



Master's Program in International Relations

Department of Political Science

**Demographic Decline and Brain Drain in Italy: Socio-  
Economic and EU impacts**

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Academic Year 2024/2025

## **Acknowledgements**

Before choosing a university for my master's degree, I selected LUISS University among many others not only for its compelling academic program but also for the opportunity to participate in the Double Degree program in China—a destination I had long dreamed of. Therefore, if I were asked whether I regret any choices from my past, my answer would be a resounding no, as I have achieved exactly what I originally set out to do.

This thesis holds a special meaning for me. I am an only child, and my father is 78 years old while my mother is 68, meaning I came into this world later in their lives. Despite never having substantial financial means, my parents never denied me anything. They gave me every opportunity, including the chance to pursue my education—first with a bachelor's degree, and now with a Master's. Moreover, my mother not only continues to work but also takes care of my father daily, as he is blind and unable to manage most everyday tasks. Because of this, the sense of responsibility I feel is even stronger, and I am determined to do everything in my power to fulfill it.

For this reason, my deepest gratitude goes to my parents, who have always been by my side. I would do anything to ensure they have the best life, as they provided for me, despite all the challenges they faced. I would also like to extend my sincere appreciation to my thesis supervisor, Dr. Song Tianyang, who has always been prompt in addressing my doubts and providing constructive and insightful feedback. I truly believe I have been incredibly fortunate to have had him by my side. Professor Giordano was no exception either, as he has always been supportive and attentive to my thesis work throughout these months.

A special thanks also goes to Veronica, a valuable friend who guided me through several joys and difficulties of this path. I do not think I would have achieved this much without her precious support.

I hope that this thesis will be valuable and contribute to leaving a significant mark in the research fields of Demography and International Relations.

Sincerely,

Valerio Lall

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## **Abstract**

This thesis investigates the connection between Italy's demographic decline and brain drain, focusing on their effects on socioeconomic stability and its role in the European Union. Low birth rates, an aging population, and a large exodus of young and talented people are all issues Italy is facing. These factors have led to a shrinking workforce, reduced innovation capacity, and a decline in global competitiveness. Therefore, Italy's economic sustainability and its capacity to influence EU migration and demographic policies are both significantly impacted by these demographic trends.

In order to identify important trends and their drivers, the study analyzes data from 2000 to 2024. By examining policy papers, comparative case studies, and demographic and economic data, the study identifies structural barriers including youth unemployment, regional inequality, and insufficient innovation ecosystems as the main contributors to brain drain. Moreover, it looks at the socio-economic consequences, namely decreased production, financial pressure, and the widening gap between Northern and Southern Italy. These factors contribute to exacerbate regional inequalities.

To address these challenges, the thesis proposes potential measures which could ease the issue, such as fostering innovation ecosystems, reforming migration policies to attract skilled talent, and facilitating the return of Italo-descendants. Furthermore, it highlights the need to address the structural aspects of structural youth unemployment, gender discrimination, and housing conditions that would prevent young people to leave the Country. Finally, the study also inquires on Italy's potential strategic capacity to lead EU-wide initiatives on labor mobility and demographic renewal. Hence, this could promote

Italy's cooperation with other Countries in Europe to enhance its boundary position in the EU.

By addressing brain drain and demographic decline, the research concludes that Italy can restore socio-economic stability, enhance its global competitiveness, and, therefore, position itself as a leader in addressing Europe's shared demographic challenges.

**Key Words: Demographic decline, Brain drain, Socioeconomic stability, Global competitiveness, Structural barriers.**

## 摘要

本论文探讨了意大利人口下降与人才流失之间的关系，重点分析其对社会经济稳定性及意大利在欧盟中的角色的影响。意大利正面临低出生率、人口老龄化以及人才外流等问题。这些因素导致劳动力萎缩、创新能力下降以及全球竞争力削弱。因此，这些人口趋势显著影响了意大利的经济可持续性及其对欧盟移民和人口政策的影响力。

本研究采用混合研究方分析了 2000 年至 2024 年的数据，以识别重要趋势及其驱动因素。通过审查政策文件、对比案例研究，以及分析人口和经济数据研究发现，青年失业率高、地区不平等以及创新生态系统不足是导致人才流失的主要结构性障碍。此外，本研究还探讨了社会经济后果，例如生产力下降、财政压力增加，以及意大利南北差距扩大，这些因素进一步加剧了地区不平衡。

为应对这些挑战，本论文提出了一系列可能的缓解措施，如促进创新生态系统建设、改革移民政策以吸引高技能人才，以及鼓励意大利后裔回归。此外，研究强调了解决青年失业、性别歧视和住房条件等结构性问题的必要性，以减少年轻人外流。最后，本论文还探讨了意大利在推动欧盟范围内劳动力流动和人口更新战略方面的潜在领导能力，从而加强其在欧盟中的影响力并促进与欧洲其他国家的合作。

本文认为，若能有效应对人才流失和人口下降问题，意大利将能够恢复社会经济稳定性，提升全球竞争力，并在解决欧洲共同的人口挑战方面发挥领导作用。

**关键词：**人口下降、人才流失、社会经济稳定、全球竞争力、结构性障碍

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Background

Italy is currently experiencing a complex demographic challenge that has profound social, economic, and political implications. The main challenge is linked to the persistently low fertility rates, which have fallen to 1.20 births per woman in 2023, far below the replacement level of 2.1.<sup>1</sup> This trend contributed to an increasingly aging population, with 24.0% of the population aged 65 and above, making Italy one of the oldest Countries in the European Union.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, even though the workforce remains stable, with 25.8 millions of labor force according to the most recent data,<sup>3</sup> it is important to know that Italy faces challenges related to an aging population and youth unemployment, which could have an impact in the composition and productivity of the workforce in the future.

Indeed, concerning this occurrence of the youth unemployment, the phenomenon of brain drain has further exacerbated the demographic crisis. In thirteen years, from 2011 to 2023, 550000 Italian youngsters aged between 18 and 34 years old left the Country in search for better opportunities abroad.<sup>4</sup> This had a considerable cost for the Italian government, which attested to be €134 Billions.<sup>5</sup> Looking at the big picture, approximately 1.6 million Italians aged between 11 and 35 years old, many of them young and highly educated, are

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<sup>1</sup> ISTAT, “Natalità e Fecondità Della Popolazione Residente – Anno 2023,” Istat, October 23, 2024, <https://www.istat.it/comunicato-stampa/natalita-e-fecondita-della-popolazione-residente-anno-2023/>.

<sup>2</sup> European Commission, “Statistics Explained,” Population structure and ageing - Statistics Explained, [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Population\\_structure\\_and\\_ageing](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Population_structure_and_ageing).

<sup>3</sup> Trading Economics, “Italy - Labor Force, Total,” Trading Economics, <https://tradingeconomics.com/italy/labor-force-total-wb-data.html#:~:text=Labor%20force%2C%20total%20in%20Italy,Bank%20on%20February%20of%202025>.

<sup>4</sup> Forbes, “La Fuga Di Cervelli è Costata All’Italia circa 134 Miliardi Negli Ultimi 13 Anni,” *Forbes*, October 23, 2024.

<sup>5</sup> Forbes, “La Fuga Di Cervelli è Costata All’Italia circa 134 Miliardi Negli Ultimi 13 Anni,”.

living abroad and this also represents a significant loss of human capital.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, we do have to consider that among these emigrants, a substantial portion are university graduates. Indeed, Italy ranks as one of the top EU Countries for the emigration of highly skilled workers.<sup>7</sup>

These issues must not be considered as isolated, but rather interconnected. In fact, emigration has been driven by a lack of job opportunities, evidenced by Italy's current youth unemployment rate of 19%,<sup>8</sup> coupled with economic stagnation and inadequate support for innovation. Moreover, the economic disparities between Northern and Southern Italy complicates the problem. Although recent improvements on productivity, the economically challenged Southern areas still endure persistent underdevelopment,<sup>9</sup> whereas regions such as Lombardy and Veneto maintain rather stable economies.<sup>10</sup> As a result, there are few prospects for professional growth, and this amplifies regional inequalities and encourages emigration.

Italy workforce composition and economic performance are especially affected by these demographic trends. A reduced labor pool has hindered productivity, caused a lack of skilled workers, and made Italy less competitive internationally. In fact, Italy's potential

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<sup>6</sup> Redazione Roma, "Dal 2011 al 2023 Emigrati All'estero 550mila Giovani Italiani," *ItaliaOggi*, October 23, 2024.

<sup>7</sup> Fondazione Pirelli, "Italy's Young People Intending to Move Abroad Are Symbolic of a Country in Decline, Hit by a Crisis of Confidence and of the Future," Fondazione Pirelli, July 15, 2024, <https://www.fondazionepirelli.org/en/corporate-culture/italys-young-people-intending-to-move-abroad-are-symbolic-of-a-country-in-decline-hit-by-a-crisis-of-confidence-and-of-the-future/>.

<sup>8</sup> YCharts, "Italy Youth Unemployment Rate (I:YUR01)," YCharts, December 2024, [https://ycharts.com/indicators/italy\\_youth\\_unemployment\\_rate\\_ifs#:~:text=Italy%20Youth%20Unemployment%20Rate%20is,long%20term%20average%20of%2028.44%25](https://ycharts.com/indicators/italy_youth_unemployment_rate_ifs#:~:text=Italy%20Youth%20Unemployment%20Rate%20is,long%20term%20average%20of%2028.44%25).

<sup>9</sup> Fabio Panetta, "Eppur Si Muove: L'economia Del Mezzogiorno Dopo La Crisi," Banca d'Italia, September 19, 2024, <https://www.bancaditalia.it/pubblicazioni/interventi-governatore/integov2024/Panetta-2024.09.19.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> Confcommercio, "Economie Regionali: Il Sud Cresce Più Del Nord Ma i Consumi Restano Fragili," Confcommercio, October 26, 2024, <https://www.confcommercio.it/-/economie-regionali#:~:text=Economia-,Economie%20regionali%3A%20il%20Sud%20cresce%20pi%C3%B9%20del%20Nord%20ma%20i,c%20la%20debolezza%20dei%20consumi%22>.

for innovation has been further depleted by the departure of young, educated people, which has led to a drop in the Country's ranks for global competitiveness.

Furthermore, as one of the founding members of the European Union, Italy's demographic problems expand beyond its national borders. Italy's influential voice to the EU's overall economic and political goals is weakened by a declining workforce, as well as a reduction in innovation and economic competitiveness. In addition to this, brain drain plays a significant role in affecting Italy's ability to take the lead in establishing EU-wide immigration and demographic policy.

## **1.2 Research question**

This research aims to investigate the relationship between Italy's brain drain and demographic decline, with a particular emphasis on how these problems together affect Italy's socioeconomic stability and its place within the European Union. The main research question at the center of this study is: what are the effects of Italy's demographic decline—specifically, brain drain—on its socioeconomic stability and its role within the EU? To guide this exploration, the study poses three key sub-questions. What are the primary drivers of brain drain within Italy's demographic context? How does brain drain influence Italy's innovation and competitiveness? Specifically, how does a declining skilled workforce hamper innovation capacity and global economic positioning? Lastly, what are the wider implications of brain drain on Italy's influence over EU migration and demographic policies? The study examines how these demographic trends impact Italy's ability to contribute effectively to EU initiatives and to assume leadership roles in tackling shared challenges.

### **1.3 Methodology**

This research employs a qualitative method based on case study analysis and process tracing in order to thoroughly examine the connection between Italy's demographic decline and brain drain, as well as the socioeconomic ramifications and effects on the nation's position within the European Union. Given the complexity of these issues, this approach will utilize an in-depth exploration of historical patterns, policy responses, and institutional factors that have shaped migration trends and demographic changes over time. This approach provides a holistic understanding of the drivers, effects, and possible remedies related to Italy's demographic and brain drain challenges.

A major part of this study involves case study analysis, which means taking a deep look at how Italy has handled brain drain and demographic challenges over the years. This will help us understand what has worked, what has not, and what lessons can be learned from other Countries. Through these comparisons, the goal is to identify effective policies that could help Italy improve its approach. Hence, the study will include comparisons with selected European Countries, namely Germany, France, the United Kingdom, and Scandinavian nations such as Sweden and Denmark. These Countries have been chosen due to their differing policy approaches to labor markets, talent retention, social mobility, and demographic challenges. Their relevance lies in offering practical policy lessons that may be adaptable to the Italian context.

Moreover, to fully grasp why Italy is facing these demographic and economic issues today, this research will use process tracing. This means looking at the key decisions, economic trends, and policy changes that have shaped migration patterns over time. Therefore, by looking at historical data, government actions, and institutional decisions, the research

will identify cause-and-effect relationships that explain how brain drain and demographic decline evolved.

Although this is a qualitative study, official data and reports will still be used to provide context and strengthen the analysis. Therefore, this research will incorporate key statistical indicators, namely fertility rates, youth unemployment and migration flows in order to support the qualitative insights and ensure a robust and interdisciplinary approach. The essay will make use of both primary sources, such as official reports from the Italian government and EU institutions on migration, labor markets, and demographics, and secondary sources, namely from organizations such as ISTAT, Eurostat, and the OECD, which provide reliable data on population trends, wages, and skilled migration.

The time period considered for our analysis will be from the 2000 till nowadays in order to analyze long-term patterns and forecast future effects on Italy's socio-economic stability.

By combining case study analysis and process tracing, this methodology will provide a clear and detailed picture of Italy's brain drain and demographic crisis. This approach will primarily allow the study to identify past policy mistakes and explain why some strategies failed. Secondly, this comparison with other European Countries will help to find effective solution. Lastly, this methodology will provide insights on how Italy can improve talent retention and strengthen its position within the EU.

#### **1.4 Structure of the Thesis**

To guide the reader, the structure of this thesis is outlined as follows: at first, chapter 1 introduces the research topic, providing the background, research questions, and methodology. Then, chapter 2 reviews the existing literature on demographic decline and

brain drain in Italy, identifying gaps and setting the stage for the theoretical framework. Chapter 3 presents the theoretical framework, discussing key theories relevant to the study. In particular, there will be a particular focus on the human capability theory, which is particularly explanatory of the brain drain issue involving Italy. While Chapter 4 focuses on the Italian Mezzogiorno as a case study, and Chapters 5 and 6 discuss national policies and possible reforms, the thesis will also draw on cross-Country comparisons with other European nations. These comparisons will be anticipated in the theoretical framework and expanded in the policy analysis part. Finally, chapter 7 concludes the study by summarizing findings, discussing implications, and offering suggestions for future research.

## 2. Literature Review

The link between brain drain and demographic decline is a pressing issue for Italy. Indeed, as it could have been observed through statistical data over the past decades, the Country has faced two interrelated challenges: on the one hand, a sharp drop in population growth, and, on the other hand, the emigration of skilled and educated individuals. Together, these trends pose significant socio-economic risks, making this topic not only relevant but urgent. This review explores what researchers have said about these issues so far and identifies the gaps that highlight the need for further study.

### 2.1 Understanding Demographic Decline in Italy

Italy's demographic challenges are widely recognized. Reports from ISTAT (Italian National Institute of Statistics) highlight a steady decline in population since 2014, with the Country's population falling below 59 million as of 2023.<sup>11</sup> However, thanks to immigration, the population remains nearly stable.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, scholars such as Billari and Tomassini, in their article published for the Italian Association for Population Studies (AISP), have highlighted that these trends are compounded by an aging population, which increases dependency ratios and puts added pressure on welfare and healthcare systems.<sup>13</sup> These issues, as noted by Matija Šerić, on its article published for the Eurasia Review, are more severe in Southern Italy, where demographic losses are most pronounced, deepening existing economic and social inequalities. Just to mention some data in order to raise awareness on the alarming situation of Italian demographic, in 2023, Sardinia

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<sup>11</sup> Reuters, "Births Fall in Italy for 15th Year Running to Record Low," *Reuters*, March 29, 2024.

<sup>12</sup> ISTAT, "Indicatori Demografici Anno 2023," ISTAT, March 29, 2024, [https://www.istat.it/it/files/2024/03/Indicatori\\_demografici.pdf](https://www.istat.it/it/files/2024/03/Indicatori_demografici.pdf).

<sup>13</sup> Francesco C. Billari and Cecilia Tomassini, *Rapporto Sulla Popolazione: L'Italia e Le Sfide Della Demografia* (Bologna: Il mulino, 2021).

region recorded a fertility rate of 0.91, so below 1.0 children per woman, while the best performing region, South Tyrol, recorded 1.42, which is still far below the replacement level of 2.1.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, the study from the AISP Population Report emphasizes that the issue is not just about numbers but also about the aging population. With fewer young people entering the workforce, Italy faces a growing dependency ratio, putting increasing pressure on welfare and healthcare systems.<sup>15</sup>

## 2.2 Brain Drain: Losing Italy's Best and Brightest

Italy's brain drain problem has grown more severe over time. Many studies confirm this unfortunate trend. Among them, it is possible to mention the Audit Court Report of 2021, which testifies that Italy's brain drain has increased by 41.8% over the past eight years,<sup>16</sup> with limited job prospects and low pay pushing more graduates to leave the Country.<sup>17</sup> This loss of educated individuals is furtherly confirmed by the case study conducted by the International Diplomatic Institute in 2018, which registered an emigration of approximately 117000 of Italians and among them 30000 were graduates.<sup>18</sup>

### 2.2.1 Economic Stagnation

There are several factors determining brain drain. First of all, economic stagnation; as evidenced by Lorenzo Beltrame on his paper "*Realtà e retorica del brain drain in Italia: stime statistiche, definizioni pubbliche e interventi politici*", economic stagnation and

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<sup>14</sup> Matija Šerić, "Italian Demographic Decline: A Threat To Italy's Future – Analysis," *Eurasia Review*, September 8, 2024.

<sup>15</sup> Francesco C. Billari and Cecilia Tomassini, *Rapporto Sulla Popolazione: L'italia e Le Sfide Della Demografia*

<sup>16</sup> Corte dei Conti, "Corte Dei Conti," Dettaglio Comunicati Stampa, May 26, 2021, <https://www.corteconti.it/HOME/StampaMedia/ComunicatiStampa/DettaglioComunicati?Id=ee67f74c-0bec-4dff-8575-13e1b77a3548>.

<sup>17</sup> Redazione ANSA, "Italy Brain Drain up 41.8% in 8 Years - Audit Court," *ANSA*, May 26, 2021.

<sup>18</sup> Istituto Diplomatico Internazionale, "Brain Drain: Il Caso Studio Dell'italia," Istituto Diplomatico Internazionale, April 17, 2023, <https://idi-international.org/brain-drain-il-caso-studio-dellitalia/>.

limited job opportunities could be determining factors behind the decisions of young Italians to move abroad.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, economic stagnation causes a lack of career perspectives and competitive salaries. This inevitably push young graduates to seek opportunities outside from Italy. These aspects are thoroughly pointed out by the meticulous research of Simona Monteleone and Benedetto Torrisi in their joint paper “A micro data analysis of Italy’s brain drain”.<sup>20</sup> Another significant contribution to witness this issue has come from the work of the journalist Stefano Paleari. On his article "*Le due facce opposte del 'brain drain' italiano*", the scholar shifts the focus to the migration dynamics of Italian researchers, highlighting how the missing of professional opportunities and economic difficulties are among the principal reasons of the emigration of talents.<sup>21</sup>

These studies highlight how the economic stagnation, limited job opportunities and the uncompetitive salaries contribute to worsen the phenomenon of brain drain, pushing several qualified workers to leave the Country and search for better opportunities abroad.

### **2.2.2 Lack of Social Mobility**

In Italy, there are few opportunities for professional growth, especially for young and highly qualified people. Ambitious workers are frustrated by organizational structures because they are frequently rigid and prioritize seniority above meritocracy. According to Lorenzo Codogno and Giampaolo Galli's book “Meritocracy, Growth, and Lessons from Italy's Economic Decline: Lobbies (and Ideologies) Against Competition and Talent”

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<sup>19</sup> Lorenzo Beltrame, *Realtà e Retorica Del Brain Drain in Italia: Stime Statistiche, Definizioni Pubbliche e Interventi Politici* (Trento, Italy: Università degli Studi di Trento, 2007).

<sup>20</sup> Simona Monteleone and Benedetto Torrisi, Discussion Papers, *A Micro Data Analysis of Italy's Brain Drain* (Naples, Italy: University of Naples “Parthenope,” 2010)

<sup>21</sup> Stefano Paleari, “Le Due Facce Opposte Del «brain Drain» Italiano,” *Il Sole 24 ORE*, August 9, 2018.

this may be due to historical reasons. Indeed, the fascist government, which placed a strong emphasis on obedience and restricted personal freedom and creativity, is the source of Italy's hierarchical structures and lack of merit-based advancement.<sup>22</sup> These historical influences have persisted, affecting contemporary business operations.<sup>23</sup> This thesis could be furtherly confirmed by Guglielmo Barone and Sauro Mocetti's work titled "Intergenerational Mobility in the Very Long Run: Florence 1427–2011", where they examine intergenerational mobility by taking into consideration six centuries. They finally remark that being part of historical elites in Florence significantly increases the likelihood of securing high-status jobs, confirming a persistent lack of social mobility in Italy over centuries.<sup>24</sup>

Coming to the most recent times, a study conducted by Maurizio Pisati and Antonio Schizzerotto, titled "*Pochi promossi, nessun bocciato. La mobilità di carriera in Italia in prospettiva comparata e longitudinale*", points out how Italy displays the highest rates of intragenerational immobility compared to Germany, Great Britain and Sweden.<sup>25</sup> This means that Italian workers have less opportunities of professional advancements during their working life.

Therefore, the combination of a rigid productive system and a less dynamic labor market, significantly contribute to the limited social mobility in Italy.

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<sup>22</sup> Lorenzo Codogno and Giampaolo Galli, *Meritocracy, Growth, and Lessons from Italy's Economic Decline: Lobbies (and Ideologies) against Competition and Talent* (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2022).

<sup>23</sup> Lorenzo Codogno and Giampaolo Galli, *Meritocracy, Growth, and Lessons from Italy's Economic Decline: Lobbies (and Ideologies) against Competition and Talent*.

<sup>24</sup> Guglielmo Barone and Sauro Mocetti, "Intergenerational Mobility in the Very Long Run: Florence 1427–2011," *The Review of Economic Studies* 88, no. 4 (November 6, 2020): 1863–91, <https://doi.org/10.1093/restud/rdaa075>.

<sup>25</sup> Maurizio Pisati and Antonio Schizzerotto, "Pochi Promossi, Nessun Bocciato. La Mobilità Di Carriera in Italia in Prospettiva Comparata e Longitudinale," *Stato e Mercato*, no. 56 (1999): 249–79, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24650820>.

### 2.2.3 Institutional challenges

Italian residents' faith in the nation's future is greatly impacted by institutional issues as political instability, corruption, and ineffective bureaucracy.

In reference to bureaucracy, Italy ranks lower in bureaucratic quality compared to other OECD Countries. Italy fell from 26th place in 2000 to 33rd place in 2018,<sup>26</sup> indicating a loss in administrative efficiency, according to a Confcommercio analysis. This inefficiency hampers economic growth and reduces citizens' trust in institutions.<sup>27</sup> In fact, Confcommercio estimated that if Italy's bureaucracy had been as efficient as the German bureaucracy, Italy would have gained €70 billions of GDP between 2009 and 2018.<sup>28</sup>

Corruption also is a persistent challenge in Italy. As professor Sabino Cassese highlighted on his article "*Gli italiani e la corruzione*", Italians deem that Italy is dominated by corruption.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, corruption is a detrimental phenomenon that compromises institutional efficiency and diminishes public confidence.<sup>30</sup> Cassese thoroughly deals with this argument in his book: "*Amministrare la Nazione: la crisi della burocrazia e i suoi rimedi*". Here, the author recognizes the importance of bureaucracy being the first employer in Italy.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, Cassese also attributes to the bureaucracy a great responsibility on the general welfare of the Country.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, a functioning bureaucracy is essential in order to achieve good results in the Country. That is the reason

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<sup>26</sup> Confcommercio, "Confcommercio: Per Qualità Burocrazia, Italia Terzultima Su 36 Paesi OCSE," Confcommercio, July 4, 2020, <https://www.confcommercio.it/-/comunicato-99-2020-su-burocrazia>.

<sup>27</sup> Mariano Bella, *burocrazia e (mancata) crescita economica*.

<sup>28</sup> Confcommercio, "Confcommercio: Per Qualità Burocrazia, Italia Terzultima Su 36 Paesi OCSE".

<sup>29</sup> Sabino Cassese, "Ecco Tutta La Verità Sulla Corruzione in Italia," *Il Foglio*, June 29, 2024.

<sup>30</sup> Sabino Cassese, "Ecco Tutta La Verità Sulla Corruzione in Italia,".

<sup>31</sup> Sabino Cassese, *Amministrare La Nazione: La Crisi Della Burocrazia e i Suoi Rimedi* (Milano, Italy: Mondadori, 2022).

<sup>32</sup> Sabino Cassese, *Amministrare La Nazione: La Crisi Della Burocrazia e i Suoi Rimedi*

why, through his book, he tries to find some possible remedies to enhance the role of bureaucracy in Italy.

Another fact which makes Italy famous all over the World is its political instability. Indeed, Italy has a history marked by frequent changes in government, with an average executive duration shorter than that of other European Countries. A recent enquiry from the newspaper “Il Sole 24 Ore” has found that, since 1946, Italy has experienced 67 different governments, with an average lifespan of about 414 days—just over one year and two months.<sup>33</sup> Therefore, as Massimo Morelli outlines on one of his recent studies, this political instability characterizing Italy often results in low-quality legislative overproduction, overburdening bureaucracy and reducing its efficiency.<sup>34</sup>

The combination of all these factors creates an environment in which citizens perceive institutions as ineffective and non-transparent, decreasing trust in the Country's future. Just to mention an explanatory data about the social discontent of Italians, the 2019 CENSIS Report about the social situation in Italy evidenced that the 69% of Italians deem that social mobility is blocked, while just a minor part of the 14% of Italians provide some optimism for the future.<sup>35</sup>

As to conclude, it has to be stated that addressing these institutional challenges is essential to strengthening citizens' confidence in Italy's future. Hence, targeted reforms aimed at improving bureaucratic efficiency, combating corruption, and ensuring greater political

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<sup>33</sup> Luca Maltauro, “Troppi Governi Di Breve Vita, l’anomalia Italiana. A Quale Costo?,” *Econopoly - ilSole24ORE*, July 28, 2022.

<sup>34</sup> Massimo Morelli et al., “From Weber to Kafka: Political Instability and the Overproduction of Laws,” *American Economic Review* 111, no. 9 (September 1, 2021): 2964–3003, <https://doi.org/10.1257/aer.20190672>.

<sup>35</sup> Censis, “Il Furore Di Vivere Degli Italiani,” CENSIS, December 6, 2019, <https://www.censis.it/rapporto-annuale/il-furore-di-vivere-degli-italiani>.

stability can contribute to creating a more favorable environment for economic and social development. For this purpose, it could be interesting to have a look on Giordano and Tommasino study on the effect of public sector efficiency to firm productivity by taking into account more than 400,000 Italian firms. The study suggested that raising public sector efficiency could yield large economic benefits.<sup>36</sup>

### **2.3 How Demographic Decline and Brain Drain are Linked**

The demographic decline and brain drain in Italy are interconnected phenomena that reinforce each other, creating a vicious cycle with negative effects on the Country's future. A researcher who discussed this issue the most is Alessandro Rosina, an Italian demographer. The argument will be analyzed by taking into consideration his declarations on the matter at stake.

At first, what could glimpse in mind is the job market. In fact, the decrease in population, driven by low birth rates and aging, reduces the available workforce, limiting job opportunities and hindering economic growth. Therefore, this contraction in the labor market pushes many young, skilled individuals to seek better prospects abroad, contributing to the so-called "brain drain". As the demographer Alessandro Rosina warned two years ago: "Italy has only two years left to flip the script, otherwise it will enter in a vicious cycle of decline".<sup>37</sup> Well, two years passed and, unfortunately data are not by our side.

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<sup>36</sup> Raffaella Giordano et al., *Does Public Sector Inefficiency Constrain Firm Productivity: Evidence from Italian Provinces* (Washington, D.C, United States: International Monetary Fund, 2015).

<sup>37</sup> Chiara Brusini, "Non Si Trovano Lavoratori? Anche Perché i Giovani Sono Sempre Meno. Il Demografo: 'L'Italia Ha Solo Due Anni per Invertire La Rotta o Entrare in Un Circolo Vizioso Di Declino,'" *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, July 5, 2022.

As a matter of fact, it can be stated that there is a direct proportionality relation between brain drain and demographic decline. The more is brain drain, the faster is demographic decline. As Rosina states on his article:” *I troppi limiti allo sviluppo di una Italia senza giovani*”, the emigration of young, educated individuals not only deprives Italy of essential skills but also exacerbates population aging and furtherly lowers the birth rate.<sup>38</sup> The loss of individuals of reproductive age reduces the number of births, while the increasing elderly population puts more pressure on the welfare system.<sup>39</sup>

As to conclude, addressing both demographic decline and brain drain simultaneously is crucial to breaking this vicious cycle. Policies that promote higher birth rates, improve job opportunities for young people, and incentivize the return of talent from abroad are essential to reversing the trend and ensuring a sustainable future for Italy.

The combined effects of demographic decline and brain drain pose a significant challenge to Italy's economy and social systems. It was possible to get an idea by looking at the study conducted by the *Fondazione Nord Est* estimating the cost of brain drain for Italy in thirteen years' time.<sup>40</sup> However, as Luca Paolazzi, the scientific director of the think tank, explains, this emigration entails another problem since this data indicate how much Italy is not an attractive Country for young people to come to work. Therefore, since the availability of the skills necessary to drive innovation and economic progress reduces, this emigration poses a significant obstacle.

At the same time, demographic decline and population aging increase the demand for healthcare and pension services, placing additional strain on public finances. Moreover,

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<sup>38</sup> Alessandro Rosina, “I Troppi Limiti Allo Sviluppo Di Una Italia Senza Giovani,” *Il Sole 24 ORE*, August 16, 2021.

<sup>39</sup> Alessandro Rosina, “I Troppi Limiti Allo Sviluppo Di Una Italia Senza Giovani,”.

<sup>40</sup> Fondazione Nord Est, *I Giovani e La Scelta Di Trasferirsi All'estero. Propensione e Motivazione* (Fondazione Nord Est, 2024).

Southern Italy, what is known to be the Mezzogiorno, is disproportionately affected by these challenges. In fact, a recent report from the European Employment Services (EURES) points out a concerning data. Italy is last in Europe for the presence of under-35 in its territory.<sup>41</sup> The number of people under 35 has dropped by over 3.5 million, namely the 21% over the past 20 years, with the southern areas being particularly heavily hit.<sup>42</sup>

This demographic decline, combined with the brain drain of young graduates, further widens the economic and social gap between the North and South of the Country.

These interrelated problems are frequently not adequately addressed by current policies. For instance, without a larger framework of job possibilities and economic development, fiscal incentives namely the "*Controesodo*" law (L.238/2010) that try to draw talent back to Italy have had limited impact.<sup>43</sup> In a similar vein, policies to boost birth rates often ignore the importance of retaining young talent within the Country.

As to conclude, an integrated political approach that acknowledges the interconnectedness of both issues is necessary to effectively address brain drain and population decline. Therefore, strategies must be developed to promote both demographic growth and the retention and development of human capital, with a particular focus on the regions most affected, such as Southern Italy, which deeply suffers this phenomenon.

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<sup>41</sup> Osservatorio Riparte l'Italia, "Il Dramma Della Fuga Dei Cervelli: Italia Ultima in Europa per La Presenza Di under 35: Il Rapporto Eures," Osservatorio Riparte l'Italia, April 10, 2024, <https://www.ripartelitalia.it/il-dramma-della-fuga-dei-cervelli-italia-ultima-in-europa-per-la-presenza-di-under-35-il-rapporto-eures/>.

<sup>42</sup> Osservatorio Riparte l'Italia, "Il Dramma Della Fuga Dei Cervelli: Italia Ultima in Europa per La Presenza Di under 35: Il Rapporto Eures,"

<sup>43</sup> Giuseppe Di Lollo, "Italia, Giovani e Rientro Dei Cervelli: In Quale Direzione Stiamo Andando?," *Orizzonti Politici*, November 3, 2023.

## 2.4 What is Missing in the Current Research?

At the light of this thorough literature review, it is possible to affirm that current research suffers considerable theoretical gaps. Indeed, while demographic decline and brain drain are well-studied separately, there is no clear unified framework to explain how they influence each other. Some scholars have examined these issues independently—for instance, Billari and Tomassini (AISP) have explored the impact of aging populations on economic sustainability, while Beltrame (2020) has analyzed how economic stagnation contributes to brain drain. However, few studies explicitly connect these two trends in a way that shows how they reinforce one another over time. One of the few attempts to link them comes from Alessandro Rosina, who argues that the loss of young, skilled workers accelerates demographic decline, creating a cycle where fewer young people remain to contribute to economic growth and birth rates continue to fall. Furthermore, there is a scarcity of studies using long-term data or analyzing regional differences to show how these issues interact over time. Therefore, it is possible to mention even the existence of empirical gaps. Lastly, as it was detected at the last part of the previous section, there are policy gaps. In fact, the existing research rarely explores integrated policy solutions that address both demographic and brain drain challenges together.

Although researchers have made great progress in understanding demographic decline and brain drain, little is known about how they interact. Although reports from ISTAT, the AISP Population Report, and other studies provide a basis, there are still gaps in integrated analysis. This gap is critical because these two issues are deeply interconnected and therefore call for comprehensive solutions. This study attempts to shed light on how to handle one of Italy's most urgent socioeconomic challenges by addressing these open concerns.

### **3. Theoretical Framework**

Italy's brain drain and demographic decline are complex issues that require an interdisciplinary theoretical approach. Hence, examining these tendencies from a variety of theoretical angles is crucial in order to have an understanding of the deeper dynamics at stake.

This research argues that brain drain in Italy is primarily driven by a combination of economic factors and structural barriers, leading to a decline in innovation capacity and global competitiveness. Addressing brain drain is not just an economic necessity but also crucial for Italy's role within the EU, as reversing this trend could enhance its influence in European migration and demographic policymaking.

To explore this issue, three main theoretical frameworks will be introduced in this chapter to explain on the one hand, the exodus of young and talented Italians and, on the other hand, the external implications for Italy's economy, society, and future role in the EU. The first theory under examination is the migration economics theory. This view will examine the labor market and financial incentives that motivate skilled workers to migrate. Secondly the human capability theory will shift the focus from solely economic incentives to the structural impediments that restrict individual opportunities and impact migration choices. Lastly, the demographic dividend and burden theory looks at the long-term repercussions of population shifts, explaining how Italy's aging workforce and shrinking labor pool impact economic growth.

By integrating these perspectives, this chapter provides a solid theoretical foundation, fundamental for analyzing the causes and consequences of Italy's demographic crisis and brain drain.

### 3.1 Migration Economics Theory: The Push and Pull Factors of Talent

The migration economics theory is one of the most widely used frameworks to explain why people move from one Country to another, particularly when it comes to the movement of skilled workers. The theory finds its roots in neoclassical economic thought, and it argues that migration decisions are largely influenced by income differentials, labor market opportunities, and cost-benefit considerations (Borjas, 1989).<sup>44</sup>

This theory divides migration drivers into two categories. On the one side, there are the push factors, which are the reasons that push people to leave their home Country, on the other side there are the pull factors, which instead are the opportunities that attract them to a different destination.<sup>45</sup>

Delving into Italy's case, the push factors overcome the pull factors. Among them, it could be mentioned a high youth unemployment, currently attested to be at 19 %, <sup>46</sup> and this makes stable employment difficult to secure. Coupled with youth unemployment, there is a considerable pressing issue of low wages since salaries for highly skilled workers in Italy remain below the EU average.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, the push factors include regional inequalities. As a matter of fact, Italy is the Country which present the most regional disparities and, indeed, the South continues to lag behind the North in terms of job opportunities and economic development.<sup>48</sup> Lastly, the weak investment in research

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<sup>44</sup> George J. Borjas, "Economic Theory and International Migration," *International Migration Review* 23, no. 3 (September 1989): 457–85, <https://doi.org/10.1177/019791838902300304>.

<sup>45</sup> Everett S. Lee, "A Theory of Migration," *Demography* 3, no. 1 (March 1, 1966): 47–57, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2060063>.

<sup>46</sup> Trading Economics, Italy youth unemployment rate, accessed February 22, 2025, <https://tradingeconomics.com/italy/youth-unemployment-rate>.

<sup>47</sup> Servet Yanatma, "Average Salary Rankings in Europe: Which Countries Pay the Highest?," *Euronews*, December 24, 2024.

<sup>48</sup> Davide Passamonti, "Rapporto SVIMEZ: Il Divario Tra Nord e Sud è Drammatico," *Micromega*, February 21, 2024.

and innovation is also noteworthy. According to the most recent data, Italy only invests the 1,33% of its GDP in this sector, in contrast to the 2,3% of the EU average.<sup>49</sup> The allocation of this small amount of resources in the research and innovation domain leads to fewer opportunities for career growth in high-skilled sectors.

All these factors contribute on pushing young Italians to leave for other Countries.

Indeed, on the other hand, Countries like Germany, the UK, and the US display strong pull factors, such as higher salaries and better job prospects for skilled professionals, especially for the US;<sup>50</sup> stronger merit-based career advancement, therefore reducing the importance of personal connections;<sup>51</sup> more efficient public administration, making life and work easier for professionals;<sup>52</sup> and greater investment in research and development, offering better opportunities for academic and scientific careers.<sup>53</sup>

From an economic standpoint, brain drain represents a significant loss of investment.

Indeed, the Italian government spends billions on education and training, only to see many of its most talented individuals take their skills elsewhere. For the matter at stake, it is appropriate to mention a research by Docquier and Rapoport (2012), who thoroughly analyze the long-term effects of brain drain on economic development. Their main argument is that while some degree of skilled migration can have positive effects—such as knowledge diffusion and remittances—persistent brain drain can significantly harm a Country's economic growth, reduce innovation, and, therefore,

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<sup>49</sup> Fabrizio Gea, "I Numeri Dell'innovazione in Italia," *Mondo Economico*, February 11, 2025.

<sup>50</sup> Albert Mercadé Laborda, "Salary Differences between the United States and Europe," *Talentup*, February 5, 2024.

<sup>51</sup> Euraxess, "Open, Transparent and Merit-Based Recruitment of Researchers," Euraxess, July 2015, [https://euraxess.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/policy\\_library/otm-r-finaldoc\\_0.pdf](https://euraxess.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/policy_library/otm-r-finaldoc_0.pdf).

<sup>52</sup> National Audit office, "International Comparison of the UK's Public Administration," National Audit office (NAO), October 22, 2008, [https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2009/02/0809123\\_Accenture\\_report.pdf](https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2009/02/0809123_Accenture_report.pdf).

<sup>53</sup> Open Polis, "Ricerca e Sviluppo: Quanto Investono l'Italia e i Paesi Ue in Questo Settore," *Open Polis*, November 27, 2019.

weaken its global competitiveness.<sup>54</sup> Hence, this is particularly true for Italy, that fails to implement policies to retain or attract skilled professionals.

Thus, Migration Economics Theory supports the argument that brain drain is a rational response to economic difficulties and weak institutional support. However, while this theory explains why individuals leave, it is less useful for understanding Italy's broader policy role in the EU.

### **3.2 Human Capability Theory: Beyond Economics**

Migration is often explained simply in economic terms, as a simple cost-benefit decision, where individuals move to maximize their earnings. However, the human capability theory, developed by Amartya Sen (1999)<sup>55</sup> first and expanded by Martha Nussbaum (2000)<sup>56</sup> later, argue that migration is not just about money. They introduced a different way of looking at human choices, focusing on capabilities rather than just income.

Thus, according to the capability approach, behind the choice of a person's decision to migrate there is not only an economic aim of seeking higher salaries, but rather a purpose of having the ability to live a fulfilling and meaningful life.<sup>57</sup> Therefore, people do not leave their home Country only because they want to earn more money, but because they feel blocked in their personal and professional growth.

This theory is fundamental because it explains the issue of brain drain in Italy more than any other theory.

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<sup>54</sup> Frédéric Docquier and Hillel Rapoport, "Globalization, Brain Drain, and Development," *Journal of Economic Literature* 50, no. 3 (September 1, 2012): 681–730, <https://doi.org/10.1257/jel.50.3.681>.

<sup>55</sup> Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Anchor Books, 2011).

<sup>56</sup> Martha C. Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development*, March 13, 2000, <https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511841286>.

<sup>57</sup> Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom*.

### **3.2.1 Why Do Italians Feel They Have No Choice but to Leave?**

The human capability theory perfectly fits the Italian context. Indeed, many young and skilled Italians do not emigrate just because of low salaries, but because the structural and institutional issues pervading the Country do not allow them to obtain the conditions to fully develop their potential and realize themselves. This sub-chapter will now engage on highlighting the principal structural barriers impeding Italian youngsters to have a prosperous future in their home Country and pushing them to emigrate.

#### **3.2.1.1 The Rigidity of the Italian Labor Market**

One of the main issues of the Country is its rigid labor market. Among the main characteristics of this rigidity there is the career progression, which is very difficult to obtain in several cases. Indeed, one of the biggest frustrations for young professionals in Italy is that career progression is often based more on seniority than on merit.<sup>58</sup> Unlike in other Countries, where employees are promoted primarily based on performance, innovation, and skills, in Italy many sectors still operate under a seniority-based system. For instance, in multinational companies based in Countries, such as Malta or Slovakia, a young professional who demonstrates leadership skills might be promoted quickly.<sup>59</sup> In contrast, in many Italian companies, managerial roles are often reserved for employees in their 40s or 50s, regardless of individual performance.<sup>60</sup> In fact, according to recent esteems, only the 14% of managers is under their 40s, against the 33% of the EU average.<sup>61</sup> This rigid system makes Italy less attractive for ambitious young professionals.

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<sup>58</sup> Guglielmo Barone and Sauro Mocetti, “Intergenerational Mobility in the Very Long Run: Florence 1427–2011,”

<sup>59</sup> Luisa Rosti, “I Dirigenti Giovani Sono Troppo Pochi,” *Il Sole 24 Ore*, January 11, 2021.

<sup>60</sup> Luisa Rosti, “I Dirigenti Giovani Sono Troppo Pochi,”

<sup>61</sup> Luisa Rosti, “I Dirigenti Giovani Sono Troppo Pochi,”

Another element making the Italian labor market rigid is its instability. Finding a stable and well-paid job in Italy is a major challenge for young people, even those with excellent qualifications. This issue is due to several structural weaknesses. First among them is the high percentage of temporary contracts (*contratti a tempo determinato*), which offer little job security. Recent data make us aware of the gravity of the issue at stake. In fact, despite Italy has just one percentage point more than the EU average in terms of temporary contracts,<sup>62</sup> it is the Country where the incidence has increased the most over the last decade: +3.4 percentage points between 2013 and 2022.<sup>63</sup> By delving into the details, youngsters are the most hit by this issue. Indeed, Eurostat evidenced that among workers aged between 25 and 34 in Italy, over 28% had a fixed-term contract, exceeding the European average for this age group by 10 percentage points.<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, Italian workers earn lower average wages than those in many other European Countries, even in highly specialized sectors. In 2023, the average net salary in Italy for a single person without children was around 24,000 PPS (Purchasing Power Standard), while the European Union average stood at 27,500 PPS.<sup>65</sup> Therefore, Italy has still a long way to go, especially if we consider Germany, where the average salary was 34,900 PPS, or France's 28,500 PPS.<sup>66</sup> To give a final explanatory example, A software engineer in Italy might start with a series of short-term contracts and earn €1,500 per month, while in Germany or the UK, the same profile could secure a permanent position with a starting

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<sup>62</sup> Open Polis, "Oltre 20 Milioni Di Lavoratori Europei Hanno Il Contratto a Termine," *Open Polis*, July 19, 2023.

<sup>63</sup> Open Polis, "Oltre 20 Milioni Di Lavoratori Europei Hanno Il Contratto a Termine,".

<sup>64</sup> Ylenia Brilli, Bernardo Fanfani, and Daniela Piazzalunga, "Quanto Incide Il Contratto Di Lavoro Nelle Scelte Di Fecondità," *La Voce*, March 5, 2024.

<sup>65</sup> Corriere della Sera, "La Classifica Degli Stipendi (Reali): Italia Ultima Tra i Grandi Paesi, La Mappa Interattiva," *Corriere Della Sera*, February 15, 2025.

<sup>66</sup> Corriere della Sera, "La Classifica Degli Stipendi (Reali): Italia Ultima Tra i Grandi Paesi, La Mappa Interattiva,"

salary of €3,000 or more. Hence, this income disparity, combined with the lack of job security, is one of the key reasons why many Italians choose to leave the Country.

Furthermore, another critical issue in Italy's job market is the influence of personal connections, the so called "*raccomandazioni*".<sup>67</sup> While networking is important in many Countries, in Italy, who you know can sometimes be more important than what you know when it comes to finding a job or getting a promotion. This system favors individuals with strong personal or family connections and puts others—no matter how talented they could be—in a disadvantaged position. The result is a lack of meritocracy, where skills and qualifications do not always determine career success.

For instance, a young journalist in Italy may find it difficult to break into the media industry without knowing the right people, whereas in Countries like Canada,<sup>68</sup> recruitment is more open to newcomers based on portfolios and merit. As a result, this lack of transparency and fairness in the job market feeds into the brain drain phenomenon, as young Italians see more equal opportunities abroad.

The study of Morano-Foadi (2006) is paradigmatic in explaining the general negative sentiment that pervades young Italian professionals. These in-depth interviews with Italian researchers working abroad confirmed that economic factors are only one among several reasons why Italian youngsters leave the Country. They leave due to deeply rooted issues in the Italian academic system: lack of meritocracy, rigid hierarchies, and opaque recruitment processes.<sup>69</sup> Furthermore, the study contrasts these lived experiences with

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<sup>67</sup> Lorenzo Codogno and Giampaolo Galli, *Crescita Economica e Meritocrazia: Perché l'Italia Spreca i Suoi Talenti e Non Cresce* (Bologna, Italy: Il mulino, 2022).

<sup>68</sup> David Ashton, Francis Green, and Graham Lowe, "The Linkages between Education and Employment in Canada and the United Kingdom: A Comparative Analysis," *Comparative Education* 29, no. 2 (January 1993): 125–43, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0305006930290202>.

<sup>69</sup> Sonia Morano Foadi, "Key Issues and Causes of the Italian Brain Drain," *Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research* 19, no. 2 (June 2006): 209–23, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13511610600804315>.

simplified media narratives that often blame low salaries or “wanderlust.” In reality, many interviewees expressed disappointment with a system that rewards loyalty over competence and discourages innovation.<sup>70</sup>

Without these reforms, the Country will continue to lose talent, weakening its workforce, its economy, and its ability to compete in the global market.

### **3.2.1.2 Limited Funding for Research and Development: A Barrier to Innovation**

Innovation and technological progress are fundamental elements for a Country's economic growth. As it was stated in the previous chapter dedicated to the push factors, Italy invests significantly less in research and development (R&D) compared to other advanced nations,<sup>71</sup> and this creates an unfavorable environment for scientists, researchers, and innovators. This is one of the main reasons why young and skilled Italians decide to flee from Italy.

Another issue due to limited funding is that academic careers in Italy are extremely precarious and difficult to build. Indeed, many young researchers, after years of study and specialization, still struggle to find stable positions and they are forced to work on fixed-term contracts and temporary research grants, often renewed year by year. Data concerning this aspect are catastrophic. According to 2013 data, approximately 50% of research staff in Italian universities consisted of temporary workers, with low chances of obtaining permanent positions.<sup>72</sup> This research also outlined that between 2002 and 2013, only 6.7% of temporary researchers managed to obtain a permanent position, and projections indicated a further decline in this percentage in the following years.<sup>73</sup> As a

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<sup>70</sup> Sonia Morano Foadi, “Key Issues and Causes of the Italian Brain Drain.”

<sup>71</sup> European Commission, “Statistics Explained,” R&D expenditure - Statistics Explained, 2024, [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=R%26D\\_expenditure](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=R%26D_expenditure).

<sup>72</sup> Valentina Bazzarin, “L’atlante Della Precarietà,” *Il Bo Live*, July 15, 2014.

<sup>73</sup> Valentina Bazzarin, “L’atlante Della Precarietà.”

matter of fact, recent data confirmed this pessimistic projection since, parallel to the reduction in permanent staff, there has been an increase in researchers with fixed-term contracts.<sup>74</sup> Furthermore, it is possible to highlight a problem of lower salaries compared to the European average. An early-career Italian researcher earns an average of €28,256 net per year. In comparison, the average salary in the United Kingdom is €49,168, while in Germany, it ranges from €50,006 (North Rhine-Westphalia) to €52,689 (Bavaria).<sup>75</sup> Instead, An Associate Professor in Italy earns approximately €40,988 net per year, while a Senior Lecturer in the United Kingdom earns €69,385. In Germany, a second-tier Professor (W2) receives between €69,328 and €70,333, depending on the region.<sup>76</sup> To clarify with a concrete example, A young Italian PhD student may spend 10-15 years juggling research grants and short-term contracts before securing a stable position. Meanwhile, a colleague in Germany or the Netherlands may already be an associate professor or hold a managerial position in the private sector. This is the reason why, with few career prospects and low salaries, many young Italian scientists prefer to move to Countries where the academic system is more meritocratic and offers economic stability. Another aspect to take into consideration is that in more advanced Countries, research is funded not only by the government but also by the private sector, through partnerships between universities and companies. In Italy, companies invest little in R&D and often do not collaborate with universities to develop new technologies. Instead, in Countries as Japan or United States, the allocation of resources in innovation is superior. In the latter

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<sup>74</sup> Gloria Riva, “I Ricercatori Italiani, Precari per Sempre. Sono Oltre 25mila «e La Nuova Riforma Non Cambia Nulla» ,” *L’Espresso*, July 1, 2022.

<sup>75</sup> Alice Civera, Michele Meoli, and Stefano Paleari, “I Ricercatori Italiani Guadagnano La Metà Dei Tedeschi e Un Terzo in Meno Dei Francesi,” *Il Sole 24 ORE*, March 27, 2023.

<sup>76</sup> Redazione Sky TG24, “I Ricercatori Italiani Guadagnano La Metà Dei Tedeschi. Gli Stipendi,” Gli stipendi dei ricercatori italiani e di quelli europei. LA CLASSIFICA | Sky TG24, March 28, 2023, <https://tg24.sky.it/economia/2023/03/28/stipendi-ricercatori-europa>.

mentioned Country, companies such as namely Tesla<sup>77</sup> and Pfizer<sup>78</sup> actively collaborate with universities and research centers, funding innovative projects. Another Country worth mentioning is Germany. There, the strong ties between universities, businesses, and government institutions help researchers to secure well-paid jobs in the industrial sector.<sup>79</sup>

At the light of this analysis, a domino effect is reported since the absence of a strong research and innovation system has negative effects on the entire Country. At first, this contributes to this loss of expertise at the detriment of Italy and at the advantage of the immigrant Country. Secondly, less innovation leads to slower economic growth. Consequently, this makes the Country less competitive globally. Furthermore, internally, the job market deteriorates since the lack of innovation brings about the creation of fewer high-skilled jobs. All of these negative aspects contribute on deteriorating the image of Italy in the international stage. As a consequence, foreign investors would be less attracted to invest in Italy and they would shift their attention to other foreign companies. To sum up, if a young researcher plans to develop a new technology in Italy, he will have few funding opportunities and will struggle to find a company willing to invest in his project. Nevertheless, in Germany or in US, he would find a more favorable environment ready to welcome and evaluate the development of his project. Thus, Italy trains talented professionals but then loses them because it does not offer them concrete career growth opportunities.

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<sup>77</sup> NotedSource, "Aligning with Innovators: Companies Known for Their Research Collaborations with Academics," NotedSource, March 26, 2024, <https://notedsources.io/resources/blog/aligning-with-innovators-companies-known-for-their-research-collaborations>.

<sup>78</sup> Pfizer, "Article," Pfizer, January 8, 2018, <https://www.pfizer.com/news/press-release/press-release-detail/pfizer-establishes-new-partnering-model-for-early-stage-academic-research>.

<sup>79</sup> Europe Now, "How German Higher Education Institutions Collaborate with Industry: The DAAD's 'Germany Today' Tour," EuropeNow, February 15, 2024, <https://www.europenowjournal.org/2024/02/15/how-german-higher-education-institutions-collaborate-with-industry-the-daads-germany-today-tour/#:~:text=During%20the%20tour%2C%20close%20partnerships,these%20private%20collaborations%20with%20applied>.

### 3.2.1.3 Political Instability: A System That Struggles to Provide Stability and Vision

One of Italy's chronic issues is its frequent political instability, characterized by frequently changing governments, reforms that are introduced and then repealed, and a slow and inefficient decision-making system. However, this phenomenon does not just stop to the institutions, but it involves several other dominions. Indeed, this has direct consequences on economic growth, investments, the job market, and ultimately influences many young Italians' decisions to leave the Country.

Italy has registered the highest number of governments among the European Countries since the end of World War II. In fact, Italy has had 68 different governments since 1946.<sup>80</sup> This data makes Italy an outlier in Europe if we consider the average lifespan of other governments, as in Luxembourg or Malta, where they generally last an average of 4 years.<sup>81</sup> However, this "European record" presents a problem because every time a government changes economic and social policies are interrupted or altered. Therefore, reforms are often left incomplete because the next government blocks or modifies them. Furthermore, this environment of instability creates uncertainty for businesses and workers. For this reason, foreign investors lose interest, preferring Countries with more stable governance. This lack of continuity creates distrust in the system and makes it difficult for younger generations to envision a stable future in Italy.

Logically, Frequent political instability also directly affects the economy and job market, making the Country less attractive for those seeking growth opportunities. Continuous changes in tax laws and economic policies make it difficult for companies to plan long-

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<sup>80</sup> Andrea Carlo, "Italy Has Its 68th Government in 76 Years. Why Such a High Turnover?," *Euronews*, October 21, 2022.

<sup>81</sup> Lorenzo Macchi, "Average Duration of Governments in Europe | Statista," Statista, January 24, 2025, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1489125/average-duration-of-governments-in-europe-by-Country/>.

term. Hence, this fiscal and bureaucratic uncertainty implies fewer stable jobs and less investment in innovation. Delving into the Italian administration system, Italy is well acknowledged to be one of the most bureaucratic Countries in Europe for starting a business. According to the World Bank's "Doing Business" reports, by considering the OECD high income Countries, Italy lags behind and this could only discourage many young entrepreneurs and startups.<sup>82</sup> Moreover, as it has been mentioned before, there is a low trust in institutions in Italy and this distrust reinforces the perception that success is more achievable abroad. Therefore, a young economics graduate with an innovative fintech startup idea might prefer to move to Germany or the UK, where economic policies are more stable and support for startups is more concrete, rather than face Italy's regulatory uncertainty.

However, political instability is not only a problem for businesses but also for workers and young professionals. Since Italy suffers a lack of long-term policies for young people, there are no lasting programs to support youth employment. This is how political instability worsens the brain drain issue. Indeed, changes in labor laws are frequent. The contract system is unstable and this creates job insecurity. Furthermore, unlike other Countries, like France or Germany, which offer tax incentives and benefits for highly qualified workers, Italy has no clear strategy to attract talent. Therefore, this results in many young Italians not seeing a stable future in their Country and preferring to move to nations with a more predictable political and economic system. Indeed, in recent years, many Italian doctors and researchers have left the Country to work abroad. In Germany, France, and the UK, working conditions are more stable and predictable, whereas in Italy,

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<sup>82</sup> World Bank, "Rankings - Doing Business," <https://archive.doingbusiness.org/en/rankings>.

continuous healthcare budget cuts and temporary contracts have made their profession less secure.

Indeed, some European Countries have developed more stable and predictable political systems, creating a more favorable environment for businesses and workers.

Germany is one of the most politically stable Countries in Europe. This stability is due to several factors. Firstly, there are long-lasting governments. Since 1949, Germany has had only 10 chancellors,<sup>83</sup> whereas Italy has had 68 governments in the same period. Furthermore, the parliamentary system is strong. Germany has a parliamentary system with stable coalitions, where parties form governing alliances that typically last for an entire legislature. Then, Germany has predictable economic policies. It follows a long-term economic strategy, with consistent investments in infrastructure, research and development, and vocational training.<sup>84</sup> Indeed, Germany stands out for its intense collaboration between the State and industry. The German model is based on a highly industrialized economy, with a solid relationship between universities, businesses, and the government. For example, the dual apprenticeship system allows young people to combine study and work, facilitating their entry into the job market. This system grants positive consequences. On the one hand, companies trust the system and invest in the long term. Indeed, Germany attracts talent and investors thanks to its economic and political predictability. On the other hand, the labor market is more dynamic, with a low youth unemployment rate of 5.96%,<sup>85</sup> against the 19% of Italy.

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<sup>83</sup> Bundeskanzler, "Federal Chancellors since 1949," The Federal Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany | Home page, accessed March 4, 2025, <https://www.bundeskanzler.de/bk-en/federal-chancellery/federal-chancellors-since-1949>.

<sup>84</sup> German Missions in the United States, "The German Vocational Training System: An Overview," The German Vocational Training System: An Overview - Federal Foreign Office, accessed March 4, 2025, <https://www.germany.info/us-en/welcome/wirtschaft/03-wirtschaft/1048296-1048296>.

<sup>85</sup> Aaron O'Neill, "Germany - Youth Unemployment Rate 2004-2023 | Statista," Statista, November 4, 2024, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/812019/youth-unemployment-rate-in-germany/>.

Then, Scandinavian Countries stand out for their low corruption level and high trust in institutions. In fact, according to the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), Denmark, Sweden, and Norway are among the least corrupt Countries worldwide.<sup>86</sup> This results in greater transparency and public trust in government. Moreover, Scandinavian governments are often formed through multi-party coalitions, which promote compromise and stability. Noteworthy mentioning is also its advanced welfare State. Scandinavian governments invest heavily in education, healthcare, youth subsidies, and work-life balance policies.<sup>87</sup> This allows young people to plan their future with greater security. Lastly, it must be highlighted a fair taxation system. Although taxes are high, they are well balanced with the high-quality public services, and this decreases economic uncertainty compared to Italy. To sum up, this stable system enables young people to have more economic security and less job precarity. Then, the education and labor system are characterized by a high level of meritocracy, and this allows to reduce favoritism and nepotism.

A last comparative case worth mentioning regards France and the United Kingdom. As Italy, the two Countries have also experienced frequent government changes. However, unlike the peninsula, they have maintained continuity in economic and labor policies. In both Countries, labor market and tax reforms tend to be predictable and less subject to drastic modifications with each government change. For instance, United Kingdom, despite its celebrity for the usual leadership changes, it managed to maintain stable economic policies and a highly competitive financial system that attracts businesses and startups. Furthermore, both Countries produce several incentives to attract talent. France

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<sup>86</sup> Transparency, “Corruption Perceptions Index 2024,” Transparency.org, 2025, <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2024>.

<sup>87</sup> Oddbjørn Knutsen, *The Nordic Models in Political Science: Challenged, but Still Viable?* (Bergen: Fagbokforlaget, 2017).

and the UK have implemented tax policies and financial incentives to retain highly qualified professionals, whereas Italy has underdeveloped mechanisms for this purpose. To mention a practical example, France introduced the "Welcome to France" program, offering tax breaks and simplified visas to attract skilled workers and foreign investors.<sup>88</sup> Finally, another positive aspect for these two countries is related to the fact that businesses have to face less bureaucratic procedures. In fact, according to the World Bank's "Doing Business" report, starting a company in France or the UK is faster and simpler compared to Italy.<sup>89</sup>

Therefore, the positive consequences for young people and businesses are a greater access to funding and venture capital compared to Italy, a more flexible and meritocratic job market, and the possibility for companies to plan long-term investments without the uncertainty of sudden policy changes.

Given this analysis, it can be stated that Italy's future also depends on its ability to offer stability. Italy's political instability has a direct impact on the economy, the job market, and the brain drain crisis. If the country wants to retain its talents and attract investments, it must create a more stable and predictable system, where reforms are long-lasting, and job opportunities are more secure.

Without these changes, Italy risks continuing to lose highly skilled young professionals, with negative consequences for its economic and social development.

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<sup>88</sup> Business France, "Welcome to France," Business France, 2017, <https://world.businessfrance.fr/app/uploads/sites/5/2024/02/bfp-doing-business-incoming-talent-booklet-2-2017-edition.pdf>.

<sup>89</sup> World Bank, "Rankings - Doing Business," <https://archive.doingbusiness.org/en/rankings>.

### 3.2.2 The "Lost Potential" Phenomenon

One of the critical insights of Human Capability Theory is the "lost potential" argument: when a Country fails to provide an environment where individuals can develop and utilize their skills, migration becomes not just a choice but a necessity. Italy's intergenerational immobility is particularly relevant here and this chapter will provide insights on this lack of social mobility.

As it has been thoroughly discussed in the previous chapters, the lack of social mobility is a characterizing fact of Italy. Regardless of their parental background, people should be able to succeed in an ideal society based on their abilities, education, and hard work. The capacity to raise one's socioeconomic standing via employment and personal accomplishments is known as social mobility. However, in Italy, social mobility is extremely low compared to other advanced Countries. This means that the birthplace, the parents, and the wealth of a family's person has often determined someone's future, more than the actual abilities.<sup>90</sup> This lack of social mobility is one of the key reasons why many talented young Italians feel forced to leave the Country in search of better opportunities.

But now, the question now is: how bad is social mobility in Italy? There are several studies which confirm that Italy has one of the lowest levels of social mobility in Europe. Research by Barone & Mocetti (2016) shows that wealth and social status are passed down from one generation to the next, making it difficult for people from lower-income backgrounds to climb the social ladder.<sup>91</sup> Furthermore, A study by the OECD (2018) found that in Italy, it takes five generations for a family born in poverty to reach the

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<sup>90</sup> Ivano Bison, "Education, Social Origins and Career (Im)Mobility in Contemporary Italy," *European Societies* 13, no. 3 (July 1, 2011): 481–503, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616696.2011.568257>.

<sup>91</sup> Guglielmo Barone and Sauro Mocetti, "Intergenerational Mobility in the Very Long Run: Florence 1427–2011,"

average income level.<sup>92</sup> For instance, in Denmark or Canada, it takes only two or three generations.<sup>93</sup> Italy has one of the lowest rates of intragenerational mobility in Europe, which means that even with a lot of effort, a person's prospects of changing their financial situation during their lifetime are quite reduced. This means that in Italy, if someone is born into a low-income family, there are high probabilities to stay in a low-income bracket for life, regardless of how talented or hardworking a person is. This is especially frustrating for young people who invest time and money in higher education, only to find that their career opportunities are still strongly influenced by their family's social position.

But why is social mobility so low in Italy? Some aspects regarding the rigidity of the Italian labor market, which are the favoritism of seniority over talent system and the power of personal connections, have already been discussed in the previous chapters. Another point to take into account is the family background in terms of education. People from lower-income origins can attain better occupations and a greater standard of living in many nations through education, which is a crucial instrument for social mobility. But in Italy, a family's wealth still has a considerable influence on a person's prospects of receiving a good education and a steady career.<sup>94</sup> There are several causes behind this. First, attending university is costly. The expense of living in large cities where universities are located makes it difficult for many families to afford tuition fees, even if they are lower in Italy than in the US or the UK. An explanatory example is Milan, where the average price of renting a studio apartment is €1311 per month.<sup>95</sup> Furthermore, many entry-level positions in Italy require unpaid internships, which means that only students

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<sup>92</sup> OECD, "A Broken Social Elevator? How to Promote Social Mobility," OECD, 2018, [https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/wp-content/uploads/sites/22/2018/09/OECD\\_Social-mobility-2018-Overview-MainFindings.pdf](https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/wp-content/uploads/sites/22/2018/09/OECD_Social-mobility-2018-Overview-MainFindings.pdf).

<sup>93</sup> OECD, "A Broken Social Elevator? How to Promote Social Mobility,".

<sup>94</sup> Ivano Bison, "Education, Social Origins and Career (Im)Mobility in Contemporary Italy,"

<sup>95</sup> Alessandro Caparello, "Affitti Città Universitarie: Milano è La Più Cara d'Italia per i Trilocali, Quadrilocali e Stanze Singole," *Finanza.Com*, October 28, 2024.

from wealthier families can afford to work for free to gain experience. Therefore, a student from a low-income family might find it difficult to move to Milan or Rome for university because of high living costs. Even if they graduate with top grades, they may still struggle to find a good job if they don't have connections or financial support to take unpaid internships. As a result, many talented young Italians realize that their economic future is limited if they stay in Italy, so they move to Countries where education and job markets offer better opportunities regardless of family background.

In fact, when young Italians see that hard work, talent, and education are not enough to guarantee success, many of them choose to leave the Country. This creates a vicious cycle since as more talented individuals leave, Italy loses its future innovators, scientists, and entrepreneurs, making it even harder to improve social mobility and economic growth.

Therefore, what can be done to improve social mobility? To stop brain drain, Italy must create a fairer and more meritocratic system. A possible solution could include more financial support for students. Scholarships are generally provided by universities. However, usually, the economic and meritocratic criteria to respect are particularly strict and difficult to obtain. Therefore, Italy could work on this aspect of augmenting these thresholds in order to favour a more egalitarian system. Secondly, reforms on the labor market rewarding merit and skills rather than just seniority or personal connections are required. With that, also stronger anti-nepotism policies could come in help in order to make hiring processes in both public and private sectors more transparent and competitive. Furthermore, there should be better access to paid internships to ensure that entry-level jobs provide fair wages, so students do not need any family financial support.

Without these changes, Italy will continue to lose its brightest minds, weakening its economy and innovation potential.

The human capability theory is the strongest, as it fully supports the main arguments of the research. In fact, according to this theory, when institutions fail to provide a favourable environment, individuals seek fulfilment elsewhere. Therefore, it can be observed that this supports the argument that brain drain is driven by more than just economic factors—it is also a consequence of weak institutional support and blocked opportunities.

Additionally, if Italy does not resolve these structural issues, its global competitiveness will continue to decline, weakening its influence in the EU. Countries that foster talent have greater leverage in shaping EU migration and demographic policies and Italy risks becoming a follower rather than a leader if it does not address this issue on time.

### **3.3 Demographic Dividend and Burden Theory: The Long-Term Economic Impact**

This theory is crucial for understanding the broader impact of brain drain and demographic decline in Italy. Demographic dividend and burden theory shifts the focus on how population changes and how this affects economic growth. It argues that Countries benefit when they have a large working-age population (a demographic dividend), but struggle when they have too many dependents (a demographic burden).<sup>96</sup>

#### **3.3.1 Italy's Shift from Dividend to Burden**

Historically, many developed nations have benefited from a demographic dividend during periods of high birth rates and strong workforce participation. However, Italy is now experiencing a demographic burden. This chapter will provide the factors which characterize this issue.

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<sup>96</sup> David E. Bloom, “Changing Demographics and Economic Growth – IMF F&D,” IMF, March 2020, <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/fandd/issues/2020/03/changing-demographics-and-economic-growth-bloom>.

At first, Italy suffers a declining working-age population. This is due to a combination of low birth rates, emigration of young professionals, and an aging population. Indeed, in 2000, Italy's working-age population made up 67% of the total population.<sup>97</sup> By 2023, this dropped to 63%, and projections suggest it will fall below 55% by 2050.<sup>98</sup> Furthermore, the workforce is aging. According to the National Institute for the Analysis of Public Policies (INAPP), in 2022, over 37% of Italian workers were aged between 50 and 64, an increase compared to 21% in 2005 and 27% in 2012.<sup>99</sup> This constitutes a problem since a smaller workforce means fewer taxpayers to support economic growth or welfare programs, leading to economic imbalances. Moreover, businesses struggle to find young, skilled workers, making Italy less competitive internationally.

Then, the second issue relates to the first. Due to the decrease in the working age population, there is an increased financial strain on pension and healthcare systems. Moreover, Italy is among the oldest nations in the world, with 24% of its population aged 65 or older,<sup>100</sup> a figure expected to rise to around 34% by 2050.<sup>101</sup> To underline some key data, the old-age dependency ratio is a trend that has been augmenting recently. Now data report the old-age dependency ratio at 38,3%<sup>102</sup> and this could reach over 60% by 2050.<sup>103</sup> In addition to this, Italy currently spends 16,3% of its GDP on pensions, the highest rate

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<sup>97</sup> World Economics, "Working Age Population," World Economics, <https://www.worldeconomics.com/Indicator-Data/Demographics/Population-Of-Working-Age.aspx#:~:text=The%20%22Working%2Dage%20population%20as,active%20and%20available%20to%20work.>

<sup>98</sup> World Economics, "Working Age Population,"

<sup>99</sup> Caterina Maconi, "Aumentano i Lavoratori Anziani in Italia: Gli over 50 Superano La Quota Del 37%," *La Repubblica*, November 14, 2023

<sup>100</sup> Statista, "Aging Population of Italy - Statistics & Facts | Statista," Statista, August 30, 2024, <https://www.statista.com/topics/8379/aging-population-of-italy/>.

<sup>101</sup> ISTAT, "Population and Households Projections," ISTAT, July 24, 2024.

<sup>102</sup> Statista, "Italy: Old-Age-Dependency Ratio 2012-2024 | Statista," Statista, August 30, 2024, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/657613/old-age-dependency-ratio-italy/>.

<sup>103</sup> European Commission, "Ageing Europe - Statistics on Population," European Commission, July 2020, <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/SEPDF/cache/80393.pdf>.

in Europe after Greece, with 16,4%.<sup>104</sup> As a consequence, the Country's healthcare system is under strain, as aging populations require more medical care and long-term support. Therefore, the public expenditure on pensions and healthcare is high. As a result, this reduces the available funds which could have been spent for education, infrastructure, and innovation. Another consequence is a lower economic dynamism, as aging societies typically have lower consumer spending and reduced labor participation.

Lastly, a major factor behind Italy's demographic crisis is its persistently low birth rate, which has remained well below the replacement level of 2.1 children per woman for decades. This phenomenon of declining birth rates could be defined as the foundation of future economic decline given the gravity of it.

This trend not only is not improving but is also getting worse recently. As a matter of fact, in 2022, Italy recorded a new historic low in births, with 393,000 newborns, marking a 1.7% decline compared to the previous year.<sup>105</sup> However, this negative trend continued in 2023, with a further decrease in births to 379,000.<sup>106</sup> These figures highlight a continuous downward tendency in Italian birth rates, with significant implications for the Country's demographic structure. If this trend continues, Italy's population could fall below 55 million by 2050.<sup>107</sup> There are several causes of this decline. Firstly, family formation is discouraged by economic uncertainty. On the other side, there is a lack of family-friendly

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<sup>104</sup> Lorenzo Ruffino, "Tutti i Numeri Sulle Pensioni in Italia e Nell'Ue, in Quattro Grafici," *Pagella Politica*, December 19, 2023.

<sup>105</sup> ISTAT, "Natalità e Fecondità Della Popolazione Residente - Anno 2022," ISTAT, October 26, 2023, <https://www.istat.it/comunicato-stampa/natalita-e-fecondita-della-popolazione-residente-anno-2022/>.

<sup>106</sup> Camera dei deputati, "Dati Sulla Natalità (Dal Rapporto Istat 2023)," Documentazione parlamentare, November 8, 2024, [https://temi.camera.it/leg19/post/OCD15\\_15126/dati-sulla-natalita-dal-rapporto-istat-2023.html#:~:text=Il%20tasso%20di%20natalit%C3%A0%20sui,unit%C3%A0%20\(%2D34%2C%25\)](https://temi.camera.it/leg19/post/OCD15_15126/dati-sulla-natalita-dal-rapporto-istat-2023.html#:~:text=Il%20tasso%20di%20natalit%C3%A0%20sui,unit%C3%A0%20(%2D34%2C%25).).

<sup>107</sup> Quotidiano Sanità, "Demografia. Istat: 'Nel 2050 in Italia Ci Saranno Oltre 5 Mln Di Residenti in Meno,'" Quotidiano Sanità, September 28, 2023, [https://www.quotidianosanita.it/studi-e-analisi/articolo.php?articolo\\_id=117025#:~:text=Istat%3A%20%E2%80%9C%20Nel%202050%20in%20Italia,residenti%20in%20meno%E2%80%9D%20%2D%20Quotidiano%20Sanit%C3%A0&text=Una%20popolazione%20in%20calo%2C%20sempre,di%20compon.](https://www.quotidianosanita.it/studi-e-analisi/articolo.php?articolo_id=117025#:~:text=Istat%3A%20%E2%80%9C%20Nel%202050%20in%20Italia,residenti%20in%20meno%E2%80%9D%20%2D%20Quotidiano%20Sanit%C3%A0&text=Una%20popolazione%20in%20calo%2C%20sempre,di%20compon.)

policies, which contributes to the insecurity of raising a child and, therefore, giving birth to a person.

### **3.3.2 How Brain Drain Fuels Demographic Decline**

The relationship between brain drain and demographic decline is not just a correlation—it is a self-reinforcing cycle that accelerates Italy’s population aging, weakens the labor force, and slows down economic growth. When young and skilled Italians leave the Country in search of better opportunities, they don’t just take their talents abroad—they also contribute to a shrinking workforce, lower birth rates, and declining tax revenues, all of which make it even harder for Italy to recover.

One of the most immediate and damaging effects of brain drain is the loss of highly educated professionals, particularly in STEM fields (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), healthcare, and research. As a matter of fact, an interesting data refers that Italy is among the top EU Countries in terms of skilled worker emigration,<sup>108</sup> yet it ranks among the lowest in attracting foreign talent.<sup>109</sup>

This is a considerable issue which needs to be solved as soon as possible since the loss of innovators, researchers, and professionals slows down technological advancements and economic productivity. Moreover, companies in high-tech industries, unable to find skilled professionals, relocate abroad or hire foreign talent, further weakening Italy’s job market.

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<sup>108</sup> ISTAT, The Italians moving abroad increase while immigration decreases, December 16, 2019, [https://www.istat.it/it/files/2020/05/Migrazioni\\_EN.pdf](https://www.istat.it/it/files/2020/05/Migrazioni_EN.pdf).

<sup>109</sup> IMD Business School, “World Talent Ranking 2024,” IMD business school for management and leadership courses, January 16, 2025, <https://www.imd.org/centers/wcc/world-competitiveness-center/rankings/world-talent-ranking/>.

To clarify with an example, Italy invests heavily in medical education, yet many of its best-trained doctors and nurses move to Germany, France, or the UK, where salaries and career prospects are more attractive.<sup>110</sup> This results in a shortage of healthcare professionals in Italy, worsening the efficiency of the national health system.

At the light of this analysis, it is possible not only to understand this correlation between brain and demographic decline, but especially its gravity. In fact, due to the workforce shrinkage, and, therefore, tax revenues decline, the result is the economic stagnation as all the enlisted factors make it harder for the government to fund welfare programs, pensions, and public services. This is the demographic trap with which Italy is now dealing with.

Therefore, this creates a self-reinforcing cycle. As Italy loses talent, it struggles to attract new workers, further weakening its economy. Moreover, Countries with a stronger workforce will have more influence in the EU, while Italy risks losing negotiating power in economic and migration policies.

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<sup>110</sup> Giulio Nisi, “La ‘Grande Fuga’ Di Medici e Infermieri Dall’Italia. Tra Il 2000 e Il 2022 Hanno Scelto Di Lavorare All’estero Quasi 180mila Professionisti,” *Quotidiano Sanità*, March 7, 2023.

#### 4. Case Study: Southern Italy as an Example of Italian Brain Drain

Southern Italy, known as the *Mezzogiorno*, has long been at the heart of Italy's economic and social struggles. Historically marked by underdevelopment, political neglect, and structural inefficiencies, the region has experienced a continuous exodus of young and educated individuals—a phenomenon that mirrors the broader demographic crisis affecting the Country.

While brain drain is a nationwide issue, the *Mezzogiorno* represents the most extreme and visible case of this ongoing talent loss. For decades, the South has been losing its best and brightest to Northern Italy and foreign Countries, exacerbating regional disparities and deepening its economic stagnation. The region's shrinking workforce, coupled with low birth rates and aging demographics, has created a vicious cycle that is difficult to break. This fact is confirmed by the study by Monteleone and Torrisi (2012), who conducted a geographical analysis of Italy's academic brain drain. Their findings show that the phenomenon disproportionately affects Southern regions, where academic institutions face structural disadvantages, lower funding, and fewer career prospects.<sup>111</sup> Researchers from the South are significantly more likely to emigrate—and less likely to return—than those from other parts of Italy. This pattern reflects broader inequalities in the national education and research system, and reinforces the idea that brain drain in Italy is not only international but also deeply internal.

This chapter explores the *Mezzogiorno* as a case study of brain drain and demographic decline, offering valuable insights into why the South is losing its young workforce at

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<sup>111</sup> S. Monteleone and B. Torrisi, "Geographical Analysis of the Academic Brain Drain in Italy," *Scientometrics* 93, no. 2 (February 29, 2012): 413–30, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11192-012-0683-z>.

alarming rates, how this mass exodus impacts the economy, innovation, and social structures, and what lessons can be drawn from the Mezzogiorno's experience to understand Italy's national crisis.

Therefore, once examined the key causes and consequences of brain drain in Southern Italy, this section's aim is to illustrate how regional imbalances amplify national demographic challenges on the one hand, and on the other hand, to demonstrate why any strategy to reverse Italy's brain drain must first address the crisis in the South.

#### **4.1 Key Data: Depopulation, Youth Unemployment, and the Flight of Graduates**

Southern Italy has been losing its population at an alarming rate. Indeed, over the past two decades, the region has seen a sharp decline in the number of young residents, particularly those with higher education. Between 2000 and 2023, more than 2 million people left the Mezzogiorno, a significant portion of whom were skilled professionals and university graduates.<sup>112</sup> This demographic shift is meaningful since it is reshaping the region's economy, job market, and long-term development prospects. This chapter will now delve into the key factors of this case study.

The first important data to mention is the depopulation. The Mezzogiorno's population is aging and shrinking. The extreme low birth rates of below 1.2 children per woman and the steady outflow of young talent convey that the region is losing more people than it gains. More and more small towns are becoming ghost towns and this phenomenon is particularly evident in municipalities with fewer than 500 inhabitants, which represent 13% of the national total and have recorded a 13.5% decrease in population between 2020

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<sup>112</sup> Redazione, "Rapporto Svimez: 'Dal 2000 a Oggi 2 Milioni Di Persone Hanno Lasciato Il Sud,'" Il Desk, November 4, 2019, <https://www.ildesk.it/campania/rapporto-svimez-dal-2000-a-oggi-2-milioni-di-persone-hanno-lasciato-il-sud/>.

and 2023.<sup>113</sup> Additionally, even major southern cities like Naples and Palermo are witnessing negative population growth.<sup>114</sup> To mention some data, between 2022 and 2023, the Mezzogiorno lost approximately 129,000 residents to the Center-North due to internal migration.<sup>115</sup> Moreover, two regions, which are Sardinia and Calabria, have some of the highest old age dependency ratio in Europe, and this makes their long-term economic sustainability increasingly uncertain.<sup>116117</sup>

Therefore, this trend is not just a regional problem since it weakens Italy's ability to compete on a European and global scale.

Secondly, Southern Italy has always suffered a considerable rate of youth unemployment. Finding a job in the Mezzogiorno is a frustrating challenge. Data from 2021 evidence how the region was having one of the highest youth unemployment rates in Europe, ranging around 32%<sup>118</sup>—nearly double the national average. Now, the situation got better since the unemployment rate reduced to 22,7% but it is still not enough to keep the pace with the national average, which is 20,2%.<sup>119</sup> It is not by chance that the South has one of the highest NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) rates in the EU at nearly

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<sup>113</sup> Francesco Aiello, "Dalle Aree Interne Ai Piccoli Comuni: Un Nuovo Sguardo Sullo Spopolamento in Italia," *Open Calabria*, October 4, 2024.

<sup>114</sup> Italiani.coop, "Demografia al 2031, Milano Cresce Mentre Napoli e Palermo Si Rimpiccioliscono," *italiani.coop*, October 10, 2023, <https://italiani.coop/demografiacomuni/#:~:text=anche%20a%20distanza%20di%20decenni,si%20rinforz%20ano%3A%20Milano%20e%20Bologna>.

<sup>115</sup> ISTAT, "Migrazioni Interne e Internazionali," Istat, May 28, 2024, <https://www.istat.it/comunicato-stampa/migrazioni-interne-e-internazionali-della-popolazione-residente-anni-2022-2023/>.

<sup>116</sup> Tuttitalia, "Indici Demografici e Struttura Popolazione Sardegna," *Tuttitalia.it*, accessed March 6, 2025, <https://www.tuttitalia.it/sardegna/statistiche/indici-demografici-struttura-popolazione/>.

<sup>117</sup> Tuttitalia, "Indici Demografici e Struttura Popolazione Calabria," *Tuttitalia.it*, accessed March 6, 2025, <https://www.tuttitalia.it/calabria/statistiche/indici-demografici-struttura-popolazione/>.

<sup>118</sup> ISTAT, "Tasso Di Disoccupazione - Dati Trimestrali Destagionalizzati - Regolamento Precedente (Fino al 2020)," Tasso di Disoccupazione - Dati Trimestrali destagionalizzati - Regolamento Precedente (Fino al 2020), March 12, 2021, [http://dati.istat.it/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=DCCV\\_TAXDISOCUDE1\\_UNT2020](http://dati.istat.it/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=DCCV_TAXDISOCUDE1_UNT2020).

<sup>119</sup> ISTAT, "Tasso Di Disoccupazione - Dati Trimestrali Destagionalizzati - Regolamento Precedente (Fino al 2020),".

30%.<sup>120</sup> As a direct consequence, this lack of career opportunities pushes young professionals to migrate, mostly to Northern Italy, Germany, the UK, and France.

However, what makes the Mezzogiorno's demographic crisis particularly severe is the disproportionate loss of university graduates and skilled professionals. Indeed, some data reveal that over the 40% of young southern graduates leave the region after finishing their studies.<sup>121</sup> The loss of skilled individuals worsens economic stagnation, as businesses struggle to find qualified workers, and this leads to a vicious cycle of low productivity, low wages, and further emigration.

This loss of skilled workers means that Southern Italy is increasingly unprepared to compete in fields such as technology, research, and innovation, which are crucial for economic growth.

At the light of this analysis, this chapter paints a bleak picture: the Mezzogiorno is hemorrhaging its most educated and dynamic population, leaving behind an aging workforce, struggling local economies, and an uncertain future.

#### **4.2 Why is the Mezzogiorno Unique?**

This chapter does not just analyze another case of demographic decline. Southern Italy's demographic and economic crisis is a structural and historical issue deeply rooted in Italy's development model. The divide between North and South has existed for centuries, and while the entire Country faces brain drain and demographic decline, the Mezzogiorno suffers more intensely for several reasons. In fact, the Country is often described as two

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<sup>120</sup> ISTAT, "NEET (Giovani Non Occupati e Non in Istruzione e Formazione)," NEET (giovani non occupati e non in istruzione e formazione) : Incidenza dei Giovani Neet - Italia, accessed March 6, 2025, <http://dati-giovani.istat.it/Index.aspx?QueryId=21784>.

<sup>121</sup> Ilaria Calabrò, "I Laureati Scappano Dal Sud: Oltre Il 50% Lasciano La Calabria Dopo l'università | DATI," *Stretto Web*, November 24, 2024.

economies in one Country. The industrialized, wealthy North and the underdeveloped, struggling South.

At first, in reference to the GDP, just the Northern regions of Veneto, Lombardia and Emilia-Romagna represent the 41% of the Country's GDP,<sup>122</sup> while the South remains heavily dependent on State subsidies. Secondly, infrastructures significantly differ from one to another area of Italy. While still some problems persist in the North of Italy, infrastructures in the South are significantly weaker—slow rail connections, inefficient public transport, and underdeveloped logistics hubs.<sup>123</sup> This is especially due to limited private investment, weaker institutions, and bureaucratic inefficiencies.

Then, unlike other parts of Italy, the South has few industries that can absorb young graduates.<sup>124</sup> The private sector is small and weak, offering low wages and unstable contracts. Data from the 2019 underline the weakness of this sector by reporting that, even though the South represents more than the 34% of the Italian population, in 2019, it contributed only 20% of the added value of the national private sector.<sup>125</sup> Instead, the public sector jobs, which have traditionally been an employment safety net in the South, have been cut dramatically in recent years. Then, in reference to innovation and research investments, they are almost non-existent, leaving STEM graduates and skilled professionals with no choice but to leave.

Shifting the focus to bureaucracy and institutions, local governance in the South is often ineffective, slow, and, in some cases, corrupt. It takes longer and costs more to start a

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<sup>122</sup> Teresa Barone, “La Classifica Delle Regioni Più Ricche e Produttive d’Italia,” *PMI*, July 23, 2024.

<sup>123</sup> Elena Pavin, “Parliamo Del Ponte, Ma Il Sud Italia è Senza Treni,” *Fleet Magazine*, June 6, 2023.

<sup>124</sup> Daria Ciriaci, “Occupazione, Soddisfazione e Fuga Dei Laureati Meridionali,” *QA Rivista Dell’Associazione Rossi-Doria*, 2006, 55–82.

<sup>125</sup> Paolo Angelini, “Il Sistema Produttivo E Finanziario Del Mezzogiorno. Lezioni Dal Passato e Linee Di Sviluppo,” Banca d’Italia, October 12, 2022, [https://www.bancaditalia.it/pubblicazioni/interventi-direttorio/int-dir-2022/Angelini\\_sistema\\_produttivo\\_finanziario\\_mezzogiorno\\_12102022.pdf](https://www.bancaditalia.it/pubblicazioni/interventi-direttorio/int-dir-2022/Angelini_sistema_produttivo_finanziario_mezzogiorno_12102022.pdf).

business in Southern Italy compared to Northern regions. Furthermore, corruption scandals and mismanagement discourage both domestic and foreign investors. Then, many EU funds meant to support Southern development remain unused due to administrative inefficiencies.<sup>126</sup> However, an example which mostly describe this inefficiency comes from the region of Calabria. Here, farmers were being pressured and extorted by the *'ndrangheta*, an organized crime, which left them with almost no freedom or fair income.<sup>127</sup> The state institutions, which should have protected them, were either too weak, too slow, or simply absent. In response to this immobility, these farmers organized themselves into a cooperative, built their own local distribution networks, and bypassed the usual power structures.<sup>128</sup>

At the light of this thorough analysis, it can be affirmed that Italy's structural weaknesses are particularly innervated in the Mezzogiorno's territory, and they force young professionals to leave, contributing to a cycle of economic stagnation and demographic decline.

### 4.3 Socio-Economic Consequences

The demographic and talent loss in Southern Italy is not just a regional issue—it has nationwide repercussions. The mass departure of young people worsens Italy's overall demographic decline and accelerates economic stagnation.

The outflow of talent from the South is creating a serious gap in skilled labor. Businesses in the region struggle to find engineers, doctors, researchers, and high-tech professionals.

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<sup>126</sup> Adkronos, "Eurispes, Problemi Strutturali Italia Ostacolano Pieno Sfruttamento Fondi Ue," *Canale Dieci*, February 27, 2025.

<sup>127</sup> Agnese Bertello, Marianella Sclavi Sclavi, and Stefania Lattuille, *L'affermazione Del "Localismo Costituzionale in Italia": Una Nuova Governance Che a Raccontarla Non Ci Si Crede*, 2018.

<sup>128</sup> Agnese Bertello, Marianella Sclavi Sclavi, and Stefania Lattuille, *L'affermazione Del "Localismo Costituzionale in Italia": Una Nuova Governance Che a Raccontarla Non Ci Si Crede*, 2018.

Southern universities produce excellent graduates, but they benefit foreign economies more than the local one, as many professionals move abroad. Furthermore, many critical industries—such as healthcare—are severely understaffed, forcing hospitals to recruit foreign doctors or operate with reduced services.<sup>129</sup>

Moreover, what brain drain is also causing is a further widening the existing economic divide between Northern and Southern Italy. On the one hand the North continues to attract talent, consolidating its economic dominance. On the other hand, Southern cities become increasingly dependent on State aid, as the tax base shrinks with the departure of working-age individuals. Furthermore, the lack of skilled professionals further discourages private investment, reinforcing the cycle of stagnation.

If this trend continues, the Mezzogiorno will face an irreversible economic and demographic crisis. Towns and villages will continue to empty out, turning some areas into “demographic deserts.” The already elevated cost of sustaining the South will increase, as an aging population requires more public resources while tax revenues decline. Therefore, in connection to the main argument of the thesis, Italy as a whole will become less competitive in Europe. A shrinking workforce means weaker economic performance and less influence in the EU.

In this pessimistic, but not too idealistic, scenario, Italy as a whole will struggle to maintain economic competitiveness without the full participation of its southern regions. Therefore, this chapter sheds the light on the difficult Southern context not merely to describe its situation, but to raise awareness on the gravity of the issue in order to make the institutions intervene as soon as possible to reverse this trend before it is too late.

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<sup>129</sup> Redazione Nurse Times, “Decreto Flussi 2024, ‘Una Risposta Mancata Alla Crisi Del Personale Sanitario e Socio-Sanitario,’” Nurse Times, December 9, 2024, <https://nursetimes.org/decreto-flussi-2024-una-risposta-mancata-alla-criisi-del-personale-sanitario-e-socio-sanitario>.

#### 4.4 Comparison with Other European Regions Facing Similar Challenges

The Mezzogiorno is not the only region in Europe suffering from depopulation, youth unemployment, and brain drain. Other areas provide useful comparisons and potential lessons for Italy.

The first comparison regards Spain, and particularly its rural exodus. Many rural regions in Spain, for example Castile and León, suffer from youth migration to urban centers.<sup>130</sup> To mitigate the issue, Spain has launched programs, namely the “*Captación del Talento*”, to attract remote workers and revitalize rural towns,<sup>131</sup> Among these initiatives there are subsidies for permanent employment. The main aim of this measure is to fight job insecurity. In fact, these incentives are provided to private companies that hire individuals with university degrees, vocational training, or professional certifications on a permanent basis in sparsely populated areas. Moreover, even entrepreneurial ventures are supported. Assistance is available for individuals starting their own businesses in these rural zones, aiming to stimulate economic activity and job creation. Another measure comprehended by this program is the “*bono talent rural*” (Rural talent voucher), aimed to cover relocation expenses for qualified professionals who move their primary residence to rural areas at risk of depopulation. Therefore, these measures are designed to retain and attract young professionals and entrepreneurs to low-density communities, thereby boosting employment and entrepreneurship in the region.

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<sup>130</sup> Ical, “Castilla y León Perdió En 2023 Casi 3.000 ASALARIADOS, La Mayoría En Favor de Madrid,” Cadena SER, November 29, 2024, <https://cadenaser.com/castillayleon/2024/11/29/castilla-y-leon-perdio-en-2023-casi-3000-asalariados-la-mayoria-en-favor-de-madrid-radio-valladolid/>.

<sup>131</sup> J.L.G, “Ayudas Para Convertir La España Despoblada En Motor Del Talento Joven,” *El País*, October 17, 2024.

Another example is Greece. During the Greek financial crisis, hundreds of thousands of young professionals left the Country.<sup>132</sup> However, Greece has recently reversed part of this trend through tax incentives and job creation programs, namely the “Rebrain Greece” program.<sup>133</sup> This initiative includes a digital platform called the "Rebrain Greece – Talent Center," which connects high-level job openings in various sectors with Greek professionals abroad. The platform aims to facilitate the repatriation of highly skilled Greeks by showcasing employment opportunities that match their expertise.<sup>134</sup> Then, to further encourage the return of Greek expatriates, the government introduced tax incentives under Law 4758/2020.<sup>135</sup> These incentives offer a 50% income tax exemption for the first seven years to individuals who transfer their tax residence to Greece.<sup>136</sup> Eligible candidates must have been non-Greek tax residents for five of the last six years before relocating and should commit to staying in Greece for at least two years.<sup>137</sup> This measure aims to make Greece a more attractive destination for professionals considering returning to their homeland. Furthermore, beyond the "Rebrain Greece" platform and tax incentives, the Greek government has developed an online repatriation guide to assist returning professionals with practical information on relocation, employment opportunities, and integration into the Greek labor market. This comprehensive approach aims to address both the logistical and professional challenges that returning expatriates might face.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Stratos Karakasidis, “Nearly Half a Million Greeks Have Left, Bank of Greece Report Finds,” *eKathimerini.Com*, July 2, 2016.

<sup>133</sup> Nektaria Stamouli, “Greece’s Reverse Brain Drain,” *Politico.EU*, January 21, 2020.

<sup>134</sup> Tovima.com, “From Brain Drain to ‘Rebrain’: Greek Labor Ministry Launches New Job Website,” tovima.com, November 9, 2023, <https://www.tovima.com/finance/from-brain-drain-to-rebrain-greek-labor-ministry-launches-new-job-website/>.

<sup>135</sup> Stephanos Mitsios, “Greece Tax Incentives for the Transfer of Tax Residence of Individuals to Greece (L.4758/2020),” *EY*, January 13, 2021.

<sup>136</sup> Tovima.com, “From Brain Drain to ‘Rebrain’: Greek Labor Ministry Launches New Job Website,”

<sup>137</sup> Stephanos Mitsios, “Greece Tax Incentives for the Transfer of Tax Residence of Individuals to Greece (L.4758/2020),”

<sup>138</sup> Bill Giannopoulos, “Greece Lures Talent Back with New Online Repatriation Guide,” *Greek City Times*, September 26, 2024.

These cases demonstrate that brain drain is not irreversible and that policy interventions can make a difference.

#### **4.5 Conclusion: Why the Mezzogiorno is the Critical Battleground for Italy's**

##### **Future**

Southern Italy is the epicenter of Italy's demographic crisis, and its future will determine the Country's overall trajectory. If the Mezzogiorno continues to decline, there will be severe consequences. At first, there will be greater political and economic instability due to the widening of the North-South gap. Then, The South will become increasingly unsustainable, and this will affect Italy as a whole since even more government intervention will be more required. As a direct consequence, Italy's national competitiveness will suffer.

Therefore, any national strategy aimed at reversing brain drain and demographic decline must start with the South. Without tackling the structural weaknesses of the Mezzogiorno, Italy will struggle to stop the exodus of its young people—and its future.

This chapter provides a specific case study of how structural and economic limitations lead to brain drain in Italy, thereby substantiating the main argument's thesis. However, it is indisputable that politicians have neglected to acknowledge this situation. Over the years, the Italian government has actually taken a number of actions to counteract these trends, such as financial incentives, business subsidies, and tax exemptions. These actions, however, have not been able to stop the exodus of young professionals, particularly from Southern Italy, as the data show.

## **5. Current Policies and Structural Barriers**

This chapter will now examine these policy failures. Why have financial incentives failed to increase birth rates? Why has the *Controesodo* law not brought back graduates? What structural barriers prevent businesses from keeping skilled professionals? By analyzing these questions, we can better understand how national policies interact with regional challenges and why structural reforms are essential to reversing Italy's brain drain.

### **5.1 Introduction: Why Are Italy's Policies Failing?**

For years, Italy has tried to address both its demographic crisis and brain drain through various policies—offering financial incentives for families, tax breaks for returning professionals, and subsidies for businesses. Yet, despite these efforts, the decline continues. Fertility rates remain among the lowest in Europe, thousands of young professionals leave the Country every year, and Italy struggles to attract talent from abroad.

The reason for this failure is that most policies are short-term fixes rather than structural reforms. Financial incentives alone cannot compensate for deeper issues, for instance, job insecurity, low wages, limited career growth, and institutional inefficiencies. This chapter will now explore why these policies have failed and what systemic problems need to be addressed before Italy can truly reverse its demographic and brain drain crises. By doing

so, it strengthens the findings of Chapter 4 and further demonstrates how migration economics theory, human capability theory, and demographic burden theory help explain Italy's ongoing struggle.

## 5.2 Birth Rate Incentives: Why Aren't They Working?

One of the main issues which Italy is dealing with is birth rates. To counter it, the government has introduced several measures aimed at supporting families financially. These include the “*Bonus Bebè*”, which is a financial allowance for new parents, ranging from €80 to €160 per month per child.<sup>139</sup> Then, a single universal allowance was introduced, which substitutes the previous family allowances.<sup>140</sup> This system provides financial support based on income level. Finally, also working parents were included in these aids since tax deductions and childcare subsidies were established for them.

The logic behind these measures is straightforward: if raising children is less financially burdensome, more couples might decide to have kids. However, these policies have had little to no impact on fertility rates. But why these measures alone did not work? This chapter will now delve into the reasons of the inefficiency of these financial incentives.

At first, there is a serious lack of job security. Many young Italians delay having children not because of a lack of financial support but because they do not have stable jobs. According to a survey reported by Changes Unipol, 61% of young Italians do not have children due to job instability, while 56% fear they would not be able to support them

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<sup>139</sup> Dipartimento per le politiche della famiglia, “Assegno Di Natalità (Bonus Bebè),” Dipartimento per le politiche della famiglia, March 23, 2021, <https://famiglia.governo.it/it/politiche-e-attivita/contributi-economici/archivio-misure-non-piu-in-vigore/assegno-di-natalita-bonus-bebe/>.

<sup>140</sup> INPS, “Assegno Unico e Universale per I Figli a Carico,” Sito ufficiale di INPS (Istituto Nazionale Previdenza Sociale), December 30, 2021, <https://www.inps.it/it/it/dettaglio-scheda.it.schede-servizio-strumento.schede-servizi.assegno-unico-e-universale-per-i-figli-a-carico-55984.assegno-unico-e-universale-per-i-figli-a-carico.html>.

financially.<sup>141</sup> Furthermore, Italy also deals with another issue, that is the job precariousness. Indeed, according to Eurostat data, in 2023, 38% of young Italians aged 15 to 29 who were not engaged in educational programs were working under temporary contracts. This figure places Italy among the European Countries with the highest prevalence of fixed-term contracts in this age group, right after Portugal (40%) and Spain (39%).<sup>142</sup>

This lack of job security directly connects to the migration economics theory. In fact, this theoretical framework explains that people leave when they do not see stable career opportunities.

Secondly, Italy has high cost of living and housing. In cities like Milan and Rome, rent prices have skyrocketed, making it financially unfeasible for young couples to afford both housing and raising children.<sup>143</sup> Indeed Milan is not only well known for its high prices for housing, which for instance, according to ISTAT, According to Istat, a single individual under 30 needs €1,175 per month to meet basic living standards in Milan, compared to €952 in other metropolitan areas.<sup>144</sup> Moreover, a study by the think-tank "Tortuga" reveals that for singles aged 18 to 29, the cost of acquiring essential goods in Milan is 23% higher than the average in other metropolitan areas and 37% higher than in

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<sup>141</sup> Redazione Changes Unipol, "Non Solo Carezza Di Lavoro: Perché Gli Italiani Non Fanno Più Figli," Changes Unipol, November 24, 2022, <https://changes.unipol.it/close-to-you/non-solo-carezza-di-lavoro-perche-gli-italiani-non-fanno-piu-figli>.

<sup>142</sup> Eurostat, "Temporary Employment: Demographics and Parenthood Factors," Eurostat, May 17, 2023, <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/w/ddn-20230517-2>.

<sup>143</sup> Massimo Calvi, "Più Le Case Costano Meno Figli Nascono. Cosa Possono Fare i Governi," *Avvenire*, June 21, 2024.

<sup>144</sup> Gianni Santucci, "Milano e Il Costo Della Vita Troppo Alto, La Proposta: «Salario Minimo Di 8,3 Euro All'ora, Copiamo Il Modello Londra»,» *Corriere Della Sera*, October 24, 2024.

towns with over 50,000 inhabitants. For couples aged 30 to 59, the cost increase in Milan is 22% compared to other metropolitan areas.<sup>145</sup>

Thirdly, the Country suffers work-life balance and gender inequality problems. In Italy, women face major career penalties after having children. Moreover, limited access to affordable childcare forces many women to leave the workforce, discouraging couples from having more children.<sup>146</sup> In particular, according to a recent report by Save the Children, in Italy, about 6 million mothers have to balance work and family responsibilities, often without adequate support.<sup>147</sup>

As structural barriers to work-life balance are described here, the connection with the human capability theoretical framework is evident. As a matter of fact, it is argued that people do not just need money, they need the ability to fully develop their potential.

After shedding the light on Italy's concerns on dealing with the birth rate rate topic, it could be useful to shift the focus on Countries which have managed to increase fertility rates. They succeeded in mitigating the problem by combining financial incentives with structural reforms. The success stories regard France and Germany.

In reference to France, there are better parental leave policies. Hence, equal maternity and paternity leave reduce career penalties for women. Furthermore, there is an affordable universal childcare. Over 90% of French children aged 3+ are enrolled in free

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<sup>145</sup> Gianni Santucci, "Milano e Il Costo Della Vita Troppo Alto, La Proposta: «Salario Minimo Di 8,3 Euro All'ora, Copiamo Il Modello Londra»,".

<sup>146</sup> Valentina Conte, "Lavoro, Allarme Inps Penalizzate Le Madri Su Stipendi e Carriera," *La Repubblica*, September 25, 2024.

<sup>147</sup> Save the Children, "Maternità in Italia: Circa 6 Milioni Di Mamme 'Equilibriste' Tra Lavoro E Carichi Familiari. Il 42,6% Delle Mamme Tra i 25 e i 54 Anni Non è Occupata e Il 39,2% Con 2 o Più Figli Minori è in Contratto Part-Time.," Save the Children Italia, May 6, 2022, <https://www.savethechildren.it/press/maternita-italia-circa-6-milioni-di-mamme-equilibriste-tra-lavoro-e-carichi-familiari-il-426>.

preschools.<sup>148</sup> Then, also the financial assistance is not missing. Families also benefit from monthly allowances (*Allocations familiales*), which increase with the number of children.<sup>149</sup>

Germany's example, instead, is outstanding for its market stability. Stability means security. Thus, more full-time and permanent contracts encourage family planning. In addition to this, the German government delivers high financial support but also family-friendly policies. Families receive direct payments, but also guaranteed daycare services. An example is the parental allowance known as *Elterngeld*. This benefit replaces a percentage of the net income of parents who interrupt or reduce their work activity to take care of a newborn. The amount varies between 65% and 100% of the previous income, with a maximum of 1,800 euros per month, for a duration of up to 14 months if both parents participate in the child's care.<sup>150</sup> Moreover, another measure, called *Elternzeit*, guarantees job protection. Parents on *Elternzeit* leave are protected from dismissal, and jobs must be kept open for them.<sup>151</sup> Then, municipal daycare (Kita) is subsidized, and since 2013, children over 1 year old have a legal right to a place in daycare.<sup>152</sup> Furthermore, Germany's strong labor protections and prevalence of permanent contracts offer young couples the security needed to plan families confidently.

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<sup>148</sup> Eurochild, "Early Childhood Development in France," Wurochild, July 29, 2021, <https://eurochild.org/uploads/2021/09/France-Country-Profile.pdf>.

<sup>149</sup> Service-Public.fr, "Allocations Familiales (Famille de 2 Enfants Ou Plus)," Public.fr, accessed March 23, 2025, <https://www.service-public.fr/particuliers/vosdroits/F13213>.

<sup>150</sup> Familienportal des Bundes, "Elterngeld," Elterngeld | Familienportal des Bundes, accessed March 7, 2025, <https://familienportal.de/familienportal/familienleistungen/elterngeld>.

<sup>151</sup> Familienportal des Bundes, "Elternzeit," Elternzeit | Familienportal des Bundes, accessed March 23, 2025, <https://familienportal.de/familienportal/familienleistungen/elternzeit>.

<sup>152</sup> I am Expat in Germany, "Childcare in Germany (Kindertagesstätte / Kita)," IamExpat, accessed March 23, 2025, <https://www.iamexpat.de/expat-info/family-kids/childcare-germany-kita-kindertagesstaette#:~:text=Since%202013%2C%20all%20children%20in,to%20a%20place%20at%20pre school.>

Without similar structural reforms in the job market, childcare, and gender equality, Italy's financial incentives will remain a band-aid solution that does little to reverse population decline.

### 5.3 The “Controesodo” Law: A Failed Attempt to Reverse Brain Drain

While Greece enacted the “Rebrain Greece” program and Spain the “Retorno del Talento”, Italy launched the “*Controesodo*” law in 2010.<sup>153</sup> This measure was aimed at encouraging Italians who moved abroad to return by offering tax breaks for professionals who move back.<sup>154</sup> Under this scheme, returning workers could pay only 30% of their taxable income for five years, with even bigger reductions for those relocating to Southern Italy.<sup>155</sup> A recent study by Bassetto and Ippedico (2023) evaluated the actual impact of these returnees tax schemes and found out that they led to a 27% increase in the return of high-skilled individuals.<sup>156</sup> Moreover, an important data retrieved by the two researchers concerns Germany, a renowned Nation for Italian emigrants. For Italians working in Germany, the reform raised the probability of leaving the German labor market by 0.5 percentage points, which represents a 21% relative increase in comparison to the period preceding the reform.<sup>157</sup>

Even though this measure was important since it marked the awareness by the institutions of the seriousness of the brain drain issue, it still was not sufficient for several reasons. First, low salaries still make it unattractive. A tax cut does little when salaries in Italy

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<sup>153</sup> Gruppo Controesodo, “Gli Incentivi Fiscali,” Gruppo Controesodo, <https://www.gruppocontroesodo.it/gli-incentivi-fiscali/>.

<sup>154</sup> Gruppo Controesodo, “Gli Incentivi Fiscali,”

<sup>155</sup> Gruppo Controesodo, “Gli Incentivi Fiscali,”

<sup>156</sup> Jacopo Bassetto and Giuseppe Ippedico, *Can Tax Incentives Bring Brains Back? Returnees Tax Schemes and High-Skilled Migration in Italy* (Munich, Germany: Munich Society for the Promotion of Economic Research - CESifo GmbH, 2023).

<sup>157</sup> Jacopo Bassetto and Giuseppe Ippedico, “Easy Come, Easy Go: Return Migration Increases with Tax Incentives in the Home Country,” *IAB - Institut Für Arbeitsmarkt- Und Berufsforschung*, November 28, 2023, <https://www.iab-forum.de/en/easy-come-easy-go-return-migration-increases-with-tax-incentives-in-the-home-country/>.

remain 30-50% lower than in Northern Europe for the same roles. For instance, software engineer in Milan earns €35,000 per year, while in Berlin, the same job pays €55,000-€60,000.

Secondly, Italy suffers a great lack of career growth opportunities. Returning professionals find few chances for career advancement compared to companies abroad. Moreover, as it has thoroughly analyzed in a previous chapter, Italy's rigid corporate culture often favors seniority over merit, making it hard for ambitious professionals to progress.

Last, but not least, the Italian Republic deals with a slow bureaucracy and institutional inefficiencies. In fact, not only do economic incentives not work in our favor, but bureaucracy also does not provide much help with this problem. Many returning professionals struggle with red tape when reintegrating into the Italian system (tax registration, health services, etc.). Therefore, it is likely to happen that in some cases, people just give up and leave again due to frustration with the system.

Without a more competitive labor market and better career opportunities, tax incentives alone will never be enough to convince Italians abroad to return. Indeed, several scholars argue that transforming emigration into a mutually beneficial dynamic, what is known as *brain circulation*, requires more than fiscal tools. As Saint-Blancat (2018) argues, turning brain drain into brain circulation is only possible if Italy invests more significantly in research and innovation, while also rebuilding mutual trust between institutions and their emigrated professionals.<sup>158</sup> Therefore, rather than focusing solely on bringing people back, Italy could gain more by cultivating transnational exchanges and treating its emigrated talents as ambassadors of knowledge, not as irreversible losses. This broader

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<sup>158</sup> Chantal Saint-Blancat, "Italy: Brain Drain or Brain Circulation?," *International Higher Education*, no. 96 (December 5, 2018): 10–11, <https://doi.org/10.6017/ihe.2019.96.10773>.

vision is echoed in the personal narratives of Italian scientists abroad. In a qualitative study, Saint-Blancat (2018) listened to their voices and found that, while many feel proud and professionally fulfilled by their choice to leave, they also express deep disappointment towards the Italian academic system.<sup>159</sup> Their return is often conditional on deeper changes in how institutions value talent, foster meritocracy, and build professional trust. Another academic contribution comes from Di Guardo (2024), who deems that mitigating the loss of human capital requires addressing structural weaknesses, such as the lack of meritocracy, unattractive salaries for researchers, and weak cooperation between academia and the private sector.<sup>160</sup> Therefore, Di Guardo consolidates the idea that policy interventions should not only aim to bring people back but also focus on improving working conditions domestically and strengthening Italy's capacity to retain and engage talent at home and abroad.

Looking at the broader picture, the inadequacy of the *Controesodo* law not only means losing the opportunity to recover the skilled workforce needed for economic growth and innovation but also proves that Italy is not attractive even to its own citizens who left. If Italy cannot even convince Italians to return, it will struggle even more to attract foreign talent. Therefore, A Country that cannot retain or attract highly skilled professionals loses influence in the European labor market and becomes less competitive. If Italy continues to lose its educated workforce, its economy will slow down, and its bargaining power in the EU will decline.

Instead, in reference to theories, this law could be connected to the human capability theory, because the law failed to provide an environment where professionals could fully

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<sup>159</sup> Chantal Saint-Blancat, "Making Sense of Scientific Mobility: How Italian Scientists Look Back on Their Trajectories of Mobility in the EU," *Higher Education Policy* 31, no. 1 (March 14, 2017): 37–54, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41307-017-0042-z>.

<sup>160</sup> Giovanni Di Guardo, "Brain Drain: Mitigatory Strategies for a Critical Issue Affecting Italy since over 50 Years," *Top Italian Scientists Journal* 1, no. 1 (January 14, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.62684/zacc6181>.

develop their potential, and the migration economics theory, since it did not change the push and pull factors that drive migration. However, it cannot be found any relation with the demographic dividend and burden theory in this case since the law was not directly about long-term population changes, only about repatriation. In reference to the first theoretical framework, it can be noted that the main reason of the connection derives from the fact that this measure offered tax breaks, but it did not fix the structural issues that pushed Italians to leave in the first place. Many professionals who considered returning found that career progression was still slow, salaries were still low, and the job market was still rigid. In addition to this, even with lower taxes, many saw better long-term growth opportunities abroad, so they stayed away. The second theory, instead, deals with push and pull factors. The *Controesodo* Law failed because it did not change the push and pull factors that shape migration decisions. The push factors, namely low wages, weak career prospects and bureaucracy, remained pretty unchanged, while the pull factors, so the strong job markets, innovation, and career growth abroad were still more attractive.

#### **5.4 Business Incentives: Why Companies Still Struggle to Keep Talent**

Despite it is clear that Italy is not doing well with the brain drain issue, it cannot be stated that the Country is not doing anything to contrast it. In fact, Italy has also introduced various business incentives to encourage companies to hire and retain skilled workers. These include tax breaks for companies hiring young employees, grants for startups and innovation-focused businesses, and regional funding programs in the South.<sup>161</sup>

However, even these efforts are falling short and the first among all reasons is that Italy's business environment is not competitive. High corporate taxes and excessive bureaucracy

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<sup>161</sup> Nicola Mastroiocco and Roberta Garganese, *Cohesion Policies in Southern Italy: An Analysis of the Interventions Funded by the National and European Structural Funds*, 2016.

make it difficult for companies to thrive. Then, many startups decide to register abroad due to easier regulations in places such as the UK, Estonia, and the Netherlands.

The migration economics theory describes this matter since it explains how economic conditions create push/pull factors for migration. The push factors are represented by the Italian high taxes and bureaucracy since they drive companies away from Italy. On the other hand, there are other Countries which exercise push factors through their lower taxes and easier bureaucracy. Shifting to the study's main argument, when companies face too much red tape, slow bureaucratic processes, and high taxes, they struggle to invest in innovation or hire and retain skilled workers. Therefore, the relocation of these businesses reduces Italy's competitiveness in innovation and business growth. If the Country cannot create a business-friendly environment, it loses its most talented professionals at the advantage of Countries with stronger innovation ecosystems.

Another cause of this failure is due to the fact that the peninsula has an established culture of temporary contracts and low wages.<sup>162</sup> Employers often hire workers on short-term contracts instead of providing stable, well-paid positions. Therefore, this creates insecurity and pushes talent to leave for Countries with better job conditions. Finally, the divide between national and regional policies is too wide. While some regions, such as Lombardy and Emilia-Romagna, have strong incentives for high-skilled jobs, the South lacks infrastructure and investment, making it difficult to attract businesses.

This lack of innovation ecosystems,<sup>163</sup> strongly felt in the South of Italy, relates mainly to the human capability theory since its absence does not enable individuals to realize themselves in the home Country.

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<sup>162</sup> Osservatorio Diritti, "Precariato: Lavoro a Tempo Determinato e Salari Bassi Dilagano in Italia," *Osservatorio Diritti*, November 9, 2022.

<sup>163</sup> Salvatore Zecchini, "Criticità Nella Politica per l'innovazione Dell'Italia," *L'industria, Rivista Di Economia e Politica Industriale*, January 2016, 119–66.

Then, in support to the main argument of the research, a strong knowledge economy, namely research and development, innovation, and high-skilled industries, is essential for national competitiveness. When a Country invests in research and technology, it attracts talent and drives economic growth. But, without strong investment in innovation, Italy struggles to create high-value jobs, which means it remains less competitive compared to Countries like Germany or France. Therefore, the failure to invest in knowledge economies directly weakens Italy's competitiveness. Furthermore, Countries with strong knowledge economies shape EU economic policies. As a matter of fact, Germany and France, who stand out for being the main investors in research and technology domain, are leaders in EU economic and labor policies. Italy, on the other hand, is falling behind in innovation, meaning it has less leverage in EU negotiations. What comes out is that Italy is less attractive for skilled professionals, making it weaker in the European labor market. Thus, it can be concluded that without a strong knowledge economy, Italy's economic influence in the EU declines.

To sum up, it can be concluded that If Italy wants to retain talent, it needs deep labor market reforms, not just financial incentives for businesses.

### **5.5 Why Is Italy Not Able to Attract Foreign Talent?**

Unlike Germany, France, or the Netherlands, Italy struggles to attract skilled professionals from abroad.

The first cause could be attributed to the red tape, particularly to the rigid and complicated work Visa process. It is difficult for non-EU professionals to get a work permit in Italy compared to other EU Countries.<sup>164</sup> Secondly, the peninsula offers lower salaries and

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<sup>164</sup> William Chiaromonte and Veronica Federico, "The Labour Market Needs Them, but We Don't Want Them to Stay for Good: The Conundrum of Migrants, Refugees and Asylum Seekers' Integration in Italy," *IMISCOE Research Series*, April 22, 2021, 193–212, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-67284-3\\_10](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-67284-3_10).

worst working conditions for skilled jobs compared to other Countries, for instance Northern Europe. There, there is a limited innovation ecosystem. Italy invests little of its GDP in research and development, far below other OECD Countries as Germany or France.<sup>165</sup>As a direct result, this makes Italy less attractive for scientists, engineers, and entrepreneurs.

While Italy exercises more push factors, on the other side, other Countries perform some pull factors which make themselves attractive for potential skilled job seekers. One Country which distinguishes itself on this is Germany that, apart from its well-known favorable and secure working conditions, it actively recruits skilled foreign workers with simplified visa processes and integration programs. Then, there is France, which offers tech visas for international startup founders and engineers.<sup>166</sup> Another good paradigmatic example which Italy could take inspiration from is the Netherlands, which provides a tax incentive known as the 30% ruling for highly skilled workers to encourage relocation.<sup>167</sup> To sum up, for Italy to become a global hub for talent, it must reform its immigration policies and invest more in research and technology.

## **5.6 Conclusion: What Are the Real Structural Barriers?**

Italy's current policies fail because they focus on short-term financial incentives rather than deep structural reforms. At the light of this analysis, it is possible to draw some conclusions on the macro issues that must be addressed. At the basis of this pyramid there is job insecurity and low wages matters. Without stable and well-paid jobs, no incentive

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<sup>165</sup> Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, "Cresce Il Divario Nella Spesa in R&S Tra Italia e Paesi OCSE," Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, November 15, 2024, <https://osservatoriocpi.unicatt.it/ocpi-pubblicazioni-cresce-il-divario-nella-spesa-in-rs-tra-italia-e-paesi-ocse>.

<sup>166</sup> Gouvernement Français, "French Tech Visa," French Tech Mission, October 3, 2023, <https://lafrenchtech.gouv.fr/en/come-work-in-france/french-tech-visa/>.

<sup>167</sup> I amsterdam, "30% Tax Ruling in the Netherlands," I amsterdam, January 2, 2025, <https://www.iamsterdam.com/en/live-work-study/living/official-procedures/30-tax-ruling#:~:text=The%2030%25%20ruling%20means%20that,employee's%20gross%20salary%20by%2030%25>.

will stop young Italians from leaving. Secondly, Family policies must improve beyond just financial bonuses. Therefore, they have to focus on a better work-life balance and on a more gender equality. Third goal, and perhaps the most difficult to put into practice due to the longevity of the issue, there shall be more career growth opportunities with a more meritocratic criteria of choice. Lastly, a serious intervention on the institutional inefficiency is required. Reducing bureaucracy and making public services faster will help both returning Italians and foreign professionals.

Without tackling these fundamental problems, Italy risks continuing its demographic and talent exodus, weakening its global competitiveness for years to come.

## **6. Strategies and Solutions to Reverse the Trend**

### **6.1 Introduction: Can Italy Reverse Its Demographic Decline and Brain Drain?**

Italy's demographic decline and brain drain are not irreversible. While the challenges are deeply rooted in structural weaknesses—such as an aging population, job market inefficiencies, and a lack of social mobility—several Countries have successfully tackled similar issues through a combination of policy reforms, economic incentives, and cultural shifts.

This chapter explores practical solutions that Italy could implement to slow down its population decline, retain skilled workers, and attract new talent. Drawing from international best practices, there will be an analysis of the policies that have been effective in reversing brain drain and boosting demographics in other Countries, and how they could be adapted to Italy's context.

Reversing these trends will require a comprehensive approach that addresses the root causes rather than just the symptoms. This includes labor market reforms, incentives for innovation, policies to attract foreign talent, and measures to improve Italy's digital and remote work ecosystem. By learning from successful models in Countries such as Germany, Ireland, and Canada, Italy can develop a strategy that aligns with its unique economic and social landscape.

## **6.2 Improving the Labor Market and Reducing Brain Drain**

One of the primary reasons why young Italians leave the Country is the lack of job stability, low wages, and limited career growth opportunities. Addressing these issues requires structural changes to the labor market that make staying in Italy a more attractive option for skilled professionals.

### **6.2.1 Labor Market Reforms: Contracts and Incentives for Young Workers**

At first, as it has been underlined throughout the thesis several times, Italy needs job stability, therefore permanent contracts. Unlike in many other European Countries, a large proportion of Italy's workforce is employed under temporary contracts, creating uncertainty and job insecurity. For instance, Germany and France have introduced incentives for companies that offer stable, long-term contracts to young professionals. Italy could follow this model by reducing employer taxation for full-time contracts and offering more subsidies to businesses that invest in young employees.

Moreover, there shall exist tax incentives for companies hiring skilled graduates. To prevent a talent from leaving, Italy could introduce tax reductions for companies that hire recent graduates in key sectors such as STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), healthcare, and finance.

Then, one of the main "push factors" leading Italians abroad is the wage gap between Italy and other European Countries. Italy, in this case, could make a "discrimination" and could implement sector-specific salary increases for high-demand jobs, similar to what Ireland did to retain IT specialists and healthcare workers.<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, "Minister Richmond Announces Largest Ever Expansion to the Employment Permits System," DETE, December 20, 2023, <https://enterprise.gov.ie/en/news-and-events/department-news/2023/december/20122023.html>.

## 6.2.2 Promoting Meritocracy and Social Mobility

As it is now clear, one of Italy's greatest challenges is its rigid corporate hierarchy. Many young Italians feel they have no opportunities for advancement, pushing them to seek better prospects abroad.

Even if it is not easy to deal with this trend since it is an eradicated phenomenon, Italy can still take some measures to mitigate it at least. For instance, firstly, it could implement a transparent promotion criterion, a system that rewards skills and performance rather than seniority can encourage young workers to stay. This is not such an idealistic project if it is considered the example of Denmark, which has succeeded in implementing successful merit-based career structures in public administration.<sup>169</sup>

Secondly, Italy could take inspiration from Switzerland and Germany in enhancing university-industry collaboration. There, strong partnerships between universities and private companies ensure that graduates enter the workforce with relevant skills and immediate employment opportunities. Italy must strengthen these ties to prevent the mismatch between education and job market needs.

Lastly, the Country should keep pace with modern times; hence it should encourage startup culture and entrepreneurship. Many Italian entrepreneurs move abroad due to excessive bureaucracy and lack of funding. Countries such as Estonia offer fast-track processes for startups, making it easier for young innovators to build businesses.<sup>170</sup> A simplified bureaucracy and tax incentives for startups could boost Italy's innovation ecosystem.

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<sup>169</sup> European Commission, "Public Administration Characteristics and Performance in EU28:," European Commission, 2018, <https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=19947&langId=en>.

<sup>170</sup> Money Control, "How Estonia Transformed into Europe's Tech and Startup Powerhouse in the Post-Soviet Era," Moneycontrol, May 28, 2024, <https://www.moneycontrol.com/technology/how-estonia-transformed-into-europes-tech-and-startup-powerhouse-in-the-post-soviet-era-article-12734179.html>.

### 6.3 Attracting Talent and Foreign Investments

While Italy focuses on retaining its talent, it must also become an attractive destination for foreign professionals and businesses. For instance, Canada, Germany, and Ireland have successfully positioned themselves as hubs for skilled workers by creating welcoming immigration policies, reducing bureaucracy, and offering competitive salaries. This sub-chapter will delve into these success stories in order to raise awareness on the feasibility of dealing with brain drain and demographic decline issue.

#### 6.3.1 Lessons from Successful Countries

In reference to the first mentioned Country, Canada, through its Global Talent Stream program, attracts highly skilled professionals by offering fast-track work visas, tax benefits, and relocation assistance.<sup>171</sup> Italy could adopt similar measures to ease its immigration process for skilled workers.

Germany, instead, introduced the Skilled Workers Immigration Act, known as “*Fachkräfteeinwanderungsgesetz*”.<sup>172</sup> This simplifies visa processes for high-demand professions and provides incentives for companies that hire foreign talent.

Concerning Ireland, this Country stands out for how its corporate tax structure<sup>173</sup> and research investment programs<sup>174</sup> have made it one of Europe’s top destinations for tech companies and skilled professionals. Italy could inspire from the Irish example on

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<sup>171</sup> Julia Hornstein, “What Is the Global Talent Stream?,” *CIC News*, January 24, 2023.

<sup>172</sup> Bundesregierung, “Fachkräfteeinwanderungsgesetz,” Die Bundesregierung informiert | Startseite, June 3, 2024, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/aktuelles/fachkraefteeinwanderungsgesetz-2182168>.

<sup>173</sup> John Seils and A. Adeniyi, “The Influence of Fiscal Policy on Foreign Direct Investment Inflow: A Case Study of Ireland,” *Research Journal of Finance and Accounting*, January 1, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.7176/rjfa/12-2-04>.

<sup>174</sup> James Kennedy and Frank Barry, “An Assessment of R&D Tax Credits and Their Role towards Innovation within Irish Industry,” *The Irish Journal of Management* 39, no. 1 (August 1, 2020): 34–46, <https://doi.org/10.2478/ijm-2010-0003>.

revising its tax policies to attract foreign companies and talent, particularly in the technology and finance sectors.

### **6.3.2 How Italy Can Adapt These Strategies**

One way through which Italy can enact some of these strategies is to “prioritize” and, therefore, create a fast-track visa program for high-skilled workers. Simplifying work permits and offering a dedicated immigration channel for professionals in high-demand sectors could help Italy attract global talent. Furthermore, it could also intervene on bureaucracy by reducing it for foreign professionals and businesses. Italy must cut red tape for foreign workers and investors to make it easier to relocate, start businesses, and integrate into the workforce. Finally, it could also offer financial incentives for returning Italians. One idea could be to concede housing subsidies, tax benefits, and relocation assistance to Italians abroad who move back.

### **6.4 Effective Demographic Policies: Lessons from France**

This declining birth rate is the major contributor to Italy’s demographic crisis. While financial incentives such as the "Bonus Bebè" have had limited success, Countries as France have implemented effective, long-term policies that could serve as a model for Italy.

There are some French policies that could be adapted to Italy. The first one is the provision of near-universal access to affordable childcare.<sup>175</sup> This enables parents to balance work and family life. In this way, Italy must invest in public nurseries and kindergartens, especially in the South, which suffers from a significant shortage of them. Furthermore, France offers paid parental leave for both mothers and fathers. By looking to their way to do, Italy could expand paternity leave and provide financial support for dual-income

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<sup>175</sup> Brian McCulloch, “Explainer: How Childcare Works in France,” *The Connexion*, October 11, 2024.

households. Lastly, families are not left alone. France offers tax reductions for families with multiple children, making parenthood more economically sustainable.

### **6.5 The Role of Digitalization and Remote Work**

The rise of remote work—accelerated by the pandemic—presents a unique opportunity for Italy to retain talent and attract skilled workers.

As analyzed in the paper by the scholar Cangìà, a phenomenon called 'South-Working' has been developing.<sup>176</sup> In fact, these “South-Working” initiatives should be supported in order to make some steps to reverse brain drain. Many Italians living in Northern cities or abroad would prefer to return to the Mezzogiorno if they could work remotely. It is here that Italy should intervene and offer tax incentives for businesses that hire remote workers based in Southern Italy. To this end, the Italian government shall provide the necessary means to achieve this goal, with the first measure being the development of digital infrastructure. This would ensure high-speed internet access in all regions, allowing more professionals to work from anywhere. Finally, always pursuing this aim of encouraging digitalization, creating more remote work hubs could serve useful for this purpose. Italy could develop co-working spaces in underpopulated towns, similar to initiatives in Spain and Portugal, where abandoned villages have been repurposed as hubs for remote workers.<sup>177</sup>

This picture of ideas is not just imaginary. Portugal and Estonia, for instance, have successfully attracted digital nomads by offering special visas and tax incentives. Italy

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<sup>176</sup> Flavia Cangìà, “‘South-Working’: Return Mobilities and Remote Work during COVID-19,” *Critique of Anthropology* 44, no. 4 (December 2024): 420–38, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0308275x241299327>.

<sup>177</sup> Kat Chen, “This Rural Region in Spain Is Paying Remote Workers \$16,000 To Move There,” *Condé Nast Traveler*, August 30, 2024.

could introduce a "Remote Worker Visa" with tax breaks for professionals who choose to live and work in Italy while employed by foreign companies.

## **6.6 Conclusion: A Roadmap for a National Strategy**

To sum up, in order to reverse its demographic decline and brain drain, Italy must implement labor market reforms to create stable, well-paid jobs, Policies that reward merit and social mobility, easier visas and competitive wages to attract foreign talent, family policies inspired by France's successful model, and investment in remote work and digital infrastructure.

By addressing these structural challenges, Italy could not only slow down its demographic crisis but also position itself as a more competitive, innovative, and attractive Country for both its citizens and international talent. The time to act is now—before the demographic and economic consequences become irreversible.

## **7. Conclusions and Future Implications**

Italy is at a crossroads now. Demographic decline and brain drain are no longer separate issues but two sides of the same coin, feeding into each other and threatening the Country's socio-economic future. This thesis has analyzed the structural causes of these phenomena, highlighting the main challenges, the failures of past policies, and possible strategies to reverse the trend.

Now, the time to directly answer the research question posed at the beginning has come. At the light of this analysis, it is possible to state that this study confirms that Italy's demographic decline and brain drain are deeply interconnected, leading to long-term socio-economic stagnation. The loss of skilled labor not only weakens national innovation but also reduces Italy's influence in the EU's economic and migration policies. Without structural reforms, the Country risks a diminished role in European decision-making, further exacerbating its economic and demographic challenges.

### **7.1 Summary of Key Findings**

Brain drain is not just about losing talented individuals—it's a massive loss of highly qualified human capital with severe consequences for Italy's productivity, innovation, and global competitiveness. A combination of low wages, lack of career advancement, an

unstable job market, and an inefficient bureaucracy has pushed hundreds of thousands of young Italians to seek better opportunities abroad.

At the same time, demographic decline is accelerating. Birth rates remain among the lowest in Europe, and an aging population is creating an unsustainable imbalance between the working-age population and retirees, putting enormous pressure on the welfare and healthcare systems.

These two phenomena are deeply interconnected: the more young and skilled Italians leave, the more Italy loses its potential for innovation and productivity. The older the population gets, the fewer resources there are to invest in the future. This vicious cycle makes it increasingly difficult for Italy to break free from economic stagnation and social decline.

## **7.2 What This Means for Italy's Future**

If Italy fails to act quickly, it risks entering a phase of irreversible decline, with devastating effects at multiple levels. At first, the Country will enter in a difficult phase of economic stagnation. Fewer young people in the workforce mean less innovation, lower productivity, and slower economic growth. Secondly, the strain on the pension system will not be bearable anymore. With fewer working-age taxpayers, pension costs could become unsustainable. Furthermore, Italy will assist to the phenomenon of depopulation involving entire regions. Southern Italy, already struggling with inequalities, could face a demographic collapse, widening the North-South divide. Finally, there will be an external bad consequence, which is a loss of influence in the European Union. It is no doubt that a Country with a shrinking workforce and slow economic growth will lose political and economic weight in the EU.

What has been displayed is clear. without a long-term vision, any policy will only be a short-term fix. Italy cannot rely on temporary tax incentives to convince a handful of professionals to return, nor can it solve the birth rate crisis with baby bonuses alone. It needs deep structural reforms to address the Country's systemic weaknesses.

### **7.3 Future Research Directions**

While this thesis has examined brain drain and demographic decline from economic, social, and political perspectives, there are still many unanswered questions that deserve further investigation. The first one could refer to the psychological and social effects of brain drain on the young Italians who stay. Secondly, it is necessary to think in a more realistic way on the strategies from other Countries that could practically be applied to Italy's case. Then, how can digitalization and remote work help reverse brain drain? A last question could reserve some role to the education system and how it impacts young italians' desire to emigrate.

The big picture of the issue seems not to predict the best scenario for Italy. However, seen some recent optimistic data coming from the South and remote jobs, the answer is positive, although it is undeniable to recognize that time is running out. For this reason, the thesis stresses the importance of intervening on the roots of the issue, which is Southern Italy. Southern regions are disproportionately affected by the outflow of young, educated professionals, which further deepens their structural disadvantages. Therefore, education must be seen as the cornerstone of any meaningful solution. Hence, investing in schools, universities, and research centers is essential for reversing this vicious cycle.

Italy has a narrow window of opportunity to implement serious reforms and stop the loss of young talent and demographic decline. What's needed are bold policies—not just

temporary incentives, but a radical rethink of the Country's economic, labor, and social model.

Based on the finding of the research, it could be established a hierarchy of policy priorities. First of all, strengthening the education and research system is the *condition sine qua non* to provide fertile ground for talent development and retention. The second top priority concerns the public sector, which urges interventions addressed to ensure transparency, meritocracy, and long-term career prospects for young professionals. Then, fiscal incentives accompanied by these previous reforms could play an important role on attracting back young people. Last but not least priority, is to promote concrete partnerships between the government, universities, and private companies, in order to create local environments that foster innovation, support research, and offer high-quality job opportunities to young professionals in their home regions.

Therefore, as to utilize a medical metaphor, it is important to prevent, thus, to intervene on the root of the problem, rather than to cure it.

If these reforms are implemented decisively, Italy can still have the possibility to reestablish itself and have a more decisive role in the context of the European Union. Nevertheless, if the Country continues to ignore the issue, it risks falling into an even deeper spiral of decline, from which it will be increasingly difficult to recover.

The future of Italy depends on the choices we make today.

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