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BALTIC YOUTH RESILIENCE

G L U E D – Linking Resilience and Youth Futures in the Baltics

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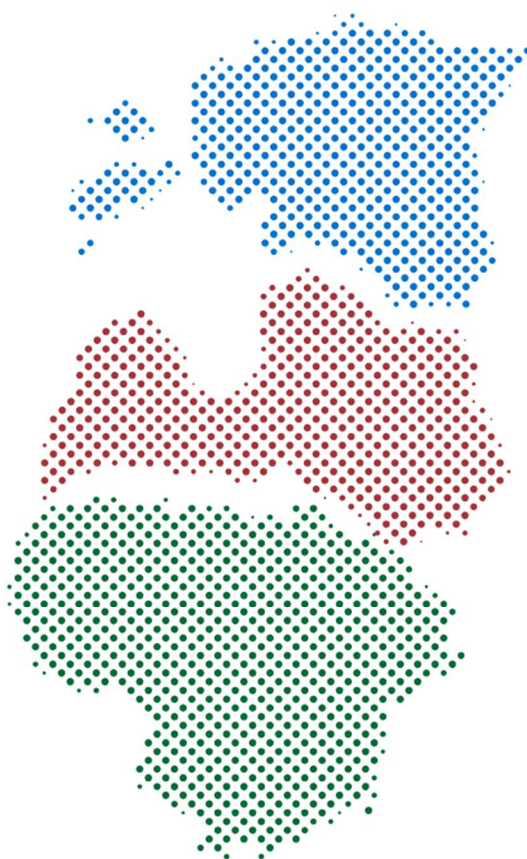TEPERIK

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Linking Resilience and Youth Futures in the Baltics

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BALTIC YOUTH
RESILIENCE

Tallinn–Riga–Vilnius

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report explores the potential for practical solutions to enhance societal resilience in the Baltic states through multitopic engagement with young people from diverse backgrounds. It employs qualitative analysis of self-perceptions to identify potential sociopsychological indicators of threats among young people in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, while scanning the civic, economic and geopolitical dimensions relevant to societal cohesion. These dimensions are examined through the lens of ethnolinguistic minorities and the increasing uncertainty surrounding the ongoing conventional war in Europe. The report also reveals **signs and symptoms of cognitive warfare** in the Baltic region.

The study finds that young people in the Baltics, while maintaining democratic attitudes and aspirations, face different types of challenges in their environments. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, coupled with the acknowledgement of the potential for escalation in their home region, is perceived as a consolidated threat by young people. However, not only the geographical but also the mental proximity to Russia and/or Belarus fills the threat definition with specific multilayers, which could be observed as ethnolinguistic group similarities in Daugavpils, Klaipeda and Narva.

Future stakeholder efforts will need to address the signs of social semi-isolation identified in the regions, support qualitative intergenerational and cross-linguistic connectivity, and provide a truly whole-of-society approach through personal or group behavioural patterns to build **cognitive resilience**, i.e. he ability to operate with future literacies, navigate uncertainty and make decisions in a stimulus-rich environment with the necessary caution.

The notion of the future is not a static entity, but rather an evolving journey that is perpetually unfolding. It is not fixed; rather, it is characterised by fluidity, influenced by factors such as time, context, and most significantly, human decisions and actions. Consequently, cultivating a mindset that is adept at navigating the complexities of future scenarios necessitates a combination of resilience, adaptability, and a **heightened level of vigilance and awareness**.

As Baltic youth confront a rapidly evolving global and regional landscape, their voices reveal both a strong sense of agency and legitimate concern about political leadership, social cohesion, technological change, and the looming security threats in their region. While they embrace democratic values, education, and innovation as drivers of the future, they also highlight gaps—particularly in **inclusivity**, **mental well-being**, and **intergenerational trust**.

⟨ FOREWORD

Heiti Talvik, a young student from Estonia

Today's Baltic youth were born too late to experience the uncertainty following the Soviet Union's dissolution, but just in time to witness their way of life threatened by its successor, the Russian Federation. This new reality demands action, even as everyday life calls for stability and steady development. Navigating the complex challenges of the second quarter of this century—marked by geopolitical tensions and rapid change—will be our task.

Within Baltic youth, two distinct communities remain: those who primarily speak their national language and those for whom Russian is the dominant language. The former group strongly identifies with their countries, values freedom and the rule of law, works hard, and embraces European Union ideals. The latter, although smaller, often feels cognitively disconnected from the national identity and its values. While citizens of free European nations, they may lack motivation to actively defend freedom, feel less connected to the small Baltic societies around them, and tend to have lower proficiency in the state language, which affects their competitiveness in the labour market. Nonetheless, they remain an integral part of Baltic youth and share in the region's successes.

It is remarkable what the Baltic countries have achieved in the 35 years since regaining independence. As someone well-travelled and deeply connected to the region, I can confidently say that the Baltics offer one of the highest qualities of life globally. We are on a clear path to joining the ranks of highly developed nations like those in Scandinavia. Young people value education and enjoy the broad opportunities that come with EU membership. However, unlike some European countries, the Baltic states cannot ignore the persistent threat from their eastern neighbour, Russia. Though not formally at war, the region is far from peaceful environment, facing ongoing hybrid warfare with clear hostile intent.

The younger generation will soon bear the responsibility of continuing to build resilient societies and secure nations. Thankfully, the majority of youth already

recognize this threat and contribute to this vital effort in various ways. EU and NATO membership remains a cornerstone of Baltic security, but it also brings with it the responsibility of setting an example for countries further from the eastern frontiers.

Baltic youth have actively represented their region throughout Europe, strengthening ties and fostering solidarity. Even as international law—the region's 'nuclear arsenal'—has been weakened recently, Baltic societies have grown stronger and more united, especially within the Baltic Sea and Nordic region. The challenge now is for young people to bridge the divide between the two parts of Baltic society, standing together as one resilient region dedicated to protecting their shared values, culture, and statehood.

WHY THE G L U E D?

A sense of belonging is a prerequisite for resilience and therefore requires appreciation and trust, which can be understood either as a **social glue** in its own right or as a constitutive element of wider social cohesion. This study report identifies the dimensions of social cohesion deemed to be the most urgent to be addressed in the forthcoming activities within the regional context of the Baltic states.

The study report is based on the framework around three main dimensions of social cohesion: geopolitical, economic and social.[1] The authors use the glue metaphor, understanding the interconnectedness of components and focusing on:

G – **Geospatial**, including geopolitics.
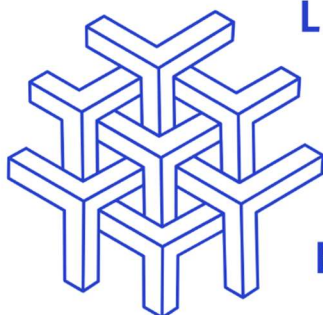
L – **Legacy**: historical memories and their influence on legitimacy.

U – **Unity**, including social connectivity and intergroup dialogue.

E – **Economy**, with a focus on education as an economic driver.

D – **Demographics**, including democratic attitudes and aspirations.

The inclusion of the ethnolinguistic minority lenses of Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania was a deliberate strategy to underscore the pivotal role of social cohesion in fostering national resilience in periods of tumultuous and unpredictable change. The views held by national majorities are typically well-articulated through public discourse and implemented in various policy measures. However, a remarkable increase of **self-censorship** and **sociopolitical silence** among ethnolinguistic minorities in the Baltics pose a challenge to the state of resilience, thereby

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[1] Broadhead, J. (2022). *Social cohesion in Europe: Literature review*. COMPAS, University of Oxford. www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/social_cohesion_in_europe_literature_reviewfinal.pdf

necessitating a comprehensive approach that integrates and glues all elements to foster forward-thinking development.[2] The primary outcomes of the Baltic cooperation project are intended to develop and enhance the existing capacities of youth leaders and other relevant stakeholders, with a view to introducing an inclusive, multidimensional approach to strengthening community resilience in the Baltic countries.

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[2] Hercberga, L. (2024). Discerning colours in greyness: Defying essentialist representation of Latvian Russian speakers in surveys and public narrative. In A. Jašina-Schäfer & N. Aivazishvili-Gehne (Eds.), *Migration, post-socialism, and diasporic experiences. Fragmented lives, entangled worlds* (pp. 17–36). De Gruyter Oldenbourg. https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111369204-002
Rožukalne, A., Kažoka, A., & Siliņa, L. (2024). "Are Journalists Traitors of the State, Really?"—Self-Censorship Development during the Russian–Ukrainian War: The Case of Latvian Public Service Media. *Social Sciences*, 13(7), 350. https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci13070350

How is this study report structured?

The study report illustrates the main challenges in each dimension identified within the **GLUED approach** and provides some policy recommendations, defined on the results of the scanning research. The subsequent chapters delineate the principal **target audiences** of the study report and outline the **original methodological approach** developed and applied within the framework of this cooperation project. The section on **Baltic youth** analyses the defining characteristics of younger generations that are of particular analytical relevance to the study. The section on **co-framing youth, resilience, future prospects, and social cohesion** reviews pertinent scholarly literature, thereby positioning this pilot research within the broader discourse on future literacy. Prior to the presentation of the empirical findings, the authors propose a set of **policy recommendations** intended to inform stakeholders and stimulate further debate.

The findings, which are described through threat perceptions, commence with the geospatial dimension, which is divided into three segments: local, regional, and geopolitical levels and actors (i.e. China, Germany, Russia, Ukraine, the USA, and the EU). In the second section, the authors concentrate on national institutions and collective memories of non-democratic experiences ('the Soviet') and democratic ('the Western') periods. The subsequent section addresses the issue of unity and societal health, with a focus on education, intergenerational relations and ethnolinguistic cohesion. The next section covers economic drivers, with a focus on certain aspects of the economy and job market, as well as the perception of a nation's economic performance and individual futures through the selection of an imagined profession. The final section places significant emphasis on the pivotal role of sociodemographic factors in the realm of democratic engagement and the cultivation of a sense of belonging, underscoring their significance in the context of future resilience building. The conclusions offer ideas and suggestions for how to approach further research into the most pressing issues raised throughout the research study.

The GLUED approach provides a suitable framework for threats focused findings on perceptions, which can be instrumental for stakeholders to recognise the complex

interconnectedness of threats and risks, as this is not reflected adequately in current policies and institutions, which often address risks in isolation. It is imperative that resilience agents upgrade their shared capacity to assess, prepare for, and respond to future risks.

GLUED — Section 1: Geopolitical and Geospatial drivers

G-1. Capitals versus regions: the widening gap

G-2. Awareness about and association with the Baltics

G-3. Futures of major powers

GLUED — Section 2: Legacy and Legitimacy

L-1. Trust in institutions

L-2. Memories and presence of 'the Soviet'

L-3. Memories and presence of 'the West'

GLUED — Section 3: Unity and Social Connectedness

U-1. Intergenerational 'monologue' in authoritarian families

U-2. Linguistic cohesion without close friendships

U-3. Education

GLUEED — Section 4: Economic Drivers

E-1. The economy and job market

E-2. The country's economic performance

E-3. Choosing a future profession

GLUED — Section 5: Demographics and Democratic Aspirations

D-1. Sense of belonging

D-2. Motivation for civic engagement

D-3. Building resilience in communities

WHO IS THIS REPORT FOR?

The beginning of 2025 has brought shifts in the stability of the global order and geopolitical architecture for many European countries, including the Baltic states, whose people report a growing sense of insecurity as changes alter many sociopsychological 'variables'. In this light, the real value of this report grows even more, as there is an urgent need to find a glue solution to repair and strengthen the social texture in the Baltics. Paraphrasing the words of the celebrated American poet Lucille Clifton, resilience stakeholders in the Baltics must ask: *"How can we create a better future if we cannot first imagine one?"*

As recommended in the recent report 'Towards Long-Term Governance: From Future Awareness to Action', new fora for future dialogue need to be created with the active participation of civil society to ensure that the voices of young people, representatives of different professions, minorities, vulnerable groups and non-citizens are better heard across society.[3] Furthermore, given that the future encompasses more than mere subsequent events, the **triad of memory construction, storytelling, and identity building** is foundational to the nature of strategic communications, which uphold a liberal democratic value system.[4]

As suggested in a study, shared values are considered necessary as a solid foundation for social cohesion. Values are ideas about desirable, trans-situational end states and behaviours. They fall into two categories, individual and societal values. Values affect social cohesion in three ways: first, when they are shared; second, when they promote behaviour that is per se conducive to social cohesion; and third, through their impact on the choice of welfare policies and institutional design.[5]

This study report is intended to serve as a blueprint for a forward-thinking approach, with a focus on engaging international and domestic stakeholders of resilience. The

[3] Demos Helsinki. (2025). *Towards long-term governance: From future awareness to action.* https://demoshelsinki.fi/new/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Towards-Long-Term-Governance-From-Future-Awareness-to-Action-1.pdf
[4] Bolt, N. (2025). The future is more than what happens next: Strategic communications and the twenty-first century. *Defence Strategic Communications,* 15, Article 15. https://doi.org/10.30966/2018.RIGA.15
[5] Nowack, D. and Schoderer, S. (2020). *The Role of Values for Social Cohesion: Theoretical Explication and Empirical Exploration.* German Development Institute, Discussion Paper 6/2020. http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3553340

objective is to foster social cohesion within the Baltic states by means of adapted policy responses, practical interventions, and targeted approaches. The report offers insights into weak signals and red flags, with the objective of creating the demand for change by emphasising the identified symptoms of threat perceptions.

It also provides recommendations aimed at empowering national, regional, and local decision-makers and active members of civil society to navigate challenges related to youth engagement and identity development, especially in the context of ethnolinguistic minorities in Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania. This could encourage a more forward-thinking approach to resilience among stakeholders in the Baltics, helping them to avoid misguiding, misframing and blind zones in national policies. Therefore, this report is produced not only for policymakers, but also for **national and regional visionaries, development enablers, values shapers,** and **open-minded strategic communicators** in the Baltic region.

WHAT WAS THE RESEARCH STUDY DESIGN?

The project methodological design was based on the three-phased-study as follows:

- the interdisciplinary tailored guidelines and questions for focus-group discussions were prepared;
- six youth events were conducted in three countries;
- a qualitative comparative analysis was performed with relevant policy recommendations.

The empirical phase of the project involved 72 young people aged 18-25 years from Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania who attended youth seminars and focus-group discussions held in Klaipeda, Vilnius, Riga, Daugavpils, Tallinn, and Narva in July-August 2024. At least 50% of the participants were from ethnolinguistic minorities present in the Baltics. The participants were recruited through public calls for participation. The study design did not aim to create sociologically representative groups, but rather to involve those active young people with different backgrounds and experiences who were motivated to express their positions and opinions during the focus group discussions. Moreover, as the engaged participants most probably belonged to the PRIME (Productive, Researchable, Independent, Mobile, and Educated) young adult category[6], their expressed concerns and detected signals regarding sociopsychological symptoms are even more significant, as they reflect the attitudes and aspirations of an active part of future generations.

In the context of the youth seminars, the Baltic study team implemented nudged interventions of an experimental nature prior to each focus group discussion. This approach ensured that all participants were exposed to identically structured introductions, with the objective of facilitating a more profound comprehension of foresight techniques and the analysis of futures. In addition, different risk landscapes and their interconnectivity maps were presented and discussed.[7] Moreover, national development strategies (i.e. Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian) were addressed and

[6] Lockwood, P. L., & van den Bos, W. (2025). *Relying on PRIME young adults limits cognitive science. Trends in Cognitive Sciences*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2025.06.010

[7] World Economic Forum. (2025). *Global Risks Report 2025*. https://reports.weforum.org/docs/WEF_Global_Risks_Report_2025.pdf

discussed with the workshop participants.[8] Furthermore, questionnaires were administered pre-event and post-event to map participants' perceptions on various topics (e.g. individual and community resilience, awareness of security threats, hope and morale, worldviews, media consumption, geopolitics, gender equality, societal well-being, education, professional development, climate change, future challenges (e.g. AI and ethics), European solidarity etc.). Focus group discussions were facilitated in accordance with the developed guidelines to cover all mentioned issues.

As interactive events, the youth seminars have stimulated a sense of curiosity and critical thinking among young Baltic participants, as they have had the opportunity to address the origins of their misconceptions and conflicting narratives, as well as to discuss the appropriate measures to prevent the spread of harmful information.

Based on the post-event evaluation data, 93% of participants rated the events as useful. Additionally, the intervention led to a significant increase in participants' awareness that young people can shape their future over the next 10-15 years. This **sense of agency also boosted optimism** about their futures, while the number of participants expressing concerns about the future declined.

The further in-depth analysis can be seen as a pilot, as it doesn't provide guaranteed extrapolatable observations, but rather highlights specific cases that could be useful for further investigation and more comprehensive research.

[8] Estonian Government Office. (2021). *Estonia 2035: National long-term development strategy.* www.valitsus.ee/sites/default/files/documents/2021-11/Eesti%202035_PUHTAND%20%C3%9CLDOSA_210512_ENG_0.pdf
Estonian Human Development Report. (2020). *Inimareng 2020.* https://2020.inimareng.ee/en/info.html
Auers, D., & Spuriņš, U. (2024). *Latvia 2040: Four future scenarios.* LaSER Think Tank. https://domnicalaser.lv/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/LaSER_Nakotnes-Scenariji_ENG_FFF.pdf
Trainauskienė, S. *et al.* (2022). *Lietuva 2050: Valstybės ateities scenarijai.* STRATA. https://lrv.lt/media/viesa/saugykla/2023/12/Fl6Ln2zAQI4.pdf

WHY THE BALTIC YOUTH?

The prospects of today's Baltic youth are shaped by a complex set of factors, including geopolitics, such as Russia's proximity, hostility and war against Ukraine, as well as drastic shifts in US policy. On the map of Europe's demographic crisis, almost all the regions of the Baltic states are red, meaning that the projected population change by 2100 will be negative, even with some positive effects from migration. The crucial importance of younger generations for the national survival of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania is more evident than ever.[9]

As the 'United Nations Future 2.0 Pact', adopted in September 2024, states, young people "*are critical agents of positive change*". Youth is defined as a distinct group from future generations. The aforementioned document has an annex—a Declaration on Future Generations to the Pact for the Future—which underlines that "*the recognition of children and youth as agents of change and the need for intergenerational dialogue and engagement, including with and among children, youth and older persons, to be taken into consideration in our policy and decision-making processes in order to safeguard the needs and interests of future generations*." Key elements of the UN approach are 1) intergenerational dialogue, solidarity and responsibility; 2) safeguarding the needs and interests of young people.[10]

A country's vision cannot be realised without its young people, who are also the creators of new meanings for a nation, so the discussions with young people from the Baltics aimed to explore the existence of commonalities between the Baltic states, whether they see a shared future or whether Baltic young people have different perspectives. Moreover, common purposes and determinations strengthen the sense of hope, which is always future-oriented and therefore a strong basis for a resilient nation.

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[9] Cox, S., & Clark, A. (2025). Europe's population crisis: See how your country compares – visualised. *The Guardian*. www.theguardian.com/world/ng-interactive/2025/feb/18/europes-population-crisis-see-how-your-country-compares-visualised
[10] United Nations General Assembly. (2024). *Pact for the Future* (A/RES/79/1). United Nations. www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/sotf-pact_for_the_future_adopted.pdf

Contemplation of the future frequently engenders imaginings of dreams concerning diverse, interrelated subjects and layers, ranging from the personal, group, societal to the national. As indicated in the research surveys of Baltic populations, including young people, there are significant differences in perceptions of ethnolinguistic majorities and minorities regarding such fundamental issues as freedom, democracy, well-being, external and internal threats, etc. For instance, 61% of Lithuanians (in general, no ethnic background was studied), 58% of ethnic Latvians, 50% of ethnic Estonians, 29% of Estonia's Russian-speaking population, and 24% of Latvia's Russian-speaking population expressed the view that their country's membership of the EU has been beneficial in terms of realising their dreams and aspirations. Furthermore, younger people of ethnic Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian origins are more inclined to endorse the following statements than their peers from ethnolinguistic minorities: *"Freedom is more important than material well-being"* and *"The state must never give up political freedom and democracy under any circumstances"*.[11] Another recent study suggests that living in and safeguarding a democracy fosters positive personal traits and reduces negative ones, while only positive traits were strongly linked to well-being.[12]

In the context of Baltic societies, which are forging a vision of a shared future in a space that is inhabited by a diverse array of communities, both geographically and ideologically, the cultivation of an understanding, exploration and discussion of differences emerges as a pivotal initial step to facilitate the management and harmonisation of expectations across various groups and generations within the Baltic region. The objective is to nurture synchronised life strategies that encompass **remembering, survival, endurance** and **development**. In other words, this project it is an experimental approach to drawing a mental map to understand whether today's young people, who are realistic about the present, trust past experiences as much as future imaginings. Knowing that most people are averse to ambiguity, the challenge is how to communicate uncertainty to build understanding and trust and

[11] Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. (2024). *Series of studies on three Baltic dreams.* https://baltic.fes.de/article/series-of-studies-on-three-baltic-dreams.html

[12] Neumann, C.S., Kaufman, S.B. & ten Brinke, L. (2025). Citizens in democratic countries have more benevolent traits, fewer malevolent traits, and greater well-being. *Sci Rep* 15, 13346. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-025-97001-7

manage expectations, while protecting young people from feelings of anxiety or despair, conspiracy theories or the traps of malicious disinformation.

As stated in the recently published 'UN Global Risk Report', disinformation is considered to be the third most significant global risk as perceived by the general public. In comparison to the issue of climate inaction, which was identified as a primary threat across all continents, the dissemination of disinformation was also prioritised as a significant concern in Europe.[13] According to the theory of cultural evolution, an increased sense of insecurity and anxiety affect many aspects of life, changing the views, beliefs and behaviour of both individual citizens and entire population groups.[14] Therefore, it is vitally important to foster among Baltic youth the skills of actively open-minded thinking, which, according to recent studies, enhance cognitive reflection and awareness of ideological bias, thereby reducing susceptibility to disinformation and mitigating conspiracy thinking.[15]

[13] United Nations. (2025). *UN Global risk report*. www.preventionweb.net/publication/documents-and-publications/un-global-risk-report
[14] Inglehart, R. F. (2018). *Cultural Evolution*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
[15] Biddlestone, M., *et al.* (2025). Norm-enhanced prebunking for actively open-minded thinking indirectly improves misinformation discernment and reduces conspiracy beliefs. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology,* 121, Article 104818. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2025.104818

Why co-framing youth, resilience, future prospects and social cohesion?

In describing the unknown, future literacy experts agree that the immediate future promises to be one of continued high uncertainty as a myriad of transformative forces such as climate change, geopolitical fragmentation, conflict, digitalisation, artificial intelligence, etc. that challenge the resilience of many societies. Moreover, many countries around the world are investing resources in strategic foresight to address future challenges through the prism of younger generations.[16]

As future literacy is a relatively new topic in the Baltic states, the project design included providing the young people with an introductory overview of the key components to increase their understanding of foresight methods. The idea was based on making logical links between global macrotrends, key drivers, weak signals, strategic choices and future aspirations of younger generations, as well as planning actions at local, national or international levels. Various scenario development frameworks were introduced to cultivate a mindset for anticipation and analytical prognostics to present the value of innovations and culture of experimentation.[17] Furthermore, project format provided an opportunity to study conditions which shape a young generation and observe some characteristics of it which will most probably impact the societies in the future, including education, work dynamics, socioeconomical habits, connectivity, mental health etc.

In his illuminating book 'Minds Make Societies', Pascal Boyer argues that all human communities share some mental representations, and that **cognition and communication create traditions**.[18] The significance of the perspectives of ethnolinguistic minorities derives from the fact that the reduction of the emotionality elicited by a foreign language may promote psychological distance, leading

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[16] Morgan, E.A. *et al.* (2025). *Scoping Existing National Policy Recognition of Future Generations: Prospects for Future Global Climate Justice*. Global Policy. https://doi.org/10.1111/1758-5899.70007

[17] NATO Defense College. (2020). *Strategic Shifts and NATO's New Strategic Concept*. www.ndc.nato.int/download/downloads.php?icode=822
Polchar, J. (2024). "Using foresight to anticipate emerging critical risks: Proposed methodology", *OECD Working Papers on Public Governance*, No. 79, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/84820cd8-en.
Poussa, L., & Ylikoski, T. (2025). *Heikot signaalit – opas*. Sitra. www.sitra.fi/wp/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/heikot_signaalit_-opas_eng.pdf

[18] Boyer, P. (2018). *Minds Make Societies: How Cognition Explains the World Humans Create*. New Haven: Yale University Press. https://doi.org/10.12987/9780300235173

individuals to make more utilitarian decisions and disrupting cognitive fluency, thus slowing down the decision-making process and diminishing the impact of intuitive processes on moral judgement, yet the importance of the latter will grow rapidly in a future world contested by geopolitical powers and disruptive technologies.[19]

Worrisome trends of the last 10 years among young American adults show that their conscientiousness and agreeableness are decreasing, and their neuroticism is growing compared to other age groups. As of 2024, American youth are making fewer plans, are less thoughtful, are less trusting, are more careless, are less outgoing and are more easily distracted than in 2014. While there is no comparable data yet, experts suggest that similar tendencies may also be found in Europe, a topic requiring further research.[20]

As identity of the youth emphasizes authenticity, autonomy and uniqueness, shift in values is drastic so true freedom is seen by young people as having access rather than ownership and loyalties are redefined because seeking out the means for self-realisation becomes a necessity.[21] Today's young people see no point in conflict with their parents or in rebellion, because they are mostly non-aggressive and cautious, having been protected from danger and aggression; they are used to fame, approval and comfort, and are therefore rather infantile and not very creative; they are selfish and unaccustomed to responsibility. Moreover, they do not often set themselves ambitious goals: firstly, because their living conditions have not required them to fight for survival, and secondly, because they have learned well: they are important in themselves, regardless of their achievements. However, many young people show an optimism gap, especially when it comes to financial security, as well as a lack of value engagement in socio-political life.[22]

Nevertheless, the youth face a growing responsibility to learn efficiently how to navigate through accumulating challenges to planetary health and human well-being while preserving hope for a better future, sustainable growth and forward-looking

[19] Costa A. *et al.* (2014) *Your Morals Depend on Language.* PLoS ONE 9(4): e94842. https://doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0094842
[20] Burn-Murdoch, J. (2025). *The troubling decline in conscientiousness. Financial Times.* www.ft.com/content/5cd77ef0-b546-4105-8946-36db3f84dc43
[21] BeHive Consulting. (2024). *Generation Z: The Digital Natives Rewriting the Rules.* https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ZQLsGSnc6mADaEp560hr03FCHa93ghHx/view
[22] Channel 4. (2025). *Gen Z: Trends, truth and trust.* https://assets-corporate.channel4.com/_flysystem/s3/2025-01/Gen%20Z%20Trends%20Truth%20and%20Trust_0.pdf

development.[23] Since hope is a strong enabler of resilience at individual, community and societal level in the Baltics[24], it was instrumental to discuss with young people which models of future projections and evolving norms can be inspirational for them to increase their **confidence and agency in civic engagement**. Moreover, the youth should be more familiar with risk analysis and mitigation strategies, especially when it comes to building future capabilities, addressing perceived inequalities and wishing to update or even rewrite a civic social contract within a country or on the European level.

As indicated in the recent report, 'freedom-restricting harassment' has become widespread and is corroding social cohesion and democratic resilience in many countries.[25] In addition, social fragmentation can be regarded as a threat multiplier, making it more difficult to respond to other challenges.[26] In his book 'Infantilised: How Our Culture Killed Adulthood', Keith Hayward argues that progressing to a more mature society requires rejecting identitarianism in order to intensify the progressive political changes needed to build a better future based on mutuality and community, rather than on obscure issues linked to tribal identities.[27] Lastly, explorative research on the subject of algorithmic memory technologies employed by young people has demonstrated that these technologies are actively made sense of through various practices and uses, ranging from avoidance and non-use to curation, reminiscence, cognitive offloading and identity management. A critical stance has been adopted towards the business models of platforms and their links with surveillance, which has resulted in feelings of intrusion into the private sphere of young people.[28]

Today's young people should acquire the knowledge and skills to cope with uncertainty and disruption, as the life environment and labour market becomes more volatile and there are emerging needs for up-skilling and re-skilling of the workforce in the future.[29] As outlined in the recent OECD study report, the socioeconomic

[23] United Nations Environment Programme. (2024). *Navigating New Horizons: A global foresight report on planetary health and human wellbeing*. www.unep.org/resources/global-foresight-report

[24] Esbit, S. *et al.* (2025). Hope and distress: A cross-country study amid the Russian-Ukrainian war. *Stress and Health, 41*(2), Article e70033. https://doi.org/10.1002/smi.70033

[25] Khan, S. (2024). *The Khan Review: Threats to social cohesion and democratic resilience*. Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-khan-review-threats-to-social-cohesion-and-democratic-resilience

[26] European External Action Service. (2024). *Global trends to 2040: Choosing Europe's future*. www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/global-trends-2040-choosing-europe%E2%80%99s-future-0_en

[27] Hayward, K. (2024). *Infantilised: How Our Culture Killed Adulthood*. Little Brown.

[28] Joanroy T. et al. (2025). *'I'd rather have memories that I can actually hold on to': How young adults use and experience algorithmic memory technologies*. Memory, Mind & Media 4, e4, 1–22. https://doi.org/10.1017/mem.2025.4

[29] World Economic Forum. (2025). *The Future of Jobs Report 2025*. https://reports.weforum.org/docs/WEF_Future_of_Jobs_Report_2025.pdf
Samochowiec, J. (2020). *Future Skills – Four Scenarios for the World of Tomorrow*. Gottlieb Duttweiler Institute Research Paper No. 4585500, http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4585500

background of a young person exerts a more significant influence on their educational ambitions than their academic aptitude. This emerging challenge pertains to the discrepancy between the career aspirations of young people and the reality of career uncertainty. In order to address this issue, there is a necessity for greater investment in career development systems: firstly, to avoid skills mismatch and secondly, to ensure meaningful engagement with potential employers. This will enable young people to make informed decisions about their education and career paths, thereby contributing to the creation of a more balanced workforce in the future.[30] In his book 'Managing the Future', Professor Georgy Pocheptsov, a renowned Ukrainian communications researcher, wrote that the future materialises for those who engage with it: *"Today, we must be guided by the task of protecting the future from the past and the present. This means not only that we should not exhaust the resources of future generations, but also that we must restructure our education system to train specialists for the future, not the present".*[31]

As highlighted in the 'World Happiness Report 2025', young people aged 18–29 declare increasing rates of loneliness and social isolation. The number of young people who report the absence of at least one close contact in their lives is growing by 1.7 million a year globally. As perception of happiness is directly related to social connections, it is important to distinguish between the quantity and quality of these ties. Quality is defined by trustworthiness, helpfulness, empathy and other social and psychological parameters. Social networks and digital platforms are increasing the number of connections between people in general and young people in particular, but the quality is decreasing, so happiness is stubbornly correlated with the strength of social connections, not the quantity. For this reason, a **sense of belonging and social cohesion** are crucial for resilience at all levels: personal, community and societal.

However, it should be noted that younger generations are reshaping the concept of community, moving away from traditional geographically based communities to those based on shared interests and digital interactions.[32] Moreover, another research study suggests that subjective well-being increases social trust at a national level.

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[30] OECD (2025). *The State of Global Teenage Career Preparation*, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/d5f8e3f2-en.
[31] Почепцов, Г. (2019). *Управление будущим.* Фолио.
[32] Helliwell, J. F. *et al.* (2025). *World Happiness Report 2025.* University of Oxford: Wellbeing Research Centre. https://happiness-report.s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/2025/WHR+25.pdf

In other words, a happy society could lead to higher levels of trust among its residents.[33] Alternatively, distrust undermines both a sense of belonging and social cohesion, as group rejection poses a significant risk to mental health, comparable to personal rejection. Research shows that the psychological harm resulting from group-based exclusion contributes to hostile emotional responses that have been found to predict more extreme intergroup attitudes, thereby deepening social divisions and further eroding cohesion.[34]

When it comes to the development of cohesion and different approaches across Europe, Jacqluine Broadhead, Director of the Global Exchange on Migration and Diversity (COMPAS) at the University of Oxford, states that there is a general sense *"that societal cohesion faces strong challenges"*.[35]

This study report is based on the framework that emerged from the literature review 'Social Cohesion in Europe', which aimed to provide a brief overview of different approaches and traditions and to focus on interventions to promote the development of cohesion. The authors do not define social cohesion, but follow the four key principles referenced below:

   a. "*Social cohesion covers the development of 'ties that bind' between and within communities, the development of well-being and satisfaction and the development of equality (including economic considerations, but not exclusively).*
   b. *Social cohesion operates at three distinct levels – individual to individual, in places and communities and through institutions.*
   c. *Social cohesion cannot be divorced from broader economic, political and social trends; these must be factored into policy and practice responses and initiatives.*
   d. *Social cohesion is both an ongoing process and a policy goal, which can be a good in and of itself as well as a means of reaching other goals.*"

[33] Glatz, C., & Schwerdtfeger, A. (2022). Disentangling the causal structure between social trust, institutional trust, and subjective well-being. *Social Indicators Research, 163*, 1323–1348. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-022-02914-9
[34] Wesselmann, E. D. *et al.* (2025). Rejection is rejection: Similarities in experiences of group discrimination, personal rejection, and ostracism. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 108*, 104555. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2024.104555
[35] Broadhead, J. (2022). *Social cohesion in Europe: Literature review*. COMPAS, University of Oxford. www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/social_cohesion_in_europe_literature_reviewfinal.pdf

In this study report, the authors use perceptions of human connections, the spatial element of cohesion and economic conditions. However, all four have been identified as 'learning from evidence' components, and perception lenses are used to highlight challenges and threats to cohesion in these three dimensions. The perceptual approach allows to focus on things that are important to the target audience, what the focus group participants were involved in discussing and sharing their knowledge, experiences and observations used as illustrative cases.

In contrast to 'Social Cohesion in Europe', which identifies the main drivers as social, economic and political (although many issues may span all three), the authors see politics as influencing the two aforementioned drivers. For the economic dimension of social cohesion, the substantive dichotomy is equality vs. inequality (inclusion vs. exclusion from education and/or labour market); for the political dimension it is legitimacy of institutions as well as participation and passivity substantive; the social dimension is recognition and rejection, with substantive understood as belonging vs. isolation.

The set of barriers to social cohesion identified on the basis of shared perceptions in the focus group discussions, as well as in the pre- and post-surveys, serves as a tool to provide policy makers and resilience stakeholders with promising strategies for overcoming them. The illustrative cases presented in this report could not be used for generalisation, as the design of the collaborative project did not include a sociologically representative requirement for participants, but rather focused on exploring **weak signals, red flags and hidden symptoms** in the sociopsychological fabric of the Baltic states.

WHAT DO WE RECOMMEND?

Building Foresight Capacity

- Incorporate social cohesion scenario planning. Include these plans in the formal education curricula to help young people imagine better futures and navigate uncertainty through social cohesion exercises.

- Encourage those who shape policies to adopt the attitude that the future is never linear, as it is a culturally relative human construct comprising various alternative perspectives.

- Promote decision-making informed by foresight. Encourage decisions and policies that enhance societal resilience in the long term by addressing weak signals and red flags in horizon scanning in a timely manner.

- Enhance foresight capabilities through after-school activities. Provide opportunities for young people to develop their foresight skills through non-formal education outside the traditional classroom.

Cultivating Social Cohesion

- Promote intergenerational dialogue. Create shared spaces where intergenerational conversations can flourish and a sense of belonging can be cultivated.

- Encourage social cohesion among ethnolinguistic majorities and minorities. Foster unity, solidarity and cooperation within diverse communities.

- Engage young people in rebranding democratic freedoms and reclaiming their meanings for future generations.

- Show strong interest and competence in foresight relating to social cohesion. Resilience stakeholders must demonstrate their ability to anticipate and plan for the future while mitigating risks to social cohesion wisely.

Uniting Youth Against Global and Community Challenges

- Focus on climate: Use climate change as a unifying challenge that erodes human security and contributes to environmental degradation.

- Promote intergroup reconciliation. Enhance meaningful forgiveness interventions to foster better social connections and plan for a safer and more prosperous future.

- Emphasise empathy in politics and take a human-centric approach to policies. Promote the cultivation of empathy in education and youth work as a remedy to reduce stigmatisation during a time of heightened marginalisation, disconnection and polarisation.

- Provide advocacy opportunities. Empower young people to advocate for their interests, developing the storytelling and critical thinking skills needed for democratic engagement at local, regional, national and EU levels. This includes making civic contributions to the European Democracy Shield.

Encouraging Education and Progress

- Educate on non-democratic regimes. Provide comprehensive information about the growing power and impact of authoritarian regimes globally and regionally.

- Instruct on transparent political processes. Ensure that young people understand the importance of participating in elections and other democratic political processes.

- Emphasise education. Highlight education — skills, knowledge and (re)learning — as the foundation for personal fulfilment and national advancement.

- Raise awareness of artificial intelligence (AI) and the Internet of Things (IoT). Inform young people about the availability and impact of AI tools and the IoT, as well as other technological advancements, particularly those from non-democratic regimes.

Supporting Regional Youth and Endorsing Mobility

- Increase development assistance. Allocate more resources to young people in remote areas and vulnerable communities.

- Foster cross-sectoral, intergenerational support. Engage young people in different communities of practice, mentoring and internships.

- Show good intent. Stakeholders should connect young people from capital cities and regional areas through a sustained and meaningful approach.

- Promote in-country and inter-regional mobility in the Baltics. Encourage interactions between cities, smaller towns, local communities, schools and civic organisations for young people.

- Support mobility within Europe and highlight the value of European democracy, countering anti-European narratives.

⊠ Glued / Section 1 — Geopolitical and geospatial drivers

This section highlights three levels: local (including hyper-local), regional (Baltic) and international. Participants in the focus groups were invited to discuss the future of Ukraine, Germany, Russia, China, the US and the EU. During these discussions, participants shared their views on the current state of affairs in each country and, in some cases, reflected on their experiences there. Drivers of perception identified include knowledge of languages, mobility, popular culture and social media, relatives and friends, education-related experiences, and news and media consumption, including passive media use.

G-1. Capitals versus regions: the widening gap

Similar patterns of geographic disconnect were observed among towns and cities distant from the capitals in all three countries. Participants from Narva and Daugavpils were particularly aware of alienation from the capital. For example, some participants from Daugavpils recounted how being from Latgale is viewed as being *"much farther away"* than being from Kurzeme. A similar attitude was evident among young people in Narva, who had been told that Ida-Viru county is more remote than any other region of continental Estonia.

Another example is when an organisation in Riga contacts a local NGO in Latgale and asks whether it would be easier to communicate in English than in Latvian. Additionally, the towns of Narva and Daugavpils are united by their rethinking of borders, specifically in terms of where counties begin geographically and ideologically, and whether towns should be considered part of a country in terms of socioeconomic and political inclusion or exclusion.

Also, those working with young people in regional centres highlight the lack of civic activism. Participants from Daugavpils and Narva, for example, who are heavily involved in youth-related projects, said that the ideal age to engage with young

people is 19, when they leave the school system. This could be partly attributed to the idea of not expressing alternative opinions being ingrained in them, as described by several participants. Young people in regional groups emphasised the urgent need for territorial development in sociopsychological terms, whereas participants from the capital cities addressed development more in economic terms.

Participants from regional towns, regardless of their ethnolinguistic background, displayed similar patterns of caring for their local areas and emphasising the differences in development compared to capital cities. While the capital cities are seen as places that offer more opportunities in terms of education, employment and entertainment, the participants' home towns were mainly described as places with a unique culture and safe environments. In Klaipėda, Daugavpils and Narva, the participants also mentioned some linguistic differences, as well as more conservative beliefs.

In reality, I don't want to move away. I could travel and come back. It's peaceful here; I'm used to it; it's lovely here. It's easy to settle down here if you find your feet and develop in your career. But I'm just anxious. — a young participant from Daugavpils.

Regarding mobility, participants from regional places emphasized their national identity over a regional one. As one participant noted, *"I am choosing Estonia; it is not so bad. Many do not see what happens in other countries. Take, for instance, France and the UK—there is true chaos in these countries, with crime, crises, and uncontrolled immigration."* This comparison suggests that Estonia is seen as relatively stable in contrast to Western Europe. At the same time, participants from these regions also expressed a stronger inclination toward emigration. For example, a participant from Daugavpils mentioned that he thinks about migration every day, highlighting an ongoing tension between national attachment and the desire to seek better opportunities abroad.

G-2. Awareness about and association with the Baltics

Participants in group discussions held in Vilnius, Klaipėda, Narva, and Daugavpils expressed familiarity with each other's countries and a sense of pride in identifying

as part of the Baltic region. When meeting abroad—typically elsewhere in Europe—they reported feeling a stronger connection with other young people from the Baltic states. In contrast, participants in Riga and Tallinn demonstrated limited knowledge, interest, or personal connections related to the other Baltic countries, resulting in a weaker sense of Baltic identity. Notably, the strongest attitudes towards the Baltic identity were expressed by participants in the Vilnius focus groups.

Regarding common ground among the Baltic countries, young people from Vilnius, Klaipėda, Narva, and Daugavpils expressed a strong sense of solidarity with their peers across Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. They noted that while they are comfortable identifying as Lithuanian, Latvian, Estonian—or simply as Baltic, for those familiar with the broader region—the West, including countries like Germany, has limited awareness or understanding of the Baltic states and maintains rather weak ties with them. These youth perceive little distinction between themselves and their European or Western counterparts, and similarly see few differences between the Belarusian and Russian youth with whom they are in contact. Nonetheless, they feel that the Baltic region remains largely invisible to *'old Europe'*, which continues to overlook its identity and relevance.

At the level of linguistic markers, some participants used the term *'Pribaltika'* to refer to the Baltic states—a word rooted in the Soviet-era Russian language, reflecting lingering historical and cultural legacies. Across all countries, Russian-speaking participants consistently distinguished themselves from Russians in Russia, emphasizing a clear sense of separation. However, they did not identify or recognize a distinct group of Baltic Russian-language users, suggesting the absence of a shared Baltic Russian identity.

Of course, when it comes to mentality, we can immediately tell the difference between a Russian from Russia and a Russian-speaking Estonian. It's all connected with history, but my generation identifies more with Estonia and Europe. Even our attitude and manner of communication are very different. — a participant from Narva.

G-3. Futures of major powers

When discussing the futures of China, Russia, Ukraine, Germany, the United States, and the European Union, young participants emphasized the interconnectedness of these major powers and the global landscape more broadly. They acknowledged that large countries significantly influence one another, as well as smaller states like Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. In contrast, the Baltic countries were seen as shaping their futures primarily through alliances and unions. Despite this recognition of global interdependence, many participants demonstrated limited knowledge of international affairs. Notably, Russian-speaking groups—particularly in Estonia— were more inclined to reflect Kremlin-aligned narratives, often portraying the West as declining and Russia as stable and progressing.

Ukraine

In the perception of Baltic youth, their own future is closely tied to the future of Ukraine as it is seen as both distant—engaged in a war—and close, given the visible presence of refugees in their countries. The attitude toward Ukrainians is mixed; while there is sympathy, concerns were raised about perceived preferential treatment, particularly in areas like education and employment. Some participants shared stories of divided families, where relatives from Ukraine have cut ties with relatives in Russia, though both sides continue to stay in touch with family members living in Estonia, Latvia or Lithuania. This situation is emotionally complex and complicated, as both groups require understanding and support. In Narva, participants expressed concern that young people there may be living under the influence of Kremlin propaganda, highlighting the challenges of navigating identity and information in a borderland city.

I'd like things to improve, but I'm not hopeful for the near future of Ukraine. — a young participant from Klaipeda.

Regarding Ukraine's future, young people from Narva, Daugavpils, and Klaipėda highlighted challenges related to migration, particularly concerning the integration of Ukrainians into the labour market. Some participants expressed concern that a portion of Ukrainian refugees may not return to Ukraine, which could have long-term

implications not only for Ukraine's recovery and demographic future but also for their own countries' social and economic dynamics.

The war in Ukraine was often discussed through the lens of state-level support, with some participants questioning the allocation of resources. As one participant put it, *"Estonia is such a small country, and it is not living completely good. That is why the resources we are sending them are actually needed here a lot."* This reflects a sense of domestic strain and perceived sacrifice in providing aid to Ukraine.

In Narva and Klaipėda, some participants expressed discomfort discussing Ukraine's future, citing what they described as internal censorship or pressure, which made it difficult for them to openly share their views. Among those who did speak, scepticism toward Ukraine's governance was apparent, with statements such as, *"They have such high corruption"*, and a desire that Ukraine *"sends back all the investments we provided"*. Across the board, young participants were generally pessimistic about the timeline for resolving the conflict, with little optimism for near-term solutions. Of all the groups, the young participants from Vilnius were the most optimistic regarding Ukraine's future.

The EU

When asked about the future of the European Union, participants from one of the groups in Narva immediately shifted the discussion toward cultural topics such as Eurovision—mentioning *"non-Christian"* and *"very strange trends"*—and the official opening of the Olympic Games in Paris. These examples reflected narratives commonly found in the Kremlin discourse, portraying European civilization as being in decline. The conversation naturally transitioned into reflections on traditional values from their childhood, which participants contrasted with current Western cultural developments. Their discussion also extended to the United States, suggesting a broader scepticism toward Western institutions and cultural shifts.

Regarding Germany, participants noted a generally weak connection with the Baltic countries. While some cultural similarities were recognized, and collaborative projects with German organizations were positively viewed as fostering ties, historical references—such as Livonia and the presence of Baltic Germans—felt

distant. Participants from Lithuania observed that Germans have previously showed little interest in the Baltic region and emphasized the need to actively promote the Baltic countries to the German public. Some participants from Vilnius noted that the presence of the German military troops in Lithuania guarantees the country's security.

In one group in Latvia, participants discussed Erasmus projects and shared a common set of *"required words"* for successful applications, such as climate change, gender, and technologies. They agreed that this reflects a top-down approach aimed at transmitting specific EU values, while regionally relevant initiatives that do not align with these themes may be overlooked or unsupported. When discussing threats to the European Union, participants identified uncontrolled immigration as a primary concern.

The US

Participants generally expressed an interest in discussing elections and recognised the United States as a leading force in innovation, often referring to it as a country that attracts talented individuals. In some groups, the US was described as a place of knowledge and opportunity. Lithuanian youth, in particular, highlighted sports as a pathway for young people to obtain scholarships in the US, viewing American education as potentially beneficial. However, some participants also pointed out the drawbacks of the US, mentioning issues such as a huge debt and perceived moral decline.

They're already telling their children in kindergarten that gender can be neutral. This is coming to Europe, and it annoys me. — a participant from Riga.

Another commonly mentioned element was the general level of crime and insecurity in the US. Despite this, the country was also seen as actively expanding its international sphere of influence. Disinformation was highlighted as a significant threat to the US's future, with some participants attributing this to *"too much freedom of speech"*. Additionally, concerns were raised that core values in the US are being undermined.

> *There was a case in America where a child at school identified as a rock. The teacher didn't understand why he was sitting silently doing nothing, so she complained to his parents. Ultimately, the teacher was sued and lost the case. And that's scary.* — a young participant from Vilnius.

The Baltic youngsters identified social media platforms—TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube—as the primary sources of these types of stories and narratives. Summarizing their views on the US, the group in Narva concluded in agreement that *"the world is getting crazy"*.

Russia

When discussing the future of Russia, participants living near the border expressed a willingness to renew at least some trading relations. In groups from Narva, participants made a clear distinction between the Russian President and the Russian people, often expressing positive wishes for the people's development and hopes for new opportunities.

Baltic youth are keenly aware of the geopolitical challenges arising from political conflicts, including Russia's unprovoked war in Ukraine and the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East. Their perceptions are shaped by a mix of national, regional, and foreign meta-narratives—both supportive and critical. As one Latvian participant noted, "*Russia's invasion of Ukraine has divided families and society, creating a split between those inclined to justify Russia's actions and those who support Ukraine*".

Meanwhile, Russian-speaking Estonians in Tallinn reported that the war in Ukraine, combined with fears that Russia might attack Estonia, has increased feelings of insecurity. This has led many to consider studying and building their lives elsewhere in Europe. Participants in Narva reflected deeply on their sense of *"otherness"* in relation to Russia. Some shared personal stories of transformation in their attitudes toward the country, highlighting evolving perspectives shaped by their unique position on the border.

> *I probably didn't realise that Narva was part of Estonia until I was about five. And when I was about ten, I found out that we lived actually in Estonia.* — a young participant from Narva.

Some young participants in Klaipeda also explained: "*We do not choose Russia or Ukraine, but if you have relatives on both sides, you sit on two chairs. This problem feels very personal and common*". Several young people mentioned Russia's innovative potential, stating that *"in Russia, there are a lot of smart brains"*. While avoiding the term 'sanctions', these participants echoed some of the Kremlin narratives, describing *"reforms that have helped Russia"*. One participant from Tallinn cited stories from relatives rather than media sources: "*They changed this, they got better with that etc."*. According to this view, Russia is becoming more independent and increasingly self-reliant.

Some young participants also expressed concern that internal instability in Russia could have spillover effects on neighbouring countries. They warned that uncontrolled chaos might be destructive, particularly for Estonia and Latvia. The young, ethnic Lithuanian participants in the focus groups emphasised that people in Lithuania and Europe generally have the freedom to choose their own identities, in contrast to Russia, where societal attitudes towards identity are considered to be more restrictive.

As the Kremlin's propaganda says that everyone wishes ill for Russia and wants to destroy or conquer it, I believe the opposite is true. We want them to have stability and to be able to live their lives. If something serious were to happen there, it would affect Estonia first. — a young participant from Tallinn.

Russia remains a highly sensitive topic among youth, and many said they avoid these discussions, especially when divergent opinions exist within families. Some participants noted that disagreements over Russia's actions have strained or even broken ties with relatives who support the Kremlin's narratives. The most critical comments about Russia came from the focus groups in Riga and Vilnius, which were made up of young people from the national majority backgrounds (i.e. ethnic Latvians and Lithuanians, respectively).

They only watch Russian news — Vesti and Perviy Kanal. They are brainwashed and live in a different world. They're saying crazy things. They think there is no war. — a young participant from Klaipėda.

China

For some participants, Asia represents a personal dream destination, largely driven by fascination with its culture. They perceive Asia as calm and secure. Those who highlighted positive views of Russia also expressed favourable sentiments toward China, citing its manufacturing prowess, stability, abundant resources, and rapid development as key indicators of its strength. Generally, participants did not focus on China's non-democratic characteristics. Instead, China was often seen as a symbol of the future—one participant remarked: *"China is practically living in 2050"*. They believe China's future lies in innovation, though they also noted challenges such as population density and the legacy of the one-child policy.

There are cameras everywhere in China. At least if you get robbed, it would be known who did it. — a young participant in Narva.

Another factor bringing participants closer to China is the widespread use of AliExpress for purchasing affordable products. Many shared that their perception has shifted from associating Chinese with bad quality to recognizing China's central role in global manufacturing. As one participant observed, "*If you think about it, the majority of things around us were produced in China. Even if you have a German or Korean car, it has been made in China.*"

Interestingly, young participants from Lithuanian focus groups, particularly those from Vilnius, expressed the most critical views on China and its ambitions. This can be attributed to the recent tensions between the two countries, which received extensive coverage in the Lithuanian media.

gLued / Section 2 — Legacy and Legitimacy

This section summarizes the main threats identified within the dimension of legitimacy, drawing on participants' perceptions of government and state institutions, and illustrated through examples related to trust. It also distinguishes between two key clusters: one centred on experiences with non-democratic systems (e.g. the Soviet) and the perceived threats associated with them, and the other focused on experiences within democratic contexts (e.g. the West).

L-1. Trust in institutions

Young Russian-speaking participants in Tallinn expressed a sense of contradiction between the Estonian government's messaging and its actions—particularly concerning national defence and refugee policies. *"While the government asserts that Russia does not plan to attack Estonia, it is simultaneously building up its military capacity and increasing taxes to enhance defence,"* several participants noted.

Another layer of mistrust raised in discussions was linked to financial inequality. One example pointed to a broader need for institutional literacy among youth.

Why do some retired people who worked their entire lives, giving their all — their health and their youth — now receive less than the minimum wage and struggle to survive due to tax increases? Meanwhile, some government officials make strange decisions that make things even worse for my country. They receive 6,000 euros, and their relatives don't even live in this country. — a young participant from Narva.

Another source of distrust identified by participants relates to the protection of human rights within their countries. Some participants from Latvia and Estonia felt that support for Ukraine and Ukrainian refugees is being provided at the expense of their own population's economic well-being.

The perceived gap between government rhetoric and action contributes to a growing sense of insecurity and prompts many young people to consider future opportunities

outside their home countries. The rise of such perceptions and narratives highlights the need for Baltic governments to foster an informational environment that directly addresses and alleviates public doubts. However, no issues related to distrust were discussed in the Vilnius focus groups of ethnic Lithuanians.

In one Russian-language group in Narva, participants expressed indifference toward elections, with some suggesting that only *"active members"* of society will take responsibility for change. The state was described metaphorically as a pyramid, with European values being transmitted top-down. As one participant put it: *"You cannot trust the words of politicians"*. This sentiment was echoed by Estonian participants who cited the example of taxes: *"The prime minister said the taxes will not increase, full stop. What do we see? It is the opposite"*.

L-2. Memories and presence of 'the Soviet'

Nostalgic trends on social media revive Soviet-era imagery framed not as an idealized past but as a stark portrayal of post-Soviet hardship, evoking memories of *"second-hand time"*. However, experts warn that this aesthetic nostalgia can subtly romanticize hardship and traditional gender roles, creating fertile ground for political manipulation and divergent historical narratives among young viewers.[36]

The term 'Soviet' was mentioned exclusively in a negative context, particularly in Russian-language groups from Narva, Daugavpils, and Klaipeda. In discussions about family dynamics, participants described autocratic parental relationships where children lack agency. A commonly cited example of this mindset was the phrase: *"It will be as I said."* A similar authoritarian approach, according to participants from Daugavpils, is reflected in certain school practices. They described a dictatorial educational environment in which only one *"correct opinion"* is accepted, leaving little room for open dialogue or diverse perspectives. Schools in Latvia, especially in Daugavpils, were seen as rigid and unwelcoming to discussion, particularly on sensitive topics. For instance, participants noted that sexual education continues to provoke fear, shame, and discomfort. This addresses a concern

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[36] Heins, J. (2025). *Cold War, warm memories: The hidden political agenda lurking behind a nostalgic social media trend. Novaya Gazeta Europe.* https://novayagazeta.eu/articles/2025/06/06/cold-war-warm-memories-en

frequently raised in scholarly debates: although individuals live in functioning democracies, many of the everyday institutions that structure their lives—such as schools and workplaces—remain largely non-democratic and often socially authoritarian. Such environments convey harmful lessons to students and employees, ultimately undermining societal resilience.[37]

The word 'Soviet' was used to describe this atmosphere, with some referencing a well-known phrase from the TV show *Telemost*, which once connected Soviet and American viewers. In that program, a Soviet participant famously said: *"В Советском Союзе секса нет"* (*"There is no sex in the Soviet Union"*)—a quote still used by some young people to illustrate lingering taboos and outdated attitudes. As expected, the young national majority participants in Riga and Vilnius felt the most distinctive from the 'Soviet' issues.

An important note on intergenerational lines of information flow: many participants in focus groups for ethnolinguistic minorities in Daugavpils, Narva and Klaipeda recounted a similar narrative, which may stem from nostalgia within their families and an inability to cope with accelerating change. This narrative was encapsulated in a popular web meme: *"How they managed to mess up the present so badly that we want a future that looks like the past!"*.

L-3. Memories and presence of 'the West'

A democratic future is something many young participants aspire to—for themselves and for their countries—yet some also pointed out the presence of non-democratic tendencies within their societies. Human rights and the freedom of expression, including the right to speak languages other than the national one, were valued by many. While European values are generally seen as contrasting with non-democratic systems, participants did not always perceive this contrast in a wholly positive light.

Some participants admitted to not taking part in European elections, citing a lack of belief in their country's ability to influence EU decision-making. As one participant put it, *"We are far from politics"*. Peer influence was occasionally mentioned as a

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[37] Gagnon, J.-P. *et al.* (2025). *The sciences of the democracies*. University College London Press. https://doi.org/10.14324/111.9781800089051
Pausch, M. (2025). Workplaces as schools of democratic resilience? Conceptual considerations about the spillover effect. *Analyse & Kritik*, *47*(1), 31–51. https://doi.org/10.1515/auk-2025-2007

motivation to engage politically, while families sometimes discouraged participation. For example, one individual described how a discussion with their mother—who advised against voting for a particular candidate—led them to opt out of voting entirely.

> *As members of the free generation, we have only ever lived under democracy, so we recognise its advantages. But do we really value them, and are we ready to protect them if necessary?* — a young participant from Vilnius.

A noted threat to democracy was internal radicalization, reflected in ideological clashes and opposing value systems. LGBTQ+ issues were a particular flashpoint: while some participants emphasized the need to protect these rights, others expressed fear or scepticism, sometimes resorting to humour framed around binary choices. Among Russian-language groups, anti-LGBTQ+ narratives were frequently voiced, mirroring Kremlin-aligned propaganda. In contrast, the focus groups consisting of ethnic Estonians in Tallinn, ethnic Latvians in Riga and ethnic Lithuanians in Vilnius emphasised the importance of democracy due to its value of freedom.

glUed / Section 3 — Unity and Social Connectedness

This section explores how participants navigate a turbulent world by building and relying on social connectivity. For the Baltic Russian-speaking youth in particular, adaptation appears more complex, as strong family ties significantly shape their decisions about where to live and study. As one participant noted, *"Где родился, там и пригодился"* *("Born and raised here, useful here")*, reflecting a sense of rootedness tied to familial expectations. At the same time, some participants expressed anxiety about the future—so much so that they hesitate to have children, citing uncertainty and instability as major concerns.

U-1. Intergenerational 'monologue' in authoritarian families

Family and parents play a significant role in shaping how young people understand and envision a favourable future. Participants often described how family-based expectations influenced their personal trajectories—both strengthening and, at times, limiting social cohesion. Some noted that their families remain deeply rooted in Russian cultural traditions. Nevertheless, when thinking about the future of their own children, many expressed a clear desire to integrate them into the local society—primarily by ensuring fluency in the national language (e.g., attending Latvian- or Estonian-language schools) and engagement with the surrounding cultural environment. Neither the ethnic Latvian participants in Riga nor the ethnic Lithuanian participants in Vilnius shared any similar concerns.

However, participants who shared such experiences also expressed feelings of marginalization. They often felt excluded—either by others (due to non-ethnic surnames) or by themselves (due to not understanding cultural references or jokes). At the same time, their future-oriented outlook distanced them from Russia. Many also noted a lack of close friendships with ethnic Latvians or Estonians, highlighting a sense of cultural and social semi-isolation.

My motherland is where I live. Coming from a Russian family with a Latvian education and traditions, I cannot feel connected to Russia. — a young participant from Daugavpils.

Some participants described identity not as something inherited, but as an active and ongoing process. For ethnolinguistic minority youth in the Baltics, fitting into national identity frameworks is often described in terms of agency—*"I did it"* or *"I built it up"*—highlighting the fluid, constructed nature of identity. This transformation can create distance from their families, who may hold more traditional or culturally perspectives, while at the same time these youth may still feel not fully accepted by the national majority. On the surface, they often manage to navigate both cultural spaces, shifting between them depending on context. Regardless of which group they align with, participants emphasized that family remains central to their vision of a preferred future—though they acknowledge that families cannot remain isolated.

Family guidance regarding the future varies significantly. Some participants shared that their families promoted a Russia-centric outlook, stressing the importance of maintaining ties with Russia through language, culture, and education. This could also include passive disengagement strategies, illustrated by the phrase *"не высовывайся!" ("don't stand out!")*, which was mentioned frequently in non-titular groups in Narva, Daugavpils and Klaipeda. This form of self-silencing was linked to a legacy of *"hidden identities"* inherited from the Soviet regime. The term 'Soviet' appeared in multiple narratives, often with negative connotations, describing relatives, the education system, communication culture, and local politics.

A different dimension of intergenerational dynamics emerged in the context of crisis preparedness. In the Russian-language group from Klaipeda, some participants described how they and their families were actively planning for potential emergencies. These preparations included checking passports, securing visas, planning relocations (sometimes to rural areas), and relying on relatives already abroad. In contrast, others—particularly those who referred to their parents as 'Soviets'—noted that their parents were not engaging in active crisis planning, beyond keeping their documents valid.

U-2. Linguistic cohesion without close friendships

Recent shifts in attitudes and policies toward the Russian language have been experienced as painful by Russian-speaking participants in the focus groups. In Lithuania, one participant from a mixed family recalled being targeted for speaking Russian in public: *"Lithuanians just bullied us"*. In the same group, participants noted the perceived inconsistency in policy—particularly the easing of education and employment requirements for Ukrainian refugees—describing it as hypocritical in comparison to restrictions placed on Russian speakers.

Cultural disconnection was also evident in afterschool activities, which are often rooted in the official language and traditions. One participant from Lithuania recalled being told, "*Go to your Russ-ka*," when seeking inclusion, highlighting exclusion from mainstream cultural spaces. Despite these challenges, participants in the same group stressed the importance of learning the Lithuanian language and acknowledged its value. However, they did not oppose the public use of Russian, especially given its prevalence among Ukrainian refugees as well.

Some young people in Narva also discussed a shared Slavic identity, with the majority of the group acknowledging its relevance to them. However, many participants tended to avoid emphasizing ethnic affiliations, instead prioritizing broader identifiers such as gender and human identity as more central to how they define themselves.

U-3. Education

Knowledge and education, frequently mentioned by participants across all countries, are viewed as key drivers for improving personal futures. Whether vocational or academic, education acts as a strong motivating factor shaping both individual and societal development. Participants universally recognized the quality of education and learning as critical issues requiring urgent attention and effective solutions if the Baltic states are to meaningfully plan for the future. Key concerns raised included outdated teaching methods, overloaded curricula, inconsistent instructional approaches, a shortage of qualified teachers, and inadequate teacher salaries.

⌐◻-◻ If we don't respect our teachers as a society, there is little chance of having a dignified future where knowledge and skills are still important. — a young participant from Tallinn.

Russian-speaking participants from Estonia and Latvia highlighted challenges faced by Russian-language schools during the transition to instruction in the state languages. They expressed concern that many Russian-speaking teachers who lack proficiency in Estonian or Latvian are not having their contracts renewed. This shift risks the loss of experienced, high-quality educators, especially critical given the existing teacher shortages, notably in regional areas. Across all three Baltic states, participants identified the shortage of highly qualified teachers as a major obstacle to future development, regardless of the language of instruction.

In Narva, Russian-speaking youth supported introducing Estonian language education from preschool to ease this transition. Those with experience in both Russian- and Estonian-language schools praised the non-graded, Estonian-instruction schools. Participants also expressed interest in public discussions acknowledging the negative legacies of *"Soviet era teachers"*.

Climate change was cited as an example of how certain topics enter school curricula via donor-supported projects. An Estonian participant noted that each of the three schools he attended held regular lectures on recycling. While these initiatives influence youth perceptions, there remains a lack of in-depth focus on region-specific environmental issues such as the closure of shale oil production and CO2 emissions. Survey results suggest that uniting diverse youth groups around community challenges could be effective, and climate change presents a promising avenue for such cohesion. According to the Office of the Director of National Intelligence's Global Trends 2040 report, climate change is eroding human security by reducing resilience to natural disasters and causing environmental degradation.[38]

A Lithuanian participant from a Russian-language group in Klaipeda shared her experience of considering university education in Russia before the full-scale invasion altered her plans. Although she had already submitted an application to a Russian university, she ultimately enrolled in Lithuania. While participants who

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[38] U.S. Director of National Intelligence. (2021). *Global Trends 2040*. www.dni.gov/index.php/gt2040-home/introduction

considered studying in other European countries generally planned to return home after graduation—provided conditions like salary were favourable—those who had considered Russia acknowledged that a Russia-issued diploma would limit their return options. When asked by classmates, *"Who are you?"* she replied, *"I am Russian".* They responded, *"Have you lived in Russia?"* She said, *"No".* They concluded, *"So what kind of Russian are you then? You are ours; you are Lithuanian!".*

gluEd / Section 4 — Economic Drivers

This section highlights perceived threats related to the economy, job market, and future professions as reflected in participants' self-perceptions. Many expressed concerns about limited job opportunities and economic instability in their home countries. Uncertainty about future career prospects often influences their decisions to pursue education or work abroad. Additionally, rapid technological changes and shifting labour market demands add to their apprehensions about professional development.

E-1. The economy and job market

In the article 'Poverty, Sense of Belonging and Experiences of Social Isolation', the authors argue that income is a consistent predictor of social isolation and sense of community belonging. They found that lower-income individuals experience greater isolation and a diminished sense of belonging compared to those with higher incomes. According to the authors, poverty influences how low-income people perceive and experience stigmatization and social isolation."[39]

Among participants from Daugavpils and Narva, poverty emerged as the most commonly cited risk, followed by concerns about climate change and political conflicts and instability. Their discussions primarily centred on the economy, including reflections on how it has been affected since the full-scale invasion in 2022. When considering the future of their provincial towns and countries in general (i.e. Estonia and Latvia), economic issues dominated the conversation, echoing Kremlin-driven narratives about the Baltic states as *"failed economies"*. Additionally, young people viewed their personal futures through the lens of entering the job market. For Narva, this was compounded by a unique challenge—economic isolation from Russia, which had been a crucial part of the region's economy before the 2022 invasion. For

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[39] Stewart, M. *et al.* (2009). Poverty, Sense of Belonging and Experiences of Social Isolation. *Journal of Poverty.* 13. 173–195. https://doi.org/10.1080/10875540902841762

example, participants highlighted the multiple impacts on their households of the vehicle border closure.

⌐X⌐ *Many people here used to buy fuel, groceries and even medicine in Russia. Given the proximity of these two cities, which are divided by a river, many people still have friends and family on the other side.* — a participant from Narva.

Young people in the capital cities (Vilnius, Riga, and Tallinn) generally expressed more optimism about their prospects in the job market compared to their counterparts in provincial areas. They cited greater access to education, internships, and diverse employment opportunities as reasons for their positive outlook. The Lithuanian youth groups in Vilnius appeared to be the most socio-economically self-confident. In contrast, youths from smaller towns often felt limited by fewer job options and economic stagnation. This urban-rural divide highlights disparities in future expectations across the Baltic states.

E-2. The country's economic performance

The economic performance of their countries acts as both a push and pull factor for Baltic youth, with favourable socio-economic conditions encouraging them to stay, while downturns prompt consideration of opportunities elsewhere. Participants often frame their future prospects in the context of their countries' economic development and broader geopolitical challenges, such as regional and global instability.

Nevertheless, some participants from the national majority youth in the capital cities (Vilnius, Riga, Tallinn) said that a globalised world felt natural to them, as they enjoyed the many good and useful things that came with it. They also used many English words to describe modern phenomena. Lithuanian youth, in particular, expressed a positive and confident outlook on their future in Lithuania, emphasizing the high quality of life and abundant opportunities for work, growth, and self-realization compared to abroad. As one participant noted, "*The internet allows you to operate internationally while enjoying the comforts and living standards of home*," and even those planning to live abroad intend to maintain strong ties, saying, "*We'll return to Lithuania with new programs, activities, and knowledge to share.*"

Socio-economic factors in Estonia, including a deep recession characterized by rising living costs, higher taxes, and increased unemployment, heavily influence Russian-speaking youth in Tallinn to consider studying and living abroad rather than staying in Estonia. In contrast, Russian speakers from Narva, despite facing similar economic challenges and even greater regional difficulties like limited investment and higher unemployment, express a more optimistic outlook on Narva's future and their own prospects. They believe they can play a meaningful role in Northern Estonia's development and stress the importance of attracting more investment to the region.

In Estonia, there is huge economic instability. If we don't invest, we could find ourselves poor one day. We're a big family, so we're going to struggle to afford good food because prices are so high. But I believe that local people can work together to create prosperity in this region. — a young participant from Narva.

Latvian participants from both Riga and Daugavpils expressed optimism about their future in Latvia, highlighting that the country *"offers more than enough opportunities for self-realization"*, though some noted that people often fail to seize them. While detailed discussions about the economies of Daugavpils and Narva frequently included specific figures—reflecting narratives that legitimize their views through rationalization—Russia's economy was viewed as a more distant, secondary experience. For these youths, engagement with Russia's economy is mostly indirect, tied to accompanying their parents or leisure activities like concerts and vacations, rather than daily economic involvement.

E-3. Choosing a future profession

Open discussions with Baltic youth reveal that when choosing future professions, participants carefully balance personal interests, labour market demand, and the pursuit of long-term economic stability. Many prioritize acquiring in-demand skills and knowledge, sometimes starting with practical training—such as culinary school—to secure financial stability before pursuing higher education. For example, an Estonian participant from Tallinn shared, "*I'll attend culinary school to gain practical skills for a steady income, then study biology, as bioengineering is a future-*

focused profession—though I'd love to be a musician, it doesn't guarantee financial security."

In fields like art and culture, where job security is less certain, Lithuanian youth often plan to study abroad to access *"world-class education"* and overcome local stagnation, while remaining committed to returning home with new programs and knowledge to share. Baltic youth generally view technological progress and emerging innovations like AI positively, seeing them as opportunities to create a better future. Although some expressed concerns about potential negative impacts on social cohesion, none raised worries about political regimes influencing technology's use or abuse.

In Narva, Russian-speaking youth emphasized that beyond education and experience, building connections is crucial for employment. They noted that some professions are well-paid and discussed strategies of starting their careers in Estonia before moving abroad to expand opportunities, expressing particular interest in professional scholarships offered by international organizations with a presence in Estonia.

This section explores how Baltic youth navigate complex identities and diverse senses of belonging, the factors influencing their motivation for civic engagement, and their perspectives on the importance of building resilient, connected communities to manage uncertainty and promote inclusive democratic futures.

D-1. Sense of belonging

"In our democratic society and culture, we agree that everyone must find their place" was a central theme voiced by participants across the three Baltic states. Russian-speaking youth in Estonia and Latvia expressed concerns that, despite their citizenship, they are often not seen by the majority as fully equal members of society. This could be also a sign of self-perceived stigmatisation, as many highlighted the persistent stigma attached to speaking Russian as their first language and called for government policies that promote greater inclusion and integration of ethnolinguistic minorities. Furthermore, Russian-speaking participants in Estonia and Latvia emphasized that ongoing prejudices against Russian ethnic minorities continue to undermine social cohesion and inclusivity.

In contrast, Lithuanian participants generally did not view ethnicity, 'Slavic' surnames, or place of residence as major factors dividing the younger generation. Instead, they emphasized shared interests, hobbies, skills, knowledge, and lifestyles as the real drivers of cooperation and connection among youth.

I care about what someone does and whether we can collaborate or play together, rather than their ethnicity or language. — a participant from Vilnius.

Participants from Narva and Daugavpils observed that ethnic Estonians and Latvians are more prone to differentiate between titular populations and Russian-speaking minorities. This dynamic risks creating a 'spiral of silence', where both the majority and minority groups avoid openly addressing these divisions. Such silence deepens

social divides along linguistic lines, weakening societal cohesion—an essential foundation for future planning and resilience.[40]

Baltic youth express a complex and evolving sense of belonging shaped by ethnic, linguistic, and cultural identities. While many feel deeply connected to their local communities and countries, minority groups—particularly Russian-speaking youth—often report feelings of marginalization and exclusion. This duality leads some young people to actively construct their identities, balancing family heritage with integration into the broader society. For some, belonging transcends ethnicity, focusing instead on shared human values or civic identity. However, experiences of discrimination (either real or self-convinced) or cultural disconnect challenge this sense of inclusion and highlight ongoing social divides.

Last but not least, in every Baltic country, youth expressed growing concerns about demographic challenges, including declining birth rates and aging populations, which they see as threats to the region's long-term sustainability. Many worry that these trends could lead to labour shortages, reduced economic growth, and increased pressure on social welfare systems. Additionally, some participants highlighted the outmigration of young people seeking better opportunities abroad as a key factor exacerbating demographic decline.

D-2. Motivation for civic engagement

Motivations for civic participation vary widely among Baltic youth. While some are enthusiastic about engaging in democratic processes and community activities, others express scepticism or apathy, especially when they perceive political systems as distant or unresponsive. Family influence plays a significant role in shaping these attitudes—encouraging, discouraging, or remaining neutral toward political involvement.

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[40] Vihalemm, T., & Juzefovičs, J. (2020). Sense-making of conflicting political news among Baltic Russian-speaking audiences. *National Identities,* 22(6), 647–664. https://doi.org/10.1080/14608944.2020.1723512

Rönngren, E. (2025). *Making sense of Russian strategic narratives: Affect and reception among young Russian speakers in Latvia* (Doctoral dissertation, Uppsala University). https://uu.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2%3A1933875/FULLTEXT01.pdf?

⌐✕⌐ I think it depends on the circles you belong to. If your friends or hobby partners are politically or socially active, you will learn from them and become more civically engaged, too. — a young participant from Vilnius.

In Latvia and Estonia, some participants reported a risk to become excluded from mainstream political and social processes, largely due to persistent language barriers and societal stigmas associated with their Russian-speaking identity. This exclusion often leads to a sense of distrust toward government institutions and scepticism about the impact of their participation. Additionally, some Russian-speaking youths perceive a lack of accessible platforms or encouragement to voice their opinions, which further diminishes their motivation to engage civically. Given its association with sociopsychological values, it is imperative to acknowledge that communities and societies exhibiting elevated levels of individualism tend to demonstrate heightened levels of political and civic engagement.[41]

Some participants from Narva and Daugavpils described a paternalistic approach from authorities and institutions, where decisions are made top-down with little input from young people. This often leads to feelings of disempowerment and a lack of ownership over community or political processes. Youth expressed expectations that the state should take care of them, but also voiced frustration when their needs and voices are overlooked. Such a dynamic can hinder active civic engagement and reduce motivation to participate in shaping their own futures.

Some youth also voiced concerns about internal radicalization and ideological clashes, which complicate their willingness to participate. Discussions around democratic values also reveal tensions, especially regarding minority rights and social issues such as LGBTQ+ inclusion, reflecting broader societal debates and external influences.

D-3. Building resilience in communities

In general, Baltic youth recognize the importance of social connectivity and community cohesion in adapting to turbulent geopolitical and social environments.

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[41] Allik, J., & Realo, A. (2004). Individualism-Collectivism and Social Capital. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 35(1), 29–49. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022022103260381

For many, family ties remain a cornerstone of resilience, providing emotional support and guiding future decisions. Yet, challenges such as ethnolinguistic divisions, language barriers, and conflicting narratives about neighbouring countries strain these bonds.

When discussing resilience, groups in the capital cities of Vilnius, Riga and Tallinn mentioned another important aspect of it: the need for mental health to manage the increasing flow of information and the negative emotions associated with current uncertainties. Some participants admitted to being worried about the Fear of Missing out (FoMo) phenomenon and suggested that it is related to their social media addiction.[42]

In regional towns like Narva and Daugavpils, youth often demonstrate a more proactive vision when it comes to building resilience within their communities. They emphasize the importance of strong local support networks, and practical preparedness to face uncertainties. Some young people engage in proactive planning for crises, illustrating a pragmatic approach to uncertainty. Despite difficulties, there is a shared aspiration among youth to strengthen communities by bridging divides and fostering inclusive dialogue, seeing this as essential for sustainable democratic futures.

We know that the first line of aid response lies with your family, close friends and neighbours. The state is slow and far away; we can react more quickly. — a young participant from Narva.

As suggested by several participants from Riga, Vilnius and Tallinn, young people from the capital cities tend to be more indifferent when it comes to community resilience, often placing greater trust in state institutions to manage crises and provide support through formal systems and government resources. This contrast highlights a gap in personal and collective responsibility between capital and provincial youth.

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[42] Piko, B. F., Müller, V., Kiss, H., & Mellor, D. (2025). Exploring contributors to FoMo (fear of missing out) among university students: The role of social comparison, social media addiction, loneliness, and perfectionism. *Acta Psychologica, 253*, Article 104771. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.actpsy.2025.104771

WHAT IS NEXT?

Young participants across the Baltic states have identified five critical global challenges shaping their future outlook: **political instability and conflicts, cybersecurity and data privacy threats, climate change, economic inequality, and human rights and social justice concerns (including assess to and quality of education).** Despite varied cultural descriptions, there was a shared emphasis on core values such as trust, care, fairness, and the aspiration for societies free from violence and aggression. Regarding the future of their countries and themselves, Baltic youth highlighted several key factors:

1. The need to foster inclusivity, enabling everyone to find their place regardless of education level, abilities, native language or ethnicity.

2. A strong focus on education—acquiring skills, knowledge, and continuous learning—as the foundation for personal fulfilment and national progress.

3. Embracing technological advancements, especially in AI, as important drivers of development, while acknowledging their impact on social cohesion.

4. A consensus that democracy remains the only viable system for sustainable national and individual growth, requiring a balance between national traditions and evolving values.

5. The importance of inclusive integration policies that actively include ethnolinguistic minorities and challenge prevailing stereotypes among majority groups.

6. Most of the youth envision their future in the Baltic states, expressing concerns about economic stability, security, mental health support, and the strengthening of interpersonal, familial, and community bonds.

The findings described above can serve as inputs into a broader or deeper research studies on the future aspirations of the youth in the Baltics, including perceptions on risks and opportunities. The vast majority of young people (81%) actively think about the future, showing a **strong sense of agency** and a willingness to take action rather

than passively accepting their circumstances. Injustice emerged as a key concern for many, highlighting the need for deeper exploration of this issue.

Moreover, young people frequently feel upset by the news agenda, and intergenerational barriers were identified as another important area for further analysis. **Intergenerational dialogue** should become the new norm to help solve generation-specific problems in the Baltics. For instance, a younger cohort can teach an older one how to safely use modern digital tools, while older generations can introduce the value of mental practices to reduce psychological dependency on increasing AI among young people. Furthermore, sharing and discussing experiences of the recent past can reinforce the national historical memory needed for younger generations to understand the fragility of freedom, which is often taken for granted. On a broader scale, fostering meaningful connections and sense-rich relationships between different generations can mitigate the negative effects of forgetting ecology (e.g. fragmented networks, algorithmic immediacy, and erosion of media awareness, etc.) when the risk of losing an authentic past increases with the use of digital media and artificial intelligence.[43]

As connectivity becomes increasingly digital, challenges persist in cross-border communication due to the dominance of non-transparent platforms. In today's hyper-connected world, it is crucial for the Baltic region to support internet-based technologies, AI, and human-machine interfaces developed under non-authoritarian regimes. There is an urgent need to introduce school curricula that educate students about the risks of sharing personal data and profiling by authoritarian countries.

In addition, the following research areas would provide valuable insights to guide policymakers, educators, and community leaders in addressing Baltic youth's priorities and challenges.

- **Educational reform and teacher functionality**

  Investigate effective strategies for modernising Baltic education systems. This should include incorporating **future literacy** and AI tools into formal and non-formal curricula, reducing disparities between urban and rural schools, and

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[43] Hoskins, A. (2024). The forgetting ecology: Losing the past through digital media and AI. In Q. Wang & A. Hoskins (Eds.), *The remaking of memory in the age of the internet and social media* (pp. 32–48). Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197661260.003.0003

improving the social status and working conditions of educators. Their role is changing; they are no longer all-knowing tutors, but rather mentors who provide experience and wisdom, model thinking, embody values, and guide foresight.

- **Digital civic literacy**

    Explore how digital environments affect youth engagement, disinformation resilience, and critical awareness of data privacy—especially in light of geopolitical cyber influences.

- **Youth perceptions of security and geopolitical risks**

    Examine how Baltic youth's views on Russia's, China's and U.S. actions, regional security concerns, and defence preparedness influence their personal and collective outlooks. Consider the role of historical memory, media narratives and peer influence in shaping these perceptions.

- **Family influence on youth civic engagement and mental health**

    Study the critical role of family support, parental competencies and social cohesion in motivating young people to participate in civic life and in shaping their physical and mental well-being.

- **Identity, freedom, and rejection of Soviet legacy**

    Explore youth attitudes toward ethnolinguistic identities, cultural heritages, human rights, and emphatic tolerance. Assess how these elements contribute to resilience, goal-setting, and community participation, while also addressing the ongoing impact of Soviet-era legacies on societal values.
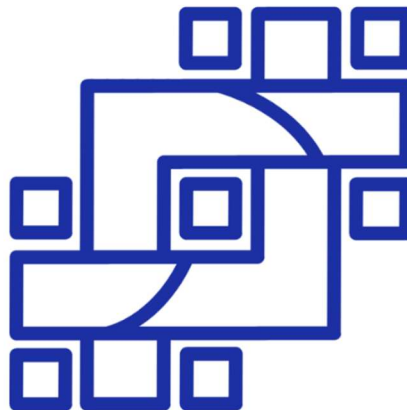
- **Optimism and concerns about the future**

    Analyse how Baltic youth strike a balance between their aspirations and optimism regarding technological progress (e.g. AI and advances in healthcare) and their concerns about climate change, environmental challenges, migration and social inclusion.

- **Youth trust in political leadership and governance**

  Research youth perceptions of political decision-making, focusing on issues of short-termism, lack of visionary leadership, and sustainability of policies. Explore mechanisms for increasing youth involvement in governance to bridge the gap between young citizens and political leaders.

Ultimately, belonging is an ongoing process, not a destination. To ensure that every young person in the Baltics feels included, our societies must create strong relationships, safe spaces, and opportunities to increase trust and foster genuine connections. Building a sense of belonging requires intentional effort at every level, involving young people as active partners rather than passive recipients. Empowering young people to forge bonds, bridge divides, take ownership of their actions, make more empathetic decisions and connect within their communities is a vital step in gluing the important pieces of the social fabric together and strengthening the societal resilience and real-world social capital of the Baltics.