

Foresight within the EU institutions: The ESPAS process so far

The European Strategy and Policy Analysis System (ESPAS) brings together the various European Union (EU) institutions and bodies in a process of administrative-level cooperation designed to identify and analyse the medium- and long-term trends facing the European Union and their implications for policy-makers. This dialogue was established in the early 2010s as a means of promoting longer-term thinking in the EU policy process and encouraging the Union's various institutions to cooperate more closely in this field. This EPRS Briefing traces the origins of the ESPAS process and describes its operation to date, with the digital version of the Briefing offering links to some of its key output since 2012. A parallel Briefing will compare and contrast the three Global Trends Reports produced by the ESPAS process, in 2012, 2015 and 2019.

Origins and development of the ESPAS process

The ESPAS process originated in an initiative taken by the European Parliament in 2009, which amended the European Union's 2010 Budget to provide for the European Commission to undertake a pilot project, which then became a preparatory action in the 2012 Budget, designed to explore the establishment of 'an inter-institutional system identifying long-term trends on major policy issues facing the EU'. The Parliament's proposal was adopted jointly with the Council of the EU, as the twin arms of the budgetary authority. A provision of two million euro was included in the 2012 EU Budget for this purpose, covering the three calendar years 2012-14. The institutions or bodies participating in this process were initially the European Commission, European Parliament, Council of the European Union, and (from 2012) European External Action Service (EEAS).

Objectives of the ESPAS process

The objectives of the ESPAS process were set out in the two budgetary texts as follows:

- to provide an inter-institutional system for identifying global long-term trends facing or relating to the European Union, and to provide common analyses of probable outcomes on major issues for policy-makers;
- to promote closer working cooperation between the research departments of the various EU institutions and bodies which are devoted to the analysis of medium- and long-term policy trends;
- to provide regular input to the EU institutions to nourish long-term and medium-term strategic thinking, including reaching out to academics, think tanks and other stakeholders to provide a broad perspective;
- to develop links with other countries and organisations undertaking global trends work, in order to benefit from their expertise, as well as providing its own expertise to other countries seeking to follow strategic trends and changes;

- to build and maintain an open website and a 'global repository' for all relevant information to facilitate access to citizens, linking the site to other working websites on long-term trends across the globe.

The EU institutions were invited to set up a fully functioning ESPAS system, involving all relevant institutions, by the end of 2014. This timetable would permit the drafting of a report on long-term trends facing the Union in time for the new, five-year EU legislative and policy cycles (2014-19), to be submitted to the incoming Presidents of the main EU institutions.

ESPAS work in the 2010-14 cycle

From 2010 to 2014, during the period of the pilot project and preparatory action, the ESPAS process was launched by the formation of a task force comprised of the Secretaries-General of the participating institutions or their personal representatives. In order to get work started, the new ESPAS Task Force commissioned a scene-setting report from the EU Institute for Security Studies (EUISS) in March 2012, [Global Trends 2030: Citizens in an interconnected and polycentric world](#), which looked at major global trends that were already apparent or might develop over the next 18 years. It then established three working groups of EU officials in the areas of economics, society, and international governance, and commissioned leading think tanks to present detailed research reports in each field in 2013. This ongoing work was the subject of discussion and review at annual ESPAS conferences which were held in 2011, 2012 and 2014.

The outcome of this dialogue was the first ESPAS Global Trends Report, entitled [Global Trends to 2030: Can the EU meet the challenges ahead?](#) This report was drafted collectively by the members of the Task Force, completed in December 2014 and published in March 2015. In parallel, an online global repository, known as [Orbis](#), was established, with the aim of bringing together foresight reports and other material from EU and other organisations around the world.

A resolution of the European Parliament (Rapporteur for Budgets Committee: James Elles), adopted in July 2013, reviewed the progress of the pilot project and preparatory action to date and deemed the emerging ESPAS process to be a success. The Parliament underlined 'the importance of continuing the process of developing an effective capacity for the provision of independent, high-quality inter-institutional analysis and advice on key trends confronting policy-makers within the EU system'. It strongly recommended that the process continue after the expiry of the preparatory action at the end of 2014, and that it involve staff from all the relevant EU institutions and bodies.

ESPAS work in the 2014-19 cycle

Following the start of the new mandates of the EU institutions in the summer and autumn of 2014, the ESPAS Task Force reconfirmed the desire of the institutions to continue the work undertaken within the process to date, in line with the objectives set down in the successive EU Budgets and the conclusion of the EP resolution of October 2013. The Task Force, now renamed Steering Group, decided on practical arrangements for cooperation between the administrations of the institutions concerned over the next five-year cycle, and agreed that each institution would cover its own costs of participating in the system, with a division of responsibilities to be agreed among them on a consensual basis.

The ESPAS Steering Group, formally established in early 2015, comprises the Secretaries-General (or their representatives) of the four participating institutions or bodies – the Commission, Parliament, Council and EEAS – supported by additional colleagues as necessary, together with the similar representatives of other EU institutions or bodies which may be given observer status. It meets at least once a quarter to coordinate the ESPAS process and to agree on future work. All roles are assigned on a voluntary basis between the EU institutions and bodies involved.

During the course of the 2014-19 cycle, the ESPAS Steering Group invited the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) and European Committee of the Regions (CoR) to join the ESPAS

process as observer members in 2015. Subsequently, the European Court of Auditors (ECA), the European Investment Bank (EIB) and EU Institute for Security Studies (EUISS) have also joined on such a basis. The Steering Group assigned the role of chairing the ESPAS process to the European Commission, and the role of secretariat to the European Parliament, rotating the arrangement made for the previous five-year cycle.

In terms of concrete initiatives, the Steering Group not only decided to intensify cooperation among EU officials dealing with long-term trends over the five-year cycle, but it also:

- established an **'ESPAS Plus' network**, to reach out to and deepen dialogue with a broad range of foresight practitioners beyond the EU institutions, including policy-planners in EU Member States and leading foresight analysts in the international think-tank and academic community;
- set up an **'ESPAS Young Talent Network'**, comprised of younger EU officials, to draw up new ideas and new thinking about future trends, challenges and choices, among the next generation of policy-makers;
- continued to hold a major **annual ESPAS conference** each autumn, with the European Commission hosting the first day, and the European Parliament hosting the second. The three conferences in 2015-17 focussed in turn on the economic, social and geo-political 'revolutions' which had been identified as key drivers of global change in the 2015 ESPAS Global Trends Report. The 2017 discussed the future world order based on a series of think-pieces, [Shaping the future of geo-politics](#). The 2018 annual conference in turn pulled these various threads together, based on a series of think-pieces, [Shaping the future in a fast-changing world](#) (2018).
- continued to build up the **Orbis digital repository** of material on global trends, so that it now includes over a thousand papers on aspects of foresight and the future, produced by many different organisations worldwide;
- published a series of short **ESPAS Ideas Papers**, based on round-table discussions which it held in the various institutions, on the future(s) of [identities and biases in the digital age](#), [migration and integration](#), [artificial intelligence and big data](#), [work and workplaces](#), [international trade and investment](#) and [warfare](#), with each paper authored by a figure from a different institution.
- invited the **EPSC** to produce a series of **'foresight reflection' papers** for the ESPAS process on forward-looking challenges – such as on [The future of mobility and migration within and from Sub-Saharan Africa](#) and [Is the internet eroding Europe's middle ground?](#) – as well as a [Strategic Foresight Primer](#) for analysts and policy-makers.
- invited **EPRS** to commission two major background **research papers** for the ESPAS process, on [Global Trends to 2035: Geo-politics and International Power](#) (2017) and [Global Trends to 2035: Economy and Society](#) (2018), as well as generate an annual 'EPRS Global Trendometer', comprising short essays on medium- and long-term trends, a series so far published for the years [2016](#), [2017](#), [2018](#) and [2019](#);
- and perhaps most importantly, decided, as envisaged in the EP resolution of July 2013, to undertake a new, five-yearly, **ESPAS Global Trends Report**, to aid new EU office-holders taking up their positions in the summer and autumn of 2019.

Published in April 2019 and entitled [Global Trends to 2030: Challenges and Choices for Europe](#), the latest Global Trends Report updates the previous 2015 text, by drawing on discussion of, and work on, medium- and long-term trends that had taken place within the EU institutions and more widely during the intervening four years. It was written for the ESPAS Steering Group by one of that group's own members, Dr Florence Gaub, Deputy Director of the EUISS.

The main themes of this new Global Trends Report, which was launched at a joint event of the EU institutions held in the European Parliament on 8 April 2019, formed the basis for discussion at the 2019 ESPAS annual conference, held on 14-15 October, with the European Commission hosting the first day of proceedings and the [Parliament hosting the second day](#), in accordance with the established format.

ESPAS work in the 2019-24 cycle

Since the starts of the new terms of office of the various EU institutions last year, the ESPAS initiative has now entered a third phase, at a time when fast-changing global events underline, perhaps more than ever, the importance of a stronger capacity for foresight and ‘anticipatory governance’. It was clear from early on that there was likely to be a significant read-across between some of the major challenges identified in successive ESPAS reports and the priorities of the new European Commission, under the presidency of Ursula von der Leyen, for the 2019-24 cycle. The launch of the European Green Deal, the emphasis on digital transformation and the need to develop Europe’s industrial base, as well as the overall branding of the new College as a ‘geo-political’ Commission, are all examples of such interaction.

In such a spirit, President von der Leyen decided from the start of her mandate to upgrade the importance attached to foresight, by including it prominently among the formal responsibilities of Maroš Šefčovič, one of the Vice-Presidents within her College of Commissioners. Mr Šefčovič has in turn already created a network of foresight experts across the Commission and will publish an annual Commission foresight report, to be discussed *inter alia* at each year’s ESPAS conference. Meanwhile the Council secretariat has decided to establish a new central strategy unit, with responsibility among other things for monitoring global trends. In effect, foresight and global trends work is becoming a more important feature in the daily life of the institutions.

In this context, the ESPAS Steering Group has already met several times last autumn and this spring and reconfirmed the strong and continuing commitment of all its existing participants to maintain and deepen the ESPAS process throughout the current five-year EU political cycle. All see it as a unique inter-institutional forum in which to develop and share a common analysis of global trends and their implications for policy-makers. The Steering Group plans to intensify its various activities and develop new partnerships, admittedly now in the more complex circumstances of the coronavirus crisis, which is itself seen as making foresight work more relevant than ever. The principal components of its work, based on the structures and activities described above under ‘ESPAS work in the 2014-19 cycle’, will be maintained and strengthened, now in tandem with an annual foresight report from the Commission. An annual ESPAS conference will be held towards the end of 2020, notwithstanding the logistical challenges of the moment.

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