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The Impact of Migration on National Identity and Citizenship in Italy

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Abstract

This study examines the complex relationship between migration, national identity, and citizenship in Italy, focusing on past and present migration patterns. Migration is defined as the movement of people influenced by various economic, social, and environmental factors, leading to voluntary or involuntary relocation. National identity is described as a socially constructed concept shaped by individual experiences and cultural affiliations. Citizenship, as the legal embodiment of nationality, encompasses rights and obligations that significantly affect migrants' integration into society. This research traces Italy's migration history, highlighting waves of emigration in the late 19th century and subsequent inflows of immigrants from Africa, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East following World War II. The study discusses current migration trends, particularly the challenges faced by migrants in accessing education, employment, healthcare, and housing, amidst evolving citizenship laws. The research employs quantitative methods to analyze secondary data on migrant demographics and integration outcomes, assessing how legal status influences socioeconomic integration. The findings indicate that while Italy has traditionally been a country of emigration, it has increasingly become a destination for diverse migrant populations. Stricter citizenship policies and integration measures reflect ongoing tensions between preserving national identity and accommodating new residents. This study underscores the need for comprehensive integration strategies to foster social cohesion and address the barriers faced by migrants in contemporary Italy.

Keywords: Migration, National Identity, Citizenship, Italy

1. Introduction

Migration is a broad term used to label "the movement of people from their usual place of residence to a new place of residence" (IOM, 2024). People migrate in different means of

transportation (mainly by plane, train—public transport, and boat and truck, which are often illegal), with modes varying depending on people's legal status and geographic location. It is fair to say that most migration definitions are temporally and spatially bounded (Skeldon, 2017). They are not broad enough to incorporate the various types of migration (Tsegay, 2023). Furthermore, migration can occur either voluntarily or involuntarily (with different mechanical terms used for each) and is driven by different push and pull factors - which include but are not limited to economic, environmental, and social motivations. For example, one person may decide to migrate to Italy for its developing industrial sectors, while other people may migrate for family reunion. In more detail, detailed subcategories in immigration include "migrants, immigrants, asylum seekers, and refugees, each with their own legal definitions and consequences." (Zimmerman, 2019). In short, one definition encapsulated in one sentence is unable to grasp all of the implications that the term "migration" encompasses—especially when migration has become overwhelmingly complex, in real life.

National identity is described as "a set of cognitions and emotions which express an individual's relationship with a nation." National identity is, therefore, understood to be subjective and voluntary and is a form of documentation that individuals choose to represent themselves or to forge ties from -we choose national identity based on our past and present experiences with a nation. It can also be viewed in the perspective of "national identity is not given; it is socially constructed through shared experiences, symbols and narratives" (Mandler, 2006). Individuals adopt a range of national identity levels based on combinations of experiences they share with the nation (e.g. cultural experiences, sense of belonging, ...etc) with most nationals operating at some level of strong national identity in comparison to other foreigners who have only settled in the country. This indicates that national identity is fluid (Fenton, 2011) and evolves, particularly in the context of globalization or migration.

Citizenship is defined as the legal rights and obligations of an individual associated with nationality under the domestic law, meaning a legal identity, which is bestowed and earned by the governments of the nation. Normally, a legal citizen has legal obligations, such as legal obedience to laws, legal payment of taxes, and legal participation (like voting) in societal processes, while also taking advantage of their civil rights (for example, your rights to privacy and freedom of expression), political rights, economic and social rights (like access to public services such hospitals), and cultural rights (the rights to preserve your cultural heritage or to take part in a national cultural event). With legal status, an individual's residency in a state is also legal, meaning the state cannot refuse them entry or evict them (The Migration Observatory, 2011). Of course, to be able to claim these important rights of being protected by the nation, the individual also has to meet certain requirements to be legally eligible, and may also obtain certain advantages from the country, such as voting rights or financial advantages. For example, some states may require individuals to live in the country for more than 5 years and have a stable job income in 2 years. Facing increasing globalization and migration, citizenship acts as a great unifying and homogenizing force in itself, as creating a unified civilization (Marshall, 1992). Since citizenship is a clear and strict determinant of one’s status in the nation, those who earn citizenship often unite as a community.

The escalating rate of immigration emphasizes the connection between migration, national identity, and citizenship. Immigration, whether temporary or permanent, "entails departure from one domain, in which one's identity has been enacted and sustained, and arrival in a new domain in which one's identity must be resituated and sometimes redefined" (Deaux, 2000, p. 429), making huge contributions to the national culture and legal framework. With reference to national identity, "even with global migration processes, the national identity of a country hardly changes at all" (Rojas, 2022). Their explanations were as follows. First, temporary immigrants (manual workers, refugees, etc.) typically do not have a national identity present in enough vigor to cause an influence in the nation they are migrating to. Most leave it,

under a sense of anger, dissatisfaction, or fear, and with their temporary length of stay, they find it difficult to contribute to the receiving nation's well-established culture. Secondly, by engaging with the traditions and lifestyles of their new country, many immigrants expand their ability to contribute socially and economically, building networks and creating opportunities in the process. In doing so, they often neglect or forget their original identity, quickly adopting a new national identity. However, in the distant future, phenomena such as "replacement migration" could occur. This happens when the number of natives in a country is outweighed by a growing immigrant population, leading to a gradual erosion of the original national identity due to demographic shifts.

Likewise, citizenship policies are changed significantly to respond to global migration processes. However, this doesn't mean that citizenship is a simply neutral set of rights and duties; citizenship is shaped by constructions of nation-statehood. To fit these constructions, many states have established stricter laws with higher thresholds for foreigners to integrate into a country's national identity. The intention behind these policies is that they only permit suitable immigrants to achieve citizenship-those with a certain skill set, and who seem capable of an appropriate level of integration. Because of this, the criteria for citizenship can differ widely based on a country's labor market needs and the group of immigrants (low-skilled labor, for instance). Conversely, the potential provision of new citizenship tends to affect the rights of native citizens hugely. This can be particularly apparent in the case of refugees, who usually have the most representative share of the population of immigrants, that are housed, for example, in poor accommodation and completely reliant on a subsistence existence. Those subjects that are accommodated under these conditions may resort to criminal behaviors (notably theft or robbery) otherwise totally alien to them, if only to survive daily. These behaviors, while clearly determined by impoverished conditions, incite even greater and generalized fears amongst natives, and questions about their own safety.

2. Migration Patterns, Citizenship, and National identity in Italy

2.1. Migration patterns before the 20th century

Despite the unification of Italy in 1861, the nation struggled with serious and persistent economic issues in agriculture and in manufacturing. Those troubles placed the greatest strains on rural populations, causing their incomes to decline steeply and triggering Italy's first substantial wave of emigration (Migration Policy Institute, 2017). Approximately 17 million Italians emigrated between 1875 and 1928. Significant proportions of the Italian emigrants from Northern Italy tended to travel to neighboring European nations, while the emigration from the poorer regions of Southern Italy tended toward transoceanic emigration: approximately 5 million to the United States, 2.4 million to Argentina and 1.4 million to Brazil.

Southern Italy's economic problems were especially severe. Old-fashioned farming practices, foreign competition, and a shrinking agricultural base that now offered few jobs left many people in poverty. Natural catastrophes and diseases to farms such as grape phylloxera and silkworm epidemics only added to the decimation of traditional livelihoods. Thus, many Italians saw better opportunities elsewhere. The U.S. was especially appealing, offering many unskilled, manual labor jobs in the industries of building railroads and mining operations, or constructing skyscrapers. The vast majority of Italians who migrated to the U.S. were looking for work in some form of manual work; over 90% of Italians were employed in manual labor in the U.S., contributing enormously to the industrial development of the U.S. Italian work organizations, such as the International Brotherhood, supported workers in organizing their associations for fair pay and safer working conditions.

Argentina and Brazil also attracted Italian immigrants, especially in agricultural jobs such as coffee plantations and cattle ranching. Many of these immigrants were encouraged by the prospect of bettering their skills and earning better wages. In total, more than 14 million of

the Italians left to find economic opportunities (Florio 2021). Given that the Italian population at the time varied between 28.4 to 37.5 million, this wave of migration represented nearly 47% of the country.

While certain migrants aimed to return home eventually—many were seasonal workers, after all—there was a considerable impact emigration nonetheless. Emigrants included artisans—knife grinders, tilers, street performers (e.g., acrobats and organ grinders), small traders (e.g., peanut and ice cream vendors), as well as political radicals (e.g., anarchists, revolutionaries) (International Organization for Migration, 2011). All were drawn abroad by the prospects of work and a better life.

Table 1. Emigration and Migration rate reported in Italy period 1861-1985

Years	France	Germany	Switzerland	USA/Canada	Argentina	Brazil	Australia	Other countries	Total
1861-1900	1.268.000	465.000	430.000	797.000	844.000	832.000	5.490	1.048.000	5.689.490
1901-1940	2.987.000	895.390	1.503.000	4.664.000	1.774.000	519.000	54.970	1.477.000	13.874.360
1946-1985	2.076.000	2.098.155	2.671.000	740.500	324.910	82.265	336.525	1.157.000	9.486.355
Total emigrants (1861-1985)	6.331.000	3.458.545	4.604.000	6.201.500	2.942.910	1.433.265	396.985	3.682.000	29.050.205
Returned to Italy	47%	30%	45%	12%	25%	11%	23%	67%	35%
Permanently established	53%	70%	55%	88%	74%	89%	77%	33%	65%

Source: Giorgia Di Muzio, 2012

With the implementation of immigration quotas allowing only 5,000 Italian immigrants to the United States per year, overall migration to the U.S. fell sharply in the early twentieth century. Italy's population during this period was between 28.4 million and 37.5 million which means it's estimated that emigrants comprised nearly 24-32 percent of the entire country (around 9 million immigrants during the period). However, it's important to remember that not all emigrants were intending to migrate permanently to the receiving country; most were seasonal workers. However, most emigrants took jobs as artisans, street vendors selling statuettes, knife grinders, tiling, artist street performers (mainly wanderers, acrobats and organ grinders), small traders (mainly food such as peanut sellers in the winter and ice cream sellers in the summer), and anarchists and revolutionaries (International Organization for Migration, 2011). These jobs offered more job security and better wages with the job opportunities.

2.2. Migration patterns after the 20th century

2.2.1. Significant migration waves from Africa, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East

At the close of World War II, Italy emerged as one of the most industrialized economies in Europe and from the late 1950s to through the 1960s experienced what has been termed an economic miracle. The industrial development in Italy led to a demand for low skilled labour which attracted considerable immigration flows that by the early 1990s, exceeded one million immigrants, mainly from Africa, Asia and Latin America. While net migration to Italy was close to balanced, the significant expansion in net migration soon took off as members of the European Union increased immigration movements (Bulgaria and Romania were accepted into the Schengen Area). The first wave of international immigrants to Italy featured women from the Philippines and Central America, Eritrea and Cape Verde who were employed as domestic workers. The initial wave while attractive immigrant employment for men was primarily in the Southern fishing industry, while established migrant labour like Tunisians, Senegalese and Moroccan men focused on seasonally as peddlers along the Italian coasts or as tomato pickers in regions of agriculture. In 1991 Italy faced its first wave of mass immigration with 50,000 Albanian refugees arriving after the fall of the Albanian government. Many Italians worried about safety and immigration impacts. However, since then, Albanians have remained one of the two largest immigrant groups in Italy. From 2003 to 2004 alone, they increased by 40%.

The Romanian community in Italy during this same period increased by 140%, becoming the largest group for three years running. Likewise, the Ukrainian population increased from 15,000 in 2003 to more than 117,000 in 2004, a remarkable increase of 700%.

2.2.2 Migration from Africa

Migration from Africa to Italy has continued as a significant and changing process shaped by a variety of factors. The most recent data show fluctuations in the number of migrants who arrived: in 2023, Italy had 155,754 migrants, up from 103,846 in 2022. These numbers demonstrate some continuity and change in the patterns of African migration to Italy.

After the migration crisis in 2014, when over 170,000 migrants stepped onto Italian soil (Laczko & Koser, 2017), the number of migrants arriving by sea started decreasing. This decrease has generally been attributed to the bilateral agreements that Italy entered into with countries like Libya and Tunisia, whereby Italy would provide assistance to enhance border enforcement and would provide financial assistance to discourage irregular migration (Laczko & Koser, 2017). Italy's partnership with Libyan authorities has especially focused on intercepting migrants before they reach Europe. Conversely, this collaboration has drawn criticism from human rights organizations for alleged human rights abuses in regard to the conditions in Libyan detention centers (The Guardian, 2024).

By 2024, arrivals by sea had decreased by 62.3% compared to the previous year, largely as a result of improved border control activities and anti-smuggling operations undertaken by the Libyan and Tunisian governments (Forbes, 2024). Although arrivals by sea decreased, asylum applications in Italy increased to reflect that fewer migrants were crossing the Mediterranean Sea, but many were still entering Italy through alternate paths or seeking asylum applications through the formal process (AP News, 2024). This shift and development reflects a different evolution of migration, including a worsening of conditions in countries of origin and altered transit paths.

A notable change has also been the demographic change in the countries of origin of African migrants. In the past, the majority of migrants, particularly Sub-Saharan Africans from countries such as Eritrea, Nigeria, and Ghana, were responsible for the largest proportion of migrant arrivals. However, there has been a major shift in arrival patterns in recent years, with an increasing share of arrivals from North African countries like Tunisia and Morocco, largely as a function of deteriorating situation in Libya, as well as political and economic instability in other North African countries (European Commission, 2018).

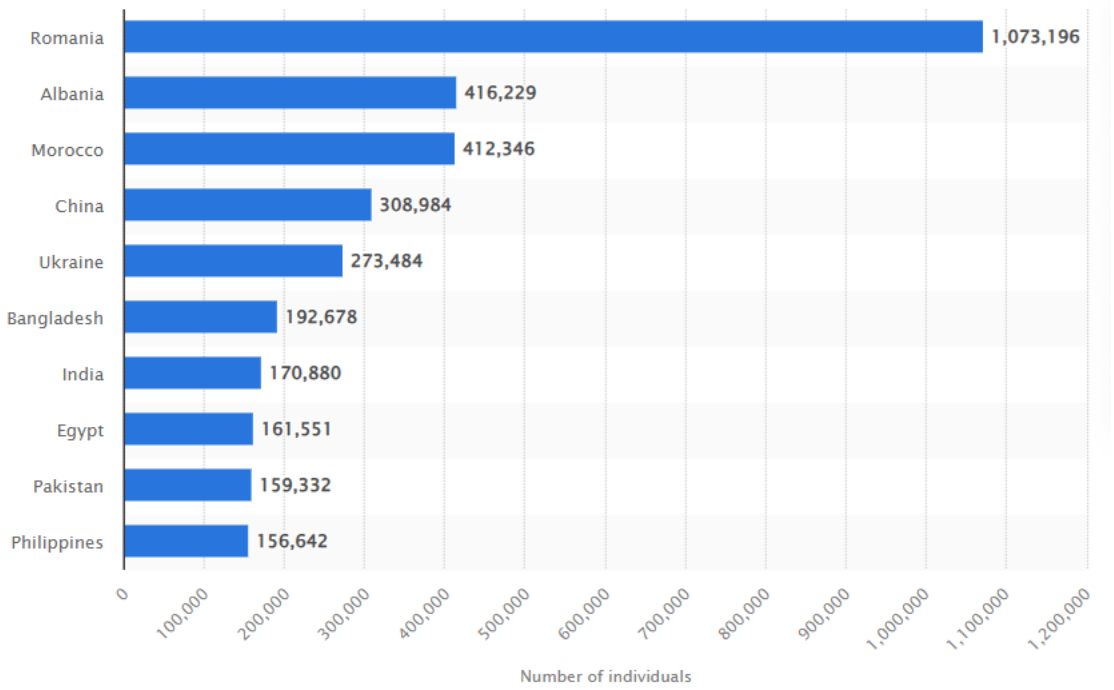
Italy has historically been a country of emigration but in the last decades has become a major immigration destination. As of 2024 approximately 9% of Italy’s population is now composed of non-EU immigrants (Lorenzo Macchi, Statista). This demographic change has spurred intense public debate over issues of national identity, membership, and social cohesion. The Italian government has been implementing and reinforcing a set of immigration laws to address the increasing number of asylum seekers and irregular migrants. Public opinion remains sharply polarized with a large portion of the population expressing concern over crime, social burden, and cultural divergence.

Migration flows occur for a number of reasons. Some of the most prominent push factors are armed conflict, political instability, poor economies, and environmental stressors. After many years of violence and authoritarian domination, some Sub-Saharan countries such as Eritrea and Sudan, have large populations of forced displaces (IOM, 2023). In addition, low unemployment, and/or economic mobility continue to push individuals to seek better economic possibilities (African Center for Strategic Studies, 2022). Environmental degradation from factors such as climate change, droughts, desertification, and resource scarcity has further propelled people to flee the region (IOM, 2023).

Africa to Italy migration is fueled by various pull factors that make Italy a favourite destination for African migrants. These include its relatively high GDP per capita around 270% of the globe average (African Center for Strategic Studies, 2022), with significant diaspora communities of Africans in major metropolitan destinations such as Rome, Milan and Turin, as well as its historical openness to migration. Diaspora communities create networks and economic prospects to help in the integration process. Italy is also close to North Africa and has maritime routes across the Mediterranean Sea, making it a significantly relevant entry point for migrants from nearer countries, for example Tunisia and Morocco (IOM, 2023).

The variables driving migration from African source countries to Italy include ongoing circumstances of political, economic and environmental crises in their countries of origin, and perceived opportunities existing in Italy. In terms of policy, Italy has made some advances in slowing sea arrival numbers, however it is positive potential for migration that remains a changing, multi-layered, and timely factor. Routes change, the demographics change, and there are inherently conversation around national policy and identity.

Figure 2. Foreign population in Italy as of 2024, by leading country of origin



Source: Statista

2.2.3 Migration from Eastern European

Migration from Eastern Europe to Italy has occurred in two significant phases, each shaped by political changes and policies at play in Europe. The first waves of migration occurred after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, as well as the collapse of communist governments across Eastern Europe. These events led to mass movements of people from Eastern Europe across to Western European countries, including Italy which had become a favorable destination given its geographic location and labor market demands. In turn, migrants during this phase were primarily absorbed into the construction, agricultural, and manufacturing sectors (particularly in the south of Italy) in which labor shortages existed.

The second wave came after the European Union opened its doors to new member states in 2004 and 2007. While migration in general became more common with this enlarged freedom of movement and opportunity to the labor market, including labor in Italy, new migrants from Eastern Europe took advantage of the new conditions. The accession of Romania in 2007 had the most important impact, notably resulting in a spike of Romanian migration to

Italy. by 2021, Romanians were the largest foreign-born group in Italian society with over one million people. Other countries such as Poland, Bulgaria and Moldova were also actively engaging in more mobility to emigrate to Italy during this second wave, as the new mobility conditions created an easier pathway to employment diversity. Either way, migrants took on necessary work roles in care work, farm work, and construction, commonly taking on low-paying jobs which were often labor-intensive and difficult for Italians to take on as local work.

Nonetheless, this upward trend has not continued in recent years. The impact of the global financial crisis in 2008 had lingering consequences on Italy's labor market resulting in high unemployment - particularly amongst young people - and discouraging Italy as a destination for economic migrants. At the same time, Eastern European migrants began shifting their migration toward other EU countries like Germany and the UK, where economic conditions and labor policies were preferred. Not to mention the implications of the 2016 Brexit referendum, which transformed preferences towards migration for Europe. Furthermore, the rise in anti-immigrant sentiment and the tightening of immigration rules, both in Italy and the EU, have reduced the inflow of Eastern European migrants. Together these developments signal a plateau, or even reversal, in terms of migration within new generational gaps, inspired by changing economic and political conditions in both sending and receiving countries.

2.2.4 Migration from the Middle East

By 2007, around 18 million people from the Middle East lived outside the region, of whom 7.4 million lived in the European Union, 7.1 million moved within the Middle East, and 3.3 million moved to other parts of the world. Southern Europe, particularly Italy and Spain, constituted a significant portion of the Middle Eastern migration from the late 1990s to the early 2000s, with Moroccan migration being conspicuous. Many migrants arrived irregularly, resulting from the need for low-wage labor. However, a growing share of Moroccan migrants ultimately gained legal residency in Italy and Spain. For example, between 1980 and 2004, the number of Moroccans living in Italy - and Spain - increased from approximately 20,000 to 65,000. The growth in the Moroccan community in Italy and Spain resulted in a tightening of the southern borders of both countries, irrespective of push factors; push factors led to the increased risk of migrant crossings across the Mediterranean in boats.

Migration dynamics between the Middle East and the EU have primarily been shaped by structural labor market complementarities. On one hand, as European countries were experiencing reduced birth rates and aging populations, they had to seek foreign labor as their need increased. On the other hand, Middle Eastern countries, which had high youth unemployment and limited job opportunities and job creation, had many workers in search of better prospects overseas. In Middle Eastern countries with political instability, armed conflict, and economic fragility, Europe offered relative economic stability, social welfare, and educational opportunities as strong pull factors.

While labor migration from the Middle East to Europe occurred as early as the 1960s, it increased significantly after the Arab Spring and then even further after the Syrian Civil War erupted in 2011. The Syrian Civil War, coupled with the rise of ISIS in the region in 2013, contributed to the largest refugee crisis in Europe since World War II. By the end of 2015, Syria became the largest producer of refugees in the world, with over 4.2 million Syrians seeking asylum abroad, over 6.5 million internally displaced persons, in addition to approximately 1.5 million undocumented migrants.

Nevertheless, in past years, the flow of Middle Eastern migrants into Italy has reduced. New policies restrict immigration, borders have been solidified and flow of migration diverted by several agreements made at a European level, such as the 2016 EU-Turkey deal. At the same time, other EU member states like Germany, Sweden and France have become relatively more enticing destinations due to better programmed welfare policies and acceptance of asylum applications. Weak socio-economic conditions in Italy; limited integration capacity, problems

of the mainstreaming of migrants and growing hostility to immigrants have made Italy a potentially less appealing destination. Additionally, the socio-economic situation in the Middle East - shifting power dynamics and the introduction of stabilization - has also had an impact on the way in which migration is distributed and decision-making processes as to where migrants decide to go.

2.3. Current criteria for acquiring Italian citizenship

While Italy's citizenship structure has changed over time, the fundamental principles governing Italian citizenship have not changed since the first citizenship law was enacted in 1912. Currently, there are nine legal ways to acquire Italian nationality, with three being the most commonly utilized by foreigners.

First, citizenship by descent is based on the principle of ius sanguinis (right of blood), which means people can become Italian citizens if they can prove they are descendants of Italian citizens, regardless of where they were born and irrespective of whether the descendant link has been broken. Second, citizenship by residence refers to foreign citizens who may wish to naturalize as Italian citizens after having resided in Italy for a prescribed number of years of residence (10 years for non-EU citizens, 4 years for EU citizens, and 3 years for descendants of Italians or stateless persons), subject to demonstrating socio-economic integration to Italy, including at least sufficient command of the Italian language, legitimate means of support and criminal law clearance. Finally, citizenship by marriage and civil partnership refers to foreign spouse(s) of an Italian citizen who may formally file an application to obtain Italian citizenship after 2 years of marriage (1.5 years of marriage if residing in Italy) subject to background check and language testing.

Less common means of acquisition include adoptive grants, acknowledgment of paternity or maternity, and minor naturalizations, as well as honorary citizenship that is awarded for extraordinary efforts made in society, particularly in science, culture, or the economy. While ius soli (birthright citizenship) exist in the limited form, children born in Italy to non-Italian parents may apply for their citizenship once they turn eighteen and meet residency requirements. In Italy, as distinguished from legal establishment, national identity is a personal perception based upon individual choices and previous experience. There is no formal identification or consent to nationality, rather national identity is very subjective and voluntary. Thus, it can be interpreted through many lenses.

2.4 Integration Policies and Migrant Challenges in Italy

Like many EU countries, integration policies in Italy dictate how migrants experience their transition and how social cohesion is achieved. Integration refers to a reciprocal relationship between the receiving society and migrants; however, the integration process is often mediated through formal mechanisms and institutional arrangements. Italy has a long history of legislative reforms regulating migration and encouraging integration:

- The Foschi Law (1986) was the first broad piece of immigration legislation in Italy. While it primarily pursued a policy of restricting the illegal employment of non-EC workers, it allowed for legal family reunification, and regularized the status of around 120,000 undocumented migrants.
- The Martelli Law (1990) uses an expansion of immigration governance, provides the right to asylum, and states more visa control. The law constituted a major regularization push that legalized over 200,000 non-EC migrants.
- The Turco-Napolitano Law (1998) was a more structured approach that implemented labor quotas, Temporary Stay Centers and the National Integration Fund. It was a very ambitious law with mixed results because of its reliance on detention and deportation strategies.

- The Bossi-Fini Law (2002) imposed more rules on immigration by linking permits of residence to an employment contract. This also made it easier to deport migrants, which reduced job and legal stability for many migrants.
- The Salvini Decree (2018) rendered several humanitarian protections obsolete and expanded the time to process citizenship applications and made asylum regulations stricter. When the Decree was repealed in 2020, several forms of humanitarian protection were restored as were several elements of integration policy.

Currently, Italy's integration efforts reflect the EU Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion (2021-2027), and emphasize inclusive education, access to employment, access to health care, and access to housing. On the national level, the Integration Agreement (Patto per l'Integrazione) is in force, with national legal obligations for non-EU immigrants who intend to stay for more than one year: participants of the integration agreement must attain basic level language proficiency (A2 level), civic education, and understanding of public services; they need to be monitored for compliance via a credit system, with consequences for not complying including the revocation of the residence permit.

While Italy has taken steps in the legislative arena, migrants in Italy continue to grapple with multi-dimensional constraints in entering or accessing the education, (formal or informal) employment, health care, and housing system, with the degree to which disparities limit migrant access, are often highly dependent on their legal status.

Education: Although regular migrants are able to access public education, language and cultural barriers hinder effective integration. According to a 2019 report, a nongovernmental report, of youth non-EU migrants (18–24 years), 21% were not engaged in Employment or Education (NEET) compared to 12.5% for native Italian students. The situation was particularly concerning for female migrants as 25.9% were NEET. Irregular migrants have little or no access to formal schooling, and work confined to informal education systems that have no formally recognized institutions and are less resourced.

Employment: Immigrants make up over 10% of Italy's work force but are subjected to a very high unemployment rate and underemployment. The unemployment rate for non-EU workers was 16.7% and certain nationalities, e.g., Moroccans and Pakistanis, had even higher rates (over 24%). Many migrants are ill fated to low wage, low commitment jobs without the clear opportunity to get out of these circumstances. The EU's integration agenda has brought improvements, e.g., by 2023 the employment rate for third country nationals (TCNs) reached 60.7% but the sector continues to face challenges. The 2020 regularization program that offered temporary status for undocumented workers was important; but delays within the program and weak qualifications reduced its effectiveness. Undocumented migrants, especially in agriculture, frequently become victims of exploitation. The caporalato, common in southern Italy, involves illegal recruitment practices providing access to migrants with terrible working conditions and mobbing that became systematic during covid.

Healthcare: Italy's universal healthcare system is available to legal residents; undocumented migrants face barriers in accessing services including fear of deportation, language differences, and institutional discrimination. The mental health sector is also under-resourced for migrant populations. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed a public health necessity for policies to include and reach all residents and not just legal residents.

Housing: Legal migrants may face discrimination in accessing the housing market, financial insecurity, and often cannot escape low-quality informal, or overcrowded places of accommodation. If you work and live in Italy without a legal status, you will be even more vulnerable; you will find yourself paying rent for an apartment in the formal housing market and renting from people who take advantage of your legal status to rent substandard accommodation or who are without regular housing altogether and thus cannot access the housing market. The issue of citizenship and integration has a long past in Italy, and is tied to

varied histories of policy, relationships, social action, and group subjectivity belonging to the present contextuality. Recent reform as a result of EU policies related to migration has often sought to ameliorate structural obstacles to migrants' full integration in Italy, particularly for undocumented migrants. Improving access to education, work, health services, and housing remains a priority to achieve fuller social cohesion and to include migrants, and an important fundamental human rights issue for Italian society.

2.5 Methodology

This research utilizes quantitative research methodologies to study immigration trends, the relationship between Italian citizenship laws, integration policies, and migrant outcomes.

- Data collection: The research uses relevant secondary quantitative data available from reputable national and international sources for demographic, labor market and housing data, comparative statistics on migrant integration across EU countries, education, employment trends and access to healthcare services for migrants.

- Data analysis is to examine data to summarize trends over time; to analyze the relationship between legal status and integration outcomes, and to assess the influence of citizenship status and length of residence on socio-economic integration outcome indicators.

2.6 Practical Implications of Migration Waves from Africa, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East

The migration waves from Africa, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East have had a deep and multifaceted impact on Italy, extending well beyond demographic change. These movements have introduced both opportunities and challenges that influence the country's economic development, legal frameworks, public services, and political discourse.

Migrants from these regions have filled critical labor shortages across key sectors. African migrants have supported agriculture and domestic work, particularly in southern Italy, although this has also exposed widespread labor exploitation and the need for stronger labor protections. Eastern European migrants, especially Romanians and Poles, have contributed significantly to construction, elderly care, and manufacturing, helping sustain vital services in an aging society. Middle Eastern migrants, including many Syrian and Iraqi asylum seekers, have increased demand for refugee support services but are also entering urban labor markets, often bringing higher education levels that remain underutilized. To respond effectively, Italy must develop targeted labor migration strategies that align migrant skills with industry needs, expand legal migration pathways, and reform exploitative labor practices like the caporalato system.

Demographically, migration offers a partial counterbalance to Italy's aging population and low birth rates. Migrant families, particularly from Africa and Eastern Europe, contribute to modest population growth and help maintain services in rural or economically stagnant regions. Given this demographic shift, Italy should adopt long-term residency and naturalization policies that promote family reunification and integrate newcomers into the fabric of society.

However, increased migration has also strained public infrastructure—especially in housing, education, and healthcare. Cities face overcrowded housing markets, school systems need better resources for second-generation migrant children, and health services must adjust to diverse health needs, including care for undocumented populations. Addressing these strains requires greater investment in inclusive public infrastructure and expanded access to culturally sensitive services, especially in high-immigration areas.

Legally, Italy's reliance on ius sanguinis has left many second-generation migrants—especially those born to non-EU parents—without a path to citizenship. These individuals often

grow up in Italy yet remain excluded from full civic participation. Reforming the citizenship framework to include elements of jus soli or hybrid models would foster greater belonging and reduce long-term marginalization.

Socially and politically, rising migration has fueled polarizing debates around national identity and cultural change. Far-right parties and media narratives have often framed migrants—particularly from Africa and the Middle East—as threats, contributing to stricter immigration laws and public unease. It is vital for policymakers, educators, and civil society to counteract misinformation and promote inclusive narratives that highlight the contributions of migrants and support intercultural understanding.

Integration also differs across Italy's geographic landscape. Urban areas offer more support structures, though often accompanied by competition for resources, while rural towns—despite offering opportunities for economic revitalization—pose risks of social isolation. Regional integration strategies should reflect these differences by scaling services in cities and designing inclusive revitalization plans for rural areas.

Ultimately, migration is reshaping Italy's national identity. While multiculturalism is increasingly visible in everyday life—from food and language to arts and community spaces—the tension between a traditional cultural narrative and an evolving multiethnic reality remains. A forward-looking integration agenda must embrace diversity as part of Italy's identity, with public institutions and media leading the way in shaping a more inclusive national vision.

3. Conclusion

The phenomenon of migration—particularly irregular and non-EU migration—has become a defining element of Italy's contemporary landscape, reshaping its labor markets, social fabric, and national identity. While the country has taken steps toward integrating migrant populations through regional regularization efforts and EU-aligned policies, systemic challenges persist. Italy's citizenship framework, grounded in the principle of ius sanguinis, continues to exclude many long-term residents, especially second-generation migrants and asylum seekers, from full legal and civic participation.

Migration from Africa, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East has filled critical labor shortages across sectors such as agriculture, construction, and care work, while also introducing new complexities around rights, recognition, and social inclusion. These migrants play a pivotal role in sustaining economic sectors and mitigating demographic decline, particularly in rural and aging regions. Yet, their contributions are often undervalued, and their integration is uneven across Italy's regions.

Barriers to education, stable employment, healthcare, and adequate housing remain heavily dependent on legal status, reinforcing disparities between migrants and native-born Italians. Undocumented individuals and those without secure status face heightened risks of exploitation, marginalization, and long-term social exclusion. Moreover, increased migration has placed additional pressure on public services, while also becoming a focal point for political polarization, with far-right rhetoric framing migrants as threats to cultural continuity and national security.

At the same time, migration has challenged Italy to reconsider its concept of national identity. While multiculturalism is becoming increasingly visible in daily life—through food, media, language, and community practices—the prevailing public narrative often resists fully integrating this diversity into the national self-image. Without a meaningful shift in how Italian identity is imagined and legally structured, social cohesion will remain fragile.

Addressing these layered challenges requires more than piecemeal policy fixes. A comprehensive equity agenda must include inclusive citizenship reform—such as expanding jus soli provisions or adopting hybrid legal pathways—as well as deeper investment in

education, labor protections, health infrastructure, and housing for migrant communities. Equally important is a cultural and institutional shift that recognizes diversity not as a threat, but as a central component of Italy's evolving national identity.

In sum, achieving lasting integration and social cohesion in Italy demands a structural and imaginative rethinking of belonging—one that aligns legal rights with lived realities, and values migrants not only as workers, but as full members of the national community.

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