

Lithuania's Response to the Crisis of Irregular Migration in 2021–2024

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Abstract. A detailed analysis of Lithuania's operational and strategic responses to irregular migration flows from Belarus has been lacking. The ongoing attempts to cross the EU external border, facilitated by Belarusian authorities, started in the summer of 2021, and coincided with simultaneous crisis situations, namely, the difficulties associated with the implementation of international/EU economic sanctions against Russia and Belarus and high energy prices. Drawing on extensive desk research and five semi-structured interviews with Lithuanian policy officials, the study analyses the institutional changes related to the management of the crisis, as well as long-term policy decisions in the field of migration management. We have found that, at the operational level, the interconnected nature of crises compelled

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public authorities to enhance inter-institutional cooperation and strengthen crisis coordination mechanisms. At the strategic level, Lithuania focused its efforts on strengthening its border with Belarus, and advocating the adaptation of EU migration legislation to situations of 'migrant instrumentalisation'.

Keywords: polycrisis, governance capacity, crisis coordination, operational response, strategic decisions, Lithuania.

Lietuvos atsakas į neteisėtos imigracijos krizę 2021–2024 metais

Santrauka. Šiuo metu trūksta išsamios Lietuvos operatyvinio ir strateginio atsako į neteisėtos migracijos iš Baltarusijos srautus analizės. Tebevykstantys bandymai kirsti ES išorės sieną, padedami Baltarusijos valdžios, prasidėjo 2021 metų vasarą ir sutapo su tuo pačiu metu pasireiškusiomis krizinėmis situacijomis – sunkumais, susijusiais su tarptautinių / ES ekonominių sankcijų Rusijai ir Baltarusijai įgyvendinimu bei aukštomis energijos kainomis. Remiantis išsamia dokumentų analize ir penkiais pusiau struktūruotais interviu su Lietuvos politikos formuotojais, tyrime buvo analizuojami su krizių valdymu susiję instituciniai pokyčiai ir ilgalaikiai politikos sprendimai migracijos valdymo srityje. Nustatėme, kad operatyviniu lygmeniu dėl tarpusavyje susijusių krizių pobūdžio valdžios institucijos buvo priverstos stiprinti tarpinstitucinį bendradarbiavimą ir krizių koordinavimo mechanizmus. Strateginiu lygmeniu Lietuva sutelkė savo pastangas į sienos su Baltarusija stiprinimą ir aktyvų veikimą ES plotmėje, raginama pritaikyti ES migracijos teisės aktus „migrantų instrumentalizacijos“ situacijoms.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: daugialypė krizė, valdymo gebėjimai, krizės koordinavimas, operacinis atsakas, strateginiai sprendimai, Lietuva.

Introduction

The Belarus-European Union (EU) border crisis started in mid-2021, and saw Belarus orchestrating irregular migration to Lithuania, Poland and Latvia, primarily from the Middle East and North Africa. Lithuania experienced a sharp rise in arrivals, with asylum applications in 2021 surging 13 times compared to 2020, mostly from Iraqi citizens.¹ The influx began early in 2021, with 90 migrants crossing into Lithuania in the first three months, rising to around 560 by June and over 3,500 by July.² The COVID-19 pandemic further strained

¹ 2021 Migration Yearbook.

² “Neteisėta migracija Lietuvoje – interaktyvi informacijos suvestinė” [Illegal Migration in Lithuania – Interactive Compendium of Information]. *Statistics Lithuania*, accessed January 20, 2025. Access online: <https://osp.stat.gov.lt/neteiseta-migracija-dashboard>

migration management. While the crisis eased in early 2022, the war in Ukraine triggered a wave of Ukrainian refugees, with over 37,000 registered by March 2022,³ and 2,000 arriving daily,⁴ thereby further straining the country's institutions. This crisis was not isolated; to the contrary, it was part of the escalating Belarus-EU tensions following the disputed 2020 election in Belarus. Lithuania provided refuge to Belarusian opposition figures, including Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, who was widely regarded as the true winner of the presidential election. In May 2021, Belarus forcibly diverted a Ryanair flight to detain the opposition journalist Roman Protasevich, leading to EU sanctions.⁵ Shortly afterwards, Belarus orchestrated migrant flows to Lithuania, Latvia and Poland, adopting the behaviour that fits Kelly M. Greenhill's definition of 'coercive engineered migration'. According to Greenhill, coercive engineered migrations are "cross-border population movements that are deliberately created or manipulated in order to induce political, military and/or economic concessions from a target state or states".⁶

The 2021 irregular migrant crisis is another example of coercive engineered migration. For Belarus, orchestrating migration flows was a way to retaliate against the EU sanctions, to burden East European countries (specifically, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland), and to test EU border defences.⁷ This aligns with the concept of using migra-

³ "Lietuvoje registruota 37,3 tūkst. karo pabėgėlių iš Ukrainos" [37.3 Thousand War Refugees from Ukraine have been Registered in Lithuania], *lrytas.lt*, 2022. Access online: <https://www.lrytas.lt/lietuvosdiena/aktualijos/2022/03/30/news/lietuvoje-registruota-37-3-tukst-karo-pabegeliu-is-ukrainos-22894878>

⁴ "Ukrainian Refugees in Lithuania – Interactive Dashboard," *Statistics Lithuania*, accessed January 20, 2025. Access online: <https://osp.stat.gov.lt/ukraine-dashboards>

⁵ Council of the European Union, *European Council Conclusions on Belarus, 24 May 2021*. Press release, May 24, 2021. Access online: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/05/24/european-council-conclusions-on-belarus-24-may-2021/>

⁶ Kelly M. Greenhill, *Weapons of Mass Migration: Forced Displacement, Coercion, and Foreign Policy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010), 13.

⁷ Alia Fakhry, Roderick Parkes, András Rác, "Migration Instrumentalization: A Taxonomy for an Efficient Response," *European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats, Working Paper 14* (2022).

tion as a foreign policy tool to influence political behaviour or extract concessions.⁸ While the hybrid attack is considered a failure,⁹ it imposed financial and political costs nevertheless. Lithuania, with its under-resourced border and migration agencies, had to mobilise other state institutions, while sparking domestic and international debates on the legality of measures like pushbacks. The crisis also led to legal and policy reviews on migration, asylum, and border control at both national and EU levels.

The literature on irregular migration in Europe largely focuses on the 2015 crisis, examining migration policy externalisation,¹⁰ the EU's response,¹¹ and the subsequent evolution of the policy.¹² At the national level, the 2015–2016 refugee emergency is seen as a governance crisis,¹³ exposing institutional weaknesses, and leading to increased securitisation, deterrence measures, and the normalisation

⁸ Kelly M. Greenhill, "Strategic Engineered Migration as a Weapon of War," *Civil Wars* 10(1) (2008): 6–21. doi:10.1080/13698240701835425.

⁹ Janko Bekić, "Coercive Engineered Migrations as a Tool of Hybrid Warfare: A Binary Comparison of Two Cases on the External EU Border," *Croatian Political Science Review* 59, No. 2 (2022): 141–169. Access online: <https://doi.org/10.20901/pm.59.2.06>

¹⁰ See Arne Niemann, Natascha Zaun, "Introduction: EU External Migration Policy and EU Migration Governance," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 49, No. 12 (2023): 2965–2985. Access online: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2023.2193710>

¹¹ Heaven Crawley, "Managing the Unmanageable? Understanding Europe's Response to the Migration "Crisis";" *Human Geography* 9, No. 2 (2016): 13–23. Access online: <https://doi.org/10.1177/194277861600900202>; Luca Raineri, Francesco Strazzari, "Dissecting the EU Response to the "Migration Crisis";" *The EU and Crisis Response*, eds. Roger Mac Ginty, Sandra Pogodda, Oliver Richmond (Manchester University Press, 2021). Access online: <https://doi.org/10.7765/9781526148346.00015>; Fulvio Attinà, "Migration Drivers, the EU External Migration Policy, and Crisis Management," *Romanian Journal of European Affairs* 16, No. 4 (2016).

¹² Tim Hatton, "European Asylum Policy Before and After the Migration Crisis," *IZA World of Labor* (2020): 480. Access online: <https://doi.org/10.15185/izawol.480>; Finja Lübben, "European Migration Policy: The New Pact on Asylum and Migration through the Lens of Human Rights Compliance, Solidarity, and Accountability," *CERGU Working Paper Series* (2021:2). Access online: <https://www.gu.se/sites/default/files/2022-01/Working%20Paper%20Finja%20Lubben.pdf>

¹³ Zeynep Şahin-Mencütek et al., "A Crisis Mode in Migration Governance: Comparative and Analytical Insights," *Comparative Migration Studies* 10, No. 1 (2022): 1–20, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-022-00290-6>

of pushbacks, detention, and expedited asylum procedures.¹⁴ Three key governance features in migration crises are highlighted: (1) a complex network of state, civil society, and private actors across national, local and international levels; (2) fragmented legal systems with frequent policy changes; and (3) a trend towards renationalisation, where states attempt to regain control.¹⁵ Lithuania exhibited at least the first two.

Migration crises involve a complex network of actors across sectors and levels, often with conflicting responsibilities.¹⁶ Blurred political-administrative boundaries and differing emergency interpretations further complicate decision-making, thus making coordination essential.¹⁷ Research on the 2015 Balkan Route migration crisis highlights chaotic government coordination, especially early on, with potential politicisation.¹⁸ Similarly, Sweden's response to the 2015 migration crisis underscores that a clear delineation of the roles of the contributing agencies aids coordination and minimises confusion among all actors involved.¹⁹ In contrast, the Slovenian example sug-

¹⁴ Polly Pallister-Wilkins, "The Humanitarian Politics of European Border Policing: Frontex and Border Police in Evros," *International Political Sociology* 9, No. 1 (March 2015): 53–69 (Access online: <https://doi.org/10.1111/ips.12076>); Şahin-Mencütek et al., *A Crisis Mode in Migration Governance*; Anna Triandafyllidou, Angeliki Dimiriadi, "Migration Management at the Outposts of the European Union: The Case of Italy's and Greece's Borders," *Griffith Law Review* 22, No. 3 (2013): 598–618. Access online: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10383441.2013.10877014>

¹⁵ Şahin-Mencütek et al., *A Crisis Mode in Migration Governance*.

¹⁶ Danila Rijavec, Ana Štambuk, Primož Pevcin, "Evidence-Based Assessment of Readiness to Solve Wicked Problems: The Case of Migration Crisis in Croatia and Slovenia," *Social Sciences* 10, No. 6 (2021): 188. Access online: <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci10060188>; Gudrun Myrberg, "The 2015 Refugee Crisis in Sweden: A Coordination Challenge," *Societal Security and Crisis Management*, eds. Per Lægred, Lise H. Rykkja (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 149–172. Access online: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-92303-1_8

¹⁷ Arjen Boin, "The Transboundary Crisis: Why We Are Unprepared and the Road Ahead," *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management* 27, No. 1 (2019): 94–99, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5973.12241>

¹⁸ Isabella M. Nolte, Eric C. Martin, "Learning and Crisis Coordination: Experiences from the Balkan Refugee Corridor," *Nonprofit Management and Leadership* 31, No. 2 (2020): 215–232. Access online: <https://doi.org/10.1002/nml.21457>

¹⁹ Myrberg, "The 2015 Refugee Crisis in Sweden."

gests that coordination issues can be addressed by centralising power at the national level.²⁰

Policy responses typically focus on border protection and logistical management. Measures include internal border controls, physical barriers, and increased patrols.²¹ Some states, such as Bulgaria, Hungary and Croatia, resorted to systemic pushbacks.²² To manage migration influxes, countries adjusted their laws, streamlined procedures, and reallocated resources.²³ For instance, in Slovenia and Sweden, staff from other government agencies were mobilised to support migration management due to workforce shortages.²⁴

While the reviewed literature focuses on operational decisions made in the course of and after the 2015 refugee crisis, not enough attention has been paid to explaining strategic, long-term decisions made at the national level. Additionally, there is a lack of research on governmental coordination and crisis management mechanisms in relation to migration crises, including the models chosen for high-level decision-making. The existing literature does not indicate which of these mechanisms and models are favoured during the highly securitised episodes of instrumentalised migration, or why. Finally, it is not clear how the simultaneous occurrence of multiple crises affected Lithuania's operational and strategic response to the crisis of irregular migration.

²⁰ Rijavec et al., "Evidence-Based Assessment of Readiness to Solve Wicked Problems."

²¹ Rijavec et al., "Evidence-Based Assessment of Readiness to Solve Wicked Problems"; International Centre for Migration Policy Development. *2015 in Review: Policy Responses on National Level by Country* (2015).

²² Livia Benková, "Europe's Response to the Migration Crisis," *AIES Fokus* 3/2017. Austria Institut für Europa- und Sicherheitspolitik (2017). Access online: <https://www.aies.at/publikationen/2017/fokus-17-03.php>

²³ Monika Sie Dhian Ho, Myrthe Wijnkoop, "The Instrumentalization of Migration: A Geopolitical Perspective and Toolbox," *Clingendael Institute* (2022). Access online: https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2022-12/Report_The_instrumentalization_of_migration.pdf; International Centre for Migration Policy Development. *2015 in Review*.

²⁴ Rijavec et al., "Evidence-Based Assessment of Readiness to Solve Wicked Problems"; Tomáš Kajánek, "The Migration Strategies and Positions on the EU Migration and Asylum Agenda: Evidence from the Visegrad Group Countries," *Journal of Liberty and International Affairs* 8, No. 3 (2022): 202–219. Access online: <https://doi.org/10.47305/JLIA2283202k>

The goal of this article is to examine the operational and strategic responses of the Lithuanian authorities to the 2021 instrumentalised migration crisis, and assess whether and how these responses were affected by the simultaneous crisis situations, such as the difficulties associated with the implementation of international/EU economic sanctions against Russia and Belarus, and high energy prices. The analytical distinction between operational and strategic responses posits that strategic actions differ from operational responses in having a broad scope and focus, a long-term perspective, and being adopted by high-level policy actors. The analytical model used in this article additionally assumes that responses (serving as our dependent variable) are affected both by the polycrisis situation and the dominant EU or regional paradigms of response. The theoretical framework also encompasses the intervening variables of governance capacity and crisis coordination. The complete theoretical framework used in our analysis is discussed in detail in the introductory article of this special issue, along with our hypothesised causal mechanisms.

The article is part of a larger embedded case study on the polycrisis in Lithuania. An embedded case study is a type of case study that involves multiple units of analysis within a single larger case.²⁵ This article employs the process tracing method.²⁶ However, given the complex nature of polycrises, it would be inappropriate to focus on a single cause and outcome. Instead, in the introductory article, we propose theoretical expectations concerning several different aspects of polycrisis management and its effects. We use a theory-oriented version of causal process tracing,²⁷ enabling us to validate whether our theoretical expectations (as outlined in the introductory article) align with the actual mechanisms at play ‘on the ground’. Our meth-

²⁵ Roland W. Scholz, Olaf Tietje, *Embedded Case Study Methods: Integrating Quantitative and Qualitative Knowledge* (Sage Publications, 2002).

²⁶ Derek Beach, Rasmus Brun Pedersen, *Process-Tracing Methods: Foundations and Guidelines* (University of Michigan Press, 2019).

²⁷ Adrian Kay, Phillip Baker, “What Can Causal Process Tracing Offer to Policy Studies? A Review of the Literature,” *Policy Studies Journal* 43, No. 1 (2014): 1–21. Access online: <https://doi.org/10.1111/psj.12092>

odological approach aligns closely with a minimalist version of theory-testing process tracing.²⁸ Rather than fully unpacking a mechanism that links a cause and an outcome, as is done in in-depth process tracing, we conduct a series of plausibility probes aimed at exploring whether there is any mechanistic evidence supporting a hypothesised process.²⁹ This understanding of process tracing is suitable “when we have little knowledge of what types of mechanism link a given cause and outcome”.³⁰ We argue that the current state of research on polycrisis management at the national level does not yet allow us to move beyond this minimalist version of process tracing. While we acknowledge that causal inferences generated through minimalist process tracing tend to be relatively weak, our primary goal is to identify common patterns in institutional responses to simultaneous crises, and to explore the interrelationships between them.

The data for this study came from desk research (a review of government decrees, decisions by the head of state-level emergency operations, laws and drafts of laws, official press releases, etc.), and five semi-structured interviews with high-level Lithuanian policy officials. The latter were seen as instrumental in uncovering the spillover effects between different crises.³¹ The article starts with a discussion of the main paradigms of response that informed the actions of the Lithuanian authorities in the course of the instrumentalised migration episode; Sections Two and Three describe and analyse the key components of Lithuania's operational and strategic response; Section Four delves into the complexity of crisis management in the context of a polycrisis as well as spillover effects; the final section concludes

²⁸ Derek Beach, Rasmus Brun Pedersen, *Process-Tracing Methods: Foundations and Guidelines*, 2nd ed. (University of Michigan Press, 2019).

²⁹ Beach, Brun Pedersen, 246.

³⁰ Beach, Brun Pedersen, 246–247.

³¹ The numbers of the interviewees (e.g., 1, 4, 6, 7, 11) are not sequential, as they refer to a broader pool of interviews conducted within the framework of a more extensive embedded case study. Only a subset of these interviews was relevant to the migration crisis case, and was therefore included in this article. Other interviews are used in separate articles in the same special issue.

by highlighting the main findings, drawing lessons on coordination and institutional change, and outlining avenues for further research on migrant instrumentalisation and crisis interaction.

1. The Crisis and its Dominant Paradigms of Response

The 2021 Lithuanian-Belarus border crisis was not the first instance of migrant instrumentalisation on the EU's external borders. Similar events include Morocco's facilitation of migration to the Spanish exclave of Ceuta in 2021, and Turkey's opening of its border with Greece in 2020. In response, both Spain and Greece used additional police and military personnel to strengthen their border protection and engaged in pushback practices, significantly undermining migrants' right to seek asylum.³² On a rhetorical level, such hardline practices were defended by highlighting the instrumentalised nature of migration flows.³³ This kind of crisis response can be characterised as *securitised*,³⁴ as it is heavily oriented towards border protection, and treats instrumentalised migration as a security threat. An alternative paradigm of response would consist of keeping the border open and upholding the migrants' right to a fair asylum procedure while providing them with a temporary accommodation. Such a response, which we will call *humanitarian*, was implemented by Germany at the beginning of the 2015 refugee crisis. While the circumstances of population movements observed in

³² Accem, "AIDA Country Report: Spain – 2021 Update," European Council on Refugees and Exiles (2022): 30; Roberto Cortinovis, "Pushbacks and lack of accountability at the Greek-Turkish borders," CEPS Liberty and Security in Europe 2021-01 (Centre for European Policy Studies: 2021, 1).

³³ Helena Smith, "Greece hopes EU-Turkey talks will ease tension over refugee crisis," *The Guardian*, March 16, 2020. Access online: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/16/greece-hopes-eu-turkey-talks-will-ease-tension-over-refugee-crisis>

³⁴ The securitisation of migration has been observed and analysed for a long time, and its relevance is not limited to cases of migrant instrumentalisation. See, e.g., Gabriella Lazaridis, Khursheed Wadia (eds.), *The Securitisation of Migration in the EU: Debates since 9/11* (The European Union in International Affairs. Palgrave Macmillan, 2015). Access online: <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137480583>

the EU in 2015 differed sharply from the cases described above, Germany's response nevertheless offers an alternative way to respond to heightened irregular migration flows.

When responding to the surge in irregular migration in the summer of 2015, Germany opened its borders to asylum seekers and permitted them to apply for the refugee status, thereby overriding the *EU Dublin III Agreement* requiring refugees to apply for asylum in the first EU country they entered.³⁵ Chancellor Merkel's famous phrase '*Wir schaffen das*' (We can do it), first formulated at a press conference held on 31 August 2015, became a symbol of a welcoming paradigm towards asylum seekers. The paradigm brought to the fore moral and legal considerations, as well as respect for human rights. While the rationale behind Germany's policy towards asylum seekers may not have been based on moral and legal arguments alone, and Merkel's decision to open Germany's borders faced considerable criticism within the country itself in the following years, it nevertheless embodied a liberal approach to irregular migration, safeguarding the right to claim asylum, as well as protecting the principle of non-refoulement, enshrined in the *1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees*.

The EU's response to the migration crisis was shaped by international treaties, the EU law, and judicial oversight, but remained fragmented and reactive. Human rights protections were based on the *1951 Refugee Convention*, the *European Convention on Human Rights*, and the *EU Charter of Fundamental Rights*, with the European Court of Human Rights and Court of Justice of the European Union ensuring legal enforcement. Despite recognising the EU's human rights standards, its crisis response relied on *ad hoc* measures, including the adopted scheme to relocate 160,000 asylum seekers, proposing a permanent relocation mechanism, and tightening return policies.³⁶

³⁵ Nanette Funk, "A spectre in Germany: refugees, a "welcome culture" and an "integration politics";" *Journal of Global Ethics*, 12:3: 289–299, doi: 10.1080/17449626.2016.1252785.

³⁶ European Commission. *Refugee Crisis: European Commission Takes Decisive Action to Tackle Crisis* (press release, September 9, 2015). Access online: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_15_5596

However, a more securitised approach to managing the crisis emerged on a national level. According to Estevens,³⁷ “the institutional debate has been ruled by a national security lens, many times ignoring the human insecurity of people facing persecution in their country of origin or discrimination in their new country or even dying in transit”. The EU also demonstrated a securitised approach towards irregular migration, exemplified by the European Commission (EC) forcing Greece to reintroduce internal border controls when it initially liberalised its migration policies.³⁸ This indicates that securitisation has become firmly embedded within the core of some institutions, including the EU.³⁹

While the EU’s response to the 2015 events was gradual and marked by division, the 2020 Greece-Turkey incident, and the 2021 Ceuta crisis, prompted a quicker and more coordinated EU reaction, emphasising the protection of external borders and discussions on a more robust asylum system. During her visit to Greece, the EC President Ursula von der Leyen announced €700 million in EU funds, with €350 million immediately available for upgrading the border infrastructure.⁴⁰ High-level EU officers expressed firm support for Spain during the Ceuta crisis.⁴¹ This rhetoric and the assertive stance

³⁷ João Estevens, “Migration Crisis in the EU: Developing a Framework for Analysis of National Security and Defence Strategies,” *Comparative Migration Studies* 6, No. 28 (2018). Access online: <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-018-0093-3>

³⁸ Dimitris Skleparis, “A Desecuritisation of Migration Doomed to Fail: The Politics of the Securitisation of Migration in the European Union and the Move towards Desecuritisation in the European Union,” *Political Studies* 65, No. 1_suppl (2017): 192–209. Access online: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0032321717729631>

³⁹ Witold Klaus, Marta Pachocka, “Examining the Global North Migration Policies: A “Push Out – Push Back” Approach to Forced Migration,” *International Migration* 57, No. 5 (2019): 280–293. Access online: <https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.12575>

⁴⁰ Jennifer Rankin, “Migration: EU Praises Greece as “Shield” after Turkey Opens Border,” *The Guardian*, March 3, 2020. Access online: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/03/migration-eu-praises-greece-as-shield-after-turkey-opens-border>

⁴¹ Emma Wallis, “Reactions to Ceuta Migrant Arrivals: “It’s a Huge Crisis for Spain and Whole of Europe”,” *InfoMigrants*, May 19, 2021. Access online: <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/32339/reactions-to-ceuta-migrant-arrivals-its-a-huge-crisis-for-spain-and-whole-of-europe>

signalled a more prominent securitised view on irregular migration, in stark contrast with the EU's reaction in 2015.

When Lithuania encountered unexpected irregular migration flows in the summer of 2021, there was an obvious need to choose or find a balance between two imperatives: protecting the rights of asylum seekers (a humanitarian response), and safeguarding the country's and the EU's external border (a securitised response). Those two imperatives commonly accompany irregular migration episodes in democratic countries. In this article, they are seen as the dominant response paradigms which Lithuanian authorities could draw on when enacting their policy towards instrumentalised migration flows. Importantly, this section showed that, in 2021, the prevailing European approach to crisis management in the context of migration emergencies was distinctly shaped by preceding events, and rested largely on a securitised perspective on migration, sometimes at the expense of human rights concerns. The European context is important for understanding Lithuania's approach to crisis management, to which we now turn.

2. Managing the Crisis

2.1. The preparedness of the Lithuanian authorities for irregular migration

Prior to 2021, Lithuania had not faced the challenge of managing significant irregular migration flows. The country's experience in managing migration crises is largely rooted in the European migration crisis of 2015. At that time, the wave of migration bypassed Lithuania, and only 489 migrants were relocated to the country under the EU refugee quota system, most of whom eventually left.⁴² Lith-

⁴² Austėja Makarevičiūtė, Jurgis Vedrickas, *Atsako į Europos migracijos krizę ir migracijos politikos pokyčių ES bei Lietuvoje 2015–2020 m. apžvalga* [Overview of the Response to the European Migration Crisis and Migration Policy Changes in EU and Lithuania in 2015–2020] (Rytų Europos studijų centras, 2020).

uanian institutions had plans on how to tackle irregular migration emergencies, and, in 2016–2017, training exercises were conducted in preparation for a potential influx of 40,000 migrants. However, when the events of 2021 unfolded, these plans proved to be null, as the state institutions faced significant challenges in managing a situation where the number of migrants exceeded merely 4,000.⁴³ Even during the pre-crisis tabletop exercises, there were signals that the plans would not work in real-life scenarios.⁴⁴

2.2. *Coordinating the irregular migration crisis in Lithuania*

Initially, the crisis management was described as ‘pure chaos’. This characterisation was mentioned in several interviews,⁴⁵ with the primary reason cited being the sudden ineffectiveness of the plans existing at the time. Institutional agendas became overwhelmed with urgent tasks requiring immediate resolution, including accommodation, security, registration, and the provision of social services. A shortage of resources and experience contributed to a heightened sense of uncertainty, and it took time for the coordination mechanisms to become fully operational. At the beginning, state institutions, like the *Migration Department* (MD), attempted to manage the migration crisis by using the already existing structures and a bottom-up approach, creating response plans within their own competencies and adhering to established legal frameworks. This departmental-level planning was carried out alongside broader governmental coordination, highlighting a dual-layered response.

⁴³ Indrė Jurčenkaitė, “I. Šimonytė: Ruošėmės atremti 40 tūkst. migrantų antplūdį, o dabar esame pasimete” [I. Šimonytė: We were Getting Ready to Repel an Influx of 40,000 Migrants, and now we are Lost]. *15min.lt*, 2021. Access online: <https://www.15min.lt/naujiena/aktualu/lietuva/i-simonyte-ruosemes-atremti-40-tukst-migrantu-antpludi-o-dabar-esame-pasimete-56-1534396>

⁴⁴ Jurčenkaitė, “Ruošėmės atremti 40 tūkst. migrantų antplūdį” [We were Getting Ready to Repel an Influx of 40,000 Migrants].

⁴⁵ Interview with Public Sector Manager 1 (September 2, 2024, Vilnius, Lithuania), and interview with Civil Servant 11 (January 28, 2025, Vilnius, Lithuania).

As the situation worsened, in July 2021, Lithuania declared an emergency situation. This provided the legal framework necessary for managing the migration crisis by enabling the allocation of funds from the Government's reserves, and expediting asylum procedures. The crisis response was led by the Minister of the Interior through the *State Emergency Operations Centre* (SEOC), coordinating key statutory agencies, such as the *State Border Protection Service* (SBPS), the *Public Security Service* (PSS), and the *Police Department* (PD). However, the escalating conditions on the ground and societal tensions, including the unrest on the 10th of August, when riots took place by the Lithuanian Parliament, and issues at the Rūdinkai Migrant Camp, called for urgent inter-agency coordination. Consequently, the *Joint Situations Centre* (JSC) was established on 11 August 2021, based on recommendations of the SBPS.⁴⁶ This centre involved a broad array of representatives of key state agencies, including the PD, SBPS, PSS, and the Armed Forces. In November 2021, a national emergency was declared in border regions, which was upheld until mid-January 2022. Following this declaration, the Minister of the Interior established the *Emergency Management Coordination Commission* (EMCC), tasked with coordinating the management of this emergency (involving representatives of the Ministry of the Interior, the *State Security Department* (SSD), the PSS, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of National Defence, the SBPS, the PD, the Lithuanian Armed Forces, the Ministry of Social Security and Labour, and the Government Chancellery).⁴⁷ The previously established JSC, enhanced with strengthened analytical and forecasting capabilities, was also designated to support the EMCC.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Interview with Civil Servant 11 (January 28, 2025, Vilnius, Lithuania).

⁴⁷ Lithuanian Ministry of the Interior, *Sudaryta Nepaprastosios Padėties Valdymo Koordinavimo Komisija* [Committee of the State of Emergency Response Management Coordination has been Launched], accessed January 2025. Access online: <https://vrm.lrv.lt/lt/naujienos/sudaryta-nepaprastosios-padeties-valdymo-koordinavimo-komisija/>

⁴⁸ Lithuanian Ministry of the Interior, *Darba baigė Jungtinis situacijų centras – įteiktos padėkos pareigūnams* [Joint Situations Center has Completed its Work – Awards have been Given to its Staff], accessed January 2025. Access online: <https://vrm.lrv.lt/lt/naujienos/darba-baige-jungtinis-situaciju-centras-iteiktos-padekos-pareigunams/>

This inter-institutional framework operated across two levels of coordination: strategic decision-making was conducted within the SEOC, while operational coordination was managed by the EMCC and the JSC. One interviewee emphasised the collaborative and innovative nature of this framework: “*The Prime Minister’s Adviser on National Security chaired an inter-institutional working group on operations coordination [...] all the representatives discuss the situation, agree on actions, take the matter to the next level if necessary, and resolve it [...] This is a very important tool that we did not have before*”.⁴⁹ One of the strengths of this coordination mechanism was very close, operational inter-institutional communication.

The complexities of inter-institutional coordination during the 2021 irregular migration crisis, and particularly the need for clearer communication and more efficient decision-making processes, were taken into account when designing the *National Crisis Management Center* (NCMC) serving to enhance the system’s overall functionality. While the Ministry of the Interior was seen as the main institution responsible for orchestrating Lithuania’s response to the crisis, its communication with other ministries and institutions was not always easy. Part of the issue was the lack of official authority to delegate tasks to other ministries,⁵⁰ thereby adding to the complexity of the coordination process.

Overall, after the initial attempt to manage the situation at the border within the existing set-up of agencies, the developments on the ground led to the activation of centralised crisis management mechanisms (namely, the SEOC). This reaction is aligned with the logic of appropriateness, as it followed the existing crisis management rules and typical procedures. However, as these approaches proved ineffective in managing the increasing flow of migrants, the risks arising

⁴⁹ Rasa Smaliukienė, Vidmantė Giedraitytė, Ingrida Grincevičiūtė, Svajūnė Ungurytė-Ragauskienė, “Good Practices in Inter-Institutional Collaboration in Managing the Migrant Crisis,” *Public Policy and Administration* 22, No. 1 (2023): 20–32. <https://doi.org/10.5755/j01.ppaa.22.1.33724>

⁵⁰ Interview with Civil Servant 6 (September 10, 2024, Vilnius, Lithuania).

from the deteriorating situation at the Poland-Belarus border, as well as the riots outside the Lithuanian Parliament, it became necessary to urgently develop new crisis management solutions. In response, the Lithuanian authorities established the JSC in 2021, as a special arrangement to coordinate the irregular migration crisis. This initiative aimed to create a platform for institutional information-sharing, and represented a shift towards a more horizontal approach to crisis management. It eventually led to the creation of the integrated system for crisis and emergency management in 2022. These changes represent efforts to strengthen the governance capacity and improve coordination between the agencies involved, indicating a transition towards the logic of consequentiality in decision-making.

2.3. Governance capacity and new governance practices

Quite quickly, around June-July 2021, the inadequate preparation and the lack of material and financial resources became evident.⁵¹ For example, the surge of migrants strained the resources of the SBPS, which had already faced a shortage of personnel before the crisis. Similarly, the Migration Department struggled to process asylum applications. According to a representative of the MD, the department's excessive workload had negative effects, causing routine tasks to be relegated to a lower-priority list: "*Staff members were on the brink of burn-out, and in certain instances we had to defer work in certain areas, consequently leading to delays.*"⁵² Another crisis management issue pertained to the accommodation of migrants who had already crossed the border. As early as in June 2021, the Pabradė

⁵¹ Interview with Public Sector Manager 1 (September 12, 2024, Vilnius, Lithuania), and interview with Civil Servant 4 (August 28, 2024, Vilnius, Lithuania).

⁵² Rugilė Augustytė, "Gudzinskaitė atskleidė neteisėtos migracijos užkuliusius bei įvertino atlaikytas krizes: "Artėjome link perdegimo ribos"" [Gudzinskaitė has Revealed the 'Backyard' of Illegal Migration and Evaluated the Crises we have Weathered: We are Approaching the Burnout Limits]. *lrt.lt*, December 31, 2022. Access online: <https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/lietuvoje/2/1917511/gudzinskaite-atskleide-neteisetos-migracijos-uzkuliusius-bei-ivertino-atlaikytas-krizes-artejome-link-perdegimo-ribos>

Foreigners Registration Centre had already reached full capacity. As the numbers of migrants kept rising, various facilities of the SBPS were used, and temporary tent camps were also set up. This prevented the Government from formulating a fast and effective response, as the resources and infrastructure were insufficient to cope with the scale of the crisis. The improvisational use of facilities and makeshift accommodation exposed a lack of contingency plans for such scenarios, leaving the authorities scrambling to meet basic needs.

To address the weaponised migration crisis, the Lithuanian authorities adopted agile governance practices, characterised by the rapid mobilisation of resources, flexible coordination across agencies, and swift personnel recruitment. Security forces, including the PSS, the PD, the Fire and Rescue Department, and the Lithuanian Riflemen's Union, were deployed to support the SBPS,⁵³ while the military provided logistical assistance. The MD reinforced its capacity by recruiting 50 additional staff from the general public, and deploying mobile registration teams, drawing volunteers from institutions such as the State Tax Inspectorate and the State Health Insurance Fund.⁵⁴ A similar model, establishing mobile registration centres, was later applied during the influx of Ukrainian war refugees, demonstrating the scalability of effective crisis management practices.

Collaborative governance was central to Lithuania's response, integrating national and EU-level resources. EU agencies, including Frontex,⁵⁵ the European Asylum Support Office,⁵⁶ and the EU Civil

⁵³ Head of State-Level Emergency Situation Operations, *Decision on Preventing Illegal Migration at the State Border of the Republic of Lithuania During the Declared National-Level Emergency Due to the Mass Influx of Foreigners*, No. 10V-1, July 8, 2021.

⁵⁴ Interview with Public Sector Manager 1 (September 12, 2024, Vilnius, Lithuania).

⁵⁵ "Į Lietuvą atvyko 60 papildomų "Frontex" pareigūnų, padėsiančių valdyti migrantų krizę" [60 Additional Personnel of Frontex have Arrived in Lithuania to Help Control the Migrant Crisis]. *Verslo žinios*, 2021. Access online: <https://www.vz.lt/verslo-aplinka/migrantu-krize/2021/07/30/i-lietuva-atvyko-60-papildomu-frontex-pareigunu-padesianciu-valdyti-migrantu-krize>

⁵⁶ Lietuvos Respublikos Vyriausybė, *Hibridinės atakos prieš Lietuvą chronologija* [Chronology of Hybrid Attack against Lithuania], 2021. Access online: <https://hibridineataka.lrv.lt/lt/naujienos/hibridines-atakos-pries-lietuva-chronologija>

Protection Mechanism, provided personnel, equipment and expertise. Support from 16 EU Member States further strengthened Lithuania's crisis management capacity.⁵⁷ Domestically, ministries coordinated efforts with the local authorities to ensure accommodation, health-care and social services, while the Foreigners Registration Centre, under oversight of SBPS, managed broader migrant housing.⁵⁸

Digital innovation also played a critical role. The *MIGRIS* IT platform was enhanced to streamline the workflows, by accelerating registration and administrative processes. Training material and video guides facilitated the rapid onboarding of staff and volunteers, replacing traditional, time-intensive training. These technological upgrades later proved instrumental in managing the arrival of Ukrainian refugees, thus illustrating the adaptability of digital tools across different crises.⁵⁹ Moreover, our interviewees highlighted the significant added value of the support provided by the State Data Agency, which played a crucial role in refining and organising data (for example, by employing the *Palantir* data analytics platform, or starting to connect data from governmental institutions in a single data lake). Previously, some data had been duplicated or manually recorded, leading to inconsistencies. This assistance enabled the more accurate assessment of the situation, and facilitated the implementation of more targeted actions.⁶⁰

Lithuania's response to the 2021 migration crisis revealed structural and procedural gaps, including resource shortages and insufficient contingency planning, which constrained the initial efforts. However, the application of agile and collaborative governance prac-

⁵⁷ Lietuvos Respublikos Vyriausybė, *Hibridinės atakos prieš Lietuvą chronologija* [Chronology of Hybrid Attack against Lithuania], 2021.

⁵⁸ Lietuvos Respublikos Vyriausybė. *Dėl Lietuvos Respublikos Vyriausybės 2010 m. spalio 20 d. nutarimo Nr. 1503 „Dėl valstybinio ekstremaliųjų situacijų valdymo plano patvirtinimo“ pakeitimo*, nutarimas Nr. 583, July 28, 2021. Access online: <https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/lt/legalAct/528a78c0f10111eb9f09e7df20500045>

⁵⁹ Interview with Public Sector Manager 1 (September 12, 2024, Vilnius, Lithuania).

⁶⁰ Interview with Public Sector Manager 1 (September 12, 2024, Vilnius, Lithuania), Public Servant 7 (September 24, 2024, online), and Civil Servant 11 (January 28, 2025, Vilnius, Lithuania).

tices, such as the swift recruitment of personnel, mobilisation of national and EU resources, and integration of IT innovations like the *MIGRIS* platform, reflects the importance of enhancing governance capacity to address crises effectively.

While limited data are available on the long-term sustainability of these new initiatives, it is reasonable to expect that the IT tools developed during the crisis will remain in use, as they continue to be applied beyond emergency situations.⁶¹ However, maintaining institutional cooperation practices, particularly collaboration with NGOs and inter-agency coordination, may prove more challenging over time. Staff turnover can erode institutional knowledge, making it more difficult to sustain effective cooperation mechanisms.

3. Policy Reaction to the Crisis

In the first months of the 2021 instrumentalised migration episode, all actions taken by the responsible institutions fell in the category of an operational rather than a strategic response. Importantly, while the decision to erect a physical barrier on the border with Belarus was primarily an operational response to sizeable irregular migration flows, it acquired a strategic dimension after the migrant numbers subsided. A law on the construction of a physical barrier at the border was passed by the Lithuanian Parliament (Seimas) on 10 August 2021, as little as two months after the start of the instrumentalised migration crisis. The 550-kilometre-long barrier, financed from national funds after the refusal of the EC to allocate financial support to this project, was completed in August 2022.⁶² The physical barrier is currently seen as an important instrument for combating future migration-related and other threats. According to a senior government

⁶¹ Interview with Public Sector Manager 1 (September 12, 2024, Vilnius, Lithuania) and Public Servant 7 (September 24, 2024, online).

⁶² “Pasienyje su Baltarusija baigtas statyti fizinis barjeras” [Construction of Physical Barrier has been Completed at the Belarusian Border]. *lrt.lt*, 2022. <https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/lietuvoje/2/1768287/pasienyje-su-baltarusija-baigtas-statyti-fizinis-barjeras>

official, it made Lithuania a less attractive target for those seeking to use instrumentalised migration tactics, and may have forced Belarus to direct migrants to new destination countries.⁶³

Lithuania's strategic response to the crisis can also be seen in legislative changes made to two key laws, the Law on the Legal Status of Foreigners, and the Law on the State Border and its Protection. Amendments to the former, adopted during the first few months of the instrumentalised migration crisis, included provisions streamlining the asylum procedure, limiting the asylum seekers' rights, and imposing stricter detention rules. Once again, while the primary motivation for the changes to the Law on the Legal Status of Foreigners came from the need to provide an operational response to the situation at the border, they may be seen as strategic to the extent that they increase the preparedness and resilience of Lithuanian institutions in the face of future instrumentalised migration threats. According to the amendment of 13 July 2021, asylum seekers' rights may be temporarily restricted during martial law, a state of emergency, or a mass influx of aliens. Additionally, the mandatory 28-day stay in temporary accommodation was extended to up to six months without administrative or judicial review.⁶⁴ While these provisions were later revised by the Seimas, special rules to be applied under the conditions of martial law and a state of emergency are maintained in the current version of the Law.

Widespread, although not uniform, public and political support for tough actions at the border facilitated the adoption of these amendments. While a strong consensus, barring a few dissenting voices, on the desired policy course was reached in Lithuania, the character of the crisis meant that its management needed to be coordinated with the EC. If we treat the Lithuanian Government and the EC as the main actors in the crisis management, the lack of a consensus on a policy response between the two sides during the initial two months of the

⁶³ Interview with Civil Servant 4 (September 10, 2024, Vilnius, Lithuania).

⁶⁴ Amendment to the Law on the Legal Status of Foreigners of the Republic of Lithuania, No. XIV-506, 2021.

crisis may have delayed the adoption of measures that later became the cornerstones of Lithuania's response: the construction of the physical barrier and migrant pushbacks. This is in line with the hypothesis on the detrimental impact of the lack of a political consensus on the speed of decision-making.⁶⁵ Also, the hesitancy of the Lithuanian authorities to apply strict border control measures in the first two months of the crisis suggests that, early on, the dominant paradigm of securitised migration was challenged by the humanitarian paradigm.

Public opinion also played an important role in shaping crisis management decisions. Notably, there was significant opposition from the public and local authorities to the accommodation of migrants, with instances of public unrest forcing the Government to revise its plans. In contrast, widespread public support for Ukrainian refugees greatly facilitated the asylum process, with numerous community-driven initiatives contributing to Lithuania successfully hosting more than 70,000 Ukrainian refugees in 2022. While the public supported the strict response, and some experts even suggested taking a more defensive approach at the onset of the instrumentalised migration crisis, politicians were worried about negative international reactions. As a result, much work was conducted at a political level to secure the approval of the EC and ensure that Lithuania would not face criticism. Politicians were mindful of the backlash that Hungary and other countries faced during the 2015 migration crisis for implementing similar measures, and sought to avoid being perceived in the same light.⁶⁶ On 1 August 2021, the Commissioner for Home Affairs Ylva Johansson visited Lithuania. During her visit, the Commissioner was briefed on the current situation and presented Lithuania's immediate needs in response to the hybrid attack on the EU's Eastern border.⁶⁷ On 3 August 2021, the practice of

⁶⁵ For a full elaboration of this and other hypotheses, see the introductory article in this special issue.

⁶⁶ Interview with Public Sector Manager 1 (September 12, 2024, Vilnius, Lithuania).

⁶⁷ "Europos Komisijos vidaus reikalų komisarė Ylva Johansson: suprantame, kad Lietuva susidūrė su išskirtine agresijos forma, rasime būdų ir priemonių išspręsti šią krizę" [European Commission Commissioner Ylva Johansson: We Understand that Lithuania is Facing an Exceptional Form of Aggression, we shall Find Ways and Means of Deal-

not admitting and redirecting irregular migrants to border checkpoints was introduced.

From the beginning of the practice of migrant pushbacks at the Lithuania-Belarus border, Lithuania received considerable criticism from international human rights actors for authorising violations of internationally accepted human rights and refugee law standards. In June 2022, Amnesty International published a damning report on the ‘arbitrary detention’ and ‘torture and other ill-treatment’ of migrants in ‘prison-like centres’.⁶⁸ In April 2023, the director of Amnesty International’s Europe Regional Office claimed that the proposed changes to the Lithuanian Law on the State Border and its Protection would legalise migrant pushbacks and “effectively green-light torture”.⁶⁹ A similar position was expressed by the Council of Europe’s Commissioner for Human Rights, who encouraged the Lithuanian Parliament to “contribute to putting a stop to [...] human rights violations and take the lead in guaranteeing a human rights compliant migration policy”.⁷⁰ The *United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees* (UNHCR) also expressed concerns about the intended changes to the Law on the State Border and its Protection, i.e., changes that were eventually adopted.

These comments lead to a more general observation regarding the nature of Lithuania’s response to the irregular migration crisis, namely, that the Lithuanian authorities (after the first two months of indecision) firmly chose the ‘border security’ paradigm as its response. According to this paradigm, the key goal was to repel what was

ing with this Crisis], *vrmlrv.lt*, 2021. Access online: <https://vrmlrv.lt/lt/naujienos/europos-komisijos-vidaus-reikalui-komisare-ylva-johansson-suprantame-kad-lietuva-susidure-su-isskirtine-agresijos-forma-rasime-budu-ir-priemoniu-isspresti-sia-krize/>

⁶⁸ “Lithuania: forced out or locked up,” *Amnesty International* (2022): 1:63.

⁶⁹ “Lithuania: Attempt to legalize pushbacks would “green-light torture”,” *amnesty.eu* (2023). Access online: <https://www.amnesty.eu/news/lithuania-attempt-to-legalize-pushbacks-would-green-light-torture/>

⁷⁰ “Lithuania: human rights should be at the centre of the parliamentary debate on migration and asylum,” *coe.int* (2023). Access online: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/-/lithuania-human-rights-should-be-at-the-centre-of-the-parliamentary-debate-on-migration-and-asylum>

called a ‘hybrid attack from Belarus’ by providing a stern response and deterring migrants from making the journey to Lithuania, as well as preventing the Belarusian authorities from attempting similar operations in the future. Since it was crucial to show that Lithuania and the EU would not give in to the migration pressure imposed by Belarus, migrant pushbacks ended up at the very centre of the Lithuanian crisis response. As, in this context, human rights concerns were treated as hindering the effective implementation of the ‘border security’ paradigm, they were given secondary importance. While there is little doubt that this had a negative effect on Lithuania’s credibility as a responsible actor in the international human rights regime, there were also important external circumstances that reduced this harm. Most importantly, Lithuania was not the only European country facing the challenge of instrumentalised migration, and some other countries, in particular, Poland, implemented even more radical measures on their border with Belarus.⁷¹ Moreover, along with other ‘like-minded’ EU member states, Lithuania garnered significant support at the EU level for tough measures in the situation of migrant instrumentalisation. A tough approach in the face of instrumentalisation fits well with a broader right-wing shift in the EU’s migration management paradigm, which puts increasingly more emphasis on various tough measures aimed at tackling irregular migration.⁷²

While the lack of serious political opposition made the crisis management easier and quicker, it also increased the risk of drifting towards policy extremes; this became apparent after the decision of the Court of Justice of the EU,⁷³ passed in 2022, and the ruling of the Lithuanian Constitutional Court issued in 2023. In June 2023,

⁷¹ Finland’s new law to deal with cases of migrant instrumentalisation, passed in June 2024, is another indication that Lithuania is not alone in favouring tough responses. The law was seen as effectively legalising migrant pushbacks.

⁷² Dalia Abdelhady, “The Rightward Shift: Transformation of Global Migration Policy and Discourse,” *Nordic Journal of Migration Research* 15(1) (2025): 1–5. Access online: <https://doi.org/10.33134/njmr.1029>

⁷³ In June 2022, the Court of Justice of the EU ruled that the pushbacks and detention of asylum seekers in Lithuania violated the EU law.

the Lithuanian Constitutional Court ruled that the country's policy of detaining irregular migrants and forcibly accommodating them violated the Lithuanian Constitution.⁷⁴ After the ruling, the Law on the Legal Status of Foreigners underwent a certain degree of liberalisation, showing that a lack of political contestation may not necessarily help prevent partial policy reversals. At the same time, and in line with our hypothesis, widespread political consensus makes it highly unlikely that the new Government would renounce the key elements of Lithuania's crisis response.

Another strategic decision involves permanently incorporating the policy of turning back migrants into Lithuania's legal framework. A new policy of turning away irregular migrants at the border and redirecting them towards designated border checkpoints was introduced by Lithuania in August 2021. The implementation of this policy proved to be effective: when Lithuanian border guards started pushing back migrants from the border, more than 20,000 migrants were refused entry to Lithuania from Belarus by April 2023. On 25 April 2023, amendments to the Law on the State Border and its Protection were adopted, enshrining the practice of turning back irregular migrants who violate state border crossing procedures during a state-level emergency situation. This law essentially institutionalised the policy course adopted during the crisis. The turning back of irregular migrants is permitted only in the border zone, extending up to five kilometres from the border. According to the newly established procedure, the provision for denying entry into Lithuania for foreigners does not apply if it has been determined that the foreigner is fleeing from an armed conflict specified in a Government decision, facing persecution, or seeking entry into the country for humanitarian reasons.⁷⁵ The Minister of the Interior and the Chair of the Parliamentary Committee on National Security and Defence considered this law necessary to ensure national security. However, there were

⁷⁴ Ruling of the Constitutional Court of Lithuania, case No. KT53-A-N6/2023 (2023).

⁷⁵ Amendment to the Law on the State Border and its Protection of the Republic of Lithuania, No. XIV-1891 (2023).

opposing voices, arguing that such a measure contradicts international law and fails to ensure the protection of human rights.⁷⁶

Along with national policymaking, Lithuanian institutions pursued another avenue in its strategic response to the instrumentalised migration crisis, namely, coalition-building at the EU level and seeking relevant amendments to EU legal acts. In July 2021, two parliamentary committees, specifically, the Committee of Foreign Affairs and the Committee of National Security and Defence, agreed that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs should be tasked with formulating legal proposals for updating EU migration rules. In September 2021, the Minister of the Interior suggested that the EU migration rules should be revised, so that the possibility for turning back illegal migrants in an emergency situation in the country is foreseen, and physical barriers could be funded from the EU budget.⁷⁷ In January 2022, Lithuania hosted an international migration-focused political meeting, gathering the ministers of the interior from more than a half of EU Member States to discuss challenges brought by instrumentalised migration. The meeting represented early efforts by the Lithuanian authorities to build a coalition of ‘like-minded’ EU states which recognise the need to adapt the EU regulations to the threats posed by instrumentalised migration.⁷⁸ The informal coalition was made up of 15 countries at the time of writing this article.⁷⁹ Therefore, as a direct result of the irregular migration crisis of 2021, Lithuania started playing a proactive role in the shaping of an EU-level migration policy.

⁷⁶ “Bilotaitė: migrantų apgręžimo įstatymas yra būtinas instrumentas gynybai” [Bilotaitė: A Law on Forcing migrants back is an Indispensable Instrument for Defense]. *lrt.lt* (2023). Access online: <https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/lietuvoje/2/1964814/bilotaite-migrantu-apgrezimo-istatymas-yra-butinas-instrumentas-gynybai>

⁷⁷ “A. Bilotaitė: Lietuva siūlo ES taisyklėse leisti neteisėtų migrantų apgręžimą pasienyje” [A. Bilotaitė: Lithuania is Suggesting that ERU Rules should Allow to Push back Illegal Migrants at the Border], *15min.lt* (2021). Access online: <https://www.15min.lt/naujiena/aktualu/lietuva/a-bilotaite-lietuva-siulo-es-taisyklose-leisti-neteisetu-migrantu-apgrezima-pasienyje-56-1572400>

⁷⁸ Interview with Civil Servant 6 (September 10, 2024, Vilnius, Lithuania).

⁷⁹ Interview with Civil Servant 6 (September 10, 2024, Vilnius, Lithuania).

The meeting of the ministers of the interior of 2022 generated a call for a revision of EU-level asylum rules in the face of instrumentalised migration, as well as the establishment of a common standard for external border protection.⁸⁰ In June 2024, an EU regulation amending the *Schengen Borders Code Regulation* (SBCR) was adopted. The amended Code states that technical means to prevent unauthorised crossings of the border can include, wherever appropriate, “all types of stationary and mobile infrastructure”, a provision that has been interpreted as “a thinly veiled reference to fences which have spread along EU external borders in recent years”.⁸¹ A representative of the Ministry of the Interior of Lithuania saw the changes in the SBCR as a positive step towards setting up clearer technical requirements for ensuring the effective protection of external borders.

Lithuania also played a role in the development of the comprehensive framework for EU migration and asylum rules. The new *EU Pact on Migration and Asylum* was adopted on 14 May 2024, and is structured around four key pillars: strengthening the external borders through integrated border management, ensuring efficient and fair asylum systems, promoting solidarity and shared responsibility among EU Member States, and incorporating migration management into the EU's external relations. According to the Crisis and Force Majeure Regulation, a situation of instrumentalisation occurs “where a third country or a hostile non-state actor encourages or facilitates the movement of third-country nationals or stateless persons to the external borders of the Union or to a Member State, where such actions are indicative of an intention of a third country or a hostile non-state actor to destabilise the Union or a Member State, and where such actions are liable to put at risk essential functions of a Member State, including the maintenance of law and order or the safeguard of its national security”. The regulation also stipulates that, in the event

⁸⁰ Interview with Civil Servant 6 (September 10, 2024, Vilnius, Lithuania).

⁸¹ Daniel Thym, “Reinvigorating Schengen amid legal changes and secondary movements,” *European Policy Centre discussion paper* (2024): 1–11. Access online: https://www.epc.eu/content/Schengen_DPEMD1.pdf

of instrumentalisation, all irregular entrants can be referred to the border asylum procedure and will be considered inadmissible until it has been completed. In assessing whether there is a situation of instrumentalisation, the EC will need to take into account not only the volume of irregular migrants, but also the nature of irregular crossings.⁸²

The Minister of the Interior declared in a public statement that Lithuania's "most important achievement is the clear definition of instrumentalisation in EU law and the consensus reached on EU-level response measures".⁸³ Therefore, the Lithuanian Government saw the inclusion of cases of the instrumentalisation of migrants in the Crisis and Force Majeure Regulation as the key ingredient in its strategic response to the irregular migration crisis of 2021. It is expected that, with the entry into force of the new regulation, the resilience of the country, as well as that of other EU Member States, in the face of migrant instrumentalisation will be significantly strengthened.

4. Complexities of a Polycrisis and its Spillover Effects

The instrumentalised migration crisis was just one of the ingredients in the polycrisis mix that Lithuania had to face in 2021–2025. Along with the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, which started in March 2020, hostile behaviour of Russia and Belarus put the Lithuanian authorities under increasing pressure. Like the irregular migration crisis, high energy prices and challenges related to the implementation of international sanctions can be hailed from the aggressive actions

⁸² Regulation (EU) 2024/1359 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 May 2024 addressing situations of crisis and force majeure in the field of migration and asylum and amending Regulation (EU) 2021/1147. Access online: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=OJ:L_202401359

⁸³ "Ministrė A. Bilotaitė: ES migracijos reforma leis efektyviau tvarkytis su migracijos instrumentalizavimu" [Minister A. Bilotaitė: EU Migration Reform will Allow Dealing with Migration Instrumentalisation more Efficiently], *vrm.lrv.lt* (2024). Access online: <https://vrm.lrv.lt/lt/naujienos/ministre-a-bilotaite-es-migracijos-reforma-leis-efektyviau-tvarkytis-su-migracijos-instrumentalizavimu/>

of authoritarian states. Moreover, the source of the 2021 migration crisis is directly related to the sanctions against Belarus, as instrumentalised migration is interpreted as an attempt by Minsk to put pressure on the EU to soften the economic sanctions introduced after the flawed 2020 presidential election.

Lithuania's response to the crisis of instrumentalised migration was affected by spillovers from simultaneous crises, most notably the COVID-19 pandemic. These spillover effects can be traced at both operational and strategic levels. At the strategic level, the establishment of a permanent centralised institutional structure with well-defined functions in crisis monitoring and management presents a long-term system-wide change in how Lithuania deals with crisis situations, and the context of this development was characterised by the incidence of simultaneous crises. In particular, 10 August 2021 saw the eruption of a riot outside the Seimas during a mass protest against restrictions for unvaccinated people, as well as unrest in the migrant camp at Rūdninkai. Commenting on these developments, the Minister of the Interior described the events as 'coordinated', and part of the same 'hybrid attack'.⁸⁴ The interlinked character of separate crisis events was one of the factors forcing the authorities to push for better cross-institutional cooperation and to strengthen the crisis coordination mechanism. Soon after the riot outside the Seimas and the unrest in the Rūdninkai camp, the Joint Situations Centre, a coordinating inter-institutional body that proved to be instrumental in the further management of the irregular migration crisis, was established. In May 2023, its functions were transferred to the newly established NCMC, thereby finalising the institutionalisation of Lithuania's crisis management set-up.

During the irregular migration crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic presented yet another complication in the management of an al-

⁸⁴ "Vidaus reikalų ministrė: įvykiai prie Seimo ir Rūdninkuose buvo koordinuoti" [Minister of the Interior: Events at the Seimas and in Rūdninkai were Coordinated], *kauno.diena.lt* (2021), <https://kauno.diena.lt/naujienos/lietuva/salies-pulsas/vidaus-reikalu-ministre-ivykiai-prie-seimo-ir-rudininkuose-buvo-koordinuoti-1037966>

ready complex situation. As Lithuania grappled with the challenge of accommodating a group of irregular migrants who had crossed the Lithuania-Belarus border in the summer of 2021, these people had to be tested for COVID-19. In some cases, migrants had to be quarantined and treated, which added another layer of logistical complexity to the country's operational response. There were also attempts to escape from isolation facilities.⁸⁵ Importantly, the public health emergency presented by the COVID-19 pandemic may have had an effect on the prevailing views of the general public towards the 2021 irregular migration crisis, as well as the desired response to it. In the context of the pandemic, irregular migration was perceived not only as a security challenge but also as a threat to public health, further 'alarming' Lithuanian society.⁸⁶ As outlined above, the overwhelmingly tough position of the general public was one of the key drivers of Lithuania's operational and strategic response to the crisis.

In addition to these challenges, the concurrent crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic, the irregular migration influx, and the arrival of war refugees, severely strained national resources, including funding and material assets. A surge in energy prices exacerbated this, placing even greater pressure on the institutions.⁸⁷ In addition, the fatigue among crisis management personnel affected their performance, resulting in 'mini crises' in their day-to-day tasks.⁸⁸ Furthermore, the pandemic and the ensuing need to ensure social distancing made the day-to-day functioning of the Lithuanian Migration Department, one of the key institutions tasked with managing the crisis, more difficult.⁸⁹

As previously noted, the instrumentalised migration crisis was inherently complex in itself. Primarily affecting Lithuania's security and public order structures, its management was hindered by the

⁸⁵ Interview with Civil Servant 6 (September 10, 2024, Vilnius, Lithuania).

⁸⁶ Interview with Civil Servant 6 (September 10, 2024, Vilnius, Lithuania).

⁸⁷ Interview with Civil Servant 7 (September 24, 2024, online).

⁸⁸ Interview with Civil Servant 7 (September 24, 2024, online).

⁸⁹ Interview with Public Sector Manager 1 (September 12, 2024, Vilnius, Lithuania).

limited resources and capacities, necessitating greater institutional involvement and complicating coordination. The migrants required healthcare services, and not only for COVID-19 but for other serious conditions, as well as an access to social and educational services. This led to the engagement of additional ministries, including the ministries of Social Affairs and Labour, and Education, Science and Sport, along with the involvement of local governments and municipalities to support the accommodation efforts. While centred on a single policy domain, the crisis demanded a complex, multi-sectoral response, straining inter-agency coordination and the administrative capacity.

In addition, institutions faced the challenge of operating under the directives of two distinct SEOCs, one addressing the migration emergency, and the other overseeing the COVID-19 response. This dual structure placed an additional burden on the personnel, who had to reconcile the requirements of the pandemic-focused SEOC with the urgent needs of the migration crisis, while ensuring compliance with both operational frameworks.⁹⁰

While spillovers from past or ongoing crises often facilitated institutional learning, which positively influenced Lithuania's response to migration challenges, this was not universally the case across all institutions involved. For instance, lessons from COVID-19 were not always identified and applied to managing migration challenges.⁹¹ However, the management of the COVID-19 pandemic brought new forms of inter-institutional coordination, which were successfully applied in the course of the irregular migration crisis. The use of remote communication technologies, which has become widespread in the public sector since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, has changed the way in which members of the responsible institutions engage with each other at a time of crisis. In the summer of 2021 and beyond, formal inter-institutional meetings were complemented by regular informal discussions, which were often held outside the

⁹⁰ Interview with Civil Servant 11 (January 28, 2025, Vilnius, Lithuania).

⁹¹ Interview with Public Sector Manager 1 (September 12, 2024, Vilnius, Lithuania).

traditional working hours, and were joined from separate locations. These developments brought more flexibility into the crisis coordination process, facilitating it in a way that would have been hard to achieve prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.⁹²

At the operational level, the simultaneous occurrence of other crises acted both as an additional challenge aggravating the operational response to the irregular migration crisis and an inspiration for the implementation of informal and effective inter-institutional coordination practices. More generally, insofar as spillovers entailed institutional learning from the management of past or ongoing crises, they had a positive influence on Lithuania's response to migration challenges. A positive spillover effect can be traced when analysing the relationship between the two migration crises: the irregular migration crisis of 2021, and the Ukrainian refugee crisis which started in 2022. The institutional experience gained in the course of the irregular migration crisis, including the improved coordination process, new inter-institutional cooperation practices, and well-developed forms of cooperation with NGOs, was instrumental in ensuring the orderly reception of more than 70,000 Ukrainian refugees in 2022. Therefore, the incidence of one crisis triggered an institutional learning process that led to a more effective response to the migration-related challenge that presented itself just nine months after the beginning of the irregular migration crisis. In the case of the refugee flows in 2022, Lithuanian society was strongly in favour of the humanitarian approach to crisis management, and there was a strong consensus on the appropriate operational response.

Conclusions and Discussion

We have hypothesised that, when normative pressures are predominant, professional interdependence and non-linear interactions among the involved stakeholders shape the results of decision-making; on the other hand, in an environment dominated by coercive pressures,

⁹² Interview with Civil Servant 6 (September 10, 2024, Vilnius, Lithuania).

multi-level political bargaining determines the outcomes of decision-making. The interviews suggest that the two initial months of the irregular migration crisis of 2021 were characterised by an intense clash between normative and coercive pressures. The latter pressures were presented by the general public and most of the political establishment, and the former were embedded in Lithuania's international human rights obligations (the 1951 Geneva Convention, EU treaties) and voiced by lawyers, NGOs, and the EC. At this intense time, the Lithuanian Government was engaged in multi-level political bargaining with NGOs, the EC, and communities living near the border with Belarus. When the EC expressed its 'tacit' agreement with tough crisis management measures involving migrant pushbacks and the construction of a physical barrier, normative pressures subsided,⁹³ and multi-level political bargaining became less intense. In the period following August 2021, the need to reduce irregular border crossings became the key focus of the Government. Therefore, the clash of normative and coercive pressures in the first two months of the crisis seems to have led to intense multi-level bargaining.

Since effective management of the irregular migration crisis was not possible without the support of the EU, the crisis provided Lithuania with a lesson in EU-level coalition building and policy advocacy. It was also the first time that it became such an active player in the development of EU migration policy rules. From the outbreak of the increased irregular migration flows, the Lithuanian authorities emphasised that the crisis at the Lithuania-Belarus border was also a crisis of the EU external border, and therefore a coordinated EU-level response was required. Consequently, Lithuania adopted an open and cooperative approach towards EU institutions, by admitting Frontex officers and engaging in dialogue with key EC political figures in an effort to provide full information about the developments on the bor-

⁹³ This is not to say that they were non-existent, as some politicians and NGOs were criticising the approach adopted by the Government, and the rulings by the European Court of Justice and the Lithuanian Constitutional Court led to the (marginal) liberalisation of the crisis response. Nevertheless, after the initial period of hesitancy, the Lithuanian Government strongly prioritised coercive pressures over the normative ones.

der and to try and agree on the appropriate response. This openness not only helped the Lithuanian authorities secure ‘tacit’ EC approval for tough anti-crisis measures, namely, the construction of a physical barrier on the border with Belarus, and the practice of migrant push-backs, but also enabled the country to take an active role in further European-level debates on migrant instrumentalisation. Ultimately, Lithuania’s strategic response to the irregular migration crisis was embodied in the EU Crisis and Force Majeure Regulation, which foresees derogations from common asylum rules in the face of the instrumentalisation of migrants.

Internally, the most consequential strategic response to the crisis in irregular migration, as well as other simultaneous crises, was the establishment of the NCMC, a body within the Government Chancellery with well-defined functions in crisis monitoring and management. The Centre presents a long-term system-wide change in how Lithuania deals with crisis situations. At the operational level, the interconnected nature of crises compelled public authorities to enhance inter-institutional cooperation and strengthen the crisis coordination mechanisms. While overlapping crises posed operational challenges in responding to irregular migration, they also spurred the adoption of informal yet effective inter-institutional coordination practices.

The research data aligns with the theoretical understanding of crisis coordination and our hypotheses emphasising the importance of both vertical and horizontal coordination during crises, as highlighted by Boin and ’t Hart.⁹⁴ Lithuania’s shift to a centralised crisis management framework demonstrates the necessity for greater integrative capacity in addressing complex emergencies, particularly in the context of a polycrisis.⁹⁵ The establishment of the JSC, and, sub-

⁹⁴ Arjen Boin, Paul ’t Hart, “From crisis to reform? Exploring three post-Covid pathways,” *Policy and Society* 41, No. 1 (2022): 13–24. Access online: <https://doi.org/10.1093/polsoc>

⁹⁵ Shannon Dinan, Daniel Béland, Michael Howlett, “How Useful is the Concept of Polycrisis? Lessons from the Development of the Canada Emergency Response Benefit during the Covid-19 Pandemic,” *Policy Design and Practice* (2024). Access online: <https://doi.org/10.1080/25741292.2024.2316409>

sequently, the NCMC, illustrates the effectiveness of hybrid models that combine hierarchical authority with networked collaboration, as proposed by Christensen et al.⁹⁶

Meanwhile, the analysis presented in this article also shows that lessons learned tend to be more transferable between similar crises, such as the weaponised migration crisis and the influx of war refugees. Similarities between crises enable the use of existing stakeholder networks, including NGOs, and the application of recently developed tools and practices, such as IT systems. From our examples, this approach proves particularly effective at the institutional level. At the inter-institutional level, however, lessons from distinct types of crises are often easier to apply. This is due to the lessons focusing on new or improved coordination mechanisms, which can be more readily adapted to managing crises across diverse policy areas.

Given that the use of the instrumentalised migration tactic is becoming increasingly frequent, we invite researchers to examine how such episodes affect state institutions and inter-institutional coordination mechanisms in target countries. For many of these target countries, migrant instrumentalisation is challenging not only because it exposes them to ‘hypocrisy costs’,⁹⁷ such cases are also complex because they have to be treated as a dual migration-security challenge, which leads to the inclusion of many different public institutions in the management of the crisis. The interaction between different, and sometimes conflicting, public bodies, as well as existing crisis management mechanisms, is instrumental in understanding why a particular type of response was chosen. Also, further research is needed on the ways how the response to migrant instrumentalisation is affected by other simultaneous crises.

⁹⁶ Tom Christensen, Per Lægred, Lise H. Rykkja, “Organizing for Crisis Management: Building Governance Capacity and Legitimacy,” *Public Administration Review* 76, No. 6 (2016): 887–897. <https://doi.org/10.1111/puar.12558>

⁹⁷ Kelly M. Greenhill, *Weapons of Mass Migration: Forced Displacement, Coercion, and Foreign Policy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010), 4.

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Appendix 1: interviews

Interview with Civil Servant 4, 28 August 2024, Vilnius, Lithuania.

Interview with Civil Servant 6, 10 September 2024, Vilnius, Lithuania.

Interview with Public Sector Manager 1, 12 September 2024, Vilnius, Lithuania.

Interview with Civil Servant 7, 24 September 2024, online.

Interview with Civil Servant 11, 28 January 2025, Vilnius, Lithuania.