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Where Is My Place? The Second Generation in Italy as a New Kind of Transnational Migrant

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The topic of intra-European youth mobility has been under investigation for some time. This contribution discusses a particular youth migration, that of the children of immigrants who leave Italy to move to Northern Europe. What are the motivations behind this de facto migration? How much do discrimination processes count in the decision to move abroad and under what conditions and for what reasons do people leave Italy? This paper – based on my extensive qualitative research on young people of foreign origin, born and/or raised in Italy – discusses the opportunities and limits of these young people’s coping strategies in the face of difficulties in inclusion and entry into the labour market. It does this based on the broader research project, by taking into account the mobility ideas, drivers and relationships between mobile youth and their (ethnic or not) social networks.

Keywords: young people, second generation, labour market, associations, skills, stereotypes

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Introduction

I have a Skype date with Valbona (27), who works as a junior accounting manager in Utrecht. A second-generation ‘migrant’ born in Padua to parents of Albanian origin, she studied economics and business management at the University of Turin. Her experience is that of an ‘expatriate’, as she defines herself. She is a young Italian, which she underlines several times, who has chosen to move to the city where she followed her Erasmus course in order to achieve professional success. A story like so many others in the last 10 years, many would say. A story of redemption, others would comment, dwelling on her origins, her accent and the comments on her migratory background when she mentioned her origins. These comments ranged from ‘Albanians are all criminals’ to ‘They treat women badly and exploit them’ to ‘Worse than you there are only black people. You are in Italy to steal and take jobs away from Italians, pretending to be helpful’. When asked about her reaction to these words, she said:

...words that stay with you, they are like tattoos that you didn't want. At first, you cry, then something clicks and you just want to prove yourself, be the best. I've always been among the best at school, I've always liked studying (...) maybe that's why I've never felt different at school, I was well integrated, I did a lot of extracurricular activities, from the parish centre to the gym. (...) The first time I felt different was when a meeting was organised at school to explain a one-year study-abroad programme. I was excited. I was already imagining myself in Australia for a year. I arranged a private interview. I introduced my father and myself and, after a few sentences, we were immediately told that the programme was only for Italian or European citizens (i.e. EU citizens). I didn't immediately understand but my father did. I won't forget that scene: he took out his identity card, opened it and showed it to the person behind the desk, pointing out his Italian citizenship. He then stood up, saying that it was not the right programme for me. I was speechless and so was my teacher who was following the interview. We went out. The teacher joined us, saying that it would be a good opportunity for me and that everyone at school thought I was the most suitable candidate for that kind of experience. My father, again quietly, replied: 'A programme that wants to offer young people an intercultural experience should train its staff better, telling them that the accent or the work they do says nothing about people, other than their genetic history. We have a migratory background, we are not foreign'. There was silence. For the first time I heard about foreigners, about skin colour. (...) I went to Australia, but on a summer English course. (...) I never spoke with my parents about the episode again but, when I arrived in Turin, I met Sara and Atifah, my fellow students, who introduced me to the associations they frequented and where they did voluntary work and I discovered a world... It's strange how I hadn't noticed anything about what was happening around me among young foreigners, among the second generation (...) if you're not part of groups, if you don't talk about these issues with friends, at school, in your family, it's as if you live in a world apart. (...) Hearing some of the stories of those who can't travel or who have problems with documents, I feel privileged. (...) My parents protected me from the reality and mistrust, from the discrimination that affects those of non-Italian origin. And it affects us children, too.

Valbona finds that she was perceived as a foreigner, even though she has Italian citizenship. The surname that sounds unfamiliar, the unusual name for Italy, the family migration history are all elements that, as she says, become indelible ‘tattoos’. They are, as the interviewee herself says, ‘electric shocks that make you feel in the wrong place’. For many children of immigrants, it's about not feeling accepted, always feeling blamed for their family history and their parents' ‘immigrant life’. Some young people, faced with such a situation – in which they feel they have to constantly justify themselves, explaining who they are, where they have been,

why they are no different from their peers – decide that Italy is not the place they want to live, where there is no future for them as people, professionals, parents, young people but only as children of immigrants (Ricucci 2021). However, the decision to leave to find a job in another country seems inescapable. To the daily difficulty of constantly feeling ‘out of place’ (Simola 2022) another bewildering factor is added: i.e. being young in an aging society where, for young people, the relationship with the labour market is both difficult and precarious (Croce and Ghignoni 2015). Here, Valbona explains these two variables which contribute to defining new migratory trajectories from Italy.

I'm working in Holland because I like it here and I think I can learn a lot, gain experience in order to work one day in an international organisation. (...) In Italy it's not so easy, as I said, there's still a long way to go, not only because there's resistance towards people with a migratory background, but also towards young people. Just think, if you're young, the child of immigrants, and a woman, and I cannot imagine what it could mean to also be black, Muslim and a lesbian. You can't succeed. (...) Here I found a job where I had done my internship during Erasmus. I had perhaps made a good impression and, I must say, I didn't know anyone: my parents work in the automotive field, so they certainly couldn't help me by introducing me to friends or acquaintances in finance or banking. (...) Yeah, you learn, when you go to university, the value of friendships, not only the value of people you can trust or talk to and go around like you do when you're a teenager... even us young people learn immediately the value of friendships and acquaintances, even in a negative way like when you comment that the guy got a good grade in an exam because he has a certain surname or because he knows the teacher... you know... but not everywhere is like that...

Ideally, Valbona's story could be part of a book on ‘brain drain’. Young, qualified, Italian, with a degree from Turin and a job abroad. Yet her foreign heritage might exclude her from a discussion on this kind of mobility: indeed, when the topic enters the public debate, the focus is on young Italians –which means Italians born and raised in Italian families, not Italians with foreign origins, like Valbona. In fact, debates on youth ‘brain drain’ only rarely deal with the outgoing mobility of the children of immigrants – the second generation. Both themes – the loss of the youth component and the economic prominence of the second generation – are topics of discussion that can touch raw nerves. They are also capable of highlighting the limits of the debate on them, in their positions and arguments, which are often not anchored to empirical evidence and are guided by outdated and anachronistic images. Valbona, as well as Elena, Dalina and other young women of foreign origin also cite, among the reasons for their departure, the climate of opinion towards diversity that affects large and small Italian towns (Chiurco 2019; Fondazione Istituto Carlo Cattaneo 2018; Ipsos 2018), highlighting the failure of actions, information and training on diversity despite the fact that the whole of Italy is now *de facto* multicultural (Ambrosetti, Strangio and Wihtol de Wenden 2016).

This contribution, based on the Italian case, discusses the topic of intra-EU mobility from the perspectives of a very particular group of young people – those who have a family (or personal) migratory background and who have developed migration projects from Southern European countries to Northern Europe. The aim is to highlight the reasons behind their migration decision and to discuss the extent to which they were (or were not) able to benefit from their own ethnic networks. The paper continues by framing the issue of youth mobility and its connection with international family migratory experiences before presenting the main actors, among whom are a little-observed category, namely the children of immigrants in Italy who – with or without Italian citizenship – decide to leave once they obtain a high-school diploma or university degree. Their reasons for leaving are numerous (Ricucci, Premazzi and Scali 2013), although the one that reflects the difficult transition from school to work is still the most significant: the second section is dedicated to this theme. Finally, in a world pervaded by social networks and biographies that unravel through photos on Instagram and posts on

Telegram, the ethnic associative environment continues to represent an important reference point for those who, while identifying themselves as ‘expatriates’ and not as immigrants, move with a rucksack or suitcase and a low-cost flight abroad. The conclusions to this paper discuss the findings, taking into account reflections collected from various Italian stakeholders.

Setting the scene

The children of immigrants are a significant segment of the population, in Italy and elsewhere in Europe. Firstly, it is difficult to ascertain their numbers from a statistical point of view, given that access to European citizenship (a process governed by heterogeneous legislation) often does not enable the identification of applicants’ citizenship of origin and therefore their migration background. Equally, the children of mixed-nationality couples – with one parent a foreigner and the other an Italian citizen – also do not figure statistically, thus contributing to an underestimation of those who, in everyday life (at school or at work, through friendships, affectionate relationships or leisure activities) are treated differently – and sometimes discriminately due to their skin colour, somatic features, religious identity or accent – because they are identified as part of the heterogeneous world of the children of immigrants, a world which it is not easy to define (Heath and Cheung 2007). In the oldest European countries of immigration, second-generation concerns have attracted attention and space on government agendas as well as – albeit from a different point of view – scholars’ research programmes in various countries (for reviews, see Lutz, Brinbaum and Abdelhady 2014; Ricucci 2013). Several events (e.g. urban revolts in Paris, Malmö and London) forced attention to be paid to the mixed results of integration processes and to relations between different cultural aspirations, causing the dangerous re-emergence of intolerance and discrimination against, specifically, people whose origins are in Muslim countries. So it is that, in a climate of suspicion, the children of immigrants (who are sometimes European citizens) have once again ended up under observation, illustrating that granting citizenship is not enough to avoid differentiation and discrimination processes connected with cultural origins. Rather, such urban conflicts, which exploded especially on the peripheries of cities, are an indicator of the necessity to examine the effectiveness of policies relating to integration and the destinies of the second generation.¹

In the history of migration, passage from one generation to the next does not always mean upward social mobility. Sometimes, as various authors have shown, the children’s integration can even be worse than that of their parents (Kasinitz, Mollenkopf, Waters and Holdaway 2008; Schmaus 2020; Talpin, Balazard, Hadj Belgacem, Kaya, Purenne and Roux 2021). Declining academic careers and employment biographies are just some of the obstacles to the realisation of parents’ dreams of seeing their children fulfilled. Italy perfectly fits these traits. The country has been facing up to the presence of foreign adults and minors for about 40 years. Since the 1990s it has begun to pay particular attention to the component of minors in the immigration phenomenon, because of both their growing numbers and the challenges and problems which they present at the local level – from reception to academic policies, from free-time activities to relations with parents. As the data show for the beginning of 2021 (Istat 2021), the 0–18-year age-group represented 20.2 per cent of the foreign population in Italy; however, as mentioned above, the data only take into account those who hold a foreign citizenship, so that those with dual-nationality parents or migrants who have become Italian are excluded.²

Thus, the immigrant presence is neither a novelty nor a passing phenomenon. Children, even more than their parents, are an important element not only in Italian schools but in society in general, albeit the educational environment has difficulty in distinguishing between these young people (all Italian) and their parents (resulting from one or more migrations). Sometimes teachers consider the various generational belongings as a complete homogenous universe and fail to take into account the differences in terms of country

of origin or legal status. Those who come from an EU member country (in Italy they represent roughly 30 per cent of the foreign population) have more rights than non-EU nationals and should not actually, according to Italy's immigration law, be considered as migrants. As they come of age, the young people continue to go through a delicate phase subsequent upon compulsory schooling and to enter the labour market, discovering the extent to which being foreigners and 'children of immigrants' means being negatively labelled (Ambrosini 2019; Ricucci 2017). Among other concerns, young foreigners are worried about matters related to their juridical status. Being born in Italy does not mean automatically becoming an Italian citizen. Even when they do finally become Italian, it does not mean that they are exempt from stereotyping: indeed, even if the children of immigrants succeed at school or in their insertion onto the labour market, they are still often perceived as 'foreigners'.

However, having to prove to their parents that efforts made to guarantee better life opportunities will have a happy ending, while always being under observation – especially when the media broadcast negative episodes involving migrants – is an aspect which seems to differentiate foreign immigrant children from their peers of Italian origin. Yet, it is not only relations with their parents and other adults which should cause concern. The issue should also be raised as to whether foreign-origin adolescents are interested in changes affecting the youth population in general or whether their transition to adulthood presents particular characteristics. Reaching adulthood – i.e. the steps which are considered as the passage between being 'young' and being 'adult' – happens more quickly for the second generation than for their Italian peers (Argentin and Pavolini 2020; Panichella, Avola and Piccitto 2021). From this perspective, the second generation represents a novelty within the so-called Mediterranean transition to adulthood in which Italy fits. However, this awareness is not widespread. Indeed, the issue of the second generation emerges mainly when studying the educational path from infancy to high school. Rarely does the focus span the university level and the relationship with the labour market. Looking at these two latter topics, emigration flows from Italy to other EU or OECD countries represent one of the more interesting patterns of social transformation in the debate on youth. However, despite the high numbers and the importance in public debate, the phenomenon of young people with a migratory background who decide to leave Italy remains quite under-scrutinised, with the great majority of research focusing only on Italians with an Italian family background.

Methodology

Drawing on an empirical investigation which adopted a qualitative approach, the rationale for carrying out in-depth interviews stems from an assumption that they allow us to capture processes such as migrant experiences, values, the production of meaning and respondents' self-positioning on crucial issues such as identity, a topic which often causes conflict between generations in migratory contexts (Lareau 2003). This paper focuses on the plans for and experiences of intra-EU mobility by a sub-sample characterised by the common variable of being part of the migratory flows moving from Central and Eastern European countries to Italy. The empirical material presented in this article is part of the research project 'Youth on the Move: Naturalized Italians', financed by the Italian University Research Funds, which investigated the biographies of young Italians with a migratory background who have already left Italy – or are planning to leave – for other European destinations in the last five years. The project, carried out during 2016–2021, employs both qualitative interviews selected through the snowball method and a multi-situated ethnography in various European cities (London, Berlin, Paris, Lyon and Hamburg): 120 interviews – which, in some cases could be described as life-stories due to the fact that some participants were followed throughout the development of their life-paths and were interviewed on several occasions – and hundreds of pages of ethnographic observations were collected. Much of the material collected was analysed with Atlas.ti (for the stories) and MAXQDA (for the ethnographic notes). The project followed the life-path of young people sharing the trait

of being children of immigrants and belonging to the top 10 main foreign communities in Italy, according to statistical data at the beginning of 2016: Romanians, Moroccans, Albanians, Chinese, Ukrainians, Moldavans, Egyptians, Filipinos, Indians and Bangladeshis. This paper refers to 30 interviews with young people of Albanian (13), Romanian (10), Ukrainian (3) or Moldovan (4) origin. As with the whole sample, these respondents were also selected by snowballing, taking care to diversify the social and work environments to which they belong. Out of the 30, 20 are university graduates in Italy; the others have an Italian high-school diploma. The interviewees have been divided into two groups: 1) those who already lived abroad (i.e. the *movers*) and 2) those who were in Italy, yet planning their international mobility (i.e. the *planners*). The sample is balanced by gender and by generation: 50 per cent belong to the 'pure' second generation (i.e. born in Italy to immigrant parents); the remaining 50 per cent belong to 'generation 1.5', according to Rumbaut's definition (1997), which means having been born abroad and then arrived in Italy due to family reunion during their pre-adolescent period. All respondents were interviewed as adults and were required to sign an interview consent form, requesting their willingness to be contacted again for a follow-up interview. Respondents were also informed of the possibility of the research being abandoned and requesting cancellation of the interview. The data collected – anonymised (the names used, in fact, are fictitious) – were stored in accordance with data privacy and processing regulations.

Looking to the new generations

To set the scene more specifically, it is useful to remember the not-so-new story of how the relationship between training-orientation-entry into the world of work and professionalism continues to require in-depth study and, above all, policies inside and outside the school aimed at teachers, human resources managers and families. The last of these often lack the necessary tools, as Gelina, 26, another Italian of Albanian origin, points out.

The problem is that our parents do not know how things work in Italy, the schools, the university, but also what the sectors of the world of work are in which to invest because they will develop. There is total trust in the teachers, and then in compatriots who have already had the same experiences, even if it is not true that if you have had experience you are an expert in that subject... in this way you only do damage. My parents always said that my brothers and I should graduate from the university but no one helped us. (...) I'm not saying that no one helped us because I'm Albanian, no, it's not that. There is not much help in general. But if you're not Italian it's difficult, because of the language, because of the information that comes from experience, from having grown up in a country... or you're at risk, as happened to my brother who was directed towards a vocational training course by his Italian teacher, because she said he couldn't cope with a high school course and now he's graduating in engineering in an Italian-English bilingual course. (...) He has to thank an old retired headmaster who used to help him with his homework in the afternoons, who convinced my parents by explaining to them some characteristics of the Italian school and how also teachers can make mistakes and not always act, let's say, with clarity (Gelina, 26, second generation, Berlin).

Back in 2011, the then Governor of the Bank of Italy and now Italian Prime Minister, Mario Draghi, stated that

the difficulties faced by the younger generations should worry us. Not only for reasons of fairness. There is a problem of wasting their wealth of knowledge, their capacity for innovation. Italy's low growth in recent years is also a reflection of the increasingly scarce opportunities offered to the younger generations to contribute to economic and social development with their innovative capacity, knowledge and enthusiasm (Draghi 2011: 161).

These words have been recalled on numerous occasions since then.

Aided by a number of programmes to relaunch higher education and its link with the world of work, for some time now the attention of public opinion, policy-makers and research professionals towards young people has been focused on the increasingly complex relationship between education, guidance and the next step, tertiary education or entry into the world of work (European Commission 2018). The intertwining of the two – education and the labour market – is sometimes underlined as a lack (or delay) of the education system in the face of a profoundly and rapidly changing scenario and as weak, badly implemented policies for the orientation and professional integration of young people (Cedefop 2020). There is a ‘persistent and unrestrained’ outflow of emigrating talent, with a consequent drain of resources trained in Italy, from which other territorial contexts and economies will benefit (Coccia and Ricci 2019). Finally, there is the reappearance of controversies over the competition between young nationals and immigrants, in which the former – for many – should be privileged, according to a functionalist and temporary interpretation of a phenomenon (immigration) that is, in fact, organic to the country (Argentin, Aktaş, Barbetta, Barbieri and Colombo 2020; Boffo and Gagliardi 2017; Ryan, Erel and D’Angelo 2015).

It is clear that the numbers of young people not entering the labour market have created a marked social alarm due to the social effects of the consequences of their lack of an autonomous income and the risk that they will need to be supported by their parents and social services (Unt et al. 2021).

Three elements have recently complicated this already negative picture. The first concerns the resumption of interregional migration within Italy. In recent years internal mobility has increased again, especially along the traditional South–North axis (SVIMEZ 2021). A second aspect has to do with the so-called brain drain, an expression to which we should add ‘and arms’, given that it also concerns many less-skilled workers (who seek employment for example in the traditional jobs of catering and tourism). This leitmotif has become stronger in recent years, thanks in part to the emergence of blogs, communities and growing media attention: the departure of many young people is both an attempt to escape the lack of work and a strategy for reacting to an Italian system that seems to offer no opportunities. Some of these young people have a migratory background. The era in which many people did not want to repeat the story of their parents’ international mobility has ended and, in recent years, there has been a reversal of the trend. Finally, there are the effects of the economic crisis and the discouraging data of recent years on the weak, precarious and often under-qualified relationship between young people and the labour market (Bjorn, Schoyen and Sirovatka 2019).

If it is true that youth represents, in every society, a precious resource for which there is growing concern, often the simultaneous belonging to ‘other’ identities obscures the generational one: this is the case of the children of immigration, too often seen and, above all, studied as immigrants and not as young people. However, the demographic predictions for Italy in the near future call for the need to recognise this segment of the population, because the forecasts suggest a scenario in which this very special type of resource will become scarce. On the other hand, we are often faced with a society in which the voice of young people resonates with less and less force, not only because of their scarce numbers but also because of a third age (75+) that maintains its operational vitality (Istat 2020).

In this scene, where Italy still struggles to think of itself as a land of stable immigration and not of temporary presences, the possibility of dealing with immigrants (and their children) in terms of investing in the future of the country remains difficult for the majority of the population, especially when young people of migrant origin are perceived as ‘dangerously different’. Moreover, it is precisely the feeling of ‘being out of place’, of ‘not being well accepted’, that is a strong motivation to look for job opportunities outside Italy. As Cyprian (Moldovan, 26, 1.5 generation, Hamburg) remembers:

Cyprian: *It is not difficult to find a job; it is difficult to get rid of the looks of those who think that you are worth less than others because you are the son of immigrants. I have experienced it myself, every time they told me ‘You are so good’, ‘We didn’t think you could be so good’. And, what they wanted to say was ‘Even if you are Moldovan, you are good’.*

Interviewer: *Aren’t you exaggerating?*

Cyprian: *No, it’s like a sixth sense that you develop year after year. Because in every environment you go to (...) no matter how well you speak Italian, how well you know the culture, how much of a football fan you are, you will never be accepted. I decided to leave and take a job in Hamburg because I wanted to stop feeling like a foreigner. Worse, an immigrant. Because we Moldovans are immigrants, we are not perceived as foreigners as a Canadian can be.*

Young ‘immigrants’ and the access to the labour market: stereotypes endure

Most of the interviews revealed different ways of relating to the idea of one’s own migration path, following on from the pathway of the family of origin. Two distinct patterns could be observed, which are reflected in different behaviour, for example, from the point of view of learning a new language in depth. On the one hand, there are those (mainly among the highly qualified who have been pushed by their parents to gain a socially elevated position and among women without a Muslim background) who do not see a future in Italy (often for a negative judgement on Italian society), even if they maintain family and friendship ties in this country. They think of a definitive transfer; of the construction of a new and stable reality in another country. This position – which applies to around 60 per cent of all participants – is contrasted by the vision of those who feel, in the words of one interviewee, ‘mobile for a long time’: experiences, professional skills, in some cases savings built with effort by working abroad, are considered a (necessary) step to build their future stable working and family position in Italy.

Alina is Ukrainian. She grew up in Novara, a provincial North Italian town, where the Ukrainian community is large and well-liked. When she chose to go to university, she moved to London because, as she says in her 2021 interview:

it is an international city. Here, the difference in accent or skin colour doesn’t matter if you know the language, have the required qualifications and demonstrate social skills. I am sorry to say this, but, in Italy, there is still a lot of racism. Towards everybody. It doesn’t matter if you are not black. It is enough that you have some connection with immigration to be looked at differently. If you come from abroad to work as an engineer it’s different, but if you want to make your way as a carer’s daughter, your mother’s role, your family’s life story becomes a boulder. My mother has tried since middle school to make me hang out only with Italian classmates. Now I understand how she sensed that Italy, and the province where we lived, was not ready to manage cultural diversity. (...) Going back to Italy? Not for now. I chose to leave Italy and get away from my family to feel recognised for my work, my skills and my projects, not for the family history only confined to the migration experience. I feel that this is a double pain for my mother: I don’t return to Lviv and therefore I don’t contribute to the development of the country, nor do I stay with her in Italy (Alina, 27, 1.5 generation, London).

Alina has her future clearly in mind. The effects of differential treatment practices or perceived racist incidents in everyday life became an unbearable burden in Italy. The perceived social climate of exclusion becomes so heavy that it becomes the main driver of a new phase of mobility. Nevertheless, in moving forward in her

decision-making and effectively becoming a planner and developing a life abroad, holding Italian citizenship could be an asset, as 25-year-old Albanian-origin Mihaela points out in her interview in Turin:

I often think about what my future will be like after I graduate. I would like to go to Canada, to Montreal. There are opportunities for my film studies there... I will do it as soon as I get Italian citizenship. Unfortunately, I was already of age when my mother obtained it and she couldn't automatically transmit it to me. But I've been working for four years in a tourist agency and I've always lived in Italy and I applied last year. There shouldn't be any problems. Without Italian citizenship it would be more difficult, I think. We know that, as Albanians, we are known because we are migrants in Italy. But who knows our writers or our musicians...?

The interview extract above underlines the importance of Italian citizenship compared to the citizenship of some other countries in facilitating international mobility paths – obviously due to the principle of free movement within the European Union (a right shared with the citizens of all the states which are party to the treaties) but also because, in some parts of the world, one enjoys the symbolic status of a ‘friendly nation’ (Della Puppa and Sredanovic 2016; Finotelli, La Barbera and Echeverría 2017). The next quote is from Agon (Albanian, 29, second generation, Turin):

I would like to leave. If they would do me this huge favour and give me citizenship, I would disappear from here. I swear, with all the love I have for this country and this city, I can't stand Italy any more, I can't stand it. I don't really know where I would like to go, anywhere where they consider me a little more. I'm looking for a place where I can at least exploit what I've studied for... but in Italy there are no prospects. I went around a bit, to evaluate the different possibilities, and I decided that I would like to go to Holland. I don't like France, even though it gives a lot of social support, but I really liked Holland. It's a country full of foreigners, it has a very good social system, there's a very good level of integration and they haven't suffered from the crisis like elsewhere. There is also a relative of my father's there... I wouldn't go to him, because I prefer to depend on myself, but having a connection always helps, it's important to have someone who gives you a hand at the beginning.

However, as mentioned above, next to those who, like Alina, choose to ‘go abroad forever’, there are those who give Italy a second chance, like Benko (25, 1.5 generation) interviewed in Turin:

As soon as we became Italian, i.e. when my brother and I received our citizenship, we started to organise our move to Hamburg. (...) It's not about escaping Italy, but about ‘getting some oxygen’. Italy is not a country for young people, as they say. However, it is not a country for young people of foreign origin either. At least for the moment. My parents tell me it was like that for them too in the early 1990s, they suffered a lot. Then over time, the perception of Albanians changed. It will happen to us young people, too, I'm sure. That's why I don't want to leave forever. Italy is my country and it's here that I want to invest, with my own skills.

The interviewee, recalling how much the Albanian community has suffered in terms of stigmatisation in the recent past, recalls how for young people the choice to spend a period (working, but in some cases – although in a minority – also studying) abroad can be part of a coping strategy against negative stereotyping, by ‘passing themselves off as Italians’ (Romania 2004). The great challenge in this case is that professional skills built in another country, together with the removal from a daily condition of marginality, allows some interviewees to

build more 'solid' and well-accepted identity elements in the comparison with Italian society, detaching themselves at the same time from the most negative aspects of their parents' experience. This search for paths of upward social mobility, it must be said, often clashes with the rather closed and rigid reality of the Italian labour market.

The entry of immigrant-origin children into the world of work is often linked to a greater autonomy and sense of responsibility towards their parents than is the case for their peers of Italian origin. However, the main actors of the second generation are, at the same time, impacted by the changes and challenges affecting the condition of young people as such, regardless of their citizenship. It is therefore worth asking what, if any, peculiarities there are in their phase of transition to adulthood. Among them is the widespread feeling of being 'watched' by a society that does not fully trust them, especially when negative episodes involving migrants are reported in the media. Such an attitude is transversal – it does not matter whether or not you are an EU citizen, or if you were born in Italy or arrived there as a child.

Every now and then someone makes a joke in class saying that we are treated better because 'we are foreigners', so the teachers don't correct us and don't assess us like everyone else. Perhaps this is true when one has just arrived: I remember that, at the beginning, when the others were doing their essays, I would go outside to learn Italian. But after the first few months, the teacher told me that the time had come to do the essays and I started. The first few essays did not go well, but then I improved: my mother helped me a lot; she made me read two books a week and made me copy pages and pages. If she hadn't been there to help me I would have gone on the electrician's course, like my neighbour. (...) I want to do engineering like my father, but I don't know if I will work in Italy; here there are difficulties for Romanians, the Italians think we are all thieves. I try not to speak Romanian when I am around and sometimes I ask my mum to speak English (Helena, 20, 1.5 generation, Turin).

Young second-generation individuals enter adulthood more quickly than the average: the need to have a job and the desire to 'start a family' are both generally greater than for Italians, who tend to postpone the stages commonly considered to be a farewell to youth.

These aspects are not very present in the Italian debate (including the scientific debate) on second generations, which is mainly discussed with reference to students in compulsory schools and (more rarely) in tertiary education. In fact, this is a story that is still little understood. On the other hand, it is also true that the common imagination still seems to create an image of the children of immigration as eternal children or adolescents, and not university students, workers or those open to international working experiences. This does not detach the second generations from discussions on their family history, focusing on the problems and characteristics linked to the migration path.

However, they are first and foremost young people who are about to become adults at a time when there are very few clear prospects for their future. In this sense, they share with all their peers in Italy the fears about the possibility of finding a job appropriate to their education and goals; not merely the fear of not finding a job themselves.

We find an echo of these fears in the interviews with two Albanian-heritage university students, who lucidly portray how difficult and, at the same time, how strongly desired it is to build a future without giving up one's own multi-faceted identity. These words reflect a reality that is not uncommon in an Italian university today, far surpassing stereotypes and preconceived images.

They rarely ask me what job I want to do. Perhaps they assume that we children of immigrants have no ideas. I remember when we had to choose the university; someone was surprised at my choice to study law.

Then they used to tell me ‘Are you specialising in immigration law?’ (...) I have to deal with foreigners just because I have a foreign surname? When are we going to change? When will the way I’m looked at change? I was top of my class in my high school. No one made my origins clear to me, even if they were surprised at first. I don’t know if this is still the case in schools, but it’s like being surprised that foreigners are educated. (...) There is still a lot of ignorance around. I want to become a magistrate, because my grandfather was a magistrate in Albania and I have a deep respect for the law. (...) I know, you have to study a lot, but my parents support me and I am a very determined person (Elena, 25, Italian of Albanian origin, second generation, Turin).

I am studying business management and statistics and I am very satisfied. I would like to work in an international company, which is why I chose the English course. I think I will then specialise in Islamic finance. It’s a reality that fascinates me and has great potential here in Europe. When I say this, some people smile... and I know what they think: you are Muslim and it will be easy for you. Without waiting, I immediately say that the greatest scholars and those who deal with it in Europe are not Muslims. It’s as if to work at Ferrari you only have to be from Monza or Italian. The world has become borderless on certain issues and for us young people it is even more so. When we talk about the future with our friends, for us the borders are the world. A different perspective from that of our parents or teachers. And, it’s not just a question of unemployment, as some politicians say. My friends and I have known for a long time that the future will be in one or more countries. Why be surprised? (...) Someone tells me that I think this way because ‘I am used to it’, because I was born in Albania, I arrived in Italy, I lived in three different cities. It’s like saying that whoever is a migrant will be a migrant forever. Many young people leave Italy not only because they cannot find a job, but often because they are not valued, they are not recognised. All of them, Italians of foreign origin and Italians of Italian origin (Ylber, 24, Italian of Albanian origin, second generation, Turin).

In these quotes are many of the key themes of the debate on youth and immigration, sometimes based more on slogans than on actual arguments. Care must be taken to distinguish between perception and reality when talking about students’ preparation and skills (are we sure they are not up to the challenges they face?) or doubts about their reference values.

The labour market in the strict sense of the term also comes up against a society that, as mentioned above, has difficulty accepting a multicultural reality and, on the other hand, is confronted with rather fragile balances in terms of employment opportunities (often precarious or ‘off the books’) and professional growth (Hawthorne 2021). In this case, the main obstacle is being able to recognise that the sons and daughters of immigration are not called upon to replace their fathers and mothers; somatic features and names and surnames that reveal ‘difference’ multiply the obstacles in the search for employment, even for graduates from Italian institutions.

Of course, many companies, especially large ones, have for some time been pursuing employment policies of positive discrimination, but the daily dimension is often that of precarious jobs, of research limited to small craft businesses or the service sector with low added value, of attendance at associations and active employment policy services, which, in a period of generalised difficulty, are less and less able to provide effective responses.

We should bear in mind that it is not citizenship that often discriminates but, above all, social capital, age or gender, which are still sources of prejudice and discrimination. However, the combination of these elements with family background can create, in a scenario of general economic difficulty, a sort of ‘perfect storm’ that

stands between the children of immigration and the ‘decent work’ referred to in the scientific literature and the policy documents of the institutions.

Ethnic associationism: still a port where to dock

The role of the ethno-national community as a ‘buffer and cushion’, at the moment of arrival in the new destination is fundamental. Today, as yesterday, for Italians abroad, associations represent a crucial actor in the relationship that is built up with the host society and its citizenship. There are different forms of aggregation, but all are characterised by the same objectives: material assistance, defence of rights, personal growth and, as far as religious associations are concerned, support in paths of faith and devotion. The difficulties are also shared: in relations with citizens, public services and local administrations and in the search for places of trust where information can be obtained. As several interview narratives testify (almost all of those who already live abroad), interacting with ethnic associations or national-based communities in a new context means receiving advice and useful information.³ Indeed, for example, Irina, a Moldovan girl working in London after 15 years spent in Italy, stressed advice she was given on being careful towards the quality of interactions: ‘Be careful not to confuse staying with integration... “All that glitters is not gold”’.

Furthermore, Lulzim, an Albanian man, underlined how useful was the possibility to meet other Albanians in Berlin for a better understanding of how to navigate the new socio-cultural context, mentioning that:

In any case, it was preferable for me to start again in another country than to continue to feel out of place in Italy, a country where I arrived when I was 16 and which, after 12 years, still made me feel foreign (Lulzim, 28, Albanian, 1.5 generation, Berlin).

Although ethnic associations are an important point of reference for compatriots, even in the world populated by e-communities, blogs and websites, they are themselves called upon to change in order to meet the needs of intra-EU youth mobility. There has been an evolution in the characteristics of ethnic-association leaders: alongside the ‘historical’ leaders of first- or second-generation associations, whose skills had been forged in the field and with the help of a social network typical of the new contexts of life (German, English, Belgian, French), there are younger protagonists with skills learned in more institutional training environments. A lively network of associations, including religious ones, is a key element in supporting the integration of foreign workers.

Energies are invested to build partnership relations, to conquer spaces of credibility and recognition: in other words, to become reliable interlocutors, expressing the desire to participate in intercultural policies in the neighbourhood, town or city (Marzana, Damia and Alfieri 2019). The aim is then recognisable, not so much – as during the migrations in the 1950s and 1960s – in the recognition of one’s own specificities, but rather in the right to diversity and the promotion of intercultural policies, in which cultural difference is one of the elements of the town or city’s social fabric and not a factor of conflict.

Lastly, but of increasing importance, online engagement is sought after, but alongside it comes the need for authentic, concrete relationships that go beyond friends on social networks. Young people, as several researches remind us, demand authentic relationships and coherence with the adults they meet: there is a greater appreciation and ability in front of which adults are called on to demonstrate concrete actions.

The issue that arises at the end of these considerations is the social commitment of young people who make geographical mobility their identifying feature. How can we ensure that the energies generously deployed have an effect on social relations and in terms of active citizenship? What is essential here is a dialogue between the institutions governing an area and all the cultural agencies operating there, whether or not they are dedicated

and exclusive to young people, but also more broadly. At the same time, attention must be paid to the so-called private social sector, which is able to put forward innovative proposals, in which bottom-up involvement and procedures become the key to action and definition of participatory processes, especially where these concern the young population.

Closing remarks

It is increasingly clear that the immigrant label can describe very heterogeneous biographical paths: stories of departures and arrivals, of different and complex legal conditions, characterised by multiple (invisible) barriers to the full exercise of social, civil and political rights.

The intra-European mobility of youth with a migratory background is just one of these potential stories. As the consequences of the post-2008 economic downturn affected, to significantly different extents, European labour markets, the intra-EU mobility landscape was reshaped by a decrease and a re-orientation of East–West flows and the re-occurrence of significant labour flows along the South–North axis. As a result, some of the main receivers of both EU and third-country nationals in the first 20 years of the 2000s turned back into net emigration countries, testifying to a significant dynamism of intra-EU mobility in response to political and economic changes. Italy, along with other Southern European countries, was among the main countries sending intra-EU youth outflows. And among those who departed in the last 10 years, there were youth, both Italians or still foreigners, with a family-migratory background. Discussing migrant children/youth mobility means considering their various paths, motivations and opportunities. These unfold differently depending on individual factors such as age, level of education, social class and characteristics of the family, migratory background, previous experience of mobility and the ability to rely on family members or friends abroad (Balduzzi and Rosina 2011; Della Puppa 2018; Rosina 2012).

The context also matters: the city of residence and its employment opportunities both intervene in defining mobility plans as well as the opportunity to collect information on potential countries of destination and their labour markets and welfare systems. Generally, the flexibility of the labour market, successive school reforms, public devaluation of the national education system, profound changes in local economies and the social fabric of urban contexts are some of the transformations that characterise the daily-life context of all the young people living in Italy, both nationals and foreigners (Bell and Blanchflower 2012; European Commission 2010; ILO 2013). Alongside these structural changes, the most important contextual change, which pushes young people to leave the country, is the long-standing economic crisis. As a consequence, looking for better job opportunities consistently appears as the main reason for leaving Italy (Centra and Gualtieri 2014); an experience, to measure oneself, to move to countries more open to diversity (of sexual orientation, skin colour, religion) or where policies addressing youth and supporting the transition to adulthood (e.g. post-graduate training, reconciling family and work, support during periods of unemployment, etc.) are more developed.

The children of immigrants share the same motivations as their native-Italian peers. Furthermore, other reasons can intertwine in their decision to leave the country. Stereotypes and discriminatory practices, which still continue to affect them without any consideration for their educational paths, their diplomas or Italian language and cultural proficiency, looking only at their skin colour, supposed country of origin according to somatic traits, visible religious (i.e. Muslim) signs and their accent. Furthermore, there are parents' dreams of success: as Gans (2009) pointed out, immigrant parents pour their dreams of socio-economic redemption in the country of immigration onto their children, even at the cost of asking them to leave the country.

Moreover, when trying to cope with these expectations and reasons, having Italian citizenship can be a strong point, which helps to react to the crisis situation (albeit in a limited way), especially by allowing greater resistance to discriminatory practices, both in the workplace and in the attitude with which one

approaches the quest for a job, whether as an employee or self-employed. Moreover, citizenship plays an important role in at least two aspects: the search for work in the public administration and international mobility.

As far as public-sector job competitions are concerned, they used to be reserved for Italian citizens, whereas today this barrier has partly fallen.⁴ The reason for this is that EU citizens – especially Romanian citizens in the Italian situation – are treated in the same way as Italians for all intents and purposes when it comes to taking part in selections in the civil service, but above all because of a European law that opens up access to the public administration for those tasks that do not require the exercise of the role of civil servant. Case law has also consolidated the principle of opening up competitions to non-Italian citizens; however, the large decrease in recruitment by the public administration in recent years has weakened the potential effect of this principle.

Considering the role of citizenship from a different perspective, acquiring Italian citizenship is a ‘free pass’ to move very easily not only in the EU but also in the North American context. A second migration – after that of their own family from their country of origin – thus takes place as a response to the recession; in a rather different context, however, and trying to exploit the training and socialisation pathway achieved in Italy. This migration project, it should be remembered, could also be conceived as temporary. In other words, a strategy to improve the experiences and characteristics of one’s curriculum, thus becoming more attractive to employers, including Italian ones.

Staying in Italy and trying to find their own way or leaving the country: these are the options. In the first case, trying to get a better job than one’s parents, or alternatively accepting (so to speak) a logic of ethnic segregation, which leads to unqualified jobs or, especially as far as entrepreneurial choice is concerned, to the chains of an ‘ethnic’ economy where employers and employees share the same nationality. In the second case trying to reach economies – and therefore job opportunities – stronger than the Italian one. Among the young children of European immigration, there is no evidence of a definitive move to the country of origin of their parents, as has been noted among the children of Maghrebi or Egyptian immigrants (Ricucci 2017).

The future of the second generation is weighed down by the difficulties of the first generation, of those fathers and mothers who still struggle to have their paths of inclusion recognised. The general imagination and the attitude of the media, which is incapable of objectively grasping the wealth of stories and potential, but also the hardships and problems that accompany the adult development of the children of immigration, also weigh heavily. The profound feeling of ‘not feeling at home’ may lead to new migration projects towards destinations deemed more favourable to young people and where there is a more positively expressed cultural diversity. Further investigation could confirm whether this is a broader Southern European syndrome or an issue that is particularly relevant in Italy, where anti-immigrant sentiment is growing and where migratory polycentrism (i.e. the cohabitation of numerous backgrounds and the presence of at least 15 significant communities in terms of numbers, according to Istat 2021) constitute specificities. The departure of young people (including those who have a migratory background) in all Southern European countries is a loss for the economy and for the socio-cultural vitality in general of its societies (Bartolini, Gropas and Triandafyllidou 2017; Mas Giralt 2016; Ricucci 2017). This is especially the case in Italy, a country among all those bordering the Mediterranean that, in fact, has in immigration and in immigrant families, an ‘energy potential’ to face a major demographic crisis of an ageing and shrinking population.

Notes

1. Immigration countries – and European countries in particular – have adopted different policies for immigrants which, since the 1990s, have demonstrated various limitations and failures, clashing with


their inability to respond to the needs of a population that is heterogeneous in background and increasingly interested in becoming an active part of society, while retaining their own specificities. From a theoretical standpoint, they can be placed on a continuum from assimilation leading to differentiated integration to segmented assimilation or differential precarity or exclusion (Foner and Simon 2015; Joppke and Morawska 2014), all sharing the fact that they have failed in the task of integrating considerable numbers of immigrants. The question remains as to the legacy of so-called national integration models. Some trace can be found in civic integration programmes, that is, in the procedures – both selective and formative (of the good citizen) – for verifying requirements such as the migrants' knowledge of the host-country language and civic culture if they wish to obtain or renew a residence permit or to access welfare measures. Thus, there has been a growing tendency over the years, on the one hand, to select entry policies aimed at delineating as much as possible the profile of desired immigrants (usually skilled) and already proficient in the language and culture of the new living context. On the other, there is an orientation towards training the newly arrived foreign citizen, through pre-defined and obligatory paths; the case, for example, of the Integration Agreement in force in the Italian context. A tendency towards a neo-assimilationist approach clearly emerges (Garcés-Masareñas and Penninx 2015). The profound transformations of immigration as a structural component of the various European countries yield plural scenarios, in which the heterogeneity of insertion paths, the degree of social, labour and cultural inclusion and the experiences of participation and civic protagonism of the second and third generations reinforce the usefulness of turning our gaze to the dynamics of inclusion that unfold at the local level, leaving in the background the complex (and unsolved) debate on integration, which should always be defined by context, group of migrants considered, legal status and cultural characteristics: all intervening facts in relational dynamics and inclusion in every sphere of society (Caponio, Scholten and Zapata-Barrero 2020; Ricucci 2021).

2. To date, the children of immigrants in Italy can obtain Italian citizenship in the following ways: 1) if their parents (or one of them) become Italian (according to the *jus sanguinis* principle); 2) if they are born in Italy and live there till they reach 18 years of age (they are no longer required to demonstrate a continuous and uninterrupted stay, even for vacations, in Italy), they can apply till they reach the age of 19 for Italian citizenship (only apply, there is no automatic positive answer). For further details see Dusi and Gonzalez-Falcon (2021).
3. All the participants mentioned that they know well the communities of expats from Italy and to use them also, especially for tips and advice on the daily-life in other countries. For the participants in this research who are graduates and already inserted abroad in the labour market, these online resources appear equally important as those managed by their own ethnic or religious groups.
4. Due to recent changes (2013) in the procedures for being hired in the public administration, it is mandatory to be Italian or to fulfill one of the following criteria: have an EU long-term residence permit (a former residence card); have a residence permit for political asylum; have a residence permit for subsidiary protection; have an EU residence card as a non-EU family member of an EU citizen.

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No conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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