



Country study

Public narratives and attitudes towards refugees and other migrants

Ireland country profile

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January 2023

Key messages

Public attitudes to immigration in Ireland are among the most positive in Europe. Attitudes are underpinned by values that prize openness and welcome, and are influenced by Ireland's own experience of large-scale emigration.

The absence of divisive political rhetoric and the lack of a far-right political force sets Ireland apart from many European countries. Immigration has rarely been a salient topic for the public.

While attitudes are positive, a significant share of the population (44%) occupies a 'conflicted middle', feeling neither overly positive nor negative about immigration and its impacts.

Recent policy reforms have sought to improve Ireland's response to international protection, including its heavily criticised asylum accommodation system. Reforms have been complicated by very high numbers of Ukrainian refugees and rapid increases in asylum seekers, resulting in unprecedented pressures on the reception and integration system.

Complacency is to be avoided given Ireland is facing an acute housing and cost of living crisis. Political leaders will need to find practical answers to the country's major challenges and must resist the urge to scapegoat migrants for current policy shortcomings.

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How to cite: Kumar, C. with Donoghue, D. (2022) *Public narratives and attitudes towards refugees and other migrants: Ireland country profile*. London: ODI.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Anna Bailey-Morley and Diego Faures for their support with data collection and research assistance. Thanks also go to Lalini Veerassamy, Christina Lowe and Caterina Mazzilli for their peer review and very helpful comments and suggestions. Sherry Dixon coordinated the production of this report and Matthew Foley provided editing. Opinions and any errors or omissions remain the responsibility of the authors.

About this publication

This briefing presents an overview of the key features of migration and asylum policy in Ireland, recent trends in migration patterns and public perceptions and political narratives on refugees and other migrants. It is part of a wider project supported by the IKEA Foundation, aimed at informing public and private stakeholders interested in engaging with migration and displacement.

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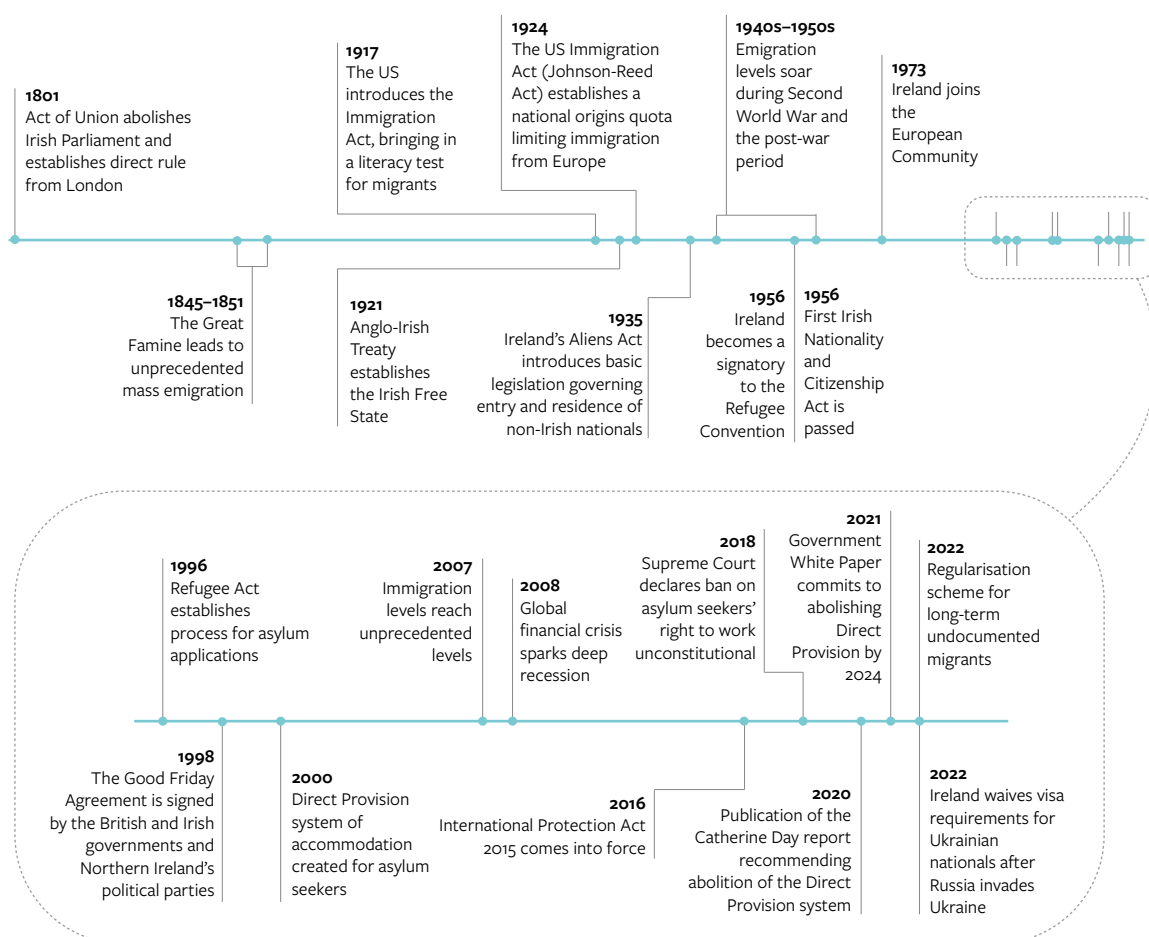
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1 History of migration in Ireland

Emigration is a defining feature of Irish history, particularly when Ireland was under British rule. Large numbers of people left from the 1800s, with a mass exodus during the famine years (1845–1851), when repeated potato crop failures entrenched starvation across the island (Donnelly, 2011). Emigrants were mainly poor smallholder farmers, with ongoing waves of out-migration largely facilitated by remittances from those who had left earlier. In all, around a million people left during the famine years, and over 2 million in the decade between 1845 and 1855 (Glynn et al., 2015). The British government’s inadequate response exacerbated the crisis (Kennedy, n.d.).

The country experienced further major episodes of emigration during the 1950s and 1980s, with the outflows of the 1950s particularly significant as 15% of the population left (Glynn et al., 2015). There was another rapid rise in emigration levels following the global financial crisis in 2008, when Ireland was plunged into a deep recession. While the US was a common destination for early migrants, this dropped off when the US brought in immigration restrictions around the 1920s (Cohn, n.d.; see Figure 1). The UK subsequently became the major destination, though the US, Australia, Canada and New Zealand have also remained popular (Glynn et al., 2015; CSO, 2020).

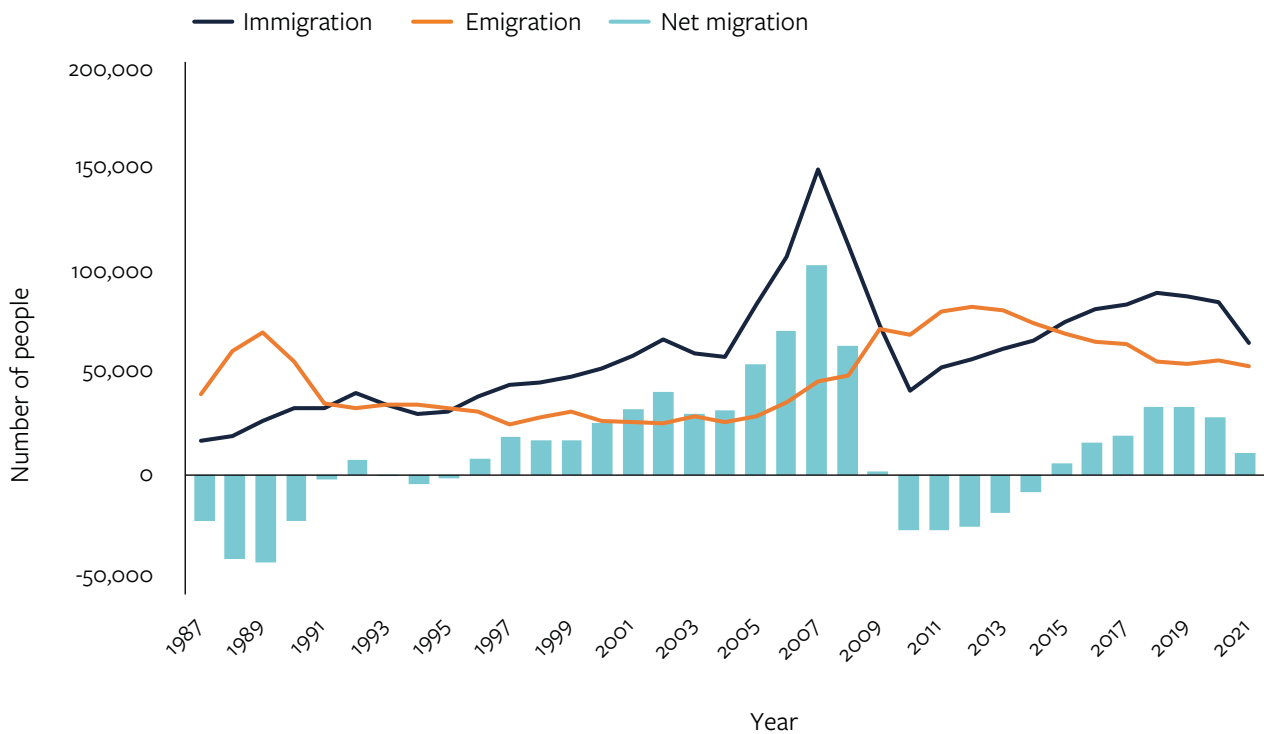
Figure 1 Migration timeline



Ireland is considered unique in Europe for its experience of extraordinarily large-scale emigration relative to the size of its population (Glynn et al., 2015). From a high of 6.5 million in 1841, numbers dropped very sharply for the next three decades and remained in decline thereafter, falling below 3 million in the 1920s and only really recovering from the 1970s (CSO, 2021). The population currently stands at 5.1 million, with immigration a major driver of population growth, generally far exceeding the rate of natural increase (CSO, 2022b).

Immigration levels increased consistently from the late 1990s, with steep rises from 2005 (see Figure 2). Over 150,000 immigrants were recorded as arriving during the peak year of 2007. The expansion of the European Union (EU) in 2004 had a major impact given Ireland was one of the few EU countries (alongside the UK and Sweden) to open its labour market to the new member states. Between 2006 and 2011, for example, the Polish population in Ireland almost doubled (CSO, 2016). The 2016 census records Polish, British, Lithuanian and Romanian as the top non-Irish nationalities (ibid.). According to data from 2019, almost 18% of the Irish population is foreign born, compared to 8% in 2000 (OECD, 2022), though at the same time a similar share (17.5%) of the Irish population lives abroad (Kenny, 2015).

Figure 2 Recent migration trends in Ireland



Source: CSO, 2021

A very clear feature of Ireland's migration history is that immigration and emigration closely track economic conditions. Immigration particularly increased during Ireland's economic boom period, known as the Celtic Tiger years, which lasted from the 1990s through to 2007. The country experienced high growth, very low unemployment (4.2% in 2001, one of the lowest levels in Europe), and a major boom in the property and construction sectors (Turner, 2010; Bergin et al., 2020).

The boom ended with the global financial crisis in 2008. The crisis precipitated a sudden collapse in house prices which – as a result of imprudent and poorly regulated lending – led to a banking crisis (Baudino et al., 2020). In 2010, the Irish government was obliged to seek a bailout from the European Commission, European Central Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF). The government also implemented a package of sweeping austerity measures, tax increases and cuts to public services. The country experienced a period of deep recession: between 2007 and 2013 unemployment increased dramatically (from 5% to 15.5%) (Bergin et al., 2020). The collapse of the construction sector meant young men were particularly affected. Job losses were also higher for immigrants than for Irish nationals (*ibid.*). At the same time a recruitment and promotion freeze in the public sector had a major impact, including for graduates in professions such as healthcare and education, who faced limited employment options in Ireland and often attractive propositions overseas (Glynn et al., 2015). The crisis also affected migration flows, as immigration declined dramatically and emigration levels rose (see Figure 2). As has been the case throughout Irish history, rising emigration operated as a safety valve, without which unemployment rates would have risen much higher.

The country has been on a slow road to recovery since, with unemployment declining steadily until the Covid-19 pandemic. While the pandemic impacted the economy and immigration levels significantly, employment has recovered to levels seen before the financial crisis (CSO, 2022c). There has also been a recovery in immigration since Covid-19 lockdowns and travel restrictions were lifted. The most recent data (for April 2021–April 2022) records 120,700 new arrivals, representing a 15-year immigration high (CSO, 2022b).¹ As has frequently been the case, many (24%) of these new arrivals were returning Irish nationals. Rapidly rising immigration figures coincide with strong demand for labour and widespread labour shortages in many sectors, including hospitality, tourism, information technology (IT), construction, engineering, healthcare, older persons' care and pharmaceuticals (Murray, 2022). Also notable throughout Ireland's experience of immigration is that immigrants have often been more highly educated than the local population (McGinnity et al., 2020b). There is evidence that migrants enhance productivity and contribute sought-after skills, given their presence is particularly strong in new and growing sectors of the economy (*ibid.*).

A new phenomenon is the high numbers of refugees arriving since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, after the Irish government allowed visa-free travel for Ukrainians. Over 62,400 Ukrainians have

1 This data is not represented in Figure 2, which shows the period from 1987 to 2021 only.

arrived since February 2022, according to the latest Central Statistics Office (CSO) data (as of 6 November 2022) (CSO, 2022a). This is a huge number in the context of annual arrivals of generally under 100,000 (Figure 2). Alongside the very high number of Ukrainian arrivals, 2022 also saw a rapid rise in international protection applications. Records from July 2022 show 7,760 applicants for the January to July period, an increase of over 700% compared to the same period in 2021 (IPO, n.d.). For comparison, over the full 12 months of 2019 Ireland received 4,781 international protection applications (ibid.). The largest numbers of asylum seekers in 2022 came from Georgia and Somalia. The rapid increase in applications may be attributable to pent up demand internationally after the pandemic and lockdown, among other factors.

2 Current immigration system and approach

Labour migration in Ireland is mainly managed through the country's Employment Permit System, with workers from outside the European Economic Area (EEA), the UK and Switzerland required to apply for an employment permit. The two most commonly used categories are the Critical Skills Employment Permit and the General Employment Permit. The government maintains a Critical Skills Occupation List designed to fill skills gaps, with occupations such as information and communications technology (ICT), healthcare, engineering and teaching among many currently on this list (Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, 2022). The General Employment Permit is available for all occupations that are not listed in the 'ineligible occupations' list,² with a salary benchmark and labour market test applied (Citizens Information Board, 2022).

Ireland's labour migration policy has been criticised by civil society as too restrictive. Changing employers means applying for a new permit and many essential jobs that receive low or mid-level salaries are deemed ineligible (MRCI, 2015). There is currently controversy around migrant workers in the fishing industry, who receive work permits under the Atypical Working Scheme.³ These permits are tied to one vessel owner, making workers vulnerable to abuse. There have been calls for migrant fishers to be included in the Critical Skills Permit System, but the government's promised review remains delayed (Dunphy, 2022). There is evidence of exploitation of migrant workers in other sectors including hospitality, domestic work, home care, retail and security; surveys have pointed to the lack of effective enforcement of the minimum wage and of inadequate efforts to counteract wage theft (MRCI, 2015).

Ireland has quite a limited offering of permanent residence compared to most EU member states, and citizenship is the primary route for non-EU migrants to make Ireland their permanent home (Groarke and Dunbar, 2020). Citizenship can be attained through continuous residence (see Box 1). In 2001, Ireland amended its citizenship legislation as a consequence of the Good Friday Agreement⁴ negotiations around territorial claims and nationality in relation to the people of Northern Ireland (De Souza, 2020). This amendment meant that all children of immigrants born in

2 The 'ineligible list' of occupations covers a wide range of categories (Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, n.d.). It is not possible to apply for an employment permit for these occupations.

3 This provides work permits for those doing atypical and short-term work not covered by other categories. Since 2015 this category has included migrant workers employed by the Irish fishing industry after concerns were raised about high numbers of undocumented workers in this sector (Arnold et al., 2017).

4 The Good Friday Agreement, or Belfast Agreement, is the peace agreement concluded between the British and Irish governments and Northern Ireland's political parties. It is the foundation of Northern Ireland's peace settlement.

Ireland were automatically eligible for citizenship, with parents granted automatic residence rights (Garner, 2007). However, in 2003 the Supreme Court removed parentage of an Irish-born child as grounds for residency (King, 2004). A referendum on this issue followed, in which almost 80% of voters opted for the introduction of a three-year residence qualification for non-Irish national parents before children could gain citizenship (ibid.).⁵

Box 1 Overview of Irish citizenship and asylum policies

Irish citizenship policy

In Ireland an immigrant can apply for citizenship on the basis of residence (requiring five years residency out of the previous nine years) or if they have been married to, or are in a civil partnership with, an Irish citizen for at least three years (Department of Justice, n.d.a). It is a costly process, requiring a €175 application fee and a further €950 fee payable if successful, some of the highest charges in the EU (Groarke and Dunbar, 2020). Refugees can also apply for citizenship, with no fee applied. The average processing time for naturalisation applications was 11 months in 2019, though delays have lengthened since the Covid-19 pandemic (McGinnity et al., 2020b).

Irish asylum policy

It is possible to apply for asylum at a port of entry or the International Protection Office. A preliminary interview will be conducted to gather basic information and an application is made at this point (UNHCR, n.d.). After a personal interview is completed and evidence provided, the International Protection Office can grant (or refuse) refugee status, subsidiary protection or permission to remain. If granted, this entitles the person permission to live in Ireland for three years, as well as full access to the labour market and public services. If refused, an applicant can appeal to the International Protection Appeals Tribunal. After a number of reforms in relation to the right to work, an applicant can now seek work six months after they have made their international protection application with permission to work granted for a 12-month period (Government of Ireland, 2021). The average time for processing of cases at the end of December 2020 was 20 months (ibid.). The vast majority see positive results from their claims, with 94% of decisions made in 2021 granting international protection status (IRC, 2022b).

5 Though there were claims at the time that immigrant women were coming to Ireland with the primary purpose of giving birth to qualify for citizenship, there were no robust statistics available and Dublin maternity hospitals had little comprehensive data to shed light on this issue (King, 2004). While the country had seen a large increase in births to non-nationals, this was assessed as a result of broader immigration patterns, mainly driven by labour market demand and immigration policies which enabled active recruitment of migrant workers (ibid.).

In December 2021, the government announced a scheme to regularise the status of long-term undocumented migrants (Government of Ireland, 2022). It had been estimated that between 20,000 and 26,000 undocumented migrants were living in Ireland, including around 5,000 children (IRMC, 2017). Results from a survey of undocumented migrants in 2020 showed that 75.5% had been living in Ireland for over five years, with the top three nationalities recorded as Filipino, Mongolian and Chinese (MRCI, 2020). Under the scheme, applicants needed to show they had been living in Ireland for four years (or three years for families with children) and pay the substantial application fee (€550 for an individual application) (Government of Ireland, 2022). A deportation order was not a bar to application, and asylum seekers who had been in the asylum process for at least two years could also apply through a separate process (*ibid.*). The scheme ran from 31 January 2022 to 31 July 2022 and almost 5,000 undocumented migrants and more than 3,000 asylum seekers received permission to remain under the scheme (Malone, 2022). Successful applicants receive unrestricted access to the labour market and will later be allowed to apply for citizenship.

Ireland's refugee resettlement efforts have historically benefited relatively modest numbers of people (O'Brien, 2004). However, in 2015 the government created a new Irish Refugee Protection Programme (IRPP) in response to the high numbers of refugees arriving in southern Europe. The government committed to receiving up to 4,000 refugees, through a combination of a relocation programme implemented within the EU (mainly with Greece and Italy) and the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR)-led refugee resettlement programme operating in Lebanon and Jordan (Department of Justice, 2020). Priority was given to resettling families and unaccompanied children (IRC, 2015; IOM, 2021). Under the collaboration with UNHCR, the Irish government had received 2,108 Syrian refugees from Lebanon and Jordan to resettle in Ireland by 2021 (IOM, 2021).

Also in 2015, the government despatched the Irish Naval Service to conduct migrant search and rescue missions in the Mediterranean. Between 15,000 and 17,000 people, most in transit from the coast of Libya, were rescued through this operation and brought to Italy (IRMC, 2017; Murtagh and Kelly, 2017). These missions came to an end in 2017, when the focus switched to support the EU-wide Operation Sophia.

While the government has continued to increase its support to UNHCR refugee resettlement, resettlement efforts are relatively small scale compared to the numbers of asylum seekers who apply for protection on arrival under procedures managed by the International Protection Office (see Box 1). These were significantly affected by a major reform (the 2015 International Protection Act) which established a single procedure for all international protection applications, meaning all grounds for protection are considered simultaneously (IRMC, 2017). While this simpler approach helps address long waiting times, the Act has been criticised for limiting rights to family reunification (*ibid.*). A new regulation introduced in November 2022 has established an accelerated process for international protection applicants from 'safe countries of origin' (IPO, 2022), including Georgia, Albania and South Africa.

Perhaps the most controversial aspect of Ireland's asylum system is 'Direct Provision'. This is the name given to a system of institutional accommodation introduced by the government in 2000 in response to the rapid growth in the number of people seeking asylum in Ireland. The system provides asylum seekers with basic housing, meals and a small weekly allowance, with asylum seekers mainly housed in privately owned hotels, hostels and apartment blocks. While the system was introduced as a short-term solution, it has remained in place for over 20 years. Known to be expensive for the state (though lucrative for the private owners of the properties concerned), it has also been heavily criticised by civil society and human rights campaigners as lacking in compassion and humanity, and is generally seen to be out of step with international best practice (see Box 2; Gorman, 2022). Its shortcomings have also been contrasted with the treatment given to Ukrainian refugees who, thanks to the EU's Temporary Protection Directive, do not have to complete individual applications or enter the Direct Provision system, and who have full access to the welfare system and the labour market (O'Toole, 2022; Pollak, 2022).

Box 2 In Focus: the Direct Provision system

The creation of the Direct Provision system rested on an assumption that applicants for asylum would have their claims processed in a timely manner and that, if and when given 'leave to remain', they would be able to move out of Direct Provision and into accommodation of their own. In practice, lengthy backlogs and shortages of relevant legal personnel have meant that, while many asylum seekers are in the system for less than two years, some have had to wait much longer to get a decision and have been forced to live in a limbo of uncertainty for years (Government of Ireland, 2020b; Gorman, 2022).

Until 2019, asylum seekers were unable to get work permits, undermining their well-being and meaning they could not integrate effectively in Irish society. With many arriving in a traumatised state, there are issues around mental health and vulnerability. In particular, concerns have been raised about children's well-being and child protection (OCO, 2021). Overcrowding in Direct Provision centres is a well-documented problem (Mouzourakis et al., 2019), and led to a large number of outbreaks of Covid-19 during the pandemic (Murphy, 2021). Even when finally granted 'leave to remain', many asylum seekers have had to stay on in Direct Provision as, in Ireland's current housing crisis, they have been unable to find accommodation of their own.

Direct Provision does not enjoy public or political support (O'Brien, 2014; Government of Ireland, 2020b). Successive governments have recognised its many deficiencies and have taken some modest steps to address them, including efforts to reduce processing times. After major public pressure, there have been three independent reviews of the Direct Provision system which have helped to force change. A group led by Catherine Day, former Secretary-General of the European Commission, recommended in 2021 that asylum seekers be accommodated in state-run facilities

only for the first three months after their application, after which they would be provided with ‘own-door’⁶ accommodation through local authorities (Government of Ireland, 2020b). Acting on the Day recommendations, the government brought in a White Paper in 2021 which committed to changes broadly on these lines, and to completing this process by the end of 2024 (Government of Ireland, 2021).

This timetable has been disrupted by the influx of Ukrainians and the equally daunting escalation in the number of asylum seekers. This is placing Ireland’s emergency accommodation capacity under unprecedented pressure, with emergency measures including tents being set up for Ukrainians (Fletcher, 2022; Gallagher, 2022). With no cap on the number of either Ukrainians or asylum seekers admitted to the country, and little prospect of Ukrainian immigrants returning home in significant numbers in the short term, the goal of moving all asylum seekers out of Direct Provision by the end of 2024 now seems beyond reach. Ending Direct Provision on the basis set out in the White Paper, however, remains a firm political commitment for the government and its three constituent parties (Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Green Party).

Ireland has traditionally lagged behind other EU countries in relation to integration services (Fanning, 2015). Since the creation of the Migrant Integration Strategy in 2017 Ireland has been assessed more positively by the Migrant Integration Policy Index, particularly for its policies around discrimination in education, migrant health and political participation (MIPEX, 2020). Migrants record similar unemployment rates to Irish nationals (6% and 5% respectively in 2019), setting Ireland apart from other EU countries that typically see much larger gaps (McGinnity et al., 2020b). However, a much higher unemployment rate for Africans has been notable for years (ibid.). Researchers point to structural racism and discrimination in the labour market as likely factors driving these inequalities (Joseph, 2017; O’Connell, 2019; McGinnity et al., 2020b). Recent research looking at the integration outcomes of resettled Syrian refugees finds poor results for labour market participation and little comprehensive support for employment access (IOM, 2021).

A major constraint on attempts to improve the Direct Provision system and migrant integration is the severity of Ireland’s housing crisis. With the highest housing costs in the EU (Weston, 2020), Ireland faces monumental challenges regarding housing affordability and spiralling numbers of evictions and repossessions (Hearne, 2022). This comes after longstanding failures to increase

6 This term refers to providing an accommodation model that is neither ‘congregated’ where asylum seekers live communally, nor ‘segregated’ where asylum seekers live in special centres or hostels, separately from the local community, for long periods.

the supply of affordable housing and poor policies that have encouraged financialised practices⁷ to dominate the Irish housing market (Hearne, n.d.). Access to housing features heavily in discussions around asylum seekers and refugees, and their support and integration (Gallagher, 2022; IRC, 2022a; Power, 2022).

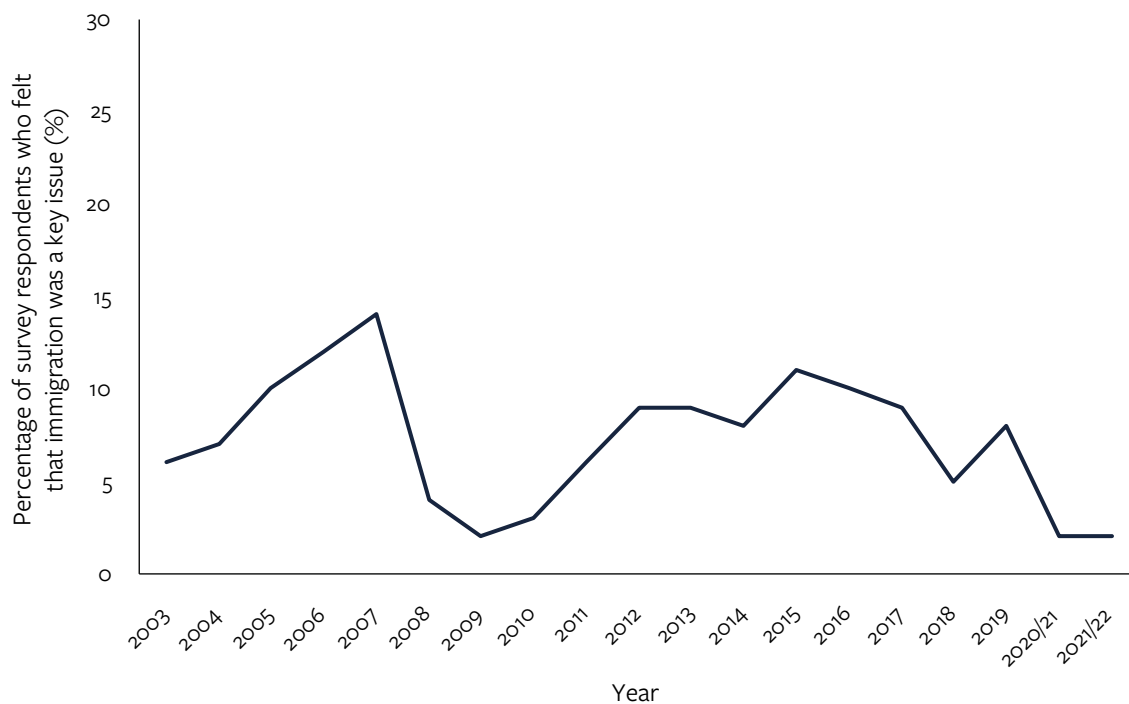
7 The term ‘financialisation of housing’ initially referred to the connections between booming mortgage markets, subprime lending and securitisation in the US. It has now expanded to include other processes and mechanisms such as social housing bonds, derivatives, and the role of private equity funds as corporate landlords and real estate investment trusts buy up large portfolios of affordable rental housing across the world (Aalbers et al., 2020). Housing financialisation trends have accelerated following the global financial crisis, which created unprecedented opportunities for private equity firms to buy distressed housing and real estate debt, including in Ireland (UNHRC, 2017).

3 Public attitudes towards refugees and other migrants: what do we know?

The Irish population see themselves as welcoming, optimistic, tolerant and open (SCI, 2018). A high proportion express interest in living in different parts of the world and assess globalisation as good for the country (O’Toole, 2021). This sense of openness is likely linked to Ireland’s unique experience of large-scale emigration. These attitudes co-exist with a strong sense of pride in Irish identity which has not waned as immigration has increased. The proportion proud to be Irish in the early 1980s (66%) – which far exceeded the European ‘national pride’ average at the time – has increased to even higher levels (82%) more recently (ibid.). This pride is directly associated with open and welcoming attitudes, rather than defensive nationalism. O’Toole (ibid.: n.p.) suggests ‘the sense of Irish nationality has become stronger as immigrants have been embraced within it’.

The Ipsos Global Trends survey in 2021 records 31% of Irish respondents agreeing that there were too many immigrants in the country (Ipsos Global Trends survey data cited in Pollak, 2021). However, it is notable that Ireland ranks far below countries such as Denmark, France, Italy, Germany and the UK, where much higher proportions of the public feel this (ibid.). Ireland also diverges from other European countries’ experiences when it comes to the salience of immigration. Salience has remained low over the last two decades, with immigration rarely registering as a top issue of concern for more than 10% of the Irish public and reaching a minor peak of only 14% in 2007 as immigration rapidly increased (see Figure 3). These are much lower levels than in the UK over the same period, where immigration has been a particularly divisive issue (Holloway et al., 2021). It also sets Ireland apart from the many European countries that experienced a surge of public attention to the issue of immigration during 2015–2016, when large numbers of refugees arrived in southern Europe (ODI, n.d.).

Recent surveys by Eurobarometer show that the Irish population has consistently been much more worried about health services and housing than immigration (Eurobarometer, n.d.). In the most recent Eurobarometer survey in summer 2022, the cost of living crisis was recorded as a top issue of concern by 65% of respondents, followed by housing (48%) (ibid.).

Figure 3 Salience of immigration as a key issue in Ireland

Note: This graphic shows the percentage of people answering ‘immigration’ to the question ‘What do you think are the two most important issues facing Ireland today?’ Annual data is presented, with data taken mainly from autumn surveys, though the Eurobarometer surveys were delayed due to Covid-19, with the autumn 2020 and 2021 surveys shifting to the winter 2020–2021 and 2021–2022 periods.

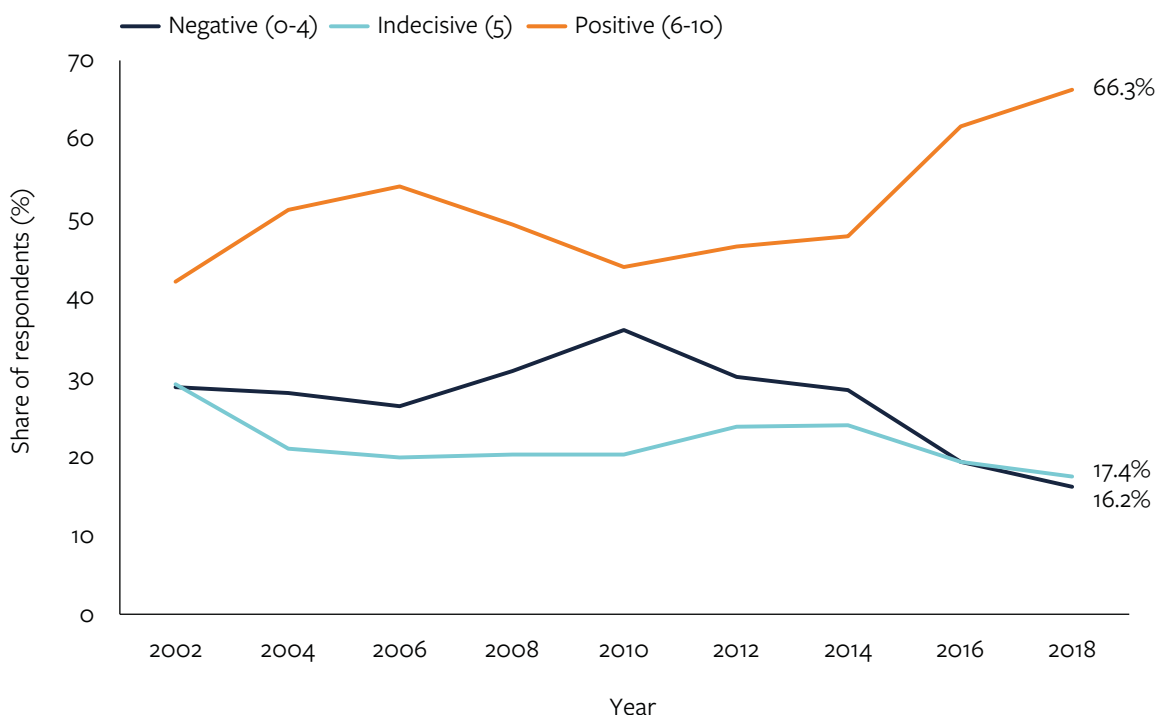
Source: Eurobarometer, n.d.

A number of surveys record broadly positive attitudes to immigration. Early data from 1981 – before any large-scale immigration – finds low levels of hostility towards immigrants, with only 6% saying they would not want immigrants/foreign workers as neighbours (O’Toole, 2021). More recent surveys still find a high level of openness to immigration, with the Social Change Initiative (SCI) (2018) recording 35% as ‘very open’ and 44% as ‘open’, though with some concerns and anxieties.

Attitudes towards immigration in Ireland show a strong correlation with economic trends. During the economic boom, attitudes towards immigrants were among the most liberal and positive in Europe. In 2002 and 2004, Ireland ranked second after Sweden on two key measures – the proportion of people agreeing that their country should allow people of a different race or ethnic group to come and live there, and the proportion saying immigrants made the country a better place to live (Turner, 2010). However, this changed with the global financial crisis and consequent deep recession. As Figure 4 shows, positive attitudes dipped (and negative attitudes rose) between 2008 and 2010. Researchers have established a clear link between rising unemployment and increasingly negative attitudes to immigration (McGinnity and Kingston, 2017; McGinnity et al., 2018).

What is also notable from Figure 4 is that, over the last two decades, positive attitudes have always outweighed negative ones, and the trend is strongly and increasingly positive (though a significant share has remained undecided). In 2018, 66% of Irish respondents felt immigration made the country a better place to live, mirroring results in Sweden (63%) and significantly higher than the UK (54%), Spain (47%), Germany (39%) and France (35%) (ODI, n.d.).

Figure 4 Attitudes towards immigration: do immigrants make Ireland a worse or a better place to live?



Note: This data has been extracted from each wave of the the European Social Survey. The survey scores respondents from 0–10. We have classified survey respondents who scored 0–4 in their answers to the question ‘Do immigrants make Ireland a worse or better place to live?’ as holding ‘negative’ views, those scoring 5 as being ‘indecisive’ and those scoring 6–10 as holding ‘positive’ views. Ireland’s data from wave 10 of the European Social Survey (conducted in 2022 due to the Covid-19 pandemic) had not been released at the time of this publication.

Source: European Social Survey, n.d.

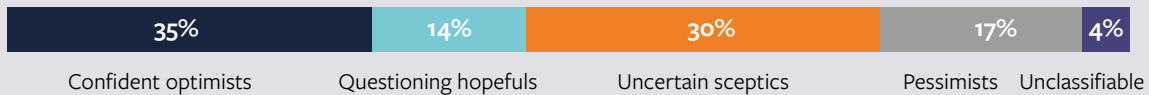
There is a strong consensus among the Irish population on some questions. For example, 74% feel that no child should grow up undocumented, and 60% agree that those living in Ireland for a long time should be able to become citizens (SCI, 2018). Almost half classify immigration as good for the economy (48%) and positive in terms of its cultural impact (47%) (ibid.). A notable concern is that immigration could be a drain on the welfare state (42%) and that it creates competition for jobs (39%) (ibid.). More recent data released this year shows that immigration is generally seen as more of an opportunity (41%) than a problem (19%) by the Irish public, with views also increasingly positive on this question compared to survey results from 2017 (Eurobarometer,

2022). In addition, 79% believe that the integration of most immigrants living in Ireland has been ‘fairly or very successful’, far above the EU average (42%) for this indicator, again emphasising the positive perceptions of the public in this area (ibid.).

These figures hide significant variations in attitudes across groups. Attitudes to immigration differ strongly on the basis of education, with those with higher education levels feeling more positive about the impact of immigration, including on the economy and Irish culture (McGinnity and Kingston, 2017; McGinnity et al., 2018). In contrast to other countries, however, older people do not appear to have more negative attitudes towards immigration than other age groups (McGinnity et al., 2018).

Using a segmentation technique, researchers have delved further into this issue, separating the Irish population into groups linked by their values and attitudes towards identity and immigration, a methodology used in several other countries (SCI, 2018).⁸ This research identifies four groups with differing profiles and views (see Box 3).

Box 3 Segmentation of the Irish population and attitudes towards immigration



Source: SCI, 2018

Confident optimists: people who are positive in outlook and optimistic about their personal circumstances as well as the country’s prospects. They have strongly positive views of immigrants and refugees, with many welcoming their skills and seeing cultural benefits. Unlike findings in other countries, this group does not disproportionately reflect more highly educated or urban residents; rather, the composition of this group is in line with the profile of the Irish population as a whole.

Questioning hopefuls: a group made up mostly of men under 35 with higher-than-average educational attainment. They are broadly positive about the economy and society and more neutral about immigration, though they express empathy towards refugees. More than half see immigration as good for cultural life and mostly not a drain on the state’s resources. However, they are unsure about whether immigrants make it more difficult for Irish people to get jobs. They tend towards the positive and, though hesitant, lean more towards openness.

8 Segmentation techniques have been most widely used in research in the UK (see Holloway et al., 2021 for a discussion of this work). The Irish research methodology was designed by Purpose and More in Common and follows previous work by these organisations in Germany, France, Italy and Greece.

Uncertain sceptics: a group made up of many middle-aged women. They have major concerns about some aspects of life in Ireland, particularly homelessness, healthcare, crime and violence. They are concerned about immigration and its consequences if not properly managed. Though uncertain about immigration policies, they are not overly anti-immigration in sentiment. Concern about pressure on housing, public services and the welfare system appears to drive more negative perceptions about immigration and a majority (61%) strongly agree, or tend to agree, that immigrants make it more difficult for Irish people to get jobs.

Pessimists: people who are very pessimistic about the economy and society and more likely to say their personal circumstances have worsened over the past year. They generally feel excluded and powerless. Immigration features more prominently among their main concerns, though it still ranks below healthcare and homelessness. They fear that immigrants will take jobs from locals and be a drain on the welfare state, and have concerns about the impact on Irish identity and culture. A high share of this group (68%) strongly agrees, or tends to agree, that immigrants are given priority in relation to housing, services and benefits. They are more likely to be unemployed and have lower levels of educational attainment and higher levels of socio-economic disadvantage. However, this group is not associated with extreme right-wing politics and they have less extreme views than 'left behind' groups in many other countries.

This research reveals the conflicted/anxious middle – in Ireland’s case, the 44% made up of ‘Questioning Hopefuls’ and ‘Uncertain Sceptics’ – that hold mixed views towards immigration (SCI, 2018). These groups are not anti-immigration but are concerned about immigration that is not well managed.

Using data from a special module of the European Social Survey in 2014, researchers have also looked at whether attitudes towards immigration vary depending on ethnic group (McGinnity et al., 2018), a particularly valid question given many immigrants in Ireland have been white European, with similar cultural and religious backgrounds. One key finding was that, while 58% of Irish respondents would allow more or some immigrants from the same ethnic group as most Irish people, this dropped substantially for Muslim immigration (to 41%) and even further when asked about Roma immigration (to 25%) (ibid.). Ireland is far less accepting of Muslim immigrants than a country like Sweden (where 82% said they would allow more/some Muslim immigration). Ireland records the lowest level of acceptance of the Roma population of the 11 Western European countries studied⁹ (ibid.).

More recent research confirms similar sentiments. When asked whether they feel ‘warm’ or ‘cold’ towards certain communities, 26% of respondents report feeling ‘cold’ towards Muslims

9 The countries in this study were Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and the UK.

(compared to only 6% when asked about Europeans) (SCI, 2018). The Irish population is also notably less accepting of Irish Travellers, with 29% feeling ‘cold’ towards this group (ibid.). In fact, public attitudes towards Roma and Irish Traveller groups in Ireland are highly prejudiced – 91% surveyed in a rights monitoring exercise in 2017 said they didn’t want a Traveller or Roma marrying into their family, and 75% would not accept a Traveller or Roma as a colleague (Rorke, 2018). Ireland lags substantially behind other European countries in Roma and Traveller integration, with both populations having substantially worse health, education and economic outcomes than the rest of the population (Department of Justice, n.d.b; Rorke, 2018).

When survey respondents are asked about beliefs about racial and cultural superiority, Ireland also records more negative attitudes than the average from a sample of 11 Western European countries (McGinnity et al., 2018). In Ireland 17% believe some groups are more intelligent than others (a little more than the 11-country average of 14% and compared to only 2% in Sweden) and 50% believe some cultures are better than others (compared to 45% average and only 27% in France) (ibid.).

When it comes to attitudes specifically towards refugees, survey results demonstrate that public opinion is generally positive. In 2016, Ireland came top in a survey of European countries, after 88% of respondents expressed some degree of sympathy with Syrian refugees, ahead of Spain (86%), Portugal (85%) and Germany (84%) (Ipsos, 2016). A clear majority (59%) support the principles of international protection, believing that people should be able to take refuge in other countries to escape war and persecution (SCI, 2018). However, a higher share (62%) is concerned that a welcoming stance will encourage more refugees to come, and 43% dispute whether refugees’ claims are genuine (ibid.). At the same time, there is very strong agreement around support for refugee or asylum-seeking children: 80% believe they should be provided with English-language teaching at school (ibid.). The main concerns about refugees appear to be related to pressure on the welfare system and public services (Ipsos, 2016). Concerns are notably less about refugees’ impact on crime rates, which is more of a preoccupation in countries such as Italy, Denmark and Sweden (ibid.).

Attitudes to Ukrainian refugees have also been positive, with Ireland showing a comparatively high degree of acceptance among EU countries in opinion surveys. In March 2022, 58% expressed support for taking in as many Ukrainian refugees as possible, above the EU average (50%), though below the most welcoming countries, Spain (65%) and Finland (63%) (B&A Ireland, 2022). Support for unrestricted admission was highest for the oldest age group (65+) (70%) and the youngest (18–24) (65%) (ibid.). Polling in April 2022 found that half the population were open to taking a Ukrainian refugee into their homes, if they had a spare bedroom, with significantly higher support among Dubliners and the middle classes (Reaper, 2022). However, this has been described as an ‘initial flush of enthusiasm for refugees’; the serious realities of Ireland’s housing crisis may well change public attitudes in this area (ibid.: 24). The positivity of attitudes towards Ukrainians also has other impacts. For example, the ‘overwhelming preference in communities

towards housing Ukrainians' has meant offers from businesses and individuals to house refugees in the midst of the current emergency accommodation crisis has skewed support away from asylum seekers, raising fears that more of the latter will end up homeless (Gallagher, 2022: n.p.).

Valid questions remain around how Ireland's positive attitudes towards immigration square with attitudes towards different ethnicities and the racial disparities that demonstrably exist in the country (Joseph, 2017). Researchers have applied a 'list experiment' – an approach that can shed light on whether surveys are capturing 'socially desirable' responses (McGinnity et al., 2020a). Using this methodology, more masking of attitudes was found in relation to the Black population compared to the Muslim population: 15% of respondents do not support more Black people coming to Ireland but conceal this when asked directly. In contrast, people feel it is more acceptable to hold negative attitudes towards Muslim immigration and less masking of negative attitudes is found. There is more masking of negative attitudes by those with the highest educational qualifications who appear to 'have learned to conceal socially undesirable attitudes' (ibid.: 44). This research suggests both that Irish attitudes may not be as positive as they seem, and also that traditional surveys in this area are over-estimating the difference in attitudes between certain groups in the population.

4 The absence of negative narratives

Unlike many European countries, Ireland does not have a history of negative political rhetoric around immigration, no doubt a factor which contributes to the low salience of the topic. During the country's economic boom period, it was not unusual for politicians to highlight the benefits of immigration, linking it to economic growth, filling skills gaps and characterising it as 'the fuel that kept the Celtic Tiger going' (Smith, 2008; Fanning, 2015: 5). Immigration was widely seen as in the national interest and proof of the success of Ireland's nation-building project (Fanning, 2015). By contrast, the political and media narratives around emigration are often extremely emotive and negative, with emigration widely perceived as a 'scourge' on Irish society (Glynn et al., 2015).

The absence of a far-right political party in Ireland also sets the country apart. Irish politics has traditionally been dominated by its two largest parties, Fianna Fáil (FF) and Fine Gael (FG), both of which have their roots in the 1917–1921 Irish independence movement (Farrell, 2020). FG is economically liberal and seen as traditional and centre-right; FF is slightly to the left of FG, putting more emphasis on social welfare and public service provision (Field, 2020). In recent decades both parties have led centre-right and centre-left coalitions.

However, in recent years Irish politics has become more volatile. The 2020 election saw the worst-ever outcome for the two largest parties after a surge in the vote for the left-wing republican party Sinn Féin (BBC, 2020). While the core of Sinn Féin's political manifesto is to achieve a united Ireland, its more immediate policy priorities include a focus on increasing public spending and particularly addressing the housing crisis (Field, 2020). While Sinn Féin sees itself as left-wing, it is variously described as populist and radical (Field, 2020; McGee, 2022). However, its immigration policies are liberal and emphasise protection aspects. Its 2020 election manifesto committed to restart migrant search and rescue operations in the Mediterranean and emphasised the need for an immigration system that meets the shortfalls of the labour market (Sinn Féin, 2020).

The particular make-up of Irish politics provides some explanation as to the absence of a far-right political force, not least because the 'national question' has been a traditional focus of political debate, rather than a left/right dichotomy (Garner, 2007). In addition, the presence and nature of Sinn Féin is considered a factor (O'Malley, 2008). It occupies the space that would often be taken up by a far-right party, appealing to those who feel economically left behind but without the negative rhetoric on immigration. Another answer is likely to lie in Ireland's history of large-scale emigration during periods of unemployment. This has resulted in less of a pool of potential supporters who feel disenfranchised and left behind (Garner, 2007).

Other explanations may lie in deeply rooted social attitudes. Prompted by new data from the Ipsos Global Trends 2021 survey, O'Toole (2021: n.p.) suggests the 'relative absence of nostalgia' is important. Ireland records the second-lowest score when respondents are asked if they would like their country to be the way it used to be. While a sense of loss often feeds right-wing

nationalism and populism, in Ireland, O'Toole (2021: n.p.) argues, the population looks back on 'mass unemployment, mass emigration, a repressive Catholic state with bans on homosexuality, contraception, divorce and abortion and the daily horrors of the Troubles'. Though the explanation for the absence of a far-right political force is, no doubt, multifaceted, the result is that no party has taken up anti-immigrant, hard-line rhetoric, despite a deep economic recession that might have provided fertile ground for anti-immigrant rhetoric (Fanning, 2015).

This is not to say that political narratives are exclusively positive. There are examples of political candidates expressing anti-immigrant rhetoric in their campaigns, but this has not found its way into party positions (Garner, 2007). The current Programme for Government agreed between the coalition parties FF, FG and the Greens commits to major reforms to Direct Provision, a new national Migrant Integration Strategy (accompanied by participatory county-level strategies) and the regularisation programme (Government of Ireland, 2020a). A key narrative advanced by the Justice Minister, Helen McEntee, to justify the regularisation scheme, has been the need to show the same generosity to undocumented migrants that the Irish have historically benefited from in the US (Molony, 2021).

There are also numerous examples of negative media narratives, including in the early days of increased immigration, when portrayals of Ireland being 'swamped, invaded and conned' were common (Quinn and Ó'Maoláin, 2002: 228). However, while tabloid coverage may occasionally strike a more right-wing tone, the mainstream Irish media is generally centrist/liberal-leaning, and seen as less likely to stir up anti-immigrant sentiment than sections of the British media (Smith, 2008). There are also some examples of consistent, positive attention in the Irish media to the migrant population, including the long-running *Irish Times* series 'New to the Parish', where newcomers to Ireland talk about their new lives (Irish Times, n.d.). One of its key aims is to challenge the assumption that 'migrant' equates to 'asylum seeker', in part due to the well-known problems with the Direct Provision system.

Positive narratives also emanate from many non-state actors. Particularly active are the non-profit and community-based organisations working to promote the rights of migrants and the protection needs of refugees.¹⁰ There are also migrant-led organisations such as the Movement of Asylum Seekers Ireland (MASI) and AkiDwa, a national network of migrant women. Local councils also play a role in advancing positive narratives, with multiple councils standing out for their inclusion and integration efforts (Cork City Council, n.d.; Fingal Public Participation Network, n.d.; South Dublin County Council, n.d.; Waterford City and County Council, 2021).

One of the most visible civil society campaigns has been for the abolition of the Direct Provision system. This has attracted widespread support including from activists, journalists, academics and the creative arts sector (Murphy, 2021). It appears to have had particular resonance with the public

¹⁰ Active organisations in this space include the Migrant Rights Centre of Ireland, Nasc, the Immigrant Council of Ireland and Crosscare, as well as networks such as the Irish Refugee and Migrant Coalition.

because Direct Provision is a reminder of the ‘institutional culture of confinement’, which includes the Magdalene laundries and Mother and Baby homes that have been the subject of lengthy public inquiries and caused huge public outcry (Loyal and Quilley, 2016: n.p.; Murphy, 2021).

Different narratives have also emerged based on the implicit assumption that Ukrainians will receive better treatment than asylum seekers within the Direct Provision system (O’Toole, 2022). Politicians justify this differential treatment with reference to their status as European neighbours. The shortcomings of this justification have been pointed out, not least the fact that Syrians are similarly geographically distant from Ireland and also fleeing Russian aggression, leaving a reasonable conclusion that being ‘white and culturally Christian’ is a key factor enabling this very strongly welcoming narrative and more expansive public policies (ibid.).

Although no real far-right political force has emerged in Ireland and narratives remain broadly positive, recent research has identified a number of small groups of far-right organisers and ‘influencers’ (GPAHE, 2022). These groups hold a combination of white nationalist, anti-LGBTQI, anti-abortion and anti-immigrant views. The Covid-19 pandemic appears to have fuelled their activity, with anti-lockdown sentiments converging with far-right views (Murphy, 2021). Still, these groups do not appear to have had a significant impact, with most ‘confined largely to online echo chambers’ and often few members (Clifford, 2022: n.p.). This has the potential to change, however, as demonstrated by the recent activity of far-right groups protesting against housing asylum seekers in East Wall, Dublin, and other locations (O’Connor, 2022).

Ireland still grapples with issues around racism and discrimination. Hate crime is on the rise, with the majority related to racism (An Garda Síochána n.d.; ECRI, 2019). There has also been an increase in online hate speech, with anti-immigrant and anti-refugee content prevalent (INAR, 2019). Political figures have been the target of racism. Hazel Chu (a second-generation immigrant born in Ireland to Chinese parents) faced online and offline racist harassment during her tenure as Lord Mayor of Dublin (Moore, 2021). Hate crimes rarely lead to prosecutions given the country’s outdated legislative framework (though updated hate crime legislation is currently being prepared) (IRMC, 2017; ECRI, 2019; Department of Justice, 2022). The police have few resources to deal with hate crime, with only the most extreme sources monitored (INAR, 2019).

5 Conclusion

Ireland has traditionally been a country of large-scale emigration, a fact that has defined Irish identity and continues to influence public narratives and attitudes around migration. Significant immigration only began in the late 1990s but, in a short space of time, has transformed Ireland into a multicultural society. The public has largely responded positively to these changes. Immigration has rarely prompted any notable levels of concern and attitudes have consistently been among the most positive in Europe.

These positive attitudes are likely due to the particularities of the Irish historical context, experience of emigration and deeply held values that have shaped national identity. However, they are also clearly a result of the fact that immigration has not been politicised. There is no far-right political force and Ireland is mainly free of the divisive rhetoric of countries such as the UK, Denmark, France and Italy. Even members of the public who are most sceptical and fearful about immigration do not espouse extreme right-wing views.

While attitudes appear mainly positive across a range of measures and surveys, there is credible new research that some ‘masking’ of less socially acceptable views is occurring. It is also clear that certain groups – particularly Black, Muslim and Roma immigrants (alongside non-immigrant Irish Traveller groups) – face persistent racism and discrimination.

There is little room for complacency as the country endures a serious cost of living crisis, given the well-established link between public attitudes and the economy. This, combined with the unprecedented housing crisis and major increases in immigration, which are particularly unique to 2022, could lead to worsening public attitudes around immigration.

Without purposeful strategies from the government, including in the areas of inclusion and integration, it would be unwise to assume positive attitudes will automatically be maintained. Possibly more than any other country in Europe, Ireland’s housing policy could be central to maintaining a cohesive society and avoiding the rise of far-right movements in the country. Political leaders will need to find practical answers to the country’s major challenges and must resist the urge to scapegoat migrants for current policy shortcomings. Ireland’s active civil society, employers who need migrant workers, academics and local leaders will all have key roles to play to maintain a welcoming attitude towards refugees and other migrants.

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