



POLICY BRIEF

The place for modern technologies in the integration of migrants

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The integration experience among migrants is associated with their use of digital technology to navigate complex adaptation challenges and acquire essential information. Digital tools like smartphones, social media, and online platforms assist migrants in settling into a new country by providing information and services, including those for language learning, sociocultural integration, employment, and skills development. Concurrently, host governments and societies are harnessing technological solutions to enhance the provision of official services and information for migrant populations, complementing the strategic use of digital tools by the migrants themselves. However, practical benefits of digital technology are often hindered by limited connectivity, literacy gaps, and socioeconomic, linguistic, and cultural barriers.

This Policy Brief explores how migrants engage with modern technologies throughout their integration trajectories in host countries, highlighting the reasons why they may encounter digital obstacles and the instances where governments have, intentionally or unintentionally, marginalised them. This brief also examines the opportunities and limitations of existing bottom-up and top-down approaches to digitalisation in migrant integration processes, particularly in Europe, as well as offers recommendations on how digital technologies can be better tailored to migrants' needs, thereby enabling more efficient investments in digital technologies within integration settings and generating increased opportunities for migrant agency.



1. CURRENT CONTEXT: LEVERAGING MODERN TECHNOLOGY IN MIGRANT INTEGRATION

The digital age is reshaping the landscape of migrant integration, redefining the approaches of the integration process. Global trends such as the rapid digital transformation have significantly impacted how societies perceive and experience the integration of migrant populations, with some arguing that digital tools and platforms have the potential to enhance integration efforts. Simultaneously, societies, whether they embrace it or not, are becoming increasingly diverse and multicultural. This shift necessitates a critical examination of how digital technologies intersect with traditional integration frameworks, and whether it redefines the understanding and support of migrant inclusion. The following sections explore these emergent dynamics, shedding light on the complex interplay between technology and migrant integration. This will involve examining both the bottom-up uses of digital media and technologies by migrant communities and top-down approaches to digitisation and digitalisation in formal migrant integration initiatives and policies.

1.1. Bottom-Up Uses of Digital Media and Technologies for Integration

Digital technologies play a crucial role in helping migrants stay informed about current events, overcome adjustment challenges, and acquire information to improve their daily lives. Migrants benefit from their smartphones and social media applications **to obtain orientation on practical issues** of the host society, such as locations, transportation, shopping and market developments in their new city. They also utilise a variety of social media platforms and messaging apps, such as Facebook, YouTube, LinkedIn, X (former Twitter), Instagram, TikTok, Reddit, WhatsApp, and Telegram, for **information-seeking and guidance** about job opportunities, training programs and the educational system. According to findings from a survey of migrants from EU and non-EU countries in Germany¹, social media are perceived as particularly helpful during their integration process for finding employment offers. Migrants in the Netherlands frequently cite the usefulness of Facebook groups and pages, such as the “Refugee Start Force” initiative, in navigating the Dutch labour market.

Social media platforms can provide migrants with valuable tools to support **language acquisition and cultural learning**, such as actively following YouTube tutorials, podcasts, e-books, and websites that offer instruction on the host country's language and insights into the new culture. In addition to educational and informational uses, migrants also leverage social media platforms for **recreational activities and vocational learning**. For instance, recent research on Ukrainians settling in Lithuania found that they use Instagram both to unwind and to access free courses for developing hobbies and talents².

The examination of digital technology adoption by migrants has primarily been framed around the concept of **migration networks that connect migrants to their kin and acquaintances**, who in turn can aid their adaptation through access to social, economic, cultural, affective, and legal resources emerging from these support networks. Studies have established that **social networks that migrants can access through digital devices and platforms** serve as a gateway to **understand and engage with the new society** they have joined. These personal connections offer culturally relevant perspectives and first-hand experience in navigating the complexities of a new place. For instance, Eritrean migrants in Europe have robust communities on Facebook and YouTube to share experiences about daily life, transportation, and immigration procedures³. Syrians in the Netherlands have established Facebook pages and groups, as well as YouTube channels, to assist peers in

accessing information, including details on civic integration exams and the workings of the Dutch healthcare system. Similarly, Syrian and Iranian migrants in Türkiye have built networks on WhatsApp and Telegram to share daily information, including news about their status in Türkiye, updates from humanitarian agencies, news from their home countries, and community events^{IV}. Ukrainian migrants use Telegram groups as a “virtual bulletin board”^V, providing vital support upon arrival in their host country.

The use of social media platforms also helps migrants in building **connections with host society members**. When opportunities for in-person interactions with the host society through employment or education remain constrained, social media can help facilitate connections between migrants and local residents. For example, in the Netherlands, Facebook pages enable migrants and Dutch citizens to organise activities fostering intercultural engagement^{VI}. Alternatively, migrants may employ a blended approach, combining face-to-face interactions with social media apps to strengthen the relationship-building process and make new friends in the host country.

Maintaining contact with family and friends is crucial for managing feelings of isolation and improving migrants’ overall well-being. Social media enables migrants to sustain a sense of “connected presence” with loved ones, even when physically separated. Studies of transnational Italian families^{VII} and Filipino migrants^{VIII} residing in London show that media platforms and devices help maintain family bonds and uphold family traditions across geographic boundaries, including through livestreaming of culinary practices. The possibility of establishing transnational family connections can help migrants overcome difficulties and feel more in control of their lives during settlement.

At the same time, digital technologies have offered a **new social sphere** for migrants to **assert their rights to identity and cultural expression** in their host countries. Existing research on Basque diaspora digital networks demonstrates that social media platforms play a crucial role in forming and preserving community identity^{IX}. This is evident in interactions between men, women, young, and old in Basque association Facebook groups. Studies of the Meskhetian Turkish diaspora reveal that digital platforms serve as a cultural unifier^X, enabling Meskhetian Turks to maintain their shared linguistic and national identities through these platforms, despite being spread across different countries and regions such as Central Asian states, Türkiye, Northern Cyprus, and the United States.

Aside from emphasising linguistic and national identities of diasporic groups, social media platforms **foster greater resilience and self-determination within migrant communities**. These communities transcend geographic boundaries, being engaging with the everyday affairs of their adopted countries while also reflecting the political context of their countries of origin. Russian-speaking migrants in the Netherlands use both public and private Facebook groups to express self-perceptions of their common identity and voice concerns about their perception within Dutch society^{XI}. These online communities share content and events that ignite discussions about community identity and perspectives on their host society.

Ultimately, social media content produced by migrants challenges discriminatory narratives that portray them as threats to European welfare systems. Research shows that Latin American migrants in Spain use TikTok to highlight their economic value and contribution to their host country. Migrants also use digital devices to showcase their integration into the host society on their own terms^{XII}. For instance, the recent *Translocal Lives* project conducted in the Netherlands demonstrated how migrants used smartphones to create short films that gave voice to the concerns of their communities following resettlement.

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1.2. Top-Down Digital Approaches to Migrant Integration

Across the European Union, governments are leveraging technology to enhance service delivery and outcomes, with many employing digital and online tools to bolster the integration of new arrivals^{xiii}. The complexity of migration policies and legal frameworks in European countries increases the information needs of refugees and migrants as well as their reliance on technologies. At the national level, government agencies use digital tools, such as mobile apps, to provide migrants with general information about integration processes. Examples include Germany's [Ankommen](#) and [mbeon mobile apps](#), Belgium's [Welcome to Antwerp](#) and [Atlas apps](#), and Finland's [Settling in Finland app](#), which offer guidance on immigration processes, as well as details on local laws, customs, along with topics like employment, language, health and housing. The *mbeon* app, for instance, includes a chat function allowing users to directly contact staff at the Migration Advice Service for Adult Migrants. Most of these tools are available in multiple languages.

Various **online courses** have been created to enhance migrants' skills and knowledge of the host country's language. For instance, [Skills Norway](#), a directorate under the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, offers online mobile-friendly assessments to help newcomers evaluate their Norwegian reading skills and identify suitable language learning curriculum. Similarly, the Swedish Institute, a government agency, offers an online course [Learning Swedish](#), designed for migrants with knowledge of English or other languages, covering basic spoken and written Swedish as well as insights into Swedish culture and society.

At the EU level, mobile apps promote migrant integration across various domains, including sociocultural inclusion ([DIGIMI app](#)), healthcare ([Mig Health app](#)), access to services ([RefAid](#)), and training and employability ([MiGreat](#)). These digital initiatives been developed through the active engagement of governments, policymakers, international humanitarian agencies, private companies, and philanthropic investment firms. The European refugee and migration crisis of 2015-16 catalysed the development of digital innovations in the migration space^{xiv}, leading to the creation of numerous smartphone apps to help newcomers navigate their journey, settlement, and integration process.

European governments have established integration policies which, in some countries like Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Norway, require migrants to pass civic integration courses assessing their knowledge of the host country's language, culture and labour market. These policies have led to the development of **e-learning programs** to help migrants prepare for and pass orientation and civic integration exams. To illustrate, Belgian integration agencies incorporate interactive online games and practice quizzes in social orientation training programs. Germany and Norway offer guidance on education, training, and career opportunities for migrants through the government websites [Make it in Germany](#) and [Utdannin.no](#), respectively.

Digital approaches to migrant integration have also explored the potential of more advanced technologies, such as [virtual reality \(VR\)](#) and **algorithms**. Partnerships between governments, private companies, and non-governmental organisations have developed and implemented these technologies to assist migrants in their economic integration. In Denmark, VR is used to provide an immersive introduction to unskilled labour opportunities for migrants and refugees, showcasing personal stories and experiences of newcomers working in sectors such as transportation, retail, hospitality, cleaning, and caregiving, and offering learners insights into the demands, expectations, and cultural norms of the Danish workforce within these industries. In some countries, like Estonia and Türkiye^{xv}, gov-

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ernments use **algorithmic matching tools**¹ to place migrants in locations that could offer employment opportunities, aiming to improve economic integration outcomes by matching migrants' characteristics with available settlement sites. The approach helps speed up decision-making, as delays in asylum decisions and labour market access can significantly impact refugee employment rates.

2. IDENTIFYING THE GAPS

While both migrants and host countries leverage technology for integration, digital migrant connections and approaches face various challenges. The subsequent section explores these integration challenges from both the bottom-up and top-down perspectives.

2.1. Challenges of Bottom-Up and Top-Down Approaches to Digitalisation in Migrant Integration

Despite the importance of digital connectivity, network resources, and practices for migrant integration, **significant barriers such as affordability, language proficiency, and literacy challenges** - especially for newly arrived migrants - can constrain the adoption of digital technology during resettlement^{xvi}. These barriers limit access to education, employment, and sociocultural interactions. In Türkiye, the lack of widespread access and resources to utilise the internet and social media represent a significant barrier among certain migrant groups^{xvii}.

For migrants who are often among the most vulnerable, such as refugees and asylum seekers, the **shift by host governments and community organisations towards remote and technology-based solutions has reinforced their social and economic exclusion**, further hindering their ability to fully utilise digital government services. The challenges migrants face in accessing local services were exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic. An online survey^{xviii} conducted by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) with 33 municipalities across seven European countries found that while the transition to digitalisation allowed municipalities to continue providing services, **migrants experienced lack of access to ICT devices, language barriers, and difficulties in reaching out to beneficiaries** due to a shortage of specialised staff.

There have been notable challenges in providing appropriate digital services to support the settlement and integration of migrants. Typically, **services intended for refugees do not profoundly engage with their literacies**. Moreover, host societies and institutions do not meaningfully involve refugees in the design and implementation of such initiatives, often **failing to consider that many migrants are tech savvy**. According to a study by Katherine T. McCaffrey and Maisa C. Taha, caseworkers, schools, and health clinics working with Middle Eastern refugees in New Jersey used **outmoded communication channels that failed to match refugees' high levels of mobile usage**, leading to unnecessary integration obstacles. Similarly, an IOM Greece survey^{xix} on designing e-learning integration courses for newcomers revealed the need for smartphone compatibility, as most respondents owned smartphones and were familiar with mobile apps, while few could use laptops to follow the courses.

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¹ One example is the GeoMatch algorithmic matching tool, developed by the Swiss Secretariat for Migration in collaboration with the Immigration Policy Lab (IPL), which aims to more effectively place asylum-seekers within Switzerland. For a more comprehensive examination of the use of matching tools within the EU, see Ozkul, D. (2023). Automating immigration and asylum: the uses of new technologies in migration and asylum governance in Europe.



Navigating bureaucratic systems has not necessarily become simpler or more accessible, even in the smartphone era. Accessing this information requires migrants to adequately use social support networks and be capable to navigate complex information landscapes online.

Furthermore, government investments in mobile app technology to facilitate information processing and service provision for migrants **may not adequately capture the diverse experiences and needs within migrant populations**. In fact, digital forms of assistance, such as chatbots or messaging apps for legal inquiries, may be viewed as less respectful compared to in-person legal aid^{xx}. This remote and impersonal approach can come across as more detached and disconnected from migrant community needs. Previous research has also shown that government websites and digital platforms **may fail to effectively engage culturally and linguistically diverse populations**. Specifically, Syrian migrants in the Netherlands reported difficulties finding detailed and adequate health information on official websites, owing to cultural barriers and language-related challenges^{xxi}.

In most European countries, the procedures, requirements, and the multiple actors involved in the settlement make the process very complicated for migrants. **Information is often presented in a fragmented, dense, and digitalised manner. Navigating bureaucratic systems has not necessarily become simpler or more accessible**, even in the smartphone era. Accessing this information requires migrants to adequately use social support networks and be capable to navigate complex information landscapes online.

As discussed in section 1.1, migrants often value the insights and guidance provided by members of their social networks and communities, as well as social media platforms, over government online channels, which are generally rated as less helpful^{xxii}. This is especially true for migrants from countries where information is tightly controlled. On the other hand, migrants' reliance on social media platforms and networks can also **expose them to a continuous stream of rumours and disinformation**, as the internet frequently serves as a breeding ground for such content. This can negatively impact migrants' everyday lives and integration prospects. Similarly, the proliferation of new apps and websites designed to support migrant integration has also led to unintended consequences, such as **digital tools becoming obsolete with broken hyperlinks, expired employment or housing opportunities, and other outdated information** - a phenomenon known as **digital litter**^{xxiii}. This misleading information can be particularly harmful to individuals who rely on it to understand visa rules and obtain information about their rights and access to services.

Finally, while algorithms increasingly shape migrants' everyday life experiences, **their potential to positively affect integration processes are inconclusive**. The insights from the *GeoMatch* algorithm suggest that prioritising integration criteria and considering migrants' preferences ultimately depend on the decisions made by state authorities. This use of algorithmic matching tools has also been criticised for failing to address structural barriers contributing to labour market inequalities, and not adequately considering migrants' families as a crucial factor in the integration process. The [Match'In](#) project in Germany has taken a more participatory and multifaceted approach, compared to other pilot tools. It engages diverse stakeholders, including migrants, in its development and implementation. The project aims to consider various integration criteria, such as migrants' family compositions, professional backgrounds, health conditions, and municipalities' capacities to provide socio-economic opportunities.

3. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Digital technologies offer transformative potential in migrant integration, particularly through innovations in information and service delivery. To fully harness this potential, the following recommendations are proposed:

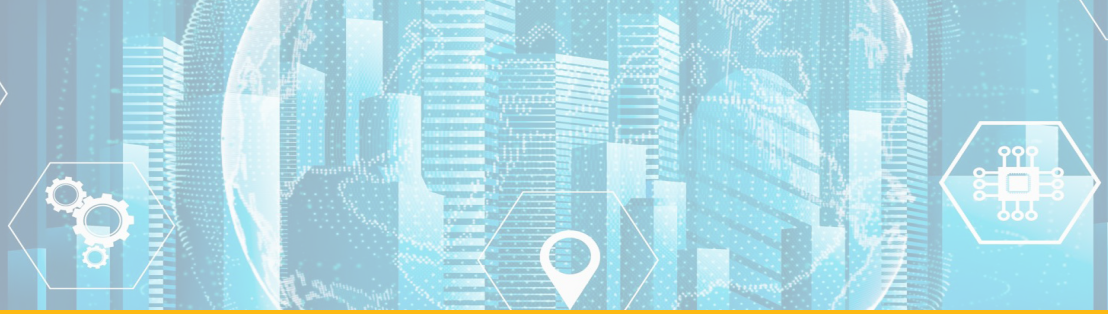
- **Improving (digital) accessibility:** While digitisation and digitalisation of government services can extend their reach, services offered in a digital format remain inaccessi-

ble to individuals without technological literacy, internet access, or compatible devices like a smartphone. Programs should consider these disparities and strategically combine digital and in-person methods to guarantee equitable access. Government online channels providing settlement information should be intuitive, easy to navigate, accessible to migrants with varying digital literacy levels, as well as offer multilingual support and step-by-step guides to follow bureaucratic processes. The "Welcome to Germany" online platform, operated by the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) in Germany, is a good example to follow, as it boasts a user-friendly layout with responsive design, intuitive navigation, and support for over 15 different languages.

- **Consolidating and streamlining official information:** Governments across Europe should centralise all relevant information on settlement procedures, requirements, and involved actors into user-friendly platforms. There within, information should be clear and concise, avoiding overly complex or fragmented content that could confuse or overwhelm users, especially newly arrived migrants. Crucially, governments must maintain robust digital administration, including strict oversight of any external organisations they fund or collaborate with, to ensure the accuracy and reliability of the information provided. This involves meticulously dating all content, regularly reviewing materials and archiving obsolete information to help prevent the spread of outdated information, which may mislead individuals with limited knowledge of the relevant legal, educational, or immigration systems, or the language used.
- **Leveraging existing social networks and online channels:** Top-down approaches to migrant integration should recognise migrants' own digital social support networks in providing guidance and insights in finding employment, understanding societal functions in areas like education and healthcare, and improving their language proficiency, while fostering socialisation and belonging. Stakeholders at the local level should collaborate with these networks and community-based organisations and utilise digital channels used by migrants, including social media, to disseminate accurate information and counteract misinformation effectively. Stakeholders can leverage migrants' use of smartphones and social media to send text messages warning against false information to communities. Local organisations can compile and disseminate directories of relevant groups in social media and messaging platforms (e.g. LinkedIn, WhatsApp, Telegram, Facebook) tailored to migrant backgrounds and needs (e.g. nationality, language, shared interests). Such directories or lists could also include freely accessible apps, podcasts and relevant websites that could assist migrants in their daily life, supporting informal learning in an efficient and cost-effective way, with positive implications for social inclusion. By collaborating with existing online migrant communities and groups, state and non-state institutions can amplify their outreach and support efforts, leveraging the trust and engagement these digital spaces have already established.
- **Collaborating with community partners:** Bridging the gap between migrants' use of digital media and top-down technology approaches in migrant integration requires meaningful and sustainable partnerships between government agencies, local community organisations, social service providers, and migrant advocacy groups. Such partnerships can develop more responsive and effective settlement support programs featuring various digital means by leveraging the expertise and established relationships of multiple actors with varying levels of understanding of the needs and challenges faced by migrant populations.
- **Maintaining transparency and trust:** While many digital apps and platforms supporting migrant integration rely on user data, organisations do not always transparently

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communicate what data is collected and for what purposes. Transparent communication about data practices, as required by the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in the EU, is directly linked to a trustworthiness, making it a critical consideration for stakeholders developing digital solutions for migrant populations. Avoiding malpractices and clearly communicating the platform's purpose, data privacy policies, and any limitations is crucial for maintaining sustainable relationships with migrant users. Moreover, ensuring that all information is sourced from reliable authorities, while also establishing clear channels for migrants to contact platform administrators or report issues, is essential for building trust and credibility.

By implementing these recommendations, digital tools can enhance the integration process for migrants, ensuring equitable access, accurate information, and robust support networks. At the same time, while digital technology holds transformative potential in the lives of migrants and their integration, it alone cannot address the multifaceted challenges of the integration process. Critical areas remain where technology's role in migrant integration is limited.

Digital technologies can offer insights into cultural norms and practices, but they fall short in fully replicating the nuanced, experiential learning that emerges from direct cross-cultural interactions and exchanges. Face-to-face interactions and immersive experiences remain essential for deeper **cultural understanding and social cohesion**, allowing for a more comprehensive appreciation of cultural subtleties and meaningful intercultural connections.

Although digital tools facilitate certain tasks and virtual connections, they do not automatically increase opportunities for in-person socialisation with local community members. Research has indicated that connections formed via mobile apps are perceived by migrants as hindering their chances to engage in meaningful face-to-face interactions with the host community^{xxiv}.

The potential for digital platforms and resources to raise awareness about **discrimination and xenophobia** is also debated. While online spaces could help address stereotypes surrounding migrants, they may equally reinforce negative narratives about them. From this perspective, personal, face-to-face interactions are crucial for overcoming deeply rooted prejudices, as they shape views, attitudes, and behaviours more effectively than digital interactions alone.

Similarly, in the context of **migrant health**, digital technologies can complement face-to-face interventions, given the affordability and widespread accessibility of smartphones, mental health apps and SMS for support and mental health services^{xxv}. Yet, effective emotional and psychological support often requires personalised, in-person counselling and therapy. There is a clear need for accessible and culturally sensitive health services to address the unique challenges faced by migrant populations.

Integrating migrant youth into the **education system and their socialisation process** are complex challenges that digital tools alone cannot fully address. Inclusive and culturally responsive educational programs, along with community-based initiatives, are crucial for the holistic development of migrant youth's educational and integration trajectories.

The debate surrounding the impact of digital technologies on migrant integration remains ongoing and inconclusive. The ways in which smartphones, social media and other advanced technologies are reshaping established patterns of migrant is not yet well-understood. Further research is needed to determine how these technologies are facilitating and hindering integration processes in various societal spheres.

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