K4D | Knowledge, evidence and learning for development

Lessons learned about political inclusion of refugees

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Question

What lessons have been learned about political inclusion of refugees, particularly in European countries?

Contents

1. Summary

Most refugees and other migrants have limited opportunities to participate in politics to inform and influence the policies that affect them daily; they have limited voting rights and generally lack effective alternative forms of representation such as consultative bodies (Solano & Huddleston, 2020a, p. 33). Political participation is 'absent (or almost absent) from integration strategies' in Eastern European countries, while refugees and other migrants in Western Europe do enjoy significant local voting rights, stronger consultative bodies, more funding for immigrant organisations and greater support from mainstream organisations (Solano & Huddleston, 2020a, p. 33).

Approaches that appear to have potential to improve the political inclusion of refugees and migrants include:

- Engaging with local government: Cities, municipalities, and similar local-level authorities generally have practical responsibility for implementing integration policies and providing basic services, have considerable latitude to adapt integration policies to local contexts and priorities, and are a natural and accessible point of contact for immigrant populations.
- Civic education: Early access to integration programmes has been shown to be important to the long-term incorporation of refugees into the cultural, economic and political institutions of host countries, and a lack of awareness of voting rights seems to be the biggest practical barrier to immigrant electoral participation.
- Consultative bodies: Compensating in part for migrants' lack of electoral power, consultative bodies create alternative opportunities for structured dialogue between immigrant groups and governments. Their effectiveness varies from country to country but they are generally seen as useful forums that can encourage and facilitate immigrant participation if they have strong links with government.
- Civil society organisations: Participation in community organisations offers refugees and other migrants an important route to social and political participation. Strengthening civil society organisations, supporting them in recruiting immigrants, helping immigrants overcome barriers to engaging with them, and ensuring that they have points of engagement with government, especially local government, can contribute to improved political inclusion of refugees and other migrants.

There appears to be less evidence available about the effectiveness of other approaches to strengthening political participation which may be more dependent on core national legislation and less amenable to interventions and experimentation. These include:

- facilitating access to citizenship,
- promoting voting in national and local elections through means other than civic education,
- supporting membership of political parties, and
- supporting participation in protests and grassroots initiatives.

A wide range of social and economic factors affect the ability of refugees and migrants to integrate politically in their host societies:

- Permanency of legal status may help enable political inclusion;
- Longer duration of residence is correlated with greater political participation;
- Fear of jeopardising immigration status discourages participation;
- Language proficiency is vital;
- Basic needs and economic stability are prerequisites for political involvement;
- Social capital and human capital support political inclusion;
- Demographic characteristics do not have clear influences;
- The political culture of the host country strongly influences participation;
- Political engagement is higher in wealthier and more highly educated host countries;
- Prejudice, discrimination, and fear of migrants are significant barriers to political and social inclusion;
- The political culture of migrants' countries of origin leaves a lasting influence; and
- Migrants from conflict-affected areas tend to have higher participation rates.

In general, there appears to be limited evidence about the effectiveness of attempts to support the political participation of migrants/refugees. 'The engagement of refugees and asylum-seekers in the political activities of their host countries is highly understudied' (Jacobi, 2021, p. 3) and 'the effects that integration policies have on immigrants' representation remains an under-explored field' (Petrarca, 2015, p. 9). The evidence that is available often comes from sources that cover the entire population or ethnic minorities without specifically targeting refugees or migrants, are biased towards samples of immigrants who are long-established in the host country and may not be representative of immigrant populations, or focus only on voting behaviour and neglect other forms of political participation (Bilodeau, 2016, pp. 30–31). Statistical data on refugees and integration policy areas and indicators is often weak or absent (Hopkins, 2013, pp. 9, 28–32, 60). Data may not distinguish clearly among refugees and other types of migrants by immigration status, origin country, or length of stay in the host country; may not allow correlating data collected during different time periods with policies in place during those periods and preceding periods; and may fail to collect a range of relevant migrant-specific social and demographic characteristics (Bilgili et al., 2015, pp. 22–23; Hopkins, 2013, p. 28).

2. Migrant Integration Policy Index: broad country rankings

The Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX) is a large-scale research project that has measured policies to integrate migrants since 2004. The latest (2020) edition covers eight policy dimensions[1] across 56 countries, but refugees are not distinguished from other migrants (Solano & Huddleston, 2020b).

[1] Labour market mobility, education, political participation, access to nationality, family reunion, health, permanent residence, and anti-discrimination.

MIPEX finds that globally, political participation is the weakest of the eight areas of integration policy it studies. Migrants generally have limited local voting rights and can rarely rely on strong consultative bodies or well-supported migrant organisations. Political opportunities differ greatly from country to country: in Western Europe, Australia, and New Zealand, migrants have greater voting rights, stronger consultative bodies, more funding for immigrant organisations and greater support from mainstream organisations; while in Eastern Europe and Asia (with the exception of South Korea) migrants enjoy almost none of these rights unless they are able to obtain citizenship. Political opportunities for migrants have been generally improving since the previous edition of the MIPEX report in 2014, with increasing interest in voting rights and creation of consultative bodies, but further improvement will require greater political will or constitutional change (Solano & Huddleston, 2020a, p. 33).

Figure 1: Migrant Integration Policy Index - Political participation

Country	Score
Finland	95
Ireland	85
New Zealand	85
Luxembourg	85
Sweden	80
Norway	80
Portugal	80
Denmark	70
Korea	65
Iceland	65
Australia	65
Belgium	65
Germany	60
Switzerland	55
Spain	55
Netherlands	50
Canada	50
France	45
United Kingdom	45

Country	Score
Chile	40
USA	40
Malta	35
Brazil	35
Russia	30
Japan	30
Argentina	30
Slovenia	30
Cyprus	25
Italy	25
Mexico	25
Albania	20
Estonia	20
Latvia	20
Israel	20
Greece	20
Austria	20
Ukraine	15
Hungary	15

Country	Score
Moldova	15
Croatia	10
Poland	10
Serbia	10
Czechia	10
Romania	5
Slovakia	5
Lithuania	5
Turkey	5
South Africa	5
United Arab Emirates	0
North Macedonia	0
Bulgaria	0
China	0
Jordan	0
Saudi Arabia	0
Indonesia	0
India	0

Source: Solano & Huddleston, 2020b. Used with permission.

Box 1: Policies on migrant inclusion and political participation in the most favourable countries

- **Finland**'s inclusive approach to democracy encourages immigrant residents to participate. Newcomers enjoy basic political liberties and democratic inclusion in their town and region. Authorities aim to improve policies and boost immigrants' civic and political participation by supporting and consulting immigrant-led civil society. The national Advisory Board for Ethnic Relations (ETNO) provides a favourable model for local/regional authorities in Finland and other countries.
- **Ireland** boosts political participation through inclusive voting rights, support for immigrant-run organisations, and, since the 2017 Migrant Integration Strategy, more regular information and consultation, although these structures and policies could be more immigrant-led.
- **New Zealand** is a world leader in granting equal opportunities for political participation to recent immigrants. New Zealand grants the right to vote in all elections to citizens and permanent residents after 1 year's residence.
- **Luxembourg**: With foreign citizens constituting a near-majority of its population, Luxembourg does more than most countries to facilitate their political participation through local voting rights, ad hoc campaigns, strong consultative bodies and funding for immigrant associations. Making the voter registration procedure automatic and ongoing from a newcomer's arrival in Luxembourg could improve participation further.
- **Sweden:** Non-EU citizens can vote and stand in local elections after three years of legal residence. Immigrants receive information about and support for their participation in civil society. Sweden does not provide an official structure for dialogue between immigrant associations and state authorities or politicians, but the government does fund immigrant associations.
- **Norway** is an inclusive Nordic democracy. Most non-EU immigrants become politically active and enfranchised as local voters or national citizens, although they could be better consulted and heard in policymaking.
- **Portugal** promotes non-EU immigrants' political participation in policy and practice by supporting immigrant civil society and consultative bodies, although voting rights remain uneven and limited.

Source: Solano & Huddleston, 2020b

By way of comparison, **Moldova**[2] ranks 39th of the 56 countries studied, with a score of 15 out of 100. Most immigrants are denied the opportunity to participate in public life, as foreign citizens have no right to vote, but since 2015 immigrants do receive more information on their political and social rights and are consulted at the national level.

[2] Moldova is noted here because it is a country of particular interest to the team that commissioned this report.

3. Impacts of integration policies

There is a significant body of evidence indicating that inclusive integration policies 'have consistently positive effects on the levels of migrant participation in the public life of their destination country', including increased likelihood of voting in elections and in other forms of political participation (Solano et al., 2022, pp. 28–29). Countries with more comprehensive and inclusive integration policies show smaller gaps between migrants and native-born citizens on many indicators of political inclusion, including various forms of electoral and non-electoral political participation, political trust, political interest, and perceived political efficacy[3] (Helbling et al., 2016, pp. 185, 195; Solano et al., 2022, pp. 29, 34). One study concurs that policies aimed at political inclusion of immigrants are positively associated with civic participation, but only for immigrants from wealthy countries, those who are non-Muslim, and those who have resided in their host countries for less than 20 years (Aleksynska, 2011, pp. 579–580). Studies also find that integration policies are more important than admission policies and other migration-related policies in influencing the integration of migrants (Helbling, Simon, and Schmid 2020, Huddeston, 2020, cited in Solano et al., 2022, p. 24). More broadly, restrictive policies towards migrants create a 'vicious circle' of exclusion that reinforces fear and separation, while inclusive policies create a 'virtuous circle' of integration that promotes openness and interaction: migrants and the public are more likely to interact with and think of each other as equals in countries where inclusive policies treat migrants as equals and invest in integration as an opportunity for society (Solano et al., 2022, p. 25).

However, not all studies agree fully on the effectiveness of integration policies. Some studies have concluded that 'neither the general integration policies nor political participation policies are related to all immigrants' intention to vote, voter turnout or formal or informal political participation' (Bilgili et al., 2015, p. 22). Considering formal representation in politics, rather than participation, several studies indicate that evidence about the effect of integration policies on the 'demographic and substantive representation of immigrants in politics' is weak or mixed, depending on a country's overall political system (Solano et al., 2022, p. 29). One analysis of representation and integration policies in 15 countries finds that policies supporting migrants' electoral rights, civic freedoms, and resources to implement policies are not statistically significantly associated with increased political representation in national parliaments, and that strong consultative migrant bodies (see page) negatively affect representation in national legislatures (Petrarca, 2015, pp. 28–29).

4. Approaches to supporting political inclusion

Engaging with local government

Local government, especially at the municipal level, plays a critical role in facilitating the political participation of refugees and other migrants. In many countries, municipal governments are responsible for implementing national policies on integration, and have considerable latitude to adapt policies to local contexts and priorities.

[3] 'The sense that change is possible and that their voice can be heard' (Solano et al., 2022, p. 29).

In **Denmark**, for example, while national government ministries have responsibilities for policy-making on migrant integration, the actual implementation of integration work is done at the local level by municipalities (Mouritsen & Jensen, 2014, p. 10). Some municipalities, particularly those with large numbers of immigrants, have also developed local integration policies, and implementation varies 'according to the different focus, integration approaches and levels of challenge that they face' (Mouritsen & Jensen, 2014, p. 12). This has led to the development of 'effective, pragmatic policies at municipal levels… [where] immigration issues are much less politicized' and to 'metropolitan', progressive inter-cultural policies and discourse (Mouritsen & Jensen, 2014, pp. 13–14).

In **Sweden**, national legislation requires that immigrants receive a civic orientation course, but implementation is highly decentralised: municipalities are given the freedom and responsibility to design and deliver the course, and develop other plans for community orientation, in the way that they see fit, with support and coordination from county-level administrative boards (SFS, 2019; Törngren et al., 2022, p. 13).

Similarly, in **Germany**, the overall legal framework for refugees and migrants is set at the national level but municipalities have a degree of freedom to implement measures that they deem appropriate, and 'follow divergent strategies of integration' (Ottersbach, 2011, p. 149, cited in Jacobi, 2021, p. 24). The extent to which municipalities are open to the concerns of refugees and the policies they develop to support integration depend on the local political culture; in many municipalities 'the idea seems to be gaining ground that successful integration of refugees benefits the community as a whole' (Jacobi, 2021, p. 24). In the city of Cologne, for example, local policies before 2003 were hostile towards refugees and appeared to deliberately aim to deter migrants from settling in the city, but policies became more accommodating and open to the concerns and interests of refugees after a change of city government in 2003, including the formation of a 'Round Table for Refugee Issues' linking the city council and various civil society organisations, creating other official organisational and communication structures to improve integration practice, supporting multiple access points for refugee issues, municipal integration centres and vibrant civil society networks, raising standards for humanitarian services (Jacobi, 2021, pp. 24–26).

In the **USA**, 'a few cities in Illinois and Maryland have successfully pushed for inclusive voting laws to incorporate noncitizen residents the right to vote in their local municipality elections and school board elections' although many others have been unsuccessful, often facing 'a stiff opposition who frame their disdain for this inclusive practice through coded, nationalistic language' (Dixon et al., 2018, p. 367).

Civic education

Early access to integration programmes 'is key to the successful long-term incorporation of refugees into the cultural, economic and political institutions of host countries' and to their becoming 'full members of the political community in their host countries' (Bekaj & Antara, 2018, p. 39). Lack of information about the host society and about migrants' rights and opportunities to participate affects political participation: 'a lack of awareness of voting rights seems to be the biggest practical barrier to immigrant electoral participation' but 'immigrants can be encouraged

to make use of electoral rights through information campaigns and capacity building, relying in particular on the networks offered by immigrant organisations' (Ahokas, 2010, pp. 21, 22)

Studies consulting refugees in multiple countries have shown that they feel a strong need for and interest in civic education: for example, Somali refugees in **Sweden** report strong demand for 'information and education about civic and political rights and the political system… to enhance their understanding of the political system and realize their potential to participate in political life at all levels' (Bekaj & Antara, 2018, p. 38); Afghan refugees in the **UK**, noting that 'they came from a country with little or no experience of participation in democratic institutions and processes' argue that 'integration into a very old democracy with a rich and diverse political system would be impossible without proper civic education' (Bekaj & Antara, 2018, p. 38); and refugees in **Austria** demonstrate 'a fundamental interest in Austria, its history and politics beyond their day-to-day political or asylum policy' through actively seeking opportunities to learn about the country on their own initiative (Pausch, 2019, p. 11).

In **Sweden**, which scores very highly on the MIPEX assessment of political participation, ranking 5th out of 56 countries (Solano & Huddleston, 2020b), municipalities are mandated to design and deliver a civic orientation course, consisting of 60 hours of instruction when it was introduced in 2010 and expanded to 100 hours in 2020, covering human rights, democratic values, civic tights and obligations, and other aspects of how Swedish society is organised and practical life in Sweden (SFS, 2019; Törngren et al., 2022, p. 13). In 2020 the national Migration Agency was tasked with developing an additional nationally-standardised course for asylum seekers covering the asylum process, life in Sweden, Swedish laws, and democracy, norms and values, which will be a one-day course to be offered as soon as possible after an application for asylum has been registered (Törngren et al., 2022, p. 13).

Immigrants to **France** are required to sign a 'republican integration contract' (*contrat d'intégration républicaine*) which is a commitment to 'respect the principles and values of the French society and the French Republic', and to follow a programme of civic education that includes 24 hours of civic training that covers the principles and values of French society, French institutions, and practical advice for accessing essential services, as well as up to 600 hours of language training (Auriol, 2022; Office Français de l'Immigration et de l'Intégration, n.d.). Evaluating the effectiveness of this integration process is hampered by the fact that France forbids collecting statistics on ethnicity, which makes it difficult to follow immigrants in society (Auriol, 2022). A recent initiative called the 'Academy for the participation of refugees' aims to strengthen capacities of migrants for political participation: in 2020, the programme selected 12 refugees across France to receive training on public speaking, advocacy, and French institutions with the aim of preparing them to participate in government or non-governmental decision-making bodies and processes (Wolffhardt et al., 2022, p. 121).

In a study in Salzburg, **Austria**, a project aiming to test various activities aimed at strengthening political participation ran a trial exercise in which about 40 refugees met with regional politicians from Salzburg and representatives of NGOs for a workshop and discussions; the event was viewed positively by all involved as an 'opportunity to express oneself and to be heard… and was seen as an experience of democracy' but it was not clear that any lasting impacts were likely to arise from it (Pausch, 2019, p. 11).

One initiative in **Ireland** that aimed to improve migrant political representation and participation was the 'Opening Power to Diversity' scheme, from 2012 to 2015, which selected volunteer migrants to work as interns alongside members of parliament to increase migrants' understanding of Irish politics and increase awareness of diversity among politicians, the political establishment and society (Crosscare, n.d.; Hopkins, 2013, p. 61). A mid-term progress report indicated that the scheme received unanimously positive feedback from all participants, with migrants reporting valuable learning and developing a greater interest in politics and parliamentarians expressing increased support for migrant involvement in politics (Crosscare, 2013, pp. 30–31). A later project adapted this model to the local government level, pairing interested migrants with councillors in Dublin in 2016 for a pilot project, and then in five other local authority areas in 2017 for four-month internships. Participants described extensive learning about local politics and government, expressed interest in becoming more involved in local politics, and three of the five participants went on to run as candidates in local elections in 2019 (Immigrant Council of Ireland, 2019, pp. 20–21). The iVote campaign, in 2009, sought to increase participation of immigrants, including refugees and asylum seekers, in local and European elections; the campaign worked with organisations and local authorities on voter registration and mobilisation, voter education activities, candidate meetings, press conferences, a voter awareness campaign, online publicity in 27 languages, and online videos produced with community leaders from immigrant communities in their respective languages (Ahokas, 2010, pp. 37–38); unfortunately no evaluation of the impact of the campaign was found in the time available for the preparation of this report.

Consultative bodies

Consultative bodies create opportunities for structured dialogue between immigrant groups and governments, and aim to compensate for the absence of formal means of political participation for resident non-citizens (Ahokas, 2010, p. 19; Bekaj & Antara, 2018, pp. 49–50). They exist at the local or national level in most European countries; at the local level they are often composed of local elected officials and immigrants, while national level bodies may include representatives of national NGOs, immigrant associations, public authorities, and other relevant organisations (Ahokas, 2010, p. 23).

Consultative bodies are valuable tools for political participation, and can successfully encourage and facilitate immigrant participation in public life, provide a public platform for refugees to advocate for issues important to them, contribute to positive relations between refugees and the host community, and enhance refugees' sense of belonging, despite a lack of formal electoral and citizenship rights (Ahokas, 2010, p. 23; Bekaj & Antara, 2018, p. 54). They can be more effective when they are formally established as permanent structures attached to official government bodies; are democratically representative of immigrant populations; include official government representatives; have effective means of communication with government agencies; and where government agencies engage seriously with them and respond to recommendations (Golubeva, 2012, pp. 16–18).

However, consultative bodies are not a complete substitute for full political rights (Ahokas, 2010, p. 23). Consultative bodies have no formal decision-making powers, so their role is limited to dialogue and making proposals (Ahokas, 2010, p. 23; Bekaj & Antara, 2018, p. 54). Most consultative bodies 'are not strong or independent enough to create meaningful opportunities for

immigrants to affect policy change. They tend to be weak, government-led, sometimes government-appointed, and too poorly funded to engage migrants and represent their diverse interests. Consultation bodies come and go according to whether or not a government is willing to listen to them.' (Solano & Huddleston, 2020a, p. 34). 'Having strong consultative bodies at the national, regional and local levels has a negative effect on immigrants' representation in national legislatures' – possibly because the consultative bodies become seen both by migrants and by political parties as the forum for representing migrants' interests, to the detriment of participation in mainstream politics (Petrarca, 2015, pp. 28–29). The examples noted below suggest that for consultative bodies to be effective, they require strong official links with government.

In **Finland**, for example, the Advisory Board for Ethnic Relations (ETNO) was established in 1998 but is the successor to a series of similar consultative bodies that have existed since 1981; it consists of representatives of ethnic, migrant or religious associations, government ministries, political parties, and other organisations, and is supported by a secretariat at the Ministry of the Interior. ETNO is well integrated into government decision-making processes and its recommendations are taken seriously by public authorities (Golubeva, 2012, pp. 10–12).

In **Germany**, foreign advisory, migration and integration councils have been established in all federal states, with varying structures and designs, as well as in 64% of municipalities as of 2012, to ensure political representation of migrants; representatives are elected by members of the non-German population or selected by municipal councils (Bekaj & Antara, 2018, pp. 50–51; Jacobi, 2021, p. 11). These councils are advisory in nature so cannot make binding decisions, have limited financial resources which limits their ability to exert influence, and suffer from low turnout in council elections which may call into question their legitimacy (Hunger and Candan 2009, Vicente 2011, cited in Bekaj & Antara, 2018, p. 51). However, interviews with Afghan and Syrian refugees in Germany indicate that they value consultative bodies as a means of political representation at the local and regional levels, while noting that the influence of these councils depends very much on the willingness and openness of the local and regional governments (Bekaj & Antara, 2018, p. 52).

In **Denmark**, consultative bodies exist at the national and municipal levels, with representatives from local refugee and immigrant associations, but at both levels consultative bodies appear to suffer from a lack of effective channels for official consultation, communication and legitimation of policies (Mouritsen & Jensen, 2014, p. 10).

In **Romania**, low political involvement among refugees is paralleled by a lack of government commitment to involve refugees and their representatives in decision-making; although several immigrant associations exist, there is no permanent structured dialogue with relevant stakeholders. From 2015 to 2018, a government-initiated multi-stakeholder forum involving refugees and NGOs existed, but in 2019 it was discontinued, despite what Wolffhardt et al. (2022, p. 123) describe as 'positive results, leading to valuable improvements in legislation and practice'.

Civil society organisations (CSOs)

Participation in community organisations and volunteering offer important routes to social and political participation and integration, can contribute to empowerment, provide a significant

platform to make their voices heard, and create opportunities to build bridges between the refugee population and local communities (Bekaj & Antara, 2018, pp. 54–55; Hopkins, 2013, p. 63; Jacobi, 2021, p. 42). For many refugees, participation in CSOs is largely about forming associations based around their own identities and seeking to advance their own interests, but political inclusion also includes participation in a range of 'mainstream' activities in the host country such as 'hobby groups, service clubs, sports and recreation organisations, school councils, environmental groups, heritage associations, neighbourhood associations and international solidarity groups' (Ahokas, 2010, p. 24). 'There is clear evidence in practice that community organizing activities for citizen and noncitizen immigrants alike can foster deeper integration into society and connect them more fully to both community and the larger democratic enterprise' (Christens and Speer 2015, Gilster 2012, cited in Dixon et al., 2018, p. 372).

Successful immigrant involvement in CSOs often requires actively changing recruitment strategies and better publicising information about opportunities and activities to be more inclusive, as information about local community activities often circulates by word of mouth within existing social networks (Ahokas, 2010, pp. 24–25; Wolffhardt et al., 2022, pp. 123–124). Organisations might consider establishing equal-opportunity policies, employing immigrants at all levels, and establishing collaborations with associations of immigrants (Ahokas, 2010, p. 25). Potential barriers to refugees' participation in CSOs, including both host-community organisations and immigrant-focused organisations, include fear of prejudice, poor knowledge of the host community language, lack of education and skills, lack of networks, being unfamiliar with community volunteering, lack of free time, poverty, lack of confidence, and issues related to gender roles or other cultural or religious values; organisations themselves may also suffer from prejudice, lack intercultural competence, or lack resources to engage volunteers (Ahokas, 2010, p. 47).

Civil society organisations tend to be more effective in achieving their aims when there are access points, sometimes called *political opportunity structures*[4], that they can use to engage with governments and bring their interests into the political decision-making process (Jacobi, 2021, p. 39). On one hand, local and national governments can deliberately create and nurture such structures to promote a greater diversity of engagement (Jacobi, 2021, p. 42). On the other hand, if CSOs are to be able to take advantage of such opportunities, they need to be able to identify appropriate access points, establish networks and alliances, and develop appropriate expertise and capacities including human and financial resources (Jacobi, 2021, pp. 39–40).

In **Sweden**, there are no legal restrictions on migrants or other minority groups joining or setting up CSOs and the requirements for establishing a new organisation are fairly simple, so civil society organisations have proliferated (Bekaj & Antara, 2018, pp. 55–56). Many refugee groups have formed organisations to advocate for their interests, build capacities of refugees, support newly-arrived refugees, and promote political inclusion, democratic participation, civic engagement and social inclusion in their host communities (Bekaj & Antara, 2018, pp. 55–56). Challenges for participation in civil society identified by refugees in Sweden include insufficient knowledge and information about mechanisms for non-formal participation in political life, and a

[4] 'Configurations of resources, institutional arrangements and historical precedents for social mobilisation' (Kitschelt, 1986, p. 58).

lack of resources and contacts, especially for new arrivals and newly-established organisations (Adan, 2018, and Mundzic, 2015, cited in Bekaj & Antara, 2018, p. 57).

In **Germany**, migrant organisations can obtain financial aid and capacity-building assistance from federal, state, and local governments and from larger CSOs and political foundations (Bekaj & Antara, 2018, pp. 57–58). Several examples of German CSOs offer relevant lessons:

- 'Participation through engagement: Strengthen the engagement of and for refugees' (*Teilhabe durch Engagement: Das Engagement von und mit Flüchtlingen stärken*), supported by the Federal Association of Volunteer Agencies, supports CSOs in opening themselves up to increase participation by refugees and asylum seekers in ten cities across Germany. The project demonstrated a high degree of willingness on the part of refugees to become engaged in the host community and noted that many refugees had relevant experience to share from their home countries. Challenges included overcoming stereotypes of refugees as vulnerable, traumatized and problematic victims and seeing them instead as active individuals with useful resources and skills who can contribute to the host society, and accessing state funding which tends to target larger umbrella organisations and well-established organisations, rather than small, new organisations (Weiss, 2013, cited in Bekaj & Antara, 2018, p. 58).
- 'Political participation with and for refugees' (*Politische Partizipation mit und von Geflüchteten*), sponsored by the Heinrich Böll Foundation, works to support political education and other initiatives for refugee assistance. Workshops in this initiative found that dialogue, training volunteers, empowering refugees, and involving target groups in the design of political education services were central tasks for successful political education; notable challenges included language limitations, dealing with experiences of displacement, and working with qualified personnel trained to deal in a sensitive way with people who have experienced conflict and displacement (Bekaj & Antara, 2018, pp. 57–58).
- Forum of Afghan Migrants (FAM), a refugee-led organisation founded in 2016, aims to help newly-arrived refugees meet their needs, advocate for rights and services (particularly broadening access to integration courses and opposing deportations), and improve relations between the German public and refugees. FAM is not an officially-registered organisation, but has an alliance with an international NGO through which it uses their premises; it is financed by membership fees rather than seeking external funding as a way of seeking to maintain independence. FAM provides assistance and support services for refugees, engages with the public to a limited extent through television and radio interviews and online media, and organises rallies against deportations. It does not have significant links or influence with the city authorities and has a limited public profile, and appears to have limited impact largely because of this lack of official connections (Jacobi, 2021, pp. 34–40).

- SOFRA[5] Cologne is a refugee-led organisation that advocates for the rights and needs of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, intersexual and queer (LGBTQ+) refugees and ethnic minorities. It was formed in 2016 by refugees who found that the German refugee system was a 'hostile environment' for LGBTQ+ people, and that most existing LGBTQ+ associations in Germany were not prepared for the specific needs of refugees. It is an informal group, not a legally registered organisation, and it relies on alliances with officially-constituted local organisations for official functions such as applying for space or funding; it receives financial support from the city and state government as well as private donations. SOFRA Cologne provides spaces where refugees can meet, hold workshops, and carry out leisure activities; offers advice and counselling to refugees; engages with local and national politicians to advocate for LGBTQ+ refugees; and raises public awareness through interviews and other appearances in television programmes, newspapers, magazines, and online media. Cologne is a city with a large LGBTQ+ community and SOFRA Cologne finds the public in general to be receptive to their concerns. SOFRA Cologne has joined an existing municipal-level working group, its members engage directly with local, state, and national politics, and it has had 'decisive influence' in persuading the city to improve the provision of accommodation facilities for LGBT+ refugees through publicising research, effective public relations, political lobbying by influential members, and participating in and testifying before city-level advisory bodies (Jacobi, 2021, pp. 26–38).

A project in **Austria** in collaboration with the *Radiofabrik* radio station in Salzburg trained between 7 and 10 asylum seekers as radio presenters and organised a weekly radio programme over a period of one and a half years. The presenters conducted interviews with politicians, NGO representatives and other refugees, developed skills in the field of media, research, moderation and presentation of content, and raised public awareness about asylum seekers (Pausch, 2019, pp. 11–12).

In the **UK**, Afghan refugees engage in CSOs, charities, and cultural and literary associations which offer spaces for refugees and asylum seekers to gather, advocate for refugees' rights, and support newly arrived refugees; trade unions are also a useful forums for professional and skilled refugees to find help and support to further their professional interests (Bekaj & Antara, 2018, p. 55). One study reported that there is interest from public and private bodies in funding integration projects for refugees addressing social and cultural activities, but projects aimed at improving civic and political participation are not backed by donors and have not been recognised as an important aspect of integration (Sharifi 2018, p. 16, cited in Bekaj & Antara, 2018, p. 55).

Access to citizenship

For refugees and other migrants, becoming citizens of their host country enables them to become full, equal, and permanent members of society, at least in law, and grants rights to

[5] *Sofra* is the Arabic word for dining table; as used for the name of the organisation, it carries the connotation of a positive and safe space atmosphere where people discuss mutual support as a community (Mokdad, 2019, p. 135, cited in Jacobi, 2021, p. 26).

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political participation such as voting in elections and holding public office (Bekaj & Antara, 2018, p. 26; Törngren et al., 2022, p. 41; Wolffhardt et al., 2022, p. 55). Attaining citizenship does not necessarily mark the end of the integration process, but it is a key step that removes legal barriers (OECD/EU, 2018, p. 121). Host countries are encouraged by international law to facilitate refugees' integration through naturalisation, but in practice often seem to prefer that refugees return to their countries of origin, so are often reluctant to expand refugees' political rights or encourage integration into the political and national community (Bekaj & Antara, 2018, p. 35).

Procedures for obtaining citizenship (naturalisation) vary widely among countries (Bekaj & Antara, 2018, p. 26) and are 'one of the strongest determining factors behind naturalisation rates for migrants… nationality procedures are as important as nationality laws for nationality acquisition among most migrants living in Europe' (Solano et al., 2022, p. 26). In most countries, requirements for obtaining citizenship include passing tests of civic knowledge, having access to a minimum level of economic resources, and legally residing in the host country for a certain number of years (Bekaj & Antara, 2018, p. 26). Some countries 'offer privileged access to naturalization to refugees… by reducing or waiving the residence requirement (as in Sweden and France, respectively) for recognized refugees, or by waiving the requirement to renounce former citizenship (as in Austria, Bulgaria, Germany and Spain, among others)' (EUDO Citizenship 2015, cited in Bekaj & Antara, 2018, p. 26). The policies with the greatest effects on naturalisation seem to be dual nationality policies of the origin and destination country, birthright citizenship for the second and third generation, and the restrictiveness of the legal and procedural requirements (Solano et al., 2022, p. 26). More open citizenship policies have little effect on naturalisation rates for migrants from relatively wealthy countries, but make a big difference for migrants from developing countries (Solano et al., 2022, p. 26).

Sweden, for example, offers favourable access to citizenship by not imposing language, integration and citizenship assessments, although recent changes aim to introduce language and civic orientation exam requirements by 2025 (Törngren et al., 2022, pp. 14, 41). In **France**, some studies suggest that language acts as a barrier to accessing citizenship as a result of increased testing (Hopkins, 2013, p. 60). In **Austria**, high financial requirements are seen as selective and a barrier to citizenship for many refugees and other migrants (Kraler et al., 2012, cited in Hopkins, 2013, p. 63).

Voting in national and local elections

Voting in national and local elections is 'the core component of democratic citizenship, and an essential requirement for a political system to be deemed fully democratic' (Bekaj & Antara, 2018, p. 35). Electoral rights at the national government level are almost always restricted to citizens[6], but approximately 45 countries worldwide grant the right to vote in local elections to various categories of resident non-citizens (Pedroza 2014, Earnest 2015, cited in Bekaj & Antara, 2018, p. 25). Within the EU, a majority of member states allow limited categories of non-citizens to vote in regional or local elections (Heelsum et al., 2016, p. 42). For example, voting in local

[6] Some exceptions include, for example, the UK, which permits citizens of Ireland and of Commonwealth countries to vote (Bekaj & Antara, 2018, p. 36; Electoral Commission, 2022), and Portugal, which permits Brazilian citizens to vote (Alto Comissariado para as Migrações, 2021).

elections is permitted in the **UK** for citizens of Ireland, EU countries, and Commonwealth countries; in **Sweden** for EU and Nordic citizens and for all citizens of other countries who have been resident in Sweden for three years or more; and in **Portugal** for EU citizens, UK citizens resident in Portugal before Brexit, and citizens from certain other countries who have been resident for two or three years (Bekaj & Antara, 2018, pp. 35–36; Törngren et al., 2022, p. 43). Non-EU nationals can also stand as candidates and vote in local elections in **Denmark**, **Finland**, **Ireland**, **Luxembourg**, the **Netherlands**, and **Norway** (Solano & Huddleston, 2020a, p. 33). The right to vote was granted to non-citizens resident in the Netherlands based on the argument that 'once immigrants had the right to vote, their interest in the Dutch political system would increase,' which was seen as beneficial for integration into society (Heelsum et al., 2016, p. 42).

Data about refugees' participation in elections are limited, but research suggests that voter turnout among immigrants tends to be slightly lower than that of the native-born electorate (Ahokas, 2010, p. 22; Bekaj & Antara, 2018, p. 36). One study in OECD and EU countries reported that an average of 74% of immigrants with host-country nationality had voted in the most recent national election, compared with 79% of native-born citizens; the few countries in which immigrants are significantly more likely than natives to vote are some Eastern and Central European countries and Israel (OECD/EU, 2018, p. 126). There are, however, significant variations in voting patterns from country to country (OECD/EU, 2018, p. 126). Persons with an immigrant background are underrepresented in local and regional councils and parliaments, but immigrants' interest in voting increases when there are candidates who have an immigrant background although it is vital that immigrant candidates engage with issues of general concern rather than only 'immigrant issues' (Ahokas, 2010, p. 22).

For example, in local elections in 2014 in **Sweden**, voter turnout among Swedish citizens was 86%, but only 46% among citizens of African countries and 29% among citizens of Asian countries; there is no reliable data on the proportion of voters from a refugee background, but data from interviews and focus group discussions suggests that factors contributing to low participation include refugees' experiences in their countries of origin, their length of stay in the host country, and their educational level, gender, age and class (Bekaj & Antara, 2018, p. 37).

Very few projects that have attempted to raise voting participation rates among immigrant populations were found in the time available for the preparation of this report and no evaluations of the effectiveness of any of these projects could be found. (For one such example, see the iVote programme in Ireland, described above in the 'civic education' section of this report.)

Political parties

Participation in and membership of political parties is an important means of participation in the host country's political life (Bekaj & Antara, 2018, p. 40). Immigrants can join political parties with no restrictions in almost half of the countries worldwide ranked in the Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX) countries (27 out of 56 countries), but are prohibited from 'joining a political party or founding a political association' in Central European countries as well as Mexico, Russia, South Africa and the Asia countries which are covered by MIPEX (Solano & Huddleston, 2020a, p. 34). Political parties in Sweden and the UK, and some parties in Germany, allow non-citizens to become members irrespective of their legal status (Bekaj & Antara, 2018, p. 40).

Sweden is particularly encouraging of immigrants to participate in politics. Any resident non-citizen, including refugees with permanent residence permits, can join any political party, and the Social Democratic Party, for example, has introduced quotas for candidates with non-Nordic immigrant backgrounds, including refugees; in the 2014 general elections one in every four of the party's candidates in Stockholm was from an immigrant background (Dähnke et al. 2014, cited in Bekaj & Antara, 2018, p. 44). However, interviews with Syrian and Somali refugees in Sweden noted that refugees who lack strong networks and connections find it difficult to win nomination contests, rise within political parties, and obtain favourable positions on party lists (Bekaj & Antara, 2018, p. 44). 'Although immigrants', including refugees', representation in political assemblies has increased in recent decades, the foreign-born population in Sweden is still underrepresented' (Bevelander and Spång 2017, cited in Bekaj & Antara, 2018, p. 44).

In the **UK**, any resident can become a member of a political party or form a political group, and most parties allow any residents (and in some cases, non-residents) to become members (Ferguson, 2015, cited in Bekaj & Antara, 2018, pp. 46–47); interviews with Afghan refugees in the UK show that for those who are inclined towards political participation, membership of a political party can go some way towards compensating for the fact that they are unable to vote, offering a chance for political inclusion, civic engagement, and protecting or improving their circumstances (Bekaj & Antara, 2018, pp. 46–47).

A study in Salzburg, **Austria**, on the other hand, found that although Austrian parties do not explicitly exclude people with foreign citizenship from becoming party members, informal hurdles exist and refugees held no membership of political parties; one project attempting to build contacts between party politicians and asylum seekers found that parties appeared to have limited interest in recruiting asylum seekers and did not actively support them (Pausch, 2019, p. 8).

In **Germany**, some political parties limit membership by legal status or length of residence, and although the proportion of elected officials of immigrant backgrounds has been rising at the national and local council levels, migrants are still significantly under-represented: one study covering 2006 to 2011 found that although migrants account for a quarter of the population in the largest cities, only 4% of city council members were of migrant origin, and only 8.6% of those were migrants by reason of forced displacement (Schönwälder, Sinanoglu and Volkert 2011, cited in Bekaj & Antara, 2018, p. 45).

Protests and grassroots initiatives

Refugees may also participate in politics through protests and grassroots initiatives, where the host country is committed to fundamental rights of association and protest (Bekaj & Antara, 2018, p. 64). 'These activities can be exercised regardless of legal status as refugees, asylum seekers or citizens, and often provide meaningful ways to express the challenges faced by communities in making their voices heard' (Bekaj & Antara, 2018, p. 64).

In **Sweden**, 'protests are mostly linked to resistance to changes in Swedish refugee and asylum policy or other issues affecting refugees at the community level', such as protests against deportations, the abolition of permanent residence permits, and restrictions on the naturalisation of refugees (Bekaj & Antara, 2018, pp. 64–65).

In **Germany**, many refugees 'acknowledged and valued the freedom and space for political activism available' (Bekaj & Antara, 2018, p. 66). Refugee-led grassroots movements have emerged to campaign for issues such as opposing deportation of rejected asylum seekers to Afghanistan, supporting integration and language courses, and countering racism, discrimination and xenophobia (Bekaj & Antara, 2018, p. 65). In 2015, for example, asylum seekers organised a protest camp in front of the organized by asylum seekers in front of a Federal Ministry for Migration and Refugees building for 54 days to demand the repeal of the Dublin Regulation (which defines the obligations of states in evaluating the asylum claims presented by people who arrive in Europe), faster processing of asylum applications, better support for family reunification, and better access to language courses, work, and higher education for asylum seekers (Bekaj & Antara, 2018, p. 65). Arts and culture also provide an outlet for political expression, with art exhibitions and literature festivals giving artists opportunities to challenge discrimination, foster intercultural dialogue, and share their stories 'of expulsion, flight and exile as well as their struggles for freedom, democracy and a better life' (Bekaj & Antara, 2018, p. 66).

In **Austria**, participation in debates, demonstrations and other forms of political expression are legally possible (although only Austrian citizens are permitted to organise or lead a meeting or demonstration), but there are unofficial obstacles for asylum seekers and refugees (Pausch, 2019, pp. 5, 9). One study in Salzburg, for example, reported incidents of refugees being misinformed by police that participating in a demonstration could have a negative impact on their immigration applications (Pausch, 2019, p. 9).

Afghan refugees in the **UK** report that the UK offers opportunities for lobby groups and activists to organise protests in which everyone, even asylum seekers, can participate, most often related to supporting refugee rights or denouncing foreign countries' involvement in Afghanistan (Bekaj & Antara, 2018, p. 66). Protests in the UK appear to attract somewhat more participation from asylum seekers than from settled refugees, and refugees with British citizenship 'appeared to be the least interested in taking part', claiming that they were too busy and that protests were not very effective (Bekaj & Antara, 2018, pp. 66–67).

5. Social and economic factors affecting political inclusion

Factors related to individuals' immigration status

Permanency of legal status may help enable political inclusion. There is an increasing tendency for countries to offer forms of temporary protection, instead of full refugee status, to people affected by crises. This approach 'emerged in response to the conflict in the former Yugoslavia as a way for states to limit access to asylum while responding to public demands for action' and critics argue that states use this status to limit displaced people's stay and encourage them to return to their home countries (Reilly, 2016, pp. 95–96). The European Union activated its Temporary Protection Directive in 2022 to enable Ukrainians fleeing from war to temporarily resettle within Europe without overwhelming the asylum systems of EU countries; this grants temporary residence and employment rights and access to basic social services, but not political rights (European Commission, 2022). A study in the **USA** found that asylum seekers from Liberia were granted Temporary Protected Status (TPS) beginning in 1991, which later evolved into Deferred Enforced Departure (DED) status, and have since been covered by this 'temporary'

status continuously for 31 years (Reilly, 2016, pp. 94–95; The White House, 2021). Temporary protected status offers protection similar to refugee status but does not provide access to services that promote integration; TPS holders avoid getting involved in community activities that would facilitate integration because of their precarious immigration status, and are ineligible for support to access to higher education, 'which has made higher education effectively unobtainable for most TPS holders' (Reilly, 2016, pp. 106, 110–111, 117).

Longer duration of residence is correlated with greater political participation. Immigrants tend to participate more in all forms of political participation the longer they have been residents (Ahokas, 2010, p. 19; Bilgili et al., 2015, p. 20). Obtaining a residence permit is often a challenge for refugees and other migrants: a study of refugees in **France**, **Germany**, and **Switzerland** found that 'almost every refugee found the process [of applying for a residence permit] to be confusing, exhausting, and tedious and that navigating it successfully affected their chances of finding jobs and housing (Feinstein et al., 2022, p. 16). Refugees complained that the process was slow and highly bureaucratic, that residence permits were often highly restrictive of mobility, and that the experience created 'feelings of helplessness, acknowledging their fate lay in the hands of a system that ignored their needs, excluded them, and diminished their existence' (Feinstein et al., 2022, p. 16).

Fear of jeopardising immigration status discourages participation. Multiple studies report that immigrants are often wary of becoming involved in politics, speaking out publicly, or otherwise attracting attention because they fear that doing so could adversely affect their immigration status (Dixon et al., 2018, p. 373; Hopkins, 2013; Pausch, 2019, p. 8; Wolffhardt et al., 2022, p. 123). It is not always clear whether such fears are based in fact, or are 'myths or misperceptions' (Hopkins, 2013, p. 125). For example, migrants in **Hungary** report very low participation in civic activities, including political participation, due to worries about losing their immigration status (Wolffhardt et al., 2022, p. 123); refugees interviewed in **Ireland** similarly reported that they feared that any involvement in political activities could invite reprisals (Hopkins, 2013, p. 105); and Afghan refugees and asylum seekers in the **UK** reported fearing that participating in demonstrations could affect decisions on their immigration status (Bekaj & Antara, 2018, pp. 66–67). In the **USA**, 'there have been efforts to threaten immigrant activists through deportation and ICE [Immigration and Customs Enforcement] raids' (Burnett 2018, Egan 2018, cited in Dixon et al., 2018, p. 373) and in **Austria** refugees report being directly pressured and misinformed by police that participating in a demonstration could have a negative impact on their immigration applications (Pausch, 2019, p. 9).

Personal characteristics of refugees and migrants

Language proficiency is vital. Many studies note that proficiency in the language of the host country is vital for effective political inclusion (Bekaj & Antara, 2018, p. 59; Feinstein et al., 2022, p. 7; Pausch, 2019, p. 12; Wolffhardt et al., 2022, p. 123). Host countries often offer language training to refugees and other migrants, but the level of provision varies: one study of refugees' experiences reported, for example, that refugees in **Germany** and **Switzerland** expressed satisfaction with the courses available to them, while refugees in **France** noted that government-provided courses included only a beginner-level foundation and that they had to seek additional classes at their own expense (Feinstein et al., 2022, pp. 16–17). Refugees in

these countries also reported challenges finding time to attend courses due to work commitments (Feinstein et al., 2022, p. 17).

Basic needs and economic stability are prerequisites for political involvement. Many refugees and migrants see social integration as a low priority: 'the lack of stability and precariousness of their livelihoods prevent them from focusing on civic activities… active social participation is… likely to be hindered by the lack of financial security since the rate of people living under the risk-of-poverty threshold is considerably high' (Wolffhardt et al., 2022, p. 123). Time pressures often mean that refugees and migrants are unable to prioritise social, cultural, and especially political activities (Wolffhardt et al., 2022, p. 123).

Social capital and human capital support political inclusion. Immigrants and non-immigrants are both more likely to be politically engaged when they have higher levels of education, income, and employment; members of political groups and trade unions are also more likely to be politically active, as are people with higher levels of social trust, political interest and confidence in parliament (Bilgili et al., 2015, p. 20).

Demographic characteristics do not have clear influences. 'No conclusive results exist for the effect of gender on the political participation and voting of immigrant women. The effect of age is positive both for immigrants' and non-immigrants with regards to civic participation, voting behaviour and voting intentions, but this positive effect decreases over time with older age. No conclusive results exist on the effect of gender or marital status on political participation and intended and actual voting patterns (Bilgili et al., 2015, p. 20).

Social, economic, and political culture of the host country

The political culture of the host country strongly influences participation. 'The culture of political participation, as measured by the average political participation levels in the country, has a positive and highly significant effect on all immigrants, both newcomers and long-settled residents, from developed or developing countries or from violent or peaceful countries. Immigrants are also more likely to be politically active in countries with higher levels of trade union membership. Similarly, immigrants' intention to vote and self-reported voter turnout levels are significantly driven by the level of voter turnout among the general population in their country of residence. In other words, immigrants living in countries with high levels of voter participation in national elections report higher voting intentions and higher levels of voter participation' (Bilgili et al., 2015, p. 21).

Political engagement is higher in wealthier and more highly educated host countries. Participation in national elections is higher among immigrants living in higher-GDP countries, and immigrants are more likely to be politically active in countries with a more educated general population. The effect of economic development is stronger for immigrants from wealthy, non-conflict-affected countries and for non-Muslims (Bilgili et al., 2015, p. 21). Some evidence suggests that immigrants coming from wealthier countries may be less likely to participate politically in their new country of residence, but this finding has not been consistently replicated, while Muslim immigrants from countries with highly educated populations are more likely to be civically active; the level of human development (HDI) or social inequality (GINI) has not been found to have an effect (Bilgili et al., 2015, pp. 21–22).

Prejudice, discrimination, and fear of migrants are significant barriers to political and social inclusion (Dixon et al., 2018, pp. 369–370; Wolffhardt et al., 2022, p. 124). Refugees interviewed in **Sweden**, for example, reported difficulty in connecting with people from the local community and that they perceive Swedish society as 'closed' (Wolffhardt et al., 2022, p. 124). Refugees in **Italy** described weakness of mutual trust between the receiving society and newcomers as an obstacle to building bridges and increasing the engagement of migrants with the new country. (Wolffhardt et al., 2022, p. 124)

Factors related to migrants' countries of origin

The political culture of migrants' countries of origin leaves a lasting influence. The level of political participation in migrants' countries of origin is an important predictor of the level of political participation in the country of residence; higher levels of political participation in the country of origin are correlated with higher levels of political participation of immigrants from that country living in European countries (Bilgili et al., 2015, p. 21). Some refugees fear involvement in politics in their host country due to their past experiences with politics in their home countries. For example, some migrants living in **Czechia** report that they fled their home countries for political reasons and 'are either afraid to engage in political activities or tired by politics generally' (Wolffhardt et al., 2022, p. 123); while Afghan refugees in the **UK** reported that past experiences of persecution in Afghanistan often led the older generation of refugees to believe that supporting a political party could have dire consequences even in the UK (Sharifi 2018, cited in Bekaj & Antara, 2018, p. 40).

Migrants from conflict-affected areas tend to have higher participation rates. 'Political participation is significantly higher among immigrants from developing or non-Muslim countries experiencing violent conflict. This effect only materialises over the long-run, meaning that immigrants from conflict zones make a later but greater contribution to the political life of their new country compared to immigrants with similar characteristics from peaceful countries.' (Bilgili et al., 2015, p. 21) This may be because immigrants from conflict-affected areas are less likely to return to their country of origin and are more motivated to settle permanently and integrate into the host country; there is also a theory that witnessing violence can be source of personal development and collective activism after trauma (Bilgili et al., 2015, p. 21).

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This report is based on five days of desk-based research. The K4D research helpdesk provides rapid syntheses of a selection of recent relevant literature and international expert thinking in response to specific questions relating to international development. For any enquiries, contact helpdesk@k4d.info.

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