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https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5660-0617

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Rasa Bortkevičiūtė

Governing in Times of Crises and Turbulence: how does Stakeholder Engagement Link to Strengthening Resilience of the Lithuanian Governance Systems?

DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

Social Sciences,
Political Science (S 002)

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Academic Supervisor –
Prof. Dr. Vitalis Nakrošis (Vilnius University, Social Sciences, Political Science, S 002).

This doctoral dissertation will be defended in a public meeting of the Dissertation Defence Panel:

Chairman – Assoc. Prof. Dr. Žilvinas Martinaitis (Vilnius University, Social Sciences, Political Science, S 002).
Members:
Dr. Tatsiana Chulitskaya (Vilnius University, Social Sciences, Political Science, S 002),
Prof. Dr. Antoaneta Dimitrova (Leiden University, Social Sciences, Political Science, S 002),
Assoc. Prof. Dr. Scott Douglas (Utrecht University, Social Sciences, Political Science, S 002),
Assoc. Prof. Dr. Peeter Vihma (Tallinn University of Technology, Social Sciences, Political Science, S 002).

The dissertation shall be defended at a public meeting of the Dissertation Defence Panel at 17.30 on 10 September 2025 in Room 402 of the Institute of International Relations and Political Science of Vilnius University.
Address: Vokiečių str. 10, 402, Vilnius, Lithuania
Tel. +370 5 2514130; e-mail: tspmi@tspmi.vu.lt

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https://doi.org/10.15388/vu.thesis.818
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5660-0617

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Rasa Bortkevičiūtė

Viešasis valdymas krizių ir neapibrėžtumo laikotarpiu: kaip suinteresuotųjų šalių įtraukimas prisideda prie Lietuvos viešojo valdymo atsparumo stiprinimo?

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Gynimo taryba:
Pirmininkas – doc. dr. Žilvinas Martinaitis (Vilniaus universitetas, socialiniai mokslai, politikos mokslai, S 002).
Nariai:
dr. Tatsiana Chulitskaya (Vilniaus universitetas, socialiniai mokslai, politikos mokslai, S 002);
prof. dr. Antoaneta Dimitrova (Leideno universitetas, socialiniai mokslai, politikos mokslai, S 002);
doc. dr. Scott Douglas (Utrechto universitetas, socialiniai mokslai, politikos mokslai, S 002);
doc. dr. Peeter Vihma (Talino technologijos universitetas, socialiniai mokslai, politikos mokslai, S 002).

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LIST OF PUBLICATIONS

This dissertation is based on the following papers published in peer-reviewed international journals that have impact factor in Clarivate Analytics Web of Science database. In two of the papers, the author of the dissertation is the sole author. In article 1, the author contributed to the development of the theoretical framework, conducted the empirical analysis, and co-authored the conclusions. In article 3, the author contributed to the development of the theoretical background, description of the research methodology, and conducted the Lithuanian case study. Each article is referred to in the dissertation by the assigned number:

1. **Article 1.** Vitalis Nakrošis, Rasa Bortkevičiūtė. Resilience building during the management of the COVID-19 crisis in Lithuania: Major breakthroughs and incremental change. *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*, 30(3), 2022, pp. 295-306. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5973.12420
2. **Article 2.** Rasa Bortkevičiūtė. Status Quo, Minor or Major Policy Alterations? Explaining Policy Change After Crisis in the Adversarial Child Rights Protection Subsystem in Lithuania. *Risk, Hazards & Crisis in Public Policy*, 16(1), 2025, pp. 1-13. https://doi.org/10.1002/rhc3.70001
3. **Article 3.** Tiina Randma-Liiv, Rasa Bortkevičiūtė, Veiko Lember, Visvaldis Valtenbergs, Vitalis Nakrošis. Advancing Citizen Engagement through Digital Tools: A Comparative Study of the Baltic States. *International Journal of Public Administration*, 2025, pp. 1-16. https://doi.org/10.1080/01900692.2025.2517124
4. **Article 4.** Rasa Bortkevičiūtė. 'Simply by collaborating'? The impact of public and nongovernmental sectors collaboration experience on its institutionalization in the Lithuanian crisis management system. *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*, 32(1), 2023, pp. 1-13. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5973.12511

In addition to the articles included in this dissertation, five other publications were produced during the period of doctoral studies:

1. Natalija Arlauskaitė, Rasa Bortkevičiūtė, Neringa Mataitytė. What solidarity? Pandemic governance discourse in Lithuania, 2020-2022. *Journal of Baltic studies*, 2025, pp. 1-28. https://doi.org/10.1080/01629778.2025.2497807

2. Rasa Bortkevičiūtė, Vitalis Nakrošis, Inga Patkauskaitė-Tiuchtienė, Ramūnas Vilpišauskas. *Nėra to blogo, kas neišeitų į gera? Reikšmingų įvykių įtaka viešosios politikos kaitai Lietuvoje 2004–2020 m*. [*Every Cloud Has a Silver Lining. The Impact of Significant Events on Public Policy Change in Lithuania 2004-2020*]. Vilnius: Vilnius University Press, 2024. 472 p. https://doi.org/10.15388/vup-book-0039
3. Inga Patkauskaitė-Tiuchtienė, Rasa Bortkevičiūtė, Vitalis Nakrošis, Ramūnas Vilpišauskas. The impact of significant events on public policy and institutional change: towards a research agenda. *Politologija,* 105(1), 2022, pp. 8-52. https://doi.org/10.15388/Polit.2022.105.1
4. Rasa Bortkevičiūtė, Vitalis Nakrošis. Public online consultation in Lithuania: A political declaration or the real empowerment of citizens? In: Tiina Randma-Liiv and Veiko Lember (eds.) *Engaging citizens in policy making: e-participation practices in Europe*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing Limited, 2022, pp. 136-150. https://doi.org/10.4337/9781800374362.00016
5. Rasa Bortkevičiūtė, Patricija Kalkytė, Vytautas Kuokštis, Vitalis Nakrošis, Inga Patkauskaitė-Tiuchtienė, Ramūnas Vilpišauskas. *Nuo greitų pergalių prie skaudžių pralaimėjimų: Lietuvos viešosios politikos atsakas į COVID-19 pandemiją ir šios krizės valdymas 2020 m*. [*From Quick Wins to Significant Losses: Lithuania's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic and the Management of the Crisis in 2020*]. Vilnius: Vilnius University Press, 2021. 423 p. https://doi.org/10.15388/vup-book-0010

INTRODUCTION

"Crises and disasters do not guarantee change and learning but they are one of the few ways in which established policies, procedures, cultures and legitimacies change course. The question – perhaps a rhetorical one – is whether we can afford to wait that long"
(Boin & McConnell, 2007:57)

"Now, when we have such numbers [*of irregular migrants*], it is very difficult to provide the entire package of needed functions; we would not manage without non-governmental organisations. Considering their organisational structure, networks, and connections through which they can amplify their support, their assistance is truly invaluable"
(interview with a public servant, 11 November 2021)

The contemporary societies have been facing increased complexity of public issues, growing number of systemic threats, crises, and unforeseen turbulent events (Boin & Lodge, 2016). As argued by Ansell et al. (2024: 1), "turbulence <…> has become the new normal", forcing decision-makers to face unpredictable emergence of complex and partly unknown problems that are constantly changing and have inconsistent effects. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic started as a health crisis, but gradually spilled-over to the economy, education, culture and even turned into a solidarity crisis (Kuipers et al., 2022). Similarly, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has triggered multiple crises related to refugees, the economy, energy and national security. It has been recognised that attempting to solve challenges crossing national or policy boundaries solely through individual institutional efforts would be "foolishly reckless" (Boin et al., 2021: 113). Instead, solutions require collective action across multiple organisations, sectors and governance levels (Sørensen & Torfing, 2007; Dunleavy et al., 2006). In other words, a "shift from hierarchical and well-institutionalised forms of government towards less formalised, bottom-up forms of governance" (Edelenbos & van Meerkerk, 2022: 429) is crucial for addressing complex external challenges.

Responding to the increasing number of adverse events, both practitioners and academics have called for enhanced resilience of governance systems (e.g. Stark, 2014; Tierney, 2014; Duit, 2016; OECD, 2021). The topic gained additional relevance when the governments faced a stress test posed by the COVID-19 pandemic (Boin et al., 2021). Conversely to some authors, who define resilience as the ability of the system to handle disturbances, rebound from crisis promptly and return to their initial state (Boin & van Eeten, 2013), this dissertation treats it as the capacity of a system to absorb shocks, adapt, and transform itself to be better prepared for future crises (Linkov & Trump, 2019; Manyena et al., 2019). The choice is guided by the idea that crises shape a new reality, thus "bouncing back" to the previous status quo might cause even harmful results, creating institutions that are unable to respond to the new circumstances and still ongoing changes (Darkow, 2018; Capano & Woo, 2017).

There is a common agreement that resilience could result both from purposeful designing and/or as a side effect of successful crisis management efforts (Boin & Lodge, 2016), but the literature offers little guidance when it comes to mechanisms of building more resilient governance systems. However, the role of citizens participation and collaborative capacity is usually emphasised in research. Some authors claim that it is the relations between the actors of a network and their quality that "make or break systemic resilience" (Boin & 't Hart, 2010: 365), while the others point to stakeholder engagement as one of the elements of resilient public administration (Duit, 2016). In addition, rethinking the "citizen-state relations" is seen as one of the pre-conditions to deal with systemic weaknesses exposed by crises (McClelland et al., 2024). Therefore, this dissertation does not question the positive contribution of stakeholder engagement to the resilience of governance systems but rather use this theory-deduced assumption as its central axis.

Stakeholder engagement in decision-making or crisis management increases availability of resources, which should be robust or rapidly accessible in resilient governance systems (Norris et al., 2008). It is the social networks that provide access to various resources in crisis situations, including information, human and financial resources (Aldrich & Meyer, 2015). The stronger the bonds among the stakeholders are and the more they are embedded in the network, the more resilient governance system is, as, for example, it may quickly mobilise dispersed crisis response resources and expertise (Darkow, 2018). Albright & Crow (2021) suggest that deeper and broader community engagement in decision-making lead towards more in-depth learning after crises, and thus, may contribute to more significant policy changes. Similarly, citizen participation can lead to elaborate post-crisis lesson-learning exchanges that subsequently enhance pre-crisis preparations (Stark & Taylor, 2014). This does not imply that stakeholder engagement is the only way to make decisions that contribute to the resilience of governance systems. Rather, it suggests that having a well-integrated network of stakeholders across institutional and sectoral boundaries may lead to more effective crisis responses and enable better-informed decision-making to transform the system to be better prepared for the future challenges.

However, current inconsistencies and complexities of the explanations linking stakeholder engagement and resilience are difficult to solve due to the *lack of empirical backing and evidence*. First, even though the idea of resilient governance systems rests on participatory and collaborative approaches, there is ample evidence pointing towards the difficulties of their initiation and sustainability (e.g., Duit, 2016; Ansell & Gash, 2008). Second, stakeholder engagement practices are not a panacea. Limited policy impact or even symbolic use (van Meerkerk, 2019; Lahat & Sher-Hadar, 2020) and unequal treatment of participants (Baldwin, 2019) are among the flaws which might deter both citizens and public officials from the further use of engagement practices. Third, the dominant perspective in the resilience literature builds on a functional input-output model of decision-making, without providing causal explanations (Biesbroek et al., 2017). Meanwhile, the mechanism-based approach holds not only theoretical, but also practical value as it can help policy practitioners to guide decision-making towards more resilient solutions. Taken together, this leads to the research problem: *although there is a common agreement regarding the positive impact of stakeholder engagement on the resilience of governance systems, the mechanisms by which this impact occurs (especially in the context of crisis) remain unclear.*

In light of current debates on strengthening public sector capacity to sustain during crises and turbulent periods, this dissertation pursues a twofold aim. Theoretically, it seeks to explain how stakeholder engagement in decision-making contributes to the strengthening of resilience of governance systems, ranging from the characteristics of decision-making processes that shape resilience to the implementation of stakeholder engagement platforms. By focusing on the Lithuanian case, the articles comprising this dissertation contribute insights to the literatures on resilience, stakeholder engagement, and (collaborative) crisis management – core concepts of the study – by offering evidence from the under-researched region of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) (Pierce et al., 2020; Osei-Kojo et al., 2022; Nohrstedt et. al, 2018). Practically, the dissertation aims to broaden the empirical understanding on the actual contribution of stakeholder engagement practices to resilience building. To achieve these aims, the dissertation builds on the results of four papers, addressing research gaps by focusing on questions such as: what is the context, logics and mechanisms of adopting decisions that contribute to resilience building? What is the role of stakeholders beyond the public sector in post-crisis policy change? Which factors shape the implementation of stakeholder engagement platforms? How are stakeholder engagement practices institutionalised?

The first section of the dissertation provides the mapping of the current state of research in the resilience, stakeholder engagement, and (collaborative) crisis management nexus, as well as identifying gaps in existing research. The second section provides an overview of the research objectives, the methodological approach of the dissertation, the methods employed in each of the four papers, and the connections between them. The third section of the dissertation summarises results and draws overarching conclusions from the four papers, outlines contributions to theory and practice, and indicates limitations and directions for future research. Copies of the papers comprising this dissertation are presented in the final section.

1. THEORETICAL FIELDS AND GAPS IN RESEARCH

This section presents the three core concepts of the dissertation: resilience of governance systems, stakeholder engagement, and (collaborative) crisis management. Considering the research problem – specifically, the unclear mechanisms through which stakeholder engagement positively influences governance system resilience – the thesis identifies key research gaps concerning the relationship between stakeholder engagement and resilience, especially in the context of crises.

1.1. Resilience of governance systems

Since the first definitions of resilience, proposed by Wildawsky (1988) and Holling (1973), there have been two dominant approaches towards dealing with the risks and crises. The proponents of contingency planning claim that government institutions should continuously monitor and prepare for dealing with systemic threats. However, this approach faces major limitations when it comes to the preparation for unknown threats (Boin & Lodge, 2016; Darkow, 2018). In addition, it was widely criticised for high costs and dependence on political support while preparing for low-probability, high-impact contingencies as well as ineffectiveness of strategies that in some cases were even named "fantasy documents" (Boin et al., 2021; Boin & McConnell, 2007).

As an alternative, the resilience approach arose (summarised in Table 1), pointing to the need to strengthen general capacities of individuals, organizations, and systems, so that they would be able to better absorb, respond, recover and transform after crises. Over the last years, the concept of resilience has attracted significant attention and was even criticised for turning into "a fashionable buzzword" (Comfort et al., 2010: 1). The need for more resilient governance systems came together with the growing recognition of different types of risks (e.g., climate change, natural disasters, terrorist attacks) and interdependence of various systems (e.g., economic, public health, cyber), which made them more vulnerable for cascading effects (Hynes et al., 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic is one the latest examples of this type of event, which reflected governments' poor capacity to deal with unanticipated shocks and highlighted vulnerabilities of policy networks (Weible et al., 2020; Boin & 't Hart, 2021). Pointing to the systems' interconnectedness, some researchers promoted resilience as a long-term commitment and a core philosophy of governance (e.g. Hynes et al., 2020).

The term is interpreted in a rather contradictory way as it includes both maintaining stability of the system (e.g., absorption of crisis, maintenance of functions) and the need to transform (e.g., learning, adaptation) (Normandin & Therrien, 2016). In addition, there is no common agreement whether resilience is a capacity of a system, its attribute or a process (Boin & Lodge, 2016; Comfort et al., 2010). Finally, when assessing resilience, it is crucial to consider the question "resilience of what, and for whom?" (Duit et al., 2010: 365) as it may vary in the face of differing types of shocks, and for different areas of government (OECD, 2021). Overall, it is important to note that resilience is a matter of degree, rather than a binary quality: for instance, governance systems may be more resilient for one type of shocks rather the other.

Table 1. Summarised characteristics of resilience

Types of resilience	Engineering, ecosystemic, socio-ecological, psychological, social (community), cyber, economic, institutional/organizational
The object (*what* should be resilient?)	Individual
	Organization or community
	System
	Function (healthcare services, electrical supply, traffic flow, critical infrastructure, etc.)
Definition (*when* something is resilient?)	Handling the crisis and preventing it from further spiralling (precursory resilience)
	Absorbing unexpected shocks and emerging from crises without lasting damage (recovery resilience or "bouncing back")
	Absorbing and adapting to disasters along with undertaking recovery activities to reduce future disruptions and their impact (transformational resilience or "bouncing forward")
Factors (*why* something is resilient?)	Resourcefulness and rapidity (Birkland & Warnement, 2014); non-hierarchical networks, involvement of stakeholders, social learning, etc. (Duit, 2016); learning, forecasting and strategic planning, stakeholder involvement in the decision-making process and in providing services, leadership and organizational management quality, human resources quality, etc. (Profiroiu & Nastaca, 2021); quality, diversity and 'slack' of resources, models of decision-making and information flow, learning, risk management plans, safety culture, coordination between organizations, etc. (Normandin & Therrien, 2016); distributed cognition, networking, learning, sociotechnical infrastructure, etc. (Comfort et al., 2010).

Compiled by the author.

As different perceptions of resilience are related with different factors (see Table 1) and require different means to strengthen it, we treat **resilience as a dynamic capacity of governance systems to absorb shocks and adapt, as well as to transform themselves to be better prepared for future crises** (Linkov & Trump, 2019; de Bruijn et al., 2017). This approach reflects the social side of resilience and refers to the idea that it is precisely an interaction within the governance system that allows to "bounce forward" after a crisis (Manyena et al., 2019). It is important to note that we do not analyse social resilience, which links to the society or community (e.g., Aldricht, 2012; Saja et al., 2018). However, analysis of governance systems' resilience involves the interaction between public institutions, their stakeholders, and the environment while confronted with a crisis (Williams et al., 2017), thus these types of resilience are closely intertwined.

Despite its increasing popularity, there is very limited empirical evidence on resilient governance systems. While some researchers focus on factors of resilience (e.g., Normandin & Thierren, 2016; Linkov & Trump, 2019) or its evaluation frameworks (e.g., Saja et al., 2018), much of the literature in this field is prescriptive and normative, highlighting the need to improvise and learn, work across boundaries of institutions and sectors, learn during and after crises as well as emerge from crises stronger and better (e.g., Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001). However, factors-based approaches reduce highly dynamic political processes into simplified and static classifications of variables, which does not always reflect their real impact on resilience. For example, it is not the number of civil society organisations, but their relationship and shared activities that matter for the level of resilience. Therefore, further analysis is needed to understand the mechanisms through which these factors interact with their environments, thereby strengthening or weakening levels of resilience.

Finally, resilience is not the only concept addressing the sustainability of public sector functions under times of crises. Growing attention is being given to public sector robustness, defined as a system's capacity to maintain stable functioning amid turbulence (Ansell et al., 2024). Robustness is closely tied to the notion of turbulence – persistent uncertainty and volatility prompting ongoing institutional transformation (Ansell et al., 2023). In contrast, resilience is more event-focused, viewing crises as discrete disruptions that call for both stability and change in governance systems (Normandin & Therrien, 2016). Due to its strong conceptual foundation for analysing public sector interactions with stakeholders during periods of both stability and change – including how engagement in one phase might influence another – resilience was selected as one of the key concepts explored in this dissertation.

1.2. Stakeholder engagement practices in routine governance and crisis situations

In the recent decades, the field of stakeholder engagement in policymaking and public service delivery has faced a major growth. The work of Robert Putnam (2000) inspired a number of efforts to examine how citizens can be engaged in the creation, design and implementation of public policies and services (Meek, 2021). The new forms of relationship between the government and various stakeholders beyond its boundaries were established within the New Public Governance paradigm (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011). As opposed to New Public Management, which treated citizen as a customer, New Public Governance offered an alternative idea of management in a network of public, private, and non-governmental actors, where a citizen should take place of a partner in decision-making process (Osborne, 2006).

Named by various terms, such as stakeholder involvement, interactive decision-making, civil dialogue, joined-up government, interactive governance or deliberative democracy, the process deals with the main challenge "how to incorporate multiple voices in public policy processes" (Lahat & Sher-Hadar, 2020). **The term "stakeholder engagement" is used throughout the dissertation to refer to public sector-initiated involvement of actors from the private, public, and non-governmental sectors, as well as individual citizens affected by a particular policy, in its formulation and/or implementation** (Schalk, 2017). This term refers exclusively to top-down engagement organised by public authorities, without accounting for bottom-up processes initiated by citizens (van Meerkerk, 2019). It was selected to reflect the crucial role of public authorities in building resilience of governance systems, and thus the importance of analysing their deliberate efforts to involve stakeholders in policymaking.

Stakeholder engagement is not a dichotomous concept; it occurs in different ways and forms and can involve varying levels of interaction between the actors involved. For this dissertation, we categorise stakeholder engagement into **citizen participation, collaborative governance,** and its modality under emergent circumstances – **collaborative crisis management**. Some types of stakeholder engagement such as co-design, co-creation, or co-production (Ansell & Torfing, 2021; Voorberg & van Meerkerk, 2019) and some horizontal governance forms such as network governance (Klijn et al., 2015) are outside scope of this dissertation as they are more oriented towards public services (in the first case) and pay less attention for the citizen-public authorities relations (in the second case).

Citizen participation is a process through which individuals contribute to decision-making in the institutions and programmes that affect them (van Meerkerk, 2019). A "Ladder of Citizen Participation" (Arnstein, 1969) is a common starting point demonstrating gradual development of citizens' empowerment, ranging from the lowest level of symbolic participation ("manipulation") to the highest one of "citizen control". Participation in decision-making usually contains three main steps: making the process accessible for the broad public, collecting opinions provided during the process, and using them in the formulation of policies (Quick & Feldman, 2011). Ensuring that participants have the capability to effectively engage in policymaking and the real power to influence it are crucial (Reed, 2008).

Facing an increasing spread of digital technologies, online platforms for stakeholder engagement emerged with a promise of change in public administration and expectation to increase political participation (Dunleavy et al., 2006; Sæbø et al., 2008; Wirtz et al., 2018; Meijer et al., 2019). However, high initial expectations have not always been met: the low level of citizen participation and only formal use of the platforms by public authorities remained challenging (Toots, 2019; Randma-Liiv, 2023). Previous research suggests that technical aspects of e-participation initiatives poorly explain their performance, thus more attention should be paid for national- and organisational-level factors, including regulation as well as management of e-participation platforms (Medaglia, 2007; Randma-Liiv & Lember, 2022). Knowledge on factors shaping e-participation initiatives is especially relevant in the context of young democracies of CEE to discover mobilising (i.e. encouraging further citizen engagement) and / or reinforcing (i.e. aligning with patterns of offline participation) effects of e-participation (Korthagen & van Keulen, 2020).

Stakeholder engagement practices may differ between the usual policymaking process and policy changes occurring in the context of crises. By drawing attention to a policy problem, crises may highlight the failures of established policies or their implementation, promote the formation of new policy alternatives, or lead to the reconsideration of previously discussed but not implemented policies (Birkland, 2006; Nohrstedt & Weible, 2010). Stakeholders may identify policy problems, mobilise support, and promote policy solutions through the activities of advocacy coalitions (e.g., Nohrstedt & Weible, 2010; Rinscheid, 2015; Nohrstedt, 2011). Research demonstrates that stakeholder engagement leads to nuanced lesson-learning exchanges post-crisis that subsequently enhance crisis preparations and contribute to resilience building (Stark & Taylor, 2014; Koebele et al., 2020).

Furthermore, stakeholder engagement might step over the limits of participation and turn into a shared problem solving through the process of **collaborative governance**. Despite varying definitions (e.g. Emerson et al., 2012; Bryson et al., 2006; Ansell & Gash, 2008), shared commitment, goal, and responsibility of participants, engagement of stakeholders beyond the boundaries of governmental institutions as well as reciprocal relations and consensus-based decision-making are the typical elements of such form of governance (Ansell & Gash 2008; Lahat & Sher-Hadar, 2020; Emerson et al., 2012). The same principles are also applied in times of crises, through the practice of **collaborative crisis management,** defined as "collective efforts of multiple autonomous actors working across organizational boundaries, levels of authority, and sectors to prepare for, respond to, and learn from risks and extreme events that disrupt our modern society" (Parker et al., 2020: 512).

Collaboration across sectoral and organisational boundaries is seen as a "necessary but insufficient condition for effective disaster response" (Hermansson, 2019: 1054). The need for stakeholder engagement in times of crises rests on two characteristics of these events: first, their solution requires broad coordination. Second, uncertainty increases demand for expertise as governments are in-need of information for understanding problems and choosing responses (Weible et al. 2020; Nohrstedt et al., 2018). In other words, when a crisis strikes, due to its scale, novelty, or cascading dynamics, it spans beyond the capacity of individual organisations and require a variety of stakeholders involvement in collective response (Boin & 't Hart, 2010; Nohrstedt et al., 2018). Furthermore, collaborative efforts may be employed to deal not only with sudden crises that manifest as one-off events (e.g., earthquakes, fires), but also with prolonged, continuously developing creeping crises (e.g., climate change, irregular migration flows) by providing relevant knowledge, offering more flexible operating procedures, and contributing to learning processes (Nolte & Lindenmeier, 2023).

Besides directly contributing to crisis management, collaborations may also generate indirect outcomes that feed back in their context of operation (Emerson et al., 2012). For instance, collaborative activities may end up with new collaborations, improved relations among partners, adaptation of services or resources or institutionalisation of new norms (Innes & Booher, 1999). While some authors explore the temporal development of collaborative arrangements (Imperial et al., 2016; Ulibarri et al., 2020), there is a lack of research analysing the relation between the processes and outcomes rather than outputs of collaborative endeavours (e.g., Avoyan, 2022).

1.3. What is known about the role of stakeholder engagement in strengthening resilience of governance systems?

Government-initiated forms of stakeholder engagement have become a significant policy strategy in many Western countries (van Meerkerk, 2019). Their effects might be distinguished into the first-, second- and third-order ones. While the first group deals with the direct results of engagement, the latter two, as mentioned in section 1.2, are related with changes of practices and perceptions, relations between actors, creation of new institutions and/or norms (Innes & Booher, 1999), which are relevant for this research. Therefore, being one of the elements of resilient governance systems, stakeholder engagement might significantly contribute to the development of other factors.

First, involvement practices are especially valued because of the possibility to inform policymakers by including public values and preferences into decision-making (Beierle, 1999) and strengthening the policy capacity within government (Howlett, 2014). Networking across sectoral and institutional boundaries increases the diversity of information available to solve policy problems both in times of usual policymaking and in times of crises (Comfort et al., 2010; Schalk, 2017). As crisis managers have to make decisions quickly, often with a fragmented understanding of the situation, which also tends to differ between network participants, information exchange is crucial for effective coordination and establishment of shared perception of crisis (Weible et al., 2020; Nohrstedt et al., 2018). Thus, *stakeholder engagement may strengthen resilience through improved information flows and, in turn, increased coordination and quality of decisions*.

Another factor of resilience – learning – is closely intertwined with the information exchange. Learning can take various forms, including instrumental (changes in perceived technical aspects of a policy problem and/or measures taken to solve it) and social (changes in the perception of the problem) (Albright & Crow, 2021; Argyris, 1976). Stakeholders may provide information derived from their experience, which may include performance data, general trends in socio-demographic and economic conditions, or information on best practices (Head, 2008). On the one hand, engaging in joint learning requires patience of all participants and may delay action, which is especially challenging in the contexts of high urgency (Nohrstedt et al., 2018). On the other hand, engagement practices lead to more in-depth learning (Albright & Crow, 2021; Koebele et al., 2020). It is especially relevant in times of crises, when evidence tend to be overshadowed by politicisation, blame-games and defensive approach of public officials (Deverell, 2010;

Stark, 2014; Boin & ‘t Hart, 2010). Thus, *stakeholder engagement may contribute to resilience building through post-crisis learning or policy change, providing specific expertise otherwise unavailable for public institutions.*

More collaborative forms of stakeholder engagement directly contribute to resourcefulness and rapidity of governance systems. It is mainly experienced through pooling organisational resources (e.g., funding, staff, equipment, etc.) in ways that improve collective ability to solve problems or enhance service delivery (Imperial, 2005). It has been noted that “emergencies, which require rapid decision-making due to the urgency and time-pressure, are not ideal times for establishing emergent collaborations with new partners” (Parker et al., 2020: 4), while more effective mobilisation and provision of resources is more likely within networks that already share some collaborative experience (Aung & Lim, 2021). Being aware of the risks of a particular situation, the types of resources available and areas of responsibilities of involved actors increase possibilities to adapt and transform based on the needs of a crisis (O’Sullivan et al., 2015). Thus, *stakeholder engagement may strengthen resilience through the diversification and increased accessibility of resources.*

Finally, stakeholder engagement practices are usually related with such benefits as growth of trust between participants (Ansell & Gash, 2008), which allows engaging in more horizontal rather hierarchical modes of coordination. Trust is closely related with expectations of the other parties’ abilities, skills, goodwill, and the stability of their intentions (Ödlund, 2010; Edelenbos & Klijn, 2007). Partners often judge the trustworthiness and legitimacy of each other based on prior collaborative experience (Bryson et al., 2006). The more shared experience stakeholders have, the greater their expected levels of mutual trust and willingness to invest in collaboration through information sharing, mobilisation, and resource access (Pramanik, 2021; Kapucu, 2006). Thus, *stakeholder engagement may enhance resilience by strengthening collaborative networks – whether in crisis management or a specific policy field – to ensure swift and reciprocal interaction when collaboration becomes necessary.*

Table 2 below summarises the key insights from current research and its gaps, presented in section 1.

Table 2. State of the art and research gaps on the resilience, stakeholder engagement, and crisis management nexus

Topic	State of the art	Research gaps
Resilience-oriented decision-making	Multiple factors that contribute to resilience of governance systems and frameworks for their assessment	Context, logics and mechanisms of adopting decisions that contribute to resilience building
Policy change after crisis	Stakeholder engagement in post-crisis learning may lead to policy change focused on decisions, increasing resilience	Role of stakeholders in post-crisis policy change (considering urgency, politicisation, blame-games, defensive approach, etc.)
Stakeholder engagement practices	Stakeholder engagement contributes to resilience by enhancing resource availability and diversification	Factors that shape implementation of stakeholder engagement platforms
Self-reinforcing effects of collaboration	Theoretical assumption: once partners have engaged in collaborative efforts, they will find it easier to collaborate again when needed in the future	Institutionalisation of stakeholder engagement practices

Compiled by the author.

2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND METHODS

The dissertation stands at the intersection of research on resilience, stakeholder engagement, and (collaborative) crisis management, borrowing some insights from institutionalist and public policy process theories. Its overarching **aim** is to *explain how stakeholder engagement in decision-making contributes to the strengthening of resilience of governance systems, especially in the context of crisis*.

To achieve this aim, we formulated four research objectives reflecting the research gaps discussed in section 1 (see the summary in Table 2), which guided the four articles comprising this dissertation. These articles are logically organised to construct the overall narrative and develop a cumulative argument. The research progresses from a macro-level analysis of resilience-building mechanisms in a crisis management regime (**article 1**), to the role of stakeholders within a specific policy subsystem after a crisis (**article 2**), then narrows to the implementation of stakeholder engagement platforms (**article 3**), and culminates in an analysis of how collaborative experiences become institutionalised in the crisis management system (**article 4**). Although not all of the articles explicitly address resilience, each of their findings demonstrates relevance to the overarching nexus of resilience, stakeholder engagement, and (collaborative) crisis management, thereby contributing to the dissertation's research aim. Below, we present the research objectives and outline how they are studied in this dissertation (see the summary in the Figure).

The starting point of our research is a lack of knowledge on how decisions that strengthen resilience of governance systems are being made (RO1: *To explain the context, logics and mechanisms of adopting decisions that contribute to resilience building*). We explore this process in **article 1**, which focuses on resilience building during the COVID-19 crisis management in Lithuania. While **article 2** tests the mechanisms of post-crisis policy change in adversarial policy subsystems, in the context of this dissertation, its findings are particularly relevant to *exploring the role of stakeholders in post-crisis policy change* (RO2). Focusing on policy change (or lack thereof) following three crises in Lithuania's child rights protection subsystem, this paper analyses stakeholder engagement by considering them both as members of advocacy coalitions and as a type of resource managed by these coalitions. Given the challenges related to stakeholder engagement in policymaking, the aim of the **article 3** is *to explore and analyse factors that shape implementation of stakeholder engagement platforms* (RO3). The findings are based on the comparative case study of e-participation initiatives in three Baltic countries – Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. Finally, building on an institutionalist approach, **article 4** applies theory-building process tracing to four periods of collaborative COVID-19 crisis management in Lithuania *to explain the impact of previous stakeholder engagement experience on the future implementation of this practice* (RO4).

Article 1. What is the context, logics and mechanisms of adopting decisions that contribute to resilience building?

Aim: reveal the key mechanisms and their impact on building resilience of governance systems.
Focus: key governance and public health decisions which strengthened governance systems' resilience throughout the COVID-19 crisis management in Lithuania.
Method and data: single case study, 25 semi-structured interviews with the main stakeholders of crisis management, pattern matching technique.
Areas of contribution: crisis management, resilience.

Article 2. What is the role of stakeholders in post-crisis policy change?

Aim: test mechanisms linking the adversarial policy subsystem with the minor, major policy change or lack thereof after crisis.
Focus: policy change (or a lack of thereof) related to activities and resources of two advocacy coalitions in the Lithuanian child rights protection system that took place following crises in 2016-2020.
Method and data: three case studies, 6 semi-structured interviews, quantitative discourse analysis (1 259 headlines), theory-testing process tracing.
Areas of contribution: public policy process, crisis management.

Article 3. Which factors shape the implementation of stakeholder engagement platforms?

Aim: explore and analyse how recent national-level e-participation initiatives have been implemented in the three Baltic States – Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.
Focus: national- and organisation-level factors that shaped implementation of Lithuanian, Latvian and Estonian e-participation platforms.
Method and data: comparative case study, 11 semi-structured interviews (for the Lithuanian case) with the main stakeholders of E-Citizen platform, overview of 230 public online consultations.
Areas of contribution: stakeholder engagement.

Article 4. How are stakeholder engagement practices institutionalised?

Aim: suggest propositions on how to explain how the previous experience of partners involved in collaborative crisis management leads to the institutionalisation of this process in the crisis management system.
Focus: development of public-non-governmental collaboration in times of the COVID-19 crisis management in Lithuania.
Method and data: single case study, 16 semi-structured interviews (part of which are serial) with the main stakeholders of crisis management, theory-building process tracing.
Areas of contribution: stakeholder engagement (collaborative crisis management).

Figure 1 . Structure of the dissertation

Compiled by the author, based on the outline provided in Broekema, W. (2018). When does the phoenix rise? Factors and mechanisms that influence crisis-induced learning by public organizations. Ridderkerk: Ridderprint BV, p. 27. ***Note:*** *the arrows indicate the logical sequence of the articles in constructing the overall argument.*

Overall, the dissertation follows the positivist paradigm. In line with the dissertation's focus on mechanisms, the articles it comprises are based on pattern-matching (Bouncken et al., 2021; Sinkovics, 2018) as well as theory-testing and theory-building process tracing (Beach & Pedersen, 2019). Consequently, the research is mostly grounded in qualitative research designs, selected as the most appropriate approach for achieving the research aims. The main data collection strategy was semi-structured interviews and analysis of publicly available information (documents, reports, news entries, etc.), which were applied to all four articles on a varying extent. The data were analysed primarily using qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2000), except in article 2, which, among other methods, was informed by quantitative discourse analysis. Taken together, these methods allowed gathering and analysing a sufficient volume of data to draw valid and reliable conclusions for each of the articles as well as contribute to broader theoretical discussions.

While each individual paper explains the choice of cases for analysis, they mostly relate to Lithuania for the following reasons. First, stakeholder engagement is a generally under-researched topic in the country, with individual case studies on municipal-level citizen participation or collaborative governance initiatives receiving the highest attention (e.g., Bučaitė-Vilkė & Lazauskienė, 2019; Akmentina, 2023). Additionally, Lithuania has made substantial progress in this area, from OECD recommendations to strengthen stakeholder engagement and promote civic engagement (2015) to performing above the OECD average in stakeholder consultation for primary laws and subordinate regulations (2023).[1] The revised Law on Crisis Management and Civil Protection also institutionalised responsibilities and collaboration mechanisms with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in crises (LR Seimas, 2022).

These developments occurred amidst multiple crises: the long-shadow COVID-19 pandemic reached the country in early 2020, a state-wide emergency situation was declared in July 2021 due to the massive influx of migrants, the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine broke out in 2022, all requiring responses beyond institutional boundaries. Paradoxically, despite the resilience demonstrated in the face of these challenges (e.g., Bortkevičiūtė et al., 2021), Lithuania struggled to sustain stakeholder engagement practices. The Civic Empowerment Index peaked at 41.3 out of 100 in 2020 but dropped significantly to 35.9 in 2022 and has yet to recover – reaching only 36.8 in

[1] The European Commission's Recovery and Resilience Facility, launched in 2021, and the implementation of the national Lithuanian plan are not included within the scope of this dissertation due to their performance-based conditionality, which drives the implementation of resilience-oriented reforms with a particular focus on specific policy areas.

2024, which remains below the pre-crisis level (Civil Society Institute, 2024). This highlights the relevance of the Lithuanian case for analysing the connection between stakeholder engagement and the resilience of governance systems.

Furthermore, while existing research sheds some light on CEE countries regarding stakeholder engagement practices (e.g., Randma-Liiv & Lember, 2022), the region is poorly represented in other fields of research comprising this dissertation, particularly in (collaborative) crisis management (Bianchi et al., 2021; Bynander & Nohrstedt, 2019) and policy process frameworks analysing policy change after crises (Pierce et al., 2017; Pierce et al., 2020; Osei-Kojo et al., 2022). This opens possibilities to contribute to international discussions by bringing additional insights from a less typical context of application. However, it is important to note that, as this dissertation is based on a compilation of articles, case selection strategies were applied only at the individual article level. Consequently, the overarching arguments presented in subsection 3.2. are applicable exclusively to Lithuania and, to some extent, to the CEE region (specifically, when the arguments are drawn from articles where Lithuania was selected as a typical case for this region).

3. CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Summary of results

This dissertation aimed to *explain how stakeholder engagement in decision-making contributes to the strengthening of resilience of governance systems*. The research aim was achieved through implementing four research objectives, each reflected in the articles presented at the end of this dissertation. This section summarises the findings of each article and presents the logical links between them, highlighted in accompanying text boxes.

Our first research objective aimed to describe and *explain the context, logics and mechanisms of adopting decisions that contribute to resilience building*. Building on ideas of the new institutionalism, more specifically, the normative logic of appropriateness and the rational logic of consequentiality, **article 1** examined how different mechanisms in varying contexts lead to different types of resilience building. Based on the results of pattern matching applied to the Lithuanian case of COVID-19 crisis management in 2020, we argue that in the environments where the logic of consequentiality was dominant, resilience was mostly strengthened through major breakthroughs, stemming from coercive pressures as well as top-down policy action from the centre of government (e.g., central authorisation of direct awards concerning the purchase of medical equipment, establishment of centralised information management system, etc.). In contrast, more incremental developments contributed to resilience building through normative or mimetic pressures, professionalisation, network-based and bottom-up practices in the environments where the logic of appropriateness prevailed (e.g., NGOs involvement in crisis and its impact management, implementation of COVID-19 management strategy, etc.).

Our research not only reveals the linkage between the dominant logic of action, mechanisms and type of resilience building, but also points to the diverging impact of resilience building through major breakthroughs and incremental measures. Despite contributing to the resilience at a particular time of crisis management, continuous political attention or the institutionalisation of new procedures is necessary for the sustainability of major breakthroughs. In other words, resilience-strengthening measures applied in a “top-down” way will have to be internalised by their stakeholders to ensure their long-term effect. On contrary, such “bottom-up” practices as the development of partnerships with NGOs could incrementally increase resilience through, for example, strengthening capacities of public institutions.

***Article 1** highlighted the importance of stakeholder engagement in ensuring the sustainability of resilience-oriented decisions. While it provided a "bird's-eye view" of the crisis management regime, it did not capture the interactions at the subsystem level, where actors are typically organised into one or several competing advocacy coalitions.*

The role of stakeholders in policy change after crisis was further analysed in **article 2**. Two mechanisms derived from the existing Advocacy Coalitions Framework research, linking the adversarial policy subsystem with the absence of policy change as well as with minor or major policy alterations, were empirically tested. This was done by applying the mechanisms on the three cases of response to internal shocks in the Lithuanian child rights protection subsystem (2016-2020) as the incidents in this adversarial subsystem led to three different outcomes: no policy alteration, major and minor policy change. By testing mechanisms of post-crisis policy change in adversarial policy subsystems, this article contributed to the second research objective of this dissertation, namely, *to explore the role of stakeholders in post-crisis policy change.*

The empirical results confirmed that no policy change takes place after crises if both coalitions support the *status quo* and that a shift in resources in an adversarial subsystem is indeed the key reason determining policy change after crisis. It also proposed a more nuanced explanation that allows for distinguishing between the occurrence of major and minor policy changes. First, the research contributed to the on-going debate on the hierarchy of coalitions resources (i.e. formal legal authority, public opinion, information, mobilizable supporters, financial resources, skilled leadership) by arguing that formal legal authority is not enough: it is precisely the stakeholders support that may be crucial to legitimise measures taken in sensitive policy areas.

Second, we suggest that 'pre-made' policy solutions are significant in adversarial subsystems, where inter-coalition conflict is heightened, amplifying the pressure and urgency caused by a crisis. This environment can facilitate major policy change only if a prepared solution is readily available to capitalise on the brief window of opportunity that crises present. Taken together with increase of resources and in particular, stakeholder support, actors of the dominant coalition will focus on the need to adopt long-awaited reforms rather than to build subsystem-wide compromise. This may be especially the case in countries with a lower capacity for policymaking and implementation of stakeholder engagement practices.

***Article 2** demonstrated that the role of stakeholders in post-crisis policy change can be analysed from two perspectives. Some stakeholders may be identified as members of advocacy coalitions, aiming to mobilise resources and promote their preferred policy change once a crisis occurs and a window of opportunity opens. Other stakeholders may be viewed as coalition resources – mobilisable supporters whose backing can strengthen a coalition's position and contribute to the desired policy change. However, a risk arises in crisis contexts, where urgency and pressure on decision-makers are high: stakeholder support may dramatically increase in favour of one coalition, thus leading to the adoption of urgent but insufficiently discussed policy solutions – particularly in settings where the implementation of stakeholder engagement practices is weaker.*

To zoom in to the aspect of stakeholder engagement practices, the **article 3** was linked to the third research objective, aiming *to explore and analyse factors that shape implementation of stakeholder engagement platforms.* The comparative case study of e-participation initiatives in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania demonstrated that, despite a variety of organisational characteristics applied in each country, broader national-level factors – typical of young democracies – tend to have a stronger impact on shaping actual implementation. Although the three Baltic governments made different organisational-level choices, the outcomes of their digital engagement processes suggest that, while the number of participatory initiatives and participants has increased, the impact of e-participation platforms on policy has remained modest. The study also demonstrated that digitalisation does not automatically foster civic participation, even in highly digitalised contexts. Rather, instead of bringing substantial change, the use of digital tools tends to reinforce existing patterns of governance in young democracies.

Article 3 *identified the predominant legalistic culture within Baltic public administrations as a key challenge to the implementation of stakeholder engagement. Furthermore, it highlighted the importance of support from politicians and senior officials with the authority to enact institutional change and integrate stakeholder engagement into policymaking processes. If it is unlikely that changes in organisational characteristics will have a significant impact on the implementation of stakeholder engagement initiatives, the question remains how these initiatives could be institutionalised not only formally, but also informally to build sufficient collaborative capacity?*

These findings link to the fourth research objective, namely, *to explain the impact of previous stakeholder engagement experience on the future implementation of this practice,* analysed in **article 4.** Combining insights from the research on collaborative crisis management and institutionalism, we identified six building blocks (i.e., pressure to collaborate, clarity of roles, mutual trust, leadership, positive feedback and learning) that influence the institutionalisation of collaborative crisis management. The theory-building process tracing applied on the case of collaboration between public and non-governmental sectors while dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic and the irregular migration crisis in Lithuania (2020-2021) allowed suggesting three propositions on institutionalisation of collaborative practices.

First, when crisis management involves partners with limited collaborative experience, both transformational and boundary spanning leadership are critical at different stages to institutionalise collaboration. Second, the clarification of roles, provision of positive feedback, and the subsequent growth of trust experienced by partners engaged in collaborative activities contribute to the informal institutionalisation of collaborative crisis management. Third, positive feedback on previous collaborative experience facilitates learning within the crisis management system and, when supported by the efforts of transformational leaders, leads to the formal institutionalisation of collaborative crisis management.

Article 4 *identified how collaborative crisis management practices were both formally and informally institutionalised in the Lithuanian crisis management subsystem. These mechanisms link back to the general aim of the dissertation, proving how stakeholder engagement could be established as a continuous practice rather than one-time-only affair.*

3.2. Instead of conclusions: overarching arguments and policy implications

To reflect on the contribution of the four research articles that comprise this dissertation, three overarching arguments are put forward based on the cumulative findings. Their key messages are as follows: 1) The leadership of senior authorities is crucial for the adoption of resilience-oriented decisions, which may be subsequently informally institutionalised through sustained collaboration and learning; 2) The combination of formal and informal institutionalisation of stakeholder engagement is essential for ensuring its effectiveness and sustainability; 3) The risks associated with stakeholder engagement should be carefully assessed before initiating the process. Each argument is accompanied by related policy implications.

Argument 1: *The transformational leadership of senior authorities is crucial for the adoption of resilience-oriented decisions, including those on stakeholder engagement practices. Once triggered, these practices can become informally institutionalised through sustained collaboration and learning.*

This dissertation demonstrates that the adoption of resilience-oriented policies, including stakeholder engagement practices, is tightly linked to the leadership of high-level authorities – a concept not explicitly analysed in this dissertation, yet embedded in multiple frameworks that explain the initiation and performance of stakeholder engagement and (collaborative) crisis management (e.g., Parker et al., 2020; Ansell & Gash, 2008; Emerson et al., 2012).

Article 1 shows that resilience in Lithuania was mostly strengthened because of major breakthroughs driven by coercive pressures and top-down policy action from the centre of government during the COVID-19 crisis. The urgency of crises points to the pressure for a quick decision-making (Boin et al., 2016), while "centralisation reflex" (Boin & McConnel, 2007: 53) suggests that, in a crisis, power and authority tend to shift up hierarchies and concentrate in executive hands (Bolleyer & O Salát, 2021; 't Hart et al., 1993). Therefore, building a resilient governance system in times of crises – one that possesses spare capacity, draws on diverse information source and enables stakeholder contributions (Duit, 2016) – is expected to begin with decisive action by high-level authorities.

Article 4 confirms that crises alone do not automatically spark cross-sectoral collaboration (e.g. Parker et al., 2020) but may facilitate the efforts of high-level decision-makers. Despite continuous NGOs efforts, in

Lithuania, collaborative NGO involvement in managing the COVID-19 pandemic became possible only under the personal leadership of Prime Minister Ingrida Šimonytė, through the establishment of a collaborative crisis management group. Sustained practice and mutual learning informally institutionalised this approach, gradually evolving into a mechanism that could be employed in future crises.

Beyond crisis contexts, high-level leadership is equally vital for overcoming the institutional inertia characteristic of Lithuania's legalistic administrative culture. Article 3 explores the low levels of uptake of e-participation platforms across the Baltic states, partly influenced by the absence of sustained political support. Although there was rhetorical endorsement of stakeholder engagement, this was not translated into consistent action. In Lithuania, this gap created a risk of a vicious cycle: while there was a formal obligation to consult stakeholders, it was neither prioritised nor actively encouraged. As a result, low-quality participation failed to attract meaningful contributions, leading to further disappointment and the eventual de-prioritisation of the tool. This negative feedback loop may negatively affect the informal institutionalisation of stakeholder engagement, thus requiring support from high-level authorities to break through the institutional inertia. For instance, although not explicitly stated in article 3, Bortkevičiūtė & Nakrošis (2022) have shown that public consultation practices were more developed in institutions where they were actively supported by senior authorities.

This argument is mostly focused on Lithuania, but we mildly suggest that it may be applicable to other CEE countries as well.

Implications for policy: relevance of transformational leadership
Research on crisis management suggests that neither transactional nor transformational leadership styles are fully suited to such conditions. Instead, horizontal or boundary spanning leadership is often preferred, as it encourages the sharing of responsibility among actors and grants them greater decision-making authority (e.g. Ansell et al., 2020a; Kalkman, 2020). Additionally, the facilitative capacities of leaders are emphasised – particularly their ability to build networks, foster shared motivation, and ensure inclusive dialogue (Emerson et al., 2012; Ansell et al., 2020; Sørensen & Torfing, 2018).

While these leadership qualities are undoubtedly crucial once stakeholder engagement *has been established*, this dissertation highlights the essential role of leadership in *initiating such engagement* in the Lithuanian context. Articles 1 and 4 point to the importance of strong ownership and the capacity to formulate, communicate, and sustain a clear vision for addressing crises – especially when doing so requires moving beyond standard practices within the public sector. Therefore, the dissertation makes a cautious recommendation that **transformative leadership may be a critical factor in enabling any form of stakeholder engagement**, particularly by helping to overcome entrenched institutional inertia.

To develop this type of leadership, knowledge of stakeholder engagement is crucial. Firstly, the current Lithuanian competence model for civil servants could be enhanced by incorporating competencies related to stakeholder engagement. Secondly, training focused on developing these competencies should be provided. Following Finland‘s example with the eOppiva training platform, Lithuania‘s Public Sector Competence Development Space, managed by the Public Management Agency, could be expanded further to include modules on stakeholder engagement. This could be developed in collaboration with the Open Government Department of the Office of the Government, which has already established the website section “Learning of Openness”. Nevertheless, a centralised approach combined with training linked to mandatory competencies is likely to yield more effective results and better prepare civil servants to lead stakeholder engagement practices.

Argument 2: *The combination of formal and informal institutionalisation of stakeholder engagement is essential for reinforcing legally binding requirements with mutual commitment, shared motivation, and the capacity for joint action.*

Emergencies are not ideal moments for initiating new partnerships. As research shows, under highly uncertain conditions, decision-makers often prefer the safety of existing procedures over innovation and spontaneity (Stark, 2014; Parker et al., 2020). If ties with stakeholders are not established prior to a crisis, their involvement in crisis management becomes unlikely or requires considerable effort to bridge gaps between sectors. **Article 1** partially illustrates this point. Although the government led by Saulius Skvernelis consulted health policy experts during the initial stages of the COVID-19 crisis, it failed to integrate various civil society initiatives into a collaborative effort. This highlights the importance of establishing both formal rules for stakeholder engagement (to ensure the process implementation, its transparency and quality), and continuous capacity-building practices (to facilitate capacity for joint action).

Article 4 demonstrates that once engaged in collaboration, the clarification of roles, the provision of positive feedback, and the subsequent growth of trust experienced by partners contribute to the informal institutionalisation of this practice. In line with Imperial et al. (2016), it proves that shared activities help overcome differences in institutional logics, organisational goals, professional cultures and thus, strengthen the collaborative capacity of partners. However, informal institutionalisation alone is insufficient, particularly in dynamic policy environments. Stakeholder engagement outcomes often depend heavily on political leaders' perceptions on the value of this process (Rafique et al., 2021), therefore, without a legal regulation in place, stakeholder engagement practices may suffer from factors such as staff turnover or shifting political priorities.

At the same time, article 3 reveals that formal institutionalisation by itself is also inadequate. In the Baltic States, the implementation of e-participation platforms often resembled a "box-ticking" exercise with limited political support (see also Randma-Liiv & Lember, 2022). While formal mechanisms existed, they were not always translated into meaningful engagement.

On contrary to Nolte & Lindenmeier (2023), who emphasise the relevance of previous relationships over the regulations, this dissertation suggests that a balance between formal and informal institutionalisation is necessary to avoid the risk of stakeholder engagement becoming an "empty shell" (Dimitrova, 2010). This is especially relevant in the CEE context, where the legalistic administrative culture prevails and the fear of making mistakes is high (Bortkevičiūtė et al., 2021). At the same time, over-regulating stakeholder practices may transform cross-sector collaboration into yet another source of bureaucratic inertia (Eriksson & Hallberg, 2022; Torfing et al., 2012; Stark, 2014). While basic functions like logistics and communication are crucial in any crisis, rigidly formalised collaboration may undermine system adaptability and the search for context-specific solutions.

Implications for policy: strategic development of cross-sectoral collaboration
The dissertation supports the claim that strengthening resilience "does not happen overnight" (Stollenwerk et al., 2021, p. 1221), but is instead a long-term endeavour requiring changes in governance networks, institutional practices, and administrative culture. While the initiation of stakeholder engagement practices may stem from leadership efforts marked by "improvisation and luck" (Boin & van Eeten, 2013, p. 430), their further development demands a strategic approach – one that combines legal regulation with the collaboration practice across sectors.

Article 4 demonstrated how the collaborative experience gained during the management of the COVID-19 pandemic was later applied in responding to irregular migration flows from Belarus. It also linked this joint crisis-management experience to the introduction of a legal framework for NGO involvement in the crisis management system. However, it is vital to strengthen these legal provisions through a sustained on-the-ground collaboration oriented towards capacity building. This can be supported by, among others, the following:

- **Systemic integration of NGOs into policymaking within their areas of expertise.** Despite possessing valuable knowledge about the communities they represent, which could inform regular policymaking processes, the current role of NGOs in Lithuania is often linked to service delivery. Systemic engagement of NGOs in policymaking would serve a two-fold purpose. First, it could contribute to decision-making processes that strengthen the resilience of represented communities even before crises occur. Second, it could foster mutual trust between the public and NGO sectors through a better understanding of each other's organisational aims and cultures. To achieve this aim, NGO involvement at the early stages of policymaking is essential. This could be facilitated by identifying a few key reforms within the Government's programme and equipping the responsible institutions with support from the Open Government Department of the Office of the Government or external consultants, who could assist in designing and implementing the stakeholder engagement processes. High-quality stakeholder engagement cases could serve as training examples, encouraging further adoption of stakeholder engagement practices and preparing public authorities to apply them independently.
- **Shared crisis preparedness efforts.** The Law on Crisis Management and Civil Protection (LR Seimas, 2022) institutionalised responsibilities and collaboration mechanisms with NGOs during crises. However, mechanisms for collaborative crisis preparedness remain fragmented, with efforts distributed across multiple national-level institutions and municipalities. Developing cross-sectoral collaboration for crisis preparedness would help overcome this fragmentation and strengthen the "whole-of-society" approach to crisis management. NGO participation in such a framework would make it possible to reach specific groups – such as the elderly, residents of smaller towns, and people with disabilities – whose preparedness remains a key challenge (Ministry of the Interior, 2025).

Argument 3: *Stakeholder engagement mostly contributes to resilience building through increased access to information and resources as well as building capacity of joint action, allowing for an effective crisis response. However, risks linked to the application of this practice should be carefully considered before engaging stakeholders.*

The dissertation confirms previous research findings (e.g., Pramanik, 2021; Kapucu, 2006) by demonstrating how collaborative crisis management, as analysed in **article 4**, supported Lithuanian public authorities during the COVID-19 pandemic and the irregular migration crisis. The collaborative practices facilitated, among other things, the mobilisation of human resources, the delivery of specialised services, and expedited public procurement processes.

While **article 4** offers an example of successful stakeholder engagement, **articles 2 and 3** present less conclusive results. **Article 2** illustrates how policy proposals developed by a "child-centric" advocacy coalition laid the foundation for reform in the child-rights protection system following several subsystem crises. However, the recurrent debates around the nature and design of the reform – ranging from media coverage to public protests – suggest that the proposals might not have been sufficiently discussed across all relevant stakeholder groups. Furthermore, outside crisis contexts, article 3 highlights the limited influence stakeholder consultations had on policymaking in the Baltic states, demonstrating that stakeholder engagement does not always yield successful or meaningful outcomes.

The relevance of the latter findings is discussed further in the section on "Limitations and Directions for Future Research." However, it is also important here, particularly regarding the quality of implementing stakeholder engagement initiatives. Stakeholder engagement can "add institutional complexity and create additional challenges to <...> planning and decision-making processes" (Fünfgeld & Moloney, 2018: 18). Thus, institutional capacity to conduct high-quality stakeholder engagement should be carefully assessed before implementing these practices. Consequently, identifying precisely which stakeholders should be involved and determining whether sufficient organisational and coordination capacity exists are crucial steps to ensure that stakeholder engagement meaningfully contributes to resilience-building.

Implications for policy: careful consideration of opportunities and challenges linked to stakeholder engagement

While stakeholder engagement practices present numerous opportunities, these must be carefully weighed against the challenges and potential risks they entail. For example, in the context of (collaborative) crisis management, cross-sectoral partnerships are expected to enhance the long-term effectiveness of crisis response. However, it should be acknowledged that coordination among actors with unequal access to resources and information – especially under high-pressure conditions – may, in fact, hinder short-term effectiveness (Ansell et al., 2010; McGuire & Agranoff, 2011; Parker et al., 2020). Managerial decisions such as participant selection, sustained inclusion, clear division of responsibilities, and procedural transparency are critical in determining whether stakeholder involvement will enhance public trust, perceptions of fairness, and the legitimacy of decisions (Brummel, 2023; Edelenbos & Klijn, 2007; Nohrstedt et al., 2018).

Building on the findings of this dissertation, several policy recommendations are proposed, focusing on how to balance the challenges and opportunities associated with stakeholder engagement:

- **Tailor engagement tools to the policy context and target audience.** Article 3 offers examples of successful consultations – particularly those that are accessible, relatable, and easy to participate in. Therefore, the first step in designing stakeholder engagement should be to tailor the tool to the specific policy problem and stakeholders affected by it. In some cases, the issue may be technical in nature and not require broad consultation; in others, it may be so complex that it necessitates a citizens' assembly. Aligning the problem with the most appropriate engagement tool enables the collection of recommendations in the most suitable format, thereby increasing the likelihood of their implementation.
- **Assign an „owner" of stakeholder engagement process and its results.** As demonstrated in Article 4, a positive feedback loop – i.e., tangible results from collaboration – is essential for maintaining the commitment of both public authorities and stakeholders. Therefore, clear „ownership" of stakeholder engagement initiatives is crucial to ensure their quality, including the inclusion of participants, shared commitment, effective information exchange, and transparency of the process. Without these conditions in place, stakeholder engagement may fail to deliver the expected outcomes.

3.3. Theoretical contribution

Oriented within the nexus of resilience, stakeholder engagement and (collaborative) crisis management, the dissertation makes several theoretical contributions, in particular to the research fields on resilience and stakeholder engagement. While individual theoretical contributions are presented in each of the articles, this section points to the overarching contribution of the whole dissertation: explaining complex mechanisms through which stakeholder engagement influences the resilience of governance systems, particularly within the under-researched context of the CEE. Three theoretical contributions are further elaborated in the section below: 1) contextualised and dynamic approach towards resilience-building; 2) transformative potential of stakeholder engagement practices; 3) potential shift in perceptions of the "crisis exploitation" thesis in the context of shared responsibility for policymaking and (collaborative) crisis management.

First, the dissertation enhances theoretical understanding of resilience by conceptualising it as a dynamic process, rather than focusing solely on it as a static outcome determined by multiple factors (e.g., Saja et al., 2018; Manyena et al., 2019). Two distinct possibilities for resilience-building are identified in the existing literature. On the one hand, some authors consider resilience as a "by-product" of crisis management, emerging out of necessity to adapt to rapidly changing operational contexts (Boin & Lodge, 2016; Boin & van Eeten, 2013). On the other hand, resilience is understood as stemming from deliberate learning and iterative processes of trial-and-error, where extended periods of stability are punctuated by crises that test and ultimately strengthen resilience, thus balancing stability with change (Broekema et al., 2017; Normandin & Therrien, 2016).

Article 1 contributes to the first strand of research by introducing a novel application of new institutionalism – specifically, the logics of appropriateness and consequentiality – to explain how resilience is constructed during crises. It demonstrates that the rational logic of consequentiality drives major, top-down breakthroughs (e.g., via central steering and coercive pressures), whereas the normative logic of appropriateness fosters more incremental transformations (e.g., through professionalisation and network-based practices). Meanwhile, **article 2** contributes to the second strand by demonstrating that the impact of a crisis on policy change is mediated by the existing structure of policy subsystems and the advocacy coalitions within them. A dominant coalition may favour "strategic inaction" if the perceived costs outweigh potential benefits, thus constraining resilience-oriented policy developments. The article further shows that shifts in resources within adversarial policy subsystems – and the strategic exploitation of these shifts by minority coalitions – are critical in shaping policy outcomes after crises. Consequently, resilience emerges not as an automatic result of crises, but rather as the product of political contestation and strategic agency.

Second, considering that building trust and collaborative skills among multiple stakeholders is crucial for ensuring governance systems' readiness to respond and adapt effectively in times of crisis (Comfort et al., 2010), this dissertation makes a significant contribution to stakeholder engagement research. A key premise underpinning stakeholder engagement is that it serves not only its immediate purposes, such as providing expertise or solving problems collaboratively, but also yields broader, long-term impacts, including increased trust, improved mutual understanding, greater capacity to cooperate, and even the emergence of new forms of joint action (Innes & Booher, 1999). Stakeholder engagement is thus perceived to possess transformative potential, particularly evident in e-participation practices, which are expected to shift policymakers' and stakeholders' attitudes towards participation by identifying new ways to integrate these practices into policymaking processes (Meijer et al., 2019; Korthagen & van Keulen, 2020).

In this context, **article 4** contributes to collaborative crisis management literature by developing propositions that explain how collaborative experiences become institutionalised within crisis management systems. These propositions (for instance, distinguishing between transformational and boundary-spanning leadership roles at different collaboration stages, or linking positive feedback loops to the further advancement of collaboration) help to explain both formal and informal aspects of institutionalisation within crisis management system. As with resilience research, this approach moves beyond static models that merely list success factors, and instead highlights the dynamic, iterative process involved in building collaborative capacity, where successful collaboration fosters further collaboration. Meanwhile, **article 3** demonstrates that national-level governance patterns significantly mediate stakeholder engagement, often resulting in digital platforms reinforcing rather than transforming existing state–citizen relationships. The finding that deeply rooted legalistic administrative cultures and a lack of political willingness to share genuine decision-making power can neutralise the transformative potential of technology offers an important theoretical insight into the limitations of digital participation tools within the context of young democracies.

Taken together, this dissertation supports the evidence on the shift towards more horizontal modes of decision-making, both in routine circumstances and during crises. However, it also highlights the need to reconsider prevailing perceptions of crises. At present, crises are often associated with political exploitation, where “both government actors and their critics try to escape blame for their occurrence, consolidate/strengthen their political capital, and advance/defend the policies they stand for” (Boin et al., 2008). This perception aligns with a more vertical, top-down approach to decision-making and crisis management, but it may not fully capture the dynamics of collaborative crisis management. Collaborative policymaking is founded on the principle of shared responsibility for policy outcomes (e.g., Ansell & Gash, 2008; Torfing & Ansell, 2016). While politicians ultimately bear formal responsibility for final decisions, the broad engagement of stakeholders – spanning both the public sector and non-state actors – can reduce the risk of them being left solely accountable for policies that underperform or result in unforeseen negative consequences. Therefore, if both routine and crisis-related policy decisions are shaped by broad stakeholder agreement, it is essential to further examine how this shared responsibility might influence perceptions of crises and the capacity to exploit them for political gain.

3.4. Limitations and directions for the future research

Each article comprising the dissertation identifies specific limitations and suggests opportunities for future research, as detailed within the articles themselves. However, taken collectively, this dissertation opens further avenues for research, stemming from both its empirical findings and the identified limitations. In this section, each key finding and limitation is explicitly paired with potential avenues for future research. Overall, the dissertation highlights five distinct areas for future research, discussed in more detail below: 1) the impact of unsuccessful stakeholder engagement practices on both public authorities and stakeholders themselves; 2) the interplay between “top-down” stakeholder engagement initiatives and “bottom-up” interest-group representation during crises; 3) the effects of crises on NGO functioning and operations; 4) the relationship between transformative resilience and robustness; and 5) opportunities for implementing larger-N comparative studies.

First, as mentioned in section 1, research associates stakeholder engagement with multiple potential benefits, ranging from improved quality of policymaking to overall increased trust in state. This is part of the assumption, linking stakeholder engagement practices with their positive impact on resilience of governance systems. However, the assumption does not consider the “drawbacks to stakeholder engagement in practice” (Baldwin, 2019: 247): some of the initiatives do not attract sufficient interest of stakeholders or, vice versa, stakeholder contributions are not sufficiently considered in policymaking. Despite this fact, the major body of research focuses on “inputs”, i.e. what is needed to design or implement successful stakeholder involvement initiatives (e.g. Ansell et al., 2020; Emerson & Nabatchi, 2012; Buckwalter, 2014), with only limited attention paid to their “outcomes”, i.e. what is the impact of unsuccessful practices (e.g. Siebers et al., 2019). To make it even more complex, results of such initiatives may be differently perceived by different stakeholder groups and successful engagement for one group may be an unsuccessful for the other (Aichholzer et al., 2016). The dissertation demonstrates positive reinforcing effect of previous collaboration experience (**article 4**) and points to the potential of negative reinforcing effect (**article 1**). Nevertheless, a relevant question that was also not touched upon in this dissertation, remains: *how do unsuccessful stakeholder involvement practices affect both stakeholders and public authorities' willingness to engage in these initiatives in the future and, in turn, what impact does it have on resilience of the governance systems?*

Second, this dissertation focuses on “top-down” stakeholder engagement, initiated by public authorities. Based on the assumption that this type of engagement is most likely to lead to tangible outcomes – since it signals that policymakers require specific knowledge or support in service provision (van Meerkerk, 2019) – the dissertation overlooks “bottom-up” initiatives and, in particular, civil society advocacy activities and lobbying. While not a central focus, the dissertation does suggest that civil society activity tends to increase during crises, with NGOs contributing both at the operational and strategic levels of crisis management (**articles 1 and 4**), as well as participating in post-crisis policy change debates by advocating on behalf of their communities (**article 2**). A growing body of literature has analysed lobbying dynamics in times of crisis in greater depth (e.g. Keller, 2016; LaPira, 2014; Timoneda & Vallejo Vera, 2021). For instance, Junk et al. (2021) found that organisations most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic – and that maintained pre-crisis lobbying frequency – gained greater access to policymakers. Other studies show that timing and resource availability matter: more resourceful interest groups that engaged early had a distinct advantage (Crepaz et al., 2022). These findings point to the need for a more integrated perspective, connecting the dynamics of voluntary interest representation with engagement “on demand” by policymakers. This is especially relevant during crises, when policymakers operate under intense pressure, limited time, and increased uncertainty. Building on this, future research could explore *what is the interplay between* *lobbying and formal stakeholder engagement during crises? How do crises affect stakeholders' capacity to represent their interests effectively?*

Third, as summarised in section 1, the major body of research on (collaborative) crisis management emphasises the necessity of cross-sectoral responses and highlights the importance of non-governmental actors in this process (e.g., Parker et al., 2020; Bynander & Nohrstedt, 2019). Empirical studies further illustrate the contributions of civil society actors in responding to various crises and disasters (e.g., Boonstra et al., 2023; Kinsbergen, 2022; Crepaz et al., 2022). This dissertation (**articles 1 and 4**) has demonstrated how NGOs contribute to crisis management through mobilising human and other resources, flexibility of actions, and targeted communication efforts. However, both this dissertation and the broader research on (collaborative) crisis management remain largely silent on the impacts that crises have on NGOs themselves. In other words, NGO contributions are often taken for granted as a cornerstone for resilience, without adequately considering what crises mean for them. The existing literature suggests that NGOs may be affected both positively (e.g., when a crisis occurs in their specific area of expertise) and negatively (e.g., when a crisis redirects resources and political attention away from their field). Such effects could include changes in resource availability, shifts in political focus, or pressures to expand their organisational missions (Schulpen et al., 2023; Parker, 2024). Nevertheless, current findings on this topic remain sparse and fragmented. Further research is therefore necessary to examine *how crises affect NGO operations, what adaptive measures NGOs take in response to changing circumstances, and how these measures influence their ability to represent interests and effectively contribute to crisis management on the ground*.

Fourth, while not being a direct limitation of this dissertation, the research allows engaging into theoretical debates with the emerging field of research on robust governance (e.g. Sørensen & Torfing, 2024; Ansell et al., 2020; Ansell et al., 2024). Robustness approach criticises the traditional bureaucracies for their rigidity, limited collaborative innovation capacity and thus, insufficient ability to operate in highly turbulent environments, defined as "enduring situations characterised by unpredictable and unsteady dynamics arising from the interaction between highly variable, inconsistent, and unexpected flows" (Ansell et al., 2024: 18). The key argument of robust governance lies between agility and resilience. However, resilience in the turbulence-robustness literature is perceived only as a "conservative, backward-striving, and stability-seeking" strategy (Ansell et al., 2024: 26). In other words, it is mostly considered as "bouncing back" rather than "bouncing forward" approach. However, the transformative approach to resilience adopted in this dissertation opens avenues for further conceptual clarification – particularly regarding *how robustness differs from transformational resilience, how these concepts interact, and how they should be applied in context. Specifically, it raises the question: when should institutions aim for resilience, when for robustness, and when for a combination of both?*

Finally, the dissertation is primarily based on the results of individual case studies (except for article 3), with a particular focus on Lithuania and the broader CEE region, especially in instances where Lithuania can be considered a typical case. On the one hand, as discussed in section 1 and the individual articles, this focus enables theoretical testing (as demonstrated by **article 2**) and offers theoretical contributions (as in **articles 1 and 4**) within a comparatively under-researched regional context. On the other hand, while the selection of cases aligns with the aims of the individual articles, *future research would benefit from larger-N analyses – particularly comparative studies*. For example, testing mechanisms of resilience-building identified in the **article 1** across the larger number of cases would allow finding out if the "top-down" resilience-building is a dominant trend across different public administration contexts or is specific to Lithuania, where the centralisation of crisis management is linked to limited capacities of public sector (Bortkevičiūtė et al., 2021).

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SANTRAUKA (SUMMARY)

Ši disertacija parengta straipsnių pagrindu. Ją sudaro keturi straipsniai, paskelbti recenzuojamuose tarptautiniuose žurnaluose, turinčiuose poveikio faktorių Clarivate Analytics Web of Science *duomenų bazėje. Pirmoje disertacijos dalyje pateikiama atsparumo, suinteresuotųjų šalių įtraukimo į sprendimų priėmimą ir (bendradarbiaujamojo) krizių valdymo tyrimų apžvalga, taip pat nurodomos esamų tyrimų spragos. Antroje dalyje nurodomi tyrimo tikslai, disertacijos metodologinė prieiga, kiekviename disertaciją sudarančių straipsnių taikyti metodai ir šių straipsnių tarpusavio ryšiai. Trečioje disertacijos dalyje apibendrinami rezultatai ir daromos bendros išvados, apibrėžiamas tyrimo indėlis į teorines diskusijas, pateikiamos rekomendacijos sprendimų priėmėjams, nurodomi tyrimo ribotumai ir tolesnių tyrimų kryptys. Straipsnių, sudarančių šią disertaciją, kopijos pateikiamos paskutinėje dalyje. Santraukoje į kiekvieną šių straipsnių referuojama pagal jam priskirtą numerį (žr. dalį „List of Publications“).*

Problema ir kontekstas

Šiuolaikinės visuomenės susiduria su vis kompleksiškesniais iššūkiais, didėjančiu sisteminių grėsmių ir krizių skaičiumi bei stiprėjančiu neapibrėžtumu. Moksliniuose tyrimuose vis dažniau akcentuojama, kad norint išspręsti nacionalines ar politikos sričių ribas peržengiančias problemas, individualių institucijų veiksmai dažnai yra nepakankami – reikalingas kolektyvinis veikimas, apimantis kelias organizacijas, sektorius ir (ar) valdymo lygmenis (Boin et al., 2021: 113; Sørensen ir Torfing, 2007; Dunleavy et al., 2006). Sprendžiant kompleksines problemas, itin svarbus tampa perėjimas nuo hierarchinių prie horizontalių valdymo formų (Edelenbos ir van Meerkerk, 2022: 429).

Reaguodami į kintantį viešojo valdymo sistemų veikimo kontekstą, tiek praktikai, tiek akademikai ragina stiprinti jų atsparumą (pvz., Stark, 2014; Tierney, 2014; Duit, 2016; OECD, 2021). Šioje disertacijoje atsparumas apibrėžiamas kaip sistemos gebėjimas absorbuoti sukrėtimus, prisitaikyti ir transformuotis, siekiant geriau pasirengti ateities krizėms (Linkov ir Trump, 2019; Manyena et al., 2019). Į kaitą orientuotas apibrėžimas grindžiamas idėja, kad krizės kuria naują realybę, todėl „grįžimas“ prie ankstesnės situacijos gali turėti netgi žalingų pasekmių, kadangi senosios institucijos nesugebės tinkamai veikti pakitusiame kontekste (Darkow, 2018; Capano ir Woo, 2017).

Atsparumas gali susidaryti tiek kaip tikslingo planavimo rezultatas, tiek kaip krizių valdymo pastangų „šalutinis poveikis“ (Boin ir Lodge, 2016). Vis dėlto literatūroje pateikiama nedaug gairių, kaip priimami sprendimai, stiprinantys valdymo sistemų atsparumą. Tyrimuose įprastai pabrėžiamas piliečių dalyvavimo ir bendradarbiavimo gebėjimų vaidmuo: kai kurie autoriai suinteresuotųjų šalių įtraukimą įvardija viena iš atsparios viešojo valdymo sistemos sudedamųjų dalių (Duit, 2016), kiti akcentuoja, kad būtent ryšiai tarp valdymo tinklo dalyvių ir jų kokybė „lemia sisteminį atsparumą“ (Boin ir ‘t Hart, 2010: 365). Atsižvelgiant į tai, ši *disertacija remiasi iš teorijos kildinama prielaida, kad suinteresuotųjų šalių įtraukimas prisideda prie valdymo sistemų atsparumo stiprinimo*.

Suinteresuotųjų šalių įtraukimas į sprendimų priėmimą ar krizių valdymą didina išteklių (įskaitant informaciją, žmogiškuosius ir finansinius išteklius) prieinamumą, sudaro sąlygas greitai juos mobilizuoti (Aldrich ir Meyer, 2015; Norris et al., 2008; Darkow, 2018). Albright ir Crow (2021) teigimu, bendruomenės įtraukimas į sprendimų priėmimą lemia gilesnį mokymąsi po krizių, o įtraukimo mastas sietinas su politikos pokyčių mastu. Suinteresuotųjų šalių įtraukimas taip pat gali paskatinti keistis krizės valdymo metu išmoktomis pamokomis, o tai gali prisidėti prie efektyvesnio pasirengimo ateities krizėms (Stark ir Taylor, 2014). Taigi kuo labiau skirtingiems sektoriams atstovaujantys veikėjai yra įsitvirtinę viešojo valdymo sistemoje ir kuo stipresni ryšiai tarp suinteresuotųjų šalių, tuo atsparesne laikytina pati valdymo sistema.

Vis dėlto esamuose atsparumo tyrimuose matomi tam tikri nenuoseklumai aiškinant suinteresuotųjų šalių įtraukimo ir atsparumo ryšį yra sunkiai išsprendžiami dėl empirinių įrodymų ir duomenų trūkumo. Pirma, valdymo sistemų atsparumui svarbios dalyvavimo ir bendradarbiavimo praktikos pasižymi sudėtingu įgyvendinimu ir tvarumo stoka (pvz., Duit, 2016; Ansell ir Gash, 2008). Antra, suinteresuotųjų šalių įtraukimo praktikos nėra panacėja. Ribotas šių praktikų poveikis politikai, labiau simbolinis jų pasitelkimas (van Meerkerk, 2019; Lahat ir Sher-Hadar, 2020) ir nevienodas dalyvių traktavimas (Baldwin, 2019) yra įvardijami kaip trūkumai, galintys atgrasyti tiek piliečius, tiek viešojo sektoriaus darbuotojus nuo tolesnio įtraukimo praktikų taikymo. Trečia, atsparumo literatūroje vyraujanti perspektyva grindžiama funkciniu sprendimų priėmimo įvesties-išvesties (angl. *inputs – outputs*) modeliu, nepateikiant priežastinių paaiškinimų (Biesbroek et al., 2017). Apibendrinant – šie nenuoseklumai veda disertacijos problemos link: *nors mokslinėje literatūroje ryškėja bendras sutarimas dėl suinteresuotųjų šalių įtraukimo teigiamo poveikio valdymo sistemų atsparumui, mechanizmai, kuriais šis poveikis pasireiškia (ypač krizių sąlygomis), lieka neaiškūs*.

Tikslas ir uždaviniai

Disertacija jungia atsparumo, suinteresuotųjų šalių įtraukimo ir (bendradarbiaujamojo) krizių valdymo tyrimų laukus, pasitelkdama kai kurias institucionalizmo ir viešosios politikos proceso teorijų įžvalgas. Jos tikslas – *paaiškinti, kaip suinteresuotųjų šalių įtraukimas į sprendimų priėmimą prisideda prie valdymo sistemų atsparumo stiprinimo, ypač krizių sąlygomis*.

Siekiant šio tikslo, buvo suformuluoti keturi tyrimo uždaviniai, atliepiantys disertacijoje pristatytas tyrimų spragas, tapę gairėmis rengiant šią disertaciją sudarančias publikacijas:

1. Aprašyti ir paaiškinti sprendimų, prisidedančių prie atsparumo stiprinimo, priėmimo kontekstą, logiką ir mechanizmus (straipsnis Nr. 1).
2. Išanalizuoti suinteresuotųjų šalių vaidmenį vykstant politikos kaitai po krizės (straipsnis Nr. 2).
3. Išanalizuoti veiksnius, kurie lemia suinteresuotųjų šalių įtraukimo iniciatyvų įgyvendinimą (straipsnis Nr. 3).
4. Paaiškinti ankstesnės suinteresuotųjų šalių įtraukimo patirties poveikį šios praktikos įgyvendinimui ateityje (straipsnis Nr. 4).

Struktūra ir taikyti tyrimo metodai

Siekiant pateikti apibendrinančius disertacijos argumentus, ją sudarančios publikacijos sujungtos į nuoseklų naratyvą (žr. paveikslą). Disertacija pradedama nuo makrolygmens analizės – tiriami atsparumo stiprinimo mechanizmai krizės valdymo režime (straipsnis Nr. 1). Toliau nagrinėjamas suinteresuotųjų šalių vaidmuo konkrečiame politikos posistemyje po krizės (straipsnis Nr. 2), tyrimas susiaurinamas iki suinteresuotųjų šalių įtraukimo platformų įgyvendinimo (straipsnis Nr. 3) ir baigiamas analizuojant, kaip bendradarbiavimo patirtis įtvirtinama krizės valdymo sistemoje (straipsnis Nr. 4). Nors ne visi straipsniai tiesiogiai nagrinėja atsparumą, kiekvieno jų išvados yra susijusios su bendru atsparumo, suinteresuotųjų šalių įtraukimo ir (bendradarbiaujamojo) krizių valdymo ryšiu, taip jie prisideda prie disertacijos tikslo.

Straipsnis Nr. 1. Koks yra kontekstas, logika ir mechanizmai, priimant sprendimus, prisidedančius prie atsparumo stiprinimo?

Tikslas: atskleisti pagrindinius mechanizmus ir jų poveikį viešojo valdymo sistemų atsparumo stiprinimui.
Objektas: pagrindiniai valdymo ir visuomenės sveikatos sprendimai, kurie sustiprino valdymo sistemų atsparumą COVID-19 krizės Lietuvoje metu.
Metodas ir duomenys: atvejo analizė, 25 pusiau struktūruoti interviu su pagrindinėmis krizės valdymo suinteresuotomis šalimis, modelių atitikties technika.
Teorinis indėlis: krizių valdymas, atsparumas.

Straipsnis Nr. 2. Koks yra suinteresuotųjų šalių vaidmuo vykstant politikos kaitai po krizės?

Tikslas: patikrinti mechanizmus, siejančius konkurencingą politikos posistemę su nedidele, esmine politikos kaita arba jos nebuvimu po krizės.
Objektas: politikos kaita (arba jos nebuvimas), susijusi su dviejų palaikymo koalicijų veikla ir ištekliais Lietuvos vaikų teisių apsaugos posistemyje po krizių, vykusių 2016–2020 m.
Metodas ir duomenys: trijų atvejų analizė, 6 pusiau struktūruoti interviu, kiekybinė diskurso analizė (1 259 antraštės), į teorijos tikrinimą orientuotas proceso sekimas.
Teorinis indėlis: viešosios politikos procesas, krizių valdymas.

Straipsnis Nr. 3. Kokie veiksniai daro poveikį suinteresuotųjų šalių įtraukimo platformų įgyvendinimui?

Tikslas: išanalizuoti, kaip įgyvendinamos nacionalinio lygmens e-dalyvavimo iniciatyvos trijose Baltijos valstybėse – Estijoje, Latvijoje ir Lietuvoje.
Objektas: nacionalinio ir organizacinio lygmens veiksniai, formavę e-dalyvavimo platformų įgyvendinimą Lietuvoje, Latvijoje ir Estijoje.
Metodas ir duomenys: lyginamoji atvejų analizė, 11 pusiau struktūruotų interviu (Lietuvos atveju) su pagrindinėmis E. Pilietis platformos suinteresuotosiomis šalimis, 230 viešųjų internetinių konsultacijų apžvalga.
Teorinis indėlis: suinteresuotųjų šalių įtraukimas.

Straipsnis Nr. 4. Kaip institucionalizuojamos suinteresuotųjų šalių įtraukimo praktikos?

Tikslas: pateikti prielaidas, kaip ankstesnė partnerių, dalyvavusių bendradarbiaujamame krizių valdyme, patirtis lemia šio proceso institucionalizavimą krizių valdymo sistemoje.
Objektas: viešojo ir nevyriausybinio sektorių bendradarbiavimo raida COVID-19 krizės valdymo laikotarpiu Lietuvoje.
Metodas ir duomenys: atvejo analizė, 16 pusiau struktūruotų interviu (dalis jų – pakartotiniai) su pagrindinėmis krizių valdymo suinteresuotosiomis šalimis, į teorijos kūrimą orientuotas proceso sekimas.
Teorinis indėlis: suinteresuotųjų šalių įtraukimas (bendradarbiaujamasis krizių valdymas).

1 paveikslas. Disertaciją sudarančios publikacijos

Sudaryta autorės, remiantis struktūra, pateikta Broekema, W. (2018). When does the phoenix rise? Factors and mechanisms that influence crisis-induced learning by public organizations. Ridderkerk: Ridderprint BV, p. 27. Pastaba: rodyklės vaizduoja publikacijų eigą, kuri sudaro disertacijos naratyvą.

Šioje disertacijoje taikoma pozityvistinė tyrimų paradigma, daugiausia dėmesio skiriama mechanizmų, siejančių suinteresuotųjų šalių įtraukimą ir valdymo atsparumą, nustatymui. Publikacijose taikyta modelių atitikties (angl. *pattern matching*) metodika ir į teorijos tikrinimą ir jos kūrimą orientuotos proceso sekimo formos. Disertacijoje dažniausiai remtasi kokybiniais duomenimis, gautais atliekant pusiau struktūruotus interviu ir viešai prieinamų duomenų analizę (išskyrus antrąjį straipsnį, kuriame pasitelkta kiekybinė diskurso analizė).

Nors straipsniuose atskirai pagrindžiamas analizės atvejų pasirinkimas, disertacijoje daugiausia dėmesio skiriama Lietuvos atvejui. Šis atvejis pasirinktas todėl, kad, nepaisant didėjančio susidomėjimo ir pažangos, suinteresuotųjų šalių įtraukimas šalyje yra mažai tiriamas. Lietuvos atvejis taip pat reikšmingas dėl panašiu metu pasireiškusių krizių (pvz., COVID-19 pandemija, nereguliarios migracijos srautai iš Baltarusijos, Rusijos agresija prieš Ukrainą), kurių sprendimas pareikalavo tarpsektorinio bendradarbiavimo. Galiausiai, nepaisant pastaraisiais metais sustiprinto teisinio reguliavimo, sudariusio platesnes galimybes suinteresuotųjų šalių įtraukimui į sprendimų priėmimą, tyrimai (pvz., Lietuvos pilietinės galios indeksas) atskleidžia, kad realus šios praktikos taikymas tebėra neišspręstas uždavinys.

Atsižvelgiant į menką suinteresuotųjų šalių įtraukimo, krizių valdymo ir atsparumo Vidurio ir Rytų Europoje tyrimų kiekį, ši disertacija pateikia vertingų įžvalgų iš mažiau tyrinėto regiono. Svarbu atkreipti dėmesį į tai, kad ši disertacija yra parengta straipsnių pagrindu, todėl atvejų atrankos strategijos buvo taikytos tik atskirų straipsnių lygmeniu. Dėl šios priežasties disertacijoje pateikiamos bendrosios išvados daugiausia taikomos Lietuvai ir iš dalies Vidurio ir Rytų Europos regionui (tais atvejais, kai išvados formuluojamos remiantis straipsniais, kuriuose Lietuva pasirinkta kaip tipinis šio regiono atvejis).

Rezultatų apžvalga

Pirmuoju disertacijos uždaviniu siekta *aprašyti ir paaiškinti sprendimų, prisidedančių prie atsparumo stiprinimo, priėmimo kontekstą, logiką ir mechanizmus.* Remiantis naujojo institucionalizmo idėjomis, ypač normatyvine tinkamumo logika ir racionalia pasekmių logika, pirmajame straipsnyje analizuota, kaip skirtingi mechanizmai įvairiuose kontekstuose lemia skirtingus atsparumo stiprinimo tipus. Remiantis Lietuvos COVID-19 krizės valdymo atvejo (2020 m.) analize, daroma išvada, kad kontekstuose, kuriuose dominavo pasekmių logika, atsparumas dažniausiai stiprintas vykdant esminius pokyčius, pasižymėjusius centralizacija, aukšto lygio sprendimų priėmėjų įsitraukimu, veikimu „iš viršaus į apačią“ (pvz., centralizuotas sprendimų dėl medicinos įrangos įsigijimo priėmimas, informacijos valdymo sistemos sukūrimas). Priešingai, palaipsniui įgyvendinami pokyčiai prisidėjo prie atsparumo stiprinimo tose aplinkose, kuriose vyravo tinkamumo logika, pasireiškusi taikant normatyvinį spaudimą, profesionalizaciją, tinklais grįstas ir „iš apačios“ kylančias praktikas (pvz., NVO įtraukimas į krizės ir jos padarinių valdymą, COVID-19 valdymo strategijos įgyvendinimas).

Šis tyrimas pabrėžė suinteresuotųjų šalių įtraukimo svarbą siekiant užtikrinti į atsparumo stiprinimą orientuotų sprendimų tvarumą. Nors vykdant esminius pokyčius įgyvendinamos priemonės prisideda prie atsparumo stiprinimo krizės metu, jų tvarumui būtinas nuolatinis politinis dėmesys. Kitaip tariant, „iš viršaus“ įgyvendintos priemonės turi būti įtvirtintos tarp suinteresuotųjų šalių, kad pasiektų ilgalaikį poveikį. O tokios „iš apačios“ kylančios praktikos kaip partnerystės su NVO kūrimas gali palaipsniui stiprinti atsparumą, didinant viešojo sektoriaus institucijų pajėgumus.

Antrajame straipsnyje toliau *analizuotas suinteresuotųjų šalių vaidmuo vykstant politikos kaitai po krizės*. Atliekant tyrimą, tikrinti du mechanizmai, paremti palaikymo koalicijų modelio tyrimais, siejantys konkurencingą politikos posistemį su viešosios politikos kaitos nebuvimu, nedideliais ar esminiais politikos pokyčiais. Mechanizmai buvo taikomi trims atvejams, susijusiems su atsaku į vidinius šokus Lietuvos vaiko teisių apsaugos posistemyje (2016–2020), kurie lėmė skirtingus rezultatus: politikos kaitos nebuvimą, nedidelius ir esminius pokyčius.

Empiriniai rezultatai patvirtino, kad konkurencingame viešosios politikos posistemyje pokyčiai nevyksta, jei abi palaikymo koalicijos remia esamos situacijos išlaikymą, o pagrindine politikos kaitos po krizės priežastimi tokiame posistemyje laikytinas išteklių persiskirstymas. Straipsnyje taip pat pateiktas išsamesnis nedidelių ir esminių viešosios politikos pokyčių priežasčių paaiškinimas. Pirma, tyrimas prisidėjo prie diskusijos apie koalicijų išteklių (pvz., viešosios nuomonės, informacijos, mobilizuojamų šalininkų, finansinių išteklių) hierarchiją parodydamas, kad teisinės galios esminei politikos kaitai nepakanka – būtent suinteresuotųjų šalių parama gali tapti esmine visuomenei jautriose politikos srityse priimtų sprendimų legitimavimui.

Antra, tyrimas atskleidžia, kad iki krizės parengti politikos sprendimai yra ypač svarbūs konkurencinguose posistemiuose, kuriuose paaštrėjusi koalicijų prieštara sustiprina krizės sukeltą spaudimą ir skubumą įgyvendinti politikos pokyčius. Tokia aplinka gali palengvinti esminę politikos kaitą tuo atveju, jei parengtas sprendimas yra pritaikomas atsivėrus krizės sudarytam „galimybių langui“. Svarbu paminėti, kad kartu su išteklių (ypač suinteresuotųjų šalių paramos) išaugimu dominuojančios koalicijos veikėjai sutelks dėmesį į ilgai lauktų reformų įgyvendinimą, o ne į kompromiso paiešką visame posistemyje, kas gali tapti iššūkiu priimtos politikos kaitos tvarumui. Tai ypač aktualu valstybėse, pasižyminčiose menkesniu suinteresuotųjų šalių įtraukimo praktikų išvystymu.

Trečiasis straipsnis susijęs su trečiuoju tyrimo uždaviniu – *išanalizuoti veiksnius, lemiančius suinteresuotųjų šalių įtraukimo platformų įgyvendinimą*. Lyginamoji Estijos, Latvijos ir Lietuvos e. dalyvavimo iniciatyvų analizė parodė, kad nors kiekvienoje šalyje taikomos skirtingos organizacinio lygmens ypatybės, didesnę įtaką įgyvendinimo procesui turi bendresni nacionalinio lygmens veiksniai, būdingi jaunoms demokratijoms. Trijų Baltijos šalių sprendimų priėmėjai pasirinko skirtingus organizacinius sprendimus, tačiau skaitmeninių įtraukimo procesų rezultatai rodo, kad net dalyvavimo iniciatyvų ir dalyvių skaičiui padidėjus, šių platformų poveikis politikai išliko ribotas. Matyti, jog net ir aukštos skaitmenizacijos kontekstuose skaitmeninių technologijų taikymas savaime neskatina suinteresuotųjų šalių įtraukimo, o tik atkartoja realybėje taikomas sprendimų priėmimo praktikas.

Šie rezultatai susiję su ketvirtuoju tyrimo uždaviniu – *paaiškinti, kaip ankstesnė suinteresuotųjų šalių įtraukimo patirtis veikia šios praktikos tolesnį įgyvendinimą.* Ketvirtajame straipsnyje, remiantis bendradarbiaujamojo krizių valdymo ir institucionalizmo tyrimų įžvalgomis, buvo nustatyti šeši kertiniai elementai (poreikis bendradarbiauti, funkcijų aiškumas, tarpusavio pasitikėjimas, lyderystė, teigiamas grįžtamasis ryšys ir mokymasis), turintys įtakos bendradarbiavimo institucionalizavimui krizių valdymo sistemoje. Į teorijos kūrimą orientuotas proceso sekimas, taikytas viešojo ir nevyriausybinio sektoriaus bendradarbiavimo atvejui COVID-19 pandemijos ir nereguliarios migracijos krizės kontekste Lietuvoje (2020–2021), leido pateikti tris prielaidas dėl bendradarbiavimo praktikos institucionalizavimo.

Pirma, kai valdant krizę dalyvauja partneriai, turintys ribotą bendradarbiavimo patirtį, transformacinė ir ribas plečianti (angl. *boundary spanning*) lyderystė yra itin svarbios skirtingose bendradarbiavimo institucionalizavimo stadijose (atitinkamai – pradedant ir įgyvendinant bendradarbiavimą). Antra, funkcijų aiškumas, iš bendradarbiavimo rezultatų kylantis teigiamas grįžtamasis ryšys ir dėl šios priežasties stiprėjantis pasitikėjimas tarp bendradarbiaujančių partnerių prisideda prie neformalios bendradarbiavimo institucionalizacijos. Trečia, ankstesnės teigiamos bendradarbiavimo patirties grįžtamasis ryšys skatina mokymąsi krizių valdymo sistemoje ir, kai jis papildomas transformacinės lyderystės pastangomis, gali lemti formalią bendradarbiavimo formatų institucionalizaciją.

Indėlis į teorinę diskusiją ir galimybės ateities tyrimams

Atsižvelgiant į keturių šią disertaciją sudarančių mokslinių straipsnių indėlį, remiantis apibendrintais rezultatais pateikiami trys pagrindiniai argumentai – ginamieji teiginiai:

1. *Aukščiausio lygmens vadovų transformacinė lyderystė yra itin svarbi į atsparumą orientuotų sprendimų, įskaitant ir suinteresuotųjų šalių įtraukimo praktikas, priėmimui. Įgyvendintos šios praktikos gali būti neformaliai institucionalizuotos nuolat bendradarbiaujant ir mokantis*. Disertacijoje atskleidžiama, kad į atsparumą orientuotų politikos priemonių – ypač suinteresuotųjų šalių įtraukimo praktikų – priėmimas ir institucionalizavimas glaudžiai susijęs su aukšto lygmens vadovų lyderyste. Pirmasis straipsnis rodo, kad COVID-19 krizės metu atsparumas Lietuvoje daugiausia stiprėjo dėl „iš viršaus“ inicijuotų sprendimų, centralizacijos ir aukšto lygio sprendimų priėmėjų lyderystės. Ketvirtajame straipsnyje atskleidžiama, kad asmeninė tuometės Ministrės Pirmininkės Ingridos Šimonytės iniciatyva įgalino konstruktyvų NVO įtraukimą į krizės valdymą, kuris ilgainiui išsivystė į institucionalizuotą praktiką. Suinteresuotųjų šalių įtraukimą ne krizės sąlygomis analizuojantis trečiasis straipsnis parodo, kad be nuoseklaus politinio palaikymo skaitmeninės dalyvavimo platformos Baltijos šalyse pasitelkiamos tik ribota apimtimi. Tad siekiant paskatinti suinteresuotųjų šalių įtraukimo praktikų taikymą, būtina aukšto lygmens vadovų transformacinė lyderystė, leidžianti įveikti institucinės inercijos keliamus iššūkius.
2. *Formalios ir neformalios suinteresuotųjų šalių įtraukimo institucionalizacijos derinys yra būtinas siekiant sustiprinti teisiškai privalomus bendradarbiavimo reikalavimus abipusiu įsipareigojimu, bendra motyvacija ir gebėjimu veikti kartu*. Šioje disertacijoje pabrėžiama, kad veiksmingas suinteresuotųjų šalių įtraukimas į krizių valdymą priklauso nuo subalansuoto formalaus ir neformalaus institucionalizavimo derinio. Krizės nėra palankus metas naujoms partnerystėms užmegzti, nes esant dideliam neapibrėžtumui, sprendimų priėmėjai dažnai renkasi saugius, įprastus sprendimus (Stark, 2014; Parker et al., 2020). Jei ryšiai su suinteresuotosiomis šalimis nėra užmegzti iš anksto, jas įtraukti tampa sudėtinga.

Pirmajame straipsnyje parodyta, kaip pilietinės visuomenės iniciatyvos nebuvo integruotos į bendrą COVID-19 krizės valdymą Lietuvoje, pabrėžiant formalių taisyklių ir gebėjimų stiprinimo svarbą. Ketvirtajame straipsnyje atskleista, kad funkcijų apibrėžtumas, teigiamas grįžtamasis ryšys ir augantis pasitikėjimas prisideda prie neformalios bendradarbiavimo praktikų institucionalizacijos. Kita vertus, trečiasis straipsnis parodė, kad vien formalios suinteresuotųjų šalių įtraukimo taisyklės, kurioms stinga neformalaus palaikymo, gali virsti riboto veiksmingumo procesais, kaip tai nutiko įgyvendinant e. dalyvavimo iniciatyvas Baltijos šalyse. Priešingai nei Nolte ir Lindenmeier (2023), teigiantys, jog ankstesnė bendradarbiavimo patirtis yra svarbesnė nei reguliavimas, ši disertacija siūlo siekti pusiausvyros: Vidurio ir Rytų Europos administracinėje kultūroje per didelis reguliavimas gali stabdyti lankstumą, o jo trūkumas – lemti simbolinį ar neveiksmingą įtraukimo praktikų taikymą.

3. *Suinteresuotųjų šalių įtraukimas Lietuvoje dažniausiai prisideda prie atsparumo stiprinimo dėl išaugusios prieigos prie informacijos ir išteklių bei bendrų veiksmų gebėjimų stiprinimo, taip sudarant sąlygas veiksmingam atsakui į krizes. Vis dėlto, prieš įtraukiant suinteresuotąsias šalis, būtina įvertinti su šios praktikos taikymu susijusias rizikas*. Šioje disertacijoje patvirtinami ankstesni tyrimai, parodant, kaip bendradarbiaujamasis krizių valdymas, kaip analizuojama ketvirtajame straipsnyje, padėjo Lietuvos viešojo sektoriaus institucijoms COVID-19 pandemijos ir nereguliarios migracijos krizės metu – ypač mobilizuojant žmogiškuosius išteklius, teikiant specializuotas paslaugas ir spartinant viešuosius pirkimus. Nors tai sėkmingo suinteresuotųjų šalių įtraukimo pavyzdys, antrajame ir trečiajame straipsniuose rezultatai yra ne tokie vienareikšmiai. Antrajame straipsnyje aprašoma, kaip vienos palaikymo koalicijų siūlymai dėl vaiko teisių apsaugos reformos turinio nebuvo pakankamai aptarti su kitomis suinteresuotosiomis šalimis, o tai galėjo sutrukdyti plačiam sutarimui ir reformos tvarumui. Trečiasis straipsnis parodė, kad ne krizės sąlygomis suinteresuotųjų šalių konsultacijos Baltijos šalyse turėjo ribotą poveikį politikos formavimui. Šios išvados atkreipia dėmesį į būtinybę įvertinti institucinius gebėjimus ir turimus išteklius prieš pradedant įgyvendinti įtraukimo iniciatyvas. Priešingu atveju tokios praktikos gali tik apsunkinti sprendimų priėmimo procesą ir turėti priešingą nei tikėtasi poveikį atsparumui.

Disertacijos indėlis į teorines diskusijas išskiriamas trijose srityse: tyrimas pateikia kontekstualizuotą ir dinamišką požiūrį į atsparumo stiprinimą, atkreipia dėmesį į suinteresuotųjų šalių įtraukimo praktikų transformacinį potencialą ir iškelia klausimą apie galimą „krizių išnaudojimo“ (angl. *crisis exploitation*) tezės peržiūrą, atsižvelgiant į suinteresuotųjų šalių įtraukimo ir (bendradarbiaujamojo) krizių valdymo skatinamą bendrą atsakomybę už sprendimų priėmimą.

Kiekviename disertaciją sudarančiame straipsnyje yra įvardijami konkretūs ribotumai ir siūlomos galimybės būsimiems tyrimams. Vis dėlto, žvelgiant į disertaciją kaip visumą, ji atveria dar platesnes tyrimų kryptis, kylančias tiek iš empirinės analizės rezultatų, tiek iš nustatytų ribotumą. Disertacijoje siūlomos penkios tolesnės tyrimų kryptys:

1. Nesėkmingų suinteresuotųjų šalių įtraukimo praktikų poveikis tiek viešojo sektoriaus institucijoms, tiek pačioms suinteresuotosioms šalims.
2. Sąveika tarp „iš viršaus“ inicijuotų suinteresuotųjų šalių įtraukimo iniciatyvų ir „iš apačios“ kylančio interesų grupių atstovavimo krizių metu.
3. Krizių poveikis NVO veiklai ir funkcionavimui.
4. Atsparumo ir tvarumo (angl. *robustness*) tarpusavio ryšys.
5. Daugiau atvejų apimančių lyginamųjų tyrimų įgyvendinimas.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rasa Bortkevičiūtė's research focuses on the intersection of stakeholder engagement in policymaking, crisis management, and the resilience of public governance. During her doctoral studies, she (co-)authored nine publications, participated in four research projects, and presented her research findings at nine conferences or workshops. In 2025, she joined Queen's University Belfast as a Research Fellow, contributing to the implementation of the Resilient Civil Society project.

In her work, Rasa employs qualitative research methods, with particular expertise in the Baltic region as well as Central and Eastern Europe. She is passionate about enhancing the quality of policymaking through collaborative, innovative, and evidence-informed practices – an interest that extends beyond research into practical applications. She is a member of the advisory group for the Open Government Partnership, established by the Office of the Government of the Republic of Lithuania, and has several years of experience in policy consultancy, contributing to policy evaluations and applied research projects, including collaborations with organisations such as the European Commission and the OECD. Since 2023, she has also served as the Head of the Science and Research Department at the Institute of International Relations and Political Science, responsible for overseeing the development, management, and communication of research activities.

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Resilience building during the management of the COVID-19 crisis in Lithuania: Major breakthroughs and incremental change

Vitalis Nakrošis | **Rasa Bortkevičiūtė**

Institute of International Relations and Political Science, Vilnius University, Vilnius, Lithuania

Correspondence
Rasa Bortkevičiūtė, Institute of International Relations and Political Science, Vilnius University, Vokiečių str. 10, Vilnius LT-01130, Lithuania.
Email: rasa.bortkeviciute@tspmi.vu.lt

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Abstract

Modern societies are facing an increasing number of transboundary systemic threats. The sudden spread of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has once again highlighted concerns about governments' capacity to deal with disruptions and stressed the need for more resilient governance arrangements. Besides the usual policymaking, the latter might emerge from decisions, made during the crisis management as well. Building on ideas of the new institutionalism, more specifically, the normative logic of appropriateness and the rational logic of consequentiality, we examine how different mechanisms in varying contexts lead to different types of resilience building. Based on the results of pattern matching applied to the Lithuanian case of COVID-19 crisis management in 2020, we argue that in environments where the logic of consequentiality was dominant, resilience was mostly strengthened because of major breakthroughs, stemming from coercive pressures as well as top-down policy action from the centre of government. In contrast, more incremental developments contributed to resilience building through normative or mimetic pressures, professionalization, network-based and bottom-up practices in environments, where the logic of appropriateness prevailed. We claim that, while the logic of consequentiality helps to strengthen resilience in the context of turbulence, the logic of appropriateness is especially important for ensuring its sustainability.

KEYWORDS
COVID-19, crisis management, Lithuania, mechanisms of change, new institutionalism, resilience

1 | INTRODUCTION

We live in an increasingly interconnected, complex world. Besides the growing number of 'wicked problems', natural disasters and transboundary systemic threats, the context in which these problems must be solved is also becoming more complicated (Nabatchi et al., 2011). This leads to growing concern about governments' capacity to cope with disruptions and risks which emerge in an era of heightened uncertainty (Berkes, 2007).

Metaphorically described as a 'grey rhino'—a highly probable, high impact yet neglected event (Wucker, 2020), management of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic required the combination of centralized and decentralized mechanisms, innovation and bureaucracy, science and politics (Janssen & van der Voort, 2020). As a result, it once again highlighted the need for greater resilience to overcome crises or disasters (Boin & Lodge, 2016), leading to a call for more resilient governance both in theory (e.g., Boin et al., 2021) and in practice (e.g., OECD, 2021). Resilience would allow governments to ensure 'the flexible adaptation, agile modification, and pragmatic redirection of governance solutions' (Ansell et al., 2021, p. 4) as a response to turbulent events.

Despite some (although contested) agreement on the definition of resilience, extensive discussion of its factors (e.g., Barasa et al., 2018) and indicators (e.g., Birkmann et al., 2013), existing literature offers little guidance when it comes to strategies which could make governance systems more resilient for crises (Boin & Lodge, 2016). The research on resilience has been dominated by the focus on community or infrastructure (Cai et al., 2018), and has recently moved to describing the constituent elements of resilient health systems during the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., Haldane et al., 2021). Meanwhile, the research on crisis management tends to orient towards coordination and communication, with little attention paid to explaining how systems become more resilient during and after these events. Finally, even though resilience building takes place in specific institutional, political and organizational contexts (Christensen et al., 2016), factors- and indicators-based approaches decontextualize and depoliticize this process (Manyena et al., 2019). This, in turn, complicates reaching an understanding of mechanisms behind the development of resilience.

In the face of disasters, crises or emergencies, public sector organizations have specific response-related roles, but usually cannot meet their objectives alone. Closer interorganizational collaboration in a crisis management network is important for coping with intractable problems (Bynander & Nohrstedt, 2020; Nohrstedt et al., 2018). An increasing number of researchers point to the need for (in)formal collaboration of individuals and organizations to cope with and recover from the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., Hsieh et al., 2021). Some authors even claim that it is the relations between the actors of a network and their quality that 'make or break systemic resilience' (Boin & 't Hart, 2010, p. 365).

Thus, it is important to analyse the interorganizational networks involved in crisis management to uncover how the behaviour of individual and institutional actors in different contexts contribute to building resilience for various crises (Boin & van Eeten, 2013). The aim of our research is to reveal the key mechanisms and their impact on building resilience of governance arrangements during the COVID-19 crisis. Understanding this process is crucial for choosing suitable strategies and operations for the development of greater resilience for potential (especially pandemic-like) threats in the future.

To bring relevant contextual factors to the analysis of resilience, we employ ideas from different strands of the new institutionalism, which emphasizes the relationship between structures, political action and the process of institutional change (Powell & DiMaggio, 1991). More specifically, our explanation relies on the logic of appropriateness and the logic of consequentiality (March & Olsen, 2013). Based on the first logic, we expect that the development of resilience will be an incremental and professionalized process stimulated by normative or mimetic pressures, collaboration and bottom-up initiatives within a crisis management network. Building on the second one, we hypothesize that resilience will be strengthened through major top-down fashioned shifts which are mainly supported by politicization, central steering and coercive pressures.

We apply flexible pattern-matching to compare our theoretical expectations with the patterns revealed by the empirical case (Sinkovics, 2018). Our analysis is based on the case of COVID-19 crisis management in Lithuania from the declaration of a nation-wide emergency in February 2020 until the first weeks of December 2020, when, after Parliamentary elections, the 2016–2020 Lithuanian government led by Prime Minister Saulius Skvernelis was replaced by the 2020–2024 Lithuanian government led by Prime Minister Ingrida Šimonytė. We analyse the management of two waves of the COVID-19 pandemic in the country to capture and explain differences in the types of resilience building during the crisis.

Two major U-turns in its response to the COVID-19 pandemic make Lithuania a typical case of Central and Eastern European countries, marked by the initial success of managing the COVID-19 crisis, the relaxation of measures in subsequent periods, and the struggle to bring the second wave under control (Toshkov et al., 2021). In the early spring of 2020, Lithuania demonstrated one of the fastest reactions to the pandemic (Toshkov et al., 2021) and had one of the most stringent regimes in Europe. After successfully coping with the first wave of coronavirus, Lithuanian authorities eased most restrictions, with the country becoming the second least stringent in terms of its response in Europe at the end of June 2020 (Hale et al., 2020). However, since Lithuanian authorities failed to adequately prepare for the second wave of COVID-19, they were forced to introduce a new nation-wide quarantine in early November 2020.

Our research results suggest that different logics of action during the COVID-19 crisis in Lithuania generated different types of resilience building. We argue that the overall resilience of governance arrangements was strengthened mostly through major breakthroughs initiated and steered by politicians from the centre of government. However, some of these were 'highly contextual adaptations' (Boin & Lodge, 2016, p. 294) that occurred as a by-product of crisis management. On the other hand, some incremental changes did somewhat contribute to the sustainable growth of resilience, but their potential was not exploited in the country's preparation for the second wave of COVID-19.

The structure of the article is as follows. The first section introduces the definition of resilience and elaborates on the mechanisms of resilience building which stem from the logic of appropriateness and the logic of consequentiality. Following a brief description of our methodology, the next section presents an analysis of resilience building during the management of the COVID-19 crisis in Lithuania. The article concludes with a discussion of key resilience building mechanisms and offers suggestions for future research.

2 | THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 | Defining resilience

One group of interpretations of resilience emphasizes the resistance to change ('bouncing back'), summarizing it as an ability of a system to 'deal with disaster and recover quickly' (Waugh & Tierney, 2007, p. 331). This definition stresses the capacity of the system to handle disturbances and the existence of an equilibrium to which it should return after experiencing turbulent events (Boin & van Eeten, 2013). However, large-scale crises tend to have an irreversible impact on the general context of functioning and thus require adjustment to the new reality.

Reacting to this issue, the other group of explanations of resilience emphasizes the importance of adaptation and transformation of systems marked by their ability to 'bounce forward' (Manyena et al., 2011). Instead of aiming to restore the previous equilibrium, systems are expected to learn from past experiences and turn them into policy changes which would lead to a newly emerging order (Duit, 2016). Building on the latter approach, we treat resilience as the capacity of a system to absorb shocks and adapt, as well as to transform itself to be better prepared for future crises (de Bruijn et al., 2017; Linkov & Trump, 2019).

To explain the resilience of governance arrangements during the COVID-19 crisis, we combine the key resilience elements of highly effective country responses (Haldane et al., 2021) and different characteristics of resilient systems (Linkov & Trump, 2019).[1] They include both policy content and joint actions of actors involved in a crisis management system:

1. *Activation of comprehensive responses* (e.g., tailored whole-of-government approach to the pandemic, spanning multiple policy subsystems, use of scientific advice during decision-making);
2. *Adaptation of health system capacity* (e.g., speed and breadth of information flows, necessary expansion of healthcare services, effective public procurement of medical equipment);
3. A horizontal principle of *community engagement and partnerships* that spans across all elements.

As highlighted by scholars of crisis management, collaboration is helpful in overcoming the lack of knowledge, competence and resources in crisis management systems (Barasa et al., 2018; Parker et al., 2020) and it may thus strengthen various elements of resilience. Following this, we assume that the development of resilience depends on mechanisms involving the interaction of individuals and organizations within the crisis management system. This factor is poorly reflected in the traditional frameworks and 'snapshot measurement methods' (Cai et al., 2018, p. 853) which are applied in the research on resilience.

2.2 | Building resilience: Logics, contexts and mechanisms of change

2.2.1 | Logics of action

Since we focus on explaining the mechanisms behind resilience building rather than describing the individual elements and functions of resilient systems, we chose new institutionalism as our main theoretical approach. New institutionalism is a 'middle-range' theory which is oriented at the explanation of institutional stability or change. It is based on the assumption that individuals and organizations are acting under conditions of bounded rationality,[2] which provides a suitable basis for explaining their interactions in an environment of high uncertainty. Although the theory allows identifying actions that constitute the change, its application for explaining the development of resilience is rather rare (e.g., Lang, 2012). We aim to fill this gap by showing that different types of interaction within a crisis management network (mechanisms) lead to divergent types and results of resilience building.

Following March and Olsen (1998, 2013), we argue that the actions of decision-makers are guided by two logics: the normative logic of appropriateness and the rational logic of consequentiality. Based on the logic of appropriateness, the decision-making processes or interaction among different actors in the network can be explained as the 'matching of (signals about) situations to rules' (Schulz, 2018, p. 915). To act appropriately is to behave according to socialized values, regulations, typical procedures or professional standards (March & Olsen, 2013; Peters, 2016). Norms guide interaction between individuals or their groups, because they act to fulfil their roles rather than calculate expected consequences (March & Olsen, 2013).

On the one hand, action based on the logic of appropriateness provides stability by guiding what sorts of policy choices are acceptable to the institution and its members (Peters, 2016); on the other hand, it may lead towards less flexibility of the system. This happens as decision-makers prefer established rules and practices to new ones, which could be more suitable in the context, or underplay risks due to their confidence in professional routines and regulations (Boin et al., 2021; Dewulf et al., 2020).

Meanwhile, rational choice institutionalism shifts attention to the outcomes of action. The logic of consequentiality links alternative decisions with their expected consequences (Dewulf et al., 2020). It is activated when exogenous developments, such as technological innovation, economic developments, crises, and changes in the distribution of power (Entwistle, 2011) evoke rational problem-solving activity aimed at discovering alternatives (March & Olsen, 2013).

As political actors are 'likely to be held accountable for both the appropriateness and the consequences of their actions' (March & Olsen, 2013, p. 490), decision-making usually includes a combination of both logics (Schulz, 2018). Besides, shifts might happen between the dominant logics: for example, the logic of consequentiality might be replaced by the logic of appropriateness through routinization and change in values held by members of an institution (Peters, 2016), while a shift from the logic of appropriateness to the logic of consequentiality might take place when the old rules are no longer applicable to the situation (Schulz, 2018).

2.2.2 | Characteristics of the context

Different logics of action are more likely to be applied in different contexts of operation. March and Olsen (1998, 2013) point to a few contextual characteristics which are presented below.

2.2.2.1 | *Autonomy of professional communities versus control by decision-makers*

Crises put actors in a continuum between the safe reassurance of procedure and riskier choices of flexibility (Bodin et al., 2019). The action of bureaucrats is mainly guided by ethos, based on procedural knowledge, precedent or socialization with other organizational members, which allows 'immunization' from postcrisis blaming (Stark, 2014, p. 705). Meanwhile, as politicians hold delegated power, crises put them under intense public pressure to 'do something' (Nohrstedt et al., 2018, p. 265), which provides more room for urgent measures and innovations (Ansell et al., 2021). In other words, the latter group might be more focused on the result (the implementation of their preferred alternatives) rather than the process (strictly following established rules). As a result, the logic of appropriateness tends to flourish among public servants, while authoritative decision-makers are more likely to follow the logic of consequentiality (March & Olsen, 2013).

2.2.2.2 | *Organizations with prior history of cooperation versus newly shaped networks*

Coworking experience helps to develop common understandings, achieve effective coordination, build shared work practices and relationships (Emerson et al., 2012). The prior history of cooperation contributes to the routinization of activities and easier assimilation of ideas or information, preventing radical changes. Meanwhile, in environments where organizations with different goals, professional cultures and backgrounds begin to work together for the first time, new mechanisms will have to be built (Boin & McConnell, 2007). Where a precedent has not yet been set, new ideas and information are more likely to catalyze major changes. Thus, it is more plausible that the logic of appropriateness will prevail in networks with previous experience of cooperation, while the logic of consequentiality will be employed where new partners enter the field (March & Olsen, 2013).

2.2.2.3 | *High versus low trust among stakeholders*

Trust reduces the unpredictability and uncertainty of the actions of other actors, creating an honest and nonthreatening environment which should lead towards a higher willingness to take risks and accept vulnerability (Ran & Qi, 2018). However, if partners of the crisis management system are not seen as trustworthy, credible or sharing similar interests (Emerson et al., 2012), it is more likely that decisions will be made unilaterally, with hierarchy and direct supervision being the dominant coordination mechanisms (Edelenbos & Klijn, 2007). As a result, the logic of appropriateness will be applied in environments marked by high levels of trust among the main actors of crisis management, while those operating in contexts with low levels of trust will favour the logic of consequentiality (March & Olsen, 1998).

2.2.3 | Mechanisms of change

Both logics are related to different mechanisms of change and pathways towards resilience which are summarized in Table 1.

2.2.3.1 | *Normative and mimetic versus coercive pressures*

The institutional perspective argues that institutional change can be adopted as a reaction to coercive, mimetic and normative pressures. Coercive pressures, where organizational change is a direct response to a formal or informal government mandate (Powell & DiMaggio, 1991), are more likely to happen in environments dominated by the logic of consequentiality. Meanwhile, mimetic and normative processes are more typical of the contexts with more frequent application of the logic of appropriateness. Mimicking happens when organizations aiming to increase their legitimacy imitate similar organizations which they perceive to be successful, while normative pressures arise from the professional public servants' community which approaches problems in a similar way (Powell & DiMaggio, 1991).

2.2.3.2 | *Professionalization versus politicization*

Crisis management brings crucial leadership challenges associated with decision-making, public information, accountability, learning, and reform (Boin et al. 2016). As the logic of appropriateness prevails in the environment of professional communities, decisions in these contexts will be based on public service ethos (Stark, 2014). Yet, in contexts where the logic of consequentiality prevails, political considerations might dominate choices. Decision-making in a crisis environment imposes pressures to adopt changes quickly, which requires political attention to overcome any conflict caused by the involvement of different interests (Brändström & Kuipers, 2003).

2.2.3.3 | *Network-based collaboration versus central steering*

Network-based collaboration is likely to ensure swift mobilization of partners across public and private sectors, nongovernmental

TABLE 1 Context, logics, mechanisms and types of resilience building

Characteristics of the context	Institutionalist principle	Mechanisms of change	Type of resilience building
Autonomy of professional communities	Logic of appropriateness	Normative or mimetic pressures	
		Professionalization	
Organizations with a prior history of cooperation		Network-based collaboration	Incremental processes
High trust among stakeholders		Bottom-up adaptation	
Control by authoritative decision-makers	Logic of consequentiality	Coercive pressures prevailing	
		Politicization	
Newly shaped networks		Central steering of the crisis network	Major breakthroughs
Low trust among stakeholders		Top-down innovation	

organizations (NGOs) or academia (Bynander & Nohrstedt, 2020; Steen & Brandsen, 2020) who share the previous experience of cooperation in contexts where the logic of appropriateness is dominant. In those cases where the logic of consequentiality prevails, power and authority tend to be concentrated in the hands of political leaders and chief executives who are able to authorize crucial measures, approve emergency resource allocation and fulfil societal expectations. In the face of crisis, this is sometimes referred to as 'centralization reflex' (Boin & McConnell, 2007, p. 53).

2.2.3.4 | *Bottom-up adaptation versus top-down innovation*

In the case of the logic of appropriateness, bottom-up adaptation to turbulent events is more likely, when public servants incrementally adjust their understanding of problems, working methods, and solutions through social learning (Manyena et al., 2019; Parker et al., 2020). Conversely, in environments where the logic of consequentiality is dominant, change is more likely to be based on top-down innovations (Kapucu et al., 2010) as radical transformations are unlikely to elicit general support (Schalk, 2017). Nevertheless, it might be marked by some elements of collaboration as stakeholders 'hold the keys to understanding a particular problem' (Torfing & Ansell, 2017, p. 38).

2.2.4 | Resilience building

Disasters or crises might challenge existing rules, but in the context where the logic of appropriateness prevails, radical change is unlikely to happen (March & Olsen, 2013; Schulz, 2018) because of the need to ensure the legitimacy of decisions. These environments are marked by the dominance of professional communities guided by formal and informal rules, reinforced by shared activities and the development of mutual trust. Thus, processes such as mimicking or adaptation are more likely to lead to incremental refinements in resilience of governance arrangements.

However, turbulent events might also require quick and innovative solutions, which are more typical in contexts where the logic of consequentiality is dominant (Schulz, 2018). This logic is more likely to flourish in environments marked by stronger control of authorities and less collaborative experience between institutions, which leads to lower levels of trust among participants (Nohrstedt et al., 2018). In the face of urgent pressures, a strong lead from political authorities might emerge, which could follow from the use of coercive pressures and top-down initiatives. As a result, it is more likely that the process of resilience building will happen as a result of major breakthroughs.

3 | METHODOLOGY

3.1 | Method

We employ a flexible pattern matching approach, which combines deductive and inductive elements, to ensure rigorous 'matching between theoretical patterns derived from the literature and observed patterns emerging from empirical data' (R. B. Bouncken et al., 2021, p. 255). We build our empirical research while analysing the data through the lens of the initial theoretical patterns (presented in Table 1) and iteratively comparing them to their manifestations in practice (summarized in Table 2). The relevance of pattern matching for this study is based on two major reasons. First, it is crucial for the testing of this novel theoretical approach as matches between theoretical expectations and observed empirical patterns allows the confirmation of relations between different contexts, mechanisms and types of resilience building. Second, by revealing mismatches or unexpected patterns, this approach provides opportunities for reexamination and further development of the theory (R. Bouncken & Barwinski, 2021; Sinkovics, 2018), which is elaborated in the Section 5.

3.2 | Case

At the time of carrying out this study, there was no reliable comparative data on the resilience of governance during the COVID-19 crisis. Therefore, the response to the first two waves of the pandemic substantiated our choice. Our research is based on the case study of COVID-19 crisis management in Lithuania, which, in this regard, is typical of Central and Eastern European countries. As the case of Lithuania represents the theoretical argument as well, it allows better exploring the mechanisms within the particular case (Seawright & Gerring, 2008). We analyse the mechanisms of resilience development during the first (from February to August, 2020) and the second (from September to December, 2020) waves of the COVID-19 pandemic. This period covers the application of both logics of action and different types of governance resilience building, which allows analysing the role of mechanisms linking these variables.

The unit of our analysis is the COVID-19 crisis management network at the national level, within which various actors (public, private and nongovernmental) worked together to control the spread of the coronavirus and address its negative consequences. The scope of our analysis is limited to the central crisis management system, including relations between central and local authorities. We focus on key governance and public health decisions which led to the development of greater governance arrangements' resilience (as defined in the Section 2.1).

3.3 | Data

The main data for this study were derived from 25 semistructured interviews with different stakeholders involved in the COVID-19 crisis management in Lithuania, 10 of which were cited in this article (a full list is presented in Supporting Information: Appendix 1). We combined purposive and 'snowball' sampling to build our sample that includes four politicians, eight politically appointed civil servants, five career civil servants and other employees of public institutions, three representatives of the nongovernmental and private sector, and five specialists in their respective fields (medicine, economics and civic

TABLE 2 Mechanisms behind resilience building in the Lithuanian COVID-19 crisis management (February–December 2020)

Characteristics of the context	Dominant institutionalist principle	Mechanisms of change	Element of resilience	Type of resilience building
Control by authoritative decision-makers, newly shaped networks, high trust within the central crisis management mechanism and low trust beyond it	Logic of consequentiality	Politicization Central steering	Creation of a centralized mechanism, tailored to the needs of COVID-19 crisis management	Major breakthroughs
		Professionalization and politicization Central steering	Approvement of COVID-19 management strategy	
		Coercive pressures Politicization Central steering	Micro-management in the relationship between the central government and other organizations	
			Central authorization of direct awards concerning the purchase of medical equipment	
		Coercive pressures Politicization Top-down innovation	Establishment of centralized information management system	
		Central steering Network-based collaboration	Creation of five clusters of healthcare organizations for the treatment of COVID-19 patients	
Control by authoritative decision-makers, newly shaped networks, high trust	Combination of both logics with a dominant logic of consequentiality	Coercive pressures Professionalization and politicization Central steering	Establishment of an advisory body of medical experts and following their recommendations	
Control by authoritative decision-makers, prior history of cooperation, high trust	Combination of both logics with a dominant logic of appropriateness	Mimetic pressures Professionalization and politicization Central steering	Imitating measures of response to COVID-19	Incremental processes
Control by authoritative decision-makers, prior history of cooperation, low trust		Politicization, Bottom-up adaptation	More active use of the working group on municipal affairs	
Professional communities, prior history of cooperation, high trust	Logic of appropriateness	Normative pressures Professionalization Bottom-up adaptation	NGOs involvement in crisis and its impact management	
		Normative pressures Professionalization	Implementation of COVID-19 management strategy	
		Normative pressures Professionalization Bottom-up adaptation	Continuous NGOs involvement in crisis management and its impact management	

Abbreviation: COVID-19,coronavirus disease 2019; NGOs, nongovernmental organizations.

participation). The interviews were conducted from September 7 to November 18, 2020 until data saturation was reached. A total of 10 of the interviews were conducted directly, and 15 of them remotely. All interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed using open coding. In addition, we analysed publicly available documents, publications and social media content.

3.4 | Operationalization

The attribution of action to the specific institutionalist principle might be made either by the researcher or by the actors themselves (Schulz, 2018). Due to the specificity of the term, which could be misinterpreted by decision-makers, or their unwillingness to reveal their real aims, we decided against the latter method. We chose to ascribe the dominant logic by cross-checking the characteristics of the context (the more elements favourable to a particular logic of action that are present in the context, the more likely that it is employed) with the evidence (intentions of action that reflect the features of the logics) provided during the interviews.

We operationalize the mechanisms of change that lead to resilience building as follows. First, normative pressures take place when practices and rules typical for a particular community are employed, mimicking–when the best practices from other contexts are copied, while coercive pressures are seen as a mandate of authorities for a particular action. Second, professionalization is employed when decisions are made with(in) professional communities, on contrary to politicization, when the process is dominated by politicians and/or politically appointed decision-makers. Third, network-based collaboration is seen as a horizontal approach, including the relevant stakeholders in decision-making, while central steering represents a vertical approach dominated by top-level authorities. Finally, bottom-up adaptation is treated as a modification of rules and processes stemming from public servants, conversely to top-down innovations when changes are initiated and pushed forward by high level authorities.

4 | EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

4.1 | Crisis management and resilience building during the first wave of COVID-19

As a reaction to the global spread of COVID-19, the Lithuanian authorities declared a nation-wide emergency at the end of February 2020. For the management of the emergency, they set up the State Emergency Operations Centre (SEOC) and appointed the Minister for Health as its head, as well as activated a number of operational centres in individual state and municipal institutions. The Fire and Rescue Department under the Ministry of the Interior which is responsible for civil protection in the country coordinated the operations of SEOC. Although it was expected that 'statutory officers will knock on the door, pull out secret plans, and take on necessary work' (interview with politically appointed civil servant 1), this did not materialize. The emergency management system composed of SEOC and individual operational centres was not able to cope with the complexity of the COVID-19 crisis, which went beyond standard civil protection practices, and soon appeared to be 'absolutely null and void' (interview with politician).

Therefore, at the end of March 2020, the Lithuanian government set up a new mechanism, tailored to the management of the COVID-19 crisis, which marked a shift from professionalization to politicization. It consisted of the COVID-19 Management Committee chaired by the Prime Minister, the Committee's administration and coordination group, and several other working groups in the centre of government. According to our respondents, the mechanism was marked by high levels of trust in the central management structure, but relatively low trust relations with stakeholders beyond it (i.e., different public sector organizations or municipalities). Its purpose was to involve the government more closely in the management of the crisis, and to address challenges which spanned different policy fields.

On the one hand, when the government assumed control, 'everything has moved' (interview with politically appointed civil servant 2). The leadership of politicians produced a more efficient dissemination of information among different participants of the crisis management network and helped to organize swift logistics operations. In addition, 'this crisis clearly revealed how weak some public sector and healthcare organizations are' (interview with state official), making it necessary to adopt many technical decisions.[3] This produced coercive pressures (in particular, through the use of micro-management practices) beyond the main mechanism of crisis management.

Taken together, these empirical patterns match with our theoretical expectations. The combination of such mechanisms as central steering, politicization and coercive pressures caused a major breakthrough in the development of more resilient governance arrangements at that time by increasing rapidity and resourcefulness within the crisis management system (Birkland & Warnement, 2014). As expected, this process was dominated by authoritative decision-makers and took place within a newly shaped network. However, our results highlight that it was particularly the low level of trust *beyond* the central crisis management mechanism that enabled more radical rather than incremental resilience building. In line with this, Lithuanian authorities failed to develop horizontal decision-making mechanisms which could have been useful while responding to the second outbreak of COVID-19.

The Lithuanian response to COVID-19 was based on the suppression strategy, aimed at 'flattening the curve' and winning some time to expand the capacity of the health system. The management of the early stages of the crisis was marked by a strong need for and reliance on medical expertise: 'especially that month [March] was without any politics at all' (interview with politically appointed civil servant 4). Even though this points to a certain level of professionalization, the establishment of a new advisory body of medical experts and taking up its recommendations was a result of political will. Besides, the early response involved mimicking the practices of other countries in light of information regularly updated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Reliance on medical advice and foreign practices contributed to resilience building by informing decision-making, developing proactive response strategies, and creating new relations which could be activated during future crises. While a new network was established in the first case (constituting a more radical change), the usual partnerships were enabled in the second (incremental resilience building). Both developments include a mixture of patterns emerging from the theoretical framework. Despite being marked by the central control of politicians in a relatively high trust environment, it was only the establishment of an advisory body of medical experts that infused decision-making with new perspectives and collaborative problem solving. Besides, the focus on healthcare issues went hand in hand with the use of coercive measures, leading towards major breakthroughs in resilience building.

Coping with the scarcity of medical protection equipment and developing adequate testing capacity were among the main challenges at the beginning of the pandemic. However, due to the global shortage and complicated national procedures, public sector organizations were competing for the same goods, and the processes of procurement were rather slow. If individual state institutions initially followed standard operating procedures due to the culture of zero-error tolerance, politicians employed coercive pressures to mobilize the efforts of diplomatic missions, the private sector, the military and other actors, as well as steered the process of central purchasing of necessary medical equipment 'because time was very precious' (interview with politically appointed civil servant 1). This was in line with the expected pattern when a major change, pushed forward by authoritative decision-makers acting in a newly shaped, low trust setting, helped healthcare organizations to ensure the treatment and care of hospitalized COVID-19 patients.

In March 2020, the Ministry of Health decided to organize healthcare services by grouping all healthcare organizations participating in the treatment of COVID-19 patients into five clusters reflecting the five biggest regions of Lithuania. The Ministry of Health coordinated the functioning of five regional hospitals, while these hospitals organized the delivery of health services related to COVID-19 within their clusters. Contrary to our theoretical expectations, a total of 60 healthcare organizations were involved in this network of COVID-19-related service delivery with two levels of (central and regional) steering, which allowed better management of the flow of COVID-19 patients in the country and promoted interorganizational collaboration. In combination with other measures, this central decision mobilized the capacity of the healthcare system, thus increasing its resilience to the pandemic. However, the fact that only 25% of excess deaths registered in 2020 in the country (Statistics Lithuania, 2020) were caused directly by COVID-19 shows that the health system was not able to effectively absorb the crisis and substantial disruptions in the provision of non-COVID-19-related healthcare services took place.

In addition, various civic society, public and private initiatives sprung up to mitigate the COVID-19 crisis by collecting donations, providing equipment to healthcare organizations, and offering voluntary assistance. However, due to the prevailing patterns of low trust and lack of cross-sectoral cooperation in the country (Pilietinės visuomenės institutas, 2015), shared decision-making or coordination were typically treated as time-consuming activities (Helsloot, 2008) and different sectors chose to act on their own. Unlike in the case of hospitals' clusters, there was no political support and coercive pressures, which would encourage different organizations to work together and enhance the preparedness for the management of the second COVID-19 wave.

Conversely, cases where state institutions and NGOs had previous experience of cooperation and enjoyed higher levels of trust match well with the expected patterns behind resilience building. For example, the Ministry of Social Security and Labor[4] strengthened collaboration with these organizations through the creation of an informal working group for information exchange, policy advice and resource management. In addition, it bolstered the capacity of NGOs by allocating additional funds to offset the expenses of those organizations incurred due to COVID-19 and to reinforce the delivery of some services whose importance had grown during the pandemic. In line with Boin and McConnell (2007), this shows that resilience was incrementally built within professional communities through the sustainable development of the already existing relations (normative pressures) as well as their adaptation to overcome uncertainty in decision-making.

Another challenge was related to information flows within the crisis management system. In the initial stages of the crisis, state institutions were sharing important information in Excel spreadsheets, which reduced data availability and reliability. At the end of March 2020, the Office of the Government launched a new centralized tool based on the Palantir software for integrating COVID-19 data. This top-down innovation strengthened resilience within the crisis management system by increasing its connectivity (de Bruijn et al., 2017), improving response to the existing epidemiological situation and preparedness for future scenarios. As the coercive pressures for the optimization of pandemic data management grew, it was later decided to make Statistics Lithuania a single centre of the data on COVID-19. This made it possible to improve the coordination of the country's response to COVID-19 across government and public sector organizations. These improvements in the data management system matches well with our expected patterns. Mechanisms needed for the major breakthrough in the development of resilience were enacted by political authorities in newly created networks characterized by low-level trust relations.

Finally, the approval of a COVID-19 management strategy on May 6, 2020 was one more advancement in resilience building. Besides offering solutions for controlling the short-term spread of COVID-19, the strategy also highlighted measures to prepare for possible new waves of coronavirus. The document was created by the representatives of the COVID-19 Management Committee, Ministry of Health, military, health, and data management experts. Therefore, contrary to what was expected, this strategy came into effect as a result of both politicization and professionalization, steered by high-level authorities. However, the implementation of this strategy was rather slow (e.g., almost one-third of the planned activities which should have been implemented before October 1, 2020 were delayed). Without continued coercive pressures from the top, it lost momentum in professionalized environments in the course of summer 2020 when the number of registered COVID-19 cases dropped substantially in the country. Overall, the strategy turned into a 'fantasy document' (Boin et al., 2021) since it was not adjusted to the changing epidemiological situation in Lithuania until the end of the term of the Skvernelis government in early December 2020.

4.2 | Crisis management and resilience building during the second wave of COVID-19

After the first wave of the pandemic, Lithuania ranked among the countries which had handled it most effectively (Sachs et al., 2020). The country significantly relaxed its COVID-19 restrictions in May–August 2020, making its response one of the least stringent in the European Union (EU). According to our interviewees, the initial success of the response led to an unfounded over-confidence within the country's authorities on preparation for the second wave. Taken together with the summer holidays, a shift of political attention towards the approaching parliamentary elections and the diminishing role of healthcare experts, it caused a 'slip back into business as usual' (Steen & Brandsen, 2020, p. 854), instead of a preparation for the second wave of the pandemic. The latter hit Lithuania with its full force in December 2020, when the country registered among the ones with the highest coronavirus infection rates in Europe. The fast spread of this infectious disease revealed the insufficient strengthening of resilience during the first outbreak.

In contrast to the first wave, the Skvernelis government was not very receptive to the advice of medical experts: instead of meetings that took place once a week in April, the advisory group was meeting once or twice in a month in November 2020. In response to the growing concerns of healthcare experts, at the end of October 2020, the President set up the Health Experts Council, a new advisory body bringing together more than 20 healthcare experts, data analysts and other specialists. However, in the context of the approaching parliamentary elections the process of crisis management became more politicized, and the recommendations of this Council had no significant impact on resilience.

There is no evidence to support the claim that the Skvernelis government was reluctant to tighten COVID-19 restrictions through fear of lowering its chances of re-election. However, we can suggest that preparation for the parliamentary elections redirected political attention away from the crisis: 'the priority was the elections, but not, let's say, the second wave of COVID-19 that might emerge or might not emerge' (interview with politically appointed civil servant 5). The drift of political attention and the diminished central steering of crisis management marked the beginning of a period with a dominant incremental resilience building led by the public sector organizations and municipalities.

Major difficulties were encountered in implementing the localized control strategy whose execution required a good deal of cooperation between the central government and local authorities as well as effective contact-tracing and digital solutions. Due to limited involvement in the initial stages of crisis management, local authorities lacked learning opportunities to strengthen their response capacities. In addition, conflicts broke out as a result of low trust and limited partnership experience between different levels of government. While the municipalities were pressing their position against the prevailing control of central authorities, the government was pointing to the limited capacity of local authorities to deal with the quickly changing situation. This process involved a combination of both theoretical patterns, highlighting the dual role of politicization. The involvement of politicians might not only catalyze relevant changes but also lock-up the situation in blame games. In the latter case, a bottom-up development of resilience through increased coordination between central and local authorities is necessary. A more active use of the working group on municipal affairs, which 'only started to work now, before the announcement of the second quarantine' (interview with politically appointed civil servant 3) could be seen as an example of it.

The National Public Health Centre, an agency under the Ministry of Health with responsibility for preventing and controlling the spread of COVID-19, had inadequate human and technological resources to ensure an effective and timely implementation of localized strategy. First, even after struggling to cope with the first wave of the pandemic, 'the Centre was not prepared … it really hurts to hear calls for help every day, because they had time all through the summer' (interview with healthcare expert 2). The 'money was not a problem' (interview with politically appointed civil servant 4) during the crisis. However, the troublesome functioning of the institution was left to solve within professional fora, under the weak leadership of the Centre's top executives.

Second, the Centre did not have sufficient capacity to proceed with digital innovations. For example, the launch of a contact tracing app got stuck in bureaucratic processes after the government delegated ownership of this project to the Centre. Instead of the planned launch date in August 2020, the app only started functioning with a heavy delay in early November 2020. There was also a lack of 'automatic, digitalized technologies' (interview with healthcare expert 1), which could have increased the efficiency of contact tracing process. This points to the complex nature of incremental resilience building: the following of standard operating procedures (normative pressures), professionalization of the process, and the failure to open the relevant processes to various stakeholders, makes it exceedingly difficult (Ansell et al., 2021).

There were no significant changes in cross-sectoral collaboration while dealing with the second wave of COVID-19. Even though in September 2020 the need to involve the nongovernmental sector in the early stages of crisis management was highlighted by the government among the lessons of the initial response, it was not sufficiently learnt. When the second wave hit the country, NGOs were still working as 'separate initiatives that were not connected' (interview with representative of an NGO). It should be noted that, in cases where certain collaborative practices were established during the first wave, they were also continued during the second outbreak, thus proving the expected pattern on incremental resilience building.

5 | CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the ideas of new institutionalism, we contribute to the increasing body of literature on resilience by offering a novel approach which treats resilience building as a dynamic process shaped by the behaviour of individual and institutional actors in different contexts. We provide a priori patterns as a theoretical interpretation and match them with observations from the Lithuanian case study. The results of pattern matching allow us to suggest that different logics of action enact divergent mechanisms and, in turn, lead towards contrasting types of resilience building.

Managing the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in Lithuania involved a mix of governance and policy decisions that corresponded to both the logic of appropriateness and the logic of consequentiality. The latter logic prevailed in controlling the spread of COVID-19 in February–June 2020 due to the establishment of the centralized mechanism for crisis management. Decisions were usually made in contexts which involved new partners and were marked by low levels of mutual trust. Reacting to high levels of urgency and uncertainty, this appears to have provoked a typical 'centralization reflex' (Boin & McConnell, 2007).

Such mechanisms as central steering and coercive pressures helped to achieve the major breakthroughs, where the old rules and practices appeared to be incapable of adjusting to dynamic developments of the pandemic. Two inconsistencies with the expected patterns were discovered. First, we found that it is both the level of trust *within* and *beyond* the central crisis management mechanism that makes an impact on the mechanisms and results of resilience building. A relatively low trust in the capacity of public sector organizations and/or municipalities discouraged central decision-makers from a closer involvement of these stakeholders in crisis management. Meanwhile, the internal trust enabled shared action within the central mechanism of crisis management which allowed to achieve major breakthroughs in resilience building through the foreseen mechanisms of change. Second, as demonstrated by the examples of the hospitals' clusters and collaboration with NGOs, mechanisms such as network-based collaboration might only enable major breakthroughs in resilience building when centrally steered and supported by politicians.

It is important to note that while some decisions guided by the (dominant) logic of consequentiality contributed to strengthening the resilience of governance arrangements by increasing their long-term robustness, resourcefulness and rapidity (Birkland & Warnement, 2014), some of them were focused on increasing systemic resilience for the situation at that time. For example, strong guidance by politicians and political appointees in low-trust environments helped to overcome bottlenecks in the public sector. However, at the same time it might have withheld learning and integration of past experiences to strengthen the system. In other words, the major top-down developments in resilience were not internalized enough to be further nurtured based on the logic of appropriateness. As a result, often the system 'bounced back' and the previous equilibrium was restored after dealing with the first wave of the crisis (Ansell et al., 2021; Duit, 2016).

Meanwhile, the use of the logic of appropriateness was rarer. As expected, it was employed mainly in professional communities marked by prior history of cooperation, high trust and guided by shared norms or procedures. In some cases, decisions based on this logic led to higher levels of adaptation to the current context of crisis, building of trust, partnership skills among multiple stakeholders and readiness to respond in the long-term (Parker et al., 2020). On the other hand, our research highlights that the dominance of the logic of appropriateness might also challenge resilience building. The following of standard operating procedures and collaboration with usual partners makes it exceedingly difficult to innovate and flexibly adapt to a dynamic environment.

Our research not only reveals the linkage between the dominant logic of action, mechanisms and type of resilience building but also points to the diverging impact of the major breakthroughs and incremental resilience building. Examples such as the development of the tailored COVID-19 crisis management mechanism, preparation of the COVID-19 management strategy or the use of recommendations of medical experts refer to 'highly contextual adaptations' (Boin & Lodge, 2016, p. 294). Despite contributing to the resilience at a particular time of crisis management, continuous political attention or a switch to the logic of appropriateness, is necessary for their sustainability. On the other hand, practices such as the development of partnerships with NGOs may incrementally increase resilience through the strengthening of capacities in public institutions.

There is widespread agreement that such massive disruptions as COVID-19 can and will happen in different policy areas in the future. However, our findings reveal that resilience of governance was strengthened primarily as a by-product of managing the ongoing crisis with limited use of thorough designing (Boin & van Eeten, 2013) in Lithuania. As a result, even though the system became more resilient to the challenges it was facing at the time, it did not in many cases 'bounce forward' by changing institutions, processes and instruments to meet emerging conditions. The ways of thinking about building a more resilient system for absorbing and recovering from similar systemic threats had not changed much by the end of 2020. Therefore, it is important to engage in strategic choices during economic, social and budgetary decision-making to better prepare for potential pandemic-like threats in the future while developing more resilient governance arrangements.

Taken together, our research shows that, to explain the development of resilience, it is important to look beyond individual factors and bring the context as well as interaction of actors within the crisis management network into the analysis. We provide two main mechanisms behind resilience building that are available for replication and comparison, but further analysis is required to better explain their relationship with different elements of resilience. It is important to find out when major breakthroughs or incremental changes help only to overcome the immediate turbulence and return to the prior order, and when they lead to the strengthening of systemic resilience, that is, to the position where the systems emerge stronger from the crisis for the long term. In addition, examples marked by mixed contextual features (such as the establishment of an advisory body of medical experts) should be analysed more elaborately to better link the particular combination of contextual characteristics and mechanisms of resilience building. Finally, a comparative analysis of crisis management in a few (Central and Eastern) European countries characterized by variation in contextual, political, policy or governance conditions could shed more light on how resilience building evolves within crisis management networks and present more evidence on the extent to which this case study of Lithuania is typical of the postcommunist countries.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

ORCID

Vitalis Nakrošis https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3841-6442
Rasa Bortkevičiūtė http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5660-0617

ENDNOTES

[1] Since these elements are context-dependent (Lang, 2012), they might be a subject to change due to the specific circumstances of the pandemic.

[2] The term refers to action, which is constrained by limited resources (such as information or time) and institutions (such as norms and cultural beliefs), and thus oriented towards a satisfactory solution.

[3] About 1400 publicly available emergency management decisions and their changes were announced by SEOC from February to December 2020.

[4] The Ministry of Social Security and Labor is responsible for the development of NGOs in the country.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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Status Quo, Minor or Major Policy Alterations? Explaining Policy Change After Crisis in the Adversarial Child Rights Protection Subsystem in Lithuania

Rasa Bortkevičiūtė

Institute of International Relations and Political Science, Vilnius University, Vilnius, Lithuania

Correspondence: Rasa Bortkevičiūtė (rasa.bortkeviciute@tspmi.vu.lt)

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the dynamics of policy change following crises within adversarial policy subsystems. Building on the Advocacy Coalitions Framework (ACF), the study empirically tests two mechanisms of policy change (or lack thereof), focusing on cases from the Lithuanian child rights protection domain (2016–2020). Analyzing three crises, ranging from no policy change to minor and major alterations, the research contributes to understanding crisis-driven policy dynamics. This study highlights the importance of pre-existing policy solutions, which can be advanced by coalitions following a crisis if the balance of resources shifts in their favor. It also suggests that negotiated agreements may arise between coalitions with similar resources. Finally, the research underscores the role of "strategic inaction" when no policy change occurs despite shifts in resources, due to the perceived costs of action outweighing the benefits. Additionally, the paper expands ACF application to the under-represented Central and Eastern Europe region, shedding light on sustainability challenges in cases of major policy change after the crisis.

1 | Introduction

Contemporary societies and governments are facing an increasing number of turbulent events, including crises, disasters, accidents, emergencies, and their variations that are "neither necessary nor sufficient conditions for policy change" but can foster this process (Boin and 't Hart 2022, p. 14; Birkland 2006). Analyzed as policy punctuations, external or focusing events as well as windows of opportunities (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Weible et al. 2011; Birkland 2006; Kingdon 1995), crises serve as a "fork in the road" moment (Hogan, Howlett, and Murphy 2022, p. 45), which may lead to inaction (McConnell and 't Hart 2019), have a limited impact on policy alterations (e.g., Nohrstedt et al. 2021; Hogan, Howlett, and Murphy 2022) or cause policy changes of varying magnitude (e.g., Mintrom and True 2022). However, there is no linear relation between the characteristics of crisis and the potential policy change: even similar events might yield different outcomes (Nohrstedt and Weible 2010; Patkauskaitė-Tiuchtienė et al. 2022). This highlights the need to explain "why some crises result in major policy change while others do not" (Nohrstedt 2008, p. 258; Rinscheid 2015), making the consolidation of the status quo or a minor policy change the most common response (Nohrstedt and Parker 2024).

The "crisis-reform thesis" (Boin and 't Hart 2022, p. 13; Nohrstedt 2022) is differently approached by the policy-process theoretical frameworks and crisis research, regarding the crisis conceptualization and its relation to policy outputs. While the first focuses on crisis-determined interactions in various policy subsystems (e.g., punctuated equilibrium, Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Chien 2014; advocacy coalitions, Nohrstedt et al. 2023; multiple streams, Kingdon 1995), the second highlights the construction of crises through sense- and meaning-making (e.g., Boin, McConnell, and 't Hart 2008; Boin and 't Hart 2010; 't Hart and Tindall 2009). This paper contributes to the first group of research, analyzing policy change after crisis from the perspective of the Advocacy Coalitions Framework (ACF), which is better developed compared with other policy-process theories analyzing triggering events (Nohrstedt and Weible 2010).

The ACF links crises occurring within or outside a particular policy subsystem to policy change through mechanisms, such as the redistribution of resources between coalitions, the exploitation of events by minority coalitions, or learning (Nohrstedt 2011; Nohrstedt et al. 2023). While these processes have been a major focus of research (e.g., Nohrstedt 2011; Wiley, Searing, and Young 2021), limited attention has been paid to the characteristics of the subsystems that can mediate the process of policy change after a crisis and thus, its outcomes (Nohrstedt and Weible 2010; Rinscheid 2015). In particular, there is a lack of evidence on how the organization of unitary, collaborative or adversarial subsystems (Weible 2008) affects policymaking within them after crises. To address this gap, we focus on the mechanisms of postcrisis policy change (or the absence of it) within adversarial policy subsystems, where policy alterations are most expected due to high levels of conflict (Boin, 't Hart, and McConnell 2009; Birkland 2006), posing a question: *What are the mechanisms linking crises in adversarial policy subsystems with major, minor, or absent policy changes*?

The study empirically tests two mechanisms derived from the existing research, linking the adversarial policy subsystem (*independent variable*) with the absence of policy change as well as with minor or major policy alterations (*dependent variable*). Due to the competitive nature of coalitions in adversarial subsystems, they are expected to strategically exploit crises to advance their policy beliefs and mobilize resources needed for both minor and major policy changes. In this mechanism, the redistribution of resources between coalitions plays a major role, altering the power balance between them and thereby enabling policy change (Nohrstedt and Weible 2010; Rinscheid 2015). Alternatively, it is expected that the status quo will be maintained in a subsystem where, despite crisis-facilitated redistribution of resources, coalitions choose "strategic inaction" (McConnell and 't Hart 2019, p. 650) to avoid policy change. We test these mechanisms by applying them to three cases of response to internal shocks in the Lithuanian child rights protection subsystem (2016–2020). Three incidents in this adversarial subsystem led to three different outcomes: no policy alteration, and major and minor policy change, thus making it suitable for the application of theory-testing process tracing (Beach and Pedersen 2019).

The analysis contributes to the scholarship on postcrisis policy change from the public policy-process perspective (in particular, ACF) in four ways. First, it demonstrates the relevance of "pre-made" solutions (i.e., policies that coalitions developed and/or advocated for before the crisis), which can be promoted by the coalitions once a crisis shifts the balance of resources to their side. Second, we suggest that an agreement may be negotiated between conflicting coalitions sharing similar resources when the dominant coalition desires to maintain the status quo and/or there is a risk that the balance of resources will shift towards the minority coalition. Third, we highlight the relevance of "strategic inaction" following a crisis, when no policy change occurs despite changes in coalition resources, as the perceived costs of action outweigh the benefits. Finally, our contribution expands the geography of the ACF application to the under-represented Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) region (Henry et al. 2014; Pierce et al. 2017; Pierce, Peterson, and Hicks 2020; Osei-Kojo, Ingold, and Weible 2022), suggesting that, due to the limited capacities for policymaking (in particular, stakeholder consultation) in these countries, major policy changes following crises in adversarial subsystems may lack sustainability.

The paper consists of five sections. The theoretical approach introduces the definition of crisis and policy change as well as elaborates on the mechanisms linking the adversarial policy subsystem with (no) policy change after a crisis. This is followed by the presentation of our research methodology and the results of the case studies. Lastly, the final sections discuss and summarize the main arguments of the article.

2 | Theoretical Approach

2.1 | Policy Change After Crises

Policy subsystems are the central building blocks of the key theoretical frameworks dealing with policy-change analysis. Following the ACF, policy subsystems are dynamic and defined by a substantive policy domain, geographical area, and a relatively stable set of actors often aligned in opposing advocacy coalitions (Knill and Steinebach 2022; Jenkins-Smith et al. 2018). The latter include actors who share policy core beliefs and coordinate their actions to translate these beliefs into policies and programs (Jenkins-Smith et al. 2018; Weible et al. 2011; Weible and Jenkins-Smith 2016). In other words, actors belonging to one advocacy coalition share an understanding of why a particular issue exists, what policy solutions would be suitable to deal with it, and how they might affect that problem. Minority and dominant coalitions are distinguished within the subsystem based on the representation of their policy beliefs in current policies and programs (Nohrstedt and Weible 2010).

The ACF associates the alterations in the policy-oriented beliefs structure with policy change, allowing a distinction to be made between minor and major change (Jenkins-Smith et al. 2018; Pierce, Peterson, and Hicks 2020). *Major policy change* is defined as changes in the direction or goals of the policy subsystem as they rely on the deep core (fundamental values) and policy core (normative and empirical problem perception, its causes, potential solutions) beliefs of the coalitions. *Minor policy change* is defined as changes in the secondary aspects (specific instrumental means for achieving policy goals outlined in the policy core beliefs) of the policy subsystem (Jenkins-Smith et al. 2018; Weible and Jenkins-Smith 2016; Nohrstedt and Weible 2010). This conceptualization resembles other typologies of policy change (e.g., Hall 1993) ranging from the improvement of an already existing policy without altering its goals and instruments to the major revision of the policy goals and the instruments employed to reach them.

The ACF positions both internal shocks (happening within the subsystem and more likely to be affected by its actors) and external shocks (outside the control of subsystem actors) as potential sources of policy change (Jenkins-Smith et al. 2018). These shocks involve but are not limited to, policy failures, scandals, and crises (Pierce et al. 2017). In this paper, the latter are defined as "events or developments widely perceived by members of relevant communities to constitute urgent threats to core community values and structures" (Boin, 't Hart, and McConnell 2009, p. 89), resulting in negative effects on the legitimacy of institutions and/or political authorities (Alink, Boin, and T'Hart 2001; Capano and Toth 2024). Crises can facilitate policymaking activities within specific subsystems and lead to policy change through mechanisms, such as the redistribution of resources between coalitions, exploitation of events by minority coalitions, or learning (Birkland 2006; Nohrstedt and Weible 2010; Nohrstedt 2011; Jenkins-Smith et al. 2018). While these mechanisms have been empirically analyzed (Nohrstedt 2011; Wiley, Searing, and Young 2021), less attention has been paid to the characteristics of the policy subsystems and their link to policy change through these mechanisms. As there "is no reason to expect that coalitions will have similar attributes across different policy subsystems" (Weible and Jenkins-Smith 2016, p. 22), the link between the characteristics of policy subsystems, the interaction of coalitions within them and thus the scope of policy change, should be further explored.

2.2 | Impact of Crises on Policy Subsystems

The way actors within the subsystems respond to crisis depends on the organization of these subsystems, in particular on the belief system compatibility of the coalitions (Nohrstedt 2009; Nohrstedt and Weible 2010; Rinscheid 2015). In other words, the extent to which and how the crisis will affect interaction within the policy subsystem depends on the *level of conflict* and *coordination* among the members of coalitions. On the basis of these elements, Weible (2008) distinguished three ideal types of policy systems: *unitary* (single dominant coalition with high internal belief compatibility and coordination), *collaborative* (cooperative coalitions with intermediate levels of conflict and high levels of coordination), and *adversarial* (competitive coalitions with high levels of conflict and low levels of coordination). As it is the competition between advocacy coalitions that facilitates discussions aiming to remedy the crisis and prevent its recurrence, thus increasing the likelihood of policy change (Birkland 2006), our analysis focuses on the mechanisms that a crisis facilitates in adversarial policy subsystems.

Mechanism 1. *Minor or major policy changes are achieved through the redistribution of resources within an adversarial policy subsystem, with minority coalitions exploiting this shift to achieve their policy aims.*

Building on Nohrstedt and Weible (2010), both minor and major policy changes may follow crises, stemming from the redistribution of resources within an adversarial subsystem. These resources encompass *formal legal authority* for policy decisions (having members that represent legal authority or supporters from it provides decision-making power), *public opinion* (support of the public for the coalitions, allowing to attract the attention of and mobilize political authorities), *information* (having information that allows formulating policy alternatives as well as strategically frame the causes of the crisis and potential policy changes), *mobilizable supporters* (attracting actors that share similar policy beliefs expands the power of a coalition), and *skilled leadership* (similarly to the political entrepreneurs defined by Hogan and Feeney (2012), leaders strategically develop coalition narratives and thus, contribute to the mobilization of resources and supporters) (Jenkins-Smith et al. 2018; Nohrstedt 2011).[1] Some of these resources (in particular, formal legal authority and mobilization of supporters) were found to be more relevant for the facilitation of policy change, but their hierarchy remains unclear (Nohrstedt 2011).

Nevertheless, while the crisis might tilt the balance of power within the subsystem, it is crucial that minority coalitions be ready to exploit this moment to their favor (Nohrstedt and Weible 2010). According to the ACF's assumption of instrumental rationality, coalitions and particularly their leaders are expected to engage in framing and sense-making activities following a crisis, strategically using the information available to formulate policy alternatives in a manner reflecting their policy beliefs. This is expected to shape public opinion and mobilize supporters to advance the coalition's policy objectives, which may even result in changes to legal authority (Nohrstedt and Weible 2010; Nohrstedt 2011; Nohrstedt et al. 2023). Once resource redistribution tips the balance of power within the policy subsystem, policy change is anticipated (Jenkins-Smith et al. 2018). However, the question remains open as to what determines the scope of policy change (i.e., major or minor) in adversarial subsystems.

Mechanism 2. *No policy changes occur if the minority coalition prefers "strategic inaction" over exploiting the redistribution of resources caused by the crisis.*

It is also possible that the status quo will remain after a crisis in an adversarial subsystem (Nohrstedt and Weible 2010, p. 24), where some redistribution of resources is evident. Research suggests that even in the case of competing coalitions, their actors are not always willing to use the opportunities provided by a crisis for policy change. This may be influenced by such factors as the timing of the crisis and elections (i.e., political authorities are less likely to be motivated to initiate policy changes if elections are imminent) or by opportunities to frame the incident as something other than a policy failure (Boin, 't Hart, and McConnell 2009; Boin and 't Hart 2022). Given these circumstances, the minority coalition may opt for (temporary) "strategic inaction"—a decision to refrain from action as its costs could outweigh the benefits (McConnell and 't Hart 2019, p. 650).

If coalitions are not willing to challenge the existing policies, they may not frame the crisis as a threat or evidence of a malfunctioning system but rather downplay it as an unfortunate incident not worth any political or policy repercussions (Boin, McConnell, and 't Hart 2008). This is typically reflected in the media portrayal of crises (Gamson and Modigliani 1989; Pralle 2003; Monahan and Ettinger 2017), defined by intensity (the limited amount of attention given to the incident), substantiality (the narrative linking crises to causes outside the subsystem), and sustainability of attention (of the short-lived focus on the incident) (Alimi and Maney 2018). In contrast to the first mechanism, despite some redistribution of resources between coalitions caused by the crisis, its framing will not further escalate the conflict within the adversarial policy subsystem, leading to the gradual decline of public support and interest (Nohrstedt 2022). As a result, in the absence of exploitation by minority coalitions, the crisis will have no impact on policy change (Figure 1).

3 | Methodology

3.1 | Case Selection

Our study relies on three cases of crises and the subsequent policy responses (or lack thereof) that took place between 2016 and 2020 within the adversarial Lithuanian child rights protection subsystem. The cases include the following:

- *The tragedy of Saviečiai (January 2016):* A man in Saviečiai village threw two of his children—a 2-year-old boy and a 4-month-old girl—into a well where they died. No policy change followed this incident;
- *The tragedy of Matukas (January 2017):* A 4-year-old boy Matas died from injuries caused by his mother and her partner. Major policy changes in the child rights protection subsystem followed this incident;
- *The incident of the Kručinskai family (September 2018):* Two children were taken from their family after a passer-by reported the mother's violent behavior. Minor policy changes in the child rights protection subsystem followed this incident.

While these shocks are not typical examples, they may nevertheless be defined as crises (e.g., Warner 2015). Fatal cases of violence (especially those that could have been prevented with the involvement of child rights protection institutions) delegitimize the system (Munro 2010), increase reputational risk (Boin and 't Hart 2022) and thus put decision-makers under pressure to take urgent measures to address the threat of repeated incidents. In Lithuania, all three shocks significantly increased media attention to child rights protection, with the number of articles published on major news websites rising from 114 in 2015 to 434 in 2018 (Figure 2). Mass protests and large-scale civil society initiatives aimed at policy change were sparked in response to cases of child abuse, and the number of complaints regarding the functioning of the State Child Rights Protection and Adoption Service (SCRPAS) increased from 146 to 210 between 2016 and 2018 (The Office of the Ombudsperson of Child Rights 2020). The incidents had a long-term impact on the societal trust in SCRPAS that reached only 6.15 out of 10 in 2021 (when the data were publicly released for the first time), with around half of respondents indicating that the institution's

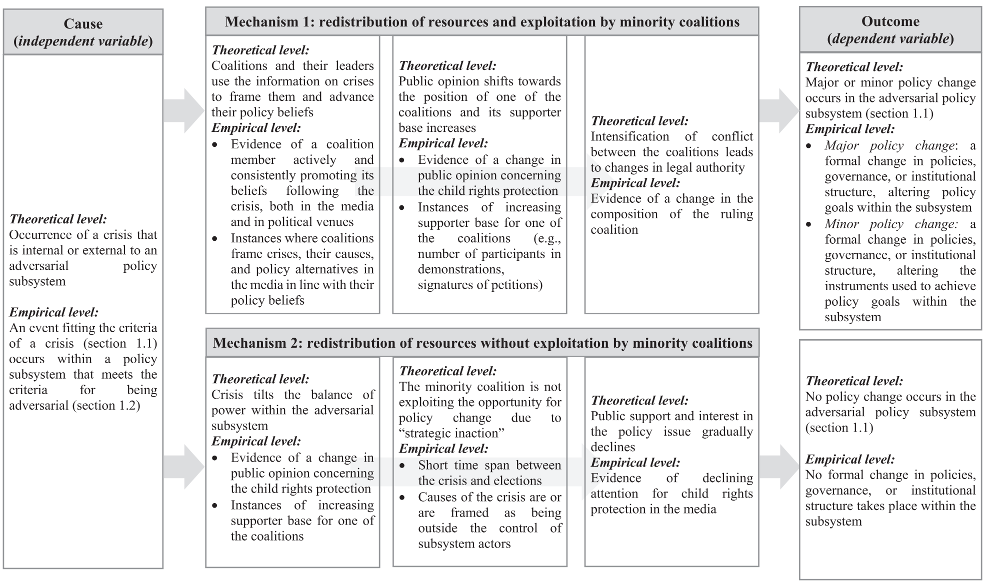

FIGURE 1 | Operationalisation of causal mechanisms on theoretical and empirical levels.

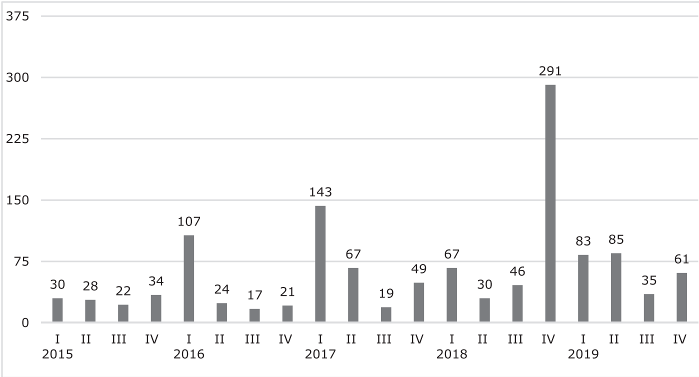

FIGURE 2 | Distribution of articles presenting the topics of child rights protection, violence against children and crises in this field on the main internet news portals, 2015–2020. *Note:* The data are distributed by four quarters of the year: I (January–March), II (April–June), III (July–September), and IV (October–December).

activities had improved since 2018 (State Child Rights Protection and Adoption Service 2021).

While admitting the relevance of coordination within and between coalitions (Nohrstedt et al. 2023), this study does not provide an in-depth analysis of this aspect, treating shared beliefs as a minimal condition for coalitions (Weible et al. 2019). The Lithuanian child rights protection subsystem can be classified as adversarial (Table 1). Since around 2010, responding to the increasing cases of violence against children and recommendations from international organizations (e.g., United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child), attempts have been made to reform the country's child rights protection system by centralizing it (ensuring the same child rights protection standard across municipalities) and prohibiting violence against children. Two advocacy coalitions typical of other countries as well (e.g., Loen and Skivenes 2023) were formed regarding this issue, with some minor fluctuations in their membership throughout the period of analysis. Both left- and moderate right-wing politicians and the ombudsperson for child rights and human rights organizations united under the "child-centric" coalition, highlighting the need to protect the interests of the child. Meanwhile, some conservative right-wing politicians and religious and parent organizations prioritized the autonomy of the family, thus shaping the "family-centric" coalition.

The ACF literature posits that policy subsystems exist in a contextual setting that conditions the efforts of the policy actors within them through factors such as the allocation of authority and general rules of decision-making (Jenkins-Smith et al. 2018). Lithuania is a semiparliamentary democracy, with power divided among the legislative (the parliament), executive (the president and the government), and judicial branches. There are two administrative levels of government: central and local, which shared responsibility for child rights protection until the reform discussed in this paper. The governance system is characterized as hierarchical and centralized with a dominant legalistic approach and a lack of systemic consultation with societal stakeholders (Vilpišauskas 2023). Taken together, the paper analyses cases underrepresented both in terms of geography and policy areas researched through the lens of the ACF (e.g., Pierce, Peterson, and Hicks 2020).

3.2 | Data Collection, Analysis, and Application for Process Tracing

Three crises that shook the Lithuanian child rights protection subsystem and resulted in different outcomes regarding policy change make these cases suitable for in-depth analysis of mechanisms, linking crises in adversarial policy subsystems with policy change or lack of it (Beach and Pedersen 2019). Therefore, our study relies on theory-testing process tracing, informed by the results of interviews, documents, and publicly available information as well as discourse analysis. We conducted the process tracing in three steps. First, we deduced the causal mechanism linking crises in adversarial policy subsystems with policy change (or lack thereof) and identified empirical evidence expected to establish whether the mechanism is present in the particular case (Figure 1). Second, having collected empirical evidence we assessed whether it matches the initial predictions. Third, we identified deviations from the expected mechanism (Beach 2016; Kay and Baker 2015; Avoyan 2021).

To inform the process tracing, six interviews were conducted in 2021–2022, involving one politician, three civil servants and two representatives of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Four of these actors were assigned as representatives of the child-centric, while two—as representatives of the family-centric coalition. All of them were directly engaged in policy formulation and/or implementation following the three crises in the child rights protection subsystem. During the interviews, the chronology of key events between the occurrence of crises in the child rights protection subsystem and the resulting policy changes, or lack thereof, was reconstructed.

TABLE 1 | Advocacy coalitions in the Lithuanian child rights protection system, 2016–2020.

Advocacy coalitions	Members of the coalitions	Beliefs system		
		Deep core beliefs	**Policy core beliefs**	**Secondary aspects**
"Child-centric" coalition advocates a system that maintains consistent quality in the protection of child rights nationwide, ensuring children develop in the most favorable environment	*Politicians:* Left- and moderate right-wing politicians (e.g., some representatives of Homeland Union—Lithuanian Christian Democrats; Liberal Movement of the Republic of Lithuania) *Representatives of public institutions:* Lithuanian Centre for Human Rights; the ombudsman for child rights *Nongovernmental and civil society organizations:* "Save the Children" and "Children Support Centre"	*Priority: Protection of child rights.* Children and their needs are seen as individuals. Specific mechanisms of the child rights protection system are needed, which, in the face of violations of child rights or the risk of such violations, would ensure their continuous protection (including the transfer of the child to a safe environment)	• Forms of violence against children must be clearly defined and unconditionally prohibited • Child neglect is also a form of violence • Centralization of the child rights protection system—an opportunity to standardize the quality of services and introduce unanimous mechanisms of action and responsibility	The basic principles of the child rights protection system should be formalized, while the actors participating in this process should agree on their implementation
"Family-centric" coalition: Advocates a child rights protection system based on the supremacy of the principle of family autonomy and support provision for families	*Politicians:* Conservative right-wing politicians (e.g., Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania—Christian Families Alliance), representatives of center-left parties (e.g., Union of Lithuanian Peasants and Greens) *Nongovernmental and civil society organizations:* Lithuanian Parents' Forum, National Association of Families and Parents	*Priority: Protection of child rights without violating family integrity.* The child rights protection system must be aimed at providing assistance to the family, state involvement must not violate the principle of family autonomy, and transferring the child to a safe environment is used only as the strictest measure. The child and his needs are seen as an integral part of the family and its needs	• Defining and prohibiting forms of violence against children does not solve deeper social problems • Attributing child neglect to forms of violence puts poor families at risk • Complex assistance measures are needed: development of parenting skills should be chosen instead of intervention in the family	Beliefs related to the use of the concept of the biological family, the definition of the responsibilities of children to their parents

The interviews lasted from 46 min to 2 h, were recorded and transcribed literally.

In addition, documents and publicly available information were analyzed with two purposes: to reconstruct the chronology of events (the documents used for this purpose were not coded) and to test the presence of the expected mechanisms (the documents used for this purpose were coded). These documents include minutes of parliamentary sessions concerning child rights protection, decisions of relevant parliamentary committees on the draft Law on Fundamentals of Child Rights Protection, reports on the Matukas tragedy and the Kručinskai family incident delivered by the Office of the Ombudsperson of Child Rights, as well as annual reporting documents of the Office of the Ombudsperson of Child Rights and the SCRPAS (the full list of documents is presented in Table S2).

The interview data, documents, and publicly available information were coded using MaxQDA software. A coding scheme was developed, covering each element of the causal mechanism identified in the theoretical approach (e.g., each of the resources, the position of the minority coalition, and the influence of factors outside the child rights protection subsystem). Considering that the theoretical approach does not differentiate between mechanisms leading to major and minor policy change, the coding scheme was supplemented during the process with themes emerging from interviews, documents, and publicly available information.

Furthermore, building on Olivier et al. (2023), who identified media analysis as a proxy for assessing changes in societal discourse and understanding how policy problems are (re) defined, a quantitative discourse analysis was performed. The headlines of articles published on the four most visited Lithuanian news portals (Delfi.lt, Lrytas.lt, 15min.lt, and Lrt.lt) found under the keywords "vaiko teisės" (*child rights*), "smurtas prieš vaikus" (*violence against children*), "Savievičių tragedija" (*the tragedy of Savičiai*), "Matuko tragedija" (*the tragedy of Matukas*), and "Kručinskai vaiko teisės" (*Kručinskai child rights*) formed the corpus of data for analysis. The search included the period from January 2015 (a year before the first crisis) to the end of 2019 (slightly more than a year after the third crisis) (Figure 2). In particular, a total of 1,259 headlines were collected.

We used MaxQDA software to perform the quantitative discourse analysis, which was delivered in three steps. First, the whole corpus was divided into three parts, reflecting the period after each of the crises. Second, three major codes (namely, *crisis*, *reform needs*, and *child rights* in the broad sense [e.g., other cases of violence against children, the state of this policy area]) were induced from the collected data, and all headlines were assigned with one dominant code. Subsequently, a deeper look into the headlines under the code "crisis" was taken to analyze how the incidents were framed in the media. These headlines were categorized under the following codes induced from the data set: *emotions* (the headline stresses cruel details of the incidents), *information* (the headline provides objective information on incidents), *responsibility of parents* (the parents are blamed for the incident), *systemic responsibility* (institutions are blamed for the incident), and *other* (remaining narratives).

Once the whole data set was coded, it was reviewed by a student assistant and the assigned codes were modified to ensure intercoder reliability.

4 | Empirical Analysis

4.1 | The Tragedy of Savičiai: An Individual Rather Than Institutional Problem

At the time of the Savičiai tragedy, the Lithuanian parliament was reviewing amendments to the Law on Fundamentals of Child Rights Protection, aiming to define and prohibit all forms of violence against children and standardize child protection procedures across municipalities. These proposals sparked controversy regarding the extent of state intervention in families and the removal of children to temporary care, leading to the draft law being returned for further revisions by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour. Towards the end of 2016, amendments to the Law were reintroduced with a focus on defining and prohibiting all forms of violence against children. This once again ignited a conflict between the coalitions, with concerns that treating neglect as violence could lead to the separation of children from parents in less affluent living conditions. In early 2017, the newly elected parliament postponed consideration of the amendments, demonstrating that the tragedy failed to prompt policy change.

The crisis had only a minor impact on the redistribution of resources, particularly in terms of *public opinion*. While the incident mobilized some *supporters* on the side of the "child-centric" coalition, the efforts were rather sporadic and mostly manifested in online space through NGO initiatives. For example, the informal NGO coalition "For the Rights of the Child," which unites 13 national-level NGOs, appealed to the members of the Parliament, urging them to adopt amendments to laws in order to prohibit all forms of violence against children, pointing to best international practices and recommendations of the United Nations.

Considering that the draft Law on Fundamentals of Child Rights Protection was prepared even before the tragedy of Savičiai, the "child-centric" coalition was leading in terms of *information* resources. However, this was not sufficiently exploited, and the increased attention that the incident garnered for child rights protection was relatively short-lived (see Figure 2). A total of 169 articles were found based on selected keywords between the Savičiai and Matukas tragedies. Over half of these headlines (105) directly addressed the crisis itself, with a significant portion (61) covering other child rights issues, and notably fewer (21) referring to the need for reform. An equal number of headlines on the incident (15) attributed responsibility for the tragedy to both institutions (e.g., "There was a bomb ticking in the family, but everyone was blind") and parents (e.g., "Mayor of Kėdainiai: it is difficult to protect from such anti-humans"), while another 14 adopted emotional approach (e.g., "Prof. R. Kėvalas: I am too weak to even talk about it"). Interestingly, when discussing the crisis, the "family-centric" coalition remained relatively inactive, while voices from the "child-centric" coalition diverged, with government representatives emphasizing parental responsibility and other actors placing greater emphasis on systemic flaws. Several interviewees from the "child-centric" coalition depicted the Saviečiai tragedy as an unforeseeable and unavoidable disaster resulting from the father's health issues (in autumn 2016, he was deemed not guilty due to his mental condition).

The incident had no impact on the distribution of *formal legal authority*. However, it is important to mention that the government, composed of the Lithuanian Social Democratic Party (primarily a "child-centric" coalition) and some center-right-wing parties (e.g., Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania—Christian Families Alliance, who represented a "family-centric" coalition), had not indicated reforms in the field of child rights protection among its priorities. Furthermore, the Saviečiai tragedy occurred less than a year before the end of the government's term, leading to prioritizing implementation of the existing political agenda over introducing new issues: "It was basically a question of political will. That government was finishing its work, preparing for the elections—no one ever makes any reforms before the elections" (interview with a civil servant 2). Consequently, there was no *leader* advocating for reform efforts in this area.

Taken together, the case demonstrates that the "child-centric" coalition had a premade policy solution even before the tragedy of Saviečiai occurred, while this incident mobilized some supporters for the coalition and increased media attention on child rights protection. However, considering the crisis placement at the end of the political cycle and the opportunities to externalize its causes outside the child rights protection system, the "child-centric" coalition took no active lead in exploiting the crisis conditions for the promotion of a contested policy change.

4.2 | The Tragedy of Matukas: Shifting Resources for a Major Policy Change

Following the Matukas tragedy, an extraordinary session of the Lithuanian parliament was held in February 2017. While there was not enough support in parliament to define and prohibit various types of violence against children after the Saviečiai tragedy, this time, the same amendments to the Law on Fundamentals of Protection of the Child Rights were passed unanimously. In addition, an agreement on the centralization of the Lithuanian child rights protection system ("Matukas reform") was reached in September 2017, leading to its implementation in July 2018. The reform fundamentally altered policy objectives and led to the centralization of the child rights protection system, the establishment of a mechanism for the continuous protection of child rights and the institution of case managers to coordinate complex assistance to the family.

The tragedy of Matukas took place in a different political context compared with the tragedy of Saviečiai: following the parliamentary elections in late 2016, the new government of Saulius Skvernelis (a coalition of the Lithuanian Social Democratic Party and the Union of Lithuanian Peasants and Greens [ULPG]) came into power late autumn. Interestingly, while the members of the ULPG belonged to the "family-centric" coalition, their delegated minister of Social Security and Labour was nonpartisan and stood on the side of the "child-centric" coalition, taking *leadership* for the adoption of reforms. As indicated by one of the actors in this coalition, "Throughout all his term, we had a minister for child rights matter" (interview with a civil servant 1). In addition, the program of the new government identified such aims as timely recognition of violence and provision of competent assistance to the child and family, to be implemented through the centralization of the child rights protection system, thus providing *formal legal authority* for the "child-centric" coalition.

While there is no reliable survey data from this period, the *mobilization of supporters* and the shift of *public opinion* towards the "child-centric" coalition was demonstrated by the launch of various societal campaigns, ranging from lighting candles in the central squares of Lithuanian cities and Lithuanian embassies in foreign countries to collect more than 30,000 signatures for a petition demanding the legal definition and prohibition of violence against children.

The narratives in the media following the tragedy of Matukas had a pronounced element of a malfunctioning child rights protection system proving incapable of preventing tragic incidents even after receiving prior signals, thus shaping *public opinion* in support of a reform-oriented "child-centric" coalition. A total of 442 articles on child rights and the incident were identified between the Matukas tragedy and the Kručinskai incident, with the majority of their headlines focusing on the crisis (168), other issues within the child rights protection system (144) as well as reform needs (130). Similarly to the Saviečiai tragedy, emphasis was placed on the responsibility of the parents, highlighting the criminal history of the partner of Matukas' mother, drug use, and the mother's indifference (33, e.g., "The teacher of the kindergarten attended by the murdered four-year-old: the mother tried to cover everything up"). However, comparatively greater attention was paid to systemic flaws, as the child rights protection system was aware of the violence experienced by the boy (32, e.g., "It was possible to save the child who was brutally beaten in Kėdainiai, but the prosecutors failed?") and emotional elements (34, e.g., "Gediminas Kontenis told about the execution of a child—it shocked the officials too").

Neither the idea of prohibition of violence against children nor the suggestion of the centralization of the child rights protection system faced hostility from the opposing coalition in the media. Only a handful of headlines reflected the views of the "family-centric" coalition (8, e.g., "P. Gražulis on physical punishments: parents must be left with the means to raise their children"). As the "family-centric" coalition was not promoting its own agenda, the narrative on the Matukas tragedy highlighting the need for reforms in the field of child rights protection boosted the resources of the "child-centric" coalition: "all these hostile, pseudo-familial voices like ⟨⋯⟩ were so quiet or so silenced after this tragedy that they didn't even have a chance to intervene in any adequate way" (interview with a politician).

The "child-centric" coalition was involved in long-lasting efforts to reform the Lithuanian child rights protection system. As a result, it was in a position to provide a quick "pre-made" policy solution for the child rights protection issues once again highlighted by the Matukas tragedy. Actors belonging to this coalition were also better *informed* about the severity of the problem and its causes, as well as the costs and benefits of proposed policy alternatives.

Nevertheless, additional efforts to mobilize political support were made by the actors of the "child-centric" coalition. They sought to exploit the overlap of the crisis and the early stage of the government's term, which was favorable to prioritizing the child rights protection issue and taking quick measures in the field: "They [*representatives of the government*] are still clean—they hear what the state needs and they do it. Later, many interest groups will appear—mayors, municipalities—who will go against this reform" (interview with civil servant 1). Furthermore, representatives of the "family-centric" coalition were involved in the discussions on the reform (e.g., through an interinstitutional working group in the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour) to build consensus on the essence of the policy change. However, heated debates moved to the parliamentary committees (e.g., more than 1200 comments and suggestions were analyzed by three committees in 2017), thus delaying the expected adoption of the amendments to the law. Taken together with declining public interest (Nohrstedt et al. 2023; Figure 2), this alarmed the "child-centric" coalition that a window of opportunity for change might be missed; thus, the decision should be made as soon as possible.

The new version of the Law on Fundamentals of Protection of the Rights of the Child, which laid the foundation for the centralization of the child rights protection system, was approved almost unanimously on 28 September 2017: "if it had not been for the tragedy of Matas, if not for the energy that was raised in the society ⟨⋯⟩ it would have probably been impossible to achieve centralisation" (interview with a politician). This demonstrates that major policy change occurred due to a combination of crisis-determined redistribution of resources between the coalitions and the "child-centric" coalition's exploitation of these circumstances. The coalition suggested and actively promoted their policy alternative in a context where the society was demanding change, successfully mobilizing supporters around their policy alternative. While it was called a "compromise of compromises" (interview with civil servant 2), the differences between the submitted and approved versions of the law were rather minor, demonstrating that the decision to adopt the "Matukas reform" was caused by a significant shift in the balance of power between coalitions rather than by changes in the beliefs of the "family-centric" coalition.

4.3 | The Incident of the Kručinskai Family: Negotiated Agreement Towards a Minor Policy Change

The third crisis—the incident of the Kručinskai family in September 2018—turned into a strength test for the "Matukas reform." Following the incident, the Law on Fundamentals of Protection of Child Rights was amended once again in 2019, modifying the "Matukas reform." The minor policy change clarified the concepts of psychological violence, neglect, and significant damage, and introduced the assessment of the child and family needs, supported by increased availability of services.

If the first two crises shaped *public opinion* and *mobilized supporters* for the long-failed reform attempts, the Kručinskai incident threatened the dominant societal values by raising a question about the adequacy of the measures taken and sparked discussions on parent-child separation. It highlighted the division between "child-centric" and "family-centric" coalitions within the society, which were further escalated by some members of the "family-centric" coalition. The voice of the latter became louder, referencing the threats of increased authority granted to child rights protection institutions. For example, several hundred people gathered in October 2018 in a protest "Stop violence against children and families." In November 2018, a protest, "Stop unjustified abduction of children and the application of Barnevernet principles in Lithuania" was organized, while at the same time, in the same place, a much smaller "anti-protest" supporting the "Matukas reform" took place. This illustrates a shift in *public opinion*, which made the resources of the competing coalitions more balanced.

While there were no changes in the *legal authority* of the coalitions, the *information* battle between them intensified to *mobilize supporters* and influence *public opinion*. Interestingly, between the coalitions, the adversarial dynamics that were suppressed by the Matukas tragedy became more evident even before the Kručinskai incident, as a reaction to the implementation of child rights protection reform. While the period between the start of the implementation of the "Matukas reform" and the Kručinskai incident was mostly dedicated to informing the society about the essence of the reform, later on, the narrative of forced parent-child separation arose (e.g., "'Matukas reform': children are taken away even from their custodians, only 18 out of 523 children taken returned home," "The family of a 5-year-old is asking for the return of their son who was taken away").

Even though the number of children being separated from their parents started to decrease after 2017, to support their beliefs, the antireform coalition framed the Kručinskai incident as an example of state institutions abusing their power. Following this incident, in all, 534 headlines using research keywords were found in the media; the attention significantly peaked and remained quite sustainable (Figure 2). Interestingly, while initially most attention was paid to the crisis itself (157) and the reform needs of the child rights protection system (145), the most significant share of attention was directed at child rights protection in a broad sense (232). When depicting the crisis itself, the responsibility of the child rights protection system was emphasized, responding to the concerns of a part of the public and the "family-centric" coalition about state intervention in family affairs (44, e.g., "S. Skvernelis: child rights services went too far"; "Member of Parliament M. Puidokas felt like an investigator: instead of supporting institutions, he stood on the side of families suspected of violence against children"). While objective informational headlines were dominant (76), there was another group strongly appealing to emotions

(32, e.g., "Parents of children that were taken away: we agree with everything, so that our children would be given back to us").

As a response to the crisis, both coalitions proposed amendments to the Law on Fundamentals of Protection of Child Rights. The draft law prepared by the "family-centric" coalition reflected their policy core beliefs and put family rights at the front (e.g., taking a child from the family was envisaged as a measure of last resort; administrative responsibility was foreseen for a false report on the violation of child rights). Meanwhile, members of the "child-centric" coalition claimed that changing the course of the policy would be unacceptable as the reform was very new and reflected transformations happening in the society: "We are maturing and growing: in my view, the current approach is way much better than the one dominant 15 or 20 years ago" (interview with an NGO representative). However, as public opinion was more divided at the time, the balance of resources between coalitions allowed for negotiation: "Ramūnas [*the leader of the ruling ULPG*] stood on the side of the public that emerged around the Kručinskai story ⟨⋯⟩ He said—either you compromise, sit down and negotiate, or I have votes in the Parliament [*for adopting 'family-centric' amendments*]" (interview with a politician).

Overall, the case demonstrates that the crisis itself did not significantly redistribute resources between coalitions. Instead, the changes in the balance of power were largely determined by the strategic exploitation of the incident by the "family-centric" coalition. Unsatisfied with the outcomes of the "Matukas reform," which strongly reflected child-centric beliefs, members of the coalition contributed to framing the reform as a threat to family integrity, a narrative that gained traction following the Kručinskai incident. Facing a potential U-turn in child rights protection policy, representatives of the "child-centric" coalition were willing to negotiate certain elements of the law, resulting in a minor policy change aimed at "reassuring and calming down society" (interview with civil servant 2).

5 | Discussion

While the ACF identifies the redistribution of resources and the exploitation of crises by minority coalitions as two separate mechanisms leading to postcrisis policy change (Nohrstedt and Weible 2010), this research suggests that both factors are necessary for major policy change following a crisis in adversarial subsystems. The Matukas tragedy reveals the relevance of the "workable idea" (Hogan and Feeney 2012, p. 6) availability that the minority coalition is prepared to promote in the face of a crisis or in its aftermath, strategically exploiting changes in resources determined by crises. When a crisis hits a subsystem, policymakers have limited opportunities and time to engage in learning, investigating, and experimenting due to high societal pressure to take action and address the threat to avoid further damage (Boin and 't Hart 2022; Kapucu and Ustun 2018). Given that the window of opportunity for major policy change is very short due to declining public and political interest (Nohrstedt 2022), the existence of "pre-made" policy solutions may help build narratives around them and satisfy the pressure for reform. In the Lithuanian case, the centralization of the child rights protection reform was adopted after multiple stages of trial and error, allowing the "child-centric" coalition to put forth a viable policy solution in the context of increased public support, legal authority, and involvement of political leaders. Thereby, contrary to Crow et al. (2023), we suggest that policy proposal development takes place through the accumulation of experience from multiple sources to be exploited by the coalitions once a crisis shifts the balance of resources to their side (Broekema, van Kleef, and Steen 2017; Nohrstedt 2022).

The policy change that followed the tragedy of Matukas confirms the resources hierarchy argument introduced by Nohrstedt (2011), suggesting that the relevance of different types of resources may be tied to policy fields or policy issues, depending on the context (Weible et al. 2016). The Matukas case demonstrates that a change in formal authority is not enough to bring about a pro-reform coalition for policy change. Instead, public opinion and supporters, linking a crisis with flaws in the system ('t Hart and Tindall 2009; Boin, 't Hart, and McConnell 2009) are crucial. This is in line with Loen and Skivenes (2023), who revealed that lagging reform efforts may be related to the sensitive nature of child rights protection policy and societal division in this regard. While a change of government could itself be treated as an exogenous shock facilitating policy change (Jenkins-Smith et al. 2018), this was not the case as the definition and prohibition of violence against children stalled in the newly elected parliament and was pushed forward only after the death of Matukas.

Our research also suggests that minor policy change in adversarial subsystems may result not only from a shift in coalition resources and crisis exploitation by minority coalitions but also from a negotiated agreement—a mechanism rarely associated with this type of subsystem (Nohrstedt and Weible 2010). While the "Matukas reform" was followed by broad societal support and discussions engaging representatives of the "family-centric" coalition, the crisis did not change the policy core beliefs of actors opposing child rights protection reform. In the aftermath of the crisis, they remained silenced rather than changed. Therefore, as the Kručinskai incident increased public support for the "family-centric" coalition, it also enabled actors in this coalition to negotiate for the revision of the "Matukas reform," integrating more safeguards for family rights. Therefore, we tentatively suggest that minor policy change may be negotiated between conflicting coalitions sharing similar resources when the dominant coalition desires to maintain the status quo and/or there is a risk that the balance of resources will shift towards the minority coalition.

Finally, the case of the Saviečiai tragedy confirms that despite changes in the coalition resources, conflicting coalitions are likely to choose "strategic inaction" following a crisis when the perceived costs of action outweigh the benefits. As a response to this crisis, some mobilization of support for the "child-centric" coalition was visible. However, the political and public authorities perceived the Saviečiai tragedy as unexpected and difficult to prevent, being caused by individual rather than systemic issues. Furthermore, the tragedy occurred at the end of the political cycle, and therefore no mobilizing action was taken from the side of any coalitions.

The research also offers insights related to the subsystem context of operation that could be relevant for the research on the CEE region. The case of Matukas illustrates the impact of overreaction to crises (McConnell 2019) in an adversarial subsystem. Similarly to Tom, Lægreid, and Rykkja (2018), who found that urgency and pressure posed by crises undermine the rationality of the policy change, we demonstrated that actors of the "child-centric" coalition focused on the need to adopt long-awaited reforms rather than negotiate their content and build a subsystem-wide compromise. This is a rather typical feature of Lithuanian policymaking (Vilpišauskas 2023). In particular, due to a lower capacity for policymaking and, specifically, to poorly institutionalized practices of stakeholder engagement, policy change after crises in adversarial subsystems may lead to the adoption of one-sided decisions, deepening the conflict between coalitions and thus potentially reducing the sustainability of policy decisions (i.e., increasing the likelihood of policy adaptations in the future or even policy reverses, once elections bring changes in the formal authority).

6 | Conclusions

This paper contributes to the analysis of the "crisis-reform" thesis from the ACF perspective by testing the mechanisms of policy change (or lack thereof) after crises within the adversarial child rights protection subsystem in Lithuania (2016–2020). Building on the results of theory-testing process tracing, our study confirms that no policy change takes place after crises despite changes in coalition resources, when the perceived costs of action outweigh the benefits, and thus, "strategic inaction" is preferred. Furthermore, while demonstrating that a combination of the shift in resources in an adversarial subsystem and the exploitation of this change by a minority coalition is the key reason for determining policy change after crises, we propose a more nuanced explanation that allows for distinguishing between major and minor policy changes.

First, our analysis suggests that "pre-made" policy solutions are significant in adversarial subsystems, where intercoalition conflict is heightened, amplifying the pressure and urgency caused by a crisis. This environment can facilitate *major policy change* only if a prepared solution is readily available to capitalize on the brief window of opportunity that crises present. Second, we demonstrate that a shift in resources caused by a crisis enables coalitions to employ other mechanisms for policy change. Building on the Lithuanian case, *minor policy change* may result from a negotiated agreement, once the crisis balances resources between conflicting coalitions and the dominant coalition desires to maintain the status quo and/or there is a risk that the balance of resources will shift towards the minority coalition.

While coming with some limitations due to its being a single case study, this research introduces a novel perspective from geographically and thematically underrepresented areas in the application of the ACF, specifically focusing on Lithuania (representing the CEE region with few ACF applications) and the child rights protection subsystem (a branch of social welfare policy with limited analysis through the lenses of ACF) (Pierce, Peterson, and Hicks 2020; Osei-Kojo, Ingold, and Weible 2022). The Lithuanian cases suggest that, in the context of limited policymaking capacities, "the tyranny of the urgent" is dangerous within adversarial subsystems as insufficiently discussed decisions lacking broad support may be adopted, thus resulting in unsustainable policies. Meanwhile, the sensitivity of child and family rights allows a reiterating argument on the hierarchy of coalition resources (Nohrstedt 2011), suggesting that public opinion and mobilizable supporters may be the key resources for conflicting coalitions, enabling policy change to be adopted after crises in highly polarizing and debatable policy areas.

Providing rich data from a single country and single policy field, this study opens opportunities for further "comparative empirical analysis across subsystems" (Henry et al. 2014, p. 302) and countries (especially from the CEE region) as coalitions formed around the same issue in different contexts were found to have varying characteristics (Weible et al. 2016).

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Data Availability Statement

The interview data that support the findings of this study are openly available at https://doi.org/10.18279/MIDAS.GEVINSA.209665. The discourse analysis data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Endnotes

[1] The category of financial resources is also outlined in the ACF, the contradictory findings on their relevance for policy change (Pierce 2016) place this aspect outside the scope of this research.

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Advancing Citizen Engagement Through Digital Tools: A Comparative Study of the Baltic States

Tiina Randma-Liiv, Rasa Bortkevičiūtė, Veiko Lember, Visvaldis Valtenbergs & Vitalis Nakrosis

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Advancing Citizen Engagement Through Digital Tools: A Comparative Study of the Baltic States

Tiina Randma-Liiv [a], Rasa Bortkevičiūtė [b], Veiko Lember [c], Visvaldis Valtenbergs [d], and Vitalis Nakrosis [b]

[a]Ragnar Nurkse Department of Innovation and Governance, Tallinn University of Technology, Tallinn, Estonia; [b]Institute of International Relations and Political Science, Vilnius University, Vilnius, Lithuania; [c]Ragnar Nurkse Department of Innovation and Governance, Tallinn University of Technology and KU Leuven, Tallinn, Estonia; [d]Faculty of Social Sciencs, University of Latvia, Rīga, Latvia

ABSTRACT

This comparative study examines the implementation of e-participation platforms in the three young democracies of the Baltic States: the Estonian Citizens' Initiative Portal, the Latvian platform MyVoice, and the Lithuanian E-Citizen platform. Drawing on 28 interviews with key stakeholders of these platforms, alongside with an analysis of their content and relevant documents, this article demonstrates that, while governments often expect digitalisation to transform participatory governance, the adoption of digital platforms alone does not lead to more deepened civic engagement. Despite the varied organisational characteristics, digitalisation in all three countries reinforced rather than challenged the existing governance patterns, as the national-level factors significantly influenced e-participation implementation. To reap the benefits of e-participation initiatives in young democracies, the institutionalisation of e-participation, transparency of decision-making, vote thresholds, resource sufficiency, and levels of engagement should be systematically considered.

KEYWORDS

E-participation; digital democracy; citizen engagement; Baltic States; comparative analysis

Introduction

The emphasis on increased public participation is often linked to concerns about a perceived democratic deficit, for which open government practices—including public participation in policymaking—are commonly regarded as potential remedies. Citizen engagement holds the potential for a "democratising effect" (Sørensen & Torfing, 2018, p. 305) by promoting ownership of reforms, strengthening perceived justice, increasing governance effectiveness, and enhancing the quality and legitimacy of policy decisions (Ansell et al., 2020; Fung, 2006), thereby helping to overcome "the problems faced by representative democracy" (Ianniello et al., 2018, p. 21). Recently, the scholarly debate on participatory democracy has increasingly focused on information and communication technologies (ICTs) and digitalization in fostering greater civic engagement in policy design and service delivery (e.g., Bannister & Connolly, 2012; Hennen et al., 2020). The dynamic between the aspirational rhetoric of participatory democracy and the practical potential of the Internet and digital tools to enhance dialogue between the state and its citizens has materialized in numerous e-participation initiatives around the world.

However, a major body of evidence points to limited results and low acceptance of e-participation initiatives (e.g., Aichholzer et al., 2020; Charalabidis et al., 2014; Kubicek & Aichholzer, 2016; Toots, 2019), raising questions about whether societal problems and challenges can be solved merely through the adoption of (better)technology (Cardullo, 2020; Tseng, 2022). Despite the dominating techno-centric focus of e-participation research (Steinbach et al., 2020), implementation challenges have been found to arise more from a complex interplay of societal, political and organizational factors than from technical aspects of e-participation (Chadwick, 2011; Jho & Song, 2015; Zheng et al., 2014). For example, previous research has shown that societal characteristics such as the number of internet users (e.g., Åström et al., 2012), digital divide (e.g., Min, 2010), trust in e-participation (e.g., Scherer & Wimmer, 2014), trust in government and social capital (Lee & Kim, 2018), the socio-economic background of the population (e.g., Medaglia, 2007), legal frameworks (Iuliano et al., 2024) as well as managerial and organizational factors (Randma-Liiv & Lember, 2022) are related to the implementation of e-participation. However, insufficient empirical attention to how the normative ideals of e-participation interact with the realities of specific implementation contexts has limited our understanding of its broader viability (Steinbach et al., 2019; Bannister & Connolly, 2012; Norris, 2010).

Responding to the call for "an intensified analysis of organisational strategic orientations and their fit with certain local contexts" (Steinbach et al., 2019,

CONTACT Tiina Randma-Liiv tiina.randma-liiv@taltech.ee Ragnar Nurkse Department of Innovation and Governa, Tallinn University of Technology, Akadeemia Tee 3, Tallinn 19086, Estonia

p. 81), this paper explores and analyses how recent national-level e-participation initiatives have been implemented in the three Baltic States—Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. The study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the similarities and differences across the Baltic States in the implementation of e-participation initiatives?

RQ2: Which national and organizational level factors shape the implementation of e-participation initiatives in the Baltic States?

RQ3: What lessons can be drawn for young democracies seeking to implement e-participation?

This research steps beyond the prevalent single-case studies of local-level e-participation in young democracies (e.g., Akmentina, 2023; Toots, 2019) by employing a comparative case study design. The comparison focuses on three in-depth case studies of the implementation of national-level e-participation initiatives: *Estonian Citizens' Initiative Portal*, the Latvian platform *MyVoice*, and the Lithuanian *E-Citizen* platform. These cases are selected based on the similarity of their historical-cultural, societal, political, and economic contexts. Each case study is informed by interviews with key stakeholders of the e-participation initiatives (a total of 28 interviews) and document analysis of publicly available relevant platform materials.

While substantial empirical research is available on digital citizen engagement in established democracies (e.g., Kornberger et al., 2017; Moss & Coleman, 2014; Reddick & Norris, 2013), the literature on advancing e-participation in the young democracies of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) (Durman et al., 2022) remains limited. Although these countries have not followed exactly the same post-communist transformation trajectories, one of the common remaining gaps in their democratization process is the relative weakness of state-citizen relationships (Guasti, 2016). The post-communist Member States of the European Union (EU)—including the three Baltic States—have been categorized as passively inclusive states (Dryzek & Tucker, 2008), where politicians declare interest in citizen engagement, yet actual inclusion of citizens' voice in policymaking remains limited (OECD, 2021). Compared to their Western counterparts, these countries exhibit significantly lower levels of citizen participation (Kostelka, 2014). This raises the question of whether e-participation could shift existing patterns of state-society interaction and strengthen citizen engagement in policymaking in young democracies (Korthagen & van Keulen, 2020; Tai et al., 2020).

The first section of the article introduces the guiding theoretical background. The second section provides an overview of the methods used in gathering the data and conducting empirical analysis. The following section provides a concise overview of the e-participation cases studied in the Baltics. The article proceeds with the comparative presentation of the key findings, discussion, and conclusions.

Theoretical background

E-participation is defined as a measure to extend and transform citizen participation in public affairs and democratic processes with the support of ICT. A key feature of e-participation initiatives is their transformational potential to increase access to and availability of participation mechanisms (e.g., Sæbø et al., 2008; Wirtz et al., 2018), thereby broadening and deepening citizen participation—a process through which individuals contribute to decision making in the institutions and programs that affect them (Van Meerkerk, 2019). E-participation initiatives, from online discussion forums and consultation platforms to legislation wikis, e-petitioning, online complaint systems, crowdsourcing platforms and one-stop participation portals, carry the *potential* for enhanced democratic processes (Macintosh, 2004), the transcendence of political distance (Coleman & Blumler, 2009) and increased legitimacy of the state (Kornberger et al., 2017). Furthermore, digitalization is expected to facilitate greater participation and better deliberation in policymaking processes while significantly reducing the costs for collective decision-making (A. J. Meijer et al., 2019). The ongoing debate remains whether and under which conditions e-participation initiatives lead to mobilizing (i.e., encouraging further citizen engagement) and reinforcing (i.e., aligning with patterns of offline participation) effects (Korthagen & van Keulen, 2020; Tai et al., 2020).

Despite the high potential and expectations of e-participation, research into *actual* implementation and impact of these initiatives shows that proof of the democratizing and legitimizing effects of e-participation has remained scarce, with digitalization often failing to mediate the transformational changes toward new forms of participation (Cardullo, 2020; Lember et al., 2019). This highlights that "technology alone cannot provide a solution" (Panopoulou et al., 2014, p. 196) and thus, a more in-depth exploration of its actual implementation is needed (Steinbach et al., 2020).

The mobilizing potential of e-participation initiatives is particularly important in the context of young democracies—in our article, the post-communist countries which have met the conditions for joining the EU. These countries have been characterized by a participatory gap, typically attributed to their historical context of centralized power, prolonged absence of citizen-state dialogue, and limited opportunities for meaningful political participation (Džatková, 2017; Kostelka, 2014). Although these states modernized their public administrations during the post-communist transition and the EU accession process, the literature demonstrates persistent challenges: limited organizational capacity, financial sustainability, membership base and mobilization power of non-governmental organizations (NGO), coupled with growing individualism, citizen apathy, and a shortage of both institutional and interpersonal trust (Guasti, 2016; Pietrzyk-Reeves & McMahon, 2022). This affects citizens' sense of democratic ownership of governmental processes, as citizens tend to perceive their democratic roles less as stakeholders than as voters.

The following sub-sections lay an analytical basis for the empirical study. First, the implementation of e-participation initiatives is conceptualized. Second, considering that the implementation of e-participation is mediated by national- and organizational-level factors, their effects are further elaborated in individual subsections based on existing academic literature. Each of the factors discussed in the following sub-sections serves as a category for the empirical analysis.

Implementation of e-participation initiatives

As an intentional activity by government authorities to support the citizen participation through digital technologies, the implementation of e-participation lies on a continuum between the adoption of a digital solution and its institutionalization (Randma-Liiv, 2023; Steinbach et al., 2019; Steinbach et al., 2020). As put forth by Klein and Sorra (1996), p. 1057), implementation is "the critical gateway" between the decision to adopt a digital innovation and its routine use. Implementation demonstrates when, how, and for what purpose, e-participation is employed by institutions in the execution of their tasks (Steinbach et al., 2019; Steinbach et al., 2020). In this paper, the conceptualization of e-participation implementation encompasses a selection of key features deduced from the previous studies, namely: the stage of the policy cycle to which e-participation initiatives primarily contribute, the level of citizen engagement, the follow-up process after citizen contributions, and the impact of e-participation on policy outcomes.

Through the use of ICT, the input of the key stakeholders can be used throughout all stages of the policy cycle (Aichholzer & Strauß, 2016). Agenda setting and policy formulation are the most likely stages where citizens could contribute to the policymaking process (Korthagen & van Keulen, 2020), although they can also be involved in other stages of the policy cycle including policy adoption, policy implementation and evaluation. Given that each stage presents distinct challenges (Van Meerkerk, 2019), the effective integration of participation into the policy cycle hinges on the governance context and specific issues at hand (Aichholzer & Strauß, 2016).

Furthermore, e-participation initiatives undertake different formats which can affect the level of citizen engagement and their influence on decision-making (Coelho et al., 2022; Macintosh, 2004; Wirtz et al., 2018). This paper draws upon the five levels of citizen participation: inform, consult, involve, collaborate, and empower (IAP2, 2018, Nabatchi, 2012). The spectrum ranges from "inform," where citizens are primarily seen as passive recipients of information, to "consult," which entails two-way communication between citizens and policymakers with limited impact, and extends to more advanced levels of engagement such as "involve" and "collaborate," ultimately reaching "empower." This level involves active stakeholder engagement and grants citizens a decisive role in policymaking.

While the implementation of e-participation initiatives is guided by formal institutions, their actual uptake may also be influenced by informal institutionalization (Randma-Liiv, 2023). To prevent mere symbolic implementation of e-participation, a "willingness to let citizens participate" should be fostered (Steinbach et al., 2019, p. 75). Research indicates that citizen satisfaction with e-participation hinges on the responsiveness of public institutions and the provision of feedback on their contributions (Toots, 2019; Van Meerkerk, 2019).

Similarly, the impact of e-participation on policy outcomes is crucial for the analysis of implementation. The instrumental perspective toward evaluating "success" in e-participation focuses on the anticipated changes brought about by online engagement initiatives (Smith et al., 2011; Tambouris et al., 2012). While the process of citizen engagement is largely in the hands of the organizers of e-participation projects, their ability to control the transformation of citizen input into actual policy contributions is limited (Kubicek & Aichholzer, 2016).

National-level characteristics shaping the implementation of e-participation

A number of studies have looked at e-participation in different national settings, showing that the national context influences the implementation of e-participation (e.g., Choi & Song, 2020; Moss & Coleman, 2014). Particularly relevant are the democratic development, socio-economic context, the development of civil society as well as the level of digitalization. The national context is likely to play a particularly important role in young democracies due to their limited history of (participatory) democracy.

Previous studies demonstrate that e-participation initiatives achieved better results in countries with stronger democratic institutions (Gulati et al., 2014) and a more professional and efficient public sector (Moon & Norris, 2005). Furthermore, recent research demonstrates that citizens with a higher level of community commitment and ownership are more likely to increase the engagement in e-participation (Choi & Song, 2020). While e-participation may mobilize those who historically were not engaged in policymaking, e-participation tends to provide an even greater advantage for those who are more affluent, digitally literate and have a repository of information and knowledge regarding political issues (Aichholzer et al., 2020; Tai et al., 2020). Studies have also addressed the digital divide, demonstrating that citizens with less digital and technological knowledge and/or those with a limited internet connection may be excluded from e-participation (Coelho et al., 2022; Panopoulou et al., 2014).

Organizational factors affecting the implementation of e-participation

One of the key barriers to citizens making effective use of the e-participation tools is organizational in nature (Kubicek & Aichholzer, 2016). The most influential organizational factors include the regulation of e-participation process, the formal ownership of the e-participation initiative and resources dedicated to its implementation.

Regulations may determine conditions for democratic participation, including access to technology and information, the right to participate, safeguards for participants, and the overall integration of e-participation initiatives into public governance processes (Berntzen & Karamagioli, 2010; Korthagen & van Keulen, 2020; Toots, 2019). The regulatory context, including norms, rules, processes, and structures were found to be relevant factors explaining the implementation of e-government strategies (Iuliano et al., 2024), while regulation was crucial for the diffusion of e-participation practices (Cezar, 2024). In addition, embeddedness in the formal policymaking processes was found to be a critical success factor for e-participation initiatives (Royo et al., 2024). Formal rules guiding the actors and processes of e-participation (i.e., initiators of the participatory processes, participation threshold, mediation of proposals) as well as those on the consideration of citizen input into policymaking indicate the institutionalization of e-participation (Randma-Liiv, 2023).

The literature distinguishes between top-down (government-led) and bottom-up (citizen-led) e-participation initiatives, based on their establishers and owners (Aichholzer & Strauß, 2016; Coelho et al., 2022). While top-down participation initiatives might be challenged by the limited diversity of participants as well as by a mismatch between stakeholders' expectations and their level of influence on decision-making, limited visibility, resources and coordination with other initiatives might pose a risk for implementing the bottom-up e-participation platforms (Van Meerkerk, 2019). Nevertheless, bottom-up initiated e-participation was found to be more successful than top-down initiatives (Aichholzer et al., 2020).

E-participation is a collaborative process involving a number of actors (e.g., government units, NGOs, businesses, ICT providers) that contribute to the functioning of the platform. This is likely to lead to complex interrelationships among actors (Randma-Liiv, 2023). Administration and resources (human and financial) matter in the adoption, implementation and further development of e-participation initiatives (Panopoulou et al., 2014; Steinbach et al., 2019). A major body of research demonstrates that a shortage of personnel responsible for the coordination and implementation of e-participation as well as insufficient resources dedicated to internal process management can hinder the implementation of e-participation (Panopoulou et al., 2011; Steinbach et al., 2019). Randma-Liiv (2023) highlights the relevance of sufficiency and stability of resources, demonstrating that financial resources tend to be allocated on an *ad hoc* basis in bottom-up e-participation platforms, potentially limiting communication, provision of feedback as well as monitoring and evaluation activities.

Methodology

A comparative case study approach is applied to explore the implementation of e-participation initiatives in the three young democracies of the Baltic States. From the pool of democratic post-communist countries, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania were selected as they share similar national-level characteristics, including historical-cultural, societal, political, and economic contexts. As demonstrated in Table 1, they also exhibit comparable levels of digitalization and share similar administrative traditions (Painter & Peters, 2010), making them suitable

Table 1. National-level information on the Baltic States.

Factor outlined in the theoretical background	Characteristics	Estonia	Latvia	Lithuania
Democratic development	Regaining of independence	1991	1991	1990
	Population, in millions (2023)	1.3	1.9	2.8
	Global Freedom Score (points) (2023)	Free/95	Free/88	Free/89
Socio-economic context	GDP per capita (euro) (2023)	15 370	13 220	14 840
	Human Development Index (points/rank) (2022)	0,899/31	0,879/37	0,879/37
Level of digitalization	E-Government Development Index (points/rank) (2022)	0,9393/8	0,8599/29	0,8745/24
	Digital Economy and Society Index (points/rank) (2022)	56,5/9	49,7/17	52,7/14
Development of civil society	Civil society participation index (2023)	0.91	0.9	0.84

Sources: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/sdg_08_10/default/table
https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/human-development-index#/indicies/HD
https://freedomhouse.org/explore-the-map?type=fiw&year=2024&country=LTU
https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/desi
https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/civil-society-participation-index?region=Europe

for comparison as most similar cases (Yin, 2018). By assuming that the national-level characteristics surrounding e-participation are similar, this study enables an exploration of the consequences of various organizational factors linked to e-participation platforms.

While existing studies typically compare similar e-participation platforms in different national contexts (Kubicek & Aichholzer, 2016), our focus is on differently implemented e-participation initiatives in similar national contexts. The criteria for case selection were the following:

(1) Cases which aimed at including citizen input into the policymaking process (rather than service delivery) on a national level.
(2) Cases which were designed for long-term or permanent collaboration and which had been in operation for at least a year.
(3) Cases which were (co)administered by a branch of government.

The following cases were chosen for the comparison: *The Estonian Citizens' Initiative Portal*, the Latvian e-participation platform *MyVoice* and the *E-Citizen* platform in Lithuania (see Table 2). All three are the main governmentally enforced national-level e-participation platforms. Although the platforms in Estonia and Latvia address both national and local government, this study focuses only on the national level.

The compared in-depth single-country case studies were based on a common analytical model and relied on information collected through document analysis and interviews. The mix of primary and secondary sources allowed an adequate level of data triangulation to be maintained, thus improving the accuracy of interpretation and analysis. Document analysis involved the exploration of the following sources: the website of the e-participation initiative, its publications and analyses; the respective laws and secondary legislation; governmental policy documents; independent reports and analyses on the platforms; and the available statistics. Triangulated with the interview data, the results of document analysis were used to describe factors outlined in the theoretical background.

Eight interviews were held in Estonia, nine in Latvia and eleven in Lithuania. The interviewees were selected on the basis of purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002) and included the following groups: the initiators of the platform, people formally involved with the maintenance and/or moderation of the platform, representatives of governmental and non-governmental partners actively involved in running the platform, policymakers who used the e-participation platform as an input in the policymaking process, and stakeholders who had been engaged in the selected platform (see Table 2 for the interviewees' distribution). The anonymous semi-structured interviews were held in the respective national languages and lasted from one to one and a half hours. All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Table 2. Characteristics of e-participation platforms selected for the case study and interviews linked to them.

State	Platform	Web	Adoption	Branch of Government	Administrative level	Number of interviews
Estonia	Estonian Citizens' Initiative Portal	https://rahvaalgatus.ee	2016	Legislative	National and local	Platform initiators and managers: 2 Politicians and policymakers: 3 Participating stakeholders: 3
Latvia	MyVoice	www.manabalss.lv	2011	Legislative	National and local	Platform initiators and managers: 3 Politicians and policymakers: 2 Participating stakeholders: 4
Lithuania	E-Citizen	https://epilietis.lrv.lt	2015	Executive	National	Platform initiators and managers: 3 Politicians and policymakers: 5 Participating stakeholders: 3

The analysis of the interviews combined deductive and inductive approaches (Bingham, 2023; Proudfoot, 2023) to develop a comprehensive understanding of actors' perspectives on the implementation of e-participation platforms in young democracies. Deductive codes were developed prior to data analysis and were informed by the theoretical background. Specifically, key concepts related to national- and organizational-level factors influencing the implementation of e-participation initiatives—such as regulations, resources, establishers and owners—were operationalized into initial coding categories. These pre-established codes guided the initial reading of the transcripts and provided a structured lens through which to interpret the data. In parallel, an inductive approach was used to identify emergent themes not captured by the initial coding scheme. This involved open coding of the transcripts to allow for the identification of national- or organizational-level characteristics influencing e-participation, which were not anticipated by the theoretical background (Bingham et al., 2022). The coding was performed manually without the use of relevant software. This decision was based on the manageable size of the interview dataset and the aim for iterative engagement with the material across the research team.

In analyzing the case studies, a classic multi-case strategy—double-step approach for content analysis—was used to provide a general understanding on how uniformity or disparity characterizes the implementation of e-participation platforms in the three countries, in contrast to focus on individuality of the single case studies (Stewart, 2012; Yin, 2018). Following the approach suggested by Stake, R. E. (2006). Multiple Case Study Analysis. New York: The Guilford Press. (2006), the analysis began with an in-depth examination of each single-case study. Its content was classified into specific themes corresponding to the factors identified in the theoretical background, resulting in three theme-based descriptions of the e-participation initiatives (implementation, national-level characteristics and their impact, organizational-level characteristics and their impact). Subsequently, a cross-case analysis was conducted to identify and examine similarities and differences across the cases.

E-participation platforms in the Baltic States

The Estonian Citizens' Initiative Portal (ECIP)

Estonia has not only managed to develop a highly functional and trusted digital government (Kattel & Mergel, 2018; Table 1), but has also a rather advanced institutional framework for public participation (Vooglaid & Randma-Liiv, 2022). Nevertheless, success in e-government and e-voting has not translated into success in e-democracy because NGOs have little experience in petitioning the government, insufficient skills for carrying out a proper campaign, and few resources to allocate to coordinated dissemination activities (Vooglaid & Randma-Liiv, 2022). In addition, policymakers tend to view citizen engagement as an activity separate from the policymaking process, and citizen participation often remains formal and superficial (Kübar & Hinsberg, 2014; Velmet, 2020).

ECIP is an e-participation initiative enabling individuals to collectively propose new ideas or changes for laws and policies to the Estonian parliament (*Riigikogu*). The platform was launched in 2016 as a collaborative effort by the Estonian Cooperation Assembly (a quasi-governmental organization affiliated with the Office of the President of Estonia), the CitizenOS Foundation (a technical provider), and the Chancellery of the *Riigikogu*. The ECIP is institutionalized through the "Response to Memoranda and Requests for Explanations and Submission of Collective Addresses Act" which stipulates that when a proposal put forth by any individual gathers 1,000 or more signatures, the parliament shall formally address the proposal. To encourage the co-creation of the final text of the proposal, the author of the initiative can only begin collecting signatures three days before submission, before which the initiative is in "forced co-editing mode." However, "not many people take advantage of this opportunity" (interview with a platform initiator and manager, EE3). The presence of digital mass-signing through the use of eIDs has provided a fast and reliable way to collect signatures and enabled the validity of the signatures to be easily checked. The parliament is legally compelled to act within 30 days of the proposal being submitted to the *Riigikogu*. Procedures for further processing initiatives are listed in the *Riigikogu* Rules of Procedure and Internal Rules Act. It is mandatory to include the author of the initiative in at least one of the sessions held on the topic. Any decision made must be forwarded as a formal response to the author of the initiative and the follow-up feed appears under the original text of the initiative within the ECIP platform.

The official proprietor of the platform is the Estonian Cooperation Assembly being responsible for securing funding, informing the public, dealing with the day-to-day moderating of the platform and technical troubleshooting. There is only one employee at the Cooperation Assembly to take care of most of these duties. According to the interview with a platform initiator and manager (EE3), "The running costs are covered by micro-donations from the ECIP users, and the personnel costs are partially covered by budget allocations from the Office of the President. Additional revenue comes from successful project proposals submitted to various foundations."

From 2016 to 2023, 343 collective addresses were co-created; out of which 136 gathered more than 1,000 signatures and were forwarded to the parliament. Altogether, 656,691 signatures were collected using the national eID system. In 2023, citizens provided 289,496 digital signatures on Rahvaalgatus.ee to support initiatives addressed to the parliament. According to the Estonian Cooperation Assembly, several environmental initiatives (e.g., hunting of birds) as well as initiatives on taxation, on pharmacy reform and on fur farms had contributed to changes in existing legislation. On several occasions Riigikogu addressed the proposed issue through nationally important deliberations, for example, on initiatives targeting the protection of disabled people, minimum wage, and exit from oil-shale energy. In some cases, the initiatives were forwarded to relevant executive authorities. Despite a few success stories, it could be argued that while ECIP has managed to initiate important discussions within Riigikogu, a great majority of the initiatives have been neglected by government authorities (interviews with stakeholders, EE1, EE7).

MyVoice in Latvia

Latvian society is characterized by comparatively limited trust in state institutions, a low level of political participation, and widespread skeptically alienated value orientation (Ņikišins et al., 2015). Similarly to the Estonian case, the Latvian government has made progress in the development of e-government and e-services as well as opening up government data (Table 1), but there have been no active state policies promoting e-participation.

MyVoice is the main e-participation platform in Latvia that emerged in 2011 in the aftermath of the global financial crisis. The platform was established and is maintained by the Civic Participation Foundation founded by private individuals. In the interview with the platform's staff, the original idea had been to make a platform for digital referendums, but after discussing with the administration of the Parliament, several politicians, social activists and civil society activists, it was decided to opt for more deliberative style solution where citizens were also involved into drafting their own legislative proposals.

The submission of collective addresses is regulated by the Rules of Procedure of the Latvian parliament *Saeima*. Once citizens have submitted their initiative to the platform, the *MyVoice* team performs a quality test on the proposed idea according to criteria such as constitutionality, legitimacy, purposefulness, concreteness and expected effectiveness with assisting volunteer experts. This is followed by a round of correspondence with the authors about necessary improvements or the rejection of the initiative. The considerations of legitimacy and transparency are relevant throughout this stage of the platform's operation. Unlike in unmoderated petition platforms, submitted citizen initiatives are filtered according to eight quality criteria by the *MyVoice* team. In case of doubt voluntary experts are consulted.

After the accepted and published initiative has gathered at least 10,000 signatures, it is submitted to the Mandate, Ethics and Submissions Commission (MESC) of the *Saeima*, which is obliged to review it within a month and invite the authors together with experts to a public hearing. The MESC transfers the initiative to the relevant commission of *Saeima* or to the relevant ministry. There is no fixed procedure for providing public feedback on policy changes.

The staff of the Civic Participation Foundation include a director, a content editor, a community editor and a part-time programmer providing day-to-day technological support. *MyVoice* does not receive direct state financing and therefore has adopted a self-financing model maintained through micro-donations by platform users and additional financing through projects from various donors. Since 2017, political parties and companies desiring to use the platform for gathering signatures and mobilizing public support have been allowed to do so for fees ranging from EUR 2000–4900.

From 2011 to 2023, *MyVoice* published over 600 citizen initiatives leading to 75 policy changes. In 2023, *MyVoice* received 344 citizen initiatives, out of which 164 (47%) were published on the portal and 38 were submitted to *Saeima*. Out of these, 8 initiatives led to legislative changes at the national level (Manabalss.lv, 2024). Altogether, about 513,866 individuals (27% of the population) have signed onto the portal at least once. Among the approved initiatives, there has been one constitutional amendment about using open voting for the president in *Saeima*. Other notable policy changes include the introduction of a drinking-bottle deposit system, the right for motorcycles to use the public transportation lane, the provision of state support for the treatment of lung cancer, hepatitis C and melanoma, automatic reimbursement of overpaid income tax, and a reduced VAT rate for certain fruits and vegetables. On several occasions, the initiatives have been held up in parliament due to lack of political support. According to interviews with policymakers (LV4, LV5), political parties on all sides of the political spectrum have come to accept the legitimacy of the platform. According to the platform's director, the more the initiatives are talked about on the media, the easier it is for it to gain the attention of the politicians and attract more signatures from the public: " … if the politicians know that the media is talking about the initiative, they will talk about it too. That's the golden rule of political communication."

E-Citizen platform in Lithuania

A legalistic approach is dominant in the Lithuanian public administration (Bortkevičiūtė & Nakrošis, 2022). The need for citizen participation is reflected in strategic documents and legislation, and is broadly supported by decision-makers. However, a lack of trust across sectoral boundaries, deep-rooted stereotypes, and insufficient capacity—both to engage citizens and to participate in policymaking—persist (Šiugždinienė et al., 2019). Lithuania performs well above the European average in open data and the number of people using digital public services (Table 1).

Launched in 2015 as part of the internet gateway to the Government of the Republic of Lithuania "My Government," the *E-Citizen* platform offers a space for dialogue between government and society. While the Law on Legislative Framework (2022) states that public consultations should be timely, focused on substantive issues and proportionate, they are not mandatory for public authorities, their results are not legally binding, and the role of *E-Citizen* in this process is not clarified. However, an obligation for ministries to consult on the platform while drafting higher impact legislation was set out by the Office of the Government in June 2021, while in 2022 the use of public consultations was incorporated in the Government Work Regulation: "the mandatory consultations on the Legislation Information System were announced at very late stages of policymaking; therefore, we aimed to encourage the use of *E-Citizen* for an earlier stakeholder engagement" (interview with a platform initiator and manager, LT1). It is recommended that public consultations contain information on their organizer, expiry date, the subject matter of the consultation and its aims, stakeholders, method(s), information on the use of contributions and results of the consultation.

The Open Government division within the Office of Government is in charge of the *E-Citizen* platform. Launched as a part of the project "Open Government Initiatives," after its end in late 2022 the platform has been financed from the state budget. Currently two employees are responsible for the facilitation of public (online) consultation across the Lithuanian public sector. Although three ministries have declared the use of consultations in their Work Regulations (as of December 2023), no employees were officially assigned to the implementation of this practice. The technical maintenance of the *E-Citizen* platform lies within the responsibility of the State Digital Solutions Agency under the Ministry of Economy and Innovation and is financed from the state budget.

From 2015 to 2023, there have been a total of 230 online and hybrid public consultations. Although the number of consultations steadily increased until 2021 (66 consultations per year), recent years have shown a downward trend (46 consultations in 2022, 32 in 2023). While the Office of Government was the most frequent user of E-Citizen until 2020 (46.3% of consultations), the number of participating ministries has progressively increased, with all Lithuanian ministries having organized at least one consultation on E-Citizen. 43.5% of online consultations were based on calls for comments and suggestions, 22.2% employed surveys, 19.5% used mixed methods, while the rest used other methods (e.g., public hearings, roundtable discussions), mostly contributing to agenda setting and policy formulation.

The participation rate has significantly varied among the consultations, ranging from zero to a few thousand. Results were published for slightly more than a third of the consultations (36%). Limited provision of feedback has made it difficult to evaluate the possible impact of public online consultations, but the interview findings point to a rather sporadic take-up of contributions: "there were talks that this tool could be very useful, but they never materialized" (interview with a policymaker, LT2).

Comparative findings

The three selected e-participation initiatives show a number of similarities and differences allowing to address RQ1.

Similarities

Table 3 summarizes the similarities of the e-participation platforms in the three selected countries.

In all the Baltic States, the platforms have broadened the channels of participation and citizen mobilization, thus affecting the degree of participation in terms of the number of participatory processes. All platforms address the agenda setting and policy formulation stages of the policy cycle. There is evidence of the use of e-participation platforms having some impact on policies. Latvia has been able to create the most significant

Table 3. Similarities of the selected e-participation platforms in the Baltic States.

Characteristics of platforms	*Estonian Citizens' Initiative Portal*	*MyVoice, Latvia*	*E-Citizen, Lithuania*
Stage of the policy cycle	Agenda setting, policy formulation	Agenda setting, policy formulation	Agenda setting, policy formulation
Impact on policies	Occasional, limited	Occasional, modest	Occasional, limited
Participation level	Consult/involve	Consult/involve	Inform/consult
Feedback to citizens	Mandatory written feedback, publicly available	Mandatory written feedback, publicly available	Optional written feedback, publicly available in some cases
Resources	State financing + micro-donations + project funding; insufficient staffing	Micro-donations + project funding; insufficient staffing	State financing; insufficient staffing

policy impact, including a constitutional change initiated through e-participation. In all three countries however, there are substantially more examples where e-initiatives did not result in any policy change. For instance, in the Lithuanian case, stakeholders' contributions were poorly integrated into the development of forest policy, while an extremely popular consultation on selecting a monument for one of Vilnius's central squares resulted in no monument being built at all. On the Estonian platform, the most popular petition—opposing a proposed car tax and gathering over 65.000 signatures—was turned down by the Parliament.

The level of participation on the inform-consult-involve-collaborate-empower continuum has remained at a rather modest level in all cases. The Lithuanian platform is the least ambitious as the participation level is "inform" or "consult," meaning that the government's ambition is predominantly to keep citizens informed, to listen to them and to acknowledge their concerns, rather than truly involve them in decision-making: "when the consultation is announced on *E-Citizen*, the draft law is already at a stage where only cosmetic changes can be made" (interview with a participating stakeholder, LT3). The level of participation is somewhat higher in the Estonian and Latvian cases; however, it remains on the "consult"/"involve" level rather than targeting shared decision-making.

In all the Baltic States, the cases highlight the problematic follow-up phase. Citizen initiatives often end up in the complex system of various government organizations, where broader issues related to policy coordination and impact assessment come into play. The Lithuanian case demonstrates more pronounced issues with providing feedback. Due to limited human resources assigned to this task, it is often perceived within ministries as an additional burden with no clearly designated responsibility. As the provision of feedback is not mandatory, public feedback is only occasionally made available.

The limited policy impact and issues related to transparency and feedback can be traced back to the low level of organizational capability of the platforms. The staff responsible for e-participation and the resources available are very limited in all countries. Whereas the Lithuanian platform enjoys stable funding from the public budget, the Estonian and Latvian platforms are financially less secure due to their private/mixed ownership leading to income coming mostly from micro-donations and projects.

Differences

Table 4 summarizes the differences in e-participation platforms in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.

Table 4. Differences in the selected e-participation platforms in the Baltic States.

Characteristics of platforms	*Estonian Citizens' Initiative Portal*	*MyVoice, Latvia*	*E-Citizen, Lithuania*
Establishment	Mixed	Bottom-up by the civil society	Top-down by the government
Owner of the platform	A quasi-governmental organization	A private civil society organization	The Office of the Government
Initiator of the participatory process	Citizens	Citizens	Government authorities
Regulation/ formalization	High: Collective Addresses Act, Riigikogu Rules of Procedure and Internal Rules Act	Moderate: Rules of Procedure of the *Saeima*	Low: decision of the inter-institutional meeting organized by the Office of the Government, Work Regulations of ministries and the Government
Voluntary/mandatory consideration by government	Mandatory	Mandatory	Voluntary
Participation threshold	1,000 signatures	10,000 signatures	No
Mediation of proposals	No	Yes	No

The establishment of the e-participation platforms provides mixed evidence in the three Baltic States. The Lithuanian platform has been developed in a top-down manner by the government, resulting in full government ownership. The Latvian case is an example of a bottom-up inception of the platform and its non-governmental status, while the establishment and ownership of the Estonian platform are quasi-governmental. The organizational design of the Latvian and Estonian initiatives has set the tone for these platforms to be more in line with bottom-up values rather than top-down decision-making. The governmental ownership of the Lithuanian platform ensures funding and stability on the one hand, but on the other, it increases the distance from citizens. Combined with a lack of targeted communication, this results in limited public awareness and use of the participation channel: "We could use *E-Citizen* as the main tool for consultations if it was fully functional and widely known, but it is not" (interview with a policymaker, LT2).

Paradoxically, the more bottom-up platforms—those in Estonia and Latvia—appear to be more formalized and institutionalized than the Lithuanian one. The throughput legitimacy of the Estonian platform is noteworthy, as it is backed by a detailed legal framework that makes it legally binding. While the Latvian platform is less institutionalized, the Rules of Procedure of the *Saeima* provide for mandatory consideration of proposals exceeding the required threshold. In contrast, despite being a top-down initiative, the Lithuanian e-participation platform lacks institutionalization and grants significant autonomy to individual institutions in deciding whether and how to use the *E-Citizen* platform.

While the design of the Lithuanian platform offers no opportunity for vote-collection and thus does not have any thresholds, both the Estonian and Latvian governments make use of formally set thresholds. Despite the two countries having a similar population, the Latvian threshold is ten times higher than the Estonian.

Whereas the Estonian and Lithuanian authorities handle citizen proposals in the form in which they are submitted, the Latvian platform is mediated by the organization running the *MyVoice* platform. On the one hand, the mediation process ensures quality checks on incoming citizen initiatives and provides assistance to grass-root activists. The platform's content manager and the network of external experts play an active role in verifying incoming initiatives and ensuring that the statements made in citizen initiatives are verifiable. In a context of a modestly developed civil society, such mediation may be beneficial for less experienced NGOs and citizen groups. On the other hand, the filtering and editorial processes are not fully transparent and are sometimes perceived as controversial (e.g., the names of experts are kept confidential).

Discussion

This comparative study of e-participation platforms in the Baltic States shows that while a variety of organizational characteristics surround e-participation initiatives, broader national-level factors of young democracies tend to have stronger impact on shaping their actual implementation (RQ2). Despite the different organizational-level choices made by the three Baltic governments, the outcomes of their digital engagement processes indicate that, although the numbers of participatory processes and participants in those have increased, the use of e-participation platforms has had a rather modest impact on policies.

The study of the Baltic States demonstrates that young democracies with limited (offline) citizen engagement practices can hardly bring themselves to achieve compelling levels of e-participation even in the context of high-level digitalization. Digitalization does not automatically foster civil participation, nor does it grant good governance. The cases in the Baltic States indicate that digital tools tend to reinforce rather than substantially change existing patterns of governance. The study confirms the previous findings (e.g., Jho & Song, 2015; Panopoulou et al., 2014; Secinaro et al., 2021) that the use of the Internet and digital technologies alone is insufficient to enhance citizen engagement or to redefine roles and relationships in the work processes of government institutions.

E-participation platforms would benefit from the backing of those politicians and senior officials who hold the power to enact institutional change. Research demonstrates that the extent to which citizen engagement outcomes are reflected in policy depends heavily on political leaders' understanding of the process and the role they assign to citizen participation in policy-making and, more broadly, in democratic governance (Rafique et al., 2021). Instead of trying to embed new participatory ambitions into innovative governance arrangements enabled by digital technologies, all three Baltic countries focused on enhancing existing policy frameworks and institutions through the use of new digital tools. The participation level never went beyond inform/consult/involve in order to avoid any political ruptures. Consequently, the development of e-participation initiatives did not instigate a shift from passively inclusive states to actively inclusive ones, where governments identify and proactively integrate social movements and interests into the political system (Dryzek &

Tucker, 2008). Although the Baltic governments expressed support for e-participation in their public discourse and introduced new decisions and regulations to promote it, their actions remained rather cautious. They developed only limited organizational capabilities and did not push for actual change in participatory practices. The limited change toward deeper forms of e-participation was, thus, strongly shaped by the dominant national governance logic.

Yet another concern in the Baltic States relates to the limited capacity of civil society to substantially influence the processes of policymaking. While in several countries (e.g., Taiwan, Tseng, 2022) and cities (e.g., Madrid, Pina et al., 2022; Barcelona; Cardullo, 2020), the shift toward e-participation has emerged from strong social movements and active mass responses to various crises, no similar tendency occurred in the Baltic countries. Although in both Estonia and Latvia societal movements were involved, the e-participation cases studied never relied upon true mass-movements and have, by and large, remained projects of a limited number of civic activists. Moreover, the Baltic cases demonstrate that many NGOs that might potentially benefit from the opportunity presented by e-participation have little experience in petitioning the government, insufficient skills for carrying out a campaign and few resources to allocate to coordinated dissemination activities. The lack of experience in mass civic movements combined with the low capacity of NGOs might be an important factor explaining the similar outcomes in all three countries notwithstanding the institutional differences in e-participation.

Although national-level characteristics are key for e-participation success, they are very difficult to alter, especially in countries which have recently gone through regime change. At the same time, it would be more feasible to address organizational factors. The variety of organizational solutions employed in the Baltic States enables these young democracies to *learn further lessons* (RQ3).

First, the level of institutionalization of the participatory process matters. A high level of formalization obtained through entrenching e-participation either in legislation or in the organization's standard operating procedures should increase throughput legitimacy and ensure the predictability and transparency of the participatory process. Formalization ensures that the way citizen proposals are formed and handled by the government is transparent and independent of the individual discretion of decision-makers. This is particularly relevant for young democracies where political and administrative cultures can be unsupportive or selective toward bottom-up initiatives. The predominant legalistic culture in the Baltic public administrations, combined with modestly developed civil societies, implies that legally binding participation is more likely to succeed than less formalized participatory tools.

Second, transparency is not only an important target, but also a driver of e-participation (e.g., Wirtz et al., 2018). Citizens are keen to know the results of their public engagement, the progress of the projects already approved, or the cancellation of debates and proposals. Especially when citizens do not get what they asked for, it is imperative that the decision-making process is at least as transparent as possible. Otherwise, any negative decision regarding an initiative may have a corrosive effect on trust not only in the specific e-participation platform but also in participatory democracy in general. A lack of transparency makes it difficult to legitimize e-participation initiatives and may also discourage citizens from engaging in future policymaking processes. Government agencies need to build organizational capacity to facilitate online discussions and provide professional feedback to citizens.

Third, the vote threshold required for e-participation proposals to be considered by the government is critically important for the effective citizen engagement. An excessively high threshold might be complicated to achieve, especially in young democracies that lack a tradition of well-institutionalized and capable NGOs and advocacy organizations. In the context of a modestly developed civil society, a high threshold of votes may be detrimental to the capabilities of NGOs in mobilizing their supporters and communicating their agenda on a broader scale. A high threshold—especially evident in the Latvian case—may result in both initiators and supporters of a proposal feeling they are "wasting their time," potentially resulting in disengagement and eventual abandonment of the platform.

Fourth, the cases demonstrate that resource-dependence is an important pre-condition for e-participation initiatives. The e-participation platforms studied are very lightweight in terms of financial and personnel resources. In particular, those cases where the initiatives have been established bottom-up (in Estonia and Latvia) are marked by a shortage of financial resources. In a similar vein, less institutionalized platforms (in Lithuania) are endangered, as they are more dependent on (potentially unstable) political and top management support. The Baltic cases indicate that lack of resources may prevent extra staff from being hired or lead to insufficient attention being paid to certain functions such as platform promotion or providing feedback to citizens. E-participation platforms cannot be taken as one-off campaigns by government. They need to be backed by sufficient coverage of running costs and investment in their further development.

Finally, the level of participation on the inform-consult-involve-collaborate-empower continuum (Nabatchi, 2012) is a key characteristic of the quality of e-participation. The collaborative and empowerment modes of participation are the most difficult for governments to achieve, since they involve changing existing power dynamics, which is decidedly more complex. This is the main e-participation challenge for young democracies where, as the Baltic cases show, the governments' ambition is predominantly to keep citizens informed, to listen to them and to acknowledge their concerns, rather than truly involve them in decision-making. In order to fully benefit from e-participation initiatives, there is a need to systematically target interactive dialogue and higher levels of participation to ensure that citizen recommendations are incorporated into decisions.

Conclusion

From this study of e-participation in the Baltic States, it may be concluded that e-participation is fraught with many of the same pitfalls as traditional offline democratic participatory practices in young democracies. Although there is a tendency to expect technology to transform organizations and processes, the use of digital technology is, in fact, no more than a potential enabler of institutional change. The three young democracies studied provided no evidence of e-participation leading to systemic change in terms of policymaking or state-society relationships. It was observed that existing e-participation tools have not been developed to their full potential and functionality in order to contribute to an open dialogue between the public sector and different stakeholders. Putting a digital solution in place does not of itself lead to fundamental change in the policymaking process. If there is no political will to change the state-citizen relationships, no organized pressure from civil society and insufficient administrative capabilities, digital technology will simply leverage the existing political and administrative rationales.

E-participation platforms are still relatively new instruments and, as the selected case studies show, there are a variety of organizational approaches in their administration, showing no isomorphism or convergence toward optimal institutional design. Therefore, it is expected that the development of e-participation initiatives is a living process grounded on continuous innovation, learning and adaptation based on performance information. However, the Baltic case studies show that there are no specific performance indicators in place. This is also the main shortcoming of the study; it does not allow links to be drawn between the organizational factors and the actual performance of e-participation initiatives. While offering valuable conclusions about the implementation of e-participation in the Baltic States, this study carries limitations typical of qualitative research, such as the context-specific nature of its findings. Given the exploratory nature of the research, it does not aim for generalizability (Gerring, 2017; Seawright & Gerring, 2008). Therefore, although the findings cannot be directly applied to other young democracies in Central and Eastern Europe, they may serve as a basis for further testing in those contexts.

Given that digitalization is considered one of the "mega-trends" in public administration (Christensen & Lægreid, 2025), future research should further examine institutional, organizational, and individual factors, navigating between traditional administrative practices and adaptive processes relevant to the e-participation implementation. Moreover, while this study focused on a specific form of e-participation—namely, citizen initiatives and public engagement administered by public organizations—future studies could compare the implementation of other types of e-participation. These might include online discussion forums, legislation wikis, online complaint systems, crowdsourcing platforms, and one-stop participation portals aimed at service delivery rather than policymaking. Furthermore, while our study identified similarities and differences in the implementation of e-participation, it did not go in depth in capturing the feedback loop of participation—either from the perspective of citizens or public administration. Future research should also broaden existing knowledge by addressing questions concerning the role of leadership, the roles and capacity of politicians, top civil servants and other influential actors to influence and govern the complex implementation process of digital democracy. While this study focused on specific kind of e-participation (citizen initiatives and public engagement administered by public organizations), further studies could explore different types of e-participation in young democracies, such as online discussion forums, legislation wikis, online complaint systems, crowdsourcing platforms, and one-stop participation portals targeting service delivery rather than policymaking. Finally, future research could also empirically explore if "the proximity principle" (M. Meijer et al., 2015) is also present in young democracies, implying that citizen engagement has more potential for high participation rates on the local, rather than national, level due to more down-to-earth topics which people may relate to more easily, and because of closer interaction with citizens which may take place not only formally but also informally.

Author contributions

CRediT: **Tiina Randma-Liiv:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Rasa Bortkevičiūtė:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Veiko Lember:** Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft; **Visvaldis Valtenbergs:** Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Vitalis Nakrosis:** Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing – original draft.

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ORCID

Tiina Randma-Liiv http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1146-3425
Rasa Bortkevičiūtė http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5660-0617
Veiko Lember http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1730-1830
Visvaldis Valtenbergs http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6276-7475
Vitalis Nakrosis http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3841-6442

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The participants of this study did not give written consent for their data to be shared publicly. Data are not publicly available due to containing information that could compromise the privacy of interviewees.

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

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'Simply by collaborating'? The impact of public and nongovernmental sectors collaboration experience on its institutionalization in the Lithuanian crisis management system

Rasa Bortkevičiūtė

Institute of International Relations and Political Science, Vilnius University, Vilnius, Lithuania

Correspondence
Rasa Bortkevičiūtė, Institute of International Relations and Political Science, Vilnius University, Vokiečių str. 10, Vilnius LT-01130, Lithuania.
Email: rasa.bortkeviciute@tspmi.vu.lt

Abstract

Despite some evidence that the experience of collaboration contributes to its institutionalization in the crisis management system, the mechanisms behind this process remain unclear. Building on existing research, we distinguish six building blocks (i.e., pressure to collaborate, clarity of roles, mutual trust, leadership, positive feedback and learning) that influence the institutionalization of collaborative crisis management. By applying theory-building process tracing to the Lithuanian COVID-19 and irregular migration crises management, we analyse the interplay on these factors to derive the following propositions: (1) when crisis management involves partners with limited collaborative experience, both transformational and boundary spanning leadership are critical at different stages to institutionalize collaboration; (2) the clarification of roles, provision of positive feedback and the subsequent growth of trust experienced by partners engaged in collaborative activities contribute to the informal institutionalization of collaborative crisis management; (3) positive feedback on previous collaborative experience facilitates learning within the crisis management system and, when supported by the efforts of transformational leaders, leads to the formal institutionalization of collaborative crisis management. These propositions demonstrate how collaborative approaches can be fostered to deal with future crises as well as raise the question on the balance between formal and informal institutionalization of these practices.

KEYWORDS
collaborative crisis management, COVID-19, crisis management, institutionalization, Lithuania, NGOs

1 | INTRODUCTION

The sudden occurrence of such multi-faceted crises as COVID-19 confronts public administrations with unanticipated problems that go beyond routine management procedures. Simultaneously, various solidarity initiatives led by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) usually emerge in response to these crises, providing relief to the affected population (e.g., Boonstra et al., 2022). Pooling cross-sectoral resources, skills and capabilities through collaborative crisis management has been increasingly seen as the preferred strategy to deal with complex challenges (Boin et al., 2021; Bynander & Nohrstedt, 2019; Nohrstedt et al., 2018).

Collaboration is a cyclical and dynamic process. It links the conditions of operation (e.g., legal framework) with the outputs and outcomes of collaboration, which directly feedback into the broader context. In other words, while the collaboration is shaped by contextual features, it may also impact the context through such outcomes as adaptation of services or new institutions for addressing public problems (Emerson et al., 2012; Innes & Booher, 1999). This, in turn, allows expecting that cross-sectoral collaborative efforts in times of crises could lead to the institutionalization of this practice within the crisis management system. If collaborative ties are indeed strengthened 'simply by collaborating' (Imperial et al., 2016, 142), the previous experience of collective action might be of great relevance in building the public institutions' capacity to deal with unprecedented crises.

However, despite some evidence that the experience of collective action contributes to further cross-sectoral collaboration in the crisis management system (Kapucu, 2006), the mechanisms behind this process remain unclear. While some authors analyse the temporal development of collaborative arrangements (Imperial et al., 2016; Ulibarri et al., 2020), studies focusing on the causal relation between the processes and outputs or outcomes of collaboration are extremely rare (e.g., Avoyan, 2022). It is especially the case in the field of crisis management, where the collaborative activities during a particular stage of crisis (e.g., Nohrstedt & Bodin, 2014), conditions fostering cross-sectoral collaboration (e.g., Hermansson, 2019) or learning of individual organizations (e.g., Broekema et al., 2017) are usually analysed.

Responding to the call for a more detailed analysis of the outcomes produced by collaborative arrangements (Bianchi et al., 2021; Rogers & Weber, 2010), we aim to explain *how the previous experience of partners involved in collaborative crisis management leads to the institutionalization of this process in the crisis management system*. Here, we perceive the institutionalization as formalization and/or internalization of collaborative crisis management (Siddiki et al., 2022). By linking the literatures on collaborative governance, collaborative crisis management and new institutionalism (e.g., Nohrstedt et al., 2018; Parker et al., 2020; Torfing, 2009), we distinguish six building blocks (i.e., pressure to collaborate, clarity of roles, mutual trust, leadership, positive feedback and learning) that shape the relation between the previous experience and the institutionalization of collaborative responses to crises.

As the COVID-19 pandemic 'came creeping and kept returning in yet another guise' (Boin et al., 2020, 119), the interval between the recurring peaks of the crisis became extremely short, highlighting the significance of prior experience of collaboration. Furthermore, in Lithuania, the COVID-19 crisis coincided with the emergence of an irregular migration crisis along the Lithuania–Belarus border. Starting as a country with a poorly institutionalized role of NGOs in the crisis management system, Lithuania adopted a new integral crisis management model in 2022, acknowledging the role of NGOs in handling emergencies. By applying theory-building process tracing to the case of collaboration with NGOs in the Lithuanian crisis management system, we develop propositions on how the previous collaborative experience affect the institutionalization of collaborative crisis management.

The paper is structured as follows. The first section sets out our theoretical approach. The second section is dedicated to the methodology, followed by the results of the empirical analysis and propositions on what mechanisms link the previous experience to the institutionalization of collaborative crisis management. The final section presents concluding remarks.

2 | THEORETICAL APPROACH

2.1 | Collaboration with NGOs in times of crisis

Crisis management involves a variety of organizations, which all have their own cultures, aims and a varying experience in both crisis response and collaboration. At the same time, it is a collaborative activity requiring efforts across organizational and sectoral boundaries to deal with emergent events. It was noticed that even without being officially included in the crisis management system, NGOs are usually among the first responders (Kapucu, 2006) and their participation remains active throughout different phases of crisis (Parker et al., 2020). Furthermore, the involvement of NGOs in crisis management was identified a 'necessary but insufficient condition' for an effective response (Hermansson, 2019, 1054).

NGOs play a dual role in crisis management, acting as intermediaries between civil society and public institutions as well as providing timely resources and services relevant for the response to crisis-related challenges. First, NGOs have expert knowledge of the needs of the communities they serve and can thus advocate for better policies and emergency management procedures (Gazley & Brudney, 2007). Second, nongovernmental actors are more flexible than public institutions, allowing for the provision of creative and swift solutions to such urgent problems as natural disasters, terrorist attacks and, most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic (Boonstra et al., 2022; Comfort, 2007). Therefore, while using the term 'collaborative crisis management', in this paper we refer to the collaboration between public and nongovernmental sector in times of crises.

The research suggests that in case of a lack of prior collaborative experience, collective action is unlikely to be established under conditions of stress, urgency and uncertainty (Kapucu et al., 2010), when decision-makers try to avoid even greater ambiguity (Helsloot, 2008). However, empirical evidence demonstrates that once established, the cross-sectoral collaboration might be further strengthened. For instance, Unlu et al. (2010) found that NGOs' performance during the emergency response encouraged the Turkish government to regulate their role in the crisis management system.

2.2 | The relevance of previous experience and the institutionalization of collaborative crisis management

The most referred frameworks of collaborative governance indicate that collaboration is dependent on the prehistory of relations between actors (Ansell & Gash, 2008), the levels of conflict or trust (Emerson et al., 2012) as well as prior relationships or existing networks within the system (Bryson et al., 2006). The experience of collective action incrementally reveals the trustworthiness of partners and contributes to the strengthening of collaborative capacity: 'the more partners have interacted in positive ways in the past, the more social mechanisms will enable coordination and safeguard exchanges' (Bryson et al., 2006, 46). This understanding supports the cyclical approach towards collaboration, stating that the outcomes of collective action reshape the incentives and the capacity for future partnerships (Emerson et al., 2012; Innes & Booher, 1999).

Empirical examples also confirm the relevance of the previous collective action experience. In the United States, communities with strong collaborative patterns in routine environments demonstrated better functioning during disasters and a higher likelihood of future collaboration (Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015; Kapucu, 2006). Building on the Dutch case analysis, Scholtens (2008) suggests that collaboration during the crisis response can be only achieved through successful cooperation in the preparatory phase. Similarly, in Sweden, the continuous interaction among the same actors was found to enhance their ability to collaborate amidst uncertainty and urgency (Nohrstedt & Bodin, 2014). Taken together, these examples reveal a link between collaborative experience and the informal institutionalization of this practice.

Building on the ideas of new institutionalism, the decision to collaborate with NGOs during crisis management depends on the institutionalized perceptions of a problem, possible solutions to it as well as their costs and benefits (Torfing, 2009). Institutions, whether formal (such as laws) or informal (such as norms), are 'a relatively enduring collection of rules and organized practices', conveying information about what actors are permitted, required, or prohibited to do within certain contexts (Olsen, 2009, 9; Siddiki et al., 2022). The rules can change due to endogenous and exogenous factors, allowing to consider the institutionalization of collaborative crisis management as a by-product of the previous experience of collaboration (Siddiki et al., 2022). In other words, the experience of collective action may alter informal institutions, which might result in the changes of the formal ones or, on contrary, the previous experience might facilitate the change of formal rules which will require adjustment of the informal ones.

We approach the institutionalization as a continuum (Torfing et al., 2012), meaning that the level of institutionalization of collaborative crisis management might vary. To assign a certain level of it, we build on the concept of rules, proposed by Ostrom (2011). Out of seven types of rules, we focus on the three that are the most suitable for the context of collaboration. *Position* rules establish positions to be filled with individual or collective actors. *Boundary* rules affect the number of participants, their attributes and resources by specifying how actors enter or leave particular positions. Finally, *choice* rules clarify actions that are assigned or expected to be fulfilled by actors in particular positions (Dunlop et al., 2022; Ostrom, 2011). Their application in the crisis management system is summarized in Table 1.

We distinguish between three levels of institutionalization of collaboration with NGOs in the crisis management system, namely, *low*, *moderate* and *high*. We treat the level of institutionalization as *low* when none of the above-mentioned arrangements or only the formal ones are observed. We assign the *moderate* level, when only informal arrangements or one informal arrangement supported by a formal arrangement is observed. Finally, we treat the collaboration as *highly* institutionalized, when two or three informal arrangements, supported by the formal ones, are observed.

2.3 | Building blocks: What links previous collaborative experience with its institutionalization?

To explain the mechanisms linking the previous experience of collective action and the institutionalization of collaborative crisis management, we identify six factors discussed in the literature on collaborative governance, collaborative crisis management and new institutionalism.

2.3.1 | Pressure to collaborate

Turbulent events serve as drivers for collaborative action (Emerson et al., 2012; Nohrstedt et al., 2018). Crises increase the need for information exchange, rapid decision-making and resources for the implementation. One strategy for dealing with these events is

TABLE 1 Rules and arrangements guiding collaboration with NGOs in the crisis management system.

Rule	Application in the crisis management system: Formal arrangements	Informal arrangements
Position	Representative(s) of NGOs have formally assigned positions in crisis management bodies	Representative(s) of NGOs are involved in crisis management bodies
Boundary	There is a formally defined mechanism of collaboration with NGOs in times of crises (coordination of NGOs engagement)	Public institutions perceive NGOs as legitimate partners and engage them in crisis management based on the needs of a particular crisis
Choice	The responsibilities of NGOs in the crisis management system are defined in legal documents	The responsibilities of NGOs in crisis management are collaboratively agreed on with public institutions

Abbreviation: NGOs, nongovernmental organizations.

through pooling and sharing resources, including financial and technical assistance, expertise and information as well as logistical and administrative support across different sectors (Bryson et al., 2006; Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015). Moreover, emergencies might push institutions to 'fail' into collaboration, when they are not able to achieve their aims individually (Sørensen & Torfing, 2021, 1591).

2.3.2 | Clarity of roles

A major challenge to cross-sectoral collaboration in times of crisis is the clarification of capacities of different actors and, therefore, the roles they would be able to perform. Collaborative activities provide knowledge about other organizations' missions, structures, styles of operation and resources (Nohrstedt & Bodin, 2014). In turn, they contribute to clarifying the capacities of the partners involved thus facilitating the establishment of structures, routines and joint mechanisms in crisis management system (Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015). Without a clear role in crisis management, NGOs might be treated 'as impediments rather than possible emergency response resources' (Helsloot, 2008, 174).

2.3.3 | Mutual trust

Collaborative crisis management involves significant costs in terms of time, money and energy (Nohrstedt et al., 2018). It therefore requires a certain level of mutual trust, which is closely related with expectations of the other parties' abilities, goodwill and the stability of their intentions (Edelenbos & Klijn, 2007). Partners often judge the trustworthiness and legitimacy of each other based on prior collaborative experience (Bryson et al., 2006; Emerson et al., 2012). Therefore, the more positive shared experience stakeholders have, the more they trust each other and are willing to commit to collaboration (Kapucu, 2006). In the long run, trust enables partners to go beyond their own institutional frames of reference towards understanding systemic needs, values and constraints (Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015).

2.3.4 | Leadership

The role of leaders is essential for facilitating and coordinating intersectoral responses (Emerson et al., 2012; Moynihan, 2020). Among various types of leadership outlined in the research, we focus on transformational and boundary spanning leadership. The transformational leadership is relevant regarding the mobilization for a collective action, the empowerment of actors as well as raising awareness and support within the crisis management system (Boonstra et al., 2022). Meanwhile, as boundary spanners understand the interests of various actors, they can overcome divergent values, traditions or even vocabularies (Kalkman, 2020; van Meerkerk & Edelenbos, 2018). In a crisis situation, boundary spanners contribute to merging conflicting problem definitions and supporting sense-making, which can enhance trust among actors, facilitate reflection and feedback that result in a collective knowledge (van Meerkerk & Edelenbos, 2018; Moynihan, 2020).

2.3.5 | Positive feedback

Positive feedback stems from key participants supporting the results of the collaborative arrangements, that is, whether the participants perceive them as meaningful, particularly against the balance of time and energy that collaboration requires (Ansell & Gash, 2008). Incentives to collaborate increase as stakeholders see concrete, tangible and effectual policy outcomes. However, collaborative activities have both direct and indirect results, such as mutual learning, changes in practices and perceptions, the emergence of new collaboration and improved relations among partners (Innes & Booher, 1999). Therefore, once established, the outcomes of collaboration may trigger positive feedback mechanisms that could reinforce the recurrence of these activities (Olsen, 2009).

2.3.6 | Learning

As organizations from different sectors bring varying knowledge, backgrounds and interests to the process of crisis management, it is important to overcome competing institutional logics and to reveal what the benefits of collaboration are. This can be achieved through organizational learning—a process of organizational evolution and transformation taking place by acquiring knowledge and integrating it into usual decision-making practices (Eriksson & Hallberg, 2022). Learning usually results from facing recurring similar crises that gradually lead to changes in prevailing beliefs (Broekema et al., 2017). Its presence may be indicated both by processes (e.g., tools, work plans) and products (e.g., policies, standards) (Gerlak & Heikkila, 2011).

3 | METHODOLOGY

3.1 | The case

The collaboration between public and nongovernmental sectors while dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic and the irregular migration crisis in Lithuania was selected as the case for the analysis. First, in terms of response to COVID-19 and its management, Lithuania is a typical case among the Central and Eastern European countries. Second, Lithuania experienced a gradual institutionalization of collaborative crisis management throughout the period of analysis, ensuring that both independent and dependent variables as well as each of the factors plausibly relevant for the mechanism are present (Beach & Pedersen, 2019). Finally, the current research on collaborative crisis management is strongly focused on North America, lacking a more in-depth analysis of this process in different contexts (Bianchi et al., 2021; Bynander & Nohrstedt, 2019). Taken together, this makes the Lithuanian case suitable for explaining how the previous experience of cross-sectoral collaboration links to its institutionalization in the crisis management system.

For the purposes of the analysis, the entire period (2020–2021) is divided in the precrisis context and three stages of crisis management:

1. Precrisis collaboration: a brief overview of the collaboration trends prevailing before the outbreak of COVID-19.
2. First stage (February to mid-December 2020): the initial period of the COVID-19 crisis management, led by the government of Saulius Skvernelis.
3. Second stage (mid-December 2020 to May 2021): the subsequent period of the COVID-19 crisis management, led by the government of Ingrida Šimonytė.
4. Third stage (May to December 2021): the dual management of the COVID-19 pandemic and the irregular migration crisis.

Our object of analysis is the institutionalization of collaboration between NGOs and public institutions in the Lithuanian crisis management system. When defining collaboration, we treat it as 'the processes and structures of public policy decision-making and management that engage people constructively across the boundaries of public agencies, levels of government and/or the public, private and civic spheres to carry out a public purpose that could not otherwise be accomplished' (Emerson et al., 2012, 3). However, we only focus on the existence of collaborative ties between public institutions and NGOs, without analysing the level of their engagement. Finally, although we acknowledge that the crisis management system is a 'constantly changing system-of-systems' (Eriksson & Hallberg, 2022, 4), we adopt a narrower perspective by limiting our analysis to the central decision-making institutions.

3.2 | Process tracing

We employed theory-building process tracing as the main research method to capture 'causal mechanisms in action' (Bennett & Checkel, 2014, 9) through close-up analysis within a single case. This type of process tracing fits our research as there is evidence of causality between the cause and the outcome, but the linking mechanisms remain unknown (X-Y-centric theory building; Beach & Pedersen, 2019). Building on Beach and Pedersen (2019), we aimed to uncover these mechanisms through the following three steps.

First, we conducted a literature review to identify the main factors that potentially shape the relation between previous collaborative experience and its institutionalization. This provided us with a preliminary structure for the empirical analysis. Then, relying on the interview data and publicly available information, we constructed an empirical narrative of the Lithuanian case, tracing how different building blocks fit together, resulting in different levels of institutionalization of collaboration in the crisis management system. This allowed us to identify systemic patterns associated with the presence of causal mechanisms. Finally, we combined the patterns inferred from the empirical evidence with the explanations derived from existing research to develop causal mechanisms that link prior collaborative experience with its institutionalization. This reflects the combination of inductive and deductive approaches, typical in process tracing studies (Trampusch & Palier, 2016). Despite being described as linear, the analysis was conducted in an iterative manner, continuously switching between the second and third steps to develop propositions on the underlying causal mechanisms, which is 'very similar to abductive analysis' (Beach & Pedersen, 2019, 277).

3.3 | Interviews and publicly available information

Due to the length of the COVID-19 crisis, a combination of serial and one-off semistructured interviews was employed to inform the process tracing. Through multiple rounds of interviews with the same person, different facets of the participant's experience over time were explored, and the relevance of different settings revealed (Read, 2018). In addition, one-off interviews were carried out with actors whose contribution was mostly relevant to a particular period of crisis management. In all, 16 interviews (presented in Table 2) were conducted between September 2020 and December 2021. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed literally. A coding scheme was developed, covering the building blocks as the initial categories of topics. During the coding process, this scheme was supplemented with topics arising from the interviews.

Furthermore, to counter the potential biases of the interviewees (von Soest, 2023) and cross-check the narrative constructed for the development of causal mechanisms (Bennett & Checkel, 2012), we triangulated data sources by additionally analysing publicly available information. This entailed reviewing the minutes of meetings of the Working Group of NGO experts (16 meetings, from December 19, 2020 to June 12, 2021),[1] the publications on cross-sectoral collaboration on the KoronaStop.lt website, maintained by the Office of the Government (26 publications, from the website's creation on October 28, 2020 to December 2021) as well as the articles on the Lithuanian National Radio and Television website (lrt.lt), accessed with such Lithuanian keywords as 'NGOs' and 'COVID-19' or 'migration crisis' (72 publications, from February 2020 to December 2021).

4 | EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

4.1 | Precrisis collaboration: Limited collective action experience

Until December 2022 when the new Law on Crisis Management and Civil Security was adopted, the country's civil security system

TABLE 2 Information on interviewees.

Respondents	Rounds of interviews: 1st round September to November 2020	2nd round April to June 2021	3rd round October-to December 2021	Total
Representative of NGO 1	+	+	+	9
Representative of NGO 2	–	+	+	
Representative of NGO 3	+	+	+	
Representative of NGO 4	+	–	–	
Civil servant 1	+	+	+	7
Civil servant 2	–	–	+	
Civil servant 3	+	–	–	
Civil servant 4	–	+	–	
Civil servant 5	–	–	+	
Total	5	5	6	16

Abbreviation: NGOs, nongovernmental organizations.

comprised the Government, state and municipal institutions, economic entities, public organizations, civil protection forces, volunteers, emergency commissions and operation centres. At the national level, the Government, the Government Emergency Commission, the Emergency Management Centre and the State Fire Prevention and Rescue Service were the main stakeholders entitled to make strategic and operational decisions for crisis management.

A variety of NGOs are conducting their activities in the country, including such international origin ones as the Lithuanian Caritas and the Order of Malta Relief Organization. However, their role in the crisis management system was not clear during the period of analysis. Different laws foreseen a possibility to involve forces of trained volunteers in rescue, search and other operations, while NGOs were expected to provide psychological, social or healthcare assistance during state-level emergencies. It was only the Lithuanian Red Cross Society (LRCS), whose functions are defined in a separate law, covering such activities as the mobilization of volunteers and the provision of support for victims in times of emergency.

The *pressure for cross-sectoral collaboration* in the crisis management system was quite low since the country had experienced only five state-level emergencies before the COVID-19 pandemic, including African swine fever, nation-wide draughts and accumulation of medical waste. In addition, the system suffered from a lack of *leadership*, focused on more collaborative approach to crisis management. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour (MSAL), which coordinates NGO policy and development, put additional effort in facilitating collaborative activities, but 'the statutory officers never felt a need to partner with NGOs' (third interview with a representative of NGO 3).

Nevertheless, the Lithuanian public administration had been facing pressure for more open and participatory decision-making (e.g., OECD, 2015), which resulted in a shift towards more inclusive governance beyond the crisis management system (Civil Society Institute, 2020). However, the process was hindered by the dominant traditional administrative culture, deep-rooted stereotypes, lack of participation traditions and *mistrust* between different sectors (Civil Society Institute, 2015). Furthermore, rather negative collaboration experiences were dominant in the system. While the representatives of NGOs stressed a 'lack of coherent long-term partnership <…> and being involved in the process from the outset' (third interview with a representative of NGO 1), the civil servants highlighted that the role of NGOs in decision-making is only advisory, therefore, their typically rigid stances burden constructive collaboration.

Overall, the existing regulation did not set a clear framework on how NGOs should be involved in crisis management as well as what responsibilities should be assigned to them. Without relevant formal arrangements in place, collaboration strongly depended on the informal ones. However, beyond the MSAL, collaboration with NGOs was not seen as an appropriate mode of decision-making.

4.2 | First stage: More urgent matters than collaboration with NGOs

Based on the potential threat from the COVID-19, a state-level emergent situation in Lithuania was proclaimed in February 2020, followed by nation-wide quarantine measures, covering various restrictions on social, cultural and economic activities. The summer of 2020 was marked by the initial optimism of successfully dealing with the pandemic as the number of daily cases never exceeded 100 until June, when the quarantine restrictions were withdrawn. However, the calm period was rather short: the Skvernelis' government reintroduced national quarantine in early November 2020, when the daily number of cases exceeded 2000.

There is considerable evidence that the complex crisis increased *pressure to collaborate*. First, the crisis management mechanism was quickly tailored to the needs of COVID-19 and moved from the Ministry of Health to the Office of the Government, where the working groups of health experts, representatives of municipalities and the private sector were established. Second, public institutions with complicated public procurement procedures were competing for personal protection measures and healthcare equipment in an overwhelmed international market. Third, COVID-19 created demand for new functions and, in turn, more human resources in the public sector.

The response of NGOs to COVID-19 in this stage included provision of policy recommendations, support with human resources and organization of fundraising campaigns. However, 'there was no state-wide strategy on how to involve NGOs' (first interview with a representative of NGO 3). Thus, the efforts of public and nongovernmental actors remained largely disconnected: 'we were just ignored' (interview with a representative of NGO 4).

A comparison between NGOs and UFOs recurred in the interviews, pointing to the lack of mutual understanding. It was admitted that 'it is the wrong time to search for partners, when you need to make urgent decisions' (first interview with a civil servant 1). Therefore, despite increased demand for resources and the initiative shown by NGOs, the pressures were insufficient to push the actors towards collaboration. Due to the lack of *clarity on the NGOs role*, they were seen as an additional disturbance to overburdened decision-makers: 'I will have less problems if I do not ask the opinion of NGOs' (interview with a civil servant 4).

The crisis created an arena for NGOs to demonstrate their capacities as 'before the pandemic, we did not hear so much either about volunteers or about their activities' (second interview with a representative of NGO 2). The *positive feedback* on their performance was evident in the speeches of key decision-makers, who expressed their gratitude to the volunteers. Moreover, the active involvement of NGOs strengthened their legitimacy, indicating an incremental shift in informal institutions: 'after witnessing the help provided, the question of its sustainability arose' (interview with a civil servant 3). This aspect was also acknowledged in the *lessons learned*, outlined by the Office of the Government in September 2020. It emphasized that NGOs possess diverse competencies, an extensive network of experts and the ability to mobilize swiftly, all of which render them valuable from the initial stages of crisis management.

In late October 2020, the Skvernelis' government approved the bill Law on Civil Security, which foreseen the possibility to involve NGOs in crisis management. However, the formal institutionalization efforts did not bring tangible results because of the change of the government. While these examples indicate the growth of trust on the side of decision-makers, the lessons learned were inadequately implemented in practice, therefore diminishing their *trustworthiness*: 'we were not listened to and heard, because it was constantly said 'we have no time now'' (first interview with a representative of NGO 1).

Major changes in terms of NGOs' engagement in crisis management were unlikely because of the lack of *leaders* with the 'willingness and understanding on how the cross-sectoral collaboration should work' (third interview with a career civil servant 1). It was only the representatives of the MSAL who initiated an informal working group with NGOs, where such issues as the provision of social services and social benefits were put on the table. To solve problems spanning different policy fields, the employees of the MSAL facilitated cross-sectoral collaboration by '<…> building bridges to those ministries with a less collaborative approach' (first interview with a civil servant 1).

Taken together, there were no formal institutional changes in terms of cross-sectoral collaboration within the crisis management system. However, an incremental development of informal arrangements took place. Despite not being included in the COVID-19 crisis management, NGOs were legitimized by the high-level decision-makers, supporting the need for their engagement in the management of emergencies.

4.3 | Second stage: Flowering of collaboration

On December 11, when the new Lithuanian Government took office, the number of COVID-19 cases exceeded 3500 and healthcare experts were warning of overburdened hospitals. The Šimonytė government therefore introduced more stringent quarantine measures that were continuously reviewed and remained in force until June 2021.

The new government *learned* from the previous stages of crisis management. Less than a week after her appointment, the Prime Minister included NGOs in the central mechanism of crisis management by setting up a working group of NGO experts in the Office of the Government. The group comprised representatives from 10 NGOs, but members of other NGOs, ministers and the Prime Minister herself would join the weekly meetings. The emergence and activities of this collaboration was directly related with the transformational *leadership* of Šimonytė herself, which contained some elements of boundary spanning as well: 'What can I do? How can I help? Should I include ministries somewhere?' (interview with a civil servant 4). Even when the epidemiological situation stabilized, the Prime Minister invited the group to continue meeting as otherwise 'it would be difficult to mobilize from scratch again' (second interview with a representative of NGO 3). The last meeting of the group took place in June 2021.

The group combined 'bottom-up' and 'top-down' approaches, since both public officials and NGO representatives could raise issues and offer solutions. This turned into a *trust-building* exercise and contributed significantly to the *clarification of roles*, as problem-solving in the forum enabled the capacities of various NGOs to be clarified and the most efficient ways for the provision of services or resources to be determined. As a result, different NGOs took the lead in providing voluntary assistance for pupils in schools, supplying food for those in need or coordinating volunteers across healthcare institutions and vaccination points.

The establishment of the working group might be seen as directly stemming from the *positive feedback*, as it was necessary to coordinate the existing initiatives undertaken by nongovernmental actors: 'it was only a minor job in this area, everything was already in hands of NGOs' (interview with a civil servant 4). Furthermore, new activities emerged, such as the voluntary services offered by the LRCS to public hospitals nationwide, followed by their support for municipalities in the vaccination process. The pro-active approach and positive performance results portrayed NGOs as *trustworthy* partners: 'once you see this good practice, there is more willingness to use it' (second interview with a representative of NGO 2).

Overall, the second stage represents a notable advancement in both the formal and informal institutionalization of collaborative crisis management. First, the establishment of the working group of NGO experts indicated that these organizations are recognized as legitimate partners in crisis management. Second, this formal arrangement set a precedent for the involvement of NGOs in the crisis management mechanism. Finally, shared activities carried out during this stage demonstrated actors' capacity to collectively delineate their responsibilities.

4.4 | Third stage: Balancing between two crises

The third stage was marked by the intertwining fluctuation of the COVID-19 pandemic and the mass influx of migrants from Belarus. The COVID-19 infection rate reached its peak in early November 2021 with more than 3600 cases per day. Vaccination was chosen as the main strategy to contain the pandemic. While the support of NGOs was relevant to organize the vaccination process, the decreasing number of hospitalizations made the high numbers of cases *less pressing*. Furthermore, due to the massive influx of migrants, a state-wide emergency situation was declared in July 2021. The number of migrants reached almost 300 per day in early August, but after the subsequent decision to turn away migrants at the Lithuania–Belarus border, it significantly reduced. Having virtually no experience with large numbers of migrants, the public institutions came under high *pressure to collaborate*.

Throughout this stage, additional efforts were put to formally institutionalize the role of NGOs in the Lithuanian crisis management system. As the working group under the Chief Adviser to the Prime Minister was preparing an integrated model for managing crises and emergent situations, the representatives of the MSAL took transformational *leadership* to argue for the development of a mechanism of collaboration with NGOs in times of crises. The concept model was presented in July 2021, leading to the adoption of the Law on Crisis Management and Civil Security in December 2022. It formally institutionalized a possibility to involve the representatives of NGOs in operation centres as well as defined the coordination and the key functions of these organizations in times of crises.

Meanwhile, the COVID-19 turned into a routine crisis during late spring-summer of 2021. Public institutions and NGOs had already *clarified their roles* and were providing continuous support at vaccination points, healthcare institutions or schools. To 'avoid the situation where the train is running on its own, and we only stop in case of fire' (third interview with a civil servant 1), the working group of NGO experts was revived at the ministerial level under the boundary spanning *leadership* of the minister of the MSAL. However, the scope of actors involved in the group significantly reduced and its activities were short-lived.

The strength of newly created collaborative practices faced a test in May 2021, with an irregular flow of migrants from Belarus. Despite admitting that *positive feedback* encouraged collaboration with NGOs, decision-makers stressed that the main *pressure* came from the critical nature of the event: 'with the increase in workload, it was clear that there was no way out without NGOs' (interview with a civil servant 5). Through *learning*, the model of the NGO experts working group tested throughout the pandemic, was also applied by the Ministry of the Interior.

Although the pandemic provided a *lesson* to 'abandon the statutory approach and have one big round table where everyone contributes' (interview with a civil servant 2), putting the collaboration into practice remained complicated. First, partners that were less involved in cross-sectoral collaboration during COVID-19 had no chance to *clarify their role*s for the migrant crisis: 'at the very beginning there was a lack of understanding on what we could expect from each other' (second interview with a representative of NGO 2). The narrative of *learning* through experience remained relevant through the course of both crises, highlighting uncertainty whether partners without prior experience 'would work in the same collaborative manner' (third interview with a civil servant 1) in case of a new crisis. Second, while the Ministry of the Interior highlighted national security as their priority, NGOs stressed the relevance of human rights, which created tensions within the working group. The involvement of the MSAL representatives helped to span boundaries by drawing a joint operating picture.

It was mostly engagement in collaborative activities and the subsequent *positive feedback* that significantly contributed to *trust-building* on both sides as 'a shared attitude towards responsibility, work and prompt reaction helped to find common ground' (interview with a civil servant 5). As a result, both formal and informal institutionalization was significantly strengthened during this period: 'at the political level, there is not even a question on whether NGOs are suitable partners for crisis management' (third interview with a civil servant 1). While some interviewees emphasized that 'once the break happens and the practice is established, it remains there' (second interview with a representative of NGO 3), there were doubts about whether partners without prior experience 'would work in the same collaborative manner' (third interview with a civil servant 1) in the face of a new crisis. The changes in the level of institutionalization of collaboration with NGOs in the Lithuanian crisis management system that took place during the period of analysis are summarized below (Table 3).

5 | PROPOSITIONS ON HOW PREVIOUS EXPERIENCE IMPACTS THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF COLLABORATIVE CRISIS MANAGEMENT

Building on the results of the empirical analysis, this section suggests three propositions on how the previous experience of collaboration leads to the institutionalization of this process in the crisis management system. Each proposition is based on the interaction of building blocks outlined in the theoretical approach.

> **P1:** *when crisis management involves partners with limited collaborative experience, both transformational and boundary spanning leadership are critical at different stages to institutionalize collaboration in the crisis management system.*

Crises present a distinct operational environment compared to regular policy-making processes. The Lithuanian case suggests that if the crisis management system is marked by a limited experience of cross-sectoral collaboration, the lack of trust and clarity on the role of NGOs increases transaction costs and thus deter decision-makers from including these organizations in crisis management. As a result, even when facing significant pressure, collaboration may not be perceived as an appropriate mode of response. Our findings indicate that transformational leadership plays a crucial role in challenging established crisis management practices and initiating collaborative arrangements. Meanwhile, the engagement of boundary spanners serves as an alternative approach to the development of relationships over time.

We argue that leadership plays a twofold role in the process of institutionalization. First, transformational leadership is crucial for breaking through the institutional inertia and establishing collaborative arrangements. Throughout the COVID-19 crisis, the government faced relentless pressure, yet the individual efforts of both the public and nongovernmental sectors only coalesced when Prime Minister Šimonytė initiated the NGO experts working group and personally involved herself in its activities. On the one hand, this collaboration challenged the usual roles and practices of key actors, placing them at a heightened risk of failure due to their limited experience of coworking (Ansell & Torfing, 2016; Imperial, 2005). On the other hand, the fact that a critical mass of NGOs supported formal crisis management from the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic, coupled with positive feedback on their activities, bolstered the legitimacy of these organizations within the crisis management system. Driven by the limited capacity of the public sector to deal with the overwhelming crisis, it was the transformational leadership of the Prime Minister that broke the deadlock by mobilizing actors across sectoral boundaries and formally assigning NGOs a position in the COVID-19 crisis management.

Second, once the collaborative arrangement is established, boundary spanning leadership becomes crucial for nurturing mutual trust and clarifying roles. In the case of the irregular migration crisis, the boundary spanning activities of the MSAL representatives helped mitigate diverging perceptions of the problem between the NGOs and the Ministry of the Interior. Consistent with Kalkman (2020), we prove that boundary spanners contribute to constructing a shared understanding of the problem, identifying actors with relevant resources and facilitating interactions between stakeholders from different domains. The ability to find common ground for collaborative action is pivotal in this process, necessitating the capacity to bridge 'different actors and their viewpoints and interests' (van Meerkerk & Edelenbos, 2014, 21) as opposed to a more transformational leadership style.

TABLE 3 **Level of institutionalization of collaboration with NGOs in the Lithuanian crisis management system (2020–2021).**

Period	Institutions in the crisis management system: Formal arrangements	Institutions in the crisis management system: Informal arrangements	Level of institutionalization
Precrisis collaboration	None of the expected	None of the expected	Low
First stage	None of the expected	Representatives of NGOs are perceived as legitimate partners in the crisis management system	Low
Second stage	NGOs have formally assigned positions in crisis management bodies	Representatives of NGOs are perceived as legitimate partners, involved in COVID-19 crisis management bodies, their responsibilities are collaboratively agreed on	Moderate
Third stage	There is a formally defined mechanism of collaboration with NGOs, their responsibilities and position in the crisis management system are clear	Representatives of NGOs are perceived as legitimate partners, involved in COVID-19 crisis management bodies, their responsibilities are collaboratively agreed on	High

Abbreviation: NGOs, nongovernmental organizations.

However, leadership is relevant not only for initiating and maintaining collaborative activities but also for adapting them to the contextual changes (Emerson & Gerlak, 2014). Boundary spanning leadership of the minister of the MSAL proved to be insufficient to reorient and adapt the NGO experts working group in face of decreasing pressures caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. This demonstrates that boundary spanners can mostly contribute to the process of institutionalization through the improvement of collaborative processes once they are already put in place.

> **P2:** *the clarification of roles, the provision of positive feedback, and the subsequent growth of trust experienced by partners engaged in collaborative activities contribute to the informal institutionalization of collaborative crisis management.*

Shared activities strengthen the collaborative capacity of partners (Imperial et al., 2016). Drawing on the analysis of the Lithuanian case, we propose that this capacity-building process consists of four main iterative steps. Initially, partners clarify each other's capacity as well as agree on their roles and responsibilities for managing the crisis. To illustrate, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the LRCS organized voluntary support for public health institutions and municipalities, with volunteers mobilized by other NGOs and the Lithuanian Riflemen's Union.

Shared activities, in turn, generate feedback on performance. We argue that positive feedback is facilitated not only by the achievement of desired outcomes (Torfing, 2009; Ulibarri et al., 2020), but also influenced by the perceived attitude of partners towards collaboration. For instance, both civil servants and representatives of NGOs that were involved in the management of the irregular migration crisis claimed that they failed to achieve some of their goals, but highly valued their partners' efforts. Surprisingly, despite noting some drawbacks such as unwillingness to compromise their position and competitiveness within the nongovernmental sector, civil servants maintained a positive outlook on collaborative crisis management. Hence, collaboration might be considered intrinsically valuable as a process, irrespective of the initial goals achieved.

Finally, in line with Edelenbos and Klijn (2007), we demonstrate that positive feedback regarding collaboration initiates the third step—the development of mutual trust among partners. It is noteworthy that both civil servants and representatives of NGOs, interviewed at the end of the third stage, indicated that reaching consensus on crisis management tasks and satisfaction with the tangible implementation of decisions contributed to the establishment of trust among the partners. On the other hand, our findings also suggest that social mechanisms enabling future collaboration are built only through the direct interaction.

The activities of both NGO working groups demonstrate that collective action experience nurtures a self-sustaining collaboration that can function even without active leadership as long the pressure for joint action remains in place. In other words, increasing collaborative experience leads to the decreasing relevance of boundary spanning activities. Furthermore, collaborative experience validates rules, norms and procedures that shape a new policy path. As a result, partners that were involved in collaborative crisis management begin treating it as an appropriate response to crises, that is, endogenous institutionalization takes place.

> **P3:** *positive feedback on previous collaborative experience facilitates learning within the crisis management system and, when supported by the efforts of transformational leaders, leads to the formal institutionalization of collaborative crisis management.*

The functioning of bureaucracies is built on hierarchies, rules and standard operating procedures (Bryson et al., 2006). Our findings suggest that while organizations tend to strictly follow the regulations in their initial crisis response, some creative solutions still take place, caused by learning from prior experiences. In terms of collaboration, learning might occur not only among its participants but also be brought back to their 'home' organizations. However, even in cases when individuals within the crisis management system undergo learning, it does not automatically translate into policy or behaviour changes. Therefore, the role of transformational leaders is relevant for the formal institutionalization of collaboration, ensuring that it is backed by existing regulations rather than personal initiatives (Imperial, 2005).

The three stages of crisis management covered by our empirical analysis reveal a continuous iteration between the positive feedback on NGOs engagement as well as learning within the crisis management system. As previously indicated, learning mostly emerges from the practical experience of collaboration and crisis management. For example, the successful performance of the NGO experts working group during the COVID-19 management provided the foundation for subsequent collaboration with NGOs during the irregular migration crisis management. Collaboration is a matter of mindset and structures (Kapucu et al., 2010), thus positive feedback and learning from experience shape a more favourable environment for cross-sectoral collaboration within the crisis management system, increasing the preference for various horizontal coordination mechanisms. We suggest that support for collaboration will be particularly evident among actors directly involved in collaborative endeavours, but instituting a change in approach beyond this group may face obstacles due to institutional inertia.

Building on the Lithuanian case, we argue that transformational leaders will put efforts to formally institutionalize successful collaborative structures or practices, to reduce their dependence on participants involved in a particular crisis management activity. For example, the representatives of the MSAL relied on the positive cross-sectoral collaboration experience gained during the COVID-19 and the irregular migration crises to advocate the inclusion of the mechanism of collaboration with NGOs in the new Law on Crisis Management and Civil Security. While, as outlined in the second proposition, collaborative practices might be institutionalized endogenously, we contend that proponents of such practices will seek their formal institutionalization. The latter would allow to safeguard against the dissolution of established networks, ensure policy implementation and maintain operational activities, even in the face of staff turnover, loss of institutional memory or changing interpersonal relationships (Boin & 't Hart, 2010; Imperial, 2005).

6 | CONCLUSIONS

Cross-sectoral collaboration is increasingly seen as the best approach to deal with complex crises (Bynander & Nohrstedt, 2019). Simultaneously, there is a consensus that collaborations, while influenced by contextual factors, also exert an impact on the context itself through the generation of collaborative outcomes. If individuals and organizations indeed 'learn to collaborate simply by collaborating' (Imperial et al., 2016, 142), the previous collaborative experience should lead to its (in)formal institutionalization in the crisis management system. Responding to the call for a more detailed analysis of the outcomes produced by collaborative arrangements (Bianchi et al., 2021; Rogers & Weber, 2010), we applied theory-building process to the case of collaboration with NGOs in the Lithuanian crisis management system.

Our analysis goes beyond the current research on collaborative governance dominated by factors and drivers (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Emerson et al., 2012) by unveiling mechanisms involved in the long-term development of collaborative relationships. With the current research pointing towards the need for more collaborative crisis management (Parker et al., 2020) as opposed to 'noncontact, silo mentalities and bureaucratic turf wars' (Boin & 't Hart, 2010, 368), we contribute to these aims by revealing the process of institutionalization of collaboration in the crisis management system.

First, we suggest that in the absence of prior collaborative experience, transformational leadership is crucial to initiate collaboration in times of crises. This is especially likely when the risks of failure in crisis management is seen as higher than those associated with collaboration. Subsequently, as collaboration takes root, the role of boundary spanners becomes more pronounced, as they align perspectives on the problem and find common ground for joint action among partners with diverse backgrounds. Second, in line with Imperial et al. (2016), we demonstrate that the informal institutionalization primarily evolves through the actual practice of collaboration. On the one hand, the previous experience of collaboration allows for a faster mobilization compared to starting the process from the scratch, burdened by the pressure of the turbulence. On the other hand, this makes the practices within the crisis management system extremely dependent on individuals. Finally, we claim that the positive experiences gained from collaboration transcend institutional boundaries through the process of learning, which allows collaboration advocates to exercise their transformational leadership and strive for the formal institutionalization of collaborative crisis management.

Nevertheless, it may be wise to exercise caution, as cross-sectoral collaboration may transform into another form of institutional inertia. While such basic functions as logistics or communication are relevant in all crisis responses, the formal institutionalization of collaborative crisis management may limit the adaptability of the system and the search for solutions that are the best fitting specific crisis (Eriksson & Hallberg, 2022; Torfing et al., 2012). Furthermore, the balance between formal and informal institutionalization is relevant to ensure that collaborative practices do not turn into 'empty shells' (Dimitrova, 2010, 146). In other words, when formal rules on collaboration are not backed by clear roles, positive feedback on interaction and mutual trust between actors involved, they might be ignored by actors who prefer sticking to their usual routines.

Finally, while coming with a number of limitations of a single case study, the Lithuanian case expands the boundaries of the research on collaborative crisis management by including evidence from Central and Eastern Europe. While some authors claim that 'collaborative governance has become the new normal' (Sørensen & Torfing, 2021, 1591), we demonstrate that this conclusion is not far reaching as some regions are still transitioning towards more horizontal crisis management approaches. Therefore, more comparative research including countries with varying political, socioeconomic and cultural contexts would benefit the field.

Moreover, while mostly focusing on the existence of collaborations in the crisis management system, the research did not grasp the level of NGOs' engagement within these arrangements. According to Bryson et al. (2006), service delivery partnerships are easier to sustain compared to the ones dedicated to policymaking. While NGOs were more actively engaged in decision-making during the COVID-19 compared to the illegal migration crisis, the reasons behind this remain unclear. Therefore, more elaborate explanation of this process is needed to avoid that 'window dressing' takes place and NGOs are engaged in collaborations only to legitimize them. Moreover, the Lithuanian case serves as an example of a rather smooth institutionalization of collaborative crisis management with positive feedback from the key participants. However, mismanaged collaboration can create more problems than it solves (Imperial, 2005), thus internal dynamics between actors and its long-term impact for their relations should be further analysed.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

ORCID

Rasa Bortkevičiūtė http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5660-0617

ENDNOTE

[1] The full title of the group is 'Working group for coordinating and solving issues, related with the support for societal groups that were

affected by the pandemic caused by the COVID-19 disease'. The minutes of the NGOs working group dedicated to addressing the irregular migration crisis were not accessible to the public at the time of writing this paper.

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NOTES

Vilniaus universiteto leidykla
Saulėtekio al. 9, III rūmai, LT-10222 Vilnius
El. p. info@leidykla.vu.lt, www.leidykla.vu.lt
bookshop.vu.lt, journals.vu.lt
Tiražas 10 egz.