

RESIDENCY

'How residency changed my life'

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For many non-EU immigrants in Ireland, their most memorable moment is when they receive their permanent residency rights. Some of them share this liberating experience with VIKTOR POSUDNEVSKY

ALEX (not his real name) from Ukraine says that he only started "to breathe freely" when he received his residency permission in November 2007. For the previous seven years, his life in Ireland was filled with uncertainty and fear. And what's more, his Irish work colleagues frowned upon him because he would not support them in industrial disputes.

"When you're working on a work permit you're not in a position to argue," says Alex, who works for a security company. "You're at the mercy of your employer because if you lose your job you might have to leave the country."

Satender Rauthan, a chef from India, comes from a background totally different to that of Alex, but he fully understands the Ukrainian's predicament. Satender got his residency rights on 27 November last year after waiting for 22 months. "My life is so much more relaxed now," he says. "Before I would worry a lot about what might happen to me and my family should I lose my job."

Both Alex and Satender applied for permanent residency after working in Ireland for five years on a work permit. But there are many other pathways leading to this status, which is the golden ticket for many non-EU immigrants. Jipe Kelly from Cameroon got his through the Irish-Born Child scheme.

"I waited for two-and-a-half years," he says. "It took so long because there is a poor link between Ireland and Cameroon. The long wait was difficult, especially for my wife. She was very depressed at times."

Jipe says the letter, when it finally arrived, took him completely by surprise. "Even now I get emotional when I remember that day. Needless to say, we celebrated. I organised a party and invited all my friends."

In 2007 Ireland was ranked bottom of an EU-wide league table for not providing long-term residence rights for migrant workers. While Ireland's citizenship laws were recognised as fairly liberal, allowing a non-EU immigrant to apply for an Irish passport after five years in the country, there was virtually no other institute that would regularise the status of migrants in Ireland. And with excessively long processing times for many applications, immigrants often wait for up to eight years for their citizenship applications to be processed.

Denis Avdonin, an IT specialist from Russia, remembers how he got his residency rights in 2004: "I didn't know that such a thing as long-term residency existed and I thought that the only way for me to become a permanent resident was through citizenship. Not

many people knew about long-term residency back then and the number of applications was low.

“I think that’s the reason I got it so quick – in just three to four months. I found out about long-term residency from some information leaflet I picked up by chance. The Department of Justice didn’t advertise it enough.”

Denis explained it to his friends, and gradually awareness about long-term residency grew among the migrant communities. As a result, the queue of people waiting to obtain this status has almost matched the line queuing for citizenship. Satender says a friend who applied on the same day with him is still in the dark about when he will get his. Alex, who got his residency rights in 2007, waited 15 months before getting word. “It’s getting longer and longer,” says Denis, referring to the waiting times. “I was lucky to get it so quick.”

Did it change his life? “Not really,” he says. “I work in IT and changing jobs in this industry is not a problem even if you’re on a work permit. I think I would’ve got a different job anyway, but it could have taken longer.”

But for others, getting a more permanent status in their passport was a truly life-changing event.

“When I got it I felt that I could finally take care of my life,” says Jipe. Alex is similarly enthusiastic: “I’ve become much more confident about my life in Ireland. Now I can stand up for my rights together with my Irish colleagues. I think I’m going to join a trade union.”

“I threw a big party,” remembers Satender. “I was the first among my Indian friends to get residency, most of them are still waiting, but they were all very happy for me. My life has improved a lot.”

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