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## The EU's new mix of three methods

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*When the 27 Heads of State or Government and the Presidents of all EU institutions signed the Rome Declaration one year ago, they reaffirmed their unity and commitment to European integration. The debate on the future of Europe has taken up pace since then, but the different methods followed by the key players in the debate have only received little attention: The European Commission has embarked on a reinvention of the “Community method”, the Leaders’ Agenda of the European Council amounts to a review of the “Union method”, and in February 2018 26 Member States committed themselves to undertake “citizen consultations” which might eventually become a third method of European integration.*

## Introduction

Since March 2017, the debate on the future of Europe has intensified considerably. Although the Rome Declaration did not turn out to be the moment for a re-foundation of the EU, national and EU leaders have tried to shape the future of Europe according to their wishes by using the existing institutional toolkit.

In doing so, they follow different methods: On the one hand, the “Community method” has been a longstanding approach for pursuing integration with the European Commission in the driving seat for making legislative proposals. The “Union method”, on the other hand, recognizes the centrality of the European Council. Big institutional questions or foreign and security policy are anchored in the Union method while many other policy areas (like environment and trade) fall under the Community method. Decisions are usually taken by consensus, but the Community method offers the possibility to decide by qualified majority. The Union method’s sources of legitimacy are primarily national and intergovernmental; in the Community method, the European Parliament co-decides.

“Citizen consultations”, as proposed and initiated by France, could eventually become a third method, the “Consultation method”. Here, the direct involvement of citizens could lead to a direct source of legitimacy for debating the future of Europe. None of the methods is incompatible with the other two, but each of them has a different logic.

This blog post reviews how each method has shaped the debate on the future of Europe.

## 1 Reinventing the Community method

António Vitorino and Michel Barnier defined the Community method (back in 2002, in a [contribution to the European Convention](#)) as a system in which the European Commission has a monopoly on tabling legislative proposals (i.e. the power to propose legislative acts), the Council and the European Parliament then adopt EU laws under the co-decision procedure.

Although the Community method has often been considered non-political and technocratic, Jean Claude Juncker’s “political” Commission has brought a slight twist to the [original Community method](#): Unlike its recent predecessors, the Juncker Commission also makes proposals that are, to say the least, not universally popular in the Council and that take a decidedly political stance. An example is the revision of the Posted Workers Directive, which Central and Eastern European member states considered unfair.

In the context of Euroscepticism and Brexit, the European Commission initially opted for a cautious approach in addressing the future of Europe: In the White Paper of March 2017 five scenarios with very different ideas for the future development of the EU were put forward.

President Juncker subsequently outlined concrete plans for the future of Europe in his State of the Union speech on 13 September 2017. By then, the European Commission became more ambitious and adopted an evolutionary “more Europe” approach (it has still refrained from suggesting anything that would require Treaty change).

Under its Junckerian reinterpretation, legislative proposals under the Community method can also have the intended effect of politicizing the EU’s institutional system, as for instance with its proposals for setting up a European Monetary Fund and a European Labour Authority. This adds up to a full-scale reinvention of the Community method.

## 2 Reviewing the Union method

The original term “Union method” was coined by German Chancellor Angela Merkel in her [Bruges speech in November 2010](#) and describes a combination of the Community method and “coordinated action” by the member states. Merkel argued that “[i]f all the major stakeholders – the Union institutions, the member states and their parliaments – complement each other by acting in a coordinated manner in the areas for which they are responsible, the immense challenges facing Europe can be tackled successfully.”

In October 2017, the European Council endorsed a “[Leaders’ Agenda](#)” drafted by its President. This document provides an overview of the most important issues Donald Tusk wants to place on the agenda of the European Council until June 2019. For this purpose, a total of 13 summits among Heads of State or Government (formal European Council meetings and informal meetings with 27 or 28 participants) are scheduled within a 21-month period. The objective is to find common solutions and break deadlocks on pressing issues such as migration and EMU reform.

Tusk’s Leaders’ Agenda amounts to a review of the Union method: It is a more structured way of providing political guidance by Heads of State or Government than what has previously been done by the European Council. The “notes” prepared for European Council meetings go into great detail. And, as the example of the note on [the next institutional cycle](#) for the informal meeting in February 2018 shows, these notes generally reflect the possible scope of joint action on a certain topic very well.

## 3 Rethinking citizen participation as part of a new method

While the previous two methods have proven their value over the course of EU integration, French President Emmanuel Macron called for a “new method” of EU integration in his [speech on the Pnyx](#) in Athens in September 2017. As [a recent blog post by Maximilian Nominacher](#) explains, the key idea of citizen consultations is that EU policy makers embrace the procedures of deliberative democracy by engaging with citizens in public debates.

According to Macron, the process should address citizens' visions of the ideal future of public life in Europe and how they could be realised.

The consultations shall tackle the disconnect between Brussels and the citizens. Currently, often only the loudest voices, those of firm anti-Europeans and firm pro-Europeans, are being heard. The outcomes of the consultations and their recommendations made will be presented to and examined by the Heads of State or Government at the European Council meeting in December 2018.

At the moment, one risk for the citizen consultations is that other EU leaders see them as a pet project of the French President, which they can agree to more easily than to others (euro area budget, European finance minister...) because it does not constitute an actual reform commitment. Although Macron seems to envisage the citizen consultations as a new method, it is still an open question what effect they can have on the integration process. Ultimately, the European Council could simply “take note” of the results of the consultations.

## Conclusion

The common goal of all three methods is to preserve the unity of the EU27 in the context of Brexit and beyond. Community method and Union method have now co-existed for many years; Macron's citizen consultations are fully compatible with the other two methods and could become a third method, the “Consultation method”.

In the current debate on the future of Europe, the Union method has played a prominent role since the Bratislava Process which was launched in late 2016. The Community method prevailed in policy-making, while the Consultation method is still in its infancy and could become a method for shaping and influencing the ideas and discourse of those governing European integration, but not for actually “governing” the EU.

Finally, even though the French President has repeatedly expressed his desire for an institutional revolution in the EU, the citizen consultations are a useful, but no revolutionary instrument. In fact, only an expansion of his movement “En Marche” beyond France and an electoral success in the European Parliamentary elections could potentially change the EU's political system in a more fundamental way. In the meantime, the future of the EU will be shaped by a mix of three methods.

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