

Stuck and Exploited

Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Italy Between Exclusion, Discrimination and Struggles

edited by Francesco Della Puppa, Giuliana Sanò

What the COVID-19 Outbreak Tells Us about Migration

Paolo Attanasio

Centro Studi e Ricerche IDOS - FVG

Abstract This chapter looks at the impact that the recent outbreak of COVID-19 is having on asylum seekers, as well as foreign workers and residents on the European continent, with a special focus on Italy. It describes the critical situation in the refugee camps at the South-Eastern borders of the EU (i.e., the Greek-Turkish border and former Yugoslavia) and the outbreaks of xenophobia that have been reported by NGOs and international relief organizations working in and around the camps. The paper also briefly looks at the present situation of migrant workers in Italy on the basis of the currently available figures, describing the impact of the COVID-19 and the subsequent regularization introduced by the Government. The concluding remarks point out that the Coronavirus crisis puts at risk the living conditions of countless vulnerable households, and could unleash a new wave of migration of people in search for better living conditions. It is therefore necessary that both governmental policies and citizens' attitude *vis-à-vis* migration adapt themselves to the global changes imposed by the pandemic.

Keywords Migration. Asylum. Coronavirus. Employment. Regularisation. Agriculture. Caregiving. Ethnicity.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Refugees, Asylum Seekers and the Coronavirus: The Lessons Learned. – 3 The Impact of the Coronavirus on Labour Migration in Italy. – 4 Is Coronavirus Hitting Foreigners Harder Than Nationals? – 5 In Place of Conclusions.

1 Introduction

The recent outbreak of Coronavirus which, from mainland China expanded rapidly throughout the world, has definitely triggered a powerful social earthquake which is shaking all aspects of modern, globalised life from its very foundations.



Società e trasformazioni sociali 8

e-ISSN 2610-9689 | ISSN 2610-9085

ISBN [ebook] 978-88-6969-532-2 | ISBN [print] 978-88-6969-533-9

Peer review | Open access

Submitted 2020-10-09 | Accepted 2021-07-23 | Published 2021-10-27

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DOI 10.30687/978-88-6969-532-2/011

263

The overall picture before our eyes is changing very rapidly, but, from what we can see now, the virus exacerbates a number of contradictions and weaknesses already existing in modern society. At a closer look, we can say that not only does the COVID-19 outbreak create new imbalances and discriminations, but definitely throws new light on previously existing ones, which had been somehow neglected in the public discourse. If it is true that major crises are but accelerators of on-going processes, then the COVID-19 outbreak should definitely prevent us from closing our eyes in front the living conditions of migrants.

Among these, different forms of inequality and discrimination, on which a large part of the current socio-economic organisation both at the global and local level is based, stand out for importance. Human mobility, which is part and parcel of today's world, will mostly be affected, but consequences will not be equal for all: having the wrong name, the wrong passport, the wrong zip code will inevitably bear consequences on the opportunities of 'foreigners' for integration in a new country. We are all facing the same storm but our boats are rather different.

The over 272 million migrants presently existing in the world will face harsh consequences on their opportunities to settle permanently in their host countries, and to earn a decent living for themselves and their families. Following the present health crisis, we will be facing a short-medium term economic and labour crisis, which will probably hit migrant workers harder: many of the jobs in post-COVID-19 labour crisis (tourism, hospitality, agriculture, cleaning services, assistance to elderly people, baby-sitting, petty trade) are actually filled by migrants. The inability to move out of their countries will impact global agriculture and put migrants' families at greater risk, as remittances will probably dry up. The 26 million refugees and the almost 46 million internally displaced people¹ are particularly at risk, considering the living conditions in the overcrowded camps, where social isolation and personal hygiene are simply impossible, and where the transmission of all sorts of diseases and viruses (including COVID-19) is extremely easy and swift.

All in all, we can maintain that the presence of migrants is more tolerated than welcome in the societies of destination, especially, as it is the case in Italy, on the basis of their economic relevance, coupled with the extreme flexibility of their working conditions, as well as the lack of social, political and sometimes even human rights. Hence, this attitude helps keeping away from the eyes of the public opinion the intolerable living conditions of tens of thousands of migrants working in the agricultural fields of many Italian regions, in the cleaning services as well as in the health care sector. The Coronavirus outbreak has in

¹ See UNHCR (2020), *Figures at a Glance*, <https://www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html>.

this respect a two-fold, paradoxical effect. The pandemic, on the one hand, puts migrants somehow on the back burner of the public discourse, because the media are 100% absorbed by the present health emergency. On the other hand, it is precisely the on-going pandemic that worsens migrants' living conditions and prompts the media (and hence the public opinion) to turn their eyes again on them. Migrants are once again brought to the forefront of the public discourse, and become again the bargaining chip of the political negotiations within Governments and Parliaments. The lengthy and heated discussions on the regularisation of migrants which took place in Italy last May (and on which we will come back later) are a clear example of that.

What are the consequences of the COVID-19 outbreak on migration and especially on migrants and their families? What are the consequences on the destination countries and their economies? How will it affect the already complicated relation between migrants and host territories and peoples? These are the main questions we will try and deal with in this chapter.

The chapter will start with a brief overview of the current situation in and around the refugee camps at the South-Eastern borders, followed by a glimpse at the recent changes in the Italian asylum legislation prior to the outbreak of Coronavirus. After a glimpse at the recent regularisation introduced by the Italian Government for agricultural workers and care-givers, the paper presents some figures illustrating a possible connection between nationality and Coronavirus impact in the UK and Italy.

2 Refugees, Asylum Seekers and the Coronavirus: The Lessons Learned

The lockdown and travel ban recently introduced by nearly all European countries, as well as the closure of international borders will ostensibly have a higher impact on foreign citizens, and especially on asylum seekers. As far as the latter group is concerned, while on the one hand it is precisely the request for asylum that could legitimise their entry, more than the search for work, on the other hand it is precisely the precariousness of their living conditions (and hence sanitation) that could induce the governments of the host countries to hinder their entry, preventing them from applying for asylum. However, we must also consider that *de facto* the different categories of migrants (once clearly distinct) now tend to mix and overlap, and seem to form a single "mixed flow", united by the same reasons for survival. Not by chance, in the current analysis of international migration, there is more and more talk of "substitution of categories" (De Haas 2011).

Let us therefore start with a brief overview of asylum (and asylum applications) at the European level.

As a result of the containment policies applied throughout Europe after 2015, first-time asylum applications dropped from 1,216,900 in 2015 to 549,000 in 2018. In 2019, they increased again to 612,700.² At the end of 2019, 842,500 applications for international protection in the EU Member States were still under consideration by the national authorities.

Coronavirus brought this growing trend to a sudden stop. According to figures issued by EASO (the European Asylum Support Office based in Malta), just before the COVID-19 outbreak, applications had increased by 16% over the same period (January-February 2019). Between February and March 2020, applications dropped by 43% (34,737 applications in March).

March figures – says EASO in a press release of 30 April – are not truly indicative of asylum-related migration trends, but are rather the result of COVID-19 containment measures.

This does not necessarily imply a sheer reduction of asylum-seekers, but simply points out that the on-going health crisis may prevent them from submitting their application, turning them into ‘invisible’ migrants.

The already dramatic situation in the detention camps at the South-Eastern border of Europe, especially in Greece, has even worsened after the outbreak of Coronavirus: EU member States, who were already trying their best to keep asylum seekers away from the heart of the continent are now given new ammunition by the pandemic, for they can maintain that it is being spread by migrants themselves. Which is, by the way, exactly what we hear from heads of Governments of member States such as Hungary, that can lead to an increase of xenophobia throughout the continent. On the other hand, it is clear that detention camps (be they in Greece or elsewhere in Europe, including Italy) are the ideal setting for an uncontrollable spread of the virus. This is why, by the way, the model of mass accommodation of migrants (recently re-introduced in Italy by the overturn of the legislation on asylum-seekers’ hospitality) is totally counterproductive. The situation is all the more dangerous because the whole issue is almost totally ignored by the public opinion, which is influenced by mainstream mass-media. This entails two different dangers: on the one hand, the danger of gross underestimation of a potentially devastating crisis; on the other hand, the opportunity for Governments to act with a free hand, without a real control by citizens and grassroots movements.

Let’s give now a closer look at the situation along the so-called Balkan Route, linking starting places in Asia and the middle-East (Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Syria) to the heart of Europe via Turkey, Greece and former Yugoslavia.

² Eurostat news release (2020). Asylum in the EU Member States, 48/20-20 March 2020.

Here, too, we have to record a media paradox. The media coverage of the appalling situation of migrants throughout the Balkan Route (from attempts to flee Syria, to their stay in Turkish camps, to their passage through Greek camps and, finally, through South-Eastern Europe) was overshadowed in early 2020 by the concentration of the media all over Europe on the Coronavirus epidemic. As mentioned earlier, immigration is only dealt with if the news to be given is tragic, and only if this tragedy also affects us, the 'natives'. Suddenly, for the migrants of the Balkan Route, both conditions have occurred: a situation that in itself is tragic (which obviously existed before) becomes noteworthy because the COVID-19, in the camps, could give rise to an uncontrollable emergency. In addition, the crisis of migrants along the Balkan Route becomes a pretext, for the governments of the countries traversed, to manipulate the discontent of their public opinion and to scapegoat migrants. The emergency situation along the Balkan Route has already existed for several years. In 2016, in order to defuse Turkey's threats to open its borders to migrants hosted in refugee camps (currently estimated at around 3.6 million people), the European Union signed an agreement with Ankara in order to contain the arrival of refugees which had seriously threatened the stability of several European governments in 2015. In a nutshell,³ with the agreement, the EU promised Ankara a total of EUR 6 billion, as well as the possibility for Turkish citizens to enter Europe, and the intensification of EU enlargement negotiations with Turkey, in exchange for Ankara's commitment to keep the growing number of refugees fleeing the Syrian war, which had begun five years earlier, in the country. In particular, the joint communiqué foresaw that, while Turkey would readmit refugees who had attempted 'illegal' entry into Greece, the EU would in turn accept an equal number of asylum seekers from Turkish refugee camps. In the first weeks of 2020, following the actual opening of the Greek-Turkish border to migrants, tensions between the two countries began running high (Viale 2020; Hackenos 2020; *Left* 2020). In this situation, already on the verge of rupture, the COVID-19 pandemic exploded: after an initial period in which Europe has turned back on itself, the time bomb of migrants in Greek camps and marching on the Balkan Route soon became apparent. Several reports by international organisations, non-governmental organisations and journalists highlighted the living conditions in camps on the brink of collapse, with migrants exposed to mistrust, when not open violence, by local populations, often stirred up by ruling classes in search of cheap scapegoats (Mazzola, Martiniello 2020, McAuliffe,

³ See EU-Turkey Joint Statement, 18 March 2016. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/legislative-train/api/stages/report/current/theme/towards-a-new-policy-on-migration/file/eu-turkey-statement-action-plan>.

Bauloz 2020; Guadagno 2020). The conservative government led by Kyriakos Mitsotakis reacted extremely harshly, with the unilateral suspension of the Geneva Convention throughout March, thus preventing migrants from exercising their right to apply for asylum. The UNHCR itself intervened to stigmatise the Athens decision, stressing that it had no legal basis: a State that is a party to the Convention (such as Greece) cannot deny those who come to its borders the possibility of applying for asylum. The Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (Article 78[3]), invoked by Athens at its advantage, “only allows for provisional to be adopted by the Council on a proposal from the Commission and in consultation with the European Parliament”.⁴ The European Union, as is well known, has had a rather ambiguous reaction in this regard: following an inspection carried out in early March 2020, the four major political authorities of the Union proclaimed that Greece represents “the shield of the European Union” on its South-Eastern borders. Furthermore, they “express solidarity with Greece” and at the same time strongly reject Turkey’s use of migratory pressure for political purposes.⁵

By the same statement, the EU promised to earmark 700 million Euros for Athens “to support migration and integrated border management”. Just to underline the short-sightedness characterising this whole story, the EU announced in the same period that EUR 2,000 each will be paid to migrants in Greece as an incentive to voluntary repatriation. By the way, it should also be noted that the initiative is also financially insufficient, because it is limited to a maximum number of 5,000 people, representing a total investment of 10 million Euros.⁶ As a matter of fact, the European Commission seems much more interested in tuning up appropriate procedures to ensure repatriation. In a recent communication, after warning that Member States are facing practical difficulties in carrying out return activities and operations to third countries, the Commission suggests that return procedures should continue as far as possible, and that the Commission and Frontex will support National authorities in coordinating their efforts.⁷

4 See UNCHR (2020), *Statement on the Situation at the Turkish-Greek Border*, <https://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2020/3/5e5d08ad4/unhcr-statement-situation-turkey-eu-border.html>.

5 Press Office - General Secretariat of the Council of the European Union, *Statement on the situation at the EU’s external borders*, 4 March 2020.

6 BBC (2020), “EU to Give Migrants in Greece €2,000 to Go Home”, 12 March, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-51859007>; ANSAmEd (2020), “Migrants: Greece to Offer 2,000-euro Repatriation Incentive”, 13 March, <https://tinyurl.com/f86a3h8w>.

7 European Commission, “Communication from the Commission. COVID-19: Guidance on the implementation of relevant EU provisions in the area of asylum and return procedures and on resettlement”, (2020/C 126/02), 17 April 2020.

Organising a solid reallocation programme to spread the migrants throughout the Member States would be, needless to say, much harder work, especially in terms of political negotiations. As mentioned above, the increase in the number of migrants on their way through the South-Eastern regions of Europe has provoked the reaction of the populations involved, often exploited for propaganda purposes by local governments. There has therefore developed a tendency to represent migrants as scapegoats for the problems afflicting different countries, causing them to close in on themselves with a 'nation-first' approach.⁸ The Coronavirus pandemic has also often provided an opportunity to further restrict migrants' freedoms, blaming them as 'plague-spreaders'. The critical situation of the camps in Greece is described in detail by a short study published by Human Rights Watch (HRW), which interviewed several migrants hosted in the camps.⁹ First, overcrowding: as of 20 April, 34,875 migrants were hosted in the camps of Chios, Kos, Lesbos, and Samos, despite a maximum capacity of 6,095 people. An interviewed operator stated that "it is very unlikely that COVID-19 will never come to Moria [the Lesbos camp]. The only solution, if we want to minimise casualties, is to decongest before it comes".

At the end of April 2020, no cases had yet been identified on the Island camps, also known as Reception and Identification Centres. The Greek Government's plan to decongest the camps by relocating migrants to the mainland actually only affected 2,380 people, which was absolutely insufficient to effectively combat overcrowding and prevent the outbreak of the pandemic. Even before the Coronavirus, Greece had already introduced new restrictive asylum legislation in the last quarter of 2019, which had raised a number of concerns: among other things, the new legislation extends the period of detention in the centres from 3 to 15 months and compiles a list of 12 'safe' countries, to which migrants can automatically be repatriated.¹⁰ Unfortunately, the situation is no better in the other countries along the Balkan Route, according to numerous local and international sources. Bosnia, given its institutional and economic fragility, is perhaps the weakest link in the chain. The camps located in the Una-Sana Canton and around the city of Bihac are suffering from serious overcrowding problems, exacerbated by the 14-day ban imposed by the authorities with the total closure of the country on 17 March.

8 In Serbia, for instance, the immigration issue strongly influenced April's parliamentary election (see Stojanovic 2020; Fruscione 2020).

9 For a detailed description of the situation, see Human Rights Watch (2020), "Greece: Island Camps Not Prepared for COVID-19", <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/22/greece-island-camps-not-prepared-covid-19>.

10 For a detailed analysis of the new Greek legislation, refer to Mouzourakis 2019.

The complete ban on moving in and out of camps imposed in the current pandemic has left those locked inside them feeling more isolated, frustrated and information-starved than ever, as an article appeared on the website *Balkan Insight* puts it (Jerevic, Stojanovic, Vladislavljevic 2020). Even worse, however, is the situation of those rejected from the Croatian border, who are setting up irregular camps without any protection, where the risk of contagion is obviously very high (Bonapace, Perino 2020). The deterioration of the situation does not go unnoticed either by the population or the local authorities, and is part of the never fully resolved conflict between the countries that emerged from the Yugoslav war in the 1990s (as well as within the national communities coexisting in Bosnia and Herzegovina).

Also here (as already seen for Greece), Europe intervenes essentially in the attempt to prevent asylum seekers from reaching the heart of the continent. One of the instruments used is Frontex, the external border control agency created in 2004. The Agency, which until now has relied exclusively on police forces provided by the Member States, is now setting up its own autonomous quota of 10,000 men to build up the European Border and Coastguard. The Commission proposal was officially approved by the Council on 8 November 2019.¹¹ The full operation of the Guard, which will have its own aircraft, boats and ground vehicles, is scheduled for 2021.¹² A small, fully-fledged army, ready to intervene at any request of the Member States, under their command.

Bosnia itself - as reported by the already mentioned No Man's Land - has moved in the direction of agreements with Frontex - which the European agency has already signed with Serbia and Montenegro - for the containment of illegal immigration, but in the course of yet another dispute between Bosnian Serbs and the state, Milorad Dodik, although a member of the presidency, halted the signing of the agreement, voting against the decision. It is interesting to see the motivation given by Dodik and collected by *Balkan Insight*:

It is a bad decision. Frontex would only go to the border between Bosnia and Croatia, and I think it is a bad decision. This would hermetically seal off Bosnia and Herzegovina and keep the migrants here. (Kovacevic 2020)

¹¹ See "Guardia di frontiera e costiera europea: il Consiglio adotta un regolamento riveduto", in <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/it/press/press-releases/2019/11/08/european-border-and-coast-guard-council-adopts-revised-regulation/>.

¹² See European Commission, "A Reinforced European Border and Coast Guard", November 2019, in https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/system/files/2019-11/20191108_managing-migration-factsheet-european-border-and-coast-guard_en.pdf.

The issue of the ‘substitution of the nation’ that is perceived in this declaration returns frequently and is reinforced by some of the leaders’ statements.

This quick review of the joint effect of COVID-19 and xenophobia towards migrants on the Balkan Route brings us directly to Italy, where the situation is also in continuous progress.

As it is well known, a profound transformation hit the international protection system in Italy in 2018, *de facto* abrogating the possibility of granting a residence permit for humanitarian reasons, renamed for the occasion protection for special humanitarian cases, which are strictly listed. In addition to this, the public system of the so-called diffuse reception has been hollowed out of its contents, pursuing

a lucid and unscrupulous political design aimed at producing a situation of confusion and uncertainty throughout the entire country [...] in order to perpetuate and cultivate an eternal emergency dimension in the management of the issue.

This legislative intervention of 2018 has thus

constantly fuelled a state of alert and hostility towards asylum-seekers and refugees so as to take full advantage of the political fallout of what many commentators have called [...] the fear factory. (Schiavone 2019, 192)

This is, very briefly, the situation in which we were at the beginning of the Coronavirus spread in the first weeks of 2020. The current situation of irregular migrants (mostly denegated asylum seekers) in the Coronavirus crisis, however, has its roots in the recent history of migration in Italy, and affects already vulnerable people. As we will see in the next paragraph, this proves what was said above, i.e., that the great crises are but accelerators of already existing problems.

3 The Impact of the Coronavirus on Labour Migration in Italy

The dismantling of the public reception system has created new irregular migrants in Italy. According to ISPI (Istituto per gli Studi Politica Internazionale) estimates, there are more than 26,000 people (26,722, to be precise), in addition to the approximately 70,000 that would have represented the increase in irregular migrants since June 2018. In other words, the tightening of reception conditions in Italy has accelerated the growth of irregular immigrants by almost 40%. This brings the overall total (again according to ISPI estimates) of irregular migrants to 611,000 at the end of 2019, and a forecast of

649,000 at the end of 2020 (Villa 2020a). In the meantime, however, the COVID-19 pandemic has occurred, just in time to prevent tens of thousands of farm workers from coming to Italy for the spring fruit and vegetable harvest. At this point, in the early months of 2020, agricultural producer associations sounded the alarm about the shortage of seasonal labour that would have affected the sector had they not taken action in good time.¹³ We do not have the space here to go into detail about the Italian agricultural sector and its labour market, but a few basic data will enable the reader to have an idea of the situation. Italian agriculture is worth 2.1% of national GDP, with a total production of almost EUR 56 billion.¹⁴ According to CREA (Council for Research in Agriculture and Analysis of the Agricultural Economy) there are over 400,000 foreigners in agriculture, both regular and irregular.¹⁵ The numerically most important group is represented by far by Romanians (107,591 in 2018) followed by Moroccans (35,013), Indians (34,043) and Albanians (32,264) (Magrini 2019, 284). It is interesting to note that, in the two-year period 2017-18, the foreign component of agricultural workers tends to increase, a sign of a progressive lack of interest in the sector on the part of Italian workers. Agriculture, in Italy, is a highly difficult sector from the point of view of labour relations, often characterised by exploitation and illegal work. The “indecent work” (as defined by the Placido Rizzotto Observatory of Flai/CGIL in its latest report¹⁶) in agriculture provides in some cases average wages between 20 and 30 euro/day, piecework, half of the salary indicated by the collective labour agreement. In extreme cases, migrant workers can be paid as little as 1 euro per hour. Exploitation is also partly due to the increasing role played by the large-scale organised retail trade, which in recent years has almost completely replaced traditional detail selling, and tends to impose ever lower prices on producers.¹⁷ In the Southern regions of Italy, it is estimated that there are about 60,000 seasonal harvesters, and up to 17,500 may live in illegal settlements. In other words, real ghet-

13 Confagricoltura (2020), “Comunicato Stampa”. <https://www.confagricoltura.it/ita/area-stampa/comunicati/a-rischio-l%E2%80%99ortofruta-italiana.-in-tervenire-per-evitare-il-lockdown-del-comparto>.

14 2018 data, in ISTAT, “Andamento dell’economia Agricola. Anno 2018”, 14 May 2019.

15 According to the Ministry of Agriculture, foreign workers legally employed in the sector would be 346,000. See declaration of the Minister of Agriculture before the Senate’s Schengen Commission on 27 May 2020. https://www.redattore sociale.it/article/notiziario/regolarizzazione_bellanova_migranti_impiegabili_da_2_giugno_corridoi_verdi_difficili_?UA-11580724-2.

16 Flai-CGIL, Osservatorio Placido Rizzotto 2020.

17 Between 24 February and 1 March, sales in supermarkets rose by 12.2%. <https://www.nielsen.com/it/it/insights/article/2020/coronavirus-continuano-a-crescere-gli-acquisti-nella-gdo/>.

tos in which it is easy to imagine that the spread of the Coronavirus could be rapid and uncontrolled, given the precarious living conditions that characterise them. This is therefore, in short, the work situation in the Italian countryside, where the outbreak of the COVID-19 has taken place. In this scenario, as mentioned above, economic reasoning prevailed, convincing the Government to promote the regularisation of certain categories of undocumented foreign workers, including those employed in agriculture. On the one hand, employers of illegally hired workers (both foreign and Italian) can apply for regularisation with a payment of 400 euro, provided that they were already in Italy on 8 March, i.e., the first day of the lockdown. Also foreign workers with a residence permit expired from 31 October 2019, can be granted a temporary residence permit for six months, if they can prove that they have worked in one of the following sectors: agriculture, personal care, cleaning work. In addition, the worker is required to pay 160 euros. It is clear that this amnesty is more useful to the economy than to the human being. The negligible duration of the temporary residence permit granted is certainly not sufficient to enable access to further employment. In other words, the measure responds first and foremost to the logic of profit and not to that of rights, as has been effectively summarised (Filippi 2020, 24). The main limitation of this operation is undoubtedly its selectivity, which clearly reveals its real purpose. The limitation to the three categories envisaged strikes the nerve of strategic sectors completely relying on the exploitation of foreign labour. This is often made up of asylum seekers whose applications have been rejected, or refugees who have left the protection system (which, as we have seen above, is also becoming increasingly selective). In the current emergency situation, it is absolutely irresponsible to leave hundreds of thousands of people uncovered by the prevention and treatment health services. Beyond the strictly sanitary motivations, the simplest public health reasons must also be considered; in emergency situations, the health service must be as broad and inclusive as possible, in order to prevent the excluded from becoming dangerous vehicles of contagion for the whole community. Also for this reason, in the first months of 2020, migration workers and scholars have got together to call for a general regularisation of the migrants living in the country.¹⁸ Though important in many respects, regularisation *per se* is certainly not the only way to guarantee migrants' access to the National Health Service (SSN in the Italian acronym, i.e., *Servizio Sanitario Nazionale*), which is a fundamental right enshrined in the Constitution since 1948. Full access to the Italian national healthcare system, has been guaranteed by law

18 Among the most relevant, the GREI250 group, which issued a detailed position paper containing innovative proposals (<http://www.grei250.it>).

to all undocumented migrants for the past 20 years. Unfortunately, concrete access to this fundamental right has been subject to many *de facto* limitations, due to the increasingly hostile environment *vis-à-vis* migrants (Perna 2018).

In this respect an interesting example comes from Portugal, which, though hit by the Coronavirus as it was, as early as last March granted resident status all migrants with on-going visas and asylum requests, hence allowing them full access to health care and social services. It is a temporary measure, due to last until the end of June, but it does represent a first step in the right direction.¹⁹

Back to the regularisation launched in Italy, the proposal made by various organisations for the protection of migrants' rights, including ASGI, was actually rather different: according to this proposal, all foreigners presently on the national territory since 29 February 2020 would have been able to obtain a residence permit of 1 year, with the payment of 500 Euros by their employer, if any, but without any expense for the worker (see ASGI 2020). It is difficult to say, at the time of writing, how many workers will be affected by the regularisation. As far as agriculture is concerned, its workforce is extremely varied: if before the crisis of 2008 it was a sector of first employment for many foreigners, waiting to find something better, from 2010 onwards agriculture has become a second-best choice for those who had lost their jobs as a result of the crisis (Ciniero 2019, 289).

Let us briefly look at the other two sectors affected by the recent regularisation (cleaning service and care, mainly for the elderly and children), for which specific COVID-19 legislation provides some extra facilities. It is estimated that in Italy there are approximately two million workers including housemaids, caregivers and baby-sitters, of which 1,200,000 with no contract, and 200,000 irregular foreigners (Zini 2019, 296). This sector has been particularly affected by the Coronavirus crisis: the employers' association Assindatcolf estimates a 30% increase in redundancies in the first quarter of 2020 compared to the same period in 2019. In April, new recruitments are expected to be halved. The situation was created essentially by the combined effect of the fear of contagion and the economic difficulties of families whose incomes fell due to the loss of employment by one or more members. Many caregivers have also tried to return to their countries of origin, frightened by the levels of spread of the pandemic in Italy. Also in this case the regularisation measure largely protects the interests of families (i.e. employers), who have the possibility to stabilise irregularly employed workers. As for agricultural workers, also in this case household workers will benefit from regularisation,

¹⁹ For more details on Portugal's innovative initiative, see Henriques 2020; Ramiro 2020.

or, in case they are unemployed, from a temporary residence permit of six months. In fact, in this way it is possible to obtain labour supply in a period of emergency and in a key sector for the whole national economy (as a matter of fact, domestic work allows a higher participation in the labour market by family members, often women). Unlike agricultural workers, an emergency two-month benefit of 1,000 euros (500 for April and 500 for May) has been made available to domestic workers (provided they do not live in the same household) under certain conditions. These are obviously temporary measures dictated by the emergency, without any guarantee that they will be made available again in the future. One of the fundamental issues that has been stressed for both categories of workers (domestic and agricultural) is the sum of 500 euro to be paid for regularisation: though the payment is due by the employer, it is likely that, as already happened in the past regularisations, it will be charged to the worker, considered by the employer as the 'real beneficiary' of the measure. All the more so in the case of household workers who will benefit from the 1,000 euro allowance.

4 Is Coronavirus Hitting Foreigners Harder Than Nationals?

In the first part of this chapter we have tried, with the few available data, to throw light on some aspects of the impact that the COVID-19 outbreak might have on foreign residents in general, and in particular on asylum-seekers and refugees, in other words on the most precarious group, in Europe and especially in Italy.

Besides, it would be now interesting to understand whether, and why, different nationalities are being hit harder by the virus. Unfortunately, available data in this respect are rather scarce and unreliable, at least for the time being. This is true for Coronavirus-related data in general, and all the more so for specific data concerning foreigners, who are not a central topic in the present public discourse. It is surely not by chance that, in a recent essay published on a leading Italian newspaper the author concludes that we have now lost contact to the spread of the virus among the general population (Villa 2020b).

The British ONS (Office for National Statistics) recently published a paper which tries and breaks down by ethnicity the number of deaths related to the Coronavirus in England (i.e., excluding Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland). The study shows that

when taking into account age in the analysis, Black males are 4.2 times more likely to die from a COVID-19-related death and Black females are 4.3 times more likely than White ethnicity males and females.

Only

after taking account of age and other socio-demographic characteristics and measures of self-reported health and disability at the 2011 Census, the risk of a COVID-19-related death for males and females of Black ethnicity reduced to 1.9 times more likely than those of White ethnicity.²⁰

This last statement clearly highlights the crucial role that “socio-economic disadvantage” (as the ONS puts it) or, in plain words, worse living conditions, play in the spread of the disease. The Coronavirus does not hit at random, but carefully selects its victims among those who are already discriminated in their access to a decent livelihood. Though socio-economic inequality cannot completely explain the gap among them (a remaining part of the difference has not yet been explained, says the ONS in its paper), it is certainly an important element of the analysis. The initiative taken by the ONS is all the more important, if we consider that not only does the public discourse in many manpower-importing industrialised countries of the West tend to minimise the role played by migrant work in their economy, but even attempts to depict them as scapegoats of economic crises.

Would it be possible to make the same analysis on the Italian case, and try to understand whether the Coronavirus is colour-blind or not? First of all, we have to remark that Italian demographic statistics do not consider ‘ethnicity’, but rather ‘citizenship’. Unfortunately, at the time of writing this chapter, there is no comprehensive report on analysing the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak by nationality, and the Italian national institute for Statistics (ISTAT) has not yet made similar data available. However, the Italian ISS (Istituto Superiore di Sanità) recently published an interesting data set on the impact of the Coronavirus in Italy by citizenship. At a first glance, foreign residents in Italy would be affected in only 5.1% of the cases (i.e., 6,395 foreigners over a total of around 126,000 residents). In other words, foreigners (who, according to ISTAT latest figures, at the end of 2018 account for 8.7% of the Italian population) seem to be underrepresented among the victims of the COVID-19. However, a closer look at the figures paints a less rosy picture.

20 Office for National Statistics, “Coronavirus (COVID-19) related deaths by ethnic group, England and Wales: 2 March 2020 to 10 April 2020”, release date: 7 May 2020. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/articles/coronavirusrelateddeathsbyethnicgroupenglandandwales/2march2020to10april2020>.

Table 1 Impact of COVID-19 on major migrant communities (Italy)

| Country of origin | Foreign residents in Italy | Percentage of total foreign residents | % residents in Lombardy out of total residents of the same national group in Italy | COVID-19 cases | COVID-19 cases per 1,000 residents |
|-------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------------------|--|----------------|------------------------------------|
| Romania | 1,206,938 | 23.0 | 14.6 | 1,046 | 0.9 |
| Peru | 97,128 | 1.8 | 44.1 | 787 | 8.1 |
| Albania | 441,027 | 8.4 | 20.9 | 602 | 1.4 |
| Ecuador | 79,249 | 1.5 | 46.3 | 335 | 4.2 |
| Morocco | 422,980 | 8.0 | 22.2 | 307 | 0.7 |
| Ukraine | 239,424 | 4.6 | 22.7 | 267 | 1.1 |
| Egypt | 126,733 | 2.4 | 67.8 | 225 | 1.8 |
| Moldova | 128,979 | 2.5 | 16.5 | 188 | 1.5 |
| India | 157,965 | 3.0 | 30.0 | 182 | 1.2 |
| Bangladesh | 139,953 | 2.7 | 15.9 | 167 | 1.2 |
| Philippines | 168,292 | 3.2 | 34.7 | 159 | 0.9 |
| Nigeria | 117,358 | 2.2 | 13.7 | 133 | 1.1 |
| Pakistan | 122,308 | 2.3 | 32.9 | 132 | 1.1 |
| Total foreigners | 5,255,503 | 100.0 | 22.5 | 6,395 | 1.2 |

Source: ISMU (Iniziativa e Studi sulla Multietnicità) elaboration on ISS and ISTAT data 2020

The information regarding citizenship was in fact available only for 69.3% of the people infected, which inevitably jeopardises the relevance of the dataset. Data on citizenship are reportedly missing for the whole population of the Emilia-Romagna region, where 23,397 COVID-infected people have been detected, as well as for 31,599 citizens from other regions. If we assume that infected foreigners are also 5.1% of the aggregated data (i.e., almost 55,000 persons-54,996), we should add to the 6,395 COVID-infected foreigners 2,804 people who have not been reckoned. The total figure of COVID-positive reported foreign citizens in Italy would be 9,199, i.e. around 7.3%. This calculation still ignores (due to lack of available data) not only the relevant number of foreigners without a valid residence permit, but also all the asylum-seekers in reception centres all over the country. The total reported figure of 6,395 appears therefore grossly underestimated. Concerning nationalities involved, the available data set only allows a limited analysis, because figures show inconsistencies among national communities, that are not easy to explain. As we can see from the table, the incidence of COVID-19 cases for 1,000 residents differs according to citizenship. If we consider the impact of the disease in absolute figures, at the first place we find the Romanian community, with just over 1,000 cas-

es, followed by Peruvians, Albanians, Ecuadorians, and Pakistanis in the last place. If we compare this list with the classification of resident migrant communities in Italy, we will see that they do not overlap with each other: less than one in 1,000 Romanians, for instance, who represent almost one fourth of all foreign residents in the country, are reported to have contracted COVID-19. On the other hand, Peruvians, and, to a lesser extent, Ecuadorians, stand out as the COVID-19 most-hit national groups in Italy, despite their limited presence in the country (1.8% and 1.5% respectively). This seemingly contradiction could find its explanation considering that both groups are mainly concentrated in Lombardy, the Northern Italian region where the pandemic first appeared and where 54% of the total casualties occurred.²¹ However, if we scroll down the list, we will see that Egyptians, two thirds of whom are resident in Lombardy, were only marginally hit by the pandemic (1.8 in a thousand). Clearly, the fact of living in the epicentre of the pandemic cannot explain everything. In other words, the foreign communities most affected by the virus are not necessarily the most numerous in Italy, but neither, as one might suppose, are those with the highest percentage of residents in Lombardy, or at least not all of them. In fact, the ISS, in its press conference, simply grouped the different countries of origin according to their Human Development Index (HDI), without going into further detail. However, it is not easy to find a link between nationality and the impact of the disease, and the available data do not provide other evidence. It might be interesting to try a quick comparison between two national groups (Peruvians and Egyptians) equally present in Lombardy, but with a very different incidence of COVID-19 cases, in order to try and highlight other features that can explain at least in part these differences. According to the data provided by the Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali (Ministry of Labour and Social Policies) in 2018 (MLPS 2019a; 2019b), the two communities present rather different data from different points of view: while among Egyptian immigrants women represent 32.4% of the total, among Peruvians they are 58.2%. Peruvians also have a higher average age (37 years) than Egyptians (28 years). However, the element that considerably distinguishes the two groups, and which could partly explain the different impact of COVID-19, is certainly their position in the labour market: while 36% of Egyptians are employed in the trade and catering sector, 59% of Peruvian immigrants work in the public, social and personal services sector. In fact, the presence of this community especially in household services (cleaning, elderly care) is well known and might have led to a high-

21 See Ministero della Salute (2020), "COVID-19 - Situazione in Italia", <https://tinyurl.com/hjhjmhdc>.

er exposure to contagion. Having said that, it is necessary to make it clear once again that these are assumptions that should be verified in the light of more precise information and reliable data. What is certain is that sectors and working conditions play a major role on exposure to contagion. While migrants (regardless of their origin) are predominantly employed in the low-end of the labour market, ethnic specialisation in different communities leads to different degrees of potential exposure to contagion.

5 In Place of Conclusions

Obviously it is not possible to draw conclusions from a story while it is taking place and that is still in full swing. However, it is possible to look ahead, and try to understand what some of the consequences of COVID-19 might be, in the knowledge that the crisis is far from being over.

We have seen, at least in part, the consequences of the pandemic on the lives of migrants in Europe and Italy, regardless of their legal status and socio-economic conditions. To put it bluntly, their life will become more difficult simply because they are foreigners.²² But foreigners, it is well known, are by definition transnational,²³ and they retain a more or less significant part of their lives in their country of origin. And they often look back on that part of their lives to imagine their future. This is why the COVID-19 crisis directly and heavily affects the countries and communities of origin.

According to a short-term forecast recently made by the World Bank, “remittances to lower - and middle-income countries (LMICs) are projected to fall by 19.7% to 445 billion USD, representing *a loss of a crucial financial lifeline for many vulnerable households*” (World Bank Group, KNOMAD 2020; emphasis added). In 2019, remittances had reached 554 billion USD. Even following the 2008 crisis, remittances fell much less (5%), which gives us a measure of the impact of the crisis generated by the Coronavirus. Forecasts for 2021 (+5.2%) tell us that

the recovery from the crisis is likely to be prolonged and arduous.
(World Bank Group, KNOMAD 2020, 8)

22 Life will probably get tougher for the so-called ‘non-foreign migrants’ too, i.e., for all those people (currently around 1.2 million in Italy) who, despite becoming Italian citizens by naturalisation, have obviously kept their names, accent and complexion. But this issue would deserve to be considered separately.

23 Foreigners are in fact immigrants and emigrants at the same time, as Sayad (2004) explained.

Talking about the foreseeable future,

the present crisis will not lower the income gap sufficiently to reduce migration pressures. On the contrary, income inequality between the low-skilled and high-skilled is likely to increase due to the crisis. (World Bank Group, KNOMAD 2020, 5)

This bleak outlook should be coupled to the forecast made by the WFP (World Food Programme), according to which the world, due to COVID-19, will soon be facing a humanitarian catastrophe, by which

an additional 130 million people could be pushed to the brink of starvation by the end of 2020. (WFP 2020)

We started this chapter by saying that people on the move do so in search for a better life.

If the above forecasts are realistic, it is to be expected that entire communities will be pushed in the near future to move from their places of origin and swell the ranks of migrants, generating a migration similar, at least in numbers, to that originated in 2011 by the Arab Springs. How will we react? How will we welcome them? By raising walls? By creating new ghettos in which to lock up those who have managed to climb over the walls? Once the vaccine will be available (hopefully before too long) will we have the foresight to make it globally accessible, or will we once again say “Europe first”, “Italy first”, “America first”? The COVID-19, which started as a health emergency, is definitely becoming a global social catastrophe. The risk is that, as some authors have highlighted, of

normalizing exceptional policies that restrict freedoms in the name of crisis and public safety.²⁴

While leaving it to others to deal with the necessary ecological turning point to be given to the economy, it is necessary, by everyone, a double quantum leap: in fact, it would not be sufficient, as many hope, the return to a social state capable of levelling out the growing inequalities and ensuring the decoupling of health services from the logic of profit. Even the most fair and far-sighted state organisation with its own citizens can stop in front of those who knock on its doors and say that “the boat is full”. In fact, it would make no sense to provide, for example, ‘food stamps’ for citizens, and exclude those holding a different passport.

24 Sandro Mezzadra (2017), *Migration - Talking Migration*. <https://www.hkw.de/en/app/mediathek/video/55855>.

From this point of view, the recent regularisation, with all its uncertainties and distinctions, is unfortunately not a very promising example.

A purely defensive attitude is not enough: the current crisis can be an opportunity to focus on the structurally unequal character of foreigners' rights and reverse the trend. But this requires civic and political courage.

While the fate of migrants depends to a large extent on the policies of governments and the attitude of citizens, we must not make the mistake of forgetting that they are themselves an active part of society, partly responsible for the success (as well as the failure) of their own migratory project. In all the great periods of crisis (as in the last crisis of 2008) migrants have shown a strong resilience, thanks to which they have been able to absorb, at least in part, the negative impact of the crisis. It will be interesting to observe, in the coming months and years, the strategies they will put in place to adapt to the global change imposed by the pandemic.

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