

## European Council Leaders' Agenda 2020-21

At the special European Council meeting of 1-2 October 2020, Charles Michel, President of the European Council, presented a new Leaders' Agenda outlining his view of 'the key challenges confronting the Union' and setting a timetable for the Heads of State or Government to address these issues at meetings between October 2020 and June 2021. The new Leaders' Agenda puts strong focus on the 'green transition and digital transformation', as well as on 'Europe's role in the world', two core priorities in the EU Strategic Agenda 2019-24. Mr Michel intends to structure the approach to external relations discussions, notably through a series of strategic debates on relations with key partners. A number of EU priority topics are however missing, notably migration, the rule of law and the Conference on the Future of Europe. Mr Michel has, however, stated that the Leaders' Agenda is a flexible tool, which can be updated as circumstances require.

### Meetings and topics of the Leaders' Agenda 2020-21

As flagged up in the EPRS [outlook](#) for the [special meeting of 1-2 October 2020](#), President Charles Michel set out his vision of the main issues to be dealt with by his institution in the coming year in the form of a Leaders' Agenda 2020-21. Along the lines of the Leaders' Agenda put forward by then-President Donald Tusk in October 2017, this document sets out a work programme for the European Council up to June 2021. Surprisingly, it only covers a period of nine months, as opposed to 18 months for the first Leaders' Agenda. Eight European Council meetings (including the 1-2 October one) are planned up to June 2021, including two informal meetings, one on China and the other on the social impact of the digital and green transformation, as well as a special meeting due to address both health issues and European security and defence (see Table 1). The agenda also includes two Euro Summits, in November 2020 and in March 2021, and envisages a series of summits with third countries: an EU-African Union Summit, an EU leaders-Chinese President meeting, a Western Balkans Summit, an ASEM Summit and a possible EU-CELAC summit.

Table 1: Main issues to be discussed at EU leaders' meetings, October 2020 – June 2021

Date	Meeting type	Main issues
<b>2020</b>		
1-2 October	Regular European Council	Digital, single market and industrial policy, and external relations (Turkey, China)
15-16 October	Regular European Council	EU-UK negotiations, climate (orientation debate) and external relations (Africa)
16 November	Informal European Council (Berlin)	China
10-11 December	Regular European Council	Climate, trade and external relations (Southern Neighbourhood)
	<i>Meeting with the African Union</i>	
	<a href="#">Euro Summit meeting</a>	<a href="#">Banking union and capital markets union</a>
<b>2021</b>		
February	Special European Council	Health, and European security and defence
February	<i>Eastern Partnership Summit</i>	
25-26 March	Regular European Council	Digital, including digital taxation, single market and industrial policy as well as external relations (Russia)
	<a href="#">Euro Summit meeting</a>	<a href="#">International role of the euro</a>
7-8 May	Informal European Council (Portugal)	Social impact of the digital and green transformation
	<i>EU-India leaders' meeting</i>	
24-25 June	Regular European Council	Future of Schengen and external relations (UK)

Source: EPRS.

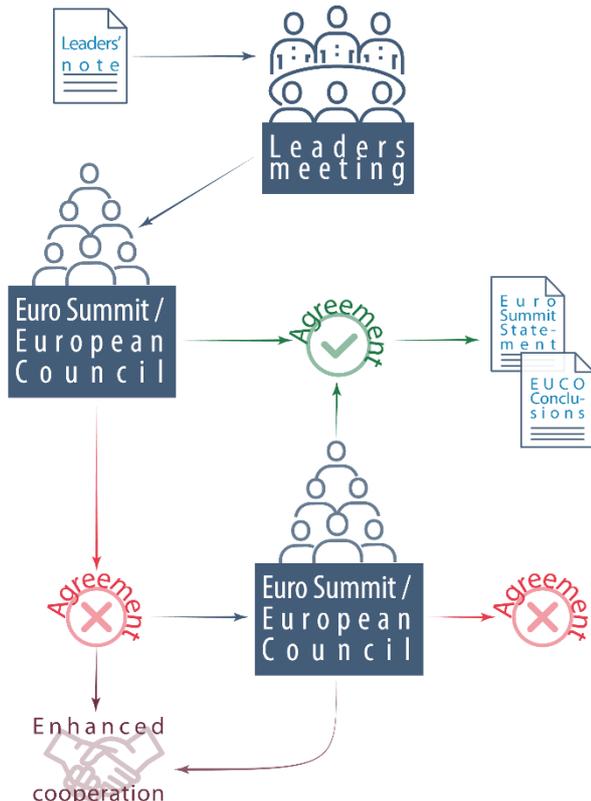
Presented as 'an ambitious European Council agenda covering the key challenges confronting the Union, the new [Leaders' Agenda](#) puts particular emphasis on the green transition and digital transformation, as well as on making the EU a strong global player. It aims to push ahead with the policy priorities outlined by the European Council in its [Strategic Agenda 2019-24](#): i) protecting citizens and freedoms; ii) developing a strong and vibrant economic base; iii) building a climate-neutral, green, fair and social Europe; and iv) promoting European interests and values on the global stage.

As regards the fourth priority, Mr Michel aims at developing a more structured approach to dealing with the EU's external relations. He has [underlined](#) that the 'EU's role in the world will be on every #EUCO agenda', and indeed, all but one of the European Council meetings have a strategic discussion on a specific external relations topic. The exception is the planned informal meeting in May 2021, which will be dedicated to the 'social impact of the digital and green transformation', but will take place back-to-back with the EU-India meeting, which is not a European Council meeting. The Leaders' Agenda notably includes a strategic discussion on Africa in October 2020 and one on Russia in March 2021. The last strategic discussion of the European Council on Russia was planned for [21-22 October 2016](#), but at that time, the European Council mainly discussed whether or not to introduce sanctions on Russia in relation to its involvement in the Syrian conflict. The new agenda confirms the recent trend to organise EU summits with third countries, such as the [EU-Western Balkans summit](#), with the attendance of all or most EU Heads of State or Government, rather than just the presidents of the European Council and the Commission, the president-in-office of the Council, and the EU High Representative/Vice President.

The absence of a number of key issues from the Leaders' Agenda is striking: next to the Conference on the Future of Europe, one of the four core priorities of the [Strategic Agenda 2019-24](#), 'protecting citizens and freedoms' is barely included. Even though a discussion on the future of Schengen is planned for June 2021, sensitive topics such as migration and asylum, and the rule of law are missing.

### Working method under the Leaders' Agenda

Figure 1: Leaders' Agenda decision-making process



The first Leaders' Agenda was launched at the European Council meeting of 19-20 October 2017, in order to facilitate the finding of consensus among the EU leaders on otherwise intractable issues. It initiated a new working method for the European Council with the introduction of a special format of the European Council, Leaders' Meetings, which were informal debates stimulated with 'Leaders' notes' from the president, outlining the main challenges and sticking-points on the topic concerned. The aim was to help EU leaders reach agreement and enable them to approve conclusions at a subsequent, regular meeting of the European Council. The idea of only adopting conclusions at a later meeting has been kept in the new Leaders' Agenda, which states that 'where no immediate conclusions are drawn, the outcome of the debates will be reflected in later conclusions'. Whether special notes will be prepared or implementation reports drawn up remains to be seen. However, Mr Michel did mention the possibility of using smaller formats, with only some EU leaders, to prepare the discussions in the European Council itself.

Source: EPRS.

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