

## Berlin Perspectives

Analysing German European Policy

### Strategic foresight: imperative for good policy-making

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Europäische Politik

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Foto: Guilherme Stecanella/Unsplash

**Strategic foresight enables policymakers to be better prepared and more proactive in emergency policy responses. The new German government should seize the opportunity to better integrate foresight analysis into decision-making processes.**

The European Union and the world currently seem to be in constant crisis mode, making a swift responsive policy approach indispensable. But, while this is vital, it is equally important not to lose sight of the bigger picture. In order to respond effectively to crises, now and in the future, it is important to design policies in a strategic manner. This applies to Germany's European policy given its often short-term reactive character and focus on day-to-day politics, as witnessed, for instance, during the country's recent EU Council Presidency. The start of a new government offers a window of opportunity to adopt a more anticipatory governance approach.

#### Relevance of anticipatory governance for policymakers

Politics needs to focus on urgent decisions and governments cannot predict what the next crisis will entail, and yet governance must also concentrate on important but not necessarily urgent issues. In order to do so, political systems, and governments in particular, need to be prepared for change, to recognize its drivers and to better anticipate its broad ramifications. The Covid-19 pandemic has underscored the relevance of an anticipatory policy

orientation, the need for policy to be adaptable to crisis situations, and the demand for flexible, evidence-informed action by political actors.

Following the European Commission's call for an increase in institutional foresight capacities at the member state level, the Institut für Europäische Politik's Strategy Group 'Berlin Futures' brought together 25 representatives from German politics, science, media and civil society to explore methodologies of strategic foresight. The group's workshops used innovative and interactive methods of anticipatory policy development from the field of foresight and futures studies to develop future-oriented ideas and impulses for German European policy and its role in shaping the European project. Strategic foresight as an approach to policy design helps explore possible scenarios for the future through horizon-scanning techniques, and it helps decision-makers to envision alternative futures to develop and refine appropriate policy solutions. As such, strategic foresight activities open the door to reflection on alternative policy trajectories ahead of crises and enable policymakers to be better prepared and more proactive even in emergency policy responses. The relevance of, and demand for, foresight processes to formulate policy priorities was underlined by strong interest from within the strategy group to pursue a more anticipatory approach to policy and governance.

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## Europe's role in the world in 2050: four scenarios

Four scenarios for a future world formed the basis of the work of 'Berlin Futures' strategy group.<sup>2</sup> The time horizon of the scenarios is 30 years, with each telling the story of global governance and Europe's role in it from the perspective of the year 2050. Given the dramatic change the world has seen over the past 30 years, this time horizon allows for consideration of the emergence of large-scale changes in ideas, technologies, policies and societies.

The TRIGGER foresight group held two areas of uncertainty to be central to the development of the four scenarios. One concerns two broad possible developments in global governance systems: a more fragmented global governance terrain and a transformed mode of global governance. The second concerns the role of the EU in global governance: considering whether it will have a strong or a weak influence with respect to global governance institutions, decisions and actions.

## Three future priorities for Germany's European policy

When working with the TRIGGER project scenarios, 'Berlin Futures' strategy group participants identified three areas as especially relevant for the future of Germany's European policy: multilateralism, democracy and the rule of law, and 'one health'. As these overlap with major priorities in global and European governance, they serve as useful starting points for strategic foresight endeavours for Germany, which should ideally result in a national strategic foresight report. The European Strategic Foresight report can serve as an example for such a stocktake of future challenges to be monitored.

This is the first of four policy briefs in an IEP series on strategic foresight. While it focuses on the general aspects of the use of strategic foresight in politics, the next three papers will focus on the three policy areas identified as most important for strategic planning for Germany's European policy over the next 30 years.

Some may argue that the electoral cycle makes long-term political decisions difficult, if not undesirable, for politicians to address, and that this curtails the efficacy of anticipatory and strategic governance approaches. However, while the electoral cycle keeps governing institutions nimble and helps respond for social change, this does not preclude the consideration of long-term implications and taking responsibility for the future consequences of present policy decisions. Inter-generational equity requirements embedded in sustainable development come into play here. The systemic complexity of governance entails that many political decisions have long-term effects that are either unintended or unaccounted for in initial decision-making processes.

Strategic foresight activities open the policymaking process to identifying and considering these potential impacts in a visible and transparent way.

## Mapping strategic foresight in Germany

There are several advisory bodies in Germany that provide an interface between science and policy. These include the Leopoldina (the German Academy of Sciences), the Council of Science and Humanities (Wissenschaftsrat), the German Ethics Council (Ethikrat) and the German Council of Economic Experts (Wirtschaftsweisen). Other federal government agencies or federal research institutes, such as the Robert Koch Institute, also offer policy advice based on scientific analyses. In 2019, the Federal Ministry of Education and Research started its third cycle of strategic foresight ([www.vorausschau.de](http://www.vorausschau.de)) after two previous cycles in cooperation with the [Fraunhofer Institute for Systems and Innovation Research](#). In March 2021, the Federal Academy for Security Policy established a centre of excellence for strategic foresight.

There are also units working on strategic planning and/or foresight at the Chancellery, the Federal Foreign Office or at the Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (Policy Lab digital, work & society). Their role within these institutions differs, as does the degree to which their tasks are clearly defined and they are included in the decision-making process.

There is a plethora of foresight actors at the EU level. Most prominently in the European Commission, there is the vice-president for inter-institutional relations and foresight, the EU-wide Strategic Foresight Network and the Competence Centre on Foresight at the Joint Research Centre. There is also the European Parliament Panel for the Future of Science and Technology and a dedicated foresight unit within the European Parliamentary Research Service, as well as the inter-institutional European Strategy and Policy Analysis System.

To date, there is no comparable institutional structure for integrating strategic foresight capacities into government strategic planning in Germany. In the previous government, the designation of Minister of State Michael Roth as 'minister for the future' owed less to the emerging prominence of strategic foresight in German politics and more to the European Commission's Strategic Foresight Network,

<sup>2</sup> The four scenarios were developed by Dr Aaron B. Rosa, Dr Philine Warnke and Andreas Röß from the [Fraunhofer Institute for Systems and Innovation Research](#) together with Carlo Sessa and Svetlana Ivanova from [ISINNOVA](#) as part of the Horizon 2020 project 'TRends In Global Governance and Europe's Role' (TRIGGER).

whose two levels are composed of national ‘ministers for the future’ and a network of senior officials from member state governments. The former have been designated by member states upon the invitation of the European Commission vice-president for inter-institutional relations and foresight. They meet informally at least once a year to discuss and agree upon the main priorities for the European Commission’s strategic foresight agenda, thus informing planning at the EU level but not conducting foresight activities themselves. The network of member-state senior officials meets at least twice a year for preparation, follow-up and working-group cooperation.

This institution building around European foresight initiatives hints at a so far rather unidirectional flow of ideas from the EU to the national level. What is more, neither the ‘ministers for the future’ designation nor the network’s meetings featured prominently in the German political debate during the previous legislature. The trend of linking the activities of the European Strategic Foresight Network to government units responsible for EU policy coordination appears to be a pattern across many EU member states.

### **Strengthening Germany’s foresight capacities**

The following recommendations set out how Germany can make use of existing foresight networks and activities as well as to better integrate foresight analysis into decision-making processes.

- Use the EU-wide Strategic Foresight Network for peer learning on how to build strategic foresight institutions in Germany.
- Establish foresight units at a high decision-making level in all federal ministries, the Bundestag and federal agencies, potentially through the extension of the mandate of existing strategic planning units. The Länder should be encouraged to follow suit.
- Connect Germany’s new foresight actors in a National Strategic Foresight Network coordinated by the Chancellery following the European Strategic Foresight Network example. Only an anticipatory mindset at all levels enables decision-makers to identify the important and the urgent policy issues and to take short-term and long-term decisions in a coordinated way.
- Create a National Resilience Council (NRC) as an anticipatory assessment body in the Chancellery. This body would bring together the leadership of the National Strategic Foresight Network with relevant federal government units as well as parliamentary bodies, under the leadership of the ‘minister for the future’. It would also connect these actors to civil society organizations

as well as to international and national disaster risk reduction and preparedness efforts. The NRC would discuss, scan, screen and monitor national capabilities in light of risk assessments and future horizons. Against this backdrop, it would assess systemic resilience in different sectors and identify priority areas for policy adaptation ahead of crisis.

- Set up the NRC with a wider focus on a variety of threats to human wellbeing (military, biological, climate/environmental, terrorist, economic etc.) rather than on conventional national security and warfare definitions that would inform the establishment of a National Security Council that identifies threats narrowly. In this context, while we fully appreciate the emergency of the ongoing pandemic situation and do not question the personal qualification of the candidate, the nomination of high-ranking staff from the Federal Armed Forces to head any sort of crisis-management task force, such as the new Covid-19 crisis-management unit at the Chancellery, would be a step in the wrong direction. Crisis management remains a political task that needs to be linked to parliamentary processes and oversight. As such, it should be an integral part of a new NRC and institutionally embedded in a civilian leadership structure.
- Use the assessments of the National Resilience Council to inform the work of a special crisis management hub within the NRC and connect them with existing early-warning mechanisms, such as the Reliefweb disaster monitor of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs; the UN Sendai Monitor (data, indicators, information system); the European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations, like rescEU; or the information resources of the EU Emergency Response Coordination Centre.
- Set up a national foresight studies research programme in order to generate targeted input from the scientific and think tank community. Such a programme should include dedicated funding lines for research on anticipatory policymaking as a whole-of-society approach. It should enable actors to further develop approaches for long-term strategic planning and foresight in order to provide cutting-edge, meaningful and policy-oriented methodological support and systemic insights.

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### About Berlin Futures

The recommendations presented in this paper are rooted in the work conducted by the IEP Strategy Group ‘Berlin Futures’ in 2020/2021. The strategy group applied a strategic foresight approach based on four scenarios for global governance and the EU’s role as a global actor in 2050 developed within the framework of the Horizon 2020 project ‘Trends In Global Governance and Europe’s Role’ (TRIGGER). The scenarios were developed by Dr Aaron B. Rosa, Dr Philine Warnke and Andreas Röß from the Fraunhofer Institute for Systems and Innovation Research together with Carlo Sessa and Svetlana Ivanova from ISINNOVA.

### About Berlin Perspectives

The policy brief series is published by the Institut für Europäische Politik (IEP) and provides precise analyses and policy recommendations for German European policy on current issues and debates.

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