Origins of the 2019-24 EU Strategic Agenda

The Future of Europe debate and the Sibiu European Council

STUDY

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Authors: Suzana Anghel and Ralf Drachenberg
European Council Oversight Unit
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Abstract
This paper is the last in a series of EPRS studies on the Future of Europe debate launched after the UK referendum on EU membership in June 2016. Its aim is to highlight how the substance of the debate shaped the 2019-24 EU Strategic Agenda adopted by the Heads of State or Government at the June 2019 European Council. The scope of the paper is twofold. First, it examines the most recent stage of the Future of Europe debate (April 2018-June 2019), analysing in particular the Sibiu Declaration and the 2019-24 Strategic Agenda, and tracing the evolution from the Bratislava and Rome Declarations. Second, it evaluates the overall Future of Europe process spanning the period from June 2016 to June 2019, and points out the commonalities across the milestone documents published in that context. The analysis shows that EU leaders focused on three horizontal messages over this period: 1) maintaining unity; 2) reconnecting with EU citizens and addressing their concerns; and 3) delivering on policy priorities.

For the previous stages of the Future of Europe debate, see the earlier EPRS publications in this series, From Bratislava to Rome and From Rome to Sibiu.
Executive summary

The Sibiu Summit of 9 May 2019 and the subsequent adoption of the 2019-24 Strategic Agenda on 20 June 2019 constitute the end of the Future of Europe debate (at least in its current iteration), which was initiated following the June 2016 UK referendum on EU membership. Five milestone moments marked three distinct phases in the Future of Europe debate: 1) diagnostics and reflection (June to mid-September 2016); 2) deliberation and proposals (mid-September 2016 to March 2017); and 3) delivery and vision (April 2017 to June 2019).

One of the main findings of this study is that throughout the Future of Europe process, EU Heads of State or Government reiterated three core messages that also featured prominently in all the milestone documents: the need for unity, priority to EU citizens, and focus on (policy) delivery. Moreover, the three policy priorities – migration, security and the economy – identified in the Bratislava Declaration, have been the focus over the entire period of the Future of Europe process (June 2016 to June 2019), forming the European Council's 'rolling agenda' of policy priorities. Despite developments in the European Council composition in that same period (as a result of the arrival of 16 new Heads of State or Government), the core messages remained almost identical, even though, often, different players were involved in drafting the related declarations and statements.

Another finding of the study is that both the European Council and the European Parliament emerged stronger from the three-year Future of Europe debate. The introduction of the Leaders' Agenda and of the new working methods allowed EU leaders to 'take things into their hands' and to concentrate on solving sensitive issues by debating them well in advance at leaders' meetings. The Parliament was active throughout the Future of Europe debate. In addition to adopting resolutions and expressing its vision in specific documents, it solidified its role as a forum for open debate by holding a series of plenary debates with EU Heads of State or Government.

An examination of the most recent phase of the Future of Europe debate (April 2018-June 2019) showed that three more or less parallel processes – the activities under the Leaders' Agenda, the debates in the Parliament, and the citizens' consultations – lasted throughout that whole phase and shaped the Sibiu Declaration and the subsequent (new) Strategic Agenda 2019-24.

The study identifies strong continuity between the new Strategic Agenda and its predecessor with regard to some policy issues, while also noting that other significant policy issues have been added and there has been a shift in focus within the different policy areas. Both the Sibiu Declaration and the new Strategic Agenda strengthen the policy focus on the EU's role as a global player in actions related to climate change.

When comparing the 2019-24 Strategic Agenda with other milestone documents that were issued during the Future of Europe debate, a certain degree of continuity on horizontal and institutional issues can be observed. However, the Strategic Agenda envisages that the different EU institutions should revisit their working methods, indicating that some institutional evolution can be expected in the near future. In the case of the European Council, for instance, this could lead to the operationalisation of the 2019-24 Strategic Agenda through a new Leaders' Agenda under the next President of the European Council.
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Introduction

Just two weeks before the 2019 European elections, EU-27 Heads of State or Government met on 9 May 2019 in the Romanian city of Sibiu to discuss the Union’s common future. The resulting Sibiu Declaration and the adoption of the Strategic Agenda 2019-24 by the European Council in June 2019 constitute the final stage of the Future of Europe debate, launched after the UK referendum on EU membership in June 2016. The debate had as its main objective to reflect on the shape and the common future of the EU at 27.

Some of the milestones in the Future of Europe debate are the Bratislava Declaration and Roadmap of 2016 and the Rome Declaration of 2017. Important contributions to the debate were made by the European Parliament in the form of numerous resolutions, and by the European Commission, first and foremost through its white paper on the Future of Europe. The debate also triggered the Future of Europe debates with EU Heads of State or Government in the Parliament’s plenary sessions throughout 2018 and early 2019; the citizens’ consultations; and the activities under the European Council Leaders’ Agenda, which brought increased predictability and transparency to that institution’s workings and planning.

As the then-President of the European Parliament, Antonio Tajani, declared on the occasion of signing the Rome Declaration, it was the European Parliament’s duty ‘to ensure that the pledges made in the [Rome] declaration are honoured’. In this context, EPRS undertook work on a series of policy publications assessing the different milestones and processes in the Future of Europe debate.

The first publication, ‘From Bratislava to Rome’, focused on the Bratislava Declaration from September 2016 and the activities leading to the Rome Declaration. After reflecting on the ‘political and practical implications of “Brexit” for the Future of Europe’, at the Bratislava Summit the EU-27 Heads of State or Government stressed the need to keep their unity, to close the gap with the EU citizens by delivering on their needs, and to focus on the policy priorities of concern to EU citizens: migration, security (internal and external) and the economy. In the period leading up to the Rome Summit, the EU institutions and the Member States increased their contributions and proposals regarding the Future of Europe, thereby helping to shape the long-term vision for the EU that was enshrined in the Rome Declaration.

The second publication, ‘From Rome to Sibiu’, covering the period April 2017-April 2018, showed how the Rome Declaration was being followed up on, in particular through its operationalisation in the Leaders’ Agenda. The paper showed that the Leaders’ Agenda was the most far-reaching institutional innovation for the European Council since the Treaty of Lisbon, helping to consolidate the European Council’s position at the centre of EU policy-making and agenda-setting. Evidence provided in the paper also suggested that the European Council and the other EU institutions had followed up on the pledges made concerning the policy priorities in the Bratislava and Rome Declarations.

This third and final publication in the series comes at the closure of the Future of Europe debate. Its focus is twofold. First, it outlines and analyses the most recent stage in the Future of Europe debate (April 2018-June 2019), including the two milestones, the Sibiu Declaration and the 2019-24 Strategic Agenda. Second, it assesses the overall Future of Europe debate (June 2016-June 2019), and highlights the common messages embedded in all of the European Council’s milestone documents from this period.

The study is structured in the following way: chapter one outlines the main phases leading up to the adoption of the 2019-24 Strategic Agenda. It looks at the input and influence of different actors in shaping the Sibiu Declaration, paying particular attention to the Future of Europe debates with Heads of State or Government in the Parliament. Chapter two examines the Sibiu Summit and...
Declaration, by comparing the key features and main messages of the Sibiu Declaration with the previously adopted declarations in Bratislava and Rome, in particular regarding policy priorities. Chapter three goes on to assess the horizontal and institutional issues as well as the policy priorities in the new Strategic Agenda, showing its evolution and highlighting its similarities with and differences from its 2014-19 predecessor, and comparing it with other milestone documents of the Future of Europe debate. The fourth and final chapter takes stock of the overall Future of Europe debate, identifying three specific phases, laying out a rolling agenda of policy issues, and describing the evolution of horizontal and institutional issues. This chapter also looks at how the entire process will reflect upon the different EU institutions. The conclusion sums up the findings of the study and discusses the next steps in the new process launched by the 2019-24 Strategic Agenda.
1. The road to the new Strategic Agenda: April 2018 to June 2019

Since this analysis is the third and final in a series of publications examining the European Council’s activities as part of the Future of Europe debate since the UK referendum in June 2016, it is important to recall what the expectations and unknowns were for the April 2018-June 2019 period and more specifically for the Sibiu Summit.

The expectations were that:

- leaders would reaffirm at Sibiu their commitment to the European project;
- Sibiu and the resulting new Strategic Agenda would be the closing stage in the Future of Europe debate;
- the UK would have left the EU by then.

The questions posed by the previous study in this series were:

- would answers be given to the Commission’s white paper on the Future of Europe;
- would the Leaders’ Agenda deliver on policy implementation;
- how would the Future of Europe debate turn out in the European Parliament.

1.1. Phases in the European Council’s activity between April 2018 and June 2019

Three distinct phases define the implementation of the Leader’s Agenda between April 2018 and June 2019 (as shown in Figure 1). Delivery on policy priorities marks the first phase (April to September 2018). This forms a continuum with the previous period – October 2017 to March 2018 – analysed in an earlier EPRS publication of this series. Brexit attracted much of the EU leaders’ attention during the second phase (October 2018 to April 2019). However, delivery on policy priorities continued to drive the EU leaders’ action during this period, with a series of ‘rolling agenda’ policy items, such as the single market and migration, attracting the attention of the Heads of State or Government. The third phase – May to June 2018 – was the shortest compared to the previous two and had a different focus from them, as the leaders’ attention had shifted from policy delivery to the next Strategic Agenda and to the search for a new leadership.

Figure 1 – Key developments in the debate on the Future of Europe (April 2018 - June 2019)

Source: EPRS.
In addition, there were three more or less parallel processes stretching over the whole period running up to the Sibiu Declaration and the subsequent new Strategic Agenda: 1) the activities under the Leaders’ Agenda, 2) the debates in the European Parliament, and 3) the citizens’ consultations. These, together with the contributions of individual actors or groups of Member States, shaped the Sibiu Summit/Declaration and the subsequent 2019-24 Strategic Agenda.

1.1.1. Phase 1: Continuity regarding policy delivery (April-September 2018)

During this phase, EU leaders focused on policy delivery, in particular ‘rolling agenda’ topics such as security and defence, and migration. External relations were on the rise in the context of an increasingly challenging international environment, with EU leaders discussing transatlantic relations, including trade with the United States, and reaffirming their support for the Iran nuclear deal. By focusing more on external relations, the European Council confirmed its ability to quickly respond and adapt to the dynamic political environment in which it operates. It also indicated that it attached importance to the EU’s global role and considered external relations a priority, even if, except in the context of the informal EU Western Balkans Summit of 2018 and trade, the Leaders’ Agenda did not feature external relations topics.

Between April and September 2018, EU leaders met in the Leaders’ Meetings format as well as in the European Council formal framework, respecting the schedule of meetings initially announced in the Leaders’ Agenda. Nonetheless, there were changes in topics at most of the Leaders’ Meetings during this period. For example, in May 2018 EU leaders did not discuss migration but focussed instead on research and innovation, a subject postponed from earlier that year. Furthermore, migration, scheduled to be discussed in the Leaders’ Meeting format either in May or June 2018, was discussed at the formal June 2018 European Council and informally at the September 2018 summit in Salzburg. As an exception, EU leaders did not discuss one of the announced topics – implementation of the Leaders’ Agenda – scheduled for June 2018.

1.1.2. Phase 2: A Brexit-dominated agenda (October 2018 - April 2019)

Brexit discussions dominated the period between October 2018 and April 2019. This trend became increasingly visible towards the end of the period, which coincided with the end of the Article 50 TEU period and was thus the original planned Brexit date. Much of the EU leaders’ attention at their March 2019 meeting was dedicated to extending Article 50 TEU rather than discussing policy priorities. Furthermore, two special European Councils, held under Article 50 TEU, were convened during this period to allow EU leaders to endorse the UK withdrawal agreement (November 2018 special European Council under Article 50 TEU), and then to agree on a further extension to Article 50 TEU until 31 October 2019 (April 2019 special European Council under Article 50 TEU).

EU leaders did not convene in the Leaders’ Meetings format during this period, although the Leaders’ Agenda included meetings on a number of topics, in particular trade, the single market and the EMU. These topics were nonetheless discussed at formal European Councils or euro summits. This development confirms the ‘living document’ character of the Leaders’ Agenda and should not be seen as a rejection of its newly introduced working methods. Trade offers an interesting example here. The leaders’ meeting on trade was scheduled for October 2018, rather late in the year, given the rise of transatlantic tensions in the first half of the same year. The EU leaders had already discussed trade informally in May 2018 and twice formally, in March 2018 and June 2019, reaching a common position, which made the October 2018 Leaders’ Meeting unnecessary.

1.1.3. Phase 3: New leadership (May-June 2019)

Two topics – the next Strategic Agenda and high-level appointments – were central to the EU leaders’ debates in May and June 2019. The Heads of State or Government applied the Leaders’ Agenda method to the new Strategic Agenda, which they had debated informally at their Sibiu Summit and adopted at the June 2019 formal European Council (see also chapters 2 and 3).
The Heads of State or Government used the Leaders’ Agenda method also in the case of the high-level appointments that would soon be made. As early as February 2018, they discussed the main principles guiding their actions based on a Leaders’ Note entitled ‘The next institutional cycle’. They then rejected the automaticity of the Spitzenkandidaten process and have not reconsidered their view since.

The May 2019 Sibiu Summit was the occasion for European Council President, Donald Tusk, to reiterate the principles – geographical representation, demographic diversity, political representation and gender balance – guiding the EU leaders in their quest for a new EU leadership. However, the high-level appointments process proved more difficult to complete than initially envisaged. An informal summit and two formal European Councils, one regular and one special, were needed to reach consensus on the names of the persons to be nominated for the presidency of the European Council, European Commission and the European Central Bank, as well as for the post of High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy.

1.2. Process and activities (April 2018 - June 2019)

The Leaders’ Agenda, adopted in October 2017, laid out the work programme of the European Council until June 2019. The main novelty, extensively analysed in a dedicated EPRS publication, consisted of the introduction of new working methods. This led to the multiplication of the number and formats of meetings, to the use of new working tools, the Leaders’ Notes, and to the introduction of a two-step approach to discussing topical issues, firstly informally in the form of EU Leaders’ debates followed, later on in the process, by decisions taken at formal European Council summits. When analysing the activities conducted between April 2018 and June 2019 under the Leaders’ Agenda, the meetings and delivery on policy priorities would also need to be analysed.

1.2.1. EU leaders' meetings

Between April 2018 and June 2019, the EU leaders met in three different formats, as follows: 1) formal European Council (four times), 2) informal European Council (two times), and 3) Leaders’ meeting (three times). The 28 Heads of State or Government have attended all meetings under these formats. This is different from the period prior to the adoption of the Leaders’ Agenda, when a parallel track was observed, with EU-leaders meeting in the EU-28 format to debate policy priorities and in the EU-27 format to discuss the Future of Europe. The focus on policy delivery under the Leaders’ Agenda might explain this development. Another explanation might be that back then the European Council was less focused on the Future of Europe debate, which was gaining momentum in the Parliament plenary and at Member State level, through citizens’ consultations (see Sections 1.2.3 and 1.2.4 below).

Three Euro Summits were organised between April 2018 and June 2019 in an EU-27 'inclusive' format. They allowed EU leaders to display unity, a central element of their action in the framework of the Leaders’ Agenda. As for European Council Article 50 TEU meetings, they took place, as required by the Treaty, in the EU-27 format.

There was great variation between the number of planned (nine) Leaders’ Meetings and those actually held (three). Only two of the initially programmed Leaders’ Meetings, on internal security and the new Strategic Agenda, took place as scheduled, in September 2018 and May 2019. The result of these meetings fed into decisions taken at subsequent formal European Council meetings organised in October 2018 and June 2019, respectively, confirming the European Council’s attachment to the two-step approach – informal debate followed by a formal decision – introduced by the Leaders’ Agenda. In the case of the May 2018 Leaders’ Meeting, the announced topic, migration, was changed to digital Europe, research and innovation, which had been scheduled for discussion back in March 2018. The topics planned but not discussed at Leaders' Meetings have been debated at formal European Council meetings.
1.2.2. Delivery on policy priorities

When presenting the Leaders’ Agenda, President Tusk announced that its main objective was to offer a framework that would enable the EU leaders to deliver on policy priorities. Although delivery on European Council commitments is in most cases handled by the other EU institutions, keeping the policy priorities identified in the Bratislava and Rome Declarations on the EU Leaders’ Agenda allowed to keep up the pressure on policy delivery. Furthermore, the objectives to attain were equally those of Bratislava and Rome, since the Leaders’ Agenda did not add any new ones.

Work on most of the Bratislava Declaration policy priorities was completed prior to April 2018; the only work remaining unaccomplished as of the moment of writing of this paper (June 2019) was in relation the priority to ‘broaden consensus on long-term migration policy and apply the principles of responsibility and solidarity’. The Rome Declaration identified four clusters of policy priorities, which have since received different levels of attention from the EU leaders. Most attention has been given to ‘A stronger Europe on the global scene’; less attention to ‘A safe and secure Europe’ and to ‘A prosperous and sustainable Europe’, whilst none to ‘A social Europe’. Yet, this should not be seen as a failure to implement the Leaders’ Agenda, but as the result of the growing attention being paid to external relations.

A possible reason for this heightened attention to external relations could be the volatile international situation that led to the multiplication of foreign policy topics discussed both in formal and informal settings. However, with a few exceptions, such as Ukraine, the MH-17 flight or enlargement, there was no follow-up from one summit to another on most of these foreign policy topics. Only with regard to climate change was there regular follow-up, with the topic featuring in all European Council conclusions since October 2018. At the same time, in a context of economic growth and lower unemployment figures, the social Europe dimension lost speed. The Strategic Agenda adopted in June 2019 confirmed the EU leaders’ intention to continue to prioritise external relations as well as both the internal and external dimensions of climate policy, whilst attention to social Europe is likely to remain low.

1.2.3. The Future of Europe Debates in the European Parliament

In parallel to the European Council’s launch of its Leaders’ Agenda, the Parliament initiated its own innovative form of debating the Future of Europe. The concept whereby Parliament would host a series of Future of Europe debates during plenary sessions, where Heads of State or Government would present their vision of a future EU in a democratic and open forum, was announced by President Tajani at the European Council of 19-20 October 2017. He stressed that Parliament ‘aims – and has the institutional duty – to be at the centre of the debate’. The debates commenced in January 2018 with the Irish Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, delivering the first such address in Strasbourg. By the end of the parliamentary term in April 2019, 20 EU leaders had presented their visions for the EU.
Figure 2 – Word cloud of the main concepts used in the debates

An analysis showed that in the course of the Future of Europe debates in the Parliament, EU Leaders touched upon many topics (see Figure 2), but despite variations in the focus of their speeches, all agreed on six main messages, as follows: 1) All EU Heads of State or Government underlined the benefits their country experienced from EU membership, notably regarding security, freedom, democracy or the rule of law; 2) They agreed that no Member State, whatever its size, was big enough to deal with the challenges of the 21st century alone. Most speakers identified the main challenges of today and of the years to come in the areas of migration, climate and security policy; 3) Every speaker mentioned the need to preserve unity, which encompasses showing solidarity and speaking with one voice; 4) Another message was the importance of European values and the need to defend them, both within the EU and externally; 5) All speakers stressed the important role of European citizens. While some focused on the need to involve citizens more actively into the EU decision-making process, others emphasised the need to highlight to citizens the benefits of the EU and to deliver on their priorities; 6) A common message voiced was also the need to reform the EU within the current Treaty framework.

When outlining the main challenges the EU is facing, EU Heads of State or Government very often mentioned migration, climate change and security, but also the lack of faith in public institutions and populism were also frequently mentioned.

Most leaders intervening in the Future of Europe debate, in particular the later contributions, chose not to dwell on institutional reforms as, in their view, attention should be given more to listening to the citizens and regaining their trust. While the Commission white paper on the Future of Europe, which outlined five possible scenarios on further EU integration, was only mentioned directly by Leo Varadkar and António Costa, others addressed one of its main question, the division of competences between the EU and its Member States. Some argued that some responsibilities needed to be given back to Member States, while many others called for more Europe, but only in specific areas.

1.2.4. Citizens’ dialogues and consultations

Different EU institutions, among them the European Council, introduced frameworks for citizens’ dialogues and consultations in order to promote engagement with citizens and contribute to the debate on the Future of Europe. The specific methodology for the consultations was left at the discretion of Member States. Consultations took place in a wide range of formats: town hall meetings, conferences, large-scale public events, interactive debates and online tools. Overall, mostly between April and November 2018, these type of consultations amounted to around 1 700 events across the different Member States.
At the level of Heads of State or Government, the concept of citizens’ consultations was introduced by French President, Emmanuel Macron, as a means to ‘breathe life into European democracy’ and to ‘have a democratic and critical debate on our Europe’. Having already mentioned the concept earlier, notably in his 2017 Sorbonne speech, Macron used his April 2018 speech in the framework of the Future of Europe debates in the Parliament to announce the start of the citizens’ consultation in France on the very same day.

Earlier in 2018, at the initiative of President Macron, the 27 Heads of State or Government had discussed the possibility of launching citizens’ consultations and agreed to voluntarily participate in this process. The consultations were aimed at identifying the main concerns, hopes and expectations of citizens, whilst helping the Heads of State or Government to set the agenda for EU action over the next years. The Commission presented the results of citizens’ consultations in a document published as part of a package intended to feed into the Sibiu Declaration and the 2019-24 Strategic Agenda.

The European Council endorsed the process of holding citizens’ consultations at its meeting on 14 December 2018, remarking that these consultations were an ‘unprecedented opportunity to engage with European citizens’ and that a number of concerns and expectations of participating citizens had already been identified. At this meeting, EU leaders were also provided with a joint report on citizens’ consultations by the Austrian and the incoming Romanian Council Presidencies. One main finding of this report was that, while the EU was generally seen positively by most participants, a lack of a clear vision and leadership were mentioned as a common concern. More specifically, the report grouped citizens’ concerns and expectations into six areas, which show some overlap with the clusters of the 2019-24 Strategic Agenda (see Section 3.2 below).

1.2.5. Contributions to the Future of Europe debate ahead of the Sibiu Summit and the next Strategic Agenda

Different actors contributed to the Future of Europe debate in the period ahead of the Sibiu Summit and prior to the adoption of the 2019-24 Strategic Agenda. At the national level, these contributions came from individual leaders (for example, President Macron’s letter to the EU citizens), groups of Member States (for example, the Meseberg Declaration and the Warsaw Declaration on the reunification of Europe) and individual Member States. Prior to Sibiu, the Dutch government issued a series of six papers laying out its detailed vision of the EU policy priorities for the next five years. The proposals included the possibility of applying qualified majority voting method to certain areas of the common foreign and security policy, achieving European climate neutrality by 2050 and tasking the European Council with providing increased strategic guidance on EU external action.

Civil society organisations and the business community were equally active in the pre-Sibiu Summit period. They urged EU leaders to take action in several policy areas, including climate change, where they pleaded to limit global warming to 1.5°C and to implement the Paris Agreement requirements. The Friends of Cohesion Joint Declaration is something of an exception as it focused on cohesion policy, a policy area not mentioned in the 2019-24 Strategic Agenda. Some of the other national contributions made prior to Sibiu were in the form of letters, as was the case with the letter addressed by 17 Member States to President Tusk ahead of the March 2019 European Council, which outlined the group’s vision of the EU single market, including digital policy, for the 2019-24 period. On other occasions, the contributors chose to use non-papers intended to facilitate negotiations and unblock deadlocks. This was the case with the non-paper on climate, which was put forward by eight Member States ahead of the Sibiu Summit with the aim to support a more ambitious climate policy and call for a transition towards climate neutrality in the EU by 2050.

At EU level, the Parliament and the Commission also made contributions ahead of the Sibiu Summit. For instance, a Parliament resolution of February 2019 took stock of the state of play in the Future of Europe debate, asked for a Treaty change and called on the European Council to refrain from
‘political initiatives’ that could restrain the Commission’s right of initiative. Following up on the recent citizens’ dialogues and consultations, the Commission published a set of policy recommendations in early May 2019 with regard to the new Strategic Agenda. EPRS analysis showed that there was a high degree of convergence between the overall policy clusters – security, economic governance, social Europe, climate and energy and the EU’s global role – outlined in both Parliament and Commission documents and in the ones later included in the 2019-24 Strategic Agenda (although a few differences were present at policy issue level).
2. The Sibiu Summit and Declaration

The Sibiu Declaration and the preparation of the 2019-24 Strategic Agenda at the Sibiu Summit constitute the final stage of the Future of Europe debate, launched after the UK referendum on EU membership.

2.1. The Sibiu Summit

The EU-27 Heads of State or Government met on 9 May 2019 in Sibiu to discuss the Union’s common future. This summit in Sibiu has been on the political agenda since the 2017 State of the Union speech by the President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker. His initial suggestion had been to schedule the summit for 30 March, conceiving it as the first such event after the UK’s departure. It would thus have been an opportunity for EU leaders ‘to take first decisions by unanimity on the Future of Europe’ and to choose one of the five options outlined in the Commission white paper on the institutional direction of the EU. However, the European Council had a different understanding of the purpose of the summit, seeing it as essentially designed to assess the implementation of previously set policy objectives and to reflect on future EU action in the next five years.

One dimension the summit fell short on concerned the evaluation of the Leaders’ Agenda, which was not carried out in the way originally envisaged in the Leaders’ Agenda. An EPRS analysis shows that the Leaders’ Agenda can be assessed rather favourably, as it enabled all players concerned to apply a more structured approach to their work and to better prepare themselves ahead of the summit. However, it did not fulfil the core objective of making it possible to overcome deadlocks on the most sensitive issues, such as migration and taxation.

The Sibiu Summit was important for the Future of Europe for three reasons:

- it kicked off the debate in the European Council on the appointment of candidates to a set of high-level EU positions;
- it discussed the outline for the 2019-24 Strategic Agenda;
- it adopted the Sibiu Declaration.

2.1.1. Process for the high-level appointments

At the Sibiu Summit, President Tusk informed EU leaders on how he intended to proceed to reach agreement in a ‘swift, smooth and effective way’ on the new EU leadership. He underlined that the rules set in the Treaties were to be followed for the appointment of the President of the European Council (Article 15(5) TEU), the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (18(1) TEU) and the President of the European Central Bank (283(2) TFEU), as well as for the proposal of a candidate for the President of the European Commission (17(7) TEU). President Tusk added that the nominations for the new EU leadership should reflect not only the EU’s demography and geographical balance but also gender and political balance. Finally, he stressed that these decisions were to be taken by consensus, if possible, but that he ‘would not shy away from putting [them] to the vote’ if needed. To conclude the process in time for the June European Council, he called a meeting of all 28 EU leaders on 28 May, immediately after the European elections. Despite this preparatory meeting, the 20-21 June European Council was not able to agree on the nominations and Donald Tusk convened a special European Council meeting, which lasted from 30 June to 2 July, with interruptions. The package the European Council finally agreed upon included:

- Ursula von der Leyen (Germany), for European Commission President;
- Charles Michel (Belgium), for European Council President;
Josep Borrell (Spain), for High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy; Christine Lagarde (France), for President of the European Central Bank.

On 16 July, the Parliament elected Ursula von der Leyen as the new President of the European Commission. Charles Michel was elected directly by the European Council as its next president at the 30 June - 2 July meeting.

2.1.2. First discussion on the 2019-24 Strategic Agenda

As planned in the Leaders' Agenda, the EU-27 Heads of State or Government had a first informal debate on the direction for future EU action at their Leaders' Meeting in Sibiu. In its contribution to the Sibiu Summit, the European Commission, whilst recalling its white paper and the five scenarios, finally aligned itself with the European Council's view on the objective of this meeting and made 10 policy recommendations for the new Strategic Agenda.

EU leaders' discussions on the 2019-24 Strategic Agenda at the Sibiu meeting were informed by President Tusk's Leaders' Agenda note, 'Strategic Agenda 2019-24 – outline', which provided a first overview of the topics that could be part of the Strategic Agenda for 2019-24. These were organised around four policy clusters:

- Protecting citizens and freedoms;
- Developing our economic base: the European model for the future;
- Building a greener, fairer and more inclusive future; and
- Promoting Europe’s interests and values in the world.

As chapter 3 will show in detail, the final version retained this basic structure, but some substantial additions were made before the European Council adopted it at its meeting of 20-21 June.

2.2. The Sibiu Declaration

At their Sibiu Summit, the 27 Heads of State or Government also adopted a declaration with 10 points, each corresponding to a commitment they undertook to fulfil in the coming months and years:

- Defending Europe – from East to West and from North to South;
- Staying united, through thick and thin;
- Always looking for joint solutions;
- Protecting the European way of life, democracy and rule of law;
- Bringing the Union closer to its citizens;
- Reducing disparities (among Europeans);
- Providing the Union with the means to achieve its objectives;
- Safeguarding the future of the next generations;
- Protecting EU citizens;
- Being a responsible global leader.

The Sibiu Declaration recalls the pledges made in the two previous declarations, from Bratislava and Rome. It does not set any implementation goals or timeline, on the understanding that the 2019-24 Strategic Agenda would offer the framework to pursue and fulfil the commitments undertaken in Sibiu. These commitments mirror to a large extent the messages – such as the need to keep unity, to defend Europe and to commonly address the challenges facing the EU and its Member States – conveyed by most EU leaders in their Future of Europe addresses in Parliament’s plenary sessions. Furthermore, some of the points tackled by the EU leaders in the Parliament plenary, such as the need to fight populism, were only hinted at in the Sibiu Declaration through a reference to the need to protect democracy, the rule of law and fundamental freedoms.
2.2.1. Comparison between the Bratislava, Rome and Sibiu Declarations

The summits held in Bratislava, Rome and Sibiu have been milestones in the Future of Europe debate, each leading to the adoption of a declaration. This section examines the key features and messages of the three declarations, whilst pointing to similarities and differences between them and their policy priorities.

Features of the Bratislava, Rome and Sibiu Declarations

Table 1 includes a select number of features that enable a comparison and an analysis of the Bratislava, Rome and Sibiu Declarations. As a common feature, all three declarations were signed in the EU-27 format. Another common feature is that all three include a declaratory part, which recalls the EU’s founding principles, as well as a policy priorities part, which outlines the policies at the centre of future EU action. In the case of the Bratislava and the Rome Declarations, there is a clear delimitation between the parts focusing on principles and policy priorities, respectively. In the case of the Sibiu Declaration, the delimitation is not that clear anymore, with both principles and policy priorities featuring among the 10 commitments agreed upon by the EU leaders.

Table 1 – Comparison between key features of the Bratislava Declaration and Roadmap, Rome Declaration and Agenda and the Sibiu Declaration

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Features</th>
<th>Bratislava</th>
<th>Rome</th>
<th>Sibiu</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nature of document</td>
<td>Declaration and work programme</td>
<td>Declaration and agenda</td>
<td>Declaration Strategic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Strategic and operational</td>
<td>Strategic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timeframe</td>
<td>Short-term (originally), 6 months</td>
<td>Long-term, 10 years</td>
<td>Not specified</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impact on European Council workings</td>
<td>Follow-up reports by rotating presidency</td>
<td>Not directly</td>
<td>Not directly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy Priorities</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objectives</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Member States involved</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involvement of other EU actors</td>
<td>Yes -</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes -</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EC President</td>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EP President</td>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rotating Presidency of the Council</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: EPRS.

However, the three declarations are different in nature. Although they all include a declaratory part that recalls the EU’s founding principles and policy priorities, only the Bratislava Declaration and Roadmap provide a work programme with clear objectives to fulfil in a limited period of time (initially intended to last six months). Out of the three declarations, it is the only one combining both strategic and operational elements, whilst the other two are exclusively strategic. The Rome and the Sibiu Declarations provide general guidelines for the work of the EU and its institutions, including the European Council, without committing to clear operational objectives. To be implemented, they both require the adoption of a work programme. From October 2017 until June 2019, the Leaders’
Agenda was the work programme allowing implementation and operationalisation of the Rome Declaration and addressing unsolved items of the Bratislava Declaration (see the previous EPRS publications From Rome to Sibiu and Assessing the Leaders’ Agenda).

Another difference concerns the timeframe. From the beginning, the Bratislava Declaration was intended to cover a short period of time, six months. The Rome Declaration provides a long-term vision as it is intended to cover an entire decade. It is thus meant to co-exist with the Sibiu Declaration, which, while remaining silent on the issue of a timeframe, does mark the end of the Future of Europe debate in the form known since 2016 and offers a common vision of the EU-27 at the start of the new institutional cycle.

Of the three declarations, only that from Bratislava, due to its mixed strategic and operational nature, had a direct impact on the working methods of the European Council. It implies an enhanced and more systematic follow-up to previous European Council commitments, based on regular reports from the President-in-office of the Council. More changes to the European Council working methods were introduced at a later stage of the Future of Europe debate by the Leaders’ Agenda.

Furthermore, different actors, in particular, the Commission President and the European Parliament President, were involved to varying degrees in the adoption of the three declarations, but in different ways. The Commission President, in his capacity of member of the European Council, was present when each of the three declarations was adopted. The Parliament President co-signed the Rome Declaration with the President of the European Council, that of the Commission and the 27 Heads of State or Government present in Rome. In the case of the Bratislava and the Sibiu Declarations, Slovakia and Romania – the countries holding the rotating presidency of the Council of the EU – were involved along with the Council secretariat in the drafting of the declarations. Similarly, when the Rome Declaration was drafted, Italy, the host, and Malta, the country holding the Council presidency, contributed along with the Council secretariat to the drafting exercise.

Comparison of the policy priorities of the Bratislava, Rome and Sibiu Declarations

Figure 3 provides an overview of the policy priorities identified by the Bratislava, Rome and Sibiu Declarations. It shows that there is substantive convergence on key policy priorities for the EU, but that there are important variations in how they are clustered in the three different documents.
The Bratislava Declaration and Roadmap introduced three clusters of policy priorities: 1) migration, 2) security (internal and external), and 3) economic and social development, including youth. The Rome Declaration and Agenda maintained the Bratislava policy priorities, but grouped them slightly differently, in four clusters. A possible explanation resides in the different nature of the two documents. The Bratislava Declaration and Roadmap were intended as a short-term operational tool allowing to kick-start the reform process and facilitate a reflection on the future of the EU, whilst the Rome Declaration and agenda provided a long-term strategic vision for the EU. Similarly to the Rome Declaration, the Sibiu Declaration provided a renewed long-term vision, with policy priorities falling under the same four clusters as those identified in Rome.

Three noteworthy changes need to be highlighted when comparing the three declarations. Firstly, the economic and social development, youth cluster identified in Bratislava was split in two clusters in the Rome Declaration, one focussing on the economy (‘A prosperous and sustainable Europe’) and another one on the social dimension (‘A social Europe’). The initial core of economic policy aspects considered in Bratislava - the review of the single market strategies, the European Fund for Strategic Investments (EFSI) and fighting youth unemployment - was expanded in Rome to include climate and energy, digital Europe, EMU, innovation and jobs, growth and competitiveness. The Sibiu Declaration and later on the new Strategic Agenda, confirmed the approach of separate clusters introduced in Rome (see also Section 4.3 below).

Secondly, the dimension of the EU as a global actor was absent from the Bratislava Declaration and Roadmap. Only two aspects of pertinence to external relations, were included in Bratislava, 1) external security (defence) as part of the security cluster, and 2) trade as part of the economic and social development and youth cluster. The Rome Declaration moved external security and trade to the newly added ‘A stronger Europe on the global scene’ cluster, which also contained two new additions, external relations and climate. Furthermore, the Sibiu Declaration kept intact the EU as a global actor policy cluster. In the period between Rome and Sibiu, one or more policy items of ‘A stronger Europe on the global scene’ cluster were always on the EU Leaders’ Agenda at each
European Council after the adoption of the Rome Declaration. This pattern is not valid for the other three policy clusters, as shown in the EPRS assessment of the Leaders’ Agenda.

Climate change is an interesting example to examine here. In 2016, climate did not feature among the main concerns of EU citizens and was hence absent from the Bratislava Declaration. EU citizens’ interest in climate grew steadily in the interim, featuring among their top concerns in 2019. The Rome Declaration added climate change to this list. In doing so, it distinguished between an internal EU dimension to climate, included in ‘A prosperous and sustainable Europe’ cluster, and an external dimension to climate, included in ‘A Stronger Europe on the global scene’ cluster. Although the Sibiu Declaration explicitly referred only to the external dimension of climate, both dimensions will continue to be pursued under the new Strategic Agenda (see Chapter 3 below).

Thirdly, the policy issues of internal and external security belonged to the same cluster (security) in Bratislava and to two different clusters (‘A safe and secure Europe’ and ‘A stronger Europe on the global scene’) in Rome. EU leaders took a holistic approach to security in Bratislava, privileging the internal/external security nexus, and a more ‘traditional’ view in Rome, splitting the two apart. They came back to their initial view in the Sibiu Declaration, where they stated their support for the promotion of the internal/external security nexus. The grouping of internal and external security under the same cluster in the Sibiu Declaration should not be seen as a surprise. Several Heads of State or Government stressed the multifaceted nature of the threats the EU is facing and the need to address them jointly, based on internal and external policy mechanisms.
3. The 2019-24 Strategic Agenda: Continuity and change

This chapter outlines and examines the 2019-24 Strategic Agenda. It will first briefly present the structure and development of the agenda before making an in-depth comparison between it and its predecessor. This comparison highlights similarities and differences regarding both horizontal and institutional issues as well as policy issues.


Following a first informal debate on the direction for future EU action at their Leaders’ Meeting in Sibiu, the EU Heads of State or Government adopted the 2019-24 Strategic Agenda at the European Council meeting of 20-21 June 2019. The document sets out the EU’s political priorities for the next five years and is organised around four headings, which cover five policy clusters:

- protecting citizens and freedoms (Cluster 1: Freedom security and justice\(^1\) policy cluster);
- developing a strong and vibrant economic base (Cluster 2: Economic policy cluster);
- building a climate-neutral, green, fair and social Europe (Cluster 3: Social and employment policy cluster and Cluster 4: energy and climate policy cluster);
- promoting European interests and values on the global stage (Cluster 5: Global policy cluster).

Each policy cluster includes various policy areas, which again include several specific policy issues, as exemplified in Figure 4.

The conclusions, called ‘delivering on our priorities’, outline how the EU should achieve the objectives set out in the policy priority areas, and include horizontal and institutional issues.

Figure 4 – Structure of policy clusters

![Policy Cluster Diagram](image)

Source: EPRS.

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\(^1\) The terms ‘freedom security and justice’ and ‘justice and home affairs’ are used interchangeably in this paper.
Overall, the substance of the Strategic Agenda remains close to the outline prepared by Donald Tusk and the discussion at the informal meeting of EU-27 Heads of State or Government on 9 May 2019 in Sibiu. Yet, the final version saw some major additions to previous versions (see Figure 5). The biggest changes concern the third policy cluster – building a climate-neutral, green, fair and social Europe – where two concepts: 1) climate neutrality and 2) social (barely addressed at all previously) were added. More precise objectives were set on both aspects. Other noteworthy deletions or additions relate to defence and migration. Overall, the Strategic Agenda is more proactive and assertive, and less defensive than previous draft versions.

Each policy cluster includes various policy areas, which again include several specific policy issues as exemplified in Figure 4.

The conclusions, called ‘delivering on our priorities’, outlines how the EU should achieve the objectives set out in the policy priority areas, and includes horizontal and institutional issues.

Figure 5: Selected changes in the 2019-24 Strategic Agenda compared to earlier drafts

Source: EPRS.
3.2. Comparing the old and the new Strategic Agenda

When comparing the 2014-19 Strategic Agenda and the new one, this paper examines, on one hand, the horizontal and institutional issues, and on the other, the different policy areas. Regarding both dimensions, one can observe strong overlaps, even if there are also significant differences.

3.2.1. Comparing horizontal and institutional issues

When examining the non-policy specific parts of the two documents (i.e. the introduction in the old Strategic Agenda and the introduction and the concluding section ‘delivering on our priorities’ in the new Strategic Agenda), one can identify 11 horizontal and institutional issues (see Table 2).

Table 2 – Differences on horizontal issues between the old and the new Strategic Agendas

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HORIZONTAL ISSUES</th>
<th>STRATEGIC AGENDA</th>
<th>2014-19</th>
<th>2019-24</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>European values</td>
<td>.....</td>
<td>&lt;</td>
<td>Numerous references</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Important challenges facing EU</td>
<td>Unemployment, changing global economy, scarce resources, cost of energy, impact of climate change, radicalisation and extremism, geopolitical instability at the EU borders, demographic trends, irregular migration</td>
<td>≠</td>
<td>Some policy specific challenges, e.g. technological, security and sustainability challenges, have been mentioned in the relevant policy cluster</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unity</td>
<td>Unity brings strength</td>
<td>&gt;</td>
<td>.....</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working of the institutions</td>
<td>Strong credible institutions</td>
<td>=</td>
<td>Our institutions will work in accordance with the spirit and the letter of the treaties. They will respect the principles of democracy, rule of law, transparency and equality between citizens and between Member States. Each institution should resist its working methods and reflect on the best way to fulfil its role under the treaties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources</td>
<td>.....</td>
<td>&lt;</td>
<td>The EU must give itself the means to match its ambitions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Varying levels of integration</td>
<td>In our Union, different degrees of cooperation and integration exist</td>
<td>&gt;</td>
<td>.....</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooperation between EU institutions and Member States</td>
<td>In line with the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality, the Union must concentrate its action on areas where it makes a real difference. It should refrain from taking action when member states can better achieve the same objectives</td>
<td>≥</td>
<td>Our institutions must focus on what really matters. In line with the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality, the EU must be big or big and small or small</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Follow up on decisions</td>
<td>The credibility of the Union depends on its ability to ensure adequate follow-up on decisions and commitments</td>
<td>=</td>
<td>Good governance also depends on rigorous implementation and enforcement of agreed policies and rules, which must be closely monitored</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involvement of other actors</td>
<td>Involvement of national parliaments</td>
<td>≠</td>
<td>Engage with citizens, civil society, social partners, and with regional and local actors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emphasis on results</td>
<td>Above all, the emphasis should be on concrete results</td>
<td>=</td>
<td>Deliver on priorities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrated approach of internal and external policy</td>
<td>.....</td>
<td>&lt;</td>
<td>Important</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: EPRS
The comparison shows that:

- on three issues (division of competences between EU institutions and Member States, follow-up on decisions and emphasis on results) there are the same or very similar messages;
- for five horizontal issues, there is no corresponding reference in one of the two documents:
  - in three cases (values, resources, and integrated approach), new ideas that did not exist in the previous Strategic Agenda had been inserted;
  - two horizontal issues (i.e. unity and varying levels of integration) referred to in the 2014-19 Strategic Agenda were not reiterated in the 2019-24 Strategic Agenda. Most surprisingly, unity, which had been a constant message in European Council declarations such as those from Bratislava and Sibiu, in the speeches of the European Council President and during the Future of Europe debates in the Parliament, was not mentioned in the new Strategic Agenda.
- in three cases, both documents make similar references to the horizontal and institutional issues, although the wording or specificity of the reference can be more or less specific. This is the case regarding the challenges of the EU, the functioning of the institutions and the involvement of other actors.

While both documents refer to challenges facing the EU, these challenges differ quite significantly. First, in the 2014-19 Strategic Agenda, the challenges were specifically outlined in the horizontal section, whilst in the new Strategic Agenda, the challenges are often mentioned more indirectly and spread across the specific policy priorities. Second, many of the previously mentioned challenges are not reiterated, such as unemployment, scarce natural resources or the cost of energy, while new ones have been added such as technological, security and sustainability challenges. This corresponds to President Tusk's explanation that 'This Agenda reflects the changes that Europe and the world have undergone in recent years'.

Regarding the references relating to the functioning of the institutions and the involvement of other players, the 2019-24 Strategic Agenda is more specific. On the former it recalls the application of the Treaties and recommends to revisit the working methods of each institution. On the latter it expands the list of other actors who should be involved beyond national parliaments, to citizens, civil society and social partners, as well as regional and local actors.

### 3.2.2. Comparing policy priorities

When comparing the old and new Strategic Agendas, one needs to consider the meaning of the policy clusters, the relative importance of each policy cluster, the continuation of existing topics in relation to the addition of new topics and the change of focus within policy clusters or policy areas.

A notable difference between the old and new Strategic Agendas is that the meaning of the overarching concept of ‘protecting citizens’, has strongly evolved. While in the old Strategic Agenda this concept was mainly associated with social and employment aspects, now it is applied to policy issues in the area of justice and home affairs, mainly regarding migration and security issues.

To assess the relative importance of a policy cluster, one can apply different indicators to evaluate the result. If one looks at the order of importance of the different headings, one can see a clear shift in focus over the last five years (see Table 3).
With the EU just coming out of the economic and financial crisis (the migration crisis not having hit yet), the 2014-19 Strategic Agenda had economic issues as a first priority. As argued in the EPRS outlook for the June 2019 European Council, the order of the priorities corresponds to the concerns of EU citizens, as indicated in the recent standard Eurobarometer at that time. Migration, followed by terrorism, is the main concern expressed and both are part of priority 1. Then come the state of Member States’ public finances and the economic situation, both considered to be part of priority 2. Climate change and unemployment are next on the list of citizens’ concerns, both part of priority 3. And fourth comes the EU’s influence in the world (priority 4).

In addition to the order of importance, the amount of attention (i.e. number of words dedicated to an issue) is another indicator of the shift in focus between policy clusters. The biggest proportionate increase concerns the global role policy cluster, which saw its share in total attention rise by seven percentage points in comparison to the last Strategic Agenda (see Figure 6). Other policy clusters that experienced a slight or moderate increase were JHA, and climate and energy respectively. The
policy cluster that lost most attention was social and employment policy, which saw a drop of 10 percentage points.

The fact that ‘Protecting citizens and freedoms’ received relatively less attention in the 2019-24 Strategic Agenda compared to the economic and global role policy clusters (and although it is first priority in the list) is surprising, as it goes against having it as the first and main priority in the list. This statistical result can be explained by the fact that unlike some of the other policy clusters, the JHA cluster is less extensive as it covers fewer policy areas (e.g. the economic cluster covers nine policy areas, while JHA only covers three).

Figure 7 – Attention to economic policies in the new and the old Strategic Agendas

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Digital capacities</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entrepreneurship/job creation</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EMU</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single Market</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trade</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competitiveness</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industrial Policy</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taxation</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R&amp;D</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: EPRS.

Shifts in attention can be observed not only between policy clusters but also within them. A telling example is the economic policies cluster (see Figure 7). Whereas the old Strategic Agenda placed more attention on the areas of EMU, job creation and entrepreneurship, the new Strategic Agenda gives more attention to the single market and competitiveness.
Another example of a significant shift in attention is the energy and climate policy cluster. Figure 8 shows a reverse of attention. Whereas in the 2014-19 Strategic Agenda the policy cluster ‘climate and energy’ was overwhelmingly focused on energy, notably energy affordability or independence, the new Strategic Agenda reverses this ratio, giving climate issues the vast majority of the policy attention.
Likewise, the ‘employment and social affairs’ cluster provides another example of the shift in attention in a given policy cluster. Within the old Strategic Agenda, employment received significantly higher policy attention compared to the area of social policy, whereas in the new Strategic Agenda this ratio is reversed, with social policy being the more prominent topic. Furthermore, by adding the area of culture, the new Strategic Agenda introduces an additional policy area to this cluster.

Figures 10-14 outline the specific evolution between the 2014-19 and the 2019-24 Strategic Agenda. They show whether a policy issue was continued as part of the agenda, was dropped or whether new ones were added. They also indicate whether or not the focus in a policy area has changed.
Figure 10 – Changes between the old and new Strategic Agendas: Justice and home affairs policy cluster

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2014 - 19</th>
<th>STRATEGIC AGENDA</th>
<th>2019 - 24</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>JUSTICE AND HOME AFFAIRS POLICY CLUSTER</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SECURITY</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Countering radicalisation</td>
<td>×</td>
<td></td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resilience to natural and man-made disasters</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>Malicious cyber activities, hybrid threats and disinformation</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fight against terrorism and cross border crime</td>
<td>×</td>
<td></td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>MIGRATION</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Address specific skill shortage and attract talent (Migration)</td>
<td>×</td>
<td></td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fight human trafficking</td>
<td>×</td>
<td>Ensure effective returns</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consensus on Dublin regulation</td>
<td>×</td>
<td>Functioning of Schengen</td>
<td>×</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooperation with third countries</td>
<td>×</td>
<td>Fight irregular/illegal migration</td>
<td>×</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asylum policy</td>
<td>×</td>
<td>Border control</td>
<td>×</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>EUROPE AND JUSTICE</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improved judicial cooperation</td>
<td>×</td>
<td></td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strengthening common tools, incl. Eurojust</td>
<td>×</td>
<td></td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mutual recognition of judgments</td>
<td>×</td>
<td></td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tackling corruption</td>
<td>×</td>
<td></td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rule of law</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>×</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fundamental rights and freedoms of citizens (fundamental rights incl. data protection)</td>
<td>×</td>
<td></td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: EPRS.
Figure 11 – Changes between the old and the new Strategic Agendas: Economic policy cluster

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2014 - 19</th>
<th>STRATEGIC AGENDA</th>
<th>2019 - 24</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>ECONOMIC POLICY CLUSTER</strong></td>
<td><strong>STRATEGIC AGENDA</strong></td>
<td><strong>2019 - 24</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>COMPETITIVENESS</strong></td>
<td>Reinforce global attractiveness of the Union</td>
<td>Fighting unfair practices from third countries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Securing strategic supply chains</td>
<td>Promote level playing field, including trade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>As place of production and investment</td>
<td>Promoting market access</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fair competition within EU and globally</td>
<td>Strong industrial base</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>DIGITAL CAPACITIES</strong></td>
<td>Prepare economies for the future</td>
<td>Thriving agriculture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Full use of EU structural funds</td>
<td>Connectivity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Using/developing financial instruments</td>
<td>Data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>e.g. European Investment Bank</td>
<td>Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>continued element</strong></td>
<td>Digital transformation and artificial intelligence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>EMU</strong></td>
<td>Stronger euro area governance and economic policy coordination</td>
<td>Investment in infrastructure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Convergence and solidarity</td>
<td>Completing Banking and Capital Markets Union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Respecting integrity of internal market and openness towards non-euro countries</td>
<td>More solid and resilient EMU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND JOB CREATION</strong></td>
<td>Access to finance and investment</td>
<td>Foster entrepreneurship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Resilient financial regulation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Well functioning labour markets</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Shifting taxation from labour</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reduce administrative burden</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Respect consumer / employee protection and health and environment concern</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>INDUSTRIAL POLICY</strong></td>
<td>Place of production with a strong and competitive industrial base</td>
<td>Comprehensive industrial policy fit for the future</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>RESEARCH AND INNOVATION (R&amp;D)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>Increase research efforts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Esp. addressing fragmentation of European research, development and innovation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Investment in innovation and research</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TAXATION</strong></td>
<td>Combat tax evasion and tax fraud</td>
<td>Fair and effective taxation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TRADE</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ambition and robust trade policy ensuring fair competition</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>At multilateral level in reformed WTO</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Complete international trade agreements</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SINGLE MARKET</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>Completing the single market in products/services</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Source: EPRS.

Figure 12 – Changes between the old and the new Strategic Agendas: Employment and social affairs cluster

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2014 - 19</th>
<th>STRATEGIC AGENDA</th>
<th>2019 - 24</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>EMPLOYMENT</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tackle youth unemployment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facility worker mobility</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protecting freedom of EU citizens to move</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>continued element</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Investment in skills, education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclusive labour markets</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SOCIAL POLICY</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safety net to accompany change and reverse inequalities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implement European Pillar of Social Rights at EU and Member State level</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inequality (esp. affecting young people)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities and rights for all</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equality between women and men</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohesion</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food standards</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Efficient, fair and future-oriented social protection system</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adequate consumer / employee protection</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CULTURE</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Investment in culture and cultural heritage</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: EPRS.
Figure 13 – Changes between the old and the new Strategic Agendas: External policies cluster

Source: EPRS.
In total, the old Strategic Agenda included 73 policy issues, while the new one includes 82. One can see a significant degree of continuity in the political agenda, since 53% of the policy issues mentioned in the old Strategic Agenda also form part of the new Strategic Agenda. The EU global role policy cluster shows the highest degree of continuity, as all policy issues from the previous Agenda were incorporated in the new one. In other areas, several policy issues from the 2014-19 Strategic Agenda were discontinued in the new Strategic Agenda (47%). Entrepreneurship and Job creation is the policy area containing the most changes: nearly all policy issues were discontinued and no new additions were made. This can be explained by the improvement in the level of employment in the EU over the past five years. The area of judicial cooperation was also largely discontinued, as most of the previous policy issues were not retained, and only one, the rule of law, was added.

Discontinuation of a policy area often goes hand in hand with a change of focus either within the policy area or even the policy cluster. There are several policy areas and policy issues where the focus has changed:

- No policy issues in the competitiveness and climate policy areas were retained from the old Strategic Agenda. This does not mean that these policy areas are less important in the new Strategic Agenda than in the old one, as a lot of new policy issues have been added. Instead, both policy areas can be seen as examples of a significant shift in policy...
focus during the past five years. While the focus regarding competitiveness was more on the internal competitiveness of the EU as a place of production and investment, current political developments, amounting to a 'world where common rules and standards are increasingly questioned' have shifted this focus towards promoting a rule-based, level playing field within and outside of the EU, and lead to a different policy focus within the area of competitiveness.

Similarly, while climate was the subject of a significantly lesser focus in the old Strategic Agenda, being addressed only in terms of the setting of climate targets, it has become a substantial part of the new Strategic Agenda. The new version formulates more ambitious targets within this area, introducing concepts such as circular economy and climate neutrality, and also addresses other climate challenges such as a loss of biodiversity or a deterioration of air and water quality.

Another example of a shift of focus within a policy area is migration, which was previously also associated with positive effects such as addressing skills shortages, but since the outbreak of the migration crisis, the issue of migration relates mainly to the management of migration flows and border control.

In the area of security policy, the focus moved away from countering radicalisation, where initiatives launched over the last years are now being implemented, whilst efforts are now shifting towards new issues such as hybrid and cyber-threats and disinformation.

In the previous Strategic Agenda, the policy issue of energy efficiency was considered in the context of making energy more affordable for people. In the new one, it is now seen more in relation to its environmental effects. In the previous document, there was a strong focus on energy security, while this time attention is more directed towards its impact on climate change.

Some 43 new policy issues have been added, representing about 52 % of the new Strategic Agenda. Policy areas including many new additions are migration, research and innovation, social policy, climate and security. Specific policy issues that have been added are for example: natural and man-made disasters, rule of law, functioning of Schengen. Policy areas in which no real additions were made include: Taxation, Single Market, Employment and Energy. Culture is the only policy area that did not exist under the old Strategic Agenda and has been added under the new one. Its addition could possibly be a result of the discussions by EU leaders held as part of the Leader’s Meeting on education and culture.

3.3. Next steps

EU Heads of State or Government see the Strategic Agenda as 'the first step in a process that will be taken forward by the Institutions and the Member States'. The European Council announced that it 'will follow the implementation of these priorities closely and will define further general political directions and priorities as necessary'.

Just like the Leaders’ Agenda was the operationalisation of the Rome Declaration, one can expect that the European Council will come up with a follow-up to the Leaders’ Agenda, which would then operationalise the Sibiu Declaration and implement the 2019-24 Strategic Agenda. EU Heads of State or Government have already set their European Council meeting in October 2019 as the moment at which they will discuss the follow-up to the Strategic Agenda.
4. From (before) Bratislava to Sibiu and beyond

This chapter considers how the Future of Europe debate evolved from June 2016 to June 2019. It focuses on the milestone moments – the June 2016 statement of the EU-27 Heads of State or Government, the Bratislava Declaration, the Rome Declaration, the Sibiu Declaration and the 2019-24 Strategic Agenda – and describes how, through their main messages and the policy priorities they set, they influenced the Future of Europe debate at EU level. The final section of this chapter focuses on institutional aspects, showing the impact of the process on the interinstitutional balance, strengthening both the European Council and the Parliament.

Figure 15 shows the number and types of meetings held during the three-year Future of Europe debate. It confirms that the number of meetings remained rather high during the entire period, well beyond the minimum four regular European Council meetings a year required by Article 15 TEU. It also shows that the types of meetings became diversified, with EU leaders meeting as a European Council, as a European Council under Article 50 TEU, informally as EU-27 or EU-28, or more recently, also informally, in the framework of Leaders’ Meetings under the Leaders’ Agenda.

4.1. Phases and milestones of the Future of Europe debate (June 2016 - June 2019)

The Future of Europe debate was initiated in June 2016 in the aftermath of the UK referendum on EU membership, and ended mid-2019 with the adoption of the Sibiu Declaration and the 2019-24 Strategic Agenda. Five milestone moments marked three distinct phases in the Future of Europe debate: 1) diagnostics and reflection (June to mid-September 2016); 2) deliberation and proposals (mid-September 2016 to March 2017); and 3) delivery and vision (April 2017 to June 2019). Figure 16 is a graphic representation of key developments in the debate on the Future of Europe for the June 2016 to June 2019 period.
4.1.1. Phase one: Diagnostics and reflection (June - September 2016)

The first phase started in June 2016 after the UK referendum on EU membership, and ended in September 2016 with the Bratislava Summit. During this phase, EU leaders took stock of the result of the UK referendum. They tried to diagnose why the EU was less popular with its citizens and considered what could be done to address this problem.

In June 2016, the EU leaders met for the first time in the EU-27 format to discuss the Future of Europe. They recognised that EU citizens were dissatisfied with ‘the current state of affairs’ at both the national and European level and that they expected action in two policy areas; security, and jobs and growth. EU citizens were also hoping for a ‘better future’. There was, at the time, growing awareness among the Heads of State or Government that the EU needed to deliver on citizens’ expectations in a united manner. They decided to start ‘a political reflection to give an impulse to further reforms, in line with the EU's Strategic Agenda, and to the development of the EU with 27 Member States’.

The months between June and September 2016 led to the multiplication of contributions from different national and European actors on the Future of Europe. Some of these contributions took a holistic approach (for example, President Juncker’s State of the Union speech), whilst others tried to advance the debate on specific policy areas, as was the case, for example, in defence.
The first major collective reflection moment was the informal meeting of the 27 Heads of State or Government held in Bratislava on 16 September 2016. The meeting had two main objectives: 1) to discuss the Future of Europe; and 2) to decide on the short-term policy priorities.

As regards the Future of Europe, the EU leaders agreed that they needed to stand together united, to improve communication between Member States and with the EU institutions, to better communicate with citizens and restore trust in the EU. They committed to continuing to reflect on a future vision for the EU, which they were to present in Rome at the 60th anniversary of the Rome Treaties.

As regards the short-term policy priorities, the Bratislava Roadmap identified three main lines of action – migration, economy and security (internal and external). President Tusk played an instrumental role prior to the summit in building consensus on the three policy priorities, which reflected, at the time, the top three concerns of EU citizens. In Bratislava, EU leaders agreed on clear policy priorities objectives that they would attain over a six-month period in each of the three policy areas, and committed to follow up on implementation.

### 4.1.2. Phase two: Deliberation and proposals (September 2016 - March 2017)

The second phase opened after the Bratislava Summit (September 2016) and lasted until the Rome Summit (March 2017). On the one hand, EU leaders focused on the implementation of the Bratislava policy priorities and kept them almost permanently on the agenda of the European Council. On the other hand, the Heads of State or Government concentrated on the preparation of a long-term, 10-year vision for the EU.

The long-term vision presented in the Rome Declaration benefited from ideas flagged up in the Bratislava Declaration and Roadmap (see Section 2.2.1). It also benefited from different contributions made by national (for example, the Visegrad countries’ statement) and European (for example, the Commission white paper, the package of three Parliament resolutions on the Future of Europe) actors in the period prior to the Rome Summit. One of the most important contributions during this period was the Valletta informal concept paper, drafted by the European Council President with input from the Italian government and the Maltese Presidency, and discussed at an informal EU-27 format meeting held in February 2017. Some of the elements, included in the Valletta informal concept paper, were later integrated in the Rome Declaration.

### 4.1.3. Phase three: Delivery and vision (April 2017 - June 2019)

The third phase of the Future of Europe debate began in April 2017, after the adoption of the Rome Declaration, and lasted until the end of June 2019, when the 2019-24 Strategic Agenda was adopted. This phase was not only the longest-lasting (two years) but also the richest in terms of developments. It was marked by the following five elements: 1) the UK withdrawal negotiations, 2) additional contributions by national and European actors to the Future of Europe debate, 3) the adoption of the Leaders’ Agenda and its implementation, 4) plenary debates in the European Parliament on the Future of Europe; and 5) citizens’ consultations. Most of these elements contributed to defining a renewed vision that was embodied in the Sibiu Declaration and the 2019-24 Strategic Agenda.

The UK notification on 29 March 2017 of its intention to withdraw from the EU marked the start of this third phase. European Council (Article 50 TEU) meetings have since been held regularly in the margins of formal European Council meetings. The initial months after the activation of Article 50 TEU corresponded with an increase in EU leaders’ attention towards the UK withdrawal negotiations and a slowdown in the Future of Europe debate. Brexit once again dominated the EU Leaders’ Agenda between October 2018 and April 2019, at a moment when the Future of Europe debate intensified both in the Parliament’s plenary sessions and at the national level, through citizens’ consultations.
After a slowdown due to a shift in attention towards Brexit, the Future of Europe debate was relaunched in September 2017, following President Macron’s Sorbonne speech and President Juncker’s State of the Union speech, both containing several proposals to advance the EU project. Shortly after, the Parliament published its vision based on its previous resolutions. Member States and EU institutions made public several other contributions throughout 2018 and in early 2019, prior to the Sibiu Summit (see Section 1.2.5).

In October 2017, EU leaders adopted the Leaders’ Agenda, which constitutes a ‘major institutional innovation’ of recent years and a work programme for the European Council until June 2019. From that moment onwards, the Heads of State or Government concentrated on implementing the Leaders’ Agenda and its policy priorities.

4.2. Main horizontal and institutional topics and policy priorities (June 2016 - June 2019)

In order to assess the development of the discourse regarding the main horizontal and institutional topics as well as the policy priorities of the European Council from June 2016 to June 2019, this section compares the milestone documents published over this period. For both dimensions, the Bratislava, Rome and Sibiu Declarations are compared, as is the 2019-24 Strategic Agenda. Concerning the horizontal and institutional topics, the statement by the 27 EU Heads of State or Government in June 2016 has also been taken into consideration. Section 2.2.1 already outlined in detail the differences in nature between some of these milestone contributions. Additionally, references are made to the Future of Europe debates in the Parliament and the Leaders’ Agenda to complement the overview on the evolution of the discourse by EU Heads of State or Government.

4.2.1. Main horizontal and institutional messages

When looking at the milestone documents in general, one can see that the June 2016 statement clearly includes the fewest horizontal and institutional topics. This is due to the fact that it was both the shortest document and was issued at the beginning of the Future of Europe process. Through reflection and discussion, some additional elements were added or existing ones were specified in greater detail. The processes of the Future of Europe debates in the Parliament and the Leaders’ Agenda also contributed to shaping the horizontal and institutional topics.

When looking at the individual horizontal and institutional topics, one can identify four horizontal and four institutional topics:

- **Horizontal topics**
  - Unity
  - EU citizens
  - Delivering on policy priorities
  - EU values

- **Institutional topics**
  - Cooperation between Member States and EU institutions
  - EU reforms
  - Division of competences between the EU and Member States
  - Enhanced cooperation
Table 4 – Selection of horizontal and institutional topics mentioned in European Council milestone documents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HORIZONTAL ISSUES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EU Citizens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delivering on policy priorities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European values</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INSTITUTIONAL ISSUES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cooperation between EU institutions and Member States</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EU Reforms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Devision of competences between the EU and Member States</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enhanced cooperation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: EPRS.

Table 4 shows the development of the main horizontal and institutional topics over the three-year duration of the Future of Europe debate within the European Council. While some issues such as EU values have been added over time and others such as EU reforms have been dropped, the overall assessment shows that the horizontal and institutional topics remained rather constant.

Figure 17 – Horizontal topics during the Future of Europe debate

Horizontal Topics from Bratislava to Strategic Agenda

- **Keeping Unity**
- **Addressing Citizens’ concerns**
- **Delivery on Policy priorities**

Source: EPRS.

Overall, as shown in Figure 17, three core messages feature prominently in all milestone documents: the need for unity, the priority given to EU citizens and the focus on (policy) delivery. Despite
changes within the European Council’s composition between June 2016 and June 2019, with 16 Heads of State or Government replaced during that period, the core messages remained nearly identical, despite the fact that often different actors were involved in drafting these declarations and statements. Critics could point to the fact that the different milestone contributions mainly express the same message, not adding anything new. However, it can also be argued that this constancy in the discourse of the European Council is a sign of coherence and consistency. It also shows that once the European Council members agree on certain horizontal issues, the European Council, as an institution, develops and maintains an internal dynamic that is not easily altered by new members joining it.

While still remaining part of the Future of Europe discourse conducted by EU Heads of State or Government, individual horizontal and institutional topics have also changed in focus, becoming more or less specific as shown below:

**Unity**: The theme of unity was central to the Future of Europe debate. It was introduced by EU Heads of State or Government in their June 2016 statement in order to face the challenge posed by Brexit and to underline that the EU-27 Member States were planning a common future together. It remained a core element of all three declarations, as well as of all speeches in the Future of Europe debates with the Parliament. The fact that unity was not mentioned in the 2019-24 Strategic Agenda does not mean that it lost in importance, as the Agenda needs to be considered jointly with the Sibiu Declaration, both forming two sides of the same coin. This mirrors the double results of the Bratislava Summit, namely, the Bratislava Declaration and the Bratislava Roadmap. Also, Donald Tusk outlined prior to the summit that Sibiu would be about ‘sending a message and confidence’.

**EU citizens**: In the aftermath of the UK referendum on EU membership, EU leaders stressed the need to overcome the disconnectedness of citizens and bring them closer to the EU. This message features prominently in all subsequent milestone documents, such as the Bratislava Declaration, which called for ‘focus[ing] on citizens' expectations’ ‘improv[ing] communications with citizens’ or for ‘listen[ing] to the concerns and hopes of all Europeans’ (Sibiu Declaration). One way of doing this was by engaging citizens more with EU politics, such as through the citizens’ consultations (see Section 1.2.4); another was by delivering on policy priorities.

**Delivering on policy priorities**: Delivering on policy priorities is the third main horizontal topic, which runs through all milestone documents. Delivering on policy priorities is closely linked to efforts to address EU citizens’ concerns related to migration, security and the economy. While all documents since Bratislava remained very general on the issue of delivery on the EU’s priorities, the 2019-24 Strategic Agenda dedicated a whole section on how to deliver. The EPRS papers in this series have assessed how policy priorities have been delivered and followed up on over time. (See From Bratislava to Rome, From Rome to Sibiu and Assessing the Leaders’ Agenda.)

**EU values**: The Rome Declaration was the first milestone document of the Future of Europe debate to refer directly to the common EU values and the need to defend them. The Sibiu Declaration was already more specific, as EU leaders pledged ‘to protect our way of life, democracy and the rule of law ...and uphold our shared values and principles enshrined in the Treaties.’ Of all the milestone documents, the Strategic Agenda focuses in greatest detail on EU values: ‘The common values underpinning our democratic and societal models are the foundation of European freedom, security and prosperity. The rule of law, with its crucial role in all our democracies, is a key guarantor that these values are well protected; it must be fully respected by all Member States and the EU.’ Moreover, the focus is not only on defending EU values in the world, but also on insisting that they are respected within the EU, by all Member States and EU institutions. The increased importance given by EU leaders to EU values, including the rule of law, can be explained by developments in some Member States and the subsequent Article 7 TEU procedures against some of them initiated by the Parliament and the Commission. Values featured high in several of the contributions made
by one or more Member States to the Future of Europe debate, including the Meseberg Declaration, President Macron’s letter to the EU citizens, and the non-paper on climate (see Section 1.2.5).

Cooperation and communication between EU institutions and Member States: The Bratislava Declaration was the first milestone document that called for improving communication between Member States and EU institutions. EU Heads of State or Government repeated this message and slightly expanded on it in the Rome Declaration, pledging to ‘work together... in a spirit of trust and loyal cooperation, both among Member States and between them and the EU institutions’. In the Sibiu Declaration, the emphasis was more on communication between Member States, as EU leaders pledged ‘to listen to each other in a spirit of understanding and respect’. In the 2019-2021 Strategic Agenda, the focus shifted to the institutions and became more detailed, as EU Heads of State or Government called on EU institutions to ‘work in accordance with the spirit and the letter of the Treaties’, respecting ‘the principles of democracy, rule of law, transparency and equality between citizens and between Member States’. The Strategic Agenda even envisages that ‘each [EU] institution should revisit its working methods and reflect on the best way to fulfil its role under the Treaties’.

Reforms: EU reforms was one of the elements mentioned in the June 2016 statement at the beginning of the Future of Europe debate, but was not mentioned in the milestone documents published since then. This omission could be explained by the Member States’ weak appetite for Treaty reforms. In his invitation letter to Bratislava, President Tusk indicated that for Heads of State or Government ‘giving new powers to European institutions is not the desired recipe’. Moreover, there was probably no agreement on how to carry out reforms (see below). This was also reflected in the Future of Europe debates in the Parliament. A common message voiced by Heads of State or Government in their speeches was the need to reform the EU. However, as opposed to previous debates on the Future of Europe, which led to Treaty reforms, this time the preferred option was to conduct reforms within the current Treaty framework, as it would be flexible enough to accommodate many of the changes needed (see Section 1.2.3).

Division of competences between the EU and the national level: All milestone contributions since Bratislava called for clarity on what the EU can do and what the Member States should do. However, none of them was very specific on the division of competences between the EU level and the national level. The Rome and Sibiu Declarations as well as the 2019-24 Strategic Agenda spoke of being big on big issues and small on small issues. The European Council missed an opportunity to be more specific in offering its views by never reacting to the five scenarios in the Commission white paper on the Future of Europe. The Future of Europe debates in the European Parliament showed that there is no prevailing common view between EU Heads of State or Government; some called for a renationalisation of competences from the EU level, while many others supported an increase in EU competences in specific areas.

Enhanced cooperation: The Rome Declaration was the only document that mentioned the possibility to ‘act together, at different paces and intensity where necessary, while moving in the same direction, as [Member States] have done in the past, in line with the Treaties and keeping the door open to those who want to join later’. The insertion of this notion in the Rome Declaration can be explained by a strong push at the time by the Benelux countries to lay out their vision of the Future of Europe. According to this vision, ‘different paths of integration and enhanced cooperation could provide for effective responses to challenges that affect member states in different ways. These arrangements should be inclusive and transparent, with the greatest possible involvement of the other member states and EU institutions’. Although the possibility of using enhanced cooperation was offered as part of the Leaders’ Agenda methodology, it has not been used so far. The Sibiu Declaration and the 2019-24 Strategic Agenda do not mention this institutional issue any longer, but rather pledge in the Sibiu Declaration to ‘always look for joint solutions’.
Being aware of the horizontal and institutional topics and their development over time is fundamental for grasping the discourse and objectives of the Future of Europe debate. The next section complements this assessment by showing how policy priorities were maintained or added during the three-year Future of Europe process.

4.3. Policy priorities

The work of the European Council throughout the three years of the Future of Europe debate was substantively driven by attention to policy priorities. It is hence important to observe how they were included on the agenda, whether they remained there, when they became a priority for the European Council, and how they have been followed up and delivered upon since.

Introducing and maintaining policy priorities on the agenda of the European Council

The policy priorities were set at milestone moments in the Future of Europe debate, Bratislava, Rome and Sibiu. Two other key moments were the adoption of the Leaders’ Agenda in October 2017 and, more recently, the Strategic Agenda 2019-24, which gives a glimpse of the European Council’s future work.

In June 2016, 27 EU leaders identified ‘security’ and ‘jobs and growth’ as two areas of concern for EU citizens. Later on, in September 2016 in Bratislava, the 27 Heads of State or Government identified, based on an ongoing reflection process and taking into consideration the top concerns of EU citizens, three policy priorities to work on – ‘migration’, ‘security (internal and external)’ and ‘economic and social development, youth’. They then committed to constantly following up on the implementation of their pledges.

The three policy priorities identified in Bratislava were in the focus of attention from June 2016 to June 2019, forming the European Council’s ‘rolling agenda’ of policy priorities (see Figure 18). Between October 2016 and October 2017, migration was permanently on the agenda of the EU leaders. The same was valid for security (defence) which was kept constantly on the agenda in 2017 before the launch of Permanent Structured Cooperation (December 2017). The economy got regular attention, but was not constantly on the agenda of the Heads of State of Government for over 12 consecutive months, as was the case of the other two policies forming the ‘rolling agenda’. A possible explanation could be that the EU economy, as stated by President Juncker in his State of Union address, was on an ascendant trend during the period of the Future of Europe debate. This positive trend was also reflected in EU citizens’ views. At the beginning of the Future of Europe debate in 2016, the economy was a matter of concern to EU citizens. Later on, in 2019, EU citizens were less concerned about the economy, whilst there were growing concerns about other matters, such as climate change.
Other policy topics had not been among the priorities identified in Bratislava but subsequently progressively gained the attention of EU leaders. This is the case with climate, which was absent from the Bratislava policy priorities and was introduced as a policy priority in Rome. EU leaders then distinguished between the internal and external dimension of climate: the former being part of ‘A prosperous and sustainable Europe’ cluster, and the latter part of ‘A stronger Europe on the global scene’. The 2019-24 Strategic Agenda maintains the division between the internal and external dimension of climate, but adds climate as a new and distinct cluster. Climate, which has regularly been on the European Council agenda since June 2017, could thus become a ‘rolling agenda’ item in the future.

The same is valid for the EU as a global player. EU leaders decided in Rome to add a new cluster of policy priorities called ‘A stronger Europe on the global scene’. This new cluster grouped together the external relations policies with the aim to ensure coherence and strengthen the EU’s global role. Accordingly, international trade was moved from the ‘economic and social development, youth’ cluster, where it was initially located in Bratislava, and external security (defence) from the ‘security’ cluster. Furthermore, new elements were added to this cluster, such as the external dimension of climate, cooperation with strategic partners, and the importance of promoting stability in the EU neighbourhood.

‘A stronger Europe on the global scene’ cluster combines ‘rolling agenda’ items, such as defence, and non-‘rolling agenda’ items, such as foreign policy. The latter items were dealt with on a case by case basis, ‘in the light of events’. The Leaders’ Agenda specified that ‘points that recur on a regular basis, such as external relations, except where a specific item is already known’ at the moment when the Leaders’ Agenda is adopted (for example, the summit with the Western Balkan countries) are
not listed in advance. More recently, with the Sibiu Declaration and the 2019-24 Strategic Agenda, the 'EU as a global actor' cluster gained weight and has the potential eventually to be fully integrated into the 'rolling agenda'. For this to happen, EU leaders would have to complement the case by case approach dictated by the fast-moving character of foreign policy dynamics with forward planning, and include foreign policy items on their agenda in advance. This could be suggested with a view to the new Leaders' Agenda that might take shape in autumn 2019 as a means of operationalising the 2019-24 Strategic Agenda.

As shown in Figure 18 above, both climate and the EU's global role progressively gained the EU leaders' attention during the Future of Europe debate, becoming priorities and possibilities for inclusion in the European Council's 'rolling agenda' during the implementation of the 2019-24 Strategic Agenda. Other policy issues discussed, such as social policy and education policy, have only been occasionally included on the European Council agenda, and will most probably remain non-'rolling agenda' items.

Two of the Bratislava policy priorities – 'security (internal and external)' and 'economic and social development, youth' – were clustered differently in Rome (see Section 2.2.1). In the case of security, whether internal and external security were grouped within the same cluster of policy priorities or not, did not affect the workings of the European Council, which continued to keep both aspects on its agenda, whilst putting emphasis on the latter. In the case of 'economic and social development, youth', EU leaders decided in Rome to introduce two separate clusters, one focusing on the economy and the other one covering social policy. The Leaders' Agenda that operationalised the Rome Declaration reflected this change and included economic governance, social policy and education on the EU Leaders' Agenda. However, both social policy and education were only occasionally discussed in autumn 2017 and remained outside the core work of the European Council.

Delivering on policy priorities

In June 2016, EU leaders committed to delivering on policy priorities. EU leaders remained attached to this horizontal message throughout the Future of Europe debate, and in June 2019 they included delivery on policy priorities in the 2019-24 Strategic Agenda. The Heads of State or Government repeatedly mentioned their intention to follow up on policy priorities, but did not define any indicators by which to measure success. Furthermore, delivery on European Council commitments is, in most cases, the responsibility of the other EU institutions and/or of the Member States and not of the European Council itself.

When considering delivery on policy priorities, one has to analyse how the Bratislava Roadmap and the Rome Agenda policy priorities have been fulfilled. The policy measures contained in the Bratislava Roadmap can be grouped under two categories. The first includes those policy measures requiring concrete action, which might or might not occur during a clearly defined timeframe (for example, 'decide on a concrete implementation plan on security and defence' by December 2016). Policy measures falling under this first category can be assessed on the basis of whether they have been implemented or not. The Bratislava Roadmap contains 13 such policy measures, all of which, with one exception ('broaden consensus on long-term migration policy and apply the principles of responsibility and solidarity') were implemented by the end of June 2019. The second category includes 'ongoing process, without a clear point of fulfilment' (for example, 'continue support to other frontline states'). In this case, the only way to measure progress is by considering whether or not the policy measure got attention from the European Council at formal or informal meetings up to June 2019. All nine policy measures belonging to the second category were discussed at European Council meetings, almost all of them more than once.

The Rome Agenda was even less specific than the Bratislava Roadmap. Its aim was to define the general guidelines for the next decade and not to provide any concrete objectives to fulfil within a certain period of time. One possibility to assess delivery on policy priorities in this case is by
examining if policy issues belonging to the four clusters of policy priorities defined in Rome – 'A safe and secure Europe', 'A stronger Europe on the global scene', 'A prosperous and sustainable Europe' and 'A social Europe' – remained on the European Council agenda. Most attention was given to 'A stronger Europe on the global scene' cluster, which managed to be permanently present on the European Council agenda and in its conclusions. One of the policy issues of 'A stronger Europe on the global scene' cluster – 'a Union engaged in the United Nations and standing for a rules-based multilateral system, proud of its values and protective of its people, promoting free and fair trade and a positive climate policy' – was addressed at all of the European Council meetings. By contrast, 'A social Europe' was the least addressed cluster, being discussed only twice since the adoption of the Rome Declaration.

4.4. Taking stock of the Future of Europe debate: Results of a three-year debate that changed the EU

Experts argue that the European Council and the Parliament ‘were major beneficiaries of successive rounds of Treaty reform’. The 'Lisbon recast' in particular had an impact on 'the balance among the institutions, with the European Council and the EP clearly in the ascendant'. The same conclusion can be drawn from the Future of Europe debate.

European Council

The three-year Future of Europe debate contributed to reinforcing the centrality of the European Council in the EU institutional architecture. This impact on the balance between the institutions in favour of the European Council over recent years has been documented by experts.2

Due to the economic, financial and migration crisis, the European Council took a central role in the EU system, justifying this with the argument of ‘crisis times’. In the words of former European Council President, Herman Van Rompuy, the institution's role is to 'keep out of day-to-day business … yet to spring into action when special cases arise'.

During the Future of Europe debate, the economic situation in the EU improved, and the migration crisis became less acute. Consequently, the European Council claimed leadership of the EU, for the first time since formally becoming an EU institution in 2009, outside a time of major crisis. This aim was clearly stated at the launch of the Leaders' Agenda in 2017, when the EU Heads of State or Government declared that they would be ‘taking things into [their] own hands’.

The European Council's claim to leadership was restated by President Tusk at the Sibiu Summit, where he stated that, 'The leaders have categorically demonstrated that they want to take full political responsibility not only for single events or challenges but for the European Union as a whole. Put simply, the member states and their democratically elected leaders want to actively shape the way the EU functions and develops'.

Another example of the European Council's strong role during the Future of Europe debate was that it maintained its stance, never responding to the Commission's demand to consider its white paper, and not blinking when the two institutions had very different views of the aim of the Sibiu Summit.

The European Parliament

The Parliament contributed very actively to the debate: whilst offering a transparent, democratic forum where EU Heads of State and Government could outline their views on the Future of Europe, it also gave Members of the European Parliament the opportunity to bring their own ideas to the debate.

2 See Eurocomment European Council Briefing Notes 2016/1-3- 2019/3.
During the first two phases of the Future of Europe debate, the Parliament contributed four resolutions related to the debate. On 28 June 2016, less than a week after the UK referendum vote, and on the same day as the European Council made its statement on the Future of Europe, a Parliament resolution called for a period of reflection on the future of the EU and ‘for a roadmap for a better Union’. Furthermore, the resolution stressed the need to address the challenges of migration, internal and external security and the economy. The document also underlined that ‘the reforms must result in a Union which delivers what citizens expect’. Some of these demands were later echoed in the Bratislava Declaration and Roadmap. On 16 February 2017, the Parliament adopted three resolutions: on improving the functioning of the European Union; on possible evolutions and adjustments to the current institutional setup of the European Union; and on budgetary capacity for the euro area.

In the latter part of the Future of Europe debate (phase 3) the Parliament was very innovative in finding additional avenues to contributing to the Future of Europe debate. It launched its own debate on the Future of Europe with the members of the European Council, enabling them to express their individual visions in a democratic and open forum at successive parliamentary plenary sessions. This process was unprecedented in the Parliament's institutional life and came at a moment when all contributions and ideas provided a valuable input to the efforts to restore the stability and clarity of the European project. This democratic process enriched the debate and allowed new ideas to emerge. It also gave citizens a view of the differences in the visions of the individual members of the European Council, as they normally only saw the consensual (and lowest common denominator) agreement, as outlined in the European Council conclusions. At the end of the legislative term, the Future of Europe debates in Parliament had hosted the majority of the EU Heads of State or Government. The process commenced in January 2018 with the Irish Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, who delivered the first such address in Strasbourg. By the end of the parliamentary term in April 2019, 20 EU leaders had presented their visions for the EU.

Through this series of debates, the Parliament managed to keep the debate on the Future of Europe on the EU agenda and to be at the centre of the discussions. This process gave greater visibility to the Parliament as an institution which, through the exchange of ideas with EU Heads of State or Government, contributed to shaping the future direction of the EU.

In a resolution of February 2019, the Parliament took stock of the state of play in the Future of Europe debate, called for a change in the Treaty and asked the European Council to refrain from ‘political initiatives’ that could restrain the Commission's right of initiative.

Throughout the whole period, the Parliament’s President, first Martin Schulz and later Antonio Tajani, regularly acquainted the EU leaders with the Parliament's views on the Future of Europe at the opening of every formal meeting, and many informal ones. Equally, the fact that the European Council President was present at plenary sessions to report after formal European Council meetings presented yet another opportunity to the Parliament to communicate its views on the Future of Europe to the European Council.

European Commission
The Commission also contributed actively to the Future of Europe debate, two prominent examples being its white paper and its contribution to the Sibiu Summit. However, more often than not, the European Council did not follow the Commission’s approach, and the Commission did not manage to assert itself in this debate. As already argued in another EPRS publication in this series, entitled ‘From Rome to Sibiu’, following the Rome Declaration, and in particular in the phase of contributions to the Future of Europe debate, there was a certain competition or rivalry between the Commission and the European Council as to which of them would take the lead in the debate. A prime example is the fate of the Commission white paper. Originally the Commission envisaged that the European Council would first draw conclusions at its December 2017 meeting. Later it promoted the idea that the Sibiu Summit would choose one of the five scenarios on the Future of Europe outlined in the
white paper. Ultimately, the European Council did not act according to the Commission’s expectations.

Member States’ contributions
Heads of State or Government individually, as well as groups of Member States, actively voiced their opinions on the Future of Europe throughout all three phases, thus contributing to the debate. They became most active before milestone summits such as those in Bratislava, Rome and Sibiu.

The role of the rotating presidency
The Lisbon Treaty reduced the role of the rotating presidency in the European Council’s activities. The Future of Europe debate allowed the rotating presidencies to regain influence though the organisation of informal summits, producing concept papers or contributing, along with President Tusk and his team, to the drafting of declarations, as was the case with the Slovak Presidency in Bratislava and the Romanian Presidency in Sibiu.

Institutional and policy priorities: Two sides of the same coin
In June 2016, immediately after the UK vote to leave the EU, the EU leaders initiated a ‘twin-track’ approach to their meetings, which proved to be a common denominator for the three phases of the Future of Europe debate. The Heads of State or Government met in the EU-27 format without the UK to debate on the Future of Europe, and discussed EU policy priorities in the EU-28 format, principally at regular European Council meetings. They systematically followed this ‘two-track’ approach until the Rome Summit in March 2017, a period that corresponds to the first two phases of the Future of Europe process. Unlike the previous two phases when EU leaders debated intensively among themselves on the future of the EU project, phase three saw them engage with EU citizens and the Parliament. The Heads of State or Government met only once, in February 2018, in the EU-27 format, to discuss the next institutional cycle. They took up the ‘twin-track’ practice again in May 2019, when they adopted the Sibiu Declaration. For as long as the EU leaders used the ‘twin-track’ approach, policy priorities were identified and agreed in the EU-27 format, and followed upon in the EU-28 format.
5. Conclusion and way forward

The Future of Europe debate was at the centre of the European Council’s activity from June 2016 to June 2019. The three-year period was marked by five milestones: the June 2016 informal meeting of the EU-27 Heads of State or Government, the Bratislava, Rome and Sibiu Summits and the June 2019 European Council, at which the EU leaders adopted a new Strategic Agenda for the 2019-24 period.

The Sibiu Declaration and the 2019-24 Strategic Agenda, which were the culmination of the Future of Europe debate and its conclusion, have been considered in this paper as two sides of the same coin and thus analysed together. The 14 preceding months (April 2018 - June 2019) saw three important parallel processes, namely the Leaders’ Agenda, the Future of Europe debates in the Parliament and the citizens’ consultations, which shaped the Sibiu Declaration and the subsequent new Strategic Agenda.

This study shows that the EU leaders’ thinking went through three different phases: diagnostics and reflection, deliberation and proposals, and delivery and vision. Throughout the three phases, EU leaders maintained the same horizontal messages focused on the need to: 1) keep unity, 2) reconnect with EU citizens and address their concerns, and 3) deliver on policy priorities. An additional message – respect for values and principles - absent from the early phases of the Future of Europe debate, was only added in March 2017 in Rome. The Sibiu Declaration and the 2019-24 Strategic Agenda confirmed that these four horizontal messages would continue to inspire the European Council’s actions in the years to come.

The study showed that EU leaders were able to maintain their unity during the three years of the Future of Europe debate and to articulate a common vision for the EU for both the short and long terms. The challenge they now face is to implement the Rome and Sibiu Declarations as well as the 2019-24 Strategic Agenda over the coming years. In this context, maintaining unity might prove challenging, particularly with regard to policy areas, such as climate change, where Member State have already expressed sensitivities.

The objective of the Future of Europe debate was to put EU citizens at the centre. The study shows that, by concentrating on the ‘rolling agenda’ topics, the EU leaders focused their debates on EU citizens’ key concerns as identified in Bratislava and later confirmed in Rome. The analysis illustrated that, by raising the profile of the climate in the 2019-24 Strategic Agenda, EU leaders took into consideration the evolution in the concerns expressed by EU citizens. Furthermore, when initiating the citizens’ dialogues and consultations, the Heads of State or Government aspired to build a direct link with EU citizens. The results of the citizens’ consultations and dialogues were presented by the Commission in a document feeding into the Sibiu Declaration. Yet, as a new cycle opens with the implementation of the 2019-24 Strategic Agenda, at a time when ideas on a conference on the Future of Europe have started emerging, it would be natural to build on the positive experience of citizens’ dialogues and consultation and to continue organising them.

Delivery on policy priorities has been one of the main messages and objectives of the EU leaders for the past three years. Yet, it is rather difficult to assess delivery on policy priorities in the absence of clear indicators allowing the measurement of success. The Bratislava Roadmap included some policy measures with clearly specified objectives. All except one were fulfilled. In the case of the Bratislava policy measures, which had no specific objectives, as well as in the case of the Rome policy aims, which were all of a general nature, the study indicates that the presence of policy priorities on the agenda of the European Council could be an indicator allowing an assessment of their delivery. The study shows that EU leaders maintained the policy priorities identified in Bratislava and Rome on their agenda, creating a ‘rolling agenda’ of policy priorities; for the moment, this agenda includes migration, security (internal and external) and the economy. The ‘rolling agenda’ could, in the future,
be expanded to include the climate and the EU as a global player, two policy areas which have gained weight through the 2019-24 Strategic Agenda.
REFERENCES

This paper is the last in a series of EPRS studies on the Future of Europe debate launched after the UK referendum on EU membership in June 2016. Its aim is to highlight how the substance of the debate shaped the 2019-24 EU Strategic Agenda adopted by the Heads of State or Government at the June 2019 European Council. The scope of the paper is twofold. First, it examines the most recent stage of the Future of Europe debate (April 2018-June 2019), analysing in particular the Sibiu Declaration and the 2019-24 Strategic Agenda, and tracing the evolution from the Bratislava and Rome Declarations. Second, it evaluates the overall Future of Europe process spanning the period from June 2016 to June 2019 and points out the commonalities across the milestone documents published in that context. The analysis shows that EU leaders focused on three horizontal messages over this period: 1) maintaining unity; 2) reconnecting with EU citizens and addressing their concerns; and 3) delivering on policy priorities.

For the previous stages of the Future of Europe debate, see the earlier EPRS publications in this series, From Bratislava to Rome, and From Rome to Sibiu.