

What next for Europe?

A strategic foresight perspective

Europe can no longer take prosperity, stability, or even democracy, for granted. Fundamental changes in technology, in relations between and within continents, are under way. A 2°C rise in global temperature will have a huge and disruptive impact across the board – and is harder than ever to avoid. Several other long-term trends are pointing in the wrong direction.

[Challenges and choices for Europe](#), a report by the European Strategy and Policy Analysis System (ESPAS) provides an overview of global trends from a European Union (EU) perspective. Described as a European reality check, it nevertheless delivers a positive message. Collectively, we have the power to make better decisions; we must never surrender to pessimism.

A changing global context



The ESPAS report offers a forensic and fast-moving tour of the future. On the international stage, the EU ranks alongside the United States of America and China as part of a G3, by economic size. Will this still be the case in 2030? What happens if Europe falls behind in the race for breakthrough technologies? A new constellation of defence and security threats is emerging; what capacities and capabilities are necessary for Europe? Is it a problem that the population of Europe will be relatively smaller and older compared to other continents?

Resilience starts at home

An embedded culture of democracy, underpinned by the rule of law and by codified individual rights, has driven the rise of Europe. Remarkably, these are now contested, even from within. As the ESPAS report points out, democratic renewal and stronger social cohesion promise better economic outcomes and greater resilience to external threats: 'the more equal our societies are, the better prepared we are to face the challenges of the future.' The report also stresses the need to reach a level of education and training suited to the 21st century.

Keeping pace with technological advance

High levels of education, connectivity and prosperity can help Europe take advantage of technological change, especially if we establish a carefully calibrated regulatory eco-system. Impact on the labour market is a major concern, but technology also has the potential to mitigate problems linked to ageing, urbanisation and climate change. Challenges however arise if Europe falls behind the USA and China in strategic areas.

Strategic autonomy

One worrying scenario is that the USA will become so absorbed with the rise of China that it will disengage from Europe and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Although Russian power has declined, it continues to be seen as a security threat in Europe. A US withdrawal would require Europe to step up its defence preparedness, both within and outside NATO. Bilateral and multilateral relationships remain important, but the report casts strategic autonomy not as an option, but rather as a necessity for Europe.

Challenges and choices

The report draws a sharp contrast between favourable and unfavourable scenarios, and emphasises that robust action can make all the difference. The critical issues and differing outcomes are set out in tabular form below.

How do we ...	With judicious action:	With inaction:
Save the planet?	Up to 1.5°C warmer	Over 2°C warmer
Improve ageing?	Healthier lives	Growing healthcare burden
Manage new technologies?	Artificial Intelligence enhances jobs	Artificial Intelligence replaces jobs
Position Europe in the world?	Strong and cohesive Europe	Vulnerable divided Europe
Manage conflict?	Conflicts are contained	An unstable neighbourhood
Protect democracy at home?	Democracy recovers	Democracy decays
Reach equality?	Reduced inequality	Inequality and unrest

Trends are interconnected

The ESPAS report stresses the interconnections between mega-trends such as digitalisation, demographics, and climate change. An individual issue can rarely be addressed as a purely economic matter, for example, in isolation from other areas. Acting on one trend means acting on another. Nor do major trends respect national frontiers. Europe needs to tease out these connections across policy silos and across frontiers. A coordinated approach to policy development is more likely to succeed in the face of coming challenges; and a strategic vision with clear goals is critically important.

Foresight matters

Foresight is the structured exploration of alternative futures. It should be creative, counterintuitive and even controversial. A foresight process is more effective if we are prepared to challenge our own thinking, and if we are willing to examine not only the outcome we want, but also the outcomes we do not want. As a component of anticipatory governance, foresight needs to encourage decision-makers to take action. This explains one leitmotif of the present report:

Foresight is much more about shaping the future than predicting it.

FURTHER INFORMATION

The ESPAS report is the outcome of a consultation and review process involving representatives from the European Parliament's Research Service, the European Commission, the General Secretariat of the Council of the European Union, the European External Action Service, the European Economic and Social Committee, the European Committee of the Regions and the European Investment Bank, as well as the European Union Institute for Security Studies, think-tankers, academics and experts. The author is Florence Gaub.



More information is available on the [ESPAS website](#). ESPAS also maintains [ORBIS](#), a repository of foresight reports.

To contact the Global Trends Unit, please e-mail: EPRS-GlobalTrends@ep.europa.eu

Manuscript completed in October 2019.

This document is prepared for, and addressed to, the Members and staff of the European Parliament as background material to assist them in their parliamentary work. The content of the document is the sole responsibility of its author(s) and any opinions expressed herein should not be taken to represent an official position of the Parliament. Reproduction and translation for non-commercial purposes are authorised, provided the source is acknowledged and the European Parliament is given prior notice and sent a copy. © European Union, 2019.