BRIEFING

Policy Foresight Analysis

European Parliament

EU policy foresight

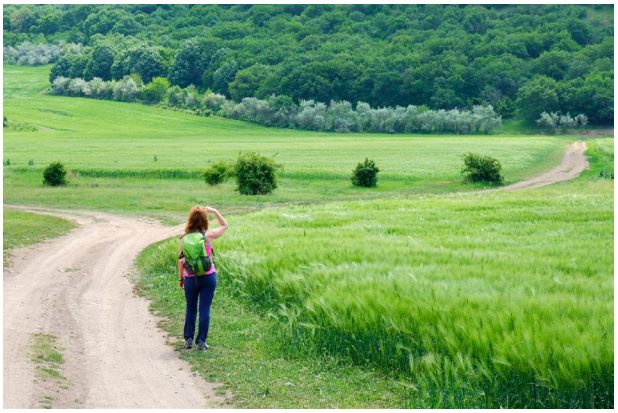
Anticipating and shaping the EU's future

SUMMARY

Foresight is increasingly used to explore future EU policies. Foresight methodology combines an evidence-based approach – including literature review, surveys and trend analysis – with the imagination of possible futures, usually based on expert views and scenarios. The application of foresight to long-term decision-making is usually referred to as strategic foresight. Used in a policy context as 'policy foresight', it is mostly used in agenda setting, strategic planning or to support policy design. Scenarios can be exploratory or normative, aiming at fixed policy outcomes. Because foresight seeks to improve policymaking by anticipating future developments, policy considerations are often part of foresight reports, sometimes followed by strategies.

All EU institutions engage in foresight, and so do several Member States. Since 2019, foresight has been part of the portfolio of one or more members of the European Commission. The Commission publishes annual foresight reports, while its Joint Research Centre conducts more in-depth foresight projects. The European Parliament's Policy Foresight Unit and its predecessors have been conducting foresight since 2015. Since 2022, the Council of the EU publishes an annual 'Forward Look', while other EU institutions apply foresight to topics that fall into their remit. Nine EU institutions and bodies cooperate in the European Strategy and Policy Analysis System (ESPAS), which holds an annual foresight conference and publishes a Global Trends Report every five years.

Recent trend analyses from EU institutions, such as the Global Trends Report, point to challenges for the EU's resilience through social fragmentation, a lack of technological sovereignty and innovation, economic dependencies, environmental risks and geopolitical rivalry. Forward-looking publications search for answers to the 'poly-crisis' in which the EU has found itself since the COVID-19 pandemic. Common objectives of current EU policy foresight, as expressed in reports and strategies, include reducing the EU's external dependencies, increasing the EU's resilience and enhancing its capacity to act. Achieving (open) strategic autonomy – sometimes referred to as 'sovereignty' – runs as a red thread through many EU policy foresight reports.



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What is policy foresight?

The policy environment of the 2020s has so far been characterised by unexpected shocks, uncertainty and complexity. The COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, the energy crisis, inflation and conflict in the Middle East have led to this being described as a period of 'poly-crisis'. In such trying times, deciding on the basis of tested practice is not sufficient. Foresight offers tools to policymakers that help them address future challenges more effectively, by seeing developments from a long-term and comprehensive perspective.[1] Policy foresight is the application of foresight to public policy, which creates specific challenges but uses the same techniques as those applied to business or technology foresight.

Foresight needs to be distinguished from forecasting. A forecast is an evidence-based calculation or estimate of future events that will *probably* happen. Examples are weather forecasts or economic forecasts. They tend to be correct for short periods of time but lack the flexibility of including uncertainties in the long term. Foresight, too, starts from collected data and experience, for instance through a literature review or surveys, but adds human imagination to project futures that are *plausible*, not necessary probable. This makes foresight something between an art and a science. Foresight uses a range of techniques that address different aspects of exploring the future.

Exploring trends and risks

Foresight brings the concept of time into policymaking, focusing on how a determined past can move through present decisions into unknown futures. It can start by looking at **trends**, which represent continuity and seem to flow over naturally from the past into the future, without fundamentally changing its direction. Trend analysis is often the first stage of a foresight process, designed to understand the dynamics of the environment in which the future develops. Whereas trends are usually visible, **horizon scanning** focuses on the emerging future that is not yet very visible. The method looks for **weak signals** – emerging developments that are currently weak but have the potential for a stronger future impact.

The future is both shaped slowly by trends and weak signals and by sudden surprising events, known as **shocks**, which represent discontinuity. More generally, the term **wild card** is used for an unknown and unpredictable factor that can substantially change the course of events. Foresight practitioners like animal comparisons: if the shock was assumed highly unlikely before it happened, they may call it a 'black swan'; if it was rather probable that it would happen but not known when and how, they may speak of a 'grey rhino'. Many foresight reports – for instance, from the World Economic Forum (WEF) or the European Parliament – explore negative futures characterised by potential **risks** that can lead to shocks. This approach differs (sometimes only gradually) from disciplines such as risk assessment and risk management, which identify present or near-future risks and their potential impact on, for instance, work safety or business.

Imagining possible futures

Having mapped existing trends and weak signals, foresight will try to explore the future by imagining potential consequences of current behaviour and new events. It will look for uncertainties that can be **drivers of change** – events that can change the course of developments. These may come either slowly or suddenly as shocks. Drivers of change can be explored in an **impact analysis**. This consists of answering a set of *What if? questions*, identifying consequences of a particular policy or event, visualised as a causality chain of events connected by arrows. Various causality chains starting from a central *What if?* question create spokes of a what is known as a futures wheel.

Although similar in name to the impact analysis, the impact assessment is a more encompassing exercise, which can include literature review, interviews, legal or economic analysis and even quantitative modelling. Impact assessments are, for instance, conducted for new Commission legislative proposals, and the Commission sometimes uses foresight methodology in its impact assessments.

More complex methods of projecting possible futures are the Delphi method and scenario building (see below). Both methods were developed from the late 1940s until the 1960s by experts from the American RAND Corporation at the time of the Cold War. This context helps understand how modern foresight tried to develop typical western ways of designing the future and distinguish them from Soviet planning methods by including an element of free choice in the methodology. Foresight was soon used for business applications and also actively promoted to influence planning methods in European countries. The French practice of *prospective* was influenced by foresight, for instance at the French Futuribles think tank, to the point of becoming its French synonym.

The **Delphi method** is based on iterative rounds of expert consultation, attempting to reach a level of consensus on what is likely to happen in the future. It was developed by the scientists Norman Dalkey and Olaf Helmer, who named it after the ancient Greek oracle. The method's consensual nature has led to criticism of 'group think'. Nevertheless, Delphi tries to transform subjective expert views into more objective information of a predictive nature. It was also an attempt to introduce human assessment and intuition into the methods of early foresight practitioners, who leaned heavily on mathematics, logic and the assumption of rational behaviour.

Scenario building was developed by the American scientist Herman Kahn. Unlike the Delphi method, it is based on the assumption that the best insight into the future can be gained by comparing various possible futures. Once these have been described as 'scenarios' – a term inspired by the film industry – one can attempt to identify policies to avoid negative scenarios and achieve positive ones. Kahn's book on thermonuclear war, published in 1960, gained widespread attention, and the topic has regained relevance in today's geopolitical circumstances. Scenario methods can be classified into more intuitive approaches, inspired by history, science fiction or simply experts' imagination, and more formal approaches. Scenarios for policy foresight tend to stay close to reality and rather reflect future outcomes of various policy choices. To assure broad representation of available expertise and areas covered in a foresight exercise, the 'STEEP' formula includes social, technological, economic, environmental and political elements. Sometimes, ethical, demographic or value aspects are added (making it 'STEEPED' or 'STEEPV'), or legal aspects are mentioned separately (resulting in 'PESTLE').

Foresight in the policy cycle

Although the term **strategic foresight** is most commonly used to characterise the above methods, the term **policy foresight** points to its use for policy purposes at various stages of the policy cycle. Foresight can be used to **explore** how the policy agenda should reflect expected societal changes. If, for instance, experts point to expected demographic changes, policy foresight could help explore policy responses in terms of education, taxation or pension schemes. Scenarios in such a foresight exercise should cover both desired outcomes and futures to be avoided, to imagine the full spectrum of possible futures and increase preparedness for less desirable ones.

However, policy foresight can also be used in the policy design phase to test various pathways to reach a desired outcome. Scenarios towards a fixed policy goal are **normative** scenarios. Exploratory and normative scenarios each have their merit. The nature of the scenarios is ideally made explicit; often, exploratory and normative elements are mixed.

It is therefore important to bear in mind who is conducting the foresight and for what purpose. Universities focus on societal context and offer future studies rather than foresight in their curriculum. However, policy foresight is often conducted in the executive branch of governments, such as ministries or planning agencies, to explore or underpin policy avenues before presenting them as concrete (legislative) proposals. This is likely to bring normative elements into the foresight process. Normative elements will always be present in policy considerations or recommendations based on the foresight. Foresight can also be conducted in the legislative branch of government. In Finland, for instance, foresight is used by the government, while the parliament has its own foresight committee. The French Senate applies foresight to inform its members about future developments in its *Délégation à la prospective*. In all cases, foresight seeks to improve the quality of policymaking.

EU policy foresight: Brief overview

European Commission

Systematic work on foresight in the European Commission started in 1989, a year of fundamental change, when the then President of the Commission, Jacques Delors, founded the *Cellule de Prospective*. Its English name was Forward Studies Unit, and its tasks included 'monitor[ing] and evaluat[ing] European integration' and 'developing an all-round and/or long-term view'. In 1999, its website noted: 'As the work of the European Union has become wider and more complex, the need for a forecasting function has grown' (still using the term forecast). This led the small and diverse team to launch a scenario exercise with a 2010 time horizon. Under Commission Presidents Romano Prodi (1999-2004) and José Manuel Barroso (2004-2014), the service was enlarged and renamed twice (first, as the Group of Policy Advisors – GOPA, then as the Bureau of European Policy Adivsors – BEPA), putting less emphasis on foresight and more on policy advice. By 2012, its core tasks did not mention foresight. Under President Jean-Claude Juncker (2014-2019), the service was called the European Political Strategy Centre (EPSC), and its mandate included 'engag[ing] in foresight and anticipatory governance'. When Ursula von der Leyen took office as Commission President in 2019, the EPSC was renamed Inspire, Debate, Engage and Accelerate Action (IDEA), while the Commission's Secretariat-General (SG) took a leading role on foresight.

In parallel to these developments at the Commission's top level, its Joint Research Centre (JRC) has developed work on technology foresight since the early 2000s. Since 2015, this has broadened towards 'foresight, design and behavioural insights' and is currently the responsibility of the Competence Centre on Foresight, part of the EU Policy Lab. In 2019, foresight was upgraded to the political level by adding it to the portfolio of Commission Vice-President Maroš Šefčovič, who took a leading role in setting up a network of European Ministers for the Future – which still exists – and publishing annual Strategic Foresight Reports. Foresight was integrated into all key EU policies, and a network involving all Commission departments was set up. A division of labour emerged, with the SG preparing the policy-oriented foresight reports, based on JRC in-depth foresight research and science for policy reports. Some have called for a real foresight think tank at SG level, and others have supported this. The second von der Leyen Commission has not pursued that path, but added foresight to the portfolios of several Commissioners: firstly, Glenn Micallef, also responsible for intergenerational fairness, a term known from the Pact for the Future launched at the United Nations (UN) in September 2024; and secondly, Roxana Mînzatu and Hadja Lahbib, who in 2025 presented a preparedness union strategy, fitting more into the risk approach of foresight.

European Parliament

Future-oriented research at the European Parliament also began in the late 1980s, although from a specific technology perspective. In 1987, the Panel for the Future of Science and Technology (STOA) was established as a group of Members, with the aim of providing parliamentary bodies with 'independent, high-quality and scientifically impartial studies and information for the assessment of the impact of possibly introducing or promoting new technologies and identifying [...] the options for the best courses of action to take'. The panel's focus is on technology assessment and scientific foresight projects, and it is assisted by the Scientific Foresight Unit in the European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS).

As from 2011 and on a parallel track, Parliament started to apply foresight to a wider set of policies, launching and chairing the interinstitutional European Strategy and Policy Analysis System (ESPAS). In 2015, it established a Global Trends Unit, which acted as the ESPAS secretariat (taking over from BEPA), and published an annual Global Trendometer (until 2019). As a democratic institution, the European Parliament was considered particularly apt for conducting foresight. The Global Trends Unit became the Strategic Foresight and Capabilities Unit, later renamed the Policy Foresight Unit (PFOR). The various strands of foresight in Parliament's research service led to several cross-cutting

initiatives within EPRS, such as the Guidelines for foresight-based policy analysis, the annual Ten issues to watch – an example of trend analysis – and the 2022 and 2023 Future Shocks reports, which took a risk-oriented perspective. PFOR aims more broadly to foster a culture of anticipatory governance in the European Parliament and beyond, through publications, training, guidance and outreach.

Council of the EU

Foresight at the Council of the EU started formally in 2020, building on ongoing work on strategy and planning. The Council Secretariat established a small research service – which also supports the European Council – called the Analysis and Research Team (ART). Its research papers cover a wide range of topics, 'from current geopolitical developments to longer-term trends such as the green and digital transitions'. At the beginning of each year, the Council publishes a 'Forward Look', which is 'the result of an annual reflection on the events and trends that are likely to affect the work of the Council and European Council during the coming year'. So far, four of these reports have been published, in 2022, 2023, 2024 and 2025.

Other EU institutions and bodies

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) has given opinions on the Commission's annual foresight reports since the first was published in 2020. In its opinion on the 2023 report, the EESC 'recognised foresight as crucial supporting decision-making processes' and called for greater involvement for the EESC in foresight. A unit for Foresight, Studies and Policy Assessment in the EESC Secretariat supports the EESC members and related civil society organisations in using foresight in their activities. The European Committee of the Regions (CoR) joined only in 2023 in applying foresight methodology in its work, but quickly developed a range of foresight activities and adopted an opinion on strategic foresight as an instrument of EU governance and better regulation. City and regional representatives working on strategic foresight came together as part of the 2023 edition of the annual European Week of Regions and Cities. Furthermore, the CoR is making an effort to integrate foresight analysis into all its opinions and studies, and in 2025 started a series of Foresight Talks for 'experts and those interested in anticipatory governance'.

The European Court of Auditors (ECA) decided as early as 2017 to establish a Future Foresight Task Force, and dedicated a 2018 edition of its *Journal* to foresight and one in 2021 to strategic planning. It considered foresight an essential step in the process of defining strategic goals and preparing audits. The European Investment Bank (EIB), during a conference in 2023, linked foresight to other activities in the policy cycle, such as impact assessments and evaluation. Foresight work in EU institutions and bodies is not always visible when it does not lead to external publications. Foresight may be carried out for internal purposes, and is often linked to coordination and planning units. This is the case for the European External Action Service (EEAS), although some of its events, such as an EU–Brazil foresight dialogue, are more open in character. In contrast, for the EU Institute for Security Studies (EUISS), publication of its future-oriented papers is essential.

Several EU agencies have also conducted foresight projects. The European Environment Agency (EEA) traces its foresight efforts back to 2009, although most projects date after 2020. The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) added foresight activities to its toolbox more recently. Its 2023 foresight workshop on fundamental rights and environmental protection is just one example of the interdisciplinary nature of foresight.

ESPAS

According to its website, 'ESPAS is an interinstitutional EU process promoting foresight and anticipatory governance. It brings together nine EU institutions and bodies committed to thinking longer term about the challenges and opportunities facing Europe and, through foresight, to support policymakers in making the right policy choices'. The start of ESPAS in 2011 'led the way in forging a new culture of foresight in the EU'. Since 2019, its steering group includes a Commissioner and a

Vice-President of the European Parliament. Its objectives are geared towards cooperation between EU institutions, think tanks and international foresight experts. ESPAS includes a joint Horizon Scanning initiative, an annual conference with policymakers and experts, the publication of foresight papers (previously called 'ideas papers'), and – every five years, usually in an EU election year – a Global Trends Report, which also identifies strategic choices for the next institutional cycle.

Expert reports, citizens' views and grand visions

Apart from foresight, EU institutions have also explored the future through expert reports, citizens' views or visions of their own. Well-known reports include the 1970 Werner Report on the economic and monetary union and the 1987 Cockfield Report on completing the internal market. Recent reports in this category are the Letta Report on the Single Market, the Draghi Report on competitiveness and the Niinistö Report on civilian and military preparedness. Future exploration in citizens panels and dialogues started only in the 2010s, culminating in the 2021-2022 Conference on the Future of Europe. The Council favoured implementing the ensuing recommendations within the EU Treaties, while Parliament suggested an additional Treaty reform, which the Commission would have supported. A reform of the Treaties was ultimately not pursued, avoiding the fate of the treaty establishing a constitution for Europe, rejected in France and the Netherlands in 2005. That constitutional treaty was a grand vision originating from the EU itself, as was the European Parliament's 1984 Spinelli Report.

European futures

EU institutions' recent foresight publications can be analysed according to three questions: Which were the main trends identified? What kind of futures were imagined? What were common aspirations and objectives across the reports and strategies?

Recent trends

The 2024 ESPAS Global Trends Report identifies trends for 10 areas: geopolitics, economic growth, demography, the environment, the energy transition, equality, technology, health, how we live and work, and democracy. The policy considerations reduce this longlist to five sets of questions:

1. How can the EU establish itself as a smart global power able to navigate effectively an uncertain **geopolitical** landscape, acting with partners where possible and autonomously when necessary?
2. How can the EU ensure that the **green** transition will be both effective and achieved in a socially and economically equitable way? What trade-offs will be necessary?
3. To what extent are EU policymakers willing to accept **economic** risks and frictions in exchange for enhanced geopolitical and **technological** sovereignty? Is the EU's current economic model fit for purpose or does it need a major overhaul to ensure long-term sustainability and wellbeing?
4. How can the EU ensure that its regulatory framework incentivises **innovation** and delivers economic benefits while safeguarding against potential harms?
5. How can the EU strengthen opportunities for all citizens in order to prevent **social** fragmentation and consolidate support for the coming transitions? To what extent could social protection instruments help to mitigate anti-democratic tendencies?

Reading them from bottom to top, these areas largely reflect the five STEEP categories: Social fragmentation; Technological sovereignty (including through innovation); Economic risks and frictions; Environmental green transition; and the (Geo-)Political landscape. The questions also contain ethical or value elements (e.g. 'socially and economically equitable' and 'mitigate anti-democratic tendencies').

Some trends also appeared in previous ESPAS reports. Rising social inequality as a cause of lower trust in democratic institutions has been a trend since the 2008 financial crisis. The EU's difficulty in keeping up with the United States (US) and China in digital innovation – currently artificial

intelligence (AI) – is also a long-term trend. Concerns about the fragmentation of global trade have increased, as have uncertainties about access to critical raw materials. Many economic and geopolitical trends have highlighted EU vulnerabilities and complicated choices between competing needs.

The Council's Forward Look 2025 mirrors these challenges in slightly different terms by exploring (i) the world's conflict landscape and (ii) great power competition (both geopolitical topics); (iii) the medium- to long-term economic outlook; (iv) electoral and societal polarisation (both a cause and an effect of social fragmentation); and (v) climate change (the green transition's main driver). As regards technology and innovation, the Forward Look points to high investment in AI, US support for its tech industry, and the risk of shrinking investment in innovation in EU countries because of regulatory and economic constraints.

The EPRS's Ten issues to watch in 2025 had a strong focus on economy, technology and innovation. Topics included innovation for productivity, European economic security, the EU's future finances, investment capacity, European electric cars and AI. The geopolitical topic on European defence and the green topic on the 2040 climate target equally focused on the problems' economic dimension. The role of social media was considered central to the issue of 'restoring trust within the public sphere', while 'speeding up the return of irregular migrants' was one of the few non-economic trends discussed.

Although the ESPAS, Council and EPRS reports start out from identifying trends, they all flow over into analysing those trends, asking related questions and bringing up policy considerations.

Imagined futures

According to futures researcher Jenny Andersson, views on the future often reflect the concerns of the time in which they are written. Foresight in the 1950s focused on predictability in order to manage the risk of nuclear war. During the 1960s and 1970s, foresight shifted its attention to social change and creating better futures through (global) cooperation, influencing work in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and UN. Foresight in the first half-decade of the 2020s addressed the 'poly-crisis' that started with the COVID-19 pandemic and its supply chain interruptions, and intensified through the war in Ukraine and the ensuing energy crisis against a backdrop of climate change and geopolitical rivalry.

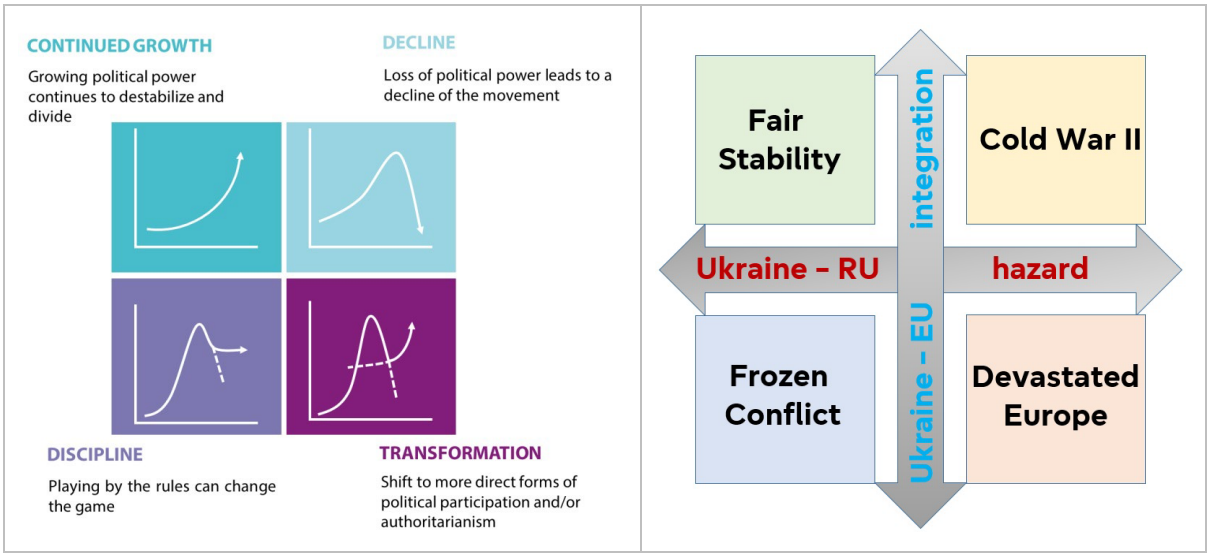
The Commission and Parliament have taken the lead in imagining possible futures, for instance in the form of scenario studies. The Commission's leading role is likely due to its large resources – in particular the JRC – but may also be linked to its right of initiative, which implies a need to assess proposed policies' possible effects. The Commission has developed reference foresight scenarios, a general framework of four views on the 'global standing of the EU in 2040' that can be applied to concrete policies. Although a general instrument, the scenarios reflect the spirit of the times, with three of them focusing on the tension between economic growth and climate neutrality, and the fourth showing a world of geopolitical blocs. Nevertheless, they are exploratory in nature, not steering the reader towards any particular outcome. Conversely, the Commission has also developed normative scenarios. The JRC used this method, for instance, to develop scenarios for achieving the main goals of the European Green Deal, whereby all scenarios led to the desired outcome. Climate change and environmental concerns were also at the heart of the EEA's four scenarios for a sustainable Europe in 2050, called 'imaginaries', underlining their imaginative nature.

A 2021 ESPAS paper, which analysed reasons for the growth of populist parties, developed scenarios for possible futures of populism (Figure 1). These are based on Jim Dator's archetypal scenarios describing continued growth, a 'disciplined society', decline, or societal transformation. This method was further developed by John Smart as phases of life: continuation (growth, youth), limits and discipline (maturity), decline and collapse (senescence), and transformation (next generation).

Serving Members with many political visions, EPRS is well placed to conduct exploratory foresight. Parliament's foresight papers have covered several aspects of the poly-crisis, such as the future of

global health, the effects of the energy crisis and the future of European electric vehicles. Moreover, the Scientific Foresight Unit has commissioned a scenario study on fragmentation of the internet.

Figure 1 – Archetypal scenarios on populism (left) and matrix scenarios on Ukraine (right)



Sources: left: ART, Populism, ESPAS Ideas Paper Series, 2021; right: EU–Ukraine 2035: Strategic foresight analysis on the future of the EU and Ukraine, EPRS, European Parliament, September 2023.

The Policy Foresight Unit has conducted two comprehensive 'strategic foresight conversations' on the EU's geopolitical future, involving external experts and focusing on EU–Ukraine relations and the Future European security architecture respectively. Both reports contain explorative scenarios, addressing, among other questions, the reconstruction of Ukraine, EU enlargement, NATO's future and the future EU defence capacity. The Ukraine study built scenarios according to the matrix method, selecting two drivers of change as axes. As shown in Figure 1, the horizontal axis looked at the level of hazard in the Ukraine–Russia relationship, while the vertical axis depicted the level of integration in the Ukraine–EU relationship. The scenarios were deducted from the values of the drivers on each axis, which is why this is also known as the deductive scenario method. The study on the future European security architecture used the matrix method more freely, presenting four scenarios for 2035 and a fifth for 2045, showing the importance of choosing suitable time horizons.

The war in Ukraine has highlighted the importance of satellites and space security, leading to foresight work on space by both Parliament and the Council. The crossroads of technology and security was also explored in an EUISS paper on the future of cyber capacity building.

Common objectives: Resilience and strategic autonomy

The Commission foresight reports provide a starting point for finding common objectives and aspirations in EU foresight work of the past half-decade, since they combine foresight and strategy, connecting key EU policy priorities and addressing the tensions between these. The reports' cover illustrations seem to visualise this double nature: the 2020 cover shows doors opening to various futures (foresight), the 2021 and 2022 covers show Europe on the globe (global context), and the 2023 cover transforms this globe into a depiction of sustainability and wellbeing (policy goals) (see Figure 2 below). The reports often characterise the EU's desired future as 'resilient' and 'strategically autonomous', creating a specific vocabulary for dealing with the challenges of shaping a better European future.

Resilience. The Oxford English Dictionary definition of resilience points to the ability to recover, to robustness and adaptability. However, the Commission's 2020 Strategic Foresight Report, Charting the course towards a more resilient Europe, used a broader definition: 'Resilience is the ability not only to withstand and cope with challenges but also to undergo transitions in a sustainable, fair, and democratic manner.' As a 2021 EPRS briefing emphasised, resilience was linked to sustainability and

a transition towards a green, digital and fair Europe, echoing the von der Leyen Commission's 2019-2024 priorities. This was visible in the title of the 2022 Strategic Foresight Report, Twinning the green and digital transition in the new geopolitical context, which contains several references to resilience. Moreover, the Commission has introduced resilience dashboards, showing capacities and vulnerabilities, including social and economic ones, per country. Furthermore, through the EU Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF), the Commission has raised funds by borrowing on the capital markets and making these 'EU bonds' available to the Member States for their reforms and investment. The term 'resilience' is likely to return in the 2025 Strategic Foresight Report, shifting the focus from sustainability and economy towards resilience in security and defence.

Figure 2 – Cover illustrations of Commission foresight reports 2020-2023

Source: European Commission, Strategic foresight, website.

Strategic autonomy: The term 'strategic autonomy' originates from defence policy, indicating the desire for more autonomy for EU countries to shape their own strategic defence policy. Since the pandemic, it has increasingly been applied to the economy, indicating the EU's aspiration to shape its own economic destiny, including through trade or industrial policy.[2] 'Strategic autonomy' was used throughout the Commission's 2020 Strategic Foresight Report and in the 2023 Strategic Foresight Report's title, Sustainability and well-being at the heart of Europe's open strategic autonomy. The adjective 'open' was added in the 2021 Commission trade policy review, highlighting that autonomy does not mean fencing off from the global surroundings but maintaining an open economy. 'Sovereignty', which can be considered a synonym for 'autonomy', appeared, for instance, in the European Council's March 2022 Versailles Declaration, which pledged to take 'steps towards building our European sovereignty', and in the EU Sovereignty Fund for European industry. Strategic autonomy has also been a recurring topic in EPRS publications in many policy areas.

Another expression of the foresight vocabulary indicating the objective of a better EU is '**capacity to act**', which appeared in the title of the 2021 Strategic Foresight Report, The EU's capacity and freedom to act. It points to the financial and regulatory capacity the EU should have to shape a resilient and strategically autonomous future. The fact that the Commission increasingly uses the word 'act' for legislation (e.g. European Chips Act, Critical Raw Materials Act and Net Zero Industry Act) might mean that the Commission wants to mimic the US legislative vocabulary (e.g. Inflation Reduction Act) but might also express the Commission's readiness to take action and enhance its capacity to act. In that respect, foresight reports often speak about the need to **reduce dependencies and increase diversification**: the Versailles Declaration called for reducing dependencies on Russian gas, critical raw materials such as semi-conductors, medicines, digital technologies, and imported agricultural products and inputs. The May 2022 REPowerEU plan mentioned the need to reduce EU energy dependency, for example by diversifying imports, almost 20 times.

A more general term for reducing the risk of dependency or interference is '**de-risking**'. The term gained particular attention when Commission President Ursula von der Leyen stated in March 2023 that the EU should 'de-risk, not de-couple' its relations with China.

Most actions that de-risk economic relations, reduce dependencies and increase the EU's capacity to act seem to be targeted at the ultimate future goal of a resilient and more strategically autonomous EU. Back in 2019, President von der Leyen called for a geopolitical Commission; and the EU still wants to become a stronger and more agile actor on the world stage. These visions emphasise the need for policy coherence, reflected in use of the term '**union**' for specific policy areas, such as health union, capital markets union, banking union, energy union and defence union. Here again, the focus on aspired futures moves with political attention over time: the health union was put in the spotlight immediately after the pandemic; in 2025, the defence union has taken its place.

While common objectives are, by definition, normative, consensus on them needs to be forged in the political space. In what has been called Europe's geopolitical coming of age, language matters. For instance, the Commission had to rename its Rearm Europe to the less aggressive Readiness 2030 plan under pressure from Spain and Italy. The example shows that the road to the future is not a straight line but a winding path marked by unexpected events, human imagination and political decisions.

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ENDNOTES

[1] The 2020 Strategic Foresight Report definition of foresight is 'the discipline of exploring, anticipating and shaping the future', adding that it 'helps build and use collective intelligence in a structured and systematic way to anticipate developments and better prepare for change' (page 4).

[2] Two definitions of strategic autonomy are: (i) 'the ability to act autonomously as well as to choose when, in which area, and if, to act with like-minded partners' (EPRS, 2020); and (ii) 'the capacity of the EU to act autonomously – that is, without being dependent on other countries – in strategically important policy areas' (EPRS, 2022).

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