



# Mutual learning to boost R&I foresight across Europe

#HorizonEU

## PSF CHALLENGE - MUTUAL LEARNING EXERCISE

In today's ever-changing world, research and innovation (R&I) foresight is more relevant than ever. It helps policymakers make better decisions by thinking towards the future. The interest in R&I foresight has grown at both national and European levels as a response to the challenges we face as a global society. When it comes to applying R&I policy, it is **important to stress the power of collective foresight**. By bringing about new ideas, unlocking opportunities and encouraging collaboration, collective foresight can shape the future in a structured way. R&I foresight is a **creative way** to explore new ideas, technologies and changes in society. This has the potential to reshape the way we think about policy and governance, paving the way for a brighter future

**Foresight is being used by governments at all levels. It is becoming an increasingly important tool for making decisions based on the best possible understanding of the future.**

The EU has played an important role in driving foresight for decades, working together with Member States and Associated Countries. Recently, the EU has started to apply foresight to different institutions and policy areas. This is a response to a changing geopolitical environment, climate crises and the global agenda (e.g. Sustainable Development Goals and the twin transitions). To show its commitment to R&I foresight, the EU has even appointed a dedicated European Commissioner – highlighting the EU's dedication to the cause. As a result, the EU has also developed a set of initiatives, structures and processes for R&I foresight. This includes the EU Better Regulation Guidelines and Toolbox, which highlights the importance of using strategic foresight to help policymakers and institutions prepare for the future<sup>1</sup>.

**R&I foresight is being used in various European countries to assist with different government policies and initiatives.** It can help with gathering intelligence, stakeholder and public consultations, building consensus, stress-testing and future-proofing policies. R&I foresight can also go further by considering new and exciting approaches. This allows us to challenge widely-held assumptions and analyse policy discussions in more depth.

Despite being a powerful tool, there is a risk that governments may not use R&I foresight to its full potential. To avoid this, the EU and Member States need to work together to promote the benefits of R&I foresight and how it can shape the future in a sustainable way. This includes improving foresight skills and conducting foresight studies. In addition, it involves promoting futures literacy which is the ability to use foresight to identify and prioritise R&I areas that are likely to have a major impact on society in the future.

## About the Mutual Learning Exercise

The Mutual Learning Exercise (MLE) on R&I foresight was set up in July 2022 under the Horizon Europe Policy Support Facility (PSF) of Horizon Europe. It was requested by Member States during the Slovenian Council Presidency (see Council conclusions on 26 November 2022<sup>2</sup>) and supported by the Directorate-General for Research and Innovation (DG R&I). Nine countries (Austria, Belgium, Czechia, Estonia, Finland, Norway, Portugal, Romania, and Slovenia), DG R&I and a team of foresight experts have played a key role in co-designing and implementing MLE.

1 The EU's Better Regulation Toolbox makes specific reference to use of foresight in Ch. 1 p. 9 <https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2023-09/BR%20toolbox%20-%20Jul%202023%20-%20FINAL.pdf>

2 See <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-14308-2021-INIT/en/pdf>.

The MLE's aim was to encourage the EU Member States and Associated Countries to share information, experiences and lessons learned in R&I foresight. Its objective was to create a powerful community that plays a key role in the European Research Area (ERA). This year-long exercise addressed the following five topics:

- Introduction and overview on R&I foresight;
- Institutionalising foresight capability and creating wide foresight communities in the R&I system;
- Citizens' engagement approaches and methods;
- Foresight, the twin transition and potential disruptions;
- From foresight for smart specialisation to engagement in EU Missions and partnerships.

## **Benefits of R&I foresight and the Mutual Learning Exercise for participating countries**

Numerous countries have highlighted the benefits they have seen from their participation on the exercise. For example, Czechia has outlined its use of R&I foresight when designing and implementing its smart specialisation strategy and missions-oriented policies. Norway, Portugal and Romania serve as prime examples of engaging citizens in R&I policy foresight, while Finland and Estonia have used R&I foresight to address the green and digital transitions.

The MLE has also helped Austria by showing how foresight can be used in setting up high priority areas. It has encouraged the country to share knowledge and work together with participating countries and foresight expert. Austria has learnt how important it is to use foresight for policies that bring a big impact into society and their connection to smart specialisation strategies<sup>3</sup>.

For Finland, participating in the MLE has highlighted the need to define R&I foresight's role on a national level. Sharing experiences and learnings from other foresight practitioners has been inspiring and has expanded their view on different applications of R&I foresight in participating countries<sup>4</sup>.

The MLE has led countries to establish national networks, with some launching initiatives at the national level to work on specific foresight topics.

## **Recommendations to expand and strengthen R&I foresight across Europe**

MLE participants developed a set of recommendations for expanding and strengthening the way R&I foresight is practiced across countries.

One recommendation is to ensure that governments champion the regular use of R&I foresight in policymaking. Moreover, countries should create the right conditions by boosting interest and offering resources and expertise.

MLE participants also recommend regular communication between national policymakers, especially for smaller Member States and Associated Countries. This would allow governments to share knowledge, ideas, tools and skills. It can also pave the way for collaborative initiatives on R&I foresight – especially larger initiatives that require shared investments.

Based on the positive feedback from Member States and Associated countries, the MLE has created a toolset for policymakers. The aim is to refine these tools into a comprehensive toolkit and to keep it updated. For this, Member States, Associated Countries and the European Commission should work together to collect these experiences, and keep the toolkit updated and easily accessible.

MLE participants suggest that it is necessary to combine government R&I foresight activities at national and regional levels, as well as in key EU policies and initiatives – particularly the EU funding programmes for research and innovation.

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<sup>3</sup> See 'Final Report Mutual Learning Exercise R&I Foresight in Government: A Handbook for Policymakers, Final Report'.

<sup>4</sup> Idem.

Another recommendation is that the EU needs to be able to detect and monitor signs of change and disruption. The use of AI and its potential in foresight calls for a European-level approach. The European Commission, with the support of other EU institutions, needs to encourage collaboration between Member States and Associated Countries to work towards a European Horizon-scanning facility<sup>5</sup>.

To take the MLE's work forward, collaboration is needed within ERA<sup>6</sup>. This can be done by combining the resources of the EU, its Member States and Associated Countries in R&I foresight. Collaboration is crucial to create the right conditions, such as building R&I foresight skills across all levels of government, whether it's within organisations or for specific projects. This requires a Europe-wide effort to promote training across all education levels. By doing so, it is possible to advance futures studies in R&I foresight and to promote collaboration.

Finally, R&I foresight depends on the vision of citizens and the expertise of scientists. MLE participants recommend that R&I foresight should involve open discussions, teamwork and joint efforts with key stakeholders to protect the public interest. In this way, collective foresight addresses the perspectives of citizens, science and research institutions.

### For further information:

[Thematic Report 1: R&I foresight: an introduction to the current state of play](#)

[Thematic Report 2: Institutionalising foresight capability and creating wide foresight communities in the R&I system](#)

[Thematic Report 3: Citizens' engagement approaches and methods in R&I foresight](#)

[Thematic Report 4: Future Studies, Disruptions and the Twin Transition](#)

[Thematic Report 5: From foresight for smart specialisation to engagement in EU research programmes, missions and partnerships](#)

### Final Report

The PSF's objective is to help Member States and Associated Countries to 'improve the design, implementation and evaluation of R&I policies.' The PSF provides expertise and practical support to Member States in three major ways: PSF Country (formerly PSF Peer Reviews & Specific support to countries); PSF Challenge (including the PSF Mutual Learning Exercises, focused on specific and operational R&I challenges of interest in several volunteering countries); and PSF Open (which allows countries that have already benefited from a PSF exercise to receive support to follow up on PSF recommendations). The PSF is funded under Horizon Europe.

<sup>5</sup> See [https://knowledge4policy.ec.europa.eu/foresight/topic/horizon-scanning\\_en](https://knowledge4policy.ec.europa.eu/foresight/topic/horizon-scanning_en).

<sup>6</sup> A new ERA Action aimed at the setting up of 'an R&I foresight community of practice for the ERA' could help to provide continuity to the MLE's work and to address this recommendation. This new ERA Action aims to work closely with the Coordinated Support Action (CSA) starting shortly, which aims at broad coverage of institutionalised foresight in Europe.