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*Bulgarian highly skilled
labour migration to Italy.*

The features of an untapped brain gain

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Abstract

Nowadays, a strategic highly-skilled migration policy is crucial for every country. A knowledge based economy represents a real business and a long term investment for the future; a highly skilled labour force is the true added value to each market, Italy is still working on implementing a new strategy for a more flexible and more internationalised society to adapt its labour force to the real global competitiveness. Although in the last decades the number of migrants in Italy has widely grown - there are around 5 million immigrants who contribute for 11,1% to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) - Italy does not exploit its potential. Even though 54,1% of immigrants have a diploma or a degree, the number of unskilled workers is quite high (73,4%). This is mostly because many workers are under classified.

This analysis considers the increasing number of highly skilled Bulgarians living in Italy in the last years which does not correspond to a real advantage to the Italian economy. All Bulgarians are employed as workers, mainly in agricultural, personal care, construction and seasonal jobs.

The majority of them are employed in less demanding work fields if we consider their qualification, their technical knowledge and their skill set. Most of these workers are located in the central and southern regions of Italy as a consequence of the high demand of agricultural workers in those areas.

In fact, in the South and in the Centre of the country, where the agricultural sector is really expanding, the foreign presence has grown on a yearly basis.

As a result, the following theory is confirmed: the brain waste that is happening in Bulgaria does not correspond to a brain gain in Italy. This situation is due to two main factors: On one hand, the Italian structural problems concerning legal and organisational aspects related to the work permit issuing procedures, and on the other hand the common mentality through which immigration is perceived as a threat for the security of the country and not as a potential resource for its development. All this leads to an untapped brain gain.

From the date it results that in the long run Bulgarian immigrants tend to plan to return to their country of origin, as shown by the interviews proposed. The link between Bulgaria and its citizens stays strong, no matter how many years are spent abroad. Thus, there seems to be foreseeable brains re-gain for Bulgaria in the future.

Keywords

migration, integration, brain gain, brain drain, highly skilled migration

1. Introduction

The phenomenon of highly-skill migration is more and more relevant, it can alter the economic and social structure of an entire state. Particularly living in a globalized world, where the knowledge based economy signifies the added value of the own market, the migration policy will be crucial for every country. Several scholars argued, in fact, that the openness of the own economy system capturing mobile skilled foreign professionals represents a real business and an investment for the future.¹

Italy and Europe in general are still working to implement more open politics² in order to be competitive in the global market of qualified brains; the European Lisbon target, to let Europe become world leader of skilled labour force, was slowed down by the economic crisis. According to OECD statistics of 2009³, different countries have proposed or established more restrictive immigration policies for highly skilled labour. These policies changed country by country, they included caps on numbers, reinforcing labour market tests, making it difficult to renew work permits, limiting nondiscretionary flows (example: family reunification, work permits for spouses) and encouraging return-migration.

This context caused difficulties in Italy which, although it developed a real international labour force panorama in the last decades, should aim for a more flexible society, based on knowledge, highly skilled people and internationalization, to adapt its market to the future competitiveness.

The presence of Bulgarians in Italy has been on the rise constantly during the past years, so I found it pertinent to study the social role and the work position of Bulgarian immigrants living in Italy, bridging an information gap on this issue. Thus, the paper seeks to analyse how the migration to Italy of Bulgarian highly skilled labour force is integrated and to check whether it corresponds to any economic grow. More specifically, the question is focused on whether it represents a real advantage, a brain gain, or an untapped potential. On the other hand, the issue on Bulgaria could be seen as a case study on what could be the consequences in the country of this kind of migration and how will the original state face this current brain drain. The first part of the article discusses the behaviour of Italy

1 See Kirkegaard J. F., *US High-Skilled Immigration Policy: A Self-Inflicted Wound*, Yale Center for the Study of Globalization, 2008; Mobilising Human Resources for Innovation, 2000; Mahroum, S., *Highly Skilled Globetrotters: The International Migration of Human Capital*, Institute for Prospective Technological Studies, Joint Research Center of the European Commission, Seville 1999

2 Mahroum, S., *Europe and the Challenge of Brain Drain*, IPTS report no 29. November 1998;

3 See <http://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx>

towards highly skilled migrants, the second examines Bulgarians in Italy, while the last part deals with a qualitative case study on Bulgarian highly skilled people working in Italy today.

2. Highly skilled expatriates in Italy

Nowadays in Italy there are around 5 million immigrants, but their number is perceived as being clearly higher by the Italians themselves⁴. They contribute 11,1% to the Gross domestic product (GDP), and almost 11 billion of social and fiscal contributions per year to the state coffers, which corresponds to 10% of total employees' contributions.⁵ They are also increasingly active in self-employment and entrepreneurship, by creating new business realities. There are around 250.000 expatriate employers who created 500.000 jobs; they work mainly in the fields of construction and commerce.⁶

Socio-statistical researches describe the highly skilled employees' phenomenon according to which most immigrant workers, despite having appropriate work and educational background, do not receive a salary corresponding to their skills. They often work in a less skilled professional position.

In Italy employers are not inclined to hire skilled immigrant workers in their companies but they prefer to select them after they have gained a certain reputation in the field, so the supply usually occurs after they have already settled in the country.

In particular a research conducted in 2008 by ISTAT (National Italian Institute for Statistics Studies) shows that 54,1% of immigrants have a diploma or a degree, but among them the number of unskilled-workers is higher (73,4%), most often because they are under classified. In comparison, the percentage of Italian graduates that are under classified is 32,9% among 62,3% of graduates.⁷ In addition, the number of foreigners working in "uncomfortable" working hours is pretty high: evening 19%, night 12%, Sundays 15%.⁸

In Italy, the rights and the whole procedure to obtain residence permits for unskilled and highly skilled employees are the same, the administrative control is done by "Prefettura", the local department of the government in a Province. The documents required formally are issued in around 60 days but often the procedure takes longer.

This context confirms that the Italian market of skilled labour is much less extensive than that of most OECD countries; this brain waste should be returned to a more general limit of the Italian labour market, which also fails in the case of native highly skilled people, who often choose to migrate.

Aware of the specifics of highly-skilled immigration, the Italian Government tried to improve labour market conditions by approving the Law 94 of July 15, 2009 on measures relating to public safety, providing the introduction of a sub-

4 Caritas Migrantes, *Immigrazione Dossier Statistico 2010*, XX Rapporto sull'immigrazione, data elaborated from ISTAT

5 Ibidem

6 Polchi V., *Blacks out*, Laterza, 2010

7 See the Minister of Interior website, data elaborated from ISTAT researches, 2008

8 Ibidem

stantial simplification of bureaucratic procedures for non-EU managers. Furthermore, on April 16, 2007, the Italian Committee of highly qualified immigrants – CIIAQ was founded. This Association aims at promoting and coordinating activities and initiatives toward a higher awareness among businesses and the public, media, and the national authorities on matters pertaining to HSI in Italy. This migration is a key component of the Italian labour market in the context of globalization. In the years since, CIIAQ has proposed and is now supporting the creation of a special “Unity” aiming at assisting highly skilled immigrants of large enterprises in managing rapidly and efficiently the bureaucratic practices required in order to receive the Italian work permit. The demands of CIIAQ on this point are contained in a document that mentions also the “Unidad de Gestion de Grandes Empresas” of Madrid, a good practice to facilitate the professional development of Spain.⁹

It is necessary to clarify that the normative aspect is only part of the problem. There are, in fact, serious problems of communication and cooperation between the different ministerial departments, offices and associations defending the majority of immigrants. The biggest problem is the duplication of responsibilities and the high diversification of roles in immigration matters that certainly do not help to manage such a delicate issue in a rational manner.

These legal and organizational issues represent a basic problem for the highly-skilled immigrants in Italy. Moreover, there is probably still a mistrust and resistance to the “immigration of quality”, still seen as a threat to the security of the country and not as a potential aid for the development of the country, there is in fact a misunderstanding of the opportunity it presents, denied in order to defend an imaginary “Italian” control of the market.

3. Bulgarian immigrants in Italy

In 2010, the Italian immigration census counts a total number of 4,235,059 legal immigrants, 2,087,563 of which coming from Central and Eastern Europe and the Balkans. They represent almost 50% of the total. The first place in number of expatriates in Italy is held by Romania with 887,763 people, the second is Albania with 466,684 people and following we find the others, Ukraine - 174,129 (5th place) , Poland - 105,608 (8th place) , Moldova - 105,600 (9th place) , Macedonia - 92,874 (11th place) , Serbia and Montenegro - 57,877 (undistributed in the report, 19th place) , Bulgaria - 46,026 (21st place) , Bosnia Herzegovina 31,000 (26th place) , Russia - 25,786 (28th place) and Croatia - 21,261 (30th place).¹⁰

Considering this overall national context of migrations, the weight of the Bulgarian residence citizens is still rather limited. While not involving a relevant number of immigrant flows, the Bulgarian presence in Italy increases annually by 0,1 % of the total:

9 Immigrazione.it, *Rivista professionale di scienze giuridiche e sociali*, 2007

10 Caritas Migrantes, op.cit., p.8

year	Total v.a.	% Total	% women	place
2010	46.026	1,1	-	21
2009	40.880	1,1	60,1	24
2008	33.477	1,0	59,1	24
2007	32.497	0,9	58,4	26
2006	17.470	0,8	57,4	31

Table 2. Data elaborated from yearly dossiers of Caritas Migrantes

It is relevant to underline, from the perspective of gender composition, that Bulgarian citizens in Italy are mainly women (more than 60%) and the increases in recent years have focused on this component. There is an annual female population increase of 1%.

Furthermore it is possible to see the distribution of Bulgarians in Italy by looking at Table 2, p. 12, where we can notice an equal presence and a proportionate increase trend throughout the national territory. The number of Bulgarians in absolute terms is higher in the central macro-region with 12,903 people, while in relative terms, the number is higher in the south with the seventh place among all foreign citizenships, in particular in Basilicata and Calabria (3% and 1,6%)¹¹.

Italian macro-regions	man	women	tot.	place
year 2009				
North-West	5677	6390	12067	23
North-East	3455	4314	7769	25
Centre	4408	8495	12903	16
South	3878	8308	12186	7
Islands	404	697	1101	18
year 2007				
North-West	4555	4859	9414	25
North-East	2619	3138	5757	24
Centre	3535	6118	9653	20
South	2713	5219	7932	7
Islands	263	458	721	23
year 2005				
North-West	3075	3097	6172	29
North-East	1596	1952	3548	34
Centre	2138	3405	5543	26
South	701	1457	2158	19
Islands	106	219	325	39

Table 1. Data elaborated from yearly data of ISTAT

One of the main reasons for this high percentage of Bulgarians in the central and southern regions of the country can be explained as a consequence of the high number of agricultural workers among Bulgarian people. In fact, in the

¹¹ Bertazzon L., *Gli immigrato bulgari in Italia ed in Veneto*, Regione Veneto and Veneto Lavoro Osservatorio & Ricerca, Nov. 2007, p.9

South and in the Centre of the country, where the agricultural sector is really expanding, the foreign presence is growing every year. According to INEA (Italian National Institute of Agricultural Economy) research, in 2009, the foreign workers were 184,877, an increase of nearly 5% over 2008 and an impact on the total labor force of nearly 21%. Among the foreigners, the presence of workers from the new EU citizens (around 60,000) continues to be important, consisting mainly of Rumanians, Bulgarians and Poles. In the same year, in parallel, albeit at a low rate, the regularization of employment contracts has grown, and their share stood at 67.1% of the total.¹² Situations with more irregularities are more evident in the South (66.3%) and on the Islands (59.1%). Overall, INEA research shows that the employment of expatriates is strongly marked as being labor intensive and with hard working hours.

In addition to the agricultural sector, Bulgarians are mainly employed in the following areas: tourism, housework, personal care, health, construction, and seasonal jobs.

In the last years, with the aging of the population and the crisis of the welfare state, the personal care sector is rapidly growing. It involves around one million and one hundred people, 87% women, 79% foreigners, the majority coming from Eastern Europe. The same phenomenon is spreading among nurseries who are more and more staffed by expatriates, in particular 75% young women (between 30-40 years old), 56% from Eastern Europe and 35% from Latin America.¹³

The ISTAT data, with respect to the construction sector, show that in 2008 there were 289.000 immigrants, 15% of the total employees, around 5% more than the year before. This percentage increase was the result of the presence of own business constructors whose share grew with 28 points.¹⁴

Before being accepted in the European Union, the large process of regularization for Bulgarian workers in Italy started at the end of 2002¹⁵. The Italian government tried to uncover a substantial number of citizens illegally present in the country, and employed in the black labour market. More than 9,000 applications for regularization of Bulgarian citizens were submitted to the Italian police headquarters, and they were partially related to employment (over 4,800) and partially to domestic work and care (over 4,200).¹⁶ Since that date, each subsequent year the Italian Embassy in Sofia has been issuing an average of 2,000 visas for Italy, both for short and long term residence.¹⁷ The number of visas issued to Bulgarian citizens relative to the total number of visa requests received by Italian embassies abroad is a very small proportion (around 0.2%).¹⁸

Nowadays, despite Bulgarian membership in the European Union, there is still a temporary process of regularisation for Bulgarians and Rumanians with reference to working in Italy. In November 2010, the Ministers of Labour and of Foreign Affairs approved an Act which describes the rules for work applications

12 Ansa.it, *Agricoltura: Inea, aumentano del 5% i lavoratori stranieri*, 21/12/2010

13 Dazzi Z., *L'esercito delle badanti clandestine: una su 4 nelle mani del racket*, La Repubblica, 16/10/2006.

14 Ibidem

15 The regularization of all immigrants in Italy in 2002 was carried out by two measures: the Law 189/2002 for domestic assistance work; the Decree-Law 195/2002 and Law 222/2002 gave the possibility of regularizing the illegal contract positions to all employers.

16 Bertazzon L., *op.cit.*, pp.7-9

17 Ibidem

18 Ibidem

to Italy. There is a free entrance for the following sectors: tourism, agriculture, personal care, construction, mechanical work, seasonal jobs, management and highly skilled work. For all the other areas an authorization is required. Similar acts have been approved in Germany, UK, France, Austria, Belgium, Ireland, Luxembourg, Holland, and Malta.¹⁹

The debate is still open on the necessity of modifying this legal framework, and a new reform is foreseen for year 2011.

4. Case study

In order to analyze the practical experiences of Bulgarian expatriates in Italy, I conducted interviews, following a questionnaire which aims to understand the social, educational and professional background of the people considered. The analysis underlines the will of Bulgarians to leave their country of origin, in search for better opportunities abroad, and the actual problems of Italy to make the most of the professional levels of these expatriates.

The methodology of the case study utilizes a qualitative approach intending to obtain more details from the immigrants themselves, from their attitudes and their will. It permits a comparison of the analysis between the professionally skilled, the real work conditions and the very perceptions of the people. Each of the interviews follows a track of 30 questions which include personal information, social and professional aspects, and comments on the country of origin and the host country.

The sample-research consists of 6 interviews of people who have been living in Italy for more than one year, specifically from 1 to 10 years, in order to have a larger range in the variety of opinions. Furthermore, the sample engages people who are effectively in work age (18-60years) and who are residents of the two Italian regions with highest presence of foreigners, Emilia-Romagna (10,9%) and Lazio (11,8%).²⁰ The complementary geographical choice of these two regions is relevant for having a more complete sample which consists of a northern and a central region located in different parts of Italy and also for representing diverse aspects of the cultures and economic realities. The last characteristic in defining the sample is the high specialization of the respondents, from their professional and educational background which, considering the target of the paper, affects the answers fundamentally.

Thus, the 6 Bulgarians interviewed are 3 men and 3 women and they are from 21 to 48 years old. For the majority of them Italy represents the first country of migration, all of them have at least a secondary school diploma, they can all speak Italian but only one young girl with a bachelor degree is working as a clerk in the tourism sector, in a travel agency for a hotel, while the others are labourers. These, although they have a really technical background of studies, such as telecommunication technology, textile and architectural designing, are working as housekeepers and agricultural workers. In any case they declare themselves satisfied with their job and their professional role.

¹⁹ Immigrazione.biz, *Per i romeni e bulgari moratoria per tutto il 2011*, 25/11/2010.

²⁰ ISTAT, *La popolazione straniera residente in Italia al 1° gennaio 2010*, Popolazione - Statistiche in breve, Roma, ottobre 2010

The majority of them left Bulgaria after graduating from high school, between 2 and 4 years ago; only two people, a couple who went to Italy respectively 10 and 8 years ago (the man, followed by the woman) were already working in a factory. The main “push element” which brought them abroad is the will to find better opportunities both for themselves and/or their family, and they all considered poverty and corruption the main problems of Bulgaria. However, there is no particular reason why they decided to move to Italy (pull element); the most important cause of their transfer was the network with relatives or parents and the specific correlated advantages.

Four of them are single and two married, all of them have a half family in Italy and another half still in Bulgaria and they keep contact with their relatives quite often, on average once per week. Moreover, they still have a lot of friends in Bulgaria to whom they talk once a month. All of them are really connected to their country of origin, in fact, they feel to be completely Bulgarian and they follow the Bulgarian traditions in their daily life, however, nobody is a member of any Bulgarian network (associations, forum, etc.) in Italy.

Furthermore, the research highlights that the majority of the people interviewed is really integrated in Italy because they feel good in their host town and they have established good relations with local people, considering some of them to be trustworthy friends. Nevertheless, they do not feel Italian except the man who has been living in Italy for longer, more than 10 years.

Finally, the result of the research shows that all the Bulgarians interviewed keep a good memory of their country, associating it with: freedom, social relations, people and wild nature. All of them wish to move back to Bulgaria one day, but in the short term nobody is planning to leave Italy in order to move to a third country.

An interesting result concerns the European consciousness: all the people interviewed declared that they feel completely European citizens.

5. Conclusion

This analysis leads to a double result that involves both Italy and Bulgaria.

As far as Italy is concerned, the migration of Bulgarian highly skilled workers is not utilized. The brain waste that is happening in Bulgaria does not correspond to a brain gain in Italy. This situation is due to two main causes: On one hand, the Italian structural problems concerning legal and organisational aspects related to the work permit issuing procedures, and on the other hand, the common mentality through which immigration is perceived as a threat for the security of the country and not as a potential resource for its development. All this leads to an unutilized brain gain.

As far as Bulgaria is concerned, although the current situation may lead to different considerations, in the long run Bulgarian expatriates tend to plan a return to their original country, as showed by the interviews conducted. The link between Bulgaria and its citizens stays strong, no matter how many years are spent abroad. Thus, there seems to be a foreseeable brain re-gain for Bulgaria in the future.

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