

Reenvisioning Migration Governance: from Securitization to Talent Exchange Between Nigeria and Lithuania

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Abstract. This article seeks to answer how civil society actors co-opt and navigate external migration governance agendas and vocabularies. Reassessing the so-called liberal migration governance paradox, it presents a case study of the “Digital Explorers” pilot initiative, aimed at fostering legal migration between the European Union and West Africa. By using publicly available and internal project documentation, the article investigates how the project consortium, led by civil society actors, deployed evolving strategies to advocate for migration openness between Lithuania and Nigeria. The study concludes by presenting a taxonomy of rhetorical frames and reflects on its implications for future research on legal migration frameworks between West Africa and EU-13 countries.

Keywords: migration governance, Lithuania, Nigeria, European Union, framing theory.

Keičiant legalios migracijos naratyvus: nuo sugrėsminimo iki talentų mainų tarp Lietuvos ir Nigerijos

Santrauka. Šiame straipsnyje siekiama atsakyti į klausimą, kaip pilietinės visuomenės organizacijos įsitraukia į migracijos politikos darbotvarkes bei diskursus ir juos keičia. Iš naujo įvertindamas liberalios migracijos politikos paradoksą, straipsnis pristato „Digital Explorers“ bandomojo projekto atvejo analizę. Remiantis viešai prieinamais ir vidiniais projekto dokumentais, straipsnyje analizuojama, kaip pilietinės visuomenės veikėjų įgyvendintas projektas taikė kintančias strategijas, siekdamas propaguoti migracijos atvirumą

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tarp Lietuvos ir Nigerijos. Straipsnis baigiamas retorinių rėmų taksonomijos pristatymu ir svarstymais apie jos reikšmę būsimiems tyrimams, susijusiems su teisėta migracija tarp Vakarų Afrikos ir ES-13 šalių.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: migracijos politika, Lietuva, Nigerija, Europos Sąjunga, rėminimo teorija.

Introduction

The Valletta Summit on Migration, organised in late 2015, set the stage for a number of migration governance initiatives between the European Union and West Africa, e.g., two multi-actor Team Europe Initiatives were launched by the EU and African states in 2022, aiming to address and facilitate migratory routes on a transcontinental scale^{1,2}. While most of these initiatives have been drawn and implemented by traditional players in the field (old EU Member States, the International Organization for Migration, and other international organisations), the Valletta Summit has also encouraged new actors to explore their possible roles in international migration management.

Lithuania, an EU member since 2004, having very limited previous interactions with West African countries as well as little if any political interests in the region, decided to not only financially contribute to the EU Trust Fund for Africa, but also expanded the geography of its development cooperation projects. As a result, since 2016 besides the traditional Eastern Neighbourhood-oriented initiatives, the Lithuanian *Ministry of Foreign Affairs* (MFA) has also been funding small-scale projects aimed at “addressing the root causes of irregular migration in West Africa”³.

¹ The author wishes to acknowledge the valuable initial input and ideas provided by Mantė Makauskaitė, Eugenija Kovaliova, and Adaeze Sokan, which contributed to the strengthening of this paper. Gratitude is also extended to the three anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments, and to Gita Petrikaitė and Kamilė Raudoniūtė for their excellent research assistance at various stages of the manuscript’s revision.

² European Commission, “EU working together with African partners on migration: Launch of Team Europe initiatives,” European Commission, December 12, 2022, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_22_7540.

³ See the map and priorities of Lithuanian development cooperation projects: “Projects Map,” *Ltaid.urm.lt*, accessed July 1, 2024, <https://ltaid.urm.lt/en/projects/projects-map/182>.

Despite the fact that contextual knowledge necessary for meaningful interventions was missing and that discourses developed by traditional migration governance actors were uncritically absorbed, this shift in the Lithuanian development cooperation policy signalled an aspiration to contribute to an emerging EU migration management agenda. Moreover, it opened a window of opportunity for civil society actors to step in and steer migration-focused engagements between Lithuania and West African countries both rhetorically and operationally away from securitization and towards unexplored areas of feasible mutual growth.

The shift in development cooperation funding priorities of the Lithuanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) also served as a springboard for an ongoing cooperation between “AfriKo”⁴, a Lithuanian not-for-profit, providing facilitation and research for collaborations between Baltic and African countries in technology and policy, and “Ventures Platform Foundation”, a Nigerian startup accelerator and development partnership organisation that provides project implementation, capacity building, and policy advisory in Africa. These two organisations were the driving force behind the “Digital Explorers” and formed their partnership for Lithuania’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) funded project (implemented by “AfriKo”), which became the inception or concept development stage of the “Digital Explorers”. The small grant of around 20 thousand EUR turned into one of four pilots under the Mobility Partnership Facility, funded by the European Commission’s DG HOME, aimed at offering and testing innovative legal pathways that contribute to addressing labour and skills shortages in selected member and partner states of the EU⁵.

⁴ In September of 2022, “AfriKo” was renamed to “OSMOS Global Partnerships” to reflect the broadening geographic scope of organisation’s projects. For example, the second iteration of the “Digital Explorers” project involves Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Nigeria, Kenya and Armenia (2023–2026). In addition, “Digital Explorers – Iraq Edition” (2023–2025) was launched the same year.

⁵ Diana Stefanescu, “Partnerships for Mobility at the Crossroads: Lessons learnt from 18 Months of Implementation of EU Pilot Projects on Legal Migration, Policy Brief,” *Mobility Partnership Facility*, <https://mobilitypartnershipfacility.eu/storage/files/mpf-policy-brief-pilot-projects-1020.pdf>.

With the stated purpose to “connect information and communications technology (ICT) markets through individual journeys,” the “Digital Explorers” project provides tailored opportunities for temporary employment in Lithuanian tech companies and training for young Nigerian information and communications technology (ICT) specialists. ICT was chosen as the priority sector due to the complementarity of the two ecosystems – as Lithuania had more than 13,000 vacancies, Nigeria boasted a skilled and diverse pool of young ICT specialists, actively looking for international work opportunities⁶. At the time of signing the grant agreement, “Digital Explorers” represented the largest grant that the Mobility Partnership Facility had ever disbursed⁷. Similar initiatives have been interpreted differently across the literature. On the one hand, a coherent governance framework for migration remains rather absent both in Africa and Europe, since the implementation of migration policies lacks alignment across different sectors and countries⁸. Nevertheless, it is understood that the migration routes from Africa to Western countries are primarily seen as serving the interests of the EU, such as implementing migration controls within the African continent⁹. Previous research has showcased how such an asymmetric relationship between these regions materializes as securitized discourse, while the idea of equal partnership re-

⁶ Vytautė Merkytė, “Šių specialistų trūksta masiškai: atlyginimų gali pavydėti bet kas,” Delfi, May 19, 2018, <https://www.delfi.lt/projektai/studijos2018/siu-specialistu-truksta-masiskai-atlyginimu-gali-pavydėti-bet-kas-77933773>.

⁷ After the first iteration of the project, building on the lessons learned, the initiative was expanded to include the three Baltic states and new partner countries. As a result, by 2025, more than 60 Nigerian, Kenyan and Armenian ICT talents were invited to join Baltic companies as employees or trainees, whereas 90 received advanced data analytics training and accelerated their careers through a newly introduced local traineeship track.

⁸ Eva Dick and Benjamin Schraven, “Regional Migration Governance in Africa and beyond: A Framework of Analysis,” Discussion Paper, No. 9/2018, 23–24. <https://doi.org/10.23661/dp9.2018>.

⁹ Franzisca Zanker, “Managing or Restricting Movement? Diverging Approaches of African and European Migration Governance,” *Comparative Migration Studies* 7.1 (2019): 1–4; Ilke Adam, Florian Trauner, Leonie Jegen, and Christof Roos, “West African Interests in (EU) Migration Policy. Balancing Domestic Priorities with External Incentives,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 46.15 (2020): 3101–3103.

mains mostly formal¹⁰. Divergent European and African positions on such crucial issues as the brain drain, and, especially, forced returns have influenced worsening relations between the regions¹¹. Whilst the EU seeks to regulate migration, so that it becomes more temporary and/or circular, African countries aim for new development avenues through the mobility pathways¹² and engagement with their diasporas, particularly regarding financial and social remittances¹³.

In the light of a mixed record of EU-Africa migration partnership, “Digital Explorers” stands out among similar initiatives in its deliberate attempt to move away from securitized migration-focused rhetoric and hence illustrates *how civil society actors can co-opt and navigate external migration agendas and vocabularies* (formulated by the European Union or adopted by national governments). In addition, by rhetorically stressing on aspects of mutual growth of sending and host digital ecosystems, the “Digital Explorers” project advocates for general openness in migration management on both sides of the Mediterranean. Hence it also addresses one of the most interesting issues in contemporary research on international labour migration, the liberal paradox, summarising conflicting incentives that decision makers face while formulating migration governance strategies¹⁴.

¹⁰ Zanker, “Managing or Restricting Movement? Diverging Approaches of African and European Migration Governance,” 1–11.

¹¹ Zanker, “Managing or Restricting Movement? Diverging Approaches of African and European Migration Governance,” 8; Adam et al., “West African Interests in (EU) Migration Policy. Balancing Domestic Priorities with External Incentives,” 3110; Franzisca Zanker, Judith Altrogge, Kwaku Arhin-Sam, and Leonie Jegen, “Challenges in EU-African Migration Cooperation: West African Perspectives on Forced Return,” MEDAM Policy Brief 5 (2019): 13.

¹² Zanker, “Managing or Restricting Movement? Diverging Approaches of African and European Migration Governance,” 8.

¹³ Adam et al., “West African Interests in (EU) Migration Policy. Balancing Domestic Priorities with External Incentives,” 3109.

¹⁴ James Frank Hollifield, “Immigrants, Markets, and States: The Political Economy of Postwar Europe” (Harvard University Press, 1992); James Frank Hollifield, “The Emerging Migration State,” *International Migration Review* 38, no. 3 (2004): 885–912, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-7379.2004.tb00223.x>; James Hampshire, “The Politics of Immigration: Contradictions of the Liberal State,” Polity Press, 2013.

Looking to unpack the empirical and theoretical added value of “Digital Explorers”, the article proceeds as follows. Firstly, it sketches out the temporal, quantitative and qualitative characteristics of the project. Second, in the light of Lithuanian and Nigerian political realities, it discusses the relevance of the liberal migration governance paradox. Third, it presents the framing theory as the methodological framework. Fourth, it investigates why and how partners of the “Digital Explorers” consortium have reframed migration governance debates to pool multi-stakeholder support. Concluding, it presents a map of the rhetorical frames analysed and reflects on how it can inform further research on legal migration pathways between the EU and West Africa.

1. A Complex Partnership of Non-Profit, Public and Private Actors

In October 2019, the “Digital Explorers” programme was officially launched in Vilnius, Lithuania. It started with the first batch of 15 information and communications technology (ICT) specialists, selected from a 1,400-strong pool of young Nigerians, looking to spend the next year in 7 Lithuanian ICT companies: “TeleSoftas”, “Beyond Analysis”, “Ruptela”, “NRD Systems”, “TransUnion”, “iTo” and “Syno International”. Aiming to connect Nigeria and Lithuania for cooperation in the ICT sector, the “Digital Explorers” programme facilitated career advancement journeys of Nigerian ICT talents, while, at the same time, giving Lithuanian companies a chance to familiarise with business development opportunities in Africa and peculiarities of attracting international talents¹⁵. In the preparatory stages of the project, visa centres were opened in Abuja and Lagos by the Lithuanian MFA facilitating visa processing¹⁶. In parallel, striving

¹⁵ “‘Digital Explorers’ at the Forefront of EU – Africa Digital Partnership,” *The Baltic Times*, October 18, 2019, https://www.baltictimes.com/_digital_explorers__at_the_forefront_of_eu_-_africa_digital_partnership/.

¹⁶ „Vizų centro atidarymas Nigerijoje,” *URM konsulinė informacija*, August 21, 2019, <https://keliauk.urm.lt/news/view/vizu-centro-atidarymas-nigerijoje>.

for a wider impact, the project also included elements of institutional knowledge exchange. Lithuanian and Nigerian public organisations, for instance, the Bank of Lithuania and the Central Bank of Nigeria, were matched based on overlapping interests and fields of expertise to share experiences about their regulation strategies for fintech, digital entrepreneurship and startup promotion.

Speaking specifically, at its core, the project provided comprehensive support for the recruitment and labour migration process for 11 software developers, 3 data scientists, and 1 quality assurance technician. In contrast to other pilots under the Mobility Partnership Facility, “Digital Explorers” explicitly facilitated employment rather than educational opportunities or other schemes which do not depend on contractual commitments and salary payments by the private sector enterprises. While the project provided comprehensive facilitation, Nigerian professionals were directly employed by Lithuanian companies. Salaries paid by companies were the only financial compensation that these specialists received. Likewise, Lithuanian companies did not receive any direct financial contributions from project funds¹⁷.

Major project activities within the “Digital Explorers” core program included (see Figure 1 below for a workflow visualisation):

- an initial outreach campaign in Nigeria to attract candidates and in Lithuania to attract companies and to generally generate goodwill;
- a large-scale hackathon in Abuja for candidate selection and matchmaking in May 2019;
- active facilitation of the migration process, including visa and work permit applications and processing, various paperwork, and liaising with Lithuanian government agencies;
- a comprehensive arrival package for Nigerian professionals, including housing, bank accounts, SIM cards, insurance registrations, etc;

¹⁷ Nicolas Friederici, “Digital Explorers, Track 1: Final Evaluation Report,” 2021.

- a launch event and networking formats in Lithuania, delivered in-person before and virtually during the COVID-19 pandemic;
- a diversity training for participating ICT companies, plus *ad hoc* one-on-one support as needed;
- structured technical trainings in Lithuania;
- institutional knowledge exchange between Nigerian and Lithuanian governments to facilitate policy reforms that enable cross-border opportunities;
- reintegration support, including identification of job openings in the Nigerian market and setting up interviews for returnees;
- overall program and grant administration and financial management¹⁸.

After the end of the first cycle, 11 out of 15 explorers were retained or found follow-up jobs in other Lithuanian companies. A few mentioned frequent job and freelance offers from Europe, often through *LinkedIn*. Several aspired jobs at *Google* or *Amazon*. Some explicitly considered Lithuania as a long-term hub for further international travel and job seeking so that to be able to go back and forth between Nigeria and Europe. In a few cases where programme participants were not retained, they felt that the companies may have kept them if the programme had continued; they advocated for a longer programme duration in future editions. One explorer was collaborating with a Nigerian startup on the side of his job in Lithuania. Several thought of Nigeria as home and wanted to eventually give back or return, just not in the immediate future. Two explorers were explicitly ruling out that they would voluntarily return, citing poor living standards and the political situation¹⁹.

In the light of its pilot nature, the project is generally considered a success despite its limited quantitative impact. This is reflected in the extension with a view to test alternative models for legal temporary

¹⁸ Nicolas Friederici, "Digital Explorers, Track 1: Final Evaluation Report," 2021.

¹⁹ Ibid.

Digital Explorers' Timeline



Figure 1. Workflow of “Digital Explorers”*

* Digital Explorers, Partnership Proposal, 2019, https://drive.google.com/file/d/1lDIkcNehH3GSKIv2907lGBQGHcRajf/view?usp=sharing&usp=embed_facebook.

migration between Nigeria and Lithuania²⁰. Stakeholder heterogeneity was considered to be one of key success factors²¹. As alluded to above, the “Digital Explorers” programme was built on and supported by an ongoing collaboration between public, private and non-profit organisations in Lithuania and Nigeria. Besides “Ventures Platform Foundation” and “AfriKo,” the project consortium included public agency “Enterprise Lithuania”, ICT trainers “Code Academy”, and mobility policy experts “Diversity Development Group.” Official support of the Lithuanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Economy and Innovation, and the Ministry of Social Security and Labour was explicitly declared and played a role in solving various bureaucratic and operational hurdles throughout different stages of the programme. Finally, the project sought to affect broader debates and partnership networks by engaging actors like policymakers and technology ecosystem builders (bloggers, media, innovation communities, etc.) in Nigeria and Lithuania²².

In the context of above-discussed hegemonic securitized discourse on EU-West African Migration Governance, the case of “Digital Explorers” with its individualised and mutual-growth-orientated structure promises to be telling about *how civil society actors co-opt and navigate external migration agendas and vocabularies* to pool multi-stakeholder support for legal migration initiatives. From a theoretical point of view, by engaging with the attempts of the “Digital Explorers” consortium to reframe the mainstream debates, the paper is also able to reevaluate the so-called liberal migration management paradox and its manifestations in Lithuania and Nigeria.

²⁰ The “Digital Explorers” program also includes a Female Track, providing young Nigerian women with data science traineeships at Lithuanian companies (see: “Female Track”, *DigitalExplorers.eu*, accessed on July 1, 2024, digitalexplorers.eu/projects/female-track). In total, 15 entry-level female data scientists were provided with comprehensive training in data science, 11 of whom were matched with 7 Lithuanian companies for 6-month internships.

²¹ Friederici, “Digital Explorers,” Track 1.

²² Ibid.

2. The “Liberal Paradox” Reconsidered

One of the most prominent theories on migration policy formation focuses on the so-called ‘liberal paradox’. Highlighting the contradictory drivers that Western policymakers faced in the post-WW II period, James Hollifield writes, “Since the end of World War II, international economic forces (trade, investment, and migration) have been pushing states towards greater openness, while the international state system and powerful (domestic) political forces push states towards greater closure. <...> Hence the liberal paradox: the economic logic of liberalism is one of openness, but the political and legal logic is one of closure”²³.

Developing the argument further, James Hampshire indicates 4 conflicting ‘push and pull’ factors inherent to contemporary liberal democracies: representative democracy, constitutionalism, capitalism, and nationhood. According to Hampshire, none can be ignored as “each is rooted in the legitimation of the liberal state”²⁴. Representative democracy structured around the public opinion, and nationhood, key to social cohesion and national identity formation, (democratic factors) push decision makers towards restrictive (im-)migration policies. In contrast, constitutionalism built on checks and balances and embedded in a global human rights regime, and global capitalism, structurally dependent on labour mobility, (liberal factors) pull decision makers towards greater openness in migration management.

Building on these ideas, a body of literature has been growing and focusing on why and how liberal motivators overcome the democratic ones. As some of the authors suggest, business lobbies, legal and non-state actors have been playing an important role in advocating for migration openness²⁵. Hence, by describing and mapping

²³ Hollifield, “The Emerging Migration State.”

²⁴ Hampshire, “The Politics of Immigration.”

²⁵ Christian Joppke, “Why Liberal States Accept Unwanted Immigration,” *World Politics* 50, no. 2 (1998): 266–293, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S004388710000811X>; Saskia Sassen, “Beyond Sovereignty: Immigration Policy Making Today,” *Social Justice* 23, no. 3 (65), (1996): 9–20.

framing strategies used by “AfriKo” and “Ventures Platform Foundation” to pool multi-stakeholder support for the “Digital Explorers” programme, this article contributes to a debate about how migration management regimes and discourses change due to bottom-up pressures.

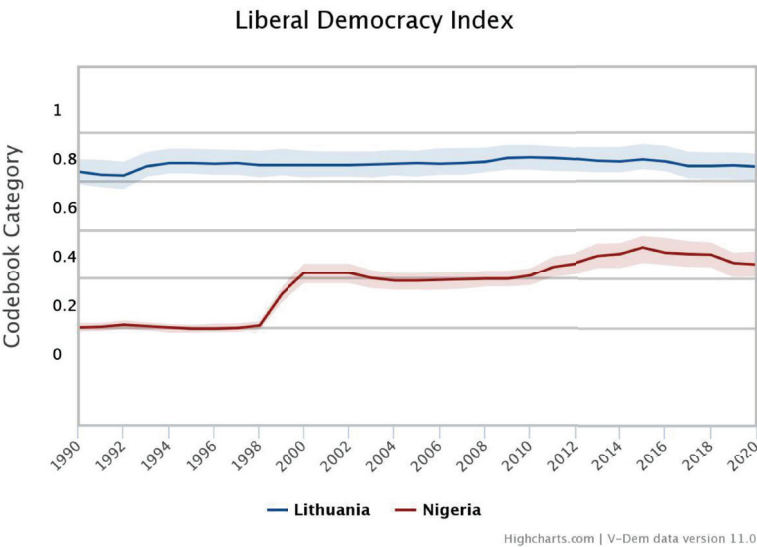


Figure 2. *Liberal Democracy in Lithuania and Nigeria, 1990–2020*

(source: v-dem.net data)²⁶

On the other hand, the paper also addresses the shortcomings of the ‘liberal paradox’ theory, which has been criticised for oversimplifying public preferences²⁷ and focusing solely on rich liberal democ-

²⁶ Coppedge et al., “V-Dem Dataset v15,” Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project 2025, <https://doi.org/10.23696/vdemds25>.

²⁷ Saskia Bonjour, “The Power and Morals of Policy Makers: Reassessing the Control Gap Debate,” *International Migration Review* 45, no. 1 (2011): 89–122, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-7379.2010.00840.x>.

racies of the postwar period, while neglecting the trends of restrictive migration policymaking in liberal democracies²⁸ and openness towards migration in hybrid²⁹ and authoritarian regimes³⁰. The case of ‘Digital Explorers’ is worth considering as it showcases how civil society organisations rhetorically manoeuvre in previously scarcely explored environments. Evidence from Lithuania and Nigeria allows for the evaluation of the relevance of the ‘liberal paradox’ with regards to emerging players in EU-West African migration governance. Moreover, the below-presented empirical exercise aims to fill a gap and reconsiders the theory in the light of changes in global distribution of political regimes by looking at a comparably young democracy (Lithuania) and a transitioning hybrid regime (Nigeria; see Figure 2). By engaging with its limitations, the paper updates the ‘liberal paradox’ and advocates for its further employment as a valuable tool for understanding ideal-type migration governance.

3. *Methodological Assumptions*

In order to better grasp the attempts to reframe the debates on EU-West African migration management by the ‘Digital Explorers’ consortium, the paper turns to the tenets of the framing theory.

As Robert Entman summarises, “framing involves selection and salience. To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item de-

²⁸ Fiona B. Adamson, Triadafilos Triadafilopoulos, and Aristide R. Zolberg, “The Limits of the Liberal State: Migration, Identity and Belonging in Europe,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 37, no. 6 (2011): 843–859, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2011.576188>.

²⁹ Diego Acosta Arcarazo and Luisa Feline Freier, “Turning the Immigration Policy Paradox Upside Down? Populist Liberalism and Discursive Gaps in South America,” *International Migration Review* 49, no. 3 (2015), 659–696, <https://doi.org/10.1111/imre.12146>.

³⁰ Katharina Natter, “Autocratic Immigration Policymaking: The Illiberal Paradox Hypothesis,” *International Migration Institute Network*, no. 147 (2018).

scribed”³¹. Understanding of framing as a structured process involving different steps or stages has been even more pronounced in studies of social movements, which have provided a tripartite typology of framing practices. First comes the diagnostic framing of current events, which seeks to discredit the prevailing framing and offer a new interpretation. Second, prognostic framing involves the rhetorical construction of a solution to the problem. Finally, motivational framing focuses on the conceptualization that triggers people to join the social movement or to actively support a particular cause³².

4. Reframing Legal Migration Pathways

The following subsections narrate how the ‘Digital Explorers’ consortium attempted to reframe migration governance debates in distinct stages of the project. All of them describe dominant discourses encountered as points of departure, practices and frames deployed to advocate for migration openness, results achieved, and the remaining reservations in shifting the debate on EU-West African migration governance from securitization towards talent exchange.

4.1. Subverting the Lithuanian Bureaucratic Jargon

In 2016, the Lithuanian Government adopted an inter-institutional action plan on development cooperation – which is a document that sets forth concrete measures for implementing Lithuania’s development cooperation policy³³. Alongside Eastern Partnership countries, a new geographical priority, reflecting commitments made at

³¹ Robert M. Entman, “Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm,” *Journal of Communication* 43, no. 4 (1993): 51–58, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1993.tb01304.x>.

³² David A. Snow and Robert D. Benford, “Ideology, Frame Resonance, and Participant Mobilization,” *International Social Movement Research* 1, no. 1 (1988): 197–217.

³³ Lietuvos Respublikos Vyriausybė, „Nutarimas dėl vystomojo bendradarbiavimo tarp-institucinio veiklos plano patvirtinimo“, *E-seimas.lrs.lt*, 2016, <https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/728ed9a083e611e6a0f68fd135e6f40c/asr>.

the Valletta Summit, has been identified as “migration origin and transit countries.” The plan explains the reasoning behind providing development assistance to the migration origin and transit countries in particular as follows: “Assistance to countries of migration origin and transit is provided in order to contribute to solving problems relevant for the whole international community and to enhance the image of Lithuania as an EU Member State demonstrating reliability and solidarity.” Based on the outlined priority, a concept note has been developed for projects geographically focusing on West Africa, as a perceived priority region of the migration origin, and calling for interventions to “improve economic and social conditions of the population of West Africa by implementing actions encouraging potential migrants to remain in their home countries.”³⁴ Hence these documents have framed³⁵ the migration discourse of Lithuania’s development cooperation field and restricted potential development assistance projects with African countries³⁶ to “addressing irregular migration”.

The inception of the “Digital Explorers” project can be traced back to a successful project application submitted in 2017 under the concept note mentioned above. The goal of the project was to conduct a baseline study and design “a mentorship program between representatives of the Lithuanian ICT sector and Nigerian tech entrepre-

³⁴ Issued by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Lithuania: “Lithuanian support for countries of origin in West Africa in implementing measures to prevent irregular migration,” Development Cooperation department project concept No. 22, 29 September 2016, https://ltaid.urm.lt/data/public/uploads/2023/01/no_22-2016-koncepcija-migr_en.docx.

³⁵ One could make an informed assumption that the wording of the concept note is based on the dominant migration governance discourse of the EU, especially narratives formulated during and after the Valletta Summit, for example, the call for addressing root causes of irregular migration. See more on Valletta Summit here: “Valletta Summit on migration, 11-12/11/2015, 11–12 November 2015,” Council of the European Union, accessed on July 1, 2024, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/international-summit/2015/11/11-12/>.

³⁶ Since 2016, this particular concept note is the only point of reference guiding development cooperation actors working with African countries. The remaining concept notes of Lithuanian MFA are focused solely on assistance to Eastern Partnership countries.

neurs”³⁷. Throughout the application, while tailoring the wording to reflect a rather securitized migration discourse, which tends to frame migration as a threat to economic stability and to both external and internal security of the receiving country³⁸, “AfriKo” advocated for focus on “information and communication technologies for development” (ICT4D) and even stated its ambition to “provide Lithuania with a longer-term ICT4D vision for its development assistance in the region”³⁹. While using the irregular migration prevention frame provided by the concept note, “AfriKo”, as the main applicant, introduced topics of digitalisation and mutually-beneficial cooperation with the private sector as crucial cornerstones of the project, in particular, and migration governance, in general.

In the final project implementation report, “AfriKo” questioned the objectives stated in the original concept note (“to encourage potential migrants to remain in their home countries”) as unrealistic given the foreseen time frame and available funding (not more than 2 years, 20–30 thousand EUR per project), and emphasised the limitations of such a narrative in building new partnerships with Nigerian organisations. Still, the implementation report attempted to explain how a joint skills exchange program between Nigeria and Lithuania enhanced employability of Nigerian youth, thus creating a “potential possibility to reduce irregular migration flows from West Africa”⁴⁰. In its reporting documents, “AfriKo” navigated between the dominant framing provided by the concept note, however, it also deliberately pointed out its faults and limitations, while employing terminol-

³⁷ Africa Research and Consultancy Centre, *Project application* [unpublished internal document], February 24, 2017, 2.

³⁸ Ayse Ceyhan and Anastassia Tsoukala, “The Securitization of Migration in Western Societies: Ambivalent Discourses and Policies,” *Alternatives* 27.1_suppl (2002): 24; Maggie Ibrahim, “The Securitization of Migration: A Racial Discourse 1,” *International migration* 43.5 (2005): 169–171.

³⁹ Africa Research and Consultancy Centre, *Project application* [unpublished internal document], February 24, 2017, 15.

⁴⁰ Africa Research and Consultancy Centre, *Development Cooperation Project Implementation Final Report* [unpublished internal document], November, 2018.

ogy signalling cooperation, openness and values of sharing instead of using the dominant securitised terminology.

In October 2018, as a follow-up a consortium of partners led by “AfriKo” and “Ventures Platform Foundation” came together to apply for European Commission DG Home funding to implement a legal migration pilot scheme (while also applying for co-funding from Lithuanian MFA). Topics of irregular migration and its root causes remained contextual in the application and subsequent implementation reports, giving way for narratives of ‘mutual benefit’, ‘growth and development of digital economy’, ‘addressing labour shortage gaps’ and ‘enhanced employability’. Wherever possible the term ‘migration’ was changed to ‘mobility’, while also avoiding the term ‘migrant’ and instead using ‘ICT specialists’ or ‘ICT talents’ when speaking of people directly benefiting from the project⁴¹.

4.2. From Labour Migration to Individualised Journeys of ICT Talents

Besides aiming to facilitate the cooperation with third countries on “management of migratory flows”, the DG Home concept note for pilot projects of legal migration also emphasised the need to “address labour shortage gaps [in] the labour market” of the EU member states⁴². Such abstract discourses are also usually used during the conversations of legal migration industry stakeholders. In this context the “Digital Explorers” team had been constantly trying to humanise and individualise their own language about the project, by emphasising that labour migration is not just an abstract concept, but, instead, by stressing that there are individual journeys behind it, concrete people with their own stories and aspirations.

⁴¹ Enterprise Lithuania et al., *Digital Explorers Project Application* [unpublished internal document], 2018.

⁴² “Concept Note: Pilot Projects for Legal Migration,” Mobility Partnership Facility, 2018, <https://mobilitypartnershipfacility.eu/storage/files/pilot-projects-concept-note.pdf>.

“Digital Explorers” started with a mission “to connect ICT markets through individual journeys”, and this was not perceived as an empty slogan for the project team; on the contrary, this was a carefully thought-through mission statement developed during the workshops with Nigerian and Lithuanian team members. Generally, the development of communication concepts was perceived not as just a marketing instrument, but rather as a conscious attempt to fill or even reframe the narrative around ‘migration’ with content that would not only speak to different audiences (young Nigerian ICT specialists, private ICT companies in Lithuania, or national and international institutions), but would also contribute to understanding that ‘mobility’ or ‘migration’ is crucial, yet this is just an instrument to achieve various goals, i.e., to build unexpected connections between the countries, accelerate career growth or bring more diversity to rather homogenous Lithuanian ICT teams. This certain language was void of bureaucratic jargon or developmental vernacular and was instead focused on a message of opportunities for cooperation, inherently different from the language usually adopted when speaking about migration, whether legal or irregular. The project’s communication consciously avoided humanitarian or cultural framing, which is usually adopted in development aid projects, aiming to rationalise its goals in the eyes of a broader public in Lithuania and in turn to ensure the sustainability of the developing partnership with Nigeria⁴³.

This framing adopted has not only been used in public communications about the project but has also been reflected in reporting documentation and actively used in meetings with diplomats and bureaucrats. The project team has also created spaces that provide recurring opportunities to reinforce a reframed narrative of EU-West African migration among institutional stakeholders. For example, the Advisory Board of the project had both members representing the

⁴³ Beatričė Staniūnaitė, “„AfriKo“ bendraįkūrėja M. Makauskaitė: „Nepastebėdami Afrikos potencialo skriaudžiame patys save”,” *žmonės.lt*, September 5, 2019, <https://zmones.l5min.lt/naujiena/afriko-bendraikureja-m-makauskaite-nepastebedami-afrikos-potencialo-skriaudziame-patys-save-aNBXez6rQ69>

private sector, as well as representatives of key ministries, namely, the Ministry of Economy and Innovation and External Economic Relations Department within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Lithuania.

Not to overemphasise the communication, the project was also intentionally designed to facilitate real human connections. Instead of ‘doctored engagements’ that usually happen during the European business missions to African countries, “Digital Explorers” brought Lithuanian ICT sector representatives to Nigeria to be part of the hackathon together with local techpreneurs. Therefore, selection of potential candidates for the programme became a joint agenda and additional (business) relationships were built: “[I]nitiatives like the hackathon in Abuja were key to bridging between stakeholders that are culturally and institutionally distant, even if they came with significant extra work for organisers, bringing them to the brink of their capacities”⁴⁴.

The project team understood the need to “speak multiple languages” and use different wording in, for example, project application and outreach communication for Nigerian ICT specialists. In one context, the migration industry jargon was expected, in another – it was a sense of possibility and attention to individual aspirations. However, sometimes risking sounding naïve or being an odd outsider in the room, the team decided to stick to the latter type of framing and the thoughtful tone of voice also in the communication with EU stakeholders during various events. Sometimes this strategy raised suspicion resulting in patronising questions about the experiences of the project team during informal exchanges, whereas, at other times, it brought sparkles in the eyes and supportive head nodding from stakeholders somewhat tired from the standard industry discourses or genuinely waiting for fresh perspectives. It would be a way-too-far-reaching conclusion to claim that this strategy had an impact on the discourses in this field, however, “Digital Explorers” have been

⁴⁴ Friederici, 2021.

showcased in different contexts, interviews with project participants have been published by ICMPD (also showing the ‘real people’ behind the project and the funding programme, etc.)⁴⁵.

Moving from the international context to Lithuania, the project managed to move away from securitized approach to migration and to generate positive reactions among public officials – either due to pride that Lithuania has successfully implemented a project in the field where it was never active before, or due to the promise for the future, as “Digital Explorers” began to function “as a first concrete touchpoint and reference for how engagement with the African continent could look like, and how Lithuania’s external relations could be diversified⁴⁶”. However, the buy-in and positive reactions are definitely more limited among officials directly working in migration-related fields – varying from careful, but reasonable observation to direct questioning of the rationality of the project or raising unsubstantiated grounds about the participants’ premature relocation to Western Europe or return to Nigeria.

The previously mentioned concept note of Lithuania’s development cooperation projects in the migration origin and transit countries has been amended several times since 2016, however, the content and wording has not substantially changed. The focus is still placed on preventing migrants from leaving their home countries. Hence, one can infer that narratives developed within and by the project have not influenced a change of the discourse on migration governance within the Development Cooperation Department of the Lithuanian MFA (at least at the level of official documentation). However, other departments within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Lithuania, with whom the project team was pro-actively liaising throughout the implementation of “Digital Explorers,” adopted elements of the narrative generated by the project. Representatives of

⁴⁵ “Digital Explorers Interview: Insights from the Participants,” Mobility Partnership Facility, May 10, 2021, <https://mobilitypartnershipfacility.eu/news/digital-explorers-interview-insights-from-the-participants>.

⁴⁶ Friederici, 37.

the Department of External Economic Relations had several interventions in various public or closed events, where they used the taglines and terminology of the “Digital Explorers” brand – connecting ICT markets, involvement of the private sector, mutual benefit to both participating countries, digital transformation – when speaking of Lithuania’s involvement in creating legal migration pathways. Diplomats at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as well as the Ministry of Interior regularly invite project implementers to contribute to their interventions in various EU-level fora on legal migration and have even mandated “AfriKo” to represent Lithuania at a high-level EU Ministerial meeting in 2021. All this signals a level of trust among diplomats in the framing developed and used by the “Digital Explorers” consortium.

4.3. From Brain Drain to Talent Export – Nigerian Context

When designing the project and its communication narratives, a major concern that needed mitigation was the perception that the project would contribute to ‘brain drain’ in Nigeria. There was an anticipated backlash from the government and key ecosystem actors. However, the reverse was the case during the implementation period, as the ecosystem actors felt somewhat indifferent about such risks, by expressing that the ‘brain drain’ was in fact more of an economic benefit, in the context of a high youth unemployment, than a deterrent. It is strongly believed that better living standards are critical to reducing the ‘brain drain’ and since economic development is still a challenge in Nigeria, emigration is one of the contributing factors to economic development. Official statistics indicate that diaspora remittances contribute more to GDP than oil⁴⁷. Project engagements showed that ecosystem actors and even government representatives

⁴⁷ Michael Ani, “Nigeria’s Diaspora Remittances Exceed Oil Receipts for 4yrs Running,” *Businessday NG*, April 30, 2019, <https://businessday.ng/exclusives/article/nigerias-diaspora-remittances-exceed-oil-receipts-for-4yrs-running/>.

encourage talents to travel⁴⁸, while also stating the need to design and implement programs that encourage remote work but at the same time emphasising the need to strengthen the ongoing efforts to support more advanced programmes that prepare talents to access global opportunities⁴⁹. There is also the widespread mindset that, due to the discouraging state of Nigeria's economy, there is a limit in scope to one's career growth. Therefore, in order to truly advance skill and career, sometimes leaving Nigeria is the only choice especially if one is in the tech ecosystem.

As previously mentioned, the development of communication concepts involved an intentional approach to build connections between Lithuania and Nigeria. An outreach campaign in Nigeria was organised with a view of deepening the "brain drain vs. brain circulation" debate, and awareness was raised concerning the country's labour market shortcomings, circulated and emphasised during roundtable conversations⁵⁰. Bankole Oluwafemi, the co-founders of one of the biggest African tech websites *TechCabal*, clearly stated that the "Digital Explorers" programme gave young Nigerian ICT specialists a chance to challenge themselves in an international environment, working with complex projects and in a short amount of time gaining a lot of valuable experience⁵¹. At the same time, "Digital Explorers" helped Lithuania and its ICT companies to discover Nigerian talents already looking for professional opportunities on an international level.

⁴⁸ Eromo Egbejule, "Nigeria must Tackle its Doctor Brain Drain," *The Africa Report*, April 25, 2019, <https://www.theafricareport.com/12252/nigeria-must-tackle-its-doctor-brain-drain/>.

⁴⁹ Dipo Olowookere, "Interswitch Addresses Nigerian 'Brain-Drain' Narrative," *Business Post Nigeria*, January 16, 2019, <https://businesspost.ng/jobs/interswitch-addresses-nigerian-brain-drain-narrative/>.

⁵⁰ Kola Aina, "Digital Explorers: A Journey of Talent Development and Knowledge Transfer," *Medium*, May 8, 2019, <https://medium.com/kola-aina/digital-explorers-a-journey-of-talent-development-and-knowledge-transfer-849e455399c4>.

⁵¹ Aušra Jurgauskaitė, "Kaip bendradarbiauja Lietuva ir Nigerija," *Ziniuradijas.lt*, October 21, 2019, <https://www.ziniuradijas.lt/laidos/verslo-pavara/kaip-bendradarbiauja-lietuva-ir-nigerija?video=1>.

Additionally, the reintegration component of the “Digital Explorers” project aimed at providing a safe landing for the Explorers returning and was used to address the perceived risk of ‘brain drain’. The project beneficiaries were supported with career coaching and securing interviews with top tier ICT firms in Nigeria while they were still in Lithuania. However, most of the participants (11 out of 15) preferred not to return to Nigeria immediately; they preferred to support their families and the Nigerian tech ecosystem in various ways remotely, from sending back money to mentoring aspiring ICT specialists back home, thus reaffirming the notion that the benefits of brain circulation are more tangible than the perceived risks. A certain dedication to the project is also evident in the fact that project beneficiaries, following prompts by “Ventures Platform Foundation”, established an alumni network, taking time to support participants of the Female Track and making themselves available for consultations. In this context and beyond, they find individual ways to ‘give back’.

Nigerian ecosystem representatives emphasised that the government has a responsibility to create an environment that attracts and retains talents, while at the same time considering that the Nigerian population is huge, and that the ‘brain drain’ helps to even out challenges linked to the population size. There are opinions that there is a need to balance the equation by designing and supporting programs that encourage people to stay back and engage in remote work, like in the case of India. These thought processes were evident during live interactions, especially during the closing event, where key stakeholders and ecosystem players in Nigeria were invited to discuss ICT talent mobility using the “Digital Explorers” project as a case study. A need for continuous conversations on harnessing this new thinking of “brain circulation or talent export” in Nigeria was also highlighted.

5. *Conclusions and Takeaways*

This article set out to present an answer how civil society actors co-opt and navigate external migration governance agendas and vocabularies and analysed the case of “Digital Explorers”, a legal migration pilot led by Lithuanian and Nigerian CSOs, which set out to “connect Lithuanian and Nigerian markets through individual journeys of young ICT talents”. Based on the tenets of the framing theory and the empirical material analysed, this paper suggests that the success of the project and support for it showcased by different groups of stakeholders can be explained by successful reframing of legal migration pathways away from securitized official tropes towards mutually beneficial economic linkages.

The official discourse on migration management encountered by “AfriKo” and “Ventures Platform Foundation” can be broken down accordingly. Diagnostic narratives of the Valletta conference identified migration as a multifaceted security threat, calling for immediate prevention. Uncritically transposed to Lithuanian national documents, the European discourse gave ground to simplistic prognostic framing, while building an argument that the security threat could be extinguished if economic and social conditions in West Africa are improved, and potential migrants simply remain in their home countries. Motivational framing accordingly promised an enhanced image of Lithuania as a reliable Member State and a partner in the EU-West African migration governance.

As the article has demonstrated, the “Digital Explorers” consortium aimed at gradually reformulating the established EU-West African migration governance mantras. Following diagnostic-prognostic-motivational breakdown, Table 1 maps the above-reviewed frames. By identifying diverging economic and political framing referents, it also showcases how “Digital Explorers” attempted to overcome the ‘liberal paradox’ and pushed for more openness in migration management by highlighting economic rather than political aspects of the EU-West African migration pathways. However, re-

Table 1. *Digital Explorers frame map*

Project stage	Frames			
	Diagnostic	Prognostic		Motivational
	Economic	Political	Economic	Political
Pre-2018 (LT stage)			ICT4 Development (ICT4D)	Long-term ICT4D vision
⇕		⇕	⇕	⇕
2018 (Engaging EU stage))	Labour shortage gaps Unexpected connections for mutual growth		Business opportunity Employability	
⇕		⇕	⇕	⇕
Post-2018 (EU-West African stage)	Connecting ICT markets through individual journeys rather than labour mobility Brain circulation/ talent export (NG)			Blueprint for diversified external relations (economic and political)

framing attempts also demanded partial adoption of dominant discourses, at least at the initial episodes.

As Table 1 recounts, the “Digital Explorers” initiative adopted ICT4D as one of the main frames, suggesting that information technologies should be key in Lithuanian engagement with West Africa. Moreover, it suggested that such engagements could serve as a sandbox for formulating a more comprehensive national ICT4D strategy in the region. On the other hand, receiving project funding from Lithuanian MFA, partners also had to pay lip service and link activities to “reduction of irregular migration”, resulting in a hybrid form of economic-political migration framing. However, the initial bow-downs to established narratives laid the ground for more comprehensive cooperation and a better equipped campaign to reframe the debate.

After initial engagements at the EU level, the project partners clearly shifted towards economic diagnostic and prognostic frames, diagnosing the existence of labour shortage gaps and room for mutually beneficial connections between Lithuanian and Nigerian digital ecosystems, foreseeing business opportunities and an increased employability of young Nigerians.

After securing the Mobility Partnership Facility grant, the partners attempted to rework the economic aspects of the argument from the inside. The “Digital Explorers” consortium chose to frame mobilities between Nigeria and Lithuania as individual journeys, looking to humanise the discourse on legal migration pathways. Inspired by the positive feedback from different audiences, the consortium partners were able to formulate new motivational frames, which situate the project as a blueprint for diversification of Lithuania’s external partnerships. By working both on the economic and political level at the same time, this hybrid framing showcases how the consortium has gone a full circle and again is able to deploy a mix of economic and political, diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational frames to pool multi-stakeholder support for people mobility between Nigeria and Lithuania.

Interestingly, on the Nigerian side, the challenge has not been a securitized discourse on migration management but rather fears of “brain drain” prevalent in the Nigerian digital ecosystem. Addressing this issue, “Ventures Platform Foundation” reviewed the diagnostic framing of the project and reworked the economic argument to showcase the added value of ‘brain circulation’ and benefits that “Digital Explorers” will bring back to Nigeria upon their return.

To sum up, the case of “Digital Explorers” contributes to a better understanding of how civil society organisations can push for more migration openness by laying out frames employed while advocating and engaging various stakeholders. It also showcases how civil society actors can themselves create spaces for diffusion of reframed discourses, selectively engage economically oriented institutions which may have a say in migration governance (the Ministry of Economy and Innovation or External Economic Relations Department within the MFA). In addition, it illustrates how, by engaging both international and national levels at the same time, CSOs are able to leverage on partnership on both levels to co-opt and reformulate the dominant frames from the inside. In this sense, the article updates the literature on the liberal migration management paradox by showcasing the intricacies of advocacy for migration openness in underexplored environments: hybrid regimes (Nigeria), young democracies (Lithuania), and multilevel governance terrains (the EU).

Nonetheless, at least a couple of reservations apply. It is complicated to identify a change in discourse in the national-level documentation, and some institutions remain resistant towards the frames advocated by the “Digital Explorers” consortium (for instance, the Lithuanian Department of Migration and Development Cooperation Department at MFA). Despite that, this case study could serve as an entry point for further inquiries on how civil society organisations solve migration governance paradoxes and engage stakeholders while advocating for more migration openness, especially while focusing on pathways between West African and EU-13 countries.

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