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Embedding the Future in the European Union: Advancing Towards Strategic Foresight

Abstract

This article seeks to shed light on how the EU and its institutions are dealing with the future, an increasingly relevant dimension of policy-making. Interest in the future as a temporal and political dimension derives from increasing general international attention to anticipatory governance, this being a proactive approach to policy-making with the aim of anticipating disruptions and critical events. The possible integration of future-oriented thinking into decision-making processes along with the normalisation of anticipatory governance in order to contain the effects of unexpected events can be an asset for many polities struggling with creeping, perma-poly-crises. The article also connects crises with the EU's commitment to so-called "strategic foresight", a structured and systematic approach of exploring plausible version of the future which can support better policy-making and incentivise forms of anticipatory governance. What has emerged so far is a multi-level yet fragmented form of European governance attempting to deal with the future. It is not yet clear how Member States are adjusting to the EU's commitment to the future and to the impact the organisation can have on their headway, considering that the aforementioned strategic foresight may be an obstacle for politicians seeking an easy and immediate consensus.

Keywords: EU, Crises, Critical Junctures, Strategic Foresight, Anticipatory Governance, Resilience, Long-Termism, Common Foreign and Security Policy, CFSP, Common Security and Defence Policy, CSDP, International Order

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Introduction

This article seeks to shed light on the impact of the future on the EU. To what extent will this temporal perspective influence the posture and the policy-making of the organisation, and how will it engage its institutions? What could be the internal and external implications of the elevation of the future to a strategic approach for the formulation of policies?

Interest in the future as a temporal and political dimension derives from increasing general international attention to anticipatory governance, a proactive approach to policy-making with the aim of anticipating disruptions and critical events. The possible integration of future-oriented thinking into decision-making processes along with the normalisation of anticipatory governance in order to contain the effects of unexpected events can be an asset for many polities struggling with, as J. Zeitlin puts it, “polycrisis” (Zeitlin et al., 2019). Simultaneous and mutually-reinforcing challenges such as the 2008 financial and economic turmoil, the COVID-19 pandemic, the climate crisis, and low economic growth have all threatened the cohesion and legitimacy of states and organisations. The eruption of wars (Ukraine, the Middle East) has further aggravated the context of fragility in which many actors operate, calling, in principle, for a paradigm shift in policy-making. However, despite the urgency for a responsive and innovative policy-making approach that is fit to react efficiently to emergency situations, states and organisations (with some exceptions) are cautiously moving towards the inclusion of the future as a trajectory for shaping policies and orienting decisions. Such caution may have several explanations. First of all, there is a lack of a culture of proactivity, experimentation, and of methodological knowledge for prospecting the future and translating insights into efficacious, anticipatory policies. Referring to the concept of usable knowledge (Lindblom, Cohen, 1979), we can state that there are fundamental problems in the relationship between the knowledge acquired in strategic foresight and its conversion into concrete policies or programs. The insufficient engagement through proactive leadership and a paucity of experienced professionals able to help politicians in their task of incorporating a strategic foresight approach in the policy-making can be a further obstacle.¹

So far, the applications of future oriented approaches are still mainly limited to the agenda-setting and policy formulation stages (De Vito,

¹ Sus (2024) emphasises that academics have rarely engaged in foresight over the past two decades, a situation that has only begun to change in recent years, leading to a rise in expertise in the field.

Taffoni, 2023, p. 1). Then, to make the future perspective a permanent feature of any kind of polity including the EU, it is necessary to proceed with its institutionalisation, assigning work, responsibilities, and tasks among the various institutions or even creating new ones, ensuring that institutions become embedded in the political culture and are accepted as legitimate entities by the relevant actors, making those institutions a routine part of political life. However, there is no single way to engineer the institutional setting in order to entrench the future into a polity's policy cycle. The absence of a model that fits all situations (polities can also be very different from a traditional state to an international organisation) is a source of concern when politicians decide to invest in the future and are anxious to show that their choice is appropriate and in the public interest. This is even more true if the 'entrepreneurs' of the future are low- or middle-level politicians or public administrators, if, in other words, the impulse is bottom-up rather than top-down.

Another hindrance has to do with the phase of assessment of anticipatory policies, which can prove rather difficult, not only because there are many intervening variables that could impact a policy once it has been implemented, but also because imagined scenarios may not always correspond to what happens in reality. The inclusiveness (involving a wide range of actors) and accuracy of the process, which necessarily involves a specific methodological choice, cannot by themselves guarantee its responsiveness to future developments. But above all, there is a purely political reason at the basis of governments' reluctance in engaging with future inspired policies. Those in power prefer to implement policies that are highly attended or appreciated by voters and that are likely to produce immediate effects and possibly benefits. Short-termism guarantees easy electoral consensus or, in the case of the EU, support by Member States and European citizens, while a more ample perspective might reduce not only the leeway of those in power, but also the chance of achieving significant results during their mandate, making their re-election or confirmation hard. It is clear that for a state, compared to the EU, the connection between rapid results and public support is more immediate. As a result, the EU is likely in a better position to advocate for and implement anticipatory policies.

These policies may require decisions to be made that are not immediately profitable, though they could yield benefits in the long term. For this to be appreciated, it is crucial that the public also understands and values future perspectives in policy-making. Long-termism, which emphasises considering the consequences of actions over extended periods and prioritising outcomes beyond immediate gains, does not, however, imply

that decisions are shaped by strategic foresight (the following paragraphs will further clarify this point).

The EU, akin to other polities, has been overwhelmed by several crises and wars. It has often looked to the concept of resilience as a way to resist unexpected events. Seeking to strengthen institutions and communities, it has implemented long-term strategies such as the 2016 European Union Global Strategy (EUGS), which, however, are not treating the future as a structural policy dimension. Nevertheless, more recently, the EU has come to consider the future as an essential and necessary dimension of policy-making. The future has therefore become an organic aspect of policy design through the internal and external mainstreaming of strategic foresight. In a nutshell, strategic foresight is a systematic and structured approach to anticipating and shaping the future, enabling polities and organisations to be more proactive and agile in responding to emerging challenges and opportunities. Rather than making predictions based on linear extrapolations of past and current trends, foresight relies on the capacity to anticipate alternative versions of the future and an ability to imagine multiple and non-linear possible consequences. Strategic foresight can also be seen as a method to inject the future into policies and politics.

The EU aims at equipping itself and its Member States and citizens with the ability to explore and prepare for multiple plausible versions of the future and associated opportunities and challenges, spurring new thinking and assessing whether strategic plans and endeavours are future-proof. So far, the EU has not only endorsed long-term strategies, but also elaborated a normative framework for promoting strategic foresight inside and outside of the EU's borders, undertaken dedicated research, and has also produced reports on specific topics. It has favoured inter-institutional connections and enacted procedures, familiarising Member States with the strategic-foresight approach and motivating those other states to share their experiences in the field. Nevertheless, strategic foresight still suffers from the absence of a holistic vision and from a weak institutional architecture, while Member States are responding rather differently to the EU's appeals for the future. Indeed, some of them, including Finland and the Netherlands, have been using this methodology for governance for several decades, and Lithuania has used it for the development of the country's State Progress Strategy called "Lithuania 2050", while others rely on it only for specific issues such as sustainability or military affairs, and others are rather beginners.

The literature on the EU and strategic foresight is still embryonic and, for now, usually focused on specific phases of the policy cycle (e.g., framing or assessing) or on specific policies, such as the European Green

Deal or foreign policy (see Bressan, Korb, 2024, dedicated to the success factors for future analysis in foreign and security policy in which there is a section investigating the case of the EU). Gadbled et al. (2024, p. 350) note that “the growing importance and institutionalisation of foresight in EU governance has, to date, largely escaped the attention of academics interested in EU integration, be they legal scholars or political scientists, beyond those writing from their disciplinary perspective within and for the «foresight community»”.

This article seeks, therefore, to encourage reflection on strategic foresight within the EU and to inspire further research on the topic. It especially underlines the connection between crises and the need to normalise the future in politics through patterns and processes which remain underexplored, especially concerning a hybrid polity such as the EU.² The article is grounded in document analysis and a form of “ethnographic” study, as the author has taken part in an EU Technical Support Instrument (TSI) multi-country project (involving Italy, Malta, and Lithuania) carried out by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in cooperation with the Italian School of National Administration (SNA) aimed at encouraging Italian institutions to adopt a strategic-foresight approach in the decision-making process and possibly to establish and institutionalise an authority dedicated to this practice.³

The article is structured into three sections: the first examines the connection between crises and the types of responses they can trigger, ranging from long-termism and resilience to strategic foresight; the second introduces the concept of strategic foresight as it has evolved within the EU context, focusing on the institutional level and exploring

² Generally, there has been a co-evolution of the academic field of innovation studies and the practice and concept of foresight (Andersen, Andersen, 2014) and, within the EU itself, the very first experiences of foresight are related to the field of innovation.

³ The author a member of the SNA team involved in the TSI (2022–2024) project, managed by the Observatory of Public Sector Innovation (OPSI) at the OECD. The project aimed to strengthen strategic foresight and anticipatory governance practices in the public sector, as well as to institutionalise these capacities in the participating countries. It was structured in several phases, including interviews with various Italian stakeholders, focus groups, a study visit to Finland, peer meetings, pilot cases, and a survey on the public administration’s knowledge and attitudes toward strategic foresight. Participation in the project allowed the author to meet individuals including EU officials who were working on strategic foresight, listen to their experiences, and gain insights into the processes taking place within the organisation and among its institutions. The analysis of documents produced on strategic foresight, particularly reports, proved to be a valuable tool for deepening the understanding of strategic-foresight management.

the division of labour among the Union's various institutions and governance mechanisms; and the third presents conclusions and suggests new avenues for research.

The Role of Crises

Crises, or, times of rupture, great difficulty, danger, or suffering, require those who lead or rule to make choices and take decisions rapidly while possibly pondering how to prevent similar situations from happening in the future. Undoubtedly, crises can be formidable political opportunities of transformation. They may well generate the space for critical junctures, i.e., special time windows in which uncertainty over the future of an institutional arrangement allows for political agency and choice to play a decisive causal role in setting an institution on a certain path of development, a path that then perseveres over an extended period of time. Critical junctures thus refer to exceptional periods during which institutions have the opportunity to embark on new and radical paths. As Capoccia and Kelemen (2007) point out, choices made during critical junctures are likely to trigger long-term sequences of institutional development. The authors, therefore, place emphasis on the institutional level of change and on the possibly enduring consequences of that change. However, crises have not yet been explicitly linked to the necessity of structurally embedding future-oriented thinking within a country's institutional framework.

The recognition of the importance of prioritising future outcomes over immediate gains, i.e., making choices today that positively impact the future, and considering the long-term consequences and sustainability of those choices characterises what is known as “long-termism”. In a research article, Leruth (2024), by exploring the nature of creeping crises, suggests that the EU engages in long-term policies. According to Leruth, politicians need to contrast creeping crises – those with issues such as climate change, environmental disasters, population ageing, and migration flows – by enacting wide-ranging policies that may need time to be effective. If not properly halted, creeping crises can produce undesirable effects and sow the seeds for future crises. Therefore, long-termism, defined as “the conscious choice to prioritise the future consequences of today's political actions over their short-term benefits” (Leruth, 2024 p. 1), primarily challenges so-called “short-termism”, which is focused on securing immediate gains at any cost.

Vogt and Pukarinen (2022) refer to “long-term decision-making as an institutional ability to systematically think in terms of a range of

reasonable future time perspectives well beyond existing electoral cycles and to set binding and politically feasible long-term policy targets based on this thinking". While long-termism implies renouncing immediate benefits in order to seek future rewards, short-termism instead seeks immediate consensus, disregarding the negative outcomes that current policies could produce in the future. While long-termism prioritises the general interest of the state, the electoral cycle drives short-termism, as politicians seeking re-election tend to favour policies that are expected to deliver rapid, clear benefits to voters (Caney, 2016, p. 146; Smith, 2021, pp. 10–11).

The advent of many unexpected and often interconnected crises has shown the limits of approaches that overlook the future. In 2016, then-President of the Commission Jean-Claude Juncker introduced the concept of "polycrisis" to describe various challenges – from security threats in the neighbourhood and at home, to the refugee crisis, to the UK referendum – that have unfurled simultaneously. Such crises "feed each other, creating a sense of doubt and uncertainty in the minds of our people" (Juncker, 2016, p. 1), and have turned out to be rather insidious for the EU's stability and cohesion. As Zeitlin, Nicoli, and Laffan (2019, p. 963) have underlined, "the refugee and migration crisis has opened a rift between the front-line countries on the South-Eastern borders and the core countries of the North-West on the one hand, and Central and Eastern European Member States, unwilling to share the burden of the crisis on the other". "Polycrisis" is therefore seen as the possible inception of subsequent processes of politicisation and polarisation.⁴ These two phenomena are surely the symptoms of a dysfunctional system that is unable to prevent crises from occurring and is unfit to find solutions to pressing problems or unexpected events (Majone, 2014; Moravicsik, 2018).

The 2019 coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) – that caused deaths, forced restrictions on people's freedom, and economic setbacks along with the war in Ukraine and conflicts in the Middle East – aggravated the perception that states and organisations are not properly equipped to confront crises, especially those erupting abruptly. It is in this context that the need for innovative, breakthrough approaches that shift the focus from the past to the future has been keenly felt. One concept in particular gained popularity in the EU's political discourse and among international organisations, states, and other actors; "resilience". Initially cultivated within the disciplines of physics, applied mechanics, and

⁴ Politicisation entails that a topic is becoming political or more entangled in political matters, rendering it able to mobilise public opinion (de Wilde, et al., 2016).

material sciences, as well as physiology, psychology, biology, and ecology, the concept of resilience has, over the last few decades, turned into a multidisciplinary universal concept.⁵ It refers to the capacity that individuals, communities and states develop in responding rapidly to unexpected events, gaining the ability to routinise threats so that they can be tackled in an appropriate manner. Resilience-based thinking retains a strong focus on surviving external shocks through reactive behaviour, while simultaneously capitalising on the experience by learning to adapt to the changed context. Hence, it is reactive in its nature (Capano et al., 2022).

Within the EU, resilience was recognised as political prominence (Korostoleva, 2019) by the European Commission (2012), and especially by the office of the EU High Representative when formulating the EU Global Strategy (EUGS) in 2016. The EUGS, conceived as a strategic framework that guides the EU's foreign and security policy, defines resilience as “the ability of states and societies to reform, thus withstanding and recovering from internal and external crises” (European External Action Service, 2016, p. 23). Due to a troublesome regional and international environment, the EU has tried to formulate ways to manage unpredictable events which were recurrent (European External Action Service, 2016, p. 46). Therefore, resilience is seen as the internal capacity of an entity to face crises. The EUGS, in particular, encourages the EU to foster resilience in neighbouring countries as a way to strengthen democratisation and stability (Giusti, 2020). The Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF), at the core of the Commission's Next Generation EU, which is a temporary recovery instrument to help economies pull through in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, still revolves around the concept of resilience.⁶ The RRF will support reforms and investments undertaken by Member States through loans and grants, with the aim of making them more resilient. Although the concept of resilience has often been linked to crises – particularly to the need for preparedness for future crises, which suggests a capacity for anticipating events – the future dimension has not been central to resilient policies nor addressed in a comprehensive manner.

⁵ The concomitant proliferation of the term and the increasing complexity and blurriness of its meaning were the grounds for a series of approaches to a phenomenology and taxonomy of the various terms and concepts pertaining to resilience (Xu, Marinova, 2013; Grimm, Wissel, 1997; Brand, Jax, 2007).

⁶ Part of a wide-ranging response, the RRF helps to mitigate the pandemic's economic and social impact, make sure Member States are more resilient, more sustainable and better prepared for the challenges and opportunities of the green and digital transitions, achieve the EU target of climate neutrality by 2050, and set Europe on a path of digital transition, job creation, and growth.

The Beginning of Strategic Foresight

As underlined in the previous paragraph, resilience is primarily intended as the ability of a system of recovering or resuming its original form after being disturbed. It is about being prepared for the unknown that is different from anticipating the future. Resilience and strategic foresight are two different paradigms and the latter is not the evolution of resilience nor a necessary pre-condition. While resilience focuses on flexibility, weathering crises, and bouncing back, foresight aims to avoid the need for resilience by preventing or mitigating crises before they occur. However, even with highly effective strategic foresight, the need to develop societal resilience remains, particularly in response to unforeseen challenges. By identifying potential risks and disruptions – such as economic crises, climate events, or technological upheavals – strategic foresight can help create more resilient structures.

Strategic foresight entails imaging and prospecting the future through solid methodological apparatus and the engagement of many stakeholders. By using a range of tools and techniques to analyse trends, identify potential disruptions, and explore multiple scenarios, strategic foresight enables nation-states and other actors to be proactive and agile in responding to emerging challenges and opportunities (Ramirez, Wilkinson, 2016, p. xii). While some countries, such as Finland, Singapore, and Canada had already gained familiarity with strategic foresight before the most recent crises, the EU and most of its Member States are relatively new to this field.

External factors, including the role played by international organisations (IOs), have been significant in advancing strategic foresight within the EU. The EU has championed the UN 2030 agenda of Sustainable Development (SDGs), ensuring that all legislative proposals effectively contribute to the realisation of the sustainable development agenda (Jütersonke, Munro, 2024). In particular, the European Commission, in its Communication on Better Regulation (2021) has linked sustainability with strategic foresight that has been recognised as a fundamental approach in policy-making. Among the objectives of the Better Regulation is the guarantee that the EU's policy-making is based on evidence, i.e., making EU laws simpler and better, avoiding unnecessary burdens, and involving citizens, businesses, and stakeholders in the decision-making process. In that vein, the European Commission (2023, p. 157) has committed to integrate strategic foresight into policymaking, ensuring that policymakers and institutions can anticipate change and proactively

shape future developments.⁷ This commitment is clearly articulated in the following statement from the European Commission: “The EU must make sure that it develops policies that are robust and future proof, and that policy-makers and institutions are prepared to anticipate changes to proactively shape the future according to the EU’s political priorities. Strategic foresight can help anticipate trends, risks, emerging issues, and their potential implications and opportunities to draw useful insights for strategic planning, policymaking, and preparedness. It can also support policymaking in the initial stages of the policy cycle, from initial problem scoping to option design, but also in reviewing and futureproofing existing policies” (EU Commission 2023, p. 157). Member States are also encouraged to advance toward strategic foresight by adopting practices of anticipatory governance, after refining the methodological tools needed to identify critical issues and future risks. Strategic foresight involves recognising factors that could shape the future, mapping alternative future trends, and defining actions to achieve desired outcomes.

The European Commission has tasked the Regulatory Scrutiny Board (RSB), an independent oversight body, with overseeing the integration of strategic foresight into policymaking and providing guidance on the methodological steps policymakers should follow to incorporate long-term perspectives into policy development. The RSB is also responsible for assisting the Commission’s services in systematically applying foresight analysis in both *ex ante* and *ex post* evaluations.

The EU is complementing its normative commitment to strategic foresight by modelling cross-cutting processes that engage various European institutions and, consequently, Member States. These Member States participate through their representatives in EU policymaking and are also the recipients of the policies shaped by the application of strategic foresight. Although there is currently no central EU institution (Umbach, 2024, pp. 10–11) specifically devoted to strategic foresight, the approach is increasingly being integrated into EU planning and policy development processes, leading to the emergence of a unique model of multilayered governance. Ideally, this would encompass both the internal framework of the EU and the strategic foresight governance that Member States could implement.

The main EU institutions are actively involved in various ways to ensure that strategic foresight becomes an integral approach, influencing all decisions and policies. Indeed, both the European Parliament (EP)

⁷ According to Leruth (2024, pp. 10–11), the European Commission is inclined to be more long-term oriented while the European Council would be rather characterised by short-termism, due to its intergovernmental nature.

and the Council of the EU have strengthened their foresight capabilities. The EP has created the Strategic Foresight and Capabilities Unit within its Research Service (EPRS), broadening its scope beyond technical and scientific domains. Likewise, the Council has established the Analysis and Research Team (ART), marking a significant advance in institutional foresight collaboration. Leveraging an enhanced, foresight-friendly environment and enhanced expertise within the EU institutions, the European Strategy and Policy Analysis System (ESPAS) has undergone an evolution since its inception in 2010, facilitating long-term thinking and anticipatory governance across EU institutions and bodies. As an inter-institutional collaboration between the European Commission, the European Parliament, the Council of the EU, and the European External Action Service (EEAS), its mission is to monitor global trends and offer strategic foresight to the EU's decision-makers.⁸ In its mandate, the ESPAS also cooperates with the European Investment Bank, the Committee of the Regions, the European Economic and Social Committee, the European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS), and the European Court of Auditors as important stakeholders in observers, working together on medium- and long-term trends facing or relating to the European Union.

The systematic employment of strategic foresight needs to be supported by continuous research and the capacity to identify and assess methodically-critical trends so as to build different potential scenarios. The Joint Research Centre (JRS) that is charge of these preliminary studies employs, in particular, megatrends and future scenarios; the former inform and shape the problem definition of the impact assessment analysis, whereas the latter complement megatrends and can be used to assess how policies will perform in the future.

At a higher level, when the European Commission took up office in 2019, President Ursula Von der Layen entrusted Vice President Maros Šefčovič with its interinstitutional relations and foresight portfolio and with the coordination of better regulation. The Commission then created the EU foresight network for ensuring long-term policy coordination between all Directorates-General. The foresight network has two levels. The "Ministers for the Future", designated by each Member State at the invitation of Executive Vice-President Šefčovič, meet informally at least once a year to discuss key issues of relevance for Europe's future. The work of the Ministers for the Future is supported by a network of

⁸ Regarding the activities of external action, the EU Institute for Strategic Studies (EUISS), the EU's foreign and security policy think tank that works with the EEAS, has equally strengthened its foresight activities, as has the EEAS itself.

senior officials from national administrations, constituting the second tier of the network. These officials meet at least twice a year to prepare for ministerial meetings, follow up on their conclusions, and collaborate in thematic working groups.

The European Commission adopted the first-ever Strategic Foresight Report in September 2020 to set out the rationale of foresight and chart priorities for the development of EU policies. The first report, titled “Charting the Course towards a More Resilient Europe” discussed the initial structural lessons learnt from the COVID-19 crisis, and explained how foresight can help strengthen Europe’s long-term resilience in an era of fundamental and rapid change. It did so by analysing the EU’s resilience across four dimensions: social and economic; geopolitical; green; and digital. These annual reports are the outcome of a participatory and cross-sectoral foresight process, led by Commission services in consultation with Member States, discussions with ESPAS (it produces the annual ESPAS Global Trends Reports) and engagement with external stakeholders. A prime example of strategic foresight in action is the European Green Deal, unveiled in December 2019, which aims to make Europe the first climate-neutral continent by 2050, and strategic foresight was used to analyse future environmental challenges, the potential impact of climate change, and the evolving role of new technologies (including green energy and digital tools). By exploring various scenarios related to environmental sustainability, energy transitions, and societal changes, the EU was able to frame long-term policies to achieve carbon neutrality.⁹

The mainstreaming of strategic foresight among the Member States is manifold but yet fragmented in the absence of a single European authority in charge of the approach. Member States are all subject to the process of Europeanisation,¹⁰ whereby legislation and policies that incorporate a strategic foresight perspective naturally become integrated into the national system. The creation of the Ministries of the future body is meant to motivate each Member State Minister to promote the future approach in national policy-making and to favour the development of an internal institutional capacity for the institutionalisation of strategic planning and

⁹ The issues of sustainability and the climate crisis have led to an increased use of strategic foresight, as reflected in documents such as the EU Green Deal Communication (2019) and the 2023 Strategic Foresight Report, which focuses on sustainability and the wellbeing of people.

¹⁰ Ladrech (1994) argued that Europeanisation happens when EU political dynamics become part of the logic and norms of domestic policy-making. He defined Europeanisation as “an incremental process reorienting the direction and shape of politics to the degree that EC political and economic dynamics become part of the organisational logic of national logic of national politics and policy-making” (Ladrech, 1994, p. 70).

foresight practice. Thanks to the all documents and reports produced by the EU and in particular by the JRC, Member States have access to a large amount of information including methodological tools, scenarios, and policy recommendations. The European Commission is also supporting specific projects as a TSI in cooperation with the OECD. A two-year initiative involving Lithuania, Italy, and Malta has, for instance, focused on strengthening anticipatory innovation governance in these countries through the development of practical tools and resources, including a curriculum to foster future-thinking and innovation capabilities among foresight practitioners, policymakers, and senior decision-makers in government (OECD, 2024). Other EU bodies, such as the European Committee of the Regions (CoR), are also pushing for strategic foresight. In 2023, the CoR adopted its first stand-alone opinion on strategic foresight as an instrument of EU governance and better regulation and invited city and regional representatives working on strategic foresight to meet as part of the 2023 edition of the annual European Week of Regions and Cities. Participants discussed how local and regional authorities could build greater anticipatory capacity to the benefit of citizens (CoR, 2023).

Conclusions

The EU, akin to other IOs and states, has been having to face creeping, unexpected, often interconnected and long-lasting crises (poly and perma-crises), causing resentment amongst the people, and putting its own stability and reliability at risk. Processes of politicisation and polarisation have proliferated, further exacerbating divisions in society and mistrust in politics. Such a context has clearly demonstrated the inappropriateness of some policies when confronting what is unknown, unforeseen and, complex. It is especially at a moment of critical ruptures that the consideration of the future can gain traction and permeate all phases of the policy cycle, from framing to assessing.

In this article, the author has briefly discussed several approaches – namely, long-termism, resilience, and strategic foresight – that have emerged to enhance policy performance. While these approaches differ and are not directly related, they are not mutually exclusive. Long-termism focuses on designing policies to achieve lasting effects, free from the pressure to deliver short-term, politically-rewarding outcomes, while resilience is instead an approach that proves especially valuable at the onset of crises.

Resilience can thus be described as an effort to withstand unforeseen challenges and enhance the flexibility of communities and states. Strategic

foresight instead focuses on the future as a dimension that should guide political action in a systematic and structured way.

By exploring future scenarios, strategic foresight helps decision-makers craft anticipatory policies, fostering a more responsive approach to policymaking that prioritises strategic options, long-term impacts, and potential futures. The institutionalisation of strategic foresight is essential for making it a permanent part of the policy cycle, rather than merely a political principle influencing policy decisions.

With the aim of not replicating past mistakes and of building policies that are not only resilient but also anticipatory, the EU has also engaged in strategic foresight. The way the EU is progressing on this approach is pioneering, due to both its uniqueness as a polity and to the absence of a model that can function for all polities. As for other aspects of European integration, the EU is learning as it advances, adjusting its institutional bodies and policy-making to accommodate such a novel approach. What emerges is a multi-level, yet fragmented, kind of governance. It is not yet clear how Member States are adjusting to the EU's commitment to the future and to the impact the organisation can have on how much headway is made. External factors, such as the UN's engagement with sustainable development and the dramatic effects of recent crises on European states, have prompted the EU to prioritise the future. The organisation is acting in a normative and prescriptive way while developing an internal governance framework and producing knowledge that external stakeholders can use. The mainstreaming of strategic foresight is of the utmost concern for the EU. An early institutional architecture based on new patterns of cooperation – such as the one provided by ESPAS with the JRC that plays a relevant role in terms of research and scenario building – is taking root. The European Commission has been actively promoting strategic foresight by creating a network of EU Ministers for the Future that should contribute to the diffusion of the approach among Member States. The greatest challenge for the EU in advancing strategic foresight inside and outside its own borders is the consequent reduction of leeway available to policy makers. Politicians are hardly willing to renounce the privilege of designing policies that ensure immediate consensus in the name of what would be appropriate and valuable according to an accurate and inclusive analysis of the future. The systematic application of a strategic-foresight approach leads to a form of de-politicisation that currently scares political leaders, especially now that populist forces enjoy certain levels of support.

This article aimed to summarise the progress of embedding strategic foresight within the EU, with the hope that future research will explore

several areas – from examining how insights are concretely translated into policies, to analysing all phases of a policy resulting from a strategic-foresight approach and assessing its long-term impact. Additionally, studying how the EU promotes strategic foresight externally would be valuable, as well as exploring the methods used to promote it abroad and the consequent reactions of its recipients.

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