

Italian Emigration is Rising as Immigration Declines

Roberta Cutillo (December 18, 2019)



Immigration is decreasing in Italy for the first time (-3.2% from last year) after a period of constant increase between 2014 and 2017, while the number of Italians leaving the country is on the rise (+1.9%) according to the latest report on immigration by national statistics agency ISTAT.

Emigration is once again on the rise

In 2018, 157 000 people left Italy to live abroad (+1.2% from 2017), 117 000 of them were Italians (+1.9%) bringing the total number of Italian expats throughout the course of the last decade to rise to 816 000.



The region from which most Italians emigrated this past year was not the South as one might expect, but Lombardy, where the number of anagraphic transfers was 22,000, followed by Veneto and Sicily (both over 11,000), Lazio (10,000), and Piedmont (9,000.)

It is important to note however that many Italians are moving from Southern regions to Northern ones and to big cities. Over the course of 2018, Sicily and Campania lost over 8,500 highly educated residents over 25 who migrated internally to other regions. Overall, all Central and Northern regions saw a positive or neutral gross variation, while Southern regions registered a clear population drop.

For the most part, the direct flows of Italian citizens going abroad came from big cities such as Rome (8,000), Milan (6,500), Turin (4,000) and Naples (3,500.)

The main destination of these flows was the UK, which in 2018 welcomed 21,000 Italians, followed by Germany (18,000), France (about 14,000), Switzerland (almost 10,000) and Spain (7,000). These five countries represented 60% of total Italian expat destinations, while the main extra-european destinations were Brazil, the United States, Australia and Canada.

The average age was 33 for men and 30 for women and over half (53%) have some type of higher education degree.

According to ISTAT, this increase in Italian emigration is in part due to the unfavorable state of the Italian job market, especially for young people and women, as well as to the change in attitude towards the idea of living abroad. Both factors are pushing qualified young people to look for opportunities outside of Italy.

Among the number of Italians leaving the country we also count those who were born elsewhere, then came to Italy, where they lived for some time acquiring citizenship and eventually moved on to a third country. 35,000 of these “new” Italians left the country in 2018 (30% of total expats, a 6% increase from 2017).

Immigration slows down

After the increase that followed the entry of Romania and Bulgaria in the EU in the early 2000s, foreign immigration to Italy started seeing a slow decline. From 2015 to 2017, it then rose again due to the numerous flows of migrants coming from the Mediterranean region.

But in 2018, for the first time, the number of migrants entering Italy decreased (-3.2% from the previous year). Romania remains the main country of origin (37,000 or 11% of the total) although the numbers are decreasing significantly (-10% from the previous year), followed by Albania (over 18,000).



Immigration flows from Africa were consistent but faced a significant decline after having peaked in 2017, particularly Nigeria (18,000, -24%), Senegal (9,000, -20%) and Gambia (6,000, -30%). Morocco is the only African country which registered a positive variation (17,000, +9%). As for the flows from Asia, most came from Bangladesh and Pakistan (both 13,000 with a decline of 8% and 12% from the previous year).

The average age of immigrant women was 32.2 and that of men 28.7, however, both age and gender both vary according to the country of origin. Overall, the youngest are African immigrants (on average 25.4 years-old), followed by Asians (27 years), while the oldest are European, American, or Australian (around 33,5 years).

Among the people moving to Italy were also 47,000 Italians, who for the most part were living in countries such as Brazil, Germany, the UK, Switzerland and Venezuela, countries that in the past welcomed a significant number of Italians. It is therefore likely that most of these represent people who are returning to Italy after having spent some time abroad.

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