



STRATEGIC POLICY
RECOMMENDATIONS TO
BOLSTER EU CANDIDATE
COUNTRY RESILIENCE
UNTIL 2035



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This policy brief presents three recommendations for how the European Union (EU) can strengthen the democratic, socio-economic, and security resilience of (potential) Candidate Countries (CCs) against foreign malign influence. Drawing on foresight analysis for the period 2026-2035, the recommendations translate key uncertainties in the EU enlargement environment into practical policy options. To ensure success, the recommendations are designed to remain effective across a range of plausible futures by building long-term linkages to EU structures and by embedding safeguards to mitigate potential risks. In doing so they provide targeted, forward-looking additions to the EU's enlargement toolkit, increasing resilience against foreign malign influence while supporting the democratic and European future of CCs.

The recommendations were developed by regional experts in a strategic policy design workshop, building on REUNIR's threat scanning and strategic foresight work. They address three urgent fields of action across the democratic, socio-economic, and security domains and are designed to be anticipatory, preventative, and robust. The policy options were then stress-tested through several rounds of robustness checks.

Recommendation 1 (democratic domain): The European Commission, in cooperation with the European Economic and Social Committee, should establish an 'EU + CC Civic Council' as a formal channel between EU institutions and civil society to strengthen democratic oversight in the accession process and protect civic space.

Recommendation 2 (socio-economic domain): The European Commission should reduce state-capture risks in CCs by structurally integrating countries into EU innovation ecosystems, thereby accelerating high-value economic diversification through competitive funding, common standards, and cross-border partnerships.

Recommendation 3 (security domain): The European External Action Service, under the leadership of the High Representative/Vice-President, should create an EU+ security forum with CCs. This would help to strengthen resilience against external shocks, deepen practical security cooperation during the accession process, and lay the groundwork for stronger security assurances over time.

1. INTRODUCTION

In a period of heightened geopolitical volatility and intensified external state pressure on the EU's Candidate Countries (CCs), enlargement policy needs to increasingly function as a resilience policy. This is especially important because foreign influence from state actors has the potential to interfere with democratic and accession trajectories by weakening democratic safeguards, creating economic dependencies, and exploiting security vulnerabilities. For the EU, this creates a practical challenge: supporting CCs in withstanding foreign malign influence during the accession process while maintaining the credibility and transformative power of enlargement.

This policy brief responds to that challenge by presenting three forward-looking recommendations for the democratic, socio-economic, and security domains. Together, they aim at strengthening CC resilience to foreign malign influence while deepening their long-term integration into EU structures. Rather than offering comprehensive solutions, the recommendations are designed as targeted additions to the EU enlargement toolkit that remain credible and workable under different future conditions.

The recommendations were developed through a strategic foresight and policy design process within the REUNIR project. They draw on REUNIR's scenarios, resilience assessments, and policy-gap analysis, and were refined in an in-person workshop in January 2026 with 12 experts from the project's consortium member institutions.¹

During the workshop, participants first developed policy options for the three priority fields of action. Several robustness checks were then carried out, such as a 'pre-mortem' exercise and a scenario-based 'wind tunnelling' exercise using REUNIR scenarios for 2035. By building on and extending strategic policy design workshop method originally designed by Baykal and colleagues, the policy recommendations seek to be (a) anticipatory, (b) preventative, (c) ambitious but realistic, (d) targeted but robust, and (e) an addition (not 'more of the same').²

The recommendations in this policy brief focus on three priority fields for action that remain insufficiently addressed in current EU policy. These fields were identified by experts during the workshop on the basis of REUNIR's foresight and scenario analysis:³

1. Intensified infiltration of democratic institutions, undermining of institutional safeguards (rule of law, democracy) and instrumentalising of cultural influence [democracy domain].

¹ The 12 participating experts reflected an even gender balance (six women and six men).

² Baykal, A., et al. (2021), *Report on four strategic policy design exercises*, Europe's External Action and the Dual Challenges of Limited Statehood and Contested Orders (EU-LISTCO) Project.

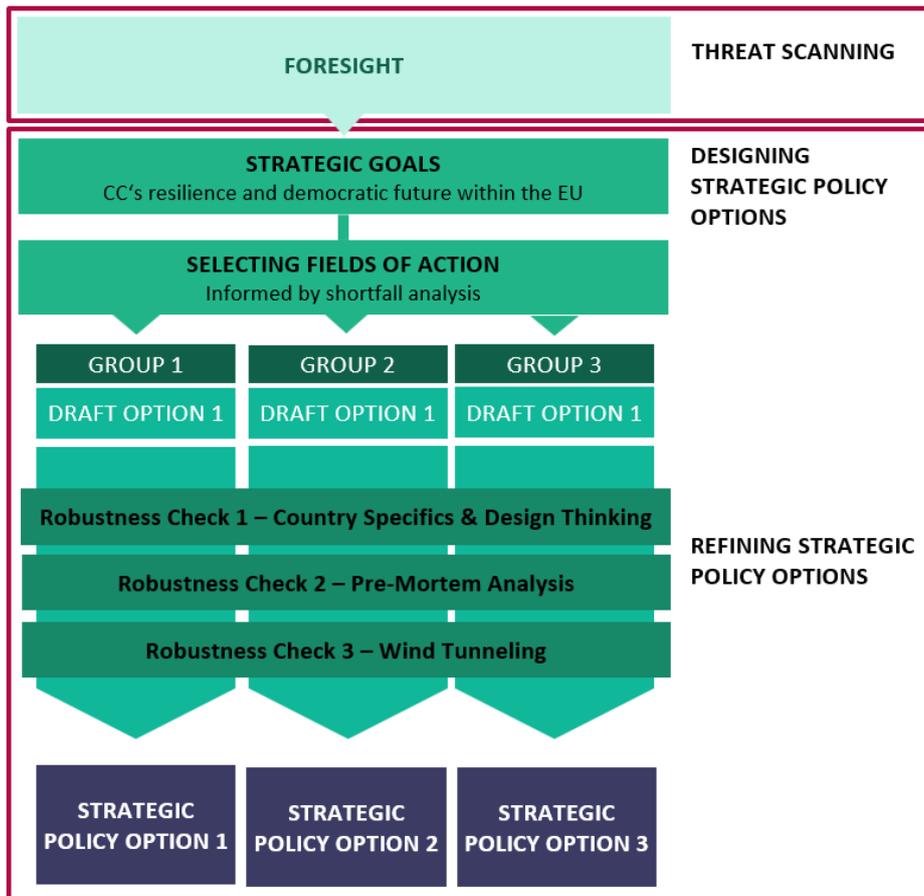
³ Flachenecker, P., et al. (2025), *Anticipating foreign malign influence in EU candidate countries: Working paper D7.1 on scenarios and forecasts until 2035*, REUNIR Working Paper No D7.1, REUNIR Project.

Flachenecker, P., et al. (2026), *Foreign malign influence in the Western Balkans and the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood: Six scenarios for 2035*, REUNIR Project.

2. China and Gulf countries creating elite dependencies through economic investments (intensifying elite capture, non-inclusive growth) [socio-economic domain].⁴
3. Intensified security and military threats to CCs (nuclear weapons proliferation/use, arms sales, warfare, authoritarian cooperation) [security domain].

The sections that follow present one recommendation for each domain, before concluding with cross-cutting lessons for more future-oriented enlargement policymaking. Figure 1 provides an overview of the methodology, while the Appendix explains the full process in greater detail.

Figure 1: Overview of the Applied Strategic Policy Design Methodology



Source: Adapted from Baykal et al. (2021)

⁴ While the REUNIR foresight work (Flachenecker et al., 2025) primarily highlights these dynamics in relation to China and Gulf countries, REUNIR experts highlighted that elite dependency and state capture can also be increased by other state actors that REUNIR investigates, including Russia, Turkey, and the United States.

2. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations were developed by REUNIR experts during the policy design workshop. They reflect the discussions and strategic considerations of participants and are intended as targeted proposals within the selected field of action, rather than as comprehensive solutions⁵.

Recommendation 1: Democratic Resilience through an EU Civic Council

Recommendation: The European Commission, in corporation with the European Economic and Social Committee, should establish an ‘EU + CC Civic Council’ as a formal channel between EU institutions and civil society to strengthen democratic oversight in the accession process and protect civic space.

- **Mandate:** Provide early warning on democratic backsliding and coordinate support where civic space is under pressure.
- **Composition:** Representatives from CC civil society and the European Economic and Social Committee.
- **Targeted field of action:** Intensified infiltration of democratic institutions, undermining of institutional safeguards (rule of law, democracy) and instrumentalising of cultural influence.

The proposed ‘EU+ CC Civic Council’ should function as an institutionalised entry point between EU institutions and civil society actors in CCs, to strengthen democratic oversight within the accession process and safeguard civic space. It should be composed of representatives from CC civil society and members of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC). Its design should include safeguards to ensure independence, prevent conflicts of interest, and reduce the risk of undue influence or capture by actors whose interests run counter to democratic principles.

The Civic Council would have two core functions. First, it would serve as an early-warning mechanism in cases where civil society actors identify risks of imminent democratic backsliding. In such situations, the Council would be mandated to formally alert the European Commission and could recommend the temporary suspension of accession negotiations until further action has been taken. This would integrate civic oversight more directly into the enlargement process by enabling the Commission, together with Member States (MS), to take such warnings into account in the relevant accession negotiation chapters and in decisions on whether negotiations should be paused.

Second, in contexts where democratic backsliding has already resulted in a hostile or restrictive environment for civil society, the Civic Council would coordinate localised support. This could include the management and creation of flexible funding mechanisms capable of responding rapidly to shrinking civic space, as well as cooperation with international organisations such as the UN or the OSCE where these retain operational access. In extreme cases, support mechanisms could include providing emergency relocation support in the EU for civil society actors facing serious threats.

⁵ see Baykal et al. (2021)

Key considerations:

- The EESC already maintains formal civil-society cooperation with Ukraine and Moldova through the EU–Ukraine and EU–Moldova Civil Society Platforms established under the respective Association Agreements, and since 2023 has broadened CC participation through its Enlargement Candidate Members initiative. The proposed Civic Council is therefore a mechanism that systematises and scales up existing practice across accession countries, rather than creating an entirely new model.
- Stress testing the drafted policy option in the wind tunnelling exercise led participants to strengthen the proposal’s robustness mechanisms, by including emergency relocation support for threatened civil society actors and safeguards against veto players or institutional capture.
- Workshop participants emphasised the importance of civil society representation that is perceived as legitimate in participating countries. One key takeaway was that the selection of participating civil society actors should take urban–rural divides into account and, where possible, go beyond traditional NGO representatives to include actors reflecting a broader range of civil society constituencies. This would help prevent the process from being dismissed as a narrow, Brussels-funded elite project detached from CC societies.

Recommendation 2: Socio-Economic Resilience through Research and Innovation Partnerships

Recommendation: The European Commission should reduce state-capture risks in CCs by structurally integrating countries into EU innovation ecosystems, thereby accelerating high-value economic diversification through competitive funding, common standards, and cross-border partnerships.

- **Focus & Target:** Innovation-driven sectors (higher-value manufacturing, digital technologies, raw materials, health, energy) through universities, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), and public actors.
- **Anchor:** Integration into the 2028–2034 EU Research and Innovation Framework Programme, the European Institute of Innovation and Technology, and alignment with Global Gateway.
- **Targeted field of action:** China and Gulf countries creating elite dependencies through unsustainable economic investments (intensifying elite capture, non-inclusive growth).

This recommendation aims to structurally reduce opportunities for state capture of economic initiatives and build long-term socio-economic resilience aligned with democratic governance standards. This would be achieved by embedding economic support to CCs within transparent, innovation-based ecosystems linked to EU rules and markets. To that end, the EU should strategically expand CC access to European Commission-managed support programmes in research and innovation (R&I), higher education, and SME development. This would primarily work by embedding CCs in the EU’s R&I ecosystems through Horizon Europe partnerships and the EU’s next Framework Programme for innovation (FP10). Such an approach would build on pre-existing efforts, including cooperation through the European Institute of Innovation and Technology (EIT) and its Knowledge and Innovation Communities (KICs).

Rather than solely trying to compete with China or Gulf countries in infrastructure, extractive industries, or other capital-intensive sectors, the EU should focus on areas where it holds stronger comparative advantages. These include digital technologies, higher-value manufacturing, health, and innovation-driven value chains in raw materials and other high-tech sectors. This requires identifying promising high-value-added sectors at national and regional levels within each CC, especially where these reflect mutual strategic interests for both the EU and the country concerned. In countries with limited industrial bases, niche sectors such as IT or knowledge-based services may offer more sustainable pathways for inclusive economic development.

To ensure durability, the policy should be implemented within the 2028-2034 European Commission-managed research and innovation framework programme, using learned lessons from the concluding Horizon Europe 2021-2027 programme. Furthermore, coordination with the Global Gateway initiatives in the Western Balkans and Eastern Neighbourhood would enhance alignment between innovation policy and broader EU investment strategies. Cooperation with like-minded partners such as Japan, Canada, the Republic of Korea, and Norway could further strengthen financial and technical capacity while reinforcing shared governance standards.

Key considerations:

- Stress-testing the policy idea against CC-specific challenges led participants to emphasise that research and innovation support must be tailored to the economic profile of each CC. The recommendation was therefore adjusted to stress that priority sectors should build on both the EU's comparative strengths and the specific economic potential of each CC, rather than focusing predominantly on countering Chinese and Gulf-country influence.
- The pre-mortem analysis further refined the proposal by shifting the focus from broader bottom-up economic support to more targeted research and innovation partnerships through specific EU programmes, in alignment with other economic partnerships. This shift was intended to make the recommendation more robust against risks of state capture by embedding support in transparent, innovation-based ecosystems linked to EU rules and markets. Moreover, these adjustments seek to strengthen the impact of the policy through effective partnerships – either with partner countries or alignment with existing policies.

Recommendation 3: Security Resilience through an EU + Security Forum

Recommendation: The European External Action Service, under the leadership of the High Representative/Vice-President, should create an EU+ security forum with CCs. This would help to strengthen resilience against external shocks, deepen practical security cooperation during the accession process, and lay the groundwork for stronger security assurances over time.

- **Immediate focus:** Defence-industrial cooperation and increasing resilience in areas such as cyber, air/missile defence, and maritime security.
- **Long-term Goal:** Gradual deepening of security cooperation and the development of a more coherent European security framework with CCs.

- **Targeted field of action:** Intensified security and military threats to CCs (nuclear weapons proliferation/use, arms sales, warfare, authoritarian cooperation).

The European External Action Service (EEAS), under the leadership of the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy / Vice-President of the European Commission (HR/VP), should create a structured EU+ security forum bringing together MS and CCs. This framework should be implementation-oriented, serving as a multilateral platform for coordinating joint initiatives, information-sharing, and practical cooperation in areas that enhance collective security in the EU and its neighbourhood.

In its initial phase, this cooperation should focus on clearly defined priority areas that align with existing EU defence-readiness priorities and lend themselves to practical cooperation with CCs, including maritime security, air and missile defence, cyber defence, joint acquisition, and defence-industrial cooperation. Over time, the forum should evolve into a more coherent framework for deeper security coordination, including, in the long term, mutual security guarantees. This would support stronger deterrence and resilience for both the EU and its future members across conventional, hybrid, and strategic domains.

The creation of this EU+ structure should be preceded by a targeted revision of the EU's existing strategic guidance on security and defence, to provide the strategic foundation for the proposed European security framework. Furthermore, the forum should be conceived as a structured framework for practical cooperation rather than a standalone new organisation.

Governance should be based on consensus among participating states and remain fully consistent with existing EU decision-making procedures and instruments. The CCs should participate as full members, on agreed terms defined by the participating members. Nevertheless, membership should be conditional on adherence to shared security interests and democratic standards, with the possibility of suspension or withdrawal in cases of non-compliance. Funding arrangements for security-building projects in the CCs should be equitable, building on existing instruments such as the European Peace Facility, and the benefits of European defence industrial initiatives should be fairly distributed among participating members.

Key considerations:

- Workshop discussions initially considered more ambitious deterrence-oriented options, such as developing an EU nuclear programme, but the robustness checks shifted the recommendation toward a more feasible CC-inclusive security forum with staged objectives.
- The wind tunnelling exercise reinforced the need for governance safeguards, including participation benchmarks and the possibility of suspension in cases of non-compliance and also led to the idea to increase interdependencies through defence-industrial cooperation.
- Moreover, the robustness checks, particularly the pre-mortem analysis, led participants to anchor the policy in existing initiatives, such as the Strategic Compass, in order to increase political feasibility.

3. CONCLUSION

Overall, the three recommendations translate REUNIR's threat scanning and foresight work into concrete options that aim to make the enlargement process more resilient to foreign malign influence from geopolitical state actors. As such, they target the most relevant threats in the democratic, socio-economic and security domain which the REUNIR foresight analysis has identified, and in which experts saw critical gaps in current EU policy. Taken together, they have the potential to strengthen CC capacity to withstand external pressure during accession by (i) reinforcing democratic oversight and civic space, (ii) reducing vulnerability to elite capture through long-term integration into EU innovation ecosystems, and (iii) developing more credible security commitments through structured pre-accession cooperation. Importantly, the proposals are designed to be robust under uncertainty, as they incorporate safeguards and conditionalities, anticipate plausible obstacles, and build on existing EU instruments rather than duplicating them. In doing so, they aim to help the EU preserve the credibility and transformative power of enlargement while adapting the enlargement toolkit to a more contested geopolitical environment.

More broadly, the recommendations underline that a robust EU enlargement policy toolkit depends on more than progress on technical *acquis* chapters. Such a policy toolkit also requires mechanisms that protect democratic institutions, constrain the capture of economic support, and provide credible security support while accession remains incomplete and future developments uncertain. This need becomes particularly clear in scenarios in which enlargement risks losing its transformative power as democratic standards erode, non-democratic external leverage over enlargement country governments increases, and domestic constituencies become disillusioned with the accession process.⁶

Creating the recommendations with this paper's strategic policy design methodology addresses these challenges by generating policy ideas in ways that increase their long-term robustness. Across all three recommendations, iterative stress-testing encouraged stronger institutional anchoring, more staged and feasible forms of ambition, and the inclusion of safeguards and conditionalities to reduce the risk of capture, deadlock, or reversal. This is reflected in the protective mechanisms added to the Civic Council proposal, the emphasis on structural integration into EU innovation ecosystems, and the evolution of the security recommendation toward a more feasible CC-inclusive forum. As a result, the recommendations are designed not only to address current vulnerabilities, but also to remain credible and effective under adverse and uncertain enlargement conditions.

⁶ See Flachenecker et al. (2026)

APPENDIX: STRATEGIC POLICY DESIGN METHODOLOGY

The recommendations were developed as part of a strategic policy design workshop, the final step of the REUNIR foresight methodology, which builds on foresight research created in previous deliverables.⁷ The workshop's methodology draws on and extends a strategic policy design workshop method designed by Baykal et al.⁸ Based on this framework, the policy recommendations developed during this workshop and presented in this brief seek to be (a) anticipatory, (b) preventative, (c) ambitious but realistic, (d) targeted but robust, and (e) an addition (not 'more of the same'). The workshop was facilitated by GPPi researchers on 29 and 30 January 2026 in Berlin and included 12 participants (six male and six female) – one from each REUNIR partner organisation.⁹

Figure 1 illustrates the strategic policy design methodology underpinning this policy brief, out of which two foundational analytical steps preceded the workshop. First, the REUNIR foresight work developed scenarios and forecasts anticipating foreign malign influence in the EU CCs ['Foresight' in Figure 1].¹⁰ Second, the strategic goals guiding the policy design process were defined within the REUNIR project as identifying approaches that strengthen the EU's policy toolkit to bolster the resilience of CCs to foreign threats and support their democratic future within the EU ['Strategic Goals' in Figure 1].¹¹ Building on these analytical foundations, a list of potential fields of action was compiled as an input for the workshop. This list drew on a shortfall analysis of the REUNIR policy briefs¹² as well as insights from the REUNIR foresight analysis.¹³

During the workshop, participants were presented with this list and tasked with identifying priority areas for new EU policies aimed at strengthening the resilience of CCs against foreign influence from external state actors. Based on this discussion, the participants selected three fields of action that require new EU policy responses: (1) Increasing infiltration of institutions, undermining institutional safeguards (rule of Law, democracy) and instrumentalising of cultural influence [democracy domain]; (2) China and Gulf countries creating elite dependencies with economic investments (intensifying elite capture, non-inclusive growth)

⁷ Flachenecker et al. (2025; 2026).

⁸ Baykal et al. (2021).

⁹ The REUNIR consortium member institutions are: Belgrade Centre for Security Policy (BCSP), Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS), College of Europe in Natolin (CEN), Global Public Policy Institute (GPPi), International Centre for Defence and Security (ICDS), Institutul pentru Politici și Reforme Europene (IPRE), Maastricht University, New Vision University, Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU), National University of 'Kyiv-Mohyla Academy', Université Sorbonne Nouvelle, University of Graz.

¹⁰ Flachenecker et al. (2025; 2026).

¹¹ see Bressan, S. et al. (2024), *The methodology for threat assessment to be conducted in WP3, 4 and 5*, REUNIR Working Paper No D2.4, REUNIR Project.

¹² Akhvlediani, T. (2025), *How to bolster socioeconomic resilience in the EU candidate countries*, REUNIR Policy Brief No D4.3, REUNIR Project.

Amoris, L. and Delcour, L. (2025), *Building robust and inclusive democracies: EU policy options for countering political threats in the Western Balkans and Eastern Neighbourhood*, REUNIR Policy Brief No D5.3, REUNIR Project.

Lawrence, T. (2025), *Investing in security: A policy agenda to strengthen the EU's future members*, REUNIR Policy Brief No D3.3, REUNIR Project.

Osypchuk, A. et al. (2025), *Resilience through EU accession: A comparative analysis of local perceptions in the Western Balkans and Eastern Neighbourhood*, REUNIR Policy Brief No D6.4, REUNIR Project.

¹³ Flachenecker et al. (2025).

[socio-economic domain];¹⁴ and (3) Intensified security and military threats to CCs (nuclear weapons proliferation/use, arms sales, warfare, authoritarian cooperation) [security domain].

Divided into one group per domain, participants were asked to create an initial policy idea to tackle the field of action at hand with the instructions to be concrete and long term oriented while not being exhaustive. To encourage precise and actionable policy recommendations, this initial policy draft had to follow the formula: ‘Who should do what in order to achieve what’. Each group presented their idea in the plenary session and other participants were able to give feedback. This initial policy idea was then refined in three steps.

First, groups had to refine their own policy draft option by considering CC-specific challenges. To that end, the groups were presented with graphs from the REUNIR resilience assessments¹⁵ and were asked to improve the original policy option based on this consideration. Furthermore, the groups were presented with a random ‘design word’¹⁶ and had to make a connection between their policy and the design word. This technique, borrowed from design thinking, incentivises creative thinking and outside-the-box considerations.¹⁷

Second, the groups engaged in a ‘pre-mortem analysis’¹⁸ to further increase the robustness of the policy drafts. In this exercise, experts are encouraged to stress-test their ideas by considering reasons why their policies ‘could have either succeeded or failed from the ex-post perspective of future historians’.¹⁹ To that end, the groups were reshuffled to enable participants to work on a new policy option. In this new constellation, the groups had to establish a ‘way to hell’ of the policy draft option in front of them. This included identifying ways how the policy option could *fail*, up to 2035. The groups were reshuffled again, ensuring that each expert contributed to all policy options. In this new round, groups had to produce ‘ways to heaven’, in which reasons for the *success* of the policy were identified. Both ‘heaven’ and ‘hell’ assessments were then presented and discussed in the plenary sessions. The original groups for each policy option then refined their proposals based on this ‘pre-mortem analysis’.

¹⁴ While the REUNIR foresight work (Flachenecker et al. 2025) primarily highlights these dynamics in relation to China and Gulf countries, REUNIR experts highlighted that elite dependency and state capture can also be increased by other state actors that REUNIR investigates, including Türkiye, Russia, and the United States.

¹⁵ Akhvlediani, T. et al. (2025), Resilience of Eastern Neighbourhood and Western Balkan countries to socio-economic threats, REUNIR Working Paper No D4.2, REUNIR Project.

Amoris, L. et al. (2025), Resilience of Eastern Neighbourhood and Western Balkan countries to threats to democracy, REUNIR Working Paper No D5.2, REUNIR Project.

Lawrence, T. et al. (2025), Resilience of Eastern Neighbourhood and Western Balkan countries to military threats, REUNIR Working Paper No D3.2, REUNIR Project.

¹⁶ Distributed design words: Economic Group: Veto; Security Group: Adaptation; Democracy Group: Bottleneck

¹⁷ Ritter, S.M. and Mostert, N. (2017), ‘Enhancement of creative thinking skills using a cognitive-based creativity training’, *Journal of Cognitive Enhancement*, Vol. 1, pp. 243–253.

¹⁸ Klein, G. (2007), ‘Performing a project premortem’, *Harvard Business Review*, September.

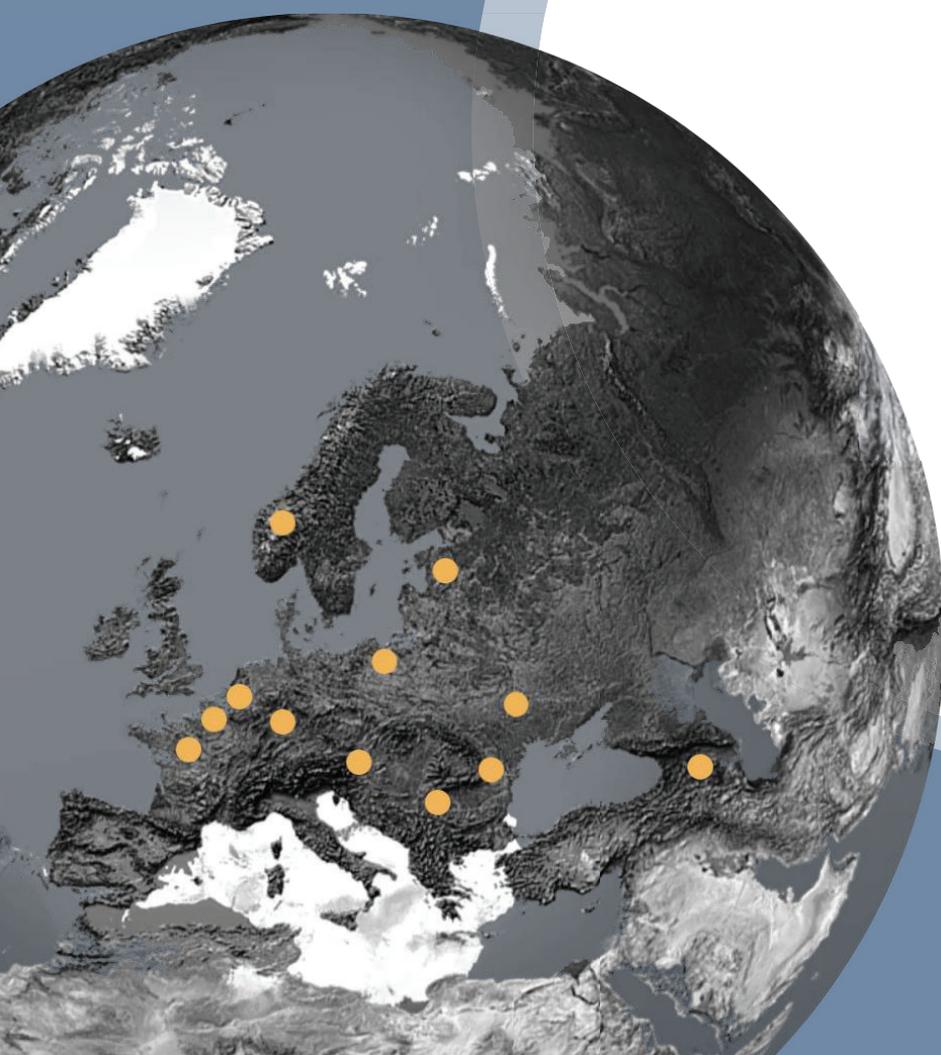
¹⁹ Baykal et al. (2021, p. 8).

Third, the REUNIR workshop extended the original methodology²⁰ by adding a final robustness check - testing updated policy options in a 'wind tunnel' exercise.²¹ For this exercise, each group received three REUNIR scenarios for 2035 that outlined plausible threat trajectories ranging from the geopolitical ambitions of foreign state actors to shifts in CC democratic resilience.²² Each scenario posed a distinct challenge to the group's updated policy option. Experts were then tasked with assessing how robust their policy was in these scenarios and to make final adjustments. Importantly, policy options were not rewritten to suit each scenario individually. Instead, experts proposed specific, targeted refinements designed to strengthen each policy option's performance across the full range of scenarios. Each group then presented their policy option for final remarks and comments in the plenary.

²⁰ Baykal et al. (2021).

²¹ Fergnani, A. and Sweeney, J.A. (2021), 'Identity wind tunneling: A method for discovering an organization's strategic identity using scenarios', *Futures & Foresight Science*, Vol. 3, e96.

²² The following scenarios were distributed: *Security group*: 'Nuclear Umbrella', 'Authoritarian Crisis', 'Emerging from Chaos'. *Socio-economic group*: 'Nationalist EU+ without NATO', 'Nuclear Umbrella', 'Authoritarian Crisis'. *Democracy group*: 'Hybrid Boom', 'Nuclear Umbrella', 'Authoritarian Crisis' Flachenecker et al. (2026).



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