

Defence, Resilience, and Emigration: A Model Based on the Latvian Example

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Defence, Resilience, and Emigration: A Model Based on the Latvian Example

Small states exposed to acute security pressure often face a dual challenge: external threats on the one hand, and internal demographic decline on the other. Latvia's population decline has often been analysed through socio-economic and migration-theory frameworks, with particular attention paid to labour-market disparities, wage differentials and the limits of social security provision. [1]

According to the Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, by the beginning of 2025 the country's population stood at approximately 1.857 million. In 2024, Latvia's population declined by 18.4 thousand people, of which 13.8 thousand was due to negative natural change, while 4.6 thousand was due to negative net migration. According to provisional data, the population stood at about 1.823 million on 1 January 2026, and natural decrease in 2025 amounted to 14.0 thousand. The Bureau links part of the decline in the first half of 2025 to the expiry of long-term visas and residence permits issued to Ukrainian civilians, which is not emigration in the sense examined here. [2] Natural decrease is thus the larger component of population decline, and the model developed in this article addresses the smaller one. These figures nevertheless show that emigration remains a continuing demographic and social challenge. It also has implications for the state's long-term human-capital base and, indirectly, for societal resilience.

At the same time, the socio-economic picture is not one of simple decline. Latvia's unemployment rate stood at 6.9 per cent in 2024, including in the fourth quarter of the year, while average monthly gross wages rose by 9.7 per cent compared with 2023. [3] Yet population decline and negative net migration persisted. This does not mean that economic factors are unimportant; rather, it suggests that economic explanations alone may be insufficient. Existing research on Latvian emigration has also pointed to non-economic factors, including weak future perspectives, social insecurity and uncertainty about life prospects in Latvia. [4]

This raises a broader question: can the problem also be approached through the lens of security confidence, perceived agency and the psychological need for predictability? If demographic decline is not only an economic phenomenon, but also partly linked to uncertainty, insecurity and weakened attachment to place, then comprehensive defence may have broader social significance. Latvia's comprehensive defence system can therefore be examined not only as a military response to external threats, but also as an institutional architecture that may strengthen societal resilience, civic participation and territorial attachment.

In this article, I develop a causal-theoretical model linking comprehensive defence, security confidence, place attachment and out-migration intention in small states exposed to acute security pressure. The central argument is that participatory defence institutions do more than improve military preparedness: they can also foster security confidence and civic agency by transforming citizens from passive recipients of protection into active participants in resilience-building. The argument draws on the concept of ontological security as developed in International Relations. [5]

This confidence and sense of agency create an explanatory chain through which the social-psychological foundations of out-migration intention can be better understood. In particular, participation in defence and civil preparedness may reduce feelings of helplessness, uncertainty and loss of control over the future of one's own community. In this sense, demography and emigration serve here as a test case for assessing the broader societal effects of comprehensive defence.

To explain the internal logic of this hypothesis, the article applies an interdisciplinary conceptual framework drawing on international relations theory, sociology, psychology and migration studies. This framework makes it possible to examine comprehensive defence as an institutional environment that may generate societal trust, civic agency and territorial connectedness. Its point of departure is the literature on anxiety and ontological security in world politics. [6]

Ontological Security and Predictability

In traditional security studies and neorealist approaches, security is usually associated with the physical survival of the state, the preservation of territorial integrity and the deterrence of external military threats. The concept of ontological security, introduced by R. D. Laing, developed in social theory by Anthony Giddens and later incorporated into International Relations scholarship, shifts the analytical focus towards continuity, identity, predictability and the stability of social existence. Jennifer Mitzen's work is particularly important in this regard, as it shows that actors seek not only physical security, but also stable routines and a coherent sense of self. [7] Whereas Mitzen applies the concept to states, this article uses it at the level of individuals and local communities, closer to Giddens's original formulation.

Ontological insecurity emerges when disruptive events sever the routines and biographical continuity through which individuals sustain a stable sense of self. External shocks, such as military aggression, regional instability or the collapse of established security expectations, can produce anxiety, helplessness and a perceived loss of control over the future. In the Latvian case, this perspective is relevant because studies of emigration have shown that migration decisions cannot be explained by economic variables alone. Mihails Hazans' work on Latvian emigration identifies changing social conditions, future expectations and "lost perspectives" as important factors in crisis-driven emigration dynamics. [8]

From this perspective, comprehensive defence can also be understood as a mechanism for restoring predictability and perceived agency. Academic literature on ontological security emphasises the importance of stable practices, institutionalised behaviour and routines in sustaining a sense of continuity and control. [9] In Latvia, national defence education, civil preparedness measures and regular defence-related training can be interpreted as state-organised practices that transform the abstract fear of armed conflict into concrete, learnable and practical civic skills.

This interpretation is consistent with Latvia's official approach to Comprehensive State Defence. The Latvian Ministry of Defence describes comprehensive defence as a framework aimed at strengthening cooperation among state institutions, developing public-private partnership mechanisms, and increasing the skills and capacities of society to protect itself, families and Latvia in a crisis. [10] National Defence Training, introduced as a compulsory element of the secondary education curriculum from 1 September 2024, similarly aims to promote civic awareness and patriotism, provide basic military skills and develop citizens capable of acting in a crisis. [11] In this sense, Latvia's comprehensive defence architecture can be considered as both a military preparedness framework and an institutional environment for strengthening societal resilience.

Social Capital, Perceived Agency and Resilience

Social capital theory emphasises the importance of community trust, networks of mutual assistance and horizontal reciprocity in sustaining social stability. In crisis situations, dense community ties and trust-based networks are widely recognised as important contributors to survival, recovery and community resilience. Rather than relying only on formal institutions or

physical infrastructure, resilient communities are also shaped by the quality of social relationships, mutual support and collective action. [12]

A related mechanism concerns perceived agency: whether individuals feel able to influence their own circumstances, or instead feel powerless against them, shapes how they respond to crisis. Migration theory increasingly treats migration not only as a response to structural pressures, but also as a function of aspirations, capabilities and perceived opportunities. [13] When individuals see themselves as powerless in the face of systemic crisis or external threat, leaving may appear to be a way of restoring security, predictability and personal control.

Conversely, when citizens take part in the territorial and municipal structures of comprehensive defence, for example through the National Guard (Zemessardze) or local civil preparedness initiatives, they acquire technical and tactical skills and become embedded in networks of trust, shared responsibility and practical cooperation. This institutional integration can reduce isolation and strengthen perceived agency, thereby creating a social and psychological barrier against the idea of escaping crisis through emigration.

Place Attachment and Out-Migration Intention

The third foundational concept is place attachment. It refers to the emotional, cognitive and behavioural bond that individuals or groups develop with a particular place, including a settlement, community, region or wider national territory. Place attachment is not only an emotional relationship with physical space; it also includes familiarity, belonging, social ties and the perceived meaning of that place in one's life. [14]

Migration research suggests that place attachment can operate as one of the social-psychological anchors that restrain out-migration intention, although the effect may depend on the strength of social networks. The stronger and more multi-layered an individual's emotional, social and practical connection to a particular locality or community, the less likely that person is to perceive departure as the first or most natural response to crisis. Conversely, when attachment to place weakens, mobility and emigration become easier to imagine as a route to security, predictability and control. In a study of 701 secondary-school students in Ethiopia, for example, the negative association between place attachment and the intention to migrate was significant only among respondents with strong social networks. [15]

Under conditions of external threat, place attachment may weaken if individuals feel unable to influence or protect the environment in which they live. Conversely, when the state decentralises elements of defence and enables citizens to participate in the preparedness of their own community, this participation can strengthen attachment to place. The citizen relates to territory as a concrete community for whose security he or she bears a share of responsibility. In this sense, participatory defence can reinforce the link between place, responsibility and resilience.

Conceptual Model: From Defence Participation to Retention Motivation

The synthesis of the three concepts discussed above makes it possible to formulate the central causal model of this article. The model rests on the claim that, in addition to enhancing the military preparedness of the state, participatory defence institutions generate security confidence, a sense of individual agency and attachment to place. Through this chain, such institutions can reduce the feelings of helplessness and uncertainty that often underpin out-migration intention. The model combines insights from the literature on ontological security, social capital and place attachment. [16]

The model can be presented as follows:

Participatory defence institutions → security confidence and sense of individual agency → place attachment → weakening of out-migration intention.

For this model to serve as a framework for empirical testing, its main components must be specified.

Independent variable: the system of comprehensive and participatory defence institutions established by the state, together with the degree of citizen involvement in them. In the Latvian case, this includes, in particular, voluntary membership in Zemessardze, the integration and coverage of National Defence Training in schools, and the accessibility of 72-hour civil preparedness guidance. [17]

Mediating variables:

Security confidence: the perceived capacity of the state and the community to withstand a crisis.

Perceived civic agency: the individual's belief that he or she can play an active role in protecting themselves, their family and, more broadly, the resilience of the state.

Place attachment: the emotional and cognitive connection to one's own community, reinforced through shared defence-related training, preparedness practices and the expansion of local social networks.

Dependent variable: out-migration intention, as well as its possible manifestation in local communities through actual emigration rates or, conversely, changes in local retention.

Scope conditions of the mechanism: the proposed model is most applicable to small states facing acute and clearly identifiable external security threats, while also possessing sufficient institutional capacity and democratic legitimacy to organise defence on public, participatory and decentralised foundations. The mechanism becomes more stable when civil preparedness is institutionalised as a predictable and regular practice, rather than emerging only as a panic-driven response during crisis.

Failure conditions of the mechanism: the mechanism may fail to function, or may even produce an opposite effect, if defence participation degenerates into non-democratic coercion. It may also fail where socio-economic conditions are so severe that no security-based confidence-building mechanism can compensate for the absence of basic material security.

Research Hypotheses

On the basis of the causal chain outlined above, the article advances the following empirically testable hypotheses:

H1: In communities where participation in defence-related institutions, such as Zemessardze, is denser and more active, subjective security confidence is likely to be higher.

H2: Higher levels of subjective security confidence and perceived civic agency are positively associated with stronger place attachment.

H3: Stronger place attachment is negatively associated with out-migration intention.

H4: This relationship is likely to become more visible in small states exposed to acute external security pressure and geopolitical uncertainty, such as Latvia. Testing this hypothesis requires a cross-national comparison with states facing lower external pressure.

Historical Background: Local Self-Defence as an Institution of Social Capital

A fuller understanding of Latvia's defence architecture, societal participation and citizen-state trust requires attention to historical memory and institutional continuity. In Latvia, territorial

defence has historically also functioned as a means of strengthening community ties, civic identity and local belonging.

The Aizsargi organisation was established in March 1919 during the Latvian War of Independence. It was initially created as a self-defence and auxiliary security structure, particularly in rural areas, with the purpose of maintaining order and protecting local communities. Its organisation followed a territorial logic, linking local security functions to specific parishes, districts and communities. [18]

For the purposes of this article, the most relevant feature of Aizsargi is its wider socio-cultural and community-building role. As the largest mass organisation outside the cities, it organised sports and cultural life in the countryside, reinforcing the organisation's place in local community life. [18] The same organisation later became one of the pillars of Kārlis Ulmanis's authoritarian regime, and in 1936 Ulmanis was proclaimed its supreme leader. [18] This part of its history corresponds to the failure condition identified above, in which defence participation is subordinated to non-democratic rule.

This historical experience matters for the conceptual model developed here because it shows that, in interwar Latvia, local defence, public duty and community life were closely intertwined. The practice of territorial self-defence was also linked to social capital, mutual assistance and attachment to place. Following the restoration of independence in 1991, this territorial and participatory logic reappeared in a new institutional form, most visibly through the establishment of Zemessardze. [19]

Comprehensive State Defence Institutions as Generators of Trust and Antidotes to Helplessness

Latvia's contemporary Comprehensive State Defence approach rests on a sober recognition: in the event of a major crisis or war, public authorities may not be able to ensure the protection of every citizen in the first hours, or even days, of the crisis. For this reason, comprehensive defence is not limited to the armed forces. It seeks to strengthen cooperation among state institutions, develop public-private cooperation, and increase the skills and capacities of society to protect itself, families and Latvia in a crisis. [20]

Within the framework of this article, Latvia's comprehensive defence system can be examined through four key institutional mechanisms. The first three correspond to the independent variable of the causal model developed above; the fourth concerns the regulatory framework within which defence-related skills are acquired. Beyond their contribution to military preparedness, they reshape the relationship between the citizen, the community and the state.

Zemessardze as an Institutional Link between Local Belonging and National Defence

Zemessardze, Latvia's National Guard, is described as the largest and most territorially widespread structure of the National Armed Forces. [21] In the proposed model, Zemessardze is particularly important because it brings together territorial defence, voluntary participation, state trust in citizens, and the practical task of protecting local communities.

By 2024, the number of national guardsmen was approaching 10,000, with hundreds of new recruits joining during the year. [22] These members are citizens who, in their everyday lives, remain embedded in civilian professions and local communities, while regular training enables them to perform legally defined defence tasks as part of Latvia's territorial defence system. This dual civilian-defence role is central to the social meaning of Zemessardze: the citizen is trained to defend the state through the community.

Zemessardze therefore institutionalises the link between local belonging and national defence. By assigning citizens a concrete and legitimate role in the defence of their own community, the state reduces the distance between public authority and individual responsibility. In theoretical terms, this is the point at which ontological anxiety can be transformed into planned, manageable and socially integrative action.

National Defence Training and Jaunsardze: Normalising Preparedness as Civic Behaviour

The second mechanism is the generational socialisation of preparedness through the national education system. Following earlier pilot implementation, National Defence Training became a compulsory part of the secondary education curriculum from 1 September 2024. It is taught in general secondary schools and vocational education institutions and is organised as eight lessons one day per month, except in September and January, over two consecutive school years, amounting to 112 lessons in total. Its core thematic areas include civic activism in the context of national security, crisis resilience and leadership, and national defence skills. [23]

National Defence Training also normalises preparedness as a form of civic behaviour. By learning how to act in crisis situations, students encounter security as a field of personal responsibility, cooperation and practical competence. [24] In this sense, defence education links civic awareness, preparedness and ontological security by reducing the distance between the fear of crisis and the ability to act in one.

Jaunsardze, Latvia's youth-oriented defence movement, reinforces this logic at an earlier stage of socialisation. It is described by the Jaunsardze Centre as the largest military-oriented movement for children and young people in Latvia, open to participants aged 10 to 21. [25] Together with National Defence Training, it contributes to the formation of a citizen who is gradually socialised into preparedness, responsibility and crisis competence.

72-Hour Preparedness and the Deconstruction of Dependency Expectations

One of the most practical manifestations of Latvia's comprehensive defence approach is the official guidance provided to the population through the brochure *What to Do in Case of a Crisis*. The 2024 version of the brochure explains what residents should do during the first 72 hours, or three days, of a crisis, until government agencies restore essential services and provide necessary assistance. [26] The guidance includes practical steps such as preparing an emergency bag, planning family action, obtaining reliable information, countering disinformation and supporting national defence in the event of war. [27]

For the theoretical model developed in this article, the significance of the 72-hour guidance lies in the way it redistributes responsibility. It asks individuals and families to prepare in advance, to understand their role in the first phase of a crisis and to contribute to wider societal resilience. In this sense, the doctrine of 72-hour preparedness weakens passive dependence on the state and replaces it with a model of distributed responsibility.

This is especially important in societies where crisis response has historically been associated with waiting for direction from the state. By openly acknowledging that assistance may not arrive immediately, and by equipping citizens with practical knowledge and a plan for self-organisation, the state changes the psychological structure of crisis preparedness. This does not eliminate fear or uncertainty, but it can transform them into more manageable forms of civic action.

Firearms Competence as Strictly Regulated Responsibility

When observed from the outside, the development of marksmanship and firearms-related competence in Latvia may be mistakenly confused with the uncontrolled militarisation of society. In the Latvian model, however, firearms competence is developed under state supervision.

Latvia's legal framework for weapons circulation and firearms permits is based on state control, registration and medical-psychological eligibility requirements. The Police procedure for granting weapons permits requires health checks to assess whether a person is fit to possess or carry weapons, including whether there are psychological disorders, substance-related problems, behavioural disturbances or other medical indications that would prevent safe use of a firearm. [28]

The state also invests significantly in defence infrastructure. The Sēlija Military Training Area is one of Latvia's major defence infrastructure projects, designed to provide a training environment for Latvian and Allied forces. [29]

For the purposes of this article, the permit regime and such infrastructure indicate that defence-related skills are developed within a state-regulated system.

Counter-arguments and Limitations

In order for the proposed theoretical model to be robust and defensible, it is necessary to address the likely criticisms and alternative explanations that may challenge it.

The Primacy of Economic Factors as the Root Cause of Emigration

The most substantial counter-argument is that demographic shifts are primarily driven by macroeconomic inequalities and disparities in living standards. In the Latvian case, this objection is valid, as income and regional inequalities remain significant. Official statistics show that regional differences in disposable income and poverty risk remain pronounced, with Latgale continuing to record the weakest socio-economic indicators among Latvia's regions. [30]

This observation, however, does not refute the model proposed in this article. The model complements economic explanations by drawing attention to the non-economic, psychological and security-related foundations of out-migration intention. Alongside economic causes, it is necessary to examine the role of trust in the future, predictability, security and the sense of agency within one's own environment. In this sense, comprehensive defence is viewed as an additional source of security confidence and social anchoring alongside economic policy.

The Issue of Voluntarism and Selection Bias

A second possible counter-argument concerns self-selection: defence initiatives such as Zemessardze attract citizens who already possess strong patriotic motivation, firm place attachment and a prior inclination to remain in the country. Under this interpretation, the institution does not actively shape or alter out-migration intentions, but mainly consolidates individuals who were already unlikely to emigrate.

This objection is partly valid, but it does not invalidate the proposed mechanism. First, compulsory National Defence Training goes beyond the limits of voluntary self-selection, since it reaches an entire age cohort regardless of students' prior ideological or political orientation. The State Defence Service, the compulsory military service reintroduced in 2023, also reaches beyond volunteers, but its effect may run in the opposite direction: for some young men, the prospect of conscription may itself become a reason to emigrate. [17] Second, 72-hour preparedness, civil defence and community self-organisation measures are not directed only at militarised or highly patriotic groups, but at the broader public. Consequently, the model should

not be assessed solely through voluntary defence structures. It should be evaluated within the wider framework of civic preparedness, where both voluntary and compulsory instruments shape citizens' relationship to security, responsibility and place.

A third possible counter-argument concerns the risk of societal militarisation: deep societal involvement in security and defence doctrines may be perceived by some groups as undesirable, particularly among citizens with pacifist convictions or minority communities, for whom hardline defence rhetoric could deepen alienation rather than build confidence. In such cases, participatory defence could repel rather than anchor.

This risk is real and should be treated as a potential failure condition of the model. Comprehensive defence generates positive social anchoring only when it rests on inclusive, horizontally organised participation; if it hardens into coercion or exclusionary rhetoric, it loses its capacity to build trust. The model's viability therefore depends on how inclusively defence participation is organised.

Geographical Proximity to Riga and the Suburbanisation Factor

Another plausible counter-argument concerns the impact of proximity to Riga. It may be argued that in certain municipalities, such as Ādaži, where a major NATO military base is located, positive migration trends may be driven not by security infrastructure, but by closeness to the capital. From this perspective, population growth may be explained by suburbanisation: the relocation of part of the middle class from Riga to adjacent municipalities while maintaining access to the capital's labour market and infrastructure. [31]

This objection raises a valid methodological challenge. It shows that the relationship between defence engagement and demographic dynamics cannot be assessed without controlling for confounding variables. In the empirical phase of the research, it will be necessary to include control variables such as distance from Riga, labour-market accessibility, housing prices, income levels, municipal investment and infrastructure development. Only through such an analysis will it be possible to distinguish the effect of the security factor from broader geographical and economic dynamics.

Methodological Framework: Empirical Testing and Operationalisation of Variables

To make the proposed causal model empirically testable, future research should combine quantitative and qualitative methods. This approach would make it possible to examine whether the density of participatory defence institutions and the level of citizen engagement in them are associated with changes in security confidence, place attachment and out-migration intention.

The model can be tested at the municipal level, using Latvia's administrative-territorial units as the primary level of analysis. Municipal-level comparison provides a suitable framework for identifying territorial variation. The analysis could combine cross-sectional comparison with time-series data in order to examine both differences between municipalities and changes over time. A stronger test is offered by the compulsory introduction of National Defence Training in 2024: comparing the migration intentions of cohorts who completed the course with those of cohorts who left secondary school before its introduction would reduce the problem of self-selection.

Operationalisation of variables

Independent variable: defence density. This variable could be measured through the ratio of active Zemessardze and Jaunsardze members per 1,000 inhabitants in a given municipality. Additional indicators could include the presence of military bases, training areas or defence-related infrastructure in or near the municipality. Other components of the independent variable

vary little between municipalities: National Defence Training is compulsory nationwide, the 72-hour guidance is addressed to the whole population, and Zemessardze, with about 10,000 members, involves roughly 0.5 per cent of the population. The presence of military bases, in turn, may coincide with suburbanisation, as in Ādaži.

Mediating variables: security confidence and place attachment. These variables could be measured through sociological surveys, including Likert-scale questions assessing residents' perceived ability to act in a crisis, trust in state institutions, trust in the local community and the strength of attachment to place.

Dependent variable: out-migration intention and local retention. This variable could be measured through municipal-level net migration data provided by the Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, together with individual-level survey data on migration intention. The Central Statistical Bureau provides data on net migration and long-term international migration by regions, state cities and municipalities, which can serve as a basis for territorial comparison. [32] Municipal net migration, however, also reflects immigration, internal moves such as relocation to the suburbs of Riga, and changes in the registration of Ukrainian refugees; it can therefore serve only as an indirect indicator, and out-migration intention itself has to be measured through individual-level surveys.

Control variables

To avoid confusing the effect of participatory defence institutions with broader socio-economic or geographical dynamics, future empirical research should control for several factors:

Average net income: to account for regional income disparities, especially between Riga and lower-income regions such as Latgale.

Unemployment rate: to account for labour-market pressures that directly affect economically driven migration.

Housing prices and real estate market conditions: to control for housing affordability, particularly for young families.

Distance from Riga: to measure the effect of suburbanisation and distinguish it from security-related factors.

Presence of educational institutions: to account for student-driven mobility.

Age structure and demographic base: to adjust for differences between ageing and younger communities.

Border proximity: to capture additional security anxieties in municipalities bordering Russia or Belarus.

Municipal investment and infrastructure development: to account for differences in local development capacity.

A research framework of this kind would allow future studies to examine not only whether a statistical relationship exists between defence participation and local retention, but also how such a relationship may be mediated by security confidence, perceived agency and attachment to place. It would therefore move the argument from a theoretical proposition towards an empirically testable research agenda.

Conclusion

The contemporary historical experience and institutional developments of the Republic of Latvia suggest that severe demographic crises and mass emigration cannot be fully mitigated or

understood if artificially decoupled from the context of state ontological security and deep-seated societal anxieties.

When citizens lack a fundamental sense of predictability regarding their future and perceive themselves as vulnerable to large-scale military-political turbulence, purely economic incentives, wage increases or generous social benefits may not be sufficient to stem migration driven by the search for security and psychological stability.

Latvia provides an opportunity to construct an experimental, practical model through which the societal impacts of defensive participation can be theorised and empirically tested. By drawing on the historical roots of local self-defence, Latvia has transformed this legacy into a modern framework of Comprehensive State Defence. The expansion of the territorial *Zemessardze*, the mandatory integration of National Defence Training into the secondary education curriculum, and the distributed responsibility of the 72-hour preparedness doctrine serve purposes beyond military efficiency. From the perspective of ontological security and socio-territorial anchoring, these institutions can convert societal anxieties into individual and collective civic agency. This framework sends a clear message to the citizen, establishing that the individual is not a helpless victim, but an active and responsible component of national resilience.

Such conceptual frameworks provide a theoretically grounded pathway through which out-migration intention can be reduced, a proposition that requires subsequent rigorous empirical verification at the municipal level. The proposed hypothesis holds vital significance for small frontier states facing acute security challenges, where the development of participatory, decentralised defence capability may serve simultaneously as a component of demographic resilience and societal stability.

Notes

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