

Migrating or Commuting? The Case of Romanian Workers in Italy: Niches for Labour Commuting to the EU

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Introduction

An increase in the number of foreign-born residents has become a widespread phenomenon in Western Europe in the past two decades. Moreover, “in relative terms the largest increases in foreign population stocks were in countries that have traditionally been considered ones of emigration. In four such countries the foreign population more than doubled: Finland (up 218.8 percent to 1992), Italy (161.5 percent)[1], Portugal (131.2 percent) and Spain (124 percent)”.[2]

Focusing on the case of Romanian workers in Italy, I intend to challenge the traditional approach towards migration in the European Union. I will argue that, when analysing the situation of Romanian workers, the term “migration” becomes more and more inadequate in addressing the problem of migrant workers in the EU. Instead, I will make use of the more specific term “commuting”, which international organisations and academic literature have previously used to describe *short-term* labour migration. Short-term labour migrants do not remain in the country for long – “they may come for the day, the week or on a seasonal basis for short periods of time to work either legally on contracts or ‘illegally’ as ‘tourists’”

However, simply classifying labour commuting as “short-term migration” would be incorrect, as it does not adequately reflect, in many instances, the longer-term nature of the phenomenon of international “commuting” and also overlooks crucial aspects of the activity and life of persons involved in transnational labour. If migration in modern society is seen as a form of geographical mobility, which aims at the **(re)inclusion** into the functional subsystems of the economy, law, politics, health or education and their organisations at a different place, labour commuting, quite to the contrary, does not lead to inclusion and integration in different spheres of the host society. In this paper, I first provide a historical context for the phenomenon of migration of Romanian workers to Italy. Based on research carried out in Italy, I then focus on three key components that make up the long-term commuter experience[3]: Italian legislation regarding stay and work; the organisation of work in Italy (in particular informal work networks); and the relationship with Romania, the Romanian community in Italy and the Italian society.

Historical Background

Understanding the phenomenon of *long-term* “commuting” from Romania is easier in light of the country’s communist experience. In the 1960s and 1970s, rapid industrialisation forced a large part of the Romanian population living in rural areas into daily or weekly movement to the city where they had taken factory jobs. While industrialisation contributed to the phenomenon of rapid urbanisation, it also contributed to the rise of commuting. As employees in socialist systems tended to remain in the same workplace for life, people travelled to their job by train or bus every day for 20 to 30 years. At that time, the conditions and restrictions accompanying the phenomenon raised problems of geographical and social mobility, just as international commuting raises similar problems today. Romanian labour migration abroad began in 1990 with the so-called “trade by suitcase”[4] to Poland and Yugoslavia and continued with workers travelling to Israel and Germany. In 1997-1998, Italy gradually becoming the favourite destination. According to the preliminary data of a survey conducted by the Centre for Regional and Urban Sociology (CURS),[5] in April 2003 almost one million Romanians were at work abroad, legally or illegally. The poll showed that in 12 percent of Romanian households at least one member of a household had gone abroad to work, legally or otherwise, as of April 2003. Annual capital entries in Romania, as a result of Romanian workers’ remittances, were estimated at approximately €2 billion for 2003, while the Romanian National Bank confirmed a similar estimate in 2002 as well.[6] At present, the region of Moldavia (the poorest and most rural region in Romania)[7] provides the biggest flow of international migration from Romania to Italy.[8]

Italian Legislation Regarding Stay and Work

Italian statistics show that the primary reason for Romanian migration to Italy is, as expected, work (see table 1).[9] Several advantages favour a massive movement of Romanians to Italy, as opposed to other European Union

countries, in search of work. First, an overwhelming advantage of Romanian workers in their attempt to fill a labour niche is the lack of a language barrier. The similarity between the Italian and Romanian languages makes it possible for even someone with a low education level to assimilate basic knowledge of the language within a matter of weeks.

Salary levels and Italian work and stay regulations are two other important reasons why, at present, Italy has become one of the most popular targets for labour commuting from Romania. Hence, although salaries are lower than in Germany, workers perceive that this lower level of income is generally compensated by more relaxed regulations in terms of stay and work.[10] In addition, relatively lax regulations make Italy an attractive labour commuting destination (see below).

The relatively low legislative barrier is undoubtedly one of the crucial elements that favoured the “Romanianisation” of Italy. The elimination of EU visa requirements for Romanians represented an important advantage, as it allowed for easier circulation and for the return home of some illegal workers that had resisted leaving Italy out of fear of not being allowed back in.

Although appreciated as rather high[11] by some of the interviewees, the price of permits to stay is comparatively low, just €10 (in Poland, by contrast, the price of the stay permit is €75). The application procedures are lengthy and bureaucratic (sometimes it takes almost a year to obtain a permit to stay), but a significant advantage comes from the fact that the workers’ legal status in Italy is not affected by the length of the procedure. At the time of application they receive a receipt (*ricevuta*), which is accepted as a legal document during police controls.

Nevertheless there are other judicial and bureaucratic barriers, which make adaptation not an easy job. Legislation regarding stay and work seems to be more a problem of contradictory regulations rather than strict enforcement.[12]

The Organisation of Work Through Informal Networks in Italy

All accounts made by the interviewees point to the existence of strong informal networks that have taken shape in Italy over the past decade. The main occupations are predominantly low-skilled ones and exploit a particular extensive need in the area. Veneto, where this research was conducted, is a region with a large elderly population with relatively high income, and is one of the main tourist areas in Italy, with superior economic development compared to the Southern regions.

Accordingly, Romanian workers try to occupy a sector by building networks of relatives and friends to activate in the same “branch” and thus fully exploit the niche. However, in terms of working conditions, labour rights are minimal as the main reward for work is money and employees concern with their own rights is obscured by the profitability of the job. In some cases, well-established networks impose discriminatory, protectionist practices against other Romanians attempting to make a living within the same line of work:

“So you see the difference between those that have been singing for very many years and those recently arrived. Those which came a long time ago have priority...they have their set area and interdiction for the rest, that is their area and nobody else enters.”[13]

The most popular occupations in the Veneto area, determined by “features of the region” as well, are: care for the elderly (this is the most popular activity, performed mainly by women), working in construction (mainly men’s occupations) and performing as public artists.

Working conditions differ by job place and employee. A Romanian professional violinist, arrived in Italy with a contract complaint regarding the situation in his branch:

“...it’s bad here, because only Nelu and I are left and if we tried to ask for some rights, what rights!? – like minimum, just to keep a bit of dignity, there are five people lined up behind you to take your place and who agree to sing for nothing. You know, these new ones were brought with contracts as well ...”

When invited to talk about her work and payment conditions, a woman responsible for taking care of an elderly well-to-do Italian woman related:

“She gives me €800 a month. It’s not that much, I heard some people get even 1,000. But I don’t have to pay for anything, I have my own room and she is not mean or arrogant. She is always content with what I cook for her.”

The way workers organise in Italy points out to the existence of significant informal networks (corroborating at the same time the findings of different studies[14] with regard to the fact that the main support basis is observed among relatives and friends). However, the existence in Italy of a cohesive Romanian diaspora (community) potentially capable to assist Romanian workers’ integration into the host society is questionable.

The Relationship with Romania, the Romanian Community in Italy and Italian Society

All interviewees and discussants without exception express longing for home. Their presence in Italy is first and foremost related to accumulating higher resources in order to improve their life at home. An interviewee speaks his mind on the topic:

“The majority of Romanians come because...this is paradise, I made it and after that... for example I met a man who had bought himself a Mercedes because he dreamt once he would return to his village in a Mercedes. He cannot go home now because he doesn't have papers and he waits for his papers so that he can.”

In addressing the problem of his relationship with Romania and Italy, an interviewee relates:

“Do you like Venice?”

“Yes, I like it very much, sometimes I miss it, you know, when I'm in the country, when I stayed last year I came home in October and I returned now, so after 9 months I returned. I really had flashes with Venice. Of course, then there is the other side, I told you I stayed in Venice for 3 weeks and afterwards I went home, I got certain that I couldn't take it any more here. At home I can take it, but here I cannot take it after a while. This is the difference.”

“Next year will you return here or go someplace else?”

“I don't know, next year I want to come to have money to stay in a hotel, to eat in a restaurant. That's all for next year...next year I don't want to return as a slave.”

Accounts of Italian society range from neutral to favourable. None of the subjects expressed views of Italian society as having poorer traits as compared to the Romanian one.

Generally, subjects speak of Italy as of a country where “stress is much lower than in Romania” and people behave more pleasantly. As regards their work they do not report finding Italians contemptuous towards their lower status job:

“The owners, how do they react?”

“Owners I think I don't know, I mean what I met, I met only waiters and the waiters I met are very nice. Firstly, why? Because they have no responsibility, you don't sing at the terrace, you sing a bit away from it. Secondly, I had this happen to me that we were singing in front of a terrace, that terrace had 3 tables and after that the terrace got filled, you understand, so it's suitable for him too. That's the deal!”

The research points to the existence of a Romanian community in Italy, which is fragmented, composed of strong small networks with a relative low level of integration in the community.

Conclusion

In this paper I focused on three sectors which I consider to have a significant impact on the status of Romanians working in Italy.

Approaching the question of the inclusion of Romanian workers in Italian society, analysis shows that Romanian workers do not fit the profile of long-term migrants trying to make a new life in the country and obtain permanent residence or citizenship.

Although apparently just a matter of statistics, assigning Romanian workers in Italy into one category or another has important implications for their conditions of life and work. Many Romanian workers have been working in Italy for more than ten years in the same workplace and have a long-established pattern of regular commuting between Romania and Italy. In view of the elements presented in my research, I conclude that the movement of Romanian workers in Italy takes the form of commuting for many years, with an enormous potential for permanence. I therefore propose the term “long-time commuting” to better capture this phenomenon.

Experience in commuting, together with non-existence of language barriers and relaxed legislation policy encourages the phenomenon of “long time commuting”. Ignoring this reality only makes the movement of Romania workers more difficult, but does not stop it. At the same time, it makes its effects harder to channel because, as Sebastian Lazaroiu argues:

“the migration flows between candidate countries and European Union countries, especially those of circular type, will be able to play an important role in the acceleration of the integration process [...] only if the origin states will know how to use institutionally these movements of the working force”.[15]

Today, as for the case of local commuting, this phenomenon raises problems regarding, for example, the access of workers to healthcare benefits and to education and their potential for social mobility. However, these are of a more complex nature, requiring an institutional approach, which seems to have been missing so far.

Footnotes

[1] Italy is a country that has constituted an important source of emigration for practically a century, beginning ever since the unification of Italy. The situation changed at the end of the 1950s when emigration flows ceased to be a mass phenomenon. Moreover, from the beginning of the 1970s the net in- and outflows result in net immigration. North Africa is a particularly important source of migration for Italy, next to Eastern Europe, more precisely the Balkans (Albania), and Romania.

[2] John Salt, "Migration pressures in Western Europe" in David Coleman (ed.), *Europe's Population in the 1990s*, Oxford (Oxford University Press), 1996, p. 93.

[3] The research was conducted in Venice in the months of June and July of 2003 and aimed at documenting the life and activities of Romanians in Italy; their reasons for coming to Italy; their conditions of stay and work; and intentions of Romanian workers active in the Venice area. The analysis comprised a series of semi-structured in-depth interviews, supported by informal discussions and direct observation

[4] In such cases, nationals of one country purchase goods cheaply in one country, transporting them in small quantities across the border to sell at a higher price.

[5] Available at: <http://www.curs.ro/archive>.

[6] *Trade and Industry Magazine*, June 2003.

[7] Moldavia is a region in Eastern Romania, not to be confused with the Republic of Moldova.

[8] *Trade and Industry Magazine*, June 2003.

[9] **Table 1. Reasons for being in Italy by nationality in 2002**

Reasons for coming to Italy as stated in *permiso di soggiorno* Morocco Albania Romania

Work	67.1%	53.8%	58.3%
Family reasons	31.7%	38.8%	31.4%
Study	0.3%	4.1%	1%
Religious reasons	0%	0.1%	0.9%
Other reasons	0.9%	3.3%	8.4%

Source: Immigrazione. Dossier Statistico 2003. XIII Rapporto sull'immigrazione - Caritas/Migrantes

[10] According to several interviewees.

[11] One interview stated, "The only thing was a "timbro di bollo", so a fiscal stamp, which of course costs 10 Euro of course, quite a lot for me."

[12] An interviewee complained: "I'm [here] with a visa. I am here for eight days now. Look how the law is right now, so that I tell you clearly: firstly, in the country [Romania] you are told that you go, you show € 500 ...you come to Italy and you are told that after eight days you have to be declared at *Questura*, so that you be in order. If after eight days you are not declared that you leave in one place ...you can get a voyage paper: voyage paper means what? They put you on a plane and they send you home and you are not allowed four years in Europe anymore. That is prison up front. Here as well as in Romania the law seems completely confuse, so you don't know, you are in lack of knowledge of the problem. Why don't they say before directly that...why don't they give a visa for eight days as they say?"

[13] This interviewee explains further on that trespassing leads to confiscation of the money made in the area.

Interview with Dan, Venice – Campo Santa Fosca, 14 July 2003.

[14] See, for example, Sebastian Lazaroiu, *The circulatory migration of the Romanian work force. Consequences on European integration*, Bucharest, 2002. Available in Romanian at: <http://www.osf.ro/ro/initiative.pdf>.

[15] Lazaroiu, op. cit., p. 3.