



SECURITIZED BORDERS, CONSTRAINED AID: HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE UNDER PRESSURE IN MIGRATION GOVERNANCE

Civil Society Responses to State-Imposed Constraints at the Polish–Belarusian Border

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Abstract

This thesis explores how Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) respond to state-imposed constraints (SICs) when delivering humanitarian assistance (HA) to migrants at the Polish–Belarusian border. Since 2021, Poland has implemented increasingly securitized migration policies in response to the orchestrated arrival of migrants via Belarus. While Ukrainian refugees were largely welcomed, those arriving from Middle Eastern and African countries were framed as threats and subjected to deterrence measures including pushbacks, surveillance, and suspended asylum procedures. Against this backdrop, both local (LCSOs) and international (ICSOs) CSOs have become crucial HA providers, yet their ability to operate is increasingly constrained.

Based on ten semi-structured interviews with LCSOs and ICSOs, this study shows that administrative/legislative constraints, such as anti-migrant rhetoric and legal ambiguity, affect all CSOs. However, physical/securitization and criminalization constraints disproportionately impact LCSOs, particularly due to their engagements in first-line HA. Building on the adjusted repression theory by (Honari, 2018), findings demonstrate a range of responses: desensitizing language to soften position, shifting tactics to other forms of HA, circumventing surveillance systems, and using de-identification to protect operations and individuals from criminal accusations. While many actors continue to resist these constraints, the criminalization of humanitarian assistance—through legal threats, fines, and prosecutions—has created a pervasive climate of fear. This not only undermines the ability of frontline actors to continue HA but shows a broader concern of shrinking civic space in securitized political contexts.

This study offers an empirically supported analysis of how humanitarian actors respond to SICs by emphasizing the lived experiences of CSOs. The findings of this case study at the Polish–Belarusian border highlight the need for political accountability and legal protection, to ensure that HA can be continued to people in need within increasingly restrictive environments and safeguard our European and humanitarian principles.

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Acronyms

Humanitarian Assistance	HA
Civil Society Organization	CSO
Local Civil Society Organization	LCSO
International Civil Society Organization	ICSO
State Imposed Constraint	SIC

Introduction

In recent years, Poland has witnessed the arrival of two major refugee movements, responding to them in sharply contrasting ways (Bogucewicz, 2024). While Ukrainian refugees fleeing the war in 2022 were widely welcomed and supported, the arrival of people crossing the border from Belarus, mostly from the Middle East and African (MEA) countries, were portrayed in Polish political and media discourse as a security threat (Samson, 2025). The arrivals were widely seen as deliberately orchestrated by the Belarusian regime of Lukashenko as part of a ‘hybrid warfare’ strategy to destabilize both Poland and the EU. Sources indicated increased airline traffic and tourist visas issued under the false pretense of promoting a route through its territory to the European Union via Poland (Bogucewicz, 2024). This tactic, of instrumentalizing migrants, triggered heightened political tensions. In response to the nearly 40,000 border-crossing attempts within the first six months since the beginning of these activities in 2021, Polish authorities increased its securitisation measures, turning borders into militarized frontlines (Filipec, 2022; Kuźelewska & Piekutowska, 2023). All official border crossings closed, physical fortifications across the border were reinforced, and practices such as detention and illegal pushbacks, even against individuals pleading for refugee status were employed (Samson, 2025). Additionally, rather than reinforcing its obligations under EU and international refugee law, Poland received political support from the European Commission to temporarily suspend asylum procedures in light of the perceived security threat (European Parliament, 2024). These decisions align with a broader securitization logic in which restrictive measures are legitimized through the framing of migration as a threat. This has exposed migrants to abandonment and abuse in Belarus and contradicting fundamental rights such as the principle of non-refoulement (Human Rights Watch, 2025; Ożyńska & Greener, 2025).

Within this securitized context, Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), both local (LCSOs) and international (ICSOs), play a critical role in addressing the humanitarian needs of migrants. CSOs act as watchdogs, hold states accountable to their international obligations, and provide humanitarian assistance (HA) in the form of food, shelter, medical assistance, and legal advice. Yet, in the current climate, their ability to operate is increasingly constrained. While previous research has primarily focused on the discursive framing of migration and the political instrumentalization of migrants (Ancite-Jepifánova, 2023; Eberl et al., 2018; Petty, 2022; Samson, 2025), the less is known about the practical implications of these dynamics on the ground. Existing literature often assesses CSO impact through policy shifts (Gerő et al., 2023), or political participation (Honari, 2018), while their everyday experiences, constraints, and responses remain underexplored. Reports by humanitarian organizations and rights monitors have documented increasing obstructions faced by CSOs working at the Belarusian border (Ożyńska & Greener, 2025; We Are Monitoring, 2024), but academic analysis remains limited. The geopolitical complexity of the EU’s external border with Belarus, and the

exceptional legislative and physical measures taken here, are compelling case to study CSOs role under restrictive governance. To overcome the academical gap, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how CSOs maintain activities within an increasingly securitized environment. Accordingly, this study asks:

How do Civil Society Organizations respond to state-imposed constraints when providing humanitarian assistance to migrants at the Polish–Belarusian border?

To answer this question, this thesis uses a qualitative approach based on ten semi-structured interviews with LCSOs and ICSOs engaged in first- and second-line HA at the border. In doing so, the study provides a detailed overview of how humanitarian principles conflict with securitized border governance, and how actors navigate these rising tensions in practice.

The following section outlines the theoretical framework, discussing the instrumentalization of migrants (Petty, 2022) and the role of CSOs in providing HA (Caponio & Jones-Correa, 2018). Next, building on empirical literature, this study provides a new analytical framework that categorizes SICs into three interrelated categories of constraints—administrative/legislative, physical/security and criminalization. Building on Honari’s (2018) adopted repression-response model, responses ranging from compliance to resistance are captured. This is followed by the chapter on the methodological design. Including the data collection process, which posed difficulties due to its sensitive context, and the analytical approach. Which presents how data is abductively analysed. The findings chapter presents the key empirical insights, which reveals the widespread presence of SICs, experienced across all three categories. The study reveals that experienced constraints differ significantly between ICSOs and LCSOs. While administrative/legislative constraints affected all organizations by the imposed anti-immigrant rhetoric and ambiguous legislations, physical/security and criminalization constraints predominantly impacted LCSOs. This was largely due to their first-line involvement in direct HA provision, in contrast to the second-line roles typically taken on by ICSOs. The physical/security constraints complicated operational activities, which ultimately defines if persons can receive HA or not. The criminalization of CSOs and HA, which emerged as the most surprising and concerning finding during fieldwork, turned individuals into targets of constraints by pressuring actors of CSOs with fines, legal threats and court cases. This created an environment of fear and emotional burdens, impacting their decisions to continue their activities in the long run. In response to the constraints, CSOs adopted a range of strategies depending on the type of constraint: from desensitization to soften advocacy language, to shifting tactics that adapt the forms of HA provided; from circumvention to bypass surveillance systems, to de-identification strategies that reduce both public and operational visibility.

To conclude, this study shows that civil society does not remain passive when the state imposes constraints upon them. Rather, many actors actively resisted them. However, especially those related

to ambiguous legislation and criminalization prove difficult or even impossible to overcome, eventually limiting the scope and reach of HA. Eventually, this study argues that these constraints not only hinder access to protection and support for migrants, but increasingly target those who offer assistance those in need. Further undermining international and humanitarian principles and values.

1 Theoretical Framework

A vast amount of literature on the state, their power, and their societal relations exists. Thereby, the structure and operations of the state are continuously impacted by external and internal elements, including international obligations, security considerations, and shifting political ideologies (Lambrechts, 2017). Since the 2015 so-called ‘migration crisis’, many European states have adopted restrictive migration policies, often embedded in nationalist rhetoric. Simultaneously, non-state actors, particularly civil society organizations (CSOs), have taken on expanded roles in migration governance and humanitarian provision (Caponio & Jones-Correa, 2018; Lambrechts, 2017).

This chapter presents the theoretical framework through which this thesis investigates the responses of CSOs to state-imposed constraints (SICs) in the context of humanitarian assistance (HA) provision at the Polish–Belarusian border. It introduces key concepts including the instrumentalization of migration, the role and scope of CSOs in HA, the typology of SICs, and a response model adapted from repression theory (Honari, 2018)

1.1 The Instrumentalization of Migrants

The concept of instrumentalization of migrants refers to the deliberate use of human mobility as a geopolitical tool to destabilize or exert pressure on other states (Petty, 2022). It is often situated within the broader concept of hybrid warfare, where non-military strategies, including migration, disinformation, and economic pressure, are deployed to achieve political aims (Filipec, 2022; Kuźlewska & Piekutowska, 2023; Zsolt, 2023). Migration is thus reframed from a humanitarian issue into a security threat, contributing to a broader trend of securitization. This reflects a broader trend in Europe, where migration is securitized and politicized, reframing migrants from vulnerable individuals seeking protection into perceived tools or threats to national security, identity, and social cohesion, (De Haas et al., 2019; Ibrahim, 2005; Marder, 2018). Such narratives often conflict with international legal obligations. The principle of non-refoulement—established in the 1951 Refugee Convention, the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), and customary international law—prohibits returning individuals to territories where they risk persecution, torture, or inhuman treatment (Duffy, 2008; Ożyńska & Greener, 2025; Zsolt, 2023). Yet, in practice, state actors increasingly disregard these obligations, undermining the legal and normative framework that supports humanitarian protection.

This creates a complex and often contradictory environment for CSOs, who must navigate between their humanitarian mandate and state-imposed restrictions justified through security discourse.

1.2 Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and the provision of Humanitarian Assistance (HA)

CSOs have become important players in migration governance, especially in contexts where state capacity or political will to assist migrants is limited (Barbulescu & Grugel, 2016; Caponio & Jones-Correa, 2018; Mescoli, 2023). These CSOs range from formal international NGOs to grassroots collectives and religious or community-based groups (Barbulescu & Grugel, 2016; Gerő et al., 2023). While some possess global reach and funding that enables critical independence from state agendas, others are heavily reliant on government contracts, which can limit their ability to operate independently or oppose discriminatory state policies (Barbulescu & Grugel, 2016). Generally speaking, CSOs engaged in migration issues fulfil two overlapping roles in providing Humanitarian Assistance (HA): direct assistance (first-line) and support/advocacy roles (second-line). Local CSOs often step in to contribute to this first front. At a more regional level, CSOs are often involved in international advocacy, monitoring states' actions, and cultivating leaders with a better understanding of migration-related issues (Geiger, 2015).

Given this diversity, it is important to adopt a flexible conceptualization of humanitarian assistance (HA). While some scholars define HA narrowly as short-term emergency relief (Fearon, 2008; Oxfam, 2025), others incorporate broader efforts such as psychosocial support, legal aid, and community-building initiatives (Long, 2013; Rose et al., 2013). The ICRC (2015) includes actions such as family reunification and engagement with armed actors, highlighting how HA can go beyond material aid to include protection and dignity. This research adopts a broad definition of HA to reflect the diversity of civil society activities at the Polish–Belarusian border. Allowing for a diversity of CSOs to fall within the research scope and share their experiences.

CSOs often face significant obstacles that prevent them from performing their activities and provide HA. While these obstacles can be imposed by different kind of actors, the next section discusses these obstacles imposed by the state.

1.3 State Imposed Constraints (SICs)

Although CSOs may face threats from both state and non-state actors (Buyse, 2018), this research focuses specifically on state-imposed constraints (SICS) due to the central role of the state in migration governance. In hybrid or politically restrictive regimes (systems that combine democratic and authoritarian features) CSOs often operate in increasingly constrained environments. McMahon et al. (2024) illustrate how in countries such as Hungary, humanitarian organizations face significantly more restrictions than in consolidated democracies. This reflects a broader pattern known as the shrinking civic space, where states use legal, financial, and discursive means to limit civil society (Buyse, 2018; Deák, 2024; Natil et al., 2020). While literature highlights many examples of such

constraints, it often lacks a clear typology applicable to migration-focused humanitarian actors. This study addresses that gap by introducing a three-part framework to analyse SICs affecting CSOs. These constraints are grouped into: administrative and legislative constraints, physical and security constraints, and criminalization constraints. The first focuses on how organizations are institutionally targeted. The second includes border militarization and safety in the field. The last involves criminalization and judicial action against individuals. This framework builds on existing literature on experienced constraints by CSOs, but offers a migration-specific refinement that functions as an analytical lens for examining empirical data.

1.3.1 Administrative/legislative constraints

Administrative and legislative constraints refer to state actions that limit the institutional capacity of CSOs through bureaucratic, legislative, and discursive means of control. Buyse (2018) highlights how denial of the registration procedure itself can be used to restrict civil society. He provides the example of obligatory high fees, burdensome requirements of information-provision, and periodic re-registration requirements. Without a formal registration, undertaking activities legally is often impossible. In extreme cases, authorities use executive powers to shut down organizations. Funding restrictions are another key mechanism in this category. States may curtail openly available funding programmes or restrict foreign funding, thereby curbing organizational independence and imposing state-defined criteria (Buyse, 2018; Gerő et al., 2023; Natil et al., 2020). Legislative ambiguity can stem from conflicting national and international agreements, policy inconsistencies or arbitrary law enforcement, which can create compliance burdens for CSOs (Buyse, 2018; Calarco, 2023; Cuttitta et al., 2023; Özdora Akşak & Dimitrova, 2022). Examples are Italy's 2018 Security Decree, which reduced CSOs' ability to provide services through bureaucratic obstacles (Calarco, 2023), and Polish new legislation that allowed for the suspension of the right to seek asylum in designated border areas. The latter directly contradicts both EU law and the Polish Constitution (le Clercq, 2025; Ożyńska & Greener, 2025). This ambiguity not only undermines the legal protection of migrants but also creates compliance difficulties. Finally, discursive tools play a significant role. Anti-migration and securitized rhetoric, often promoted by state-actors and politicians, contributes to a hostile climate that legitimizes political violence and delegitimizes CSOs (Özçetin & Emre, 2024). Although discursive in nature, it undermines public support and further legitimizes and justifies administrative hurdles (Gerő et al., 2023). This thesis therefore conceptualizes such rhetoric as part of the broader administrative and legislative landscape.

1.3.2 Physical/security constraints

Unlike administrative barriers, these constraints restrict not only legal access but also the physical presence and safety of CSOs in border areas. It refers to physical and environmental restrictions that directly impede CSOs' ability to deliver humanitarian assistance in the field. These

include militarized border zones, surveillance technologies, exclusion areas, and acts of intimidation by state security forces.

At Europe's external borders, the growing militarization of migration control has intensified risks for both migrants and those who assist them. In the Mediterranean, Search and Rescue NGOs have faced physical blockades, surveillance, and hostile actions by coast guards (Briguglio & Brown, 2022; Calarco, 2023). These tactics are also increasingly executed at land borders. At Europe's external borders, systematic pushbacks not only endanger migrants but also obstruct CSOs from providing HA (11.11.11: Internationale Solidariteit et al., 2025). In Poland, the implementation of an exclusion zone, complemented with monitoring systems, patrols and restrict entry, have created a climate of intimidation for humanitarian actors (Ożyńska & Greener, 2025). These constraints significantly affect the ability of CSOs to provide first-line assistance.

1.3.3 Criminalization constraints

Criminalization constraints refer to the criminalization of CSOs and humanitarian activities through criminalization practices such as prosecution or legal costs, as well as the failure of the state to protect CSOs under humanitarian law. These measures typically target individuals rather than organizations, creating personal risk for staff and volunteers.

Across Europe, state actors have increasingly turned to legal tools to punish those providing aid to migrants. Volunteers have been prosecuted for entering restricted zones, providing food, water, or medical assistance, or simply associating with undocumented individuals (Marszałek-Kawa et al., 2024). Though often symbolic, such prosecutions have concrete consequences such as fines, police investigations, and judicial harassment, creating a climate of fear that suppresses activism (Marszałek-Kawa et al., 2024). Such actions reflect not only state repression but also a failure to protect CSOs from violence and intimidation by third parties (Buyse, 2018). This way, CSOs may be punished for activities that are legally protected under international humanitarian law, deepening their vulnerability and inhibiting their work.

Accordingly, the next section explores how CSOs respond to these constraints and choices they make to continue their activities under a restrictive environment.

1.4 Responses of CSOs

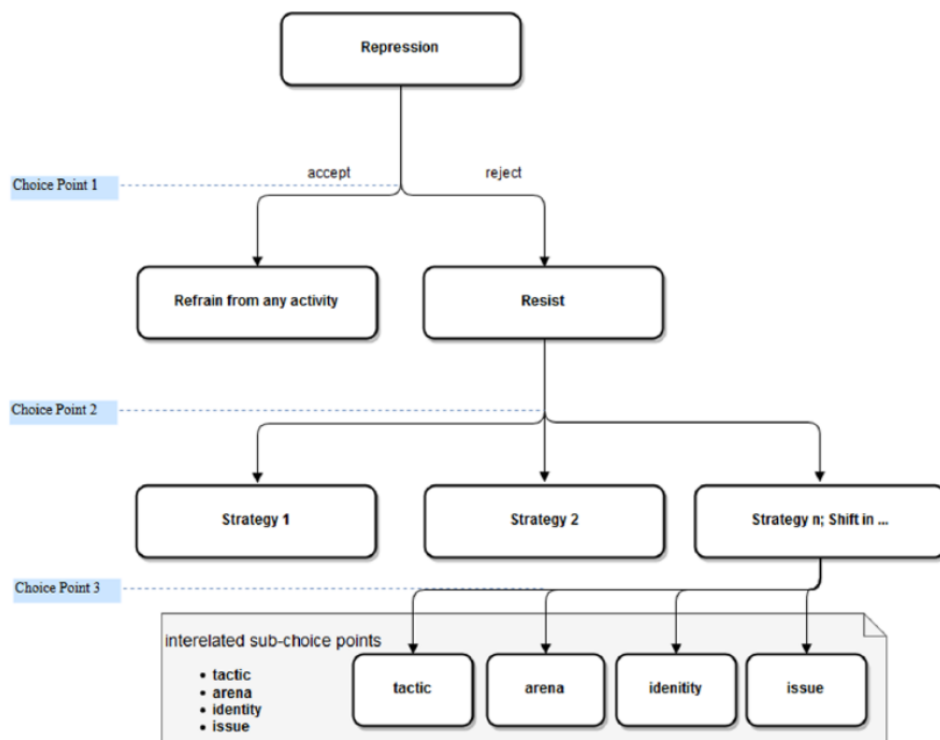
Understanding how CSOs respond to SICs is central to this study, as it reveals the interplay between constraint and delivery of HA. While the previous section outlined the categorization of SICs, this section focuses on how CSOs respond—whether through resistance or compliance—and how these choices shape the provision of HA. CSOs have a strong humanitarian commitment and activist orientation and are known to effectively cope with and operate within shifting and increasingly restrictive environments (Natil et al., 2020). CSO responses in a "shrinking political space," primarily

characterized by diminished policy impact, were examined by Geró et al. (2023). By investigating how people and organizations respond to repression through strategic decision-making, Honari (2018) expanded on this theory. Even though he focuses on political engagement and repression, this study adapts his framework to CSO responses to SICs.

Although they differ, repression and SICs have several characteristics in common. Honari (2018) drawing on Davenport (2005), defines state repression as actions by authorities that restrict the behaviours or beliefs of individuals and groups through negative sanctions (such as curfews, arrests, or bans on organizations) or by physically harming citizens. Honari (2018) on to distinguish between perceived repression—people's perceptions of the state's threats and barriers to political participation—and experienced repression, which refers to actual confrontations. The primary difference in this study is its focus: instead of examining protest behavior or political participation, it looks at how constraints affect CSOs' capacity to deliver HA. Which is useful, since the similarities are clear. SICs and repression both explain how state activities limit behavior, whether it be at the organizational, collective, or individual level. While Honari (2018) primarily discusses individuals and collective movements, this study only focuses on organizational responses. Therewithal, it assumes overlap between collectives and CSOs, and argues that SICs similarly shape the behavior and strategies of CSOs. Therefore, repression theory becomes extremely relevant and provides a useful lens to understand how CSOs respond and continue their operations under constraint when the focus is shifted from political mobilization to humanitarian practice.

In figure 1, Honari (2018) introduces the idea of choice points. These are critical moments when actors must decide whether to comply or resist. These decisions shape the overall impact of what he calls 'repression'.

Figure 1: Repression – Response model (Honari, 2018).



These distinctions allow for an understanding of subsequent response, which are:

1. The decision to comply or resist repression.
2. Strategic responses: if resisting, which strategy to use. Strategies are defined as collective plans of action aimed at achieving goals within a specific context
3. Tactical responses: is more practical and focuses on specific means and methods by which strategies are enacted. It is about adjusting tactics, arenas, issues, and identities

While acknowledging the relevance of this distinction, this research does not strictly differentiate between strategies and tactics. The emphasis is on how actors react to SICs, whether through resistance or compliance, and in what manner, rather than on hierarchical or sequential divisions. While tactics can be part of broader strategies, this study's main goal is to understand the variations in these responses. To better reflect this empirical focus, choice points 2 and 3 are merged. This allows for a simplified yet analytically useful framework that captures both strategic and tactical elements without distinguishing between them. The adapted model consists of the following elements that influence the overall effect of the constraints.

1.4.1 Choice Point 1: Comply or Resist

Actors must decide whether to comply with constraints (e.g., reduce or cease activity) or resist them (e.g., continue operations). This decision represents a critical juncture that shapes all following actions.

1.4.2 Merged Choice Point 2 & 3: Strategic and Tactical Responses

Once resistance is chosen, actors may adopt a variety of adaptive strategies and tactics. For analytical clarity, this study merges Honari's (2018) strategic and tactical levels to reflect the hybrid nature of CSOs responses. The six key responses are now discussed.

'Network reformation' entails that organizations may restructure to formal or informal networks, to better withstand or mitigate constraints. This may involve decentralizing leadership or collaborating through loosely affiliated initiatives to increase resilience and reduce visibility. 'Circumvention tactics' is the use of VPNs, encrypted communication, or other technological tools to bypass surveillance and maintain access. Next, 'shifting tactics' means to adapt methods. In this case, it is shaped by shifting forms of AH to lower-profile activities to reduce risk of crackdowns. The 'shift of arena' means CSOs may shift their activities to less controlled spaces. Avoiding direct confrontation with authorities. The final responses are 'desensitization' and 'de-identification'. The first is the reframing of activities in less politically sensitive terms to increase legitimacy. An example is from "providing medical aid to undocumented migrants" to "supporting people in need". But it includes also emotion management, to remain calm under pressure. The latter are the techniques to obscure the identity of actors to enable safer operations, either literally (e.g., field workers operating anonymously) or symbolically (e.g., presenting as religious or community-based groups).

Without assuming a strict classification between choice point 2 & 3, framework enables an empirical analysis of how CSOs navigate constraints, identifying compliance, resistance, and responses. It allows for to understanding decision-making in a restrictive environment, adopted to practice rather than theory alone.

1.5 Expectations

Given the instrumentalization of migration and the consequent securitized migration governance in Poland (Grześkowiak, 2023), it is expected that CSOs operate under increasingly restrictive measures, facing elements of administrative/legislative and physical/security constraints. Rather than complying with the constraints, following the strong humanitarian commitment and activist orientation of CSOs (Natil et al., 2020), it is expected CSOs adopt forms of resistance as theorized by Honari (2018). Likely, the degree and type of resistance will vary based on their organizational structure, activity type, and relationship with the state.

Building upon the amount of literature on administrative and legislative constraints, particularly on bureaucratic hurdles (Buyse, 2018; Gerő et al., 2023), it is expected that all CSOs, to a stronger or lesser extent, experience bureaucratic hurdles. The degree of formalization and state dependency is expected to shape the extent of this constraint. Formal CSOs that rely on state funding or maintain ties with public institutions are more likely to experience administrative or legislative constraints, particularly when their activities challenge state narratives. These organizations are expected to adopt desensitization to maintain access and continuity of their activities. On the other hand, because of their relative autonomy informal or grassroots CSOs may perform responses like circumvention or de-identification. Even if they bear greater personal and legal risks.

Additionally, the role and activities of CSOs at the border is expected to shape their experiences. Organizations that are directly engaged in HA at the border zones, are likely to encounter physical and security constraints, such as restricted access or intimidation. In contrast, supportive or advocacy-oriented CSOs are expected to face primarily administrative or legislative hurdles, such as funding restrictions or registration barriers. These types of experienced constraints are likely to influence the form of response. For example, physical restrictions (e.g., exclusion zones) may lead to tactical or arena shifts (e.g., different forms or locations of HA), whereas legal threats may de-identification or in extreme cases compliance.

2 Research design and methodological justification

2.1 Research design

This research adopts a qualitative case study design to explore how CSOs navigate SICs in Poland's securitized migration contexts. Ten semi-structured interviews with key informants were conducted and analysed abductively, enabling iterative movement between empirical findings and theoretical insights (Timmermans & Tavory, 2022; van Hulst & Visser, 2025). Rather than statistical generalizability, the study prioritizes analytical depth to capture participants' perceptions, experiences, and strategies (Zapata-Barrero & Yalaz, 2018). The central research question is:

How do Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) respond to State Imposed Constraints (SICs) when providing Humanitarian Assistance (HA) to migrants at the Polish-Belarusian border?

Two sub-questions guide the analysis:

1. What SIC do the involved CSOs encounter in their HA activities at the Polish-Belarusian border?
2. Which specific responses do CSOs employ to continue delivering HA under restrictive conditions?

The study is grounded in an interpretivist approach, recognizing that knowledge and meaning are socially constructed and shaped by contextual and normative frameworks (Zapata-Barrero & Yalaz, 2018). This orientation is well-suited to illuminate the lived experiences of CSOs and the complex realities of humanitarian action under constraint.

The following section discusses the case study, operationalization of concepts, data collection and analysis methods, and finally the limitations and ethical considerations.

2.2 Justification of the case

The Podlaskie province is the bordering region with Belarus and a key site of irregular crossings and humanitarian action. It offers a critical site to examine CSO responses to heightened restrictive anti-immigration governance in the region. The Polish government's framing of the Belarusian frontier as a 'hybrid-war zone' has enabled exceptional legal and physical measures, including militarization and the suspension of asylum rights (Erling & Charlish, 2024; European Parliament, 2024). Unlike many European counterparts, Poland's implementation of these tools is both empirically urgent and analytically significant (Eriş & Öner, 2021). The selected field site enables direct engagement with CSOs providing HA on the frontlines and those engaged in second-line support from nearby urban centres such as Warsaw. The inclusion of diverse CSOs at both local and international levels allows to analyse the experienced constraints and responses under different circumstances. Details of sampling criteria and organizational selection are described in Section 3.5.

2.4 Operationalization

Following the theoretical framework, key concepts are operationalized as shown in Table 1. The two primary empirical indicators are SICs and CSO responses. The first indicator is categorized following the type of constraint, the second indicator is categorized according the types of choices made by CSOs. Each category is defined and illustrated in Table 1 with preliminary codes to guide thematic analysis.

Table 1: Operationalization of key concepts

EMPIRICAL INDICATORS	CATEGORY	DEFINITION	EXAMPLES – CODES
STATE-IMPOSED CONSTRAINTS	Administrative/Legislative Constraints	<i>Limit the institutional capacity of CSOs through bureaucratic, legislative, and discursive means of control.</i>	• Shutdowns and suspension of CSOs activities • Permit requirements and delays • Prolonged approval processes • Limitation of CSOs autonomy • Excessive documentations. • Targeted inspections • Restricting registration • Restrictions on (foreign or domestic) funding • Financial dependency on state (risking loss of neutrality) • Derogations from international legal obligations • Unclear legislative environment • Prohibitions on specific activities or advocacy

			• Anti-immigrant rhetoric
	Physical/Security Constraints	<i>Physical limitation through militarized borders, surveillance, and restricted access</i>	• Illegal pushbacks • Blocked from delivering HA • Restricted access to border (facilities) such as the exclusion zone • Exposure of staff to violent or intimidating behaviour • Checkpoints
	Criminalization Constraints	<i>Impacting individuals through the criminalization of CSOs and HA</i>	• Criminalization practices; legal costs, reputational damage, detention of staff, prosecution, penalties/fines • Weakening of staff's legal protections • Climate of fear
CSO RESPONSES	Choice point 1	Comply	• Stop providing HA
		Resist	• Continue providing HA
	Choice point 2 & 3	Network reformation	• Mobilizing structure of organization • De-mobilizing structure of organization
		Circumvention	• VPNs • Encrypted communication channels • Proxy servers. • Deliberate non-compliance with physical imposed monitoring systems

	Shifting tactic	• Shifting forms of HA to less visible actions or lower-profile activities
	Arena	• Relocating the site of HA from heavily monitored borders to avoid direct confrontation with authorities.
	Desensitization	• Reframing the declared purposes of activities such as "religious charity work" or "people in need". • Realtering the declared purposes of activities. • Emotion management
	De-identification	• Use of pseudonyms • Selection vehicles • covering humanitarian operations under the names of religious organizations or local community groups • physical disguise.

2.5 Data collection

Participants were selected based on their involvement in either first-line (direct) or second-line (indirect) HA to migrants along the Polish–Belarusian border. In total, the sample represents ten different CSOs. Consisting of six representatives of Local CSOs (LCSOs), originally grassroots volunteer collectives, now all formalized, and four representatives of International CSOs (ICSOs), with a humanitarian or legal assistance mandate. This structure enables analysis of how state-imposed constraints (SICs) operate at different organizational levels. For anonymity, participants are referred to as LCSO or ICSO, followed by a number.

As summarized in Table 2, all organizations are formally structured. Most describe themselves as independent from the Polish state, meaning they neither receive government funding nor coordinate

their activities with state authorities. Half of the ICSOs reported collaboration with the state, referring to operational relationships with the government, particularly considering their registration for broader humanitarian operations, including regions such as Ukraine. No organization reported operational dependency on the state for HA delivery at the study field site. Differences in organizational relationships and dependencies with the state were taken into account during the data analysis process, as such factors may shape the strategies and responses developed by CSOs.

Table 2: Overview of participants, their role and relationship with the Polish state.

CSO	Role/type of activity	Structure	Relationship with Polish state/dependencies
1. ICSO1	2 nd line – Warsaw based, providing legal advice to people in the forest	Formal	Applying for national funds
2. LCSO1	1 st line – providing direct HA	Formal	Independent
3. ICSO2	2 nd line - supports LCSOs with funding and advocacy.	Formal	Independent
4. LCSO2	1 st line - providing direct HA	Formal	Independent
5. LCSO3	1 st line - providing direct HA	Formal	Independent
6. LCSO4	1 st line - providing direct HA	Formal	Independent
7. ICSO3	2 nd line - supports LCSOs with funding and advocacy.	Formal	State cooperation for broader mandates
8. LCSO5	1 st line - providing direct HA	Formal	Independent
9. LCSO6	1 st line - providing direct HA	Formal	Independent
10. ICSO4	2 nd line - supports LCSOs with funding and advocacy.	Formal	State cooperation for broader mandates

Participant recruitment combined purposive and snowball sampling (Zapata-Barrero & Yalaz, 2018). Recruitment involved online searches, direct contact, outreach via LinkedIn and social media, and field visits. Despite extensive efforts, many potential participants did not respond or withdrew, likely due to the sensitive context and security concerns. These challenges reflect the high level of distrust and the risks perceived by CSOs operating in this environment. The specificity of this study and access limitations in a securitized context constrained the number of participants. The original focus on first-line actors expanded during fieldwork to include second-line actors, prompting a broader definition of HA, including legal support and advocacy. This reflexive approach (Zapata-Barrero & Yalaz, 2018) ensured the final sample provided sufficient diversity and depth for qualitative analysis, but also meaningfully addressed the research questions.

Five interviews were conducted face-to-face, especially with LCSOs; the remainder were held online via Microsoft Teams, following established online interviewing guidelines (Lobe et al., 2020). Interviews were recorded and conducted in Dutch (n=2) or English (n=8), lasting between 60 and 90 minutes. A semi-structured format allowed for both predefined and follow-up questions tailored to each participant's role (Zapata-Barrero & Yalaz, 2018). Interviews began with background questions, progressed to current activities, SICs encountered, responses employed, and ended with reflections on the future of HA (Appendix 1). Sensitive topics, such as responses to SICs were introduced gradually to build trust and ensure participant felt comfortable discussing them. The decision to include dependencies on the state as an analytical factor emerged later during the analysis phase and was therefore not explicitly included in the initial topic list. However, because of the in-depth nature of the interviews, relevant insights could still be retrieved from the data. In cases where this information was not sufficiently, clarification was requested from participants at a later stage.

2.6 Data analysis

All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, with transcripts corrected manually for accuracy. Data was coded thematically in Atlas.ti, following an abductive approach (Timmermans & Tavory, 2022; van Hulst & Visser, 2025). All data was double-coded to ensure validity and reliability. Deviant interpretations were noted and revised a third time to make a well-substantiated interpretation grounded in empirical evidence and theory. The abductive approach enabled iterative movement between empirical material and theoretical framework, particularly suitable for under-theorized or dynamic empirical contexts, such as the provision of HA in securitized border zones. While the initial theoretical framework focused on administrative/legislative and physical/security constraints, the analysis revealed a third, previously under-theorized category. The empirical significance of the criminalization of CSOs and humanitarian action subsequently integrated this into the framework. Among which the code 'climate of fear' arose particularly from interviews, rather than theory. The initial empirical indicator "operational constraints" was in response refined to "SICs" to better capture both organizational, physical and individual impacts. This refinement of the theoretical scope enabled the framework to better reflect the empirical realities of the case, ultimately contributing to a revised theoretical argument.

2.7 Limitations and ethical considerations

Interpretation of the data is shaped by both researcher and participant positionalities (Barglowski, 2018). As an outsider to the Polish humanitarian context, the researcher's access and perspective were inevitably limited. Hampering the ability to fully comprehend the realities faced by both first-line and second-line CSOs operating under difficult conditions. Efforts to require access and build trust included careful language, transparency about research intent, and sensitivity to political and operational concerns. Ensuring protections of participants' identities and ensuring confidentiality

of sensitive information that could jeopardize their work or personal life. To develop a well-informed understanding of the political and humanitarian context, this study draws on academic literature and key human rights reports. The situational report from Oxfam by Ożyńska & Greener (2025) particularly helped to prepare for field work and contextualize findings.

Finally, it is important to mention that this research focuses on the lived experiences of CSOs, and not on state actors. This provides a one sided perspective on the situation.

2.8 Context

Recognizing that migration and its governance must be studied within its spatial, political, and historical contexts (Zapata-Barrero & Yalaz, 2018), this section outlines the contextual landscape in which the case study unfolds.

Poland has not been an exception to the broader European trend of securitization. Since 2015, Poland has shifted from relative openness towards migration, to portraying migrants, especially from the Middle East and Africa (MENA), as cultural and security threats (Hargrave et al., 2023). Media often portrayed refugees attempting to reach Europe to disguise ‘malevolent intentions’ (such as terrorists), or undeserving of humanitarian aid (Zawadzka-Palucka, 2023). The 2021 Belarus-Poland border crisis, widely seen as orchestrated by Belarus, and the subsequent arrival of Ukrainian refugees Russian invasion of Ukraine, intensified these dynamics (Grześkowiak, 2023)(Ociepa-Kicińska & Gorzałczyńska-Koczkodaj, 2022). This sparked the migration debate in Poland, and while offering large-scale support to Ukrainians (seen as culturally and historically close allies), its response to MENA migrants remained restrictive..

Politically, migration securitization was intensified under the populist Law and Justice Party (PiS), which criminalized humanitarian aid, restricted border access, and normalized pushbacks. After the 2023 parliamentary elections, a new government was formed under Donald Tusk’s Civic Coalition, which presents a more pro-EU stance. However, despite changes in leadership, anti-migrant rhetoric and the suspension of asylum procedures have largely (Ożyńska & Greener, 2025). In this broader context, interviews with CSO are embedded in the institutional and discursive frameworks of Polish migration governance. Offering a critical lens to examine the faced SICs and responses.

3 Empirical findings and analysis

This section presents the main SICs and responses identified through the interviews. The analysis is structured according to the SIC categories of administrative/legislative, physical/security, and criminalization constraints, followed by the corresponding responses at choice point 1 and choice points 2 and 3. Findings are organized by the most prominent outcomes. That is, the codes most frequently detected and substantiated in the interview data. The presentation of findings follows the coding scheme developed in Table 1 (Operationalization Table, Section 3.4), ensuring coherence between the analysis and the study's theoretical framework.

3.1 State Imposed Constraints (SICs)

Interview analysis identified three main categories of state-imposed constraints: administrative-legislative, physical-security, and legal. The following section examines how these constraints affect CSOs, noting key differences between ICSOs and LCSOs.

3.1.1 SICs – Administrative/legislative constraints

Anti-immigration rhetoric

Across the sample, the most frequently identified constraint in this category is the anti-immigration rhetoric supported by the government. Participants emphasize that, while bureaucratic constraints are rare, the dominant negative narrative delegitimizes HA and creates an atmosphere of hostility. An ICSO explains that, rather than targeted actions by the Polish government, “they feed the anti-immigrant sentiment” (ICSO3). There may be accusations that organizations are working as the propaganda arm of the Russian government, which creates risks for their operations and broader involvement in HA. LCSOs share concerns that the politicization and securitization of the topic also lead to decreased public support and funding. For example, LCSO6 refers to how even the liberal government frames them as terrorists. Another participant states, “Death to the enemies of the country is what we hear [...] people are obviously more against us, so the funding does not come anymore” (LCSO3). According to one representative, larger support withdrawals occur because donors prefer to focus on politically accepted situations: “They say: ‘No, because you're sponsoring Lukashenko's weapon [...] we'd rather help Ukrainians because it is politically okay’” (LCSO5).

Examples of anti-migration rhetoric in politics and the media, as given by participants, include public statements about “aggressive rapist hijab women” and a shocking online poll promoted by the government. In this poll, people voted on whether soldiers should be allowed to shoot at migrants at the border; 86% voted yes (Erling & Charlish, 2024).

Derogations of international obligations

Beyond anti-immigration rhetoric, legislative hurdles are also described as significant challenges. One prominent example is the suspension of the right to apply for asylum, which affects both ICSOs and LCSOs. An ICSO states that this suspension contradicts both Polish constitutional protections and EU directives (e.g., the Procedures Directive), but notes that in practice, the implications are limited:

Before the suspension, it was already arbitrary whether a person could request asylum. Without any witnesses, the border guards either processed or refused the application, so nothing has changed in practice. However, now there is a legal basis to refuse asylum applications. (ICSO1)

This ICSO adds that bringing these human rights violations to court is challenging, as many migrants are reluctant to participate in legal action. They fear repercussions under the Dublin Regulation, which could result in their asylum claim being processed in Poland, where they perceive little chance of a successful outcome.

Several LCSOs state that not being able to help migrants apply for asylum is “next level,” and that the stakes of providing HA have increased. If CSOs are caught during their interventions, there is nothing they can do to prevent migrants from being sent back (LCSO1; LCSO6).

Unclear legislative environment

These legislative constraints are further exacerbated by what many participants describe as an intentionally unclear legal framework. LCSOs frequently noted that an unclear legal environment made compliance difficult, especially when interpreting the reach of the suspended asylum law at different distances from the border. One LCSO provides the example of pushbacks from hospitals 20–30 km away from the border, causing confusion among CSOs: “I think the law is intentionally unclear because it gives a larger part for authorities to manipulate with it; it basically allows them to throw out anyone they catch, doesn't matter where they're at” (LCSO1). Another participant described the inconsistent enforcement of the exclusion zone, which in 2021 ranged from 3 to 17 km: “We could go there during the day for shopping, but at night, or with backpacks or shoes in the back of the car, they fined us” (LCSO2). ICSOs did not specifically report this constraint.

Bureaucratic hurdles

In contrast to the previously discussed constraints, direct bureaucratic hurdles are largely absent across the sample. Participants consistently note a lack of state interference in the form of documentation, registration, or permit requirements. One ICSO suggests this may be connected to the organization's establishment outside Poland (ICSO2). Another ICSO emphasizes that closing its Polish office was unrelated to repression but instead “the consequence of ceasing our Ukrainian activities”

(ICSO3). A third ICSO representative describes their limited engagement with the state: “There is not any negative atmosphere connected between the government and our job [...] as second line we do not have any conflict with the government” (ICSO1). Despite the absence of direct bureaucratic hurdles, many ICSOs report adopting a more cautious or even distanced approach, citing concerns about being associated with local actors at the border. They fear potential damage to their registration or broader humanitarian operations, including in other regions such as Ukraine (ICSO3; ICSO4). One ICSO noted that, due to broader operational relationships with the government, there are fears of political backlash: “We don’t want to piss them off. We’re working with them well on a lot of things [...] even just associating with people on the border could label us as supporting Belarusian agents or Russia” (ICSO3).

While LCSOs also state explicitly that bureaucratic hurdles are absent, they do express concern about state influence on their work: “They don’t try to get us through the organization but through criminalizing our actings in the forest. They don’t come to our budget” (LCSO2). The criminalization noted here is explored further in Section 4.1.3 (“Criminalization Constraints”). Additionally, there are no clear indications that the state directly limits CSO autonomy. Some organizations nevertheless report self-imposed caution in their activities, which will be discussed in the Section 4.2 (“Responses”).

3.1.2 SICs – Physical/security constraints

(Illegal) Pushbacks

One of the most severe barriers identified by participants is the inability to deliver HA due to illegal pushbacks. These occur both before and after the suspension of the right to apply for asylum. Migrants are often intercepted and pushed back before CSOs can intervene. As one LCSO explains, “People were running as fast as they could [...] but mostly they were caught by guards and pushed back before we could reach them” (LCSO2). Asylum procedures are described as arbitrary and inconsistent: “Before the law changed, it was often up to the individual border guard whether they accepted an asylum claim. It was a total lottery” (LCSO3). Since the suspension of asylum rights, decisions are now made at the discretion of individual officers, further normalizing pushbacks (LCSO5). Furthermore, concerns are raised about unreliable age determination methods. In some cases, x-rays for bones are used, which are originally designed for Caucasians and have an error margin of three to five years (LCSO2). This results in questionable pushbacks of minors.

Restricted border access and use of violence

Local CSOs frequently report random police stops near border zones, often experienced as tactics of intimidation (LCSO1; LCSO2; LCSO5). Sometimes, a car is stopped three to ten times a day (LCSO2). While some acknowledge the purpose—to prevent smuggling (LCSO5)—most still find the

checks threatening and excessive: “Three unmarked cars cut me off. Armed men surrounded my car. I froze” (LCSO1).

The Polish government has implemented an exclusion zone, whose range changes over time, limiting access for humanitarian workers, journalists, and the public (LCSO1; LCSO5). Zones are monitored by advanced surveillance systems, including thermal cameras and electronic sensors, and patrolled by military forces (LCSO3). CSOs add that cooperation with border guards is often deliberately delayed, reducing the effectiveness of HA: “We waited four hours in the freezing forest with a boy who couldn’t walk. It felt like they delayed on purpose” (LCSO4). Others describe how guards’ behavior undermines trust and transparency: “They told me someone was getting medical help, then pushed him out four days later with no shoes [...] I was his power of attorney, and I couldn’t do anything about it” (LCSO6).

Participants also reported being intimidated to unlock your phones, without legal justification (LCSO5). Others described they were physically prevented from assisting people, being subjected to violence:

I ended up on the ground with the man (migrant) clinging to me. The guards refused to let him apply for asylum [...] They knelt on my arms for seven minutes [...] now I’m on trial for insulting a guard. (LCSO2)

The next section further examines these measures, focusing on the use of legal proceedings and prosecution against CSOs, under the category of criminalization constraints.

3.1.3 SICs – Criminalization constraints

Criminalization practices

Criminalization emerges as one of the most pervasive constraints, particularly for LCSOs directly engaged in frontline HA. Participants indicate that, after three years, authorities have finally found ways to target them. They consistently report that the state does not pursue organizations structurally (administrative/legislative) but seeks instead to criminalize individual actions in the field. As one LCSO explains, “They don’t come after our budgets. They’re trying to get us through criminalizing our actions in the forest” (LCSO2). This participant faces up to eleven legal cases, mostly for minor infractions such as entering restricted zones or delivering HA. However, some accusations have escalated significantly including detentions, repeated fines (sometimes up to 1,000 zlotys (€250)) and charges of obstructing border operations or threatening a soldier’s life for allegedly driving too close to a military vehicle: “They’re accusing me of threatening a soldier’s life for driving too close to a truck. It wasn’t even a scratch on the car, just paint” (LCSO2). While some cases are dismissed due to legal inconsistencies or deemed disproportionate—judge’s ruling that providing HA

is more important than the accusations—this participant still faces charges that carry up to three years’ imprisonment.

Other participants describe similar experiences. Several LCSOs refer to ongoing or recent trials against colleagues or friends, including charges for physically and verbally assaulting border guards while assisting migrants, or for refusing to leave border stations without information about people in their care (LCSO1; LCSO4; LCSO4). One participant illustrates:

They [migrants] were not there anymore because they had already been pushed back, but he [activist] came with this bag of clothes and said, ‘I’m not going to leave until you tell me what happened with the people’. They used force and kicked him out. Now they press charges against him. (LCSO6)

In many cases, participants note that legal actions appear arbitrary or excessive, and even dismissed cases still contribute to a broader climate of fear and deterrence. The so-called “High Five” case, involving a group of five activists, is cited as a prominent example of coordinated prosecutions (LCSO3).

A major concern shared by LCSOs is that, as a result of these legal proceedings, authorities often seize and decrypt encrypted phones, gaining access to all operational data (LCSO2). While representatives of ICSOs report that their staff have not experienced such extreme measures, they recognize the seriousness of the legal risks faced by their local counterparts. One potential ICSO participant, who eventually stopped communicating, had been working on a report about the criminalization of CSOs at the border. Whether their decision not to participate reflects the high stakes involved or stems from other factors, it nonetheless highlights that the issue remains a pressing concern for engaged CSOs.

Climate of fear

While cases rarely result in convictions—some participants even refer to “show of processes” (LCSO3)—they create a climate of legal uncertainty and fear. Although not initially identified in the theoretical framework, interviews reveal that respondents constantly feel watched: “No matter how I behave in front of border guards, they will always find a way to hurt me” (LCSO5). For some, this insecure environment is non-determinative and leaves them unbothered (LCSO1); others describe how accusations discourage colleagues from participating. LCSO2 explains that individuals dropped out after realizing that even small acts—like driving a car into the forest—could result in legal charges. Legal stress, being summoned for court hearings, or simply living under the impression of ongoing investigations is described as emotionally draining (ICSO2). Another participant notes that such cases can have long-term consequences for innocent actors, potentially affecting their future careers (LCSO6).

Actors not directly targeted also feel the weight of collective exposure, especially within tightly connected networks of frontline workers. This climate of fear leads to widespread self-censorship, particularly in online spaces. Activists report avoiding public posts about their activities or intervention locations out of fear of surveillance and repercussions. As one explains, “Rationally, there is nothing to be scared of ... I’m doing everything legally, but I’m paranoid, worried they’ll find something to charge me with” (LCSO5).

Participants further describe the current environment as unpredictable and highly politicized, especially during election periods. As LCSO4 states, “We know we are in the spotlight. The authorities check us; we don’t know if they’re preparing any case against us ... we are not safe, we’re not” (LCSO4). These underlying tensions create a constant fear of being watched or accused of wrongdoing among LCSOs. While the participating representatives in this research indicated to resist this constant pressure of fear, they also shared that colleagues and friends at some point decided to leave the humanitarian field. This endangers the continuity of HA at the border.

Weakening protection of activists

Despite reporting violations, participants state there is little to no legal follow-up or protection. The filing of complaints with military departments or prosecutors has so far not proven successful, often leaving cases without response (LCSO1). This impunity signals a broader weakening of legal protections for CSO staff. One participant highlights the problematic nature of these activities in light of international rights and values:

It’s disturbing that this happens under the flag and watchful eye of the European Union. We highly speak of democracy and human rights, but apparently not when it comes to migrants or the organizations that stand up for them. (ICSO4)

The criminalization of humanitarian assistance has a collective impact on the entire community of CSOs, especially among local organizations that frequently collaborate within broader collectives (LCSO2; LCSO5; LCSO6). Interviewees note that the prosecution or investigation of one organization or its employees creates a climate of fear and heightened caution for others in the collective. As one participant explains, legal actions against a single humanitarian organization reverberate across the sector, affecting not only individual freedom and safety but also the sense of security among partner organizations (ICSO2). This shared fear is described by another interviewee, who expresses ongoing anxiety about potential criminal charges

I always have in the back of my mind that I might get a knock at my door early in the morning and be questioned about my humanitarian work, because there’s a risk of being framed as part of a smuggling operation, just for helping people. (LCSO5).

This first section of the empirical findings chapter provides an answer to our first sub-question: What SIC do the involved CSOs encounter in their HA activities at the Polish-Belarusian border? It shows that contrary to our hypothesis, bureaucratic hurdles are minimal, and at most feared for by ICSOs who depend on operational state-cooperation in other projects. Anti-migration rhetoric and legislative ambiguity combine to constrain CSOs' institutional capacity. Whereas physical/security barriers (pushbacks, exclusion zones) impact operational capacity of LCSOs. This aligns with the expectations that the role and activities of CSOs at the border shapes the experienced constraints. The criminalization of HA was not anticipated in the theoretical expectations but emerged strongly from the interviews, particularly with LCSO participants. This form of constraint generates a pervasive climate of fear and uncertainty, raising serious concerns about the sustainability of HA provision in the future.

3.2 Responses

3.2.1 Choice point 1: Resistance and compliance

Resistance

Most LCSOs and ICSOs demonstrate resistance. Despite intensifying restrictions, many LCSOs continue delivering HA, stating that fear and legal pressure do not deter them (LCSO2; LCSO3; LCSO4). One volunteer explains, "It may happen that I get arrested. Personally, it doesn't scare me, but I understand why it scares people. For me, this was obvious" (LCSO6). Another volunteer notes that, despite traumatic experiences and the psychological scars they leave, these events have not discouraged his group: "I'm long past the moment that I'm afraid of admitting I've delivered humanitarian aid. I don't give a damn if I can face prosecution, because it's insane" (LCSO1).

LCSOs report intentionally ignoring restrictions when lives are at stake, emphasizing that humanitarian principles take precedence over SICs (LCSO1; LCSO2; LCSO3; LCSO4; LCSO6). In parallel, one legal ICSO continues to bring cases to administrative courts, even when evidence or plenipotentiaries are difficult to secure (ICSO1). These examples illustrate CSO resistance to SICs. the specific strategies involved are examined in Section 4.2.2 (Choice Points 2 and 3).

Compliance

At the same time, some instances of compliance—particularly indirect—are observed. A few participants note that colleagues withdrew from fieldwork due to fear. In the early phases of the crisis, this fear was enough to prevent individuals from giving basic aid such as food or water (LCSO2). Legal proceedings later became a breaking point for others, as the sheer number of trials led many to stop volunteering. Legal threats and constant pressure caused people to step back. As one respondent summarizes, "I think people just burn out. They had traumatic experiences, or they want to have a life; not everything can be combined with going to the border" (LCSO6).

Among ICSOs, compliance is often tied to broader strategic calculations. Representatives report that political sensitivities and the risk of losing operational licenses—particularly in relation to Ukraine—lead them to act more cautiously in Poland (ICSO3; ICSO4).

3.2.2 Choice point 2 & 3: Tactics and Strategies

All LCSOs report avoiding the sharing of sensitive operational details, emphasizing the importance of anonymity to protect both themselves and those they assist. Most agree that specifics about routes or timing should remain unpublished, and there is a consensus among LCSOs about what information can be disclosed (LCSO6). This section explores only the least sensitive tactics.

Shifting tactics

All LCSOs demonstrate “shifting tactics” by adapting their forms of HA. Actors aim to conduct as many actions as possible themselves. Since many groups are composed of certified members, they limit contact with authorities (LCSO6). One ICSO explains that their local partners undergo medical training, and some are equipped with ultrasound technology, enabling activists to carry out most HA independently (ICSO2). While original involvement focused on delivering basic HA (such as food, water, and medical assistance), their work evolved as needs and restrictions changed. For example, when migrants began requesting help applying for international protection, actors developed new methods of assistance. However, following the suspension of asylum rights, legal support was largely halted, and activities returned to distributing only basic aid: “You just come, say hello, I can't do anything for you anymore, good luck on your road” (LCSO6).

While providing HA remains the primary task for LCSOs, some have shifted toward specialized services. Two participants report that increased restrictions led to higher numbers of missing people, prompting their involvement in documenting disappearances and cooperating with authorities during search efforts (LCSO3; LCSO4). Another participant describes how she became involved in long-term support for migrants, focusing on those who are injured, traumatized, or particularly vulnerable by assisting with rehabilitation, arranging psychological care, or, in extreme cases, intervening in problematic situations:

She was taken to an orphanage in which it was really horrible, we made a battle to take her out of this orphanage and decided, which is absolutely against all the humanitarian rules, that we will take her home. (LCSO2)

Despite setbacks, many LCSOs have diversified their work beyond border zones, providing legal and psychological support or planning integration assistance in urban areas, emphasizing that if they cannot change the situation at the border, they at least want to help those who are already in Poland (LCSO1). ICSOs note that their involvement at the border is politically sensitive. While they limit direct operational involvement, they use their international status to shield local groups (ICSO3;

ICSO4). One participant state: “We can provide a slight shield... the Polish government would have a harder time saying we’re a weird criminal group than someone who actually operates there” (ICSO3).

De-identification

Actors also adopt a complex set of protective behaviours centred on de-identification. While the use of pseudonyms primarily serves self-preservation, concealing operational names and physical disguise aims to shield vulnerable individuals. Participants highlight that anonymity in public, rather than in the field, remains critical. At the border, most are no longer anonymous, as they have become representatives and are registered with authorities (LCSO1; LCSO6). However, increasing securitization and criminalization have led some volunteers to withdraw from visible activism. For example, some use pseudonyms and avoid referencing their villages in public communication (LCSO2). Others report exercising extreme caution in disclosing their involvement, whether online, in personal life, or even within their teams: “I know I’m doing everything legally, but I worry they might find something to charge me with [...] We know each other by nicknames, so if anyone asks me, I know nothing” (LCSO5).

More tactical concealment or “physical disguise” is also applied in the field; volunteers wear camouflage clothing, avoid artificial light at night, or use gloves to avoid recognition by night vision (LCSO2). One participant stresses that their approach is to enter the forest, deliver aid, and leave as quietly as possible. These choices are motivated primarily by the need to protect migrants, rather than activist anonymity. As one participant explains, “being thrown out to Belarus means you can get beaten, raped, or extorted for money by Belarusian authorities. It’s about protecting those who trust us” (LCSO1).

In extreme cases, activists use creative solutions to remain present in restricted areas, such as obtaining residency in border zones or affiliating with institutions like universities to gain access for “research purposes” (LCSO5). Notably, some situations challenge the logic of de-identification and instead require visibility. In emergencies, visibility can be both harmful and necessary; for instance, medical assistance may only be available if border guards are present, which risks pushbacks to Belarus (ICSO2). Visibility is also strategically pursued to attract attention to trapped underage migrants at the border wall: “We were calling ministers, all the MPs in Poland and every border guard station, it was insane” (LCSO1). These experiences demonstrate that actors continually balance the need to remain visible enough to maintain legitimacy while staying discreet enough to avoid profound constraints. As one participant summarizes, “You have to know how to respond” (LCSO5).

Circumvention

LCSOs employ a range of circumvention strategies, including bypassing digital and physical monitoring systems. While ICSOs report awareness of these tactics among their local partners, none report employing them directly. The use of encrypted communication tools such as Signal is standard,

as in other human rights groups (LCSO1). On the ground, participants describe adapting operations to remain unseen and avoid detection. One tactic aligns with the previously mentioned strategy of physical disguise, including covering identifying features: “We read somewhere that we have to put gloves on so the system wouldn’t see our fingers [...] In some cases, the tactic was simply to run” (LCSO2).

Although working at night is not formally adopted as a tactic, many participants report responding to requests after dark, citing urgency rather than strategy (LCSO5; LCSO1; ICSO2). Navigating in darkness requires learning new skills, while daytime operations involve smaller groups and lookout systems to avoid detection (ICSO2). Circumvention or “ignorance” of the exclusion zone varies among participants. Some actors claim to respect the boundary to avoid illegality, while others admit to entering when necessary: “We stand at the position that the most important thing is saving people’s lives [...] the other rules don’t apply” (LCSO1). Despite frequent crossings, one participant emphasizes that his group has never been caught, leaving these tactics undisclosed. Another CSO adds that there are better and worse ways to enter the zone, stating, “that is something you should not publish” (LCSO6).

Desensitization

Both ICSOs and LCSOs adopt forms of desensitization, such as reframing or altering their activities. Publicly, both LCSOs and ICSOs emphasize the legality and neutrality of their actions (LCSO1; ICSO3). The securitized stance of the state and the criminalization of CSOs and HA influence decisions about public advocacy and reporting. For ICSOs, it is important to adapt how they position themselves, often softening advocacy language to preserve field access. This awareness leads many ICSOs to adopt a more cautious or even distanced approach; some express concern about being associated with local actors at the borders (ICSO3; ICSO4). One ICSO notes that, unlike in Greece, where “they do not think three times about how to formulate things,” in Poland, language is more carefully chosen (ICSO4).

Internally, LCSOs also follow strict protocols, being cautious in how they speak with people on emergency lines to prevent complicity. LCSOs consistently warn people that crossing the border is illegal and extremely dangerous (LCSO3). In the field, reframing serves as both an emotional de-escalation and a legal self-protection strategy. One LCSO describes the need to “be the de-escalator, even when you're dealing with armed border guards” (LCSO1). Others acknowledge that, under extreme circumstances, it can be difficult to perform de-escalation:

I will be kicking and biting them as much as I can. Despite this rational process that they can press charges, I will fucking fight for my life because I will be held on the ground by five soldiers. (LCSO6).

Desensitization also appears in how actors prepare for formal encounters with authorities. One participant describes rejecting a border guard's request to call the police if he witnessed a law being broken: "I didn't see that he [migrant] crossed the border, everyone can be in the forest, I can't check his passport, I'm not police, so I can give water and food for everyone" (LCSO4).

Actors also realter their operations as a protective mechanism. They never go alone and have begun recording interventions to document legality, deter violence, and in some cases, prevent illegal pushbacks (LCSO1; LCSO2; LCSO3; LCSO5).

Arena shift

The least frequently identified tactic was the shifting of operational arenas. This response was marked by relocating the provision of HA, particularly to areas outside the exclusion zone. As previously noted, most actors did not feel obstructed by the exclusion-zone and decided to continue their work regardless. However, for some, entering the exclusion area represented a boundary they were unwilling to cross for fear of problems or legal repercussions. In such cases, HA activities were deliberately moved to nearby accessible areas (LCSO5).

Network reformation

Network mobilization as theorized by Honari (2018) was not reported by either ICSOs or LCSOs. Decisions to formalize or informalize networks were primarily related to internal dynamics as well as operational and administrative advantages. Nonetheless, the alignment of groups under umbrella structures hinted to actions in response to SICs. It enabled coordination while allowing individual groups to retain autonomy. Collaboration among 10 to 15 groups constituted a public affirmation of legality and was viewed as a tool for shaping collective narratives, including those directed at authorities (LCSO5; LCSO6). The umbrella structure also served as a platform for coordination, resource sharing, and tactical alignment. Although not a formal organization, it facilitated collective responses to policy changes and promoted shared field practices (LCSO2). As one participant explained, collective discussion and agreed protocols enabled groups to "do things in a similar way," despite internal differences (LCSO6).

By revealing the various forms of responses to SICs, this second part of the empirical findings answer the second sub-question of this research: Which specific responses do CSOs employ to continue delivering HA under restrictive conditions? It is shown that six out of six responses from choice point 2 & 3 of Honari's (2018) repression-response model are demonstrated, from most to least prominent these are: shifting tactics, de-identification, circumvention, de-sensitization, arena shift and

network reformation. This confirms our expectations that rather than complying with constraints, following the strong humanitarian commitment and activist orientation of CSOs (Natil et al., 2020), CSOs adopt various forms of resistance as theorized by Honari (2018), in a securitized political context. It furthermore shows that Honari's (2018) repression-response model is extremely suited to map CSOs responses to SICs. Additionally, actions of compliance, shaped by legal pressure and operational risk, were shown. However, these were not common and only performed in extreme situations when there was not legislative space to respond, or when the psychological pressure was too high. These varied responses highlight the resilience and complexity of CSOs' engagement in the face of pressuring and evolving SICs.

4 Conclusion and discussion

Since the 2015 migration crisis, the European Union's external borders have been marked by securitized migration governance and constrained humanitarian activities. This is particularly visible at Poland's eastern frontier, the Podlaskie region bordering Belarus. Here, the instrumentalization of migrant has provided fertile ground for restrictive securitization policies (Petty, 2022; Filipec, 2022). This context illustrates a broader trend of shrinking civic space across Europe (Buyse, 2018; Deák, 2024), significantly complicating the operations of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) engaged in humanitarian assistance. Building on a theoretical framework that conceptualizes State Imposed Constraints into three categories—administrative/legislative, physical/security, and criminalization constraints—and drawing on Honari's (2018) repression-response model, this study has aimed to answer the main research question: how do Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) respond to state-imposed constraints (SICs) when delivering humanitarian assistance (HA) to migrants at the Polish–Belarusian border. The qualitative case study, based on ten semi-structured interviews with both local (LCSOs) and international (ICSOs) actors, offers new insight into how humanitarian action not only survives but is continually reshaped under state pressure. By considering CSOs type of activity, either first-line involvement (LCSOs) and second-line involvement (ICSOs), and checking for state-dependencies, it is attempted to provide more transparent findings.

Administrative and legislative constraints were experienced primarily through anti-immigration rhetoric and legislative ambiguity rather than through traditional bureaucratic obstacles. Contrary to what much of the literature suggests, often emphasizing permit denials or documentation barriers (Buyse, 2018; Gerő et al., 2023), these bureaucratic obstacles were largely absent for the CSOs studied. Instead, participants consistently identified the hostile public discourse and a ambiguous legal framework as primary challenges. These findings support the argument that discursive delegitimization has become a main instrument for states to undermine civil society (Buyse, 2018; Calarco, 2023). For CSOs, this environment eroded not only their legitimacy but, according to LCSOs, also impacted funding streams. Desensitization was a central response under participants. Organizations constitutently adapted their public language and reframed their activities to emphasize legality, neutrality, and humanitarian values. Two ICSOs, who indicated to rely on certain state cooperation for broader mandates, responded with extra caution. They softened advocacy or reducing their presence in the field to safeguard organizational relationships. Particularly for LCSOs, the changing legislative environment reduced the opportunities to continue their daily activities, narrowing their HA to only basic needs. However, ICSOs offering legal assistance also at the second line, found their space to continue their activities reduced. While underscoring the restrictive impact of legal ambiguity and hostile discourse. Notably, this climate of uncertainty contributed to a sense of unpredictability, which demanded constant adaptation and humanitarian determination of CSOs.

Physical and security constraints emerged as direct threats for the provision of HA, especially for those involved in first-line activities. At the militarized border, humanitarian actors not only experienced restriction zones, surveillance and arbitrary police checks but also, but also the normalization of illegal pushbacks and persistent intimidation. These constraints reflect the broader militarization of Europe's borders, where security priorities overshadow humanitarian principles (Briguglio & Brown, 2022). For LCSOs, such barriers complicated their ability to provide HA, compelling them to adopt a spectrum of strategies. Commonly adapted responses were physical disguise, encrypted communication, and, where personal risk was considered important. These evolving challenges forced CSOs to constantly. The ongoing surveillance and unpredictability intensified the already complicated circumstance and contributed to an environment where innovation and flexibility became necessary for survival.

Perhaps the most striking constraint revealed in this research is the criminalization of CSOs and HA. Unlike administrative or physical barriers, which tend to target organizations, criminalization is felt most sharply at the individual level. Legal proceedings and prosecutions for relatively minor infractions, such as entering exclusion zones or providing HA, have become frequent for LCSOs. The findings illustrate a shift in state strategy from targeting organizations via bureaucratic hurdles, to targeting individuals involved in HA. The findings shows that this approach generates a climate of fear, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion among frontline actors. Even when charges are eventually dropped, the emotional and psychological toll can be high. Although participants themselves reported not to comply, they shared experiences of colleagues and friends withdrawing from the humanitarian field. Responses such as self-censorship, the use of pseudonyms, and secure communication became common, aiming to minimize exposure to future criminalization. Desensitization remained an important response, with both LCSOs and ICSOs emphasizing legality and neutrality in their communications. For ICSOs, this sometimes meant softening their stance or keeping a greater distance from frontline work to shield broader organizational interests. Although not explicitly highlighted in the theoretical framework, these dynamics underscore Honari's (2018) claim that modern repression is increasingly individualized. Highlighting how criminalization has profound personal and organizational consequences, even when it is not always evident. The abductive approach to analyze the data proved especially valuable to identify and theorize this constraint, which at first was not included as a SICs.

The findings from the participating CSOs showed a constant effort to adapt, resist, and occasionally comply with the different types of SICs. CSOs along the Polish-Belarusian border are anything but passive, and actively readjust their activities. By utilizing a broad range of responses theorized by Honari (2018), from desensitization and circumvention to shifting tactics and arena, they show their ability to resist. There are notable differences between first- and second-line parts, with front-line actors bearing a disproportionate amount of the risks. The LCSOs expressed frustration with

the state's absence in providing HA, and several described feeling emotional exhausted. Eventually, it shows that the physical/security constraints complicated operational activities and the provision of HA. While the criminalization of CSOs and HA impacted individuals' decision to continue their activities in the long run, bringing insecurities for the future of HA at the border.

In conclusion, this study shows that the combination of administrative/legislative, physical/security, and criminalization constraints causes CSOs at the Polish–Belarusian border to employ a dynamic combination of responses. Whether an organization operates on the front-line or second-line shapes how these responses unfold. Additionally, this study highlights the significant psychological pressure, operational complexities, and personal risks that such resistance involves. Many CSOs observe that their space to act is shrinking, not only due to laws and restrictions, but also because individuals, not just organizations, are increasingly being targeted. Furthermore, discursive and legal uncertainties become tools of governance to increase control over CSOs. The case of the Polish–Belarusian border show the need for political accountability and legal protection. Not just to support CSOs and their continued effort to provide HA, but also to safeguard our core European and humanitarian principles and the rights of those they serve.

5 Recommendations

Several limitations must be acknowledged. To start, the small and selective sample which is driven by security concerns and access barriers has limited the generalizability. While interviews are conducted in-depth, a larger sample could have enriched the findings. The focus on CSOs means that the perspective of state actors is absent, thereby overlooking government rationales or nuanced understanding. Additionally, the voices of migrants and civilians are missing, crucial actors that could have offered a more holistic perspective on the humanitarian landscape. Future research should aim to include these groups and might explore the interplay between these state and non-state actors more directly. The perspective of border guards, to whom is frequently referenced by LCSOs as also facing emotional burdens and operating without proper training, could add another interesting perspective to this topic. Especially considering the physical and security constraints, which is now presenting a one-sided story. Furthermore, the absence of major international organizations such as IOM and UNHCR raises important questions for future research regarding their reasons behind their non-involvement. Additionally, following the most concerning finding of this study, the criminalization of CSOs and HA, this study suggests scholarly attention to the sustainability of humanitarian activities in increasingly securitized political contexts in Europe. The Polish-Belarusian border has proven to be a field of struggle over Europe's migration governance. Further research must show the extent to which humanitarian principles are under pressure other parts of Europe.

On the theoretical side, this research notes that more precise mapping of the different experiences between ICSOs and LCSOs—rooted in their specific activities and relationships with the state—could further refine repression–response theory. While this study merged Honari's (2018) the strategic choice point (2) and tactical choice point (3) for a broader overview, future research might benefit from analyzing these choice points separately and chronologically to yield deeper insight into the dynamics of adaptation. Ultimately, the findings from this specific context highlight trends and risks that resonate across Europe's external borders. Ensuring that CSOs can in the future continue their HA to vulnerable people demands not just CSO flexibility, but also international vigilance to prevent the deterioration of international humanitarian principles and legal protections. Without concrete legal and political measures to protect humanitarian actors and enforce accountability, the shrinking civil society space becomes normalized, with consequences for both migrants and the wider humanitarian system.

Finally, based on this research, it is recommended that the Polish government extend its humanitarian obligations to *all* individuals in need, regardless of nationality or migration route. HA should be grounded in the principle of equal access and treatment. This includes accommodation, medical support, and fair asylum procedures for all. LCSOs emphasize that discourse between CSOs

and state actors could be mutual beneficial and open pathways for more constructive cooperation between state and non-state actors.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 - Interview topic list

Introduction & background

1. Please describe your CSO structure-ngo, grassroots, religious, formal, informal.
2. How is your involved in providing assistance for migrants at the border.
 - a. What forms of humanitarian assistance do you provide?

CSOs experiences regarding SICs

3. Can you identify state-imposed constraints that affect your first-line/second-line HA to migrants at the border?

Some more targeted questions regarding the SICs as identified in my research, that might apply to you when providing humanitarian assistance to people at the border; administrative/legislative and physical/security.

4. Governments regulate operations by limiting CSO autonomy and restricting activities, do you experience a/b/?
 - a. delayed registrations, permit denials?
 - b. Shutdowns?
5. Conflicting international and national law can weaken protection of CSOs, have you experience with this?
6. How does an unclear legal status of migrants and changes to the right to asylum affects the provision of humanitarian assistance?

7. To what extent do you experience violent ‘attacks’ in the exclusion zone (and outside the exclusion zone)?
8. Does the state impose funding restrictions?
 - a. How does it hinder your activities?
 - b. Does it make you dependent on the state?

CSOs responses to operational constraints

9. How have you/your organization responded to the above identified constraints – *comply or resist?*

More targeted questions regarding response:

10. Have you/your organization mobilized with other actors, or on the contrary reorganized into loosely connected (leaderless) structures? - *network reformation*
11. What tactics in the field do you use when resisting the above identified constraints?
 - a. **Shifting Tactics;** Methods to bypass constraints such as different forms of HA
 - b. **Circumvention ;** use of VPN, encrypted communication channels.
 - c. **Shifting Arena;** Relocating the site of humanitarian assistance to avoid direct confrontation with authorities, to less heavily monitored arenas.
 - d. **De-identification;**
 - i. Techniques to obscure the identity of actors to enable safer operations.
 - ii. Use of pseudonyms, non-branded vehicles, covering humanitarian operations under the names of religious organizations or local community groups; physical disguise (e.g., dressing as civilians)
 - e. **Issues;** (desensitization);

- i. Framing work in more neutral or “acceptable” terms/rebranding humanitarian assistance.
- ii. Realtering the declared purposes of activities; providing different forms of humanitarian assistance.

Effects on Humanitarian assistance

12. How do these responses affect the ability and quality of providing humanitarian assistance?

Future directions & improvements

13. How do you see your organization’s role in continuing to support humanitarian assistance in the future here at the border with Belarus?
14. Do you expect your responses to shift or remain the same?

AI Statement

For this thesis, the AI tool ChatGPT was used to support the writing process. The tool offered suggestions on the structure and provided critical feedback and recommendations on draft texts. It helped highlight sections that required stronger academic grounding and identified areas for improvement in the conclusions and discussion section. All research, analysis, and final writing is created by me, wherein AI served as a support tool, not a content generator.