



2026



**BALTIC YOUTH
RESILIENCE**

Preparing the Next Generations for Resistant Futures

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TEPERIK**

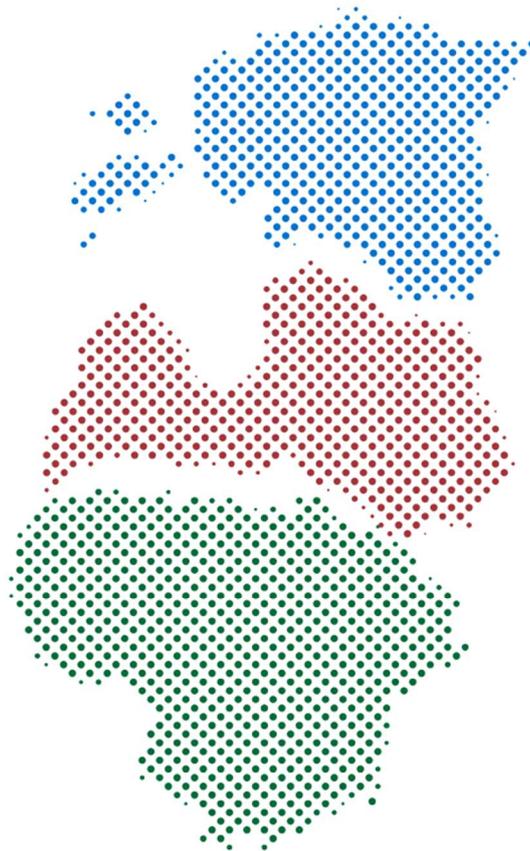
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Tallinn-Riga-Vilnius
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2026



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Embassy
of the Federal Republic of Germany
Tallinn

This policy paper was prepared with the support of the German Embassy in Tallinn.

The views and opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors only, and do not necessarily reflect the official stance of any institution or organisation.

ISBN 978-9908-9709-5-0 (pdf)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Baltic societies are navigating a period of structural uncertainty shaped by geopolitical instability, technological acceleration, demographic change, and contested information environments. For younger generations, uncertainty is no longer episodic but systemic, influencing their planning horizons, professional choices, and sense of agency. In this context, resilience can no longer be understood solely as institutional robustness or crisis response capacity. It increasingly depends on the ability of societies **to articulate shared, forward-looking narratives that sustain democratic legitimacy, social cohesion, and long-term development.**

This policy paper draws on youth foresight workshops and cross-sectoral stakeholder consultations conducted across Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania in 2025. It analyses how young people perceive governance, education, and security, and proposes an actionable framework for strengthening future literacy as a **strategic pillar of democratic resilience in the Baltic region.**

The findings reveal several structural tensions. First, Baltic youth demonstrate strong normative trust in democracy and regard it as **the only legitimate form of governance.** However, democracy is often treated as a given rather than as a system requiring continuous vigilance and engagement. This democratic habituation reduces sensitivity to early warning signs of erosion, while also creating an opportunity for targeted future literacy interventions.

Second, while young people recognise geopolitical instability as a major driver of uncertainty, they often perceive limited personal influence over security developments. Security should not be understood exclusively in military terms. Instead, it encompasses socio-economic stability, mental well-being, trust in institutions, and the integrity of shared narratives about the future. **Expanding the security paradigm to include cognitive resistance and socio-economic dimensions is therefore essential for sustaining long-term resilience.**

Third, discussions highlighted the ambivalent role of local and regional identities. Local belonging provides a meaningful anchor in times of uncertainty, yet it may

become vulnerable to political instrumentalisation if trust in national institutions weakens. **Strengthening complimentary multi-layered identity architectures**—local, national, Baltic, and European—can reinforce cognitive resilience and reduce susceptibility to polarising narratives.

The analysis is structured around three interdependent domains. Governance concerns legitimacy, civic engagement, and meaningful participation. Young people **demand more strategic, anticipatory leadership and participation mechanisms** that move beyond symbolic consultation. Education builds capabilities, transgenerational values, and collective sense-making. Youth expect **human-centric systems that integrate civic literacy, ethical judgment, crisis preparedness, and AI-ready competencies while fostering psychological safety**. Security encompasses agency, resistance, and the protection of future trajectories. It must expand beyond military logic to include **socio-economic wellbeing, cognitive resilience, and shared ownership of the future**.

Future literacy connects these domains. It equips individuals and institutions to anticipate change, interpret uncertainty, and act collectively. **Participatory foresight, inclusive multilogues, and constructive narrative-building** enable young people to move from passive observers of transformation to co-authors of shared futures. This shift has measurable psychological and social effects, strengthening hope, agency, and commitment while countering fatigue and disengagement.

In terms of future projections, by 2040 resilient and resistant Baltic societies will be defined not only by strong institutions and infrastructure, but by their **collective capacity to anticipate change, sustain democratic agency, and protect shared futures through inclusive, future-literate governance**. Achieving this vision will require institutionalised foresight mechanisms across governance levels, human-centric education systems that cultivate agency and ethical judgment, and an expanded cognitive security paradigm that safeguards democratic confidence and shared ownership of the future.



INTRODUCTION — FRAMING THE CONTEXT

Growing uncertainty is increasingly contributing to anxiety and a sense of sociopsychological insecurity—not only in geopolitical terms, but also in relation to self-realisation through education, professional trajectories and personal life choices. As planning horizons shrink, many individuals postpone key decisions or abandon long-term aspirations altogether. This **erosion of future-oriented agency** is particularly visible among younger generations, for whom uncertainty is no longer episodic but rather structural. This condition is intensified by the speed and simultaneity of technological, economic, and geopolitical changes, which continuously reshape the parameters within which futures can be imagined and acted upon.

Situated on contested frontiers, Baltic societies represent multifaceted environments where perceptions of endangered freedom, independence and national security are deeply intertwined with cultural heritage, collective memory, and historically embedded mindsets of resilience and crisis preparedness. These layers coexist with rapid technological, economic, and demographic transformations, producing a contested narrative environment in which competing—and at times coercive—stories about risk, opportunity, and identity simultaneously shape how societies interpret the present and imagine the future.

Within this context, a central challenge emerges: not merely to identify hope, but to collectively construct hope as a **form of shared agency** rather than an abstract emotional state. Societal resilience increasingly depends on the ability to articulate shared, forward-looking macro-narratives that can function as a beacon—orienting societies across generations toward desirable versions of possible futures that remain democratic, cohesive, and sufficiently prosperous to sustain long-term development. Without such strategic narratives, uncertainty risks solidifying into apathy, withdrawal, or polarisation.¹

¹ Riedy, C., & Waddock, S. (2022). *Imagining transformation: Change agent narratives of sustainable futures*. *Futures*, 142, Article 103010. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2022.103010>

This guidance is of particular significance for younger generations, who are actively seeking points of reference that provide meaning, stability, and direction. Beyond material security, young people express a growing need for cognitive and interpretative skillsets: **the ability to recognise societal patterns, navigate competing narratives, and make sense of rapid, often disruptive change**. Developing these capacities is not only a matter of individual empowerment, but a strategic prerequisite for maintaining social cohesion, democratic resilience, and future-oriented governance in the Baltic states.

Having worked with youth groups from diverse socioeconomic, ethnolinguistic, and geographical backgrounds across the Baltic states in 2024–2025, the interdisciplinary team of authors developed a **coherent analytical framework for resilience-building through future-oriented thinking: the GLUED**. The framework brings together key spheres shaping long-term resilience, including geopolitical and geospatial drivers; issues of legacy and legitimacy; unity and social connectedness; education and the economy; as well as demographic trends and democratic aspirations.² The goal of this policy paper is to equip Baltic decision-makers and resilience stakeholders with an **actionable future literacy framework** that enables more effective civic engagement of younger generations in complex, cross-sectoral multilogues on governance, education, and security.

Insights from a series of interactive foresight workshops conducted with young people across the Baltic states during 2025 reveal a striking pattern. Most participants frequently think about the future and believe that they will be able to influence it meaningfully within the next 10–15 years (i.e. by 2040). At the same time, they identify three systemically interdependent domains that require deeper engagement and qualitative improvement: **governance** (strategic, democratic, inclusive, civic, and local), **education and training** (new skills, technology, and cognitive superiority), and **security** (geopolitical and socio-economic stability, as well as crisis preparedness).

² Teperik, D., Denisa-Liepniece, S. and Bankauskaite, D. *GLUED: Linking Resilience and Youth Futures in the Baltics*. Research report. National Centre of Defence & Security Awareness (NCDSA). ISBN 978-9908-9709-1-2 (pdf), <http://dx.doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.12470.77125>.

These domains offer three analytical lenses for addressing a set of critical questions:

- ❖ Who shapes the future expectations of young generations in the Baltics, and how?
- ❖ Who creates new visions, produces shared meanings, and drives change in everyday life?
- ❖ Who is able to challenge entrenched assumptions, reject outdated narratives, and demand more inclusive and resistant futures?
- ❖ Finally, do effective models of shared leadership, collective sense-making, and engaged communities exist in the Baltics under conditions of sustained uncertainty?

Across the Baltic youth foresight workshops, participants articulated not simple problems, but a series of underlying tensions that shape their future outlooks. These include high trust in democracy alongside limited engagement with its fragility; strong security concerns coupled with anxiety about militarisation; and deep attachment to local and regional identities coexisting with uncertainty about national and European belonging. Rather than isolated contradictions, these tensions represent **structural conditions of transition**. They recur across governance, education, and security. These tensions provide the analytical backbone for the sections that follow.

Through consultations and structured discussions with national stakeholders from multiple sectors, the Baltic expert team identified one critical area requiring sustained joint intellectual effort, sociopolitical attention, and implementation resources: **the strengthening of future-oriented confidence within Baltic societies, particularly among younger generations**. Durable and resistant futures depend on legitimacy, which emerges when diverse voices (e.g. young people) are meaningfully involved in shaping collective trajectories. In this context, nurturing and reinforcing complementary identities across the Baltics can have a positive and stabilising effect on social cohesion and collective crisis preparedness, both of which are essential for endurance in times of heightened risk and for recovery following systemic disruptions. When widely shared and deliberately cultivated, a **Baltic identity** can provide an additional layer of protection against cognitive threats stemming from hostile actors, unfriendly states, or malign narratives.

Just as personal, community, and professional identities can serve as sources of resilience, regional identities—such as Baltic or Nordic—can complement national identities and reinforce European belonging. Together, they create an additional constructive and stabilising point of reference within a complex and layered sense of belonging. Such multilayered identities function simultaneously as a **shield, protecting societal groups** from competing and polarising narratives, and as an **operational values framework** that guides collective future thinking. Both functions are increasingly indispensable in Baltic societies, and particularly for younger generations, at a time when sense-making is under growing pressure from geopolitical competition, economic uncertainty, and information contestation.³

Collaborative narration about the future—particularly about preferred futures—can be practised across multiple levels, from community and national to regional (Baltic) and pan-European. Such shared future-making prepares diverse societal groups to **anticipate and cope with potential traumas of tomorrow**, including the rise of authoritarian regimes, environmental breakdown, migration pressures, and the growing dominance of disruptive technologies. It also invites a rethinking of **aesthetic agency**—the active role that aesthetic experiences, judgments, and forms play in shaping human life, social values, and cultural memory. Rich, generative intergroup multilogues become possible when alternative futures—optimistic, challenging, and transformative—are discussed inclusively and simultaneously rather than sequentially.⁴ Against the backdrop of structurally reduced agency, the following sections examine how these dynamics manifest across governance, education, and security.

³ Gvineria, S., Bankauskaite, D., Struberga, S., Nazarov, M., Teperik, D. (2026). *Exploring Interdependencies Between Identity and Resilience: Lessons from the War in Ukraine for the Baltic States*. In: Smaliukiene, R., Schultz, D., Giedraityte, V. (eds) *Democratic Resilience in the Baltics*, Vol. 2. Baltic Security and Defense. Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-10146-4_10

⁴ Miller, R. (Ed.). (2018). *Transforming the Future: Anticipation in the 21st Century* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351048002>



GOVERNANCE

***Goal for 2040:** Young people across the Baltic states demonstrate a high level of societal awareness and future orientation as they actively plan for their personal and professional futures, follow domestic and international developments, critically assess emerging risks and opportunities, and seek preparedness for uncertainty. Importantly, many young people express a genuine willingness to participate in the governance of their countries, European Union, and the wider international community.*

This section examines a central governance tension observed across the Baltic youth foresight workshops: strong normative trust in democracy combined with limited engagement with its vulnerability and long-term sustainability.

Across all three Baltic countries, democracy is regarded by young people as the only legitimate and acceptable form of governance. Participants in youth foresight workshops showed a solid understanding of how democratic institutions function and, consequently, articulated clear expectations regarding their performance and accountability. Democracy is not perceived merely as an abstract ideal but as a **practical framework enabling self-realisation, participation, and protection of freedoms.**

Values, identities, and belonging emerged as key sources of future inspiration, alongside education and learning. At the same time, politics and governance, as well as demographic change and migration, were consistently cited as areas of concern. Notably, trust in governance was discussed not as a 'soft' value, but as a functional one: an enabling infrastructure that reduces friction, increases compliance, and allows for long-term planning at both individual and societal levels in the Baltics.

When asked to prioritise major challenges and threats, young people tended to rank global issues—such as climate change, migration, and socio-economic pressures—above domestic concerns. These issues were almost exclusively discussed through the assumption that democracy is a stable and permanent constant. While alternative political systems were occasionally acknowledged, youth foresight workshop

participants rarely explored how global challenges might be addressed differently under non-democratic regimes, nor did they assess the **specific risks associated with democratic erosion**. Emerging technologies, for example, were discussed mainly in terms of opportunities and challenges within democratic governance, without systematic reflection on how they might be used under authoritarian systems.

This implicit assumption of democracy as a given is understandable: the current generations of Baltic youth have grown up in independent democratic states and possess largely theoretical knowledge of alternative regimes. However, this mindset carries risks because treating democracy as a natural constant may reduce young people's ability to recognise early warning signs of democratic backsliding, assess shifting political environments, or feel sufficiently motivated to actively defend democratic institutions. This reflects not a rejection of democracy, but a form of democratic habituation that reduces vigilance. In addition, age differences were evident. Older participants demonstrated a more nuanced understanding of democracy as a **system that requires continuous effort, participation, and vigilance**. They more clearly articulated that freedom and free choice are not self-sustaining, but depend on active civic engagement and institutional accountability. When democratic participation is experienced as symbolic rather than consequential, habituation can gradually shift from passive trust to disengagement.⁵

A shared concern across Baltic youth foresight workshops was **political short-termism**. Irrespective of their socioeconomic, ethnolinguistic or geographical backgrounds, the majority of participants concurred that domestic politicians tend to prioritise immediate gains over long-term sustainability and that current political decisions in the Baltic states often fail to address challenges unfolding over the next 10–15 years. This perception contributes to frustration and reinforces **the demand for more strategic, future-oriented governance in the Baltics**.

Young people's understanding of democracy is shaped not only by individual maturity but also by family memory, intergenerational narratives, and collective historical experience. While the workshop format did not allow for a deep exploration of intergenerational transmission, discussions nevertheless revealed strong insights

⁵ Foa, R.S., & Mounk, Y. (2016). *The Danger of Deconsolidation: The Democratic Disconnect*. *Journal of Democracy* 27(3), 5-17. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/jod.2016.0049>.

into how young people interpret geopolitics, regional threats, and the role of government in the Baltics. A salient example is provided by recent civic movements in Lithuania that oppose an antisemitic political party in the ruling coalition, which has attempted to undermine the independence of the national broadcaster. These movements united generations: citizens who defended independence in 1990 stood alongside young people born after 1990, collectively reaffirming democratic values. Such cases demonstrate the **power of intergenerational continuity in reinforcing democratic resilience**. This reveals a core tension: democracy is deeply valued and trusted, yet insufficiently problematised as a fragile system requiring continuous defence.

Trust in electoral processes remains high among young people in the Baltics. Even when preferred parties did not win elections, participants did not question the fairness or legitimacy of electoral outcomes. Confidence in democratic procedures was consistently expressed as a stabilising factor. At the same time, youth discussions highlighted vulnerabilities: **perceived deficits in political leadership, growing social isolation, and inner insecurity**. Participants recognised that these factors are actively exploited by hostile actors seeking to fragment Baltic societies and erode trust.

Young people repeatedly emphasised that they are not an unorganised 'crowd' as many are already organised through youth organisations and student bodies and are capable of representing public interests. However, they also described experiences of symbolic participation, where politicians appear to listen but do not meaningfully incorporate youth perspectives into decision-making—particularly in areas such as education reform. For young people, disagreement with government decisions is not a threat to democracy but a defining feature of it. What matters most is procedural fairness and legitimacy that, in their view, requires openness, inclusivity, and genuine access to participation, rather than restricted or performative consultation. Trust in institutions was widely recognised as fragile, unevenly distributed, and reversible. Participants of the Baltic youth foresight workshops stressed that democratic principles—**transparency, accountability, responsiveness, and inclusivity**—must be consistently upheld, especially in times of crisis, if young people are to remain engaged in political life.

Finally, discussions identified three complementary pathways for **strengthening youth participation in governance**. The first pathway operates through formal participation structures, such as student councils in schools and municipal youth councils. While participants highlighted several effective examples at the school level, their overall impact was seen as highly dependent on institutional leadership and support. At the municipal level, youth councils were frequently described as underutilised or largely inactive, limiting their capacity to function as meaningful channels of influence.

The second pathway centres on strengthening youth-led civil society organisations. Participants emphasised that these organisations play a critical role in aggregating youth interests, building collective capacity, and connecting young people to wider civic and advocacy networks. Through sustained engagement, civil society structures enable more consistent, informed, and impactful youth representation in policy discussions and governance processes.

The third pathway involves formal and active membership in youth wings of political parties and movements. These structures were recognised as important incubators for future decision-makers, offering young people direct exposure to political processes, leadership development, and responsibility within democratic institutions. When supported with meaningful roles rather than symbolic participation, such pathways can contribute to the long-term renewal and resilience of democratic governance.

Overall, Baltic youth demonstrate a strong commitment to democracy and a growing readiness to participate in governance. However, their engagement is constrained by short-term political practices and limited meaningful inclusion. Nevertheless, they share the assumption that democracy is not self-sustaining and therefore must be cultivated. This can be understood as a developmental paradox. On the one hand, Baltic youth display strong normative trust in democracy; on the other, they rarely explore counterfactual governance scenarios in depth. While this creates a potential vulnerability, it also opens a strategic opportunity for future literacy interventions that **strengthen democratic vigilance and anticipatory capacity**. Without deliberate interventions that expose young people to counterfactual governance scenarios and democratic fragility, habituation risks evolving into disengagement rather than

defence. These dynamics are particularly salient at the local level, where everyday identities shape trust, agency, and susceptibility to narrative manipulation - the issues returned to in the concluding section. Strengthening future-oriented, inclusive, and genuinely participatory governance structures is therefore **essential to transform youth willingness into lasting democratic resilience.**



Goal for 2040: *Education systems across the Baltic states equip young people with the knowledge, skills, and values needed to thrive in conditions of sustained uncertainty and rapid transformation, including the digital transformation. Education fosters not only professional competence and adaptability, but also civic literacy, critical thinking, and ethical judgment, enabling young people to participate meaningfully in democratic life.*

This section examines the perspectives of young people on education, revealing a persistent tension between the development of instrumental skills for employability, and the deeper demand for meaning-making, civic orientation and emotional safety in times of uncertainty.

Across all Baltic youth foresight workshops, there was unanimous agreement that quality education is one of the most critical foundations for a sustainable, competitive, and secure future. Young participants consistently framed education not only as a pathway to employment, but as a **core resilience-building mechanism in a context of accelerating uncertainty, technological disruption, and geopolitical volatility**. In this sense, education functions simultaneously as a societal infrastructure and a lived developmental process. At the same time, young participants questioned whether investments in teachers are sufficient to drive educational transformation. Generational, technological, and values gaps, particularly those between younger learners and older educators, continue to hinder progress and create additional challenges.

While formal education was primarily associated with career preparation and economic self-realisation, civic education was understood as the mechanism that prepares young people for active citizenship. **Active citizenship remains a significant challenge**. While not generalisable, some young participants described receiving 'family instructions' such as 'stay invisible' and 'do not act', which discourage engagement from an early age. Additionally, some noted that teachers often convey conflicting narratives about government actions, which further reduces young

people's willingness to participate in state institutions' work. However, civic education was described as the process through which individuals are meaningfully integrated into society, fostering a sense of belonging grounded in shared values, democratic norms, and collective responsibility. Young participants emphasised that civic education should enable young people to understand their rights and responsibilities, engage constructively in public life, and navigate complex societal debates.

The majority of young people surveyed identified a series of fundamental democratic and social values that education should proactively promote, including integrity, curiosity, creativity, reflexivity, respect for diversity, openness, self-reliance, solidarity, advocacy, equity, human rights, and respect for law and justice. These values were not framed as abstract ideals, but as practical competencies that support relationship-building, social trust, and civic participation. Importantly, participants rejected the idea that education should demand blind conformity or unconditional loyalty. Instead, they argued that modern schools should nurture **independent thinking, critical reflection, and informed engagement**—qualities they considered essential for sustaining democracy. Youth discussions revealed a persistent tension between instrumental skills development and the deeper need for meaning-making, civic orientation, and emotional security under uncertainty.

Young participants repeatedly returned to the question of skills development under conditions of rapid change. They stressed the need for a **human-centric skills ecosystem** that prioritises analytical and creative thinking, curiosity and lifelong learning, leadership and social influence, systems thinking, teaching and mentoring capabilities, and the ability to collaborate across disciplines and cultures. **Aesthetic agency**—through storytelling, symbolic practices, and participatory design—emerged as a critical pedagogical resource for translating abstract futures into lived experience and civic motivation.

Inclusivity emerged as a critical enabling condition. Young people across the Baltics noted that inclusive approaches to education and skills recognition not only strengthen trust in institutions, but also ensure that skills remain relevant and transferable across borders, sectors, and industries. This was particularly important in the regions shaped by mobility, demographic change, and evolving labour markets.

Technology was viewed ambivalently. Young participants agreed that digital tools, artificial intelligence, and educational technologies should function as enhancers rather than substitutes for human judgement. When designed responsibly, technology can expand access to learning, support scalability, and facilitate reflection. In discussions on safety and security, young people emphasised that technological development must be accompanied by robust **safeguards for transparency, privacy, and equity**; consequently, contemporary and future-oriented education must strengthen awareness of cognitive risks and digital manipulation. Overall, Baltic youth tend to embrace technology without pronounced fear, expressing greater concern about equitable access to its benefits than about potential misuse related to personal privacy.

Furthermore, Baltic youth are increasingly expecting education to equip them with the **knowledge necessary for navigating crises and systemic shocks**. This includes crisis preparedness, emergency decision-making and financial literacy to manage instability and long-term risk, as well as environmental literacy to understand climate-related disruptions and resource constraints. Young participants did not frame these competencies as specialist or technical training, but rather as essential life skills that **strengthen personal agency, reduce anxiety and encourage responsible civic behaviour in uncertain conditions**. Integrating such applied literacies into education systems would reinforce future confidence and complement democratic and professional self-realisation rather than competing with them.

Learning environments must therefore support **lifelong learning, re- and upskilling, and human-centric innovation**, integrating technologies such as artificial intelligence as tools that enhance—rather than replace—human agency. Inclusive, values-based education strengthens social trust, nurtures belonging, and equips young people to navigate complexity, assess risks, and co-create democratic and sustainable futures.⁶ Moreover, civic literacy, future literacy, and instrumental skills development should be understood as mutually reinforcing components of education rather than as separate tracks of formal and non-formal learning.

⁶ World Economic Forum. (2025). *New economy skills: Unlocking the human advantage* (White paper). World Economic Forum. https://reports.weforum.org/docs/WEF_New_Economy_Skills_Unlocking_the_Human_Advantage_2025.pdf

Finally, discussions revealed that **future knowledge gaps and skill-related anxiety** play a decisive role in whether educational and professional transitions succeed. Young people are more likely to adopt new skills and engage in re- and upskilling when learning pathways feel emotionally safe, socially supported, and aligned with their sense of purpose. Psychological safety, trust in institutions, and realistic future narratives were therefore identified as essential complements to technical skill development.⁷ While employability remains important, young people consistently prioritise education's civic, ethical, and resilience-building functions as foundational. Baltic youth view education and technological development as strategic societal infrastructure that underpins resilience, democratic participation, and future confidence, rather than merely employability. Moreover, **a lifelong strategy for educational transformation is needed**. It should promote individual and societal well-being. To meet these expectations, education systems in the Baltics must integrate AI literacy, civic literacy, human-centric skills, ethical judgment, and psychologically safe learning pathways that enable young people to navigate uncertainty, preserve prospects for decent professional self-realisation, and actively shape sustainable democratic futures.

⁷ OECD (2025), *OECD Skills Outlook 2025: Building the Skills of the 21st Century for All*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/26163cd3-en>.



***Goal for 2040:** Young people across the Baltic states demonstrate the willingness, readiness, and ability to resist, protect, and defend democratic values, open societies and general wellbeing against a wide spectrum of threats. This includes not only military and hybrid risks, but also cognitive, informational, and societal challenges. Security is understood as a shared civic responsibility grounded in trust, preparedness, and solidarity.*

This section examines how young people's perceptions of security are shaped by an underlying tension between the need for protection and the desire to maintain autonomy, agency and freedom of choice in the future.

A recent report on EU research and innovation for long-term resilience concludes that, in order to prepare for future disruptions and structural shifts in the global economy, the EU must link its economic security and competitiveness strategies in a more coherent and integrated manner. The report argues that Europe's strongest pathway to security and resilience—and, consequently, sustained competitiveness—lies in deliberate investment in a broader conception of security, one that is firmly grounded in stable, inclusive, and sustainable wellbeing. Furthermore, the report emphasises that maintaining Europe's global competitiveness and security requires decisive action to integrate innovation, sustainability, security, and resilience across all levels of policymaking. This integration must extend from EU-level strategies to national, regional, and local governance frameworks, ensuring that resilience is not treated as a sectoral concern but as a cross-cutting principle shaping long-term development and societal stability.⁸

Geopolitical instability and armed conflicts were ranked by the majority of participants in the Baltic youth foresight workshops as among the most significant future drivers of concern—areas in which young people perceive themselves to have little or no direct influence. From a personal perspective, such attitudes are

⁸ European Commission: Directorate-General for Research and Innovation, Richardson, K., Renda, A., Schwaag Serger, S., Walz, R., Potočník, D., Świeboda, P., Christophilopoulos, E., Balland, P.-A., Grabbe, H., Muntean, B., Castaño Marín, M. L., Weresa, M., Alkemade, F., Dunlop, K., & Simonsson, J. (2025). *Research and innovation for long-term resilience : towards a place-based, innovation-driven strategy for Europe's security and competitiveness*, Publications Office of the European Union. <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2777/0338624>.

understandable. However, national security in the Baltic states is based on a **whole-of-society paradigm of total defence**, which requires the active engagement of all societal groups within their respective capacities.

Young participants generally acknowledged that, within the military domain of security, there are certain avenues through which they could contribute. At the same time, many expressed concerns about the perceived overmilitarisation of everyday life and its potential impact on personal freedom, life choices, and mental health. This tension suggests a **narrow and one-sided understanding of security**, largely viewed through the prism of existential military threats that are perceived as unavoidable and capable of destroying future life prospects, with few or no alternative pathways imagined. Participants articulated a clear tension between the need for protection and the desire to preserve agency, personal autonomy, and life choices—highlighting a broader gap between institutional security paradigms and youth perceptions of security as lived experience.

Many participants articulated a fear of an inevitable war in Europe, accompanied by a sense of powerlessness and resignation. These perceptions may represent early symptoms of what can be analytically described as the **colonisation of minds**—a strategic process with deliberate efforts to shape how societies imagine their future by introducing narratives that weaken democratic confidence, distort threat perceptions, and normalise fatalism. In the Baltic context, such narratives are often produced and amplified by hostile state and non-state actors seeking to undermine trust in democratic governance, collective defence arrangements, and European integration. By portraying the future as inevitably unstable, unjust, or externally controlled, these narratives erode individual and collective agency and reduce societal willingness to invest in long-term resilience and proactive resistance.

These dynamics are further reinforced through **willful ignorance**, which frequently emerges under conditions of perceived social or identity-related threat. When individuals or groups feel culturally marginalised, economically insecure, or politically unheard, rejecting inconvenient or complex information can become a psychological coping strategy. In such contexts, simplified explanations, conspiratorial thinking, and emotionally charged narratives offer a sense of certainty and relief, even when they contradict empirical evidence. This mechanism makes

identity-sensitive groups particularly vulnerable to future-oriented disinformation that exploits fear, nostalgia, and grievance.⁹ This **sense of inevitability is not accidental**; it reflects exposure to narratives that narrow perceived futures and suppress alternative forms of agency.

From a security perspective, NATO experts increasingly raise a critical question: **what blind spots exist in current conceptualisations of future conflict?** Traditional security planning has tended to prioritise kinetic, technological, and territorial threats, while underestimating the cognitive, narrative, and psychosocial dimensions of conflict. Yet the contestation over futures—who defines them, who is excluded from imagining them, and whose expectations are systematically discouraged—has become a central arena of strategic competition.¹⁰ Addressing these blind spots requires recognising **narrative space as a security domain** and investing in societal capacities that strengthen future literacy, cognitive resilience, and inclusive meaning-making across generations, as also emphasised in the NATO Chief Scientist's research on cognitive warfare.¹¹ These blind spots mirror the gap observed in youth perceptions, where futures are often framed as externally determined rather than collectively shapeable.

Security must be conceptualised beyond a purely military logic, as participants in the Baltic youth foresight workshops consistently identified socio-economic prosperity and expectations of a stable environment for both material and mental well-being as integral components of security. Young people consistently framed **welfare as an essential element of societal resilience** and emphasised that their willingness to protect shared values and defend their countries is closely linked to present socio-economic conditions and **credible future prospects for their regions**. From a broader security perspective in the Baltics, a primary risk is the loss of youth agency and future ownership due to narrative manipulation and other mechanisms such as identity threats and socio-economic insecurity, which can lead to perceived powerlessness and weakened societal resistance.

⁹ Gkinopoulos, T., Kossowska, M., & Walther, E. (2026). "A community of unknowledge": A social-psychological model of the self-reinforcing cycle of social identity-driven willful ignorance and conspiracy beliefs. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 67, Article 102193. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2025.102193>

¹⁰ Minvielle, N., Roussie, M., & Thomas, R. (2025). *Future of conflicts – A vision of what is to come* (NDC Insight 06-2025). NATO Defence College. <https://www.ndc.nato.int/future-of-conflicts-a-vision-of-what-is-to-come>.

¹¹ NATO Science and Technology Organization. (2025). *Cognitive warfare: NATO Chief Scientist research report* (Chief Scientist Research Report No. STO-OCS-001). <https://www.sto.nato.int/wp-content/uploads/chief-scientist-report-cognitive-warfare-final.pdf>

These discussions indicate that young people are prepared to confront current challenges and endure short-term difficulties when a compelling collective goal is clearly articulated and when pathways toward that goal are transparent and attainable. In this sense, socio-economic security functions not only as a material condition but also as a motivational anchor that sustains civic commitment, trust, and readiness for collective action. Only by expanding the security thinking of younger generations beyond military preparedness to **include agency, imagination, and shared ownership of the future** can Baltic societies sustain long-term resilience and support proactive resistance in an era of uncertainty.



CONCLUSIONS AND WAY FORWARD

If generalised, resilience can be understood as a set of three interlinked capacities, all of which are fundamentally connected to foresight¹²:

- ❖ **Coping capacity** – foresight supports sense-making during crises by helping individuals and communities navigate uncertainty, ambiguity, and emotional stress.
- ❖ **Adaptive and transformative capacity** – foresight enables social systems not only to adapt after shocks, but also to transform by imagining and preparing for futures worth striving for.
- ❖ **Participatory capacity** – foresight processes mobilise a wider diversity of actors, perspectives, and lived experiences, strengthening legitimacy and collective problem-solving in times of crisis.

Across Baltic generations with different experiences and aspirations, a key challenge lies in aligning how meaning is constructed—between frameworks that emphasise attitudes, mindsets, and behaviours, and those that focus on expectations, motivations, and values. A critical knowledge gap remains: **what are the implications for inclusivity, well-being, and resilience when future needs are interpreted through these differing conceptual lenses?** Bridging this gap is essential for designing policies and interventions that genuinely reflect diverse societal realities and support sustainable resilience.

Findings from the Baltic youth foresight workshops and cross-sectoral expert roundtables with national stakeholders indicate that **resilience alone is insufficient**. Future-oriented training frameworks must also cultivate **willingness, readiness, and the ability to resist**. Resistance, in this context, extends beyond physical or institutional capacities to include **psychological dimensions**. Mental health, cognitive strength, and emotional stability therefore emerge as **core components of societal resistance** in an era marked by prolonged uncertainty, AI-driven disinformation, and

¹² Lorenz, D. F. (2013). The diversity of resilience: Contributions from a social science perspective. *Natural Hazards*, 67(1), 7–24. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11069-010-9654-y>

other hybrid threats. Moreover, the concept of resistance is not at odds with that of resilience; rather, it is a complementary aspect of it. It denotes the capacity to actively oppose, defend, and counter harmful trajectories. Resistance refers not to confrontation or militarisation, but to the civic, cognitive, and psychological capacity to actively defend democratic agency, shared meanings, and future ownership. Therefore, resistance can be regarded as a **normative activation layer of resilience**, rather than a competing paradigm. Moreover, applied resilience literacy—including everyday preparedness competencies, proactive resistance and decision-making under uncertainty—must become a core civic capability supporting democratic agency and societal endurance.

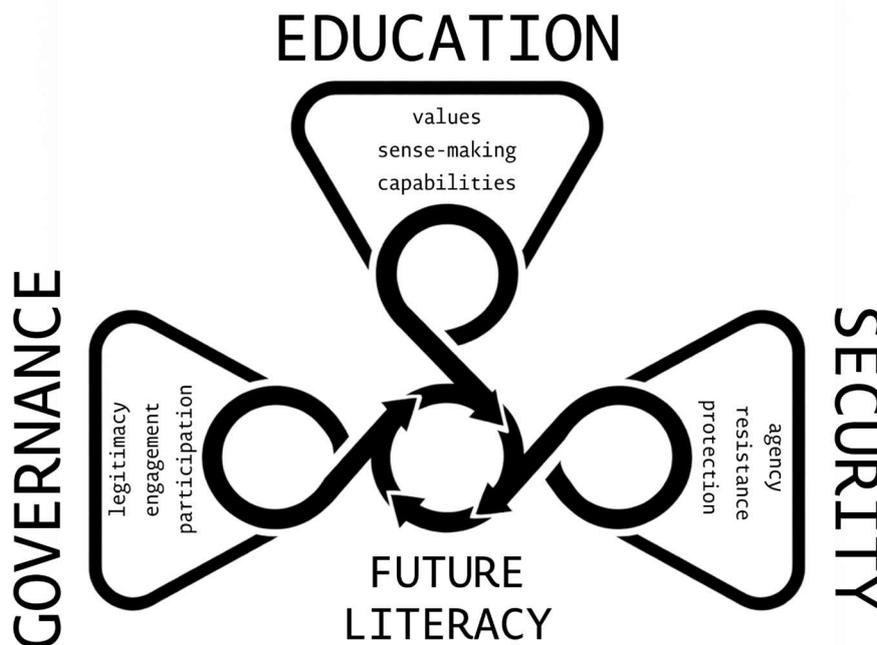


Figure 1. The interplay of key domains and functions. Governance concerns legitimacy, civic engagement, and meaningful participation. Education builds capabilities, transgenerational values, and collective sense-making. Security encompasses agency, resistance, and the protection of future trajectories. Future literacy connects these domains by enabling societies to anticipate, interpret, and act upon uncertainty. The figure illustrates not linear relationships, but interacting tensions that require continuous balancing through future-literate governance.

When war ends, long-term recovery will extend far beyond material reconstruction as it will require repairing and reconnecting the social fabric, rethinking national and transnational memory, and critically engaging with conflict and commemorative cultures. In this context, **future thinking and transformative memory** play a decisive role in enabling societies to process collective trauma while orienting themselves toward constructive, shared futures. Preparing different generations in the Baltic states for this task is essential to sustaining resilience and social cohesion.

A consistently observed insight is that **a positive outlook on the future correlates strongly with a sense of influence and agency**. The question therefore becomes: how can imagination, dreaming, and visioning be activated to engage diverse societal groups and co-produce inspiring orientations for the future of the Baltics? The answer lies in **collective storythinking**—shared processes of meaning-making that connect socio-economic sustainability with democratic participation. An unprecedented civic mobilisation of imagination—through participatory visioning, speculative design practices, and distributed future labs—has the potential to reshape how societies define what is possible. As future literacy becomes a mainstream civic skill, it can fundamentally alter politics, planning, and public expectations.

As highlighted in The Quiet Futures Report 2025 for the Nordic-Baltic region, futures are not only planned or engineered; they are lived into through everyday decisions, shared rituals, and the stories societies tell themselves about what matters.¹³ Future literacy therefore operates not only as an analytical skillset, but also as a cultural and experiential practice. Through aesthetic agency—manifested in **storytelling, collective visioning, participatory design, and symbolic action**—young people move from passive recipients of change to co-authors of shared futures. Such practices help translate complex transformations in governance, education, and security into lived experiences.

Young generations in the Baltic states recognise that the region continues to navigate the complex task of integrating diverse populations while preserving its cultural anchors. They acknowledge that plurality does not emerge automatically but requires

¹³ Paju, K. (2025). *The Quiet Futures Report*, Futures Journal. https://drive.google.com/file/d/1lsx6SAUhziCLG7_8dCGSp5TG6-eFXQIV/view

deliberate effort: **inclusive design, multilingualism, and cultural humility** are essential prerequisites for resilient and future-ready societies. These dynamics will increasingly shape patterns of intergenerational living, care, and solidarity, influencing how social cohesion and collective responsibility are sustained over time.

When reflecting on the future, Baltic youth consistently call for **higher-quality, responsible leadership** across national and local politics, the economy, social affairs, education, and cultural development. They urge a shift away from constant reactive 'firefighting' toward open-minded leadership capable of anticipating emerging challenges through strategic foresight, compelling visions, empathetic guidance, and value-based decision-making. At the systemic level, **ethical infrastructure** emerges as a foundational condition for trust-based collaboration and societal coherence. At the same time, youth participation is evolving from consultation toward **co-creation**, and it proves effective only when young people perceive decision-making processes as fair, meaningful, and genuinely consequential.

Baltic youth consistently emphasise that democratic resilience is strengthened not only through institutions, but through people's capacity to imagine, understand, and shape their future together. By engaging young participants in co-creation and collective imagination, the stakeholders can translate abstract future scenarios into shared and tangible visions. This process produces measurable psychological and social effects, **fostering hope, agency, and a sense of ownership** while countering fatigue, uncertainty, and feelings of powerlessness.

If the divergence between young people's expectations of transparent, inclusive, and future-oriented governance and the realities of institutional practice remains unaddressed, there is a **tangible risk of societal atomisation, civic avoidance, and political alienation**. Persistent experiences of symbolic participation, short-term decision-making, and limited responsiveness can erode trust over time, particularly among younger generations who otherwise express strong normative commitment to democracy. In such contexts, disengagement does not necessarily manifest as overt opposition, but rather as withdrawal, reduced participation, and declining willingness to invest in collective futures—dynamics that weaken democratic resilience and increase vulnerability to polarising or malign narratives.

A further core contribution lies in strengthening contextual understanding of future possibilities in the Baltics. The key task for resilience stakeholders in the Baltics is to translate complex systemic transformations—such as labour market change, energy transition, demographic diversity, and security dynamics—into relatable and meaningful experiences rooted in everyday life and local realities. By making these transformations more intelligible and actionable, young generations develop a **clearer awareness of both opportunities and constraints** shaping the region's future.

When designing policy interventions aimed at building resistant futures, decision-makers need to recognise that **trust operates simultaneously at normative (values-based) and functional (institutional and systemic) levels**. Acknowledging this duality is essential for balancing inclusiveness and social cohesion, particularly when navigating the trade-offs between security measures and the protection of democratic freedoms and rights.

Strategic goals for 2040 should therefore recognise that meaningful change unfolds across multiple, interconnected levels. At the community level, residents—especially young people—can transition from passive observers of transformation to active contributors, reinforcing **trust, social cohesion, and local problem-solving capacity**. At the municipal and regional levels, cross-sectoral cooperation among education, economy, culture, and security actors can become more coherent and aligned around shared long-term priorities. At the national and Baltic Sea regional level, regions such as Latgale, Ida-Viru, Klaipeda or Visaginas can demonstrate that resilience is built not only through infrastructure and regulation, but through agency, inclusion, and civic leadership. Resilience strategies should explicitly address local identity dynamics by investing in inclusive narratives that are aligned with democratic futures rather than grievance-based framings.

Local identities constitute an important but ambivalent layer of belonging within Baltic societies. Unlike national or civic identities, they are grounded primarily in everyday life-worlds, local routines, shared experiences, and practical knowledge of 'how life works here'. They are shaped by proximity, familiarity, and collective memory of place rather than by long historical continuity or formal political obligations. Precisely because of this, local identity can strengthen social cohesion at the community level and provide a **meaningful platform of belonging, particularly**

for young people navigating uncertainty. At the same time, local identity possesses what Frederik Barth described as ‘soft boundaries’: it can easily expand or contract and does not inherently entail political loyalty or responsibility toward the state. When trust in national institutions declines, local identity becomes particularly susceptible to political instrumentalisation.¹⁴ Narratives structured around perceived local injustices—such as centre–periphery divides, unequal investment, or donor–recipient framings—can be mobilised to construct an oppositional ‘local we’ positioned against the state. In such contexts, local identity does not require a shared political future; a shared sense of present grievance may suffice. During periods of crisis, this dynamic can temporarily displace national identity and weaken societal coherence. Taken together, these tensions—between trust and vigilance, protection and agency, skills and meaning, local belonging and national coherence—**define the transitional condition of Baltic societies rather than their failure.**

Importantly, local identity itself is neither negative nor expendable. When depoliticised and embedded within a broader civic and national framework, it enriches collective identity rather than undermines it. For resistant futures, the policy challenge is therefore not to suppress local identities, but to integrate them constructively into multi-layered identity architectures that reinforce trust, legitimacy, and democratic participation. Properly cultivated, local identity can function as a stabilising layer of belonging that complements national, Baltic and European identities rather than competing with them, thereby contributing to cognitive resilience against malign narratives and identity-based manipulation.

Ultimately, sustained emotional engagement of young people with desired futures contributes to a measurable increase in **democratic resilience and proactive resistance to malign influence.** These capacities are reflected in higher levels of participation, future confidence, and cross-group understanding. By combining participatory communication, social inclusion, and future literacy, this approach supports the emergence of a more resilient, engaged, and hopeful Baltic society—one capable not only of adapting to change, but of shaping it collectively.

¹⁴ Barth, F. (1969). *Ethnic groups and boundaries: The social organization of culture difference*. Little, Brown & Co.



WHAT MUST BE IN PLACE IN THE BALTICS BY 2040?

- ❖ **Institutionalised future literacy and participatory foresight.** Future literacy must be embedded in governance, education, and civic life through permanent participatory foresight mechanisms. These mechanisms should enable shared sense-making about global change, risks, and opportunities, and be anchored in strong, complementary civic and state-oriented identities that reinforce democratic legitimacy.
- ❖ **Human-centric education systems that cultivate agency.** Education systems must prioritise human agency alongside innovation, equipping learners with future-relevant skills—including AI-readiness, critical thinking, ethical judgment, and decision-making under uncertainty. Education should prepare young people not only to adapt to change, but to shape it responsibly in democratic, economic, and social domains.
- ❖ **An expanded cognitive security paradigm.** Culture of resistance and security thinking must extend beyond military and infrastructural dimensions to include cognitive superiority and societal resilience. Safeguarding collective, civic-oriented ownership of the future requires protecting societies from manipulative narratives, erosion of agency, and resignation, while strengthening trust, meaning-making, and democratic confidence.

By 2040, resilient and resistant Baltic societies will be defined not only by robust institutions or physical infrastructure, but by their collective capacity to anticipate change, sustain democratic agency, and protect shared futures through inclusive, future-literate governance.



ISBN 978-9908-9709-5-0 (PDF)

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