Dr Ilze Vilka, Populist Encounters Research Group, Social Sciences Research Centre, Riga Stradins University, Populism, Economic Insecurity, and the Will to Resist: Strategic Fragility in the Baltic States.

In the context of a fragmenting global order, the resilience of small democracies increasingly depends not only on material capabilities but on the population's will to resist. This paper examines how populist narratives and rising economic insecurity undermine the societal cohesion, trust, and legitimacy required to sustain national defence efforts with a focus on geopolitically exposed Baltic states. Using a comparative approach, the study integrates defence economics indicators (GDP growth, tax revenue, inequality, and trust in institutions) with political data on populist activity and foreign influence. It argues that populism, often fueled by socioeconomic grievances and amplified by Russian disinformation, erodes the core conditions that enable societies to mobilize and maintain resistance: shared identity, institutional trust, and confidence in the future. Latvia, with the highest inequality and lowest institutional trust, emerges as the most vulnerable. Lithuania faces growing populist pressure under inflationary stress. Estonia demonstrates relative resilience, though not without risk among its Russian-speaking minority.

This paper complements Brigadier General Andreas Stupka's ISMS 2024 call for strengthening cognitive resistance by underscoring the economic foundations required to support it. While cognitive warfare targets psychological readiness, this study argues that such readiness cannot emerge without fiscal legitimacy, inclusive governance, and institutional trust. The paper contributes to the growing discourse on the "will to resist" by proposing a framework that links defence economics to societal resilience, offering policy recommendations for strengthening societal defence through economic coherence, inclusive communication, and early-warning indicators of fragmentation. As hybrid threats blur the line between morale and material, understanding the economic conditions that shape the will to resist becomes essential for both strategic planning and democratic survival.