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INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND POLITICAL SCIENCE



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The polycrisis and systemic change in Lithuania: from fragmentation to integration



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CONTEXT OF THE RESEARCH

A series of **transboundary crises** (the COVID-19 pandemic, migration, energy (cost of living) or the crisis of security) in European countries over the last five years

Recent crises were catalysed by **the increasing aggressiveness of the authoritarian states**

Since these interconnected crises overlap, they can be analysed as **a single polycrisis**

POLYCRISIS

The simultaneous occurrence of two or more interconnected crises characterised by high complexity and/or spill-over effects

Although the concept of a polycrisis was developed for a better understanding of interconnected global events, it is also relevant for exploring **national policymaking or crisis management** (Dinan et al., 2024)

RESEARCH GAPS

Knowledge about interconnected transboundary crises, especially those overlapping in time and space, remains shallow (Homer-Dixon et al., 2022; Anghel and Jones, 2023)

Physical, financial or governance linkages among individual crises are seldom explored (SAPEA, 2022; Group of Chief Scientific Advisors, 2022)

The field of crises and disaster studies remains dominated by single case studies and exploratory research (Wolbers et al., 2021), with limited attention to cross-country or cross-case comparisons

It is important to shift from **the focus on operational-level responses to the study of system-wide institutional change**

PURPOSE AND QUESTIONS

The purpose of the paper is to assess the impact of the recent polycrisis on systemic change in Lithuania

The specific research questions:

1. How did Lithuanian authorities respond to the overlapping crises during the 2020–2024 period and what systemic changes occurred at the domestic level?
2. What institutional logics—appropriateness or consequentiality—dominated crisis decision-making, and how did they shift over time? To what extent did professional interdependence and political bargaining shape governance adaptations?
3. Can these institutional responses be considered emergent or 'programmatic' (strategically planned)?
4. What lessons can be drawn for other countries confronting similar polycrises?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: DRIVERS OF CHANGE

Insights from new institutionalism and complexity theory

	Complexity theory	
Logic of change	Low complexity	High complexity
Normative pressures (the logic of appropriateness)	Professional self-organisation	Professional interdependence and (non-linear) interactions
Coercive pressures (the logic of consequentiality)	Political control	Multi-level political bargaining

HYPOTHESES

Hypothesis 1a: In the early stages of a crisis, institutional change will be dominated by the logic of appropriateness, relying on pre-existing structures and routines of crisis management.

Hypothesis 1b: As crises escalate and spill over into additional domains, the logic of consequentiality will increasingly drive decision-making, leading to the development of more centralised and inter-institutional coordination mechanisms.

Hypothesis 2: Within high-complexity environments, professional interdependence and political bargaining across different levels of government (national and international/EU level) should become the primary drivers of decision-making processes.

Hypothesis 3: Systemic reforms in crisis management are more likely to emerge organically in response to evolving challenges and systemic pressures during a polycrisis, rather than through programmatic, pre-defined strategic documents.

OUR METHODS

The case study approach by focusing on the process of crisis management and systemic change during (1) the COVID-19 pandemic and (2) the migration crisis

Causal process tracing (Kay and Baker, 2014) that allows to check whether a theoretical explanation corresponds to actual mechanisms 'on the ground'

Semi-structured interviews with key decision-makers and participants of crisis management, with the results of 8 interviews used in the paper

FROM THE OLD FRAGMENTED SYSTEM TO A NEW INTEGRATED SYSTEM

The old system

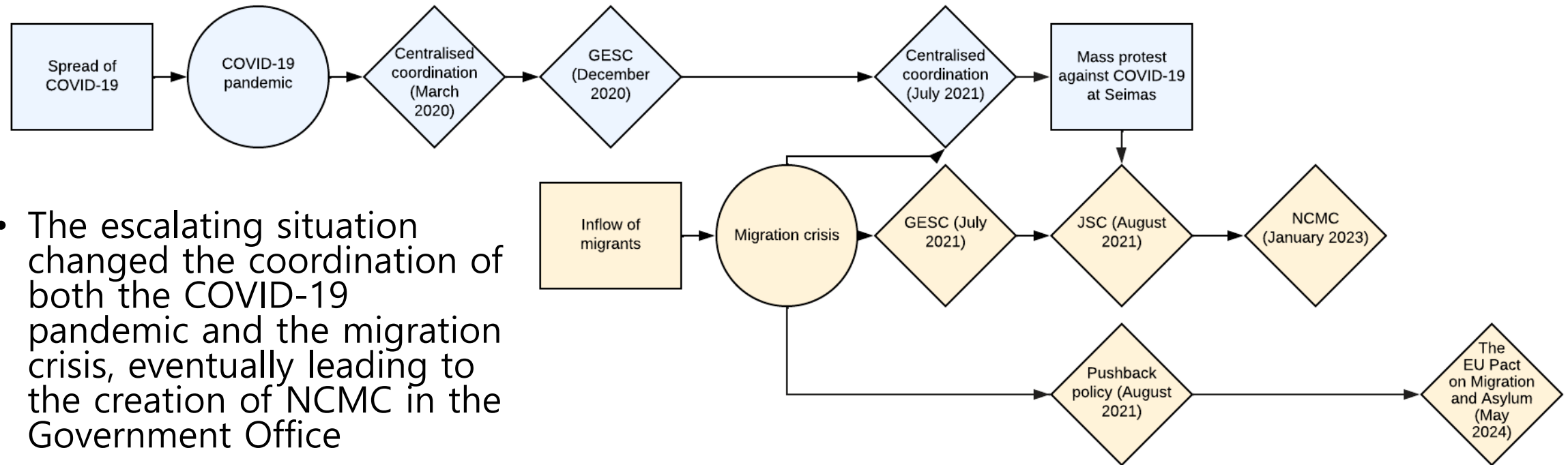
Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (2020), Lithuania's crisis management system was fragmented, with **the Fire and Rescue Department** under the Ministry of the Interior managing emergencies and **the Prime Minister's Office** handling state-level crises (like the global financial crisis)

The previous emergency management system heavily relied on **hierarchy and top-down command** within the Fire and Rescue Department ([Widmalm](#) et al., 2019)

A new system

The creation of a centralised and integrated crisis and emergency system centred around **the National Crisis Management Centre** within **the Government Office**

LITHUANIA'S CRISIS RESPONSE TIMELINE (2020-2024)



- The escalating situation changed the coordination of both the COVID-19 pandemic and the migration crisis, eventually leading to the creation of NCMC in the Government Office
- *"the Ministry of the Interior and its administrative bodies were overwhelmed by the influx of irregular migrants"*

THE CRITICAL EVENT OF RIOTS

The Ministry of the Interior initially handled the migration crisis through its Operations Centre

On 10 August 2021:

- A riot broke out at the Rūdninkai migrant camp
- A mass protest against COVID-19 restrictions at the Lithuanian parliament escalated into riots

On 11 August 2021, the Minister of the Interior created a **Joint Situations Centre** because the escalating situation required *"a unified response from all state institutions, involving regular inter-institutional contacts"*



CONCLUSIONS: FROM NORMATIVE TO COERCIVE PRESSURES

The coordination of both individual crises in Lithuania initially relied on the existing institutional arrangements and professional routines following the logic of appropriateness. However, this approach failed to provide an effective response to the increasing complexity of the polycrisis in the country (H1a)

When the impact of the individual crises intensified and/or they spilled into different domains, the Lithuanian authoritative decision-makers introduced more centralised and inter-institutional coordination mechanisms, aligning with the logic of consequentiality stemming from coercive pressures (H1b)

In the high-complexity environment of overlapping crises, both professional interdependence (e.g. operations coordinated through the JSC) and multi-level political bargaining (e.g. the interplay of Lithuanian authorities and EU institutions while formulating the policy response at the national and EU level) became central to decision-making processes (H2).

COMPARISON ACROSS CASES

Crisis	Initial dominant logic	Mechanism of change	Evolution of coordination instruments	Main hypotheses supported
COVID-19	Appropriateness	Coercive pressures	More centralisation: COVID-19 Committee → GESG → Government Chancellery and NCMC	H1a, H1b
Irregular migration	Appropriateness	Coercive pressures Increasing complexity of the crisis through spillovers	More inter- institutional coordination and centralisation: GESG → JSC → NCMC	H1a, H1b H2 H3

THE ITERATIVE EMERGENCE OF THE NEW SYSTEM

Emergent reforms

- Organic, arising from the repeated interaction of various actors
- Processes of adaptation to the crises
- Unpredictable

Programmatic reforms

- Programmed by authoritative decision-makers and state institutions
- Deliberate policymaking/lawmaking processes
- Typically predictable

THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTION

By moving beyond the global-level application our research further demonstrated the utility of the polycrisis concept to **analysing crisis management at the national level**

Building upon the ideas of new institutionalism and complexity theory, this paper applied **a novel theoretical framework to assessing systemic change** based on institutional logics and change drivers (during a worsening geopolitical environment)

We further theorised **the emergent nature of systemic reforms** and explored it empirically during a polycrisis

DISCUSSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR RESILIENCE

Overall, the country's crisis management system was able to “**bounce forward**” (Manyena et al., 2011), with the potential of strengthening the overall resilience of the country's administration

While the National Crisis Management Centre has recently managed several minor events in the country, its capabilities to respond to more serious crises are **still to be tested**

Also, the system's centralised structure, with strong reliance on the Prime Minister's authority, may present **challenges in addressing future systemic threats such as climate change**, whose mitigation can be facilitated by polycentric governance structures (Boasson and Tatham, 2022)

RELEVANCE TO OTHER COUNTRIES

Lithuania's recent experience of going through several overlapping crises can offer valuable insights for other countries, in particular those from Central and Eastern Europe or Taiwan and South Korea, facing security threats from authoritarian countries

While the context of the polycrisis spurred the system-wide reforms of crisis management in Lithuania, its authorities placed a greater emphasis on centralised policy-making to address national security challenges stemming from the aggressive authoritarian regimes

However, the applicability of these research results to other contexts may vary:

- Despite high-complexity settings, pressures for reforms might not be as pronounced in countries facing weaker security challenges
- Similarly, the effectiveness of crisis coordination from the centre may be less apparent in more decentralised political systems where regional action may be more crucial

FURTHER RESEARCH

While focusing on systemic reforms, it is possible to extend the analysis of reform results to **assessing resilience in governance and public administration** as one of the main objectives of crisis management

A comparative analysis of crisis management reforms in a few European countries characterised by variation in contextual, political, policy or institutional conditions could shed some light on the importance of different conditions and resulting adaptive processes

Delving into **the specific interaction effects of different types of crises** within a polycrisis (e.g., a mix of a security crises interacting with other types of crises compared to other combinations due to the importance of national security concerns)



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Thank you for the attention!



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