

Migration

Ciaran Oglesby interviews Aki Stavro of Integrating Ireland

CO: Welcome Aki.

AS: Hi Ciarán. Thank you very much.

CO: Now Aki could you tell me what in your experience are the primary motives for people migrating to Ireland?

AS: I think primary motives would differ depending on the type of immigrant we see coming into Ireland; have traditionally come to Ireland and are still coming into Ireland and I think we can break it down into a number of, a number of categories. There is immigrants who have come here for work and sometimes for short-term work or long-term work. There is immigrants who have come here for protection- we refer to them as asylum seekers and/or refugees and there would be and certainly up until around 2005 an important component of immigrants coming into Ireland were returned Irish. Quite often when we use the word “returned Irish” we tend to think of people who have gone and come but that is not necessarily the case. It has also been Irish of second generation and third generation who have decided to come back to the land of their parents as such. Now depending if we sort of unpick them a little bit and we look at those who have come here for work there would be immigrants who have come here from the rest of Europe and there we saw a mass movement of immigration from Eastern Europe when the ten new accession states came on board and that immigration is responsible for about 75% of all immigration that we have seen into this country. Now depending on who we speak to, for some it was always going to be a short-term or even oscillating migrantcy... where people would come and go depending on the level of work available or level of opportunity available for them to try and access. For others it might have been about putting down long-term roots. We’re not quite sure where it falls but nevertheless I think what we are seeing now with the contraction in the economy, a recession as we are being told. A lot of people who have come are leaving. It’s again very difficult to put numbers or percentages or say how many or how much but there is a combination of those two. For those seeking protection it’s just very clear. Ireland has always stood up in the United Nations and within the European Union and on numerous international fora proclaiming itself as a country that takes its international obligations seriously and as such, is a country where people seeking asylum because of conditions in their countries of residence, their home countries where they are coming from, and Ireland offers that sanctuary to which it signed up to and so there would be people coming for protection as such. And then during the years of the Celtic Tiger, there were a lot of Irish who of second or third generation abroad who felt that link to go back to the land of their parents and grandparents and we saw a lot of that and indeed I think up until 2004 they counted for 50% of all immigrants coming here. It was only when the accession states came on board that the numbers really started to tip in the direction that they did. And I should also add that there has also been a steady movement of people, which would be migration of course, coming from the United States, Australia, South Africa, United Kingdom which has been ongoing for decades and during the time of the Celtic Tiger that sort of increased quite substantially and would amount for around 20% of immigration into Ireland as well. So when we start

unpicking it, it's actually a very, very small percentage of people who have actually come from outside the EU and from outside, sort of, North America and Australia, New Zealand, if you like. At one stage, we were given numbers of about 400,000 people coming into this country, while less than 90,000 come from outside the EU and outside those two geographical areas.

CO: So to a degree the migrational trend is continuing in Europe between mixing and migrating cultures within Europe itself.

AS: It is continuing, but it's changing direction. I think what we are clearly seeing is that a number of your Eastern European countries, we still tend to refer to them as the accession states, although they've been with us for some time now. Their economies have grown and they've grown to the extent that they are now becoming attractive for those migrants that left and came to predominately the UK, Ireland, Sweden and sort of later on Spain- they tended to be the destinations for most of Eastern Europeans and Italy as well. And as conditions have become less attractive in those countries, many are beginning to return back. So we are seeing that flows that were largely westward are now turning back and becoming eastward.

CO: What is the migration experience like and how does this affect migrants?

AS: I guess the migration experience is as varied as the type of migrants that come here and for the reasons that they come here. For somebody seeking asylum, we have probably one of the most difficult asylum systems within the EU and I'm just going to use the EU as to compare against. It's very difficult to come in. It used to be up until very, very recently a very lengthy process, to the extent that we have asylum seekers some of which have been living in direct provision centres which is where they are housed for a lengthy time period. At one stage a couple of years ago there would have been people who have been in there for well over five years. Now those time lists have shortened substantially. There is still some people that have fallen through the gap in terms of timing, but that is shortening and I would imagine that within the next couple of years, the government would have got rid of those very, very lengthy lists. But nevertheless, it remains a very difficult process. I think we saw examples recently of an Indian cleric who was turned away at customs when he came in to visit. So, it is becoming much more difficult to come and at times we also question as to whether we are starting to abdicate from some of our international obligations. The other issue it is very difficult for labour migrants who have come in here and here I would be referring to non-EU persons moving to Ireland, because EU persons have the right of residence no different to any other Irish person. But the difficulty for what we would call third country migrants is getting long term residence. Now there is a new immigration Residency and Protection bill which is touted as a bill which will offer longterm residency to people coming to Ireland. That's not true. It offers residency to people for up to five years which it then has to be renewed. And I guess, renewed means under very stringent conditions. And although I'm not going to discuss the stringent conditions they are kind of, very difficult to implement. One is not quite sure when you start to renew and given that sometimes the processes here can take anything between about six months and two years is is fraught full of difficulties but it does not offer a pathway to citizenship and a pathway to permanent immigration into the country. The other issue which is very difficult for all types of immigrants is family reunification. It's bringing your family members to join you

once you have been allowed to settle in this country although over a given time period, that is. And if we look at the rest of the EU, family reunification is the largest form of immigrants coming into those countries and we have put some incredibly stringent contingents in this respect. So those types of experiences aren't great. On the plus side, you do have what so far has been a largely welcoming population, local population in Ireland, not just in Dublin because a lot of people tend to think this is where immigrants come. And certainly, just under half are living in Dublin but throughout the country, people have largely been very positive to the overwhelming majority of immigrants. I mean, there have been problems. There have been racial problems. There have been xenophobic problems. There have been social exclusion problems. They are all there but they are really no different to those that you would find in other parts of the EU, and in fact, I would say, until now, we have probably done a lot better than most other EU countries.

CO: Great. What stereotypes do migrants face and what stereotypes do they have of Ireland before they arrive?

AS: I was kinda thinking of that question, it kinda often gets asked. I guess, if I could start off before you get to Ireland, I think, the type of stereotype, this I get from other immigrants because it is a question we have tended to discuss with each other, is that Irish are a happy people. I mean happy is a kind of descriptive word and it can have many sort of different nuances and meanings but generally a sort of laid back type of population which however gets on with things and you know, you don't get period like the Celtic tiger if everybody is kind of happy go lucky, sitting around and having a great time. It's a kind of a mix of an industrious population but one that feels and knows how to enjoy itself. And that is the case, I mean, when you come into here that's what you do find.

Vox Pop conducted by Ciaran Oglesby

CO Do you have a feeling, a sense of belonging or social inclusion in Dublin since you have been here.

VP1: Well, I think most of the people that I have interacted with, like my colleagues, who are not necessarily Irish. They could be from Spanish, Italian, in that sense, I think that slowly, I think over the two months I am getting to mix around with everyone and trying to settle down so to speak.

VP2: I think that here the people are very kind so if I, sometimes, if I don't understand something, the people can help me.

VP3: Actually, after one year, I feel very comfortable here, nice people and I hope you stay like you are, guys

Interview with Aki Stavros resumes

AS: You do find people who do try to have a quality of life but also know how to work very hard. There are other stereotypes as well. There are the stereotypes that you would find. You find your xenophobes and your racists. They have by and large, so far been pretty much in the minority. You do find people that will have

other prejudices. Sometimes, they are prejudices that you don't see. I have often referred to glass doors where you know there are certain differences you kind of experience from when you come into this country amongst people and you navigate either past them or through them. Sometimes, glass doors, little nuances that are very Irish, you just bounce off. Again, no different to what you would find in other countries. I guess, the other thing that when you talk about the type of stereotypes, is that it is a very young population. It is a young group and when one talks to middle aged migrants, their experiences are somewhat a little more difficult because at the same time one of the other stereotypes you do pick up is a cautious population. The Irish are a cautious people. They don't just jump into things. They don't jump into friendships. I think once you have made friendships you've really, you have got true friendships but it's a cautious group whereas among the youth, or the younger cohorts people are less cautious and it's easier to strike up friendships. It's a lot more difficult for middle aged people. It's a kind of varied experience. And then I guess, it depends again on what part of the world you are coming from. If you are coming from sub Saharan Africa, for instance, you would expect sort of prejudices related to race. Largely, most people would tell you that actually the experience was not that bad. If you are coming from the Islamic world, you would expect prejudices coming from in terms of being anti-muslim. Again, we have got a pretty good record here. That's not to say that, that doesn't happen but thus far, it has been very contained and you know, pretty low

CO: How do migrants find the integration progress into Irish culture and to a large degree you answered it there to some extent, but from your own experience in the organisation?

AS: Once again, I have to refer to where immigrants have come from. I think immigrants that have come from countries which are pretty Anglophone countries, countries that would in many respects would share the type of television that one has in North American television, Anglophone European television, the sort of cultural nuances as I would call them, of Irishness, you are already well aware of those and so it makes it a little easier for people to come in, from making a joke or picking up sort of comments that are made, you know, you can take them in your stride. If you are coming from a culture that is very different and here the eastern European culture for instance can be very different and if it comes down to humour because humour is part of the culture. Very different type of humour. There have been problems. We conducted a study down at UCC about six years ago and ironically found in terms of cultural integration when we compared groups of people from different parts of the world and we felt that a black African, for instance, would have a greater problem being culturally ingrained in Cork society, if you like, as opposed to an Eastern European. I'm going to have to use colour coding. A white eastern European as opposed to black African. Actually we found completely the opposite. We found Eastern Europeans having a much greater problem. However, there is now a massive eastern Europeans in this country in terms of numbers and that is largely dissipated but yea.

CO: How important is intercultural dialogue to the integration of migrants?

AS: Well let's put it this way, intercultural dialogue opens up doors. And if we don't open up doors we don't even begin to understand our differences and our

commonalities. And only after we have understood our differences and our commonalities and, just in a sense, try and bridge these differences and work on the commonalities only they can we synergise our collective effort to move forward. And it really would be an intercultural dialogue that facilitates this. Now, dialogues can take place at different levels and within different spheres of society. They can take place in the church. They can take place in the workplace. They can take place in the pub. They can take place in the sports field. They can take place in a variety of different areas and all of them are absolutely important, because they impact on different aspects of the population at different times. To give an example, within the workplace, a lot of migrants have found it really easy to traverse through the various barriers, the various challenges if you like, and get over them pretty quickly but when you move out of the workplace and come the weekend and then come, what are you going to do after work, you find a lot of migrants then would congregate with each other because that sort of intercultural mixed dialogue hasn't taken place, you know, within that particular sphere. So, we think it's absolutely vital. It is essential because you just don't open door otherwise.

CO Right. Do the migrants experience social exclusion due to the language barrier and what or do they generally take measures to overcome this?

AS Yes, they absolutely do experience social exclusion, and rightfully so the government has identified that as the single most important issue in terms of the integration debate, the integration challenge if you like. Because in a sense, if you can't communicate, you just don't socialise you just can't even enter any kind of dialogue. So you do get excluded from a whole series of processes. But also at the same time, what you do is, you compensate for that and then you start to build parallel societies and it is those kind of multicultural models that have emerged in other countries other parts of the world which we really should be avoiding here because what we don't want is parallel societies. How do migrants overcome it? For those who struggle because of the language barrier there is almost a greater necessity on their behalf to showcase themselves and to work harder than their peers to just do that little bit extra so they get noticed, you know, because of what is lacking. Because they can't communicate, well, I'm going to stand out from the crowd by excelling. It puts an enormous amount of pressure and people might say that's a good thing. Well, yes, it's not a bad thing except when that is not recognised then negative feelings set in and it's possible, I'm in no doubt it does happen, in some circumstances people then become resentful of that and start to self exclude themselves even further.

CO: Counterproductive

AS: Absolutely.

CO Finally, what do you think are the biggest challenges which prohibit intercultural dialogue?

AS: There is a number of them. We have spoken about a number of them already being language, being prejudice. If I can just refer to prejudice a little bit because I have mentioned it a number of instances earlier on, how we have been lucky thus far in terms of racism, xenophobia, social exclusion etc. but that's on the increase and it's beginning to increase quite rapidly. We just have to look at classic theory of recession etc. and the battle for scarce resources and that's a natural thing that's going to happen anyway. It's going to happen anyway between certain groups of

Irish people. You don't need immigrants for that to take place. I think it's going to be a little bit more explicit with immigrants. Thought we've got to be very very careful about that challenge particularly going into a recession. The other challenge, of course is a challenge related to resources. Integration doesn't just happen. It needs special strategies. It needs specific programmes and these all need to be funded and as we speak a budget is probably being delivered. I don't think it is going to be kind to any sector in society. There is nothing to suggest that migrants are going to be elevated to a level above other components of society. So I think, you know there is going to be...the whole of society is going to suffer, given from where we are coming from. But that is a challenge and it is a challenge we just have to bear in mind when our resource constraints are less severe than they are now. And I think the final thing, for myself, is the whole notion of space. If we are going to talk about people coming together, people getting to know each other, people moving together into a future. You need a space for that to happen. Although we have mentioned the workspace, we mentioned religious places education etc, but there still need to be that common place where you can go and have a barbeque and where you can meet. Now the Irish tradition has largely been, I'm not doing any stereotyping here myself but it has largely been in the pub. The pub is not an easily accessible thing or place for all migrants who come in, for various reasons. And although they are wonderful places to go in Ireland and I've had wonderful experiences in lots of pubs up and down this country until one gets known you remain a blow-in. And it takes time to lose that tag and once you are losing that tag a lot of valuable time often gets wasted. So the notion of space which is mostly an intangible is something we really need to be talking about and seeing, you know, how do we deal with this challenge.

CO: Thank you, Stavro. Thank you very much for your time

AS: Not at all, and thank you very much for the opportunity and good luck.

Ciaran Oglesby speaks with Conor Lenihan, TD, Minister for Integration.

CO: What stereotypes do migrants face and what stereotypes did they have of Ireland before they arrived?

CL: I think some of the obvious stereotypes that we have seen over the years and it is only ten years that we have been experiencing mass inward migration into Ireland. But, I think some of the stereotypes that you see amongst Irish people is that this kind of whole idea that immigrants are somehow taking from our system and I suppose you know, it's hard to say but that harsh reality or the difficult reality for some people to face because these things are profoundly believed by some people is that over the last ten years, migrants have been net contributors to our society and our economy. They have actually been working. They are typically, in age profile terms, in that 18-44 year-old age demographic which is typically working, not actually taking social welfare. In fact, the numbers of immigrants on social welfare has been extraordinarily low in fact as low as 16,000 up to this year. It literally doubled with the Dell turn to over 30,000. So, in other words, the number of people from the immigrant community actually claiming social welfare by way of unemployment benefits has been extremely low and disproportionately low compared to the percentage they have in the population as a whole. And that basically reflects the fact that the people we have attracted are predominately overqualified for the jobs they are doing. Highly qualified people, in some cases in that 18-44 age cohort they are actually more likely to have a third level degree than the indigenous population in the same age category. So, you know, there are a lot of myths and stereotypes about them, about taking from the system, about social welfare abuse and issues like that and they are not entirely true. In fact, they are very wide off the mark. Of course, you do have, like we have in our own population, you have people who abuse the social welfare system but percentage wise it is not disproportionate with the immigrant population. In fact, the other thing that you often frequently hear said by people but of course there is no factual basis for it, "Oh God, there is so many non-Irish people in the prison system". But in fact there are percentage wise for their proportion of the population, they are not overly represented for instance, in the prison population. But that's a story or a yarn that you'll hear told left, right and centre in pubs, in shops and God knows where you'll go now in the city of Dublin and elsewhere and it is not the case. They are no more likely to commit a crime than our own population and they are reflected in our prison population for instance, they are virtually I think represent pro rata for their actual percentage in the overall population. I think it is around 10%.

C.O. : How important is intercultural dialogue to the integration of migrants?

C.L. : Well, obviously it's hugely important and you know, in a way, I hate the word intercultural dialogue because it sounds like an awful jargon word and unfortunately, I think, in this area like many other areas of public discussion it's infested with this kind of jargon. But, I mean if you are talking about intercultural dialogue meaning how important is it that there is a basic elemental contact, social and otherwise, formal or informal between members of the Irish community, Irish decision makers and the

migrant community and their representative I think that is hugely important. I think a lot of very good work is being done at this, particularly at local authority level, particularly, for instance through the local library services. There is a lot happening on the ground and that is one of the better signs of things to come here in Ireland. Already, you know, over the last ten years an enormous amount of contact is occurring and happening at a very distinct social level. Principally, I suspect, because we haven't got to the situation yet and we have to be careful of this we have created urban ghettos where only the migrants live. Now we have certain areas where they are very strongly represented in numbers and we all know those, when we look around our towns and cities, but it hasn't become so concentrated that they can live almost in their own world without having to make contact with the indigenous population and vice versa. So, it seems to me that there is a high level of discussion and talk going on between immigrants and domestic or indigenous population.

C.O. : Do migrants generally experience social exclusion due to the language barrier and what and do they generally take measures to overcome this?

C.L. Well, yeah, the language barrier is enormous. You know, the Irish people themselves have been defined by their outward bound journeys themselves as emigrants. I think it is no accident for instance, I think a great amount of the tolerance and understanding and affinity that exists in Ireland for the situation facing immigrants is because we have within our population since the boom starting in the ninties here that we have a lot of people upwards of three to four hundred thousand Irish people who lived abroad in multicultural multiethnic settings. So they are familiar with the concept, by dint of maybe living in the U.K. , the United States, New Zealand in multicultural settings themselves for five or ten years themselves finally getting the opportunity to come home and take a job and raise their family, in Ireland. I think that section of the population have had quite a big influence on how we have handled this issue because they act as a, I would call it a tolerance valve against, what I would call the more ignorant voices who might try to create stereotypes or create, what I would call a run against immigrants.

C.O. Finally, what do you think are the biggest challenges which prohibit intercultural dialogue?

C.L. I suppose, the basic and biggest challenge is that a lot of people simply don't want to engage at all. They don't. They are not interested and I think there is a very clear link let's be honest about this, when you read all the research that's done, Europe wide, and here in Ireland as well, there is a very strong link between people who evince on a routine basis racist type viewpoints and attitudes and very low levels of education and attainment and that is a very serious challenge. That typically, racism and by implication, intercultural dialogue does not take place where people form these attitudes from a position of a lack of knowledge or a lack of education or a lack of intuitive understanding to be able to cope with the concepts. The biggest challenge in Ireland, is a sort of shyness in my view. A lot of people are quite shy and they don't know what to say and they feel awkward and sometimes, I think, I would argue the biggest challenge to integration happening is, this kind of fear or phobic reaction to whether its foreign people or whether it's Irish people on the other side being slightly afraid because they might seem or think because of political correctness that they might say the wrong thing. You know, there is a lot of those social phobias

which don't allow people to engage with each other and you know, I think sometimes the kind of prevailing culture of political correctness can sort of ruin the possibility of that happening naturally and organically. One of the biggest challenges as well, would be the extent to which people in the employment or workplace understand fully the benefits that it brings, and I mean, particularly employers, that employers realise that there is an awful lot of talent in the immigrant group that is part of their workforce and quite often internationally as well. Employers don't realise the actual skills and levels of skills that are actually in their own workforce. And, I think that would be a tragedy in Ireland, look down the road ten or twenty years and we were still saying down the line the immigrants who are in Ireland are predominantly overqualified for the jobs that they are doing. To my mind that is the biggest challenge in the area of immigration and integration is a productivity one. It is an old-fashioned economic productivity one. And I mean, productivity not just defined in the economic sense. I'm talking about societal productivity and improvement that you can actually be a very productive society socially if one addresses the problems by diversity in a well managed and purposeful way. You can release an awful lot of productivity in the economic sense and we can become wealthier and better off. You know, this isn't rocket science. There is a fellow; I met last year, called Richard Fodder, one of the best selling authors and academics. He speaks about the twenty richest cities in the North America, Canada and all of the wealthiest and most successful cities in the North America have diversity built into the basis of the city. And if people plan and get it right there is huge rewards. You know, it is no accident that New York is possibly the most successful city on earth. It is a hugely diverse city. A city that they built obviously struggle and had their difficulties with but you know, they have done it, they have they have built a very impressive city and it's no accident it is the wealthiest city in the world because they build diversity into the very feature of the city and its street life and stuff and I'm not saying we should be like New York. You know, we are never going to be like New York in terms of the melting pot. But we can build and make a huge competitive advantages out of and productivity out of working diversity to our own advantage.

C.O. Conor Lenihan, TD and Minister for Integration, thank you very much.

C.L. Thank you very much