



Reinforcing Integration via  
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## COMMUNITY SPONSORSHIP:

PERSPECTIVES FROM MIGRANTS, HOSTS, AND  
GOVERNMENTAL AND NON-GOVERNMENTAL  
ORGANIZATIONS ON SUPPORT AND INTEGRATION



Conducted by:  
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## CONTENTS

<b>SUMMARY</b> .....	4
<b>SWOT</b> .....	8
<b>RESEARCH FINDINGS</b> .....	8
1. ARRIVAL AND ACCOMMODATION: MANIFESTATIONS OF ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE.....	8
2. EXPERIENCE IN HELPING WITH ACCOMMODATION. EXPERIENCES OF HOSTS AND MIGRANTS .....	11
3. INTEGRATION. SUPPORT RECEIVED. NEED FOR SUPPORT .....	13
4. CHALLENGES IN ACCESSING AND RECEIVING SUPPORT AND HOUSING .....	15
5. THE KNOWN INITIATIVES OF CIVIL SOCIETY AND STATE INSTITUTIONS TO SYSTEMATICALLY ADDRESS THE ISSUE OF REFUGEE RECEPTION AND INTEGRATION .....	20
6. COMMUNITY SPONSORSHIP MODEL IN LITHUANIA. HOW MUCH IT IS UNDERSTOOD AND TO HOW MUCH EXTENT IT IS (ALREADY) IMPLEMENTED.....	22
7. ADDITIONAL OBSERVATIONS / EXPERIENCES AFTER RECEPTION / CURRENT SITUATION .....	26
<b>CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS</b> .....	28
<b>METHODOLOGY</b> .....	31

## SUMMARY

This research surveyed 22 participants from four distinct groups: five migrants, seven individuals hosting migrants, five representatives from non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and five representatives from governmental institutions.

**The aim** – to understand the experiences of migrants and their integration processes upon arriving in Lithuania, and to assess the awareness and potential of the "Community Sponsorship" model.

### ARRIVAL AND ACCOMMODATION. PROVIDING SUPPORT - MANIFESTATIONS OF ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE

Migrants report that they arrived in Lithuania either due to invitations from acquaintances or because of its favourable geographical location. Upon arrival, the first point of contact was often the Registration centre. The organization most frequently mentioned as facilitating accommodation was "Stiprūs kartu" (Strong Together), with one host also referencing the The Family Center of the Vilnius Archdiocese.

The process of offering support was relatively straightforward, with the main procedure being the completion of a questionnaire distributed by "Stiprūs kartu", which assessed housing size and transportation accessibility. Based on these criteria, the organization matched families to the most suitable housing options. Migrants who wished to change accommodation (due to the desire for more privacy, lack of socialization, need for integration, or inconvenient location) received support from volunteers of the Red Cross, acquaintances, or host families.

After the initial accommodation period or due to other reasons, when the migrants left their accommodation and started to look for their own place to stay, they got help from Red Cross volunteers, refugees they knew from Ukraine or through social networks, with the assistance of their hosts.

### EXPERIENCE IN HELPING WITH ACCOMMODATION. EXPERIENCES OF HOSTS AND MIGRANTS

The migrants' experiences with accommodation were positive - most found housing smoothly, crediting the staff at the Registration centre for their success. The housing conditions were described as excellent; even when living with their hosts, migrants were provided with separate spaces in large, private homes, equipped with all necessary supplies and food. Utility bills were covered by the host families, who also provided additional domestic assistance. The accommodations provided by the hosts were often the migrants' first residence in Lithuania, unless they had initially stayed in state facilities (which were described as having very poor conditions) or in homes of acquaintances for a few nights.

No criteria or procedures were required to receive or provide housing. On the contrary, the assistance from organizations in accommodation matters felt proactive.

## INTEGRATION. SUPPORT RECEIVED. NEED FOR SUPPORT



Regarding integration support, migrants highlighted assistance from organizations such as the Red Cross, which provided essential items like food and clothing, as well as temporary shelter. Employment Service consultations and advice from other organizations and volunteers were also noted as significant. Educational institutions and kindergartens played a key role in supporting the integration process, offering free meals, transportation, and, in some cases, free schooling. Additional aid

came from community members and volunteers, helping with tasks such as finding housing, jobs, extracurricular activities, documentation, referring to medical services, providing material and financial support.

The emotional and psychological assistance was also noted as particularly valuable to migrants. It provided them with emotional comfort and helped them feel part of a family

- the care of the hosts made them feel that way, the homey atmosphere and family-like environment greatly helped them recover, as hosts tried to ensure that the migrants felt as much at home as possible.

## CHALLENGES IN ACCESSING AND RECEIVING SUPPORT AND HOUSING

One of the primary challenges mentioned was the language barrier. This obstacle created difficulties in expressing needs, hindered socialization, and limited access to well-paying jobs, difficult access to information in an understandable language, housing rentals processes. Another significant challenge was the housing situation itself, which is considered a fundamental need that has to be addressed before further integration can occur.

Systemic issues were also identified, such as delays in receiving accommodation funding, limited availability of temporary shelters for vulnerable groups, and difficulties finding large enough accommodations for families with multiple children. Cultural and bureaucratic barriers further complicated the process, particularly for mothers with children, who faced additional challenges in finding flexible employment options and understanding the local system.

Experts note that the current situation regarding the provision of support has subsided—some migrants have already left, while those arriving now are more aware of where and to whom they are going.

## THE KNOWN INITIATIVES OF CIVIL SOCIETY AND STATE INSTITUTIONS TO SYSTEMATICALLY ADDRESS THE ISSUE OF REFUGEE RECEPTION AND INTEGRATION

Most migrants were only familiar with the organizations they had directly interacted with. The "Stiprūs kartu" initiative was the most frequently mentioned, alongside the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the Red Cross, and Caritas. Various individual and community-based initiatives were also highlighted, including activities organized to help with migrant integration.

## COMMUNITY SPONSORSHIP MODEL IN LITHUANIA. HOW MUCH IT IS UNDERSTOOD AND TO HOW MUCH EXTENT IT IS (ALREADY) IMPLEMENTED

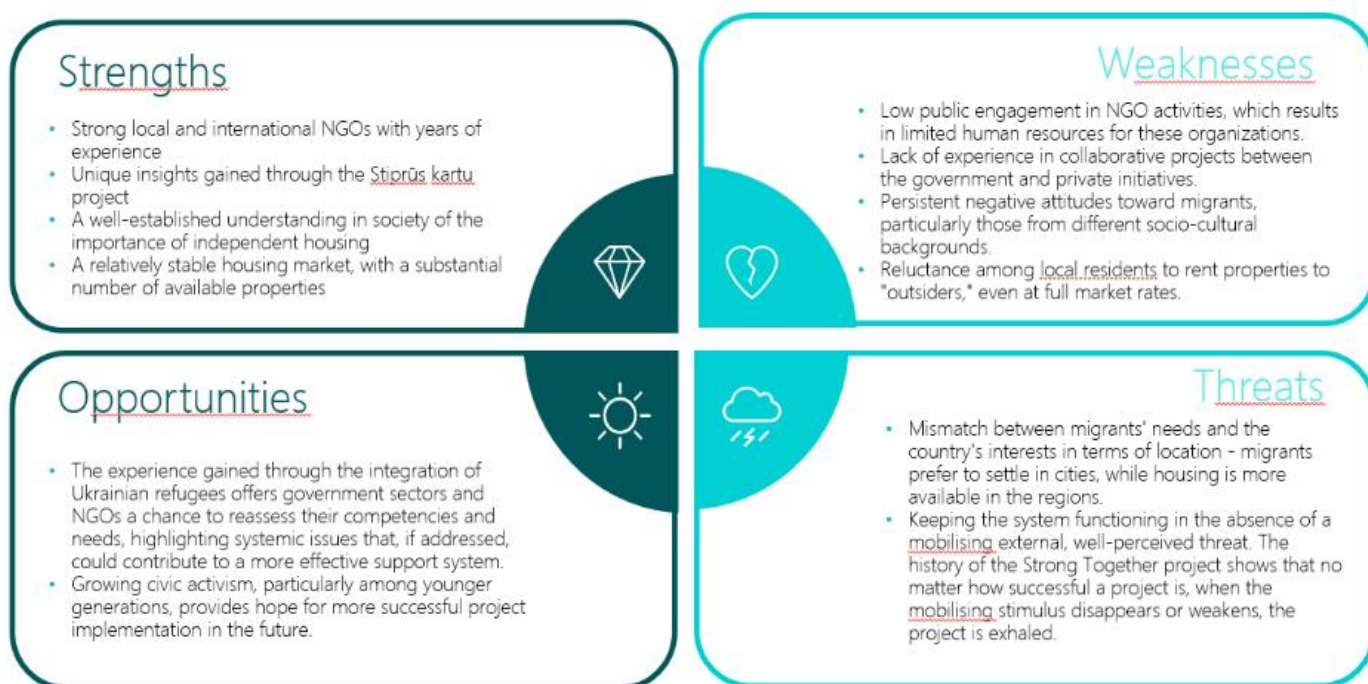
Awareness of the Community Sponsorship model is low among the respondents, with only a small portion, mainly experts working in state institutions, being familiar with it. The most notable example of this model mentioned is the "Stiprūs kartu" (Strong Together) initiative, which was successful due to its alignment with an issue that was familiar and close to the public. The "BeFriend" initiative, active in 2022, was also mentioned as operating in a format close to what could be considered community sponsorship.

Organizations that respondents believe could be linked to this concept include Caritas, Save the Children, IOM, the Red Cross, the Ukraine Centre, and the Ukreate Hub in Lithuania.

According to experts, the main obstacle to the successful implementation of this model is that "Stiprūs kartu" was a spontaneous and one-time response to a widely understood threat. For sustained success, continued effort, funding, and a clearer legal framework are necessary.

For this model to succeed, it would need to expand to more cities, operate more clearly and efficiently, and have access to ongoing support. Strong leadership is also considered crucial for its future success.

## SWOT



## RESEARCH FINDINGS

### I. ARRIVAL AND ACCOMMODATION: MANIFESTATIONS OF ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

#### ARRIVAL AND ACCOMMODATION. MANIFESTATIONS OF ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURES

Migrants shared their experiences about their arrival in Lithuania, citing the reasons for choosing the country as invitations from friends or acquaintances, or its favourable geographic location. For example, some migrants arrived in Poland first but chose Lithuania as their next destination, as Poland quickly became overcrowded with refugees at the beginning of the war, making it difficult to find housing. However, in many cases, the decision to come to Lithuania was heavily influenced by invitations from acquaintances already residing there.

When discussing the accommodation process and the role of organizational structures in facilitating housing, migrants indicated that their first point of contact in Lithuania was the registration centre (Registration/Migration Centre (department)), where



they received initial help with accommodation. Hosts who offered housing through organizations like "Stiprūs kartu" did so after registering their willingness to assist and, in some cases, also provided housing for acquaintances who were migrants. Some hosts mentioned that they had previously worked with organizations related to migration and then personally contributed to the housing process.

When discussing the accommodation process and the role of organizational structures, migrants indicated that their first point of contact upon arriving in Lithuania was the registration/registry/migration centre, where they received initial assistance with accommodation. Hosts who provided housing mentioned that they started offering support by registering through the "Stiprūs kartu" organization and expressing their willingness to help. Some hosts also accommodated acquaintances who were migrants. A portion of the hosts noted that they had worked in organizations related to migration and then had personally contributed to the housing process.

The organizations that the hosts mentioned they encountered when offering housing were "Stiprūs kartu" and The Family Center of the Vilnius Archdiocese. Hosts approached "Stiprūs kartu" as volunteers, expressing their willingness to welcome migrants into their homes. One respondent mentioned receiving a letter from The Family Center of the Vilnius Archdiocese, asking them to host a family. Until they could provide housing, the host supported the family financially, and once the opportunity arose, they moved in together.

Hosts who were professionally involved in migrant assistance were well aware of all the housing criteria and procedures. When asked to specify them, they mentioned the questionnaires sent by "Stiprūs kartu," which assessed the size of the housing (in square meters), ease of access to essential services (such as education and healthcare), and proximity to public transport stops. Based on these criteria, families were matched with hosts offering accommodation.

After the initial accommodation period or due to other reasons for leaving the provided housing, migrants searched for new places to stay either on their own or with the help of volunteers or their hosts. The search for further accommodation was facilitated

by Red Cross volunteers, acquaintances who were refugees from Ukraine, or through social networks, with the assistance of their hosts.

Migrants cited several reasons for wanting to change their housing. These included the desire to live independently with only their own family (as most lived with their hosts), a lack of social interaction, a desire to engage with and integrate into the local community (especially relevant for younger migrants without families or children), and the inconvenient location of the provided housing, such as a house in the suburbs too far from their workplace. In some cases, hosts requested that the migrants vacate the housing due to changes in their personal circumstances (e.g., a child returning to Lithuania, or needing more space for a daughter after childbirth). A more exceptional case involved an unfriendly host, with whom the migrant had to live, feeling controlled and eventually being pressured to pay for utilities, despite the legal agreement for free accommodation.

In summary, the organization "Stiprūs kartu" played the most significant role in facilitating the accommodation process by acting as an intermediary between individuals willing to provide housing and arriving refugees. From the migrants' perspective, the Registration Centre was also highlighted as the primary point of contact upon their arrival in Lithuania.

## 2. EXPERIENCE IN HELPING WITH ACCOMMODATION. EXPERIENCES OF HOSTS AND MIGRANTS

### EVALUATION OF ACCOMMODATION EXPERIENCES

Overall, migrants had positive experiences with accommodation. All participants stated that they found housing smoothly and credited this largely to the staff at the Registration Centre. All migrants received housing free of charge, which they described as a lifesaver: *"This was invaluable help when you've lost everything. It takes time to get back on your feet. When you only have \$1,000, and you know it would only last you a month if you had to pay for everything yourself, this help was a real salvation."*

### CRITERIA FOR RECEIVING HOUSING

When discussing the criteria required to receive housing, migrants stated that no formal procedures or criteria needed to be met. On the contrary, they mentioned that organizations were proactive in addressing accommodation needs. These organizations actively assessed the preferences and circumstances of the migrants and offered housing options that best suited their individual situations. For example, one young mother with a child was assigned a house in the suburbs near a kindergarten or school. Migrants also noted that other factors, such as access to transportation and the ability to communicate with locals in Russian, were taken into consideration.

From the hosts' perspective, they similarly noted that there were no specific programs or stages required to provide housing, as most of the arrangements were voluntary, either through "Stiprūs kartu" or by hosting acquaintances.

### HOUSING CONDITIONS: LIVING ALONE OR WITH HOSTS

Migrants reported being generally satisfied with the housing conditions. In most cases, they mentioned living with their hosts; however, they still had separate living spaces within large private homes, complete with their own entrances. They stated that they were provided with all necessary household items and equipment. Furthermore, migrants noted that not only was the housing provided free of charge, but the hosts also covered utility costs, provided food, and helped with various domestic issues.

Hosts also reported that the housing conditions were excellent, often offering the same homes they lived in themselves. For cases where the hosts did not reside with the migrants, they stated that the accommodation provided was spacious and of high quality. Migrants mentioned that all families or individuals they housed were not required to share their accommodations with other refugee families. In most cases, the housing provided by the hosts was the place migrants first stayed in after arriving in Lithuania, unless they had temporarily stayed for a few nights in state facilities or in homes of acquaintances. Migrants described the state facilities as having very poor living conditions, with many beds in single rooms, sleeping in what can be considered corridors, inadequate for long-term living.

## AGREEMENTS RELATED TO HOUSING

Both migrants and hosts reported that the only formal agreement related to housing was the signing of a loan-for-use agreement, which was described as part of the "Stiprūs kartu" accommodation process. Hosts mentioned that even when they later accommodated refugees independently (without the involvement of "Stiprūs kartu"), they continued to use this type of agreement. All other arrangements related to accommodation were mostly verbal, typically concerning the length of stay, an agreement that the migrants would not pay for utilities, or house rules. One host, for example, mentioned that one of the house rules was that *"if you need something or want to ask someone who's in another room, you don't shout, you go over and ask them."* It was noted that most agreements were informal and involved adapting to each other's personalities and needs as they went along. In some cases, household chores were shared as an unspoken form of compensation for housing.

## FEEDBACK FROM THE ORGANIZATION THAT FACILITATED ACCOMMODATION

Both hosts and migrants noted that there was no follow-up contact from the organizations involved during or after the accommodation period. "Stiprūs kartu" or any other organizations were involved only at the beginning of the accommodation process, but no further contact or checks on living conditions were made afterward. Neither hosts nor migrants were asked for feedback, nor did the organizations seek any.

### 3. INTEGRATION. SUPPORT RECEIVED. NEED FOR SUPPORT

#### SUPPORT RECEIVED AND ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURES INVOLVED

Migrants who had fled war and arrived in a country with a different language, systems, and cultural norms emphasized that the support they received from host organizations, institutions, and volunteers was crucial. The primary need for assistance was housing, but beyond that, migrants also mentioned receiving various types of help from different sources. These included assistance with food and essential items from the Red Cross, as well as temporary accommodation for three nights. Employment Service consultations regarding job opportunities were also mentioned, along with advice on integration from other organizations and their volunteers. Migrants noted that this assistance often involved sharing useful contacts and directing them to the appropriate people for further help.

#### ASSISTANCE FROM INSTITUTIONS NOT DIRECTLY LINKED TO MIGRANT SUPPORT

Migrants also reported receiving help from institutions not directly linked to migrant support. Educational institutions, such as schools and kindergartens, were highlighted for providing free education, meals, and transportation. For instance, one migrant mentioned being able to send their child to a private Lithuanian-Ukrainian school free of charge thanks to the administration's support. Another migrant reported that their workplace provided food assistance and access to Airbnb vouchers for 40 days of free accommodation.

#### ASSISTANCE FROM INDIVIDUALS

Migrants also mentioned receiving assistance from individuals, often volunteers from organizations or members of local communities. This help included finding housing after the initial accommodation period, with volunteers from the Red Cross helping to locate a place to stay. Financial support was also provided, with some contributing up to €150 toward rent payments. Migrants noted help in finding jobs in places like Circle-K, private Lithuanian-Ukrainian schools, as nannies, or working as cooks in Russian-speaking Lithuanian families. Volunteers also assisted in finding medical care, such as helping locate

a dentist, covering the costs of medical visits, or finding veterinary care for pets. In addition, they mentioned support with items and transportation when moving to a new place. Some also reported receiving assistance with registering for residence permits, finding extracurricular activities for children, and help navigating the school system (such as getting children into Russian-speaking classes).

The hosts emphasized that all the people around them came together in groups and communities, collectively gathering and sorting items to give away, offering help on a large scale. They noted that this was a pressing issue, and people wanted to contribute not only through official volunteering but also individually.

## EMOTIONAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL SUPPORT

Emotional and psychological support was also emphasized as an essential form of assistance. Both migrants and hosts stated that this was a sensitive area. Hosts noted that they saw how deeply affected the Ukrainian refugees were by the war, especially the children. One host mentioned how children would cry at night or be startled by the sound of fireworks, which reminded them of gunfire. Therefore, emotional support was deemed critical, and migrants expressed gratitude for the psychological comfort they received.

Emotional help was not only provided by close circles such as neighbours, kindergarten teachers, or school teachers but also by the hosts, who offered moral support and helped ensure psychological well-being. One host remarked, *"We shared in all the worries and challenges the migrants faced."*

Migrants highlighted how this care made them feel like part of a family, saying that the homey atmosphere and family-like environment greatly helped them recover, as hosts tried to ensure that the migrants felt as much at home as possible.

From both migrants' and hosts' experiences, it was clear that there was no shortage of support. Help was provided not only by organizations and volunteers but also by individuals who came together in groups or communities. It was noted that this was a pressing issue, and it was easy for people to personally engage, which led to a high level of volunteer activity.

## 4. CHALLENGES IN ACCESSING AND RECEIVING SUPPORT AND HOUSING

### Challenges in Receiving Support:



#### CHALLENGES IN RECEIVING SUPPORT: THE LANGUAGE BARRIER

The language barrier was identified as one of the main challenges in receiving support, as noted by all groups of informants. Migrants, especially older individuals, reported not knowing English, making Russian their only means of communication or relying on other refugees who became volunteers and helped their fellow countrymen. It was noted that children adapted to the language more quickly and were often able to help their parents with translation.

The following issues caused by the language barrier were identified: difficulties in receiving support or expressing expectations, disruptions in smooth socialization, obstacles to securing well-paid jobs or jobs that match one's qualifications or profession, and the limited accessibility of information in a language that migrants can understand. As one migrant noted, *"It all starts from here—migration processes, filling out documents, understanding what I need to do."* It was also noted that the language barrier complicates the rental process—if a rental agreement is prepared in a language the tenant does not understand, they cannot feel safe or confident about the rental terms, and this becomes

an issue for landlords as well: "If I receive an agreement or a rental contract in a language I don't understand, how can I feel safe? Likewise, the landlord won't want such a tenant."

Due to the difficulties caused by the language barrier, migrants are attending or planning to attend Lithuanian language courses to learn the language thoroughly (not just to obtain a certificate). It was mentioned that information about language learning usually reaches migrants through the Employment Service, Caritas, the Red Cross, and various Facebook groups.

## CHALLENGES IN RECEIVING SUPPORT: HOUSING

Housing was reported as one of the primary challenges in receiving support. It was identified as a basic need that had to be met for further integration to be possible: *"Integration doesn't begin with language courses or community activities; it starts with addressing basic humanitarian needs like housing. Without housing, no further integration can proceed."*

Both governmental and non-governmental organizations noted systemic issues related to the housing process. For example, there was a delay in receiving financial support for housing. Ukrainian refugees are entitled to three months of accommodation compensation from the municipality, starting from their visit to the migration office, but the funds are only received two weeks later, leaving refugees without a place to stay during that period. It was also noted that "Stiprūs kartu" is no longer operational and that temporary housing facilities or shelters are only available for the most vulnerable groups (such as women with children and people with disabilities), leaving those outside these groups without options.

The difficulties in renting housing for large families, especially those with five or six children, were also highlighted. Experts noted that there is a very limited supply of housing units that can accommodate such large families, if any at all.

Experts further noted that successful integration is most likely to occur in large cities, where there are better opportunities for employment, education, and access to specialized services, such as therapy or social work, which are especially important for those fleeing war. However, integration in large cities is also more difficult due to the higher cost of



services and housing, which is often not matched by the migrants' lower incomes. As a result, the highest concentration of migrants is in Vilnius, which only increases the competition for housing among this group.

Social attitudes toward foreigners and existing prejudices also hinder the ability to secure housing. It was reported that landlords often remain reluctant to rent to foreigners, especially from countries further away than Ukraine. Additionally, a lack of understanding of the legal system and fears about renting to families with children, due to the complexities of terminating a rental contract, further contribute to this challenge. Some landlords prefer to rent properties "under the table," which complicates the involvement of the state or the receipt of financial support, as a formal rental agreement is required to receive any assistance.

## ADDITIONAL CHALLENGES: MOTHERS WITH CHILDREN, UNDERSTANDING THE SYSTEM, CULTURAL BARRIERS

Additional challenges were noted, particularly for mothers with children, who faced significant difficulties in finding flexible jobs (especially considering that job opportunities were already limited). Without family members or close relatives to help care for the children, their options were even more restricted.

Another reported challenge was the lack of understanding of the local system and its processes. When migrants arrived in Lithuania, they struggled to comprehend how the municipality operated. It was mentioned that while processes related to education and healthcare were somewhat easier to navigate, thanks to assistance from volunteers and NGOs, considerable difficulties remained in understanding other aspects of the system.

Migrants also noted cultural differences as a less frequent but notable challenge. For example, they mentioned difficulties in understanding aspects of Lithuanian culture: *"When do we smile? When do we show that we like or don't like something? I've heard many say it's easier to understand services and information here, but it's much harder to understand you as Lithuanians."*

## CHANGES IN SUPPORT PROVISION IN RECENT YEARS

Experts observed that the current situation regarding support provision has slowed down. A portion of the migrants has already left Lithuania for their final destination countries, which they initially intended to reach. Lithuania served as a transit stop for many. The remaining migrants, those still in Lithuania, often live in designated centers, such as refugee reception centers or mother-and-child centers. These centers mostly house seniors, mothers with children, large families, or individuals with health conditions.

It was noted that the decrease in support is partly due to the strong Ukrainian community already established in Lithuania. This community, which has become well-rooted, now takes on much of the responsibility for helping newly arriving migrants, offering guidance and assistance where needed.

Overall, it was emphasized that the initial wave of refugees arrived in Lithuania out of necessity, often without a clear plan. By contrast, the second wave of migrants arriving now are more informed about where they are going and whom they will be staying with. Many of the migrants who remain in Lithuania are those who plan to settle down permanently or those who continue to live in social centres.

## CHALLENGES IN PROVIDING SUPPORT: HOSTS' EXPERIENCES

Hosts who provided accommodation to migrants also reported facing certain challenges. One of the more frequently mentioned difficulties was the lack of clarity about the extent and type of assistance they were expected to provide. As one host noted, *"I didn't know exactly what medical services they were entitled to because sometimes services would be denied, even though I knew they had the right to emergency care."*

Another challenge reported by hosts was helping migrants find employment, especially when the migrants had higher qualifications and wanted to secure jobs that matched their expertise. Helping migrants manage stress, particularly children who had experienced trauma, was also mentioned as a difficult task. Hosts reported that accessing psychological support for migrants was complicated, as healthcare institutions often refused to provide consultations in a language other than Lithuanian, or with a translator.

Overall, the most frequently mentioned challenges in providing and receiving support were the language barrier and housing issues. These two aspects were identified as causing a cascade of related problems and were the most frequently mentioned by both migrants and experts. Other challenges were mentioned less often or were important to a smaller / more specific group of migrants.

## 5. THE KNOWN INITIATIVES OF CIVIL SOCIETY AND STATE INSTITUTIONS TO SYSTEMATICALLY ADDRESS THE ISSUE OF REFUGEE RECEPTION AND INTEGRATION

### AWARENESS OF "STIPRŪS KARTU" AND OTHER ORGANIZATIONS

Migrants who had received support from organizations helping with refugee reception and integration most commonly mentioned the organizations they had personally encountered. For instance, one migrant highlighted "Stiprūs kartu," stating that the organization helped them find housing. Another migrant mentioned volunteering at the Red Cross and collaborating with "Stiprūs kartu" to resolve accommodation issues. A third migrant noted that they used "Stiprūs kartu" to help find housing for an acquaintance. All three migrants expressed positive experiences, reporting that the organization quickly found suitable housing for Ukrainians and that the volunteers were very friendly.

Representatives from governmental institutions highlighted that "Stiprūs kartu" is one of the most prominent examples when discussing organizations addressing refugee reception and integration issues. However, they also noted that other organizations are involved as well: *"Everyone is contributing in their own way—be it the Red Cross, Caritas, the Order of Malta, and other organizations—but it's difficult to single out any other organization apart from 'Stiprūs kartu' as a particularly notable example."*

Before discussions about the "Community Sponsorship" model in Lithuania became more widespread, a representative from an NGO mentioned that "Stiprūs kartu" was one of the most notable examples of such a model, although it is no longer active. The representative stated, *"When Ukrainian refugees arrive, they see that 'Stiprūs kartu' provides housing assistance, but when they call, they are told that there are no staff or volunteers available, although some help with transportation may still be offered."*

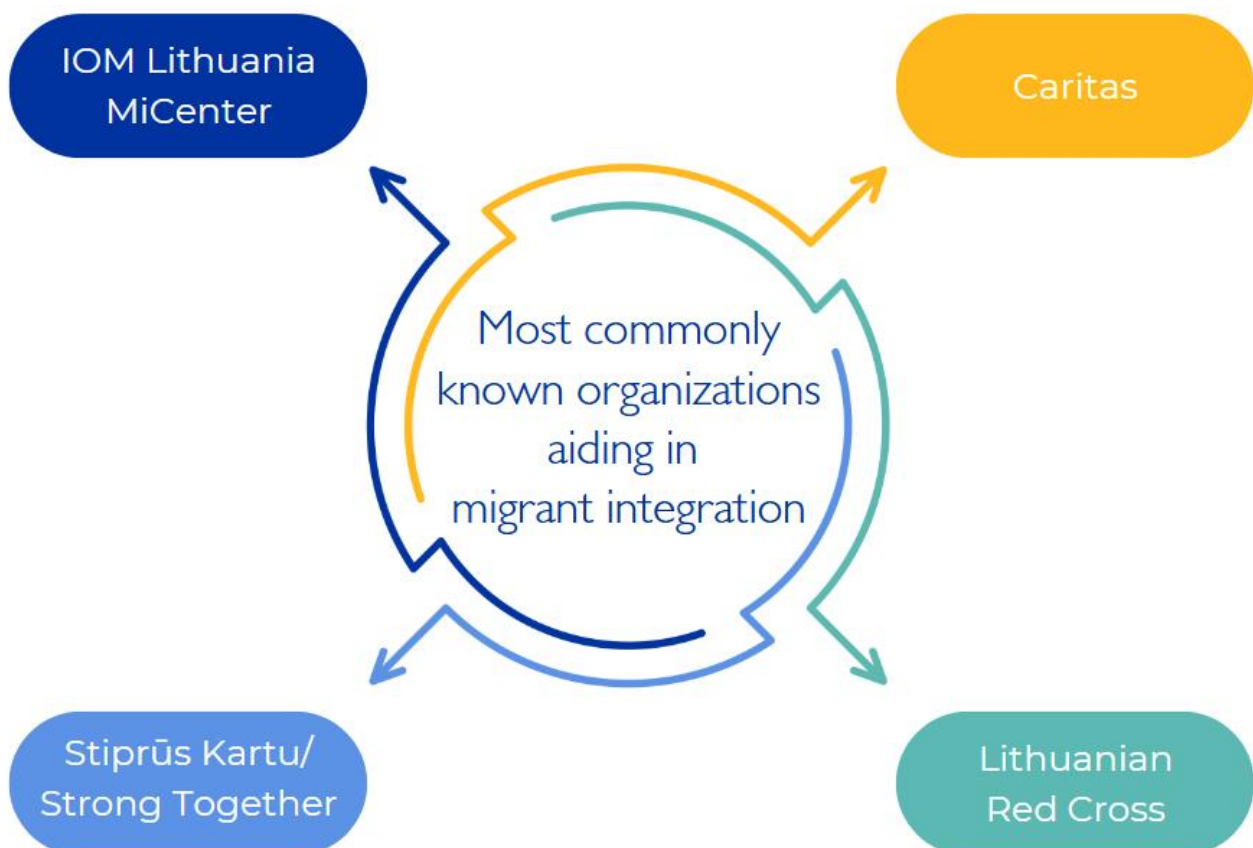
Representatives from non-governmental organizations, in addition to "Stiprūs kartu," also identified the International Organization for Migration (IOM), *"which has the largest information centre in all of Vilnius"*, as an institution assisting with migrant integration. They also mentioned the Red Cross and Caritas as organizations that provide consultations on housing searches and how to navigate the process.

## OTHER INDIVIDUAL ACTIVITIES AND INITIATIVES

In addition to organizations, individual activities and initiatives that support migrant integration were also highlighted. Community-led initiatives, volunteer activities, and events aimed at assisting refugees and their children were mentioned. Non-governmental organization representatives noted specific initiatives, such as cultural evenings that are organized once a month, where people from different cultures come together to learn about each other. These events focus on a different culture each month, with activities ranging from sharing traditional dishes to dancing and singing.

Another initiative mentioned was the celebration of International Refugee Day, which is held in a different parish each year to reach a wider group of people and raise awareness about migration and refugee issues.

Therefore, while the number of initiatives has decreased in recent times, there are still activities and efforts in place to support migrant integration. Experts noted that their awareness of organizations and initiatives is much broader than that of migrants, who typically only know about the organizations or initiatives they have directly interacted with.



## 6. COMMUNITY SPONSORSHIP MODEL IN LITHUANIA. HOW MUCH IT IS UNDERSTOOD AND TO HOW MUCH EXTENT IT IS (ALREADY) IMPLEMENTED

### AWARENESS OF THE COMMUNITY SPONSORSHIP MODEL

The Community Sponsorship model is understood by only a small portion of respondents, mainly experts working in state institutions. A significant part of the respondents had not encountered this concept and could not provide any examples of it in action.

Representatives from non-governmental organizations stated that there are no concrete forms of Community Sponsorship in Lithuania, but individual communities are trying to collaborate on projects and obtain funding for those activities. More frequently, they referred to community empowerment forms, such as the Refugee Reception Centre or programs supporting refugee entrepreneurship, where individuals can apply for and receive financial aid. However, it was noted that these examples were more individual cases rather than community-wide efforts.

State institutions were somewhat more familiar with the model but only at a superficial level. The most prominent example they cited was the "Stiprūs kartu" initiative, which had played a major role in housing Ukrainian refugees at the start of the war.

Hosts who received migrants tended to understand the Community Sponsorship model more as general community assistance (from friends, neighbours, etc.) in the form of supplies or social interaction. They mentioned that the existence of such a model could be seen through the support provided by neighbourhood or gardening communities, like those in Tarandė or other residential areas.

### ORGANIZATIONS ASSOCIATED WITH THE COMMUNITY SPONSORSHIP MODEL

"Stiprūs kartu" was highlighted as a successful and overall exemplary instance of the Community Sponsorship model, especially because Ukrainians were seen as a very specific group that easily garnered public support. The state encouraged action, and citizens found

it easy to identify with the Ukrainians asking for help. It was much easier for people to relate to their situation and feel empathy compared to refugee groups from the Middle East or African countries, where cultural differences make it harder for the local population to empathize in the same way.

Migrants who were provided with a full explanation of the Community Sponsorship model reported that they believed there were enough organizations in Lithuania working in this area, but that ensuring their continuity was important. The organizations they associated with this concept included Caritas, Save the Children, IOM, the Red Cross, the Ukraine Centre, and Ukreate Hub in Lithuania. According to one woman, these organizations have continued their activities and support for Ukrainians even two years later, organizing celebrations, events, discussions, psychological support meetings, and grant competitions.

One expert mentioned the "BeFriend" initiative, a mentoring program that operated in 2022, which closely resembled a Community Sponsorship format. The program was aimed at war refugees and Ukrainian citizens, with mentors assisting newcomers on various matters, including housing. The process involved the Ukrainian refugee registering for the program, being matched with a potential mentor, and receiving the necessary assistance—whether that be finding schools or kindergartens, securing work or housing, or receiving broader social support in a mentoring format. The expert noted that the program has since evolved, as the number of arriving Ukrainian refugees has changed, along with their needs.

## LIMITATIONS AND OBSTACLES TO THE COMMUNITY SPONSORSHIP MODEL

Overall, it was noted that the Community Sponsorship model is still not widely known, even among individuals who, professionally or through their personal experiences, might be closely connected to it.

Experts highlighted that the primary obstacle to the successful operation of such a model is the fact that "Stiprūs kartu" was a spontaneous and one-time response to a well-

understood threat. In a broader context, the general public is not fully prepared or informed about refugees from the Middle East, North Africa, or other regions.

It was also pointed out that this type of initiative requires continuity and financial support, such as subsidies for individuals renting apartments. As one expert noted, *"In the long term, even 'Stiprūs kartu' could only assist for a limited time. There should be some kind of continuity."*

Another critical aspect for the smooth operation of this model is a clearer legal framework: *"Less shadow and more proper, clean declarations."*

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

It was emphasized that there is a need for similar or related organizations in other cities. It was noted that Vilnius has quite a few such organizations compared to Klaipėda or other cities, and expanding these efforts to other regions is crucial.

Experts also noted that a well-functioning community should be well-organized, with a clear definition of what it represents (e.g., an association or NGO) and operate transparently: *"It should be clear what it stands for and what its goals are."* Such transparency could help the community obtain funding, such as donations through the 1,2% income tax allocation or other forms of financial support.

In addition, it was highlighted that strong leadership is essential for a well-functioning community: *"Leadership is a fundamental principle, and it's crucial for the community—even if it is strong, without leadership it's impossible."* The leader, especially if they are from the refugee community (for example, a Ukrainian), should be well-established in the country and able to assist arriving refugees by mediating with NGOs or state institutions. However, it was noted that the leader does not necessarily have to be from the same ethnic group; it would be beneficial for them to speak the community's language and understand its culture. At the same time, having a Lithuanian leader who understands the local language and bureaucracy was deemed essential to guide the community in the right direction. The proximity and unity within the community itself were also noted as important.



Finally, it was suggested that future efforts to improve the assistance process should focus on giving more attention to the most vulnerable groups—seniors, people with disabilities, and single mothers with children.

## 7. ADDITIONAL OBSERVATIONS / EXPERIENCES AFTER RECEPTION / CURRENT SITUATION

### ACCOMMODATION AFTER THE INITIAL RECEPTION PERIOD

Most of the migrants interviewed stated that they are now living in different accommodations than the ones they were provided with upon arriving in Lithuania. They reported that finding new housing was not a significant challenge, and currently, nearly all of them are renting accommodations independently—working, paying rent, and covering utility bills. Only a few respondents mentioned living in housing provided by acquaintances, though they still cover their own utility costs.

The most commonly reported difficulties with their current living situation are financial. A large portion of their income is spent on rent and utilities, and many said that their earnings are insufficient because, without language proficiency, they cannot work in their field of expertise and earn a corresponding salary. Additionally, it was noted that from January 2024 onwards, the state will no longer provide any financial assistance.

Non-governmental organization representatives also observed that some Ukrainians are now finding it more difficult to rent housing. One stated, *"In the beginning, they were welcomed with open arms, but now many are being turned away."* This situation was attributed to financial issues and cultural differences, such as smoking indoors, which is common for some Ukrainians but unacceptable to landlords, as well as landlords not receiving the promised compensation from the state for providing housing.

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVING INTEGRATION BEYOND STATE INSTITUTIONS

The respondents highlighted the importance of sociocultural and community activities as recommendations to improve migrant integration outside of state institutions: *"This is very important, and state institutions will never fully address this need. They only cover the basic necessities, but the more we involve people in social activities, the lower the risk of social exclusion."*

It was also noted that there is a lack of communication about the added value that migrants bring to society. Respondents suggested that improving the perception of migrants could positively influence how they are viewed: *"We mostly talk about how dangerous they are (whether it's justified or not), but what's missing is basic communication that shows why we need them, especially given our current demographic situation."*

Another recommendation for improving migrants' image in the community was for the migrants themselves to demonstrate their commitment to staying in the country, such as learning the language. *"Language learning is a key form of assistance, and the fact that migrants are willing to learn it shows that they are planning to stay and live here among us."*

To promote self-sufficiency and integration, respondents identified key areas of focus: allowing time to find a job and secure stable income, offering more Lithuanian language courses or encouraging language learning, and organizing employment and skills development programs.

## POST-RECEPTION EXPERIENCES

According to the hosts who provided accommodation for migrants, only one respondent is still housing newcomers. Most of the other migrants either returned to Ukraine or moved on to other countries. The hosts stated that the reason for no longer offering housing was the perception that there was no longer a need—migrants had returned to their home country, or the hosts needed the space for their own family members. Some also believed that it was time for the migrants to become more self-sufficient and move forward independently: *"It became comfortable and safe, and they did not feel much urgency to look for something else."*

However, hosts noted that they would be willing to provide help again if needed, as they understand the difficult situation faced by people leaving their homes. One host mentioned that they still provide support by sending packages, maintaining contact, and offering help when challenges arise.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### CONCLUSIONS

Public engagement in the non-governmental sector in Lithuania remains relatively weak compared to neighbouring countries, such as those in Scandinavia. This phenomenon can be attributed to both historical and cultural factors. Lithuania, for many centuries, was predominantly an agrarian society with a lifestyle characterized by isolation and a strong focus on micro-communities, especially the family unit. During the Soviet era, forced collectivization further deepened societal resistance to collective action. Additionally, historically low levels of trust in both society and the state have discouraged individuals from investing their time and effort in initiatives they do not fully trust.

Given this socio-cultural context, the potential for implementing a Community Sponsorship initiative in Lithuania appears limited. However, the outbreak of the Russian war against Ukraine on February 24, 2022, along with the urgent need to accommodate Ukrainian refugees and the perceived threat of broader conflict, mobilized Lithuanian society in an unprecedented way. Amidst international organizations providing aid to Ukrainian refugees, the private initiative *Stiprūs kartu* (Strong Together) emerged as a significant player. Despite the tragic circumstances, this timely and well-positioned initiative provided a unique example of civic solidarity, offering valuable insights into the potential for developing a Community Sponsorship model in Lithuania.

The analysis of the reception and integration of Ukrainian refugees reveals that while many local and international organizations played a role, the majority of assistance was channelled through the new platform *Stiprūs kartu*. This initiative was particularly crucial during the early phases of refugee accommodation, offering not only temporary shelter but, in many cases, long-term housing as well as organizational, technical, and even emotional support. However, as the refugee wave subsided and the situation transitioned to a "new normal," the platform's activities began to taper off.

When discussing the Community Sponsorship model—still relatively new and unfamiliar to the target groups in the study—informants identified similar examples in traditional aid organizations such as IOM, Caritas, the Red Cross, Save the Children, and

Ukreate Hub. These organizations possess established systems with long operational histories, defined structures, stable funding, and strong management practices. Stiprūs kartu could draw from these examples, adopting best practices such as its platform model that aligns the needs of incoming refugees with the needs and capabilities of host communities, as well as offering legal assistance and FAQ services (in the case of Stiprūs kartu, the creation of a rental agreement template was particularly effective).

All target groups agreed that NGOs in Lithuania exhibit the strongest potential for implementing aspects of the Community Sponsorship model. However, what remains lacking is state-supported engagement through its bureaucratic systems, as well as the integration of private and civic initiatives into a single cohesive framework. This gap is seen as a major challenge, particularly because successful collaborations between the governmental and non-governmental sectors have been scarce in Lithuania. The limited involvement of the population in NGO activities, as previously mentioned, further complicates these efforts. The structural and organizational components are therefore perceived as the most significant threats to the successful implementation of a Community Sponsorship model in Lithuania.

Another challenge lies in societal perceptions of the issue and the public's willingness to assist. In a country where homeownership is highly valued, there is widespread recognition of the importance of independent housing for the successful settlement and integration of individuals. However, negative attitudes toward migrants persist. Even when contracts are signed with organizations (as opposed to individuals), local residents are often reluctant to rent their properties to such migrants, a sentiment exacerbated by the recent migrant crisis orchestrated by Belarus, which has further intensified public hostility towards these individuals.

Cultural Barriers: The integration of Ukrainians into Lithuanian society has revealed that for those whom Lithuanians often consider to be culturally similar, significant cultural challenges still arise. Cultural challenges revealed in simple household aspects, such as smoking indoors, also it was mentioned that Ukrainians found it difficult to understand the moods of Lithuanians, when they were happy, when they were not, and so on.

Geographical Distribution: From both housing accessibility and national interest perspectives, it would be prudent to distribute migrants evenly across the country. However, this presents further challenges, as migrants in rural areas often face greater social isolation, language barriers, and, most importantly, limited employment opportunities. There is also a shortage of active local community leaders to facilitate this integration.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

**Leadership.** Given that non-governmental community initiatives in Lithuania are relatively weak, the successful implementation of the Community Sponsorship model requires a leading organization - one with an established structure, stable income (financial support from Government as well as other permanent sources), connections with governmental organizations, and recognition and acceptance within society.

**Network Building.** It is essential to identify governmental agencies and non-governmental organizations (both in terms of structure and regional coverage) that could become the primary promoters and advocates of the Community Sponsorship model. These organizations should also undertake the process of training target group representatives and community leaders through conferences, seminars, workshops, and other educational events.

**Public Education.** The Community Sponsorship model relies on the involvement of society members, yet it is currently not widely known to the public. Therefore, a broad educational program and dissemination of best practices are needed through national, local media channels, and social networks.

**Overcoming Opposition.** The application of the Community Sponsorship model in the refugee integration process will inevitably face significant ideological resistance in society. It is recommended to identify and work with societal groups that do not hold negative preconceived opinions or that prioritize humanitarian aspects. Changing public opinion and fostering tolerance toward refugees, due to the scale of this challenge, should not be a direct goal.

## METHODOLOGY

### METHODOLOGY. MIGRANT FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION (FGD)

- **TARGET GROUP.** Migrants.
- **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY.** To find out about migrants' experiences on coming to Lithuania and the integration processes, as well as understanding the concept of Community sponsorship.
- **METHODOLOGY.** Focus Group Discussion (FGD).
- **RESEARCH SAMPLE.** 6 informants.
- **LOCATION.** Lithuania.
- **DURATION OF THE FGD.** 1.5 - 2 hours.
- **SAMPLING METHOD.** Targeted sampling.

### METHODOLOGY. HOSTS FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION (FGD)

- **TARGET GROUP.** Hosts.
- **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY.** To find out about the hosts' experience in hosting refugees and integration assistance, as well as understanding the concept of the Community sponsorship.
- **METHODOLOGY.** Focus Group Discussion (FGD).
- **RESEARCH SAMPLE.** 7 informants.
- **LOCATION.** Lithuania.
- **DURATION OF THE FGD.** 1.5 - 2 hours.
- **SAMPLING METHOD.** Targeted sampling.

## METHODOLOGY. NGO SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW

- **TARGET GROUP.** Representatives of non-governmental organisations.
- **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY.** Understand the integration challenges faced by refugees and ways to manage them, as well as familiarity with the Community Sponsorship concept and how it works.
- **METHODOLOGY.** In-depth semi-structured interview.
- **RESEARCH SAMPLE.** 5 informants.
- **LOCATION.** Lithuania.
- **DURATION OF THE INTERVIEW.** 1 hour.
- **SAMPLING METHOD.** Targeted sampling.

## METHODOLOGY. GOVERNMENT ORGANISATIONS SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW

- **TARGET GROUP.** Representatives of Government organizations.
- **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY.** Understand the integration challenges faced by refugees and ways to manage them, as well as familiarity with the Community Sponsorship concept and how it works.
- **METHODOLOGY.** In-depth semi-structured interview.
- **RESEARCH SAMPLE.** 5 informants.
- **LOCATION.** Lithuania.
- **DURATION OF THE INTERVIEW.** 1 hour.
- **SAMPLING METHOD.** Targeted sampling.



**Reinforcing Integration through Sponsorship Enhancement (RISE)** project aims to promote community sponsorship (CS) schemes and integration of persons in need of international protection. The objective is to contribute to addressing housing shortages for beneficiaries of international protection by piloting community sponsorship schemes and enhancing engagement of sponsors in Belgium, Italy and Lithuania.

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