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# Becoming a digital citizen in Estonia? New migrants' interpretations of their digital participation

**Abstract**

'Digital citizenship' can be seen both as an aspect of and precursor to participation in society. Potentially, this might create new opportunities and encourage participation among different groups, including new migrants. The political participation of exchange students, in many cases living in another country temporarily, has not has not been extensively studied previously. This article focuses on both secondary school and university students and their approaches to becoming digital citizens in Estonia. Using evidence from qualitative interviews, the article analyses the meanings they give to their experiences of integrating into Estonian society with a focus on take-up of digital opportunities, with fieldwork conducted between October 2021 to April 2022, when society remained partly closed. The analysis confirms the importance of having access to various E-services and the transparency of state bureaucracy, that help increase trust and encourage participation. However, the conditions for participating and self-perception as a (digital) citizen are highly dependent on the ability to engage in civic debate in the host society and integrate into social networks in Estonia, issues that could be better addressed in digital environments.

**Key words:** digital citizenship, new migrants, Estonia, micro-level analyses

## Introduction

In contemporary societies, ideas regarding what it means to be a 'citizen' are changing. Social change shifts, related to issues like transnational mobility, internationalisation, growing use of digital technologies and lockdowns during the pandemic have increased the visibility of debates about 'digital citizens.' The idea of digital citizenship is potentially important to how we practice politics, acknowledging the importance of what we do online to participation in civic society (Isin & Rupert 2020). Social media opportunities can open up new and exciting means of being political, especially among young people as 'networked young citizens' (Loader, et al. 2014). That can change the meaning of politics as well as the manner in which we exercise our citizenship rights (Isin & Rupert 2020). Recent literature has emphasised that discussions concerning young people and citizenship still focus on traditional approaches that align with the participatory experiences of small group of young people with "participatory capital" (Wood, 2023). Although there has been extensive discourse on the decline of institutionalised forms of citizenship, insufficient attention has been given to lifestyle, DIY (do-it-yourself), or activist forms of citizenship (Suppers et. al. 2023). This article focuses on digital citizenship as a means of potentially fostering political participation among diverse group, specifically individuals with migration backgrounds and recent temporary migrants.

Estonia presents an excellent case study in which to explore different aspects of digital citizenship. The country has been described as the 'first digital nation' and a 'European Silicon Valley,' having launched the world's first e-residency programme (e.g., Medium 2023). Estonian residents can then be said to have extensive and relatively easy access to e-services

and online information. On the other hand, it is a former socialist country characterized by traditionally low levels of political trust and limited interest in civic engagement, with discrepancies in participation rates between different groups of age groups (Author XXXX).

This article focuses on the experiences and opinions of students who have recently migrated to Estonia. They have mostly been in Estonia for one to five years, and have not as yet decided on their future plans, including the intention to stay permanently in Estonia. Such people constitute a growing population, with the number of foreign students in the country growing rapidly in the last decade. The political participation of such young people, living in another country temporarily, has not generally been studied. Young new migrants' participation is studied in the framework of Erasmus programmes (Author XXXX) and political participation of young migrants has been studied as one aspect of their connectedness to the country of residence. Study is showing that young people with temporary residence permits can be excluded from traditional forms of participation as they do not have the right to vote (Tran and Gomes 2017). On the other hand, that does not necessarily have to be very important, as it has been commonly accepted for a while now that 'many young people in a globalised world cease to see the relevance of state-based politics or state-oriented participation' (Harris et al. 2010).

When we discuss this topic, it is then important to bear in mind what citizenship and youth participation, as well as digital citizenship, actually mean. Therefore, we start with a brief overview of these concepts, followed by an introduction of the research context and methods. Micro-level empirical analysis is structured according to different meanings associated with 'digital citizenship'.

## Theoretical approaches

### Changing approaches to citizenship and political subjectivity

Numerous recent studies refer to the fact that the understanding and exercise of citizenship is changing, especially among younger people. Political participation is more diversified than in the past, with youth participation outside the formal confines of political parties or elections is conceptualized in numerous ways (e.g., Amnå, 2013; Banaji & Buckingham, 2013; Bennett, 2008; Riley et al. 2010). These diverse concepts include everyday 'transient and self-expressive' (Harris et al. 2010: 13) participatory practices, in addition to what may be viewed as politically relevant acts. For example, Bennett (2008) has argued that as a result of the increasing use of internet it is possible to discuss cross-national shifts in post-industrial democracies, from dutiful citizenship to an actualizing citizenship model. The dutiful citizenship model emphasises obligations to participate in government-centred activities, joining and expressing interests through parties and other organizations. In contrast, the actualizing citizenship model underlines a diminished sense of government obligation and elevates a higher sense of individual purpose as the main role of citizenship, with the help of digital opportunities, favouring a loose network of community actions and mistrust of both the media and politicians, an attitude reinforced by a negative mass media environment and increasing use of social media (Bennett, 2008: 13–14).

The concept of actualizing citizenship links with the theory proposed by Amnå (2013), who offers the concept of 'standby citizens' to describe subdued, informed youth who nevertheless stay alert and keep themselves informed about politics by bringing up political issues in everyday life contexts, and are willing and able to participate if needed. The distinction between government-centred activities and less formal modes of political participation is

further developed by the concept of 'lived citizenship', which refers to 'people's experience and practice as part of their everyday living, personally as well as in groups and movements, including more and less intentional civic activities' (Kallio et al., 2020). One dimension of lived citizenship stresses the importance of transnational networks across cultural and physical borders, as well as the new relationships of citizenship they evoke (Häkli et al., 2019). These changes are also influencing how people perceive themselves as political subjects. Contemporary political subjects can't then be understood as coherent but rather composites of multiple subjectivities that emerge from different situations and relations.

*Digital citizenship*

Digital citizenship is a contested and amorphous term, that covers a wide range of theoretical concepts. The term can be used to refer to norms and behaviour in the use of information technology and proficiency in the use of digital media for participating in society, as well as being an aspect of and a precursor to more traditional forms of political participation; that is, something that enables individuals to fully participate in society.

In regard to prior studies on this issue, a number of perspectives have emerged. Firstly, digital citizenship can be related to access and use of the internet by citizens as a means of obtaining and sharing information. American scholars, especially Mossberger and colleagues have investigated how digital citizenship correlates with political engagement and economic activities, drawing attention to the ability of citizens to participate in society online. They claim that in same way literacy promoted democracy, widespread use of the internet has the potential to facilitate social inclusion through access to government services, online news and different information, generating benefits for society as a whole. Technology take-up disparities, on the other hand, have the potential to reinforce a range of inequalities (e.g., Mossberger et al. 2012; Mossberger et al. 2008).

Other authors have focused on the relationship between online participation and digital citizenship (e.g., Jenkins and Carpenter, 2013). It is stressed that social media supports political engagement through 'digital citizenship' type of activities, especially among younger generation. It is stated that 'social media is used for sharing information and discussing points of view by activists as much as they are employed by politicians' (Allen et al., 2014). It has also pointed out that social media facilitate online participation, by documenting and collating individual experiences, community building, and development of shared realities (Greijdanus et al. 2020). It is even claimed that digital communication technologies not only constitute a new set of tools for politics; they also provide a new, connective logic to political identity and group formation. They use the term 'connective action' (instead of collective action) to approach and define the logic of political activities that rely on the self-motivated sharing of personalized ideas, resources, images and plans on social (Bennett and Segerberg 2012). They claim that in 'connective logic,' taking public action or contributing to a cause is an act of personal expression and the recognition of self-validation, achieved by sharing ideas and actions within an online community, and not an expression of pre-existing collective political identities (ibid, 752-753). Therefore, new forms of more participatory citizenship can be linked to changing conceptions of social media literacy (Gleason and Gillern, 2018) and inequalities in online political participation also emerge due to disparities in literacy (Mascheroni, 2017). Digital citizenship is also connected to 'norms and behaviour concerning technology use' (Rible, 2017), and emphasising the required proficiency level in digital media use for

participating in society. It is claimed that digital citizenship is developed through training in digital practices and refers to set of competences that support the norms and behaviour considered appropriate (Jones and Mitchell, 2016).

Some scholarship has also appeared critical to the normative approach in the definition of digital citizenship, especially Isin and Ruppert in their book 'Being Digital Citizens' (2020), which stresses the importance to politics 'of what we are saying and doing through the Internet.' Besides the connotations of digital citizenship that we have discussed above (access and use of the internet by citizens, together with norms regulating it), Isin and Ruppert also consider as relevant topics related to digital citizenship, the use of the internet by governments to enhance citizenship, for direct political participation and advocating for political action by citizens. They approach political subjectivity as a composite of political subjectivities that emerge from different situations and relations. Their particular interest is in the performativity of digital citizenship and they stress the importance of investigating how new forms of political subjectivity are made and governed in different contexts (Isin and Ruppert, 2020).

**Citizenship and participation in the Estonian context**

Estonia shares a legacy with other formerly socialist countries. Since regaining independence in the early nineties, the country has been transformed through radical political, economic and social reforms – rapidly turning towards political liberalism, adopting a parliamentary system in place of single-party rule and a suppressed civil society and changing to a participative culture that supports a wide spectrum of organizations (Author, xxx). However, low levels of citizen involvement in politics have remained, which 'in East-Central Europe are usually linked to low levels of social capital', citizens have inherited passive attitudes from the socialist regime amplified by the negative effects of a major political and economic transition, demand additional attention (Author XXXX).

Among the former republics of the Soviet Union, Estonia (with a population of 1.3 million) is known for its radical reforms and a fast transformation to liberal capitalism (Norkus, 2007). Estonia chose a path of radical neoliberal economic and political reforms after regaining independence, which led to the popularization of a success-oriented, materialistic and individualistic public discourse. Hence, young people have mostly focused on individualistic and materialistic goals rather than becoming interested in politics, although it could be argued that the dutiful citizenship model never reflected the behavioural trends of young people in Estonia (Author xxxx). So rather than replacing one model with another in Bennett's (2008) terms, we can discuss emerging ways of how to be the citizen in Estonia: which is not necessarily focusing on government-centred activities but rather 'civic activities which are part of their everyday living,' personally as well as in movements that could be referred as lived citizenship (Kallio et al., 2020).

At the same time, technological development has been a crucial component of the Estonian transition. 'Internetization' became one of the central symbols of a rapidly changing society, leading to a widely held perception of Estonia as a leading e-state (Kõuts-Klemm et al., 2017). Young people in Estonia tend to be more open towards online participation compared to other forms of participation. Recent studies have shown that the internet and social media can have a central role in shaping the political subjectivity of the Estonian youth, and they are informed about political topics and interested in debate, but focusing on topics highlighted by global social movements (such as climate activism, LGBTQ+ movements, BLM, etc.) rather than

local politics (Karatzogianni et al. 2021).  It could be said they are often turned off by electoral and party politics, but have not lost the willingness or desire to participate in civic life in general (Boulianne and Theocharis 2020).

This is important to consider in the context of this study in order to understand the context of political participation surrounding new migrants in Estonia, and their peers in Estonia may feel that they have more in common with social movements based on global values than with Estonian national institutions and politics.


**Methods and data**

Empirical data for further analysis was gathered between October 2021 and April 2022. The sample criteria was young people aged 16-29 currently studying or just finished school who had been in Estonia for at least six months and were planning to stay for at least two more years at the time of the interview. In European Union young people have defined mostly as those between 15 and 29 years old. The lower age limit of the age range (16) is based on the age limit for local elections in Estonia. This means that, in Estonia it is assumed that at this age, young people are mature enough to fulfil their civic duty in electing political representatives.

The study is based on interviews with 14 young people (aged 17-27), 7 of whom were female and 7 male.[1] The informants included young people who came from or lived during childhood in Europe, the Middle East, North America or Asia[2]. Most of the interviewees had lived in Estonia for at least a year, and future plans regarding staying in Estonia were open.

Informants were given a choice of time and place for the interview. Given the health risks associated with the COVID-19 pandemic and to facilitate participation, participants were asked whether they preferred to be interviewed face-to-face or via the Zoom platform. Half of the informants opted for the Zoom interview. Face-to-face interviews were conducted at the premises of Tallinn University.

Prior to the interview, all participants of the study received detailed information about the research project, the processing of their personal data and that the it would be recorded. Before starting the interviews, participants were given enough time to ask questions. In the case of underage informants, parental consent to participate was obtained prior to their participation in the study. For assuring anonymity, informants' data is pseudonymized and only the region has been mentioned instead of the country of origin to avoid identification.

The longest interview lasted 1 hour 26 minutes and the shortest 36 minutes. Most of the interviews were conducted in English, but one in Estonian and another one in Russian. The interviews mainly lasted about an hour, with topics divided into blocks: getting settled in Estonia, being informed about to get involved in society, interest in society and politics, participation experiences and ideas for a digital engagement platform. The order of the questions varied depending on the conversation. Relevant examples for this article include questions about informants' political activities, their ideas and experiences on digital participation and their interest in political and social issues, as well as access to relevant

[1] See the table of the Interviewees for further details.
[2] Full list of countries born or lived previously: Germany, Czech Republic, Albania, Russia, United Kingdom, Finland, Iran, Saudi Arabia, USA, India, Pakistan, Malaysia, Sri Lanka

information in Estonia. However, the analysis is based on coded material, the structure of which does not correspond unambiguously to the interview design due to the diversity of experiences among the research subjects, necessitating a degree of adaptation.

All interviews were transcribed either by writing down word-for-word or using software (Descript), subsequently correcting errors that occurred during transcription. The interview material has been transcribed and analysed using NVivo, using open coding and axial coding. Open coding included careful reading of the interviews and marking of themes and meaningful phrases. Axial coding was used to group open codes under generalizing categories. This article mainly used materials grouped into the following categories: information about political issues; discussing political issues; participation via social media; and ideas about a possible participation platform. As open coding emerged from the dataset, the nuances of the personal stories have been taken into account to ensure the trustworthiness of analysis. On the other hand, theoretical statements are based on an analysis of the all material, and quotations are used to illustrate arguments. Pseudonym, age at the time of the interview and the region of origin have been added to the interview extracts provided.

## Results

In analysing the empirical evidence, the impression that emerges is one of a contrast between experiences of digitalized forms of citizenship - overwhelmingly positive - and debate about political issues that could potentially lead to activism, which remains limited by factors including a limited capacity to engage in dialogue with Estonian citizens. Both these issues are discussed in the following sections, followed by exploration of social media literacy and participation via social media, as well as assessment of digital potentials to enhance citizenship.

### *Digital citizenship and e-government*

As was mentioned in discussion of digital citizenship, focusing on provision and delivery of public services through the internet is a long-standing research topic, to the extent of possibly losing part of its relevance. However, we still consider it to be a relatively important aspect of living in a 'digital nation' for young migrants due to the assistance digital platforms offer in integration processes. The informants praised the ease and speed of administration, the availability of e-documents and ID cards, as well as transparency and a lack of bureaucracy. For example, 26-year-old Ann, an interviewee with a European background, emphasised how both the ease of digital administration and high level of proficiency in English among officials has made settling in Estonia rather pleasurable. The positive aspects of digitalization were also highlighted by 22-year-old Pavel who pointed out that there were surprisingly few obstacles in Estonia compared to his previous place of residence in Europe, where he had experienced many bureaucratic delays. Also 26-year-old Kevin from Middle East was positively surprised and described that while in Asian country it had taken him several months to get a bank card, in Estonia he was able to do it in a day.

The advantages of Estonia were emphasised by students of Middle Eastern and Asian origin, who compared Estonia to their home countries. According to Carol, thanks to e-government services, everything is not only faster but also many times more honest in Estonia. A lot can depend on an official holding a position of power in their home country, with the potential for corruption. Estonian society seems much fairer and more transparent in this respect.

> Carol, 25 (M-E): *Anything you want is done either online within 20 minutes, uh, everything is clear. The biggest problem back in my country is bureaucracy, a lot of paperwork and then a lot of suspense that you just have to wait in, not knowing when it's going to be done, when the person in charge is going to be available. So, this is the thing, that biggest difference between the two countries. And obviously that also means, consequently, that corruption is much lower in this country.*

In addition to the low level of corruption, what was happening in politics in general was considered important, partly related to digital services. Inevitably, the interviewees compared what they saw in Estonia with what happens in their homeland.

> Charmi, 22 (A): *it sounds good to me maybe because I'm from X [country in Asia]. So, it's like, hey, fancy, you know, women president, online voting system. What are you guys complaining about?*

Similar to Charmi, other students of Middle Eastern and Asian origin highlighted the positive sides of Estonian society, which were not associated with their countries of origin. For example, Ted stressed: *the politics, the political transparency is a lot better than in my country.*

In summary, we can say that digitalization in managing the administrative aspects of citizenship has led to many positive experiences, and is particularly appreciated when experienced for the first time. Furthermore, interviewees noted the practical benefits of digital opportunities, a reflection of greater transparency in contemporary society; by using an ID card or Smart-ID they felt like digital citizens because they were able to access services and information, creating the opportunity to participate in society.


*Political subjectivity and civic debate*

Political subjectivities tend to be intertwined with political conversations. In the case of new migrants' socialization processes, the involvement of local people can be crucial in shaping views on local politics and participation opportunities. The interviews showed that the generally positive impression about Estonia is not necessarily matched by a capacity to participate in other forms of politics, attributed to issues such as a lack of civic debate. As well as discussing the importance of digitalization, interviewees mentioned the passivity of local residents in relation to discussing social and political issues with some scepticism. Many missed having conversations on political topics that would have created a stronger bond with Estonian society. Doubts about locals' interest in society were emphasised more by new migrants from Europe or North America, such as 29-year-old Eliza.

> *It's hard to see the activism or political interest in Estonian people I know. Um, and I don't see many kinds of protests or spreading of information [...] I'm not going to pretend to fully know, but I also sometimes feel like there's maybe less engagement*

To such young people, for whom participating in organizations and demonstrations in their homeland is more commonplace than in Estonia, it seems that Estonian citizens are quite passive.

> Linda, 23 (E): *sometimes I feel like there's, not so much going on here/.../ it's understandable because Estonia is like a very young democracy...*

According to the interviewees, they would like to discuss issues relating to Estonian society much more, but their few Estonians friends do not seem particularly interested; they don't want to talk about politics and might even become very irate when pressed on political issues.

> Alice, 25 (E): *I feel like they are not very keen on talking about politics, like Estonians, I don't know. Just my impression. Or they are very careful with what they are saying.*

Although an interest in the politics of the country of residence was self-evident among interviewees, the lack of communication with locals about political issues is an obstacle. For example, Kevin, wanted to participate more in Estonian society and, if possible, influence it, but he did not have a forum for discussion about current affairs and party political issues. In fact, having a politically tight-lipped group of friends meant that he was not clear about his possibilities about participation.

> *I found it hard to discuss, for example, the Tallinn elections recently that we had. I wanted, well, I wanted to vote first, but I couldn't apparently because you need to have this permanent residence permit, which I don't have, but I was trying to talk to these Estonian people, but I didn't get that much out of them. They just avoided or changed the topic*

At the same time, there were also very well-informed new migrants among the interviewees. For example, Charlie followed the English-language portals of National broadcaster and Postimees (one of the biggest newspapers), starting his days by reading both the Estonian and international news. Thanks to this, he was well acquainted with Estonian politics. At the same time, Charlie's level of interest and activity was understandable, given that he studied social sciences at university. In addition, he was one of the few informants whose circle of friends included Estonians who were well informed and interested in politics, and with whom he often talked about political issues.

> Charlie, 28 (A): *Uh, yeah, we talk about it all the time. Like political issues. As I said, my friend and me graduated from politics and a friend of mine, his father is in the European Union, some minister of Estonia. I have another friend, like same group. His father is in the Navy. So, like, yeah, they are politically active.*

We can see then that it is possible to be well aware of local politics, although such cases may be exceptional, arising where there are encounters with people who have a strong grounding in political structures, principally via their family background. However, for the most part, local contacts are not very helpful, since people are not willing to engage in discussions. Therefore, although the transparency of the e-state can increase the trust of new migrants in the state and raise the desire to participate in society, the passivity of local residents in discussing political issues prevents this from happening. The fact that it can be difficult to find local young people interested in Estonian politics can be associated with the tendency for global social movements to be more important for Estonian youth than local politics.


*Digital citizenship and (social) media literacy*

These reflections take us towards a consideration of some of the changes in political subjectivity and being a citizen in connection to widespread transnational mobility as well as (social) media literacy. For many well-educated interviewees, it was self-evident that one should become familiar with the politics of both country of residence and country of origin. For example 22-years-old Ted explained that he frequently followed the new from his country of origin, also stating that:

> *But you can still be interested in politics in the country that you're living in. I believe everyone should be aware of the politics of the country that they're living in. Um, and if you're ignorant about it, then, you know, you can't complain oh, why, why is this*

*happening when you didn't know about it? […] I feel like it's a responsibility as well for each person to be up-to-date and about, you know, what's happening as well.*

That could be interpreted as developing a political subjectivity that is not only related to one country only but developed into a form of transnational digital citizenship, and feeling of belonging to several societies. For the youngest informants, who had only recently arrived in Estonia, local society had less importance compared to what was happening in their country of origin; it depended on whether they discussed social issues with friends from their country of origin or with Estonian youth. If communication in Estonia was limited to other young people with an international background, there was less focus on local topics.

Although news about Estonia is available in English, informants complained about the lack of information and its reliability, as they did not know where to find it and which channels to trust, implying that the availability of information alone is not enough to increase the political awareness and potential participation of new migrants. On the basis of the interviews, communication with Estonians proved to be important, if only to better know where to find such information. For example, Ann admitted that she has not updated her knowledge about Estonia and she comes across Estonian topics only by chance.

> Ann, 26 (E): *I'm not too well-informed about Estonian politics. I'm trying to be, but until now it was quite out of reach or I wasn't really aware that it's available in English. And since I don't really feel confident in looking up things in Estonian […], it was more that random different events came to me and I was like paying attention to them*

A randomness of information about Estonian politics and society was also evident in several other interviews. In a number of cases, information on political issues of the day was based not on the news but on campaigns, public meetings or random discussions. For example, 16-years-old Alec was aware of LGBTQ+ and several other global issues in the Estonian context, because he had seen demonstrations taking place. Pavel mentioned the recent presidential elections in Estonia, because he had noticed the campaign buses driving around Tartu. Most people were familiar with topics that had reached the informants half accidentally.

The easiest path for news about politics to travel to the interviewees, and no doubt to many other young people, is through social media, and those who spend a lot of time on social media in fact find it almost impossible to avoid political content. Political topics often reach young people via social media as infotainment, for example, in the form of jokes and memes.

> Alice, 25 (E): *I see something it's um, a meme or how do you say it English – satire […] I get like posts about, uh, animal, uh, protection or those kinds of things.*

Those who use social media are however quite wary of the affordances of social media platforms and, at the same time, aware of problems related to false information, as illustrated by Alec's comments.

> Alec, 16 (E): *I usually like try not to take Instagram as my main source, because it can be some like, um, like fake news or something. So, I always want to make sure if I like see something and I want to make sure it's real, I just go more in depth and check*

The interviewees, regardless of their country of residence are generally well informed about global movements and global issues. At the same time, topics on Estonian society and politics do not reach young new migrants with the same ease. While lack of Estonian language skills may be a problem, social media networks are likely to play a bigger role. The disadvantages of new immigrants arise from their lack of interaction with Estonians, which affects their media

literacy, more specifically their ability to find information. Also, the digital environment does not contribute to the dissemination of information in the absence of contact with Estonians.

*Digital citizenship and participation via social media*

These remarks lead us to consider the relationship between online participation and digital citizenship. Digital technologies, the internet and social media have become fundamental to young people's digital citizenship in Europe. Nowadays, it is becoming self-evident that digital communication technologies can provide a new, connective logic to political subjectivity (Bennett and Segerberg 2012). The interviewees stressed as the most important aspect of participation via social media the possibility of amplifying important topics and making the voices of those who are unnoticed heard by a wider public. Global new social movements related to social justice have also attracted the attention of many interviewees. Pavel recognized that due to social media the Black Lives Matter (BLM) campaign became visible and more powerful. He has shared posts both on BLV and several other topics.

> Pavel, 22 (E): *Then there was the Black Lives Matter movement. I remember I definitely was quite, I wouldn't say active, but I, I would share some things on, on that. Like, um, then there was the whole situation with, uh, uh, the Muslims in China. I made a post on that. Then there also, um, then there was a protest against, uh, Russian politics of 23rd of January of this year, when there where huge protests in Russia, I reposted a post.*

In addition to keeping up-to-date with political topics, social media is often perceived as an important environment in which to learn how to express ideas and think through different positions (e.g., Author xxxx). On the other hand, Charmi described her participation in social media as rather limited, feeling that she lacked both the knowledge and argumentation skills for more meaningful discussion. This recognition nevertheless motivated her to familiarize herself with political issues.

> Charmi, 22 (A): *when I got into a debate, I would realize that, oh, I only know, like, I don't know how to argue properly, so I should read up on articles and read a lot of stuff for it, which was tough. I mean, so, so now I've recently like, okay, if I'm talking about something political, I'm going to know everything. So even if someone asks me, I'm able to at least come up with a point for supporting it.*

In some cases, the interviewees interpreted the opportunities created by social media in terms of mobilization potential. For example, one of the younger informants, sixteen-year-old Henry, pointed out that if he wanted to change something in his hometown in Estonia, he would first start a campaign on social media and maybe later invite people to participate in a demonstration.

The sharing of political memes is currently popular form of civic participation that can increase interest in politics. Easy-to-share ironic pieces of information bring together a 'cross-section of actors who are temporarily united through affective bonds' (Tuters & Hagen 2020), with the possibility of 'adding one's voice to an existing wider conversation, thus connecting to imagined audience' (Literat & Klinger- Vilenchik 2019). In cases where political content is expressed in a hidden, implicit or interpretative form, young people can get involved in social and political discussions even if they consider themselves (politically) inactive. Nevertheless, using humour can also be interpreted as an 'expression of disillusionment on the part of individuals who feel that they cannot make a difference to wider society' (Sinanan & Hosein,

2017). In this way, Carol's creation and sharing of memes among her friends can be interpreted as a restrained social criticism in her country of origin.

> Carol, 25 (M-E): *I used to make memes myself, even the religious memes, let's say mocking it a little bit. It's not a very, uh, pleasant content here, but yeah, that's, I think my people, we might find it funny also at times. So, we share it among ourselves. It doesn't really go out of the community.*

It could be imagined that in a country ruled by Islamic extremists, creating memes in a closed friendship group is a safer form of participation compared to, say, going to a demonstration. Although Carol could not and did not try to change society with her memes, it helped her and like-minded people develop a critical attitude towards taboo topics in their homeland.

Our research confirmed also that the belief in the potential of social media to change society varies. Comparative study of European countries has also shown that youth in Estonia are likely to say that to make a change, online discourse and spread of content on social media is particularly important. In contrast, in Greece, demonstrations are still considered the most effective means of protest, while online spaces are reified as a means of alternative or counter information that should lead to the most active participation (Karatzogianni 2021).

It can be argued that the interviewees' scepticism about the effectiveness of social media is also related to previous social media experiences - when the initiative in the country of origin did not cause the slightest change. There were several cases of digital participation not being seen as enough to get the government's attention, making it necessary to go to the streets. At the same time, the informants pointed out that social media initiatives have much greater potential in Estonia than, for example, in Asian or Middle Eastern countries.

> Charlie, 28 (A): *It depends on the society. Social media can be powerful in Estonia, but it is less powerful in, let's say in X [country in Asia] If you have activism only in social media, then it's just talk. Real change starts when people come to the streets. Then the government understands, now they are serious about it!*

Such a position confirms the importance of spatial location to the efficacy of social media, and provides a reminder of the significance of Estonia's 'digital' culture, in contrast to other regions where digitalization is much less intensive.

*Digital potentials to enhance citizenship*

A final issue relates to the potential of digitalization to enhance citizenship. One prominent area relates to signing petitions. Many informants were familiar with international digital platforms that host petitions and enable people to express their opinions via such means.

> Eliza, 29 (N-A): *I've definitely like signed petitions on […] different political matters, just ways you can donate and support or amplify. In different platforms online but I forget the names of them. They often pop up in certain tandem with different events, that happen.*

However, no one was familiar with online platforms specifically related to Estonia, suggesting that petitions related to Estonia have not come to their attention. Expressing opinions in such a manner is more applicable to global issues. At the same time, the interviewees were interested

in possible platforms for participation, in particular, where there was no forum where they could talk to locals about political issues, suggesting that there is a gap in the market. For example, Carol would be happy to make stronger contacts with local people, as she perceived segregation as a problem.

> Carol, 25 (M-E): *it could connect me to locals [...] If both the migrants and the locals they, if it can create a way for people to actually interconnect, it will be really nice. And the greatest problem is actually the separation that is going on. There's not many opportunities for us to connect with the Estonians and to get to know them, maybe this platform could provide us with that opportunity.*

In regard to issues, Ted emphasised that he misses having a space for debate about the environment, where he could ask questions about the politics and society from Estonian people. Eliza wanted to know more about what is important to Estonian citizens. In Charma's opinion, new migrants should also have the opportunity to initiate political issues together with local residents.

> Charmi, 22 (A): *I think, uh, there could be a website just to like initiate talks, like with what, if there is a political scenario that has two sides. There could be a website where there, where it's like a questionnaire or the survey and you get to, you get to feel and you get to describe why you picked the side, whatever your sides can be.*

The informants tended to think that interactive platforms for participation would help to better integrate them with the local society. In addition to reducing the gap between locals and new migrants, such platforms could convey important information and introduce the Estonian political system and parties. Eliza pointed out that the platform could provide a simple and clear overview of the programmes of Estonian political parties:

> *Just sort of, like an easy-to-read kind of list of bullet points, like, this is what legislation they argue for and trying to pass.*

Especially in connection to local party politics, interviewees emphasised that as a possible source of information, the participation platform should definitely be transparent and neutral, and as Alice points out, connected with national institutions:

> Alice, 25: *For me it's important that I see that it's a trustful source. So, for example, when I see that the platform is provided by the government, then I feel like there is. Um like rather transparent [...] it should be a kind of neutral.*

It was also pointed out that it would be useful if the content on the platform was in three languages - Estonian, Russian and English - and the information and participation opportunities the same in all languages. Previous research shows that the low political participation of Russian-speaking youth is also present in digital participation, which is partly related to fewer opportunities, for example, for starting online petitions (Author xxxx). Ann also thinks that in addition to new migrants, Estonian residents who do not speak Estonian would benefit from these opportunities:

> Ann, 26 (E): *sometimes the problem is that like in Estonian, there is this full version and then in English and in Russian there's this very shortened, not really understandable version. So maybe like if it can be expanded and make more sufficiently, uh, understandable for, for foreigners or for Russian speaking part of the society.*

Such measures might be useful, although it hard to envisage how such platforms would be created and maintained in a manner that is 'a kind of neutral,' not to mention the contentious issue of hosting debate in the Russian language. As such, this is unlikely to happen in the near future, suggesting that there may be limits to what can be achieved in the 'digital nation.'


**Conclusions**

In summarizing this analysis, the important point has been made that in regard to the interviewees' experiences in Estonia, a dichotomy exists between the availability of online opportunities for becoming citizens, in a very literal sense in regard to bureaucratic procedures, and opportunities to engage in actual political discussion with local people, which is not quite so well developed. This means that people can develop a certain amount of trust in society, but less not necessarily in specific regard to civic dimensions of life in Estonia, except in exceptional circumstances. Nevertheless, opportunities to engage in globalized modes of participation remain strong, and generalized, available to people irrespective of their migration history.

In regard to how this evidence relates to different meanings of 'citizenship,' aspects of an 'actualizing citizenship model' (Bennett 2008) are present, including a fairly loose connection with formal political participation. It has been argued previously that the 'dutiful citizen' (Bennett 2008) model never reflected the behavioural trends of young people in Estonia, at least not to same extent as in some mature democracies (Author, xxxx). So rather than replacing one model with another in Bennett's terms, we can discuss emerging examples of micro-level participation in a form of 'standby citizens' (Amnå 2013) prevalent among many local young people. In a way, new migrants fit into the same pattern. However, in cases where new migrants participate like 'standby citizens' (Amnå 2013), this is not necessarily out of choice but rather due to the lack of opportunities for engagement in formal political participation.

What these findings suggest is that e-governance is very important for new migrants, both in regard to practical issues relating to citizenship, but maybe even more important for developing trust towards the state and making people feel welcome. This can be seen as a reflection of Estonia's status as an e-pioneer, something that was emphasised in all the interviews, and confirms the previously mobilized idea that 'use of the internet has the potential to facilitate social inclusion through access to government services' (Mossberger et al. 2012). The internet enables people to keep connected with globalized political issues, related to current forms of political subjectivity that also reflect issues pertinent to the host country and homeland.

Participation via social media was something that most interviewees took for granted. It can then be confirmed that in general, social media supports collating individual experiences, and development of shared realities (Greijdanus et al. 2020) through 'digital citizenship' type of activities. However, although social media was perceived as an important environment with the possibility of amplifying important topics, enabling people to express ideas, and can be useful for social mobilization, it is more closely related to global social movements and ideas. At the same time, it cannot be said that Estonia-specific political content easily reaches new migrants, or that digital opportunities help them feel part of the Estonian community, or that any aspect of it acts as a 'connecting action' (Bennett and Segerberg 2012). It might then be said that civic debate is somewhat lacking. Social media provides a degree of compensation but does not help new migrants make meaningful connections with local people, which seems to be the precondition for perceiving themselves as citizens in the country of residence.

In looking towards ideas that might enhance participation among new migrants, in Estonia or elsewhere, it is notable that having good social media proficiency is important but this in itself does not necessarily help people become civically engaged in the host society. An obvious way forward would be the use of the internet by governments to enhance citizenship (Isin and Rupen 2020), creating digital environments focusing on Estonian issues. Based on the findings, recommendations for practitioners working with young people include stressing the importance of promoting innovative digital participation across social media and digital platforms to enhance citizenship. Simultaneously, it is pertinent to establish both online and offline spaces that encompass individuals from diverse backgrounds, facilitating intercultural communication and integration. Such measures would have the efficacy of e-governance but address different themes, oriented towards civil society issues and different forms of participation.

Directions for future research should focus on the political participation and citizenship of new migrants, including exchange students, as this group encompasses an increasing number of young individuals. Our study demonstrates that young people who reside temporarily in another state express interest in becoming active citizens of their host country, and digital citizenship presents new opportunities in this regard. Investigating this phenomenon in various countries and contexts would be beneficial for understanding how to enhance the citizenship of contemporary mobile youth.

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ANNEX: LIST OF THE INTERVIEWEES

| | Pseudonym and age | Lived in Estonia | Region of origin | Status | Type and duration of the interview |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Linda, 23 | Over 1 year | Europe | student | Face to Face, 1 h 16 min |
| 2 | Carol, 25 | Over 2 years | Middle East | student, employed | Face to Face, 1 h 7 min |
| 3 | Ann, 26 | Over 2 years | Europe | student | Face to Face, 1 h 11 min |
| 4 | Eliza, 29 | Over 2 years | North-America | student | Zoom, 1 h 6 min |
| 5 | Alice, 25 | Over 1 year | Europe | student, employed | Zoom, 59 min |
| 6 | Charlie, 28 | Over 4 years | Asia | student, employed | Face to Face, 1 h 4 min |
| 7 | Ted, 22 | Over 4 years | Asia | student | Zoom, 54 min |
| 8 | Pavel, 22 | Over 1 year | Europe | student | Zoom, 1 h 1 min |
| 9 | Kevin, 26 | Over 2 years | Middle East | recently graduated, employed | Face to Face, 57 min |
| 10 | Ruslan, 18 | Over 5 years | Europe | student | Face to Face, 54 min |
| 11 | Maria, 17 | Over 4 years | Europe | pupil | Zoom, 1 h 6 min |
| 12 | Charmi, 22 | Less than 1 year | Asia | student | Face to Face, 1 h 26 min |
| 13 | Henry, 16 | Over 4 years | Asia | pupil | Zoom, 55 min |
| 14 | Alec, 16 | Over 4 years | Europe | pupil | Zoom, 36 min |