The Western Confrontation with Russia: Scenario Planning in the Area from the Baltic Sea to the Wider Black Sea

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Geopolitical Analysis: The Sources of Confrontation

Over the last few years the confrontation between Russia and the West has made the headlines of plenty of academic and media analysis. The conflict in Ukraine and the ensuing Western sanctions, the alleged collusion of the last presidential elections in the US and the angry retaliation by the Congress, the US-Russia *tit-for-tat* diplomatic spats, NATO's and Russian strategic and military build-ups in the Baltic Sea and the Black Sea areas, the growing hybrid and cyber threats have plagued relations between Russia and the West turning them from partnership and cooperation into sheer confrontation. Not surprisingly, the countries from the Baltic Sea to the Wider Black Sea, located at the epi-center of this confrontation, have been struggling to re-balance their positions against Washington, Brussels, and Moscow.

The sources of this confrontation are highly controversial, even among Western scholars. On the one hand, there is a large score of analysts who blame Moscow's expansionism. For example, Jan Bugajski is persuaded that: "The primary objective of Moscow's foreign policy is to restore Russia as a major centre or pole of power in a multipolar or multi-centric world. [...] the Kremlin reinvigorated its global ambitions and regional assertiveness."[1]   He went even further with absolving the West of any responsibility for the outbreak of this confrontation: "Moscow's security is not challenged by the accession to NATO of neighbouring states. However, its ability to control the security dimensions and foreign policy orientations of these countries is challenged by their incorporation in the Alliance because NATO provides security guarantees against Russia's potential aggression."[2]

In contrast, Dmitri Trenin, director of Carnegie Moscow claimed that Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland would be safe, since Moscow had no interest in risking nuclear war by attacking a NATO member state, and the sphere of Russian control to which Putin aspired certainly excluded these countries[3]. He further argued that Russian defense planning remained consistently focused on the United States and NATO, which the Kremlin still considered its primary challenges. Russia's National Security Strategy for 2016 described U.S. policy toward Russia as containment; it also made clear that Russia considered the buildup of NATO's military capabilities a threat, as it did the

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[1] Jan Bugajski and Margarita Assenova- Op.cit.

[2] Ibidem.

[3] Dmitri Trenin- "The Revival of the Russian Military", in Foreign Affairs, May/June 2016, pp. 23-29.

development of U.S. ballistic missile defenses. To counter these moves, Russia was modernizing its nuclear arsenal and its own air and missile defenses.

On the other hand, professor John Mearsheimer contended that the Ukraine crisis could not be blamed entirely on Russia. "The United States and its European allies share most of the responsibility for that crisis. The taproot of the trouble is NATO enlargement, the central element of a larger strategy to move Ukraine out of Russia's orbit and integrate it into the West. At the same time, the EU's expansion eastward and the West's backing of the pro-democracy movement in Ukraine—beginning with the Orange Revolution in 2004—were critical elements, too."[4] Mearsheimer further explained Russia's aggressive reaction from a geopolitical perspective where great powers were always sensitive to potential threats near their home territory. Eventually, Mearsheimer suggested that the United States and its Allies should consider making Ukraine a neutral buffer between NATO and Russia instead of westernizing it. The goal would be to have a sovereign Ukraine that falls neither in the Russian nor in the Western camp.

Working Hypotheses for Scenario Planning

This **Buffer Zone scenario** has been supported by other most prominent international strategists. For example, in an interview with the National Interest[5], Henry Kissinger was arguing for exploring the possibilities of a status of non-military grouping on the territory between Russia and the existing frontiers of NATO. More concretely, he suggested that some cooperation between the West and Russia in a militarily nonaligned Ukraine is examined. Henry Kissinger was warning in an earlier interview with "Der Spiegel"[6] that Russia has been an important part of the international system that might be useful in solving all sorts of other crises, for example in the agreement on nuclear proliferation with Iran or over Syria.

Skeptical about NATO's ability to confront Moscow, STRATFOR's George Friedman suggested a US strategy of indirect engagement to limit the development of Russia as a hegemonic power. The key element of that strategy would consist of **an Inter-marium[7] Alliance[8]**, including countries on the Estonia to Azerbaijan line, which shared the primary interest of retaining their sovereignty in the face of Russian power, and feared that the Ukrainian war might spread and directly affect their national security interests.

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[4] John J. Mearsheimer- "Why the Ukraine Crisis is the West's Fault?", in Foreign Affairs, September/October 2014.
[5] **** - "The Interview: Henry Kissinger" on 19 August 2015, from http://nationalinterest.org/feature/the-interview-henry-kissinger-13615
[6] **** - "Interview with Henry Kissinger: 'Do We Achieve World Order Through Chaos or Insight?", on 13 November 2014, from http://www.spiegel.de
[7] Broadly speaking, the area from the Baltic Sea to the Wider Black Sea.
[8] George Friedman- "From Estonia to Azerbaijan: American Strategy after Ukraine", STRATFOR's Geopolitical Weekly, March 2014, from http://www.stratfor.com/weekly/estonia-azerbaijan-american-strategy-after-ukraine#axzz3CjiYrwKf

In the wake of the UK referendum on leaving the EU (BREXIT), the **Western Decline scenario** has become more credible than in the past. Adding to a plethora of events over the last years which have seriously questioned the European project and the West European partnership with the United States, the impact of BREXIT on the EU might be growing uncertainty and possible turmoil.
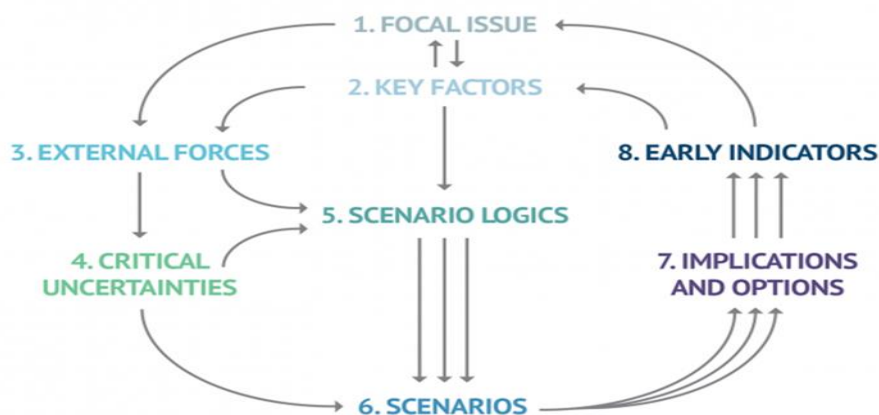
The scenario of **Regional Chaos** in the wake of a potential turn of the current geopolitical confrontation into a regional war has been little seriously considered so far. However, particularly in the context of Ukrainian requests for the West to help in arming Kiev in view of enabling it to better defend itself against Russian aggression in Eastern Ukraine, the scenario of uncontrolled regional military escalation could not be ruled out.

Assessing On-line Scenarios against the Scenario Planning Method

Scenario planning is a structured way for organisations to think about the future. Scenarios are stories about how the future might unfold and how this might affect an issue that confronts an organization. They are possible views of the world, described in narrative form, that provide a context in which managers can make decisions.

According to Jay Ogilvy[9], the scenario planning process usually unfolds according to an orderly, methodical process. There are many authors who offered scenario planning methodologies. These include the steps taken from the identification of the issue and of the main drivers of change, external forces, and critical uncertainties, all the way through to scenario writing and testing. The methodology proposed by Stratfor's Jay Ogilvy[10] is linking scenario planning to geopolitical analysis, and it is highlighting how the two methods may work together (see Picture below):

THE EIGHT-STEP SCENARIO PLANNING PROCESS

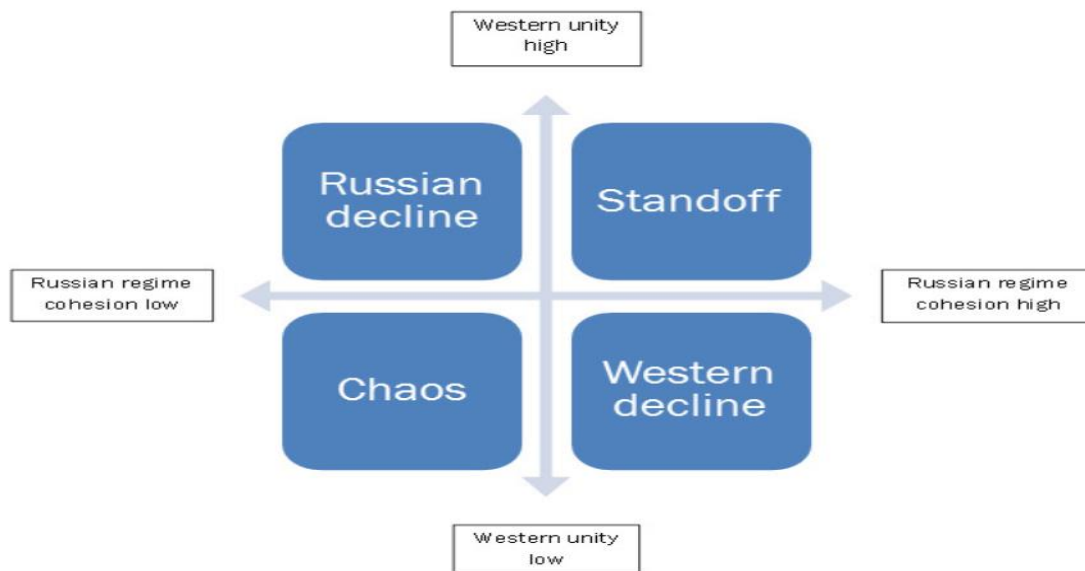Copyright Stratfor 2015   www.stratfor.com

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[9] Jay Ogilvy- "Scenario Planning and Strategic Forecasting" from
http://www.forbes.com/sites/stratfor/2015/01/08/scenario-planning-and-strategic-forecasting/#4852c7226b7b, published on 8 January 2015.
[10] Jay Ogilvy- "Scenario Planning and Strategic Forecasting", 2015, from
https://www.stratfor.com/weekly/scenario-planning-and-strategic-forecasting

A typical scenario planning project would usually start with interviews and an initial workshop, followed by at least one month of research and writing, then a second workshop to draw implications from the ramified and refined scenarios, and eventually some time to summarize the results of the second workshop into a presentation.

Chronologically, the first attempt at describing the current confrontation between the West and Russia in the shape of scenarios for the future was the paper published, in June 2015, by Joerg Forbig "What's Ahead for Russia and the West? Four Scenarios"[11]. This was probably the researched paper that was the closest to applying the scenario planning method by fleshing out the scenarios logics around two main axes: the cohesion of the Russian regime vs. the Western European and Transatlantic unity.

In Forbrig's approach, the confrontation that Russia would be seeking with the West was critically shaped by the degrees to which both sides were able to maintain their cohesion and unity. He saw it rather as a race for time, with either side hoping that its own efforts to undermine the cohesion of the other would come to fruition before its own ranks broke apart. Consequently, while deeming the outcome of this contest as completely open, he suggested that the further evolution of relations between the West and Russia might develop around this basic fault line, which could serve to model four scenarios:

[11] Forbrig Joerg- "What's Ahead for Russia and the West: Four Scenarios", issued in June 2015 by the German Marshall Fund of the United States, Washington DC.

The paper on "New Dynamic in the East: Conflicts, Vulnerability and Dis(order)"[12] was rather focused on assessing three strategic options on how best to relate to the Russian Federation in the future by explaining their characteristics, organizing rationales, and embedded assumptions. The authors gathered military and civilian mid- to senior level security policy practitioners and experts from twenty-eight countries in the framework of an European Security Seminar East (ESS-E) at the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies. They asked them to look at three strategic options with a view to support strategic planning in future relations with Russia: Reset 2.0, Containment 2.0, and Confrontation 1.0. The two authors concluded that Containment 2.0 allowed the West to balance its interests and focus on mitigation measures. In addition, the authors thought that containment would also best manage worst case alternative future scenarios.

The paper on "Transatlantic Fragmentation and Policy Adaptations. The Security of Europe in 2025"[13] reflected a scenario-exercise involving U.S. and European policymakers, experts, and private sector representatives, aimed at presenting a credible vision for the future of transatlantic security cooperation. They looked at three different trends and their possible evolutions until 2025: (1) the articulation of domestic politics and foreign policy in the European realm; (2) the "Russian Test"; (3) the future of transatlantic military interventions.

As it becomes obvious when looking at Table 5, the latter paper is the richest in drivers of change and external forces. This might be the case, on the one hand, since this assessment has been basically made upon two and a half sets of scenarios proposed by three different authors, and, on the other hand, since this was most recently published. The downside that neither set of scenarios was directly addressing the Inter-marium region remained though.

Having ticked off in Table 5 a large number of drivers of change and external forces, it may be probably worth to address new drivers of change, which were not touched upon yet. In this vein, the most notable absences in the researched scenarios have been two inter-linked drivers of change, i.e. "the US expanding its military footprint in Eastern Europe, outside of NATO", and "building closer partnership between EU and Russia". Those drivers of change would underlie the core of the proposed Inter-marium Alliance scenario. A possible explanation of this absence may be that it might be too early after the election of the American president Donald Trump, and the historical decision made by the UK to proceed with the BREXIT to have noticed significant movements in those

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[12] Herd Graeme and Roloff Ralf - "New Dynamic in the East: Conflicts, Vulnerability and Dis(order)", Security Insights, George C. Marshall European Centre for Security Studies, Garmisch-Partenkirchen, No 12/January 2016.

[13] Balfour Rosa, Bryza Mathew, Shea Jamie - "Transatlantic Fragmentation and Policy Adaptations. The Security of Europe in 2025", "Transatlantic Security and the Future of NATO", issue 15/2017, German Marshall Fund of the United States, Washington DC, April 2017.

TABLE 5: THE USE OF DRIVERS AND EXTERNAL FACTORS IN RESEARCHED SCENARIOS

TYPE	DRIVERS OF CHANGE	FORBIG -4 SCENARIOS	HERD & ROLOFF 3 OPTIONS	BALFOUR, BRYZA, SHEA- T-A SCENARIOS
Geopolitical	ROLLING BACK EUROPEAN INTEGRATION	✓		✓
Geopolitical	WEAKENING TRANSATLANTIC LINK (NATO, NATO-EU, US-EU, TTIP)	✓	✓	✓
Geopolitical	DEEPENING AND ENLARGING EURASIAN INTEGRATION			
Geopolitical	FOSTERING WEST-RUSSIA SECURITY DIALOGUE & COOPERATION		✓	✓
Geopolitical	BUILDING CLOSER PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN EU AND RUSSIA			
Geopolitical	COMMON NEIGHBORS JOINING THE WESTERN OR THE RUSSIAN CAMPS	✓		✓
Geopolitical	WEST IGNORRING UNRECOGNIZED STATES (ABKHAZIA, SOUTH OSSETIA, TRANSNISTRIA, DONBAS)			
Ideological	RISING ANTI-WESTERN IDEOLOGIES AND POLICIES IN RUSSIA	✓	✓	✓
Ideological	RISING RUSSOPHOBIA IN THE WEST			
Security	RE-FOCUSING SECURITY ON TERRITORIAL DEFENCE	✓	✓	✓
Security	SHRINKING WESTERN INTERVENTIONISM ABROAD			✓
Security	EXPANDING RUSSIAN INTERVENTIONISM ABROAD (I.E. SYRIA, LYBIA, AFGHANISTAN, ETC.)	✓		✓
Security	THE US EXPANDING ITS MILITARY FOOTPRINT IN EASTERN EUROPE, OUTSIDE OF NATO			
Security	PERSISTING UNRESOLVED CONFLICTS IN COMMON NEIGHBORHOOD			✓
Security	RISING HYBRID THREATS	✓	✓	✓
Economic	SHRINKING ACCESS TO ENERGY FOR GEOPOLITICAL OR OTHER REASONS	✓	✓	✓
Economic	SHRINKING ECONOMIC GROWTH	✓	✓	✓
Economic	PERSISTING SANCTIONS AGAINST RUSSIA. REDUCING RUSSIAN ACCESS TO FDI	✓	✓	✓
Economic	RUSSIA SUPPORTING CLIENT STATES AND UNRECOGNIZED STATES IN COMMON NEIGHBORHOOD			
Economic	WEST SUPPORTING CLIENT STATES IN COMMON NEIGHBORHOOD		✓	✓
Political	GROWING NATIONALISM/RE-NATIONALIZING FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICIES OF STATES	✓	✓	✓
Political	RISING RADICALISM (RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISM, XENOPHOBIA)			✓
Political	RISING POLITICAL POPULISM	✓	✓	✓
Social	FAILING PLURALISTIC SOCIETIES			✓
Social	GROWING UNEMPLOYMENT RATES	✓	✓	✓
Social	GROWING GAP BETWEEN RICH AND POOR WITHIN SOCIETIES			✓
Technological	SHRINKING RUSSIAN ACCESS TO MODERN TECHNOLOGIES	✓	✓	✓
Technological	LOSING WESTERN PREEMINENCE OVER DEVELOPING MODERN TECHNOLOGIES			
TYPE	**EXTERNAL FORCES**			
Security	RISING TERRORIST THREATS			✓
Security	RISING CYBER AND ORGANIZED CRIME THREATS		✓	✓
Security	RISING WMD THREATS		✓	✓
Security	SHRINKING ACCESS TO ENERGY, FOOD, AND NATURAL RESOURCES DUE TO REGIONAL INSTABILITY			✓
Economic	SLOWING DOWN ECONOMIC GLOBALIZATION			✓
Economic	DEVELOPING EURASIAN INFRASTRUCTURE PROJECTS (F.I. BELT & ROAD)	✓		
Economic	GREENING THE ENERGY SOURCES AT GLOBAL LEVEL			
Social	RISING ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION THREATS	✓		✓
Social	AGEING POPULATION			✓
Technological	ACCELERATING TECHNOLOGICAL REVOLUTION			✓

directions. However, at this stage, those drivers of change can't be completely dismissed, while it might be worth keeping them, at this stage, as "hidden drivers of change".

Other hidden drivers of change might stem from ignorant or slightly biased Western approaches to evolutions within the Russian camp in the researched scenarios. For example, the drivers of change "deepening and enlarging the Eurasian integration" and "Russia economically supporting client and unrecognized states" cannot be stripped of their relevance to the topical issue of this research.

The outbreak of the Ukrainian crisis, and the Armenian dramatic switch of geopolitical orientation proved, in 2013-2014, that the Eurasian and the European integration processes have emerged as alternative futures for the Inter-marium states, while essentially remaining at odds with each other. Likewise, "rising Russophobia in the West" (the other side of the coin of the noted "rising anti-Western ideologies and policies in Russia"), and "losing Western preeminence over developing modern technologies" have also been left out of the researched scenarios. For example, the whole range of stories flooding the US mainstream media in early 2017 on the alleged Russian collusion with president Trump's electoral campaign in 2016, has led to rising Russophobia in the US, that was also visible in some parts of Eastern Europe.

Initial Findings from Applying the Scenario Planning Process

Having passed through the first steps of the scenario planning process: Defining the scope, trust and permission/ focal issue[σ]; Identifying Drivers of Change/Key Factors and External Forces[σ]; Ranking Drivers by Importance; and Ranking Drivers by Uncertainty, the next step would involve **building the Scenario Matrix/ Logics[σ]**.

A matrix of drivers defined by importance and uncertainty should be constructed. The purpose at this stage is to identify clearly the role the key drivers will have in the generation of the scenarios. That is, the 'critical uncertainties' in the 'scenario space' upon which the different futures will depend, and the 'pre-determined elements' in the 'forecasting space' which will feature in each of the different scenarios. The challenge of this step consists in deciding how to narrow down from the virtually infinite number of possible futures to settle on just two to five that will lead to strategic insight.

[σ] Ogilvy Jay- "Scenario Planning and Strategic Forecasting", 2015, from https://www.stratfor.com/weekly/scenario-planning-and-strategic-forecasting

To this end, in Table 6, two critical uncertainties, namely the evolution of globalization, and the cooperation/conflict rate in relations between Russia and the West were deemed as essential for responding the focal issue: **"What security scenarios would most accurately outline the confrontation between the West and Russia in the geopolitical area between the Baltic Sea and the Wider Black Sea, in 2025-2030?"** Afterwards, the drivers of change have been clustered in three main categories, and within each category, they were listed according to their assessed level of certainty: 1) Drivers largely depending on the **evolution of globalization**-marked with G; 2) Drivers largely depending on the **cooperation/conflict rate** - marked with C; 3) Drivers largely depending on **both globalization and the West-Russia relations** -marked with G, C.

Afterwards, **the key drivers of change were bolded**, in particular those assessed as highly important, low level of certainty. Eventually, the scenario matrix/logics was drawn up along the two clusters' axes: globalization thrives vs. globalization recedes; and cooperation prevails vs. conflict prevails in relations between the West and Russia, and the four proposed security scenarios responding to the focal issue of this scenario planning process emerged in the four quadrants formed along the two clusters' axes:

1) **"Buffer zone scenario"** – if globalization thrived, and cooperation prevailed;

2) **"Inter-marium Alliance scenario"**–if globalization thrived, and conflict prevailed;

3) **"Western Decline scenario"**–if globalization receded, and cooperation prevailed;

4) **"Regional Chaos scenario"** – if globalization receded, and conflict prevailed.

Cooperation Prevails

| Western Decline | Buffer Zone |

Globalization Recedes ← → **Globalization Thrives**

| Regional Chaos | Inter-marium Alliance |

Conflict Prevails

Scenario-Matrix for the Confrontation between the West and Russia in the Inter-marium, 2025-2030
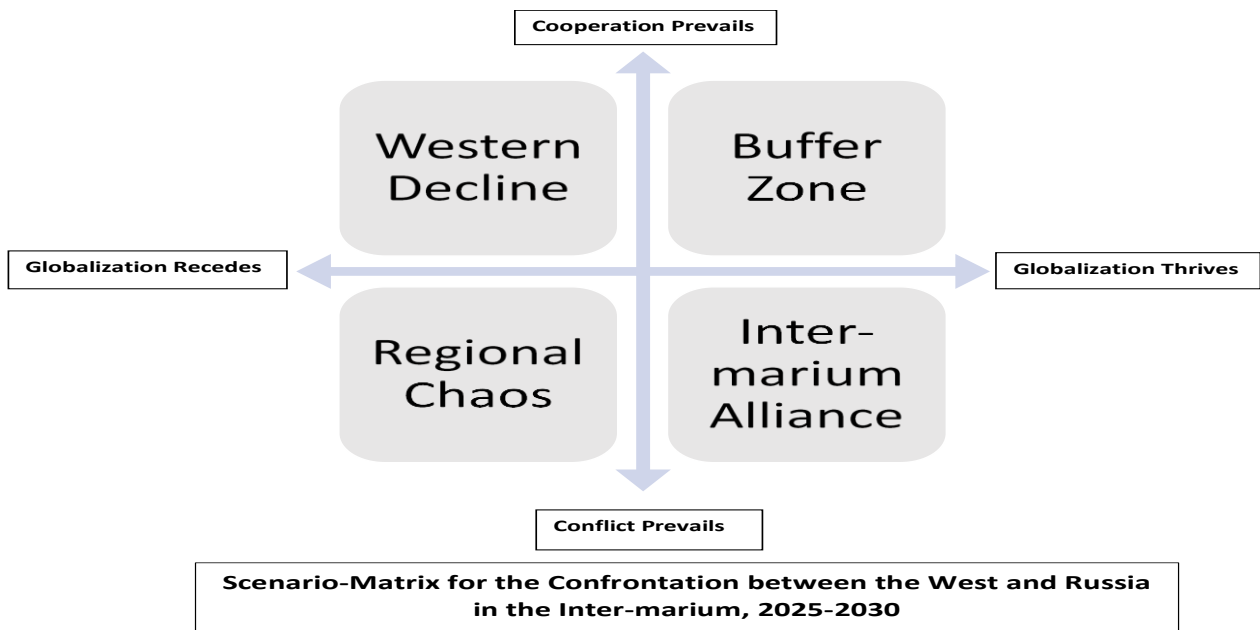
TABLE 6: RANKING DRIVERS AND EXTERNAL FORCES BY CLUSTERS (EVOLUTION OF GLOBALIZATION -G, COOPERATION/CONFLICT RATE-C)

TYPE	DRIVERS OF CHANGE	LEVEL OF IMPORTANCE	LEVEL OF CERTAINTY	CLUSTER
Geopolitical	ROLLING BACK EUROPEAN INTEGRATION	High	Low	G
Geopolitical	WEAKENING TRANSATLANTIC LINK (NATO, NATO-EU, US-EU, TTIP)	High	Medium	G
Geopolitical	DEEPENING AND ENLARGING EURASIAN INTEGRATION	High	Medium	G
Security	SHRINKING WESTERN INTERVENTIONISM ABROAD	Medium	High	G
Economic	SHRINKING ECONOMIC GROWTH	Medium	High	G
Political	GROWING NATIONALISM/RE-NATIONALIZING FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICIES OF STATES	High	High	G
Social	FAILING PLURALISTIC SOCIETIES	Medium	High	G
Social	GROWING UNEMPLOYMENT RATES	Medium	High	G
Social	GROWING GAP BETWEEN RICH AND POOR WITHIN SOCIETIES	Low	High	G
Technological	SHRINKING RUSSIAN ACCESS TO MODERN TECHNOLOGIES	High	Medium	G
Technological	LOSING WESTERN PREEMINENCE OVER DEVELOPING MODERN TECHNOLOGIES	High	Medium	G
Geopolitical	FOSTERING WEST-RUSSIA SECURITY DIALOGUE & COOPERATION	High	Low	C
Geopolitical	BUILDING CLOSER PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN EU AND RUSSIA	High	Low	C
Geopolitical	COMMON NEIGHBORS JOINING THE WESTERN OR THE RUSSIAN CAMPS	Medium	Low	C
Ideological	RISING ANTI-WESTERN IDEOLOGIES AND POLICIES IN RUSSIA	High	Medium	C
Ideological	RISING RUSSOPHOBIA IN THE WEST	High	Medium	C
Security	RE-FOCUSING SECURITY ON TERRITORIAL DEFENCE	High	High	C
Security	RISING HYBRID THREATS	High	High	C
Economic	SHRINKING ACCESS TO ENERGY FOR GEOPOLITICAL OR OTHER REASONS	High	Low	C
Economic	PERSISTING SANCTIONS AGAINST RUSSIA. REDUCING RUSSIAN ACCESS TO FDI	Low	Low	C
Economic	RUSSIA SUPPORTING CLIENT AND UNRECOGNIZED STATES IN COMMON NEIGHBORHOOD	Medium	High	C
Economic	WEST SUPPORTING CLIENT STATES IN COMMON NEIGHBORHOOD	Medium	High	C
Geopolitical	WEST IGNORRING UNRECOGNIZED STATES (ABKHAZIA, SOUTH OSSETIA, TRANSNISTRIA, DONBAS)	Low	High	G,C
Security	THE US EXPANDING ITS MILITARY FOOTPRINT IN EASTERN EUROPE, OUTSIDE OF NATO	High	Medium	G,C
Security	PERSISTING UNRESOLVED CONFLICTS IN COMMON NEIGHBORHOOD	Medium	Medium	G,C
Security	EXPANDING RUSSIAN INTERVENTIONISM ABROAD (I.E. SYRIA, LYBIA, AFGHANISTAN, ETC.)	Medium	High	G,C
Political	RISING POLITICAL POPULISM	Medium	Medium	G,C

TYPE	EXTERNAL FORCES	LEVEL OF IMPORTANCE	LEVEL OF CERTAINTY	CLUSTER
Economic	SLOWING DOWN ECONOMIC GLOBALIZATION	High	High	G
Social	AGEING POPULATION	Medium	High	G
Economic	DEVELOPING EURASIAN INFRASTRUCTURE PROJECTS (F.I. BELT & ROAD)	Medium	Medium	G
Political	RISING RADICALISM (RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISM, XENOPHOBIA)	Medium	Medium	G
Economic	**GREENING THE ENERGY SOURCES AT GLOBAL LEVEL**	**High**	**Low**	**G,C**
Security	RISING WMD THREATS	Medium	Medium	G,C
Security	RISING CYBER AND ORGANIZED CRIME THREATS	Low	Medium	G,C
Technological	ACCELERATING TECHNOLOGICAL REVOLUTION	Low	Medium	G,C
Security	**RISING TERRORIST THREATS**	**High**	**High**	**G,C**
Social	RISING ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION THREATS	Medium	High	G,C
Security	SHRINKING ACCESS TO ENERGY, FOOD, AND NATURAL RESOURCES DUE TO REGIONAL INSTABILITY	Low	Medium	G,C

The next steps of the scenario planning process -scenario building and scenario writing- should be pursued further. Eventually, the outcome of this research will determine how the proposed scenarios may impact on the future configuration of, and processes within, the geopolitical area from the Baltic to the Wider Black Sea with a view to informing decisions of relevant/interested state and non-state actors on adapting their current regional strategies.

It would be also worth noting here that the whole scenario planning process might be improved by a collective effort, as suggested by Jay Ogilvy (and other scholars). The involvement of a larger number of international experts in the identification, clustering, gauging the levels of importance and certainty of the drivers of change and external forces could add value to defining its key elements, and thus to the accuracy of the ensuing strategic foresight emerging from the respective scenarios.