# POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN THE CONTEXT OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA: THE CASE OF REFUGEES IN LITHUANIA

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**Abstract**

This study aims to explore how new communication technologies are transforming the nature of political participation and how social media platforms can create discourses of solidarity with migrants or confrontation with them. The objectives of the study are: to analyse the concept of political participation in the context of migration; to describe the role of new communication technologies in the decision-making process of the host society; and to show the role of social media in increasing refugee integration of migrants and solidarity with them. In order to explore the role of new communication technologies in the context of refugee integration, interviews are conducted with refugees living in Lithuania, whose unique experiences are analysed in the context of not only the role of new communication tools, but also political participation (e.g. citizenship, voting in the elections, meetings with local government representatives, etc.) in their host country.

It should be mentioned, that new communication technologies enable migrants to participate in the communities they have left behind and to create new virtual communities that function as a mobilising instrument for migrants. The analysis of the dynamics between migrant integration and new communication technologies shows that digital technologies facilitate the integration of migrants in social, political, economic and cultural spheres. New technologies can help migrants to find information on rights, citizenship, local migrant support services, and overcome feelings of isolation by providing migrants with information. The results of the interview show that new technologies are very important for refugees, as they help to build networks of family and friends, support communities and create a sense of belonging in the host society. However, negative representations of refugees in social media also contribute to the difficulties refugees face during their integration.

**Keywords:** New Media, New Communication Technologies, Social Media, Political Participation, Refugees, Integration, Migration, Lithuania.

## 1. Introduction

The increased influx of refugees in 2015 has caused a number of discussions in Europe. Governments, at that time, have taken various measures to limit the number of refugees arriving. At the same time, civic participation and volunteering have been discussed [1]. In 2015, the massive influx of refugees into Europe from countries, such as Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq exposed fundamental political disputes between European Union (EU) and Member States, which sparked debates on border control. Soon afterward, "European migration crisis" spread throughout Europe. Amendments to the decisions governing EU rules on registering asylum seekers in the first EU country they enter were discussed. In this discussion enviroment, Europe was divided into two parts, the first supporting a 'Welcome Refugees' stance, while the other was characterised by strong anti-immigration attitudes and a policy of border-control tightening [2].

Participation in social media promotes solidarity by creating a group consciousness, achieving common goals or building and maintaining a community. Research [3] and [4] highlights the mobilising effect of social media on different forms of civic, political or democratic participation. Social media provides a new platform for people to share information, discuss their worldviews and perhaps even reach consensus on what actions should be taken [5]; [6]. Social and political participation is fostered by interactions between individuals, supported by online platforms, such as Twitter and Facebook [7]. The example of Alan Kurdi in 2015 confirms that sharing information, photos or opinions can mobilise individuals who have not previously involved in a social and political issues [8]. However, in order for people to act together to solve a problem in society, they need to

identify themselves as a member of a particular group, through which action can be mobilised [9]. By posting, sharing and commenting online, people create new online communities. Participation in social media helps to shape both civic and political engagement, which leads to a psychological sense of unity with other people who share a similar worldview [10]. Social and political mobilisation is an important factor in bringing about change in society.

In the context of new information and communication technologies, the exchange of people, goods, services and information is always a topic of discusssion. The question that being asked for many years is whether social media (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, Linkedin, etc.) could be important for social transformation. The impact of social media is particularly relevant for migrants. Social media enhances migrants' ability to maintain family and kinship ties, to build extensive personal networks and to participate in national communities through international institutions. Nevertheless, there is still little research on the opportunities, offered by new technologies to migrants to participate in various issues in the communities they have left behind [11]. The ability of migrants to maintain their loyalty to their communities inevitably affects migration and integration processes.

In this context, it is important to examine how social media contribute to migrants' participation in their origin communities and how social media platforms generate discourses of support that promote solidarity with migrants or discourses against them. These technologies enable migrants to participate in the communities they have left behind and it also helps to create new virtual communities that function as an instrument for mobilising migrants. The concept of the 'connected migrant' is a distinctive feature of new migration patterns. Today's migrant is a representative of a new culture of mobility that marks a new transnational geographical and digital mobility. Despite the distance, the new means of communication make it possible to stay in constant contact, which contradicts classical sociological assumptions in the context of 'twofold absence'. However, it is not clear whether the high level of communication of migrants with their origin communities changes the nature of migration, and how new technologies enable participation in the life of 'left behind' and 'new' communities [12]. These questions are important in order to clarify how discourses are created in social media that promotes solidarity with migrants or that creates discourses against them.

**The aim, goals and methods of the study**

The aim of this paper is to find out how new communication technologies are transforming the nature of political participation and how support or confrontation discourses are created in social media platform in the context of migration. The goals of the study are: 1) to analyse the concept of political participation in the context of migration; 2) to describe the role of new communication technologies, e-diasporas and communities in the decision-making processes; 3) to shed light on the role of social media in increasing refugee participation, solidarity and strengthening social ties.

Theoretical background

**Concept and forms of political participation**

Political participation is usually defined as citizens' interaction with political parties or institutions. The centre-right perspective emphasises traditions based on Christian values, such as solidarity. One of the advantages of democracy is that it gives citizens the opportunity to have their interests involved in the political process. In addition to taking part in elections, it is also possible to work for political parties, take part in civic initiatives, sign petitions, take part in demonstrations, donate money to political organisations, take part in protests, or take up a position in the public service. Civic engagement usually refers to the actions of ordinary citizens that reflect the expectations of wider society. Political organisations encourage citizens to engage in various forms of participation through digital platforms. Political parties, NGOs or civil society organisations try to encourage citizens to promote their campaigns and speak out on important issues. However, the old traditional means of mobilisation are also holding their ground, such as door-to-door campaigns. The Christian Democratic Union Deutschlands (CDU Deutschlands) has been successful in this door-to-door campaign, but has also made use of new communication technologies (Initiative Connect 2017) [13].

While scholarly interest in participation is growing, online media practices have not been widely analysed [14]. The notion of participation has long been central to explaining the role of me-

dia in democratic societies, even before the advent of the latest communication technologies. [15] has analysed how audience practices have evolved historically, and the media have played an important role in engaging members in community activities. Today, however, mass media can offer new and simpler forms of interaction due to the development of digital technologies, moving from passive media observation to a "participatory culture" [16]. [16] argues that the emergence of digital media is leading to the development of cultural, political and social practices, whereby users seek, share and use information sources in new ways.

At the end of the 20th century, new tools emerged that gave the media new powers to participate in the public information process (email, html websites) [17]. [18] talks about a new culture of participation, related to platforms, used by for-profit companies. Commenting and sharing news and other participatory practices are based on various means, such as email, websites or social networks. [19] argues that the media environment encompasses all spheres of social life, and that people need to engage with the media in order to participate in public life. Sharing news or commenting by expressing political views on social media has an impact on political participation both online and offline [20]. The sharing of news, articles, and photos by social media users and their friends enhances discussions with other individuals [21]. For example, research shows that comments, posted under news items, can change participants' views [22].

In response to the biggest humanitarian crisis since the Second World War, it is important to include new forms of political engagement. The need for the distribution of refugees and migrants has led to a discourse of fear and threat across Europe, as political campaigns based on anti-immigration sentiments have emerged in Poland, Hungary and Slovakia since autumn 2015. Thus, in order to unravel the mysteries of political engagement, it is important to understand the motivations of individuals, which have more to do with psychological aspects than economic ones. On the one hand, it is anger, euphoria and moral outrage, while on the other hand it is encouragement, hard work and employment [23]. However, in summary, the new digital decision-making process reduces the distance between the so-called political elites and ordinary citizens, regardless of their technological abilities.

**Migration, community and new communication technologies**

In the context of the new information and communication technologies, new concepts and phrases have emerged, such as "annihilation of space" or "death of distance" [24]. However, while there is much debate about the implications of the new technologies, there is no universal agreement on how existing structures are changing. In particular, the potential of the Internet to facilitate communication in virtual communities, which mimic traditional communities, has been highlighted [25]. Researchers are focusing on communication patterns linking online and offline interactions, looking for answers to questions about how individuals make connections, seek information, and give and receive help. These individuals participate in many different networks, but the members may not know each other, giving rise to the term 'networking individualism' [26]; [27]. However, a new concept of 'networked sociability' has been proposed, as new technologies not only facilitate communication, but can also help to mobilise groups, forming communities that share similar characteristics (age, situation, etc.) [27].

Migrants' communication practices can be used to explore the potential of social media for building virtual communities. For people who are in direct daily contact with people close to them, the impact of new technologies is very minimal. In contrast, for migrants who leave their communities, technology becomes important when trying to keep in touch with the people they have left behind. Of course, migration is not a new phenomenon, as people have always moved from one place to another and from one society to another (for economic, political or personal reasons) [28] Although face-to-face communication is limited by distance, new technologies offer new opportunities. Expressing solidarity digitally remains important for migrants. New technology products, such as social media, are placed in a Web 2.0 context, as the user creates content, shares and receives information quickly [29]. In addition, technical innovations, such as texting on mobile phones or voice transmission over the Internet, are leading to a reduction in the cost of communicating content and an increase in the speed of dissemination [30].

The benefits of new technologies are described through the concept of 'network capital', defined as "the ability to build and maintain social relationships with people who are not necessarily close to one another, which generate emotional, financial and practical benefits" (p. 93) [31]. These technologies enable migrants to participate in the communities they have left behind or to create new virtual communities that function as a mobilising instrument for migrants. The concept of the 'connected migrant' is a distinctive feature of the new migration patterns. Today's migrant is representative of a new culture of mobility that marks a new transnational geographical and digital mobility. Despite the distance, the new digital tools allow for constant contact, which contradicts classical sociological assumptions in the context of 'double absence'. However, it is not clear whether the high level of communication in migrant communities is changing the nature of migration, or whether the new technologies are actually enabling participation in the life of the 'left behind' and the 'new' communities [12]. These questions are therefore important to understand how discourses of support are created in social media to promote solidarity, or perhaps confrontation, between migrants.

**Social media and political participation**

Social media can turn passive media users into active, participative consumers by allowing them to choose their own content, rate it and share it publicly [32]. It is a new way for individuals to go beyond the "normal/media boundary" (sharing memes, videos, photos, posts, etc.) (p. 120) [33]. Many media critics have recognised that the media can become an institution of democratic expression as forms of social media activism are more participatory and communication-oriented. Activists use social media to reach audiences and supporters in contrast to traditional media [34]. [35] talk about new forms of 'guerrilla wars' – wars of words and wars of pictures – which is important for understanding contemporary ideological action on communication platforms.

The development of information and communication technologies and the increasing popularity of the internet are changing the role of communication in the 21st century [36]. These communication tools include social media, which is defined as a set of online tools, designed to promote and enable social interaction [37] According to [38], the main characteristics that define social media are participation, openness, communication, engagement and connection. Similarly, [39] argues that social media enable citizens to express their thoughts, regardless of whether they are controlled by money and politics (as in the case of traditional media). These technologies encourage a rethinking of democratic practices of participation and engagement and contribute to improving the structure of public space [40]. Since 2011, social media activism has transformed trends in political participation around the world. Vulnerable populations, such as opposition parties, minorities and refugees, are actively using social media platforms to challenge dominant discourses and ideologies that may be highly conducive to the interests of the nation state [41]. As social media connects users globally and political content is read by users outside the political system, the power of social media in "digital diplomacy" is recognised.

Public authorities are also using new communication channels, in particular social media, for various reasons, for example to overcome communication barriers, often encountered in the public sector [42]. It has been observed, that the use of social media in the public sphere can improve communication, promote citizen participation, transparency, trust, democracy and share good practices among government institutions [43]. Social media can be seen as a set of technologies that promote citizen participation. [44] argue that social media plays an important role not only in promoting citizen participation but also in mobilising people to take social action. The term 'participation' refers to the involvement of citizens in social issues. Social networks provide an opportunity to put this participation into practice by coordinating discussions and social action [44]. [45] argue that the real potential of social networks lies in their support to civil society and the public sphere. Examples include the Egyptian revolution of 2011.

The emergence of new media reduces the physical distance between people who are geographically distant from each other and creates the conditions for direct and interactive communication. However, there are also negative aspects, as online media increase the political information gap between people who use online media and those who do not or do not have access to a wider range of information. The digital divide is a result of the popularity of online media and nowadays the growing number of social media users [46]. It has been observed, that usage patterns may dif-

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fer, given that older people have lived with offline media and therefore prefer live communication, while those whose learning system has been more digitally connected may be used to using online media. However, more research is needed to clarify how these differences affect political participation. In addition, it is important for further research to find out whether the use of online media in the diaspora can enhance political engagement.

## 2. Materials and Methods

**Objectives of the empirical research.** This study seeks to explain 1) the role of new communication tools in the integration process of refugees; 2) the role of new communication tools in the context of political participation of refugees.

**Methods:** The theoretical and empirical research methods were used. In order to clarify the concept of political participation, a wide range of literature was collected, information was systematised and a descriptive approach was used. A literature review is conducted to analyse the role of new communication technologies and community mobilisation in the context of migration. In order to explore the role of new communication technologies in the context of refugee integration, interviews are conducted with refugees living in Lithuania.

**Formulation of Interview Questions.** In order to answer the first research objective, the interview questions include: do you use social media, do you often speak out on refugee integration issues (comments, photos, shares, posts, closed group conversations, etc.); does the negative representation of refugees contribute to the difficulties that refugees experience during integration? If so, which ones? In order to answer the second research objective, the interviews include questions, such as do you hold Lithuanian citizenship? If not, whether you would like to be granted citizenship (or are working towards it), whether you participate in the political life of the country (e. g. elections, meetings with local government representatives), whether you participate in the life of the local community (various events, festivals, meetings, etc.).

**Subjects.** Refugees living in Lithuania (women and men living in the country for more than 6 months).

**Sample size and nature.** A total of 8 semi-structured interviews with refugees living in Lithuania. The assumption why this sample is adequate: semi-structured interviews are conducted to identify the role of new communication tools in the integration process of refugees and their impact in the context of refugees' political participation.

**Research ethics**. Qualitative research makes it difficult to maintain impartiality when organising and analysing data. In order to ensure the objectivity of the research, the author declares that there is no conflict of interest. Personal or financial relationships with other people or organisations and personal beliefs are irrelevant to objectivity or motivation to interpret data accordingly. The analysis of the data collected and the presentation of the information is in no way related to the author's ethical or other beliefs, or to membership of any ethnic, social, religious or other group. The informed consent was obtained from study participants.

## 3. Results and Discussion

**The role of new communication tools in refugee integration**

For both migrants or ethnic minority groups and refugees, new technologies are essential for creating networks of family and friends, maintaining communities and building a sense of belonging in different social groups. Social media provide a variety of opportunities to communicate with friends or family members living abroad (messages, photos, audio and video). The results of the interview study also confirm that platforms, such as Facebook, Skype, Twitter, YouTube or Viber, are becoming important technologies for staying in touch and creating a sense of belonging to a community. Rapid access is also linked to mobile technologies, which often determine how refugees interact through communication platforms, as they can not only keep in touch with family and friends, but also with the country, from which they left.

Almost all interviewees answer positively to the question of whether you use social media, but there are often cases where interviewees say that social media does not reflect reality, but on the contrary, it can be used for misinformation:

"I don't believe social media. Nothing will change. But also sometimes it is important to discover the world, to see what is happening around. All social media try to show the situation in Syria, the relationship between this country and the other countries. They are very sad. They need a help. We need freedom and revolution is the only choice. There is an attempt to show the truth in international social media but if we are talking about media inside Syria, from one side it is controlled by government and from another side it is ordinary people who try to make changes. Every channel shows what they want to show, therefore nobody believes anything" (Interview 2) [47].

It is important to consider the broader socio-cultural situation of refugees in the context of migration when addressing intercultural challenges [48]. Refugees experience difficulties due to language or cultural differences, which are often linked to racist and discriminatory prejudices. For this reason, refugees often seek peer or group social support to overcome social isolation and to receive emotional support or practical information about their new environment [49]. Most interviewees emphasise that they use social networks, such as Facebook, to communicate with friends or family members (whether they have arrived or remain in their country of origin): "Yes. I use Facebook, Instagram. But I don't discuss about refugee issues. Actually, I don't like to spend my time. I am using mostly for communication with friends, to know what is going on around" (Interview 5) [47]. However, a certain fear motive also emerges, as refugees express fears that it is not safe to use social media: "I use only Facebook. I don't like to discuss about refugees on social media. Sometimes you don't know what kind of people they are. I mean some people don't show their identity that is why I don't like to communicate in social media" (Interview 6) [47].

There are many studies focusing on the use of new technologies during the resettlement of refugees in the host society [50]; [51]. Digital technologies are used to maintain contact with other migrants, in this case refugees [52], family members, or to promote the well-being of refugees [53]. Moreover, the links between digital technologies and the mobility of refugees (their decision-making process, planning their travels, etc.) have been continuously debated [54, 55]. Thus, social media do not only serve the functions of information-seeking, entertainment or communication, but they also become a powerful tool for self-expression and organisation. For example, in an interview, a refugee in Lithuania talked about the potential of social media to reach out to a wider public through the organisation of Human aid events: "Not so much. But with project "Human aid" we organize some events and we are using social media to invite people to participate in our activities" (Interview 8) [47]. This is a project, curated by NGOs in Lithuania, which aims to strengthen the capacities of groups seeking to promote refugee integration through training, short-term coordination of activities and funding for volunteer initiatives.

Social media are described as organisation hubs, which are characterised by their easy accessibility, allowing "organisers, activists and followers to coordinate their actions" (p. 1223) [56]. These organisational hubs can serve a variety of purposes, such as collecting or sharing information, communicating with followers, organising an event or promoting political activism [57]. In addition, for mobilising communities or bringing about political change, social media can facilitate the dissemination of information between internal (e. g. refugees) and external groups (government or non-governmental organisations).

Refugees in Lithuania responded negatively to the question whether you often speak out on refugee integration issues (comments, photos, shares, posts, conversations in closed groups, etc.), as they do not tend to expect that what they say will make a difference: "I use social media, but not quite often. I don't comment at all, maybe just sometimes. It is impossible to change some attitudes. If you are arguing, you need to reply a lot and it is waste of time" (Interview 3) [47]. Similarly, another interview states that everyone has their own opinions and should not try to change them by sharing content on social media: "I used to. Now I am not very into social media but I use Facebook or Twitter. As well as Instagram in order to follow some news. But I don't share my opinion about refugees. I don't like this topic on social media because every person has different opinion" (Interview 4) [47].

Communication is seen as an important tool for immigrants' adaptation, and the media play various roles in this process. However, there is a consensus that in recent years, digital technologies can facilitate migrants' lives in various social, political, economic and cultural areas of integra-

tion [58]. Digital technologies can help migrants to find information on rights, citizenship, local migrant support services, and overcome feelings of isolation by providing migrants with information in their mother tongue as well as cultural practices in the host society. The distinctiveness of social media is linked to the rapid development of migrants' social networks and the ability of users to create and share content or opinions on these networks [59]. These platforms can also facilitate language learning and promote the inclusion of marginalised immigrant youth [58]. In other words, social media, with their services and important communication innovations in the context of migration, can act as a mobilising factor for migrants.

However, negative representations of refugees in media can contribute to the difficulties, faced by refugees during their integration. Refugees in Lithuania state that: "Yes. Muslims in Europe suffering these integration issues. That is why I want to do something through expressing my experiences because I understand that, for example, research results if they are objective might help for making decisions. I mean, to make positive decisions in favor of everybody who lives in Europe" (Interview 1) [47]. Furthermore, most interviewees responded positively to the question whether negative representations of refugees contribute to the difficulties, experienced by refugees during integration:

"The society always keeps an eye on us. For example, it might be significant when we will search for a job. Maybe refugees are good people. But how they can know it if they have lots of stereotypes. They can see difference if only they give us a job. But we also might not search for a job place because we are scared, because the media has created an image about us. Media is going in a wrong direction. It should be neutral. Stories about good refugees also should be showed. Nowadays it is one side story. It's hard to get a job if public opinion is negative. Mentally it affects you as a refugee" (Interview 8) [47].

Also according to the 2019 public opinion poll, 73.6 % of respondents say that refugees may increase the crime rate in Lithuania, and 68.0 % believe that refugees may cause social unrest in Lithuania [60]. However, it is important to mention that there is a lack of objective studies presenting the experiences of refugees in integrating in different countries. In this case, it is the opinion of the majority of the society, but how these attitudes lead to the integration of refugees is hardly investigated.

In summary, digital technologies can facilitate the integration of migrants in various social, political, economic and cultural spheres. New technologies can help migrants to find information on rights, citizenship, local migrant support services, and overcome feelings of isolation in the host society. However, social media can also pose certain dangers or risks in terms of misinformation, which can pose a threat to their safety.

**The role of new communication tools in political participation of immigrants**

While digital technologies and social media are important in strengthening the links between the state institutions and migrants, it is important to answer the question of how refugees engage with their communities. Social cohesion refers to the state of social relations in a given area or society. It can be identified as feelings of belonging or attachment, identification with a place, inclusion in terms of income, community resources, participation in social activities, public space, or even degree of trust in public institutions [61]. These different forms of social cohesion are known to underline the importance of building relationships between individuals, communities or institutions. Digital technologies and social media platforms can enhance or extend social cohesion, but equally they can also pose certain challenges (caused by limited access to technology). For example, to overcome the social isolation, experienced by migrants (or in this case, refugees), to keep in touch with family or friends, as well as to strengthen ties with local communities [62]. While digital technologies can help to strengthen ties with local communities, it usually remains based on shared nationality [63].

During the interviews, the following questions were asked in order to find out the correlation between the new communication tools and refugees' involvement in local community activities and political participation in general: Do you have Lithuanian nationality? If not, would you like to be granted by citizenship?; Do you participate in the political life of the country (e. g. elections, meetings with local government representatives)?; Do you participate in social activities of

the local community (various events, festivals, meetings, etc.) [47]? Although this is not the main focus of the study, it is assumed, that positive relations with members of the local community and a positive attitude towards refugees may also lead to refugees' motivation to integrate, to have a positive attitude towards citizenship and to other opportunities to take part in the country's political processes. Although none of the interviewees had citizenship of the Republic of Lithuania, almost all refugees would like to become Lithuanian citizens in the future:

"I would like. It might help me in the future, for example, if I am going to apply for some job places not even in Lithuania but in other European countries like Germany, Sweden, Belgium and so on. But on the other hand, it will be difficult for me to lose my Syrian citizenship. Because Lithuania doesn't have a right for double citizenship. Anyway, for me much better to get a European citizenship because I don't want to go back to Syria" (Interview 4) [47].

However, when analysing refugees' answers to the question of whether they intend to participate in the political life, it is noticeable, that 90 % of the refugees interviewed say that they are not currently interested in politics, but that they would possibly get involved in certain political processes in the future (e. g. voting in elections): "I don't know. Maybe in the future. I didn't try it yet. I came here when I was 12 years old, therefore I didn't have rights or opportunities. For example, to vote for the right person" (Interview 4) [47]. It also highlights that one of the "duties" of political participation is voting in elections: "Not yet but if I would get a citizenship that would be possible. People should know how to say their opinion, they should vote when they have the right to do it, when they have opportunity of that. It's kind of duty, if it is for the sake of the country every person should participate, to express their opinion" (Interview 5) [47].

Digital communication technologies can act as a tool to bring individuals together, strengthening social ties both locally (often within ethnic communities) and globally (through diaspora communities). However, social inequalities can be created for those who have limited access to the internet, thus forming a community where economic status, literacy and education, language barriers, and age all play a role [64]. [18] speaks of a new transformation of 'participatory cultures' into a 'culture of connectivity', where everyday people are connected to digital media. Younger people are referred to by the author as 'digital natives'. It can thus be argued, that social media not only enable communication, community building, and migrant mobilisation, but at the same time, they also break down cultural, social, political and personal boundaries between individuals, institutions, businesses or public spheres.

Communication and security are considered important factors in this process, as there is a perceived correlation. If the local community is involved in the integration process of refugees, then refugees feel safer (see Interviews 7; 8 [47]) due to the connections they have with members of the local community and are therefore more likely to be involved in the political life. The results of this study reveal that local community involvement is an important factor influencing refugees' integration practices and experiences in the political context, their participation in the host society and their full integration, which is not only related to language proficiency, but also to a certain sense of security, citizenship, involvement in local community activities and other communicative aspects.

The results of the analysis of the data, collected during the interviews, show that in the case of Lithuania, communication in Lithuanian and participation in the labour market are among the main factors for getting involved in other activities in the local community (according to the refugees, it makes it easier to establish contact with the host society). However, there is a lack of greater community involvement in the integration process of refugees (negative attitudes and stereotypical attitudes towards refugees make it difficult for refugees to find a place to live, to learn the language, to get a job, to feel safe, etc.). In response to the question "do you participate in social activities of the local community (various events, festivals, meetings, etc.)", insecurity is also mentioned as a factor that hinders refugees from becoming more involved in social life in Lithuania: "I am meeting with my friends. But talking about those festivals, other leisure activities. It is dangerous and risky, especially, New Year's celebrations. Very crowded places, lots of problems might happen. I don't want to have this kind of problems. I just used to stay at home with my family" (Interview 4) [47].

Most research on social media and integration processes focuses on the maintenance of social ties [65]. For example, social networking sites provide migrants with new forms of interac-

tion between the host society and the home country. Thus, social media platforms are widely used among migrants to stay in touch with family members and friends in their country of origin, and it is also associated with migrants' need for emotional support to overcome feelings of loneliness [11]. However, there is also a contrary view, with some scholars arguing [66] that social media can slow down the integration process, as arrivals become less dependent, less likely to make friends, and less likely to develop social ties in the host society. Research provides strong evidence that modern communication tools can help to maintain social relationships and build transnational online communities, helping migrants to overcome the challenges of adapting to a new country, rather than creating social exclusion [67]. The interviews also highlight the role of the local community in this process: "I think the atmosphere can make so much difference. Organizations and local people should be more open to different people, different cultures, different nationalities. They should learn to accept, and the way locals treat us is very important. Open-minded people will understand that we are not bad people. Give us a chance even with a certain distance. Refugee who wants to integrate he or she will try to adapt, to work, to study. It will create an impression on you. If you know how to adapt yourself to a new culture, it will be easy to integrate into society. We can adapt ourselves just if we are sure we do the right things. Therefore we need support from local organizations and local community" (Interview 8).

In addition, refugees say that social media not only facilitates their participation in the local community, but also facilitates their integration process in general. Social media also helps refugees learn about various events, projects and activities, organised by NGOs, which is also important for their full integration into society: "<...> But with project "Human aid" we organize some events and we are using social media to invite people to participate in our activities" (Interview 8). The possibilities for political participation of refugees can also be linked in a certain sense to the supportive discourses, created on social media, which can act as a mobilising instrument for the refugee community. Moreover, the impact of social media on refugees' experiences depends on their perception of integration in the host society in relation to the social and political contexts, their own role and the role of social media in this process.

**Limitations of the study and prospects for further research**

The main limitation of this study is related to the homogenous target audience, therefore there is a possible risk of obtaining selective data (reflecting only the views of a small part of the selected refugee population) when studying characteristics of political participation in the context of contemporary media. However, alternatives for mitigating such risks are possible through further research, related to experiences of refugees and also the efforts of the authorities to encourage opportunities for political participation of refugees in other EU member states (a comparative analysis of several different contexts).

It should also be noted, that this study does not examine other problems, related to refugee integration in Lithuania, for example asylum policy or human rights issues, which might be relevant, while evaluating different aspects or limitation of political participation. Therefore a larger sample of participants and the inclusion of other social, economic and cultural factors in order to identify the reasons for refugees' political (non) participation in the daily "life" of the state should be considered in future research.

**5. Conclusion**

The development of information and communication technologies and the growing popularity of the internet are changing migration patterns in the 21st century. Among these communication tools, social media are defined as a set of online tools, designed to promote and enable social interaction. Social media platforms are widely used by migrants to stay in touch with family and friends in their country of origin, and are also linked to migrants' need for emotional support and to overcome loneliness. These technologies enable migrants to participate in the communities they have left behind, or to create new virtual communities that function as a mobilising tool for migrants. Participation in social media promotes solidarity through the formation of a certain group consciousness, which is why the mobilising effect of social media on different forms of civic, political or democratic participation is highlighted.

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A more coherent study on the role of new communication technologies shows that these technologies enable migrants to participate in the communities they have left behind, or to create new virtual communities that function as a mobilising tool for migrants. The concept of the 'connected migrant' is identified in the context of new migration patterns. Virtual world "creates" a new sense of belonging, shared experience, social identity, increases the degree of socialization and forms new online communities.

An examination of the dynamics of migrant integration and new communication technologies reveals that digital technologies are facilitating the integration of migrants in various social, political, economic and cultural spheres. New technologies can help migrants to find information on rights, citizenship, local migrant support services, overcome feelings of isolation by providing migrants with information in their mother tongue as well as cultural practices in the host society. The uniqueness of social media is linked to the rapid development of migrants' social networks and the ability of users to create, share content and opinions. These platforms can also facilitate language learning and promote the inclusion of marginalised immigrant youth. However, social media can also pose certain risks or dangers in terms of misinformation. "Smart refugees" face unreliable information when using social media technologies, which can pose a threat to their safety.

The results of the interview show that new technologies are very important for refugees, as they help to create networks of family and friends, support communities and create a sense of belonging in the host society. Social media provide a range of opportunities to build or maintain relationships not only with family members, but also to engage with the host society. However, negative representations of refugees in social media can contribute to the difficulties that refugees face during their integration. Refugees in Lithuania state in interviews that new communication tools also play a role in negative public attitudes towards them.

The role of new communication tools in the context of refugees' political participation suggests that communication technologies can facilitate the integration of refugees not only in the social, economic or cultural spheres, but also in the political sphere. New technologies can help migrants to find information on rights, citizenship, local migrant support services, and to overcome feelings of isolation in the host society. Social media helps refugees to find out about various events, projects and activities, organised by NGOs, which is also important for their full integration into new society. The interviews show that around 90 % of the refugees interviewed say that they are not currently interested in politics, but that they intend to get involved in certain political processes in the future (e. g. voting in elections, meetings with local government representatives, etc.). Moreover, although none of the interviewees had citizenship of the Republic of Lithuania, almost all refugees would like to become citizens in the future. However, there is a lack of greater involvement of the host community in the integration process of refugees. Social media can help revitalise political participation by providing new opportunities for bottom-up policy initiation, self-organisation of participation, etc. Social media not only enable communication, community building, refugee mobilisation, and a sense of belonging across different groups in society, but also break down cultural, social, political and personal boundaries between individuals and institutions.

**Conflict of interest**

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