

III

(Preparatory acts)

EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE

568TH PLENARY SESSION OF THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE –
INTERACTIO, 23.3.2022–24.3.2022**Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council — 2021 Strategic Foresight Report — The EU's capacity and freedom to act***(COM(2021) 750 final)**(2022/C 290/06)*Rapporteur: **Sandra PARTHIE**

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| (for/against/abstentions) | 199/3/0 |

1. Preamble

1.1. The EC report and Opinion were drafted before the Russian aggression, the war in Ukraine and the resulting humanitarian crisis, their effects are thus not reflected in the Opinion. The EESC underlines that these tragic events obviously severely impact on our way of life and thus urges that the ongoing strategic foresight activities by the JRC and the European Commission take the geopolitical effects of these strategic shifts much more prominently into focus for the upcoming strategic foresight report than previously planned; ranging i.a. from raising energy prices, higher spending for security and defence, new migration flows and insecurity of supplies not only in Europe but also beyond.

2. Conclusions and recommendations

2.1. The EESC continues to very much welcome the inclusion of the foresight methodology into the EU's policy-making process. Strategic Foresight being a participatory process, the EESC still expects synergies as well as the structural involvement of all EU institutions, including the EESC, to prosper on this basis. In this context the EESC highlights European Strategy and Policy Analysis System (ESPAS) as a good example of EU inter-institutional collaboration.

2.2. The EESC believes that the **four key global trends** are relevant to the fundamental question of the EU's capacity and freedom to act. They represent the central overarching megatrends of our time, which will continue to be of crucial importance for shaping European policy. However, their development remains broad-based and touches upon various aspects while lacking 'deep dives' into individual sub-topics. The EESC specifically deplores the fact that the social dimension has not been sufficiently taken into account, and the lack of consideration of youth and intergenerational justice issues, despite these issues being developed in the underlying Joint Research Centre (JRC) report *Shaping & securing the EU's open strategic autonomy by 2040 and beyond*⁽¹⁾.

2.3. The EESC agrees that the topic chosen for the 2021 Strategic Foresight Report is of high political relevance and capable of creating the right framework conditions for well-managed interdependence and open strategic autonomy based on shared values, cohesion, strong multilateral governance, and rules-based cooperation. However, we urge that proper use be made of the methods of the foresight process to determine future topics. It is crucial to assess developments over time, i. e. the current R & D investments or numbers of patents must not only be compared with those of China or the US but also with regard to previous levels in order to get a clear view of whether we are moving in the right direction.

2.4. While the approach of using Strategic Foresight and the topical focus of the report are not being questioned, it remains unclear what distinguishes the 2021 Strategic Foresight Report as a true foresight resource. A clear link between the selection of trends, the future(s) considered and the logical conclusions for the focal question of the report are lacking.

Besides the lack of an apparent foresight methodology, the Commission's second Strategic Foresight Report, for 2021, falls short in providing a logical, coherent, and action-oriented framework for EU policy-making and thus enabling policy-makers to set strategic priorities and to act.

2.5. A very relevant topic for a deep dive is the role of non-state actors in today's governing systems — particularly multinational corporations. Strategic autonomy should, in our opinion, be increased as a minimum with regard to actors that have a de-facto rule- and norm-setting status, such as large tech companies, globally active banks and financial actors as well as civil society organisations.

2.6. The foresight dimension of the report will only fully realise its potential to EU policy-makers if it is fundamentally designed as an open and pluralistic as well as diverse, cross-disciplinary exercise, involving organised social partners and civil society, in particular the EESC, at all stages of the foresight process leading up to (future) Strategic Foresight Reports.

2.7. In this context, the EESC calls specifically on the JRC to involve the Committee fully in its foresight cycle and support it in screening existing foresight activities carried out by civil society organisations, trade unions and business associations. The EESC also proposes supporting EU civil society organisations in developing foresight expertise and in conducting foresight activities as part of a structured process, together with the JRC, e.g. in the form of a pilot project with EESC members and civil society organisations.

2.8. So, while the aspiration is fully welcomed, there is still room for improvement for the next foresight reports with regard to the following:

- the report needs to better tie together the megatrends and strategic cornerstones from the point of view of coherence, probability and relevance;
- the foresight process leading up to the next report should provide concrete opportunities to the EESC as well as other relevant actors to learn from, contribute to and enhance its quality;
- the EESC in particular has already developed a number of opinions with regard to the upcoming 2022 foresight report, i.e. on the twin green and digital transitions;⁽²⁾

⁽¹⁾ https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/bitstream/JRC125994/open_strategic_autonomy_2040_online_1.pdf

⁽²⁾ EESC Opinions: OJ C 311, 18.9.2020, p. 36; OJ C 364, 28.10.2020, p. 143; OJ C 440, 18.12.2020, p. 99; OJ C 429, 11.12.2020, p. 268; OJ C 429, 11.12.2020, p. 51; OJ C 429, 11.12.2020, p. 66; OJ C 429, 11.12.2020, p. 187; OJ C 429, 11.12.2020, p. 259; OJ C 374, 16.9.2021, p. 84.

- in this regard, the EESC would suggest that the Commission, in cooperation with the JRC, develop an annual consultation cycle to contribute to preparing the annual foresight report. The Commission should involve the EESC and the Committee of the Regions, as well as other EU institutions, for example by offering regular, dedicated workshops and by involving EESC members in the underlying foresight activities by DG JRC and the Secretariat-General;
- a focus group with social partners/civil society actors should be set up to discuss how this target group can benefit from the Commission's Strategic Foresight Reports and how future reports could be shaped to offer the most value to them;
- Commission-led demand for the ministerial network to involve social partners and civil society representatives in the network's foresight-related activities.

2.9. The EESC suggests reshaping the Committee's own working processes with regard to the annual foresight reports so as to provide insight, expertise and specific proposals *ex ante*, i.e. during the drafting process of the respective reports instead of just commenting *ex post*. We believe this will improve the intelligence gathered for annual foresight reports because EESC members have strong and deep connections to their respective branches of society and economy and are better able to detect crucial so-called 'weak signals' in relation to relevant developments. In addition, the EESC can relay and disseminate foresight results and insights, thereby helping national civil society actors to better understand political decisions made by the EU.

2.10. Finally, the EESC encourages the Commission to continue developing the EU's Strategic Foresight agenda. The EESC is convinced that further integration of foresight into EU decision-making is the way forward and reiterates its offer to help the Commission and other EU institutions in this objective.

3. General comments

3.1. The EESC fully supports the report highlighting the importance of an open, competitive, and fully functioning single market to enable businesses to grow to the scale needed to compete globally. This also extends to the report's recommendation to fully implement the Capital Markets Union and Banking Union, which the EESC believes to be directly contributing towards the EU's resilience against financial crises, the protection of depositors and a robust and stable economic recovery ⁽³⁾.

3.2. The EESC welcomes the publication of the revised Better Regulation guidelines and toolbox which focuses on defining how strategic foresight should be used in impact assessments and evaluations. In order to ensure its successful application, it is key that the Commission provides adequate training and resources to its staff conducting impact assessment and evaluations.

3.3. As part of its responses to a more challenging landscape for governance, the report highlights the need for participatory and inclusive governance to enhance trust and legitimacy at all levels, raising the importance of platforms such as the EESC. We believe that, now more than ever, providing an EU-wide voice to civil society is key in enabling effective governance in the 21st century and reaching broad-based and sustainable solutions, rather than easy ones.

3.4. The EESC acknowledges the follow-up ⁽⁴⁾ by the European Commission to the EESC opinion on 2020 Strategic Foresight Report— Charting the course towards a more resilient Europe ⁽⁵⁾ and feels compelled to respond to aspects it still considers relevant, given that they have not been sufficiently addressed in the 2021 Strategic Foresight Report:

⁽³⁾ <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/policies/policy-areas/financial-services-and-capital-markets>

⁽⁴⁾ Pages 187-200 https://www.eesc.europa.eu/sites/default/files/files/04_eesc_follow-up_report_april_2021_gri.pdf

⁽⁵⁾ OJ C 220, 9.6.2021, p. 67.

- The follow-up document argues that foresight had been included in the 2020 Strategic Foresight Report. From an EESC point of view though, there is a lack of transparency in how foresight principles and methodologies have been used to arrive at the report's conclusions and how external actors were included in foresight activities. For example, no clear path for engagement has been offered to the EESC;
- The follow-up document points out that individual issues need to be further developed and specified, as requested by the EESC, and should be incorporated into policy proposals and that the Foresight Report only offers a starting point of reflection. In the EESC's opinion, the current format of the report is neither suitable for deriving policy proposals nor does it offer concrete starting points of reflection;
- The follow-up document also emphasises the importance of describing the present situation and status quo in a foresight analysis. The EESC agrees that, traditionally, this is the very first step in a foresight analysis. However, other than its current use in Strategic Foresight Reports, it should form but a starting point towards a future-oriented analysis, which would be a more relevant way for EESC members to derive recommendations for action.

3.5. As for the **ten areas** in which the EU could strengthen its open strategic autonomy and global leadership, while they are generally relevant, from the EESC's point of view, they are not presented as logical strategic conclusions derived from a framework covering trends and uncertainties. Hence, it cannot be assumed that they present holistic and accurate strategic cornerstones from a foresight perspective.

3.6. The EESC believes that there is no actual shortage of foresight or strategic planning on the part of the Commission. In the EESC's view, the real issue is the lack of political will by EU decision-makers to turn foresight into far-reaching proposals. If the political will is not there, even foresight will not lead to the desired steps being taken.

3.7. Highlighting the shortcomings of a closed-off foresight process with limited consultation, the EESC notes the failure to mention the issue of rising inflation as well as increasing energy prices, both of which the EESC considers crucial elements of the issue of strategic autonomy. Within its consultative role, the EESC is already preparing forward-looking opinions ⁽⁶⁾ to contribute to EU capacity to better integrate foresight into the decision-making process.

3.8. Furthermore, the role of social security systems, including welfare state development, receives no mention in the report. In general, social aspects of the issue appear to be neglected in favour of technological and economic aspects. EU citizens expect a high level of social security and welfare to be provided by the state. Hence, in the light of strategic autonomy, an unanswered question remains how social security systems will be financed in the future. We would very much welcome a more in-depth analysis on this topic using foresight tools.

⁽⁶⁾ See recent examples of forward-looking EESC opinions:

- OJ C 374, 16.9.2021, p. 73;
 - OJ C 129, 11.4.2018, p. 36;
 - CCMI/184– Anticipation of structural and sectoral change and reshaping industrial cultures — up to new borders of recovery and resilience in the different parts of Europe;
 - OJ C 220, 9.6.2021, p. 118;
 - OJ C 341, 24.8.2021, p. 1;
- The EESC also organises activities promoting forward-looking debates, such as for example:
- ECO conference on *Economic aspects of Strategic Foresight and EU decision-making* (June 2021);
 - REX conference on *The Geopolitics of the European Green Deal (EGD), a crosscutting insight into the geopolitical implications of the EGD* (December 2021);
 - REX debate at Section meeting: *Strategic foresight — a vision for the future of Europe* (February 2022).

3.9. The 2021 Strategic Foresight Report draws up a comprehensive list of challenges. However, it does not provide clear guidance on priorities and priority actions or proposals on how companies or workers can or should prepare to meet these challenges. Many trends may affect citizens and companies simultaneously. This is a lost opportunity, which the EESC could help remedy given its relevance in addressing high-level challenges and translating proposed solutions into everyday lives, particularly those of employers and employees.

3.10. The report does not currently live up to its title as a foresight document, as described in the former EPSC's 'Foresight Primer', for example ⁽⁷⁾. A good practice example for methodologically transparent foresight reports can be found in *Tackling Obesities: Future Choices* ⁽⁸⁾, as commissioned by the UK Government's Foresight service.

3.11. The report refers specifically to the EU Foresight Network of Ministers for the Future, and the related development of foresight capacities at national level. We urge the Commission to ensure also in this network that actors such as the EESC be actively considered when implementing foresight exercises rather than presented with their results.

3.12. The EESC encourages the Commission to continue developing the EU's Strategic Foresight agenda. As the opinion has indicated, several changes need to be made. However, the EESC is convinced that further integration of foresight into EU decision-making is the way forward and reiterates its offer to help and cooperate with the Commission and other EU institutions in this objective. Foresight will only achieve its stated objectives if it is an open and pluralistic as well as a diverse, cross-disciplinary exercise, involving organised social partners and civil society, in particular the EESC, at all stages of the foresight process.

Brussels, 23 March 2022.

The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Christa SCHWENG

⁽⁷⁾ 'What strategic foresight is not? Not a report — a carefully designed and purposeful intervention. Strategic foresight is a learning process that offers a decision-maker new and refreshing perspectives on the present situation — which is often puzzling, socially messy and uncertain. It engages with uncertainty as a friend rather than as a foe. It is not a report but a means to some other end. The carefully designed and purposeful intervention focusses the social learning process on the needs of a specific set of users and their needs (i.e. their uses foresight).', European Commission, European Political Strategy Centre, Wilkinson, A., *Strategic Foresight Primer*, Publications Office, 2017, Retrieved January 16, 2022 from <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2872/71492>

⁽⁸⁾ *Tackling obesity: Future choices— project report*. Retrieved January 14, 2022, from https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/287937/07-1184x-tackling-obesity-future-choices-report.pdf