

The 2019 ESPAS Conference: Some useful take-aways

The annual ESPAS Conference is the leading interinstitutional EU event on strategic foresight. It is devoted to the 'disciplined exploration of alternative futures' – including possible disruptions – with a focus on possible implications for the EU. This paper rounds up issues and perspectives from the European Parliament day of the most recent conference, held in the EP Library reading room on 15 October 2019.

Inequality

Current state of affairs. Globally, several factors generate inequality: absolute and relative poverty, the denial of access to public goods (education, health care, social protection and security), discrimination, and exclusion from political participation. In wealthier regions, citizens are accustomed to increased social participation via technology, and expect this to be reflected in new forms of democracy. Many are irritated by tax avoidance and asymmetrical access to education. Populism increases real inequalities and injustices, and distracts from common tasks such as digital transformation and climate change.

Main trends. Economic growth no longer means decreasing inequality. Inter-generational inequality might increase antagonism between age groups. Rising social distrust and the consequences of climate change may drive further inequality. Digitalisation poses many challenges; unequal ownership and analysis capability of data, digital surveillance, the automation of work, and access to and control over artificial intelligence (AI).

Key uncertainties. What is the right or acceptable amount of inequality in society, the economy and politics? Should the limits be different? What will be the long-term effect of ever more precise micro-targeting of political campaigns and economic marketing? Will the downside of digitalisation mainly affect low-income groups? Can we organise a green transition that is both effective and fair?

Ageing

Current state of affairs. The life span of human beings is increasing by three months every year, leading to a rise in the proportion of older people in our societies. Our understanding of what we do at a given age is changing. Strategies to mitigate the economic costs of ageing include automation, increased immigration and later retirement. Each option has drawbacks.

Main trends. The projected increase in the global population to 2100 (from seven to ten billion) will mainly be in the older age groups. More exercise and healthier diets are the keys to a healthier life. Ageing populations are less involved in wars, but many fragile states will continue to have young populations.

Key uncertainties. Biological ageing, which has been stalling lately, could be on the verge of a revolution: With sufficient funding for research on its causes, the process of ageing could be arrested, or even reversed. People may live healthier lives for longer, but what are our evolutionary constraints as a species? Are there age limits to our biological and psychological programming? Could we end up in a world where vast differences in healthy life spans become a major societal and political problem?

Higher education

Current state of affairs. Universities create invaluable, creative atmospheres when academics and admission are unconstrained, and both public and private funding is available. A big problem for universities is the wide gap between university research interests and world affairs. Other threats are rising populist and nationalistic politics, human intolerance, and disrespect for truth and facts.

Main trends. If universities do not reach out to other parts of the world and under-appreciated segments of society, they become isolated and irrelevant. New challenges need new centres of knowledge, for example on climate change.

Key uncertainties: How will universities cope with the rise in research costs? Competition from China? Calls for intellectual 'safe zones'? What of other forms of learning, notably digital ones? Are universities a cause of, or solution to, rising inequality? How can open inquiry and real-world problem-solving co-exist in universities?

Geopolitics

Current state of affairs. Rising powers such as China have embarked on the hard test for their sustainability in the big league, while those in relative decline such as the EU and the US need to show that they can reverse the trend. Everyone is searching for new cooperation and trying to shape technology in their image. Europe has to reconcile two tasks that may involve uncomfortable trade-offs: increasing its resilience against threats, while staying true to its values and maintaining a rules-based order.

Main trends. One possibility is the development of a poly-nodal (or post-polar) world, where winners and losers in the global power game are determined by the ability to forge connections and rally others around a cause. Military power seems to have a bright future. Breaking up alliances and sabotaging connections between actors will become more rewarding.

Key uncertainties. In a poly-nodal environment, the EU would ideally have a broad concept of power and the ability to forge broad alliances. Yet it may be militarily weak, disunited and disinterested. Has Europe realised the urgency of its security problems and the need for greater defence cooperation? Can NATO succeed politically in a world of fragmented power and public diplomacy? Could ignorance about obvious threats discredit and delegitimise Europe's democratic political system? What will it take to be an effective power today and tomorrow? Will the economic and social global behemoths become players in conflict? How will the power relationship between individuals and the state change? Can the world re-learn how to avoid a descent into war?

Government foresight

Current state of affairs. Effective government foresight needs a strategic mind-set, coordination between institutions, incentive structures as well as an openness to uncomfortable questions. Obstacles include the lack of a common language, common goals and common values between experts and decision-makers. Public pressure can help to forge a common purpose.

Main trends. Good government foresight goes beyond trend analysis and scenario planning to a holistic view of trends. Humility in analysis and outreach, and an ability to both inform and to inspire decision-makers are important. Parliaments can provide visibility for foresight, and can serve as a platform for citizen participation. Europe needs a deliberative foresight process that includes citizens and expert communities, including academia.

Key uncertainties. Foresight needs to involve the whole EU, and the new European Commission's emphasis on foresight is a good sign. The European Parliament is a sounding board and a market place of ideas. The ESPAS initiative can help the EU shoulder its responsibilities in the world and actively shape the future by persistently speaking truth to power.

MORE ON THIS TOPIC

The [ESPAS report](#) 'Global Trends to 2030: Challenges and Choices for Europe'.

This [EP Think Tank blogpost](#), linking to videos of the proceedings of 15 October 2019.

The [ESPAS conference website](#) with details of the previous day, hosted by the European Commission.

European Commission webpage on '[Foresight in research and innovation](#)'

