



Methodology of FRA's foresight process

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Introduction

This document explains how FRA designed and carried out its strategic foresight exercise on fundamental rights in Europe in 2040. It complements *Fundamental rights in an uncertain future: Strategic foresight for Europe 2040*, which presents the findings, and *Embedding fundamental rights in foresight: A guide for practitioners*, which offers general guidance for designing and reviewing foresight exercises. This document focuses on the methods, the links between stages, participation and validation, and the lessons learned from applying a fundamental rights perspective throughout. It does not repeat the report's substantive analysis or the guide's general checklists.

During 2025, more than 140 people contributed their expertise across four in-person workshops. They represented EU institutions and agencies, international organisations, national authorities, human rights bodies, civil-society organisations and academia, and included foresight practitioners and human rights experts.

FRA carried out the *Fundamental Rights in Foresight* project to examine how long-term developments could affect the protection, exercise and enforcement of fundamental rights in Europe by 2040. The foresight process described here took place during 2025. This document records the methodology so that readers can understand how the findings were generated and apply relevant lessons to comparable work.

The foresight process was implemented by a consortium led by the Austrian Institute of Technology in cooperation with FRA. An informal advisory group contributed external expertise, and an independent expert provided peer review. The 2040 report is FRA's analytical synthesis of this collective and exploratory process, and its findings should not be attributed to individual participants.

The focus is on methodological choices and implementation. The 2040 report presents the analysis, scenarios and pathways. The practitioner guide sets out principles and actions for other foresight exercises. This document refers to outputs only where they help explain how one stage informed the next.

Purpose, scope and evidence base

The exercise examined fundamental rights in Europe, with a particular focus on the European Union, and considered long-term developments up to 2040. It addressed a broad range of rights protected by the EU Charter, recognising that rights are interconnected and that change often cuts across policy sectors.

A fundamental rights perspective was integrated into every stage. The exercise did not seek to predict the future. It explored plausible future conditions through exploratory

scenarios, articulated desirable rights-based futures and tested the robustness of possible pathways under uncertainty.

The account draws on the project's research outputs, workshop materials and records of review and validation. It explains the evidence and methods used and how each stage built on the previous one. Detailed substantive findings are presented in the 2040 report rather than repeated here.

Methodology

The process combined established foresight methods with a fundamental rights perspective grounded in applicable obligations under international human rights law, the EU treaties, the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union and relevant EU law. It was informed by evolving FRA guidance on embedding fundamental rights in foresight, while experience from the exercise helped test and refine the approach presented in the final practitioner guide.

Overall design of the foresight process

The process comprised five linked stages, moving from broad exploration to the development and testing of pathways. It combined desk research, expert input and participatory workshops. The stages were horizon scanning, exploratory scenario development, visioning, pathway development and stress-testing. Review, validation and methodological reflection ran throughout the process.

- identify and prioritise factors of change relevant to fundamental rights;
- explore uncertainties through scenario development;
- envision desirable rights futures;
- outline pathways towards such futures; and
- stress-test pathways under disruptive future conditions.

This design maintained continuity from the initial scan to the stress-tested pathways. Six mutually reinforcing principles from FRA's practitioner guide informed the process: legality; relevance; participation; equality and non-discrimination; reliability; and transparency and accountability. They shaped the questions asked, the evidence and perspectives considered, workshop design, participant selection, analysis and communication.

Horizon scanning: factors shaping fundamental rights futures in 2040

Horizon scanning provided the analytical foundation for the exercise. It identified developments that could shape the protection, exercise and enforcement of fundamental rights in the European Union by 2040. The process combined systematic desk research, semi-automated scanning, expert review and workshop-based validation and prioritisation.

The approach followed three stages:

1. **Collection of a broad inventory of factors of change** across social, technological, economic, environmental, political, values-related and legal domains.
2. **Validation of factors** and identification of interconnections and implications for fundamental rights.
3. **Prioritisation** of those factors with the highest potential impact on fundamental rights and the greatest uncertainty.

Inventory of factors of change

Desk research produced an initial longlist of 180 potential factors from scientific literature and policy, civil society, media and institutional sources, including FRA materials. Review, consolidation and prioritisation reduced this longlist to the final inventory of 50 factors used in the exercise. The figures therefore refer to different stages of the selection process.

Sources included:

- **Peer-reviewed academic literature**, such as articles in *Nature Sustainability* or the *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies*.
 - **Foresight and policy reports by international organisations**, including JRC foresight analyses, the OECD *Science, Technology and Innovation Outlook*, and the European Parliament's *Global Trends to 2040*.
 - **Legal and governance-focused studies**, for example the Dutch government's *Fundamental Rights and Algorithms Impact Assessment*.
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- **Recent publications by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights**, such as the *EU Gender-Based Violence Survey (2024)*, the *FRA Strategic Plan 2023–2028*, and the *Fundamental Rights Report* series.
- **Civil-society and NGO reports**, including analyses by organisations such as Amnesty International.
- **Media reporting and thematic journalism**, for example from the BBC, *Politico* and *Forbes*.
- **Inputs from civic monitoring platforms**, such as the European Civic Forum and the Eco Jurisprudence Monitor, which highlighted developments in societal and activist domains.

The inventory showed that developments well beyond conventional fundamental rights policy can shape how rights are protected and exercised. Climate change, technological innovation, geopolitical instability, demographic shifts and changes in labour markets can affect equality, privacy, access to justice, participation and social protection. This broad scope helped the later scenarios reflect the complexity of change across Europe.

Prioritisation and workshop process

A multidisciplinary workshop helped review, consolidate and prioritise the factors. Participants brought expertise on democracy, climate change, sustainability, equality, technology and other relevant fields. Some sectors, including industry, and some institutions, including national human rights institutions, were underrepresented. This limitation was recorded because it affected the range of perspectives directly represented in the exercise.

Participants assessed each factor against three considerations: its potential influence on fundamental rights; the uncertainty surrounding its direction or scale; and its links with other factors. They also considered its relevance to fundamental rights in Europe in 2040.

The prioritisation highlighted critical uncertainties around democratic resilience, digital governance, socioeconomic inequality, environmental pressures and geopolitical change. These uncertainties later informed the scenario architecture.

Emerging tensions and implications for scenario development

The scanning process highlighted several cross-cutting tensions that are likely to shape rights futures:

- **Security and liberty:** growing security concerns may prompt wider surveillance or greater use of emergency measures.
- **Technological innovation and non-discrimination:** poorly governed AI systems may reproduce or deepen existing inequalities.
- **Economic competitiveness and social protection:** the green and digital transitions may distribute benefits and burdens unevenly.
- **Environmental urgency and social fairness:** rapid measures may create new inequalities if their distributional effects and short implementation periods are not addressed.
- **Digital governance and democratic accountability:** concentrated digital power may weaken institutional oversight.

The prioritised factors and tensions informed the exploratory scenarios by providing critical uncertainties and rights-related questions for further examination. This connected the evidence gathered through horizon scanning with the participatory scenario-development stage.

Scenario development

Scenario development enabled the exercise to explore how fundamental rights might be protected, exercised and enforced under substantially different conditions in Europe in 2040. The five exploratory scenarios were not predictions, forecasts or preferred outcomes. They were structured narratives used to test assumptions, identify vulnerabilities and examine whether legal and institutional safeguards would remain effective over time.

Building on the JRC reference scenarios

The scenarios built on the reference foresight scenarios on the global standing of the EU in 2040 developed by the EU Policy Lab at the European Commission's Joint Research Centre. They used a framework structured around the strength of the European Union and the nature of global dynamics, and enriched these geopolitical contexts with a fundamental rights perspective. This meant examining how changes in institutional capacity, social cohesion, technology, crisis preparedness and other conditions could affect rights and safeguards.

Scenario development process

The scenario workshop brought together FRA staff, human rights experts, foresight practitioners, researchers, civil-society representatives and specialists in areas such as security, youth and future generations, democracy, refugee rights, minority inclusion and technology assessment.

The process followed three main steps:

- 1. Develop factor projections.**

Working in STEEPVL-based groups, participants reviewed the prioritised factors and merged or reformulated them where needed. For each selected factor, they developed several projections: business as usual, extreme positive, extreme negative, combined and radical break. A tetralemma-inspired approach helped challenge assumptions and widen the range of futures considered.

- 2. Co-create integrated scenario paths.**

Participants then carried out a scenario sprint. Each group selected a starting

projection and combined it with projections from other STEEPVL domains to build a coherent and plausible pathway. Groups assigned working titles and outlined the main features of each 2040 future.

3. Refine the scenarios and identify implications.

Groups positioned their scenarios in a matrix combining a strong or weak EU with a collaborative or hostile global context. They tested the scenarios for coherence and distinctiveness, then considered implications for protecting and promoting fundamental rights. These reflections informed the final scenario descriptions and later workshops.

The five exploratory scenarios then provided contrasting contexts for developing desirable futures. Participants examined their constructive and adverse elements and used them to shift from exploring what could happen to considering what a rights-based Europe should look like in 2040.

Visioning and pathway development

The visioning and pathway stages marked a shift from exploring possible futures to articulating desirable rights-based futures and identifying how progress towards them could be supported. Visioning and pathway development were distinct stages of the five-stage process, although they were addressed through closely linked workshop activities.

Developing desirable visions for fundamental rights in 2040

During two half-day sessions in Vienna in June 2025, participants developed desirable futures in six areas high on the EU agenda: environmental protection, the economy, digital transformation, preparedness and security, democratic resilience and the governance of human rights.

From desirable futures to practical pathways

Participants used structured templates to map pathways towards these desirable futures. Each pathway covered:

- **milestones** marking progress towards the vision;
- **enablers**, such as institutional capacity, inclusion and data-protection frameworks;
- **barriers**, such as legal gaps, unequal access to technology and limited resources;
- **relevant actors**, including EU institutions, Member States, civil society and the private sector; and
- **affected groups**, so that equality and non-discrimination remained central to the analysis.

The pathway material was subsequently synthesised into six strategic directions presented in the 2040 report. In this methodology, the emphasis is on how the pathways were generated rather than on reproducing their substantive content.

Stress-testing pathways

The fifth stage stress-tested the pathways against disruptive developments and changing conditions. Wildcards (that is, low-probability but high-impact events) were used to expose assumptions, weaknesses and dependencies and to identify adaptations that could make the pathways more robust under uncertainty. The exercise covered disruptions such as climate shocks, technological failures, geopolitical instability, democratic strain and emergency governance.

Methods and workshop design

The workshop brought together experts from EU institutions, Member States, civil-society organisations, academia and the private sector. It followed three steps:

1. **Presentation of the draft pathways** developed through the visioning and pathway stages.
2. **Wildcard testing** to examine whether the pathways and their safeguards would remain effective under sudden technological, environmental, geopolitical, democratic or governance-related disruption.
3. **Identification of adaptation needs** to clarify which refinements, safeguards or institutional adjustments could keep the pathways viable and rights-respecting under the conditions tested.

The results were used to refine the pathways and identify approaches that could remain robust across different future conditions. Stress-testing did not amount to a legal assessment or produce formal recommendations; applicable fundamental rights obligations remained the baseline for interpreting and using the results.

Applying fundamental rights across the process

This chapter considers how the exercise applied the six principles in FRA's practitioner guide: legality; relevance; participation; equality and non-discrimination; reliability; and transparency and accountability. The principles reinforced one another and informed the process as a whole, although their practical importance varied between activities.

Legality

Applicable obligations under international human rights law, the EU treaties, the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union and relevant EU law provided the legal baseline. The scenarios could explore futures in which safeguards were weakened or rights violated without presenting those conditions as legally permissible policy options. Distinguishing exploratory futures thinking from legal assessment preserved space for creative exploration while keeping the interpretation and use of results grounded in existing obligations.

Relevance

The exercise showed how foresight can support FRA's mandate by anticipating long-term developments that may affect rights. Horizon scanning identified drivers beyond conventional rights domains, while scenario development and stress-testing brought long-term uncertainty into policy reflection. Together, these methods helped keep the exercise relevant to FRA and EU institutions.

Participation

More than 140 people contributed across the workshops. Their varied backgrounds brought different perspectives and forms of experience into the process. This was especially valuable during scenario development and visioning, where contrasting

viewpoints broadened the outputs. The experience underlined the importance of planning for diverse participation throughout future foresight work.

Equality and non-discrimination

Participants considered how future developments and policy choices could affect groups differently, reinforce structural disadvantage or create barriers to rights, services and remedies. The visioning and pathway stages addressed fairness, inclusion and equal access, while stress-testing helped reveal potentially unequal or discriminatory effects. The exercise also showed that equality and non-discrimination need to be built in from the scoping stage, not added later.

Reliability

A shared evidence base, documented methods, iterative review and established foresight techniques supported reliability. The JRC reference scenarios provided a recognised foundation. Factor projections, participatory challenge and wildcard testing made assumptions and uncertainties more visible. Evidence gaps and limitations in representation were recorded rather than taken to mean that no rights impact existed.

Transparency and accountability

The process documented its purpose, sources, methods, participant selection, assumptions, uncertainties and limitations. It also recorded how inputs informed later stages. Participants' exploratory contributions were distinguished from FRA's analytical synthesis, and findings were not attributed to individuals. Recording gaps in representation, methodological adaptations and links between stages supports scrutiny and helps readers judge how the outputs should be used.

Methodological lessons for future exercises

The exercise generated lessons that informed the final practitioner guide, including:

- embed fundamental rights considerations early and apply them consistently;
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- plan for diverse and meaningful participation;
 - connect foresight methods to decision-making and anticipatory governance; and
 - stress-test pathways and safeguards against different future conditions.
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What the methodology offers practitioners

The five stages show how a foresight exercise can move from a broad evidence base to structured exploration, desirable futures, pathways and stress-testing while keeping fundamental rights in view. Its practical value lies in the connections between stages: each output became an input to the next, and participatory work was supported by documentation, review and methodological reflection.

The most transferable lessons are to identify rights implications early, select participants deliberately, maintain continuity between stages, address uncertainty and unequal effects explicitly, and document assumptions, limitations and adaptations. The practitioner guide turns these lessons into general principles and checklists. The 2040 report shows how the resulting analysis was used.
