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Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions — Strategic foresight as an instrument of EU governance and better regulation

(C/2023/1327)

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POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS (CoR)

The right time

1. notes that through strategic foresight, various possible futures can be anticipated and explored in a structured, systemic and collective way, meaning that more suitable choices can be made;
2. emphasises that the goal of strategic foresight is not to predict the future, but to prepare for it, thereby contributing to an anticipatory governance at all levels. Therefore highlights the importance of foresight, especially in situations that are complex, uncertain, and fast-evolving, in order to increase resilience and ensure that all institutional levels of the EU are better equipped to respond to change in a timely and innovative way, in line with the principle of subsidiarity;
3. points out that the final recommendations of the Conference on the Future of Europe are based on citizens' expectations of forward-looking, sustainable and 'future-proof' action by the EU; in this regard welcomes the Commission's recognition of strategic foresight, both as one of its cross-cutting objectives and as a governance tool;
4. highlights the contribution of foresight to providing a long-term strategic perspective, which is particularly important for the elaboration of a strategic agenda for the future of the EU in the wake of the 2024 European elections and in view of the adoption of the new 2024-2029 political agenda, as well as throughout the preparatory stages for the new policy cycle;
5. regrets that strategic foresight is often carried out on a sporadic basis and/or is limited to a small group of analysts and technicians. Believes that strategic foresight is of considerable political importance and must therefore be regarded as a process of strategic thinking within the institutions involving continuous interaction with the context in which they operate, their stakeholders and the citizens; its ultimate goal must be to contribute to better multilevel governance and future-oriented policies that better correspond to citizens' needs;
6. also believes that appointing a vice-president of the Commission to be in charge of strategic foresight and including foresight in the Better Regulation guidelines and toolbox (2021) are important developments; expects that these concrete steps will be also endorsed by the new Commission and be further developed in the future;
7. stresses the potential of foresight as a tool for strategic guidance which is also useful for weighing financial and budgetary decisions more effectively. By identifying the factors that will have the greatest impact on the future (and the needs associated with them), foresight makes it easier to determine investment priorities and to allocate resources to areas that are likely to have the greatest impact;

8. underlines the need to mainstream strategic foresight more systematically into EU policies in order to improve the EU's resilience and ensure future-proof EU policy-making. Stresses by the same token that developing a culture of strategic foresight geared towards better governance at local and regional level, and linking it more closely to other levels of decision-making, is integral to building resilience and anticipatory as well as participatory governance across the EU and globally;

9. stresses that local and regional authorities (LRAs), as well as other local and regional stakeholders and citizens (especially young people) must be key players in strategic foresight and proactively contribute to the choices that will determine their future.

Global trends and local and regional challenges

10. considers it essential to identify the impact of global trends on the local and regional dimension in a timely and systematic way. In fact, better coordinating information and capabilities at different levels is essential for better understanding and preparing for different possible scenarios;

11. therefore believes it essential to identify the most appropriate ways and channels for LRAs and other relevant local and regional stakeholders (e.g. regional development agencies) to benefit from and/or contribute to existing strategic foresight activities at European level;

12. points out that the ESPAS ⁽¹⁾ report on global trends and the Commission's strategic foresight reports set out crucial challenges that affect all levels of EU governance, in particular the pursuit of open strategic autonomy, the need to mitigate and adapt to climate change, the need to reconcile the green and digital transitions and to ensure economic and social sustainability, and the urgent need to address the growing territorial disparities and the effects of ongoing urbanisation. Stresses that the true challenge lies in exploring how the identified trends may interact with each other, and in understanding, at an early stage, not only the local and social impact of these trends, but also the local and social impact of the policies and decisions taken at EU level to address them. Stresses in particular the importance of properly analysing the impacts of these on the world of work, on industrial policies, and on the possible widening of sub-national and national disparities;

13. notes that urbanisation is the area where major global trends converge, and can be seen as an accelerating force for many of them; also stresses that cities have to deal with a growing number of transnational challenges, and are increasingly acting as global players. This is an important development to factor into strategic thinking;

14. recognises that cities, provinces and regions are places of transformation; therefore stresses the need to manage these processes through strategic, innovative, participatory and long-term spatial planning. Believes, here, that a place-based approach, multi-sectoral policy frameworks ⁽²⁾, processes such as smart specialisation, interregional alliances and innovation ecosystems can foster new territorial models for more sustainable societies, while reducing the risk of entire areas falling behind. Emphasises that strategic foresight is a suitable tool for facilitating such processes;

15. calls for a more in-depth debate on the most appropriate and useful approaches to the decision-making processes to be used in local and regional strategic foresight, taking into account the methodological limitations, specific features and challenges of the context in which they are applied, such as increasing social vulnerabilities, regional diversity and the factors causing public dissatisfaction.

⁽¹⁾ European Strategy and Policy Analysis System.

⁽²⁾ For example, policy frameworks combining industry, innovation and education policies.

Added value of local and regional strategic foresight for the EU's Better Regulation agenda

16. stresses that strategic foresight is an integral part of the EU's efforts and instruments under the Better Regulation agenda, aimed at creating evidence-based, sustainable, transparent and future-proof legislation that creates the highest added value for EU citizens. The CoR notes that this approach is fully in line with its concept of 'active subsidiarity' ⁽³⁾;

17. reiterates its call for a territorial vulnerability scoreboard to be developed in close collaboration with the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission to better understand and consider risks related to such vulnerabilities ⁽⁴⁾;

18. reiterates that all levels of governance, starting at the local and regional levels, have important elements to contribute to every stage in the life cycle of EU legislation and policies. In this regard, stresses the importance of steps such as jointly identifying future challenges and long-term trends; carefully assessing their impact, including at local and regional level, when drafting legislation (including making territorial impact assessments mandatory); checking compatibility with the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality (including by the CoR and sub-national levels of governance); and reviewing the implementation of legislation and assessing whether it is fit for purpose, including with regional impact criteria (e.g. through the CoR's RegHub network and the Fit for Future Platform). Also believes that foresight methods, such as policy stress testing, can help better prepare for crises and disruptive events; also encourages this practice;

19. points out that creating the Better Regulation and Active Subsidiarity Steering Group (BRASS-G) brings together (at policy level) the CoR's various activities in the field of better regulation. The possibility is being considered of including a CoR member focused on strategic foresight in this group.

Interinstitutional cooperation on foresight

20. confirms its willingness to contribute and add value to the EU's interinstitutional strategic foresight efforts. In this regard, welcomes the proposals adopted by the CoR's Conference of Presidents in its 2022 Roadmap for CoR Strategic Foresight Activity;

21. proposes improving knowledge and raising awareness of strategic foresight among CoR members and officials, and key LRA personnel. To this end, plans to promote training activities tailored to these specific needs;

22. is committed to contributing to existing inter-institutional cooperation activities, such as actively participating in ESPAS, 'horizon scanning' and identifying the most relevant trends for the future, enhancing the local and regional perspective. Therefore calls for this dimension to be incorporated into the Commission's Strategic Foresight Report and the ESPAS report on global trends;

23. reiterates its intention to include the strategic foresight approach in CoR opinions in a cross-cutting way, and welcomes the fact that an increasing number of studies supporting the CoR's work contain foresight elements;

24. also proposes fostering synergies and better ways and means of exchange between cities, provinces and regions interested in strengthening their strategic foresight capacities and/or sharing good practices or mutual learning processes;

25. is therefore committed to voicing its members' perspectives at EU level, and to collecting and promoting the foresight skills and experiences of LRAs and other local bodies;

⁽³⁾ The meaningful involvement of all levels of governance in generating EU added value.

⁽⁴⁾ Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions on preparing for and dealing with crises: strengthening the resilience of the Union, its regions and cities (OJ C 257, 21.7.2023, p. 6).

26. is prepared, in cooperation with the EU institutions, to promote a closer link between the strategic foresight activities promoted at local, provincial and regional level with those at national level; is therefore interested in being informed and involved in the initiatives promoted by the rotating presidencies of the Council of the EU and/or the Commission in this area;

27. encourages the Commission (specifically the JRC) and the Parliament (in particular the EPRS) to work with the CoR in developing easily accessible and multilingual tools (manuals, training courses, toolkits, etc.) in order to promote the sharing of expertise and to strengthen LRAs' strategic foresight structures;

28. stresses that there are many approaches to strategic foresight and that local and regional authorities should choose, with the necessary flexibility, the methods that best suit their needs and capabilities, or devise their own approaches;

29. calls on the JRC to work closely with the CoR in order to develop methodological approaches and thematic applications tailored to the needs of sub-national governments and local and regional stakeholders; therefore welcomes the cooperation between the CoR and the JRC in organising a foresight activity on the future of the Green Deal (the CoR's Green Deal Going Local working group).

Recommendations for taking a local and regional approach to strategic foresight

30. stresses the importance of including the local and regional perspective and of adopting a broad strategic vision in setting and implementing the 2024-2029 agenda; therefore calls on the Parliament, the Council presidencies and the Commission to take note of the importance of this dimension and to include it in their respective reports and strategic foresight activities;

31. requests to be consulted systematically and in a timely manner when the Commission drafts its annual strategic foresight report, and commits to strengthening the strategic foresight orientation of its annual report on the state of cities and regions in the EU;

32. underlines the democratic added value of promoting participatory strategic foresight activities at local level, and the importance of bottom-up contributions to multi-level governance and a sustainable development agenda. Therefore calls for citizens and LRAs to be educated and involved in foresight exercises, such as horizonscanning, identifying weak signals and long-term trends, identifying possible scenarios and jointly identifying options for the future;

33. stresses that a future revision of the Interinstitutional Agreement (IIA) on Better Regulation should clearly recognise strategic foresight as a key element of this agenda. In this context, stresses that the CoR should be taken more into consideration and should play a more pivotal role, particularly within the Regulatory Scrutiny Board, given the political legitimacy of its members and the experience it can bring from the local and regional level;

34. highlights that the CoR should have access to trilogues in the co-decision procedure on the basis of the revision of the IIA, and reiterates its commitment to exploring new ways of influencing EU interinstitutional dialogue. This is all the more relevant in the context of the recognition of strategic foresight, and of its local and regional dimension, as a key element of the EU agenda;

35. calls for the roles of LRAs and the CoR to be strengthened in EU policy-making. Believes that policy-makers should, for example, be more involved in stress-testing exercises, in order to anticipate and revise EU legislation and to adapt policies⁽³⁾;

36. calls on the other EU institutions to support the CoR in strengthening the foresight capacities of LRAs through appropriate dissemination and training activities for regional policy-makers and local civil servants. Requests their cooperation to increase the profile and visibility of local and regional strategic foresight activities at all stages of the EU decision-making process;

(3) Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions — Health Emergency Preparedness and Response Authority (OJ C 301, 5.8.2022, p. 33)

37. calls on LRAs to invest in strategic foresight and in the contributions it could bring, for example in terms of more forward-looking, systemic, coherent and participatory spatial planning, and in more innovative and sustainable development strategies.

Brussels, 11 October 2023.

The President
of the European Committee of the Regions
Vasco ALVES CORDEIRO
