

BALTIC SEA REGION YOUTH FORUM

Youth Advocacy Working Group

Policy Paper on Youth Security and Stability in the Baltic Sea Region

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Abstract

This policy paper presents the findings and recommendations of the Baltic Sea Region Youth Forum (BSRYF) Youth Advocacy Working Group for the 2025/2026 term. Drawing on an original survey of 523 young people across the Baltic Sea Region (BSR), the paper identifies the principal concerns, democratic participation barriers, and security perceptions of youth aged 15 to 22. Cost of living, mental health, and low civic participation emerge as the most consistent challenges across all participating countries. The paper puts forward six policy recommendations for decision-makers within the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS), with the aim of strengthening youth resilience, democratic engagement, and regional cooperation.

Introduction

Young people across the Baltic Sea Region are coming of age in a period of considerable instability. Economic volatility, geopolitical insecurity, rapid technological change, and growing social polarisation are shaping how youth perceive their futures and their trust in institutions. Issues such as rising living costs, mental health pressures, disinformation, and regional security dynamics are daily realities for this generation.

The BSRYF Youth Advocacy Working Group was established to give structured expression to these realities and to translate youth perspectives into concrete policy input. During the 2025/2026 term, the Working Group has undertaken two principal activities: the design and deployment of a region-wide youth survey, and the organisation of youth engagement events in Norway, Lithuania, and Poland, with some events aiming to draw excess of 150 participants. This paper consolidates that work into a set of evidence-informed recommendations addressed to the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of the 10 CBSS Member States and to the European Union.

The BSRYF Youth Survey 2025/2026 was conducted to better understand the priorities, concerns, and participation barriers of young people across the Baltic Sea Region. This is part of a wider project across all Baltic Sea Region Youth Working Groups, this one combining youth advocacy with security, considering the increasing tension in the region and the need to include youth in all decision-making areas.

This report translates found patterns into targeted policy recommendations aimed at strengthening youth resilience, democratic engagement, and regional cooperation across the Baltic Sea Region.

Methodology

The BSRYF Youth Survey 2025/2026 was designed to capture the priorities, concerns, and civic participation barriers of young people across the Baltic Sea Region. The survey was made available in the majority of national languages of all CBSS Member States as well as in English, in order to maximise accessibility and ensure meaningful regional representation.

The survey combined demographic questions with issue-based ratings, allowing for both quantitative trend analysis and qualitative insight into specific concerns. Respondents rated issues on a five-point scale from 1 (not a problem) to 5 (severe concern), and indicated preferences across areas including education, political focus, and security.

In total, 523 responses were collected from participants residing in CBSS countries. The sample was predominantly composed of individuals aged 15 to 18, with the majority enrolled in secondary education. Responses were received in Finnish (99), Latvian (85), Lithuanian (82), English (113), Estonian (60), Swedish (46), Norwegian (34), Polish (4), and German (1), with no responses received from Iceland or Denmark.

The survey reflects a voluntary, self-selected sample and representation across countries was uneven. These limitations mean that results cannot be treated as statistically representative of national youth populations. Nevertheless, the dataset provides a meaningful directional overview of youth perspectives across the region and reveals patterns that are consistent enough to inform policy development.

Regional Findings

Despite variation across countries, several concerns emerged with notable consistency across the region.

Cross-Regional Priorities

The following issues were identified as primary concerns (rated Level 4 or 5) by a majority of respondents regardless of country:

- Cost of living and inflation - the single most widespread Level 5 concern across almost all participating countries
- Job opportunities and career development
- Mental health - consistently rated as a serious concern and understood as interconnected with economic and security pressures
- Global conflicts and regional security
- Climate change - particularly prominent among Finnish and Swedish respondents
- Low youth participation in civic life - with 70 to 85 percent of respondents in most countries reporting non-membership in any youth organisation

Civic Participation

Across the region, large shares of respondents report feeling only sometimes heard (or rarely heard) in decision-making processes. Barriers to participation are consistent: lack of political knowledge, absence of meaningful encouragement, and the perception that youth voices do not count. These findings point to structural deficits in how youth participation is facilitated, rather than a lack of interest per se.

Security Perceptions

Most respondents feel broadly safe in their current living environments, though a notable minority, particularly in Latvia and Lithuania, reported feeling somewhat or very unsafe. When asked what changes would make them feel more secure, economic opportunity, crisis readiness information, civil defence education, mental health support, and inclusive communities ranked highest. The data suggest that security, for young people in this region, is understood in holistic terms: physical, economic, and psychological dimensions are intertwined.

Policy Recommendations

The following six recommendations are directed at decision-makers within the CBSS. They are grounded in the survey data and the Working Group's engagement activities across the region. Each recommendation identifies the underlying rationale, specific actions, and, where applicable, the countries where urgency is greatest.

1. Address Youth Economic Insecurity as a Regional Priority

Rationale: Cost of living is the most widespread Level 5 concern across the survey, cited by respondents in all participating countries. Economic anxiety was closely linked to perceptions of insecurity and reduced civic participation.

- Strengthen financial literacy and career development education through accessible modules at the secondary level and a regional mentorship and opportunities network.
- Expand student housing support and youth employment guarantees; encourage the private sector to introduce trainee/junior programmes.
- Support youth entrepreneurship region-wide
- Introduce tax incentives for companies hiring first-time young employees.

Most urgent need to act: *Latvia, Lithuania, Sweden, Estonia*

2. Build a Regional Youth Mental Health Strategy

Rationale: Mental health was consistently rated at Level 4 or 5 across the region and is increasingly understood by respondents as interconnected with economic insecurity, security concerns, and civic disengagement.

- Coordinate cross-border approaches to alleviate mental health issues.
- Expand school-based psychological services and encourage youth to seek such help.
- Invest in digital mental health tools designed for regional interoperability.
- Develop peer-support and community resilience programmes.
- Integrate mental health into civil defense and crisis preparedness education.
- Incorporate mental health support into all other youth-focused policy areas.

Most urgent need to act: *Norway, Lithuania, Sweden, Finland*

3. Increase Youth Democratic Participation and Institutional Trust

Rationale: Between 70 and 85 percent of respondents are not members of youth organisations. Large shares feel only sometimes or rarely heard. Principal barriers include fear of criticism, limited political knowledge, and the sense that participation has no meaningful impact.

- Introduce Youth Policy Statements as additional advisory information for legislation.
- Simplify participation channels and reduce procedural barriers to youth engagement.
- Fund micro-grants for youth-led local initiatives.

Most urgent need to act: Latvia and Lithuania (highest rates of feeling unheard)

4. Counter Disinformation and Strengthen Media Literacy

Rationale: Disinformation was rated a serious or severe concern across most participating countries. Rapid AI development was also identified as a significant concern, particularly in Latvia and Poland.

- Integrate media literacy as a core component of school curricula across the region.
- Promote AI literacy, including the identification and evaluation of AI-generated content.
- Strengthen cooperation with public broadcasters on youth-oriented content.

5. Improve Youth Security and Crisis Preparedness

Rationale: Security concerns differ in character across the region but are consistently present. Respondents understand security in different terms, ranging from physical safety to economic stability, and psychological well-being. Youth from rural areas are often less connected to available resources.

- Expand access to voluntary civil preparedness training.
- Develop accessible and widely disseminated crisis communication platforms.
- Strengthen local community integration programmes and actively engage youth from rural areas.
- Attempt to embed mental health support in security planning.
- Introduce lighter programs for basic skills and survival that are not strictly military related.

Most urgent need to act: Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia

6. Pursue Climate and Sustainability Leadership with Youth at the Centre

Rationale: Climate change is a Level 5 concern for many Finnish and Swedish respondents and a significant political priority for youth across the region. Young people want active, not symbolic, roles in climate governance.

- Integrate youth into BSR climate governance forums in a way that is active instead of just symbolic.
- Fund youth-led green innovation projects at the regional level.
- Provide climate education that is explicitly linked to career pathways.
- Connect climate action with economic opportunity.

Most urgent need to act: Finland and Sweden (strongest demand)

Conclusion

The BSRYF Youth Survey 2025/2026 paints a picture of a generation that is economically anxious, geopolitically aware, and increasingly disconnected from the institutions that govern their lives. Youth across the Baltic Sea Region want practical support, not symbolic engagement, and they want to be heard in decision-making, and do not desire to be present primarily to observe.

Security concerns are rising, but cannot be addressed through conventional frameworks alone: for young people, security encompasses, mental health, economic stability, and the physical security of national borders. At the same time, the structural mechanisms for youth participation require improvement in CBSS Member States, and if civic disengagement is left unaddressed, it risks deepening over time.

The Working Group urges the CBSS to treat these findings not as a report on a distant constituency, but as a signal from citizens who will define the region's future. The Baltic Sea Region has the capacity and the regional architecture to become the most youth-inclusive macro-region in Europe. The recommendations in this paper offer a practical pathway towards that goal.

Left unaddressed, the trends identified in this paper risk producing declining democratic trust, increased polarisation, continued brain drain from smaller regions, and a generation that feels structurally excluded from economic and civic life.

Structural Recommendations for Implementation

Alongside the six thematic recommendations above, the Working Group proposes the following institutional measures to support ongoing monitoring and coordination:

- Track a standardised set of youth indicators annually across CBSS Member States to enable consistent comparison and progress assessment.
- Provide structured support for cross-border youth projects for youth to involve themselves in solving the mentioned issues.

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This paper was produced by the Youth Advocacy Working Group of the Baltic Sea Region Youth Forum (BSRYF) during the 2025/2026 term. The survey data on which it is based was collected from 523 voluntary respondents across the Baltic Sea Region. Survey results are directional and should be interpreted alongside other sources of evidence on youth conditions in the region.