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# The EU's future after the 2024 elections: Making the Strategic Agenda more strategic

Eric Maurice

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## INTRODUCTION

During their European Council meeting on 27-28 June 2024, the EU's 27 heads of state and government will adopt the Union's Strategic Agenda for 2024-2029. It will be the third time they do so, after 2014 and 2019. But the stakes are higher this year. In the context of poly-transitions (such as green, digital and demographic), the EU faces a full-scale war in Ukraine and the threat of Russian imperialism, the global contestation of the rules-based international order, a growing loss of competitiveness compared to the US and China, and a possible election of Donald Trump in the US. These fundamental issues in an era of perpetual crises necessitate a truly strategic agenda for the EU. To this end, it should set clear objectives instead of general priorities, and provide the necessary funding and coordination in the long run to achieve them. Strong political will and a change in the preparatory work and structure of the Strategic Agenda are also required.

## BACKGROUND: THE BIRTH OF THE STRATEGIC AGENDA

The Strategic Agenda relates to the overall role of the European Council as it is enshrined in the Treaty on the European Union (TEU). Article 15.11 states that the European Council gives the EU the "necessary impetus for its development" and "the general political directions and priorities". However, elaborating a Strategic Agenda is not an explicit treaty requirement and has not been formalised with a fixed procedure or methodology.

The first Strategic Agenda, adopted in June 2014, was the product of political circumstances. The then British Prime Minister David Cameron opposed Jean-Claude Juncker's

nomination as European Commission President. He then asked that the European Council, chaired by Herman Van Rompuy, agreed on a document that would set the broad lines of Juncker's mandate and limit what Cameron considered as his federalist leanings.<sup>1</sup> The Strategic Agenda was drafted in a few weeks and adopted just before the European Council endorsed Juncker for the Commission presidency (see table 1).<sup>2</sup>

In 2019, the second Strategic Agenda<sup>3</sup> marked the final stage of a process that followed the 2016 Brexit referendum, to reflect on the future of the EU thereafter and address citizens' concerns. The successive declarations adopted at summits in Bratislava (September 2016), Rome (March 2017), Sibiu (May 2019), and in the Leaders' Agenda (October 2017), all fed into the 2019 Strategic Agenda (see table 1).

The 2019 process was longer and more structured than in 2014. It aimed to showcase unity among member states following the UK's decision to leave the Union. Another difference was that the Juncker Commission in March 2017 participated in the process, by contributing a White Paper on the Future of Europe, which described five scenarios for the EU by 2025,<sup>4</sup> as well as a communication ahead of the 2019 Sibiu summit.<sup>5</sup>

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Despite the different approaches followed in 2014 and 2019, both Strategic Agendas had one thing in common: they both failed to anticipate and prepare for future events. The original nature and order of priorities had to be adapted considering the fundamental crises the EU27 had to confront. More specifically, the 2014 Agenda did not anticipate the 2015-2016 migration crisis, the Brexit referendum or Donald Trump's election in the US. In a similar vein, the 2019 Agenda was not designed to get the EU ready to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic, the cost-of-living crisis, or Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine.

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The process of drafting this year's Strategic Agenda was launched in June 2023 by European Council President Charles Michel. The declaration of Granada in October 2023 set its main, albeit non-definitive themes: strengthening the economic and technological bases; security and defence; energy; and engagement with the rest of the world.<sup>6</sup>

As an innovation in the working method, Michel organised eight rounds of consultations in November 2023 and April 2024, each time with a small group of EU leaders in different capitals to collect their input.

The Commission was represented in the preparatory meetings but did not directly contribute to the agenda setting. In April 2024, the main themes (i.e. security, economy, values) and what they should include were mapped out to prepare the first draft. After an in-depth discussion of EU leaders on defence and economy at two summits in March and April, a second draft was circulated at the end of May. Final negotiations take place after the European elections in the run-up to the ordinary meeting of the European Council on 27/28 June, when EU leaders shall adopt the documents.

**STATE OF PLAY: USUAL TALKS IN CRUCIAL TIMES**

The grounds for the 2024-2029 Strategic Agenda were laid by the EU's responses to the crises it has faced since 2019. In particular, the Versailles Declaration that was adopted in March 2022 in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine<sup>7</sup> set three key priorities: bolster the EU's defence capabilities; reduce energy dependencies; and build a more robust European economic base. These priorities were reiterated in Granada in October 2023, and a fourth one was added: engagement with partner countries to defend the rules-based international order.

In the latest drafts of the 2024-2029 Strategic Agenda, following the different rounds of consultations, defence and economy now top the list of priorities, and a third chapter is devoted to the rule of law and democratic values. The main issues that underlie the drafts are the Russian threat and uncertainty over the future of US commitment to NATO; the growing gap of competitiveness between the EU, the US and China, especially in the context of the climate transition and technological breakthroughs; the spread/rise of

**Table 1: Main priorities of previous strategic agendas**

Strategic Agenda for the Union in times of change 2014-2019	A new Strategic Agenda 2019-2024
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. A Union of jobs, growth and competitiveness.</li> <li>2. A Union that empowers and protects all citizens.</li> <li>3. Towards an Energy Union with a forward-looking climate policy.</li> <li>4. A Union of freedom, security and justice.</li> <li>5. The Union as a strong global actor.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Protecting citizens and freedoms.</li> <li>2. Developing our economic base: the European model for the future.</li> <li>3. Building a climate-neutral, green, fair and social Europe.</li> <li>4. Promoting Europe's interests and values in the world.</li> </ol>

illiberalism; the risk of foreign interference in the EU’s democratic processes; and the ongoing global contestation of the rules-based order. All these challenges make it imperative for the EU to define key strategic priorities for the new politico-institutional cycle and respond effectively to them.

However, there are significant differences in how EU leaders think that contemporary problems should be addressed. For example, in a recent joint opinion article, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz and French President Emmanuel Macron called for “more single market, innovation and investment”,<sup>8</sup> but Olaf Scholz continues to resist the ambition of Emmanuel Macron to increase the Union’s funding capacities, including through a new form of EU joint borrowing.<sup>9</sup> While Estonia, Poland and France support new debt to fund Europe’s defence industry, Germany, The Netherlands, Austria and other countries remain opposed.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, a plan supported by France and Germany to establish a Capital Markets Union (CMU) is seeing pushback from countries like Estonia, Ireland and Luxemburg.<sup>11</sup>

The Strategic Agenda has become a quasi-institutionalised element of the post-Lisbon interinstitutional dynamics that was created by modifying the (s)election process of the Commission president. Article 17.7 TEU states that the Commission president is elected by the European Parliament (EP) based on a proposal from the European Council, “taking into account the elections to the European Parliament and after having held the appropriate consultations”. By interpreting the treaty to their advantage, since 2014, the Parliament has tried to establish the so-called *Spitzenkandidat* process by which the lead candidate of the largest party in the EP should become Commission President.

As a result, while the EP tries to exert political influence on the Commission president through the *Spitzenkandidat* process and the need for the nominee to the Commission presidency to secure a majority to be elected, the European Council uses the Strategic Agenda to keep the upper hand in the definition of policy priorities and to frame the discussions with the political groups. However, at the same time as the European Council drafts its Agenda, the Commission prepares its work programme and the briefs for the future Commissioners.

Aimed at identifying the main issues that will structure the upcoming mandate, the Strategic Agenda is more detached from ongoing crises and emergencies than the European Council conclusions that are published after each regular summit. Since EU leaders often do not share the same vision of what the Union should do, the Agenda’s language is open enough to guarantee consensus and give leaders room for manoeuvre on decision-making and implementation later on.

The drawback is that the Strategic Agenda in its current shape and the way it is elaborated is not used as an instrument for real political choices and long-term planning. That is to say that – despite what its name suggests – the Agenda is not actually strategic. A strategy is a combination of an objective, a plan to achieve it through a set of coordinated actions, and the political, institutional and financial means to implement the plan. So far, the Strategic Agendas have not brought together these necessary elements.

Like the previous Strategic Agendas, this year’s draft document is organised in thematic chapters that express priorities on which EU leaders can agree. Moreover, each chapter contains a list of general actions or

**Table 2: Evolution of priorities**

Versailles Declaration March 2022	Granada Declaration October 2023	Strategic Agenda drafts April-June 2024
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Bolstering our defence capabilities</li> <li>2. Reducing our energy dependencies</li> <li>3. Building a more robust economic base</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Strengthening our economic base, our technological bases</li> <li>2. Security and defence</li> <li>3. Energy transition</li> <li>4. Engagement with the rest of the world</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. A free and democratic Europe</li> <li>2. A strong and secure Europe</li> <li>3. A prosperous and competitive Europe</li> </ol>

desirable goals to be achieved. But this type of structure perpetuates silo thinking and policymaking and stops short of preparing the EU to address the multiple systemic challenges it faces in a more strategic way. It does not recognise the linkages between challenges or policies, nor does it consider the necessary trade-offs between policy actions to achieve identified common objectives. The draft Strategic Agenda also does not clarify how the main objectives will be funded or how the Union's next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) will reflect and enable the Union to implement them.

## **PROSPECTS: MAKE THE AGENDA REALLY STRATEGIC**

The 2024-2029 Strategic Agenda comes at a time when the EU is at a critical juncture: it must achieve the climate and digital transitions, ensure economic security, develop defence capacities while simultaneously reducing public debt, protect the well-being of its citizens, and tackle the consequences of demographic change.

As Emmanuel Macron said in his speech at Sorbonne University in April 2024: "Europe today is mortal" and its future depends on choices that "must be made now."<sup>12</sup> This requires clear political decisions to define the EU's direction of travel in the years to come, based on a common assessment of challenges and the trade-offs involved in addressing them to ensure ambition, coherence and efficiency. This cannot be achieved if this year's Strategic Agenda is shaped on the same model as the previous ones.

To 2024-2029 Strategic Agenda should reflect the following five/six recommendations:

### **(1) Set objectives, not priorities**

When the European Council agrees on the 2024-2029 Strategic Agenda, EU leaders should not adopt general priorities but rather a clear set of objectives. The Agenda should be structured according to these objectives and accompanied by specific actions aimed at achieving them, instead of presenting an extensive Christmas list of themes and sub-themes.

The objectives should be determined based on what the leaders identify as the EU's main challenges for the upcoming period. The importance of the challenges should in turn be defined by the degree of threat they pose to the security and prosperity of the EU and its citizens in the mid- to long-term. At present, Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine and the global economic and industrial competition put at risk the EU's two main *raison d'être* and factors of stability, i.e. peace and prosperity.

Challenges must be zoomed in on, and objectives need to be stipulated for dealing with them. In more concrete terms, there is a need to focus on the development of European defence and security capabilities and the restoration of the EU's competitiveness. The latter

includes the achievement of the Green Deal, which should continue to be regarded as the "EU's growth strategy".<sup>13</sup>

### **(2) Commit to whatever it takes**

These two overarching and urgent goals should be supported by an explicit political commitment from EU leaders to do "whatever it takes", early in the next political cycle. Massive public and private investments are needed for defence, the energy transition and industrial policy, including a Green Deal contingency plan.<sup>14</sup> EU leaders should give clear guidance on how the EU can use all the tools at its disposal, including joint borrowing with a targeted use of the money for defence and/or climate and digital transitions. The clearer the strategic objectives are being set, the easier it will arguably be to design solutions that fund them as efficiently as possible.

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### **(3) Link the Agenda to the MFF**

The preparation of the next 2028-2034 MFF is due to start in 2025. The 2024-2029 Strategic Agenda should already include guidelines on its priorities and structure, based on the primary objectives.

Furthermore, EU leaders should make political choices coherently with key objectives. This requires compromises between short-term emergencies and long-term policies, between short-term political and economic costs and long-term political and economic benefits, between the cost of action and the cost of non-action in the short or long-term, and of course between national and EU interests. For example, the cost of joint borrowing to fund European defence industry or EU capacities in AI or energy technologies should be compared to the benefit of creating jobs, fostering innovation and increasing security in future.

Designing the MFF in a more strategic way would also help go beyond the opposition that is usually made in budget negotiations between traditional policies – mainly agriculture and cohesion – and new priorities, instead of looking at how they could be complementary in helping to achieve the EU's objectives.

For future Strategic Agendas, as it is too late for this year's Agenda, further changes in the working methods are needed. Preparatory work should focus on identifying key challenges and objectives, and more effort should be made to follow up on implementation.

#### (4) Organise follow-up on implementation and adaptation

EU leaders should regularly take stock of the implementation of the Strategic Agenda. They could provide complementary guidelines as the strategy is deployed, re-evaluate in the light of potential future crises and agree on decisions to adapt it if internal or external circumstances change and call for it. This would allow the EU to stay on course.

To this end, the European Council president should publish a yearly report to be discussed by leaders. The regular European Council conclusions should refer to the strategy roll-out, and as much as possible to reflect the main objectives.

In addition, to involve citizens one could use the idea to establish ‘big tent’ fora to discuss and evaluate the implementation of the Strategic Agenda.<sup>15</sup> These fora would be composed of randomly selected citizens from all over Europe and elected representatives, from the local level to the European level. They would meet ahead of each new politico-institutional cycle and in the middle of the cycle to discuss and contribute to the policy priorities.

#### (5) Clarify the relationship between European Council and Commission

The European Council and the Commission should lay down their respective and complementary role and responsibilities in setting and implementing long-term concrete priorities and strategies.

While the European Council gives the “necessary impetus” and “general directions”, it should not infringe on the prerogatives of the Commission, which is “completely independent” and shall take no instructions from other institutions (Article 17.3 TEU). On the other hand, agreeing on general priorities or vague commitments in the Strategic Agenda or in regular summit conclusions leaves the Commission responsible for making real and far-reaching political choices.

While preserving their respective autonomy, the two institutions should formalise their cooperation through an interinstitutional agreement. In addition, the presidents of both institutions should commit to sincere cooperation and refrain from stirring inter-institutional competition. Such an approach would increase their ownership of the agreed strategies and their implementation, clarifying who is politically and democratically accountable.

#### (6) Focus on challenges and options, rather than issues

Future Strategic Agendas should be more forward-looking and use of foresight and risk assessment to identify key strategic challenges and necessary responses.

The strategy-oriented structure of the Agenda should be reflected in the preparatory work. Rather than setting thematic chapters, the European Council presidency should aim to identify challenges, based on an assessment of the degree of threat they represent, and to design policy options to address them, which should inform discussions and drafting with the member states.

To increase public support for the EU’s actions, citizens and representatives from different policy levels should be involved as well in the preparatory work through ‘big tent’ fora where they would discuss and contribute to the EU’s priorities ahead of a new institutional cycle.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Author’s interview with Herman Van Rompuy, April 2024.

<sup>2</sup> European Council (2014) “[Strategic Agenda for the Union in times of changes](#)” (Accessed 31 May 2024).

<sup>3</sup> European Council (2019) “[A new Strategic Agenda, 2019-2024](#)”.

<sup>4</sup> European Commission (2017) “[White Paper on the Future of Europe](#)”.

<sup>5</sup> European Commission (2019) “[Europe in May 2019: Preparing for a more united, stronger and more democratic Union in an increasingly uncertain world](#)”.

<sup>6</sup> European Council (2023) “[The Granada Declaration](#)” (Accessed 31 May 2024).

<sup>7</sup> European Council (2022) “[Versailles Declaration](#)” (Accessed 31 May 2024).

<sup>8</sup> Emmanuel Macron and Olaf Scholz (2024) “[Macron and Scholz: we must strengthen European sovereignty](#)” Financial Times: London.

<sup>9</sup> Emmanuel Macron (2024) “[Europe Speech](#)”.

<sup>10</sup> Henry Foy (2024) “[Why EU leaders reached a stalemate on joint defence bonds](#)” Financial Times: London.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Moller-Nielsen (2024) “[A difficult summit: Corporate tax, single supervision scrapped from conclusions](#)” Euractiv: Brussels.

<sup>12</sup> Eric Maurice (2024) “[Emmanuel Macron sets high ambitions for the next Strategic Agenda](#)” European Policy Centre: Brussels.

<sup>13</sup> Ursula von der Leyen (2019) “[The European Green Deal – our new growth strategy: Op-ed by European Commission president von der Leyen](#)” (Accessed 31 May 2024).

<sup>14</sup> Stefan Sipka, Laura Rayner, Simon Dekeyrel, Philipp Lausberg, Danielle Brady (2024) “[The Green Deal in times of polycrisis: Aligning short-term responses with long-term commitments](#)” European Policy Centre: Brussels.

<sup>15</sup> Corina Stratulat and Janis Emmanouilidis (2024) “[Participatory democracy at the EU level: How to break the invisible ceiling?](#)” European Policy Centre: Brussels.

<sup>16</sup> Corina Stratulat and Janis Emmanouilidis (2024) “[Participatory democracy at the EU level: How to break the invisible ceiling?](#)” European Policy Centre: Brussels.