

## From Hostility to Inclusivity for Migrants in Eastern Europe: Digital Literacy Against Online Hate Speech

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**Abstract.** Since the official launch of online social networks in the 1990s, the number of users and offered services has risen progressively, affecting societies and daily life. In some cases, these online platforms have been a breeding ground for radical groups to share their point of view on migrants, leading to incidents of disinformation. On that note, the current research paper aims to examine the digital literacy rates in Bulgaria and Romania, the two EU Member States in Eastern Europe that recently entered the Schengen Area, and monitor the shift of public opinion towards migrants in recent years. Eventually, the paper demonstrates how the ability to track and report misleading information on migrant stories and integration policies in digital platforms can be a significant factor in reducing the spread of hate speech across different social groups. By utilizing a mixed-methods approach, namely investigating national reports on digital and media literacy, and tracking down the changes in public perception, this study sheds light on the initiatives implemented in those countries to combat hate speech and discrimination against migrants. Additionally, through the finding analysis, the paper concludes with key remarks on how policy recommendations can be formed based on decisions on regional and transnational levels.

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Ultimately, the study results can be the basis for future research on the correlation between education level and media interpretation.

**Keywords:** Bulgaria, digital literacy, disinformation, European Union, hate speech, integration, media literacy, Romania

## Introduction

Modern societies are characterized by multicultural and multilingual populations, paving the way for diverse communities where cultural differences in beliefs, norms, and values can be bridged with intergroup dialogue and inclusive policy mechanisms. Central and local authorities provide evidence-based examples of permanent residence incentives, such as the right to nationality, labor market mobility, and access to education and health facilities (Walsh, 2021: 297-319). These initiatives can raise the chances of family reunification. That leads to a prosperous life for individuals who face critical obstacles in their countries of origin, such as conflict-torn areas or financial instability. Nevertheless, there is another element that should be taken into consideration when evaluating migrant integration strategy on a national level: anti-discrimination. Discriminatory practices can be traced in various occasions of the social sphere ranging from the workplace to politics, creating a mixture of uncertainty for those individuals who were forced to flee their country. Moreover, such behavior might also be reinforced by adopting hate speech and stereotypes which can disorientate public opinion and breed xenophobic attitudes (Hangartner & Spirig, 2024: 480–486).

The extensive use of digital platforms to share personal opinions can affect societal beliefs differently. Anonymity plays a significant role in this regard, as it camouflages social media users who hide behind their identities. Eventually, individuals spread their messages with the clear aim of producing harmful narratives. This might involve undermining migrants and accusing them of disturbing cultural homogeneity (Anderson, 2013). The abundance of misleading information has provoked civil society organizations (CSOs) and certain authorities to launch informative campaigns

and raise awareness about online hate speech, with the direct intention of protecting the integrity of marginalized groups, such as migrants. However, effective navigation of digital information can also be achieved with the correct tools acquired during primary and secondary education, as well as in later stages of adult life. Digital literacy has been discussed in recent years by academia and policymakers, especially in countries where migration flows have increased dramatically (Vanek, 2017).

This research paper investigates the relationship between digital literacy and public opinion shifts towards migrants in Eastern EU Member States, specifically Bulgaria and Romania. It also examines how targeted initiatives, including media literacy campaigns, can foster long-lasting changes in behaviors described with a discriminatory lens and hate speech. Referring to reports and literature from academia and CSOs is a productive means to associate two vital issues in modern societies: disinformation and stereotypes against migrants. By mentioning migrant stories that present a part of the actual incidents or misinterpreting the events that took place, this study demonstrates the key elements that can assist in building more human-centered societies in the globalized environment and abandon practices that cultivate prejudices towards social groups that are in a vulnerable state.

## **Literature Review**

The rise of online social networks has transformed the public sphere enormously. Contemporary societies depend on receiving and sharing information via digital platforms, while extended exposure to a screen is proven to have mental health implications unless restricted, mainly higher rates of depression, anxiety, and other related disorders in adults and children (Schürmann & Margraf, 2018: 102–112). The most concerning remarks stem from the findings on the mental development of Generation Alpha, meaning the individuals being born from 2012 onwards, where emotional outbursts and endurance to prolonged time on information being received traditionally may cause them profound discomfort (Šramová et al. 2023: 132-154). Critical areas in digital literacy and hate speech can be understood thoroughly thanks to mentioning these developments in psychology.

The media consumption habits have altered significantly over the last few decades. Older age groups have been greatly influenced, too. In their case, the potential gradual shrinking of the social circle, due to busy schedules or retirement, affects their well-being. Although it can benefit them mentally, they might also experience depression or anger expression depending on their economic background. On top of that, the restrictions imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic caused the general population to direct its attention to a series of applications to be informed about daily news and receive content based on their preferences (Ramos, 2022: 1-8). Although several communication channels have been praised for their inspiring, informative, and highly educational content, others prioritize sensational material to attract viewers and claim their content originality. Nevertheless, they neglect their major influence on numerous subscribers, especially young people. The latter can prove a difficult puzzle if parents, teaching staff, and campaigners are not actively involved in those efforts.

The extended use of online social networks has caused the surge of radical groups. More specifically, they operate unconventionally since they organize and launch their activities on digital platforms. This development not only complicates the monitoring of such incidents due to the shield of their leaders from direct accountability but also attracts the interest of younger individuals who envision themselves as important gear in those groups. Their willingness to spread hateful messages and proceed in demeaning actions protects the frontrunners from exposing themselves to potential arrest for organized crime. At the same time, more youngsters follow in the footsteps of their peers. Moreover, it should be noted that such groups are supported by individuals who systematically read misleading publications or online tabloid press. Eventually, this practice is provoked by statements made by public figures (e.g., content creators, media personalities, and politicians) whose intention might not be to ignite this type of action, but they should bear in mind their impact on viewers and readers. The lack of effective monitoring services aiming to preserve civil order leads to the spread of messages from radical groups, constituting a threat to public safety (Assimakopoulos et al. 2017).

The deliberate spread of misleading information has generated numerous cases of hatred towards specific social groups based on sexual orientation, origin, or religious beliefs. The principal characteristic of such practices is the use of discriminatory verbal patterns and demeaning phrases to express discomfort regarding their presence and activities. This occurs because they are portrayed as the scapegoats to explain the lack of opportunities in vital life elements, particularly employment opportunities, the rise of the permanent citizen-to-migrant ratio, and organized crime. It is essential to mention that hate speech is not limited to verbal patterns; it often operationalizes metaphorical terms, non-verbal gestures, and symbols (Ziccardi, 2020). These varied forms of expression reveal the inherent complexity of clearly defining hate speech, which can be settled by defining the research objectives.

Since 2014, academic interest in hate speech has gradually grown, highlighting the significance of online social networks and the omnipresence of such incidents on several digital platforms. Despite the commitment and imposed regulations by owners and dedicated agencies, there is no clear indication that this tendency will slow down in the upcoming years. Online hate speech towards migrants has also attracted the interest of social scientists who started calibrating frameworks around 2015 to assess the shifts in public opinion towards them. This timing indicates that certain characteristics of migrants are framed to provoke negative perceptions and reinforce stereotypes. Additionally, suppressed or marginalized groups tend to find shelter in communities that claim to dominate other minor groups to manifest their suffering and soothe their pain. The latter can be a result of personal upbringing or a lack of social structures to address mental issues (Barberet & Rodriguez-Spahia, 2018: 93-102). These insights reaffirm the importance of digital and media literacy to identify and respond to divisive narratives in online social networks and media outlets.

From a political standpoint, governments and political parties often deploy campaigns during elections to gather as many voters as possible who value securitization and are drawn into xenophobic populism. The spread of migration-related news that is not cross-checked or is purely based on manipulated images and sensational tabloid sources, can lead to the detriment of democratic and humanitarian processes and values. Eventually, discourse

is shaped in a way that does not allow online media viewers and readers to discern reliable sources. Therefore, they regularly opt for informative material that reaffirms their core beliefs. Meanwhile, the role of migrants in modern societies is undervalued due to their portrayal as a national security threat or economic burden. Therefore, media researchers and social scientists have reiterated the fact that journalists should cover migration-related news with professionalism and avoid sensationalism into the public sphere, due to their influence on large audiences (Carboni, 2019: 153-166). Furthermore, while technical measures for migration can have a limited capacity to address these biases, disinformation narratives are utilized to alter general attitudes and disorientate public opinion from key policy developments.

The current social environment in the European Union (EU) does not differ from the trends that describe the surge of online hate speech across the globe with multiple implications for migrants. Several scholars have referred to the underlying theme of digital illiteracy with major concerns expressed for younger generations (Vissenberg et al. 2023: 2-5). Since they are asked to be the driving force in online social networks that follow malicious practices against migrants and other social groups, this situation is alarming. Therefore, this research paper prioritizes the relationship between digital literacy and online hate speech and identifies the key role of media literacy in addressing disinformation campaigns on migrants. Since the EU is dedicated to tackle this issue, it is necessary to assess public and private initiatives operating in Bulgaria and Romania, the two EU Member States that joined the Schengen Area in 2024.

The academic research on anti-migrant campaigns has also delved into the political parties adopting such practices, including the spread of hateful messages. In particular, several scholars have reiterated the necessity of political solutions to manage migration flows, mainly through bilateral and multilateral policy dialogue with the countries of origin (Sharland & Ilhan, 2023: 11-18). At the same time, it is widely discussed that social contributions from immigrants are not shared on digital platforms, whereas criminal activities and malicious practices substantially cover online social networks and media outlets. The recent conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East have also demonstrated the multifaceted aspect of migration as a social phenomenon.

The country of origin and proximity – geographical and cultural – play a vital role in integration policy development and implementation in the short and long term.

As previously stated, the Schengen Area Entry of Bulgaria and Romania creates a new reality for migrant populations. From a geographical point of view, the two countries merge the EU Corridor between Greece and Hungary, which in the past had generated free movement issues among the legally present citizens in the territory of EU Member States. However, managing disinformation narratives distributed by public figures and politicians affects the online social networks and media landscape. Therefore, implementing anti-discrimination legislation is considered a valuable tool for victims to seek mental support in the strongest equality bodies across Europe. Since Bulgaria and Romania joined the Schengen Area and the EU Elections occurred in June 2024, tracking incidents of hate speech against migrants and evaluating efforts of digital and media literacy campaigns can assist in interpreting potential shifts in public opinion.

## **Conceptualization & Operationalization**

Concerning extraction and evaluation, online social network users are asked to perform these mechanics more frequently compared to the past due to the multitude of sources. Because of this newly formed reality that includes immediate access to online information within a few seconds, specific skills are crucial to managing the abundance of data. On the one hand, digital literacy involves the capacity to understand, generate, and distribute digital content securely and ethically. Thus, we shall consider technical and cognitive abilities (Sirlin et al. 2021). On the other hand, media literacy should be distinguished from digital literacy, since it refers to online information interpretation, including identifying biases and disseminating content responsibly (Potter, 2013: 417–435).

Hate speech can be highly controversial due to its applicability to various aspects of the social sphere. In recent years, the tracked incidents of hate speech have increased online, where users or groups of users opt for

harassing and threatening individuals because of their ethnicity, gender, religion, and other cultural or personal traits (Awan & Zempi, 2015; Williams et al., 2020). Eventually, this poses a threat to democracy and human rights and deteriorates the lives of migrants who face obstacles during the integration process, as they are not fully accepted into society or given equal opportunities.

In the contemporary era, strong competition prevails in various aspects of social life, from employment to civic participation. This observance creates a lot of stress for most individuals, leading to the urge to act and feel superior to the rest of the 'competitors'. Individuals aspire to gain control over many situations that could elevate them to a better social life status, thinking that with this achievement all personal issues can be resolved. Thus, online social network users tend to promote the supposedly 'healthy' aspect of their lives ignoring the apparent difficulties that all individuals face. This creates a tantrum for most users who want to perform similarly. During that process, individuals tend to operationalize every means to undermine and outshine their 'competitors'. Hence, it is usual to witness actions filled with discrimination (Hatano, 2023: 127–156). More specifically, human and other legal rights are neglected due to the purposeful distinction made in policy or received behavior from society. Under these circumstances, migrants are expected to be among the major social groups to face discriminatory actions, which immensely affects their integration process as they experience hardships and equal access to all services in the destination country might be hindered due to the outrage of public opinion (Esses et al. 2017: 78–123). Individual and collective statements are formed based on false or fabricated information regarding immigrants. That can lead to social unrest that requires targeted strategies at national and regional strategies to reverse this trend.

A multidisciplinary approach is required to respond to the research themes associated with social changes and potential shifts in public opinion. Although that might seem challenging, especially in the interpretation of phenomena that progress dynamically, there are research tools that can be utilized to respond effectively and precisely to the existing research gaps and build on previously conducted research material. In this context, social scientists have developed a wide pool of indicators to measure trends and developments concerning policy design and implementation. Although the term was first



used to describe financial trends, statistics on social issues can shed light on the current research study since the interpretation of migrant-related topics covers different scientific fields, from economics to education policy. On that note, indicators are used to address matters associated with combating exclusion and tracking socioeconomic changes too. On some occasions, the operationalization of multiple indicators can lead to the formulation of a composite indicator, a single index intended to recognize alterations in many scientific fields and provide a clearer image to the public (van der Maesen & Walker: 2005, 8-24).

As for the present research study, two principal concepts are explored, digital literacy and hate speech along with migrant integration, constituting a solid case for the indicators to manage data acquired from various reports on national and transnational levels. For instance, a comparative analysis of data acquired from Eurostat and national agencies of Bulgaria and Romania is crucial to locate data management and interpretation gaps and provide a nuanced perspective on the research subject. This process can also include results addressed by academic institutes or civil society organizations (CSOs) with a research-based focus on social policy. Moreover, conducting interpretive analysis on quantitative and qualitative data is a significant tool to simplify and highlight unobservable data in the first place. Additionally, the inclusion of domestic politics in this research study brings the multiple applicability of this topic to the spotlight since it covers an important part of the electoral campaigns and manifestos too.

Having referred to the study-related concepts, hypotheses are essential for an in-depth analysis of the reasons and incidents concerning migrants in Bulgaria and Romania. Due to the multidisciplinary nature of the current research subject, the inclusion of an extensive literature review facilitates this step to be performed with precision and respect to academic integrity. On the one hand, it is considered that the increasing number of online hate speech targeting migrants is strongly connected to the below-average digital literacy rates in Eastern Europe, and more specifically in Eastern EU Member States. Based on recent studies, countries with low digital literacy rates will experience more incidents due to the lack of critical engagement among online users.

On the other hand, the promotion of digital literacy initiatives to combat hate speech has had an observable impact on public opinion and eventually attitudes towards migrants in this region. Proactive measures to address this social phenomenon can decrease harmful narratives on online social networks and monitor any minor incidents more sufficiently and with direct action. Consequently, raising awareness and cutting down on discriminatory practices can be feasible.

## **Methodology**

Once the first and most significant step in the research process, which is the identification of key concepts, is finalized, it is necessary to describe the methods planned for operationalization. In this context, specific procedures are performed to track and analyze data strongly connected to the topic. This eventually paves the way for proceeding with in-depth data analysis on information gathered through different tools ranging from graphs to tables. Therefore, researchers opt for quantitative or qualitative data analysis depending on the research question and objective to cover potential gaps in academic output. Moreover, it is common in various scientific fields to operationalize a mixed-methods approach to grasp every detail that has not been observed in former research projects, especially in social sciences.

The European Union has prioritized the promotion of digital literacy frameworks on national and regional levels to raise awareness of the required skills to gather and assess information in the workplace and daily life efficiently and promptly (Vuorikari et al. 2016). As previously stated, disinformation plays a key role in attracting the interest of online social network users to target migrants and treat them as scapegoats due to economic scarcity and cultural differences. On that note, data extraction and evaluation from Eurostat can shed light on the digital literacy context in Bulgaria and Romania. More specifically, thanks to comparative analysis based on quantitative data, the research can build on the gap in recent years covering policy-related developments in those two EU Member States and potentially identify reasons for their ranking. This shall include any particularities tracked

in the wider region of Eastern Europe so that authorities can act accordingly and improve the overall digital literacy rate. With the inclusion of data from the official EU database, the development of specific evidence-based policy recommendations can be tailored to the national contexts of Bulgaria and Romania and close the gap in certain aspects with the rest of the EU Member States.

Data extracted from Eurostat also complement the research study by referring to national reports conducted by academic institutes and CSOs. The aim is to further enrich research output based on developments in national and local communities and recognize possible traces of impairment in intergroup dynamics. This shall cover any incidents of hate speech or discriminatory practices towards migrants with specific ethnic origins and cultural traits and spot differences based on religion, beliefs, and values. Hence, in Bulgaria, the sociological study conducted by the Red Cross will be mentioned to track the age groups that hold a more favorable stance towards asylum seekers and migrants, as well as spot its correlation with the distinction between 'us' and 'them' (Anderson, 2013). In the case of Romania, an institutional research study completed by Babes-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca will be explored to delve into Romanians' public perception towards migrants, existing integration policies, and public sector initiatives to deter individuals from operating in a discriminatory way to other ethnic groups (European Website on Integration: 2021). Both research studies were published a couple of years ago (2021-2022). At the same time, the inclusion of migration-related indicators to measure social behavior and integration mechanisms (Migrant Integration Policy Index: 2020) can provide a solid foundation to proceed with qualitative analysis based on the insertion of related data (e.g., discrimination).

The design and implementation of national strategies and support for related initiatives is another key component in the efforts of national authorities to improve the necessary skills to address disinformation and reduce the cases of hate speech in online social networks. Those strategies can be productive thanks to the involvement of national experts and the participation of research centers that follow ethical principles and adhere to integrity rules (Krasavina: 2022 & 2023). Moreover, the responsible authorities

are required to draw their attention to crucial aspects of digital literacy, among others critical thinking and the ability to share cross-checked information. Since the European Union has been facing constant crises in the past fifteen years ranging from financial instability to clashes in its neighboring countries, the role of Eastern EU Member States is vital for the continuation of its strategic objectives. Hence, bilateral partnerships between the two countries, namely Bulgaria and Romania, should also be inserted in the current research study to examine the short-term progress and evaluate the potential benefits of this type of cooperation (Center for Independent Journalism: 2023). Additionally, mentioning similar strategic partnerships among countries in Eastern Europe and beyond can be a compass for conducting comparative analysis more thoroughly.

The selection of quantitative analysis through graph and table analysis from Eurostat is the first step that covers the digital literacy context followed by the findings on hate speech from research institutes and CSOs. Then, the qualitative analysis is launched to compare the identified trends with the rest of the EU and propose evidence-based recommendations to endorse the attempts for a more inclusive society where mutual respect among different social groups can be feasible and migrants will not face threats or social undermining.

## **Findings and Data Analysis**

As stated before, digital illiteracy remains a major issue for the EU collectively. The main reason is the looming vulnerability to hybrid threats, especially in online social networks, where individuals turn into subordinates of personalities with a clear intention to disturb social stability. The absence of concrete measures to address this challenge can lead to radical shifts in public attitudes towards vulnerable groups, including migrants, who have decided to relocate temporarily to a new country in search of better labor opportunities and higher quality of life. Drawing data from the EU official database, Eurostat, this research study can shed light on the current trends of digital literacy within the last five years.

The EU has a median rate of 55.56% of citizens with basic or above basic digital skills, while at the same time, sixteen Member States have exceeded this mark in the latest measurements. As for the situation in Bulgaria and Romania, the national rates fall short compared to the rest of the EU Member States. This observance is alarming because not only are the two lowest-ranked countries, with (35.52%) and (27.73%) respectively, but also the third lowest-ranked country, Poland, surpasses them with almost or more than 10% (44.30%). Digital literacy is crucial both for employment purposes and for avoiding disinformation narratives related to the economy and society. Such disparities demonstrate the need for immediate actions from the EU in close collaboration with the national authorities to raise digital literacy awareness and fortify public opinion on cases of instrumentalization of vague and misleading information. This might also indicate that low levels of digital literacy can create an irreversible dynamic between metropolitan and rural areas, where digital literacy rates are critically low. Therefore, this type of digital divide should be prevented as the marginalization of social groups can cause social instability and incidents of discrimination among them while affecting intergroup relations.

EU Member States	Digital Literacy (2021)	Digital Literacy (2023)
Finland	79.18	81.99
EU-27	53.92	55.56
Poland	42.93	44.30
Bulgaria	31.18	35.52
Romania	27.82	27.73

Source: Eurostat, 2024

The low digital literacy rate in Eastern EU Member States can be explained by referring to data associated with closely related aspects of the socioeconomic policy. More specifically, the root causes can be traced to access to digital infrastructure, education initiatives, and training programs, as well as potential linguistic or cultural barriers. It is indicative that in surveys conducted by research institutes within the last couple of years, 40%

of Romanian respondents were susceptible to conspiracies and disinformation narratives. Eventually, the low digital literacy rates coupled with the increasing use of online social networks by younger generations create a concerning mixture for social cohesion. Additionally, targeted policy interventions connected with internet speed should be accompanied by initiatives to safeguard susceptible to disinformation groups from false narratives, especially knowledge and experience sharing with high-ranked experts from Member States, such as Finland and the Netherlands. Thanks to digital inclusion initiatives along with interventions from top to bottom administration-wise (municipalities, counties, national authorities) citizens can build skills, mainly critical thinking and awareness, to counter misleading narratives leading to a decline in hate speech towards vulnerable groups in Eastern Europe.

Hate speech incidents and discriminatory practices prevail in modern societies due to the extension of the financial gap among social groups and the lack of equal access to employment opportunities and integration programs for vulnerable groups. On that note, the research study should delve into the current trends of public perception towards migrants, either moving from their country of origin in search of a higher quality of life or due to conflict-torn areas. Eventually, this subsection aims to analyze the correlation between online hate speech and ethnic and cultural traits, that affect attitudes towards these specific social groups in Bulgaria and Romania.

Beginning with the data extracted from the study conducted by the Bulgarian Red Cross (European Website on Integration: 2022), it is evident that there has been a change in public perception towards refugees in recent years. More specifically, 62% of respondents mentioned that they do not hold any type of negative stance while a substantial majority (71%) are in favor of their integration into the society. Nevertheless, there are still challenges in fostering acceptance and tolerance towards them by a significant number of respondents (37%), indicating that despite not reporting any personal issues with them, stereotypical imagery is common and spread more easily through online social networks compared to objective coverage from journalists and migration policy experts. Similarities between Bulgaria and Romania are prominent in hate speech and perception towards migrants, but it is essential to specify the observed particularities in the second case. Romanians believe

that 13% of the total population consists of immigrants, whereas the true percentage lies at 3.5%. This difference might be a result of low digital literacy along with the stance of national news agencies, which do not refer to quantitative data frequently. Despite the positive economic impact of immigrants with diverse backgrounds, respondents claim that certain integration policies (e.g., housing) require a different approach from the national and regional authorities. Hence, further measures from municipalities and countries in Romania should be implemented and deter practices of exclusion or neglect. Moreover, the anti-discrimination policy frameworks in both countries are viewed as favorable for migrants, with victims being able to seek support from equality bodies, but they are under-resourced compared to other EU Member States.

These findings demonstrate the complex nature of hate speech towards migrants. High digital illiteracy coupled with fluctuating public opinion can function as a solid ground for individuals targeting vulnerable social groups online. Intending to reverse this trend, it is essential to analyze data from Eurostat on individuals encountering degrading online messages. Although there is no specific indicator that measures messages aiming to harm individuals based on their migrant or refugee status, it is possible to interpret results from cases related to hostile behaviors online due to ethnic identity. First, the median ratio for the EU Member States stands at 0.53, whereas in Bulgaria and Romania, the ratio is 0.44 and 0.47 respectively.

The lower ratio can be explained by the low digital literacy rankings among the EU Member States along with the positive image of neighboring countries, such as Moldova and Ukraine, and the historical ties with different civilizations too. However, with higher digital literacy comes greater responsibility. Countries with high digital literacy might also present a higher ratio of encountering hostile messages, such as the Netherlands (0.70). Ultimately, digital education and awareness campaigns might also play a pivotal role in this because there are also EU Member States with high digital literacy, with lower than the EU median ratio (Finland – 0.51).

<b>EU Member States</b>	<b>Degrading Online Messages (X)</b>	<b>Degrading Online Messages Based on Ethnic Origin (Y)</b>	<b>Ratio (Y/X)</b>
Netherlands	48.40	34.00	0.70
EU-27	33.50	17.86	0.53
Finland	46.33	23.86	0.51
Romania	20.81	9.78	0.47
Bulgaria	23.83	10.54	0.44

Source: Eurostat, 2024

Both EU Member States have designed national strategic plans to digitize education and raise digital literacy in younger generations. Their focal point is the implementation of specific policies to endorse cross-cultural education and counter incidents of disinformation through intergroup dialogue and community-driven initiatives. Although this type of framework can be a solid foundation for the fulfillment of the aims mentioned in the national strategic plans, special reference to the allocation and monitoring of EU and national funding is deemed necessary. Utilizing this approach, can ensure the targeted and timely execution of the objectives for a higher digital literacy and eventually reduce the cases of false narratives that affect public perception towards migrants. At the same time, bilateral partnerships between the two EU Member States can be traced in several schemes, such as the Bulgarian-Romanian Digital Media Observatory which aims to tackle disinformation and foster cooperation on journalistic integrity. Similar collaboration schemes will be proven essential as the recent Schengen Area entry calibrates a new mentality in the public discourse about the role of migrant integration into societies.

## Conclusions

Public opinion towards migrants differentiates over time, with online hate speech incidents becoming a prime example of discrimination in multiple countries worldwide, and Europe specifically. Access to information has



reached unprecedented levels, requiring a particular skill set to manage this amount of data productively and adhere to guidelines for data protection. Therefore, the ability to manage and compare content from multiple sources online can foster a more inclusive and effective integration of migrants since related stories are interpreted differently. Along with other tools provided by several digital platforms and online social networks, users can report any incidents of degrading behavior or cases of misleading and false narratives regarding vulnerable groups or personal cases. Thanks to this, they can protect their integrity in online environments and interact with the community without fear of encountering behaviors that can harm their mental state or encourage violence against them and their social group. The contribution from relevant authorities and civil society in terms of funding and strategic planning can effectively support the initiatives to inform the public on ways to combat hate speech incidents and endorse activities for equitable integration policies.

Eastern Europe is considered a key region for the EU, with Bulgaria and Romania recently entering the Schengen Area. However, the ongoing conflicts in the neighboring regions affect public discourse with disinformation narratives and cyber incidents becoming a common phenomenon that requires immediate actions from civil protection forces and informative campaigns on media literacy. The two EU Member States can build on lessons-learned practices on national and international levels to implement their strategic plans constructively and update them depending on cutting-edge knowledge on contemporary topics, mainly the role of artificial intelligence in shaping public opinion through falsified information. Both countries have established partnerships between academic institutions and the public sector which can pave the way for raising awareness regarding digital literacy without causing social instability or hatred towards certain social groups. Furthermore, close collaboration with international organizations and other neighboring countries (EU Member States, Western Balkans) can fortify efforts to handle such incidents in the short-term future and form strategic schemes to formulate a secure long-term future on social issues leading to inclusive multicultural societies in the EU.

## Future Research

Sociopolitical developments immensely affect the decisions made on institutional and national levels and the public opinion towards burning topics in our contemporary era, ranging from fiscal policy to integration schemes. It has been almost four years since the first proposals by the European Commission regarding the design and implementation of the New Pact on Migration and Asylum (September 2020). The approval of the European Parliament for changes in regulations to manage migration as a phenomenon constitutes a substantial case study to be examined both from a policy perspective and a social acceptance standpoint. Among the research areas that could be further explored is the short and mid-term impact of the New Pact on Migration and Asylum on the online discourse along with the multitude and frequency of cases of xenophobia and discrimination individuals – and specifically immigrants – face daily. On that note, tracking the evolution of digital literacy skills among EU citizens can become a catalyst for the interpretation of related data. This research approach may lead to crafting of a new context for targeted partnerships to address online hate speech towards migrants and other vulnerable groups and eventually create the conditions for inclusive societies across the EU Member States and beyond.

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