

# THE IRISH IN CONTINENTAL EUROPE AND IRELAND: SUSTAINED CONNECTEDNESS ACROSS A VIRTUAL DIASPORA SPACE?

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## Introduction

Connections between Ireland and its diaspora have significantly changed in the last decade. Once a largely uni-directional phenomenon (from diaspora to Ireland) the relationship between Ireland and its communities abroad has now taken on a more multi-directional form (Boyle & Kitchin 7). Advances in new technologies have certainly contributed to these multi-directional exchanges, and the dominance of these technologies in global relations, through the increased use of e-mailing, Skype, Twitter, Facebook, and Myspace for instance, has considerably altered the way people exchange and communicate. These developments have also naturally touched Irish communities abroad.

The proliferation of internet sites aimed at the Irish diaspora has led to increased access to information for those Irish-born or those of Irish descent living abroad. The Irish in continental Europe are no exception. The principal site created for the Irish across continental Europe – *EuropeanIrish.com* – aims at providing Irish people with networking opportunities, a means of accessing resources and information about Ireland and facilitating exchanges between the Irish abroad and Ireland.

This article will firstly examine to what extent a virtual Irish diaspora space exists for a largely under-researched part of the Irish diaspora – the Irish in continental Europe. Secondly, the role played by the 'new technologies' in transnational exchanges between Ireland and continental Europe will be studied. An analysis of the responses of 150 Irish people based in continental Europe to a questionnaire aimed at establishing the level of exchanges and contacts between their host country and Ireland across this virtual diaspora space will be carried out. The implications on both home and host country, when links are maintained, will also be assessed.

## Transnational Exchanges

While much research has been carried out concerning immigrant communities and their host country, migrant exchanges between host and home country also deserve attention. The Council of Europe in a recommendation in 2004 declared that

while much attention has been paid to the situation of migrant communities and their relations with their host country, relatively little consideration has been given to relations between these communities and those *between each community and its country of origin*. The Assembly recalls in this context its earlier recommendations on the links between Europeans living abroad and their countries of origin. (Council of Europe 1)

In the last few years, the Irish Government has started to see the potential benefits of its Irish communities abroad and has begun to assess the advantages of the implementation of an Irish diaspora strategy. Two global Irish economic forums were hosted by the Irish Government in 2009 and 2011. In 2009, the then Minister for Foreign Affairs, Micheál Martin, described this initiative as a “national effort to reach out to the most successful and influential members of Ireland’s diaspora to facilitate their work and contribution to Irish economic recovery” (Connolly). The Government hoped that this forum would initiate a thinking process on the best ways to network the global diaspora that would not only benefit Ireland but also its communities abroad. The Government invited people based in Britain, the US, Asia, Australia, the Gulf Region, and also continental Europe to attend this forum. The Government hoped Ireland would follow the example of other countries and develop an effective diaspora strategy, which would aid Irish economic recovery and future stability.

In a report published by *The Ireland Fund* in 2009 comparing international diaspora strategies and their applicability to the Irish context, the authors stated that

[t]he Irish can be seen as a global tribe united by history, culture and shared experiences and networked through technology. In a highly competitive world this potential network offers many advantages for Ireland of which we have to take full advantage. Other countries see the opportunities and are actively putting in place extensive programmes of engagement. (Aikins, Sands & White 6)

The Irish Government has now awakened to the possibility of tapping into the potential of the huge Irish diaspora worldwide. In this citation, reference is made to networking the global tribe through “technology.” Later in the report the authors explain more fully what they mean by this:

What were once globally dispersed communities are being brought closer together through developments in transportation and communications. The internet is now bringing a sense of sustained and immediate connectedness. People can be both ‘here’ and ‘there’ at the same time. Networking enables people to maintain simultaneous connections with two or more nation states. (9)

The extent to which diaspora communities feel “connected” to Ireland and the importance of exchanges across a kind of virtual diaspora space are difficult to evaluate. Using empirical evidence collected on a sample of Irish people across continental Europe, we will look at the types of connections, via modern communication networks, that are now taking place between host country and Ireland: how often is contact kept? If regular contact is maintained with Ireland, what are the effects of these exchanges on identity formation? What could be the potential advantages or disadvantages on the home or host country?

### The Irish in Continental Europe

The Irish on the continent live within a relatively short distance from Ireland and many live in European member state countries. They negotiate their day-to-day lives often in a very different cultural environment to those Irish living in America, Great Britain, or Australia, for example, and have to work and live in a language that is not their mother tongue.

The Irish based in continental Europe have been largely ignored in policy and debates concerning the Irish diaspora in the past. The Irish Abroad Unit set up in 2004 following the publication of the task force report on policies regarding emigrants has financed Irish organisations throughout the world, but very little funding has been given to groups based in Europe. In 2011, the majority of funding went to organisations and associations based in Britain and the USA (over € 9 million and just over € 49,000 to organisations based on the European continent) (Emigrant Services Grants).

According to the Emigrant Advice Network (EAN), 3.1 million Irish citizens (passport holders) currently live overseas and of these approximately 950,000 are Irish-born: nearly 700,000 are based in Britain, 156,000 in the USA, 50,000 in Australia, and over 22,000 in Canada (Boyle & Kitchin 3).

Concerning the Irish based in Europe, it is more difficult to obtain exact numbers. A study carried out by *EuropeanIrish.com* in 2007 using Irish embassies, local statistics offices, local Irish societies and clubs in different European countries and various other resources came up with an estimate of between 250,000 and 300,000 Irish people living in continental Europe, but this figure still remains difficult to verify.

The Irish embassy in Paris estimates an Irish population ranging from 15,000 to 30,000. In Germany, the officially registered figure is over 10,000, but it may be much higher. The long established Irish club based in the Netherlands estimates the Irish population at about 14,000. In Belgium there are approximately 6,000 Irish people registered, but the Irish embassy and the Irish club in Belgium put forward 15,000 as a more realistic figure including all those unaccounted for and those who come on assignment to work in the EU ("Study of the Numbers of Irish People").

The number of Irish people moving to Spain surged by twelve per cent in 2009, and the Irish have established themselves as the country's ninth largest immigrant community. Figures released by the Spanish government revealed that the number of Irish expatriates registered as resident in Spain had risen to 90,000 at the start of 2008 and that most Irish there were of working age ("More Gaels in Spain"). The fact that Irish people are spread out in varying numbers across the continent and may not have access to information on Irish events and activities in their host country gave Proinsias Collins the idea of setting up the first site aimed at Irish people based across the continent.

### ***EuropeanIrish.com***

On Easter Monday 2003, *EuropeanIrish.com* was launched. Its aim was to connect Irish people in continental Europe with Irish services, other Irish people, and Irish groups in Europe. Initially a resource for Irish people based in Europe, it quickly evolved into also being a resource for Irish people planning to head to Europe and non-Irish Europeans interested in Irish music, sport, culture, and pubs.

While based in France in the 1990s, Proinsias Collins became involved in Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) activities in Paris and was one of the founding members of the European GAA county board. He set up the first website for the GAA in Paris and in Europe. He began to realise, after having missed some Irish sporting and musical events in Paris, that it was difficult for Irish people interested in attending Irish activities to have access to this information. He then decided to expand his website to include other sporting activities and then started to add information on Irish music and other events. He discovered a vast Irish world across continental Europe.

His research has shown that there are active Irish clubs and societies across Europe, more than 200 Irish dancing schools, 650 Irish music bands, and more than 600 Irish and Celtic festivals. *EuropeanIrish.com* has featured more than 30,000 Irish events in Europe and more than 5,000 Irish news stories from the continent. Members of the site can subscribe to the weekly newsletter in that part of Europe in which they live and receive it by e-mail. It has been estimated that more than 2,500 people read the newsletters sent out by the site (Interview Proinsias Collins).

In November 2007, the site carried out its first survey aimed at the Irish in Continental Europe and received 309 responses. The survey contained 11 questions aiming to discover how long Irish people intended to stay in their host country, the difficulties they had encountered since leaving Ireland, what they liked best about the country where they were now based and comparisons between Ireland and continental Europe.

The site has been running a survey since November 2008 asking the following questions, “Living in Europe? Why would you prefer to stay in Europe, not Ireland?,” and gives the following choices: better health service; better pub and social scene; standard of living; the weather; I am settled with family; better education system; for jobs and employment and other. There had been 1,763 responses by late August 2009, and the top three reasons for staying in continental Europe were: the weather (20 per cent), standard of living (19 per cent), and better health service (18 per cent).

The interest that *EuropeanIrish.com* has provoked gives an indication that many Irish people are keen to keep up-to-date with events and activities related to Ireland in their host countries. While the two surveys conducted by *EuropeanIrish.com* have elicited information on Irish people and their reasons for leaving Ireland and staying in continental Europe or the positive and negative aspects of their new lives, it is also interesting to assess the extent to which Irish people keep in contact with Ireland and

the role of modern technologies in exchanges between Ireland and mainland Europe. According to Avtar Brah,

the ways in which diasporic collectivities themselves mobilise collective resources and identities is also crucial to the construction of diaspora space. With modern means of transport and communication, regular contact across transnational boundaries may be maintained with comparative ease through travel, telephone, fax machine, video, computer and satellite. (243)

Are the Irish in Europe maintaining regular contact with Ireland across this virtual diaspora space? At what level are transnational exchanges occurring between Ireland and Europe?

### **Exchanges in the Virtual Irish Diaspora Space**

In order to analyse the extent of exchanges between Irish people in Europe and Ireland, a questionnaire was prepared by the author, which aimed at ascertaining what type of contacts Irish people had with Ireland. The questionnaire was constructed to assess how important it was for Irish people on the continent to keep abreast of news and developments in Ireland and the main reasons for this. Moreover, if contact was not kept with Ireland, the reasons why these Irish people did not feel the need to keep in touch with events in Ireland were also examined.

This questionnaire was put on-line in July 2009 by *EuropeanIrish.com* to be filled in by people visiting the site who might be interested in replying. Irish clubs and societies, embassies and consulates were also contacted across Europe informing them about the research. Naturally, Irish people who were internet users were targeted, as this research was designed to ascertain the level of exchanges between Europe and Ireland via the web. By mid-August 2009 the questionnaire had been filled out by 150 people, and an analysis of results was carried out by the author using Limesurvey software.

The sample was quite evenly divided between male and female with 55 per cent of respondents "female" and 45 per cent "male." Most of the respondents had been born in the 1970s (34 per cent), followed by those born in the 1960s (22 per cent) and the 1950s (18 per cent). The person most advanced in age who answered the questionnaire was 79 years old at this time and the youngest three people were 29 years old.

Over one third of respondents to the questionnaire live in Belgium, followed by Norway, France, and Switzerland. There are very active Irish associations in Belgium and Norway, which may explain the high response rate. While the response rate from other countries was low, nine from Spain, six from Germany, and one or two from other countries such as Bulgaria, Cyprus, Denmark, Finland, Greece, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Sweden, and the Ukraine, a wide variety of countries were represented in the sample: 18 in total.

Respondents were based in their host country for short and long periods. Four respondents arrived in their host country in the 1960s, 15 in the 1970s, 14 in the 1980s, 41 in the 1990s, and 75 since 2000 with 19 respondents arriving in 2008, which could be partly explained by the worsening economic situation in Ireland. One person did not answer this question.

When respondents were asked if new technologies were important to keep in touch with family and friends in Ireland, 93 per cent said “yes,” and only 7 per cent said “no.” When the web was used, the majority of respondents used e-mail, skype, and facebook to stay in touch. Naturally, this depended on whom they were contacting in Ireland, as not all parents or relations would have access or know how to use the internet, in which case the telephone was used.

When asked how often they had contact with family and friends in Ireland, 37 people replied every day, 42 people several times a week, and 51 people once or twice a week. Therefore, 87 per cent of people were in regular contact with family and friends in Ireland, while for 13 per cent contact was more sporadic. Irregular contact with Ireland was largely age-related: nine of the ten respondents who had only monthly contact with Ireland were all born from 1930 to 1960. Three of them had spent more than 30 years living in their host country and one more than 20 years, but from the remaining six, three had arrived in the 1990s and three after 2000. Age, rather than length of time spent in their host country, for these respondents seemed to influence their level of contact with friends and family more.

The web was also very important for keeping up-to-date with news and events about Ireland for 89 per cent of people. The most visited site was the newspaper site for the *Irish Times* followed by *rte.ie* and then the *Irish Independent* newspaper website.

Of the 135 respondents who answered this question, 65 per cent consulted these sites on a daily basis, followed by 15 per cent who consulted them at least once or twice a week.

One of the reasons evoked for visiting these sites was to find out, in the words of one person, “what was happening *at home*.” Interestingly the use of the word “home” showed how this person, who was 47 years old and had been living in France for nearly 20 years, still called Ireland “home” and still felt connected to the country. Similarly a 79-year-old participant living in Spain stated, “I’ve spent most of my life outside Ireland [...] and lived in many lands [...]. Ireland was and still is my *homeland* which I love and will love until I die, I am very proud to be Irish.”

Two participants in their late thirties living in Belgium and Spain still considered Ireland as home even though they had been living outside Ireland for 10 to 15 years respectively, and a 49-year-old woman who had been living in Greece for 20 years declared, “even though abroad many years Ireland will always be my *home*.” This sense of roots and origins was still very important for these respondents and made it natural for them that they would want to know what was happening in Ireland.

For other participants a strong sentiment of national identity, of being Irish, was paramount, and keeping up-to-date with events in Ireland meant that they could retain this sense of identity and belonging even though they were living abroad:

because I am Irish. I left when I was almost 18 years old, my heart is very much in Ireland though I know it is very different to my day. I am now 72. It is my identity. [...] There are a number of reasons I suppose but all stem from wanting to still belong. (female, 72, Cyprus)

Other participants also shared the same sentiment in relation to maintaining an Irish identity: “because even though I have lived 40 years in Norway, I still have an Irish passport and feel very Irish, and it’s important for me to keep in touch” (female, 60, Norway); “once Irish, always Irish. I still have an Irish passport, couldn’t even consider exchanging it” (female, 55, Belgium); “so I don’t lose my identity whilst living abroad” (female, 32, Norway), and finally, “because I maintain a strong affinity with an Irish identity” (male, 29, Belgium).

For three participants, all male and recent arrivals in their host country, language problems coupled with problems integrating and adapting to their new environment kept them in contact with Ireland: “I don’t feel at home in Belgium. I’m part of the expat community rather than the Belgian one” (male, 25, Belgium). Another man, also living in Belgium, affirmed:

Mainly because I haven’t fully immersed myself in Belgian culture. My French is still pretty poor and I have not yet substituted Belgian t.v., media, sport or culture for the Irish news and events I currently follow. In time I expect that I will develop interests in local (Belgian) news and events, and ultimately lose touch to some degree with what is going on in Ireland. (male, 26, Belgium)

An Irish man living in Spain felt that regular contact with Ireland was important as a sort of “social crutch” for him and allowed him to overcome the negative aspects of his new life:

At the moment I am not integrated into the Catalan community in which I live. From past experience I expect this to take a further three years to be comfortably integrated. In the meantime by keeping in contact with my friends and their society I will be able to use their presence as a social crutch. I expect that as I become more fluent in Catalan I will focus my attention more on the Catalan region. (male, age unknown, Spain)

For the large majority of respondents the main reason for their regular visits to Irish sites was to be able to follow developments affecting the lives of family and friends and being aware of what was shaping their lives. Keeping links and feeling connected to Ireland was also important for a number of respondents. The following reasons for their continued interest in Irish affairs were given by a sample of participants:

So that I can be up-to-date when speaking with friends and family. Also, I have a natural interest in events happening in Ireland, makes me feel that I am not very far away and I still feel connected to my friends and family there. (female, 36, Netherlands)

It’s important to keep the link there. You never really stop losing interest no matter how long you are away. Events there impact on your family especially now. It’s like reading a horror story now though from long distance. (male, 46, Spain)

To avoid feeling homesick and to have the impression that although I’m living away from Ireland, I’m still aware of everything that’s happening there. Also to be able to partake in conversations with friends and family in Ireland about current affairs etc. (female, 31, France)

You can’t keep up contact with friends if you have no idea about what is shaping their lives. (female, 45, Germany)

Feel less foreign when visiting Ireland. Can discuss with friends and family. Still feel some connection and concern for events in Ireland. (male, 53, Norway)

Because I feel that I have roots in two places, my adopted home of Norway and my birth home of Ireland. In my head I live a double life! Also I want to be able to connect with family and friends in Ireland by keeping up-to-date on events in Ireland and not play the role of returning emigrant who is surprised at how things have changed since she left! (female, 58, Norway)

While the majority of respondents felt the need to stay in touch with Ireland, 11 per cent of the sample did not. For these people their lives were not affected by developments in Ireland and they were more concerned with what directly affected them: “sometimes I am more interested in news about Portugal as that is what directly concerns my life here and the people I meet here in person” (female, 30, Portugal); “it also seems unnecessary to follow the day-to-day issues as they do not have much relevance for my life” (female, 52, Belgium); “as I don’t live there my life is not directly affected by political decisions or events that take place there” (female, 26, Belgium); “I live my life where I am” (female, 47, Belgium). For another person the main cause of having lost touch with Ireland was the time spent living outside the country: “probably because of length of time I have not lived in Ireland” (female, 71, in France since 1973).

We can conclude from the responses of this sample that for a large majority, 89 per cent, contact with Ireland through the internet is a regular occurrence. One respondent felt this might even have its disadvantages:

I came to Switzerland just as the internet was taking off (1997) – and it has been my main connection to Ireland since. One negative interpretation could be that I have not fully moved here due to the internet – as I am much more familiar with current affairs in Ireland than I am in Switzerland – despite having lived here for almost 12 years. (male, 45, Switzerland)

However, another respondent felt that both the internet, virtual journeys, and low-cost air travel, physical journeys, had brought him “back to Ireland.” He said:

Cheap flights and the internet (especially the internet) have brought me “back” to Ireland. After initial contact on first emigrating I had virtually lost all contact with Ireland. The availability especially of online newspapers means I have a very good feel for what is going on in Ireland, socially, politically, sport, etc. Especially now that the *Irish Times* does not require a subscription! (male, 53, Norway)



The developments in new technologies have clearly helped this participant to feel closer to developments in Irish society. Unlike emigrants in the past, the modern-day migrant has many more possibilities to move between two nations, which opens up much potential for both home and host country.

### **Conclusion**

This survey is a small step towards assessing the extent of transnational exchange and communication between the Irish in Europe and Ireland. What can be concluded is that for the majority of this sample virtual travel to Ireland is a regular phenomenon and the reasons for this are varied.

The Irish in this study represent what might be termed as the modern-day transnational migrants, settling abroad but maintaining links with their places of origin. The ready availability of air transport and the evolutions in modern communication methods have provided the basis for the emergence of this transnational migrant. The lives of the Irish people in this study encompass both home and host societies, and many are negotiating dual existences.

Unlike the Irish who have settled in America, the UK, or Australia, the Irish in Europe are living their day-to-day lives in at least two different languages and adapting to sometimes very different lifestyles and cultures in their host countries. Many of the Irish in this study are only a two-to-three-hour flight away from Ireland, yet, according to one respondent, are often considered to be “exotic by our countrymen.”

The creation of the site *EuropeanIrish.com* has contributed to the formation of a virtual Irish community across Europe. How real or imagined this community is remains to be researched. The experiences, life histories, and contributions of Irish emigrants in continental Europe to their host country and to Ireland have remained a largely blank page in the story of the modern Irish diaspora. The time may be right to accord some space to these migrants, whose connections to Ireland still remain so strong.

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