

D5.2 Foresight in a state of war and geopolitical tensions: Scenario-building methodology



Project acronym:	RE-ENGAGE
Project full title:	Re-Engaging with Neighbours in a State of War and Geopolitical Tensions
Grant agreement no.:	101132314
Type of action:	HORIZON-RIA
Project start date:	fixed date: 1 January 2024
Project duration:	36 months
Call topic:	HORIZON-CL2-2023-DEMOCRACY-01
Project website:	https://re-engaging.eu/
Document:	Background paper
Deliverable number:	D5.2
Deliverable title:	Foresight in a state of war and geopolitical tensions: Scenario-building methodology
Due date of deliverable:	31 October 2024
Actual submission date:	31 October 2024
Editors:	Jan Daniel
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Reviewers:	Morten Bøås, Kari Osland, Marianne Riddervold, Pernille Rieker
Participating beneficiaries:	Whole RE-ENGAGE Consortium
Work Package no.:	5
Work Package title:	Forecast and scenarios of external actors' engagement
Work Package leader:	Jan Daniel
Work Package participants:	IIR, NUPI, ICH, EUT, UNSA, EECMD, UESA MSU, CAS, SSSA
Estimated person-months for deliverable:	1
Dissemination level:	PU
Nature:	Report
Version:	1
Draft/Final:	Final
No of pages (including cover):	28
Keywords:	Foresight, methodology, scenario-building, foreign influence, external actors, hybrid regimes, Eastern Europe, Western Balkans



BACKGROUND PAPER

Foresight in a state of war and geopolitical tensions: Scenario-building methodology

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30 October 2024

SUMMARY

This paper presents the conceptual background and methodological approach designed for the re-ENGAGE foresight exercise and scenario development process. The foresight and scenarios designed focus specifically on the involvement of key external actors (Russia, China, Türkiye and the United States) in Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans in the mid-term future. The paper first overviews some of the conceptual debates in the foresight and scenario analysis. It reviews the state of foresight and future analysis in the EU institutions with a specific focus on the existing scenario analyses of the two studied regions. The second part of the paper then provides a conceptual and methodological framework for scenario development. It highlights the normative underpinning of the re-ENGAGE approach to foresight and provides a three-step methodological approach for scenario analysis, consisting of horizon scanning, scenario narrative construction and probing of the response strategies.



Introduction

It is a truism to say that the future is fundamentally unknowable. However, it is widely recognised that this unknowability makes policy-making a difficult task which is riddled with uncertainties, and which needs to account for unforeseen events, trends and potential risks. It is thus no wonder that the past decades witnessed a rapid proliferation of different methods aimed at reducing future uncertainty. On the one hand, new methods of managing and assessing risks and forecasting the most likely course of events have sprung up, using, among others, recent advances in processing and analysing big data and causal and probabilistic modelling to develop scenarios of the most likely futures. On the other hand, alternative strands of future thinking have recently sought to make uncertainty about the potential course of events in the future part of the analytical process and, through the process of foresight, expand the range of policymakers' and analysts' imaginations. By doing so, foresight analysis helps to point to unforeseen trends and possible risky developments that might be beyond our current focus and to which the current policies might not have an answer while developing scenarios that help to visualise these trends and point to the existing blind spots.

Re-ENGAGE takes the latter approach as, following a number of unforeseen and unexpected (and usually negative) events and developments taking place in the wider European neighbourhood, it seeks to help make the EU better prepared for what might come in the future. It seeks to do so by a process of foresight outlining the potential trends and structural conditions which might play a role in how the EU's rivals and potential competitors could behave and, subsequently, developing a range of possible scenarios of external actors' involvement in Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans. In this respect, the foresight exercise and the scenarios developed in re-Engage are specifically intended to assess the future trends in the involvement of Russia, China, Türkiye and the USA as four key external powers in the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe, and the internal development of the hybrid regimes present in these regions (see Bolkvadze et al. 2024; Mishkova et al. 2024). The purpose of the foresight and scenario development process is to understand not only how this involvement might turn out in the future and what the (present and future) structural opportunities that these actors might exploit are, but even more importantly, how a particular form of their involvement can affect the EU's democracy promotion and resilience-building strategies in the two regions (see Buras et al. 2024). In this respect, the re-ENGAGE foresight exercise and scenario-building process are not supposed to chart the most likely trajectory of the future.

Following the core tenets of foresight methods, they are supposed to enhance creative thinking about the future and identify potentially overlooked trends and how they might play out together beyond the common wisdom enshrined in the main EU policies and approaches.

This paper presents a conceptual and methodological background for the foresight exercise and the development of specific scenarios for the external actors' involvement in the two regions in the mid-term future. As such, it connects different phases of re-ENGAGE and the corresponding outputs. It builds on the conceptual and theoretical papers (Giske et al. 2024), studies on competing actors in Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans (Daniel et al. 2024), EU democracy promotion in the two regions (Buras et al. 2024) and the shape of the specific hybrid regimes in both regions (Bolkvadze et al. 2024; Mishkova et al. 2024). This body of research and other secondary sources will provide the necessary empirical and conceptual background for the foresight and scenario-building process, which will be carried out in the second year of re-ENGAGE. These will happen through a combination of desk research and workshops, bringing together re-ENGAGE researchers from different work packages and countries, invited experts and policy officers.

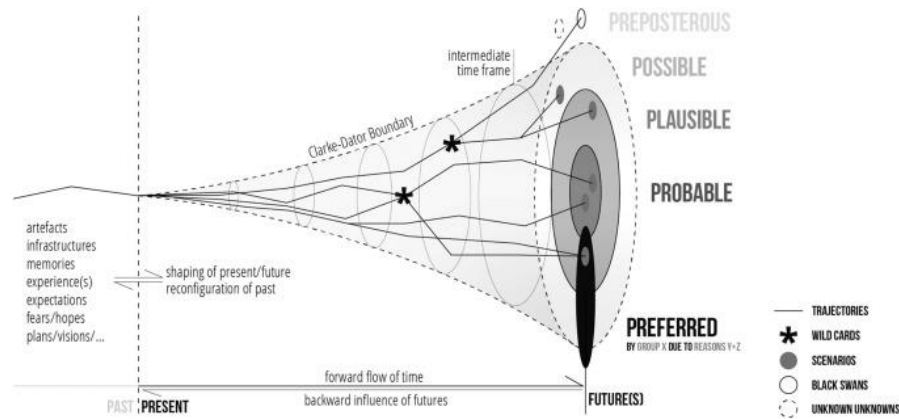
The paper proceeds in the following way. First, it briefly overviews the development of foresight and scenario analysis and the differences between various approaches in this area. Then, it moves to a review of the state of foresight and future analysis in the EU with a specific focus on the existing scenario analyses of the two studied regions. The second part of the paper provides a conceptual and methodological framework for scenario development. It highlights the normative underpinning of the re-ENGAGE approach to foresight and provides a three-step methodological approach for scenario development and analysis.

Forecast, Foresight and Scenario-building as Analytical Methods

Different forms of forecast and foresight as an extension of present trends to the future have been an inseparable part of policymaking since the advent of modernity when the establishment of states capable of projecting statistics about their populations into the future made possible such analysis (Wenger et al. 2020). However, the origins of foresight, forecast and especially scenario analysis in their present forms which are used in the field of International Relations, are often traced

to scenario exercises carried out by the US nuclear planning analysts during the Cold War in institutions such as the RAND Corporation. This era witnessed a rise of interest in probabilistic predictions of actors' behaviour based on game theory or operational code analysis that were enabled by advances in computer-assisted modelling and systems theory. Scenario analysis was specifically supposed to provide a way of thinking about potential futures which would differ from the basic policy planning foresight based on existing data and probabilistic models. The goal of scenario-building as a method was to provide a narrative highlighting certain trends and move attention to a potential causal process – a sequence of logically linked events extending to the future – and the key inflection points that can lead to different outcomes (Bernstein et al. 2000; Neumann and Øverland 2004). Such a method helps to provide a structured way of thinking about the potential future and the process that leads to it.

The basic logic of scenario development as a method of analysis of potential futures often follows the outlined RAND method of developing stories that extend to the future and allow for making potential uncertain developments visible and legible. As opposed to the approach of looking at the most likely scenarios, contemporary scenario analyses often work with different types of futures. These can extend from those futures that are deemed to be possible (i.e. that stretch the limits of imagination the furthest yet are still conceivable, such as the use of nuclear weapons in the conflict in Ukraine) to those that are plausible and probable (i.e. that are considered the likeliest, such as more isolationist U.S. policy under second Trump's administration). The multiplicity of futures, scenarios depicting scenario storylines running into (some of) these futures, and their increasing unknowability in time have been often visualised via the 'futures cone'. While showing the growing uncertainty and the progressive extension of the range of possibilities of the different courses of the future in time, some versions of the 'futures cone' also work with 'preposterous' scenarios, which exceed futures that are currently being considered conceivable and preferred futures, which outline the normative aspirations of the scenario developers (Gall et al. 2022).



Futures cone (Gall et al. 2022)

There are diverse typologies of future and scenario analysis, ranging from the divisions based on the length of extrapolation to those based on their normativity and/or descriptiveness. However, one of the important dividing lines can be drawn when it comes to dealing with methods, future uncertainty, and types of futures that the scenarios claim to work with, which we pointed to in the introduction of this paper (see Sus and Hadeed 2020). The *predictive* and *forecasting* approaches seek to develop scenarios for already known (albeit uncertain) risks, and chart probable futures and the way they will most likely play out. Often focused on specific issues and concrete areas, these approaches sometimes work with quantitative methods, extrapolating certain data trends to the future and constructing scenarios by identifying the (probable) course of events and their outcomes based on existing data. Such an approach allows for distinguishing and categorizing risks that are more and less likely to occur. Alternatively, the predictive approaches could also work with predetermined sets of risks to which they devise scenarios covering potential responses and the most likely obstacles that these might face. The goal of scenarios developed in this tradition is to make the probable futures visible and calculable and categorise the risks likely to come based on the data at hand and our understanding of them (Dunn Caveltly 2020).

On the other hand, forecasting and predictive approaches struggle with unexpected events and often also with the broader picture. The *foresight* scenario analysis (used in re-ENGAGE) rather seeks to embrace the uncertain future course of events. As such, it seeks to prompt thinking about futures that might not be readily apparent based on the present data but whose early signals we might already be seeing. This does not mean that foresight analysis does not work with currently existing data and trends or with analogies with the past. Instead, it means that it deliberately seeks to widen the pool of what is considered and how it might matter in the future. The task of the scenario development process in this respect is to help

the analysts, as well as policy-makers, who should be explicitly included in the scenario development, to expand their thinking about what is relevant for the future (Cuhls 2020). The foresight scenario exercises should allow them to be better attuned to not yet properly recognised data and signals of change in the analysed environment, internal societal and political contradictions and conflicts between social forces, which (or whose interactions) otherwise might not be considered. Foresight scenarios thus do not claim to uncover the most likely course of the future. While constructing internally consistent and logically developing stories about the future, they aim to spur our thinking about the future into novel directions, in some cases even crossing the boundaries of what was previously thought to be possible. Moreover, thinking about previously unanticipated futures is supposed to strengthen the ability to expect and adapt to future uncertainties in general (Dunn Cavelty 2020, Sus and Hadeed 2020).

In re-ENGAGE, the foresight exercise and the specific scenarios developed within it will help to identify potential novel avenues of foreign influence in Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans and their interplay with particular features of hybrid regimes in both regions as well as more general future strategies of the EU competitors influenced by unforeseen events (e.g. a type of regime change or a sudden shift in preferences due to a major crisis elsewhere). Moreover, due to the involvement of partners from both of the regions in the foresight process, the re-ENGAGE will aim to go beyond the democratization (or stabilization and resilience) futures currently considered in the EU debates (see Buras et al. 2024) and tap into regional debates, expectations and desires that all form the regional multiverse where the EU policies coexist with local discourses and the activities of other external actors (see Osland et al. 2024, 24). As such, re-ENGAGE scenarios aim to provide a counterpoint to futures currently considered in the EU policies and, by doing so, inform the debate on their revision or finetuning. To set the re-ENGAGE approach to foresight in the ongoing discussions, the following section will thus briefly turn to the current foresight practice and existing scenarios outlining the development of both of the studied regions.

The State of Foresight in the EU and Beyond

The scenario design and foresight method has migrated from the security community to the business and policy planning process more broadly, notably being used to visualise climate change and energy futures (Wiebe et al. 2018), only to return to the former in the wake of major geopolitical events in the past two decades. Multiple observers have recently noted that different forms of foresight and scenario analysis have proliferated immensely in the past two decades among the security and international politics community (Sus and Hadeed 2020). Following the major unpredicted events that changed the course of international and European politics (the 9/11 attacks, the Arab Spring, the Russian occupation of Crimea, Brexit, the Hamas attack on Israel, etc.), the demand for ‘thinking the unpredictable’ and spotting previously unrecognised trends has grown and gained in relevance as local ‘black swan’ events have consequences far beyond the place where they happen.

In effect, most of the major think tanks, national policy planning agencies and international organisations (including the EU and NATO) have started to be involved in developing scenario and foresight outputs. In the area of international politics and security, the NATO Strategic Foresight Analysis (Strategic Foresight Analysis Team 2013), the US National Intelligence Council Global Trends reports (The Strategic Futures Group 2021), and the UK MoD Global Strategic Trends (Ministry of Defense 2024) are often mentioned as examples of long-running and widely recognised foresight reports. Major US and European think tanks, such as the EUISS, RAND, CSIS, the Atlantic Council, SWP and many others, have then been recognised as key sites involved in producing foresight analysis. At the same time, many private think tanks and research institutes have developed a more specific focus on future risks (EIU 2024; AXA 2024).

Specifically, the EU has increasingly been involved in scenario and foresight analysis and foresight was explicitly recognised as one of the important areas of policy-making by the 2019 European Commission with its dedicated Commissioner for Inter-institutional Relations and Foresight. While the Commission portfolio was reorganised in 2024, several dedicated agencies, institutions and collaborative mechanisms have been tasked with foresight analysis in the previous years. Among the most notable is the European Strategy and Policy Analysis System, which is engaged in various horizon scanning exercises and producing Global Trends Reports (The Strategic Futures Group 2021). Also of note are the various foresight reports produced by the Joint Research Center of the

European Commission (JRC), which has become the leading site for foresight methodologies in EU institutions. JRC-produced foresight analyses, in most of the cases, cover wider issues, such as technological, demographical and environmental changes and their impact on various areas of European policies (e.g. Mochan et al. 2024), but they have often crossed over into security and international politics (Vesnic Alujevic et al. 2023). The Policy Foresight Unit within the Secretariat of the European Parliament also produces forward-looking foresight studies mapping the potentially significant future risks in the framework of the Future Shocks series (EPRS 2022; EPRS 2023) as well as more general guideline documents outlining the best practices of scenario analysis (Van Woensel 2021). Moreover, the EU has included foresight and scenario elements in several of its Horizon 2020 and Horizon Europe project calls (Saz-Carranza et al. 2023; Sus and Hadeed 2020). The re-ENGAGE foresight scenario methodology takes inspiration from the scenario methodologies used in many of these existing studies, while it specifically seeks to design an approach which would account for the turbulent context of the hybrid regimes in Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans and the future role that the EU's competitors might play in their development. As such, the re-ENGAGE scenarios are focused more specifically on the interaction of different external players with the particular political and social environment (hybrid regimes) existing in the two regions, and they pay specific attention to the coexistence of different future expectations on the local and international side.

Given their geopolitical importance, it is unsurprising that the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe have already become the focus of numerous scenario exercises, which have sought to chart their future development in the context of the Russian war on Ukraine (and their development in the years before). Among the more thorough examples, the European Parliament's study on this topic outlined four different scenarios of the state of EU-Ukraine-Russia relations in the year 2035 (Damen 2023), and the European Commission developed scenarios focused on the future of Western Balkans research and innovation policies as well as their integration with the EU more generally (European Commission 2021). Think tank Visegrad Insight ran a series of workshops and devised a series of scenarios on the EU enlargement and the futures of the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe (Visegrad Insight 2023). In other recent examples, several think tank scenario exercises focused specifically on the scenarios of possible Russian futures in the context of the ongoing effects of the Russian war on Ukraine (Michel 2024; European Leadership Network 2023; Havlíček 2024), whereas a more detailed analysis by the

Aspen Institute outlined scenarios for several policy areas in the Western Balkans (Aspen Institute 2023).

Re-ENGAGE scenarios depart from these not necessarily only in the applied methodology of scenario-building but also more substantially in focus on the future involvement of the EU's competitors and other actors in Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans in the regional hybrid regimes. This will add to the already existing scenarios by considering the interplay of foreign influence, the specific dynamics of local regimes and the impact on the EU activities in the two regions. Furthermore, the re-Engage foresight deliberately attempts to step outside the previously imagined futures through its stronger focus on the interaction of different local and external forces and their imaginaries of the future, thus allowing for sketching novel trajectories of possible development.

A critical appraisal of a method and its potential

As the brief review in the preceding section demonstrated, a real foresight industry has emerged, surrounding the world of policymaking and creating an intersection between the world of analysts and that of policy professionals. This industry draws its purpose and legitimacy from the perceived need to develop a culture of anticipation and preparation to face ever-more complex global challenges (Jeffrey and Dyson 2021; Wenger et al. 2023). Foresight exercises and the development of future scenarios that prompt us to use our imagination in a learned and methodologically disciplined way, envision different futures and think through pathways toward those futures that are better (or at least not worse) than the present are a valuable effort. Leaving aside how much 'strategic' foresight in the sense of correctly anticipating the course of future events the many armchair futurologists are capable of producing and if this is the point of foresight in the first place (see Gaub et al. 2022), we briefly present a critical interrogation of the normative dimension of foresight production before moving to the methodological toolbox.

This reflection should start with a series of questions. From what standpoint is foresight predominantly formulated, and how does this shape the resulting imageries of the future (Altstaedt 2024; Andersson and Rindzevičiūtė 2015)? Whose interests does it advance – and who is left 'futureless'? And perhaps most importantly, how can strategic foresight be conceived as a critical strategy to

react to problems existing in the present as well as in the future and devise innovative means to manage and steer change through experimental and participatory policy designs that have the public interest and welfare as their ultimate goal (Ditrych and Sánchez Avilés 2023)?

‘Seeing’ the future has conventionally been a means of authority, as it is intimately related to the exercise of power and (re-)produces its existing configurations. This is the case even more so in the modern ‘risk society’ (Beck 1992) – one where, among other things, security is enacted through practices of risk management (de Goede 2008; Aradau and van Munster 2011). Understanding strategic foresight and scenario building as a method through which it is done as a critical strategy is an invitation to unpack the relations between making sense of the future, the exercise of power at present and sensitivity to the ways different positionalities of participating social actors influence their imagination of future (Altstaedt 2024). The re-ENGAGE foresight exercises and fieldwork experiments will explicitly react to this normative aspiration and actively seek to make visible the dissonances between different visions of the future that are present among different social groups. This is not only a valuable insight in itself, as it helps us to understand the multiverse of hybrid regimes and external actors in the studied regions (see Osland et al 2024), but becoming attuned to these differences and contradictions also helps us to spot the overlooked trends which are more apparent to some groups than others and account for the future political relevance of the differing perceptions of the past and the political contradiction of present political and social orders. Some scenarios developed in the re-ENGAGE foresight process will also include these considerations and identified trends and patterns.

Second, foresight exercise and scenario building, more specifically, are an invitation to advance an inclusive, collective imaginative process that incorporates many perspectives, including a variety of local and subaltern ones, to produce better images of the future. These imaginaries are conditioned on the capacity to collectively better understand differential effects of future social processes on various elements of the relevant social field – and the potential impact that these drivers have on the future interactions of the actors that inhabit this field. The normative appeal of participation in foresight is inherent – including in ‘wind tunnelling’ response strategies from viewpoints representing different positionalities and desires. In the re-ENGAGE case, this would mean testing the existing and planned EU policies in Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans against the identified trends and preferences of different social groups which might drive

the regional politics in the future. Yet there is also a pragmatic case to be made, as diversity may balance off ideological *a priori*, mitigate echo chamber effects in the foresight process and limit blind spots, availability heuristics (Kahneman 2011) and adverse impacts of motivated reasoning.

Third, collectively generating ‘memories of the future’ through foresight does not need to be only about anticipation and preparation through devising and wind tunnelling corresponding response strategies, as important as these may be. It can also be a learning tool (Herrmann and Jong 2007), as it critically assesses intersubjective assumptions about causal mechanisms that result in one future and not another. This can be done through ‘forward reasoning’ (Bernstein et al. 2000), learning from the future as it unreels while confronting it with the foresight narratives that are anchored in these very assumptions. In other words, the foresight exercise presents an opportunity to learn from the future by being ‘faced’ with it in the coming years and revisiting the basic assumptions about the dominant trends and driving forces upon which the thinking about potential futures was done. Naturally, this requires the outputs of the forecast to be as transparent as possible about the initial assumptions and the process of designing the futures, and the potential divergent trajectories should also be noted. This very factor of the re-ENGAGE approach to foresight helps to provide critical feedback to current EU policies and the assumptions on which they are made (see Buras et al. 2024). Moreover, since the foresight exercise and scenario development should feed into policy recommendations developed in the later stages of the project, we can at least partially already see which trends could be materializing and which are not.

Scenario-Building: A design protocol

Scenario development is conceived in re-ENGAGE as a method of strategic foresight serving to develop collective intelligence in a structured way to help policy-makers be better prepared to anticipate previously unforeseen future trends, design efficient policies and boost shock resilience (see European Commission 2024). For the purposes of this design protocol, the scenarios will be explorative and will focus on selected outside powers and their interactions with the regional hybrid regimes. The scenarios devised in re-ENGAGE are specifically intended to assess the future involvement of Russia, China, Türkiye and the USA as four key external powers in the Western Balkans and the Eastern Neighbourhood regions, and the countries of which they consist – and, in particular, how this involvement can affect the EU’s

democracy promotion and resilience-building strategies (see Bolkvadze et al. 2024; Buras et al. 2024; Daniel et al. 2024; Giske et al. 2024; Mishkova et al. 2024).

The scenarios' **explorative** (or 'descriptive') character means that they will collectively explore alternative futures and the pathways leading to them.¹ They will not predict the future but rather describe possible *futures* through narratives based on available intelligence and foreknowledge (Kuosa 2016; Costanzo and MacKay 2009; Schwarz 2023). It is important to clarify that these narratives are constructed with the understanding that they are supposed to devise futures of complex and nonlinear systems. Their complexity implies that perfect information about their initial conditions is never available (Bousquet and Curtis 2011). This naturally limits the potential to predict their future state. Their nonlinearity also suggests that this future state will not be a simple extension of the past (although the past naturally weighs on it). In other words, the future will certainly not be like any of the – fundamentally better knowable – states of the past (cf. Doran 1999, see also the non-linear trajectories of the various narratives in the futures cone in the second section).

The explorative character of the scenarios further means that they will not be 'normative' in the sense of devising ideal futures which should be achieved – or dystopias to be avoided at all costs. That does not mean that the normative dimension should be elided, however. While it will not be integrated into future projection activities covering horizon scanning and scenario writing, it will feature in the response strategies' design stage. At the same time, the explorative nature of scenarios means that they are conceived as a tool where participants involved in the collective foresight exercise can realise their biases and assumptions and confront them with others. In this respect, the re-ENGAGE foresight exercises (taking place in the first stages of the process) will aim to involve researchers from different countries involved in the project but also reach beyond the project and invite other experts and policy professionals from the analysed countries, the European research community, and EU policy professionals.

Zooming in on external actors means that the scenarios should not encompass the entire future landscapes of these regions within the set timeframe (envisioned as medium-term). The focus of the foresight and the scenario

¹ Mietzner and Reger (2004) distinguish between descriptive scenarios (describing a possible future) and normative scenarios (positing an ideal future and designing pathways to it). Borjeson et al. (2006) further divide descriptive scenarios into predictive (*what will happen*), i.e. instruments of forecasting, and explorative scenarios (*what can happen*), i.e. instruments of foresight.

narratives should rather be the intentions and capacities of the external powers (Russia, China, Türkiye, and the USA) in the particular space and their dynamic interaction with the two regional environments. In other words, the scenarios will concentrate on the main variables which shape the behaviour of the chosen external powers in the two regions, when it comes to their core interests and perceptions of these spaces as well as their capabilities. These actor-centric projections will be set within the broader circumstances that shape the behaviour of these actors in the two regions – most importantly, the dynamics related to great power rivalry at the ‘macroscale’ of global politics and the specific context of the individual country levels (for background work on these issues see Bolkvadze et al. 2024; Daniel et al 2024; Mishkova et al. 2024).

The conceptual and methodological framework outlined in this paper will be employed throughout the project's second year for developing specific foresight scenarios. These will be divided into two papers focused on the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe, respectively. The process of developing the scenarios will be detailed in the papers, but it is envisioned to take place through several workshops bringing together project partners, policy professionals and local experts in various stages of the horizon scanning phase and development of the particular scenario plotlines.

The scenario building exercise will consist of **three main stages to be implemented** over 2025:

- **horizon scanning** developing key future building blocs (predetermined elements, drivers, critical uncertainties);
- **narrative construction**, including determining indicators and wild cards;
- devising and ‘wind tunnelling’ **response strategies**.

1) Horizon Scanning

The foresight exercise will commence with the horizon scanning part (see Cuhls 2019). This phase will rely mostly on desk research, research that was already done within re-ENGAGE (see Bolkvadze et al. 2024; Daniel et al 2024; Mishkova et al. 2024 and the forthcoming studies), and the collective reasoning of the selected project members, the outcome of this activity should be the identification of key constants (predetermined elements), trends and signals of future development.

To prompt thinking about potential future trends, the participants in the foresight exercise will employ the **futures triangle tool**, specifically in its version

adapted for scenario-building (Fergnani 2020). This specifically means that they will be asked to evaluate the potential building blocks of the future against the *weight of the history* (barriers to change, deep-seated perceptions and structural conditions – e.g. in the way how particular external actors historically see the two regions and what capacities they have developed), the *push of the present* (the key currently observable trends – e.g. what are the key methods of influence building in the two regions) and the *pull of the future* (the key identifiable desirable outcomes among actors – e.g. the vision of regional hegemony).

The identified variables will be more specifically translated into the basic future building blocks for the short to medium term (provisionally envisioning the year 2035 as the key endpoint), which will be classified according to the four external powers, the two regions and the **three main focus areas**:

1. The external powers' intentions and capabilities and the variables of their formation in material, representational (e.g. dominant geopolitical discourses present among the foreign policy elites) and praxeological (e.g. repeated patterns of behaviour) terms (for a background assessment, see Daniel et al. 2024).
2. Their dynamic interaction with the regional environments and the effects of this interaction at individual country levels, considering the ecosystem where the external powers' activities are realised (see Van Woensel 2021). Here, the key focus will be on the factors that enable or impede the activities of the examined actors and trends related to these factors. In this respect, the foresight exercise will build on other insights already developed in previous re-ENGAGE publications focused on the nature of the hybrid regimes in Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans (Bolkvadze et al. 2024; Mishkova et al. 2024) and the forthcoming studies focused on the sources of regional vulnerability and/or resilience towards external influence. Moreover, this stage will make use of insights gathered through the fieldwork process and the qualitative and quantitative micro studies (see Giske et al. 2024).
3. Finally, the horizon scanning will outline the key trends related to great power rivalry at the macroscale of global politics as a whole and the role these might play in the activities of the selected powers.

The lists can include as many items as the participants in the exercise agree on. While the horizon scanning will draw on the existing background papers, the process might reach well beyond the trends already identified in the existing studies.

The participants in the horizon scanning process will be specifically prompted to consider crosscutting issues and trends as well as interactions.

This process will result in the identification of the **three types of future building blocks**: *predetermined elements, driving forces and critical uncertainties*. Drawing on Bernstein et al. (2000), we define them as follows:

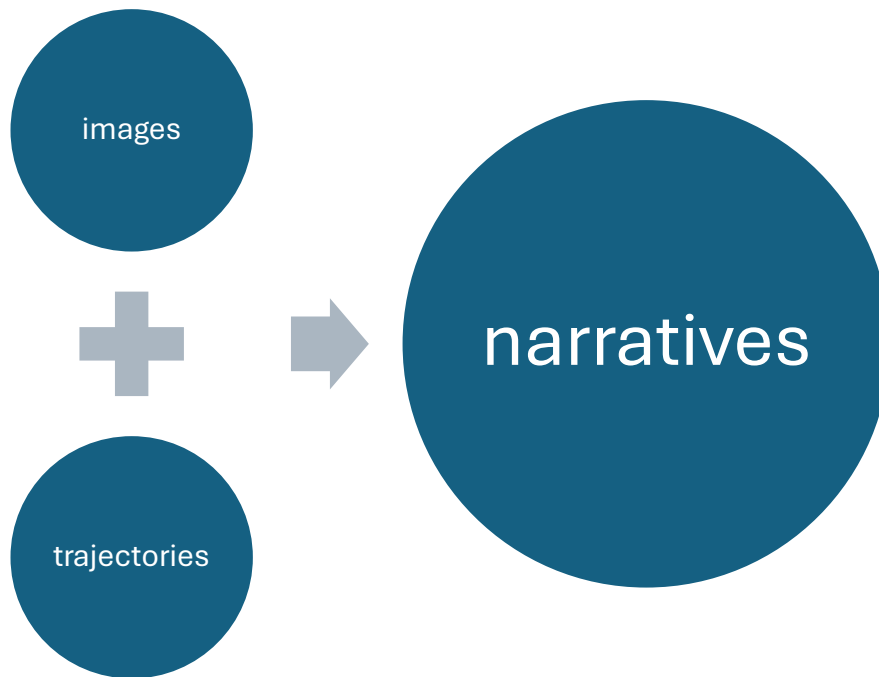
Predetermined elements. Predetermined elements are future realities or trends that can be considered relatively certain within the set timeframe (-2035). They are structural or systemic features rather than, e.g., events such as elections, of which it is known in advance on what date they will take place. The relative certainty may be a subject of contestation among the participants of the exercise and should be established by their (near) consensus. Examples of predetermined elements in this scenario exercise may include patterns of political polarisation, long-held geopolitical preferences pointing to alignment to some of the external actors or economic inequality in the two regional environments, or a (macroscale) relative distribution of power among the three great powers.

Driving forces. Driving forces are important trends that constitute elements of causal mechanisms shaping future developments. Like predetermined elements, they are not singular events such as an electoral victory. Rather, they represent longer trends, longer-held interests and strategic considerations that drive the behaviour of the states. Some examples of driving forces are the intentions of the Russian regime to establish its influence, control or even sovereignty over the Eastern neighbourhood as a part of its imperial restoration project, and its capacities to exercise influence operations in the pursuit of these objectives, and China's strategic interest in enhancing its influence on the trade routes connecting Asia and the EU.

Critical uncertainties. Critical uncertainties stand here for determinants such as shock events ('unknown unknowns') but also outcomes of certain volatile trends that are not, in principle, predictable ('known unknowns'). A careful assessment of critical uncertainties is indispensable for the success of this scenario exercise. This is because it is the combination of the relatively more or less known elements in the form of the predetermined elements and driving forces, and those not so known ones (here critical uncertainties) that creates an added value of scenario building as a method of reasoning about the future, as opposed to, e.g., standard social science theories. Critical uncertainties are one important vehicle to reflect nonlinearity in foresight as they endow the scenario plot lines with a potential for discontinuity, disruption and branching out into the future ('bifurcation'). Some examples of critical uncertainties are an eruption of a new conflict, a regime collapse potentially coupled with a geopolitical realignment (either in one of the four powers, or in a country in the region) and a major health or environmental crisis with political, social and economic effects that dramatically alters the conditions in which the three external powers pursue their interests.

2) Scenario Narrative Construction

In the second stage, scenarios as consistent and structurally differentiated narratives about the future (van der Heijden 1996: 29) will be constructed as combinations of selected previously listed future building blocks. Not all the building blocks need to be used in the end, and some can be used in more than one scenario. They serve as a thinking tool to organise collective thought about a potential future rather than as a building material that has to be consumed. The narrative construction will proceed in **three steps**.



In the first step, several basic **images** of the future character of the involvement of the four external powers in the two regions and their impact on those regions in 10 to 15 years will be outlined. Like the final narratives, they should be differentiated and sketch potential configurations in which all four external powers' involvements are modelled together (naturally, the level of detail in the involvement of each actor will differ), and which consider the role of the EU. Inventing temporary names for the rough images (e.g., 'A New Russian-Chinese Empire' for an image where Russia comes to dominate in the region politically and China economically) may be useful. To facilitate the differentiation between the images, they may be structured as including a standard (or 'baseline') image together with several probable (or 'canonical variation'), plausible, possible and 'impossible' images (Voros 2017, see the discussion above).

In the second step, **trajectories** leading to these basic images from the present moment should be devised and visualised as diagrams with lines but also critical junctures, or 'decision points' (Kahn and Wiener 1967). These represent points of the future where bifurcations (branching out) of the linear storylines – as well as, at a later point, a potential merging of separate lines back into one (see also Gall et al. 2022) – can take place. To return to the previous image of 'A New Russian-Chinese Empire', we can, for example, think of a (catastrophic) storyline where the U.S. withdraws from Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans, while a divided EU cannot

agree on an effective policy (and its implantation) and effectively cedes the influence in many of the regional countries to its rivals.

While in the first step, the objective is to imagine potential futures based on combinations of the blocks identified in the horizon scanning stage. Still, without the burden of causal thinking (*how to get to them*), in this second step, the objective is to think through possible (complex) connections that link those futures with the present and the past. Unlike in normal theories, here equifinality and multifinality (multiple pathways leading to the same results or similar processes with widely different outcomes) are incorporated in the reasoning about the future in the scenario building, and they are not seen as a ‘problem’ (see Gall et al. 2022).

To assist in thinking about the trajectories of the nonstandard projections, we will employ some of the concepts from the ‘foresight zoo’ featuring *grey rhinos* (probable but ignored high-impact events), *black swans* (unforeseeable high-impact events) and *black jellyfish* (phenomena thought to be understood and controlled but turning out to be much more complex and uncertain than expected). While devising the storylines, the participants in the scenario-building exercise will be explicitly asked to think about these types of phenomena and – where appropriate – they will be incorporated into the final scenario document.

In the third step, **narratives** combining the images with the trajectories will be written as stories of the future and potential pathways leading to it. Their final number will be identical to the number of basic images devised earlier. Each narrative should be further complemented by lists of indicators and wildcards.

Wild cards. Wild cards are unlikely events disrupting the causal mechanism through which the image of the future and the present moment are connected in the scenario. They are another means of accounting for nonlinearity, unpredictability and even randomness in addition to critical uncertainties. Unlike critical uncertainties, wild cards are not integrated in the scenario plot lines but rather remain on the ‘outside’. Therefore, they suggest how the plot line – which can feature internal branching out and in as a result of critical uncertainties – can be disrupted in a way that shifts the future away from the image on which the given scenario is based.

Indicators. Indicators are cues that allow the scenarios to act as sensemaking devices (Walton, O’Kane and Ruwhiu 2019). They are observable and measurable characteristics that allow both the author and the audience to assess whether a future unreels along the plot established by the scenario. An indicator for a hypothetical scenario ‘A New Russian–Chinese Empire’ could be a *coup d’état* in Armenia that would install a vassal regime in the country and wider presence of Chinese investments tied to specific political goals. Indicators are indispensable for establishing a ‘reality value’ of the scenario over time and also for learning enacted in the forward tracking process (see above).

3) Response strategies

The scenarios conceived in the previous two stages serve as a springboard for assessing 1) the EU’s **readiness** to respond to events in the Western Balkans and the Eastern Neighbourhood, which are impacted by the presence and actions of the United States, Russia, China and Türkiye, as well as 2) the general **strategic soundness and clarity** regarding linking available EU resources to (normatively set) objectives against the backdrop of the foreseeable dynamics in the two regions. As such, the scenarios will feature a brief section outlining the implications for the EU.

Furthermore, the planned inclusion of policy professionals, as well as the involvement of project partners and other experts from the studied countries in different phases of the foresight and scenario development process, will also help to account for the potential bias in the present EU thinking of the countries and their relations with external powers (Van Woensel 2021). While the scenarios will be specifically written with the EU as the main actor for whom they are created in mind, they will also keep up with the normative stance outlined in the previous section. They will point to the diverging visions of the future of different actors and social groups and the implications these divergencies might have (see also Osland et al. 2024).

This assessment of existing EU policies and thinking about the roles of external powers and the two regions will further provide a foundation for policy recommendations to be formulated in the final stage of the project. Both the existing

and the new proposed strategies and specific initiatives can be wind-tunnelled at this stage by incorporating the EU as an actor into the scenario plot lines, in particular around critical junctures/decision points. Some scenarios based on black swan events or defined by various wildcards might be turned into smaller 'war gaming' exercises focused on the EU responses to these events and developments and testing preparedness of the EU institutions. We envision that such an exercise will be carried out in the project's later phases and will be connected to the preparation of specific policy recommendations.

Conclusion: Charting the Way Forward

In this paper, we aimed to provide an introduction to how the re-ENGAGE project understands foresight and scenario analysis and how it will be practically employed. We situated the re-ENGAGE approach to foresight in broader conceptual, methodological, and normative debates and pointed out our intention of broadening the imagination concerning the range of possible futures as well as factors that will play a role in their shaping. In the second part of the paper, we outlined the more specific approach for the development of particular scenarios in the three-stage process of horizon scanning, scenario narrative construction, and analysis of the potential response strategies.

As we pointed out throughout the paper, we understand foresight and scenario construction as a collective process. Hence, the next stage of the process, which will take place in the coming months and the first quarter of 2025, is envisioned as consisting of sketching the first drafts of the horizon scanning, but also of a series of workshops with the participation of the members of the re-ENGAGE research team. In these meetings, we aim to develop the horizon scanning phase of the foresight process, and test and discuss the first version of scenario building blocks created on the basis of existing re-ENGAGE background studies and additional desk research. In the next phase (second and third quarter of 2025), these building blocks will be revised and turned into the first versions of basic storylines and different scenarios. These will be again subjected to collective debate among the re-ENGAGE team and invited external experts and policy-makers and will be further refined. In the last stage, the final versions of the scenarios will be turned into the planned written outputs and used to assess the EU approaches and policies to Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans as well as to its competing actors in the two regions.

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ABOUT RE-ENGAGE

Russia's war against Ukraine has radically altered European security. Confronted by the direst security crisis in decades, EU policymakers are forced to fundamentally rethink their security policies. Europe has demonstrated unexpected unity and resolve, adopting a series of sanctions against Russia, increasing national defence spending, but also by deciding on a historic revival of the EU enlargement process.

Still, there is an urgent need to make sure that this process contributes to democratic, well-functioning and stable neighbourhood states, capable of countering external threats, particularly those posed by hybrid warfare. A thorough investigation is required to determine how this can be achieved without compromising the EU's values and security in the current context.

RE-ENGAGE's overarching ambition is to assist the EU in refining its foreign policy toolbox, including its enlargement and neighbourhood policies. This will enhance the Union's geopolitical leverage and provide better tools for democracy promotion in its neighbourhood. To achieve this goal, RE-ENGAGE will conduct in-depth studies in six candidate countries – three in the Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia & Herzegovina and Serbia) and three in the Eastern Neighbourhood (Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine).