GAMES, EXERCISES AND SIMULATIONS

ALTERNATIVE SCENARIOS IN ANALYZING THE DEVELOPMENT OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES AT NATIONAL LEVEL*

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Abstract:

The article presents the format of an exercise conducted within the Summer School "Strategic communication, governance and security within the European Union", organized in June 2022 by the "Mihai Viteazul" National Intelligence Academy, as part of the Jean Monnet EUSEGOV Module. The text emphasizes on the techniques of preparation and implementation, without disclosing neither the topic of the exercise, nor the results obtained during the summer school.

The present exercise introduces the reader in the alternative scenarios technique and in the field approached through the analysis- conspiracy theories, it presents the context of the premises of the topic, establishes the instructions for the participants, proposes instructions for the moderators, and highlights the analysis directions in the process of building the alternative scenarios.

The theme proposed makes the exercise accessible for a high range of participants, with educational and/ or professional background in fields such as European studies, security and intelligence, public administration, academia, civil society, research, NGOs, mass-media and others. As such, the exercise is addressed to M.A. and PhD students, and also to experts interested in the theme and in the technique.

The steps and explanations included validate the exercise as a learning and as a teaching tool, as it can be replicated into conducting similar exercises.

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A short introduction in the alternative scenarios' technique

The alternative scenarios technique is funded on the principle of designing possible types of future, based on predefined factors, which are used to create a four-quadrant model by intersecting them within a matrix (see Figure 1) (Globalytica, 2017; Bishop, Hines and Collins, 2007; Ogilvy, 2000; Van Notten, Rotmans, van Asselt, Tothman, 2003). The technique is also known as "the multiple scenarios technique", as it results with four possible futures. The technique generates multiple explanations of developing a certain situation, in the presence of fundamental factors, which are essential for the topic analysed. (Globalytica, 2017) The scenarios are not predictions of possible outcomes, but potential developments of certain situations. (Jackson, 2011) Therefore, the alternative scenarios are the result of an anticipation process when analysing potential developments of a situation, stated on a certain set of variables; as such, the scenarios are coherent and consistent descriptions of the situations that may occur as a result of the intersection of the two main factors (Surdu, 2020). The alternative scenarios are built by taking into consideration past and present events and are useful tools in preparing for future challenges or for preparing strategic responses or actions for certain situations (Surdu, 2020).
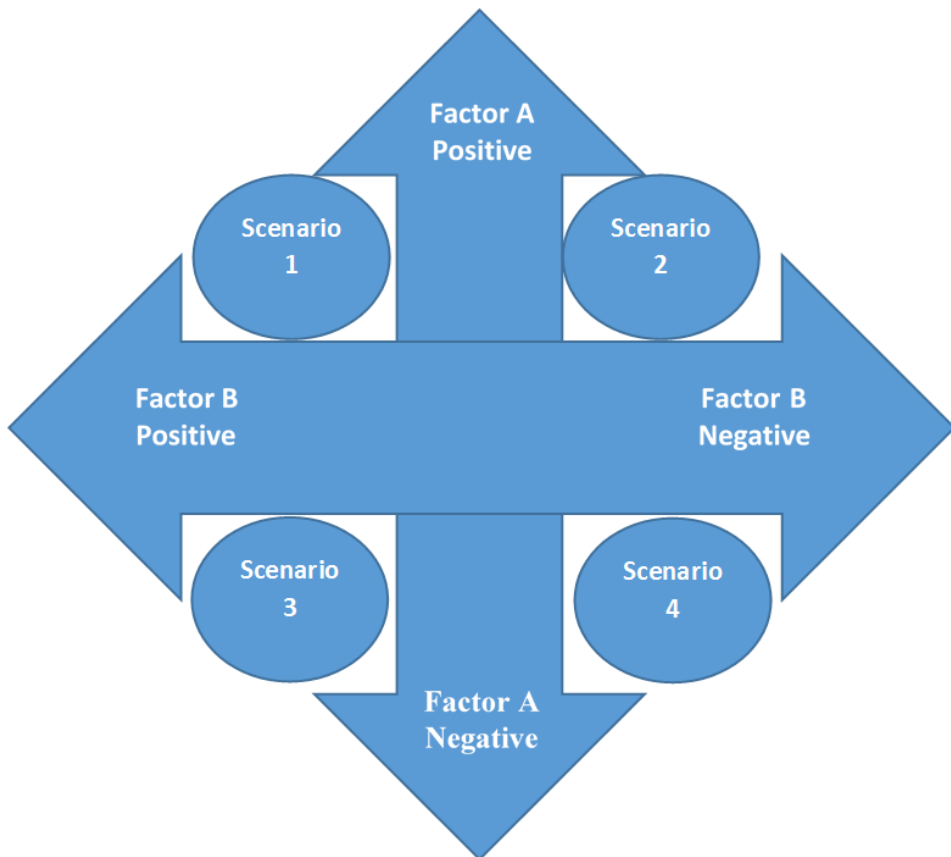
Figure 1: Alternative scenarios matrix (Source: Author's elaboration, adapted after Handbook of Analytic Tools and Techniques, 2016; Watts et. al., September, 2019; van Notten, 2006; Foresight Horizon Scanning Centre, October, 2009; Surdu, 2020)

The alternative scenarios are grouped after micro and macro characteristics by van Notten (2006): purpose, process of development and content. When discussing the purpose of the technique, we can identify scenarios that analyse gradual changes, respectively discontinuous ones; the process implies an exploratory analysis, and creative thinking, and it may fund strategic decisions. The process of

development can be intuitive – based on creativity, and analytical – based on quantification techniques. The content can be complex – by going through different stages of development, or it can be simple – by targeting only the final result (Van Notten, 2006).

Börjeson (Bishop, Hines and Collins, 2007) identifies three categories of scenarios. The first one is based on the analysis of what will happen; these are the predictive scenarios. The second category analyses what might happen; these are called exploratory scenarios. The third category implies a normative process, which analyses the steps that may lead to reaching a certain objective; these are the normative scenarios. The normative process does not imply the analysis of past events, but more of norms that apply in the certain field or situation, while the exploratory scenarios take into consideration past events (Kuosa, 2014).

The alternative scenarios are built by following a set of steps:
1. identifying a set of factors,
2. defining each factor,
3. grouping the factors in 2x2 sets,
4. describing the possible developments of the situations resulted by the intersection of the sets of factors,
5. selecting the relevant developments,
6. identifying the relevant indicators that describe the developments selected. (Globalytica, 2017)

Moreover, van Notten (2006) invokes both analytical and intuitive approaches in developing alternative scenarios. While the analytical process covers quantification techniques or content analysis, the intuitive one includes a set of steps to be followed:
1. identifying the problem,
2. identifying the relevant factors,
3. describing the relevant factors,
4. selecting the factors included in the analysis,
5. developing the scenarios.

Both approaches – analytical and intuitive – can be used as complementary methods (van Notten, 2006).

When building alternative scenarios by grouping 2x2 factors a four-quadrant matrix will result, and each of the four intersections

describe a possible future. Why is this the recommended model? Because one scenario may be received as a prediction, two scenarios may induce the idea of competition, three scenarios may lead to the perception that one might be the real version of the future, and more than four scenarios would imply a morphological analysis (Jackson, 2011). The two factors included in the model are selected by their impact relevance for the situation analysed (van Notten, 2006). The process of analysing the alternative scenarios implies the identification of the possible trajectories, by developing possible trends of the situation (Globalytica, 2017).

Alternative scenarios are successfully used to inform and fund decisions, plans and type of actions (Globalytica, 2017). As such, the technique is feasible in different fields, as a singular research method or as part of a mixed one, when it is used along with other techniques (Kuosa, 2014). Foresight Horizon Scanning Centre (2009) evaluates that successful scenarios must follow a set of principles: being consistent, using rigorous data and being convincing.

Alternative scenarios are usually developed within organized teams; practice demonstrated that not only the onsite format creates a productive context, but also the online one. The creativity and imagination of the participants are the key element here (Surdu, 2020). A Deplhi approach can also be used; the method allows the individual contribution of the team members, which is discussed and agreed upon by the whole team (Wright et. al, 2013).

Conspiracy theories: theories and studies

Reality is affected by clandestine actions and covert operations of invisible networks that constantly manipulate information and present false versions of it. The power of such networks also manifests itself in the way the target audience perceives reality and makes decisions. Who is behind such actions? The brain itself, according to Brotherton's (2015) analysis, as people tend to accept the respective explanations as real, finding recourse in the information they have access to.

Conspiracy theories are found in all kinds of facts and actions, presenting plausible explanations for their existence or course, such as

the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, the trip to the moon, Area 51 (Brotherton, 2015), or, among the most recent – COVID-19.

Conspiracy theories are based on real facts or a belief accepted by the general population, but also by scientists. These have experienced a process of expansion with the advent of the Internet and the digital age: "As the global networks of the information age have expanded, many of us are overwhelmed and undermined by an ever-present uncertainty." (Dean, 2000)

A series of experiments on the elements that determine the credibility of a message identified internal conflict, general confusion, the disorder of the environment, or the clear way of visualizing a written message. Conspiracy theories also appeal to consumers' fears and needs to determine acceptance and internalization of the promoted message (Brotherton, 2015). According to Lipset and Raab (1973), a successful conspiracy theory must have mysterious elements and a visible target group to disseminate it and make it tangible to the target population (Brotherton, 2015).

Anthropological and sociological studies analyse human behaviour from the perspective of symbolic activity, but also as structured activity through symbols. Conspiracy messages make use of symbolic mediation and representational practices, organized through specific languages and institutions.

From a psychological and sociological perspective, conspiracy messages can (also) be analysed through the lens of persuasive communication. Persuasion is the act of getting someone to think and act in a certain way (Chelcea, 2006). Persuasion aims to change the attitude and behaviour of the target audience, as a result of the change of opinion. This involves studying the target audience, structuring and supervising the communication process (Dobrescu and Bârgăoanu, 2002).

The spread of events and information can have social polarizing effects. Polarization can be associated with either the process or the state by which attitudes are skewed toward extreme ideologies. (DiMaggio, Evans, & Bryson, 1996) Bias can result from exposure to "accidental" or "selective" information; while accidental exposure occurs while documenting about other topics, selective exposure involves selecting information according to people's interests (EPRS, 2019). Media sources

can help to increase the level of polarization if the public shows antipathy towards opposing views and, at the same time, the media can help to moderate attitudes in the presence of compelling arguments (EPRS, 2019). In terms of channels of propagation of polarization, some studies have shown that social media platforms can facilitate exposure to opposing views, especially on political topics, but with a lower impact on people with a high level of polarization (EPRS, 2019). Fletcher and Nielsen (2018) concluded from a 2017 study of *The 2017 Digital News Report* that search engines used for news expose people to different types of views, but did not indicate a clear impact on the level of polarization. Flaxman et al. (2016) indicated that people who use search engines for news are more ideologically dispersed and polarized than those who use social media platforms, or both social media platforms and search engines.

Conspiracy theories are of interest to global and European entities such as the European Commission. According to the agreed description, the European Commission considers conspiracy theories "the belief that certain events or situations are secretly manipulated behind closed doors by powerful forces with negative intentions." (The European Commission) The European Commission promotes six characteristics of conspiracy theories, so that they can be more easily identified by the target audience: they represent a conspiracy, they involve a group of conspirators, they are supported by evidence, they claim that there are no coincidences, that nothing is as it seems and that everything is connected, they divide the world into "good" and "bad" and identify the culprits. Conspiracy theories may begin as a suspicion, identify possible beneficiaries of the situation, who become conspirators, develop through logical explanations and the gathering of evidence; anyone who could fight it can become suspected of being a beneficiary. Those who disseminate conspiracy messages may have various motivations, such as: the belief that they present real information, they want to manipulate the target audience, they have political, economic, social interests etc. (The European Commission)

Among the disruptive effects of conspiracy theories, the European Commission identifies: amplification of discrimination, justification of

hate crimes, exploitation by violent extremist groups, radicalization, determination of political apathy, determination of lack of trust in authorities, promotion of lack of trust in scientific information etc. (The European Commission)

Mere exemplification of effects and possible explanations do not describe what a conspiracy theory is. The Oxford English Dictionary defines conspiracy theories as "the theory that an event or phenomenon occurs as a result of a conspiracy between interested parties". (OED, https://www.oed.com/) The Merriam-Webster dictionary adds to this definition the aspect of intentional influence of the parties: "a theory explaining an event or set of circumstances as the result of a secret conspiracy by powerful conspirators" (https://www.merriam-webster. com/dictionary/conspiracy%20theory). According to Dexonline, the term "conspiracy" refers to a "plot directed against (leaders of) the state or public order". For Richard Hofstadter (1964) conspiracy theories represent a "style" of explaining things. "A conspiracy theory is a proposition about a conspiracy that may or may not be true, which has not yet been proven." (Olmsted, 2011, p. 3) Kathryn Olmsted, thus, highlights the fact that a conspiracy theory cannot be proven by its very structure, but does not lose its conspiratorial character once it is proven (Olmsted, 2011).

Conspiracy theories can include events or facts, from deceptive messages by corporations to attract customers, to acts of bribery, kidnappings, assassinations, terrorist attacks etc. According to Fenster (2008), conspiracy theories do not aim to describe events that happened, but highlight conspiracies, with the aim of persuading and alerting the population; thus, conspiracy theories are accompanied by the belief that the truth will never be known. At the same time, the conspiracy style implies that events or facts are not hidden from the consuming population, but that they are actively deceived and misled (Brotherton, 2015). Conspiracy theories are built around real facts, or logical arguments, that cannot be disputed. In the absence of official evidence, conspiracy explanations become (more) credible. Any attempt to debunk a conspiracy theory can be interpreted as disinformation (Brotherton, 2015).

Conspiracy theories work by referring to the assumption that there are two versions of reality: a real world and an illusion meant to

hide the truth (Wood and Douglas, 2013). Conspiracy theories can be perceived in a deeper way than official messages regarding the same event or phenomenon, they highlight anomalies that unify in a complete description, as they have the ability to present both official information, as well as those that are missing, but which provide additional explanations (Keeley, 1999). Rob Brotherton (2015) identifies six characteristics of a conspiracy theory: it relates to an unanswered question, it starts from the presumption that nothing is as it seems, the promoters are highly competent and malicious people, it is based on an anomaly, and it is unchallenged. These characteristics can also describe real facts. Conspiracy theories are the product of imagination, and their popularity is explained by aligning with the imagination of the target audience, respectively attractive and plausible ideas. The component messages are based on archetypal, well-structured narratives that train the moral faculties.

According to van Prooijen and van Vugt (2018), a conspiracy theory is based on at least five factors: it starts from the assumption that people, objects or events are causally interconnected, it believes that the promoters of conspiracy messages act deliberately, it involves a group of actors acting together, it refers to a threat and always contains an element of secrecy, which cannot be invalidated.

According to Daniel Pipes (1997), the promoters of conspiracy messages have the ability to foresee the way in which events will evolve from the moment they occur, thus, any entity that could benefit from conspiracy theories is perceived as promoting it. People who support the conspiracy character of an event or phenomenon generally have very advanced knowledge about it, so that it becomes very difficult to identify false elements in the information disseminated, promoting the conspiracy message as the only alternative to understand the course of events (Hofstadter, 1964). At the same time, the conspiracy style does not give equal importance to each argument used in promoting the credibility of the disseminated message (Brotherton, 2015).

Lewandowsky and Cook (2020) distinguish between conventional and conspiratorial thinking: while the former presents scepticism, it refers to evidence, it seeks coherence in arguments, the latter presents suspicions, interpretations of evidence and contradictions. The authors

assess that vulnerability and a lack of a sense of power contribute to the belief in conspiracy theories and their dissemination. Conspiracy theories appeal to the needs of the public, to the need to satisfy one's own ego, but also to the needs of social integration (Albarracín, 2021). Conventional thinking refers to real conspiracies – proven plots, and conspiracy thinking to imagined conspiracies. COMPACT Education Group (2020) The Internet and social media platforms facilitate the spread of false information, misinformation, sometimes by people who believe it to be real, who have malicious intentions, who have various benefits, and sometimes by fake accounts or bots (Lewandowsky and Cook, 2020).

Class exercise: Alternative scenarios in analysing the development of conspiracy theories at national level

- **The purpose of the exercise:** Analysing the possible trends of developing conspiracy theories at national level.

The exercise targets building alternative scenarios by using the four-quadrant model, on a 2x2 matrix. The scenarios will be developed within working teams, composed of minimum 4 and maximum 10 participants. Therefore, the exercise will result with four scenarios multiplied by the number of teams.

The matrix will be developed by grouping **the following two factors**, which were selected as being relevant for the situation – analysing the possible trends of developing conspiracy theories at national level:

- o Evolution of the digital technologies related to digital social networks;
- o Number of elements that compose the conspiracy messages.

- **Actors involved in conducting the exercise:**
- o Team members: minimum 4 and maximum 10 participants on each team; the exercises foresee the necessity of organizing at least two teams.
- o A moderator: The moderator has the role of introducing the participants into the alternative scenarios' technique, of presenting the theme to the participants and the steps of the

exercise, of organizing the teams, of offering all the resources needed and of being the connector between all participants and the facilitators.

o Facilitators: one facilitator for each team. The facilitator has the role of reminding the theme and the steps of the exercise if necessary (within their teams), to determine the participants to be active without offering content ideas, to offer support into filling in the matrix and into identifying a team representative, to make sure that all the steps are being followed and that the team respects the time allotted.

- **Steps in developing the alternative scenarios:**
1. The alternative scenarios technique – short introduction to the participants (5 minutes);
2. Establishing the tasks for the team (10 minutes);
3. Working in teams, being assisted by an assigned facilitator for each group (60 minutes);
    ➢ In case the exercise is conducted online or in a hybrid format (online and onsite participants), the teams can use an electronic document that can be viewed and edited by all participants in real time.
4. Presenting the results by a representative of each team (10 minutes x the number of teams);
5. Voting the scenario that mostly indicates an ascendant trend of developing conspiracy theories at national level (5 minutes).
    ➢ The vote can be organized either online (for exercises developed online or onsite), or onsite (only in case the exercises are conducted face-to-face). The online version of the vote can be developed on an online platform which can be easily accessed by using a mobile phone, or a computer (for example: a Google form, polleverywhere.com etc.).

- **Resources implied:**
The moderator or the facilitators can have prepared:

o a printed/ electronic selection of information regarding the alternative scenarios' technique;

o a printed/ electronic selection of information regarding conspiracy theories;

o a printed/ electronic presentation of the exercise;

o only for online or hybrid formats of the exercise: an electronic document which includes the matrix with two factors; a document should be created for each team;

o for the offline format of the exercise: a flipchart or flipchart papers for each team, markers, pens;

o a form dedicated to the voting step –online or printed, considering the format of the exercise.

- **Instructions for the participants:**
o **Tasks:**
  ➢ Within your team, develop four alternative scenarios, using the four-quadrant model, which aim to analyse **the possible trends of developing conspiracy theories at national level.**
  ➢ When elaborating the four alternative scenarios, use a matrix with the following **factors**:
  1. Evolution of the digital technologies related to digital social networks,
  2. Number of elements that compose the conspiracy messages.

Stages of the exercise:
  ➢ Only for online or hybrid formats of the exercise: Use the electronic document which includes the matrix with two factors, in order to contribute in real time to the development of the scenarios.
  ➢ Discuss as a team the **characteristics and implications** of the variables that describe each of the four possible scenarios, created by intersecting the minimum and maximum values of the two factors, using the diagram below:
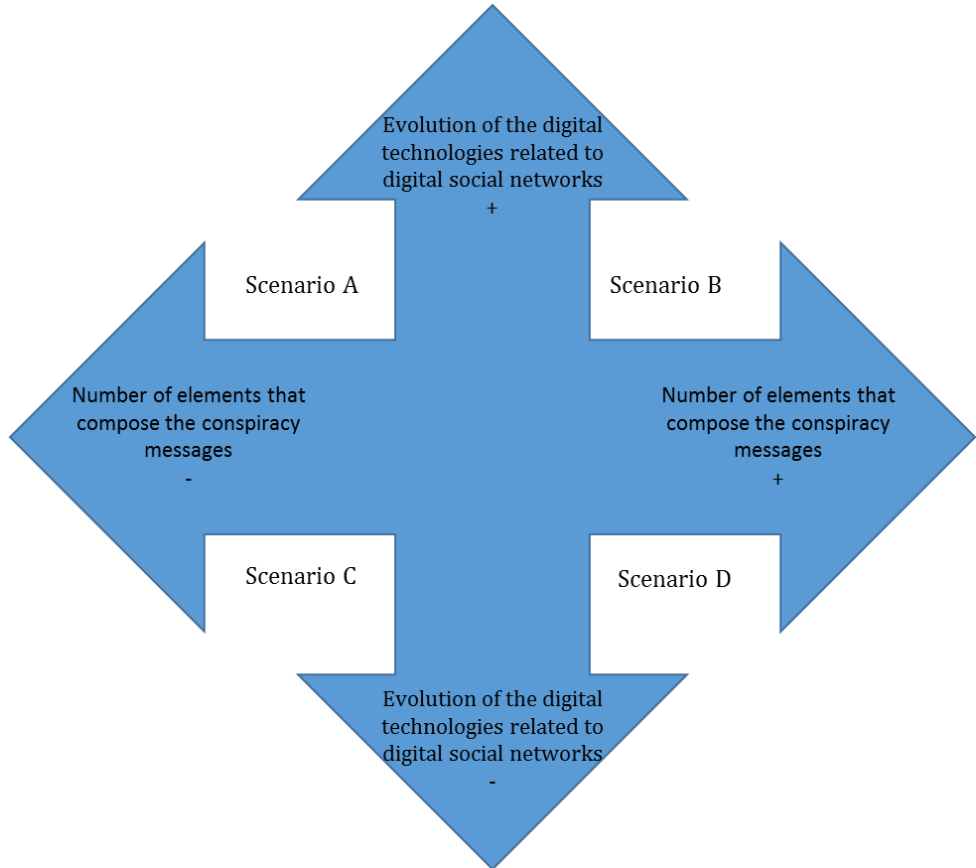
Figure 2: Diagram to be used in the development of the four alternative scenarios (Source: author's proposal)

1. Develop each scenario, created by intersecting the minimum and maximum values of the two factors;
2. Write down the characteristics and implications of the variables that describe them;
3. Give each resulting scenario a descriptive title;
4. Select a) the super pessimistic scenario, b) the pessimistic scenario; c) the optimistic scenario and d) the super-optimistic scenario among those created;

5. Select the indicators/characteristics to watch in the future that could indicate the fulfilment of the four alternative scenarios;

6. Choose a representative of your team to present the four resulting scenarios: characteristics and implications, title, fitting into one of the four categories from point 4, indicators to monitor (estimated time for presentation: 10 minutes).

Allotted time: 60 min

Instructions for the facilitators:
o   Review the topic and steps of the exercise whenever you find it necessary *(according to the instructions for the participants)*.
o   Intervene only to get participants to be active, not to provide them with ideas for filling-in the matrix.
o   Support them in actually filling-in the matrix if appropriate, or in selecting a representative to present the results.
o   Intervene if necessary to get them to finish the entire exercise so that they fit within the allotted time.

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