

Smart Refugees And The Role Of Technology In Their Integration Into Host Communities

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Abstract:

Digitalization has become an integral part of human life fueled by both the pandemic and the rapid advancement of technology in recent years. It has brought new opportunities to address various societal challenges we face, including the integration of refugees into host communities. Digital solutions can facilitate the use of tools that can ease the work of organizations and institutions dealing with the adaptation and integration of refugees, however, it also has its own vulnerabilities that require new adaptation measures. This article presents a qualitative study with refugees from Ukraine, settled in the Rădăuți city, to investigate the uses and purposes of social networks, associated with different areas of refugee integration in our country. The results indicate that social networking sites were particularly relevant for refugee participants in acquiring language and cultural skills, as well as maintaining connection with family and building new ties with the host community. The article concludes that digital technology, in particular smartphones, are increasingly considered a useful resource in programs that provide settlement services or promote participation in social life and hold untapped potential for integration processes

Keywords: *Ukraine refugees, integration, digital technology*

1. Introduction

The popularity of smartphone and social media use among Ukrainian refugees has not gone unnoticed during the recent crisis. The use of a smartphone was essential for these refugees, primarily to stay in touch with family and friends remaining in Ukraine, to receive advice from refugees who have already arrived in other countries in Europe, and last but not least to maintain contact with local authorities who offer them protection and assistance. Also, social networks accessed via smartphone were a crucial source of information in the decision-making process regarding continuing migration or settling in Romania. Therefore, social networks have become popular communication channels that make refugees more informed about migration possibilities and settlement destinations (Dekker, Engbersen & Faber, 2016; Thulin & Vilhelmson, 2014) about the possibilities of integration into the host community (job offers, housing, educational offers for children, but also possibilities to complete education through online learning programs, etc.)

Smartphones also provide access to strategic information that is disclosed through social networks and that can be used during the crisis and after. However, studies also describe obstacles and risks in the use of social networks, risks related to the circulation of misinformation that could hinder the process of social and professional inclusion ((Dekker & Engbersen, 2014; Wall, Campbell & Janbek, 2017).

Moreover, social networks and other smartphone applications for navigation and translation empower refugees, making them less vulnerable to becoming victims of traffickers, and this new autonomy, according to Collyer (2007: 674), makes “refugees more self-reliant (Zijlstra & Van Liempt, 2017), giving them the chance to adapt much more easily to the new context offered by the host community.

Language is another crucial indicator of integration, the media playing a variety of roles in this process. Through technology, foreign languages can be learned through online training programs and applications, but also through communication platforms. Thus, digital technology acts as an essential bridge, facilitating not only language learning, but also the cultural and social integration of refugees into new communities. Based on the results of a qualitative study conducted with refugees from Ukraine living in the Rădăuți city, this study highlights what Ukrainian refugees gain through the use of technology, more specifically through one of its tools, namely – smart phones: information and communication resources that allow them to develop “smart” adaptation and integration strategies. This paper explores the relationships between the use of social networks, as an important factor in the lives of migrants, and integration processes, analyzing how refugees use these technologies to adapt to the new environment, to the new culture of the host community.

2. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

The issue of refugee integration is approached by specialists from two points of view, namely: it is a one-way process, in which refugees must adapt to the host society, while the host society does not have the responsibility to adapt to them (Da Lomba, 2010). It is an assimilatory perspective in which refugees should abandon their own cultures and values and adopt those of the new society, and those who fail to achieve the same adaptation goals and therefore do not integrate become a problem for host societies (Strang & Ager, 2010). Another problem with this integration approach is that it does not recognize the cultural and social diversity of refugee populations (Da Lomba, 2010). And the second perspective on integration defines it as a two-way process characterized by the involvement of refugees as well as host societies in the adaptation of newcomers (Ager & Strang, 2004). In this context, both refugees and members of the host society play a crucial role in ensuring that refugees have access to jobs, education, housing, health, culture and language, and that they feel part of the new environment rather than problematizing the refugees. In his influential theory of acculturation, Berry (2006) also argues that the integration process involves both minority and dominant groups to enable them to negotiate their cultural differences and avoid conflict.

The integration of Ukrainian refugees into the societies of the new host nations is yet again a major challenge for the European countries (e.g., Hannafi and Marouani 2022; Brell et al., 2020). In this context, governments shape their strategies to address the needs of newcomers based on historical, political, economic and social factors (Ferris, 2020) and institutions responsible for providing essential services, such as health services, housing, language courses and employment opportunities, have made efforts to respond within the limits of their means, resources and expertise (Fike&Androff, 2016). A key element contributing to both the resettlement and integration of refugees is digital technologies. However, studies show that individual, cultural and socio-economic factors of refugees, such

as language, communication styles, cultural background, education level and age (Chen, 2012; Sawyer & Chen, 2012), as well as attitudes towards integration can cause significant differences in media use during their adaptation (Dekker & Engbersen, 2014). It has also been highlighted that the sociopolitical conditions of the reception context (e.g., integration policies, host society's attitudes towards newcomers, labor market conditions, etc.) can also enable or hinder the refugees integration (Alencar & Deuze, 2017).

Furthermore, due to the increased intersection between social and technological elements of everyday life, digital technologies such as social networks and smartphones are becoming “lifelines”, providing social connections and bridges for refugees (Berg, 2022; Merisalo & Jauhiainen, 2021). At the same time, financial, linguistic, cultural and employment barriers limit many refugee communities' access to technology and digital education (Dahya et al., 2020).

Also, according to Ives (2007), active participation in education and language learning is essential for a successful integration process, and technology plays a crucial role in this, providing flexible and accessible tools, for example: *translation tools* (Google Translate), *language learning apps* (Duolingo or Mondly), *online learning platforms and virtual courses* (YouTube), *mentoring and virtual interaction*, (video call, chat), *access to local information and resources* (learning the language through exposure to specific terminology and local context).

Eurostat (2018) indicates that “mastery of the host country language is the most important skill that refugees need to integrate into the host country”. Furthermore, researchers have shown that education and language enable social inclusion and improve well-being (Stanley et al., 2011). Language learning is not only crucial for daily interactions with the host society, but is also a requirement for almost all integration activities. For example, finding a suitable job generally requires mastering the local language, continuing your studies, and engaging in social and cultural activities.

Qureshi (2019) shows that the implementation, use or diffusion of technology leads to improvements in people's lives through the economic, social and human conditions of a group of people, community or region (Qureshi, 2019), which, in turn, leads to the achievement of a socially inclusive society.

3. Methodology

In this study, we applied a qualitative methodological research method using the focus group. It was conducted in July 2025, with eight refugees from Ukraine, settled in the Rădăuți city, who received a residence permit¹ in 2023. The study does not aim to generalize, but rather tries to provide information about the stories of Ukrainian refugees who use smartphones and the internet to cope with the challenges of their daily lives and integrate into their new community.

The social worker of the *Aghata Association* from Rădăuți, who has been involved in the refugee issue since the beginning, helped us contact the respondents,

Ukrainian refugees in Romania obtain a residence permit (through temporary protection) that ¹ allows them to work, have the right to reside and access to housing, social protection and healthcare, and access to education, with an initial duration of 12 months, with the possibility of extension (<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/ro/policies/refugee-inflow-from-ukraine/>)

with whom she has collaborated and supported for the last two years. We explained to the respondents that the research aims to study how access to information from the online environment influenced their decision-making regarding migration and the desire to stay in Romania, and how technology helped them integrate. Ethical concerns included the confidentiality of the respondents – we explained that this involved a study conducted by academic researchers and that the responses would be anonymous and would have no consequence on the respondent's residence status. Informed consent to participate in this research was then obtained from all respondents before the interview began.

Our sample consisted only of women aged between 35 and 66. A quarter of the respondents had a higher education level (university), the rest had graduated from high school or intermediate vocational studies. The focus group took place at the *Agatha Association* headquarters and there was no need for a translator/interpreter because all respondents spoke Romanian. The focus group lasted 60 minutes, and all respondents agreed to be audio-recorded.

The discussions were as follows: introductory questions about migration to Romania, access to online information before and during migration, transmitting information to families/friends in Ukraine after arrival in Romania, general perceptions regarding the use of the internet in the socio-professional integration process and the use of certain smartphone applications and functions in everyday life. And finally, some demographic questions. The discussions started by asking about various sources of information (personal contacts, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), etc.) and intermediaries (face-to-face contacts, media, internet, etc.) used before and during migration. Subsequent questions focused in particular on the use of online information, the internet specifically, social networks and various devices (smartphones) in their process of adaptation and integration into the Rădăuți community.

4. Analysis and Discussion

The focus group discussions touched on the following topics that were of major importance in the process of social and professional integration of Ukrainian refugees in the Rădăuți city.

a. Solving Everyday Problems with Digital Technology

Respondents found ways to incorporate devices into their daily lives until smartphones became indispensable, deeply ingrained tools for solving problems, connecting with host community members, sharing information, and creating communities of mutual support. There were also crucial moments when the refugees interviewed realized the potential of the device they owned.

One Sunday I felt bad and needed medicine and I searched on Google and found a pharmacy that was open...the phone helped me a lot...(refugee, 52 years old)

Last year I found another place to live and I needed help moving my things....I asked a question on the Whats App group and within three hours two volunteers from Rădăuți came and helped me...(refugee, 60 years old)

Technology, through various applications, also provides access to local society, allowing newcomers to familiarize themselves with the place, to explore interesting places in the community so that integration can occur naturally. One respondent said that the Waze application had helped her a lot since she arrived in Rădăuți, especially in finding the institutions where she needed to solve various problems and the headquarters of the various associations in Rădăuți that were helping refugees.

We have meetings at various associations in Rădăuți and the Waze app helped me a lot to find the locations. A volunteer installed the app for me right when I crossed the border. And now I always use it to get where I need to go. (refugee, 37 years old)

In Ukraine I never used the app on a mobile phone to go from one place to another... I knew all the places and if I didn't know I asked someone. Here when I was at the beginning and I didn't speak Romanian I couldn't do that...(refugee, 48 years old)

Smartphones and GPS-based services play a defining role in *familiarizing refugees with urban space* (Kim & Lingel, 2016,) and are particularly helpful for those from rural backgrounds. In this way, location-based media technologies may even have an empowering effect, allowing refugees to explore their new urban surroundings with more confidence and independence. Conversely, research has indicated that reliance on smartphone technology can also limit opportunities to socialize with locals, as technology replaces the need to ask for directions (Kim & Lingel, 2016).

Another vital element provided by technology is access to help. Refugees use the phone for personal safety, allowing them to call for help in an emergency, and also to contact humanitarian organizations, NGOs, volunteers and authorities, to request assistance, accommodation, legal support, etc.

Personally, the phone gives me a sense of security, because I have health problems, and when I feel sick I can call an ambulance and it comes here very quickly.....(refugee, 65 years old)

One of the reasons that made me stay in Rădăuți is that the people are very good here and I became very attached to them... whenever I needed something I called and immediately received help...(refugee, 37 years old)

b. Everyday communication and learning Romanian

The second important theme revealed by the data was learning Romanian and English and translating in everyday use.). Smartphones are increasingly used in mobile learning as they are 'particularly suited for supporting personalized, situated, authentic and informal learning' (Kukulska-Hulme et al., 2015, 16).

Devices have become recognized as tools for language acquisition and translation (Sharples, 2013), especially by refugees for whom language skills are essential for social integration (Gaved & Peasgood, 2017). Respondents indeed

reported various practices of using YouTube videos for language purposes and Google Translate applications, especially in the workplace. The Google Translate application was used by respondents in particular to translate food labels from supermarkets.

The videos on YouTube helped me a lot to improve my Romanian...I spoke Romanian but not very correctly...(refugee, 35 years old)

I used Google Translate at the store, especially to see if there were vegan products or not...I'm still fasting and I wanted to make sure I was getting what I needed....(refugee, 52 years old)

I also used YouTube to learn Romanian but the lessons I attended at the Rădăuți Civic Association were very helpful, where I did Romanian with a compatriot of ours who had moved to Romania a while ago...and it was much easier...and after less than 4 months I found a job...I was really lucky! (refugee, 48 years old)

Apps and videos available on YouTube, created by other refugees or native speakers, for free, have become vital tools for supporting the integration of Ukrainian refugees in Romania. Translation apps were consistently used by respondents, especially to overcome language barriers in critical situations, such as a medical consultation or official interactions.

The hardest thing for me was when I arrived in Romania, I didn't know the language and I had to urgently get to the doctor... when I arrived, although I was accompanied by a volunteer who translated, to make sure the doctor understood what was hurting me, I put them on Google Translate(refugee, 48 years old)

Social groups also provide invaluable opportunities to practice language in a natural and relaxed context, being a central pillar of successful refugee integration.

I am in a WhatsApp group with a few friends from Rădăuți and the fact that we chat every day has helped me to speak Romanian better but especially to write. (refugee, 35 years old)

Some of the respondents (those who did not know Romanian at all when they arrived in the country) claimed that although it was difficult for them to learn the language, it helped them a lot, especially at work, providing a sense of security and alleviating isolation.

c. Social media and access to information

Respondents positively assessed the use of social media before and during their trip to Romania. They mainly appreciated social media for the wealth of

information available, the timeliness of the information and, in particular, for information based on personal experiences. Social media provides refugees with diverse types of information, making them less vulnerable to fraud and disinformation (Rianne Dekker, Godfried Engbersen, Jeanine Klaver & Hanna Vonk, 2018).

Respondents stated that they are part of several WhatsApp groups, including one in which there are refugees and important social actors from the host community, where are transmitted informations regarding accessing various social or medical services, information regarding to access to Rădăuți schools and kindergartens for children's refugee, about NGOs that provide support as well as projects launched with the aim of supporting refugee communities, available jobs and spaces/housing for rent. Another group is made up only of refugees, here they share experiences, offer solutions to various problems, offer each other accommodation, information about jobs, information about social services and emotional support for newly arrived people, but the fact that they communicate in their native language is a great advantage because the information is understood much better and also provides comfort and emotional support. Another group is made up only of family members, both those who managed to cross the border and those who remained in Ukraine. It has the primarily role of emotional support, of transmitting news related to the situation in Ukraine but also of requesting support. Facebook is also very popular among refugees, which allows them access to vital information provided by various institutions in Romania but also those regarding the evolution of events in Ukraine. It is a very important tool that also contributes to the integration of refugees.

The fact that we can express our problems in our own language is a great advantage...you are better understood and you see that you are not the only one who has this problem and then the situation does not seem so bad. (refugee, 52 years old)

Although I am not active in the Whats App group, I read everything that is written there and I find out a lot of information, especially those related to the law and how we can benefit from certain services. (refugee, 60 years old)

I use Facebook a lot, I like to read the news, to find out the news especially from here in the city and information about the events that are organized for us. (refugee, 48 years old)

Smartphones also offer many advantages for maintaining contact with family and friends who remained in Ukraine. Regular exchanges of selfies, animated video chats, video communication, voice messages and emoticons have not only reduced the physical distance between refugees and their loved ones but have also provided a sense of togetherness, contributing to the health and well-being of loved ones.

When I was at home in Ukraine, I didn't use video on WhatsApp, now whenever I get a free moment, I call my family ...at least to see them for a few minutes. (refugee, 52 years old)

For many refugees, caring for their parents or grandparents left behind in Ukraine is enormous given the uncertain and unstable situation in the country, which is why they felt an immense moral responsibility to maintain constant contact with them, even virtually.

I'm always paying attention to my phone...if it beeps it means I've received a message and I open it the next second to see if it's from my parents...it's the only way I feel close to them. (refugee, 48 years old)

Most respondents reported that they never disconnected from the internet for fear of missing a message or call from family, and when they were looking for a job, from potential employers. The desire to always stay connected and the possibility of doing so, increased the chances of finding a job, of being informed in time about various legal aspects related to their status and, last but not least, of staying connected with family.

One day I was away from Rădăuți to visit an acquaintance who lives right near the border and I didn't really have internet there...and when I came back I think we had 20 messages from my family...they had become very worried...since then I try to always stay connected... (refugee, 37 years old)

I got used to taking the charger with me when I leave home so I wouldn't be left without my phone...I don't know if I could manage without it...it's my best friend... (refugee, 52 years old)

Therefore, the social groups created provide a safe environment where they can establish friendships with both locals and other refugees, alleviating the loneliness and psychological stress related to their experiences. They contribute to creating a sense of belonging and trust in the host community, thus helping them manage trauma and regain self-confidence.

By actively engaging local people, these groups contribute to creating a more welcoming and inclusive host society, which is essential for successful integration. The social connections facilitated by these groups can also open doors to employment or volunteering opportunities, crucial for long-term economic independence and social integration.

For study participants, this multiplicity of uses led not only to a strong emotional attachment to their smartphones, but also to a technical-material dependence on the functioning of smartphones (Gillespie et al., 2018).

This combination of attachment and dependency seems to be a key feature of refugee life, where devices form the constant basis of daily practices in terms of managing both the new environment and the social network of relationships that has moved into the digital sphere. Smartphones have become a key tool in several areas of refugees' lives and have helped them cope with everyday challenges. In this context, we asked respondents to name their top five most important apps that they used the most. The most frequently mentioned were Facebook, WhatsApp, Waze, Instagram and Google Translat.

Consequently, the interviewees described their smartphones as their *confidant, the best friend, or right hand*. When asked how they would feel without a smartphone, they replied:

A phone is no longer a fad....it is a necessity....you can no longer live without it...(refugee, 52 years old)

If you are not connected to the internet...it is as if you do not exist, you miss out on a lot of important information for yourself and your family(refugee, 44 years old)

When I leave home and if I forget my phone....I don't feel good...I can't wait to get back to see if someone called me...(refugee, 37 years old)

The study shows an explicit dependence of Ukrainian refugees on mobile applications to satisfy their needs in achieving their ultimate goal of social inclusion, with digitalization becoming a new normal in their social life, which they certainly cannot resist or simply ignore.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

We analyzed the use of digital technology by a group of Ukrainian refugees settled in Romania, specifically in the Rădăuți city, as a way to explore how digital technology contributed to their social and professional inclusion. We suggest that, for such individuals, socio-professional inclusion represents the extent to which they are able to function effectively in their new society and regain control over their displaced and disrupted lives. Our empirical analysis suggests three digital technology-based capabilities that underpinned their integration: *solving everyday problems with the help of digital technology, everyday communication and learning the Romanian language, social networks and access to information*.

In the host community, refugees faced severe challenges both emotionally due to the trauma they suffered, as well as material, informational, and even cultural challenges, which they were able to overcome with the help of their smartphones, as this study illustrated. Internet connectivity has unlocked new and faster ways of communicating, accessing information, and social and educational services, bringing new opportunities, in a relatively short time.

This study highlights that Ukrainian refugees had access to information from social networks, often through the use of smartphones, before and during their migration and after settling in Romania. We can characterize them as *smart refugees* – referring not only to the *smart* phones with distinct multimedia capabilities (Madianou, 2014), but also to what they gained by using this device: information and communication resources that are essential for the development of *smart* migration strategies (Dekker, et al., 2018) and integration into the host community.

Respondents identified different tools, ways and methods for their integration and inclusion in the Rădăuți city community, such as: social services, language courses, social participation initiatives, counseling, direct support in finding a job, from consultancy to employment, ensuring access to decent housing, integrating children in the educational process. These were mostly undertaken by local

authorities, NGOs or civil society organizations. Digital solutions can facilitate the use of these tools and ease the burden on these organizations.

It is important that in the future local institutions provide refugees with a list of freely available applications for the everyday context of the host city, which would reduce the costs of supporting informal and autonomous learning, identifying jobs and social services available for this category of vulnerable people - and, therefore, accelerate social inclusion.

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