Resistance as Re-existence? Grassroots civic engagement with illegalised migrants in the borderlands

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Introduction

The lexicon of *"entangled uncertainties," "multiple crises,"* and *"being out of joint"* represents a fraction of the myriad terms that scholars have coined to encapsulate the ontological condition of the 21st century, marked by capitalist dispossession, state violence, environmental degradation and a disheartening lack of promise for a better future. This context of **polycrisis** also calls us to revisit and perhaps attune some of the existing terms to talk about border violence, migration, and resistance. Drawing on fieldwork from a specific location in the Eastern EUropean[1] borderlands, this paper aligns with similar interdisciplinary efforts to coin or affirm critical terms, or the so-called keywords, that would better equip us to think about borders and solidarity in both global (see: Casas-Cortes et al., 2015) and situated contexts (see: Banerjee, Chowdhory, and Singh, 2023).

The concept that I would like to explore further here is *re-existence* in the context of migrant support and border activist solidarity practices in Eastern EUrope. I argue that this term can shed light on increasingly multifaceted responses to border violence in liminal, in-between spaces, where coloniality takes on mutating and hybrid forms. My main argument is that *re-existence,* rather than *resistance,* allows one to account for multiple intersecting forms of violence and dispossession, as well as the contingent, ambivalent forms of resistance engendered by them, spanning questions of power, subjectivity, memory, and imagination. This term suggests shifting the gaze from the *"urgency of now,"* which motivates individuals to assist illegalised migrants often in humanitarian ways, to a more self-reflexive, long-term engagement with a strong political dimension. Such engagement manifests in heterogeneous and pluriversal forms (Kekstaite and Vukotic, forthcoming), hinting at new imaginaries of *"how to be in the world."* Thus, it proposes a more affirmative critique rather than a purely deconstructive one.

In the following pages, I'll reflect on the keyword *re-existence,* drawing on a few fragments from three years of engagement[2] with *Sienos Grupė* (Eng. *Border Group*), a grassroots

[1] EUrope' is a term used by critical border scholars, such as Stierl (2020), to highlight a critical perspective on how the EU constructs its identity and policies, particularly in relation to borders and migration. This concept emphasises a critique of Eurocentrism by illustrating the intrinsic connection between the idea of Europe as an imagined civilisational space and the EU as an institutional structure

[2] My ethnographic engagement (January 2022 – ongoing) could be seen as engaged ethnography approach that views research and praxis as complementary in pursuing social justice. By actively participating as members of the movement, engaging in daily tasks, and co-constructing knowledge with

collective providing humanitarian, legal, and social support to illegalised migrants in Lithuania against the backdrop of the so-called EU-Belarus border crisis. While concording with the idea that keywords should be coined collectively (Samaddar, 2023), this work is indebted to my conversations with interlocutors and friends—*Sienos Grupė* activists who, while not engaging with theory per se, in their epistemic uncertainties and self-reflexive conversations pushed me to think of resistance to border violence in a new light. In addition, it is intended as a conversation opener to see if this lens resonates with other contexts and borderlands.

Context: Migration governance in Eastern EUrope as mutating forms of coloniality

As violence and resistance are co-constituted, it is crucial to examine one to understand the other. Since 2021, Lithuania has witnessed peaks in migrant arrivals from Africa and the Middle East through its border with Belarus, facilitated by its dictator Lukashenko following the establishment of a visa-free regime and, at times, through coercion. Eastern EU member states such as Poland, Latvia, and Lithuania regarded such movements as 'hybrid warfare' and responded by implementing pushbacks and other forms of slow and fast violence, such as detention, deportations, and administrative obstacles, to create an environment of the 'politics of exhaustion' (De Vries & Welander, 2016) against minimal meaningful political opposition. These policies also contrasted sharply with the welcome extended to Ukrainian migrants fleeing Russia's war in Ukraine.

Nevertheless, one should refrain from analysing this phenomenon solely through a securitisation/geopolitical lens or as a mere continuation of the EU's colonial (im)migration policies. As argued elsewhere (see Kekstaite & Vandevoordt, forthcoming), apartheid-like border policies in Lithuania take on specific hybrid forms due to its liminal, in-between position across competing Western and Russian influences, its past of Soviet occupation, and its current membership in the EU. These policies should be examined through the intersection of race and geopolitics. As Bielousova (2022) argues, Lithuania experiences the condition of 'double hegemony', caught between 'competing Western and Russian influences and agendas, often without direct rule over the region.' This local dynamic problematises the binary black-and-white coloniser-colonised dynamics, instead manifesting in complex triangulations of race, identity, and power.

Thus, while Lithuania's borders coincide with those of 'Fortress Europe', they are also heavily militarised and securitised, intended to shield the country from the perceived threat of war (Klumbyte, 2022). Against this complex hybrid border violence situation, specific forms of resistance have also emerged where, once again, the very same location of liminality and iterimperiality has determined the possibilities for political action.

Sienos Grupė was formed as a response to government violence on the Lithuanian-Belarusian border, mirroring a similar mobilisation by Grupa Granica in Poland. In November 2021, following the first protest against pushbacks in Vilnius, which featured slogans such as 'We do not want our border to become a death zone', its founder rented a summerhouse in the border

fellow activists, I seeked to the researcher–activist binary and fostered long-term relationships based on reciprocity and trust.

zone and established a hotline to provide humanitarian necessities to people stranded in the forest. This initiative paved the way for more people to join the group, which has now grown into a small but influential political actor.

As the migration governance situation evolved, Sienos Grupė's activities expanded to include informing the public, drafting legislative amendments, maintaining contact with migrants in detention camps, organising protests and exhibitions, and later assisting people in finding accommodation and jobs, as well as providing help with legal issues. This mix of activities is best described as a manifestation of hybrid solidarity, blending humanitarian aid with contentious political action (Della Porta & Steinhilper, 2021).

Currently, Sienos Grupė runs a social centre in Vilnius where migrants can come to socialise or address their questions regarding various issues. Initially criminalised and marginalised, it has slowly emerged as a tolerated actor. Sienos Grupė engages in various national-level coalitions with other NGOs, trade unions, and artist spaces, as well as regional coalitions with Polish and Latvian neighbours, and occasionally attempts—albeit with limited success—to penetrate international discussions.

The group does not have a homogenous identity and is comprised of individuals from various political and ethical positions, age groups, and backgrounds. It also includes both Lithuanian residents and those with migration backgrounds, often jokingly calling themselves a 'mixed bag'. In addition, the group's political repertoire spans more contentious and more mainstream humanitarian initiatives, as defined by one member, making the group similar to an Irish political party that has both a militant and a political wing.

What fascinated me was the group's extreme diversity with barely any conflict. Nevertheless, I did not want to pinpoint yet another typology or categorisation defining this civic mobilisation but was more interested in documenting *becoming*, where I believe the term 're-existence' comes in handy.

Some notes on theory: Resistance as re-existance

Having briefly established the empirical context of violence and resistance within an inter-imperial framework where multiple oppressions intersect, we now turn to the theoretical transition from resistance to re-existence as its more ambivalent and complex counterpart.

Resistance, a critical concept in this discourse, has been explored by numerous scholars, with no singular definition emerging. Instead, resistance is understood through various lenses, each offering distinct insights into its relationship with power. Michel Foucault (1978, pp. 95-96), for instance, argues that "where there is power, there is resistance," viewing it as an inherent and ubiquitous element within power dynamics that often operates from within existing systems. For Foucault, resistance is not necessarily about transcending or overthrowing power but challenging it in multifaceted ways. Similarly, Antonio Gramsci's concept of "passive revolution" highlights the subtle, often gradual forms of resistance embedded within social structures, which can shift the balance of power without direct confrontation. These approaches

underscore the complexity of resistance, framing it as a reactive and systemic engagement, rather than a simple oppositional force or transformative reconstitution of power relations.

Border scholars have further engaged with situated understandings of resistance attempting to move beyond its reactive aspects. Maurice Stierl (2014) argues that the lens of resistance—encompassing dissent, solidarity, and excess—decenters Eurocentric modes of thinking about mobility and brings alternative imaginaries to the forefront. Through this lens, resistance is not merely oppositional but also epistemic and embodied. It contests dominant discourses and policies while exposing the material infrastructures that sustain them. Stierl's perspective underscores resistance as a process of generating "cracks" or epistemic frictions (Medina 2011) within hegemonic reasoning, achieved through successful articulation (Laclau and Mouffe 2014), alliance building, and strategic dissimulation (Majewska 2018). These efforts expand "the distribution of the sensible" (Rancière 2000), challenging the boundaries of what is politically conceivable (Escobar 2020).

Simultaneously, resistance operates as an embodied process, grounded in presence and encounter. It reveals shared vulnerability and precarity while interrogating the contingency of one's own condition (McNevin and Missbach 2018). Such embodied resistance facilitates critical openings for new social relationalities to emerge, highlighting the relational and affective dimensions of contestation.

To fully grasp resistance's scope, it must be situated historically and relationally within its given context. Its temporality, however, is not confined to the past or present; resistance actively imagines alternative futures, even those deemed impossible (Vandevoordt and Fleischmann 2021). Braidotti (2013) extends this perspective by conceptualizing resistance as a generative force concerned not only with critique but also with envisioning and shaping "what we want to become."

Building on this generative trajectory, feminist and decolonial theorists, including Mignolo (2007, 2011) and Tlostanova (2017), reframe similar manifestations of resistance as described above as **re-existence**. Re-existence is not merely opposition to domination but an affirmation of life through the redefinition and re-signification of existence in conditions of dignity and self-determination. As Albán (cited in Walsh 2018, p. 18) asserts, re-existence involves the mechanisms, strategies, and practices employed against racialization, exclusion, and marginalization, enabling the reconfiguration of life beyond oppressive structures.

This perspective shifts critique from being purely negative to an affirmative process of world-making. Re-existence creates cracks within the pervasive patterns of global coloniality—those enduring structures of power, knowledge, and being established during the colonial era and sustained even after the end of direct colonial rule. Madina Tlostanova situates re-existence within the decolonial option, emphasizing its role as a conscious intellectual and epistemic stance. Global coloniality, as an objective condition of the world, demands an active response—a deliberate choice of how to act upon and transform it.

In this light, re-existence transcends the reactive confines of resistance. It embodies a constructive ethos, one that reclaims agency, fosters alternative ways of being, and nurtures a

pluriversal vision of the world. It is not only a response to oppression but a blueprint for reimagining and reconstituting the terms of existence itself.

Fragments of re-exitence in Eastern EUropean borderlands

In this section, I aim to explore how resistance manifests in the case of Sienos Grupė by examining its epistemic and ontological dimensions. When I joined the group in December 2021, despite our diverse backgrounds, a shared sense of injustice united us. This injustice stemmed from the systemic devaluation of human lives—people forced to endure freezing forests, locked in detention centres without court rulings, and subjected to divisive political narratives that categorised us into "us" and "them" (Anderson, 2013).

Although our demands echoed those common to such movements (see Picozza, 2021), there was also a palpable urgency—a collective desire "to do something" and to envision an alternative reality. This urgency was encapsulated in the shared sentiment: "We wish we were not needed, but we will continue to act as long as we are needed." Ontologically, the group initially defined itself in opposition to violence and injustice, uniting through what it collectively rejected.

Over time, I observed a significant ontological shift in Sienos Grupė's self-identification, both individually and collectively. By the summer of 2022, during a meeting where the group was formally established as a legal NGO (partly to facilitate access to the border), the discourse began to adopt a more affirmative and imaginative framing. Phrases like "for a diverse Lithuania" emerged, and conversations among volunteers reflected visions of a future where migrants were embraced as part of Lithuanian society: "a Lithuania where migrants can stay."

This shift represented a move from a negatively defined ontology—focused on opposing violence and exclusion—to an affirmative one centred on the idea of Lithuania as a commons. Some may view the invocation of "Lithuania" as a nationalist trope, and admittedly, my initial reaction was discomfort, shaped by decolonial critiques I had encountered in the West. However, deeper reflection and further conversations revealed a different understanding. In this context, Lithuania symbolised not a nation-state, but a place of belonging and shared existence, a site of commoning.

This interpretation resonates with Ozoliņa's (2022) perspective, which observes how, in Latvia, amidst waves of emigration and neoliberal austerity, people often cling to nationalist symbols in an attempt to mend the social fabric. She argues that such acts, such as wearing a scarf with fragments of a flag, should not be misinterpreted as ethnonationalism, but as attempts to "be in a world that makes that world feel like home" (105). While I am a strong proponent of denaturalising the nation-state as the default organising unit of society, I recognise that for my research subjects, the invocation of 'Lithuania'—as opposed to the rhetoric of no borders—was a way of finding common ground, expanding its meaning against the backdrop of growing societal polarisation, further exacerbated by Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine and the existential anxieties it has triggered.

Similarly, the Palestinian slogan “Viva Palestina,” often heard in protests, can be understood not simply as a nationalist cry but as a pluralistic assertion resisting both nationalist exclusivity and capitalist exploitation. This reimagining aligns with Catherine Walsh’s concept of “re-existence,” which challenges us to transform, rather than merely critique, existing institutions and practices, enabling survival and flourishing in the face of dehumanising conditions (Walsh, 2018).

In relation to this, the act of re-imagination is essential for resistance. During my internship at the Calcutta Research Group in Kolkata, India, I got a chance to visit Bengali Biennial and encountered a poignant example of this through Khandakar Ohida’s short film *Dream Your Museum* (2022), which reframes the concept of museums. By documenting his uncle’s intimate, decades-long collection of objects, Ohida challenges capitalist and class-based notions of heritage preservation, proposing instead a vision of museums as spaces for shared community narratives.

Similarly, Sienos Grupė’s evolving imagination could serve as a blueprint for reimagined communities. While Benedict Anderson famously describes nation-states as “imagined communities” built on homogeneity as well as bounded and inherently sovereign, Sienos Grupė’s imaginaries of community centre on commoning and heterogeneous identities, not holding onto bounded categories. These imaginaries offer a powerful alternative framework for collective belonging and resistance to border violence.

However, it is important to avoid painting an overly optimistic picture of this form of resistance from the borderlands. The case of Sienos Grupė underscores the inherent paradoxes within such grassroots mobilisation. Emerging against the backdrop of volatile legal changes and ever-evolving border policies, this type of citizen mobilisation was unprecedented in Lithuania. While drawing on existing social justice initiatives both locally and internationally, and cultivating networks of support, Sienos Grupė was, in many ways, politically "coming of age" and adapting in real time. As one activist summarised, “In Germany, you would have hundreds of citizens’ organisations in the field of migration, whereas here we are the only one, and are considered experts.” Echoing this sentiment, several members of the group acknowledged that failure was an integral part of their process of learning and growth.

Unresolvable tensions were another defining feature of Sienos Grupė’s work, reflecting the broader experience of migrant support movements that often lack rigidly defined agendas. Acting both in spite of and despite these tensions became central to their efforts. The group followed a fluid political trajectory, tailoring its demands to address the immediate needs of migrants, and in doing so, formulated political problems dynamically. However, this adaptive approach also exposed them to what could be termed "epistemic uncertainty" (Parker & Yonucu, 2022)—the unpredictability of changing conditions and the effects of their actions.

For instance, while advocating for the release of detained migrants, the group encountered new challenges when many of those released found themselves homeless and unable to work legally in Lithuania. In response, Sienos Grupė, in collaboration with migrants, organised protests and other actions to demand the right to work for illegalised migrants. While this campaign achieved partial success, enabling migrants to participate in economic life, the outcome was

deeply ambivalent. Migrants gained the right to work but remained deportable, included in the economy as exploitable labour while still excluded from full political and social rights.

This outcome reveals the paradoxical and mesy nature of such political reppertoires: even strategies driven by an "ethics of care" and the subjective needs of migrants can produce results that are simultaneously empowering and precarious. Nevertheless, this does not reduce migrants to mere victims. Migrants demonstrated agency through their collaboration with Sienos Grupė, resisting their marginalisation and asserting their presence in Lithuania despite systemic constraints. This is just one example of many such contradictions. It epitomises what it means to imagine 'otherwise' beyond epistemic certainty. While I have my own epistemic positioning, I find it crucial to let my interlocutors' epistemic uncertainties inform my research through their self-reflexive accounts of social realities. What I came to realise is that reading resistance merely as opposition to hegemonic discourses in liminal spaces like Eastern Europe, fraught with multiple crises, is insufficient. Often, uncertainties and questions are integral parts of activists' praxis and their developing political subjectivities, enabling them to embrace change in more creative and proactive ways.

Conclusion

This essay introduces the keyword *re-existence* to reflect on emerging forms of resistance that navigate the interstices of uncertainty, moving beyond the traditionally conceptualized dichotomy of hegemony and resistance. It explores the ambivalent and nuanced ways resistance manifests, transcending rigid moral and political certainties. This is not an argument for moral or political relativism but an acknowledgment of the complex repertoires and framings of political action that arise in solidarity with migrants. The focus shifts from solely addressing the effects on migrants to imagining new possibilities for collective action.

While the concept of *re-existence*, as introduced here, is situated within specific contexts, it is not confined to them. Rather, it is deeply informed by, and transferable within, the global colonial condition. Moreover, the notion of *re-existence* could extend to the figure of the researcher. We are acutely aware that more information about border policies or the documentation of migrant deaths rarely translates into tangible social change. Similarly, we recognize that universities, as institutions, are deeply embedded in neoliberal logics. Yet, *re-existence* points to the possibility of reimagining and transforming these spaces from within—by engaging in active critique while/ or simultaneously constructing alternatives. It also weaves well with ather terms of post-colonial, decolonial and feminist scholarship such as 'cracks', 'otherwise', 'another possible' or 'undercommons' that would require more elaborate exploration.

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