbevelingen: “Geen advies van een of ander klein denkclubje.” (Belga, 31/05/2012); “Europese aanbevelingen vandaag bekend, gisteren al afgekraakt” (De Morgen, 30/05/2012); “Geen boete wel ruzie” (Het Laatste Nieuws, 31/05/2013); “Europa voert uit wat we samen hebben gevraagd” (De Tijd, 31/05/2013); “Een brief volstond niet voor de Europese Commissie” (De Standaard, 31/05/2013); “Maandag nieuwe Europese aanbevelingen, wellicht geen uitstel voor Belgische begroting” (België, 30/05/2014); “Europa maant België aan tot loonmatiging en taxshift” (De Tijd, 13/05/2015).

See for instance, “België staat mal figuur bij Europa” (De Tijd, 28/04/2016)


http://www.tijd.be/politiek_economie/belgie_federaal/EU_ultimatum_voor_Belgische_begroting.9573006-3136.art?ckc=1

http://deredactie.be/cm/vrtnieuws/politiek/1.1642307


Deelstaten nog niet betrokken bij semesteroverleg” (Belga, 29/03/2011); “Nationaal Hervormingsprogramma: Vlaanderen naar een werkzaamheidsgraad van 76%” (Belga, 15/04/2011); “Yves Leterme sert NV-A” (De Standaard, 16/04/2011); “Peeters paait Europa” (De Standaard, 13/04/2012); “Vlaanderen zet zwaar in op werk” (De Standaard; 13/04/2012); “Vlaanderen slaat mea culpa over klimaatinspanning” (De Tijd; 13/04/2015).


On 1/04/2011, 30/03/2012, 29/03/2013, 28/03/2014

The sixth state reform offers the opportunity to improve the efficiency and cation and beleid/vanguard_initiative, with high levels recorded in Wallonia (14.7 %) and Brussels (15.8 %), compared to an EU average of 12.5 %.“ (http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/pdf/csr2016/csr2016_belgium_en.pdf, pp. 43-44).

129 See the passages on long-term institutional care (pp. 12 & 13), the regionalisation of employment policy (pages 17 & 20), the competence over business establishment rules (p. 23).

For example, recital 14 to the CSRs: “The sixth state reform offers the opportunity to improve the efficiency and targeting of employment policies, provided that cooperation between the federal and regional levels is optimised.” (http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/pdf/csr2014/csr2014_belgium_nl.pdf, p. 6)

Substance of CSRs:


http://ec.europa.eu/avservices/video/player.cfm?ref=102367&sitelang=en
http://www.belgamediasupport.be/pressrelease/detail.do;jsessionid=3F3AD961E7AB8ED5735AD83C484D38?pressid=53442&searchKey=1&language=EN
http://www.ewi-vlaanderen.be/jaarverslagen/2015/internationaal/fact-finding-mission-van-de-europese-commissie

The amendments need to be focused on those elements over which manifest disagreement exists, which contain factual inaccuracies and which are substantial in nature.


The latter was a point Belgium had repeatedly made, underpinned by the fact that Member States were to continue to have sufficient policy margin in their choice of instruments for achieving targets set by Europe.

In CSR 3, “sub-regional” was added; in CSR 4 “ports and road transport” were deleted; in CSR 5 “and the integration in the labour market” was added; in CSR 7 “allocation of duties” was replaced by “allocation of the efforts”. Here too, the powers of the Regions came into the picture, without the C&Rs giving their consent.

By doing so the involved committees were given more time to discuss possible amendments with regard to the CSRs.

http://presscenter.org/nl/pressrelease/20160429/stabiliteitsprogramma-van-belgie-2016-2019
http://presscenter.org/nl/pressrelease/20160415/landsbeleidsprogramma-2016
http://www.parlament.gv.at/PAKT/EU/XXV/EU/02/95/EU_29581/imfname_10475463.pdf
http://vlaamseklimaattop.be/
http://www.parlament.gv.at/PAKT/EU/XXV/EU/02/95/EU_29581/imfname_10475463.pdf
http://presscenter.org/nl/pressrelease/20160429/stabiliteitsprogramma-van-belgie-2016-2019
http://presscenter.org/nl/pressrelease/20160415/landsbeleidsprogramma-2016
http://www.parlament.gv.at/PAKT/EU/XXV/EU/02/95/EU_29581/imfname_10475463.pdf
http://vlaamseklimaattop.be/
The representation of “informal Councils” (meetings of ministers who exchange thoughts on an informal basis and make no formal decisions) is to a large extent arranged along the same lines as the formal Councils.\\n
Draft of Cooperation Partnership between the Federal State, the Communities and the Regions, on the Representation of the Kingdom of Belgium at the European Council, the Council of Ministers of the European Union and other bodies of the European Union.\\n
Within the framework of the European Semester, the ‘filière education’ was introduced in EMCO. This refers to two or three meetings per year; multilateral surveillance based on the recommendations of the previous year and negotiations on amending the CSRs of the current year.