**Strategic foresight: civil society has a key role to play in facing future challenges for Europe and the world**

**The conference on** [**Strategic foresight: a vision for the future of Europe**](https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/agenda/our-events/events/strategic-foresight-vision-future-europe)**, held by the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) in the framework of its External Relations Section (REX) meeting, highlighted the emerging importance of identifying different possible futures, and explored pathways to tackle challenges and seize opportunities. The participants called for attention to civil society interests and concerns, underlining that these should be reflected in the Strategic Foresight Reports drafted by the Commission.**

EESC President **Christa Schweng** mentioned: *"Democratic countries are the only ones to be really committed to transparency, the only ones with a public opinion, holding governments accountable for the choices they make. And of course, they are the only ones with an organised civil society enabled to fully participate in the decision-making process."*

Even though strategic foresight has become a field of activity for the European Institutions in the last years, the concept of a strategic vision guiding policy-making is not new. As **Eric Thiers**, Secretary General of France's High Commission for Planning, underlined, the idea of planning and consultation of social partners dates back to the period when a founding father of Europe, namely Jean Monnet, inspired the creation of the first Commission for Planning and immediately met the French Economic and Social Council. Mr. Thiers explained the work of his institution, underscoring that the same principles of broad consultation and cooperation guide its activity today.

**Geopolitics and strategic autonomy: EU needs to become a true actor**

Can strategic foresight be on any help to define the EU Foreign and Security Policy in the current geopolitical situation? This was one of the questions that participants in the meeting tried to answer. The EU risks to be sandwiched between China and the United States, without forgetting the current tensions with Russia. It is clear that the EU needs to react and to carve out its own path and address global challenges in a more effective manner. It is time to leverage all the tools from the box. Finding the right balance between interests and values, promoting multilateralism and strengthening cooperation with NATO are major prerequisites for Europe's global role.

The Strategic Compass, which is being finalised and will be ready for adoption in March, is an exercise which uses strategic foresight and will aim at providing security for EU citizens and contributing to international peace and stability.

**Foresight in a multipolar world**

The participants brought to the table examples of how strategic foresight is done around the globe. According to a study from the European Commission on [Strategic Foresight in the Western Balkans: Recovery on the Horizon](https://ec.europa.eu/info/news/foresight-study-sets-out-possible-senarios-research-and-innovation-policies-western-balkans-2035-2021-oct-12_en), the scenario of strengthened EU cooperation will enhance human capital development, unlock local potential and foster the transition to a sustainable and knowledge-based economy.

The [2022 Foresight Africa report](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/foresightafrica2022_fullreport.pdf) from Brookings Institute has a special focus on the risks the continent is facing, which endanger its development such as absence of democratic State institutions, potential debt crisis, absence of infrastructure for rapidly growing population in urban areas.

Contrary to the belief on China's new assertiveness, the foresight concerns in China are focussed on its domestic politics and its own social contract based on economic performance and on the party's political legitimacy to deliver in line with the expectations of the population. As a consequence, in the following years China might become more reluctant to engage with countries beyond the Asia-Pacific area.

Foresight approaches differ around the world and futures literacy was presented as an alternative. This is an approach in which everyone has a role to play, as we all have the capability to better understand the future. Being futures literate enhances imagination and improves our ability to prepare, recover and invent as changes occur.

**Civil society as a key actor in the foresight process**

Participants agreed that the involvement of civil society organisations (CSOs) in strategic foresight is of outmost importance. Five points for genuine and meaningful civil society participation in this process: understanding that civil society is an indispensable part in the construction of the future; introducing foresight across all EU institutions; giving equal weight to CSOs; ensuring diversity of expertise and maintaining its continuous participation.

EESC member **Sandra Parthie**, rapporteur for the EESC upcoming opinion on strategic foresight, mentioned that the expertise of CSOs should be taken into account in the Commission's reports, which requires a functioning process. Ms. Parthie stressed that, in order for foresight to be useful, "*it needs a very wide lens, a multitude of sensors in business and society to catch relevant signals early enough to be able to react. Therefore, the EESC insights must structurally be better included in the Commission’s strategic foresight cycle."*

Calling for an active involvement of CSOs, employers and trade unions in the foresight process as he concluded the event, REX sectionpresident **Dimitris Dimitriadis** also added: *"We must focus on the megatrends concerning the EU. It is important to observe how the EU reacts to these megatrends, as they have an impact on our future."*