

Job integration of highly-skilled Romanian migrants in Italy

Introduction

In classical economics, migrations for work purposes are interpreted as a response to existing imbalances in wage levels among the different countries. Nevertheless, the causes of migration cannot be ascribed exclusively to economic factors (and in particular to wages and income). Indeed, while these factors are decisive in the processes that give rise to international migrations, the migratory flows of each country are also certainly influenced by specific conditions or changes in the local economy, as well as by the history of each nation (see, for example, Kazlauskienė & Rinkevičius, 2006). The causes of migration may therefore differ from one country to another, particularly in the case of the migration of highly-skilled workers.

For instance, according to Horvat (2004), the causes of highly skilled migrations from the South-East European countries are closely linked to the current social and political climate prevailing in these nations where, on occasions, an oligarchic social order has been set up which tends to expel the more highly qualified citizens, who are considered an “undesirable” elite. This situation can have severe consequences for the transition that these nations must undergo during the process of their admission to the European Union. The quality of this transition is indeed jeopardized by the fact that these migrations amount to an undeniable “brain drain”, as they comprise the “best and brightest” national human capital, although other examples indicate that this process has not yet become irreversible.

In such a framework, it is particularly important to consider the situation regarding the migration to Italy of skilled workers from Romania. At present there are very strong flows of Romanian workers, who today make up the largest immigrant community in Italy, accompanied by the delocation of small and medium entrepreneurs towards Romania (Ricci, 2006). These flows benefit both Italy’s commercial interests and Romania’s need for development, which seems to confirm the thesis that immigration is an opportunity. The situation also seems to confirm Massey’s (1998) “migration network theory”, according to which the nations from which emigration is strongest towards a given country are those in which a more substantial presence of capital from that country may be observed. However, a further incentive for Romanian migration towards Italy is certainly represented by the cultural affinity between the two countries (Ricci, 2006): this same factor, moreover, in recent years has been instrumental in making Spain the second ranking country regarding influx of Romanian immigrants (UNFAP, 2007), even though there is no evidence of any particular interest by the Spanish entrepreneurial world for investment in Romania.

According to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA, 2007), in 2006 some 2 million Romanians were working or temporarily resident abroad on regular permits, about 50% of them in Italy. Romania’s entry into the “Schengen treaty area” of the European Union in January 2007 inevitably led to an increased outflow.

A vast majority of Romanian immigrants (77%) were in possession of a higher education certificate and 9% of a university diploma (Sandu, 2006). Migrations from Romania may indubitably be ranked as a medium-high skilled migratory flow. It nevertheless remains to be verified whether this flow is sustainable for the country of origin. This situation is of particular concern as far as medical and paramedical personnel is concerned (Galan, 2007): on the one hand, this personnel is currently

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numerically below the European average and on the other, surveys carried out by the Medical Association and the principal trade union operating in the Romanian health sector indicate that, after the recognition of the legal value of the degree in medicine throughout the European Union, somewhere between 54% and 65% of Romanian doctors have expressed their intention to move abroad in the near future. The root causes of this decision are the low salaries paid in that country, the lack of suitable equipment and of economic resources available to the health service and the absence of a satisfactory career structure. The situation is even worse in the case of paramedical personnel, for whom the legal value in the European Union of their nursing diploma had been recognized even prior to Romania's admission to the "Schengen Area". Also the immigration of Pharmacy graduates is a frequent occurrence. This would seem to indicate that the Romanian health service will find itself in an unsustainable position, particularly in country areas where the situation is already highly critical.

Also the results of a survey carried out using an on-line questionnaire among Romanian information and computer science specialists and scientists having immigrated (Ferro, 2004) show that the principal pull factors operating in the host countries for these particular immigrants are better career prospects and quality of life, as well as the migration policy applied by the host country to more highly qualified persons, while the main push factor is a gloomy view of the situation at home due to corruption and poor job and career prospects. Therefore the intentions that these immigrants have of returning seem to be more emotional than material as the majority concur that their living and working conditions abroad are much better than those they could expect in their own country.

However, it is not even certain that migration is ultimately an advantage for the individual migrant. A survey run on Romanian immigrants in Spain (Cucuruzan, 2006) shows that they consist of a majority of women with a medium to high educational level, without any specific employment experience in their own country, who choose to stay for lengthy periods even though they consider they will ultimately return home, who are employed legally and are reasonably satisfied with their wages and standard of living. Nevertheless they are often employed at a level far below their qualifications and only rarely in the higher segment of the job market (informatics, financial services, etc.) and much more frequently in relatively unskilled jobs, in agriculture, the hotel industry or assistance to families.

Also the elite segment analysed by Ferro (2004) is constantly at risk of finding itself in a difficult situation, also because these very highly qualified migrants, unless they succeed in obtaining permanent residence, find themselves in a position of contractual weakness as they are completely dependent for the renewal of their stay permit on the certification provided by their employer.

Taking these studies into account, it thus seemed worth while verifying the outcomes of skilled Romanian migration in Italy and the effective correspondence between this phenomenon and the "migration as an opportunity" model, also because previous surveys conducted on foreign residents in Rome in possession of a high level educational qualification (Brandi, 2001) as well as on highly qualified Maghreb immigrants in Italy (Brandi, 2006) revealed that, only too often, these migrations ultimately led to underemployment and therefore to a "brain waste". For this reason, within the framework of the National Research Council project launched in 2008 on the subject of "Job insertion of skilled immigrants from the Eastern European countries in the province of Rome" it was decided to use immigrants arriving from Romania as the starting point for the research.

A few preliminary results

An early phase of this study consisted in the preparation of a questionnaire and of thirty interviews administered to privileged witnesses. These consisted of highly qualified Romanian immigrants, all graduates, long resident in Rome, who had already had a large number of job experiences, whose names had been signaled by organizations active in the field of assistance to immigrants as persons highly familiar with the working situation regarding their fellow citizens.

It emerged from our interviews that highly qualified Romanian immigrants may be subdivided into three groups: a minority that has succeeded in finding a job corresponding to their qualifications, another group that has succeeded in obtaining, usually at the cost of huge efforts and after many years, a satisfactory position although in a sector that is different from the one for which their qualifications would be required and a majority that has instead been trapped in a situation of underemployment which it has accepted as a means for beginning a migratory itinerary in this country or as a temporary situation to allow them to solve their economic problems in view of a possible return to their country.

However, our respondents' declarations pointed to a number of general characteristics that are independent of the outcome of the migration.

In the first instance it is clear that the push factors for this particular migration flow are definitely more important than the pull factors. In practically all cases the process actually stems from an unsustainable economic situation in the country of origin due to the mechanisms triggered by economic changes produced by political changes. For instance, this may result in the loss of jobs due to the privatization of public enterprises and their entry into the market, the loss of purchasing power of service industry employees and a declining school population, which has led to a reduction in the number of teachers. In other cases, the critical economic situation gives rise to tensions in the family, resulting in a separation and in the decision to leave the country and make a new life for oneself elsewhere.

Another unifying factor is represented also by the pull factors: the majority of highly skilled Romanian migrants seem to have chosen Italy as their country of destination as many of their parents and friends already live there, from whom they can usually obtain essential help in the early stages of their move. This often leads to the onset of "chain migration" involving the moving to Italy of entire extended families of the Romanian middle class. It is also interesting to note that, in these families, the outcome of migration may be quite different as regards employment success while in any case the presence in Italy of family members and friends stabilizes the move even when a satisfactory job situation cannot be found.

Many of the causes of dissatisfaction and failure plaguing skilled Romanian migration are the same as those of which other migrants complain (see, for example, Brandi, 2001; Brandi 2006): red tape involved in obtaining visas and work permits, failure to get qualifications recognized, lack of confidence of Italian employers in skills acquired in a country deemed to be less developed. However, there was no universal agreement among our witnesses concerning explicitly xenophobic attitudes concerning Romanian immigration, although many believe these attitudes are relatively widespread.

By way of a test, the thirty respondents were also asked to fill in the questionnaire, which will be used in a subsequent survey. The results are set out in Tab. 1.

Obviously such a small sample cannot be used to draw conclusions that may be considered valid for the whole population. However, it is interesting to note that, regarding many questionnaire items, the respondents' responses were subject to very low scattering, much lower than would be expected from the natural "vagaries of sampling". It is widely known that, when such a situation arises, it is generally due to the fact that the population from which the sample is drawn has a distribution that is strongly clustered around its mean values, so that even a small sample faithfully reflects the general situation (see for instance Cochran, 1997). We shall therefore briefly comment on these results which must, however be considered only preliminary, as they probably reflect the real situation regarding skilled Romanian immigration in Italy.

For instance, 96% of respondents attended university in Romania: therefore, skilled Romanian immigration in Italy does not use university studies as a canal through which to prepare its move to this country²; moreover, it is a known fact that Italy has a very low percentage of foreign university studies compared with the other OECD countries.

² As is instead very frequent in skilled migrations towards the USA or Australia

Moreover, a vast majority (74.1%) learned Italian only after their arrival in Italy and 81.5% learned the language by themselves, without attending schools or courses organized for migrants: this shows that the problem of the language is a much less dramatic issue for Romanian migration than it is for that from the Maghreb (see, for instance, Brandi, 2006). Linguistic affinity is actually a power factor that can facilitate migration flows, as was previously the case for Italian migration towards Latin America.

In our sample, 64% had trouble getting a work permit and 63.6% encountered difficulties in having their foreign degree recognized: it is obviously still too early for Romania's admission to the "Schengen Area" to have produced an appreciable effect.

Some 93.6% of the respondents confirmed that some diploma holders and graduates were employed in jobs in which the knowledge they possessed due to their education was not exploited and 70.8% declared that this underemployment was not limited in time and did not relate only to the first few years in the new country. It therefore did not consist of an orientation period after which, in most cases, the worker found a job suited to his or her skills. Moreover, the responses given by 82.6% of interviewees showed that an underqualified job is more likely to be accepted by someone who plans to return to the home country after a limited stay in Italy. Lastly, the great majority (82.1%) declared their fellow citizens were offered only certain kinds of jobs regardless of their qualifications and that there is no offer of skilled jobs for immigrants in Italy.

Conclusions

Highly qualified migrations from Romania towards Italy might present a significant resource both for the country of origin and the host country. They might actually act as a driving force to counteract the intellectual unemployment caused by the ongoing economic changes affecting Romania and provide job opportunities in a country that is culturally and geographically quite similar to the mother country, affording these migrants earnings that might allow them to return home in economic conditions such as to allow them to blend into the new context likely to develop there. Moreover, the presence of a strong migrant elite inside the principal foreign community resident in Italy could have a strong function of cultural mediation and facilitate the processes of integration.

The studies and preliminary results presented herein nevertheless show that the situation is liable to evolve in a completely different direction. On the one hand, the process of transforming the Romanian economy is not producing the hoped-for results, and for many years has plunged the country into a situation of crisis in which the migration flows generated are too powerful and could lead to an unsustainable shortage of qualified human resources; on the other hand, Italy has often shown that it is incapable of making a profitable use of the "brain gain" produced by immigration, and has often relegated even highly qualified migrant personnel to a situation of underemployment instead of making good use of their potential.

Should this situation be prolonged in time, the qualifications possessed by the migrants at the time of their move could rapidly become obsolete and the process might end in a "brain waste" for both Romania and Italy.

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