

# A Small Country with a Huge Diaspora, Ireland Navigates Its New Status as an Immigration Hub

June 5, 2024 PROFILE | By Mary Gilmartin and Clíodhna Murphy

For the first time since 1851 (during the Great Famine), the Republic of Ireland's population exceeded 5 million people in 2022, a tremendous growth from fewer than 4 million in 2002. This change is in part due to changing patterns of migration. More than 1.6 million people immigrated to Ireland over those 20 years, with net inward migration of around 520,000 people.

Historically a country of mass emigration, Ireland has rapidly emerged as a new immigrant destination. It is home to significant numbers of immigrants from other EU Member States and beyond, as well as a growing population of immigrants' children who are contributing to greater racial and ethnic diversity. While emigration of Irish citizens and foreign nationals alike continues, the issue of immigration has in recent years received more political, policy, and public attention.

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While Ireland is a member of the European Union, its immigration policy has traditionally been more influenced by relations with the United Kingdom due to its history with Great Britain and disputes over the status of Northern Ireland—which is part of the United Kingdom but where some residents want to unify with Ireland. This is typified by the Common Travel Area (CTA), which has long allowed free movement of Irish and British citizens between the two countries. Irish leaders have felt a need to align with British policy to protect the CTA, and as such have picked and chosen which EU migration policies to enact, opting into several EU asylum instruments but few EU policies for migration of third-country nationals. However, the United Kingdom's 2020 departure from the European Union undermined the relationship between London and Dublin, and current indications are that post-Brexit, Irish immigration policy may be moving more towards EU norms.

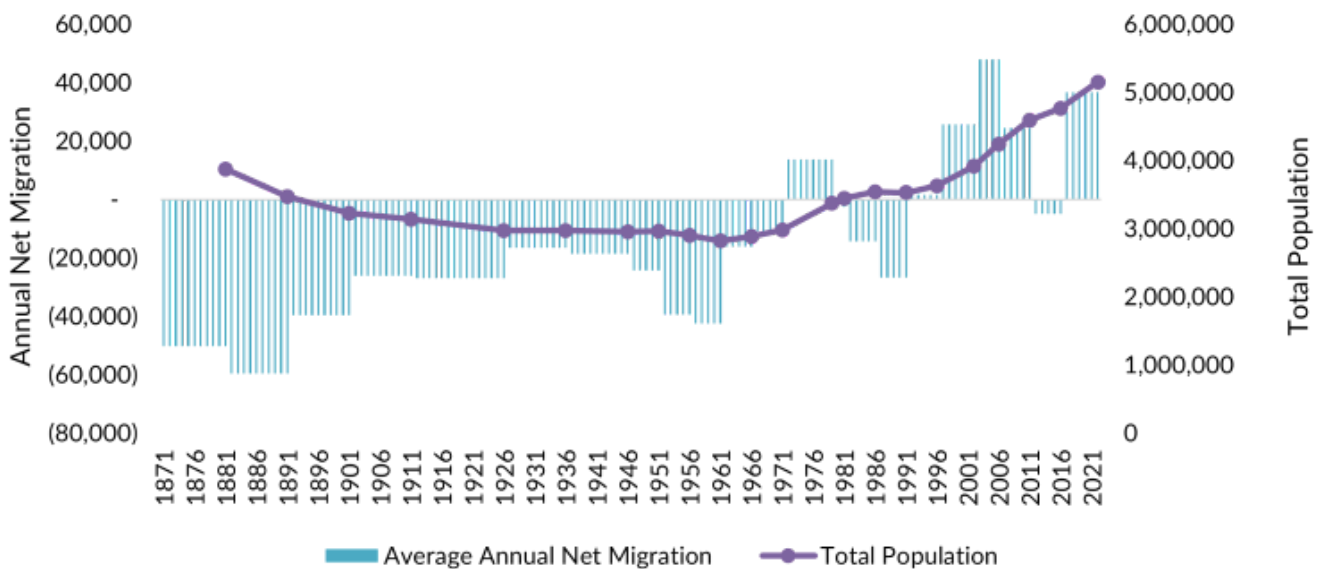
This article provides an overview of migration trends, policies, and debates in the Republic of Ireland, focusing in particular on the era of immigration that began in the early 1990s. This transition from a country of migrant origin to one of destination is linked both to the return of some

of its massive diaspora as well as the country's "Celtic Tiger" period of rapid economic growth, but in recent years tensions have started to show.

## Migration Trends: Long Emigration and a Rapid About-Face

The history of emigration from what is now the Republic of Ireland is long, with peaks in the 1880s, the 1950s, and the 1980s (see Figure 1). This movement was largely the result of the country's internal challenges and delayed economic development, with the population shrinking to 2.8 million in 1961. This net emigration gave rise to the substantial Irish diaspora that the government estimated numbered around 70 million as of 2017, with major populations in the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia. For example, 32.7 million people of Irish heritage lived in the United States as of 2022, according to U.S. Census Bureau data, just 123,000 of whom were born in Ireland. A growing number of people living in the United Kingdom now hold Irish passports—available to many children of Irish citizens and those with at least one grandparent born in Ireland—applications for which surged after Brexit created new restrictions on mobility to the European Union.

**Figure 1. Republic of Ireland Annual Net Migration and Population, 1871-2022**

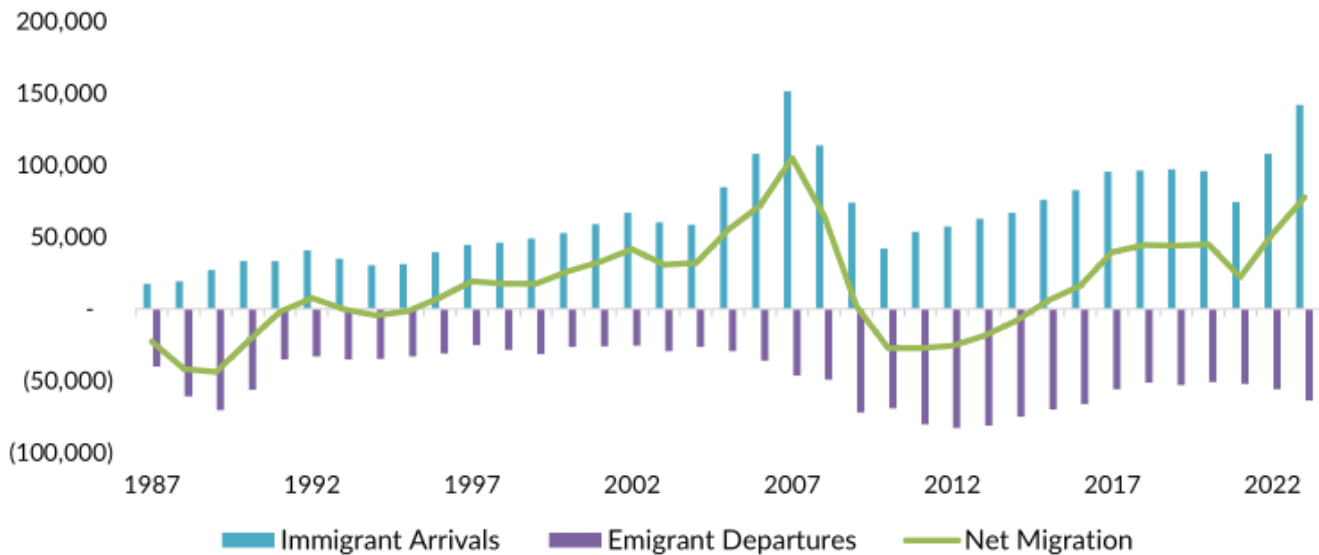


*Note:* Figure shows average net annual migration over periods of varying lengths.

*Sources:* D.A. Coleman, "Demography and Migration in Ireland, North and South," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 98 (1999): 68-115, [available online](#); Ireland Central Statistics Office (CSO), "Census 1991," accessed April 22, 2024, [available online](#); CSO, "FY105: Average Annual Components of Population Change," updated May 30, 2023, [available online](#); CSO, "F1001: Population at Each Census," updated June 2023, [available online](#).

Aside from a brief period in the 1970s when people returned to or moved to Ireland during a short-lived economic boom, immigration did not begin to surpass emigration until the mid-1990s. The period around EU enlargement in 2004 saw a rapid rise in immigration from new EU Member States, particularly Poland and Lithuania. Immigration peaked in 2007, when there were more than 150,000 new arrivals. The economic crash of 2008 briefly changed migration patterns; between 2010 and 2014 more people left Ireland each year than arrived, with more than 80,000 people emigrating in 2013. But immigration has since rebounded. Since 2015, the Republic of Ireland has experienced net immigration each year, and the estimated net immigration in 2023—just under 78,000—is the highest since 2007. This 2023 figure includes a substantial number of Ukrainians fleeing Russia's invasion, including many of the nearly 105,000 who arrived between March 4, 2022 (when the EU Temporary Protection Directive went into force) and February 4, 2024.

## Figure 2. Republic of Ireland Immigrant Arrivals, Emigrant Departures, and Net Migration, 1987-2023



Source: CSO, “PEA18: Estimated Migration (Persons in April),” updated September 25, 2023, [available online](#).

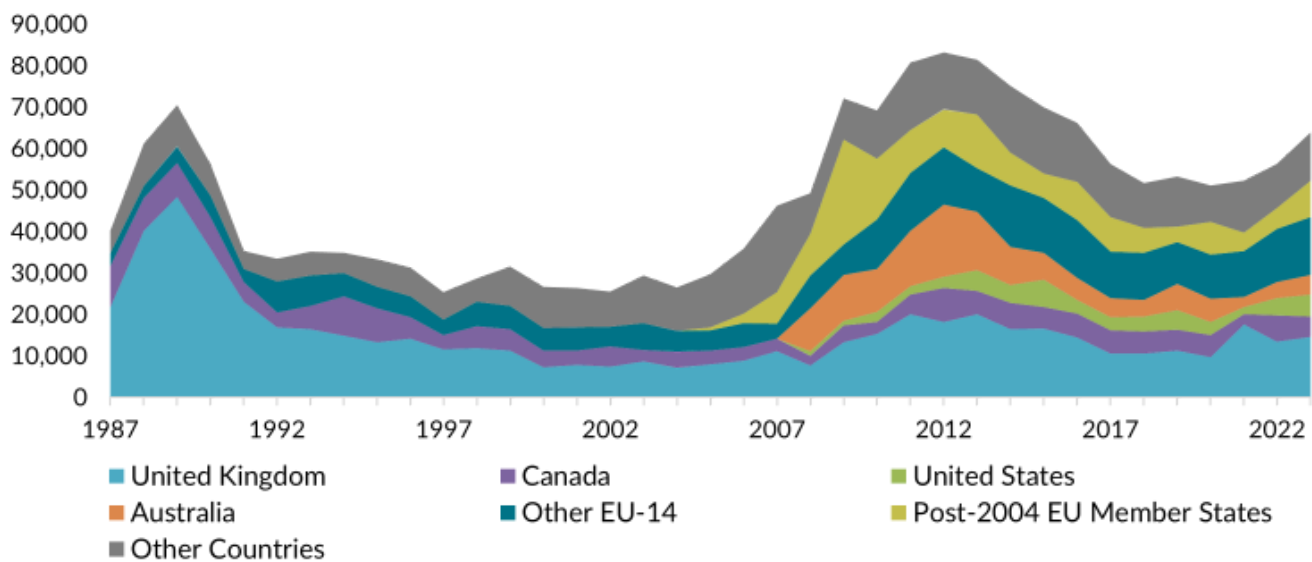
### Recent Dynamics

The number of Irish citizens (including those born abroad who inherited their citizenship) moving or returning to the country each year has remained relatively stable, at between 20,000 and 30,000 for each of the last 15 years. However, there have been marked changes in the numbers of foreign nationals immigrating. In particular, there has been a significant reduction in the number of citizens of recent EU Member States (such as Poland and Lithuania), from a high of more than 56,000 in 2007 to fewer than 10,000 in both 2022 and 2023. Meanwhile, there has been a corresponding increase in the number of immigrants from outside the European Union, from almost 17,000 in 2007 to more than 50,000 in both 2022 and 2023. While some of this increase is due to the influx of Ukrainians, many arrivals are also international students and, more recently, workers. Annual applications for asylum have also risen, to nearly 13,800 in 2022, a more than ninefold increase over 2014 (more on this below).

As for emigration, recent estimates suggest an average of around 30,000 Irish citizens left the country each year from 2007 to 2023, accounting for around 45 percent of all emigrants in that period. An average of about 18 percent of departures each year were of individuals from outside the European Union or the United Kingdom, but their share has been growing, suggesting that many of the recent arrivals are unable or unwilling to stay permanently.

While the United Kingdom remains a significant destination, the numbers heading there from Ireland have decreased over time. Significantly fewer people are emigrating to Australia compared to a decade ago, while older EU Member States (such as Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, and Spain) and other countries outside the bloc have been consistently popular destinations (see Figure 3). It is difficult to fully capture the range and popularity of emigrant destinations, though there is some evidence of emigration to the Middle East, with estimates of around 10,000 Irish citizens currently living in the United Arab Emirates. However, it is likely that onward migration from the Republic of Ireland by people who are not Irish citizens will not be picked up in many official statistics.

### Figure 3. Annual Emigration from the Republic of Ireland, by Destination, 1987-2023



*Notes: Other EU-14 are the other EU Member States that joined before 2004: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, and Sweden; Post-2004 EU Member States are Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia.*

*Source: CSO, "PEA18: Estimated Migration (Persons in April)."*

### Box 1. Irish Citizenship

Citizenship of the Republic of Ireland is available to anyone born on the island of Ireland—including the UK territory of Northern Ireland—before 2005, as well as their children.

People born outside of Ireland with a grandparent born on the island of Ireland or a parent who was an Irish citizen at the time of the applicant's birth are eligible to become Irish citizens once they are added to the Foreign Births Register.

People born on the island of Ireland after 2005 are eligible for citizenship only if a parent was or was entitled to be an Irish or British citizen, was a permanent resident of Ireland or Northern Ireland, or was a qualifying legal resident for three of the four years before the applicant's birth.

Immigrants can also naturalize as citizens after a period of residence, which may be shortened for spouses of Irish citizens.

### Current Immigrant Population

Comprehensive counts of immigrants occur as part of regular censuses, which generally happen every five years. However, these surveys are less effective in gathering data about the growing number of immigrants' children, who are not necessarily Irish citizens (see Box 1).

Because of the large numbers of returning diaspora members, calculating Ireland's current immigrant population is trickier than it might seem. Nearly 632,000 foreign citizens were living in Ireland during the most recent census, in 2022, accounting for 12 percent of the population. But this does not include members of the diaspora who were born elsewhere, acquired Irish citizenship through ancestry and moved to the country later in life, or naturalized immigrants who otherwise have no Irish ancestry. Identified by place of birth, more than 955,000 residents were born outside the island of Ireland, comprising approximately 19 percent of the population. This number includes many residents born in Australia, Britain, and the United States, half of whom identified as White Irish in the 2022 Census.

Poles have accounted for the largest group of foreign citizens in recent years, slightly outpacing UK nationals (see Table 1). The count of Polish and UK citizens living in Ireland fell between 2016 and

2022, though there was a significant increase in the numbers with dual Irish citizenship in the same period. In 2022, nearly 32,000 people were dual Irish-UK citizens, more than twice as many as in 2016. This increase is primarily a response to Brexit, as UK citizens living in Ireland have similar rights to Irish citizens. However, the broader increase in dual Irish citizenship—with high numbers of Irish nationals also holding citizenships of Poland, Nigeria, and the Philippines—is also a consequence of earlier immigration and the five-year wait required of most immigrants before they can apply for naturalization.

**Table 1. Largest Foreign-National Groups in Ireland, 2011, 2016, and 2022**

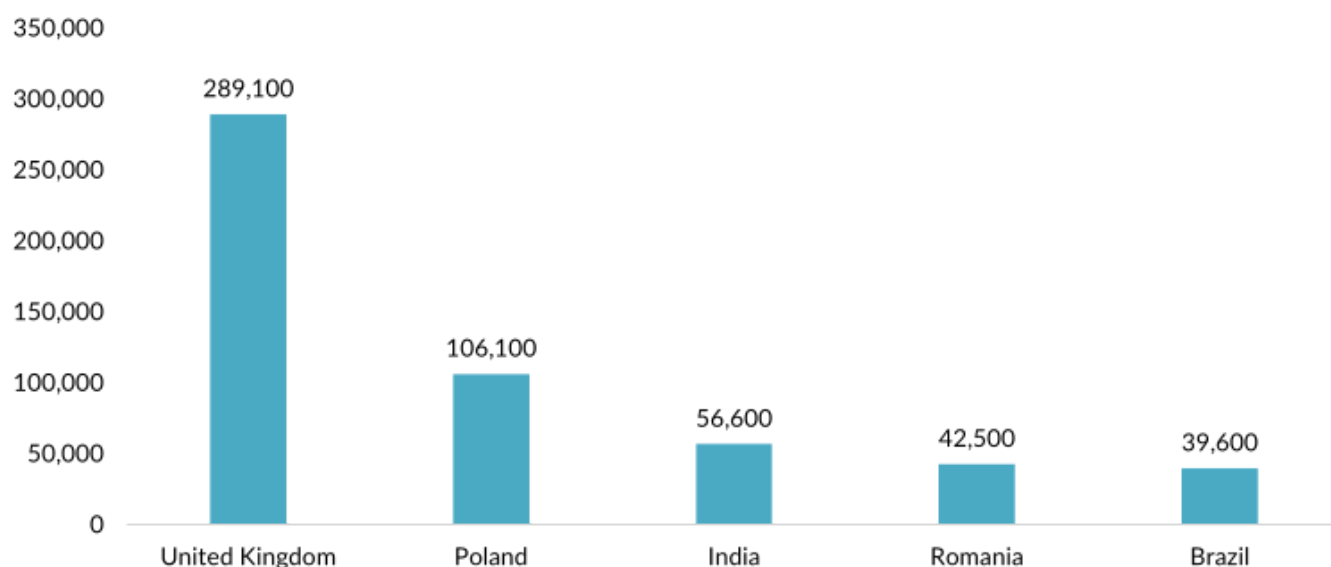
2022		2016		2011	
Citizenship	Number of Immigrants	Citizenship	Number of Immigrants	Citizenship	Number of Immigrants
Polish	94,000	Polish	123,000	Polish	123,000
UK	83,000	UK	103,000	UK	112,000
Indian	45,000	Lithuanian	37,000	Lithuanian	37,000
Romanian	43,000	Romanian	29,000	Latvian	21,000
Lithuanian	31,000	Latvian	20,000	Nigerian	18,000
Dual Irish	171,000	Dual Irish	105,000	Dual Irish	56,000

*Note:* Individuals with Irish citizenship in addition to that of another country are only counted as *Dual Irish* and not in other categories.

*Source:* CSO, “FY017: Population Usually Resident and Present in the State,” updated May 30, 2023, [available online](#).

Counting by individuals’ place of birth paints a different picture of the current immigrant makeup. In 2022, more than 289,000 Irish residents were born in the United Kingdom (including Northern Ireland as well as England, Scotland, and Wales), considerably more than those born in Poland (see Figure 4). Many more people were also born in India than those declaring Indian citizenship: this may be because they have been naturalized in Ireland and are not permitted to retain Indian citizenship.

**Figure 4. Top Foreign Places of Birth for Residents of the Republic of Ireland, 2022**



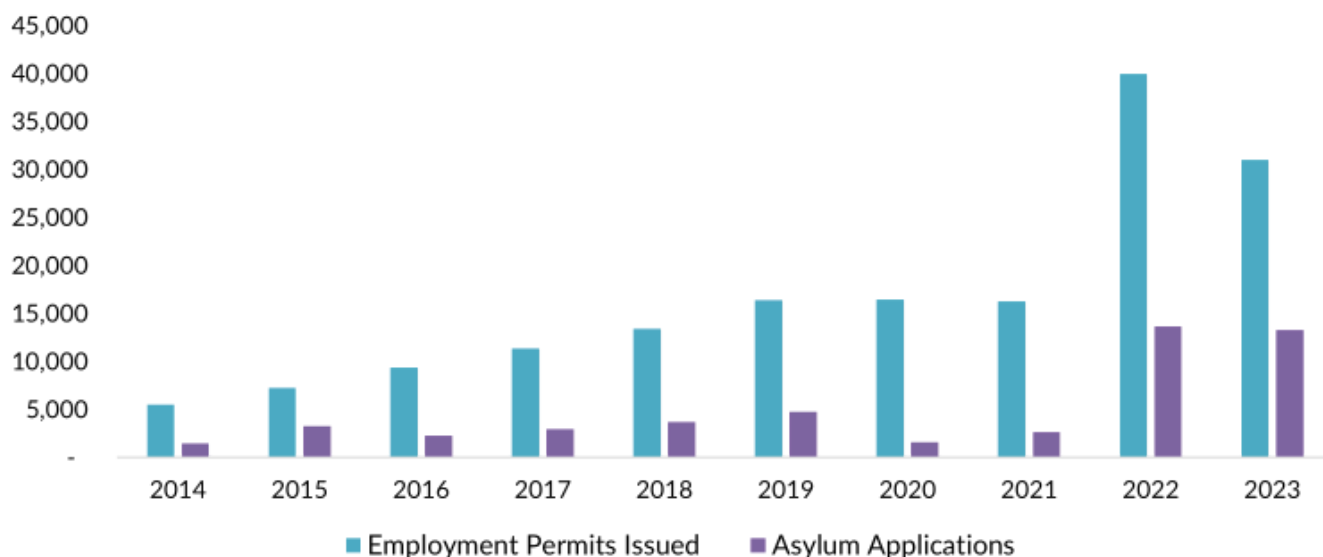
*Source:* CSO, “F5014: Population Usually Resident and Present in the State,” updated October 26, 2023, [available online](#).



Data measuring the flow of migrants in and out of the country are less robust. Statistics show that the numbers of work-permit holders and asylum seekers have increased dramatically since 2014, although these are a small proportion of all immigrants (see Figure 5). However, there are no such public statistics on international student visas or other short-term visas.

Data on emigration flows are patchy and partial, and prioritize movement by Irish citizens, and as such are less useful for understanding onward migration of foreign nationals or, potentially, of dual citizens. That said, it is important to note that emigration from Ireland, including of Irish citizens, remains relatively high.

**Figure 5. Employment Permit Issuances and Asylum Applications Filed in the Republic of Ireland, by Year, 2014-23**



*Sources:* Ireland Department of Enterprise, Trade, and Employment (DETE), “Employment Permits Statistics 2023”, updated January 2, 2024, [available online](#); Ireland International Protection Office (IPO), “Statistics,” updated March 2024, [available online](#).

### Key Policies for Straddling the United Kingdom and European Union

Ireland’s relationships with the United Kingdom and the European Union have shaped its regulation of immigration. The CTA between Ireland and the United Kingdom has been at the heart of Irish migration policy since independence in 1922. This previously largely unwritten arrangement has facilitated unrestricted travel and residence for British and Irish citizens in either country, as well as the rights to work, access social protection, and vote, among others. It has also played an important political role in British-Irish relations, by enabling people of Irish identity in Northern Ireland not to have to assert British citizenship to establish permanent residency in the place they were born or, following Brexit, the right to live and work there. To address the uncertainty caused by Brexit, central aspects of the CTA were recorded in a 2019 Memorandum of Understanding between the two governments, a 2019 bilateral Convention on Social Security, and domestic legislation.

Free movement available to EU citizens and their families has also been formative for Ireland’s recent history. Ireland enthusiastically opened its doors to workers from the new EU countries in 2004 and 2007 without imposing restrictions on labor market access, in contrast to most EU Member States. Especially during the economic boom, this immigration had a generally positive impact on Ireland’s gross domestic product (GDP). To this day, some of Ireland’s largest immigrant groups come from these recent accession countries.

If the immigration system for citizens of the United Kingdom and the European Union (plus countries in the European Economic Area [EEA] and Switzerland, which also comprise the free-movement area) has been relatively straightforward and underpinned by the principle of reciprocity,

the immigration regime for those from elsewhere has evolved in a piecemeal manner. Asylum legislation was modernized and consolidated through the International Protection Act 2015, but comprehensive immigration legislation remains lacking. The immigration framework has been developed incrementally since the 1990s and remains characterized by discretionary decision-making and a reluctance to use legislation to reinforce key policies. Family reunification and long-term residence policies, for example, are not enshrined in statute but are provided for through administrative schemes under which the justice minister (through civil servants) adopts decisions on individual cases. Decisions on deportation and naturalization are also made by the minister with no route to appeal the merits, only judicial review of the courts' decision-making process. Non-EU residents "regularly face problems of administrative discretion, bureaucracy, and uncertainty about their permits and legal status," the Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX) found in 2020.

The lack of clear eligibility criteria for long-term residence in Ireland has long been criticized. Yet naturalization is easier in Ireland than in many other EU Member States. Unlike other countries, Ireland has not yet demanded that would-be citizens meet integration milestones or prove language competency, for instance, and it has embraced citizenship ceremonies to celebrate and welcome its newest citizens. Nevertheless, the citizenship regime contains some restrictive elements. Automatic citizenship for those born on the island of Ireland was introduced in 1998 to facilitate the implementation of the Belfast Agreement (also known as the Good Friday Agreement) which marked the culmination of the Northern Ireland peace process. However, it was removed only a few years later, in 2005, following a referendum in which the government argued that it was a pull factor for "citizenship tourism."

### *Labor and Student Migration*

Labor immigration of non-EEA nationals mainly happens through the employment permit system, which is managed by the operation of "critical skills" and "ineligible" occupational lists, with significant input from employers. Work permits are linked to a specific employer, potentially making employees dependent on their workplaces to retain legal status, which critics have argued can lead to exploitation. In principle, government policy remains focused on recruiting highly skilled workers from non-EEA countries for positions where the requisite skills cannot be met domestically.

International students are also active on the labor market and can work for 20 hours weekly during the academic year and 40 hours during holidays. Ireland has a well-established pattern of student migration. Poor regulation of language schools and the status of international students who stay in Ireland to work and live without securing new status have been the focus of media and policy attention since the 2000s. In 2018, the government introduced a special regularization scheme for those who had arrived as students between 2005 and 2010 and then fallen out of status. Efforts to enhance regulation of the English-language education sector are ongoing, and the International Education Mark quality assurance standard is due to be implemented in 2024.

### *Unauthorized Immigrants*

Irish politicians have frequently advocated for the rights of Irish emigrants lacking legal status abroad, yet Irish law is comparatively restrictive in generally excluding unauthorized immigrants from employment protections and pay-related social insurance benefits. In 2020, the Migrant Rights Centre Ireland estimated that between 15,000 and 20,000 immigrants lacked legal status. Regularization efforts have tended to be ad hoc or adopted in response to specific situations, such as long-resident international students who fall out of legal status.

In this context, a "once-in-a-generation" regularization scheme introduced in 2022 was a landmark moment that arrived as result of a sustained grassroots campaign linking current irregular migrants to the historical experiences of Irish immigrants in the United States. More than 8,000 people applied for the program during the six-month application window, of whom more than 4,600 were granted relatively secure and long-term status; as of July 2023, the government had processed 87 percent of applications. Applicants had to show they had continuously lacked legal status for four

years, which may have excluded some long-term residents, but they were not required to be economically active. Still, compared to similar programs in other countries, Ireland's regularization was broad and inclusive, although there was a high application fee of 550 euros for a single applicant and 700 euros per family. While 2022 is not a long time ago, the introduction of such an initiative would be politically difficult now, given the increased visibility of the far right and increasingly restrictive rhetoric on migration and security.

### **Current Discussions: Lagging Integration Policies and Changing Approach to Asylum**

With the consistent growth in the immigrant population, politicians and policymakers have begun again to acknowledge questions around integration. This conversation started prior to the economic crash of 2008 but was abandoned when emigration rose rapidly in its aftermath. The government's first Migrant Integration Strategy was published in 2017, covering the period to 2021, and was being updated as of this writing. MIPEX described the government as having developed "a more comprehensive approach to integration," though noted some ongoing challenges related to labor market mobility in particular, such as immigrants being unable in practice to access all types of jobs or have their foreign credentials recognized. More central funding has been made available to local authorities to support and enhance immigrant integration. Additionally, a white paper on the Direct Provision system for accommodating asylum seekers—which has been widely criticized for its poor living standards and for preventing individuals from integrating into Irish society—promised to end Direct Provision by 2024. To that end, a one-off regularization process was introduced for asylum applicants whose cases had been under review for longer than two years. More than 3,200 applications were received for this scheme; as of June 2023, nearly 1,600 people had been granted approval and a further 1,100 were separately granted another form of status.

These moves have been put under pressure by the arrival of Ukrainians since 2022. Amid a national housing crisis, the government struggled to find suitable accommodation for Ukrainians, which was separate from Direct Provision but similarly generally acquired from hotels and other private companies. In addition, the numbers of people seeking asylum in Ireland increased from fewer than 3,700 in 2018 to more than 13,000 in each of 2022 and 2023. The pressure led the government to announce in December 2023 that it could no longer house all asylum seekers and would prioritize women and children. In April 2024, 1,620 male asylum seekers were homeless, with many sleeping on the streets. The government's piecemeal approach to finding accommodation meant that some communities began to object to its short-term conversion of buildings for refugees and asylum seekers. In some instances, these protests became violent; 16 arson attacks were carried out at sites housing or believed to be planned for housing refugees or asylum seekers in 2023.

Protests also led to changes in the treatment of Ukrainians who had arrived under the European Union's Temporary Protection Directive. Until March 13, 2024, they were provided with accommodation and welfare payments at the same level as Irish nationals. Since then, new arrivals receive accommodation for a maximum of 90 days and welfare payments at the same rate as asylum seekers (38.80 euros per week for an adult, down from 220 euros per week). In May 2024, it was announced that this approach would be extended to all Ukrainians living in state accommodation, regardless of their date of arrival. These changes are a response to growing discontent about Ukrainian arrivals, underpinned by a belief that the welfare payments were responsible for making Ireland especially attractive.

Meanwhile, more workers are needed in many segments of Ireland's economy and 2023 saw the largest expansion yet of the employment permits system to include a wide range of occupations, from assistance dog trainers to genetic counsellors. Quotas for agricultural workers have also increased due to ongoing demand. Access to the labor market for spouses of work permit holders has been liberalized. A proposal to overhaul the employment permits system—including to offer seasonal employment permits for the first time, and to allow all permit holders to change employer after nine months—was as of the time of writing making its way through the houses of parliament, the Oireachtas.



## On the Horizon: New Immigration Resistance and Asylum Changes?

Ireland's ongoing housing crisis is often cited as an impetus for emigration. It is also being exploited by anti-migration activists, whose often use terms such as "House the Irish first" or "Ireland is full." Growing levels of actual or threatened violence together with increased numbers of protests have led many political representatives to question the scale of migration and raise new concerns about immigration.

Against this background, the government has endorsed several measures within the European Union's Pact on Migration and Asylum, which will entail a complete overhaul of the country's asylum policy. Justice Minister Helen McEntee has described the pact as a "game changer" for speeding up asylum processing and increasing deportations of those ineligible for protection. The government has also increased the number of countries designed as safe for asylum application processing, although in April 2024 the High Court found that the designation of the United Kingdom as a safe third country for these purposes was unlawful. The court based its decision on technical reasons rather than London's proposed asylum externalization policy involving Rwanda—a plan to send some asylum seekers arriving in the United Kingdom to the East African country—yet the decision highlights some potential difficulties on the horizon in terms of reconciling Ireland's EU obligations, relationship with the United Kingdom, and human-rights mandates.

The implications of Ireland's relatively recent transformation from a country of mass emigration to one of immigration have yet to be fully understood. Increased racial, ethnic, and religious diversity has not yet led to significant changes to the traditional structures of society, such as the largely Catholic public school system, but continued change poses questions for traditional elements of Irish society. Immigration has also brought to the surface longstanding issues relating to access to and availability of public goods such as housing, health care, and disability services. Broader discontent about service provision and the cost of living has been exploited by restrictionists, who hope for a political breakthrough in upcoming elections.

Still, Irish attitudes about immigration remain generally positive, and are some of the most positive across the European Union, according to research by the Economic and Social Research Institute. It remains to be seen whether this translates to full integration and equality for the growing population of immigrants' children, especially amid the rising visibility of far-right political voices.

The growing focus on immigration at times distracts from ongoing emigration from Ireland, which remains high and relatively under-explored. In particular, it will be important to better understand the levels of onward migration of people who have recently received Irish citizenship and those who identify as members of a racial or ethnic minority group, in addition to the more established scholarship on the emigration of Irish nationals. Similarly, it will be important to assess whether the return migration of Irish nationals is affected by concerns over the country's quality of life, particularly limited and expensive housing. These kinds of concerns have been expressed by multinational corporations headquartered in Ireland, because it may reduce their ability to recruit and retain skilled workers from abroad.

The economic crash that began in 2008 demonstrated how quickly migration to and from Ireland—as well as related political priorities—can change. However, it is clear that the Republic of Ireland is an important immigrant destination, as well as a source country for significant emigration. Ensuring that immigrants can fully participate in Irish society, as well as providing support for emigrants as they leave and return, will be crucial for social cohesion as the population grows and faces new pressures.

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