



Jagiellonian University in Kraków  
Faculty of International and Political Studies  
Institute of European Studies

# **Framing State Action: Diverging Narratives of Polish NGOs in the Poland-Belarus Border Crisis**

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Arailym Nurlybayeva  
1209409

Supervisors:

Dr Agata Mazurkiewicz, Jagiellonian University  
Dr Huseyn Aliyev, University of Glasgow

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## Abstract

In recent years, the Eastern flank of the EU has been exposed to hybrid threats not only from Russia but also from Belarus. The border crisis orchestrated by the Belarusian regime has been at the centre of attention, primarily focusing on the dominant state-led narratives. The role of non-governmental organisations as discursive actors in the context of hybrid warfare is often overlooked in the existing rich body of literature. In order to fill this gap, this thesis attempts to critically examine the role of Polish NGOs in shaping public narratives. Employing critical discourse analysis of official NGO reports, the study explores how these organisations frame the responsibility shared by the Polish and Belarusian governments. The analysis reveals a notable pattern, where most of the NGOs' criticism is directed towards Poland. By constructing a narrative where both the aggressor and victim countries of the hybrid warfare are equally responsible for the crisis, NGOs challenge the state-led securitisation of migration. Thus, operating not only as humanitarian actors, but also as counter-securitising voices. The findings support the argument of the "blurring" character of hybrid warfare, wherein different actors create their own fitting narratives. These narratives reveal the clash between different points of view on border security, protection of human rights, politics and ethical dilemmas that arise when humanitarian and legal obligations stand in the way of national security.

*Keywords: NGOs, hybrid warfare, securitisation of migration, counter-securitisation, framing.*

## Abstrakt

W ostatnich latach wschodnia flanka UE była wystawiona na różnorodne zagrożenia hybrydowe, pochodzące nie tylko z Rosji, lecz także z Białorusi. Szczególne znaczenie zyskał kryzys graniczny wywołany przez białoruski reżim, który znalazł się w centrum debaty publicznej i politycznej, zdominowanej głównie przez narracje państwowe. W istniejącej, bogatej literaturze przedmiotu często pomija się jednak rolę organizacji pozarządowych jako aktorów wpływających na dyskurs dotyczący wojny hybrydowej. Niniejsza rozprawa podejmuje próbę uzupełnienia tej luki, analizując krytycznie działania polskich NGO w zakresie kształtowania narracji publicznych. Wykorzystując narzędzia krytycznej analizy dyskursu, badanie koncentruje się na oficjalnych raportach organizacji, aby pokazać, w jaki sposób przedstawiają one odpowiedzialność zarówno władz Polski, jak i reżimu białoruskiego. Wyniki wskazują na wyraźny wzorzec – większość krytyki ze strony NGO kierowana jest w stronę polskiego rządu. Organizacje konstruują narracje, w których państwo agresor i kraj ofiara są traktowane jako współodpowiedzialne za kryzys, co stanowi wyzwanie wobec sekurytyzacji migracji prowadzonej przez instytucje państwowe. W ten sposób NGO pełnią funkcję nie tylko podmiotów humanitarnych, lecz także uczestników procesu kontrsekurytyzacji. Analiza potwierdza tezę o rozmywającym się charakterze wojny hybrydowej, w której różni aktorzy budują własne narracje, często sprzeczne ze sobą, ale wzajemnie się uzupełniające. Powstające w ten sposób dyskursy ujawniają napięcia między odmiennymi perspektywami dotyczącymi bezpieczeństwa granic, ochrony praw człowieka, praktyk politycznych oraz dylematów etycznych, pojawiających się w sytuacji, gdy zobowiązania humanitarne i prawne kolidują z priorytetami bezpieczeństwa narodowego.

*Słowa kluczowe: organizacje pozarządowe, wojna hybrydowa, sekurytyzacja migracji, kontrsekurytyzacja, ramowanie.*

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## **1. Introduction**

In July 2021, the Belarusian regime started a deliberate unconventional attack against the European Union in response to its new set of sanctions, focusing on its Eastern borders, including Poland, and on a smaller scale, Lithuania and Latvia (Filipec, 2022). In order to overwhelm the borders, thousands of migrants were forced to cross the border into the EU territories. This type of artificially created crisis is conventionally seen as a hybrid warfare tactic, wherein migrants are merely used as instruments. Although the nature of this crisis involves migrants, this situation is not as clear-cut as other migrant crises. The main difference here is the involvement of Belarus, which has been orchestrating this crisis by involving human traffickers and travel agencies. These actions have created massive polarisation in some EU states, especially those which were already sensitive to migration issues (Filipec, 2022).

Even though the crisis has been permanently claimed as “Belarusian hybrid war” by the governments of three EU member states affected by the crisis, a number of non-governmental organisations appear reluctant to adopt this narrative (or at least distance themselves from it by focusing on the humanitarian side of the crisis). While all three countries have undergone considerable pressure, such a division of interpretations between the state and engaged NGOs was primarily and extensively apparent in Poland, as the country has experienced the largest number of illegal border crossings (European Union Agency for Asylum, 2022, p.76), provoking the widest, most organised and consistent NGO response.

### **1.1. Research Problem**

The ongoing migrant crisis at the Poland-Belarus border is already conventionally seen as hybrid warfare, deliberately orchestrated by the Belarusian state. General consensus would suggest that the victim state, in this case, Poland, would hold a unified front against the imminent threat. Moreover, the majority of actors in the crisis agree on the consensus of the crisis. Both the Polish state and the NGOs involved in the crisis agree that Lukashenko’s regime, using the state’s travelling agencies, has instrumentalised migrant flows in order to destabilise Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, and the European Union as well. That said, Polish NGOs have mostly focused their critique on Polish authorities, even going as far as suggesting that Poland’s defensive response and securitisation of migration are fueling the crisis. Many domestic and international actors reiterate systemic suffering that migrants undertake from

Polish and Belarusian border guards. NGOs, namely Grupa Granica, claim that Poland's aggressive and threatening, and securitised approach harms the migrants and the overall humanitarian cause. According to them, the securitised narrative, wherein migrants are seen as a hybrid warfare tool used by Lukashenko's regime, makes Polish authorities equally responsible for it. This is the puzzling part of the thesis. Contrary to what is commonly expected, NGOs are focusing the majority of their critique on the victim country's government rather than the aggressor's. Thus, this research puzzle would fall under the category of contra expectations. This paper attempts to explore how victim and aggressor states can be seen or portrayed as equally responsible for the unfolding of the migrant crisis in the context of hybrid warfare.

## **1.2. Aims of the Study, Objectives and Questions**

The main aim of this thesis, therefore, is to critically examine the role of NGOs in this crisis, focusing on how they constructed narratives around the actions taken by the Belarusian government, and most importantly, the Polish government. Moreover, the role of the non-governmental organisations in the complex hybrid warfare context is usually overlooked, creating a gap in the academic literature. This thesis aims to conduct a thorough analysis of the NGO narratives through the lens of hybrid warfare, thus attempting to contribute to the literature on unconventional means and tools of warfare. It also discusses the implications and direct/indirect influence of contrasting narratives of the state and NGOs on hybrid warfare. One of the key parts of this analysis is to identify recurring discursive patterns and language in NGO statements. Accordingly, this study is guided by the following research questions that will provide insight to answer the overall research query: 1. How did NGOs frame the Polish authorities in their reports? 2. How did NGOs frame the Belarusian authorities in their reports? Furthermore, the following sub-questions were analysed and discussed: 1. What motivates NGOs' apparent prioritisation of focusing their critique on the Polish government over the Belarusian one? 2. Can the NGOs' rhetoric and framing of the Polish authorities be seen as counter-securitisation?

## **1.3. Research Significance and Structure of the Thesis**

The Polish-Belarusian border crisis is an unprecedented situation, where illicit migrant smuggling has been carried out by a single country systematically on such a broad scale (Perkowska & Gutauskas, 2023, p.118). As the instrumentalisation of migration becomes a

highly effective and mostly used tool of hybrid warfare, there is a growing academic demand to investigate not only how state actors respond and securitise such threats, but also how non-state actors interpret and influence the deployment of such crises. This thesis also provides insight into the role of NGOs as securitising (or counter-securitising) actors in a complex hybrid warfare context. It tries to figure out if Polish NGOs have the capacity to construct counter-securitising narratives by framing the government's actions as violating human rights and undermining democratic principles. Highlighting the counterintuitive and intricate nature of humanitarian actors' participation in security discourses, it provides a new perspective and a more nuanced understanding of the role of NGOs during crises.

This thesis is structured around seven chapters, including the Introduction. Chapter 2 consists of a review of existing literature, a conceptualisation of main terms, an outline of the theoretical framework for the analysis, as well as identified gaps in the literature this paper intends to address; providing a contextual background to this research, Chapter 3 sheds light on the geopolitical dynamics of the region and Russia's influence on Belarus. The 4<sup>th</sup> Chapter outlines the methodological framework and research design of the study, including data collection and case selection, as well as the limitations of this research. Chapter 5 presents the findings obtained throughout the research process, supported by the author's interpretations with regard to the theoretical and methodological frameworks. The answers to the research questions are provided as well in the same chapter. Next, the Discussions Chapter attempts to reflect on the findings in the broader academic context, explaining why they matter and what they imply. Lastly, the final part provides conclusions to this thesis and reviews the overall outcomes of the research, which will be put in light of the identified gaps in the academic literature on hybrid warfare and securitisation, opening up to potential future research.

## **2. Literature Review**

Throughout history, countries have experienced many periods of both violent confrontations and peaceful coexistence, reflecting the dynamic nature of international relations. In the context of shifting dynamics of power and global strategic instability, the process of innovation has given rise to a complex and relatively new phenomenon of hybrid warfare. This chapter explores existing literature related to the field of hybrid warfare, focusing particularly on the migration crisis and evolving role of non-governmental organisations in such conflicts. By examining existing research, this chapter attempts to provide a comprehensive understanding of how hybrid warfare was defined and conceptualised, and how NGOs are increasingly involved within modern crises. Through an analysis of the current literature, gaps in the research will be identified, especially regarding the intersection of hybrid warfare and non-governmental humanitarian actors. Moreover, this chapter will review theoretical approaches, such as constructivism and securitisation theory, to assess their relevance in explaining the role of NGOs in hybrid conflicts. The literature review is structured into five groups: 1) Definition and Conceptualisation of Hybrid Warfare; 2) Tools and Tactical Variety of Hybrid Warfare; 3) Conceptualisation of Non-governmental Organisations; 4) Theoretical Framework on Hybrid Warfare; 5) Gaps in the Existing Literature.

### **2.1. Definition and Conceptualisation of Hybrid Warfare**

The concept of hybrid warfare gained increased notice in recent years, particularly in the context of contemporary conflicts and crises, where conventional warfare tactics are combined with irregular non-military strategies, including disinformation campaigns, cyberattacks, indiscriminate violence and coercion, and the use of proxy forces, which nowadays are often preferred by states over traditional methods for their strategic, practical and economic advantages. The concept remains contested due to the lack of a universally agreed-upon definition and conceptual clarity. Nevertheless, it offers us important insights into modern and future challenges of security and defence.

Although ‘hybrid warfare’ was first emanated from the paper written by William Nemeth, as many sources agree, it was popularised by Frank Hoffman in his book named “Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars”, where he described it as a challenge to longstanding conceptions of war and world order, produced by “the blurring of modes of

war, the blurring of who fights, and what technologies are brought to bear” (Hoffman, 2007, p.14). Nemeth (2002) and Hoffman (2007) both agree that hybrid warfare will undoubtedly become prevalent in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and will require a shift in doctrines. The main argument that Nemeth presents is that warfare reflects the society that enacts it, implying that a hybrid society will engage in hybrid warfare. Hybrid societies, in turn, are described as anarchic societies with mixed modern and traditional structures (Nemeth, 2002, p.5). Hybrid warfare, according to Nemeth, is “the contemporary form of guerrilla warfare, a continuation of pre-state warfare that has become more effective because it employs both modern technology and modern mobilisation methods” (Nemeth, 2002, p.29). Hybrid military forces, created by hybrid societies, can be seen through the concepts of Fourth Generation Warfare, New Warfare, which are acknowledged in Nemeth’s work. According to 4GW theory, the world has undergone three generations of warfare, including linear warfare, firepower and manoeuvre warfare, currently reaching the fourth. The Fourth Generation Warfare, being a complex type of insurgency, prospers under conditions of the absence or fall of the state, hence eliminating the “state-established monopoly on war” (Lind, 2004). The characteristics of 4GW include the use of terrorism, organised crime, advanced technology and complex psychological warfare. These are very similar to Nemeth’s hybrid societies and their hybrid ways of conducting war.

Nemeth’s idea of hybrid societies and the ways of conducting hybrid wars appears to be similar to the premises of the abovementioned concept of 4GW. In Nemeth’s concept, warfare often requires advanced technologies (e.g. Media and Cyber) that are used by Western societies (Nemeth, 2002, p.3). While Nemeth’s work sheds light on the early perceptions of hybrid warfare, his research solely focuses on the non-state actors and societies engaging in hybrid warfare, as well as tactical recommendations to combat it.

Despite hybrid warfare being considered just another term of little significance to describe contemporary wars and conflicts in the early 2000s, it slowly started gaining more attention particularly after Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, which demonstrated for the first time a practical application of hybrid tactics by an internationally recognized state, underpinning the importance of Hoffman’s ideas in understanding modern conflicts. Unlike Nemeth, Hoffman focuses on both states and non-state actors (terrorist groups, insurgents, militias, etc.) and their ability to conduct hybrid wars, incorporating disruptive multi-modal activities that are “operationally and tactically directed and coordinated within the main battlespace to achieve synergistic effects” (Hoffman, 2007, p.14). He discusses how non-state actors, like terrorist groups, have adapted hybrid strategies, demonstrating their ability “to study and deconstruct the vulnerabilities of Western-style militaries, and devise appropriate

countermeasures” (Hoffmann, 2007, p.8). He also emphasises that states cannot be characterised as essentially traditional forces, as well as non-state actors as inherently irregular (Hoffman, 2007, p.58). Actors use military force alongside non-kinetic tactics such as propaganda, disinformation, cyberattacks, and economic disruption, often targeting civilians to destabilise governments and societies. In hybrid warfare, there is no clear-cut distinction between regular war and organised crime, nor between the civilian population and soldiers. This implies that the hybrid warfare pushes the target to defend itself against multiple threats at the same time, often depleting its resources and making it difficult to mount an effective defence. The synergistic effects allow hybrid warfare actors to effectively attack the weak points of the target in a multi-faceted manner. By targeting multiple aspects of a country’s structure (military, economic, political, and social), the adversary can reach more substantial results than by using one particular method in isolation. That being said, the aim of hybrid warfare does not necessarily imply a military victory in the traditional sense; instead, the goal is to achieve strategic objectives, including political destabilisation, economic influence, manipulating the public perception of the problem and creating internal dissent within the targeted country. Wearing down the resistance of the target by using protracted conflicts might ultimately lead to its defeat. The disruptive nature of hybrid wars lies simply in the criminal activity rather than in high-end technology, as Hoffman states (2007, p. 29). He then examines various terms often related to hybrid warfare in academic literature, such as Compound and Unrestricted Warfare, where multiple forms of conflict are combined. While the concepts are not always described as mutually exclusive, Hoffman points out dissimilarities. Compound wars are “major wars that had significant regular and irregular components fighting simultaneously under unified direction” and are able to use the benefits of all kinds of military force, increasing the threat posed by them (Hoffman, 2007, p. 20). On the other hand, unrestricted warfare might be seen as more all-encompassing and “beyond limits,” exploiting the advantages of “combination in types of organisations and among the various domains of national power” (Hoffman, 2007, p.22).

Another concept that Hoffman touches upon is the Fourth Generation Warfare. As mentioned previously, the concept has also been illustrated in Nemeth’s paper. However, their approaches to it greatly differ. While Nemeth mainly focuses on ‘hybrid societies’ through lenses of concepts such as “New Warfare, Fourth Generation Warfare, Low Intensity Conflict and Terrorism”, the primary point Hoffman attempts to make in his work relies on the difference between Fourth Generation Warfare and his perception of hybrid warfare. Hoffman acknowledges the ‘elusive’ nature of 4GW theory as well as its advocates’ “ignoring the history

of irregular warfare” (Hoffman, 2007, p.18). That being said, Hoffman’s definition of hybrid warfare does not exclude the contributions of Fourth Generation Warfare, such as its blurring character, weakening of the states, the rise of non-state actors and their ability to challenge states’ legitimacy (Hoffman, 2007).

As noted above, 2014 crisis not only did greatly influence the rise of academic and political interest in hybrid warfare, but served as a ‘wake-up call’ for European security (Lasconjarias & Larsen, 2015, p. 7), leading to the recognition of the threat and the reassessment of the security environment by the NATO and EU (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, 2014; European Commission, 2016). NATO’s reference to the concept regarding the 2014 crisis is one of the reasons which led to its widespread notice on the international stage. NATO’s latest conceptualisation of hybrid warfare views it “as the combination of military and non-military as well as covert and overt means, including disinformation, cyber-attacks, economic pressure, deployment of irregular armed groups and use of regular forces. Hybrid methods are used to blur the lines between war and peace and attempt to sow doubt in the minds of target populations” (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, 2024). Despite this definition resembling Hoffman’s ideas, subsequent post-2014 NATO publications offered more clarity and explanation on non-violent actions such as information operations through planted newspaper articles and false websites, exploitation of trade unions and NGOs as fronts, etc (Libiseller, 2023). However, NATO’s hybrid warfare is criticised for becoming a political narrative which shapes only Russia’s actions. While at the start this concept focused on operational aspects, now it encompasses a broader spectrum of military and non-military methods, especially the latter one (Libiseller, 2023).

Following Hoffman’s seminal work, many scholars have studied the evolution of hybrid warfare, its theoretical and conceptual foundations (Wither, 2016, p. 74-76; Fridman, 2018, p.11-30), and the various ways it manifests in modern geopolitical crises (Najžer, 2020, p. 27-28). Unfortunately, the phenomenon has been consistently misinterpreted, and the majority of its iterations has been debated, as Brin Najžer discusses in his book “The Hybrid Age: International Security in the Era of Hybrid Warfare” (2020). Najžer claims that hybrid warfare should be examined in a more strategic way, unlike many securitisation-focused hybrid warfare studies. While definitions given by Nemeth and Hoffman were technical and tactical, Najžer introduces his strategic definition as follows: “Hybrid warfare is a distinct form of low-level conflict spanning the spectrum of capabilities. It is a deliberately opaque merger of conventional and unconventional warfare and is conducted under a single central authority and direction of a state and/or state-like actor. The aim of hybrid warfare is to achieve political

objectives that would not be achievable, or would incur too high a cost, through the use of either form individually. The blend of conventional and unconventional enables the actor to exploit an opponent's strategic or doctrinal weakness while maintaining deniability and strategic surprise" (Najžer, 2020, p.29). He further justifies this definition by using examples of Russia's annexation of Crimea and China's activities in the South China Sea, when both countries tried to keep their conflicts at the "low level" without provoking the "guardian powers" of the global order and threatening their national interests. The author claims that the success or failure of hybrid war strictly depends on the maintenance of this low level, avoiding a full-scale conventional war (Najžer, 2020, p.30).

When it comes to centralised decision-making, it is worth noting that it is precisely the reason why it is difficult for democratic states to be engaged in hybrid warfare-like actions. In order to conduct a hybrid warfare action, a state's political system and its structures have to have an element of opaqueness, which is the opposite of the transparency that democratic countries have. Democratic states usually engage in some degree of civilian and institutional oversight over military actions; there is also a significantly higher expectation for transparency, which forces the military institutions to keep their strategies clear for the public. For the abovementioned reasons, an attempt to engage in hybrid warfare in a democratic state would likely create a legitimacy crisis and be doomed to fail. That said, it shall not be stated that hybrid warfare is unique to authoritarian regimes, but the nature of such an operation is extremely unlikely to reach success in a democratic state.

## **2.2. Tools and Tactical Variety of Hybrid Warfare**

In order to understand the complex nature of hybrid warfare, it is crucial to differentiate between the strategies and tactics employed by state and non-state actors. As it was previously discussed, hybrid warfare tactics encompass a diversity of unconventional actions, which in the broader framework are guided by the strategies and strategic objectives of the actors. The effectiveness of the strategies usually shapes the direction of the conflicts, however as it was defined by Najžer earlier, in hybrid warfare, there is always a potential for strategic surprise (Najžer, 2020, p.34). He further explains his idea by presenting ways to differentiate conventional military forces from hybrid forces. Firstly, unconventional units lack insignia, which creates a layer of plausible deniability used to deny any involvement. That said, often their true activity is obvious. Furthermore, this layer is especially problematic when the response is needed, but the newly created legal grey zone makes it very challenging (Najžer,

2020). Bad actors have taken this into account; thus, hybrid warfare is becoming a more often phenomenon in the world of geopolitics. Another major advantage of hybrid warfare is its element of surprise because it often uses a combination of conventional and unconventional tactics, making a much-needed counterattack difficult. Together, these methods of conflict pose extra danger towards traditional military strategies (Najžer, 2020). As we already figured out, the main strategy in hybrid warfare often revolves around achieving political objectives without engaging in a large-scale conventional war. Unlike conventional war operations, which follow predictable patterns of escalation, the ambiguous, fragmented and deniable nature of hybrid tactics avoids immediate recognition as acts of aggression. As it was stated in NATO Review by Arsalan Bilal, “Hybrid warfare below the threshold of war or direct overt violence pays dividends despite being easier, cheaper, and less risky than kinetic operations. The costs and risks are markedly less, but the damage is real” (Bilal, 2021). Tactical variety enabled such strategies as the element of surprise. A strategy involving a combination of a wide range of tactics, from disinformation to the weaponisation of migration, makes it especially difficult for the victim states to identify and respond to quickly changing and evolving threats. It was previously stated that hybrid warfare encompasses a wide range of tactical variety; nonetheless, to avoid overload, this section aims to place a particular emphasis on the tactics that have been employed in the Polish-Belarusian border crisis, including the weaponisation of migration and disinformation campaigns.

Kelly M. Greenhill’s seminal work, *Weapons of Mass Migration* (2010), introduces the notion of “coercive engineered migration,” where migration is used as a tool of coercion. Greenhill identifies over 50 instances where states have intentionally created or manipulated migration flows to extract concessions from target states.

Instrumentalisation or weaponisation of migrants bears the hallmarks of three fundamental features. First, it involves the irregular cross-border movement of persons into one State’s territory without its official authorisation. Second, this movement of persons is deliberately instigated, reinforced or exploited by a different State. Third, this is done to coerce the former State with the aim of obtaining strategic, political or other benefits. All three of the above-mentioned features have been put into the proposal presented by the European Commission; thus, following the Belarus crisis, the Schengen Border Code was updated. This proposal provides a definition for the instrumentalization of migrants: “a third country instigates irregular migratory flows into the Union by actively encouraging or facilitating the movement of third-country nationals to the external borders, onto or from within its territory and then onwards to those external borders, where such actions are indicative of an intention of

a third country to destabilise the Union or a Member State, where the nature of such actions is liable to put at risk essential State functions, including its territorial integrity, the maintenance of law and order or the safeguard of its national security” (Guillaume, 2023). This definition can be analysed by separating it into two parts. The first one involves two elements of instrumentalised migration: the movement of people across the border and the involvement of a third state orchestrating it. The second part describes the coercive element. In its definition, it is apparent that it requires a certain amount of evidence which would showcase the intent to destabilise the EU or its Member States. It also involves a threshold, in which a third State’s involvement in it must create a certain type of risk, which would threaten important functions of the EU Member State.

Today, irregular migration constitutes an estimated 20 percent of all migratory flows in the world (Chamie, 2016). IOM defines irregular migration as a “movement of persons that takes place outside the laws, regulations, or international agreements governing the entry into or exit from the State of origin, transit or destination”. Irregular migrations are particularly exposed to instrumentalisation, where the groups of persons are vulnerable for the exploitation. Such movements are sometimes artificially created in order to achieve geopolitical goals. This can occur through adversarial states acting against their enemies in a grey zone or through non-state actors as a means of proxies for these adversaries. This complexity makes it harder to attribute responsibility and, consequently, to formulate an appropriate response (Wohlfeld et al., 2024).

Scholars and political analysts have examined a variety of the underlying tactics in hybrid warfare. Information manipulation and cyber operations are increasingly integrated in hybrid warfare strategies, paralysing not only government and its institutions, but also the whole society. These domains are sometimes considered interdependent and strategically fused by some scholars. Scholars like Splidsboel-Hansen (2017), Sarts (2021) have analysed the strategic use of disinformation, underlining its potential to shape public opinion and destabilise society without depending on conventional force. Meanwhile, Steingartner, Galinec (2021), and Tsaruk and Korniets (2020) have highlighted the growing importance of cybersecurity in the hybrid warfare framework, noting the role of cyberattacks in disrupting critical infrastructure and in gaining a tactical advantage.

Disinformation, according to Sarts (2021), is “deliberate, consistent and coordinated use of false, deceptive or distorted information across various information channels to achieve a desired effect on a specific audience” (Sarts, 2021, p.25). And the modern digital environment

allows it to expand much faster than ever before, offering a significant advantage to hybrid warfare actors (Fridman et al., 2019, p.1).

### **2.3. Conceptualisation of non-governmental organisations**

In order to conceptualise non-governmental organisations, it is important to separate them from similar and potentially confusing entities. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are sometimes confused with non-profit organisations (NPOs). The concept of NGOs is related to that of NPOs because both of them fall under the category of the non-profit sector. Salamon and Anheier provide a definition, which states that this sector is “a collection of entities that share five crucial characteristics” (Salamon and Anheier, 1997), which are the following:

1) Some type of organisation, which means that a company has to have some “internal organisational structure”.

2) Has to be private, meaning some type of separation from the government. Besides that, Salamon and Anheier point out that “non-profit organisations are nongovernmental in the sense of being structurally separate from the instrumentalities of government. This does not mean that they may not receive significant government support or even that government officials cannot sit on their boards” (1997, p.3).

3) Such organisations must be “non-profit distributing”, meaning that made profits cannot be given out to owners or members of the organisation; instead, it should fund the goal or the mission of the organisation.

4) It must be “self-governing”; thus, they must be able to organise and control their actions by themselves autonomously.

5) It must involve voluntary participation.

6) It must be non-religious. Authors note that “this criterion excludes congregations, synagogues, mosques and churches, but leaves church-related and religiously affiliated organisations within the nonprofit sector” (Salamon & Anheier, 1997, p.4).

7) It must be *non-political*, broadly meaning that these organisations should not be primarily focusing on the promotion of some party or candidate (Salamon & Anheier, 1997, p. 4).

It must be noted that these are just some of the characteristics that would make an organisation a non-profit one, but it does not mean that all of these organisations are equal in terms of the number of similar characteristics they share. Nevertheless, they differ in their size, field of activity, goals, etc. That said, the main point is “that these entities do share an important

set of attributes that, together, set them apart from the other two major segments of society-- the market and the state” (Salamon & Anheier, p. 4).

Within this extensive definition, the NGOs fall under a more specific classification, mainly they can be characterised by their separation and independence from the government and its institutions. Absent government control, these organisations mostly focus on humanitarian assistance, protection of human rights and protection of the environment. In this thesis, a closer look will be taken at some particular NGOs, focusing on their involvement and operations in the context of hybrid warfare and the Polish-Belarusian border, especially securitisation narratives surrounding it.

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are typically seen as non-profit seeking, independent organisations that function separately from the government. They are often viewed as subjects mainly focusing on social and humanitarian issues. Barnett and Weiss say that: “Not without good reason, aid workers are routinely celebrated as righteous heroes (...). Humanitarianism is treated as a symbol of what is good about the world” (Barnett & Weiss, 2008). The underlying basis that they operate on is rather universal, among it we can find principles such as humanitarianism, neutrality and independence. These principles are ultimately what guide their decision-making when confronting humanitarian challenges. Today, NGOs are providing crucial aid to schools, hospitals, refugees, and migrants across the world. NGOs get their funds from a variety of sources, from private to governmental donors. Some scholars go as far as describing them as a creation of donors mainly from the West (Zaidi, 1999). Undoubtedly, this support led to the growth of NGOs in the world; consequently, Western liberal values were promoted around the globe.

As it had been studied, “NGOs are generally more effective in delivering services and can be more cost-efficient. The reasons for this are said to be because such organizations are less bureaucratic, more flexible and innovative” (Bendell, 2006). However, there are some criticisms of NGOs that are worth further exploration. One of the most common and reappearing condemnations of the NGOs is that “the Western funded and headquartered NGOs working overseas is that they impose their own interests and agendas on people” (Bendell, 2006). Zaidi points out an example of Kenya, in which NGOs receive almost all their funding from abroad (Zaidi, 1999). It is entirely possible that such worries can come from certain governments trying to centralise all the power in their control; however, “there is a legitimate concern about the influence of foreign funded groups on domestic culture, economics and politics, especially when the concept of development and how to attain it is so contested” (Bendell, 2006).

## 2.4. Theoretical Framework

As it might have been clear from the previous chapters, the Poland-Belarus border crisis demonstrates the instrumentalisation of migration, which was a part and a tool of broader hybrid warfare.

Aiming to contribute to the growing research on hybrid warfare, this thesis adopts **constructivism** as the primary theoretical framework in order to thoroughly analyse how the relations between the main actors of the crisis and the complex role of non-governmental organisations in it are socially constructed within the concept of hybrid warfare. When examined through constructivist and securitisation lenses, the Polish–Belarusian border crisis emerges as a socially constructed phenomenon that illustrates how actors’ interpretations of the crisis shape their responses.

The emergence of Constructivism is commonly associated with the end of the Cold War, when the traditional theories of International Relations were rendered irrelevant due to the strong emphasis on states and the unequal power dynamics implemented in these theories. By primarily focusing on states, dominant theories such as Realism and Liberalism were not able to explain and observe the role of the “agency of individuals”, often viewing only states and structures as the driving forces (Theys, 2018). Constructivism addresses this issue by emphasising that the social world is constructed through the actions of not only states and international organisations, but also ordinary people and smaller actors (Onuf, 1989). Furthermore, constructivists focus on the role of ideas and identities, which shape the ever-shifting reality of international relations (Onuf, 1989). Reality itself is a subject of perception for the constructivists. To put it in Sarina Theys’s words, “meanings are not fixed and can change over time depending on the ideas and beliefs that actors hold” (Theys, 2018, p.37). Moreover, meanings can coexist, often at odds with one another, demonstrating how different actors’ interpretations of the same situation may construct different realities (Klotz & Lynch, 2007, p.10). However, certain meanings might become consistent and stable over time, building social orders such as structures and institutions. Understanding which identities and interests can be expected or what kind of conduct is legitimate and acceptable is crucial in the social construction of world politics and international order (Klotz & Lynch, 2008, p.8). Worldwide, and more so in Europe, world leaders generally adhere to norms of warfare. That said, when it comes to hybrid warfare, wherein a grey zone of conventional and unconventional military tactics is mixed with propaganda and disinformation, such norms become vague. Hybrid warfare methods are especially effective in such environments. It not only threatens

legal frameworks but also allows aggressor states to operate not in an open conflict while still doing significant damage to the victim state and the whole EU. Both changes and structural continuities of the social reality draw upon the concept of agency (the capacity of actors, in other words). Constructivism sees structure and agency as “mutually constituted”, rejecting the individualism often embedded in rationalist theories, in which the nature of actors’ identities and interests is considered pre-given and stable (Klotz & Lynch, 2008, p.3).

Alexander Wendt, one of the most prominent scholars known for his foundational work in Constructivism, outlines two widely accepted tenets of the theory: (1) that not material forces but shared ideas determine the structure of international politics and that (2) these social structures form and construct identities and interests of purpose-driven actors (Wendt, 1999, p.1). Wendt’s well-known example of the U.S. perceiving five hundred British nuclear weapons as less concerning and threatening than five North Korean ones demonstrates that threats are intersubjective and are based on perception and identity. It appears that the same logic can be applied to the Polish government’s unequal handling of migrants during the Ukrainian migration crisis and the crisis at the Polish-Belarusian border (Tomczak-Boczko et al., 2023; McCorkle and Parven, 2024; Zessin-Jurek, 2024). While the humanitarian stakes can be compared to one another, the response that Poland issued was completely different. In the case of the Middle Eastern migrants at the Belarus border, Poland’s response was strict and militarised; it involved constructing them as a potential threat and a hybrid warfare tool used by Belarus. At the same time, refugees coming from Ukraine were offered legal protection and a variety of support initiatives in the country. From the previous example, it can be understood that the U.S. considers Britain as a friend and North Korea as an enemy. In the same way, Poland’s response to this hybrid threat can be broadly constructed as “us” versus “them”. On the contrary, Ukrainian refugees were, firstly, framed as European and Christian, thus meaning just “like us”, secondly, they were righteously constructed as the victims of Russian aggression. These constructions fell right under the framework of Polish self-understanding. At the same time, migrants coming from the Belarus border were viewed as, firstly, non-European, non-Christian, and not necessarily victims, but rather a part of hostile actions. These were enough for the justification of securitisation. In this case, constructivism shows that policies towards migrants from different places are not neutral, but rather deeply planted in created narratives.

In spite of constructivism emerging as a challenging and opposing theory to the traditional ones, Alexander Wendt agrees that all five realist assumptions of Mearsheimer are equally applicable in constructivist approach: (1) anarchy of the world politics, (2) existence of the offensive capabilities of states, (3) lack of certainty in the intentions of others, (4) will

for survival and (5) an established rationality, alongside a state-centred focus in the analyses and the significance of third image theorizing (Wendt, 1995, p.72). The realist assumptions might play a role in this particular Poland-Belarus crisis, but, at the same time, its usefulness lies on the constructions that actors choose to accent. What is the identity of the migrants, or what is the threat their arrival suggests, are some of the key things that create the public's perceptions and attitudes toward them. Some of these actors are NGOs. In Poland, they are one of the main factions that challenge the mainline interpretation. They send the message that there are multiple meanings. They challenge the notion that Poland's behaviour is rational and propose that it is rather focused on the social context.

Analysing hybrid warfare through the prism of constructivism brings up a couple of issues for the debate. Most likely, hybrid warfare takes place between two actors with different values. At the same time, it helps if these values are part of their identity. Therefore, it can be stated that the goal of the attacker is the creation of the target, which is unlike the others, thus turning allies against each other and creating further chaos. Having stated that, it can be concluded that hybrid warfare through the prism of constructivism prioritises not the conventional war, but rather one which is fought over values, discourses and perceptions (Filipec, 2019).

In constructivism, as Klotz and Lynch (2007) state, "all people can exercise some degree of power, because their practices either reinforce or undermine meanings" (Klotz & Lynch, 2007, p.10). In the Poland-Belarus border crisis, this idea was put into practice by non-governmental organisations contesting the government's securitised construction of the threat with their humanitarian approach. The Polish government framed the Middle Eastern migrants as security threats - a narrative actively contested by NGOs. A constructivist framework is crucial for this thesis to understand how the abovementioned meanings are, firstly, constructed, and finally, contested in a variety of spaces, including public discourse, institutions and policy papers.

Thus, the constructivist approach allows us to examine not only the diverging interpretations of the Belarus-EU border crisis, but also the humanitarian role of the non-governmental organisations, which undoubtedly had an impact on the unfolding of the crisis.

Furthermore, this thesis draws on **securitisation theory**, the foundational principles of which were introduced by the Copenhagen School of Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver and Jaap de Wilde (Buzan et al., 1998; Wæver, 1989, 1995). It provides an important analytical lens for examining how issues are framed as critical menaces that require exceptional measures. Such measures are often justified through "speech acts", the success of which hinges on convincing

the audience. While the theory was originally developed by the Copenhagen School, it has later been modified by the critics of a ‘second-generation’ of securitisation scholars, such as Thierry Balzacq (2005) and Didier Bigo (2002). The goal of this section is not to provide an assessment of existing debates on the differences between these two generations, but to focus on the important and fundamental principles and ideas of securitisation theory, which would allow us to unpack the complex roles of actors in hybrid warfare.

The main argument of securitisation theory is that threats and issues are not an objective condition, but a social and linguistic construction. An issue becomes a matter of ‘security’ not because it poses an inherent threat, but because it was presented as such through discursive politics. In Wæver’s words: ‘it is by labelling something a security issue that it becomes one’ (Wæver, 2012, p.53). It is also important to note that speech acts are not constituted just by the uttering of the word ‘security’ (Buzan et al, 1998, p.27). While the designation of an existential threat that requires special measures is crucial, it is the audience that defines the success of the securitisation: ‘Does the audience accept that something is an existential threat to a shared value?’ (Buzan et al., p.31).

According to the Copenhagen School, there are three units involved in securitisation:

1. Referent Objects – in other words, targeted objects of existential threats that have a legitimate claim to be protected. Traditionally, the state and the nation have been the most acknowledged referent objects. Although in theory, anything can be constructed as a referent object, in practice, not all of them can be accepted by the audience.
2. Securitising actors –perform the act of securitisation by declaring that a referent object faces an existential threat, aiming to legitimise extraordinary responses.
3. Functional actors are the ones who can significantly affect the outcome of the decisions without being either a referent object or the securitising actor (Buzan et al., 1998, p.36).

Typically, NGOs would play the role of functional actors, especially within the framework of the securitisation of migration. However, this thesis adopts a hybrid warfare lens, within which these traditional roles become more fluid. In the Polish-Belarusian border crisis, Polish NGOs engage in securitising actions themselves, framing the Polish government as a source of harm and destabilisation in their social media posts and public reports. By actively contesting the Polish government’s securitising narratives as a main source of threat, these NGOs performed what Stritzel and Chang (2015) refer to as **counter-securitisation**.

In defining counter-securitisation, Stritzel and Chang refer to Vuori (2008) and his example of Chinese students reacting to their government’s measures of crackdown on the 1989 student protests. Trying to counter the government’s securitising moves, they “portrayed

themselves as patriotic, self-sacrificing, and being of morally high fibre” (Vuori, 2008, as cited in Stritzel and Chang, 2015, p.551). In this example, it would be the side that is securitised, for example, Chinese protestors, who are pushing back against an attempt to construct them as a threat. These types of resistance can manifest themselves in forms of protests or political actions, which are intended to oppose the dominating narratives. These forms of resistance can go further, as far as changing power dynamics in the country (Stritzel and Chang, 2015). In the case of the Poland-Belarus border crisis, migration is securitised by Poland’s government, and NGOs, as advocates of the migrants and human rights, might engage in practices known as counter-securitisation.

According to Balzacq (2015), resistance is not to be simply understood as a reaction to power, but rather as manifesting in relation to it. Both resistance and power perform an identity-forming task; moreover, it is naturally connected to the forces they challenge. Wherein the legitimacy of authority performing security measures starts getting questioned, resistance often starts. Thus, it can be considered a response and a part of this dynamic. Building on these understandings, this thesis positions Polish NGOs not only as humanitarian but also as counter-securitising actors whose discursive practices construct a form of resistance against state-driven securitisation narratives.

## **2.5. Gaps in Literature**

There is a substantial body of research that has emerged around hybrid warfare and securitisation-migration nexus; that said, some important aspects remain underexplored. In particular, the role of NGOs in hybrid warfare and reshaping securitisation narratives is often a subject to limited scholarly attention. What is visible in the existing research is that the construction of migration as a security threat and the creation of a hostile environment in some countries are both well-documented (Paterson, 2023). The presence of proxy forces, as well as militant groups, is recognised alongside the state actors. However, far less attention has been paid to the humanitarian non-state actors, which might be capable of challenging the state narratives and creating contesting discourses. Research has shown that security is always a subject to contestation (Paterson, 2023). Yet, the question of whether this contestation is equal to the process of desecuritisation or counter-securitisation often remains barely mentioned. Moreover, a thorough analysis of the role and activity of NGOs in this process has yet to be undertaken. Exploring this perspective could substantially enhance theoretical and empirical understandings of hybrid warfare tactics.

Overall, this literature review examines the most prominent concepts of hybrid warfare. It conceptualises hybrid warfare and its modern tools and tactics, as well as the non-governmental organisations. Moreover, it demonstrates how NGOs, while traditionally seen as humanitarian (*non-political*) actors, can intentionally or unintentionally fall into securitisation narratives. Falling back onto the theories of constructivism and securitisation, this thesis frames security as a process that is, firstly, socially constructed, and secondly, understood by the way various actors frame threats and general discourse. The chapter allows for further examinations, particularly ones focusing on the discursive roles played by the NGOs in the Polish–Belarusian crisis, all while paying attention to the context of hybrid warfare.

### 3. Background and Context

#### 3.1. Geopolitical context

This section of the thesis provides the backdrop for the Central and Eastern European region. Focusing on how the historical, political and economic factors shaped the relationship between Poland and Belarus, making it a centre of current and other geopolitical conflicts. This context is firstly needed to understand the motivations behind Belarus's actions, and secondly to understand Poland's response.

Belarus is often described as a puppet state of Russia, the country known for its "*gibridnaya voyna*" (Fridman, 2017). While this claim can be partially explained, especially after two states joining into a State Union, which will be further analysed in the following paragraphs, the foreign policies of Belarus are not always so predictable and adhering to Russia's (Fedor et al., 2017). We can notice both, Belarus accepting and rejecting Moscow's initiatives (Meister, 2018). After all, Belarusian authorities announced that they will take a neutral stance in Russia's war in Ukraine, offering the two states mediation to find a resolution to the conflict. Despite such actions, further engagement with the West is yet to be seen. As of today, political steps towards more liberal policies are also yet to be taken. This stagnation is best illustrated by laws that are not seen in Europe anymore, namely the death penalty, making Belarus the last country in the continent of Europe that still carries out such a punishment.

In contrast, Poland's historical journey has been one of struggle for independence and freedom against stronger state actors. Poland did not have an independent state between the 18<sup>th</sup> and the early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. According to Przemysław Grudziński, for this very reason, Poland's fight for independence and freedom became a part of its identity, thus also forming its security perception after the end of the First World War in 1918 (Grudziński, 2008, p.72). This perception is further strengthened after the developments of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Europe, especially after the division of Poland as a result of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact. Poland's geographical position determined that it was situated between greater powers during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. During the same century, Poland felt betrayed by its allies, Britain and France, namely the promise of mutual defence promised by them in case of Russian or German aggression. Such promises are not seen as a concrete guarantee, therefore making NATO, and particularly its Article 5, more significant than ever. All this historical progression eventually led to the Polish accession to the North Atlantic Treaty in 1999. Arguably, since the existence of the Russian Empire, Russia has been seen as a threat to the Poles; this perception has defined

Poland's role in NATO, consequently explaining why, since its accession to NATO, Poland has supported the organisation's expansion eastward, wherein other nations have similar perceptions towards the threat of Russia. Despite the newly acquired hard security guarantees, especially after the start of the crisis and Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Poland is continuing to increase defence spendings and strengthening its defensive policies. While before the full-scale war in Ukraine, in Poland, voices of criticism of NATO and the EU existed, mainly worrying about Poland's sovereignty and the effectiveness of collective defence, today, post the invasion of Ukraine, these voices of scepticism have lost most of their traction. Recently, the Polish government has approved the 2025 budget, in which 4.7% of Poland's GDP will be allocated for defence (Wypartowicz, 2024). The defence and security of Poland today is constructed on its own defensive capabilities, not only on NATO, the EU, and the United States, which is seen as a guarantee of NATO's strength, but also on its own defensive capabilities, which are increasing every year.

After the Cold War, during the 1990s, Poland and Belarus took radically different geopolitical routes. Both states faced a variety of political and economic troubles; as one of the possible solutions to this problem, Poland decided to integrate with the EU and NATO, at the same time, Belarus aimed to strengthen ties with Russia. Ever since, Poland's route has been marked by a relatively prosperous journey. Compared to Belarus, Poland became more democratic and economically stable. On the other hand, Belarus had a relatively slow growth of economy, and the democratisation of Belarus has failed entirely, thus leading to decades of sanctions imposed by the EU. In 2014, after Russia's annexation of Crimea, the relationship between Poland and Belarus reached a new stage, which was marked by the increased number of high-level visits, such as the meeting between Polish foreign minister Witold Waszczykowski and Alexander Lukashenko in 2016. These bilateral visits have shown both states' intentions for Belarus to be less dependent on Russia. Unfortunately, the attitudes toward each other were short-lived, eventually changing once again after the 2020 Belarusian presidential election, which was declared invalid by Poland and the West. This started a new period of tensions between the states, marked by Lukashenko's deployment of troops near the Eastern border of Poland. After that, the Polish government promised to provide help to the opposition in Belarus. The European Union imposed further actions. Following the forced landing of a Ryanair passenger plane, the president of Belarus threatened the EU, stating that he is going to flood Europe with "drugs and migrants" (Bennetts, 2021). Not long after, the government of Belarus started a coordinated influx of migrants mainly from the Middle East and Northern Africa, directing them to the borders of Latvia, Poland and Lithuania, with the

main goal of creating a humanitarian crisis (Wilkosz, 2025, p.30). This man-made migrant crisis entangled thousands of people, who got stuck near the border. This called for immediate action from border security services, which furthermore started a new political conflict in the EU and its policies, thus pushing Belarus away from the West even further than before.

Finally, following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the perception of the border situation gained new attention as a purposefully orchestrated element of hybrid warfare. Both, the Polish public and the government started recognising this as a deliberate effort waged by Belarus, but most likely coordinated with the Kremlin as well, with an aim to destabilise not only Poland, Lithuania and Latvia, but the whole European Union (Berzins, 2022). This geopolitical context shows possible intentions behind Belarus's actions. At the same time, it provides the necessary knowledge needed to understand the motivation behind Poland's reaction to the coordinated and man-made crisis at the border between Poland and Belarus.

In conclusion, the geopolitical relations between Poland and Belarus are firstly rooted in their historical choices and currently shaped by a variety of geopolitical challenges. Poland choosing the West and Belarus choosing closer ties with Russia have created a rather unstable landscape in the region. This context is needed for understanding today's crisis and the strategies used by both states in dealing with it. The following section will further analyse the influence of Russia on Belarus.

### **3.2. Russia's influence on Belarus**

To understand the border crisis between Poland and Belarus, it is important to know the broader context of the region. It can be done by understanding the main geopolitical players of the region. Let's start with Belarus, which is a relatively small and authoritarian state. Compared to Russia, Belarus has very few natural resources, and its economy is yet to be reformed and modernised. Belarus is heavily reliant on foreign support, mainly Russia, which deliberately subsidises it, thus keeping the politicians and the elite loyal to the Kremlin. Close ties between Russia and Belarus are very significant in the border crisis as well, as Belarus's actions align with Russian interests quite often. Belarusian president Alexander Lukashenko took over the control of the country in the mid-1990s. His main priority was the integration with Russia in the spheres of politics and economics, thus rejecting any direction towards the West. Authoritarian president Lukashenko and his regime have ruled Belarus continuously for decades; therefore, it also faced a number of challenges domestically, which eventually ended up with massive nationwide protests following the likely rigged presidential election of 2020.

The protesters demanded a variety of democratic reforms and changes, among which was the call for Lukashenko to resign. Unfortunately, Lukashenko responded with heavy violence, arresting the protesters, thus isolating Belarus from the West even more, while at the same time, unifying with Russia even more. This union was solidified in 2000 with the ratification of the Union State treaty between Russia and Belarus. The treaty allowed for a European Union-like model, under which workers of both countries were guaranteed the same rights. Furthermore, border control was removed, and a single economic space was created, making the Ruble a single currency for both Russia and Belarus.

The rejection of Western ideas and the West in general is what bridged Putin and Lukashenko together. In 1999, Lukashenko stated that: “the union of Belarus and Russia should become an actual counterweight to the unipolar world” (Nice, 2012). Not out of character for the authoritarians is to manipulate people by spreading fear. Using keywords like “survival”, Lukashenko claimed that the unity between Russia and Belarus is “a historic chance of the entire Slavic civilisation to survive under the current grim conditions of the world’s re-partition” (Nice, 2012). Furthermore, Lukashenko himself expressed that: “We will always be with the Russian people. If you would like to call us Russia’s outpost in the west, we do not mind, we have never denied that” (Nice, 2012). Although there were some lower moments between Russia and Belarus over the years as the 2010 Belarus’ refusal to ratify the Code of the Customs Union with Kazakhstan and Russia or the Russia’s launched “Black PR” campaign against Lukashenko in the same year, the overall direction of the Union State implies “a broader political community based around a Slavic civilisational bloc” (Nice, 2012). The previously mentioned protests of 2020 pushed Lukashenko closer towards Moscow, not only politically, but also economically, making them more aligned and dependent on Russia. The involvement of the Kremlin in the border crisis has extended beyond economic support, shaping the narrative for propaganda, especially in the EU states that are still sensitive to migration. Undoubtedly, this crisis has served as a tool to further divide Europe. All the factors above make it difficult to doubt the coordination of the Union State in the border crisis, with both states having something to gain out of it, thus giving a better understanding of the actions taken by Belarus in the border crisis.

In conclusion, Russia’s influence on Belarus is a fact that cannot be ignored. The alignment between these states is rooted not only in economic affairs but also in ideological worldview. On top of that, Lukashenko’s arrests of protesters and the suppression of the opposition have led to further entanglement with Russia. Mutual gain from this situation paints a broader picture of Belarus’s role in the crisis and the following sections.

### 3.3. NGOs involved in the Polish-Belarusian Border crisis

In the context of Poland and Belarus, there are several NGOs that have been actively engaged in the ongoing and dynamic crisis at the border. All of them mostly focus on providing humanitarian aid, but, nevertheless, some of them also provide legal assistance for the refugees, whose rights have allegedly been infringed upon. These NGOs often operate independently from the government. Instead of following the government's guidance, they act on their own, prioritising humanitarian goals rather than aligning with the current ruling government. Perhaps the most prominent NGO involved in this crisis is Grupa Granica. Grupa Granica describe itself as "an informal coalition, supported by non-governmental organisations, institutions and individuals" (Grupa Granica, 2023b, p.7). It was established in August 2021, with the start of the crisis, and has been operating continuously ever since. Together with activists, these smaller organisations collaborate and provide a variety of humanitarian/medical aid at the border. Furthermore, if there is a need, they attempt to provide migrants access to legal aid. The main goal of this organisation is to uphold human rights and ensure humane treatment of migrants. Besides that, Grupa Granica has a number of demands that they have listed in their report; they are the following (Grupa Granica, 2023b, p. 14-15):

- 1) Conducting activities oriented toward the prevention of further cases of death and disappearance of migrants at the Poland-Belarus border.
- 2) Eradicating illicit pushbacks and violations of Polish, international and EU laws.
- 3) Guaranteeing the alignment of Polish legislation with constitutional standards, particularly in relation to: "repealing the provisions of the Regulation of the Ministry of Interior and Administration from August 2021 that introduce the possibility of returning a foreigner to the state border line, and the provisions on issuing decisions on leaving the territory of the Republic of Poland introduced by the amendment to the Foreigners Act from October 2021, and reversing changes that violate the rights of migrants, introduced by the draft amendment to the Foreigners Act of 26 January 2022" (Grupa Granica, 2023b, p.14).
- 4) Establishing secure and humane conditions for the submission of applications for international protection at the border between Poland and Belarus (including outside border crossings) in full compliance with the EU and international laws.
- 5) Adhering to legally mandated procedures, including the acceptance of applications for international protection or the initiation of return proceedings of the unregulated migrants.
- 6) Implementing identification systems to guarantee enhanced protection for the individuals belonging to vulnerable groups, such as children, torture survivors, victims of

human trafficking, pregnant women, the elderly, sick and people with disabilities (Grupa Granica, 2023b, p.14).

7) Ensuring the provision of assistance by governmental bodies to families pursuing locating their missing kin.

8) Mitigating and addressing violations, encompassing abuses of power and failures to discharge responsibilities by officers performing service at the border.

9) Ensuring the provision of reliable and accurate information to the public about the circumstances at the border and putting an end to narratives that depict migration solely as a security threat.

10) Facilitating support for border area residents through the implementation of recovery programmes designed to alleviate the negative consequences of the humanitarian crisis.

11) Restricting the use of migrant detention to last-resort circumstances, aligned with Polish legal frameworks and human rights obligations, and maintaining conditions that respect dignity and humanity throughout the status determination process. Prioritising special safeguards for children, persons with poor health conditions, and victims of violence (Grupa Granica, 2023b, p.15).

Grupa Granica is primarily funded through a mix of different means. A significant portion comes from individual donations. Funding is gathered through a variety of fundraising initiatives, wherein you can donate money directly or make purchases through their operated shops, for example, “Sklep Bez Granic” (Shop Without Borders). In this case, people can donate in the form of specific items, such as packs of water or medical aid kits. Nevertheless, people have the ability to make their own donations in different forms, material or physical (clothing, food, etc.) (Polish Migration Forum Foundation, 2024).

Another source of money comes from partner organisations and other NGOs, which provide financial and logistical support. One of the most notable is Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights (HFHR), which provides funds to support a variety of activities, legal aid included (Stowarzyszenie Egala, 2022).

Evidently, similarly to other NGOs, the activity of Grupa Granica is reliant on a number of supporters, among which there are partner organisations, volunteers and individual supporters.

However, despite its humanitarian goals, Grupa Granica and other similar organisations working at the border have also ignited serious controversy. This includes people from the government and media, who accuse them of unknowingly assisting Belarus’s controlled hybrid

warfare by providing aid and means for migrants to cross the border, therefore indirectly making the problem worse. For instance, while addressing the situation, Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk declared that this is indeed a hybrid war, which is progressing and involving illegal immigration, thus indirectly condemning people facilitating it. This is further proven by the issues people face when they provide aid to them, for example, the five people who got charged with “facilitating unlawful stay in the territory of the Republic of Poland” (European Council on Refugees and Exiles, 2024).

In conclusion, in order to have a nuanced understanding of the influence that the mentioned NGOS have in this particular Polish-Belarusian border crisis, it is important to examine them as active players in the crisis.

### **3.4. Laws of the EU and Poland / Lawfare during the crisis**

The legal dimension dictating the actions taken at the border is of crucial importance in this border crisis. This section examines the legal framework and measures taken to control migration and activism at the border.

The mood surrounding immigration in Poland really worsened during the 2015 European migrant crisis. The arrival of millions of asylum seekers into Europe also brought new debates and attitudes towards the EU. In the same year Law and Justice party won the elections in Poland. The party mainly consisted of right-wing populist politicians, namely Jaroslaw Kaczynski, who were extremely critical of the European Union’s intent to relocate some asylum seekers to Poland (Kabata & Jacobs, 2022). Overall, the Law and Justice party can be characterised as leaning conservative, nationalist and Eurosceptic. When it comes to immigration, PiS’s policy framework focused mainly on security concerns and preservation of the Polish identity, thus making these aspects paramount when constructing their migration policies that were mostly restrictive.

Following the 2021 Belarusian manufactured crisis at the border, the attitude towards migrants in Poland got even worse. The Polish government, still led by the PiS, considered this crisis to be manufactured by Belarus and Russia; therefore, it was considered not as a regular migrant crisis, but as a purposely created security threat. Following that, Poland took some rather drastic steps, namely pushing back asylum seekers to Belarus, which became a state policy. These actions have become an area of a legal conundrum as they directly oppose the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, and the EU Directive concerned with the asylum-seeking procedures (European Union, 2013). The mentioned documents guarantee the legal right to

apply for asylum anywhere in the EU, once they reach its borders, thus directly opposing the pushback strategy.

During the same year, the Ministry of Internal Affairs issued a Regulation, which gave the green light to the pushbacks, meaning that once caught crossing or already having crossed the border illegally, asylum seekers were to be returned to the state border. This regulation contradicts the obligations that Poland has under international law, particularly the Geneva Convention and other legal documents derived from it. Following amendments allowed the border guards to give orders to asylum seekers, which required them to leave Poland immediately, thus preventing them from their rights to seek asylum (Forti, 2023). These actions have been sanctioned by Polish courts (Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, 2023). While being criticised and sanctioned, the same procedures continue till this day, with Polish authorities citing the threat to the security of the country as a justification.

Regarding migration, the Polish have a few national laws concerned with it, namely the Act on Foreigners (2013), which was amended in 2022 (Office for foreigners, 2022), during the crisis at the border. This amendment made further restrictions on the migration processes. As a member of the EU, Poland has an obligation to follow not only national laws, but also make sure its law adheres with the broader EU agenda and its legal framework, for example Asylum and Migration Management Regulation (AMMR), which gives a framework on the determining the responsibilities that EU states have when it comes to applications for asylum and their examinations. That said, current national Polish laws, evidently, do not adhere to these obligations, thus it can be noticed that political tensions between Poland and Brussels are rising.

Following the national Polish election in 2023, Civic Coalition (Platforma Obywatelska), led by Donald Tusk, gained enough votes to win the election and replace the PiS. Newly elected pro-EU party have promised to align more with the European Union and its legal frameworks. However, on October 12, 2024, surprising everyone, Donald Tusk stated his intent to suspend the right to seek asylum in Poland, providing similar justification as the former ruling party PiS did, referring to the instrumentalisation of migration, which is deliberately used by Belarus and Russia. As of today, there are no substantive changes being made, migration hasn't stopped, and security concerns are increasingly rising.

Considering all these measures, it can be concluded that the authorities of Poland have engaged in "lawfare" with the EU. This can be seen by the actions that both, former and current, governments have taken. That includes a number of new laws and regulations that made further restrictions not only on migration and asylum-seeking process, but also on the humanitarian organisations seeking to provide humanitarian aid at the border. This has exceeded the verbal

form of the conflict and reached the legal grounds, thus creating friction between the institutions of Poland and the EU.

### **3.5. Humanitarian crisis**

There is no universal agreement on the definition of a humanitarian crisis. Often, terms like “humanitarian emergency” or “humanitarian disaster” are used interchangeably. That said, a humanitarian crisis can be generally described as a single or a series of events that create a threat to the health, well-being, security or safety of a group of people over a particular region/area. This section examines the nature of the crisis between Poland and Belarus.

Scholars studying various humanitarian crises have derived a number of different types of such disasters. Some authors, namely Raimo Vayrynen has separated such crises in three different categories: first one being “violent”, in which suffering is connected to people being killed and displaced during the time of war; second one being connected to “poverty”, in which suffering is connected to hunger and disease; and finally the third one “complex”, in which we can find a combination of the latter two, where violence and poverty are combined (Vayrynen,1996). There can be many different and more specific types of crises, but the broadest and therefore satisfactory group of types for this thesis is the following:

- 1) Naturally occurring;
- 2) Man-made;
- 3) Complex.

Naturally occurring humanitarian crises are the ones which occur as a result of natural processes of the earth. For example: earthquakes, floods, droughts, plagues, etc. According to the sources, such crises kill around 50,000 people a year (Ritchie et al., 2022). Man-made crises are simply disasters or emergencies caused by humans. This includes conflicts, man-made fires, pollution, etc. Complex type crises usually appear as a result of both – man-made and natural disasters. Usually, one disaster makes way for another. For example, when extreme violence in a region causes hunger or vice versa. This type of emergency is usually the most extreme, leading to a significant amount of violence, loss of life, and displacement of people, often leading to refugee crises elsewhere.

When it comes to the border crisis between Poland and Belarus, deciding which is the correct type can be argued. It is entirely possible that some would see this part of the thesis as irrelevant, and the question of whether this crisis occurred naturally or whether it was caused by humans could be seen as trivial, but, arguably, this information is crucial to determine

whether this border crisis can be considered purposefully used as a tool in hybrid warfare. Unsurprisingly, this crisis is seen as an act of hybrid warfare enacted by Belarus and arguably Russia, by the Polish, Latvian and Lithuanian governments. At the same time, even the most pro-human rights organisations, such as Grupa Granica, make it clear – “what is happening on the border between Poland and Belarus is not a migration crisis. The situation was not caused by any war, natural disaster or a sudden power shift within a region. People were brought to the border area by the Belarusian regime precisely to cause confusion and to generate polarisation and conflict within the Polish society” (Grupa Granica, 2021).

Taking into account the words of Alexander Lukashenko, threatening to flood Europe with migrants and drugs, as well as the official positions of Polish, Lithuanian and Latvian governments, and the report of Grupa Granica, this section contextualises and states that the current border crisis at the border is not only man-made, but also never seen before in scale, and, arguably, used as a single part of a larger geopolitical conflict between the West and Russia. Using this framing, we can further contextualise this crisis and get a better understanding of the response of Poland.

## **4. Methodology & Research Design**

This section contains an overview of the methodology and the data collection process. It includes the justification of the chosen research design, the methods used, and the selected case, data and time frame. In order to critically reflect on the adopted research design, this section also presents the limitations of the study and how they affected the outcome of the research.

Given that the paper investigates discourses and narratives of Polish NGOs around securitisation and migration, the interpretivist research philosophy was adopted to emphasise the complex social phenomena through the experiences and interpretations of involved non-governmental organisations. In its essence, interpretivism facilitates the significance of qualitative data gathering (Kaplan & Maxwell, 1994, as cited in Chowdhury, 2014). Hence, understanding the social phenomena through context-specific interpretations, this work applies qualitative analysis of the data. Qualitative data are particularly highly appropriate for locating and identifying the meanings that are placed on events and processes and for connecting these meanings to the social world (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p.10).

### **4.1. Research methods**

In order to address the research questions posed in the Introduction chapter, a discourse analysis has been carried out, focusing on how language employed by Grupa Granica actively shapes different public perceptions. This analysis draws upon key principles of Critical Discourse Analysis, particularly those developed by Ruth Wodak, Michael Meyer and Norman Fairclough, which are based on the perception of language as “a form of social practice” (Fairclough, 1992; Fairclough et al., 2011). Fairclough, in his book, analyses discourse through “a text, discursive practice and social practice” (1992, p.4), emphasising its complexity. Moreover, he points out that discourses are not merely a representation or reflection of social entities, but they actively shape and construct (‘constitute’) them (Fairclough, 1992, p.4). Critical discourse analysis goes beyond textual analysis by including ideological functions of language and the power relations embedded in discourse (Fairclough, 1992, pp. 2-11). He argues that language is not neutral but deeply ideological, sometimes serving hegemonies and hegemonic interests (Fairclough, 1992). Following Fairclough’s thoughts, Teun A. van Dijk links language use with social practices, particularly those involved in maintaining dominance.

He also emphasises that Critical Discourse Analysis is not just an academic method, but also a critical approach which directly addresses the issues of power, inequality, dominance, and ideology as they are expressed, reproduced and resisted in discourse (van Dijk, 1993, pp.250-253). In this context, discourse becomes a site of ideological struggle, where competing narratives attempt to shape public opinion.

Thus, discourse analysis is not simply the study of language, but rather the examination of language in its social and discursive context, attending to how such practices legitimise or challenge dominant narratives. This approach is especially suited to the current study's theoretical foundation in Securitisation Theory, wherein language, specifically securitising speech acts, is central to the construction of existential threats and the justification of exceptional measures (Buzan et al., 1998).

#### **4.2. Case and Data Selection**

To achieve the goals and objectives of this thesis, namely, to reveal how non-state narratives are constructed and framed, it is important to define the NGOs that are greatly and actively involved in the crisis. Polish non-governmental organisations were selected for this study due to their continuous and direct engagement in this migrant crisis. Unlike many international organisations operating from the distance, Polish NGOs have been directly and actively present at the border. Not only have they engaged with migrants and participated in legal aid and advocacy, but they have also been regularly monitoring the situation and publishing monthly reports. This thesis specifically focuses on the single network of Polish NGOs as a key non-state actor in the Polish-Belarusian border crisis.

This thesis employs a single-case study strategy, specifically focusing on Grupa Granica, a coalition of several NGOs working in the border zone. Emerging in response to the crisis, Grupa Granica became increasingly influential in shaping discursive opposition to state narratives in Poland through its extensive presence in mass media and consistent publication of reports.

According to Meyer (2001), Critical Discourse Analysis does not prescribe a rigid, unified method of data collection, but rather encourages flexible approaches that align with the researcher's theoretical framework and research questions (Meyer, 2001, p.23). In line with this, the present study adopts a text-based approach to data collection, focusing on publicly available NGO reports. This choice reflects a practice within CDA, particularly observed in the

work of Fairclough and van Dijk, who often draw upon non-reactive textual materials such as press and media content (Meyer, 2001, p. 24). The advantage of this strategy is that the data are produced independently of the research process and therefore reflect the organic discursive practices of the organisations being studied. Similar to theoretical sampling in grounded theory, this research has approached data collection as an iterative process, beginning with a core set of reports from Grupa Granica, and allowing for the inclusion of additional materials as emergent themes required deeper contextualisation. This aligns with Meyer's view that in CDA, data collection is not a single, isolated phase but an ongoing and responsive part of the research process.

The primary data published by Grupa Granica between 2021 and 2024 were collected from the official website of the We Are Monitoring Association, which is a part of the Grupa Granica network. Due to the relatively limited number of publicly available data published by Grupa Granica, it was decided to incorporate all the accessible annual reports. Thus, 4 annual reports were chosen for the analysis that would demonstrate Grupa Granica's position in this crisis. While other monthly reports can be found on the website, they only present statistical data. For that reason, reports that clearly and explicitly reflect this NGO's discursive language were chosen carefully, laying the groundwork for the analysis.

The reports were taken from the We are monitoring association's website, where all the data is sorted by the year of their publication. Despite the limited number of the dataset, these documents provide detailed insights into the framing strategies, securitising and desecuritising moves, and counter-narratives employed by the NGO. Analysing the reports and statements of Grupa Granica allows us to study the public discourse around the interpretations of state actions in the crisis. Even though Grupa Granica is not the only organisation invested in the securitisation of the Polish government in this crisis, focusing on one NGO would allow us to carry out a systematic and reasonable analysis of how it interacts discursively with state-led securitisation processes in hybrid conflict settings.

Covering the period from 2021 to 2024 ensures data richness and enhances the reliability and validity of findings by incorporating a diverse set of documents that reflect both immediate reactions and long-term policy stances.

To identify important recurring themes, narratives and framing language, systematic coding of textual data was implemented using MaxQDA software. Analysing the qualitative data using codes and categories was especially beneficial in order to see what the parsed data can "yield" before putting the data back together in a meaningful way (Creswell, 2015, p. 156).

### 4.3. Limitations

Unfortunately, this study faced several challenges and limitations that ought to be acknowledged. Firstly, this research failed to conduct the initially planned interviews with NGO representatives. After obtaining Ethics Approval from the University of Glasgow, multiple attempts were made to contact relevant organisations and individuals; yet the number of respondents who agreed to participate was insufficient to ensure methodological rigour or representativeness. Initially, 12-15 semi-structured interviews with NGO representatives were planned to be incorporated in this research as a primary source. However, the expectations to collect first-hand perspectives regarding the development of non-state discourses and narratives were not met. As a result, the decision was made to remove interviews from the final research design.

Although an attempt was made to mitigate this obstacle through the publicly available data, the scope of the research was undoubtedly narrowed. Publicly available data does reflect the organisation's official positions and communication strategies; nevertheless, the findings from the textual analysis might lack the depth and empirical support that interviews could have provided.

Another limitation the readers should be mindful of is the issues of interpretivist qualitative analysis, such as the evident possibility of researcher bias, the credibility and quality of the analysis and drawn conclusions (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p.2). From a conventional standpoint, the credibility and methodological rigour of qualitatively derived findings are often subject to significant doubt (Dawson, 1979, 1982; Ginsberg, 1990; Kirk & Miller, 1986; Kvale, 1989a; LeCompte & Goetz, 1982, as cited in Miles & Huberman, 1994, p.2).

The thesis is also constrained by the researcher's basic knowledge of the Polish language. Hence, the analysis has been drawn from the sources in English or translated materials, failing to incorporate important relevant data in Polish, including parliamentary debates, governmental websites, and domestic media coverage, which may have offered profound insights into the Polish state's perception and framing of NGO activity in the crisis. While key NGO reports and documents in English were sufficient to conduct a meaningful and valuable qualitative analysis, they still may have overlooked the nuances of the Polish government's official statements regarding the opposing discourses of the involved NGOs.

#### 4.4. Coding Frame

Aiming at conducting a systematic and structured analysis, firstly, an initial reading of the reports has been done. Secondly, after getting the first impression of the object, several codes have been carefully developed.

In order to make the analysis using codes more coherent and to understand the framing strategies with regard to Poland and Belarus, separate sets of codes were derived. Regarding the Polish government, the coding set includes the following categories: Aggressive/hostile framing, Legal Criticism, Disinformation Framing, Moral Criticism, and ineffective action framing. These categories showcase how NGOs, using rhetorical strategies, frame Polish authorities using means of hostility and brutality (Aggressive/hostile framing), furthermore it shows how NGOs frame the Polish government as the one breaking legal barriers and violating human rights (Legal Criticism), as well as being unable to fix the crisis (Ineffective activity framing). The accusations of Polish authorities being dishonest (Disinformation framing) show how NGOs, in order to counter the official story, express their own narrative about the crisis. A variety of criticisms that appeal to ethical and humanitarian norms will fall under the code (moral framing).

Regarding Belarus, codes include the following: Deliberate instigator and Passive Framing. The first code showcases NGOs framing Belarus as the ones directly involved in fuelling the crisis, often accused of orchestrating the crisis. The remaining “Passive Framing” showcases a more nuanced framing. Often acknowledging Belarus’ involvement in the crisis, but directly or indirectly drawing attention back to Poland and its actions.

In addition to codes regarding Belarus and Poland, a separate “shared responsibility” code was used. It underlines the cases wherein both Belarus and Poland are directly or indirectly blamed for playing a role in the facilitation of the crisis. Different from the previous codes, in these particular cases, NGOs don’t place blame on one or the other but rather emphasise that the current humanitarian outcome is due to the policies undertaken by both states.

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To provide a clear and concise visual representation of the developed sets of codes, the following Coding Table was constructed:

*Figure 1. Categories and Corresponding Codes*

Categories	Corresponding Codes
Framing of Belarus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Deliberate Instigator</li> <li>- Passive Framing</li> </ul>
Framing of Poland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Aggressive/ hostile Framing</li> <li>- Legal Criticism</li> <li>- Moral Criticism</li> <li>- Disinformation Framing</li> <li>- Ineffective Action Framing</li> </ul>
Shared responsibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Shared responsibility</li> </ul>

*Source: devised by the author.*

## **5. Overview of Findings**

### **5.1. Introduction to Analysis**

The following chapters showcase the critical discourse analysis (CDA), which was applied to annual and monthly reports published by the NGO Grupa Granica coalition. More specifically, it analysed the rhetorical strategies found in reports from the beginning of the crisis in 2021 until 2024, which covered the Polish-Belarusian crisis. In it, the following research questions were addressed: 1. How did NGOs frame the Polish authorities in their reports? 2. How did NGOs frame the Belarusian authorities in their reports?

These questions are framed in this way in order to get a better understanding of the nature of the discourse created by the NGOs, particularly the aspects of blame, responsibility and support for several different actions at the border and beyond it. Using this analysis (CDA), this paper seeks to showcase both the explicit and the implicit meaning of NGOs' messaging. It also seeks to underline the rhetorical choices they made for the outcomes to align with their ideology.

Furthermore, the method of using critical discourse analysis here has been chosen because it is especially useful when seeking to understand the usage of language in political contexts. Political language and speech contexts often use linguistic means that are intentionally more nuanced and carefully chosen. This type of writing asks for an analysis, which would not take everything at face value. In order to understand what types of messages are emphasised and which are minimised and why, CDA is employed.

In the analysis part, quotations from the report that have fallen under a certain type of code are used as examples. Not every coded example is showcased in the following sections of the analysis, but rather some are picked to show a clear and sufficient pattern that falls under each code. The goal of using CDA is to critically examine the language and give an interpretation of the chosen examples, and to make an assessment of why NGOs chose a particular way of framing.

The Discussion section addresses the strategic and political motivations behind explicit and implicit framings of Belarus and Polish authorities. It discusses why NGOs have a variety of critiques towards Poland in contrast to Belarus. It also examines the aspects of securitisation and how NGOs used narratives that could function as a type of counter-securitisation. Finally, the selective approach towards the legal conduct of both states is addressed as well.

Finally, this analysis is done to showcase how NGOs construct narratives around this particular humanitarian crisis. That said, it can be used to broaden the understanding of how NGOs use means of communication in their reports and social media posts to shape perceptions and discourse on migration and borders.

## **5.2. Analysis**

### **5.2.1. Framing of Belarusian authorities**

The analysis of the Belarus framework found in the NGOs' reports is done using the following codes: Deliberate Instigator, Passive Framing, Shared Responsibility. The following section explores narratives wherein NGOs construct Belarusian authorities as deliberately orchestrating and instigating the crisis.

#### **5.2.1.1. Deliberate Instigator**

The analysis of the narratives ascribed to Belarus revealed that the most prominent way of describing the Belarusian authorities is to showcase them as explicit instigators in this crisis. There were 26 instances that fell under the code of the "Deliberate Instigator". The following will be some of the most illuminative examples that show this pattern found in the NGOs' reports:

"Belarus claims that this migration is spontaneous and that their country has merely stopped preventing migrants from going westwards across the Belarusian territory. This claim is outright false. There are specific airlines that are known to have been assisting in bringing migrants to Belarus — a practice that has only currently been curbed" (Grupa Granica, 2021, p. 3).

Using the phrase "*outright false*" clearly indicates that NGOs (in this case, Grupa Granica) frame Belarus as being dishonest and falsifying information. It also implies the active role of Belarus in facilitating this crisis. This narrative can be further seen in the following example:

"Orchestrating migration has become the Belarusian regime's tool to inflict vengeance on the European Union — including on Poland — for their political decisions" (Grupa Granica, 2021, p. 3). In this example, the words "*orchestrating*", "*tool*", and "*inflict vengeance*" showcase not only the active role of Belarus but also the intentionality and hostility of its aims. These examples show that NGOs frame Belarus not as a victim or merely a passive observer,

but rather an actor, which took an active and manipulative role. Furthermore, by using the word “vengeance”, NGOs provide a possible motivation behind Belarus’ actions.

A similar motif can be seen here: “People were brought to the border area by the Belarusian regime precisely to cause confusion and to generate polarization and conflict within the Polish society” (Grupa Granica, 2021, p. 3). Firstly, the phrase “*were brought*” doesn’t leave much space for ambiguity when it comes to putting the agency on someone. In this case, the bad actor is clearly identified to be “*the Belarusian regime*”, wherein, the NGOs provide a possible aim of the regime: “*to cause confusion and to generate polarization and conflict within the Polish society*”.

The following three framings show the accusations of Belarus being the bad actor in the crisis, and, furthermore, it shows a motif of coercion. We can see it in the first quote: “His government has been issuing visas to thousands of people from countries afflicted by wars or years of lawlessness, only to force them to make irregular entry into Poland, Lithuania or Latvia” (Grupa Granica, 2021, p. 11). Here, the agent is “*His government*”. And its activity is phrased as “*only to force them*”, showing coercion. A similar description can be found in the following quote: “Belarusian services relocate groups of 100 to 500 migrants along the entire borderline to make them forcibly enter the Polish territory” (Grupa Granica, 2021, p. 8), once again, the agent is connected to Belarus authorities (“*Belarusian services*”), and the aspect of used force can be found: “*to make them forcibly enter*”. Again, a similar narrative can be found here: “Shortly before they can reach the border crossing, they are forcibly led into the forest by Belarusian uniformed officers, who force them to push through the barbed wire fencing along the border” (Grupa Granica, 2021, p. 8). The agent being “*Belarusian uniformed offices*”, and the element of coercion seen here: “*who force them to push through*”.

The abovementioned examples illustrate the framing of Belarus as the primary manipulatory perpetrator in the crisis. The rhetoric used by NGOs provides a direct link between the actions of the state and the consequences at the border. The next section provides examples, wherein Belarus is framed in a less direct manner.

#### **5.2.1.2. Passive framing**

Another prominent narrative that was identified during the analysis was the framework that fell under the code “Passive Framing” (13 instances). Here, Belarus, and its role in particular, was not as explicit. In these cases, Belarus’ role was mentioned in an indirect or vague manner. Compared to the “Explicit Instigator” code, this framework asked for extra

careful analysis of the rhetoric. As an example, that illustrates this, let's take a look at the following quote: "Belarusian services direct so far the largest group of migrants — around 3,000 people — towards the border crossing in Kuźnica Białostocka" (Grupa Granica, 2021, p. 8). At first glance, just like in the previous examples, there is a notion that showcases Belarus ("*Belarusian services*") as the instigator, but the language used in this quote is different. While previously, the dominating word used to describe Belarus' action at the border was "force", now, we find the verb "direct". In this case, Belarus' forces are described not as "forcing" the migrants towards the border, but rather "directing" them. This choice of framework becomes even more interesting in light of the fact that Grupa Granica claims that the actions of the Polish side are better described as "expulsions". The following is their explanation of the usage of the word "expulsion":

"In the report, we also use the term "*expulsion*" (Pol. *wywózka*). In this way, we wish to communicate the actual meaning of actions by the Polish services. Although the English term "push-back" has also been used in this context, in our view, we are witnessing something more, i.e. mass and illegal expulsions of people rounded up in the forests" (Grupa Granica, 2021, p. 4).

For these reasons, using the verb "*direct*" would fall under the framework of "Passive Framing". Another such case can be found in the following quote: "*In 2023, the Egala Association recorded the admission of 159 patients who ended up there after crossing the Polish-Belarusian border in a non-regulated way*" ("*Pepper spray in a bottle of water*", 2023, p. 46). The keyword here is "*non-regulated*". In contrast to the word "*expulsion*" used to describe pushbacks done by Polish authorities, the phrase "*non-regulated way*" is rather an abstract one. The agent, which facilitated these crossings is absent in this quote. The same framing occurred in a few more cases here: "Complying with the procedures provided for by law, consisting in accepting applications for international protection or initiating return procedures against foreigners who crossed the Polish border in an unregulated manner" (Grupa Granica, 2025, p. 5), as well as here, "It seems that 15,057 people may have irregularly crossed the Polish-Belarusian border (...)" (Grupa Granica, 2023, p. 56). Even though these events have been meticulously documented, and undoubtedly, the instigating agent is known by the NGOs as well, Belarus and its authorities are constructed here in a passive manner.

A similar passive framework continues here:

"The current dramatic situation of the people stranded in the forests near the border results not from a migration crisis but from a humanitarian one, which is due to a strategy that the Polish government decided to adopt in response to Alexander

Lukashenko's actions towards forced migrants who have already crossed the Polish border” (Grupa Granica, 2021, p. 3).

Here, Grupa Granica claims that “the current dramatic situation” is not caused by the “migration crisis”, but rather Polish government and its response to Lukashenko’s actions, thus ascribing the blame on Poland for the humanitarian crisis at the border, and, at the same, putting some distance between the crisis and the Belarusian regime.

Another similar case can be seen here:

“However, the Belarusian authorities have easily managed to lead Poland into taking a series of radical steps: introducing the state of emergency, restricting freedom of media, banning activists from entering the border area, without exception for those providing medical and humanitarian aid” (Grupa Granica, 2021, p. 3).

In this example, the NGO describes Belarus as an instigator at the beginning of the sentence, but then the critical rhetoric shifts to Poland and its government’s measures. Actions of Belarus are not further analysed, condemned or criticised from the moral perspective, as was often the case when analysing Poland’s framework. Meanwhile, Poland’s actions are showcased as the central issue here. They are described as “*radical*” and further listed in detail: the declaration of a state of emergency entailed curtailing media freedoms and enforcing an indiscriminate ban on the presence of activists in the border zone, without exception for providers of medical or humanitarian aid (Grupa Granica, 2021, p.3). The extent to which Belarus is blamed here is minimised to “*leading*” Poland.

The examples demonstrate instances wherein the framing of Belarus’ role is not as clear-cut. Instead of providing a direct acknowledgement of Belarus’ role in facilitating the crisis, Lukashenko’s regime’s actions are indirectly implied or downplayed using a variety of linguistic and rhetorical tools. The following chapter of the analysis examines the constructs of Polish authorities in the reports.

### **5.2.2. Framing of Polish Authorities**

In the following section, the NGOs’ reports will be analysed using the following codes: Aggressive/hostile framing, Legal Criticism, Moral Criticism, Disinformation Framing, and Ineffective Action Framing. The following section explores narratives wherein NGOs construct the Polish authorities as an instigator and one of the primary sources of danger in the crisis.

### 5.2.2.1. Aggressive/hostile framing

When it comes to the narrative analysis of Polish authorities, it was revealed that the most common way to describe Polish authorities and their actions was to describe them as threatening or hostile. This code was named “Aggressive/hostile framing”, and there were 29 such cases found in the analysis of the report. This section will showcase some of the examples that showcase this most common pattern found in NGOs’ reports.

To begin, it is worth looking to the previously mentioned description that NGOs have deliberately attributed to the Polish tactic of “pushbacks”. As it was mentioned, NGOs prefer the term “expulsions” as it, according to them, “communicates the actual meaning of actions by Polish services” (Grupa Granica, 2021, p.4). Nevertheless, NGOs see the act of pushing back migrants as a hostile one, wherein people are indiscriminately rounded up in the forest by mass and then expelled from the Polish territory. Usage of this word can be found throughout yearly reports, for example here: “Polish Minister of Internal Affairs and Administration issues an implementing act legalizing expulsion” (Grupa Granica, 2021, p. 5). Also here: “For the first time, NGOs are able to document a case of expulsions in the Polish border region” (Grupa Granica, 2021, p. 5). Such and similar descriptions of Polish actions can be found throughout each report.

Besides the pushbacks, NGOs have directly and indirectly accused Polish authorities, particularly the border guards, of being hostile and dangerous not only towards the migrants but also towards the volunteers helping them. For example:

“After attending a call from people stranded in the forest, medical staff from 'Medycyna Granicy' find the wheels of their ambulance deflated. As they approach the vehicle, they notice armed men and a woman walking away, and then leaving in a vehicle believed to belong to the Polish Army” (Grupa Granica, 2021, p. 8).

This example illustrates how the NGO constructs Polish border guards as intimidating and threatening humanitarian workers. This case is not a direct accusation from the NGOs, hence the absence of direct blame, and hedging, demonstrated here by the phrase “believed to belong”. The main goal here is to paint Polish authorities as intimidating and aggressive. To amplify this image, the usage of “armed men” is employed, putting it in contrast to the medical workers of the NGO.

Overall, constructing Polish border guards as intimidating and hostile is one of the main themes in the reports. Another example of this: “During the night, Polish soldiers fire warning shots into the air to prevent a group of migrants from crossing the border from Belarus” (Grupa

Granica, 2021, p. 9). This example constructs Polish border guards using gunfire as a tactic of deterrence. It also constructs migrants as simply trying to cross the border; therefore, the use of gunfire appears to be excessive.

The presence of armed soldiers and border guards in restricted areas and border cities is mentioned numerous times in the reports. According to the NGOs, “Living in a highly militarized area (which also affects areas outside the restricted zone) may cause a lot of stress and mixed feelings among the residents. We have often been asked about what might happen next” (Grupa Granica, 2021, p. 26). In this example, the NGO suggests that military presence is unsettling and fear-inducing. Overall, NGO makes an attempt to construct militarisation of the border as a heavy emotional toll on the local population, thus painting the Polish government’s tactics as excessive. Furthermore, NGO suggests that local residents are aware of abuses and human rights violations: “Since they knew about the scale of abuses and human rights violations they had come to witness, many residents became reluctant to call the border guards and treated it as the last resort” (Grupa Granica, 2021, p. 26). A couple of things are demonstrated here. Firstly, although done indirectly, the arm of the Polish government, in this case, the military and border guards, is constructed as abusers and violators of human rights. Secondly, it further reinforces this argument by saying that this is a well-known thing among the residents, who “*became reluctant to call the border guards*” for the aforementioned reasons. In addition to that, according to the report, “Some officers have made insulting comments about the residents' involvement in providing aid. All this undermines the residents' confidence in the authorities' actions in the area and the rule of law” (Grupa Granica, 2021, p. 27). This excerpt emphasises the hostility of border services, which, in this case, is expressed by verbal intimidation of the local population. Framing Polish authorities and their arms not only as a threat and hostility towards migrants and humanitarian workers, but also towards anyone helping migrants, in this case, the residents of restricted areas and border cities.

As it was shown above, NGOs have repeatedly framed Polish authorities as armed, intimidating and often aggressive. This type of conduct is framed as a legitimate source of fear not only for migrants but for humanitarian aid workers as well. While this section focused more on the emotionally loaded frameworks, the following section will illustrate how these narratives are followed up with legal aspects of criticism, including the Polish government’s policies framed as not adherent not only to international law but to local as well.

### 5.2.2.2. Legal Criticism

The second most prominent framing of Polish authorities fell under the code of “Legal Criticism” (27 instances). The following section will showcase some of the most illustrative examples, wherein Polish authorities are framed as enacting policies and tactics, which are not adherent to Polish and European laws.

The most prominent criticism found in the report is that Poland is not following international law and its rulings. As seen here:

“The European Court of Human Rights issues an interim measure ordering Poland to provide food, shelter and water to a group of Afghan men and women stranded in Usnarz Górny. On September 27, this order is extended. Poland has not honoured these commitments” (Grupa Granica, 2021, p. 6).

One of the international courts, in this case, “The European Court of Human Rights”, has issued an interim measure; while not ruling on a permanent solution, this court ordered Poland to do a specific humanitarian act to help a group of migrants at the border. That said, according to the NGO, “Poland has not honoured these commitments”, thus framing them and their policies as not abiding the international law. Similarly, here: “The Polish Parliament passes an amendment to the law on foreigners — the so-called 'expulsion law'. The legislation is at odds with international law” (Grupa Granica, 2021, p. 6), NGOs frame the Polish authorities, specifically The Polish Parliament, as the ones making legal changes, which are “*at odds*” with international law. In addition, this report claims that every pushback done by the border guards violates international law, as seen here:

“Each push-back operation (although given the current situation on the Polish-Belarusian border the terms "roundup" and "expulsion" seem more appropriate) carried out at the borders of EU countries constitutes a gross violation of the EU and international law, as it deprives persons wishing to apply for refugee status of their right to submit the required application” (Grupa Granica, 2021, p. 10).

The abovementioned examples illustrate how the Polish state’s policies are framed as opposing international law, especially concerning humanitarian obligations. Legal criticism is a common pattern found in these reports; however, unlawful conduct is often followed up with moral criticisms, which will be analysed in the next section.

### 5.2.2.3. Moral criticism

Another common framing of Polish authorities fell under the code of “Moral Criticism” (13 instances). This framing is illustrated by the NGOs’ use of rhetorical strategies in order to demonstrate the actions of Polish authorities, border guards included, as not only illegal, as was shown in the previous section, but also as immoral and often inhumane.

One illustrative example of moral criticism can be found in the following statement: “Poland has abandoned ensuring standards of human rights protection, protection of refugees and the basic principles of humanity” (Grupa Granica, 2021, p. 3). By using the verb “abandoned”, NGOs imply that Polish authorities are deliberately engaging in immoral actions. It is not merely a consequence of a difficult-to-navigate crisis, but rather a conscious choice to act this way. The following phrase “basic principles of humanity” frames the Polish authorities as not only abandoning their legal obligations but also not being able to ensure the very basic needs of migrants. This motif is further reinforced here: “Meeting the needs of these people certainly does not exceed the possibilities and resources of our country” (Grupa Granica, 2021, p. 3). Here, the NGO rejects the idea that Poland is incapable of providing the help needed at the border. The phrase “*certainly does not exceed*” clearly states that, in the opinion of the NGO, Poland has plenty of resources to be capable of providing aid, thus connecting the blame to the ethical failures of the state.

Another example where the NGO employs ethically loaded language is the usage of the word “*expulsion*”: “Each push-back operation (although given the current situation on the Polish-Belarusian border the terms “roundup” and “expulsion” seem more appropriate)” (Grupa Granica, 2021, p. 10). This example shows how the NGO critiques not simply the action of pushback, but also the term “pushback” itself. It proposes the usage of “roundup” and “expulsion”, which, according to them, are more appropriate. Employing terminology that is more morally loaded appeals to the people’s emotions; it also suggests that the term “pushback” is masking the immoral action done by the state.

These examples show how Polish actions are framed not only as simply unlawful but also as overstepping the most basic moral and ethical standards. Moral criticisms are often emotionally loaded, appealing to the reader’s sense of morality. This type of criticism seeks to make readers reevaluate the actions taken by the Polish authorities. Furthermore, NGOs seek to challenge not only the morality of Poland’s conduct but also its communication. The following section examines how NGOs construct Polish authorities as the agents who seek to control and manipulate the information field around the crisis.

#### 5.2.2.4. Disinformation Framing

Another common pattern that was found in the NGOs' reports is the framing of Polish authorities as the ones employing disinformation or manipulative narrative tactics. This category was "Disinformation framing"; it was observed 19 times. This category frames Polish authorities as the actors distorting facts and misleading, as well as doing it on purpose.

An illustrative example can be seen here: "The activists also aim to counter the official propaganda of fearmongering that targets refugees and to support residents who decide to assist people in need" (Grupa Granica, 2021, p. 5). This example clearly and very directly constructs Polish authorities as the employers of propaganda. Using the word "*official*" suggests that the source of this type of information is the Polish state. The word "propaganda" implies that the Polish authorities are strategically using tactics of deception and manipulation in order to reach their goals, instead of truthfully informing their citizens. The word "*fearmongering*" implies that the state is engaging in purposeful inciting of fear. Another similar example is the following: "Polish authorities pretend their actions are legal" (Grupa Granica, 2021, p. 14). In this example, NGOs construct Polish authorities as not only doing illegal things but also doing them knowingly. The word "*pretend*" implies that Polish authorities are aware of their wrongdoings, but they choose to be deliberately deceptive. Constructing the Polish state as fearmongering and pretending reappears throughout the reports a few times. Another such example can be found here:

"Fearmongering and use of military terms (the tweets refer to: "attacks", "forcing", "thrust", "fight", "defence") create a false image and make officers face what is, in fact, a false dilemma, by suggesting that border protection precludes humanitarian action" (Grupa Granica, 2021, p. 18).

Once again, we find the term "*fearmongering*" implying the intentional inciting of fear. Usage of the phrase "a false dilemma" is particularly interesting here; it frames the state as presenting a fallacious choice, wherein you have only two options: either protect the border of Poland or help the migrants. According to the NGOs, both are possible. The word "*suggesting*" is not as straightforward as "*pretend*", but, nevertheless, it implies the strategic use of rhetoric as opposed to facts being stated. Similarly, here:

"The very fact that it came into being - as well as attempts by at least two journalists to understand the numbers reported by the Border Guard - proves that the data, which is selectively used in the Border Guard's press materials, as well as for political purposes and (with few exceptions) uncritically quoted by the media, is at the same time non-transparent,

incomprehensible and does not serve an informative function, and sometimes even causes misinformation” (Grupa Granica, 2023, p. 56).

The excerpt “*selectively used (...) for political purposes*” aligns with previously shown patterns, wherein Polish authorities are framed as not being entirely truthful and shaping the narrative to achieve their own political goals. Furthermore, “selectively used” implies that it is not merely an error, but rather a purposeful manipulation.

Moreover, in this excerpt, we find a new type of accusation. The quote “uncritically quoted by the media” implies that the Polish state isn’t acting alone; the actions of the Polish media are also mentioned here. The NGO suggest that the purposefully spread selective data from the Polish authorities is amplified by the media.

The abovementioned examples illustrate how NGOs frame the Polish government’s communication in a negative light; in addition, they challenge the intentions behind some particular choices of rhetoric employed, especially those which have traits of manipulation and disinformation. Another major theme of critique that emerges in these reports is the portrayal of Poland’s policies as ineffective and failing.

#### **5.2.2.5. Ineffective Action Framing**

Another pattern found in NGO reports showcases the Polish government and its strategies as ineffective. It fell under the code “Ineffective action framing” with (14 instances), and, differently from others, it does not focus on the legality or hostility of the actions, but rather on the failure of the state to tackle the crisis successfully or effectively.

An illustrative example of NGOs constructing the Polish authorities as ineffective can be seen here:

“Twitter messages are also to demonstrate the effectiveness of Border Guard activities, which is supposedly enforcing the law and "preventing" attempts at illegal border crossings. However, the fact that a growing number of people had crossed the heavily militarized border zone and were arrested in Germany shows that these actions are ineffective” (Grupa Granica, 2021, p. 18).

This example showcases how NGO frames Polish policies as ineffective by comparing them to the outcome. Firstly, it implies that the government uses Twitter to demonstrate the effectiveness of preventative measures at the border; secondly, it contrasts this with the fact that there is an increasing number of people getting arrested in Germany, thus, constructing the state’s actions as ineffective. The following examples will showcase more occasions, wherein

NGOs frame state policies as ineffective. In this example, “Putting up border fences makes hostile countries even more hostile” (Grupa Granica, 2021, p. 29), two frameworks can be seen, firstly, while admitting that one side is hostile, NGO expresses that the Polish government’s tactic of building a border fence doesn’t achieve the expected outcome, therefore it can be perceived as ineffective, and secondly, it goes further by saying that this policy is counterproductive, claiming that it increases the hostility from the countries that are already hostile. The border fence is one of the most critiqued policies of the Polish state. The same ineffectiveness theme is illustrated here:

“Poland needs to rethink its strategy of providing humanitarian and development aid. We currently earmark PLN 3 billion a year on Official Development Assistance; let us compare that amount with PLN 1.6 billion to be spent on the border fencing” (Grupa Granica, 2021, p. 33).

In this excerpt, the report suggests that Poland reevaluates its strategies concerning humanitarian aid. In addition, it compares funds allocated to “Official Development Assistance” with the financing of the border fence, thus indirectly implying that these funds are being spent ineffectively and could be allocated somewhere else.

Examples from above show how NGOs construct Polish authorities and their policies as ineffective in tackling the crisis. Besides being hostile, or in some cases, unethical, the Polish government’s policies are framed not only as ineffective, but, in some cases, even counterproductive, thus failing entirely. Earlier sections analysed the framing of Belarus and Poland individually; the following chapter examines the cases wherein NGOs construct them as mutually responsible for the ongoing crisis.

### **5.2.3. Shared responsibility**

Previous chapters examined how NGOs construct the Belarusian and Polish authorities separately. That said, during the analysis, it was revealed that there is another common framing pattern that warrants its own separate chapter. This section focuses on the instances, where NGOs put some type of blame not on a single state or actor, but rather both, more or less responsible for the crisis. There were 14 instances of such examples found in the reports. The examples below demonstrate in what ways NGOs construct mutual responsibility for both states.

It was often found that NGOs indicate Belarus as the initial instigator, but immediately follow it up with a variety of criticisms aimed at Poland and its actions, as seen here: “Even

though the situation on the border has been orchestrated by Belarus, it is also the result of decisions and choices made by Polish politicians” (Grupa Granica, 2021, p. 3). This sentence shows that NGOs acknowledge the Belarusian agency: “orchestrated by Belarus”, but do not isolate the blame entirely on it. On the contrary, it puts part of the blame on the Polish state, which, by their own decisions and choices, has contributed to the crisis. Nevertheless, using the words: “decisions and choices” implies that Poland had other options, but had deliberately chosen tactics, which are currently employed at the border. A similar notion can be found here:

“As a result of actions undertaken by officers of both countries, female and male migrants spend weeks stranded in the forests near the border, exposed to cold and rain, without access to food, clean water and medical assistance” (Grupa Granica, 2021, p. 4). In this example, by saying “As a result of actions undertaken by officers of both countries” NGOs, once again, put the blame for the instigation of the humanitarian crisis on both sides.

As seen from the previous section, “Disinformation Framing”, these reports have showcased that NGOs are engaged in the critique of media as well, going as far as presenting them as complicit in the distribution of poorly chosen or intentionally misinforming data. The following example showcases how NGOs put the actions of the Polish state in comparison with the Belarusian regime: “On the Belarusian side, the media are controlled by the regime. On the Polish side, the state of emergency introduced in the border area on September 2, 2021, restricted entry into that zone, with the ban also applied to journalists, representatives of NGOs and humanitarian organisations, as well as independent observers” (Grupa Granica, 2021, p. 10).

In this example, using phrases “On the Belarusian side (...)” and “On the Polish side (...)”, two states are placed alongside each other. In this type of framework, NGO is trying to highlight the similarities of the actions taken by both sides, specifically their attempts to take control over the information distribution field. By choosing this type of structure in this example, NGO invites the reader to consider both states as functionally and tactically closer than previously thought.

Furthermore, there is another interesting pattern often found in these reports that also falls under the code of “shared responsibility”. In it, migrants are framed as the ultimate victims, while both states are addressed as equally responsible perpetrators in this crisis, wherein they cause the suffering of these victims. As seen here: “migrants have become trapped in the border area in both countries as hostages used in the political game between the Lukashenko regime on one side, and Poland and the European Union on the other” (Grupa Granica, 2021, p. 14), migrants are framed as “hostages”; this word is used for its emotional

load, it implies that they are used as tools in the “political game” played by both sides. This notion of a game played by both sides is repeated a couple of times, as seen here: “ping-pong game consisting of repeatedly pushing people across the border” (Grupa Granica, 2021, p. 30), as well as here: “now aware that they remain completely dependent on the political game between Belarus, Poland and the European Union” (Grupa Granica, 2021, p. 16).

As it was demonstrated, while it was more common to put framings onto the actors separately, mutual responsibility was a common pattern found in the reports. Using a variety of strategies, namely structural comparisons or metaphorical constructions for both states, NGOs construct both states as mutually responsible, furthermore framing migrants as being caught in between or simply used as instruments for the broader goals of the states.

### **5.3. Conclusion of the Analysis**

Applying the critical discourse analysis method, this study has explored how NGOs, namely the Grupa Granica coalition, engaged in the construction of discourse surrounding the Polish-Belarusian border crisis, specifically Polish and Belarusian authorities. The analysis focused on the NGOs’ reports, dating from 2021 to 2024. In order to achieve the analytical goals, a special coding mechanism was designed, which allowed for a better macro understanding of the discourse and the framing of the actors involved in the crisis.

When it comes to Belarusian authorities, the majority of cases fell under the code of “explicit instigator”, meaning that it was mostly framed as the actor who instigates and orchestrates the crisis. Furthermore, the report analysis revealed some repeating discursive patterns, namely words like “orchestrating” or “forced”, revealing the goals and intentionality of these actions, as seen through the NGOs’ perspective. Overall, these codes revealed that Belarus was mostly described as intentionally being engaged and actively facilitating the crisis by controlling the flows of migrants. Using this framing, NGOs underlined the responsibility of Belarus in the crisis.

That said, the next framing brought more nuance to this discourse. The following code was “passive framing”, which revealed some rhetorical strategies that NGOs used to alleviate the responsibility and accusations. Using a more passive communication strategy, NGOs suggested that Belarus is involved in the crisis, but not as explicitly. This type of framing often was followed by a reference to Poland, namely its responses to Belarus’ actions, thus, shifting the blame from Belarus as the primary instigator and cause of the crisis, to a joint responsibility

concept, in which both states are sharing the responsibility, moreover, constructing an idea that absent Poland's erroneous response, the humanitarian crisis could be solved by other means.

In respect of the Polish authorities, a different type of strategy was found in the analysis. It involved a variety of criticisms, slightly differing in their nature. Similar to the framing of Belarus, Poland was also constructed as an instigating and hostile actor. Moreover, Polish authorities were also painted as unlawful, in some cases immoral, showing propagandistic traits, and overall ineffective in their attempt to tackle the crisis. The analysis demonstrated that Polish authorities, particularly border guards, were framed as especially hostile and intimidating, not only towards migrants but also towards humanitarian aid workers and even local residents who live in the border zone. In order to demonstrate this aggression, NGOs heavily relied on their own experiences at the border, and on the witnesses' statements provided by migrants themselves.

A significant part of the criticisms towards Poland included the legality of its actions. Throughout the reports, NGOs have repeatedly criticised Polish authorities for violating the law, mostly focusing on Poland's inability to adhere to its international obligations, for example, ignoring the European Court of Human Rights and its orders, as well as its domestic rulings.

Moral criticisms were also a big representation of NGOs' framing of the Polish authorities. Framings that fell under this category appeared to be rich with emotionally charged language. It mostly focused on basic human rights, painting Polish authorities and border guards as the abusers of these principles. It should be mentioned that this analysis has also demonstrated that this disregard for human rights has been framed by NGOs as deliberate. NGOs have repeatedly argued that the current humanitarian crisis is not due to insufficient funding ability or some other cause, but rather due to Poland's intentional moral and other failures. In a few cases, NGOs compared Polish authorities to Belarus' counterparts, and combined with moral failings, this type of framework highlighted Poland's self-declared democratic values against its actual actions in the crisis. While continuously drawing attention to Poland's inability to make morally sound choices, NGOs attempted to invoke a more critical perspective from the readers.

NGOs have also extensively focused on the Polish authorities' communication. This type of framing fell under the code called "Disinformation Framing". Examples that met this category involved accusations, wherein the Polish government was framed as an actor engaging in the spreading of misinformation, from giving out incoherent crossing numbers to exaggerating security rhetoric in order to control the discourse surrounding the crisis. This type

of behaviour was framed as strategically and deliberately developed with the goal of misleading Poland's citizens. In their reports, NGOs have repeatedly reiterated the need for genuine communication, which, according to them, was not being reported by the state and media, the latter being blamed for being complicit.

The ineffectiveness section focused on the policy failures of Polish authorities. In this chapter, NGOs claimed that the militarised and securitised approaches, such as the construction of the border fence and the deployment of the military, were firstly ineffective, and secondly counterproductive. Having repeatedly reiterated the ineffectiveness of Polish policies, NGOs have made a case for an alternative approach, focusing mainly on a softer, more tolerant and humanitarian-focused method.

The final section was called "Shared Responsibility". Framings that fell under this code included cases wherein NGOs constructed both states as responsible and blameworthy for the crisis. This type of approach was used to illustrate a heterogeneous aspect of the crisis. NGOs suggested that neither state was facilitating the crisis by itself. In an attempt to showcase a more nuanced position, NGOs employed a number of linguistic tactics, namely alluding to metaphorical political games played between greater powers, wherein migrants are just used as "pawns" to achieve broader political goals. Conventionally, this crisis is seen as one side being the aggressor and the other one defending itself; that said, NGOs have rejected this perspective. Instead, they have framed it as a humanitarian disaster, in which Belarus and Poland are jointly to be blamed.

## 6. Discussion

This section of the analysis reflects on the data and results of the analysis, addressing the most important findings, namely NGOs' apparent prioritisation of critique directed towards Polish authorities, securitisation aspects, and other secondary findings.

The primary finding of the analysis was the difference in coverage of the two states involved in the crisis. Authorities of Belarus were depicted as deliberate instigators, but the overwhelming majority of the critique was aimed at Polish authorities. It would be fair to assume that the main reason for this type of coverage inequality is that the NGOs working at the border are Polish, thus more critical of their own government. Furthermore, Poland is a member state of the EU, which means that they are legally bound to a variety of international courts. Knowing that it is possible that NGOs could assume that their political pressure could produce meaningful policy change. In contrast to that, Belarus is internationally and conventionally perceived as an authoritarian regime, which is automatically less inclined toward international norms and, thus, mostly immune to political pressure, especially from non-governmental actors. For these reasons, choosing to focus mostly on Poland could be a more strategically viable choice, since such democratic states are usually held to a higher degree of accountability, thus a political change is more likely as well. Another reason that could explain this vast contrast in coverage could be a simple audience-based issue. This type of critique of a democratic state could resonate more with the readers of NGO's audience. Moreover, NGOs often get their funding from a variety of sources that are usually more inclined to uphold humanitarian standards.

From a pragmatic perspective, NGOs could be choosing to focus on realistically achievable political goals. It is feasible that in order to save resources and focus time, NGOs attempt to pressure states, wherein a change is possible, especially knowing the grip that the current Belarusian regime has on its citizens.

That said, this strategy has its own possible flaws. NGOs have to carefully choose the amount and ferocity of their criticisms. Failing to do so, intentionally or unintentionally, increases the risk of downplaying the actions of one of the actors, in this case, Belarus. Here, admittedly, NGOs see the actions of Belarus as an act of hybrid war. However, in the analysis, references to "hybrid warfare" were scarcely found. It consisted of only a few examples, which were used in the early reports following the very beginning of the crisis. Having completely moved past this term in the later reports, NGOs are potentially showcasing that their entire focus is placed on the humanitarian side of this crisis, while at the same time distancing

themselves from the perspective of the Polish state. The latter perspective allows for a more drastic response, namely “push-back” strategy, which not only does not align with the goals of the NGOs, but, on the contrary, it is the main issue that NGOs are actively advocating against, therefore, it is possible that overemphasising the notion of hybrid warfare at play in the crisis could contradict the primary humanitarian goals that NGOs prioritise. Knowing that, it is even more important to avoid downplaying the primary instigator of the crisis, for it can decrease the credibility of the NGO’s actions. For some readers, it can appear that the suffering that followed as a consequence of the crisis is mostly due to Polish policies, and not Belarus’ deliberate hybrid attack, wherein they have tactically exploited migrants.

Another surprising observation revealed from the analysis was the absence of legal criticism directed towards Belarus. Despite the recognition of its deliberate instigation tactics, NGOs have not explicitly focused on the Belarusian regime’s unlawful conduct. The lack of legal criticism on a Belarusian scale here could, once again, signal the pragmatic approach of the NGOs’ framings. After all, considering Lukashenko’s regime’s attitude towards international legal norms and any foreign pressure, NGOs could have taken a realistic approach, in which an attempt to enact accountability against the regime is very unlikely. Therefore, different framing approaches here could be more useful, for example, more morally loaded language could facilitate a more humanitarian force, instead of a legal one. On the contrary, similarly to the previous case, this type of construction, wherein Polish policies and actions at the border are disproportionally critiqued in comparison with Belarus’ counterparts, could undermine the perspectives of the NGOs themselves.

One of the theories used in this thesis was securitisation. This theory led to a question: to what extent NGOs themselves are engaging in securitisation by constructing Poland’s actions as a threat? As it has been reiterated in the earlier chapters, scholars like Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde (1998) and others described how a variety of actors can use rhetoric as a way to construct certain types of issues and crises as serious, or even existential threats. Typically, it is states that use securitisation. This strategy is often used to create a justification for certain types of policies, which otherwise would be unlikely to succeed, for example, Poland and its approach to the border crisis, namely the militarisation of the border. That said, analysis of reports suggests that NGOs themselves use rhetorical means that could be classified as a form of counter-securitisation. As seen from the analysis, NGOs have framed Polish authorities as actors, who are not following humanitarian norms, thus, also creating and facilitating a humanitarian disaster to the extent that it requires legal and humanitarian help from international institutions. As the reports have shown, NGOs often described migrants as

“instruments” or “pawns”, who found themselves in the area of “political games” played by bigger actors. Here, emotional load and selective empathy are used as a securitisation strategy, which allows NGOs to reach their set goals more effectively.

Once again, this type of conduct brings its own risks. Undoubtedly, NGOs are aiming to improve the humanitarian situation at the border; that said, securitising Polish authorities is polarising by its own nature. In this case, NGOs could possibly benefit from collaboration with Polish authorities, but framing them as adversaries could possibly be counterproductive. Thus, it all comes down to finding the right balance between securitisation rhetoric and the recognition of actual security concerns coming from the hybrid warfare tactics that Belarus is engaged in.

All things considered, the discussion chapter examined some possible motivations behind the strategies employed by the NGOs, namely their prioritisation of critique towards Poland. It also addressed securitisation aspects, from which it was apparent that NGOs themselves engage in securitisation, wherein Polish policies were framed as threats towards migrants. Analysis has revealed that Poland and its authorities are disproportionately represented in the negative framings of the NGOs; that said, the motives behind it are not entirely clear. It is possible that NGOs see Polish authorities as equally responsible in the crisis, but, on the other hand, it is possible that they are taking a more pragmatic approach, where any change or attempt to hold the Belarusian regime accountable is seen as unrealistic and not worthy of limited resources.

## 7. Conclusion

Grounded on the theories of constructivism and securitisation, this study analysed public narratives created by Polish NGOs based on their publicly available annual reports. Employing critical discourse analysis, this thesis aimed at revealing how Polish NGOs, conventionally being considered as humanitarian actors, might engage in political discursive processes. Polish and other Eastern European countries targeted by Belarusian hybrid attacks frame themselves as victims who are ensuring the border security and defence strategies cooperatively, taking a decision to push migrants back with a unified voice. Beyond dispute, any measures violating human rights are always criticised by international humanitarian organisations. However, the complex nature of hybrid warfare, within which both the “victim” states and NGOs are *forced* to operate, makes us question the traditional roles of involved actors. Moreover, the limited attention that non-governmental organisations receive in the hybrid warfare literature offered a compelling perspective for analysis. Therefore, in order to conduct comprehensive research, the analysis was guided by four research questions.

The two main questions addressed the NGO’s framing of the Polish and Belarusian authorities. Overall, Belarus was portrayed as a deliberately instigating actor, while Poland and its authorities were framed in a multifaceted way, including legal, moral, communicative, and effectiveness-focused narratives. Using a variety of rhetorical strategies, NGOs demonstrated themselves as actors expressing their own perspectives to create alternative narratives challenging the conventional understanding of the crisis, primarily advocating for a more humanitarian approach and international cooperation. However, the Discussion Chapter suggested that such an approach might have drawbacks, as fragmented criticisms they express against the aggressor hybrid warfare actor in their reports may have a counterproductive impact, risking the credibility of NGOs’ actions.

Sub-questions that were examined in the Discussion Chapter covered the following matters: NGOs’ motivation in centring their criticism on the Polish government over the Belarusian one and NGOs’ potential as counter-securitising actors. When it comes to the first issue, it was assumed that there might be several reasons, including a) Poland being an EU member state and thus being more legally bound to international courts; b) Belarus, as an authoritarian state, being disinclined to uphold international legal obligations and thus being immune to political pressure, especially from NGOs; c) the perception of the target audience. In light of these considerations, choosing to direct their pressure against the Polish government could be seen as a more tactically sound decision, especially when such democratic states are

obligated to adhere to a higher level of responsibility. Regarding the target audience of NGOs, it was assumed that such a narrative would also find a greater response from readers.

Addressing these research questions supported the achievement of the main research aims and objectives. One of the aims was to explore the role of NGOs in such crises through the lens of hybrid warfare, which led to the assumption that they might be considered as counter-securitising actors against the Polish authorities. In doing so, this research attempted to respond to the identified gap regarding the role of NGOs in hybrid warfare literature. Furthermore, it should be noted that the recurring discursive patterns and language in the official reports and statements of NGOs were additional points of concern in the established objectives.

While this thesis could potentially be a meaningful contribution to the academic literature on hybrid warfare, it still has several weaknesses and limitations, as was outlined in the Methodology Chapter. The major weakness was the failure in recruiting an appropriate number of respondents for semi-structured interviews with Polish NGO representatives, after which the interviews were eliminated from the final research design. The interviews would facilitate a more comprehensive and deeper understanding of the NGOs' motivations and perspectives. Another flaw is the interpretivist research analysis upon which this thesis was built. Interviews with NGO representatives would be equally valuable in this context to tackle the latter limitation better, supporting or contradicting the assumptions made by the researcher. Further studies could address these limitations in order to broaden the investigation of the problem.

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