



European Committee  
of the Regions

# Embracing Uncertainty: Harnessing Strategic Foresight for Regional and Local Progress

**STRATEGIC  
FORESIGHT**

*in regions & cities*



**European Committee  
of the Regions**

## *Table of Contents*

<b>What is strategic foresight?</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Why is it important?</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Why is it important for cities and regions?</b>	<b>6</b>
Tackling climate change	6
Improving the response to health threats	6
Embracing new technologies	6
Skills investment	7
Addressing rural-urban transitions	7
Migration and integration	7
<b>Foresight tools</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>The European Committee of the Regions</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>The CoR and strategic foresight</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Examples of CoR foresight actions</b>	<b>10</b>
Embedding strategic foresight in legislative works	10
Participatory lab	10
Exercise in the Green Deal Going Local Working Group	11
Interinstitutional cooperation	11
Publications	11
<b>Examples of European regions and cities using strategic foresight</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Our partners on strategic foresight</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>Contact us</b>	<b>14</b>

*Wild animals run from the dangers they actually see, and once they have escaped them worry no more. We however are tormented alike by what is past and what is to come.*

– Seneca (4 BC – AD 65)

## What is strategic foresight?

*Contrary to a general misconception, foresight is more about shaping the future than predicting it.*

Strategic foresight is a **future-oriented discipline** that seeks to understand, anticipate, and address emerging challenges and opportunities, through systematic and structured identification and analysis of long-term trends, drivers of change, and potential disruptive de-

velopments that may shape the political, economic, social, and technological landscape. It is not about predicting the future; it is about **exploring different possible futures** that could arise, in order to better prepare for change.

## Why is it important?

*Preparedness is crucial, and foresight provides a methodology and processes to better prepare the European Union and its Member States, regions and cities for what lies ahead.*

When applied to policy-making, the objective of strategic foresight is to **enable decision-makers to develop strategies**, policies, and actions that promote resilience, innovation, and sustainability, ultimately helping to steer the future in the desired direction. More specifically, strategic foresight can support policy-making in the following ways:

- **Better anticipation** ..... → helps predict future changes more accurately.
- **Policy innovation** ..... → suggests new and creative approaches that can be tested.
- **Future-proofing** ..... → reviews existing or proposed strategies to ensure they can withstand future challenges.
- **Better use of public and private financing** → helps public authorities to allocate resources appropriately in view of long-term policies.
- **Citizens' engagement** ..... → provides the opportunity to engage with local communities and stakeholders, thereby promoting policy acceptance and fostering public trust towards institutions.



## Why is it important for cities and regions?

Cities and regions possess unique socio-economic, cultural, and environmental fabrics that distinguish them from the national and global level, as well as from each other. For this reason, **conducting strategic foresight at subnational level is vital to identify specific needs, challenges, and drivers of change that affect each territory differently**, thereby enabling regional and local decision-makers to tailor policies and strategies to the particular context. This applies to all policy areas – for example:

### ➤ Tackling climate change



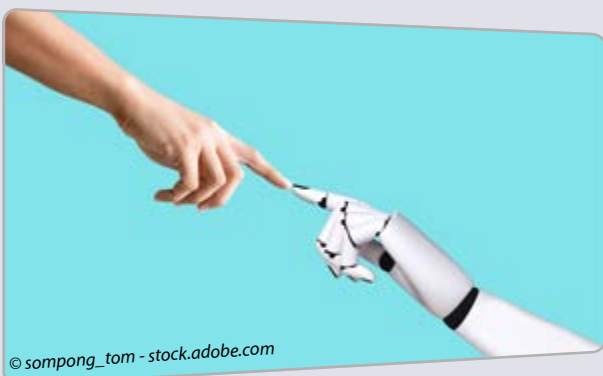
Recent findings show that climate change risks to cities, settlements and key infrastructure will rapidly rise in the mid- and long-term with further global warming. Tackling climate change is therefore not only a moral duty, it is also essential in order to safeguard human well-being, improve public health, and promote economic growth. Rising temperatures, extreme weather events, and rising sea levels are just some of the many environmental challenges posed by climate change. A forward-looking approach is necessary in order to mitigate these risks.

### ➤ Improving the response to health threats



Cities and regions in many countries carry out important activities to protect the health of their residents, employing a large share of the healthcare workforce, funding and managing health systems, and designing and implementing health policies. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, public health has been pushed even further to the top of their agenda. Strategic foresight can help to foster a proactive approach to preparedness for health threats.

### ➤ Embracing new technologies



The exceptional transformative impact of digitalisation and emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence span various aspects of our life, offering unprecedented opportunities for innovation and efficiency, but also raising significant challenges and ethical dilemmas that demand careful consideration. Systematic scanning of the evolving technological landscape can help regions and cities keep up with progress, while also dealing with threats related to privacy, security and digital cohesion.

➤ **Skills investment**



As new businesses emerge and technology transforms existing jobs, it is becoming crucial to equip current and future workers with the appropriate skills to successfully navigate dynamic market conditions. By capturing the competencies that will be increasingly sought after by recruiters and by identifying potential critical skill gaps, strategic foresight can contribute to ensuring that the workforce is reskilled and upskilled according to evolving job demands.

➤ **Addressing rural-urban transitions**



Europe's level of urbanisation is expected to increase to approximately 83.7% in 2050. Rural depopulation and urbanisation are two sides of the same coin with often equally detrimental effects for both rural and urban areas. The former resulting in the deterioration of local economies, services and infrastructure, and the latter putting excessive pressure on urban facilities. By turning to strategic foresight, local and regional authorities can better prepare for these trends.

➤ **Migration and integration**



The EU is a popular destination for both refugees seeking a safe haven and economic migrants seeking a better life. Local and regional authorities play a crucial role in welcoming and integrating these newcomers, ensuring their successful integration into society and contributing to the economic and social fabric of their communities. By proactively identifying potential migration patterns, anticipating the needs, and developing contingency plans, they can reduce disruptions and help to ensure a more seamless integration process.

# Foresight tools

To understand and explore future horizons, the discipline of strategic foresight makes use of a **wide variety** of methodologies and techniques. Listed below are some examples, but there is no one single best way to conduct foresight. New approaches and techniques can also be created to suit organisational needs.

**Horizon scanning** consists of systematic monitoring of the external environment, in order to detect emerging trends, issues, and potential disruptors that may impact the upcoming future.



**Scenario planning / building** involves simulating several alternative future developments and observing corresponding alternative future outcomes.



**Megatrends analysis** identifies patterns of change and investigates their potential impact on certain policy domains.



**Backcasting** defines a desirable future outcome and then identifies what actions and steps are necessary to achieve it.



**Futures wheel** is a way of structuring brainstorming that offers a graphical visualisation of the direct and indirect consequences of future events.



Source: Nielsen, A.F., Michelmann, J., Akac, A. et al.





Source: [European Committee of the Regions](#)

## The European Committee of the Regions

The European Committee of the Regions (CoR) is the voice of regions and cities in the European Union. It represents local and regional authorities across the European Union and advises on new laws that have an impact on regions and cities (70% of all EU legislation).

The CoR is a political assembly made up of 329 members and 329 alternates from all EU countries who hold a regional or local authority electoral mandate or are politically accountable to an elected assembly. They come to Brussels to debate their opinions on proposed legislation and agree on resolutions for further action by the EU.

## The CoR and strategic foresight

The CoR has been actively seeking to link cities and regions with strategic foresight capacity without necessarily creating any new structures, to build its own foresight capacity, and to mainstream foresight into its work. Such an approach is in line with the key objectives of the Conference of Presidents' "roadmap for CoR strategic foresight activity".

A growing number of cities and regions are engaging in exploring, anticipating and shaping their future by using strategic foresight in a structured and systematic way.

In a CoR survey carried out in 2022, 52% of the respondents (local and regional politicians) confirmed that some form of foresight activity already existed in their respective subnational authorities. Based on these results, desk research on regions and cities with foresight structures was carried out, covering a large number of

Member States and languages. This research has shown that comprehensive cross sectoral foresight is taking place in a more limited number of sub-national authorities, but still the interest in this domain is considerable.

Among the topics that CoR members identified as the most relevant for foresight activity were climate change, economic development, demographic change and mobility, sustainability, and digitalization.

The results of the survey clearly demonstrated that the CoR could tap into the important resource represented by the expertise of its members and the activities of their regions and cities on foresight. This capacity is being combined with the knowledge already present at CoR staff level and cooperation with other stakeholders to bring a local and regional perspective to EU foresight activity.

## Examples of CoR foresight actions

The CoR contributes to the EU better regulation agenda through a variety of tools, approaching the legislative process in different phases and from different angles.

### ➤ Embedding strategic foresight in legislative works

In 2023, the CoR adopted its first stand-alone **opinion on strategic foresight as an instrument of EU governance and better regulation**. The spokesperson for the CoR on this topic is Giorgio Magliocca, president of the Caserta province in Italy. [The document](#) stresses the added value of strategic foresight for local and regional authorities.



CoR rapporteur  
Giorgio Magliocca

Members further underline that regions and cities need to be supported in developing their own foresight capacity through appropriate dissemination and training activities for local and regional decision-makers and for

public authority staff. Encouraging learning and involving citizens and local and regional authorities directly in horizon scanning, identifying weak signals and long-term trends will raise the profile and visibility of foresight activities in EU policy making and help develop options for the future.

The CoR is currently making a considerable effort to **integrate foresight analysis into all its opinions and studies**. Information sessions for CoR members are held in the context of CoR commission meetings and relevant working groups related to thematic areas.

The **Better Regulation and Active Subsidiarity Steering Group (BRASS-G)** was created within the CoR in June 2022, with the aim of ensuring synergies and seeking coherence across the range of CoR activities in the field of better regulation. The members of the group are elected local and regional politicians who work together to strengthen the strategic orientation and coordination of the CoR's better regulation instruments, including foresight.

### ➤ Participatory lab on foresight

City and regional representatives working on strategic foresight came together for the first time as part of the 2023 edition of the annual **European Week of Regions and Cities**, at an event organised by the CoR and the European Commission. Approximately sixty participants discussed how local and regional authorities can build greater anticipatory capacity for the benefit of citizens.

The first part of the foresight event brought together speakers from the two EU institutions, as well as the European Association of Development Agencies (EURA-

DA) and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). The second part of the event took the form of a participatory laboratory in which four good foresight practices were presented by civil servants from **Hauts-de-France, Helsinki-Uusimaa, Ost-belgien and Sardinia**. The Partnership for Regional Innovation project was presented by the Joint Research Centre. The objective was to share good practices and inspire representatives of other regions and cities to use strategic foresight tools such as horizon scanning.



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Source: [European Committee of the Regions - Strategic foresight in EU regions and cities – A policy lab #EURegionsWeek, Brussels – Belgium – October 2023](#)

➤ **Foresight exercise in the Green Deal Going Local Working Group**

Which are the main barriers faced by local and regional authorities in the implementation of the European Green Deal? What are the main missing elements of the Green Deal and how it should be improved to help cities and regions advance towards climate-neutrality and support the wellbeing of Europeans? These were some of the questions the CoR's Green Deal Going Local Working Group discussed on 15 November 2023 as part of a strategic foresight exercise supported by the

**European Commission's Joint Research Centre (JRC)**. In an innovative approach, members were using the Scenario Exploration System methodology developed by the JRC to respond to two contrasting future scenarios, playing the roles of EU or national policy makers, businesses or civil society representatives. The results of the exercise will be analysed and communicated to the European Commission.



Source: European Committee of the Regions - [14th Meeting Towards a Green Deal 2.0, Brussels - Belgium - November 2023](#)

➤ **Interinstitutional cooperation**

The CoR is an active participant in the [European Strategy and Policy Analysis System \(ESPAS\)](#), an interinstitutional EU network promoting foresight and anticipatory governance that brings together nine EU institutions and bodies committed to thinking longer term about

the challenges and opportunities facing Europe and, through foresight, supporting decision-makers. The CoR has hosted several “foresight talks” organised by the ESPAS Young Talent Network.

➤ **Publications**

The CoR contributes to the preparation of the ESPAS Global Trends Reports, Partnerships for Regional Inno-

vations Playbooks and ESPAS Ideas Papers, for instance on [digital cohesion](#).

## Examples of European regions and cities using strategic foresight

In a survey conducted by the CoR in 2021, 52% of local and regional authorities said that some form of foresight activity already existed in their respective LRAs. Comprehensive cross-sectoral foresight is taking place in a limited, but growing, number of sub-national authorities, such as those listed below.



Source: [Flanders region](#)

The Flemish government frequently uses strategic foresight to navigate in a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous world. To embed strategic foresight in all processes, a dedicated Strategic Insights and Analyses Unit within the Chancellery and Foreign Office has defined four functions: discover, explore, map and create. The initiatives that fall under “discover”, for example, focus on using international data sources (such as the Futures Platform) for horizon scanning to identify early signs of change not yet on the radar or not yet addressed adequately within government. Science-to-policy dialogues, an example within the “explore” initiatives, focus on enabling scientists and policymakers to engage in strategic conversations and develop anticipatory intelligence. To ensure the uptake of these strategic insights, Flanders further invests in developing coalitions for the future within and outside Flanders. Embedding the four functions in this way has proved to be essential, ensuring high-quality, evidence-informed and future-proof decision-making.

The Friuli Venezia Giulia region in northern Italy carried out strategic foresight training courses for regional directors and heads of unit, as well as teachers in high schools located in the region. It also prepared the 2020 Foresight Scenarios FVG Report, aiming to design possible models for territorial development (in cooperation with the foresight agency Skopia and the University of Trento with the professor R. Poli as UNESCO Chair in Anticipatory Systems).



Source: [Friuli Venezia Giulia region](#)



Source: [Hauts de France region](#)

The region of Hauts-de-France has a large unit specifically dedicated to strategic foresight. The 17-strong team carries out advanced research and analytical work on territorial, economic and social development topics and offers full support for municipalities located within its territory. The regional Foresight College has conducted three main long-term projects – one on the attractiveness of coastal areas in 2040, one on the future of city centres and one on the future of industry – as well as foresight analyses in areas such as school dropout, train demand and the evolution of work patterns.



Helsinki-Uusimaa  
Regional Council

Source: [Helsinki-Uusimaa region](#)

When working with scenarios during autumn and winter 2020 and winter 2021, reflections in the Helsinki-Uusimaa region in Finland centred around considering alternative long-term futures. Three scenarios were prepared to describe developments and trends: state-run green transition, the driving force of the global economy, and local community spirit. The scenarios provided the Regional Council with material for its Regional Programme 2022-2025, to help prepare for an uncertain future and for influencing it, for decision making and for regional development activities.

The German-speaking Community in Belgium has launched a foresight project focusing on a vision for 2040 in their region, with the goal of creating a more sustainable and liveable future for the region's inhabitants. The project uses foresight tools such as horizon scanning and workshops with citizens, stakeholders and experts to identify emerging trends, such as citizen-centred digital administrations or alternative drive systems. The project has resulted in a mission statement with different key objectives that set out the route for how people in the German-speaking Community want to live in 2040.



Ostbelgien

Source: [Ostbelgien region](#)



**REGIONE AUTÒNOMA  
DE SARDIGNA**  
**REGIONE AUTONOMA  
DELLA SARDEGNA**

Source: [Sardinia region](#)

The Italian region of Sardinia has developed two important foresight strategies: the regional strategy for adaptation to climate change 2021-2050, and Sardegna 2030 – regional strategy for sustainable development. The former, based on scientific data, presents the most probable climate scenarios for different territorial areas of the region until 2050, together with recommendations for the future. The latter builds on a multi-stakeholder participatory process, and its goal is to strengthen civil society and the multi-governance system, including all aspects of sustainability.

## Our partners on strategic foresight

[European Commission](#)



[ESPAS](#)



[OECD](#)



[EURADA](#)



[INTERREG](#)



## Contact us

If your region or city carries out foresight work and you would like to share your experience with others, ask any questions or simply be informed about our upcoming initiatives, send us an email:

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Created in 1994, the European Committee of the Regions is the EU's political assembly of 329 regional and local representatives such as regional presidents or city-mayors from all 27 Member States, representing over 446 million Europeans.

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