EYE OF EUROPE

STEPPING OFF THE ROLLER COASTER

Inroads into collective transformation for regenerative futures

Policy Brief No. 2

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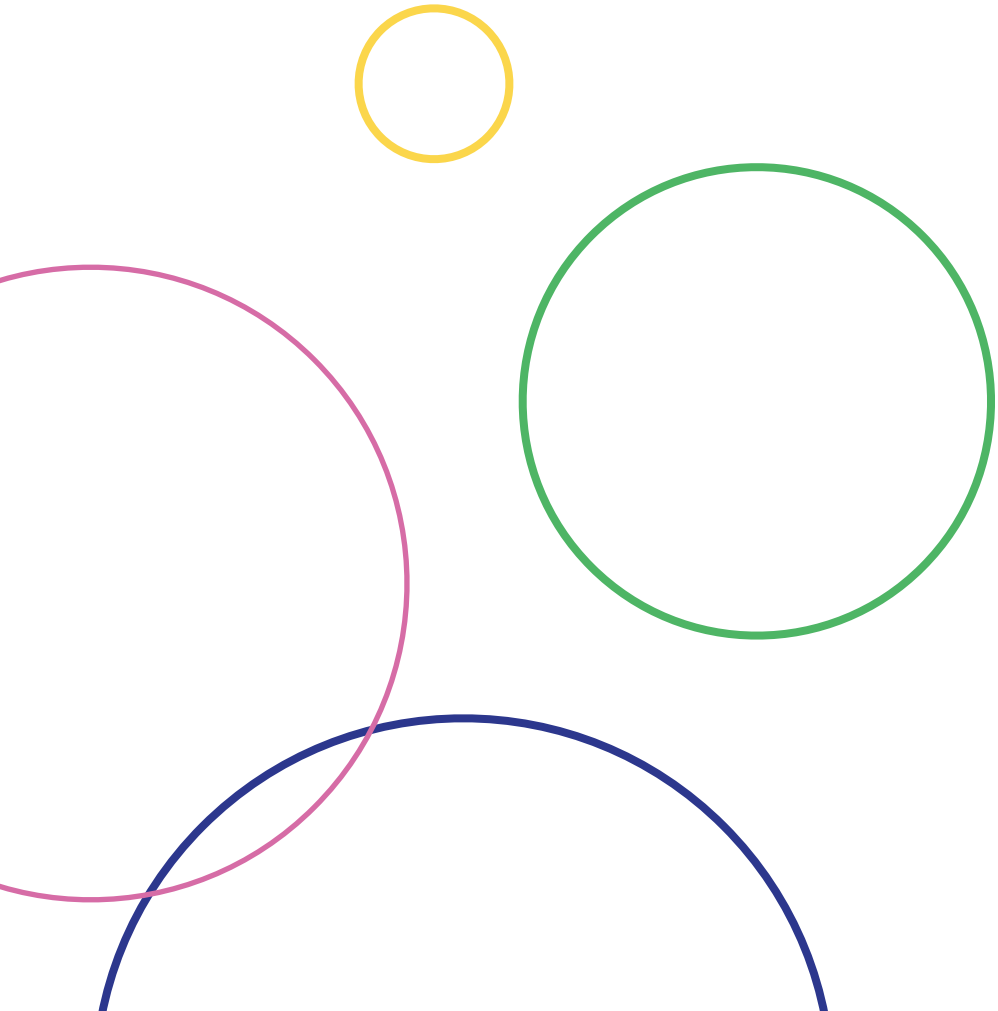
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SUMMARY

This policy brief presents a cross-cutting narrative, four focal areas for policy action, and multi-level research and innovation (R&I) policy implications for EU, Member State, and regional actors.

The brief argues that the focal areas are interconnected facets of a single structural challenge: a socio-economic system whose incentives reward speed, throughput and short-termism, and whose governance institutions are routinely outpaced by change. The result is not only exhaustion but also confusion and a loss of purpose, which makes regaining direction as important as reducing pressure. Hence, we propose stepping off the roller coaster and engaging in collective transformation. To this end, foresight can be operational to engage diverse stakeholders, including citizens as holders of knowledge, in jointly envisioning pathways to regenerative futures. Investment should extend beyond technology to social, institutional and governance innovation, reward systemic and interdisciplinary research, and be aligned vertically across EU, national and regional levels as well as horizontally across policy domains. Stepping off the roller coaster does not mean standing still: it means building the collective capacity to steer.

The brief synthesises the outcomes of all ten thematic foresight pilot workshops conducted under the Eye of Europe project (2024–2026) engaging over 400 participants — including policymakers, researchers, entrepreneurs, citizens, and foresight practitioners — across Berlin, Bucharest, Madrid, Paris, Prague, and Thessaloniki. Building on Research and Innovation Policy Brief No. 1, this brief extends the analysis to the full workshop series.

TOPICS COVERED IN THE WORKSHOPS

- Long-term Future of Democracy
- Sustainable Fashion
- Science and Conflicts
- Industrial Decarbonisation
- Knowledge of our Civilisation
- Emotion Ecosystems
- Democracy and Technology
- Ageing and Assisted Living Technologies
- Public Policy and Change of Diets

INTRODUCTION

The Eye of Europe project set out to enhance the integration of foresight practices into R&I policymaking across Europe. Across ten pilot workshops in six cities, engaging over 400 participants from diverse backgrounds, the project has surfaced a shared diagnosis of the systemic condition confronting European societies and a set of actionable alternatives.

In the beginning of the workshops, participants were asked how they perceived the future. Most prominently (36% of participants), the future was identified as a roller coaster. After further synthesising the full series, a cross-cutting narrative emerged: 'Stepping off the Roller Coaster.' Modern society is structurally designed for speed, creating confusion and a systemic trap in which individuals, industries, and governments are locked into cycles of acceleration and crisis response. Contemporary societies are caught in accelerating cycles of pressure, uncertainty, and reactive response, leading to a breakdown and even a lack of direction and purpose. This appeared in the emotion ecosystems workshop as a call for collective 'relaxation'; in the fashion workshop through discussions on slowing consumption and rethinking value; in food system discussions through the search for more equitable and resilient transitions; and in broader governance reflections emphasising anticipation and direction-setting over perpetual crisis management.

> "The problem is not simply speed, but loss of control over direction. A racing car brakes not to stop, but to navigate a sharp turn without leaving the road. Collective transformation, in this framing, is a prerequisite for regaining agency."

With collective transformation, we refer to the process through which diverse societal actors develop shared understanding, agency and coordinated action through deep collective learning, critical reflection and inclusive deliberation to address complex challenges that no single actor can solve alone. It is enabled by transformative learning, transformative and deliberate governance, and safe spaces for experimentation and dialogue that foster systemic change beyond short-term societal and political pressures.

Collective transformations open pathways to regenerative futures that are desirable long-term pathways that enable human and ecological systems to thrive by restoring, renewing and strengthening the resilience of interconnected social, economic and environmental systems. Grounded in systems thinking and complexity, they depend not only on reducing harm but also on enhancing the adaptive capacity and building the regenerative potential of socio-ecological systems for future generations.

This brief translates this narrative into an actionable policy framework, organised around four focal areas of collective transformation for regenerative futures. For each focal area (see the table below), the brief traces the paradigm shift from reactive to regenerative approaches and draws out R&I policy implications at the EU, Member State, and regional levels.

TABLE 1. THE CORE POLICY MATRIX

FOCAL AREA	OLD PARADIGM (Accelerated)	NEW PARADIGM (Regenerative)	KEY POLICY INROADS
SOCIETY From Individual Wellness to Collective Wellbeing	Burnout management & self-care apps	Structural economic slack; time sovereignty; collective care	Working-time entitlements; Universal basic services; rest-supportive technology design
FASHION From Ultra-Fast Fashion to Regenerative and Immaterial Value and Identity	Linear, ultra-fast throughput & voluntary eco-labels	Circular flows; regenerated & immaterial value	Producer responsibility; right to repair; product passports; business-model diversification
FOOD From Efficiency and Optimisation to Regeneration and Resilience	Hyper-optimised global yield maximisation	Food sovereignty & regional resilience	Speculation safeguards; agroecology incentives; short food chains; territorial food governance
GOVERNANCE From Reactive Firefighting to Anticipatory Governance	Reactive firefighting & crisis response	Institutionalised foresight and anticipatory governance	Long-term institutions; circuit-breaker mechanisms; citizens' assemblies; statutory foresight

FOCAL AREA 1: SOCIETY

From Individual Wellness to Collective Wellbeing

The Emotion Ecosystems workshop identified a fundamental misdiagnosis at the heart of contemporary well-being policy: burnout and emotional dysregulation are treated as individual psychological conditions requiring personal intervention, when more often they are structural by-products of economic systems optimised for speed, continuous availability, and perpetual productivity. The workshop on Ageing and Assisted Living Technologies (AALT) reinforced this finding: care relationships, for older adults, for people with disabilities, for anyone requiring human support, cannot be automated without difficult loss. Time, attention, and paced interaction are not inefficiencies to be engineered out of care; they are the substance of it.

The Longevity of Democracy workshop added a further dimension: democratic participation requires sufficient time. Citizens who are time-poor, perpetually stressed, or cognitively overloaded are less able to engage with civic life, making burnout not merely a health issue but a democratic one. The dominant policy response to address individual resilience training and self-care apps places the burden of structural change on those least able to bear it. A regenerative paradigm redesigns the structural conditions that generate time pressure in the first place.

ALTERNATIVE STRATEGIES EMERGING FROM THE WORKSHOPS

- Time sovereignty by design: embed rest, boundary protection, and genuine discretion over working time into the default architecture of the digital economy and employment law, rather than treating these as individual achievements.
- Working-time reduction as a macroeconomic instrument: treat a shorter, reorganised working week as a structural lever for reducing environmental strain, improving population health, and sharing the load of care work, supported by rigorous pilot evidence before mainstream adoption.
- Universal Basic Services: build unconditional access to housing, transport, healthcare, and education to dissolve the baseline survival anxiety.
- Rest-supportive technology design: reorient R&I in digital and AI tools away from engagement-maximising architectures and towards technologies that protect attention, rest, and user autonomy.

R&I POLICY IMPLICATIONS

EU LEVEL

- Commission: fund longitudinal multi-country trials of working-time reduction, measuring productivity, health, and emissions co-benefits under Horizon Europe.
- Frame societal burnout as a system-level R&I mission spanning time-use research, mental-health science, and Universal Basic Services design under a dedicated ERA priority.
- Mandate and fund research on rest-supportive technology standards under the AI Act and Digital Markets Act implementation frameworks.
- Integrate well-being and time-poverty metrics into (ERA) performance scorecards.

MEMBER STATE LEVEL

- National R&I strategies: fund programmes on care time, informal care burdens, and technology-mediated time pressure.
- National health research agencies: reframe burnout from a clinical to a social-determinants domain with interdisciplinary funding mechanisms.
- Social affairs ministries: pilot working-time entitlement reforms and evaluate through national research infrastructure.
- Commission longitudinal cohort studies on digital well-being among workers and carers.

REGIONAL LEVEL

- Regional authorities: pilot time sovereignty measures in regional labour markets, particularly in high-intensity digital-economy regions.
- Include care economy and well-being technology as priority innovation domains.
- Regional health networks: fund place-based pilots of community well-being infrastructure (social prescribing, community care hubs).
- Urban planning authorities: integrate 15-minute city and ‘slow city’ principles into regional spatial strategies.

FOCAL AREA 2: FASHION

From Ultra-Fast Fashion to Regenerative and Immaterial Value and Identity

The two Sustainable Fashion workshops in Thessaloniki, combining speculative design with participatory foresight, surfaced a systemic tension: sustainability in fashion is largely framed as an add-on to existing production models (eco-labels, organic cotton lines, recycling bins in stores) rather than as a structural redesign of the value chain. The dominant model remains one in which profitability depends on ever-faster physical throughput. Workshop participants created alternative and speculative artefacts imagining clothes as durable, repairable, embedded with digital records of their material life, and valued for longevity rather than novelty. Fashion can bridge the gap between technological innovation and adoption by shaping norms and identities.

The Industrial Decarbonisation workshop in Madrid deepened this from a materials science perspective. Solvolysis — a chemical process enabling the recovery of high-value fibres and materials from composite waste — was identified as a promising R&I frontier directly relevant also to fashion: if fibre recovery infrastructure exists, product passport frameworks can create economic incentives for brands to design for disassembly from the outset. The convergence of AI, industrial symbiosis, and biotechnology further opens pathways to self-optimising, near-zero-waste production systems applicable across sectors.

ALTERNATIVE STRATEGIES EMERGING FROM THE WORKSHOPS

- Beyond ultra-fast business models: support transitions from speed-and-volume competition towards diversified offerings — more affordable and personalised services, rental, repair, and digital or experiential value — so profitability no longer requires ever-faster physical turnover.
- Repairability and longevity by design: shape product norms so that durability, modularity, and the right to repair are built into the design stage, shifting consumer culture from replacing to maintaining.
- Extended producer responsibility: make brands legally and financially accountable for the full lifecycle of what they put on the market, making disposability economically irrational.
- Product passport infrastructure: develop standards and interoperable platforms that make a garment's materials, production conditions, and lifecycle transparent, unlocking resale, upcycling, and regeneration markets at scale.
- Immaterialisation research: explore how value migrates from physical goods to services, experiences, and digital twins, genuinely decoupling prosperity from material throughput.

R&I POLICY IMPLICATIONS

EU LEVEL

- Commission: prioritise R&I funding on durable, recyclable, and bio-based materials, design-for-disassembly methods, and fibre-to-fibre recycling under Horizon Europe.
- Accelerate Digital Product Passport implementation under the EU Ecodesign for Sustainable Products Regulation (ESPR), with dedicated R&I support for data infrastructure and SME-accessible tools.
- Fund living labs and research consortia on business model diversification and 'servitisation' in fashion and consumer goods sectors.
- Support an ERA research network linking material scientists, business model researchers, and policy analysts on circular fashion.

MEMBER STATE LEVEL

- National R&I programmes: fund centres of excellence in circular materials and textile recycling, linked to existing textile manufacturing regions.
- Industrial policy ministries: co-fund industry-led R&I on solvolysis, bio-based solvents, and advanced recycling to scale circular manufacturing.
- Consumer protection agencies: fund research on repair culture and the conditions enabling durable-goods markets.
- Fashion sector clusters: support national fashion innovation centres integrating sustainability, digital, and craft dimensions.

REGIONAL LEVEL

- Incorporate circular fashion and creative economy circular economy as priority domains in textile-producing regions.
- ERDF: co-finance regional textile recycling infrastructure, repair hubs, and innovation clusters for sustainable fashion.
- Regional development agencies: support fashion-as-service pilots in medium-sized cities with strong retail and craft heritage.
- Local government: integrate circular economy fashion into urban economic development and cultural strategies.







FOCAL AREA 3: FOOD

From Efficiency and Optimisation to Regeneration and Resilience

The Paris workshop on healthy and equitable diets, co-designed with the 14th District Food Social Security organisation, produced one of the most convergent outcomes in the entire workshop series. Nineteen citizens — working without prior acquaintance, in a half-day session — constructed a shared territorial vision for food by 2040 that centred on short supply chains, solidarity-based food access, and a fundamental rebalancing of power in food systems. This convergence is striking because participants were invited to diverge; the fact that they did not suggests that underlying values around food sovereignty, dignity, and equity are widely shared but systematically underrepresented in formal food policy processes.

The workshop revealed a troubling equity gap in mainstream sustainability discourse. Sustainable food transitions are often framed as choices available to conscious consumers: buy organic, buy local, reduce meat. But for participants in the 14th District — a diverse urban community with significant income inequality — the shift towards healthy diets was largely a question of access to food and the organisation of food solidarity initiatives. As healthy foods are simply more expensive than ultra-processed alternatives, a purely market-led sustainability transition risks accelerating a two-tier food system in which ecological virtue becomes a luxury good. Food sovereignty reframes the question: not 'how do we nudge consumers towards better choices?' but 'how do we restructure food systems so that healthy, ecologically sound food is the default for everyone?

ALTERNATIVE STRATEGIES EMERGING FROM THE WORKSHOPS

- Insulating staples from speculation: design mechanisms shielding local and regional food systems from global commodity price volatility, which triggers food insecurity and agricultural over-exploitation.
- Rewarding agroecology over intensity: reorient agricultural incentives towards polyculture, soil-restoring, and biodiversity-positive practices, valuing long-horizon ecological health above short-term yield.
- Resilient short food chains: build regional food hubs, cooperative distribution networks, and urban-rural linkages that reduce dependence on hyper-optimised, fragile global logistics.
- Food solidarity infrastructure: invest in community food models (food social security, community-supported agriculture, solidarity purchasing groups) as public goods rather than voluntary innovations.
- CAP reform for agroecology: redirect Common Agricultural Policy subsidies from area-based payments towards ecosystem services, biodiversity outcomes, and support for small and medium-sized farms practising agroecological methods.

R&I POLICY IMPLICATIONS

EU LEVEL

- Commission: rebalance Horizon Europe food research funding towards agroecology, soil-microbiome science, and polyculture systems, which remain underfunded relative to high-input precision agriculture.
- Develop remote-sensing, soil-carbon verification, and biodiversity-index methodologies needed to operationalise outcome-based agricultural support under future CAP reform.
- Fund research on food price formation, commodity speculation, and price stabilisation mechanisms aligned with Farm to Fork and biodiversity strategies.
- Support interdisciplinary research networks linking nutrition scientists, agricultural economists, sociologists, and urban planners around territorial food transition.

MEMBER STATE LEVEL

- National agricultural R&I: fund national agroecology research programmes including long-term field experiments and farm-system modelling.
- Food policy ministries: commission research on food access inequality, ultra-processed food consumption drivers, and equity-first dietary transition levers.
- National food agencies: fund nutrition science integrating environmental sustainability, food culture, and access dimensions.
- Rural development programmes: co-fund innovation in regional food logistics, cooperative models, and short supply chain platforms.

REGIONAL LEVEL

- Regional agri-food strategies: use EAFRD and ERDF to fund regional food hub infrastructure, cooperative logistics, and urban-rural food partnership programmes.
- Include agri-food system transformation as priority in food-producing regions, with agroecology innovation clusters.
- Regional food policy councils: fund participatory food scenario planning at regional level.
- Urban authorities: integrate food sovereignty principles into city food strategies, urban farming policies, and public procurement (school meals, hospital catering).

FOCAL AREA 4: GOVERNANCE

From Reactive Firefighting to Anticipatory Governance

The biggest structural obstacle to slowing down the roller coaster is that democratic political cycles are fundamentally short-term. Elected governments face strong incentives to respond to immediate crises and visible constituencies, while the systemic drivers of acceleration — disruptive technology deployment, entrenchment of fossil-fuel dependencies, erosion of institutional trust — play out over decades. The tension between electoral temporality and systemic change timescales is not new, but the pace of technological disruption has made it acute.

The Democracy and Technology workshop, the Longevity of Democracy workshop, the Science and Conflicts workshop, and the Industrial Decarbonisation workshop in Madrid all converged on a common diagnosis: existing governance structures were not designed for the velocity and complexity of current change. Citizens in Prague proposed democratic circuit-breakers — mandatory deliberation periods before high-risk technology deployments. Science and conflict experts identified the erosion of rules-based international science cooperation as a systemic risk requiring anticipatory governance. Industrial decarbonisation participants developed three geopolitical scenarios (collaborative multipolar, limited cooperation, open hostility) precisely to build anticipatory capacity into R&I roadmapping. And the Knowledge of Civilisation workshop added an epistemological dimension: anticipatory governance is only possible if society invests in futures literacy and the research capacities needed to model, monitor, and navigate complexity. Formal structures alone, however, are insufficient: effective anticipatory governance also depends on senior-level sponsorship, organisational incentives, staff capabilities and routines that legitimise long-term thinking alongside immediate operational pressures.

ALTERNATIVE STRATEGIES EMERGING FROM THE WORKSHOPS

- Institutions for the long term: create bodies with explicit statutory mandates to weigh present decisions against their long-term consequences, giving future generations a structural voice in current legislation (modelled on the Welsh Future Generations Commissioner or Finnish Committee for the Future).
- Built-in reflection mechanisms: introduce mandatory deliberation periods and circuit-breaker-style pauses for fast-moving technological and economic disruptions, creating space to assess systemic effects before irreversible lock-in occurs.
- Deliberative citizens' bodies: give randomly selected, representative groups of citizens the time — months, not days — to study complex issues and produce policy recommendations, insulating direction-setting from short-term electoral pressure.
- Statutory foresight in R&I governance: embed horizon-scanning and foresight as permanent, funded capacities within governance structures, research funding agencies, and technology regulators, and with arrangements adapted to the institutional context and linked to concrete decision processes.
- Science diplomacy for open science: develop international agreements and institutional mechanisms that protect scientific cooperation in contexts of geopolitical competition.

R&I POLICY IMPLICATIONS

EU LEVEL

- Commission: establish a dedicated Horizon Europe funding stream for comparative and experimental research on long-termist governance institutions (citizens' assemblies, future-generations commissioners).
- Embed foresight as a statutory requirement in ERA governance, with dedicated funding under FP10.
- DG CONNECT and DG GROW: expand responsible innovation, technology assessment, and regulatory-sandbox research so that AI, biotech, and other fast-moving technologies are assessed for societal impact before wide deployment.
- Commission research on science diplomacy and international research cooperation resilience under ERA security research priorities.

MEMBER STATE LEVEL

- National STI agencies: fund national foresight offices with long-term statutory mandates and cross-ministerial authority.
- Parliamentary science offices: strengthen technology assessment capacity and integrate citizens' panels into deliberation on technology legislation.
- National R&I strategies: embed foresight cycles into programme design and evaluation as co-design mechanisms with diverse stakeholders.
- Interior and justice ministries: fund research on democratic safeguards for surveillance technologies, algorithmic governance, and biometric data use.

REGIONAL LEVEL

- Regional authorities: build capacity for strategic foresight and anticipatory planning in regional development authorities.
- Regional innovation agencies: introduce regional citizens' assemblies on technology governance.
- Smart Specialisation: incorporate foresight and technology assessment as core competences in regional innovation ecosystems.
- Cross-border cooperation programmes: fund transnational foresight projects addressing shared regional challenges such as demographic transition and energy security.







CROSS-CUTTING R&I POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Beyond the four focal areas, the full workshop series generated several cross-cutting findings with direct implications for how Europe organises its research and innovation system to overcome challenges related to speed of change and related confusion and lack of purpose in society.

SYSTEMIC THINKING AND INTERDISCIPLINARITY

Every one of the ten workshops emphasised that the challenges under examination — from emotional well-being to food sovereignty, from ageing to democratic resilience — cannot be addressed through disciplinary silos. The roller coaster metaphor is itself systemic: the tracks are laid by interconnected economic, technological, cultural, and governance dynamics. Yet the dominant R&I funding architecture still rewards disciplinary depth over systemic breadth. A regenerative R&I policy would create funding mechanisms that reward integration, mandate cross-disciplinary teams for system-level challenges and evaluate research on its capacity to illuminate interconnections rather than isolate variables.

CITIZEN AND STAKEHOLDER KNOWLEDGE AS RESEARCH INPUT

Several workshops — most strikingly the Paris food workshop and the Prague democracy workshop — demonstrated that citizens and non-expert stakeholders produce substantive policy intelligence when given structured deliberative conditions. This is not merely a matter of legitimacy or participation; it is a matter of epistemic quality. Citizens bring contextual, experiential, and values-laden knowledge that expert-only processes systematically underweight. R&I policy should treat citizen-centred foresight as a research method with distinct validity, not merely as a communication or engagement tool.

IMAGINATION AND TRANSFORMATIVE AMBITION

A recurring theme across the workshop series was the tension between incremental, business-as-usual futures and genuinely transformative visions. Participants' perspectives often remained anchored in present-day assumptions, highlighting the need to strengthen the conditions for transformative imagination through dedicated time for reflection, exposure to diverse perspectives, interdisciplinary collaboration, and the freedom to explore radical alternatives. In an era marked by geopolitical instability, information manipulation, and the polarising effects of social media, fostering society's capacity for collective imagination and critical thinking is becoming a strategic necessity. R&I policy should therefore elevate collective transformation research higher on the policy agenda by investing not only in technological innovation but also in social, institutional and governance innovation, while valuing long-term transformative potential, resilience and societal impact alongside technical feasibility.

FORESIGHT AS A EUROPEAN PUBLIC GOOD

The Eye of Europe project has demonstrated, across ten workshops in seven countries, that structured anticipatory intelligence can be mobilised at scale across the European Research Area. The futures4europe.eu platform is building the infrastructure for a permanent, distributed European foresight community. For this to become institutionally durable, foresight must be recognised as a public good requiring sustained public investment — not a project-by-project activity, but a permanent capacity of ERA governance. This is the ultimate policy implication of the roller coaster metaphor: the tracks of the future are being laid now, and only sustained anticipatory intelligence can ensure they lead somewhere worth going.

CONCLUSIONS AND FORWARD LOOK

The four focal areas are not isolated policy domains. They are interconnected facets of a single structural challenge: a socio-economic system whose incentive architecture rewards speed, throughput, and short-termism, and whose governance institutions are systematically outpaced by the changes they are trying to manage. The outcome is not only exhaustion but also confusion and a loss of purpose. Citizens, businesses and policymakers alike are kept busy reacting to successive crises, without a shared sense of where they are heading or why. Regaining direction is therefore as important as reducing pressure. Collective transformation processes can benefit from foresight practices. Such practices should focus not only on foresight structures or outputs, but on recurring interfaces through which horizon scanning, exploration of alternative futures and stakeholder deliberation inform agenda-setting, strategy development, priority-setting and programme design. Such forward-looking processes should engage broadly diverse stakeholders, including citizens as holders of knowledge to jointly envision pathways to regenerative futures. Effective anticipatory governance also requires a feedback loop: assumptions and signals should be monitored, strategies revisited and policy responses adapted as conditions change. In practical terms, this means moving iteratively from anticipation and deliberation to decision, experimentation, monitoring, learning and revision.

Investment in such collective transformation should extend beyond technology to social, institutional and governance innovation. Funding and evaluation should reward systemic, interdisciplinary research that sheds light on interconnections rather than isolating variables. Such action at EU, national and regional levels should be aligned both vertically as well as horizontally across policy domains, like the four focal areas discussed in this brief.

Herein, the futures4europe.eu platform offers a forum for policymakers and other stakeholders across the European Research Area to engage, contribute, and help shape the anticipatory institutions that Europe needs. Stepping off the roller coaster does not mean standing still. Like a racing car braking before a sharp turn, it means building the collective capacity to steer.

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