

Keynote speech by Vice-President Maroš Šefčovič at the European Strategy and Policy Analysis System conference “Changing the Game: Putting Foresight at the Heart of Policymaking”

Dear Ann,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am thrilled to be in your company today. Let me start by applauding your collaboration under the ESPAS umbrella. It shows what can be achieved when we pull together resources and brainpower from all our institutions and beyond.

We would all agree that the world is changing at unprecedented pace.

Despite our efforts at EU level, humanity's ecological footprint is deteriorating and has resulted in the global climate emergency. We risk suffering the worst – even fatal – effects of climate change in the generations to come.

We have embarked on a global race for leadership in key enabling – or I'd say empowering – technologies, including digital. This is not just about the economy. Yes, strategic technologies are a source of future prosperity but they are also a source of global influence.

Moreover, they are set to radically transform our societies. As the fourth industrial revolution unfolds, we are broadly unprepared for its impacts.

The multilateral, liberal international order that Europe stands for – in fact, it is in our DNA – is undergoing its deepest crisis since WWII. I know you spoke at length about the future of values.

The age of disinformation, combined with security threats and persisting inequalities across the board – between rich and poor, men and women, North and South, East and West, demographics or access to water and food – put a real strain on our democracy.

Those are only a few examples that point to the profound, structural and accelerated change on the horizon. For that reason, we know that our actions today will define the role and nature of Europe in this 21st century.

With this in mind, I would like to address the following questions with you:

First, how can the European Union ensure that it does not end up a middle power, caught between the two hegemonies – the United States and China? How can

we ensure that the 21st century will be European? I see you had an intervention on “The Future is Asia: are we ready for it”. Politically, I would challenge you to question that title!

Second, how can we move from the multi-crisis management mode of the past few years to a political leadership by foresight, building a real culture of anticipation, preparedness and resilience?

I am truly honoured by President-elect’s trust to put me in charge of both, Interinstitutional Relations and Foresight. It is a perfect match, the two domains reinforce each other and if linked successfully, it can be a true game-changer.

Today’s choices are critical. And they require first, an honest assessment of where we stand and second, a clear vision of where we want to go in this new geo-strategic, geo-economic and geo-technological order.

It is no coincidence that the President-elect has branded her Commission a geopolitical one.

As you know, the new Commission is not yet in place. But based on the ESPAS work and this renewed political momentum, I would suggest we already start looking, together, at what should be our priorities.

As I said in my recent hearing at the European Parliament, I want Europe to strive for world-class anticipatory governance.

We will therefore build foresight capacity inside the Commission and with external actors. My intention is to mobilise the resources of the Joint Research Centre as a key enabler and multiplier. But this will not suffice.

We will need to create synergies with other key actors inside and outside the Commission.

In this context, I foresee setting up an EU Strategic Foresight Network that would bring together the best of the EU institutions and Member States. I know that here, we can rely on the impressive resources of the ESPAS and its growing global community.

There is a huge potential that the ESPAS has started tapping into. Your global network allows looking at the world through different lenses. This is very much needed.

Our goal should be to build a strong governance system aimed at structurally embedding foresight into our policy-making. A well-established horizontal structure can empower our agenda-setting, contribute to policy coherence, and also result in on-demand Strategic Foresight Support Service for Member States – eventually supporting neighbours and partners as well.

As you know, I have been tasked by the President-elect to steer the work on an Annual Foresight Report on key transformative megatrends. It will feed into the preparation of the State of the Union address and our multiannual programming.

The Report could also trigger debates beyond the EU – globally, at international forums, such as G7 and G20. This will give us an opportunity to contrast our foresight with other powerful blocs – to see where we converge and how to collectively implement that shared vision.

Second, focusing on strategic prioritisation and action. We should make sure our foresight activities are anchored onto medium-to-long-term strategic policy objectives.

One of my responsibilities will be to bring well-prepared foresight work to the highest political level. We will discuss foresight conclusions with my fellow Commissioners and other leaders. This requires to be able to collectively address three set of questions – sequentially.

What long-term issues are of strategic importance to Europe?

Based on the foresight work, we should engage political actors to develop a common vision and send the right signals on our long-term objectives.

What gaps do we need to overcome to reach those goals?

We will need to identify enablers and obstacles. This will link up quite closely to the work on evidence-based policy-making. We will in particular need to connect the foresight work with our Better Regulation Agenda. I have already announced that I will transform the REFIT platform into a FIT FOR FUTURE one. We might also want to explore the idea of a Policy Design Board that would allow integrating robust foresight into our evidence-based policy-making.

Finally, what policy orientations and actions should we collectively endorse?

In other words, what collaborative strategies we should put into place. I can give you a vibrant example of this – the European Battery Alliance.

Even if at the 12th hour, we had anticipated a tectonic shift towards e-mobility that should hit us by 2030. So with the industry leading, we started to act collaboratively to build a strong value chain for batteries in Europe.

In less than two years, we have created manufacturing partnerships and projects throughout the supply chain, we have boosted our innovation ecosystem, we have joined forces with Member States, regions, private and public investors throughout Europe – to produce at scale.

In less than two years, we have put Europe on a track to catch up with our Asian competitors.

In less than two years, we have started laying the grounds for our automotive industry to remain the best in the world, with sustainability at its core. This is unfinished business – in the next mandate, we will have to develop future-proof regulations and standards for batteries produced in and imported to Europe.

I am ready to discuss in which other strategic sectors Europe should and

could make a real difference, provided we follow a similar collaborative approach.

Let me be clear: foresight will only be a game changer if it has joined-up, collective ownership, which will also require political courage. Because this cannot be a purely intellectual exercise. This brings me to my last point: the imperative of participatory governance

We will need to better engage with stakeholders – whether other EU institutions, national foresight institutions, other actors on the ground or the wider public as such. The work under the ESPAS is an essential part of it.

I often say about my current portfolio, the Energy Union could not have been built in or from Brussels only. We are succeeding thanks to close collaborations with all actors on the ground.

So outreach will be key.

We will need to bring foresight closer to our industry (as you know, some large companies have already built impressive foresight capacity that should be connected), closer to our civil society (NGOs, trade unions, think tanks, universities and so on), and more generally closer to our citizens.

Foresight will therefore feed into the Conference on the Future of Europe as well as other events organised by the Commission Representations in the Member States, perhaps in close collaboration with the European Parliament representations and of course, with the Member States themselves – both governments and national Parliaments are expressing their interest.

I am also fond of initiatives engaging the young generations. I support the ESPAS Young Talent Network. I would also be ready to launch a Future of Europe Essay Competition for high-school students. In fact, we see them challenging and calling us to bold action.

To conclude, foresight is not a luxury item. It is a must.

I am convinced that we do not really have a choice if we want our Europe to be resilient, to remain a major global player in this turbulent time, and basically retain the ability to form its own future – together with our main partners.

We need to be able to shape the transformative megatrends at work. It is either this, or we become the victims of our future. Politically, that is simply unacceptable. This is fundamentally why we have decided that foresight should become a political priority for Europe.

We will have to move fast in view of the key challenges ahead of us. Let me point to those I consider crucial.

First, the new economy sectors and the future of work. The Commission committed to work on the human and ethical implications of Artificial Intelligence, but this is just the tip of the iceberg. The transition to new

technologies will be potentially highly disruptive.

Second, strategic value chains and how to manage new dependencies, e.g. on fossil fuels, raw materials, rare earths, technologies, military, space as the next frontier. This is ultimately about our shared strategic sovereignty.

Third, the future of our democratic fabric. We see the plague of nationalism, intolerance and xenophobia coming out again and expanding. Some of the world's populist leaders have no qualms in directly attacking and torpedoing representative institutions and counter-powers. At the same time, we see new forms of democratic governance coming to life, with civic activism on the rise, notably in Europe.

We have a political responsibility to address this forcefully. And foresight must play its part.

I see the following session is on "Democracy, Free Societies and Their Enemies". May this two-day conference – and in fact, your entire work – be productive and enriching potential solutions. You will have in me a strong supporter of your community and I am convinced that we will achieve great things together.