Scenarios for Governance Breakdown and Violent Conflict in the EU’s Neighbourhood

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This booklet presents 13 scenarios for governance breakdown and violent conflict in the EU’s neighbourhood which were created in the context of the EU-LISTCO research project.

Scenarios are plausible thought experiments about alternative future developments. Each is useful for learning something new about a topic and its uncertain future. Useful scenarios are not probable or likely from a current perspective because they necessarily diverge from current expectations. The usefulness of a scenarios lies in the eyes of its creators. To their authors, each offers new perspectives and a deeper understanding of the topics in question.

We hope this booklet helps readers learn something new, broaden their horizons and think differently about the scenario topics. We would, however, ask all readers to recognize the origin of the scenarios as briefly described below. This is crucial for their understanding, as the scenarios cannot and were never meant to offer a neutral perspective on future developments.
The Origin of the Scenarios

The scenarios below are the result of four threat-scanning exercises with expert participants about potential governance breakdown and violent conflict in the European Union's neighbourhood. Each deliberately focuses on developments that may be considered surprising or even unlikely, but plausible. The chosen time horizon for each exercise was five years into the future (looking from 2018–19 ahead to 2023–24) in order to anticipate threats for the European Union in a way that is timely with respect to the dynamics of the policy process and the reaction speed of most relevant policy instruments for foreign services. The scenarios are intended to help enhance the EU’s capacity to prevent these threatening developments or to prepare for them – a main concern of the EU-LISTCO project.

A small group of experts (between 8 and 15) participated in each of the four exercises, which were conducted in part online and in part at a workshop. The groups consisted of EU-LISTCO researchers with relevant regional or sectoral expertise, additional experts from Europe and the focus regions, and policymakers from cooperating foreign services (France, Germany, Italy, and the EU EEAS). The four workshops took place between June 2018 and May 2019 in Jerusalem, Berlin, Paris, and Brussels, and covered the following geographical and thematic areas:

- **Middle East:** In order to be open to a multitude of potential risk factors and threats, the exercise focused on the ‘region between the Eastern Mediterranean and Afghanistan’. Starting in mid 2018, the looked ahead to 2023.

- **Eastern Neighbourhood:** This exercise focused on regional risks in the EU’s eastern neighbourhood, including the countries of the EU’s Eastern Partnership – which includes Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova, and Ukraine – and on the Russian Federation. Starting in late 2018, the exercise looked ahead to 2023.

- **North Africa:** This exercise focused on regional risks in the EU’s southern neighbourhood, including in Egypt, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya. Participating experts decided to build scenarios for Tunisia and Libya. Starting in early 2019, the exercise looked ahead to 2024.

- **Out-of-Control Technologies:** This exercise covered diffuse risks that are not geographically contingent or are non-territorial in nature. Namely, these risks are related to out-of-control technologies that have become independent of their origin and creators, whether by design or accident. Starting in early 2019, the exercise looked ahead to 2024.

Scenarios are produced in a structured group process, because only collectively can people break out of their individual mindsets, current expectations and common sense of what the future might hold. The scenarios are the result of a methodologically guided and facilitated process in which a diverse group of experts share and integrate their views, perspectives and knowledge in order to learn from each other and to explore plausible (not probable) future developments. The process and methodology that were utilized to create the scenarios are described in Sarah Bressan, Johannes Gabriel, Philipp Rotmann and Dominic Seefeldt’s, "Report on Four Threat Scanning Workshops", EU-LISTCO Deliverable 2.3, August 2019 (available from the authors).
Scenarios for Governance Breakdown and Violent Conflict in the EU's Neighbourhood

Middle East
1. To the Brink of an Arab World War
2. How the Hashemites Lose Control of Jordan
3. Yankee Goes Home

Eastern Neighbourhood
4. Russian Reboot
5. When Putin's Away, the Mice Will Play
6. Russian Red Button

North Africa
7. Libyan Drought and China's Rescue
8. Libyan Drought and International Neglect
9. Tunisia's Vicious Cycle
10. Tunisia Between the Crescent and the Gun

Out-of-control Technologies
11. DATA Revival
12. RoboDaddy
13. Closed Bubbles, Open Net
To the Brink of an Arab World War

Core scenario created on 22 June 2018

**Tipping Point 1:** An Iraqi government that is perceived to be firmly taking Tehran’s side – rather than continuing its balancing act between Riyadh and Tehran – has enormously damaging effects on two levels: Domestically, it shatters the Sunni majority’s as well as the many other minorities’ fragile trust in a cross-sectarian polity that is committed to dealing fairly with all groups, and thus erodes the Iraqi state’s legitimacy among most of its population. Across Sunni Arab states, it amplifies deep-seated fears of Iranian domination and thus fuels an escalatory spiral that would be very hard to control.

**2019**
- **Shi‘ite alliance revived**
  - In 2019, Iran completely pulls out of the nuclear deal. European efforts to stabilize the treaty have failed. Iran unilaterally restarts its nuclear weapons program. In reaction, an increasingly worried US administration bolsters the number of American troops in the region. Meanwhile, in Baghdad, protracted negotiations between political blocs produce an al-Sadr government that begins to maneuver Iraq slowly and, at first, informally into a Shi‘ite alliance with Iran [TP1].
- **Nuclear arms race**
  - In response to the Iranian nuclear revival and early signs of Iraq being drawn into a more and more threatening Shi‘ite alliance run by Tehran, Riyadh approaches the Pakistani government for help with a Saudi nuclear program. A constant stream of rumors about progress in both the Iranian and the Saudi nuclear programs further fuels already existing tensions in the region.

**2020**
- **The crown prince fails**
  - By 2020, Mohammed bin Salman’s talk of reforms in Saudi Arabia is increasingly seen as empty promises by the Saudi population. Rising unemployment leads to protests and civil unrest, particularly among disadvantaged populations such as the Shi‘a in the Eastern Province, but also among elite groups previously marginalized by the crown prince.

**2021**
- **Repression in Saudi Arabia**
  - Due to the catastrophic humanitarian situation in Yemen, tens of thousands of Yemenis – both Shi‘a and Sunni – flee into Saudi Arabia. In 2021, furthered by the civil unrest and the challenges of managing the growing Yemeni refugee population in Saudi Arabia, Shi‘ite refugees and Saudi Shi‘ites suffer a series of atrocities. These reports become a rallying cry among Shi‘a clerics across the region. There are rumors of clandestine Iranian military support to Shi‘a underground groups in Saudi Arabia, and, in turn, more repression by the Saudi security forces.

**2022**
- **Iran-Saudi standoff**
  - In response to several synchronized terrorist attacks against high-profile targets in Saudi Arabia in early 2022, the regime in Riyadh mobilizes forces along the Saudi-Iraqi border amid increasing reports of secret IRGC formations to the Iraqi side of the border. With Iraq in a state of civil war – and all its neighboring states involved in the conflict – tensions run high. Saudi and Iranian forces face each other at the border for a year. A single random border incident near Hafar Al-Batin leads to escalations in 2023 [TP3].

**2023**
- **The standoff escalates**
  - April 2023: Violent skirmishes at the border between Iraq and Saudi Arabia claim the lives of several Saudi and Iranian soldiers. As Iran mobilizes more forces, there are attacks on Iranian critical infrastructure: electricity production, water supplies, and enhanced oil recovery. Iran holds Saudi Arabia responsible and hints at nuclear escalation, which gets the US involved and in turn triggers Russia to send 50 aircrafts to Iran. Israel calls up its reservists and the Israeli Defense Force alert is set to the highest level.

- **Displacement and regional collapse**
  - The region is on the brink of complete governance breakdown. Existing violent conflicts (e.g., in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen) begin to escalate. Meanwhile, there is an increasing risk of violent conflict in countries like Lebanon, with the potential for mass displacement of tens of millions of people toward Europe (including the many who previously found safe haven in Lebanon).

- **Europe has failed**
  - The economic consequences for the region are devastating. Conflict prevention has failed once more, and European foreign policy makers are out of options: just coping with the refugee influx, the economic effects, and the politics of ensuring Israel’s survival pushes EU governance to its limits and beyond. Peace and stability along Europe’s southeastern neighbourhood will be out of reach for years to come.

**Governance breakdown and violent conflict**
- Armed rebellion and insurgency in Iraq.
- Breakdown of nuclear non-proliferation regimes and nuclear arms race.
- Escalation of violent conflict in Iraq, Syria and Yemen and related governance breakdown.

**Tipping Point 2:** If the government fails to provide security on its own and instead relies on official Iranian military support as a last-ditch effort to prevent a breakdown of security governance, the result is violent conflict in several of Iraq’s regions. Even worse, bringing in Iran triggers a disproportionate Saudi response, and therefore heightens the risk of violent conflict at the regional level. With Iraq in a precarious state of political recovery from the war with the Islamic State, it would take little to tip the fragile balance back into violent conflict.
MIDDLE EAST
Scenarios (2019-2023)

How the Hashemites Lose Control of Jordan

Core scenario created on 22 June 2018

2019: Jordanians divided
In 2019, the Palestinian Authority is in deep financial trouble and cannot pay public sector wages. The Hashemite Kingdom is helping them with a line of credit that, given its own fiscal situation, is at once too limited to make a major difference for Ramallah but sufficient to exacerbate Jordan's domestic tensions between its two main population groups, so-called East Bankers who trace their lineage back to regional tribes, including Bedouins and Houranis, and so-called West Bankers, descendents of Palestinian refugees who arrived in Jordan after 1948 [Trend 1]. Most West Bankers support the loan as a means of solidarity with their Palestinian compatriots, while most East Bankers see it as a waste of their taxes on a corrupt and ineffective institution.

2019: Conservative backlash
Pushed by an initiative of Queen Rania, women are given equal citizenship. This is the final straw for some ultra-conservative demagogues who weave the loan and female citizenship into a divisive narrative of wealth being handed out, social hierarchy being compromised, and conservative values being aban- ned to please Palestinian women. Many East Bank conservati- ves rally to the firebrands, taking part in protests growing in numbers as the year goes by, while the Palesti- nian Authority becomes weaker and weaker.

2020: An unholy alliance
In 2020, an ultra-hawkish Israeli government sees the Palestinian Authority as too weak to resist and, without any objection from Saudi Arabia, annexes settlements in the West Bank [Trend 2]. There are unconfirmed reports of Israeli-Saudi negotiations about custodianship of holy places in and around Jerusalem [TP1]. In response to ‘disrespectful’ comments from leading Jordanian politicians about repression in Saudi Arabia, Riyadh discontinues aid to Jordan, which in response pushes back against the annexations and Saudi Arabia’s custodian role.

2021: Corruption scandal
In 2021, growing economic pains force Jordan to comply with strict World Bank conditions that hurt the lower-income population in particu- lar. As a corruption scandal involving the queen’s real estate business breaks, a huge drop in investor confidence drags the economy further down while social grievances increase. In an attempt to regain the initiative, the court appoints a reformist East Banker as the new prime minister, only to be turned down in the most embarrassing way possible. At a press conference, the appointee publicly declines, impli- cing that the Hashemites should clean up their own mess – a thinly veiled jab at the queen’s corruption. Combined with the Hashemites’ claim to custodianship over the holy sites of Islam in Jerusalem being exposed as hollow, it deals a se- vere blow to the dynasty’s public legitimacy. Jordan loses its prior direct and indirect influence over the Israeli government to modera- te its policies.

Trend 1: The constitutive political bargain between the two key groups of Jordanian society – ‘East Bankers’ and ‘West Bankers’ – is under pressure, and tensions have surfaced every few years.

Goverance breakdown and violent conflict
Active radical militant groups in Jordan; potential break- down of security governance and civil war.

2023: Hashemites contested and militants striving
Rumours that the assassins are military officers exacerbate cracks within the army and security services. As Sunni radicals in Jordan begin to mobilize and manage to manipulate members of the Hashemite family into verbal attacks on the government, Tehran and Damascus issue very similar statements in support of the Palestinian people against the Israeli annexation, openly calling for calm, but they are unsure what to do as the political, social and military schism opens up the country to the further entrenchment of radical militant groups, the breakdown of security governance, the legitimate creation of binding rules and quite possibly a full-scale civil war.

Tipping Point 1:Israeli annexation of the West Bank settlements would be a critical juncture. Combined with the Hashemites’ claim to custodianship over the holy sites of Islam in Jerusalem, it deals a powerful blow to the dynasty’s public legitimacy. Jordan loses its prior direct and indirect influence over the Israeli government to moderate its policies.

Tipping Point 2: An appointment that breaks with the long tradition of prime ministers being drawn from the East Banker elite ‘hurts’ East Bankers who feel already under siege from West Bankers and ‘their’ Palestinian Authority. In combination with economic pressure and a progressive queen, this undermines social trust and accelerates the loss of public legitimacy.
2019: The Americans retreat
In her farewell speech in the fall of 2019, Angela Merkel calls out Donald Trump for his ‘irresponsible’ foreign policy, while sources close to her leak an unguarded remark in which she calls Trump ‘a total idiot’. Domestically, Trump is under pressure since US debt has risen to $25 trillion, the Israeli Prime Minister pronounced the Trump Peace Plan ‘dead on arrival’ only a month previously, and he is about to kick off his re-election campaign. He takes the opportunity to announce via Twitter that all US troops in the Middle East will be called home.

2019: Disguised Nuclear aspirations
In response, Turkey, Israel, and Saudi Arabia each begin to discuss strategic autonomy openly. All three launch huge civilian nuclear programs 'to invest in a post-fossil future', a thin disguise that does nothing to stop the speculation about three-way nuclear breakout in the near to mid-term future.

2020: Palestinian governance deteriorates
In 2020, the Palestinian National Authority collapses. To prevent governance breakdown and in response to domestic pressures, the Israeli government annexes settlements in and around Hebron, while Hamas takes over basic service delivery alongside international aid agencies in the rest of the West Bank.

2020: Isolationism continues
In the US, Trump is voted out of office, but isolationist politics continue under the new administration, as congress is gridlocked. As unemployment in the US hits a new high, the Dow Jones plummets, and the dollar falls, the US begins a phased military withdrawal from the Middle East.

2020: Nuclear aspirations
'Liberted' from US hegemony, the Middle East is in the middle of a three-way nuclear arms race that takes place in the shadows but is clearly out of control. In addition to Israel’s thinly disguised nuclear force, ‘purely civilian’ nuclear programs in Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey appear to be competing with an energy and determination not fully explained by the region's new appreciation of climate change alone. Behind the scenes, journalists and analysts are whispering about impending live tests of nuclear weapons by any of the three regional powers, while governments are busy jockeying for position in volatile alliances.

2023: Nuclear aspirations
'Infidels gone'
4 July 2023: As the American flag is lowered for the last time in the handover ceremony of what used to be the US Navy’s Fifth Fleet headquarters in Juffair, Bahrain, TV images of the stars and stripes in the evening sun on America’s Independence Day are watched with deafening cheers on streets and public squares anywhere from Cairo to Tehran. ‘We have won, infidels gone’!, say the banners of ISIL supporters, whose latest political leader proclaims an ‘Independence Day of the Arab World’ as the United States hand over their second-to-last military base in the region (save 4,000 troops stationed in Qatar).

Governance breakdown and violent conflict
- Breakdown of nuclear non-proliferation regimes and nuclear arms race.
- Critical gaps in basic service delivery: humanitarian crisis across the region.

ISIL campaign against Yazidis and others now seems merely a ‘minor prelude’. With oil prices plummeting and the dollar at an all-time low, the region is in full humanitarian and economic crisis – right on Europe’s doorstep.

Tipping Point 1: Turkey leaving NATO is read by the region’s governments as a signal that Ankara is reverting to traditional power politics. Given the open historical wounds left by the Ottoman legacy across the Arab world as well as the more recent experiences in Iraq and Syria, many see this prospect as an additional reason to achieve effective deterrence capabilities directed at Turkey, in addition to other regional competitors. It therefore compels both an acceleration of the arms race and of the mushrooming of ‘alliances of necessity’ (e.g., Israel/Saudi Arabia).
**RUSSIA**

**Scenario 4**

**EASTERN NEIGHBOURHOOD**

Scenarios (2019-2023)

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**2019: Trade war**

In 2019, Trump's trade war escalates further. Russia and China jointly impose higher tariffs on American exports. WTO-led negotiations reach an impasse as neither party is willing to move. The global economy suffers.

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**Governance breakdown and violent conflict**

Reconquering of territories by Ukraine, causing civilian and military casualties and a humanitarian crisis.

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**2019: Electoral fraud**

2019 is also an election year in many Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries. Across the board, ballots are marred by irregularities. Civil society organisations in Ukraine heavily criticize Petro Poroshenko's victory, after his militant supporters disrupted opposition rallies and were observed stuffing countless ballot boxes. Developments in Georgia, Moldova and Armenia mirror those in Ukraine. The election irregularities lead to a freeze of high-level dialogues with the EU and the 2019 EU-EaP summit is rescheduled.

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**2019: Recession pains**

In combination with continuing EU sanctions, the trade conflict and the resulting global recession – through plunging energy prices as one of the most potent links - hurt both the Russian state and Russian oligarchs’ access to their foreign assets.

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**2020: EU cuts all funds**

After the success of illiberal parties in the 2019 European Parliament elections, micro-financial assistance by the EU to EaP countries is ended in 2020.

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**2020: Russians take to the streets**

The Russian state is increasingly unable to pay for its vast pension system and freezes the salaries of state employees. First protests arise in major cities. The rally 'round the flag phenomenon – which was bolstered by the Ukraine conflict and the annexation of Crimea – on which Putin's regime has capitalized no longer suffices to control the population. Russia's dormant civil society is ready to take action against the government – and just waiting for a leading figure.

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**2022: Crackdown backfires**

Internet tycoon Pavel Durov has become the leading figure of a Russia-wide movement. Numerous other businessmen are leading local groups – first concentrated in western cities and later spreading east and to rural areas. This spread is accompanied by an increase in violence. Desperate authorities react by expanding their crowd control tactics.

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**2023: Vultures circling**

The United States sees the political turmoil as both a risk and an opportunity, and finally gives in to Polish and Baltic demands for US bases. Ukraine reclaims the Donbas ‘People's Republics’, which are now without Russian financial and military support. The reunification of Ukraine ends a long-standing war, but tensions are high as Russia has been challenged and defeated in its own neighbourhood [TP3].

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**2023: New oligarchs rising**

Newly emerging economic and industrial elites in Russia see an opportunity to oust Putin from power. In an attempt to maintain order, they take measures to centralize power and halt good governance reforms, thereby disempowering civil society.

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**2021: Closing the hatches**

Witnessing the instability in Russia, political leaders across the region are weary of revolution and turn to old post-Soviet oligarchs by reforming Russia in a way that both aligns with their economic interest and satisfies their political ambitions [TP1]. By late 2021, members of this elite start providing financial support to existing protest groups and organise them to join forces.

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**2022: China reaches out**

China sees the opportunity and invites Eastern Partnership countries to its 16+1 and Belt and Road Initiative. Belarus is the only notable exception to the region's Chinese Turn, pursuing warmer relations with the EU and the US.

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**Tipping Point 1: Putin’s social contract is dead.**

Once Putin's government is no longer able to provide economic relief to the poor, it has to break the almost exclusively material social contract which underpins the highly personalized regime in Russia. The decision to brutally crack down on protests amplifies public discontent and drives opposition groups underground (security governance breakdown). Some of the new tech oligarchs take advantage of the collapse of Putin's legitimacy and that of his regime. They provide the missing leadership and organizational capabilities to transform undirected and easily controlled protests into a serious disruptive force. So long as the regime’s mechanisms for buying loyalty remain inaccessible due to the continuing global recession, this threatens the regime’s survival and increases the likelihood of governance breakdown in many sectors and many parts of the country.

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**Tipping Point 2: A failure to pay wages in the security sector is the final nail in the coffin of a regime that has lost popular legitimacy.**

Significant xenophobia leads to discrimination and violence against minorities. However, social trust among the ethnic Russian, Orthodox Christian-dominated majority population remains high as events trigger historical memories of previous challenges of anarchy and civil war. In fact, once regime legitimacy is lost, high social trust might lead to a strong and cohesive civil society, which would make regime change more likely.

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**Tipping Point 3: The Kremlin’s preoccupation with domestic problems and the sense of political support by the US enables an aggressive government in Kyiv to try to reconquer lost territories (violent conflict), causing civilian and military casualties, a humanitarian crisis and additional tensions with Russia that might not accept defeat.**
When Putin’s Away, the Mice Will Play

Core scenario created on 8-9 November 2018

Scenarios (2019-2023)

EASTERN NEIGHBOURHOOD

Scenario 5

2019: Recession drives polarization
In 2019, the trade war between the US, the EU and China intensifies and creates a durably unfavourable global trading climate that heavily contributes to the start of a global recession. A long-standing feeling of discontent among populations that have not seen tangible benefits from globalization is amplified. Populist movements across the West exploit feelings of economic insecurity and a perceived loss of identity – partly created by increasing migration – to gain power.

2019: Russia has closed the Strait of Hormuz, disrupting the global oil supply. The price of oil increases, further aggravating poverty and increasing the polarization between wealthy local elites and poor populations. The gradual increase in oil prices eases these tensions as the people feel the higher prices at the pumps.

2020: Opposition’s rebirth
The feeling of general exasperation and exhaustion translates into Russian public discontent. Opposition leaders in Russia and in Belarus take advantage of the social unrest, politicize the movements, and start pressing the government to step down.

2020: EU stops aid
Not only the people of Russia are on the streets: so are those of other Eastern Partnership countries, especially in Belarus, where oligarchs are deserting the regime like in Russia. Regime collapse becomes a possibility. The media is reporting that EU financial assistance is going directly into the pockets of local elites, explaining respective leaders’ disinterest in reforms. EU Commission President Weber terminates all financial aid programs to Eastern Partnership countries.

2020: Baku looks East
As the Russian government is preoccupied with domestic turmoil, the Azerbaijani government is unhindered in deepening its ties with China. In September 2021, Aliyev III and his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping sign a free trade agreement, further cementing China’s influence in the region. At the same time, Baku is seeing the first returns on investment from the trans-Anatolian gas pipeline. The hike in oil prices, China’s economic influence, and close collaboration with Turkey enables the Azerbaijani economy to flourish against the global trend.

2021: Crackdown
Putin and Lukashenko try to secure their power by cracking down on opposition movements. However, putting popular opposition leaders in jail only fans the flames of discontent, as do desperate assassinations of individual leaders.

2022: ‘Reunifications’
With Russia looking inward, Eastern Partnership countries develop plans to oppose the Kremlin, with few to no consequences. In 2022, the new Ukrainian president orders his troops to reconquer the ‘occupied’ Donbas [TP4]. Although the first phase of the offensive causes a high number of military and civilian casualties, the lack of Russian support quickly forces the separatists to surrender. Acknowledging the ethnic and linguistic composition of Ukraine, and to avoid further humiliating the defeated, Kyiv grants the region increased political autonomy within a newly established Ukrainian Federation.

Emboldened by his economic prowess and by Ukraine’s military success, Aliyev III takes to consolidating his power and decides to take back Nagorno-Karabakh through a bloody military offensive, along with changing the constitution and the legal status of the region.

Tipping Point 1: Once Putin’s government is no longer able to provide economic relief to the poor, it has to break the almost exclusively material social contract which underpins his rule. The decision to brutally crack down on protests amplifies public discontent and drives opposition groups underground (security governance breakdown). Losing buy-in from key oligarchs sets the stage for a major and potentially very violent breakdown of the regime (which would result in a fragmented constellation of governance breakdowns in different sectors and places).

Tipping Point 2: The Kremlin’s preoccupation with domestic problems as well as NATO’s internal deadlock enable militant governments in Ukraine and Azerbaijan to start new military offensives to reconquer lost territories (violent conflict), causing civilian and military casualties, humanitarian crises, and disruptions in energy flows (in Azerbaijan).

In the EU’s Eastern Neighbourhood, the global recession leads to cuts in social spending, further aggravating poverty and increasing the polarization between wealthy local elites and poor populations. The gradual increase in oil prices eases these tensions as the people feel the higher prices at the pumps.

In 2021, the Russian economy is in dire straits. The Russian people are dissatisfied with everyday economic insecurity as well as Putin’s perceived inability to restore Russian prestige. Large protest movements resume under new leadership from the oligarchic class, who feel that Putin’s time is over. 1991-style chaos looms.

The economic crisis – despite the high oil prices – has left the Russian economy in dire straits. The Russian people are dissatisfied with everyday economic insecurity as well as Putin’s perceived inability to restore Russian prestige. Large protest movements resume under new leadership from the oligarchic class, who feel that Putin’s time is over. 1991-style chaos looms.

In 2022, Putin declares a state of emergency in Russia and mobilizes the country’s security forces to arrest ‘every’ opposition leader and dismantle the strongest fractions of the protest movements in order to restore stability. Meanwhile, Lukashenko alters the constitution in order to use emergency powers to ‘pacify the country’ thus following the same strategy [TP1]. It works: in both countries, the organized oppositions have their backs broken and cannot take effective collective action for some time.

However, the damage has already been done. The public is on the streets and even pro-government forces increasingly question the ability of the leadership to safely steer the country out of the crisis.

REST OF THE WORLD

RUSSIA

2023: Chaos looming in Russia
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2023: EU stops aid
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2023: Oil and populism: rising together
Iran has closed the Strait of Hormuz, disrupting the global oil supply. The price of oil immediately skyrockets and then stabilizes at $150 per barrel. The high oil price further exacerbates the global economic crisis. World politics are dominated by populist movements. The US is at the forefront of this development: Washington has almost completely upheld the ‘America First’ principle and retired from world affairs, focusing instead on internal administrative efforts to fix its domestic economy.

2023: Strongmen cling to power
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2024: NATO deadlock
These major shifts in the geopolitical equilibrium are also facilitated by the inaction of NATO, which is blocked by the growing number of member countries with populist governments on both sides of the Atlantic. [TP2]

Governance breakdown and violent conflict
- Ukrainian military offensive to reconquer Donbas, causing military and civilian casualties.
- Military offensive and casualties in Nagorno-Karabakh.
- Security governance and security sector governance breakdown (see Schröder, 2018) in major Russian cities.

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Scenarios (2019-2023)
EASTERN NEIGHBOURHOOD
Scenario 6

RUSSIA

Tipping Point 1: Putin's resignation without the prospect of an immediate strong successor sparks enormous political uncertainty in Moscow. It is seen and used as a window of opportunity for aggressive state and non-state actors in the region to turn long-standing territorial claims into new realities on the ground, including by (re-)starting violent conflicts.

2019: Russia’s new oligarchs
Falling oil prices put the Russian state and its ability to uphold its social contract under heavy strain. Simmering popular discontent is activated by a new generation of oligarchs who got rich in agriculture and manufacturing, and who uses the protests to challenge the old oil and gas oligarchs. As the economic sanctions imposed on the old elites by the EU are still in place, the new generation manages to mobilize financial assets faster and can therefore outspend and out-organize the old guard.

2020: Putin resigns
The popular protests reach unprecedented levels, until the new oligarchs manage to convince Igor Sechin, Putin’s right-hand man, and other key securocrats to abandon the president in favour of a new political settlement. Putin resigns in late 2020 [TP1].

2021: Who’s in charge?
A period of turmoil follows. For months and months, the world is left wondering who is really in charge in Russia, as no successor to Putin is named. Behind the scenes, negotiations between the competing elite groups drag on and on. Meanwhile, the world is getting ever more nervous. ‘Who controls Russia’s nukes?’ is becoming an ever more common headline in the global news. Islamists in the North Caucasus take advantage of the distraction of Moscow’s security apparatus and step up their terrorist campaigns with covert support from Iran. Similarly to NATO and China, Iran sees Russian instability as a stepping stone for increasing its influence in the region.

2021: NATO’s nuke scare
NATO members are increasingly desperate to see an end to the instability in Russia. They want a safe pair of hands in control of the Russian nuclear arsenal. With Islamist terrorism on the rise inside Russia, the fear of nuclear terrorism is palpable around the world: whoever controls the Red Button in Moscow has to be trustworthy.

2022: Saber-rattling
By 2022, agricultural and manufacturing magnates in Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia control the only functioning and cost-effective industries as the falling oil price has pulled the rug from under the old guard. They spend freely to buy political influence. In order to legitimize their power grab in the eyes of the public, they force their respective countries’ political leaderships to solve unpopular territorial conflicts. Similarly, NATO finds a golden opportunity amidst the long moment of Russian instability and offers membership to Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova. Pushed forward by the newly empowered oligarchs, and emboldened by the continuing turmoil in Russia [TP2] and the offer of joining NATO [TP3], all three governments launch military offensives to federalize their respective disputed territories by force. As Moscow remains distracted by domestic turmoil, its allies are left without Russian support and therefore vulnerable. Kyiv quickly restores control over the separatist parts of the Donbas, while Moldova annexes Transnistria and Georgia retakes control of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

2023: Belarus goes West
In a surprising turn of events, a pro-Western leader comes to power in Belarus, marking the end of Lukashenko’s 27 year reign.

2023: Armenia loses
Armenia finds itself on the losing end of the geopolitical shift in Eastern Europe. Without Russian support, it is exposed to uncoordinated attacks from competing Azerbaijani forces. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict reignites and further undermines Russia’s influence in its near abroad.

2023: Stability over democracy
Ukrainians, Moldovans and Georgians rally around their victorious leaders – presidents and prime ministers as much as the oligarchs behind them – who gain enormous legitimacy. Corruption becomes even more rampant, while EU-supported governance reforms stall. Increased stability, the resolution of the respective territorial conflicts, and popular satisfaction make sure that Brussels keeps quiet as democracy and transparency are further undermined.

2023: Safety in Sechin
The upcoming Russian elections attract international attention. After Vladimir Putin’s unexpected resignation and months of political infighting, Igor Sechin emerges as the likely new president of the Russian Federation (albeit only after some back-channel facilitation by key NATO countries as well as China). NATO members signal their support for Vladimir Putin’s former counsellor while taking advantage of the handover of power to increase its military presence in the South Caucasus.

2023: Russia’s oil price shock
An unexpected drop in oil prices to $8 per barrel in January 2022 deals the final blow to the government’s collapsing finances. Already struggling to pay pensions, the government has to print money to avoid ceasing payments altogether. Inflation quadruples within weeks and leads to far-reaching political consequences: protests re-emerge and swell rapidly in both their frequency and magnitude.

Tipping Point 2: Building on and far exceeding TPI in impact, protracted domestic turmoil in Russia leads to previously stalemated conflicts gaining in heat as militant state and non-state actors seek to use the opportunity to create new facts on the ground (violent conflict).

Tipping Point 3: NATO encouragement for offensive military action, if given inadvertently and potentially in ignorance about local political dynamics, may be the final straw for Eastern European governments to pick a military conflict with the respective separatist forces.
2020: Haftar’s victorious march
After taking over the El Sharara oil field and the major southwestern city of Sabha, Haftar’s Libyan National Army (LNA) marches into Tripoli andousts the Presidency Council and the Government of National Accord (GNA). GNA Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj flees to Italy.

2020: Droughts and militias
In the wake of Haftar’s seizure of power, Southern Libya and parts of Egypt as well as other North African countries are hit by a drought that leads to severe food and water shortages. In Libya, thousands of people move north to the coast, where the new LNA government is overwhelmed by the looming humanitarian disaster while trying to fend off the pressure from southern militias trying to re-establish themselves on the coast.

2020: Empty aid pockets
The international aid community fails to attract sufficient funding to mount a costly new operation in an insecure Libya and benefit even low numbers of beneficiaries in need. The EU in particular is hit by a huge economic and social crisis that is triggered by an EU-US trade war and a 2019 crash of the Italian economy. Part of the resulting austerity agenda includes slashing humanitarian spending, which leaves Libya and other drought-affected countries to fend for themselves.

2020: Gulf in crisis
Due to a low oil price and stalled progress on the Saudi Vision 2030 and other key reform projects, the Gulf is equally inward-looking. Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman lacks the funds to deliver on his ambitious promises and responds to growing popular opposition with massive crackdowns. The violent repression broadens opportunities for Islamist terrorists to disrupt oil production at the kingdom’s main production sites (the main source of liberalization, modernization and the loss of the kingdom’s moral compass, according to the terrorists’ YouTube manifesto). The toxic mix of popular unrest, terror threats and state repression spills over to the rest of the Gulf, refocusing the Gulf regimes’ military and security capabilities on domestic developments and leaving no attention or funds for their Libyan allies [TP3]. Global oil output declines.

2020: No refuge in Egypt
As coastal cities provide no refuge, but rather discrimination and violence, some Southern Libyan refugees begin to move toward Egypt. However, Libya’s neighbour is occupied with its own crisis. The 2020 drought hits the country very hard and forces the regime to focus on the immediate needs of its own population, putting a lot of pressure on Egyptian public services and finances. With its favoured faction now in power in Libya, Cairo presses for stricter controls on both sides of the Libyan-Egyptian border to limit the number of people seeking to cross and to prevent ‘jihadi infiltration’.

2020: EU deadlock
The number of refugees trying to reach Europe increases because the eastern border to Egypt is closed. The higher number of refugees leads to more polarization in the EU and further strains the relationships among EU members, who fail to agree on a common refugee policy.

2021: The LNA loses control
In 2021, Khalifa Haftar’s death breaks open the charade that was the LNA government [TP2]. A lack of international support, a progressive decrease in water supply, open fighting between militias, and the Libyan administration’s lack of capacity leads to governance breakdown in Libya. Haftar’s successor, former LNA Chief of Staff Abdel Salem Al-Hassi, struggles to impose his authority and effectively respond to the situation. The population is starving while tribal militias and jihadi groups from all parts of the country compete for dwindling resources along the coast. With a humanitarian crisis on the one hand and territorial struggle between competing armed groups on the other, Al-Hassi effectively loses control of the country.

2022-24: China steps in
An increasingly insecure oil supply as well as the global ripple effects of the European economic crisis spark increased demand for Libyan oil in Asia, particularly in China. In 2022, China offers humanitarian assistance in exchange for the right to exploit Libyan oil fields. After weeks of talks with the LNA government, Chinese armed forces land in Libya to deliver aid helping Abdel Salem Al-Hassi to regain control of and tighten his grip over the country, Beijing promotes itself further. By the end of the year, Al-Hassi’s LNA neutralizes all remaining pockets of resistance in Tripoli. Russia applauds the Chinese initiative while Western powers are left to witness a major power shift in the region and their corresponding loss of influence.

2024: Libya is stable, thanks to China
By 2024, Libya adopts a Chinese-supported development model, which helps Al-Hassi keep water and food shortages to a minimum, thereby contributing to his legitimacy in the eyes of the Libyan population and the different tribes.

Goverance breakdown and violent conflict
- Violent conflict in Libya.
- Humanitarian crisis; food and water shortages.
- Armed opposition in Chad marches into N’Djamena, deposing President Déby.
Governance breakdown and violent conflict
- Food and water shortages; widespread disease; humanitarian crisis; complete governance breakdown.
- Violence between Tuareg and Tebu communities.
- Fighting over access to oil fields.

**Tipping Point 1:** Massive resource shortages and the absence of mitigating governance measures exacerbate conflict. In this case, the lack of attention to these effects leads to escalating violent conflict between the Tuareg and Tebu in 2024.

**Tipping Point 2:** Premature withdrawal of international support and attention exacerbates the limitations of information collection and analysis regarding key developments outside the central geographic regions, and on other issues than those considered most political. It also creates long lead times for mandating and funding public service provision even in the coastal cities. The slums around Tripoli, Misrata and Benghazi expand rapidly.

**Tipping Point 3:** Strong, effective, institutional leadership is quickly replaced by the realization that, without international support, it neither has the financial means nor the management capacity to deal with this new crisis. International donor fatigue and institutional deadlocks in the EU and UN mean that discussions over a new humanitarian aid operation in Libya drag on for many months.

**Tipping Point 4:** In a system that depends on oil revenue to fund basic governance services, violent conflict around oil fields leads to a feedback effect: leakages contaminate vulnerable aquifers and oil production ultimately stops, which sparks comprehensive governance breakdown if no other governance providers step in.

**2019**

2019: Crisis averted
Beginning in the autumn of 2019, a series of heat waves hit southern Libya. Major inland oases such as Ubari and Sabah dry up, causing water shortages and the disruption of food production [TP1]. The deterioration of the situation is compounded by the relative well-being of the coastal population and the appearance of political progress. The ‘National Reconciliation Government’ is stable and manages to effectively organize the provision of rudimentary public services along the coast, thus crafting an impression of slow and steady progress which dominates journalists’ and embassies’ reporting about Libya.

2019: Peace in Libya?
The results of the June 2019 Libyan general elections are contested. The polls are marred by irregularities and no candidate manages to secure a convincing majority. Several political camps claim victory. To add to the confusion, the head of the Libyan National Army, Khalifa Haftar, holds a press conference in his Tobruk headquarters and announces that he will not accept the election results. In order to prevent the situation from spiraling out of control, the United Nations (UN) steps in and brokers a power-sharing ‘National Reconciliation Government’ that includes all of the biggest factions of the Libyan conflict, including the one led by Haftar. The next few months are peaceful and encouraging. The population’s and the international community’s expectations are high.

**2020**

2020: Libya without elections
As a result, in 2022, Haftar’s death in early 2022 fundamentally changes the dynamic between the competing for local power.

2020: A new beginning
The international community feels ready to turn the page after many difficult years and seeks to make the UN’s temporary truce permanent at an international conference in Tripoli. Under the headline ‘Libya 2020: A New Beginning,’ a new constitution is to be ratified while ‘foreign meddlers’ are to agree to respect Libyan sovereignty and stop interfering, initially sceptical about ceding ground to a strongman like Haftar, Agiers acquires to the decision as its own leadership is threatened by popular protests and political deadlock over Buitela’s succession during 2019 and 2020. For Egypt, Haftar is a powerful ally in its fight against radical Islamist groups in the region, so his central role allows Cairo to stand back. In his concluding speech, the new defence minister and de facto power behind the no-name prime minister, Khalifa Haftar, celebrates the start of a new era of stability and prosperity for Libya. The international community considers the Libyan case closed, withdraws the UN political mission and reduces diplomatic attention [TP2].
Tunisia’s Vicious Cycle

The situation deteriorates quickly and by 2024, the cornered putschists have ramped up the repression further. The country has broken apart: many provinces are in open rebellion against the central government (violent conflict), and the remnants of the state forces are stretched thin by fighting the rebels and brutally quelling the protests in the cities. The energy industry is on hold, external debt is sky high, the tourism sector has collapsed, and the agricultural sector is heavily affected by the drought. The population suffers from a general lack of opportunities, very low income, and increasing food prices leading to starvation and localized conflicts over resources, particularly in the inland provinces where basic services are in many places unavailable as the fighting makes international aid deliveries unpredictable. The aid provided to the government by the Gulf continues to be exclusively used to keep the coastal cities (and thereby the support base of the military government) afloat.

Governance breakdown and violent conflict
- Food and water shortages, humanitarian crisis.
- Violent conflict between autonomy movements and the central government.
- General strike in January 2020 to protest the freeze of public sector wages, the privatization of national companies and the severe price hikes on consumer goods.

2019: Essebsi wins
In 2019, the relationship between Tunisian President Beji Caid Essebsi and his Prime Minister Youssef Chahed is at its all-time worst. After Chahed’s split from the ruling Nidaa Tounes party in January, the president’s son Hafedh Caid Essebsi emerges victorious from the leadership battle. Despite a sizeable anti-Essebsi movement and a successful #BejiGoesToUS social media campaign, Nidaa Tounes wins the parliamentary majority and Hafedh is appointed prime minister, while the political landscape has become even more polarized.

2019: Unpopular reforms
The International Monetary Fund (IMF) lowers its global growth forecast from 3.6 percent in 2019 to 3.0 percent for 2020. Against the backdrop of a looming global recession, donors are reducing their aid to Tunisia, while the few private foreign investment projects stall. With the economy under growing stress, Hafedh – in a bid to style himself as Tunisia’s ‘moderniser-in-chief’ in the image of Saudi Arabia’s Mohammed bin Salman – pushes forward the budget consolidation measures introduced by Youssef Chahed. The political debate is bitter and the legislative process rushed [TP]. The parliament is more polarized than ever and popular backlash is immediate. The Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT) declares a general strike in January 2020 to protest the freeze of public sector wages, the privatization of national companies and the severe price hikes on consumer goods.

2020: Up in arms
The public debate is tainted by accusations of corruption and intimidation. In February 2020, the respected investigative news blog Inkyfada publishes evidence that the recently disappeared leader of the Popular Front, Hamma Hammami, was in fact assassinated for political reasons. The political left is up in arms and many Tunisians turn out to protest. After several high-profile self-immolations, every political force except Nidaa Tounes tries to capitalize on the protests, including many Islamist figures (some of whom are suspected to support international terrorist groups). The government is cornered. After initial attempts to negotiate with the unions fail, localized crackdowns against Islamist rallies begin to spread to other kinds of protest, which are met with force. The Hafedh government reactions to the regime’s security forces, which only adds fuel to the fire and reinforces the popular perception that Hafedh is in over his head and was put in power through his father’s nepotism.

2020: Terrorists return
In addition to the economic and political crises, intelligence agencies fail to monitor and manage ISIS returnees from Syria and Libya. Islamist terrorist organizations use the turmoil to their advantage. They and launch a series of attacks on government buildings and protesters, claiming dozens of lives and further weakening public trust in, and the legitimacy of, the government.

2021: Drought, austerity and strikes
In 2021, a series of heat waves hit the country, causing droughts, decimating crops and triggering widespread food and water shortages. After a brief rebound in the production of phosphate, recessions in some of Tunisia’s new Asian markets also lead to a drop in demand for Tunisian phosphate, sending the country’s export industry into a tailspin and exacerbating the economic crisis. The country’s biggest producer, the Compagnie des phoshates de Gafsa, sees its production drop to under two million tons annually, from a production level of 5 million tons in 2014 (USGS 2016). The government responds to the crisis with new austerity measures, prompting the UGTT to call a new general strike. Despite the terrorist threat, the anti-austerity movement manages to mobilize large crowds of people in the country’s major cities. In Tunis alone, more than 200,000 people take to the streets.
Tipping Point 1: The breakdown of a functioning political process that provides access to power for all major stakeholder groups and produces binding decisions unleashes centrifugal forces previously kept at bay by the political system.

199: Islamic superstar
The October 2019 election results come as a shock. Nidaa Tounes’ January split is revealed as having been fatal to both Nidaa Tounes and Tahya Tounes as no clear parliamentary majority emerges. The rise of a new fundamentalist Islamist party makes headlines as it manages to secure 20 percent of the seats in parliament. His party’s loss and the fact that his son, Nidaa Tounes’ leader Hafedh Caid Essebsi, is partly blamed for it, undermines Beiji Caid Essebsi’s prospects for reelection as president. The leader of the fundamentalist party, a charismatic newcomer who amassed millions of followers with his Islamist YouTube channel, takes the country by storm and wins the presidential election by the narrowest of margins.

1921: Extremists in control
In addition to serving as symbols of anti-Western resistance, the groups assist the president’s movement with the provision of public services in underfunded areas. Ansar al-Sharia is active in coastal cities and Tunis, AQIM covers Kasserine and the mountainous region, while ISIS is in control of the territories bordering Libya, where it builds a new nucleus for its caliphate. To further consolidate his power, the president makes the redistribution of finances to regional administrations conditional upon their allegiance. In dissident regions, Islamist groups conduct attacks on local governments to force them into submission while helping the population survive and thus gaining, or forcing, people’s loyalty.

2021: Economic crisis
The economic situation becomes untenable. Unemployment reaches new heights, with more than 17 percent of the population without a job. The value of the dinar plummets, with an inflation rate of more than 15 percent. Internationally aid is suspended because of suspicions of rule of law violations and human rights abuses. The president uses the international aid cuts to frame the economic crisis as a Western attempt to bring his democratically elected government to its knees. His strategy proves effective: more and more Tunisians support radical religious groups. Radical Islamism is gradually becoming mainstream, while secular and moderate voices are increasingly sidelined and local affiliates of international terrorist groups are unofficially brought into the political system.

Governance breakdown and violent conflict
- Violent attacks by Islamist groups.
- (Counter-)insurgency war between left-wingers in Gafsa/- Tataouine and Islamist government.
- Public service breakdown.
- Coup and violent conflict between security forces and opposition groups.
- Humanitarian crisis; no humanitarian access to regions of conflict.

2023: Civil war and martial law
In reaction to the military crackdown on terrorist organizations, thousands of Tunisian jihadists return in 2023 to fight the Tunisian armed forces. Civilians are caught in the crossfire and as the conflict goes on both of the warring factions start losing popular support. The military government secures Tunis and the coastal cities and manages to re-establish and centralize rudimentary public services. The capital now serves as the headquarters for a UN humanitarian mission. The aid, however, cannot reach large swathes of the population as the frontlines are constantly shifting and many of the Islamist groups actively target aid workers. Along with the counter-terrorism operations on the Libyan border and in the mountains, the counter-insurgency operation against left-wing autonomy movements in Gafsa and Tataouine continues. Political parties are banned and their leaders are in custody. Martial law is in force and military tribunals pay little attention to the rule of law.

2022: Critic and allies
While Western countries issue a vague call for the re-establishment of the constitution and a democratic transition, Algeria, Egypt and Russia applaud the coup and the military’s anti-Islamist agenda. Turkey and Qatar continue to support Ennahda’s underground structures in order to lay the groundwork for the party’s eventual return.

2021: Coup d’état
Ultimately, the new president fails to win the loyalty of the military leadership. Capitalizing on his overwhelming support from an increasingly radicalized population, he tries to bully the generals into submission, which proves to be a costly mistake. In 2022, Tunisian special forces storm the presidential palace in Carthage and the Parliament in Le Bardo by order of the chiefs of staff. The president and his allies are taken into military custody. The all-military ‘Executive Council for the Prosperity of Tunisia’ appears on television to dissolve the parliament and suspend the constitution. In the following weeks, the armed forces launch a series of coordinated attacks on terrorist groups in order to take back control over the key economic assets around the country (TP2).
DATA Revival: Baseline scenario

**2019**

**Digital natives**
The 2019 European parliamentary elections result in a coalition of the political left. Reacting to the rise of right wing populism and disinformation, the newly elected parliamentarians put a strong focus on the dangers of (purposeful) disinformation through digital media. Operating on the assumption that technical fixes cannot solve the technologically created problems, they set up an education fund to enhance media literacy in Europe and its neighbourhood. These actions strengthen nascent movements of digital natives, especially in the Balkans. Europe’s eastern neighbourhood soon sees active societal efforts to fight for changes in environmental regulations and measures to protect (digital) privacy.

**2020**

**2020: Breaking up big tech**

Meanwhile, the Democrats in the US take back the White House, partially thanks to their platform of targeting big tech companies through new antitrust laws that are tailored to address the challenges posed by large technology-driven corporations. Encouraged by this, the European Commission introduces a data tax, while the US Congress pushes through antitrust laws similar to the pre-Reagan period, breaking up the big tech corporations through the Digital Anti-Trust Act.

**2021**

**2021: Open source revolution**

With corporations weakened and the international movement of digital natives strengthened, open source approaches are on the rise. The movement announces a global education revolution that makes use of the new government funds for media literacy training as well as opportunities for open education enabled by Massive Open Online Courseware and the learning-by-doing environments created by the movement itself.

**2022-2023: Start-up boom**

By 2022, the Digital Anti-Trust Act has unleashed a boom for freelance work and small and medium enterprises, particularly in well-educated and media-literate societies with many unemployed young people. The EU’s eastern and southeastern neighbourhod, in particular, develops a flourishing start-up culture. Services that big tech corporations used to provide have now decentralized and many small businesses emerge. Employment rates rise rapidly and many formerly dissatisfied people can see a path for improvement. Critical voices who call the economic boom superficial go unheard by both its many beneficia-ries among the population at large and the movement of digital natives that counts maintaining a single, unified internet as part of its success story. Governments and large private corporations are struggling to find common ground, since the movement of digital natives has gained substantial political influence. In 2023, Eastern European governments plan to introduce measures of technologically driven public surveillance, only to be stopped in their tracks by the now powerful movement of digital natives. Capitalizing on a groundswell of public support from their role in paving the way for growth and new hope for many, the movement chooses the fight for digital freedom and privacy as their next political battle-ground. For the time being, it succeeds.

**2024: Balkan deepfakes**

With populations enjoying a third year of solid growth and starting to demand more transparency and accountability from their leaders, politicians in power in one of the Western Balkan countries are the first to employ deep fakes to discredit their opponents. Rising media literacy in the region, paradoxically, sparks over-confidence: by now unde-tectable with the natural eye, deep fakes play particularly well with an optimis-tic, self-assured target audience.

**2024: Rigged victory**

Only weeks before the presidential election, as the liberal reformist opposition leader has a 23 point lead over the president in the polls, a respected media outlet publishes a ‘leaked’ video in which the opposition candidate is seen under oath that the president personally ordered him to ‘drown [the opposition leader] in dirt’, paid for with government funds. In the face of angry public protests, the entire government resigns and new elections are scheduled. The newly educated and economica-llly flourishing society proves resilient enough in the face of the ‘Deepfake Crisis’. While there was plenty of low-level violence amid the protests and a dozen opposition activists were heavily injured by riot police, the country avoids both governance break-down and violent conflict.
2019: Father of the Nation
In late 2019, the president of Ourbaijan is re-elected and humbly accepts the title 'Father of the Nation,' given to him by his passionate supporters. In his inaugural address, he warns against Western imperialism and interference, and urges his population to stand together, praising corporate-state fusion as the secret to a self-reliant and thriving economy.

2020: Oil for Chinese tech
Ourbaijan joins the Shanghai Co-operation Organization in order to sell natural resource rights, especially for oil drilling, to China and to attract Chinese capital. At the end of 2020, thanks to natural oil growth and growth in exports to China, larger investment in cutting-edge education begins. Scientific and tech literacy grows, fueling the growth of a domestic tech sector which thrives, not least as a result of the considerable support from and rapid transfer of skills and resources by Chinese tech companies. Increased networking and access to Chinese capital to develop domestic technology according to the Chinese model. This includes the country's own RedNet networking protocol and Application Programming Interface (API) as well as a domestic operating system similar to Linix.

2021: Ending the West
To support the development of the domestic tech base with Chinese backing and to protect it, the government of Ourbaijan introduces a 66 percent ‘Google tax’ in 2021. There is strong mutual reinforcement between the technological developments and strong patriotic and nationalist sentiments in Ourbaijan. Most Ourbaijans are critical readers of the domestic press and have lively political discussions, but they are mainly interested in a harmonious society in a self-reliant system in which the government and the corporative sector work closely together for the common good. The public willingly rises up against Western big tech, which they see as the extended arm of a West inimical to their country.

2022: Tech’s dark side
Alleged by technological progress in Ourbaijan, an open-source deep fake generator becomes readily available. It is better, more efficient and easier to use than previous technology. While the government’s grip on the populous country has tightened by the following year, hacker groups turn against the government by launching viral videos that claim to expose RoboDaddy as ‘fake software’ (by showing footage of huge digital sweatshops where people answer RoboDaddy questions) and its purported self-reliance as a lie (by showing the president meeting Mark Zuckerberg in one video and Sundar Pichai in the next).

2023: Illusion of unity
A few months later, people start reporting the breakdown of refrigerators, TVs and PCs in Ourbaijan. Every second a poorly integrated mix of software in the country’s largest power-grid – caused by a knockoff of Chinese technology, licensed to Ourbaijan as part of the Belt and Road Initiative – ‘Western disinformation’ that every device linked to RoboDaddy is ‘thankfully protected from’.

2024: False convictions
A few weeks later, people start reporting the breakdown of refrigerators, TVs and PCs in Ourbaijan. Every second a poorly integrated mix of software in the country’s largest power-grid – caused by a knockoff of Chinese technology, licensed to Ourbaijan as part of the Belt and Road Initiative – ‘Western disinformation’ that every device linked to RoboDaddy is ‘thankfully protected from’.

2021: Introducing ‘RoboDaddy’
By mid-2021, the artificially intelligent personal assistant ‘RoboDaddy’ is introduced as a freely available service for all citizens of Ourbaijan. Its use is widespread, with voice assistants and smart devices connected to RoboDaddy in every home and on most mobile devices. Having appeared so quickly on the stage amidst a very new local digital ecosystem, RoboDaddy is considered by the Western press to be a knockoff of Chinese technology, licensed to Ourbaijan as part of the Belt and Road Initiative – ‘Western disinformation’ that every device linked to RoboDaddy is ‘thankfully protected from’.

2022: ‘RoboDaddy’ everywhere, anytime
By 2022, 85 percent of Ourbaijans use ‘OurChat’, which is based on WeChat and integrated in the RoboDaddy operating system. RoboDaddy switches its default search engine and cloud storage to the domestic services ‘DaddaKnows’ and ‘DaddaHeaven’. Thanks to the developing tech base, the Father of the Nation marks Ourbaijan’s achievement of full technological self-reliance. Society unites in harmony and patriotism, which some people express by burning down the capital’s Apple store in a violent anti-Western protest. The president’s family buys the largest mobile phone operator and domestic broadcasting companies. The foreign press is comprehensively censored. By New Year’s Eve, the Ourbaijani press leads with the headline ‘RoboDaddy saves first life’ after the AI’s surveillance and predictive policing capabilities helped authorities track down criminals about to commit murder, or so the report claims.

2021: 2024: Copying China’s success
In late 2023, the popular campaign Google Go dismissals of charges by Western tech vendors. Thanks to RoboDaddy, crime rates are at an all-time low. With preventive detention of dissidents spiking in 2024, the last separatist holdouts join the national hacking guard against Western liberal absolutism. The self-sufficient web ‘R-Net’ is separatist holdouts join the national harmony and patriotism, which some see as the extended arm of a West inimical to their country.
Closed Bubbles, Open Net: Baseline scenario

2020: Global protectionism
The original tech bubble is at an end. Trade conflicts are still ongoing. China focuses on the need for domestic growth in the face of rising debt and slows down foreign direct investment as well as its One Belt One Road Initiative (OBOR) plans, retreating from investment commitments in Europe's neighbourhood. It turns out that Europe is not able to fill the investment vacuum that China's retreat from OBOR leaves in its neighbourhood. Trade unions across Europe's neighbourhood lose recognition and influence. Inequality grows and the social gap widens. The West looks inward as well, wrestling with job losses and unemployment due to automation. The US threatens to withdraw from the IMF.

2020: Neutral and open net
Netflix is blocked by Chromecast, which fuels the debate about net neutrality. People across Europe and China's retreat from OBOR leaves in its wake. Trade unions across Europe's neighbourhood lose recognition and influence. Inequality grows and the social gap widens. The West looks inward as well, wrestling with job losses and unemployment due to automation. The US threatens to withdraw from the IMF.

2021: Online bubbles
People's media literacy across the EU's neighbourhoods is low, but trust in online and offline media is high. Due to widespread inequality, society is fragmented. People retreat into bubbles. While older generations focus on their local religious communities, younger people escape into the virtual worlds of augmented reality online gaming. International online communities in a relatively unregulated internet become more important as people's social support networks.

2022: Blowing the whistle
By 2022, advanced facial recognition in YouTube videos enables the identification of people who feature in videos uploaded to the platform. The EU announces its new net neutrality law, which gains massive public support around the world. A whistleblower reveals that the Chinese social credit system has an additional component: a monitoring system that allows the tracking of people in real time during situations like protests and riots. This causes a public outcry around the world, with people in the 16+ countries being particularly worried about how their own governments' use of Chinese technology affects their freedoms and lives.

2023: Risky surveillance
Ukraine, Turkey and Tunisia acquire a more efficient and comprehensive online censorship system from China. The program's launch causes an internet breakdown in the three countries, blocking younger people from accessing the virtual bubbles they have become so reliant on. Critical civil society groups that had gained support after the revelations around the Chinese social credit system capitalize on the widespread discontent and organize mass protests and sit-ins. The population turns to the traditional media and journalism, which experience a renaissance. Governments begin to fully understand the risks posed by Chinese technology. Afraid of another Arab Spring or colour revolution, some governments even shut down their Chinese surveillance and censorship systems, though it remains the stuff of popular rumours and conspiracy theories whether or not this is actually true.

2023: Rogue or neutral?
This new environment allows organized crime to flourish. A huge dataset with the names of people in YouTube videos is leaked. While some are only embarrassing, others are clearly incriminating. Organized crime takes advantage of governments' paralysis and starts blackmailing people. Police and intelligence services in the EU's neighbourhood want to use the data for their purposes, but governments are wary of people's scrutiny and another technological failure that fuels public discontent. So they ban its use by authorities. In 2024, the UN endorses the Net-Neutrality Pact. Even Ukraine joins the pact and Belarus starts tearing down censorship firewalls.

Closed Bubbles, Open Net: Deepfakes (alternative scenario)

2020: Global protectionism
2020: Neutral and open net
2021: Online bubbles
2022: Blowing the whistle

2023: Egypt's deepfake revolution
In Egyptian society, people focus their entire social lives on local religious communities. In 2023, a series of videos of government officials and members of the elite is leaked. In one of these videos, General Al-Sisi secretly meets a Christian pastor and converts to Christianity. In another video, men wearing Chinese symbols abduct a group of Muslim women to sell them as sex slaves. The leaked YouTube dataset - the largest deepfake training dataset in the world - was a game changer for creating deepfakes. But the population is not aware of the extent to which advanced deepfake technology enables criminals to create fake videos and thus are absolutely traumatized by the videos, in which the elites seem to sell out the population to foreign players and betray the Muslim population in a massive conspiracy.

2023: Trust breakdown
Dissatisfied with the economic situation and hysterical about the videos, the many unemployed people take to the streets to protest. Religious minorities, particularly Christians, are targeted by vigilant groups, but they also turn their anger and violence against the government, which has completely lost the populations' trust: even if not every one of these outrageous videos can be legitimated, people think, who can still be trusted?

2023: Sisi's surveillance state
The Sisi government bets on the full force of the Chinese real-time monitoring system and makes use of the leaked YouTube facial recognition data. Access to social media is blocked, because there is no way to tell real from fake videos and images. Protest leaders mysteriously disappear. While the government tries to suppress protests, the situation escalates. Protests turn violent and the security forces respond in kind. This entirely changes the course of events and convinces governments that they need to make use of technology to stay in control. Net neutrality is definitely off the table. With the scarce public resources diverted to establishing a full-scale 21st-century surveillance state, other areas of public services and governance suffer.

Closed Bubbles, Open Net: Artificial intelligence (alternative scenario)

2020: Global protectionism
2020: Neutral and open net
2021: Online bubbles
2022: Blowing the whistle
2023: Virtual reality
A new virtual reality online game, a mix of Pokémon Go and Fortnite, is popular with young people across North Africa and the Levant. Unemployed and suffering from dire economic conditions in crowded urban centres, they are happy to at least have access to cheap mobile technology, which is their gateway into the world of online gaming. People wander through the streets, to real places which have a function in their online game.

2023: Disrupted order
Suddenly, imams of local Muslim communities start reporting incidents of young people without proper clothing walking into mosques, shouting and running around. It turns out that the virtual reality game's script suddenly lure people into holy sites, leading to lynching and more extreme violence between ethnic and sectarian communities. In the same game, people are systematically directed to deserted areas only to be robbed and then beaten, completely overstressing and scaring police forces.

2023: Profit trumps trust
Based on the scale and organization of the scam, as well as the sophistication required to infiltrate the game system, it becomes clear to people that this must be an organized crime plot. The game developers in California find no recognizable pattern and fail to track down the manipulation of their game, which appears only to affect particular countries whose languages they do not understand. Still, at this early stage of the company, these countries represent a massive chunk of its customer base that brings in lots of revenue and the next funding round is looming. So the management refuses to take the game offline for these countries until the vulnerability is found and fixed, leaving hundreds of thousands of players across North Africa and the Levant vulnerable to violence and much bigger urban populations on
Scenarios for Governance Breakdown and Violent Conflict in the EU’s Neighbourhood