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Crossing Boundaries: NGO Efforts and Government Pushback Policies on Irregular Migration at the Lithuanian-Belarusian Border

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Master in Sociology

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October, 2024

SOCIOLOGIA
E POLÍTICAS PÚBLICAS

Department of Sociology

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Dedicated to advancing a world that honors human rights,
ensuring dignity and respect for every individual, regardless of borders.

Acknowledgment

I wish to express my gratitude to my thesis supervisor, whose insight into the potential of this topic and ongoing support throughout this journey have been valuable. Thank you for your guidance, as it has been important in navigating the complexities of this topic.

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Resumo

Esta dissertação lança luz sobre a dinâmica entre as políticas governamentais e os esforços humanitários liderados por ONG na gestão da migração irregular na fronteira Lituânia-Bielorrússia, centrando-se na ONG Sienos Grupė. Ao investigar as perspetivas e experiências dos ativistas e voluntários da ONG Sienos Grupė, o estudo analisa a interação entre as respostas humanitárias de base e a abordagem securitária da Lituânia à migração irregular, que é marcada por *pushbacks* e políticas de detenção restritivas. Utilizando o conceito de biopolítica de Foucault como uma lente teórica, juntamente com os conceitos de migração projectada e identidade colectiva, esta investigação analisa os mecanismos de poder estatal, exclusão e movimentos sociais que moldam o tratamento e a perceção social dos migrantes. Através de uma abordagem de estudo de caso, os resultados destacam os conflitos entre os requisitos humanitários impostos pelos actores da ONG Sienos Grupė e a gestão da migração orientada para a segurança do Estado, enfatizando como as experiências individuais e as identidades de grupo dentro da ONG criam uma contra-narrativa que desafia as acções do Estado. Em última análise, este estudo fornece informações sobre as dinâmicas sociais e institucionais mais amplas que têm impacto na migração irregular na Lituânia, ilustrando os papéis do Estado e da sociedade civil na definição e no desafio das fronteiras da inclusão e da exclusão.

Palavras-chave: Migração irregular, securitização, relações ONG-Estado, resposta humanitária, fronteira Lituânia-Bielorrússia

Abstract

This dissertation sheds light on the dynamics between state policies and NGO-led humanitarian efforts in managing irregular migration at the Lithuanian-Belarusian border, focusing on the NGO Sienos Grupė. By investigating the perspectives and experiences of NGO Sienos Grupė activists and volunteers, the study examines the interaction between grassroots humanitarian responses and Lithuania's securitized approach to irregular migration, marked by pushbacks and restrictive detention policies. Using sociological theories like Foucault's concept of biopolitics as a theoretical lens, along with the notions of engineered migration and collective identity, this work analyzes the mechanisms of state power, exclusion, and social movements that shape migrant treatment and societal perception. Through a case study approach, the findings highlight conflicts between the humanitarian requirements imposed by NGO Sienos Grupė actors and the state's security-driven migration management, emphasizing how individual experiences and group identities within the NGO create a counter-narrative that challenges the state's actions. Ultimately, this study provides insights into the broader societal and institutional dynamics impacting irregular migration in Lithuania, illustrating the roles of both state and civil society in defining and challenging the boundaries of inclusion as well as exclusion.

Keywords: Irregular Migration, Securitization, NGO-State Relations, Humanitarian Response, Lithuanian-Belarusian Border

Index

Acknowledgment iii

Resumo v

Abstract vii

Introduction 1

Chapter 1. Literature Review 3

1.1. Foucault's Concepts of Power and Biopolitics 3

1.2. Thanatopolitics & Zoopower 4

1.3. Engineered Migration & Migrant Instrumentalization 5

1.4. Collective Identity & Social Movements 7

Chapter 2. Terminology & Contextual Background 9

2.1. Terminology 9

2.1.1. Irregular Migration 9

2.1.2. Pushback 10

2.2. Contextual Background 11

Chapter 3. Methodology 17

3.1. Organization 17

3.2. Research Design 18

3.3. Sample & Procedure 18

3.4. Data Analysis 20

Chapter 4. Findings 23

4.1. Volunteer Experiences & Practices 23

4.1.1. Profiles & Backgrounds 23

4.1.2. Motivation & Personal Drive 25

4.1.3. Experiences & Challenges 27

4.2. Contrasting Migrant Perceptions 27
4.2.1. Activist POV 28
4.2.2. Society POV 29
4.3. NGO Sienos Grupė: Role & Relations 31
4.3.1. Grassroots Beginning 31
4.3.2. Core Function 32
4.3.3. Network & Partnership Dynamics 34
4.4. External Forces Shaping NGO Strategy 37
4.4.1. State Policies 38
4.4.2. Public Opinion 39
4.4.3. War & Geopolitics 41
4.5. Violence, Discrimination & Exclusion 42

Conclusions & Final Thoughts 45

Bibliographic References 48

Appendix A 50
Appendix B 52

Introduction

In his 2021 paper, *Philosophies of Migration Governance in a Globalizing World* (pp. 105), Antoine Pécoud wrote:

> States progressively opened up to transnational flows of goods and investments and agreed to their liberalization, but people remained outside this process. This makes for today's imbalanced governance of globalization, marked by the contrast between the free circulation of capital and the unfree circulation of labour.

In November 2021, a news article was published in Lithuania about a situation at the Lithuanian-Belarusian border involving an Iraqi family with four children[1]. It sparked a heated and polarizing public debate, where some citizens condemned the Iraqi father for endangering his children by embarking on such a perilous journey, while others dismissed the situation, claiming the children were being used as a ploy to gain entry into Lithuania. A prevailing narrative also emerged that framed the family as a "weapon" of Belarusian President Lukashenko's regime, part of a broader hybrid warfare tactic. The humanitarian aspects of their situation were completely ignored, including how and why this family was constantly forced to cross borders without a clear status or protection. The discourse also ignored the pressing questions of their rights, safety, and the lack of a humane solution for their situation, revealing the broader issues of securitization over humanitarian considerations in Lithuania's handling of irregular migration.

Academic research on this topic is relatively divisive since the phenomenon is rather new and dynamic, particularly at the time of writing. It can also be challenging to conduct research on a topic where states and irregular migrants both seek to remain clandestine. Still, these types of circumstances also create the conditions for human rights violations to occur, go undetected, and leave little room for accountability. That is also the reason why this research topic is dynamic and political, and debates on it remain heated.

Studying Lithuania's contemporary irregular migration situation is also essential because it brings to light the current conflict that exists in migration governance between humanitarianism and national security. By looking at the state's pushback policies and the opposing humanitarian

[1] LRT.lt, BNS. Pasienyje su Baltarusija aptikta irakiečių šeima su 4 vaikais: ieškoti vyko Seimo narys Tomilinas, suteikus pagalbą, šeima išlydėta atgal į Baltarusiją. <https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/lietuvoje/2/1535940/pasienyje-su-baltarusija-aptikta-irakieciu-seima-su-4-vaikais-ieskoti-vyko-seimo-narys-tomilinas-suteikus-pagalba-seima-islydeta-atgal-i-baltarusija> [2021-11-07]

initiatives, this research aims to show how security-driven migration practices exercised by the state impact human rights, overall public perception, and civil society's role in advocating for migrants. This case could be an essential representation of the global migration difficulties because it provides deeper insights into EU migration policy, moral and legal issues, and the repercussions of securitizing migration. Therefore, this work aims to shed light on state and NGO dynamics in migration management by exploring how NGO Sienos Grupė workers and volunteers perceive and address irregular migration in Lithuania and how these assessments connect to broader institutional, societal, and geopolitical dynamics in managing irregular migration.

Research question: How is the irregular migration situation being perceived and tackled in Lithuania, according to activists and volunteers of the NGO Sienos Grupė? How do these perceptions reflect individual experiences and broader institutional and societal dynamics?

Research objectives:

1. To assess the current situation in Lithuania regarding irregular migration and analyze the state's role in managing this issue, including policies, strategies, and practices.
2. To describe how activists and volunteers of NGO Sienos Grupė perceive the irregular migration situation at the Lithuanian-Belarusian border.
3. To analyze how individual experiences of activists and volunteers of NGO Sienos Grupė relate to broader institutional, societal, and political dynamics.

The dissertation is comprised of four main chapters. The first chapter presents the literature review, drawing on various theoretical perspectives. The second chapter defines key terminology and provides the contextual background necessary to understand the present state of irregular migration in Lithuania. The third chapter outlines the qualitative research design, including participant selection, sampling, procedures, and data analysis. The fourth chapter reveals the findings from data collected through semi-structured interviews. The conclusions, along with the final observations, are covered in the last chapter.

CHAPTER 1

Literature Review

In order to thoroughly analyze the complex dynamics between state power, migration control, and humanitarian responses at the Lithuanian-Belarusian border, an integrative approach was selected for this literature review. This approach relies on a variety of theoretical perspectives and interdisciplinary insights. It will draw on Foucault's concept of Power and Biopolitics, examining Thanatopolitics and Zoopower, then exploring Engineered Migration and Migrant Instrumentalization, concluding with an overview of Collective Identity and Social Movements.

1.1. Foucault's Concepts of Power and Biopolitics

Before discussing Foucault's idea of biopolitics, one has to recall how he approached the concept of power. According to Foucault (1998, pp. 94), power cannot be "acquired, seized, shared", kept, or given up because it does not originate from a single source or place. According to his theory, power is primarily a relational phenomenon that is distributed throughout society "through ceaseless struggles and confrontations" rather than being concentrated in the hands of a sovereign (Foucault, 1998, pp. 92). Furthermore, "where there is power, there is resistance" (Foucault, 1998, pp. 96) due to this relational nature of power. Most significantly, Foucault distinguishes between biopower and sovereign power by asserting that the sovereign's privilege was the unrestricted ability to choose between life and death: "take life or let live" (Foucault, 2003, pp. 240). However, because the sovereign cannot give life in the same way that he can take it, there is always a bias in favor of the former. Therefore, according to Foucault, the shift from an unconditional understanding of this power to one that only allows the sovereign to kill whenever their own life is in danger is what defines modernity (Foucault, 1998).

Industrialization, population growth, and advances in medical knowledge made the sovereign power somewhat outdated. Still, according to Foucault, it did not vanish but instead evolved into two new types of power: biopower and disciplinary power. The purpose of the disciplinary power is primarily to control and supervise individual bodies through institutions (e.g., schools or prisons) to enforce conformity, while biopower expands this type of control into the population as a whole, using particular policies or systems to manage health, life, and demography of these societal populations (Foucault, 2003). Hence, the old sovereign right to "take life or let live" was replaced by the power to "foster life or disallow it to the point of death" (Foucault, 1998, pp. 138). The shift to "making one live and letting another die" is seen as the central power of biopolitics, which, according to Foucault, emerges predominantly within liberal forms of governance. Here, liberalism is oriented around managing individual freedom conditions while imposing controls, limitations, and forms of coercion. Foucault refers to this as *security*: a set of technologies involving forecasts, statistical estimates, and comprehensive measures to maintain equilibrium within society, balancing freedom with calculated mechanisms of regulation and control (Foucault, 2003).

By using the Foucauldian perspective in border studies, Nick Vaughan-Williams (2015) develops Michel Foucault's idea of biopolitics. He contends that contemporary border policies are a component of a larger biopolitical strategy meant to manage populations instead of just controlling territory. According to Vaughan-Williams (2015), borders serve as spaces where the state exercises biopolitical power by classifying people, particularly migrants, as either "worthy" or "unworthy" of protection. Under the pretense of security and sovereignty, this control enables the state to determine who is accepted into the social body and who is not, frequently justifying severe treatment and constraints on undocumented migrants.

The "illegality" of migratory movements has become a foundational industry for governments (Andersson, 2014). The argument used by the border surveillance industry is that immigration "crises" must be stopped despite the fact that the majority of data compiled by academics and other professionals demonstrates that tighter border controls do not prevent people from making unauthorized crossings (Andersson, 2014). Closing legal routes and intensifying border security have been shown to be key factors in the development of "irregular" migration (Andersson, 2014). By framing unsanctioned migration as an emergency or crisis, the political discourse hopes to divert attention from the needs of migrants and instead focus on the safety of a nation-state that is being attacked (Mohan et al., 2023).

1.2. Thanatopolitics & Zoopower

Building on Foucault's biopolitics and exploring the concept of "letting die", Giorgio Agamben's notion of thanatopolitics (or the politics of death) further illuminates the treatment of irregular migrants, especially through practices like pushbacks at borders (as cited in Vaughan-Williams, 2015, pp. 46). Agamben extends Foucault's ideas by suggesting that modern states practice a form of sovereign power that not only manages life but also exercises control over death, determining which lives are "bare" or stripped of rights and can be exposed to danger or death without consequence (as cited in Vaughan-Williams, 2015, pp. 50). In the context of migration, pushbacks illustrate thanatopolitics, as they embody state policies that place certain populations outside the protection of law, exposing them to violence, exploitation, or even death in the name of state security. This framing positions migrants as lives that can be disregarded, underscoring the state's authority over who is deemed valuable within its borders.

Additionally, Jacques Derrida's notion of zoopower offers a lens through which to view the conditions of detention centers, where migrants are often held in ways that strip them of human identity and agency (as cited in Vaughan-Williams, 2015, pp. 71). Based off of the story where a municipal zoo in Tripoli has become a migrant processing center, zoopower refers to a state's capacity to reduce individuals to a status similar to "animal life", devoid of political or social rights (as cited in Vaughan-Williams, 2015, pp. 89). Within detention centers, irregular migrants experience this reduction, as they are held in spaces where their agency and autonomy are minimized, their voices suppressed, and their existence regulated. Through Derrida's zoopower concept, detention becomes a form of dehumanization, where migrants are surveilled, confined, and controlled, echoing how states exercise a form of sovereign power that reduces them to "bare life" (Agamben's concept) and denies them full humanity within the state's biopolitical framework (as cited in Vaughan-Williams, 2015, pp. 91). Drawing on Derrida's notion of zoopower, Vaughan-Williams develops this further and suggests that zoopolitical borders represent an extension of biopolitical governance but operate at a more dehumanizing level and function by confining migrants in spaces such as detention centers, where they experience a kind of "animalization" (Vaughan-Williams, 2015).

1.3. Engineered Migration & Migrant Instrumentalization

The term "coercive engineered migration" is used by Greenhill (2010), and it is a phrase that describes migration in which people who eventually anticipate finding better economic prospects are exploited in a way that leaves them as forced migrants. Greenhill (2010) outlines two approaches: the coercer attempts to outweigh the target state's capability and the state's

motivation to accept migrants. Additionally, coercive engineered migration can pose a potential threat to liberal democracies and weak actors frequently engage in this behavior to obtain advantage (Greenhill, 2010). Turkey is a fitting example in this case, where the state is using refugees as a bargaining chip to further its own goals by posing threats to permit migrants to enter Europe and cross the EU borders (Gökalp Aras, 2019). This tactic appears to be growing in popularity as more eastern European countries (Serbia, Bosnia, and Belarus) have been condemned for using migrants as wagers against some EU members (Romania, Poland, Greece, Croatia) (Bejan & Nabi, 2021). Greenhill (2010) assumes two motives for why this method endures: due to political transparency, it is simpler for the coercer to forecast the results of an attack through forced migration, and secondly, the targeted nations are likely obligated to protect human rights under international agreements. Both reasons pose a conflict that is associated with real or perceived inconsistency between a state's declared commitment to liberal values and norms as well as its' actual or implied acts that go against that commitment (Greenhill, 2010). These inconsistencies have already transpired, and countries' political images are compromised as some migrants submit cases to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) for violation of human rights.

The intentional use of migration flows by governments or other political actors to further geopolitical or strategic goals is known as "migration instrumentalization," which frames migration as an oppressive instrument rather than a humanitarian issue. Fakhry, Parkes, and Rácz (2022) describe it as a hybrid threat tactic, where states manipulate migration flows to impose pressure or destabilize the surrounding regions, frequently in reaction to sanctions or political disputes. Greenhill (2010) further describes this tactic as using "weapons of mass migration" and notes that such forced displacement is used to coerce target states by creating crises that disrupt their social and political stability. For example, in 2021, Belarus allowed migrants to travel toward the EU's eastern borders to retaliate against European sanctions[2], creating a humanitarian crisis. Such instrumentalization of migration raises ethical concerns as it exploits vulnerable populations while casting them as security threats, which often reinforces restrictive and exclusionary policies in affected countries (Fakhry *et al*., 2022; Greenhill, 2010). Security issues, including terrorism and internal conflicts, are still cited as the primary reason for the promotion of restricted immigration laws (Luedtke, 2008). "Fortress Europe" is the term used to describe the shift towards stricter asylum laws, which suggests the Member States are prepared to further implement harsher migratory controls and policies (Thielemann, 2009).

[2] Council of the EU and the European Council. EU sanctions against Belarus
< https://europa.eu/!9fjygK > [2024-08-26]

1.4. Collective Identity & Social Movements

Understanding how individuals organize against severe migratory restrictions and discrimination requires an examination of social movements and collective identity. This reveals how activists are empowered by shared values and solidarity and oppose as well as advocate against state-imposed exclusions.

Melucci's notion of collective identity (1996) adds another layer to understanding grassroots activism, describing how social movements form through shared identities and values that unite individuals. His study mainly concentrated on social movements that gained popularity in the 1970s and 1980s, including feminist, environmental, and peace movements. In order to fully understand how these new social movements established solidarity through common identities and values, Melucci (1996) developed the idea of a dynamic process through which individuals in a social movement create and sustain a sense of belonging and shared purpose, which he named collective identity. Participants construct and constantly renegotiate it via discussion, shared ideals, and objectives. Despite having different backgrounds and motivations, this process helps people to see themselves as a part of a collective "we," bringing them together in action and purpose (Melucci, 1996). By fostering a sense of solidarity among activists, collective identity enables them to view their struggles as a component of a greater cause rather than as separate actions, and it also allows them to differentiate themselves from opposing groups and challenge dominant social norms and institutions. Maintaining involvement requires this identity formation, particularly in movements that encounter social resistance or demand that members engage in high-risk activism (Melucci, 1996). Melucci's (1996) theory emphasizes that a movement's endurance and unity are maintained by its relational ties, shared experiences, and consensus on goals. The idea of collective identity has been used to examine migrant solidarity movements in Italy, Greece, Germany, and Spain. This is particularly applicable in light of European border and migration politics following the 2015 refugee crisis, when locals and foreigners worked together to provide aid and promote refugee rights, frequently opposing EU border policies and detention practices. (Zamponi, 2018; Della Porta, 2018).

Doug McAdam's (1986) idea of high-risk activism looks at how people participate in activism that poses a high personal risk, such as possible legal ramifications, physical harm, or social exclusion. He asserts that people who engage in high-risk activism frequently do so because their moral convictions and sense of duty to their cause outweigh any potential personal costs (McAdam, 1986). McAdam (1986) referred to high-risk activism by analyzing the Freedom Summer project of 1964, where volunteers in the U.S. Civil Rights Movement worked to register Black voters in Mississippi despite facing severe threats, including violence, arrest, and even death. These high-risk activists were bound by a shared identity that surpassed individual motivations, transforming their personal convictions into a broader force for social change (McAdam, 1986).

One of the high-risks that activists face can be identified as Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs) which emerged in the US during the 1970s (Canan, 1989). By intimidating activists and constraining criticism, SLAPPs effectively discourage civic engagement and limit freedom of expression, upholding established power structures (Canan, 1989). To isolate and marginalize people or groups who challenge powerful interests, SLAPPs are described as a type of "legal intimidation", which serves to maintain the current social and political order as well as act as deterrents against activism and public participation in social advocacy (Canan, 1989). Canan (1989) primarily reviewed lawsuits in environmental and community activism contexts where citizens or community groups were sued by corporations or developers after raising concerns about environmental impacts, such as pollution or zoning decisions. Legal threats and SLAPP-like actions are increasingly applied in the context of irregular migration in Europe to suppress migrant support activities. For instance, authorities in Italy and Greece employ suspicion-based practices, intimidation, and administrative sanctions to deter NGOs and volunteers from supporting migrants, framing their actions as preventative measures against migrant smuggling (Allsopp *et al.*, 2021).

In summary, the literature on biopolitics, thanatopolitics, zoopower, and the instrumentalization of migration illustrates how state power categorizes and controls migrant populations, often framing them as security threats while neglecting humanitarian obligations. Collective identity and social movement theories further highlight how grassroots initiatives (such as those from NGOs) form in opposition to these exclusionary practices, fostering solidarity and resistance against restrictive policies. Together, these theoretical perspectives provide a comprehensive framework for analyzing how activists and volunteers perceive and respond to Lithuania's irregular migration challenges.

CHAPTER 2

Terminology & Contextual Background

2.1. Terminology

Before embarking on the contextual background, it is essential to introduce the two key terms used in both the dissertation's title and throughout: irregular migration and pushbacks.

2.1.1. Irregular Migration

While the term “irregular migration” is used in this work to refer to cross-border migration that does not follow the legal requirements of the sending, transit, and receiving countries, it should be noted that the concept is comprehensive and requires further exploration. In more reductive terms, it includes individuals who enter or remain in a country without the necessary authorization, documentation, or legal status established by that specific country. The phrase refers to a wide variety of situations, including people who overstay their legal permits, those who are fleeing conflict or persecution but do not have official refugee status, and those who are looking for better economic opportunities but do not have the required visas.

From a sociological perspective, “irregular migration” is not an inherent or neutral category but is socially constructed through legal, political, and social processes that assign legitimacy or illegitimacy to certain types of migration. Michel Foucault’s theory of biopolitics sheds light on how states exercise control over populations by creating categories like “irregular” migrants to regulate who is included or excluded from social rights and protections. By labeling some migrants as “illegal”, states assert control over their borders and manage perceived threats to national sovereignty, stability, or security, often at the expense of marginalized groups.

The "irregularity" element also arises from the fact that governments all over the world have been progressively restricting the legal and pathway options for safe migration (Mohan et al., 2023). This first started occurring in the 1970s when new policies were designed to restrict labor mobility in response to rising unemployment rates during the energy crisis. States then created security protocols to fortify borders simultaneously, and consequently, securitization changed the way migration was framed over the past decades, moving it from being a human rights issue to a security one (Vollmer, 2017 from Mohan et al., 2023). Although there are differences in approaches to irregular migration, and it usually depends on the policies put in place by the state, there are many similarities in the governance of irregular migration when considering the EU.

The emphasis on the potential safety of the nation-state reveals a sense of duality in the concept as a whole because emphasizing the safety of citizens frequently reduces the safety of irregular migrants themselves. Significant risks are frequently associated with irregular migration, such as being exploited by smugglers, experiencing dangerous travel circumstances, and being open to human rights violations. Because it impacts matters of security, sovereignty, humanitarian need, and human rights, it presents complex challenges to governments, international organizations, and the migrants themselves.

2.1.2. Pushback

The UN Special Rapporteur on human rights of migrants has described the term pushback as "*various measures taken by States, sometimes involving third countries or non-State actors, which result in migrants, including asylum seekers, being summarily forced back, without an individual assessment of their human rights protection needs, to the country or territory … from where they attempted to cross or crossed an international border.*"[3]

Forced relocations frequently involve psychological or even physical violence, which is typically carried out by the state or border police (Bužinkić & Avon, 2020). People's rights are routinely violated throughout this procedure since migrants who are being pushed back might not have access to legal assistance or protection from assault by police while in transit. There have been increasing reports on violence related to pushbacks, especially in the Balkan states, which disturbingly are mostly focused on border brutality, traumatic experiences, and effects

[3] A/HRC/47/30: Report of the Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants. < https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/ahrc4730-report-means-address-human-rights-impact-pushbacks-migrants > [2021-05-12]

of pushback on migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees (Marković *et al*., 2023; Davies *et al.*, 2020).

2.2. Contextual Background

To better understand the irregular migration events in the external EU borders of Lithuania-Belarus, one must go back to 2020, the year Alexander Lukashenko won re-election as president of Belarus.

Following the election, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) declared widespread and systematic violations of human rights. It demanded that the official election results be invalid due to discrepancies throughout the entire voting process[4]. The EU imposed a series of harsh penalties on the Belarusian government in reaction to the fraudulent election, and a group of Belarusian officers was mainly targeted by these sanctions, including freezing all their assets in Europe and a travel ban[5]. Lukashenko then issued a warning, stating that Belarus could loosen border controls against drug trafficking and illegal immigration headed toward the West in retaliation for the most recent EU sanctions: "*We were stopping drugs and migrants -- now you will catch them and eat them yourselves*"[6].

In the second half of 2021, Lithuania, Latvia, and Poland reported an increasing irregular migrant influx. Lithuania's government was quick to allege that Lukashenko's government was pushing for the opening of new migration routes to create instability[7]. The Belarusian government declared that it did not stop anyone from traveling to the outer borders of the EU[8].

As a response to the European sanctions and to create an artificial migration crisis on the EU's external border, a complex operation involving diplomatic missions, travel agencies, and airlines took place in the months that followed (Forti, 2023). The plan, according to several published reports and articles, was to fly migrants, primarily from the Middle East, to Minsk

[4] OSCE. Rapporteur's Report under the Moscow Mechanism on Alleged Human Rights Violations related to the Presidential Elections of 9 August 2020 in Belarus <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/2/b/469539.pdf> [2020-10-05]
[5] Council of the EU. Belarus: EU imposes sanctions for repression and election falsification <https://europa.eu/!dr63kU> [2020-10-02]
[6] Patrick Reevel, Ines de la Cuetara. Trapped in the woods: Belarus accused of using migrants as weapons < https://abcnews.go.com/International/trapped-woods-belarus-accused-migrants-weapons/story?id=80579382> Abc news [2021-10-15]
[7] Liudas Dapkus. Lithuania Says Belarus Could Be Behind Recent Migrant Influx < https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2021-06-07/lithuania-says-belarus-could-be-behind-recent-migrant-influx > Associated Press [2021-06-07]
[8] BelTA, Lukashenko comments on measures to fight illegal migration on border https://eng.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-comments-on-measures-to-fight-illegal-migration-on-border-141460-2021 [2021-06-06]

and then transfer them to the border with Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia.[9] Ylva Johansson, the European Commissioner for Home Affairs, charged that Lukashenko and the Belarusian government were using refugees as a weapon against the EU.[10] Furthermore, Belarus has been accused of waging a hybrid attack against the EU and its member states through hostile policies of instrumentalized migration, according to EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen[11].

In just one month (August–September 2021), Polish border authorities recorded roughly 9400 attempts to cross national borders illegally, while Latvia received around 582 requests for asylum in the same year. Lithuania has received a total of 4259 applications for asylum in 2021, 13 times more than the previous year (Figure 1).

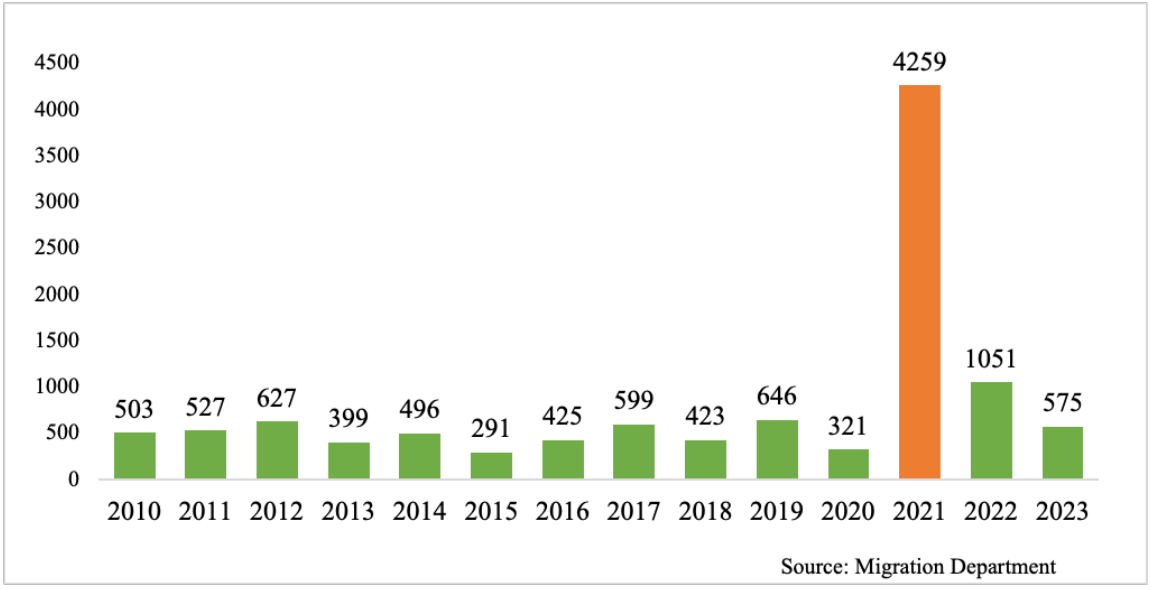


Figure 1. Applications for asylum in Lithuania, 2010-2023

In 2021, the majority of asylum applications in Lithuania (70%) were submitted by individuals from the Middle East and North African (MENA) regions, primarily from Iraq and Afghanistan, followed by 14% originating from Sub-Saharan Africa (e.g., Cameroon, Congo) (Figure 2). By 2022, the total number of asylum requests had reduced significantly, dropping to one-fourth of the previous year's total, and the regional distribution of applications shifted

[9] Aurel Sari. Instrumentalized migration and the Belarus crisis: Strategies of legal coercion <https://www.hybridcoe.fi/publications/hybrid-coe-paper-17-instrumentalized-migration-and-the-belarus-crisis-strategies-of-legal-coercion/> Hybrid CoE [2023-04-25]

[10] Jack Parrock. Lukashenko is 'using human beings' in an 'extreme act of aggression towards the EU', says Johansson < https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2021/08/25/lukashenko-is-using-human-beings-in-an-extreme-act-of-aggression-towards-the-eu-says-johan > Euronews [2021-08-25]

[11] European Commission. Statement by President von der Leyen at the joint press conference with NATO Secretary-General Stoltenberg and Latvian Prime Minister Kariņš in relation to the situation in Belarus and at its border with the EU < https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_21_6402 > [2021-11-28]

markedly. Applications from the MENA regions decreased to 27% of all submissions, while those from Europe increased dramatically from 10% in 2021 to 55%. In the most recent year, there were only 575 asylum requests, with nearly two-thirds (62%) originating from Europe, predominantly Belarus.

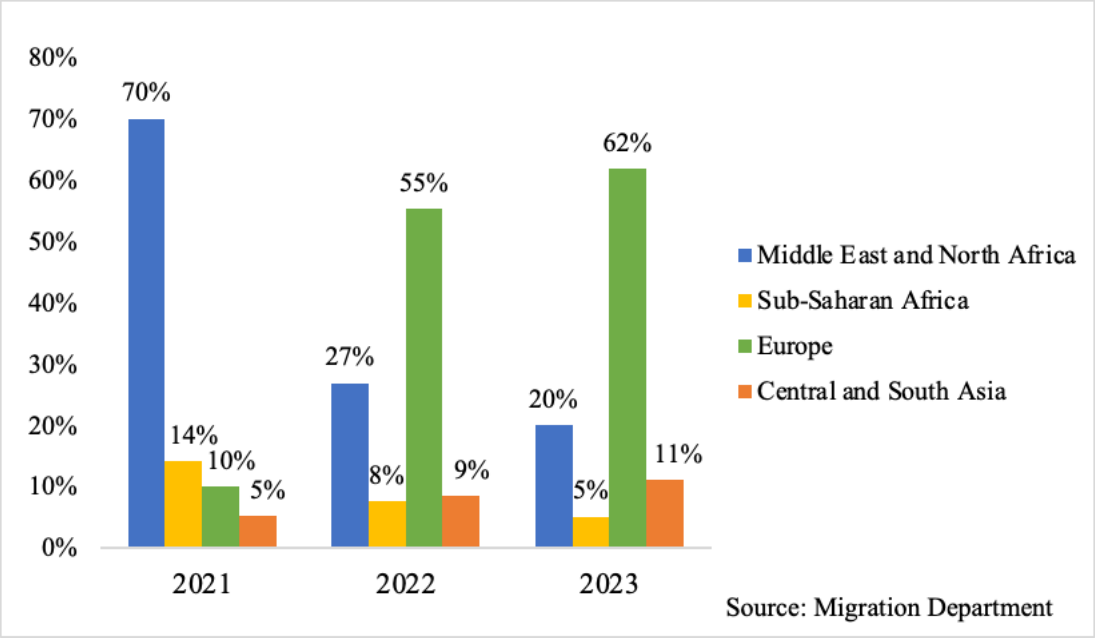


Figure 2. Proportional Distribution of Asylum Applications by Region, 2021-2023

The changing patterns in regional origin and the overall reduction in applications reflect actions taken by the governments of Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia, who, recognizing the steadily increasing number of migrants as a potential security threat, drastically modified their asylum and migration laws. These legislative changes were aimed at strengthening border controls and implementing more stringent criteria for asylum seekers, affecting the accessibility and processing of asylum requests in these countries. For example, in response to the increased border pressure, Polish authorities erected a 187-kilometer-long steel wall with barbed wire along its border with Belarus and deployed roughly 25,000 soldiers and 4,000 border guards. In Latvia, the state of emergency in the border areas has been extended seven times, and in August 2023, it was lifted and replaced by a robust border protection regime, which is still in place today (Fundacja Ocalenie, 2024). Latvia also completed the construction of a 154-kilometer fence along its Belarus border in July 2024[12].

[12] Latvian Public Broadcasting. Latvian-Belarusian border fence project completed. < https://eng.lsm.lv/article/society/defense/31.07.2024-latvian-belarusian-border-fence-project-completed.a563367/ > [2024-07-31]

On July 2, 2021, the Lithuanian government declared an extreme state situation in response to a "mass influx" of foreigners. The Interior Minister, appointed as the Head of State-Level Emergency Operations, then authorized the deterrence of migrants crossing the Belarus-Lithuania border on August 2, 2021[13]. In August alone, the Lithuanian State Border Guard Service (VSAT) recorded 2,079 incidents of "turning away" migrants at the border, a term used instead of "pushback" to distance the government from any claims of illegal activities. It's relevant to note that even though a person or group may be "turned away" more than once, official government statistics do not identify these instances because government representatives do not record individuals and their biometric parameters before a pushback. In response to increasing border security concerns, Lithuania began construction of a 4-meter-high barbed wire fence along its 678-kilometer border with Belarus in October 2021, completing the barrier in August 2022[14]. All three countries not only constructed physical barriers but also enhanced their border security with extensive surveillance systems. In September 2023, a noteworthy trend followed as Lithuanian authorities reported a rise of migrants coming to Lithuania through Latvia, aiming to reach Western Europe. Lithuania's Minister of Interior reported that 1,085 irregular migrants were apprehended in Lithuania and sent back to Latvia, where they had initially crossed from Belarus into the EU[15].

Moreover, Lithuanian authorities adopted amendments to the Law of the Republic of Lithuania on the Legal Status of Aliens, where in the event of martial law, a state of emergency, or an emergency brought on by a sudden influx of asylum applications, the maximum 28-day stay at places for arbitrary detention has been extended to six months. Adopted changes established guidelines stating that asylum applications would be reviewed promptly, appeals would be settled via the Migration Department, and the courts' decisions of first instance would be final and not susceptible to review by courts of higher appeal[16]. In November 2021, the Parliament of Lithuania declared a state of emergency, and in December, a new amendment was ratified (to the Law of the Republic of Lithuania on the Legal Status of Aliens No. XIV-816), which extended migrants' detention from six months to a year.

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[13] Minister of Internal Affairs of Tthe Republic of Lithuania. Decision of the Head of State-Level Emergency Operations < https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/6c0ea3a0f42811ebb4af84e751d2e0c9?jfwid=zh18cyw1m > [2021-08-02]

[14] BNS. Lithuania completes building fence along border with Belarus. < https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1768340/lithuania-completes-building-fence-along-border-with-belarus > [2022-08-29]

[15] BNS. Ministerija: šiemet iš Latvijos atvykusių neteisėtų migrantų padaugėjo 20 kartų. < https://diena.lt/naujienos/lietuva/salies-pulsas/ministerija-siemet-latvijos-atvykusiu-neteisetu-migrantu-padaugejo-20-kartu-1141598#google_vignette > [2023-09-27]

[16] "Law amending Articles 5, 71, 76, 77, 79, 113, 131, 136, 138, 139 and 140 of Law No IX-2206 of the Republic of Lithuania on the Legal Status of Aliens and adding Chapter IX-1 to the Law", July 13, 2021. < https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/legalAct.html?documentId=a4780990eac111eb9f09e7df20500045 >

On April 25, 2023, the most critical change occurred as the Lithuanian parliament passed the “push-back law”, authorizing border guards to turn away migrants entering the border strip during periods of extreme situation regimes or states of emergency[17]. The legislation was heavily criticized by many international NGOs and even condemned by Amnesty International, which stated that this move would give a “green-light to torture”[18].

Following the legislative developments in Lithuania, attention shifted to the broader societal and political reactions toward migrants. Politicians and the media have significantly shaped the narrative around migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. Politicians have predominantly framed the migration issue through a security lens, particularly in response to perceived threats from a strategically aggressive Belarusian regime and the orchestrated movement of migrants from Africa and the Middle East. This security-centric discourse has often overshadowed considerations of human rights, leading to public discontent and prompting certain radical groups in Lithuania to organize anti-immigration demonstrations[19]. Interestingly, these political groups also actively participated in protests against unrelated issues, such as LGBT rights and participation in anti-NATO movements[20]. The media also frequently adopts biased language, with pervasive use of terms like "illegal migrant" and a noticeable lack of representation of the voices of asylum seekers[21]. This approach is not unique to Lithuania; similar populist and fear-inducing tactics have been observed elsewhere in the EU (Bosswell *et al.*, 2011). Such framing obstructs the development of effective migration policies by distorting public perception and policy priorities (Geddes & Hadj-Abdou, 2018).

The politicization of migration often translates into security policies that compromise the rights and freedoms of migrants, reinforcing a cycle of exclusion and marginalization (Huysmans, 2006). The EU migration policies conflict with the growing militarization of national borders and control over immigration. Schengen Borders Code (SBC) 19 Recital 26 outlined why the migration of multiple citizens of third countries shouldn't be seen as a security

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[17] Andrius Sytas. Lithuania passes legislation allowing border guards to turn back migrants < https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/lithuania-passes-legislation-allowing-border-guards-turn-back-migrants-2023-04-25/ > [2023-04-25]

[18] Amnesty International. Lithuania: Legalizing illegal pushbacks gives green-light to torture. https://www.amnesty.eu/news/lithuania-attempt-to-legalize-pushbacks-would-green-light-torture/ [2023-04-20]

[19] LRT. Šeimų maršo protestuotojai surengė akciją pasienyje prieš migrantų atvykimą. < https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/lietuvoje/2/1448724/seimu-marso-protestuotojai-surenge-akcija-pasienyje-pries-migrantu-atvykima > [2021-07-11]

[20] LRT. Už Šeimų maršo rengėjų ir rėmėjų – antiNATO mitingų šleifas, pronacistinės organizacijos ir ryšiai su VSD ataskaitose minimais asmenimis < https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/lrt-tyrimai/5/1410733/lrt-tyrimas-uz-seimu-marso-rengeju-ir-remeju-antinato-mitingu-sleifas-pronacistines-organizacijos-ir-rysiai-su-vsd-ataskaitose-minimais-asmenimis > [2021-05-07]

[21] Media4Change. “The Crisis of Migrant Representation in the Media“ < https://www.media4change.co/reactions/the-crisis-of-migrant-representation-in-the-media/ > [2021-07-16]

risk in and of itself. However, the dehumanization of migrants brought about by the securitization of migration issues justifies the lack of regard for their rights. Physical barriers, pushback procedures, and the establishment of detention facilities that are primarily overcrowded and inadequate in terms of living conditions are examples of this.

CHAPTER 3

Methodology

3.1. Organization

According to John B. Thompson (1995), most people observe irregular migration through a “mediated experience” indirectly shaped by media, which differs from the direct, “lived experience” that is immediate and unfiltered. For those with firsthand encounters—such as volunteers, aid workers, officials, or journalists—the migrant influx is an authentic, personal experience. The individual impacts of being driven out are what make up the "lived experience" of the refugee crisis (Szczepanik, 2016). Refugees and migrants share them with different individuals, such as workers of aid-providing organizations or researchers conducting fieldwork. This is a one-of-a-kind experience that can focus on things like losses of social networks and political and legal rights in the context of displacement (Szczepanik, 2016).

This chapter discusses the final sample and the process of selecting participants. It also explains the research design, sample, procedure, and data analysis, including how the theoretical framework was implemented.

This research explores how NGO Sienos Grupė workers and volunteers perceive and address irregular migration in Lithuania and how these views connect to broader institutional, societal, and geopolitical dynamics in managing irregular migration.

To achieve this goal, the following tasks are set:

1. Investigate the personal motivations, backgrounds, and values of NGO Sienos Grupė workers and volunteers engaged in humanitarian work.
2. Analyze how NGO Sienos Grupė workers and volunteers perceive irregular migrants and how these perceptions compare to societal and institutional views.
3. Describe the approaches, strategies, and practices NGO Sienos Grupė has employed to provide aid and advocate for irregular migrant rights.
4. Assess the legal, social, and institutional challenges NGO Sienos Grupė has encountered, particularly in relation to government restrictions, public perception, and media portrayal, as they navigate a tense environment at the border.
5. Investigate the impacts of external forces faced by NGO Sienos Grupė and how it navigates the tension between national security concerns and humanitarian principles.

6. Document the forms of violence, discrimination, and exclusion that NGO Sienos Grupė's volunteers and activists have observed among irregular migrants both inside the country and at the border.

3.2. Research Design

A qualitative single case study research design based on semi-structured interviews is applied in this thesis. By comparing various observations made within a single case, case-based research allowed me to collect as much detailed data as possible (6 & Bellamy, 2012). Compared to other designs, case-based research is more adaptable because it promotes an iterative discussion between theory and empirical evidence, which helped me get a thorough understanding of the information at hand (6 & Bellamy, 2012). Semi-structured interviews allowed me (as the interviewer) to guide the conversation and make sure it stayed relevant to the research objective while also providing the participants with the freedom to discuss topics that were significant to them (Brinkman, 2015). I was able to gather the essence of each person's experience through qualitative interviewing, which is something that could hardly be done with any other approach.

Despite criticism for being excessively subjective, qualitative interviewing has been considered the best approach to understanding the way people live because of its capacity to identify the distinctive qualitative aspects of an individual's life (Brinkmann, 2022). However, I acknowledge that the data gathered from the interviews does not represent the objective truth but rather is a byproduct of social practice and is influenced by both my and the participants' understandings of the current reality. This is in line with the constructivist approach, which holds that reality is constantly constructed by those participating in it (Brinkmann, 2022).

3.3. Sample & Procedure

A combination of purposive and snowball sampling techniques was used to select the respondents (Patton, 2002). It is relevant to note that although each sampling technique has its obstacles, combined, they provide a more complete understanding of the target group. While purposive sampling ensured that the participants were chosen based on the precise research criteria, snowball sampling aided in locating initially undetected participants. The sample consists of seven individuals involved in activist and aid work at the NGO Border Group (Sienos Grupė), the first grassroots initiative that emerged in response to the rising migrant influx on the borders in Lithuania in 2021. The interviewees represent a diverse group of

individuals involved with an NGO and contributing to its mission of aiding irregular migrants in Lithuania or at the border with Belarus. They include individuals with backgrounds in activism, academia, social work, and humanitarian efforts, each bringing unique perspectives shaped by their varied experiences in different countries and sectors. Their engagement in this range of work is driven by a commitment to humanitarian principles and social justice and a desire to challenge dominant narratives around migration.

The particular sociodemographic details of each respondent have been deliberately omitted to protect their anonymity because the NGO is relatively small, and providing such information could potentially lead to their identification. This decision protects the participants' privacy while allowing their perspectives to contribute significantly to studying irregular migration and humanitarian assistance in Lithuania.

Several individuals in my target group were contacted by a family member with an extensive social network, informing them about the study. I got in touch with the participants directly after they showed interest. A few respondents referenced other participants after the interviews. All of them were sent a message via Messenger or WhatsApp at first, and when the response was positive, we set up a time and a meeting point to conduct the interview. In the event of an online interview, I asked for the participants' email addresses so that I could send them the link to the Zoom or Google Meets meetings.

The interviews were carried out in 2024 between July 8 and August 2. They lasted an average of 80 minutes, ranging from 60 to 109 minutes. The interview formats included both in-person (four) and virtual (three) interviews. Out of those conducted virtually, one was via the Zoom platform and two via the Google Meets platform. In-person interviews were conducted in various public locations, mutually selected by both parties, where my criteria as an interviewer were to ensure a comfortable space in which the respondent would feel safe enough as well as a space silent enough where an audio recording of decent quality could be made (Roulston, 2010). Both modes have their pros: while face-to-face interviews offer the advantage of richer, non-verbal communication and a more natural flow (which can enhance data quality), virtual interviews offer greater convenience and flexibility, especially for participants in varying locations (Opdenakker, 2006; Archibald et al., 2019). After the interviews began, the participants were asked to confirm their consent to participate verbally. Both my phone and my personal computer were used to record the interviews.

Since the interviews were semi-structured and followed by an interview guide, which was categorized into broader topics (Appendix A: Interview Guide), I made notes of specific responses or non-verbal clues that were of relevance and adjusted the conversation accordingly (Roulston, 2010). After the first interview, the categorical structure became more crystalized. Almost all questions in the questionnaire were designed in an open-ended format, with careful attention to neutrality, to avoid leading responses and to encourage in-depth answers rather than brief ones. Facilitating informal conversations helped participants elaborate on topics related to their drive, which resulted in the emergence of new themes and the collection of richer data.

Lithuanian was the language used for conducting and transcribing the interviews. The transcription process for this research resulted in 147 pages of text. I manually transcribed the first interview, while the rest were processed using "Ausis", a transcription tool developed and used by the Vilnius University community for converting Lithuanian phonograms into text. Despite the use of this tool, significant editing and proofreading were required to ensure accuracy and coherence. To enhance the readability of the transcripts, filler words, utterances, and extended pauses were excluded from the final text. The relevant interview segments were translated from Lithuanian to English and are presented in the upcoming "Findings" chapter to ensure accessibility and clarity for the broader academic audience.

It is relevant to note that certain ethical considerations and limits to the study can be identified. Due to the NGO's small size and the delicate nature of its work, anonymity and confidentiality are essential because even the smallest sociodemographic detail could jeopardize participant privacy. Furthermore, given the divisive topic of border security and migration policies, the study's conclusions may affect how the public perceives the NGO or its interactions with the government. An ethical priority is making sure the research doesn't unintentionally damage the organization's operations or reputation with authorities. Lastly, generalizability is limited due to the focus on a specific group working in a particular context (Lithuania's border with Belarus), which may limit the applicability of its findings to other contexts.

3.4. Data Analysis

The collected interview data was analyzed using the qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA. Using MAXQDA for qualitative analysis is particularly relevant because it facilitates the systematic management and organization of complex coding processes, enabling a more rigorous and structured analysis (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2019). Initially, broader sections

of the interviews were coded in alignment with the interview guide. After that, I reviewed these sections again, coding the smaller, more relevant sections and defining thematic subcategories. There were ultimately 614 coded segments in the entire code system. Given the large number of segments deemed important, I then consolidated the more minor codes into broader categories to structure the findings more coherently by identifying connections between the developed categories. I then worked to identify a central category that linked them all together, forming a cohesive narrative that guided the writing of my findings. This step-by-step process of coding and organizing themes aligns with a thematic analysis approach, which focuses on identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The MAXQDA program was particularly useful due to its analytical function of attaching memos and comments to documents, codes, and data segments, allowing me to review specific codes with greater ease and quickly reference my notes when revisiting certain parts of the data. This feature streamlined the analysis process, providing better organization and enabling me to track my thoughts and reflections throughout the coding stages.

There has been much discussion among researchers regarding the importance of validity and reliability for qualitative research, with different perspectives held by different scholars (Bryman, 2016). In this study, research quality was ensured by adhering to criteria such as credibility, transferability, and dependability, which are widely regarded as more fitting for qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was enhanced through a rigorous and systematic coding process, ensuring the accurate representation of participants' perspectives. Transferability was addressed by providing detailed descriptions of the research context, allowing others to assess the applicability of the findings to similar settings. Dependability was maintained by documenting the research process comprehensively to ensure transparency and consistency.

CHAPTER 4

Findings

This chapter presents the findings from the data collected through semi-structured interviews with volunteers and activists involved in NGO Sienos Grupė, who are addressing the humanitarian crisis of irregular migration in Lithuania. This chapter is structured into five main sections, which correspond to the themes emerging from the analyses of the interviews with the qualitative software program MAXQDA. Each is further divided into specific subsections for enhanced clarity and depth. Initially, the analysis delves into the participants' profile, experiences, and practices. It then transitions to exploring varied perceptions of migrants. This is followed by an examination of the NGO Sienos Grupė activities and its interactions with various stakeholders. Subsequently, the analysis shifts to the external influences that shape the strategies of Sienos Grupė. The final section addresses the complex landscape of violence, discrimination, and exclusion within Lithuania's irregular migration context.

4.1. Volunteer Experiences & Practices

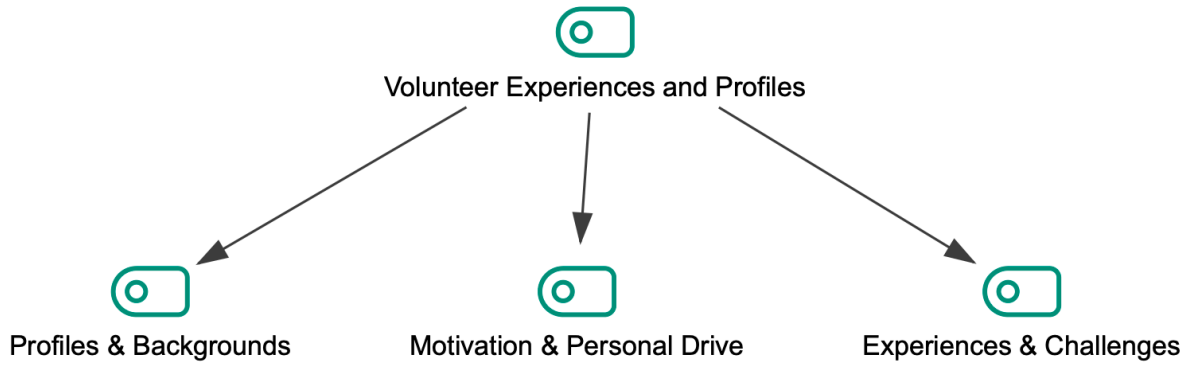


Figure 2. Codes for the category “Volunteer Experiences and Profiles”

Examining volunteer profiles and experiences can help clarify what drives citizens to become involved in social activism, how their personal experiences shape their behavior, and what barriers they face. This type of information relies on understanding the micro-level processes that could contribute to larger social movements and how these movements engage with larger societal structures.

4.1.1. Profiles & Backgrounds

It is essential to emphasize that providing detailed demographic profiles of respondents could risk revealing their identities. Therefore, the focus will remain on presenting significant findings that safeguard participant confidentiality, ensuring that insights are shared without compromising their anonymity.

Several significant findings emerged from the segments that illustrate how volunteers' personal histories, educational backgrounds, and prior experiences contribute to their engagement in humanitarian work. First, and most significantly, having international experiences and cultural exposure. Every single interviewee has at some point lived, studied, or worked abroad, particularly in countries known for stronger welfare systems or humanitarian values, such as Germany or Scandinavian countries. They seem to be more open to new ideas, more socially conscious, and more sympathetic to underrepresented groups as a result of these experiences, which increases their likelihood of becoming involved in activism:

"People with foreign experience are more supportive and more willing to connect" (Respondent 2)

"*Many [volunteers] are people who have lived abroad, who themselves probably have that experience of migration and understand what it means to cling to life in some other country, and of course, they are not afraid of diversity.*" (Respondent 4)

The progressive values they encountered abroad likely helped them align with the mission of the NGO they joined. This aligns with the highlighted role of cultural diversity in fostering empathy and shaping the motivations and actions of volunteers (Wilson, 2000).

Five out of seven respondents possessed higher education degrees, holding at least a bachelor's degree, whereas the remaining two actively pursued such qualifications. A noteworthy finding regarding the respondents' backgrounds was their educational background in socially oriented fields. By the time the research was conducted, one of the interviewees was enrolled in the social sciences and humanities program, and another was studying sociology. One respondent had a bachelor's degree in social work, and the other two were working on an academic research project related to irregular migration. This sort of knowledge and academic background in socially relevant subjects equips volunteers with a deeper understanding of structural inequalities and the global dynamics of migration.

The aforementioned findings highlight the importance of personal backgrounds, particularly cultural exposure and educational experience, in shaping volunteers' identities as activists. Travelling abroad develops empathy and a more global view, while education in social sciences provides the knowledge needed to critically engage with migration and human rights issues. This combination of empathy and knowledge makes volunteers highly effective in addressing the complex humanitarian challenges they encounter.

4.1.2. Motivation & Personal Drive

Several significant focuses emerged from the segments that illustrate the internal and external factors driving volunteers' engagement. These findings are important as they reveal the deeper motivations behind individuals' engagement in humanitarian work, showing how personal values and emotional connections to irregular migration influence their actions. The desire to counteract social apathy was one of the most common personal drivers for the respondents. They perceived Lithuanian society as being either ignorant of the situation on the border or apathetic toward it. Some respondents went so far as to express their frustration with the lack of interest in the migrant crisis displayed by the general public. This frustration served as an incentive for them to take personal action.

"And what I see is that our civil society is not that strong. And those people, especially those who have not received asylum, who are here illegally, or who do not have documents, absolutely nobody cares about them." (Respondent 2)

"I really want to be there because I understand that a small part of the public is only involved in this, and it felt like more hands were needed" (Respondent 5)

The responses indicate a sense of moral urgency and desire to counteract societal inaction while driving individuals to engage in volunteer work and social movements, particularly in contexts where they perceive injustice and apathy (McAdam, 1986).

The public disengagement may also indicate that the government and media are not providing enough information about the overall situation at the border or in the detention centers where undocumented migrants are held. Several participants also highlighted this, and some raised concerns that the government was attempting to hide the realities of the situation.

"*It started to get cold, and somehow, the number of people did not decrease. Then there was a natural question: how do they survive that cold, and just in the same weeks, they [the state] banned almost everyone, including journalists, from going to the border, and then there was that natural curiosity and anger about those bans*." (Respondent 1)

Activists and volunteers became motivated to get involved and monitor the situation, as they felt the government was being dishonest about the conditions and the number of people being pushed back at the border. This could correlate with activism often arising when citizens feel excluded from information and decision-making processes, particularly in contemporary settings where governments may control or manipulate information (Melucci, 1996).

Some respondents also expressed a strong personal commitment to human rights and rejection of injustice. Their motivation to engage in activism is driven by a deep belief that a just and ethical society cannot exist without safeguarding human rights. These comments also indicate a strong personal drive to oppose systems of oppression and inequality:

"I personally would not want to live in an apartheid state" (Respondent 5)

"We are talking about standards, standards of humanity, in principle, I don't need a state where national security exists only by itself. I don't need a country that, you know, does not have human rights in its national security." (Respondent 4)

The participants' motivations were challenging to classify because there wasn't just one overarching motivation; rather, they were quite varied, from simply gaining experience in humanitarian work to hopes for enduring influence of future advocacy and policymaking. By balancing individual values with collective efforts to remove structural inequalities, the variety of components keeps volunteers committed and enhances the overall effectiveness of humanitarian organizations.

4.1.3. Experiences & Challenges

Volunteers reported both positive experiences and significant challenges during their involvement. On the positive side, many volunteers expressed a deep sense of pride in grassroots mobilization and felt a strong sense of community within the NGO. They also highlighted how working together in a collective effort to address the humanitarian crisis fostered solidarity and a shared purpose, which was highly rewarding. However, volunteers also faced several challenges. One major difficulty was maintaining volunteer engagement and sustaining community spirit over time, especially as the initial urgency of the crisis faded.

"And there are some volunteers, I call them "sleeping", they really are like some sleeping beauties (...) But I know that if there was a call to go to the forest (...) they would come back very quickly." (Respondent 3)

Additionally, many respondents noted the challenge of transitioning from an emergency response mode to handling more administrative tasks as the NGO became more structured, which occasionally led to frustration and reduced motivation among volunteers. Some even expressed a certain nostalgia for hands-on assistance in the forest and stated that NGO Sienos Grupė is expressing a sort of "identity crisis" since the activity at the border has decreased significantly since 2021. This mirrors previous findings on how grassroots movements often face internal tensions and identity struggles as they shift from direct action to more formalized, organizational structures (Maiba, 2005).

These mixed experiences reflect both the empowering aspects of collective action and the obstacles in sustaining long-term engagement in volunteer work. They highlight the evolving nature of the volunteer efforts and the nonstop need to adapt and reinvent the organization's approach.

4.2. Contrasting Migrant Perceptions

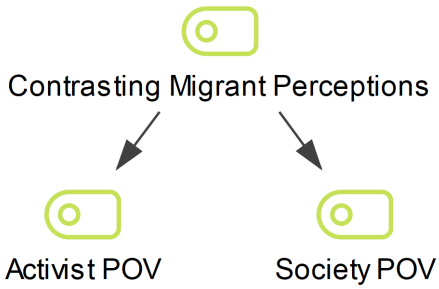


Figure 3. Codes for the category "Contrasting Migrant Perceptions"

This section looks at how activists characterize civil society's perspective on migrants and the contrasting views they have about them. This breakdown sheds light on the differences between common assumptions and more knowledgeable, compassionate viewpoints of individuals who have direct experience working with migrants.

4.2.1. Activist POV

Volunteers and activists working closely with migrants tend to hold more nuanced, empathetic views. Diverse migrant profiles are acknowledged, with activists recognizing the varied backgrounds of migrants, from those with financial means who still take illegal routes to those who lack basic language skills and rely on guides.

"People, of course, are very diverse (...) And from very much with Western know-how, where they speak all kinds of languages, to very precarious, where... Where, you know, you wouldn't be able to communicate with" (Respondent 5)

Activists often see migrants as courageous, willing to take great risks to secure a better life, and express a strong empathetic perspective. Furthermore, some activists pose a nuanced view of asylum seekers, understanding that not all migrants are fleeing immediate danger but still prioritizing humanitarian assistance without judgment. For instance, respondent 1 recalls that no one was questioning whether migrants were escaping persecution or seeking a better life when they called for assistance from the forest, freezing and starving. The preservation of their life is of utmost importance for activists. This perspective highlights the complex reality of providing aid and advocacy, especially in situations where migrant presence fluctuates due to deportations and re-entries. Providing aid to everyone also doesn't mean that activists don't recognize the underlying motivations that drive migrants to flee their homes. According to them, many are seeking safety and better living conditions, especially minority groups:

"There are, for example, Iraqis who are LGBT <...> where the father sends them money, you know, the father is a lawyer in Iraq, but he just can't live there at all. He had a great life in Iraq financially, but he is not safe there because of his orientation." (Respondent 3)

One of the main reasons why some participants continue to fight for the rights of migrants is the perception that they are marginalized by the state. The same story, shared by two participants, had a profound impact on them and stuck in their memories as a symbol of injustice:

"I personally was visually traumatized the most, probably the state of this situation, when we went, you know, to that camp in [location], <...> the people are surrounded by that simple fence and like you drove with the organization every day, sharing 1,5L of water per day. As it happened, we got to the fence, and people were putting their hands through the fence. Almost all of the hands are not white, you know, and we were throwing water at them like that. And then wars start to take place [inside the camp] because people started stealing the water from each other <...> and then I turn back, look to the side, and the border guards were testing a water cannon, you know. And I think <...> I'm sorry for swearing." (Respondent 4)

This story represents the profound injustice and marginalization of migrants, illustrating their dehumanization and extreme deprivation, where basic necessities like water are rationed, and their suffering is met with indifference or force by authorities.

4.2.2. Society POV

It is important to acknowledge that the following discussion of society's perception of migrants is viewed through the lens of activists and volunteers and is based on their encounters in person or via social media. While it does not represent the entire society, it reflects broader tendencies and patterns observed by those working closely with irregular migrants.

The general public generally perceives migrants through a lens shaped by stereotypes, misinformation, and homogenized narratives. The societal perspectives frame migrants as outsiders who do not belong to the established social group. Terms like "strangers" and "others" as mentioned by Respondents 1 and 7 reflect this view that migrants are often viewed as fundamentally different, which fosters social distance, exclusion, and reinforces stereotypes that dehumanize them.

Moreover, the most recent migrant influx in 2021 makes people generalize migrants who have come to Lithuania previously and have already established a life for themselves:

"[there is] a refugee from Sri Lanka who has been living here for a long time. People ask him, "Did you climb over the fence?" He has probably lived here since 2010, and when he says that he is from Sri Lanka and a refugee, then they ask him "Did you come from Belarus over the fence?" It would be interesting to talk to other people, foreigners, living in Lithuania, are they all now suspected of having come over the border?" (Respondent 1)

The tendency to generalize can lead to misconceptions, where even long-established migrants are unfairly grouped with recent arrivals, as society often fails to differentiate between diverse migrant backgrounds and experiences. Activists notice a struggle in society to shift these narratives and update their preconceived notions, resulting in a gap between public perception and the actual diversity of the migrant population. This struggle becomes particularly apparent when people learn about specific instances of criminal activity involving migrants. For instance, Respondent 7 observed a rise in hateful remarks on the Facebook page of Sienos Grupė following news of a border guard stabbing in Poland. The majority of the comments focused on proving that all immigrants pose a threat. This finding, though unfortunate, is not new; hate speech against migrants has been widely documented in the digital sphere by several scholars (Aldamen, 2023; Gonçalves, 2024).

An interesting observation was made among younger volunteers. They tend to view society as a more dynamic and fluid group, making it harder for them to categorize societal perceptions. They also appear to have more hope and understanding regarding how society views migrants, often trying to understand the reasons and recognizing how easy it is for society to fall into the trap of generalizing migrants when exposed only to simplistic, homogenized narratives through mainstream media. Their involvement with NGO Sienos Grupė allows them to see the diverse stories and motivations behind migration:

"*If I had not joined the Sienos Grupė and had not had the opportunity to communicate with people (...) perhaps it is not difficult for an ordinary citizen, a person, listening, reading general articles, messages, to generalize in this way, to see that (...) is some kind of one story, one narrative, but there are no different reasons why people may come to Lithuania and their stories of coming to Lithuania in general."* (Respondent 6)

In conclusion, a look into how activists and society view migrants reveals important distinctions in the ways that these groups approach and interpret the migrant crisis. Activists offer a more sympathetic and nuanced understanding, whereas society frequently relies on stereotypes and generalizations. What is interesting to note is that, despite having very different points of view, both viewpoints recognize migrants as "transiting" people—individuals passing through rather than settling—highlighting the shared recognition of migrants' temporary, unstable status in the country, albeit viewed through different lenses.

4.3. NGO Sienos Grupė: Role & Relations

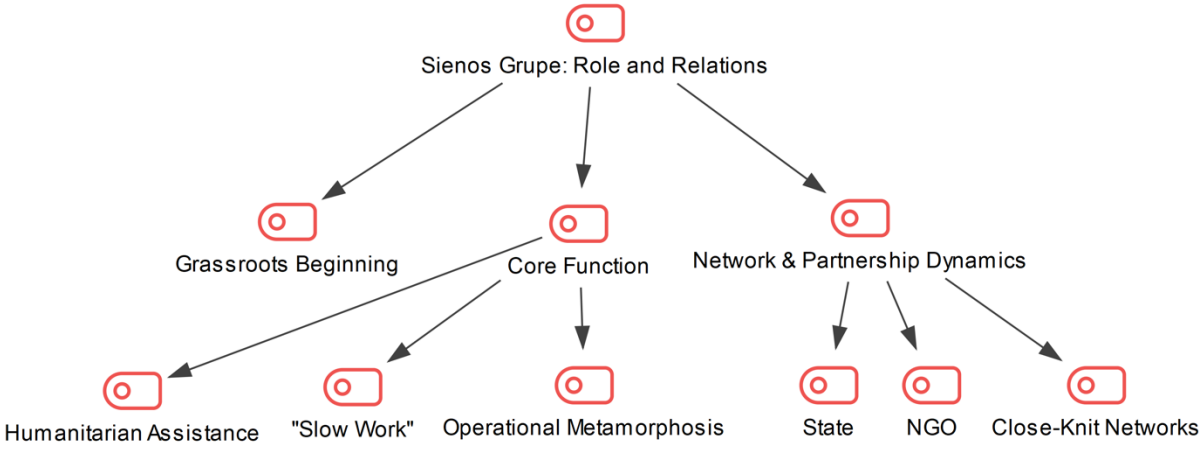


Figure 4. Codes for the category "Sienos Grupe: Role and Relations"

This category delves into the complex roles and relationships of Sienos Grupė, the NGO at the center of this research. It is actively involved in resolving irregular migration-related issues in Lithuania and working to ensure the rights of migrants and asylum seekers. It examines the organization's grassroots beginnings, how its strategy and operations have changed over time, and how it interacts dynamically with both other NGOs and the government.

4.3.1. Grassroots Beginning

The original formation and motivations of Sienos Grupė are rooted in grassroots activism. As the Belarus border crisis started to develop in 2021, a strong sense of urgency and responsibility took hold of one of the co-founders of Sienos Grupė. Respondent 2 stated that they were compelled to act after reading about the situation in Poland and hearing about the frightening occurrences and the pushback policies being put in place in Lithuania. Their emotional and

personal investment deepened as they connected with others concerned about the crisis, culminating in a critical social media post that resonated widely. This post not only articulated the stark realities at the border but also galvanized support, leading to key collaborations that marked the beginning of Sienos Grupė in October 2021. The grassroots efforts quickly gained momentum as more individuals, inspired by the co-founder's candidness and commitment, joined the cause:

"And then [deducted] called. They say, how is it here, I can help, and then another woman calls from a similar field, and the woman also says: "listen, what's going on here?" And then I say, here you just need to start being on duty and providing humanitarian aid. And I think, wow, it seems impossible, we all work, everyone is busy, and now you have it somehow, and somehow they supported that idea. Well, here was the turning point. That there were a couple of people who supported that idea <...> It was also a great lesson for me in life anyway, that telling the truth, no matter how uncomfortable it is, can open up doors." (Respondent 2)

This story perfectly encapsulates the grassroots beginnings of Sienos Grupė, emphasizing the critical role that public advocacy and personal conviction played in obtaining support and establishing the organization. Social movements indeed emerge when networks unite around shared interests and collective identities (McAdam et al., 2003).

4.3.2. Core Function

This subcategory explores the primary operational aspects of Sienos Grupė, specifying how the organization enacts its mission through varied strategic approaches and activities that fluctuated over time.

Humanitarian Assistance

This sort of work in Sienos Grupė focuses on immediate, hands-on interventions in crises, providing critical on-the-ground support to migrants at the border. During the peak of the migrant influx in Lithuania in 2021–2022, humanitarian intervention was the main objective in the organization's early days. At that time, Sienos Grupė was the only grassroots-based non-governmental organization to provide ad-hoc aid in Lithuania, attempting to establish personal contact with migrants and learn about their needs to supply the goods necessary for their survival.

Over time, as migrant networks became more familiar with the activists and their methods of contact, they began to send ‘pins’ to indicate their location, along with a list of needed supplies and information about their health. Upon receiving a ‘pin’, the activists would prepare packages filled with previously gathered essentials such as food, water, clothing, shoes, power banks, phones, and medical supplies. However, since many migrants are unable to contact the activists directly, some are discovered through search missions where activists search the woods for any signs of people. Additionally, activists strategically place “packets” of water, food, and other necessities throughout the forest, hoping migrants will find them.

Respondent 5 reflects on the NGO’s formative days, emphasizing the responsive and highly adaptive nature of humanitarian work. There was no fixed job description when it came to humanitarian interventions; tasks were shaped entirely by emerging needs. Labor division was fluid, allowing activists to take on roles best suited to their individual strengths, which shifted with each unique situation.

“Slow Work”

The term “Slow Work” consists of the crucial administrative work that keeps the organization running smoothly, such as documenting, consulting, and handling legal advice, obtaining funding, and planning events. When talking about the organization's current roles, one respondent brought up the word “slow”. They used it to refer to the current tasks as “slower”, contrasting the non-institutionalized and dynamic way of working during the early days of the NGO.

Respondent 4 has mentioned that since the hands-on work was so intense in 2021 - 2022, there is now a lot to do in terms of documentation, including gathering media reports about the NGO, comparing statistics on pushbacks, etc., and contributing to annual reports on migration, the most recent of which is on migrant deaths (Fundacja Ocalenie, 2014). Monitoring and collecting information on irregular migration contributed a lot to the fact that almost all participants noticed a lack of information or incoherence in either statistics or the information that was being shared publicly regarding pushbacks.

Another important job Sienos Grupė is currently doing is the 24/7 helpline and case management based on consultations. Originally intended to respond to alerts and “pins”, it now serves more as an NGO helpline where migrants can message or call in with any questions they may have, from legal and integration concerns to those looking for missing family members.

Advocacy is another key activity undertaken by the NGO. It includes organizing protests to highlight critical migrant issues, facilitating political debates, and hosting cultural events such as the most recently organized Iraqi Cultural Day and celebrations for India & Pakistan's Independence Day. These events serve to educate the public, enhance cultural appreciation, and foster stronger community ties, while also influencing policy and public perception toward a more inclusive approach to migrant integration.

Operational Metamorphosis

Sienos Grupė experienced a significant operational metamorphosis since its inception as a movement in October 2021, culminating in its official registration as an entity in October 2022. This formalization expanded its capabilities, allowing it to engage legally in advocacy for irregular migrants' rights, comment on migration laws, and provide border aid with official backing while continuing to gather funds from supporters. A noticeable shift from Direct Action to Slow Work marked a transformation in the NGO's activities, reflecting a change from hands-on emergency responses to more structured administrative tasks. Such transitions are supposedly seen as pretty typical as NGOs adapt to new challenges and opportunities, shifting toward activities that maximize their impact under current conditions (Salamon, 2015). However, what seemed unique to me was that this shift has elicited a sense of nostalgia among volunteers for the dynamic, direct engagements of the past.

"We have become an NGO with paper and daily city activities. Everyone holds those forest activities dear; however, now, there are no alerts, so we go on hikes into the forest, where we study what is left, the traces. We talk to residents and maybe border guards." (Respondent 1)

This sort of adaptation shows the NGO's effort to maintain its foundational spirit while responding to evolving needs and remaining relevant in its support and advocacy efforts.

4.3.3. Network & Partnership Dynamics

In this subsection I will explore the complex relationships and networks that Sienos Grupė has developed with various external entities, focusing mainly on the relationship with the state bodies and relationships with other NGOs. Additionally, I'll discuss a particular relationship dynamic of a small country which I labelled as "Close-Knit Networks".

State

The relationship between Sienos Grupė and the state can be defined as complex and strained, characterized predominantly by legal confrontations and systemic challenges. The NGO often encounters skepticism and sometimes even outright hostility, particularly when its support of migrant rights collides with immigration and national security regulations. Interactions with the Lithuanian State Border Guard Service (VSAT) are stated to be the most common way to identify this collision.

A number of legal challenges have also been brought against the organization by state entities, frequently in the name of the public interest but viewed as calculated attempts at preventing its operations. One notable example involved a pre-trial investigation started against the NGO that was widely publicized before formal notification was provided to the NGO, a tactic that Sienos Grupė criticized as a form of public intimidation meant to discourage civic engagement. As one member described:

"First, we saw in the media that a pre-trial investigation had been initiated against us. Only days later did we receive the documents... We said, "It's quite interesting how you work." (Respondent 3)

This scenario illustrates the SLAPP (Strategic Litigation Against Public Participation) approach, where lawsuits are employed not necessarily to win but to overwhelm and publicly discredit the organization as well as prevent the development of an active civil society (Pring & Canan, 1996).

Despite these challenges, Sienos Grupė has proven to be incredibly resilient and strategically clever, often prevailing in legal disputes. The organization has not only managed to have several cases dismissed but has also successfully sued state institutions for failing to respond to communications, further establishing its legal standing and the unjust nature of some of the actions taken against it. The NGO views these victories as affirmations of its professionalism and the legitimacy of its cause, enhancing its standing both domestically and in the international field.

Moreover, alongside these confrontations, there have been positive instances of constructive engagement where individual government officials or judiciary members have shown a fair and supportive stance towards the NGO's activities. Additionally, one participant gave a conference talk at a university titled "From Villains to Vigilantes," which demonstrated a change from a non-compliant movement to a more legitimate one that is now working more with state institutions and other NGOs. This suggests a slight but significant change in the dynamics of the NGO-State relationships.

NGO

Sienos Grupė retains an elaborate network with different non-governmental organizations that include both strategic partnerships and occasional disputes. The geographic origins of the organizations involved have a significant impact on this dynamic, with a clear distinction between local and foreign NGOs.

Internationally, Sienos Grupė enjoys robust partnerships that bring crucial support and insights. For instance, a few participants recall how activists from the Balkans and Greece have shared critical information on pushback tactics, while Polish counterparts have been instrumental in providing operational know-how essential for handling migrant movements at the border. Financial and logistical support from organizations like the Danish Refugee Council and a generous donation of a vehicle by Swiss volunteers underscore the strong backing Sienos Grupė receives from international allies. This international cooperation has not only facilitated knowledge exchange but also supported anticipatory actions against similar challenges within Lithuania.

In contrast, dynamics with local NGOs are often more nuanced and fraught with challenges. Despite the potential for productive collaboration, there is a noticeable lack of support and cooperation from these organizations. A telling incident occurred during an annual report presentation by another local NGO, where a Sienos Grupė member was unexpectedly asked to leave, highlighting the underlying suspicion and reluctance to collaborate. However, relationships tend to be more positive on an informal basis. Individuals within these local NGOs occasionally express support for Sienos Grupė’s initiatives, though they often do so privately, hesitant to publicly align themselves with Sienos Grupė's more visible and sometimes contentious activities. This complex interplay of formal tension and informal support illustrates the subtle balance Sienos Grupė must navigate within the local NGO community.

While foreign NGOs provide crucial strategic insights and support and local relationships are characterized by a blend of cooperation and competition, this description offers a thorough understanding of the ecosystem in which Sienos Grupė functions.

Close-Knit Networks

This category refers to the dense and interconnected relationships prevalent in smaller or more insular communities, such as those found in a relatively small country like Lithuania. It is a unique dynamic where, in such environments, personal and professional networks overlap significantly, enabling quick and informal communication channels that can facilitate organizational operations. Due to Lithuania's small size, individuals in politics, NGOs, or other organizations are easily reachable, which highlights the interconnectedness and accessibility of key players:

"For example, we organize events in the parliament, and for that, it is enough to know or maintain a good relationship with one member of the parliament, and they can register [the event] there." (Respondent 1)

These networks often allow for rapid mobilization of resources, collaborative efforts, and advocacy, which in this case is very helpful for an opposing humanitarian initiative such as Sienos Grupė, but it could also lead to challenges like conflicts due to overlapping interests. As simple as it is to make operations easier, it is equally easy to make circumstances more complicated.

4.4. External Forces Shaping NGO Strategy

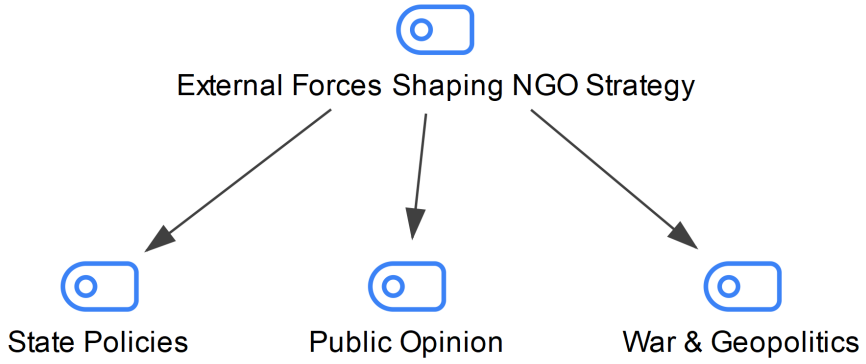


Figure 5. Codes for the category "External Forces Shaping NGO Strategy"

This section explores the wide-ranging influences - from state policies and public sentiments to geopolitical tensions - that critically shape the operational approaches and strategic decisions of the NGO Sienos Grupė.

4.4.1. State Policies

Securitization is a dominant theme in the implementation of state policies, marked by the deployment of physical barriers such as barbed wire fencing and the utilization of advanced surveillance technologies like cameras. According to the interior minister, the EU allocated EUR 70 million to establish a border surveillance system along the Lithuanian-Belarusian frontier from early 2021 to late 2022[22]. These developments have significantly diminished the frequency of border crossing attempts, prompting adjustments in the patrol strategies of border guards responsible for enforcing pushbacks. Additionally, volunteers and journalists are required to obtain a specific permit to access the Border Strip, which is issued by the VSAT (Lithuanian Border Guard Service). The complicated securitization has frustrated Sienos Grupė volunteers, who find it difficult to help but continue to look for solutions:

"When it was forbidden to go to the zone, then the residents who lived in the zone and could move freely in it, they provided aid packages several times" (Respondent 1)

Gaps in migration policy and institutional obstacles significantly affect the process and fairness of entry into Lithuania, particularly for asylum seekers. Systemic delays are common in handling asylum applications, which should technically be processed within 6 months. As noted by one volunteer, these delays often force migrants to seek private legal help due to a lack of state-provided legal aid, highlighting a major accessibility issue. They also told a story about a Sri Lankan café owner and translator in Lithuania, who had fully integrated into the community and learned Lithuanian but faced a setback when his temporary residence permit, issued during the pandemic after a negative asylum decision, was revoked. Uninformed and unadvised, he now faces deportation, highlighting significant gaps in communication and legal support within the Lithuanian migration system.

[22] Lukas Juozapaitis, ELTA.< https://m.kauno.diena.lt/naujienos/lietuva/salies-pulsas/ministre-apziures-kaip-baltarusijos-pasienyje-diegiama-vaizdo-stebejimo-sistema-1091907 > [2022-08-19]

Furthermore, the participants' examples point to double standards and clear discriminatory practices in the treatment of migrants, especially evident in the preferential treatment of Ukrainian and Belarusian refugees. Unlike migrants from other regions (non-Europeans and typically non-white) who are often detained for extended periods without work rights, Ukrainians typically receive immediate rights to work and face no detention. This disparity highlights double standards in humanitarian policies and the need for a more unified and unbiased approach to migration management that maintains the dignity of all individuals regardless of their nationality.

One notable insight is an adaptation of migrants' routes in response to changing policies. For example, when Lithuania strengthened its borders, it seems that migrants shifted their routes through Latvia or Poland. When asked about the possible reasons for reduced irregular migration flows, the participants did not know the reason and were unwilling to speculate. When thinking about the possible causes, one respondent made a noteworthy characterization of Lithuania as a "turned high-risk" country, suggesting that this designation stems primarily from the likelihood of migrants being detained at the border and confined indefinitely in detention centers without definitive resolution or clarity regarding their asylum applications. Reduced flows are likely a result of the securitization strategy by the state and a physical border, which was erected soon after the irregular migrant influx, but another participant suggests that this strategy is a short-sighted solution, and it is problematic to praise the state for it since the overall migration flow has not decreased but has instead moved to different regions (Latvia and Poland) leaving the issue unresolved for the future.

4.4.2. Public Opinion

Societal attitudes, media portrayals, and governmental stance on NGOs have a significant impact on their operations, especially when these perceptions are negative or misinformed. A pervasive theme is the state and public labeling of Sienos Grupė as “anti-state” or against national interests. This label is often used to discredit the organization, marginalize its activities, and complicate the group's operational environment.

Sensationalist coverage leads to a misunderstanding of the NGO's motives and activities, portraying them as aligned with adversaries like Belarus or undermining state security. Respondent 4 recalled that during a discussion on Lithuanian National Radio (LRT) about what awaits migrants who have entered Lithuania illegally, the Minister of Defense of the Republic of Lithuania openly declared that Sienos Grupė has a monument to Lukashenko at its headquarters. Moreover, the previously mentioned pre-trial investigation against Sienos Grupė volunteers for alleged "people smuggling" was also reported widely by the Lithuanian media. Respondent 3 thinks that this sort of media marginalization of Sienos Grupė activities made some public members fearful of the NGO. They contemplate whether the outcome would be different if not for the media framing:

"Despite their potential support, the majority of people are afraid of what we do because of the extremely harsh public actions against us that were reported in the media." (Respondent 3)

There is, however, a noticeable shift from intense scrutiny and suspicion towards more recognition and acceptance of the NGO's role. Hostility and skepticism are gradually being replaced by a broader understanding and some level of trust, especially as the NGO's actions and justifications become more publicly visible and the public more informed on the topic of migration. After activists were fined[23] and threatened with legal action by the state, Respondent 1 initially expressed distress over being in the public eye. However, they quickly recognized that Sienos Grupė could not remain anonymous if they wanted to bring about any kind of change. It appears that the public became less doubtful and more accustomed to the NGO after it began to make public comments and become more visible. As a result of the growing attention, Sienos Grupė gradually began to get invitations to speak at events, take part in political discussions, and make appearances at universities. This indicates a positive shift in how their contributions are valued within society and suggests their growing influence in shaping a more informed public opinion about migration.

[23] Augustinas Šemelis. MSF among volunteers fined for helping migrant on Lithuania-Belarus border < https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1572055/msf-among-volunteers-fined-for-helping-migrant-on-lithuania-belarus-border > [2021-12-28]

While initial responses may be heavily influenced by negative portrayals and state-driven narratives, sustained efforts by the NGO to engage, educate, and transparently communicate their missions can gradually shift public opinion to a more supportive stance. This dynamic draws attention to the NGO's continuous battle and chance to change its impact and reputation in society through persistent public engagement and advocacy.

4.4.3. War & Geopolitics

The subsection presents the complex and polarizing effects of the geopolitical crisis at the Lithuania-Belarus border, where migrants have been used as instruments in a "hybrid war" between the European Union and Belarus. Moreover, the war in Ukraine has had a big impact on migration priorities in Lithuania. This crisis has contributed to the rise of nationalist sentiments, with national security concerns frequently taking priority over human rights concerns.

A major discourse barrier that keeps Sienos Grupė from more successfully promoting the rights of migrants and their integration into Lithuanian society is the dehumanization of migrants and their reduction to mere “pawns” in a larger plan by Belarus (in cooperation with Russia) to overthrow the European Union. It's crucial to note that Sienos Grupė activists are not disputing this narrative but are rather highlighting the harm it causes to irregular migrants and their rights as people seeking refuge. While debating with their like-minded peers, some participants express their surprise after discovering that they are on opposing sides regarding this discourse.

There are also fears that Belarus and Russia are deliberately trying to sow division and undermine Lithuania's democratic values and Sienos Grupė is playing into the narrative by opposing state decisions. However, some participants argued that Lithuania's harsh treatment of migrants, including pushbacks and the suspension of asylum procedures, has played into the hands of the Belarusian regime and its propaganda efforts:

“They (Belarus) are not pushing them because we would accept them, they are pushing them so that we can show how we will deal with our high European values. (...) and we fail that exam when they (Lithuania) push those people away” (Respondent 2)

The war in Ukraine has heightened security concerns among the general population and policymakers, leading to a perception of new arrivals as potential threats. While this view may be an exaggeration of the situation, it is also understandable, given the broader sense of insecurity due to the conflict in neighboring countries. This highlights the difficulty in navigating these sensitive issues and the lack of clear solutions, particularly for activists seeking to advocate for the rights of migrants and refugees during these times.

"*it seems that human rights are temporarily suspended (...) maybe these are difficult times for activism"* (Respondent 5)

A recurring tension in the segments is the balance between national security and human rights. Interestingly, many participants have highlighted that the mere concept of balance is harmful, and there should be no contraposition between the two. According to them, the concepts should be mutually indispensable.

"What is national security if it does not protect the rights of certain groups of people?" (Respondent 1)

4.5. Violence, Discrimination & Exclusion

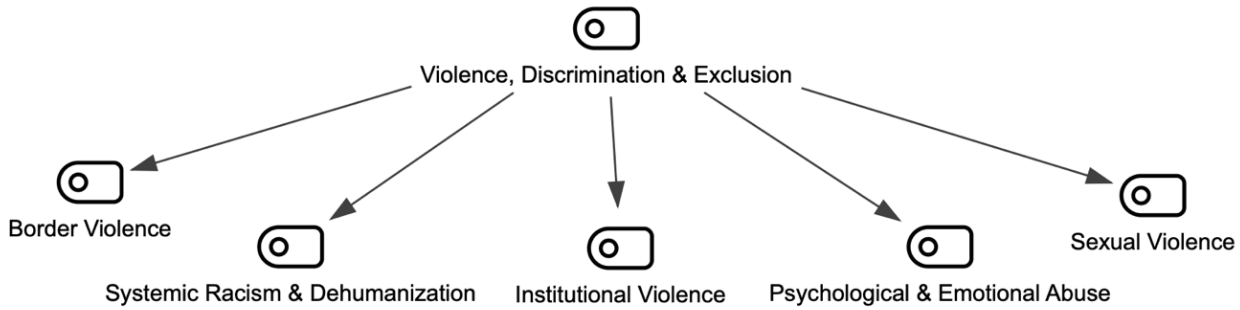


Figure 6. Codes for the category "Violence, Discrimination & Exclusion"

One of the main missions of Sienos Grupė is to combat violence at the border and discrimination against migrants. It is important to note that not all state officials engage in such behaviors; there are individuals within these institutions who strive to uphold dignity and human rights. However, these perspectives draw from firsthand accounts from volunteers from the NGO Sienos Grupė and reveal a multifaceted landscape of violence ranging from explicit physical

assaults to more discrete, systemic, or psychological damages, highlighting significant human rights concerns within the migration framework in Lithuania.

Volunteers report instances of violence at the border, a direct form of abuse often involving coercive pushbacks, where migrants are forcibly removed without the opportunity to claim asylum. Testimonies suggest that such practices are not only routine but also are sometimes executed with a degree of brutality and lead to serious injuries, such as amputations of limbs due to frostbite and, in some cases, death. At the moment, there is no official government data on how many migrant deaths have been recorded since the beginning of the crisis that began in the summer of 2021. However, Sienos Grupė volunteers have now officially found that there were two migrant deaths in the Lithuanian border area (an Indian man and a Sri Lankan man). The body of one other possible border victim was also discovered in March 2024, but this has not yet been officially confirmed. Sienos Grupė is still receiving inquiries about missing persons, so the actual death count remains unclear. Additionally, there are systematic efforts to confiscate and destroy migrants' personal belongings, such as mobile phones, which they could use to document these abuses. The deliberate destruction of such items serves not only to isolate the victims but also to eliminate any potential evidence of misconduct by border officials. The use of physical force, denial of legal entry, and disregard for the safety of individuals highlight critical issues of accountability and oversight in border management operations.

A persistent theme across volunteers' descriptions is the racial or ethnic discrimination against migrants. Volunteers describe a clear pattern of preferential treatment where migrants from certain countries, notably those of Eastern European descent (Ukraine, Belarus) face less stringent procedures compared to those from the Middle East and Africa. Racism and xenophobia also manifest starkly at the border and include not only migrants but volunteers themselves. An illustrative incident told by one participant involved a Sienos Grupė volunteer from Turkey who was mistaken for a refugee and subjected to physical violence. Border guards dehumanized him by kicking him in the legs to prevent movement, demonstrating a prejudiced assumption of his status based solely on his appearance. This systemic racism is further highlighted by an interaction where a Lithuanian female volunteer was criticized by border guards for not being married and having children, with the guards commenting that people like her are the reason the "white race" will die off in 50 years. Such actions not only embed racism in institutional operations but also foster an environment where migrants are routinely dehumanized, viewed not as individuals with rights but as undesirables.

Beyond the immediate physical abuses, institutional violence manifests through the mechanisms of migration control itself. This includes arbitrary detention and inhumane conditions in detention centers, opaque and unresponsive asylum procedures, and random denials of asylum applications. The deceptive practices by authorities further highlight this violence, as one participant recalled that a migrant was misled by a social worker's assurance via text that visiting the migration center was a routine check, not related to detention, only to find himself detained upon arrival. The participant also conveyed their frustration with the situation, saying they could not see the point in deceiving the migrants after learning through conversation with them that the social workers' information about Lithuanian policies was wrong. These systemic issues highlight a larger framework of structural violence that migrants must deal with, severely limiting their access to truth and decreasing their dignity.

Volunteers often witness psychological and emotional abuse inflicted on migrants, a direct result of stringent policies and treatment. This form of violence, while less overt, is deeply traumatizing and detrimental to the mental health of migrants. Beyond facing verbal abuse from officials and encountering hostile comments online, a volunteer noted a particularly distressing incident involving the same migrant who was misled into detention. Before being detained, he lived together with his Lithuanian partner and their two children, one of whom is a newborn. His partner, currently unable to work postpartum, now faces uncertainty about his return, leaving her to care for their children alone indefinitely. This situation exemplifies the ongoing trauma and despair that many migrants endure, perpetuating a cycle of emotional distress.

Although more difficult to document due to its sensitive nature, one participant mentioned that there are credible allegations of sexual violence against migrants in detention centers in Lithuania. Such incidents are usually underreported due to the stigma and fear of reprisal that victims face. Sexual violence in the context of migration control presents serious moral and legal concerns regarding the accountability of those in positions of authority and the protection of the most vulnerable.

Together, these categories of violence paint a disturbing picture of the challenges faced by irregular migrants in Lithuania. The findings underscore a critical need for comprehensive policy reform, enhanced oversight of border control and immigration enforcement practices, and a fundamental shift in how migrant welfare is perceived and prioritized within the national and European legal frameworks. This analysis not only contributes to the scholarly discourse on migration but also serves as a call to action for stakeholders at all levels to address these pervasive issues of violence, discrimination, exclusion, and, most importantly, violation of human rights.

Conclusions & Final Thoughts

This study aims to illuminate the complex dynamics between state policies and NGO-led humanitarian efforts in migration management. It specifically focuses on the NGO Sienos Grupė and how its members perceive and address irregular migration at the Lithuanian-Belarusian border. The study's key conclusions are presented in the following paragraphs:

The results show a fundamental conflict between Sienos Grupė's humanitarian position and Lithuania's security-driven policies on irregular migration, which place a higher priority on border control and national sovereignty. By supporting migrant rights and offering direct aid, this NGO opposes the state's strategy and draws attention to the moral dilemmas that arise when national security and humanitarian commitments must be balanced. Moreover, through their actions and advocacy, NGO Sienos Grupė constructs counter-narratives that challenge state power and exclusionary practices.

The way that Lithuania handles irregular migration reflects Foucault's notion of biopolitics, in which the state uses the classification of migrants as a security threat to exercise power. This grouping justifies restrictive measures like detention and pushbacks. The results also support the idea of engineered migration and migrant instrumentalization since Belarus's actions (using migrants and allowing their flows to reach EU borders) are seen as a strategy to apply pressure on its neighbors.

Activists within NGO Sienos Grupė are fueled by a strong collective identity (Melucci's concept) which is rooted in humanitarian values. This collective identity creates solidarity among members, enabling them to mobilize resources, challenge state practices, and advocate for migrants' rights, despite the risks involved. The high-risk activism that challenges state practices includes facing violence from border guards as well as SLAPP (Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation) tactics aimed to deter their advocacy. This illustrates how shared values drive resistance to state-imposed exclusion, emphasizing the essential role of civil society in promoting balanced migration narratives.

The state's securitization of irregular migration (often reflected by the media) influences public opinion by portraying migrants as a possible threat. Lithuanian society is often influenced by this framing, which may lead to the public welcoming more restrictive laws. According to the findings, securitization often conceals the humanitarian needs and personal accounts of migrants, thus preventing a more balanced understanding of migration issues.

Additional findings are worth mentioning as they reveal several unique aspects of NGO Sienos Grupė's operations and challenges within Lithuania's irregular migration context:

1. Over time, the NGO has undergone an operational metamorphosis, shifting from immediate, direct aid in 2021 to a more gradual, methodical approach now in order to better address the long-term nature of the migration crisis. This shift has coincided with an identity crisis as members grapple with defining the NGO's role within evolving state policies and public sentiment.
2. Another finding was the unique dynamic of Lithuania's close-knit networks, where personal and professional relationships overlap and enable Sienos Grupė to mobilize resources, collaborate, and advocate quickly through informal communication channels. However, this overlap can also create challenges as conflicting interests arise within these tightly interconnected circles.
3. A contrast in support between international and local NGOs was noticed. International NGOs were deemed to be far more supportive, providing financial aid and other assistance, while local NGOs tend to be less cooperative and more cautious. Although some local NGO members personally support NGO Sienos Grupė, this backing remains on an individual basis rather than institutional, reflecting a hesitancy within the local NGO community.

Together, these insights highlight the complexity of NGO work within tightly interconnected social and institutional landscapes, particularly in a small nation that is seeking to prioritize its security concerns.

Recently, NGO Sienos Grupė joined over 50 grassroots and political organizations in Brussels to discuss a common narrative on migration hosted by the Global Strategic Communications Council. During these discussions, the metaphor of borders as a "skin that protects but also breathes" emerged, representing borders not only as a safeguard but as a penetrable boundary that supports the movement of people and communities. This powerful metaphor encapsulates Sienos Grupė's vision and advocacy, emphasizing that migration management can equalize protection with openness.

This study merely underscores the need for a more integrated approach that considers both security concerns and humanitarian obligations in migration management. Viewing security and humanitarianism as opposites on a scale can create a problematic frame of reference, where one is assumed to prevail at the expense of the other. Instead, this study suggests the importance of deconstructing this binary and exploring alternative approaches in which security and humanitarian values can coexist, fostering a migration framework that protects without dehumanizing and safeguards without excluding.

The Pact on Migration and Asylum, a set of new guidelines for controlling migration and creating a unified asylum system, was published in April 2024 at the time of writing. It will surely be a transformative legislation for the European Union. The Pact is currently considered a controversial document, but in Lithuania, it is still a better solution regarding migrant rights, as pushbacks are not authorized in this pact. Action will be taken to prevent the instrumentalization of migration, and "instrumentalized" migrants will be evaluated to determine whether they are instrumentalized by international organizations rather than domestic ones. Instead of causing pushbacks, this will accelerate the asylum processing process, which would differ from Lithuania's current policy. It will be interesting to observe how Lithuania's situation regarding irregular migration will change once the pact takes effect in 2026.

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Appendices

Appendix A. Interview Guide in English

Topic	**Question**
Introduction / Personal Background	I would like to talk a little about yourself first. Could you introduce yourself? Tell me about yourself and what you do in life.
Motivation to volunteer / engage in activism	If you're comfortable sharing, tell me what influences your life or your motivations for activism?
Incentive to join the NGO	What motivated or inspired you to get involved in the activities of Sienos Grupė?
Perception of Migrants	While working at Sienos Grupė, I'm sure you've encountered many different migrants. Could you describe these individuals? How do you see them? How do you think society sees them? And the state?
Discrimination and Violence at the Border	One of Sienos Grupė's missions is to combat manifestations of violence at the border and discrimination against migrating people. Could you share any forms of violence observed at the border or instances of discrimination your organization has documented?
Humanitarian Work and Strategies	What is your role in Sienos Grupė? Could you share some strategies or methods Sienos Grupė uses when facing strict border control measures to try and meet the needs of migrants?
Humanitarian Challenges	Could you describe the challenges that Sienos Grupė faces? Where do these challenges originate?
Relationships with State Institutions	In the context of migration work, what is your organization's relationship with state institutions? And with other non-governmental organizations?

Relationships with Other NGOs	What more would you like to see from each of these organizations?
Migration Narratives	Observing discourse in the media and on social media, there's a lot of talk about irregular migrants as Lukashenko's "weapons", and the concept of Hybrid War / aggression is also present. Have you heard of it? How do you see this narrative and its impact on society?
Security vs. Human Rights	What are your thoughts on the balance between security and human rights? Is compatibility achievable?
Anti-State Discourse	The anti-state rhetoric comes from both the authorities (e.g., fines for crossing the border zone) and social media (Facebook comments). What is your opinion on such arguments?
State Security Threats	What do you think are the risks to state security in this migration context?
Threats to Migrants	And what risks do you think migrants face in this context?

Appendix B. Interview Guide in Lithuanian

Potemė	**Klausimas**
Prisistatymas / Asmeninis fonas	Norėčiau pirmiausia šiek tiek pakalbėti apie tave patį. Ar galėtum prisistatyti? Papasakok šiek tiek apie save, kuo užsiimi gyvenime.
Motyvacija savanoriauti / užsiimti aktyvizmu	Jei patogu dalintis, sakyki, kas turi įtakos tavo gyvenimui ar motyvacijoms užsiimti aktyvizmu?
Įkvėpimas prisijungti prie NVO	Kas tave motyvavo ar įkvėpė įsitraukti į Sienos Grupės veiklą?
Požiūris į migrantus	Dirbant Sienos Grupėje, neabejoju, kad sutikai daug įvairių migrantų. Ar galėtum apibūdinti šiuos žmones? Kaip juos matai?
	Kaip tau atrodo, kaip juos mato visuomenė? Valstybė?
Diskriminacija ir smurtas pasienyje	Viena Sienos grupės misijų yra kovoti su smurto apraiškomis pasienyje ir migruojančių žmonių diskriminacija. Ar galėtum papasakoti, kokias kaip organizacija užfiksavote smurto formas pasienyje arba bendrai diskriminacijos apraiškas?
Humanitarinė veikla ir strategijos	Koks tavo vaidmuo Sienos Grupėje?
	Ar gali pasidalinti strategijomis ar metodais, kuriuos taiko Sienos grupė, kai susiduria su griežtomis pasienio kontrolės priemonėmis ir siekia ‚patenkinti' migrantų poreikius?
Humanitariniai iššūkiai	Ar galėtum nusakyti, kokius iššūkius patiria Sienos Grupė? Iš kur tie iššūkiai ateina?
Santykiai su valstybinėmis institucijomis	Kalbant apie darbą migracijos kontekste, koks yra jūsų kaip NVO santykis su valstybinėmis institucijomis?
Santykiai su kitomis NVO	Su kitomis nevyriausybinėmis organizacijomis?
	Ko daugiau norėtųsi iš kiekvienos iš institucijų?

Migracijos naratyvai	Stebint diskursą spaudoje, socialinėse medijose, labai daug kalbama apie nereguliarius migrantus kaip apie Lukašenkos ginklus, o ir hibridinio karo / agresijos sąvoka šiuo metu yra nesvetima. Kaip matai šį naratyvą ir jo efektą visuomenėje?
Saugumas vs. Žmogaus teisės	Kokia yra tavo nuomonė, kai yra kalbama apie saugumą vs. žmogaus teisės? Ar yra įmanomas suderinamumas?
Antivalstybinis diskursas	Antivalstybinis paveikslas, ateinantis tiek iš valdžios pusės (pvz. baudos už pažeidimą pasienio ruože) tiek iš socialinių medijų (Facebook komentarai). Ką manai apie tokį argumentą?
Valstybinio saugumo grėsmės	Kaip manai, koks pavojus kyla valstybiniam saugumui šiame migracijos kontekste?
Grėsmės migrantams	Koks pavojus šiame kontekste kyla migrantui?