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THE SILENT ITALIAN DEMOGRAPHIC CRISIS AND THE ISSUE OF SOUTH ITALY

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***Abstract:** The paper examines the different forms of mobility in Italy and the gradual decrease in the population of South Italy in the last decade. Statistical data show the emerging differences among the different Italian regions, and especially the differences between Central-North Italy and South Italy. The analysis of the data clarifies that the decrease is due to the brain drain of youngsters with high level of education. South Italy has been facing this phenomenon for several years. To sum up, by taking into consideration the latest literature, the paper proposes solutions to the problem.*

***Key words:** Italian population, mobility, brain drain, socio-economic questions*

1. INTRODUCTION

The paper examines the different forms of mobility in Italy and the gradual decrease in the population in South Italy. First of all, the paper analyses the demographic changes occurred in Italy in the last decade, highlighting the differences emerging between the different Italian regions, above all the differences between Central-North Italy and South Italy.

After identifying the problem, the analysis of the data shows that the demographic decrease in South Italy is due to the brain drain of youngsters with high level of education. By interpreting the data and the great deal of information, it becomes clear that the brain drain is a common denominator of all South Italian regions. There is a gender problem as well, that is the migration of young highly educated women. To conclude, starting from the study of the latest literature, the paper not only focuses on the economic and social problems of South Italy, but it also offers suggestions to stabilise the economy of this area and reduce brain drain.

2. THE DEMOGRAPHIC CRISIS

The Italian population¹ (fig.1) is not increasing, but it is in fact decreasing: on January 1, 2020 a loss of 116 thousand inhabitants was registered compared to 2019, -1.9 for every 1000 inhabitants. This data is confirmed by the trends in the last few years, as shown by figure 2. The data from 2015 and 2020 show a significant and progressive decrease caused by an increasing divergence between the births and deaths. For instance, in 2019, there were just 67 births for every 100 people who died. Another reason is the decline in the number of people migrating to Italy in 2019, with a loss of 32 thousand people compared to 2018. Due to a reduction in the number of births, the Italian population is constantly getting older. The average age of the population in Italy is 45.7 years and the percentage of old people represents 23,1% of the population. However, this situation does not involve the whole nation because the above-mentioned demographic decrease is more significant in South Italy (fig.3). If North Italy experienced only a negative peak in the last decades, the Centre, and in particular the South went through a dramatic drop. In actual fact, internal and international migrations made the population of North Italy, North-East in particular, remain steady, and, in some areas, even increase. In Centre Italy there was a drop in the number of residents in 2018 due to a decrease in the numbers of Italian and foreign immigrants, but there was a stabilisation in 2019. In South Italy, the decrease in population in the period 2017-2019 is more significant and the stabilisation less consistent.

Furthermore, by comparing the 2011 data with those of 2020, after about 10 years, the Italian population appears to be stable but with some differences. In 2011, the residents were 59.433.744, while in 2020 they were 60.136.000. Compared to 2011, the number of residents has decreased in South Italy and in the islands (-1,9% and 2,3 %), while the number has increased slightly in Central Italy and a bit more in North Italy (fig. 3). Although the comparison does not show substantial changes, in the last 5 years a consistent number of Italians left their territory to move abroad or to other regions².

¹ The demographic data, reported in the three paragraphs, are taken from the ISTAT (Italian Statistical Institute) website and precisely from the following websites: www.istat.it; www.demoistat.it; [www. https://www.tuttitalia.it/statistiche/nord-centro-mezzogiorno-italia/](https://www.tuttitalia.it/statistiche/nord-centro-mezzogiorno-italia/).

² See: [www.https://www.istat.it/it/files/2020/12/REPORT_CENSIPOP_2020.pdf](https://www.istat.it/it/files/2020/12/REPORT_CENSIPOP_2020.pdf)



Figure 1. Administrative regions of Italy
(source: *libresriageografica.com*)

Moreover, about 50% of Italians are located in five regions, two of which are in the North, Lombardy (16,8%) and Veneto (8.2%), one in Central Italy, Lazio (9,7%), and two in the South, Campania (9.6%) and Sicily (8.2%). The remaining 50% is distributed in 15 regions. Therefore, there is a tendency for Italians to live in some areas due to work or quality of life. In South Italy itself there is a mismatch: rural and mountainous areas are losing population, while the urban areas in Campania and Sicily are getting a high concentration of population. The problem is not only Italian, but concerns mountain and rural areas in Europe (Johansson, 2014). Among the various cases, that of Romania is also interesting (Risteiu Toader, Cretan, O'Brien, 2021), as shown in the appendix below. Romania anticipates a process of escape, due to the communist regime, representing a concrete example for the migration processes in Europe. Hence, South Italy needs to be studied.

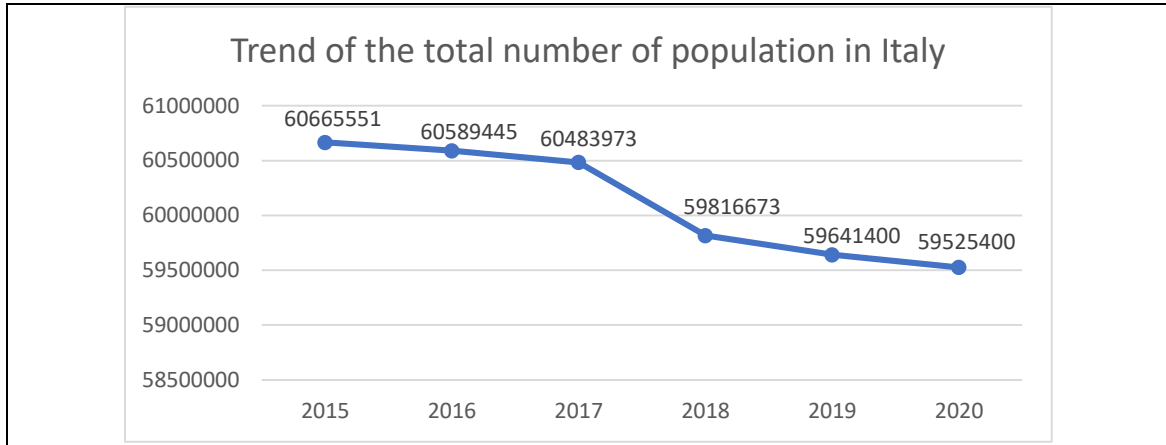


Figure 2. The decrease in the total number of the population in the last years (our elaboration of Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) data)

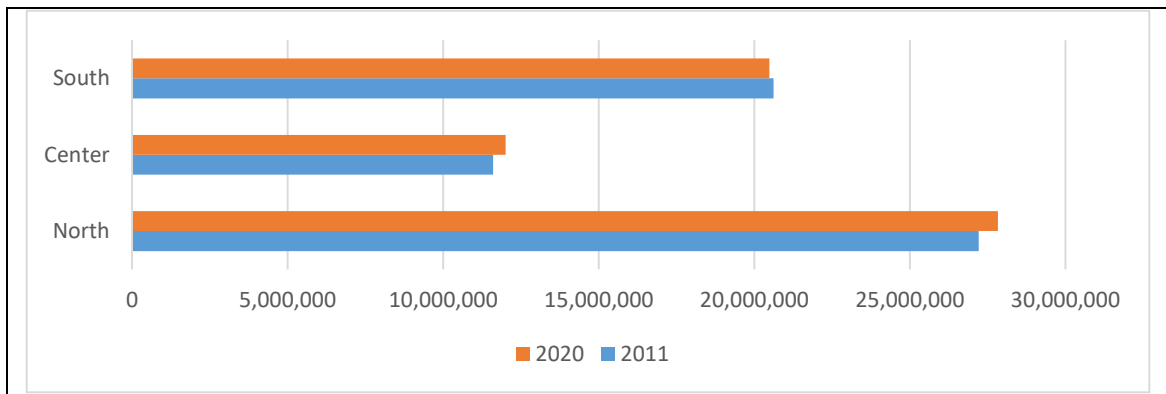


Figure 3. Differences in total number of population between the three Italian geographic areas (our elaboration of Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) data)

3. BRAIN DRAIN AND THE IMPOVERISHMENT OF SOUTH ITALY

If we study the demographic trend in South Italy from 2011 to 2019, we notice how it is mutable during this decade, compared to North and Central Italy. Despite a positive peak between 2013 and 2014, the decline appeared to be inevitable (fig. 4).

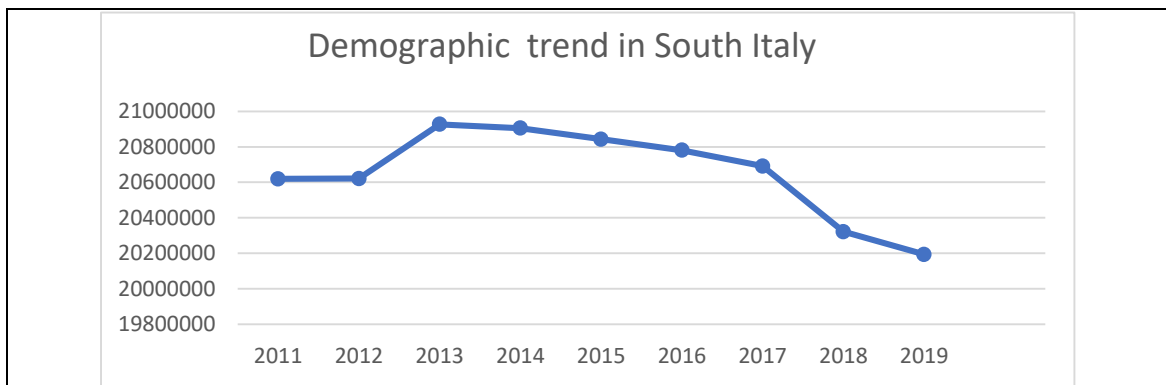


Figure 4. The evident demographic decrease (our elaboration of Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) data)

Compared to 2011 data, all regions³ in South Italy have lost population⁴: Apulia has lost 100.000 inhabitants, Sicily 217.000, Calabria 64.940. Although Campania is still densely populated (5.800.000 residents in 2019), it lost 54.667 inhabitants in the last decade. Sardinia is the only region which suffered a minor loss, around 28.000 residents, even if commuting is still a common phenomenon in this region. Basilicata and Molise are the two regions most significantly affected by a loss of population. Basilicata, a region particularly limited from a demographic point of view, lost 30000 residents between 2011 and 2019 (from 586.721 to 553.254). Molise, which has only 300000 residents, underwent a decrease in 10000 inhabitants in that decade. In fact, this region is geographically located in Central Italy, but for historical and socio-economic reasons it is considered, by the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT), part of South Italy along with Abruzzo, which lost 13000 residents in the examined period.

The reasons for such a loss are closely linked to the economy and society of South Italy and to the difficulties youngsters have in finding a job in those regions. Since 2000, a million of South Italians aged between 15 and 34, have left the South. 200 thousand of them were graduated or had a high level of education. Furthermore, there are many commuters - only in 2018, 236 thousand people moved to surrounding regions due to work. Not only does the brain drain affect the young researchers, but it also concerns talented youngsters with a high level of education in search of professional opportunities suitable for their abilities and competences⁵. Thus, Italians do not leave their country for political reasons, like young Romanians, but to turn their life around.

Where do the youths go? To all regions in Central-North Italy as well as to the UK, Germany, France, Switzerland, Spain, Brazil, the US, Australia and Canada (Lecce, 2014; McKay, 2014). A brain drain which costs to the Italian Government 30 billion of euros, and 165 hundred euros to each family. Moreover, about 48% of the brain drain consists of women. Sicily (over 350.000) and Campania (over 231.000) have the highest number of women who moved from their native region.

These are the two significant differences from the internal migrations of the previous decades, when peasants and workers, or mainly male youngsters, were those who decided to move. Now, it is both highly educated men and women that consider to move⁶.

³ The regions of Southern Italy are: Basilicata, Calabria, Campania, Puglia, the islands of Sicily and Sardinia. For historical reasons, the regions of Molise and Abruzzo are also included in the South, geographically located in Central Italy. See figure 1.

⁴ For further data relating to Italian regions, See:

<https://www.rainews.it/tgr/puglia/articoli/2020/12/pug-istat-rapporto-abitanti-puglia-5711033c-c8d5-4d3c-b6f1-a5260ccdc063.html>;

<https://www.nebrodinews.it/la-sicilia-perde-quasi-130mila-abitanti-in-un-anno/>;

<https://calabria.gazzettadelsud.it/articoli/cronaca/2021/02/26/la-calabria-e-una-terra-che-si-spopola-nel-2019-popolazione-ridotta-del-94-21c5fc5a-d5a1-4405-9fea-5832bd3f713e>;

<https://www.napolitoday.it/attualita/censimento-campania-2021.html>;

<https://www.cagliaripad.it/522836/istat-sardegna-sempre-piu-vecchia-in-8-anni-perde-27mila-abitanti/>;

<https://www.melandronews.it/2020/12/19/censimento-istat-la-basilicata-in-un-anno-perde-quasi-10mila-residenti/>;
<https://www.primonumero.it/2021/02/il-molise-perde-3mila-residenti-allanno-popolazione-ormai-sotto-i-300mila-abitanti/>.

⁵ For the brain drain see: Gibson, McKenzie, 2011; Docquier, Rapoport, 2012; Docquier, Lohest, Marfouk, 2017.

⁶ For the new Italian emigration, see: Cristaldi, 2019; Pugliese, 2014; Sanfilippo, 2017.

It is interesting to observe the data concerning Apulia between 2008 and 2017. The young residents aged between 15 and 34 sharply decreased; from 1065000 to around 900000, the vast majority of which, around 135000 residents, moved to another Italian region, while the remaining chose to go abroad.

The neighbouring Basilicata, which has a high schooling rate, constantly loses a great part of its graduated residents, about 3500 every year. Calabria, on the other hand, is one of the European regions with the highest youth unemployment rate (52.7%). Considering that the average unemployment rate in Europe is around 6,9%, the brain drain is inevitable. However, Calabria has another sad primacy: those graduated are still not able to find a job even after 5 years from their graduation. The data in Sicily are not better. There, around 5600 young people between 25 and 34 years old decided to emigrate. A lot of recently-graduated women emigrated to France, Germany, England or the United States in the hope of a career without gender inequalities. Moreover, around 5207 graduates left Campania looking for a job in 2018, 4190 of which emigrated to Central-North Italy, while the remaining decided to leave Italy. Sardinia is affected as well because it lost 2000 residents aged between 18 and 34, in the period 2016-2018.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The Italian demographic imbalance has paved the way to worrying predictions: in 2065 Italian population may well decrease from 60 million to 53 million. South Italy may be depopulated or with residents who are mainly old people. How can we change the situation? Which solutions can be adopted? Some strategies must be implemented on a national level, but some others must focus on South Italy. Declining births are a common Italian trait, the number of sons for every woman is constant and low:1.29. Another problem is the decrease in the number of fertile women, namely those aged between 15 and 49. Indeed, the average age of mothers at childbirth is 32,1. The difficulties in finding a job and the limited help working mothers get are all deterrent factors. Despite some bonuses and aids established in 2020 and 2021, there is not an effective planning in favour of young couples. Aids should not only be economic but also fiscal and focused on reorganising childcare facilities. Some surveys proved the relationship between workers and childcare services⁷. In four regions in North-Italy, Valle d'Aosta, Emilia Romagna, Tuscany and Umbria, where nursery schools and childcare services are more than 33%, the rate of working women is high and reach 60%. Furthermore, it is important to implement a flexible working hours so as to help both parents. Hence, an adequate planning, which takes into account the young couples, is fundamental.

However, even specific measures for South Italy must be adopted. As Panetta (2019, p3) clarifies, "South Italy represents the unsolved question of the Italian economy. In the regions of South Italy, the GDP per capita is half of that of North Italy; unemployment is near 20%, two times higher than the rest of Italy. Inequalities and poverty are widespread. Infrastructure and the quality of public services are not satisfactory".

Although South Italy showed some signs of improvement in the period 2011-2019, the financial crisis and recession have deeply affected the South (Panetta, 2018). There is still a shortage of public services and infrastructures. Some areas still have

⁷ See: www.linkiesta.it/2019/06/occupazione-femminile-asili-nido/.

See too: Bianchi, Provenzano, 2012.

traditional services, so there is a lack of telematic and IT services. Industrial and tourism development is not uniform in South Italy. In the last decade public investments in relation to the population were lower than in Central-North Italy, meaning that they did not support industrial development. This is the reason why there are not suitable jobs and youngsters prefer going away. There is not a strategy of development based on innovation (Orrù, 2019). This shortage leads the youngsters in South Italy to move even before they finish university (Pagano, 2012; Lafleur, Stanek, 2017). Student mobility keeps increasing significantly year after year. The brain drain should favour professional and human exchanges, but the South is paying the price because, around 25% of southern young people decide to study in a university in Central-North Italy. According to research⁸ conducted between 2017-2019, they anticipate the problem rather than moving to North after graduating. The regions most affected by this phenomenon are Sicily and Apulia, with around 40000 students that prefer studying in another region every year. Anyway, this emigration costs the South 0.4% of its GDP, considering that immigrants to the South are few. In South Italy, there is the brain drain but not brain circulation, that is the flowing circulation of talented people. If the South were attractive, it could compensate the loss of its youngsters with the presence of highly-qualified foreigners. However, immigrants to Italy possess only basic competences and have themselves the tendency to move to those regions, which offer more working opportunities.

Hence, South Italy must achieve some objectives to become more attractive. First of all, it is important to renovate physical and immaterial infrastructures. Renovation is a preliminary condition if the South aims to strengthen its connection with other Italian regions, Europe and the Mediterranean.

Secondly, the model of development must focus on innovation which must take into consideration three aspects: developing IT services, investing in research, and concentrating on smart specialization (Markowska, Kusterka-Jefmańska, Jefmański, 2016). Smart specialization is a model that analyses local potentials and fosters competitive processes. It seeks to increase innovations and facilitate the use of European funds. In this way, every territory, according to its resources and potentials, could specialise in specific productive sectors or finalise ongoing initiatives.

Furthermore, mountain and rural areas, when emigration becomes a social issue as in the initially mentioned case of Romania, need to receive more funding than in the past to get more attention from the Union (Karcagi Kováts, Katona Kovács, 2012; Crețan et Al. 2018). The funds foreseen for the National Recovery and Resilience Plan should fill the previous financial gaps.

Moreover, it is necessary to discuss another important issue: the grants for businesses. Banks loan money with an interest rate, which is three times higher than in North Italy, so businesses in South Italy are usually in debt. This problem must be overcome to give companies more liquidity, foster their expansion, and increase working opportunities for youngsters.

In the end, as above-mentioned, young workers and families in financial straits must be helped. On the whole, South Italy requires a model of development which could increase economic growth decreasing poverty and inequalities. Only under those conditions will South-Italian youngsters, the most valuable resource, give a new lease of life to a territory, which is getting poorer and poorer.

⁸ See: <http://lnx.svimez.info/svimez/lemigrazione-universitaria-penalizza-il-mezzogiorno/>

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APPENDIX A. Number of Ethnic German that emigrated from Romania⁹

Year	Registered in Germany	Year	Registered in Germany	Registered in Romania
1950	13	1978	12.120	10.993
1951	1.031	1979	9.663	8.617
1952	26	1980	15.767	13.608
1953	15	1981	12.031	9.948
1954	8	1982	12.972	10.954
1955	44	1983	15.501	13.441
1956	176	1984	16.553	14.425
1957	384	1985	14.924	12.809
1958	1.383	1986	13.130	11.034
1959	374	1987	13.994	11.639
1960	2.124	1988	12.902	10.738
1961	3.303	1989	23.387	10.738
1962	1.675	1990	111.150	14.598
1963	1.321	1991	32.178	60.072
1964	818	1992	16.461	15.567
1965	2.715	1993	5.811	8.852
1966	609	1994	6.615	5.945
1967	440	1995	6.519	4.576
1968	614	1996	4.284	4.065

⁹ Source: Bundesverwaltungsamt; Anuarul statistic al României, București, Institutul Național de Statistică, 1993, p. 143; Anuarul statistic al României, București, Institutul Național de Statistică, 1994, p. 150; Anuarul Statistic al României, București, Institutul Național de Statistică, 1995, p. 136-137. For the difference between the registered numbers two periods of time were important: during communism time, when the difference could represent largely the irregular migration, after 1990, when the majority of migrants were not all recorded by the Romanian authorities. As well, from 1978 onwards Romanian authorities were registering the number of legal German emigrants as these numbers were negotiated upon within the bilateral negotiations between Romania and Germany. Therefore, we provide the data available after 1978, less the data from 1950 onwards.