

The Pandemic Helped Reverse Italy's Brain Drain. But Can It Last?

Many young Italians who left for opportunities abroad are now working remotely from Italy. The government has welcomed them, but experts say the economic benefits will be fleeting.

By **Emma Bubola**

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When Elena Parisi, an engineer, left Italy at age 22 to pursue a career in London five years ago, she joined the vast ranks of talented Italians escaping a sluggish job market and lack of opportunities at home to find work abroad.

But in the past year, as the coronavirus pandemic forced employees around the world to work from home, Ms. Parisi, like many of her compatriots, seized on the opportunity to really go home, to Italy.

In between Zoom meetings and her other work for a recycling company in London, she took long strolls on the beach near her family's home in Palermo, Sicily, and talked recipes at dawn with vendors in the local market.

"The quality of life is a thousand, thousand times better here," said Ms. Parisi, who is now in Rome.

As with so many things, the virus has upended a familiar phenomenon — this time Italy's longstanding brain drain. How much things are changing, and how permanent those changes will be, is a source of debate in the country. But something is clearly different.

Italy, along with Romania and Poland, is among the European countries that send the most workers abroad, according to figures from the European Commission. And the proportion of Italians living abroad who have a university degree is higher than that of Italy's general population.

Taking into account the money the country spends on their education, Italy's brain drain costs the country an estimated 14 billion euro (about \$17 billion) every year, according to Confindustria, Italy's biggest business association.

Italian lawmakers had long tried attracting back talented workers with tax breaks, but a grim job market, high unemployment, a baroque bureaucracy and narrow avenues for advancement continued to draw many Italian graduates abroad.

Then the virus seemed to do what years of incentives could not.

In the past year, the number of Italians aged 18 to 34 returning home increased 20 percent over the previous year, according to Italy's foreign ministry.

"The counter-exodus of the brain drain," declared Italy's *Il Sole 24 Ore* newspaper in September. "Now young people want to come back to Italy," proclaimed *Il Giornale di Sicilia*. *L'Espresso* magazine last month called 2020 "the year of the turning point, of the return."



An empty shopping area in Milan this month. Italy's brain drain is estimated to cost the country about \$17 billion a year. Alessandro Grassani for The New York Times

The Italian government has welcomed the return of some of the country's best and brightest as a silver lining to what has been a brutal pandemic for Italy, calling the shift a "great opportunity." There is also a financial benefit, as Italians who spend more than six months in the country have to pay their taxes there.

Paola Pisano, Italy's minister for technological innovation, said at a conference in October that Italy had a chance to benefit from the skills and innovations that returning Italians brought back with them.

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She also said Italy needed to do its part to keep them there. For one thing, the country needs "a strong, diffuse, powerful and secure internet connection," she said, so that those who had moved abroad "can return to their country and keep working for the company they worked for."

One group of Italians started an association called Southworking to promote working remotely from Italy's less developed south, in the hopes that returning professionals would dedicate their free time, and their money, to improving their hometowns.

"Their ideas, their volunteering, their creativity stay on the land where they live," said Elena Militello, the association's president, who returned to Sicily from Luxembourg.

To promote remote working, the association is creating a network of cities equipped with fast internet connections, an airport or train station nearby, and at least one co-working space or library with good Wi-Fi.

To map them, the association has received help from Carmelo Ignaccolo, a doctoral student in urbanism at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology who returned home to Sicily after the coronavirus hit.

In recent months, Mr. Ignaccolo has overseen exams with the Mediterranean in the background of his Zoom screen, taught classes near his great-grandfather's olive press and taken refuge from the heat by studying in a nearby Greek necropolis.

"I 100 percent embrace an American professional life," he said, "but I have a very Mediterranean lifestyle."

It's not only Italy's south that is benefiting from the reverse traffic.

Roberto Franzan, 26, a programmer who built a successful start-up in London before taking a job at Google there, returned to his home in Rome in March.

"You go to the bar and you can just strike up a conversation with pretty much whoever," he said. "It has worked great for me." He said that a number of interesting start-ups and tech companies were popping up in Italy and that he could imagine investing in the country.

Roberto Franzan, 26, in his family home this month with his mother, Laura. He built a start-up in London and now works for Google. Nadia Shira Cohen for The New York Times

"This moment has given us all the time to realize that getting back to your roots can be a good thing," he said.

Italy's business leaders have urged the government not to squander the opportunity.

"Coronavirus, the about-face of the brain drain," Michel Martone, a former deputy labor minister, wrote in the Roman newspaper *Il Messaggero*. He urged lawmakers to find a way to retain the "extraordinary army of young people who returned home in the face of the emergency."

But some experts say there aren't really that many advantages to solidify.

While many Italians may have moved back to the Tuscan countryside or to Sicilian beachfronts, their minds are still benefiting American, British, Dutch and other foreign businesses.

"Zoom is not going to solve Italy's problems," said Enrico Moretti, an economist at the University of California at Berkeley who focuses on labor and urban economics and is himself part of the Italian brain drain.

Brunello Rosa, an economist in London who is another member of the diaspora, said that returned Italians “produce an activity for a foreign entity — they create value abroad and income abroad.” He added that “the fact that they spend their salary in Italy doesn't really make a difference.”

A more likely outcome, he said, is that the virus will lead to economic wreckage and huge levels of unemployment that will set off another wave of emigration as soon as European countries lift their lockdowns.

London on Tuesday. Many Italians who left the city because of the pandemic say they plan to return. Andrew Testa for The New York Times

To really address the issue, he and others said, Italy needs to undertake deep structural and cultural reform that streamlines bureaucracy and improves transparency rather than relying on “people who come back home because the food is worse abroad and the weather is bad.”

Mr. Ignaccolo, the M.I.T. doctoral candidate, plans to return to the United States to pursue his academic career, and the new company Mr. Franzan, the programmer, is launching will be based in Delaware.

The downsides of working in Italy also worry Ms. Parisi, who is concerned that her professional advancement would be stymied in what she sees an Italian business world that has narrow scope for younger workers. She allowed that London's lack of sun was bleak and British food was bad for her skin, but said that other things were important in life, too.

“I am young, I am a woman and I am in a very senior position,” she said, explaining that she would return to her job in London when her office reopened.

“It was a unique opportunity. I could both keep the job and live in Italy,” she said of her time working there. “But I always knew it was going to be temporary.”