Assessing the Leaders' Agenda

A new way of doing business at European Council meetings

IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS

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The Leaders' Agenda, adopted in October 2017, was the most recent European Council contribution to the future of Europe debate. It set out the work plan for the European Council up to June 2019, and introduced a new working method for discussions among EU Heads of State or Government. We are now reaching the end of the Leader's Agenda life-span, and the Sibiu summit is expected to evaluate its implementation. The aim of this paper is therefore to assess whether the Leaders' Agenda has led to better decision-making and better delivery on citizens' concerns and needs, while also sustaining unity among EU leaders.

The analysis shows the Leaders' Agenda can be assessed rather favourably, as it has enabled more structured work and better preparation by all actors concerned. This method can be recommended for the future work of the European Council as it allows for consistent follow-up. However, it has not helped to overcome deadlock on some of the most sensitive issues, such as migration and taxation. Drawing on the lessons learned from this Leaders' Agenda, the authors highlight elements which should be continued or improved as part of the next work programme of the European Council.

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Executive summary

The Leaders' Agenda, adopted by the EU Heads of State or Government on 20 October 2017, was designed both as a contribution to the realisation of the objectives set out in the 'future of Europe' debate and as a concrete work programme for the European Council up to June 2019. The main feature of the Leaders' Agenda is the introduction of new working methods to enable consistent follow-up on the policy objectives outlined in the Bratislava and Rome declarations, previous milestones in the future of Europe debate. It notably increased the number and formats of meetings, and introduced a new approach to the discussions among EU Heads of State or Government.

This method has allowed an open debate among EU leaders on sensitive political issues at informal Leaders' meetings, with the aim of facilitating consensus, which would be followed up through the adoption of formal European Council conclusions at subsequent meetings. The informal debates were stimulated by the use of Leaders' notes, which outline the main challenges and sticking-points on a specific topic. In this sense, the Leaders' Agenda can be seen as the operational follow-up to the Bratislava and Rome declarations. Ahead of the expected discussion on the implementation of the Leaders' Agenda at the 9 May 2019 Sibiu summit, one can conclude that the Leaders' Agenda was a rather successful approach, which introduced a more structured framework to the proceedings in the European Council and generally improved decision-making, whilst also sustaining unity among EU leaders when the Union faced the unprecedented challenge of the departure of a Member State. This notwithstanding, it seems that the Leaders' meetings and Leaders' notes, the purpose of which was to serve as consensus-building tools, have not been used to their full potential. However, a follow-up to this Leaders' Agenda would be advisable in the next institutional period, while taking the lessons learned into consideration.

At the core of the Leaders' Agenda is the objective of preserving unity, which can be considered as the red line running through Donald Tusk's term in office as European Council President, at least since the United Kingdom (UK) referendum on EU membership. This assessment distinguishes between achieving unity (on a piece of legislation or in a given policy area) and maintaining unity between Member States when the EU faces a major challenge. While the European Council was rather successful in maintaining this unity, in particular with respect to Brexit, it has a more mixed record in achieving unity on certain other topics, such as migration, where Member States have very different positions.

Moreover, the Leader's Agenda emphasised the importance of taking account of citizens' views when shaping a common future for Europe. The three policy areas - migration, security and unemployment - indicated by President Tusk as priorities under the Leaders' Agenda, also reflected the three main concerns of EU citizens, as expressed in Eurobarometer surveys at the time.

Now that the end of the life-span of the Leaders' Agenda is approaching, one can indeed observe that most of the policy priorities included in the Bratislava and Rome declarations have figured on the agenda of meetings of EU Heads of State or Government and been debated to varying degrees, either as part of the formal European Council, the Leaders' Agenda meetings or the Euro Summits.

As we approach the 2019 European Parliament elections, EU leaders ought more than ever to be encouraged 'to draw inspiration from new ideas' that have arisen from citizens' dialogues and consultations, in which, under the Leaders' Agenda, they have voluntarily agreed to participate and to conduct. Whether and to what extent the citizens' views will be reflected in the output of the Sibiu summit, and the European Council's subsequent new strategic agenda, remains to be seen.

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Introduction

On 9 May 2019, EU leaders will meet for an informal summit in Sibiu, during the Romanian Presidency of the Council of the EU. The meeting and its results are expected to mark the final stage of the Future of Europe debate in its current form. Initiated immediately after the UK's Brexit referendum in June 2016, it produced significant milestones in the form of the Bratislava Declaration and Roadmap, the Rome Declaration and the Leaders' Agenda. The aim of the Sibiu summit is twofold: on the one hand it is expected to look at the implementation of the Leaders' Agenda, and on the other, it will prepare the new Strategic Agenda for 2019-2024, which will be formally adopted at the subsequent European Council on 20-21 June 2019. This paper will concentrate on the former objective and carry out an assessment of the Leaders' Agenda.

The members of the European Council unanimously adopted the Leaders' Agenda on 20 October 2017. It was prepared by the European Council President, Donald Tusk and his team, following the leaders' informal discussions on 29 September 2017 in Tallinn. The 'Leaders' Agenda' defines the main issues and sets out the work plan for the European Council up to June 2019. As part of the Leaders' Agenda, the EU Heads of State or Government agreed to hold at least 14 meetings between October 2017 and June 2019. The aim was to discuss topics central to the Future of Europe, either at formal or informal European Councils, at EU-27 or EU-28, or at Euro summits.

The Leaders' Agenda introduced significant changes to the working methods of the European Council by increasing the number and formats of meetings, introducing new tools and changing the way topics are discussed (i.e. first informal debate and later formal decisions). The Leaders' Agenda indicates that it will include 'issues that require discussions aimed at resolving deadlock or finding solutions to key political dossiers (indicated in italics)'. Leaders' meetings, which represent a new format of meeting between EU Heads of State or Government plus the European Council President and the European Commission President, allowed an open debate among EU leaders on sensitive political issues. As previously outlined, the idea behind the Leaders' meetings is that, instead of striving to find a consensus on draft conclusions regarding highly charged issues, leaders first discuss the topic in an open, free-flowing debate, and then return to the topic at a subsequent European Council meeting, with a view to reaching agreement. These meetings were informed by 'decision notes', later changed to 'Leaders' Agenda notes', drafted by President Tusk and his team, 'precisely describing the scope of conflict, thus allowing [Leaders] to hold a serious, political discussion. The aim will be to break any deadlock'. Using the Leaders' meetings and Leaders' Agenda notes as consensus-building tools, the purpose was to reach an agreement, which would subsequently be reflected in the European Council conclusions. In this respect, the paper examines to what extend this has been achieved, where possible shortcomings can be identified, and which elements of the Leaders' Agenda should have been used more efficiently, such as additional Leaders' meetings or triggering enhanced cooperation – to unblock persisting deadlock.

When assessing the impact of the Leader's Agenda, it is important to take its nature into account and evaluate it on the objectives intended by its creators. While no specific policy objectives were set, the Leaders' Agenda was the 'operationalisation of the Rome Declaration', as it provided the operational follow-up to the policy priorities outlined in the Rome Declaration. It also continued the spirit of the Bratislava Declaration and Roadmap that called for delivery on key priorities for the following months, aiming to better serve EU citizens' needs. This can be seen in President Tusk's first principle in guiding the European Council's work under the Leaders' Agenda, namely finding practical solutions to EU citizens' real problems. The other principles were to use a step-by-step approach and to preserve unity. Whether or not these macro-level guidelines for the Leaders' Agenda have been followed will be examined hereunder.

When assessing the Leaders' Agenda, this in-depth analysis will examine its two complementary components: 1) Better decision-making; and 2) Better delivery on citizen's concerns and needs.

Section 1 will look at the application of the new working methods for the European Council, then section two will examine whether it delivered on citizen's concerns and needs. Of the three guiding principles, preserving unity and addressing citizens' concerns and needs fall into the category of better delivery, the step-by-step approach relates to better decision-making and will be addressed accordingly. The concluding section will assess the overall achievements of the Leaders' Agenda and outline the lessons learned for any potential follow up to the Leaders' Agenda.

# 1. Better decision-making through adapted working methods

One of the main characteristics of the Leaders' Agenda is its procedural nature. Its purpose is to improve the European Council's decision-making by adapting its working methods, and to serve as a tool for the operational follow-up on the priorities set in the framework of the future of Europe debate. This was, according to Donald Tusk, supposed to be done in a step-by-step approach; a natural choice to allow the European Council to address the EU's challenges. The purpose of a step-by-step approach was to allow Heads of State or Government to concentrate on one issue, dedicate the necessary time to it, and lead to better decision-making. This meant using new tools, such as Leaders' meetings, a work programme, and Leaders' Agenda notes, as well as implementation reports. In order to assess the achievements of the Leaders' Agenda in this respect, the use of each of these different tools will be assessed in turn.

1.1. Leaders' meetings

Leaders' meetings were clearly an innovation in the European Council's working methods. Although informal meetings of EU Heads of State or Government have existed for a long time, the novelty of the Leaders' meetings is that they are informed by a Leaders' Agenda note (see Figure 1), and aim at preparing an agreement for a subsequent formal European Council or Euro Summit.

This inbuilt follow-up mechanism creates a direct link between the informal leaders' meeting and a subsequent formal European Council meeting (or meetings), where the results of the informal discussions are translated into formal European Council conclusions and sometimes expanded upon (see below). This can be seen in the work programme of the Leaders' Agenda, where, for every topic identified for a leaders' meeting, a subsequent formal European Council is due to address this topic. This planning also enabled the individual members of the European Council, as well as the other European institutions, to prepare ahead of the meeting. For example, in addition to the Leaders' notes drafted by the European Council

Figure 1 – Leaders' Agenda decision-making process

Source: EPRS.
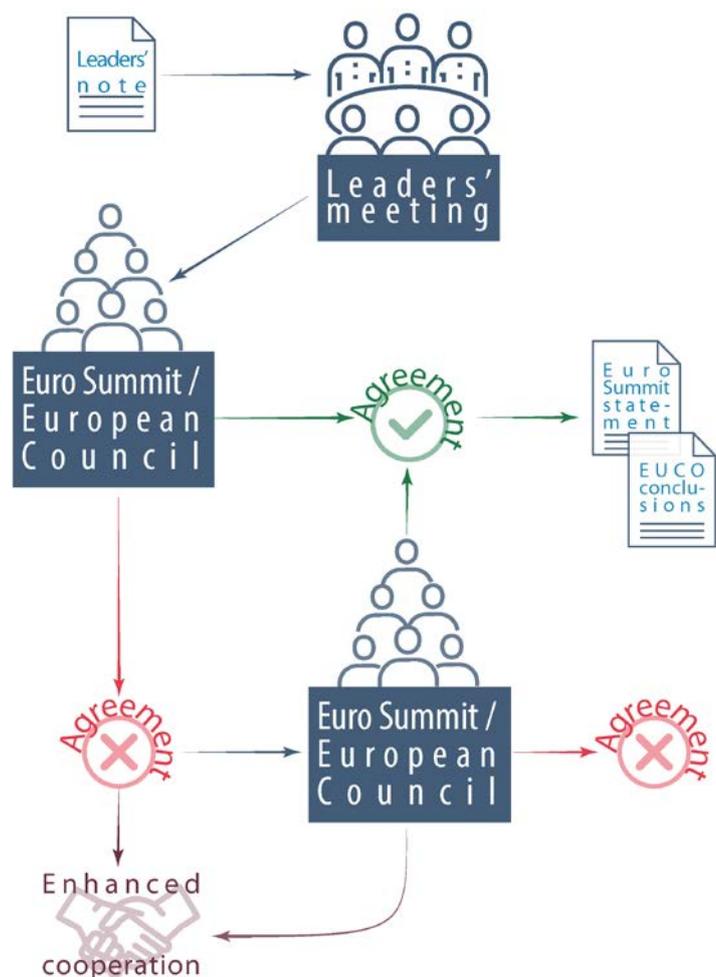
President to inform a leaders' meeting, the European Commission also provided contributions to

Leaders' meetings, such as for the debate on [migration](#) and the discussion on the [future institutional framework](#).

From the start, Donald Tusk emphasised that the Leaders' Agenda is 'a living document that will have to be updated and enriched [over time]'; it is thus important to examine on which issues and in which ways Leaders' meetings differed over time from the original plan, to assess whether this new working method provides results.

Differences between the Leaders' meetings occurred regarding the number of topics, the scope, the timing of meetings, the participation of EU leaders and the follow-up. Topics which were selected in the Leaders' Agenda to be discussed at Leaders' meetings were:

- education and culture,
- migration,
- economic and monetary union (EMU),
- innovation,
- the multiannual financial framework (MFF),
- the next institutional cycle,
- digital issues,
- research and innovation,
- Leaders' Agenda: state of play on implementation,
- internal security,
- trade,
- single market,
- Leaders' Agenda implementation,
- and the preparation of the Strategic Agenda 2019-2024.

Not all of these topics were truly controversial, but Leaders' meetings included topics that had not figured on the agenda of the European Council for a long time, such as education and culture, and social policy.

While some Leaders' meetings were supposed to deal exclusively with one topic (the meeting in October 2017 was, for example, dedicated to education and culture), for other meetings two topics were planned (such as the meeting in February 2018, which dealt with the MFF and institutional issues – see Figure 2). Conversely, on some topics, such as migration and EMU, two Leaders' meetings were considered necessary. However, the analysis shows that, on migration, although several meetings should have taken place, in reality only one leader's meeting transpired. This raises the question as to why, specifically on an extremely difficult topic, the President of the European Council did not call any further meetings. The analysis also shows that, a leader's meeting was not held on all topics indicated in the Leader's Agenda. In fact, out of the 16[*] Leaders' meetings envisaged under the Leaders' Agenda, only 12 actually took place. On certain topics (single market, trade and economic and monetary union), the leaders' meeting planned for March 2019 did not materialise. Regarding the absence of a leaders' meeting on trade in October 2018, this could be explained by the fact that trade was discussed at previous formal (March and June 2018) and informal European Council summits (EU-Western Balkans, May 2018), where trade difficulties with the United States were addressed, and a [common position](#) reached.

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[*] Two timeslots were tentatively reserved in the Leaders' Agenda for a debate on migration. Here, it is assumed that the agenda did not plan for two meetings additional to the December 2017 meeting on migration, but that this was done with the aim of leaving the leaders flexibility as to when to address the topic again as a leaders' meeting in 2018. Consequently, the two insertions of possible meetings on migration are counted only as one planned meeting.

The single market topic, originally envisaged for discussion in the leaders' meeting format in December 2018, was briefly discussed as part of the formal European Council of December 2018, and in greater depth at the European Council of March 2019. Consequently, a leaders' discussion was probably no longer necessary.

Arguably, the most significant change to the Leaders' Agenda work programme, from a working methods perspective, was the absence of a 'Leaders' Agenda state of implementation' discussion, envisaged for June 2018. This lack of evaluation did not allow EU leaders to formally give their views on the success of the new working methods. Another illustration of the 'living document' character of the Leaders' Agenda was the holding of an additional leaders' meeting on economic and monetary union (EMU) in March 2018,† which was not originally scheduled in the process. In other cases, the scope of the Leaders' meetings changed, such as regarding digital issues, which developed into a taxation (including digital taxation) discussion in March 2018, whilst the meeting on research and innovation of May 2018 was changed to a discussion on innovation and digital issues.

† Euro Summits can be considered as Leaders' meetings if they are accompanied by a Leaders' Agenda note and did not produce formal conclusions or a statement.

Figure 2 –Topics planned and actually discussed at Leaders' meetings and at European Council meetings
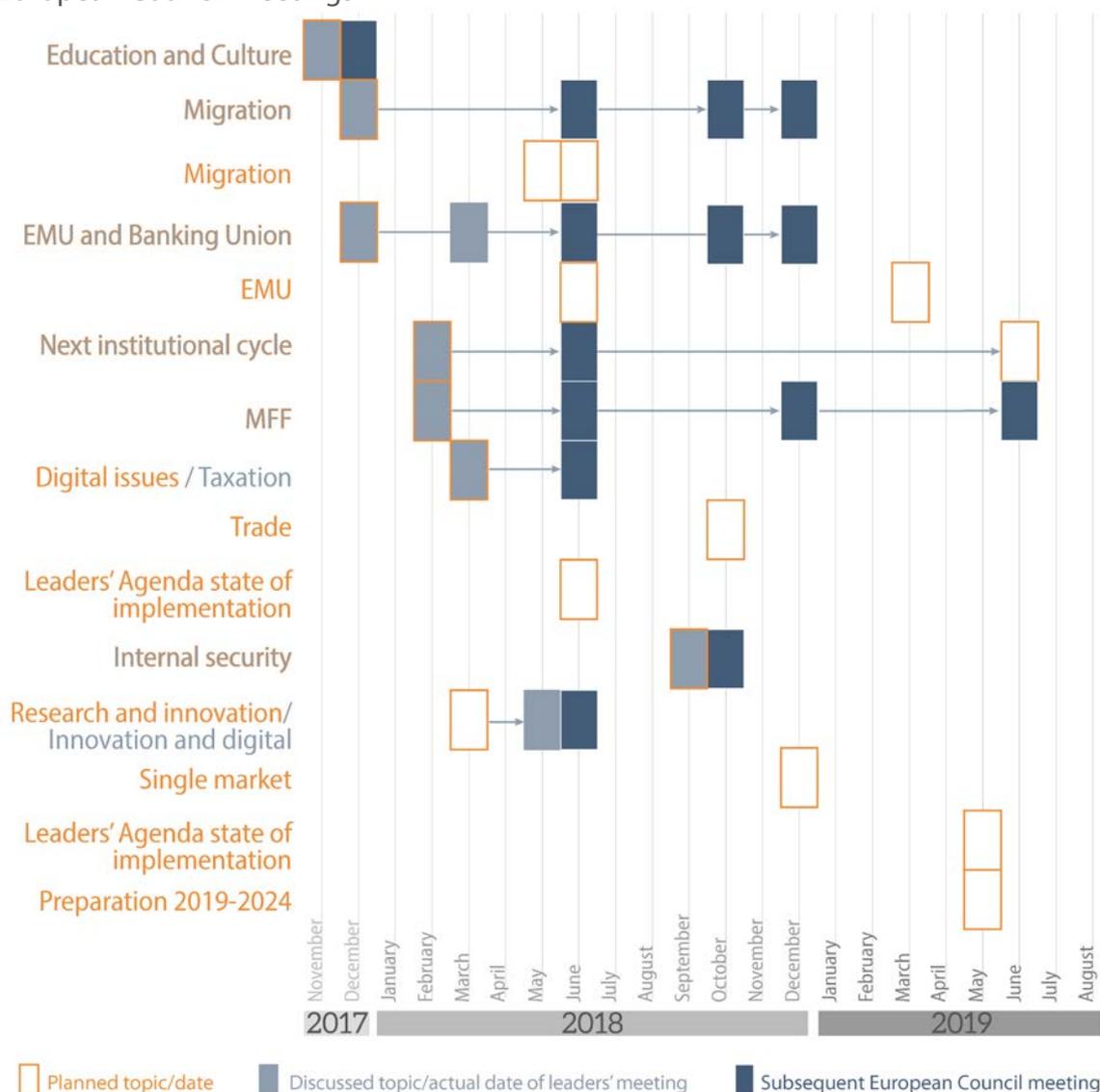
Source: EPRS.

Leaders' meetings also differed in their composition. While most Leaders' meetings were attended by all members of the European Council, the UK Prime Minister did not attend the leaders' meeting on EMU, the next institutional cycle and the multiannual financial framework (MFF). This practice was different in the period between the UK referendum on EU membership and the adoption of the Leaders' Agenda. During that phase, there were parallel tracks for the members of the European Council: meetings of the EU-28 on the one hand, and the EU-27 (i.e. the EU-28 minus the UK Prime Minister), on the other. The EU-28 debated EU policy priorities, while the EU-27 concentrated their discussions on the future of Europe. Another variation in Leaders' meetings attendance was with respect to the President of the European Parliament, Antonio Tajani, who attended some Leaders' meetings, such as the one regarding the next institutional cycle, but was not invited to attend most of the others. This was most likely linked to the fact that the topic discussed was of direct relevance

to the European Parliament, as it focused on its composition after the UK's departure from the EU, justifying President Tajani's presence.

Another difference was the follow-up to leader's meetings in the European Council conclusions. Figure 2 shows how Leaders' meetings discussions have been followed, until now, by European Council conclusions. One can observe that there are significant variations as to whether or not there was any follow-up at all, the time span between a leaders' meeting and the issuing of subsequent European Council conclusions, the number of follow-up conclusions and the substance thereof (see Leaders' notes section below). While for some topics the follow-up was quite rapid (such as on education and training), as there was general agreement on these issues, other issues took longer (for instance on institutional issues). Most issues addressed at a leaders' meeting were only addressed at one subsequent meeting, while the very contentious issues of EMU and migration were addressed at several of the following summits.

A final dimension regarding Leaders' meetings was the possibility of not reaching an agreement on a sensitive issue. When proposing the new working method of using Leaders' meetings to overcome deadlock on issues, President Tusk indicated that 'if the first discussion does not succeed, [the members of the European Council] will need to decide whether to make another attempt at solving the issue, or if the only way forward is enhanced cooperation among the willing countries, as provided for by the Treaties'. However, this did not occur in respect of the most sensitive issue, migration, and more specifically, the relocation of refugees, as Member States maintained opposing views, and some were not interested in finding a common European solution. Consequently, no additional Leaders' meetings to attempt to solve this deadlock were arranged.

A method to break such an impasse, enhanced cooperation, has been advocated by the European Parliament, as well as by some leaders, such as the President of France, Emmanuel Macron. While enhanced cooperation has been enacted during this period in the area of defence, this was a topic where no leaders' meeting was organised, as EU Heads of State or Government were rather in agreement on the issue. However, on other topics, where Leaders' meetings did not manage to overcome 'deadlock in the Council of Ministers', such as the reform of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS), or taxation, no proposals to use enhanced cooperation were made. In the case of migration, particularly the reform of the CEAS, EU Heads of State or Government tried to reach agreement not just once but several times at formal European Council meetings. Following the Leaders' Agenda method, if divergences persisted, the triggering of enhanced cooperation could have been considered (see Figures 1 and 2). Nevertheless, this option has not been used so far as part of the Leaders' Agenda process, demonstrating that different national views persist. Similarly, diverging views on taxation have persisted and this has been reflected in a rather low-key output during the lifetime of the Leaders' Agenda. Consequently, it can be concluded that Leaders' meetings did not fulfil their purpose of resolving the most contentious issues, neither by reaching agreement among the EU-27/28, nor by making recourse to enhanced cooperation.

1.2. Leaders' Agenda notes

Leaders' Agenda notes were similar in their objectives as they aimed at steering the debate and supporting Leaders' meetings in facilitating consensus between EU Heads of State or Government, which would then be reflected in subsequent European Council conclusions, or the Euro summit statements. They usually describe recent developments, outline the main challenges and sticking points on a specific topic, and in most cases, raise questions to be addressed by the Heads of State or Government as part of their informal debate.

Nine Leaders' Agenda notes have been issued since October 2017, covering the following topics:

- education and culture,
- migration,
- EMU,
- institutional aspects,
- MFF, taxation,
- innovation and digital issues,
- and internal security.

One Leaders' Agenda note was issued per topic, with the exception of EMU where two notes were put forward as a basis for debate at successive Leaders' meetings (see above).

1.2.1. Similarities and differences between Leaders' Agenda notes

Leaders' Agenda notes have evolved over time, from the first note on education and culture issued in November 2017, to the most recent on internal security in September 2018. They present a number of differences, with respect to their structure, and both their prescriptive and concrete follow-up in European Council conclusions (or Euro summit statements, in the case of EMU).

As regards their structure, most of the Leaders' Agenda notes present the state of play in the area they cover and include a set of questions for EU leaders' to consider and decide. Two noteworthy exceptions need to be outlined here. Firstly, the education and culture note was the only one to put forward detailed recommendations, and not to include a set of questions for the EU Heads of State or Government to address at their debate. This situation can be explained by the fact that the education and culture note was the first in the series, and thus, a trial case for the EU leaders' work on the Leaders' Agenda notes, and also because this topic is less controversial. The note, shaped by President Tusk and his team, based on the views expressed by the Member States, was received with 'reservation' at the preparatory meeting of the sherpas (personal representatives), as it contained 'too many concrete proposals and not enough analysis'.‡ Secondly, the December 2017 EMU note presented the state of play, but did not *stricto senso* include questions, although the EU leaders had to agree whether or not 'to mandate the Eurogroup/ECOFIN Council' to continue work, in particular on those aspects 'were there is the largest degree of convergence'.

All other notes included sets of closed questions (which required a 'yes' or 'no' answer, and thus aimed at reaching a decision), and/or open questions (ideal for stimulating the debate and facilitating brainstorming), which invited EU leaders to answer or express their views. Evidence shows that the note on migration included only closed questions, whilst the notes on the MFF, taxation and innovation and digital comprised only open questions. The notes on the next institutional cycle, EMU (from March 2018), and internal security (from September 2018), presented a mixture of closed and open questions.

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‡ After this first decision note was published on education and culture, the title of the notes contributing to the Leaders' meetings was changed to Leaders' Agenda notes, to better reflect their nature (see Eurocomment Pre-summit Briefing 2017/8).

Additionally, Leaders' Agenda note questions were either specific or wide in scope. Specific questions called for an answer to a single aspect of a subject (for example, whether or not to support the '*Spitzenkandidaten*' process outcome), whilst questions with a wider scope touched upon several aspects of a subject (for instance, whether or not EU leaders agree with the overall assessment of the state of play in migration).

Figure 3 – Questions in Leaders' Agenda notes clustered by topic and by type
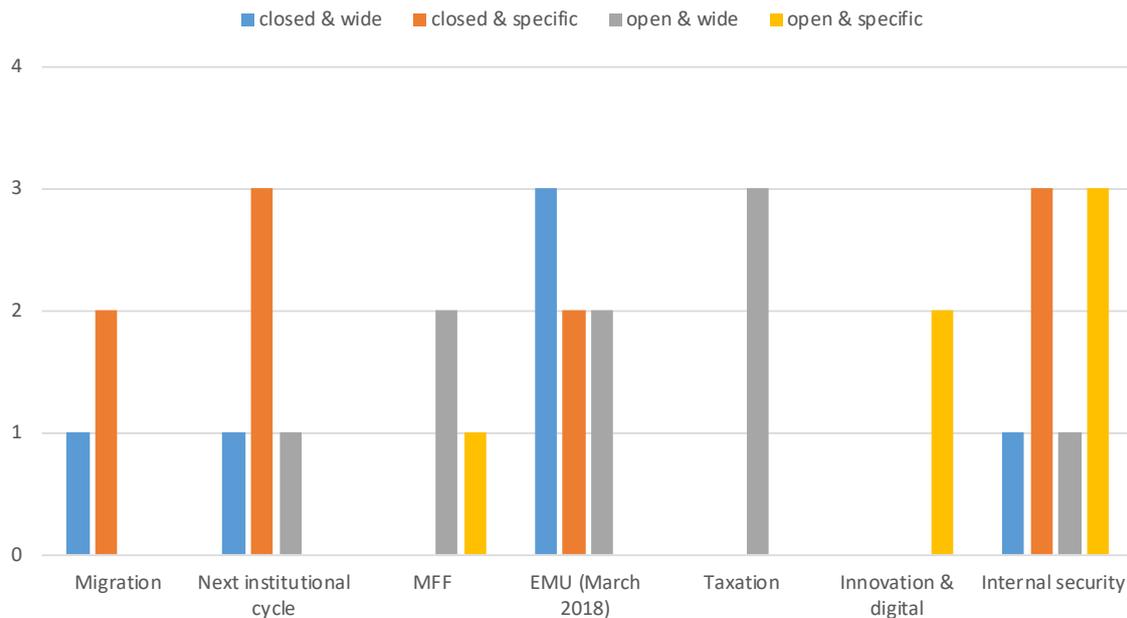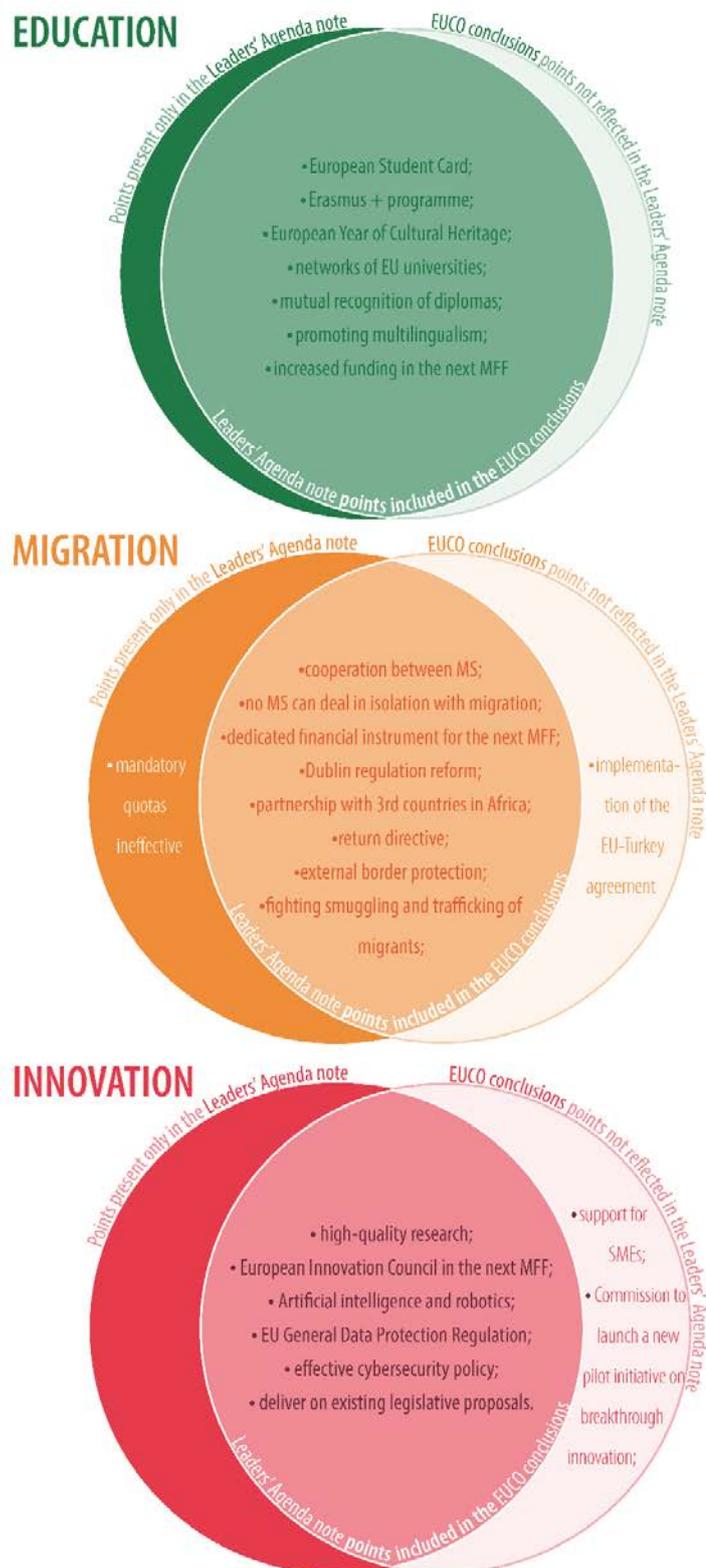

Source: EPRS.

All notes included a prescriptive follow-up. The most frequently used formula was a sentence which indicated the actor in charge of the follow-up, the expected action and the time horizon. The responsible actor was either the European Council President (such as for migration, education and culture), the European Council (in the cases of taxation, innovation and digital), or a group of Member States (for the EMU in March 2018). For the next institutional cycle and MFF, the actors in charge of the follow-up were only implied.

There is great diversity when it comes to the follow-up actions. In the area of education and culture President Tusk was asked to draft conclusions, whilst in the area of migration he was asked to 'present a way forward'. The latter formula allowed for flexibility, as it provided the possibility to organise another leaders' meeting on migration if necessary, based on a new note, in line with the initial Leaders' meetings schedule announced in October 2017 (see above). In the case of the next institutional cycle and of the MFF, the EU leaders indicated that it was their task to follow-up on these aspects, either by deciding on the European Parliament composition after Brexit, or by reaching an agreement on the next MFF. Nevertheless, in some of the notes, the language used was similar to that of the European Council conclusions – calling on EU leaders to return to the topic at the upcoming European Council or Euro Summit.

Figure 4 – Comparison between Leaders' notes and European Council conclusions

EDUCATION

Points present only in the Leaders' Agenda note

EUCO conclusions points not reflected in the Leaders' Agenda note

- European Student Card;
- Erasmus + programme;
- European Year of Cultural Heritage;
- networks of EU universities;
- mutual recognition of diplomas;
- promoting multilingualism;
- increased funding in the next MFF

Leaders' Agenda note points included in the EUCO conclusions

MIGRATION

Points present only in the Leaders' Agenda note

EUCO conclusions points not reflected in the Leaders' Agenda note

- mandatory quotas ineffective

- cooperation between MS;
- no MS can deal in isolation with migration;
- dedicated financial instrument for the next MFF;
- Dublin regulation reform;
- partnership with 3rd countries in Africa;
- return directive;
- external border protection;
- fighting smuggling and trafficking of migrants;

- implementation of the EU-Turkey agreement

Leaders' Agenda note points included in the EUCO conclusions

INNOVATION

Points present only in the Leaders' Agenda note

EUCO conclusions points not reflected in the Leaders' Agenda note

- high-quality research;
- European Innovation Council in the next MFF;
- Artificial intelligence and robotics;
- EU General Data Protection Regulation;
- effective cybersecurity policy;
- deliver on existing legislative proposals.

- support for SMEs;
- Commission to launch a new pilot initiative on breakthrough innovation;

Leaders' Agenda note points included in the EUCO conclusions

Source: EPRS.

All notes, except the one on migration, gave a time horizon for follow-up. This either takes the form of a clearly specified date, or remains rather vague, as it is the case with the MFF, with an agreement expected 'during 2019'. Two notes indicate more than one date for follow-up. The February 2018 note on the next institutional cycle included two follow-up dates, depending on the item: 1) June 2018, for the European Council to decide on the EP composition after Brexit; and 2) June 2019, to decide on high-level appointments. The September 2018 internal security note distinguishes between short- and long-term aspects, and indicates that the former should be considered at the October 2018 summit, whilst longer-term issues should 'form an integral part of the discussions on the European Council's Strategic Agenda, to be adopted in June 2019'.

1.2.2. Inclusion of elements of Leaders' Agenda notes in European Council conclusions

The comparison between the Leaders' Agenda notes and the European Council conclusions shows that the majority of topics covered by the notes were later addressed in conclusions or statements. An exception to date is the note on the next institutional cycle. In June 2018, as a follow-up to the note on the next institutional cycle, EU leaders adopted a [decision](#) on the EP composition without mentioning it in their conclusions.

However, there is great variation across topics regarding the degree to which individual points of the Leaders' Agenda notes were included in European Council conclusions. Three types can be identified: 1) topics were all points from the Leaders' Agenda note have been included into the European Council conclusions; 2) topics with some degree of overlap between the European Council conclusions and the Leaders'

Agenda notes; 3) topics where the European Council conclusions are more far-reaching than the Leaders' Agenda notes.

For example, education and culture falls under the first type, as all points, and sometimes even language elements of the Leaders' Agenda note, were retained in the European Council conclusions, as shown in Figure 4. Migration falls under the second type, with a large range of elements from the Leaders' Agenda note included in the European Council conclusions, but with no breakthrough on crucial points, or a simple referral to Council with no deadline. In the third type, although some aspects of the Leaders' notes were not included in the European Council conclusions, the conclusions nevertheless went further, by including additional elements which did not originate in the Leaders' Agenda note. Innovation and digital issues falls under the third type, as the substance of the European Council conclusions were more far-reaching than the Leaders' Agenda note.

While in many cases the content of the Leaders' Agenda notes was addressed at subsequent European Council meetings, in some cases, such as tax, the topic was only flagged up, but none of the controversial issues were addressed, as no agreement was reached.

1.3. Implementation reports

An important aspect of the new working methods of the European Council is 'the rigorous follow-up to European Council meetings' through the further development of the progress report provided by the Head of State or Government of the country holding the current Council presidency. These reports would present the developments from one European Council meeting to another. As these reports have not been made public, it is not possible to examine this aspect. Another report focusing on implementation was the Bratislava implementation report, which indicated progress made in all policy priorities since the Bratislava Declaration and Roadmap was issued. The decision not to periodically publish an update of the report showing the state of play of the implementation of the Bratislava agenda was a missed opportunity. This could also have provided the basis for the leaders' meeting to assess the state of play on implementation of the Leaders' Agenda, which has not happened to date.

2. Better delivery on citizens' concerns and needs

The change in the European Council's working methods outlined above should not be seen merely as an end in itself, but is designed to contribute to better delivery on EU citizens' concerns and needs through the implementation of the Bratislava and Rome policy priorities, and as a means to achieve unity.

2.1. Unity

The objective of preserving unity must be considered as the red line running through Donald Tusk's term in office as European Council President, particularly since the UK referendum on EU membership. Article 15.6 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) stipulates that the European Council President 'shall endeavour to facilitate cohesion and consensus within the European Council'. Whilst this was also one of the main objectives of the previous office holder, Herman Van Rompuy, Donald Tusk was particularly vocal on the subject, and made the objective of unity his main task as European Council President. The public and repeated emphasis on the need for unity started to appear in his speeches from February 2016 onwards, and increased strongly after the Brexit referendum. All his remarks prior to, or after, every European Council meeting throughout 2017 included a reference to the need for unity. Consequently, unity became one of the guiding principles of the Leaders' Agenda. This 'obsession' with unity, as Tusk himself referred to it, was only publicly scaled-down in 2018. One explanation for this might be that this message became the message of all members of the European Council. The Heads of State or Government of all EU Member States, who spoke in the European Parliament on the future of Europe,[§] stressed the need for unity, and many positioned unity as one of the main points of their speeches.

When assessing the achievements of the Leaders' Agenda regarding unity, one needs to distinguish between achieving unity and preserving unity. While the former most directly reflects the task assigned to the President of the European Council in Article 15.6 TEU and aims at building consensus on controversial issues, the latter focuses on keeping the 27 EU Member States together and preventing fragmentation when the EU faces a major challenge.

As regards achieving unity, in December 2017, President Tusk clearly identified migration and EMU as two areas 'where a lack of unity [was] very visible'. Has the lack of unity been overcome during the lifetime of the Leaders' Agenda? Regarding migration, one cannot avoid concluding that, despite all the results delivered in this policy area, such as reducing illegal migration flows, unity was not achieved on the main dividing issues on migration – how to relocate refugees and asylum seekers across the EU. Notwithstanding the President of the European Council and the respective EU Council presidencies' efforts, Member States were not able to agree on the reform of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS). For the purpose of this assessment, it is in particular noteworthy that, following the first leaders' meeting on migration, and although divergences persisted, President of the European Council, Donald Tusk, did not call any additional leaders' meeting or produce any further leaders' note to try to bring positions closer and attempt to find a way out of the deadlock.

Achieving unity on EMU reform produced a mixed result. On the positive side, EMU was back on the EU Heads of State or Government agenda, having been less prominent since 2015, with no Euro

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§ R. Drachenberg and S. Kotanidis, The debates on the Future of Europe in the European Parliament: A contribution to the Sibiu summit, EPRS, May 2019.

Summit held in 2016.** Moreover, leaders did reach an agreement in June 2018 showing a degree of progress. At the same time, the agreement could have been more far-reaching, as was advocated by some Member States, and its follow-up more thorough. Holding all but one Euro Summit in an inclusive EU-27 format (i.e. the 19 euro-area members, as well as those Member States which have ratified the Treaty on Stability, Coordination and Governance in the EMU, plus the Czech Republic), can be seen as a further attempt to foster a consensus, which still lacks crucial reform elements. Consequently, the Leaders' Agenda did not fulfil one crucial role that President Tusk had intended for it, to serve as a consensus-building tool on the most controversial issues.

Conversely, when considering the Leaders' Agenda scorecard on maintaining unity, the way in which the EU-27 handled Brexit was a clear success in maintaining EU unity. Early in the process, President Tusk made sure that the Member States and EU institutions agreed and coordinated their messages, thus preventing the EU-27 from fragmentation at a moment when this was far from guaranteed. The European Council, together with the European Commission, managed to keep Member States, with their varying interests and facing different consequences of Brexit, united in their position towards the United Kingdom.

Generally, if the Leader's Agenda method allowed successful maintenance of unity between the Members when the EU was faced with an unprecedented challenge, the assessment however shows that, in the most controversial policy areas, the gap between the different Member States' positions was not overcome and the deadlock remains (such as in migration). One could argue that this lack of effective results is because it was not in the interest of some Member States to compromise. It equally shows that the leaders' method could have been used to its full potential, in the sense of holding more regular Leaders' meetings on sensitive issues, particularly migration or taxation, following the model of the EMU, where two Leaders' meetings informed by notes were held.

Furthermore, when assessing implementation of the Leaders' Agenda, it should also be stressed that Brexit discussions have dominated EU leaders' attention to the point of condensing debates on other topics which were supposed to be addressed either as part of the formal European Council or in Leaders' meetings, as was the case in March 2019.

2.2. Finding practical solutions to EU citizens' real problems

Just like the Bratislava Declaration and the Rome Declaration, the Leader's Agenda emphasises the importance of taking account of citizens' views in creating a common future for Europe. When launching the Leaders' Agenda, President Tusk stressed that he 'will concentrate on finding real solutions to the real problems of our citizens, who are concerned about security, migration or unemployment'.

The focus on these three policy priorities indicated continuity, as these are the same as those chosen by EU Heads of State or Government in Bratislava. These also reflected the three main concerns of EU citizens as expressed in Eurobarometer surveys at the time. Recent Eurobarometer findings (see Figure 5), illustrate that while migration and terrorism are still the main concerns for the EU in the eyes of citizens, their urgency has diminished.

** According to the Treaty on Stability, Coordination and Governance in the Economic and Monetary Union (TSCG) and the rules for the organisation of the proceedings of Euro summits, Euro summit meetings should take place when necessary, but at least twice a year.

Figure 5 – Political concerns of EU citizens
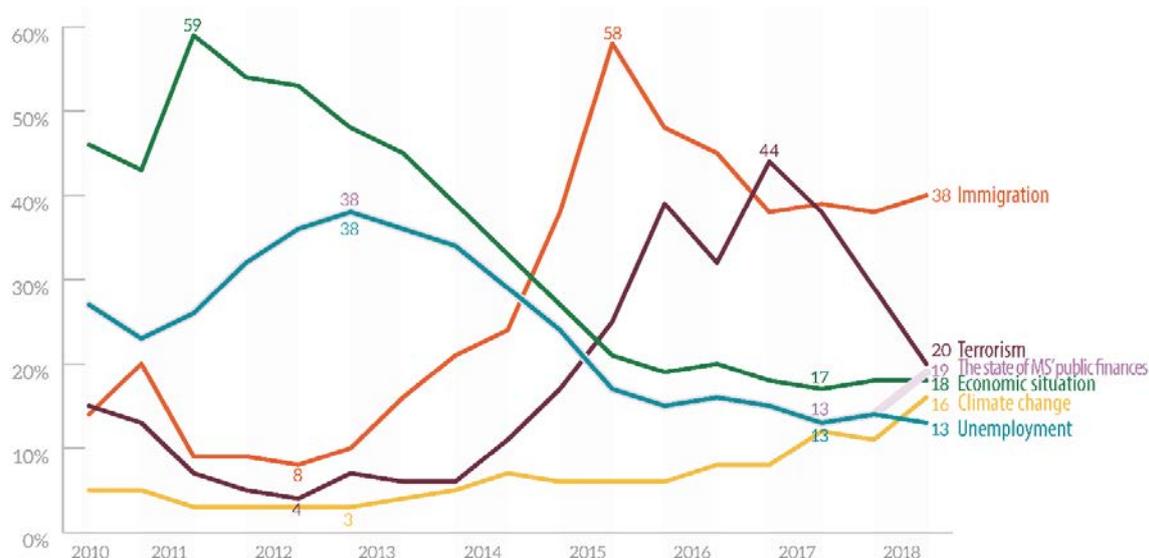
Source: Eurobarometer 90.

The Leaders' Agenda also encouraged leaders 'to draw inspiration from new ideas on how to debate Europe', meaning primarily the use of citizens' dialogues and consultations. This idea was discussed by EU Heads of State or Government at their informal meeting of 23 February 2018, when Member States agreed to participate voluntarily in this process and to conduct consultations according to their national practices. Citizens' consultations were largely held between April and November 2018, with the Commission also reporting on previous citizens' dialogues. The European Council of 13-14 December 2018 welcomed the holding of citizens' dialogues and citizens' consultations and indicated that, 'at their informal meeting in Sibiu on 9 May 2019, Heads of State or Government will discuss priorities for the next institutional cycle, with a view to agreeing on the next Strategic Agenda in June 2019'.

2.3. Political attention and delivery

To gauge whether EU Heads of State or Government have delivered on citizens' concerns and needs, it is necessary to examine how they continued their work regarding the Bratislava and Rome policy priorities.

Although the Leaders' Agenda said that it would 'set out clearly what [European leaders] intend to deliver', it did not provide clear criteria for assessing this, as no specific policy objectives were outlined. However, Donald Tusk stressed that the Rome and Bratislava declarations provided the background for the Leaders' Agenda, which both emphasise the importance of 'better delivery'. In this sense, the Leaders' Agenda can be considered as the operational follow-up to the policy priorities outlined in the Bratislava Declaration and the Rome Declaration. Consequently, one can assess whether or not the Leaders' Agenda 'delivered' by looking at the EU Heads of State or Government's follow up to the Rome and Bratislava policy priorities. While the Bratislava Declaration and Roadmap provided specific objectives that the European Council needed to carry out in key policy areas, often by a certain date, the policy priorities outlined in Rome are conversely of a more general nature. Therefore, the sub-sections below will examine, on the one hand, if and when the European Council has delivered on the clear-cut policy objectives set in Bratislava and, on the other

hand, if the policy priorities set in Rome were followed-up the European Council at its formal meetings.

2.3.1. Delivering on the Bratislava policy measures

When examining policy delivery, it should be pointed out that, in most cases, it is not the European Council, but the other European institutions which deliver on European Council commitments, including on the specific policy measures outlined in the Bratislava Declaration. However, by maintaining the EU focus at European Council level on specific issues, EU leaders have also kept up the pressure on all actors to achieve the objectives set in the Bratislava Declaration.

When looking at the specific policy measures from the Bratislava Roadmap, it is important to distinguish between two different types of measures. The first type, indicated in orange text in Table 1, corresponds to an actor's fulfilment, or otherwise, of a specific action (such as the adoption of a piece of legislation), and can clearly be assessed. Close to the end of the lifespan of the Leaders' Agenda most of the policy measures falling under this type have been addressed. The one exception relates to migration, as the objective to 'broaden consensus on long-term migration policy and apply the principles of responsibility and solidarity' has not been fulfilled

The second type, indicated in blue text in Table 1, refers to a more ongoing process, without a clear point of fulfilment, and cannot therefore be assessed in the same manner as 'completed' or not. For example, providing support to Member States or cooperating with third countries fall under this second type. In this case, the table indicates whether or not the issue was discussed during at least one of the formal European Council meetings during the lifespan of the Leaders' Agenda. The table also indicates how many of the measures were already fulfilled, or received attention, before the Leader's Agenda was introduced. Evidence shows that all policy measures falling under this second type featured in at least one of the European Council conclusions during the duration of the Leaders' Agenda, and were thus afforded a certain degree of attention and follow-up.

Table 1 – Delivery on Bratislava policy commitments

Source: EPRS.

2.3.2. Rome Declaration follow-up

Even if no specific policy objectives were outlined under the Leaders' Agenda, maintaining a focus on selected policy priorities is an indicator of European Council follow-up on the policy priorities of the Rome Declaration. Keeping the policy issue on the agenda of the European Council can also be considered as a legitimising action.[††]

When examining all the formal European Council meetings which have taken place so far during the lifespan of the Leaders' Agenda (from October 2017 to March 2019), one can see that the Rome policy priorities have been followed up to varying degrees by EU Heads of State or Government. Table 2 shows the policy priorities organised under four different policy clusters: A safe and secure Europe; a stronger Europe on the global scene; a prosperous and sustainable Europe; and a social Europe.

The policy priority which was most often mentioned in European Council conclusions was, under the cluster 'a stronger Europe on the global scene': '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 global climate policy', and was addressed at all of the meetings. Other very prominent policy priorities were, under the same cluster: 'a Union further developing existing partnerships, building new ones and promoting stability and prosperity in its immediate neighbourhood to the east and south, but also in the Middle East and across Africa and globally'; and under the cluster 'a prosperous and sustainable Europe': 'a Union where a strong, connected and developing single market, embracing technological transformation, and a stable and further strengthened single currency open avenues for growth, cohesion, competitiveness, innovation and exchange, especially for small and medium-sized enterprises'.

The policy priorities that received least attention were, under the cluster 'a prosperous and sustainable Europe': 'a Union where economies converge'; and under the cluster 'a social Europe': 'a Union that preserves our cultural heritage and promotes cultural diversity', as well as more generally most of those under the policy cluster 'a social Europe'. This is all the more surprising as President Tusk initially indicated that 'the social dimension will be an important part of this new agenda'.

While EU Heads of State or Government addressed all of the Rome priorities, one can clearly see that some were only addressed marginally throughout the Leaders' Agenda period. This is particularly the case of 'social Europe', which was not originally part of the Bratislava priorities and was added in the Rome Declaration. Consequently, the Leaders' Agenda did not deliver on all priorities to date, and these should feature prominently in the new strategic agenda.

[††] Cuperus R. et al., 'The European Council's Strategic Agenda: Setting the EU's political priorities', Clingendael Report, January 2019.

Table 2 – European Council focus on Rome Declaration policy priorities

Rome Agenda	Formal European Council or Euro Summit meetings						
	Oct-17	Dec-17	Mar-18	Jun-18	Oct-18	Dec-18	Mar-19
A safe and secure Europe							
'a Union where all citizens feel safe and can move freely'	✓	x	x	✓	x	x	x
'secure external borders'	✓	x	x	✓	✓	✓	x
'efficient, responsible and sustainable migration policy, respecting international norms'	✓	X*	x	✓	✓	✓	x
'fight terrorism and organised crime'	✓	x	x	✓	✓	x	x
A stronger Europe on the global scene							
'a Union further developing existing partnerships, building new ones and promoting stability and prosperity in its immediate neighbourhood to the east and south, but also in the Middle East and across Africa and globally'	✓	x	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
'a Union ready to take more responsibilities and to assist in creating a more competitive and integrated defence industry'	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	x	x
'a Union committed to strengthening its common security and defence, also in cooperation and complementarity with the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, taking into account national circumstances and legal commitments'	x	✓	✓	✓	x	✓	x
'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 global climate policy'	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
A prosperous and sustainable Europe							
'a Union that creates growth and jobs'	✓	x	✓	✓	x	✓	✓
'Union where a strong, connected and developing single market, embracing technological transformation, and a stable and further strengthened single currency open avenues for growth, cohesion, competitiveness, innovation and exchange, especially for small and medium-sized enterprises'	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	✓	✓
'a Union promoting sustained and sustainable growth, through investment, structural reforms'	✓	x	✓	✓	x	x	✓
'working towards completing the economic and monetary union'	x	✓	x	✓	✓	✓	✓
'a Union where economies converge'	x	x	x	x	x	✓	x
'a Union where energy is secure and affordable and the environment clean and safe'	✓	x	✓	x	x	✓	✓
A social Europe							
'a Union that, based on sustainable growth, promotes economic and social progress as well as cohesion and convergence, while upholding the integrity of the internal market'	x	✓	✓	x	x	x	x
'a Union taking into account the diversity of national systems and the key role of social partners'	x	✓	✓	x	x	x	x
'a Union that promotes equality between women and men as well as rights and equal opportunities for all'	x	✓	✓	x	x	x	x
'a Union that fights unemployment, discrimination, social exclusion and poverty'	x	✓	✓	x	x	x	✓
'a Union where young people receive the best education and training and can study and find jobs across the continent'	x	✓	✓	x	x	x	x
'a Union that preserves our cultural heritage and promotes cultural diversity'	x	✓	x	x	x	x	x
'a Union where energy is secure and affordable and the environment clean and safe'	x	✓	x	x	x	x	✓

* Migration was addressed as part of the Leaders' meeting but not at the formal European Council.

Source: EPRS.

3. Lessons learned from the Leaders' Agenda

One of the main aims of the informal meeting of Heads of State or Government on 9 May 2019 in Sibiu is to discuss the implementation of the Leaders' Agenda. Ahead of that meeting, the assessment carried out in this paper shows that, despite shortcomings (notably the failure to overcome deadlock in sensitive policy areas), many of the Leaders' Agenda policy priorities were followed-up. Also the Leaders' Agenda did improve the internal working methods of the European Council, as it provided a more structured approach and a new method for discussions. This would consequently justify a follow-up work programme or new Leaders' Agenda. However, when deciding on the follow-up to this Leaders' Agenda, it would be worthwhile taking account of the lessons learned from the current instalment.

Better decision-making

The Leaders' Agenda introduced a more structured approach to the working methods of the European Council, and as such, has provided EU leaders with an innovative tool. However, certain aspects of the Leaders' Agenda could be further developed.

Most Leaders' meetings took place when and on the topic planned in the original Leaders' Agenda. However, since September 2018, no further Leaders' meetings have been held, although they had been scheduled. This is the case for trade, the single market and EMU. Moreover, the possibility of having additional Leaders' meetings for the most contentious issues was not used. Under any future form of a Leaders' Agenda, the use of additional meetings, where necessary, supported by 'Leaders' notes' could be applied more often for contentious topics. In addition, systematic inclusion of the President of the European Parliament in Leaders' meetings would potentially enrich these meetings in the next institutional cycle.

The introduction of Leaders' notes can be generally positively assessed, as they provide the policy context and outline the major concerns to be addressed by EU leaders. However, they could have been used more consistently, as not all items covered in the Leaders' notes then materialised in subsequent European Council conclusions. As part of the follow-up to the Leaders' Agenda, the link between Leaders' notes and European Council conclusions should be strengthened.

The use of implementation reports provided by the Council presidency for the work of the European Council has increased. However, they were not made publicly available. For the future, it would be worth considering publication of these reports, as this would contribute to greater transparency. Regarding the implementation of the Bratislava priorities, not providing a more regular update to follow its first and only edition was probably a missed opportunity. In future, a more regularly and publicly available update on the implementation of policy priorities is recommended.

One of the main shortcomings of the implementation of the Leaders' Agenda was the absence of a mid-term assessment, which was actually planned in the Leaders' Agenda. This would have provided the opportunity to add further topics and more meetings, and to streamline follow-up action. Any new form of Leaders' Agenda should include a mid-term assessment.

Unity

Unity was an important element of the Leaders' Agenda. Overall the Leaders' Agenda method, allowed the preservation of unity between the members of the European Council when faced with the major Brexit challenge. However, the assessment shows that, in some policy areas, the gap between the different Member States' positions was not closed to the level anticipated (such as in migration and taxation). Beyond the fact that an agreement was probably not in the interest of some Member States, the persisting divergences in certain areas also indicate that the Leaders' Agenda did not fulfil its consensus-building role as much as was hoped. In these cases, President Tusk did

not avail of the option of calling additional Leaders' meetings or proposing enhanced cooperation, although he himself introduced this latter option when outlining the principles governing the Leaders' Agenda. In the follow-up to the Leaders' Agenda, it is highly recommended to envisage a series of Leaders' meetings on a contentious topic, fed first by initial Leaders' notes, and followed by Leaders' notes on progress, indicating elements of convergence at the last discussion.

Delivering on citizens' needs based on Bratislava and Rome policy priorities

The lack of specific objectives gave EU leaders greater flexibility in their actions, and simultaneously makes an assessment of the Leaders' Agenda achievements more difficult.

The Leaders' Agenda put all of the policy priorities mentioned in the Bratislava and Rome declarations on the agenda of EU Heads of State or Government, either as part of the formal European Council, the Leaders' Agenda meetings or the Euro Summits. They have thus attempted to respond to citizens' expectations by keeping the focus on the policy priorities set in Bratislava and Rome. However, during the lifetime of the Leaders' Agenda, EU leaders did not deliver on all priorities to date, in particular regarding the social policy objectives.

The next Leaders' Agenda, should have measurable policy priorities, such as those in the Bratislava Roadmap, which would be based on the forthcoming Strategic Agenda 2019-2024. Moreover, it should include new priorities, as citizens' concerns, for instance on migration and security, have decreased and others, such as climate change, are on the rise.

New ways of debating Europe

Citizens' dialogues and consultations were initiated with the aim of debating the Future of Europe in the national context, and have received the support of EU leaders throughout the duration of the Leaders' Agenda. Various events and initiatives took place in the Member States, with the results presented in the European Council. To what extent the results of the consultations, summarised by the Austrian and Romanian Council Presidencies, will be reflected in the output of the Sibiu summit and the subsequent European Council new strategic agenda remains to be seen.

A work programme for the European Council

The work programme format of the Leaders' Agenda was timely, as it introduced greater stability and visibility in the European Council's work at a time when its agenda was no longer driven by immediate crisis management, with the exception of Brexit. Introducing a medium-term work programme for the European Council over one and a half years enabled it to deal with the different topics, in parallel, with a step-by-step approach, concentrating on each issue in turn. Knowing in advance when which topic would be discussed, helped the members of the European Council, as well as the other institutions, to be better prepared and able to contribute to the debate. Moreover, dealing with topics first informally, and then later in a formal manner with European Council conclusions, worked well in most cases. As the Leaders' Agenda was conceived as a 'living document', allowing for flexibility to adjust to unforeseen events, some changes regarding the topics and the number of meetings were to be expected.

The next Leaders' Agenda should certainly include another work programme for the European Council. It could be argued that, when choosing the lifespan of the Leaders' Agenda, EU leaders learned from the Bratislava Roadmap, which was originally envisaged to last six months, but took about two years to address. Therefore, the duration of a future Leaders' Agenda should be of at least two years, covering more or less one mandate of the President of the European Council. It could be expected that any follow-up to this Leaders' Agenda would materialise in early spring 2020, with, most probably, a view to the March 2020 European Council, once the new European Council President has settled into office.

How the Future of Europe debate will conclude, and to what extent the Bratislava and Rome policy priorities will remain the driving force behind the European Council's activities, needs to be evaluated following the Sibiu summit and the adoption of the new Strategic Agenda for 2019-2024 in June 2019.

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The Leaders' Agenda, adopted in October 2017, was the European Council's most recent contribution to the future of Europe debate. It set out the work plan for the European Council up to June 2019, and introduced a new working method for discussions among EU Heads of State or Government. We are now reaching the end of the Leaders' Agenda lifespan, and the Sibiu summit is expected to evaluate its implementation. Therefore this paper aims to assess if the Leaders' Agenda has led to better decision-making and better delivery on citizens' needs, while also keeping unity among EU leaders.

The analysis shows the Leaders' Agenda can be assessed rather favourably, as it has enabled more structured work and better preparation by all actors concerned. This method can be recommended for the future work of the European Council as it allows for consistent follow-up. However, it has not helped to overcome deadlocks on some of the most sensitive issues, such as on migration and taxation, in part due to the fact that not all elements of the Leaders' Agenda, such as additional meetings or enhanced cooperation, have been used.

Drawing on the lessons learned from the Leaders' Agenda, the authors point out elements which should be continued or improved as part of the next work programme of the European Council.