Introduction

Every epoch is an epoch of transition. We know only one thing about the future or, rather, the futures: it will not look like the present.

Jorge Luis Borges

The notion that Europe at the start of the third millennium is facing many challenges has gained widespread credence. The fact that our societies along with their values and traditions are changing rapidly is also commonly accepted. Daily, the threats and opportunities stemming from new technologies are the subject of numerous public debates. Our political leaders incessantly reiterate that we must find new ways to deal with the complexity of our contemporary world. Very seldom, however, are concrete examples presented in order to give people the opportunity to form an idea of how the future of Europe might look. Even more rarely are coherent and contrasted illustrations given of how Europe may evolve in the future as the result of actions and decisions that are taken today.

Aware of this lacuna, the Forward Studies Unit of the European Commission launched at the beginning of 1997 a project, Scenarios Europe 2010, with the objective of producing a set of coherent and thought-provoking images of the future of Europe. It is the hope that by studying these scenarios the reader will be encouraged to reflect both on the changes that are taking place in the world and on the options that lie ahead.

Many elements contribute to the process of societal change. The transition from the agrarian and industrial societies to the information society has not only prompted new modes of living and a different, less hierarchical organization for society, but has also generated new values and aspirations for individuals. Scientific know-how has become so advanced as to allow humans to influence the cause of events on a large scale, and the possibilities of communicating and travelling have rendered the world a subjectively smaller place. In this world of constant mutation, individual citizens are looking for answers to complex questions and to new frames of reference against which the world can be understood.

In contemporary society, it is recognized that public policies and the way they are conducted are becoming increasingly complex. This postulates that
efficient formulation and application of policies is dependent on the ability of organizations to take in a multitude of facts, to interpret these facts from a variety of angles and to update policies continuously in order to reflect the changes in the context for which they were initially aimed. In this context of uncertainty, a better and more versatile understanding of the future and the deep trends influencing its evolution can assist policy-makers in identifying future needs and developing appropriate policy initiatives to meet them. For European citizens to participate actively in the shaping of Europe’s future, it is important for them to acquire a broader insight into the interplay between driving trends, structural elements, ideologies and policy outcomes.

Illustrating the future by means of scenarios is a way to overcome human beings’ innate resistance to change. Scenarios can open mental horizons that allow the individual to accept and understand change, and so be able to shape the world. Scenarios may help in seizing new opportunities in advance as well as avoiding the undesirable effects of misconceived actions. The principal aim of Scenarios Europe 2010 was therefore twofold: to stimulate debate inside and outside the Commission on the future of European integration; and to develop a tool to put the Union’s policies and strategies into perspective and contribute to their improvement.

The project Scenarios Europe 2010 relied on the expertise of civil servants of the European Commission. Through a process of structured brainstorming and step-by-step synthesis (see Chapter 8 ‘How We Built the Scenarios’), the background knowledge and the emerging ideas of the participants were drawn together into a global project. Responsibility for organizing the process and for the actual writing of the scenarios fell entirely on the Forward Studies Unit, and particularly on the authors of the present publication. The entire exercise, which took about two years, was also aimed at fostering a ‘future culture’ inside the Commission. As officials from different departments are encouraged to know more about the future limits and opportunities in policy areas other than their own, it should be possible for a more integrated and forward-looking approach to policy-making to emerge.

The scenarios are entirely qualitative in nature. They present a number of plausible, internally coherent illustrations of the future of Europe to which no probability is attached. Scenarios are not, and cannot be, either a projection of the future, or a prediction of the likelihood of a certain outcome. Deliberately, none of the scenarios is entirely rosy and none is entirely dark. Each scenario contains positive and negative aspects that allow for a composite, even contrasted, picture of the future – like, indeed, our contemporary world. The exercise was designed not to make value judgements, since ‘good’ or ‘bad’, put in a specific context, mean different things to different people. There was also an attempt not to make the scenarios too complex in the sense that each scenario should have a character of its own with easily recognizable features.
Introduction

For the same reason it was decided that a trend scenario would not be developed, not because a continuation of present trends is unlikely, but rather because, for the purpose of intellectual stimulus, other alternative scenarios are more interesting and their consequences more compelling. Finally, a narrative style was chosen in order to facilitate the reading and in the hope of making the reader ‘feel’ the implications of different future outcomes.

The qualitative nature of the scenarios and the choice of a narrative style are of course no excuse for dispensing with a rigorous review of the factors that are bound to influence the future of Europe. Besides the expertise contributed by the participants to the scenario-building exercise, the Forward Studies Unit engaged in an analysis of a number of deep-lying trends affecting Europe that are broadly speaking ‘set’ within the time horizon of 2010. The illustration of the trends is a necessary complement to the scenarios in order to give the reader a multi-faceted and more complete picture of the future. For this reason they are included in the present publication (see Chapter 6 ‘What We Know About the Future’).

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, many commentators have underlined the importance of a wide public debate on the future of Europe. These scenarios are intended to contribute to such a debate by forming the background for a meaningful discussion and by offering the participants the possibility to acquire a common language.

When studying the scenarios, it is up to the readers to assess, on the basis of their experience, beliefs and expectations, which combination of them best corresponds to their idea of Europe in 2010.