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## **In search of a good life in a southern European country: The new Italian migration to Athens and Valencia**

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**Abstract:** The most studied mobility flows from southern Europe today are those towards other highly developed areas in the world, especially northern Europe. We do not know very much about those flows directed toward other southern European countries. The main aims of this paper are to contribute to a better understanding of these processes and to find common features between them, discussing – in a comparative perspective – some research findings related to Italians living in Athens (Greece) and Valencia (Spain). These studies have been carried out with a qualitative method combining participatory observation in virtual and real Italian communities with in-depth interviews. The main result of the comparison is that both migration flows go beyond economic mobility from Southern Europe, predominantly caused by a shortage of good jobs. Other motivations seem to be at stake in these pathways of mobility. Factors attracting Italians to these two cities, such as the cost of living, the quality of services, less taxes, the safety of public spaces, among others, are related with the better quality of life as opposed to the one related to the area of origin. Those factors do not replace the relevance of economic migration motives, but certainly put forward the complexity of these emerging intra-southern European countries migration flows, underlining the multidimensional factors pushing them.

**Keywords:** Southern Europe, international migration, lifestyle migration, quality of life.

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## **En búsqueda de una buena vida en un país del sur Europa: la nueva emigración a Atenas y Valencia**

**Resumen:** Los flujos de movilidad del sur de Europa más estudiados en la actualidad son los que se dirigen a otras zonas altamente desarrolladas del mundo, especialmente al norte de Europa. No sabemos mucho sobre los flujos dirigidos hacia otros países del sur de Europa. Los principales objetivos de este trabajo son contribuir a una mejor comprensión de estos procesos y encontrar rasgos comunes entre ellos, discutiendo -en una perspectiva comparativa- algunos resultados de dos investigaciones realizadas sobre italianos residentes en Atenas (Grecia) y Valencia (España). Estos estudios se han llevado a cabo con un método cualitativo que mezcla las técnicas de observación participativa en comunidades italianas virtuales y reales y entrevistas en profundidad. El principal resultado de la comparación es que ambos flujos migratorios van más allá de la movilidad económica desde el sur de Europa, causada predominantemente por la escasez de buenos empleos. Otros motivos parecen estar en juego en estas vías de movilidad. Los factores que atraen a los italianos a estas dos ciudades, como el coste de la vida, la calidad de los servicios, los menores impuestos, la seguridad de los espacios públicos, entre otros, están relacionados con la mejor calidad de vida en comparación con la de la zona de origen. Estos factores no sustituyen la relevancia de los motivos de la migración económica, pero ciertamente ponen de manifiesto la complejidad de estos flujos migratorios emergentes entre países del sur de Europa, subrayando los factores multidimensionales que los empujan.

**Palabras Clave:** Europa del Sur, migraciones internacionales, migración de estilo de vida, calidad de vida.

## **1. Introduction**

According to a recent review of the literature on migration in southern European countries (Maddaloni & Moffa, 2019), there are many important migration flows in this area. It is well known that there is a persisting flow of migrants and refugees from sub-Saharan Africa and the Near and Middle East. Secondly, there is a “lifestyle migration” from other developed countries, a phenomenon that partly overlaps with other similar processes, such as marriage migration and retirement migration. Finally, there is a new emigration flow from this region: people who are leaving the countries of southern Europe, especially after the last economic crisis (2008-2016). Among them, special attention has been paid to highly skilled youth migration, which seems to be highly related to the so-called brain drain. A significant debate has focused on the implications of youth mobility as both an enriching experience in a subjective perspective and a loss of human capital for source areas (Staniscia et al., 2021). The public discourse on migration has overwhelmingly focused on the first of the above-mentioned processes. However, other migratory flows are apparently gaining a growing importance today. Migration from Italy, for instance, remains very high even after the upturn in the domestic economy in late 2010’s (Pugliese, 2018, pp. 9-14). Moreover, very little attention has been paid to migration *within* southern Europe, except from a study about reciprocal youth mobilities between Italy and Spain (Pumares et al., 2017). Nevertheless, today these flows involve many people – this is especially true for Italians’ migration to Spain (Ingellis & Esteban, 2018).

The aim of this paper is to present some results of two research projects, on Italian communities abroad conducted independently during 2017 and 2018. More specifically, one research was focused on the Italian diaspora in Athens, Greece (Maddaloni, 2019; Maddaloni & Moffa, 2020), whilst the other one investigated the more recent and still growing Italian emigration to the city of Valencia, Spain (Ingellis & Esteban, 2018, 2020).

The fast-growing presence of Italians in Valencia (Esteban & Ingellis, 2018) and Athens (Maddaloni, 2019) motivated the research teams to explore this emerging phenomenon. These research programs were aimed mainly at analysing, through the individual migrants’ subjective perspective, the motives to move to Valencia and Athens as destination cities and the main features of their way of living in these two cities. Structural indicators do not fully explain these flows as an economic migration mostly driven by a regional economic decline and the consequent lack of good quality jobs:

Spain (Ingellis & Calvo, 2015) and Greece are not more economically developed and with more inclusive labour market than Italy (Ingellis, 2017). Therefore, other factors and individual motivations should be at stake today in these intra-Southern European migration flows (Ingellis, 2016). The case studies of Italians moving from many areas of Italy to these two cities could help to explore the attractive factors and subjective motives. This paper tries to explore them and finds common features between the two flows.

## **2. Theoretical framework**

### *2.1. The new Italian emigration in times of crisis: an overview of the literature*

With the beginning of the economic recession, at the end of the first decade of the new century, the framework of Italian migration has changed. Starting from 2012-2013, the outflows from this country almost exceeded the inflows, which remained high only because of Italy's role as the first destination for refugees and migrants. This recent wave of emigration is marked by a series of features that have induced many migration scholars to define it as "new" (Bonifazi, 2017, pp. 43-114; FILEF, 2014; Gjergji, 2015; Pugliese, 2018; Sanfilippo, 2017). Following this literature, we can summarize the new features of the Italian emigration as follows.

First, we must underline the growing heterogeneity of these new migration flows as regards age, gender, nationality and other socio-demographic features. After the Second World War, during the last migration wave before the one we are experiencing today, the prototypical Italian emigrant was a man at working age, coming from southern Italy, with low educational level. He was usually moving towards the Americas, the northern and central European countries, or even the most developed Italian regions, in search for a job in the secondary sector. This image is no longer representative of the new Italian emigrant.

To begin with, the recent migration flows from Italy seem to involve people of all ages, not only young people, but also adults and even the elderly people. The increased heterogeneity of these flows per age groups implies *per se* a greater articulation of structural factors and individual reasons for migration. Besides, even though there is a little number of foreign residents among recent emigrants, native Italian citizens are still the bulk of the new emigration flow. Furthermore, there is a growing number of women among the new emigrants. Women who migrate from Italy are no longer following their fathers or husbands (Bruzzone et al., 2016). Their mobility is rather the

result of a personal choice. Sometimes this can result in an inversion of the traditional roles in the migration pathway (Moffa, 2014).

In addition, the new Italian emigrants mainly come from urban areas. In many cases, they also come from the northern and central regions of the country. This last result contrasts sharply with the idea that emigration comes mainly from “backward”, “underdeveloped” or “peripheral” regions. On the contrary, there is evidence that the more developed areas of Italy are turning now into a main source of outward mobility flows (Staniscia & Benassi, 2018).

As shown by many scholars, most migrants have a higher education and/or high professional skills and migrate to European capitals such as London, Berlin and Paris (Dubucs et al., 2017; King et al., 2016; Valisena, 2016; Varriale, 2021) searching for job opportunities or to move ahead their career. This highly skilled migration makes sense for the current debates on “brain drain” or “brain escape” (Avveduto et al., 2004; Beltrame, 2007; Tintori & Romei, 2017), which are becoming popular in the media. Indeed, highly qualified emigration appears today as almost the only concern in domestic public discourse on this kind of international mobility.

Finally, some new migrants come from families with a high (sometimes very high) social status. This seems to be a topic still little explored by the current literature on international mobility concerning Italy. Anyway, some debates on this subject can be found in the literature on lifestyle migration (Benson & O’Reilly, 2009; Benson & Osbaldiston, 2014).

The social and demographic profile of the Italian emigration is not the only feature that has changed recently. Indeed, the whole migration process has changed. The migration project, the mobility pathways, the way to live the emigration experience and many other elements are deeply changing the nature of these flows.

To give just a few examples, traditional intermediaries and emigrant associations have almost completely disappeared in this new wave of Italian emigration. They seem to have lost their role of reference points for the migrant networks and the national/regional communities abroad, substituted almost entirely by virtual communities in mainstream social media, fostering social capital via trust and “weak ties” (Granovetter, 1973). Consequently, often the individual migration pathway is preceded today by a preventive socialization through online social media. Facebook groups, personal blogs and websites about Italians living abroad provide the information base and the “weak ties” of cooperation that allow the first definition of the individual mobility project.

Moreover, many migration pathways are preceded, today, by long (albeit temporary) life experiences abroad. Sometimes, this can happen as a result of appealing European

Union's cultural exchange programs (Raffini, 2014). Other times, this may result from long visits to relatives and friends who have already emigrated. Tourist experiences can also be "reused" to build a new mobility project (William & Hall, 2002).

As far as the destination areas, the new emigration takes advantage of the opportunities offered by globalization and involves all developed and emerging countries of the world. However, the countries of the European Union are certainly those towards which mobility flows are most concentrated on. The creation of a single area of citizenship for the nationals of EU Member States is a powerful incentive for expatriation, which is perceived by many, especially young people, as an update of the old "internal" mobility (Favell, 2008; Recchi, 2013; Recchi & Favell, 2009; Valisena, 2016). The ease of transport and communication with the homeland is another factor driving the migratory choices of Italians.

Finally, it should not be forgotten that changes in the economy and the labour market everywhere result in increasing uncertainty and insecurity in employment relationships and often in self-employment as well. Consequently, many new Italian emigrants cannot find but precarious jobs. This affects not only low-skilled expatriates, but also those with high educational credentials. Therefore, many new Italian emigrants are often supported by their families at least in the early stages of their migration pathway.

## *2.2. Structural factors and individual motives at the origin of the new emigration: a theoretical debate*

Some literature on the new Italian emigration explains this phenomenon purely through economic categories. Drawing basically on conventional theories on labour market and mobility, this literature focuses on what is perceived as the most important migration flows – those concerning working-age people. According to these scholars, the scarcity of quality and well-paid jobs, due to the Italian economic crisis, drives young highly skilled people to leave the country (Recchi & Salamónska, 2015; Varriale, 2021). This outflow is not balanced by a corresponding inflow, because of the declining conditions of the Italian economy in the medium-long term. On this point, conventional literature maintains that "highly skilled workers often leave their home country in the pursue of better life standards, higher pay as well as better and more challenging work opportunities" (Nedeljkovic, 2014, p. 7). Moreover, "highly skilled individuals are over-represented in the new flows of Southern European migrants because they are the ones who are able to better respond to the labour market needs of Northern EU Member States" (Lafleur & Stanek, 2017, p. 216). Therefore, the new migration from Southern Europe can be seen as an almost natural aggregate effect of

individual choices based on both long-term historical differences in national labour market institutions (Maddaloni, 2009) and their reaction to the structural changes underway in the era of neoliberal globalization. Italy, for instance, “does not adequately reward the young and educated either, who are very often confined to and limited by unattractive careers, underpaid and underemployed” (Tintori & Romei, 2017, p. 63). The migration flows we are focusing on cannot be explained only by differences in the local economy and labour market, because the employment opportunities of the destination countries (Greece and Spain), do not seem to be, at a first glance, better than those that migrants have in their country of origin. That is why we are going to explore alternative perspectives.

So far, these flows have been little considered by migration research, but they have gained consistency in recent years. Apart from the data already mentioned above, we can note that the Italian Register of Residents Abroad (AIRE) has included Spain among the 10 main destinations of Italian emigration in the 2010 decade. Recently, Greece has also appeared among the destinations of Italians who move abroad, although the flow of migration to this country is much lower than that to Spain (the same can be said about Portugal).

As is well known, the countries of southern Europe have been included in the category of PIGS by the media, during the last downturn. This is a derogatory acronym that aims at describing them as “backward” countries whose development pathway seems to have recently suffered a setback and even a turnaround that pushes them away from the European core. In such a context, it can be hard to understand why the new Italian migrants should go to countries with a similar (Spain) or even lower (Greece) level of overall economic growth, labour market standards, earned income, quality of services, etc. If there are not economic and structural factors beyond this migratory flow, thus, why is the Italian emigration today moving (also) towards other southern European countries?

Different factors influence the migration project (Hoey, 2014; Torkington, 2012). A recent attempt to create a typology of new Italians’ migration paths tries – as a first step on this road – to separate the reasons bringing about the departure from the country of origin from those that produce the choice of the destination one (Delli Paoli & Maddaloni, 2021). Exploring those reasons, we find as opposites and dichotomised work and lifestyle, production and consumption, or materialist and post-materialist values. The logic of work/production/materialist values is mainly based on economic concerns. In contrast, the logic of post-materialist lifestyle/consumption/values is mainly based on emotional choices related to the construction of individual identity.

This implies that migration can be seen as a choice driven by the search for economic success and/or fulfilment through work, or by consumption, leisure and lifestyle.

It is also worth noting that the changing reality of migration is much stronger than any abstract scheme (King, 2012b). The mutual exclusivity of migrant groups is challenged by the dualism of production and consumption (or work and lifestyle, or materialist and post-materialist values) which, although valid for heuristic purposes, is sometimes ineffective in explaining the actual paths of individual mobility at different stages of their development.

Almost every individual migration path involves both materialist and post-materialist motivations (Bell & Ward, 2000; Williams & Hall, 2002), to the point of prompting some authors to introduce the concept of pro-sumption regarding lifestyle migration (Cohen et al., 2013). In this context, scholars of mobility phenomena work on social, cultural and economic factors such as: cost of living, housing costs, interest in self-fulfilment, leisure experiences, enjoyment of the natural and social environment and cultural heritage, the so-called "rural idyll", climate, improved health, etc. (Huete et al., 2013). Other streams of scientific literature introduce the issue of the individual aspiration to a better quality of life as a motive for migration. The starting points of these approaches focus on issues such as post-materialistic values and lifestyles (Inglehart, 1977), the theory of the creative class (Florida, 2002; 2005), or research on the creation of a new European identity (Recchi, 2013). The point of arrival, however, is similar. Many migrants are apparently searching for better life conditions in a holistic perspective, not only focused on employment opportunities. Decisions about the destination countries, therefore, are not driven solely by labour market or economic growth concerns. The main objectives of the research pathways presented was to try to answer these questions exploring migrants' motivations to choose these cities, through an in-depth analysis of their subjective perspectives.

Even though we are not exploring migrants' motives for leaving Italy – which have already been well analysed in previous studies – but the motives to choose cities of other southern countries, there is a strong connection between the two elements. As well explained by Benson and O'Reilly (2009) "how individuals perceive destinations is the result of a complex interaction between their prior experiences of a location ... and their individual circumstances (including cultural, educational and economic capital) at the point of migration" (p. 613).

In this line, therefore, this paper aims to provide the following contributions to the scientific literature on contemporary migration: (1) to make visible a new emerging intra-EU flow; (2) to explore the reasons to migrate to these two cities from a subjective



perspective; (3) to highlight the main elements of the migrants' assessment of the migratory experience. Therefore, our paper can be useful in current debates about the new intra-EU migrations and its main features.

### **3. Methods**

#### *3.1. Technique and instrument*

The use of the ethnographic perspective to explore this phenomenon is based on evidence that the narration of personal experiences is of fundamental value when exploring the new mobility trends, given that the decision to relocate stimulates thoughts of a new, different and more fulfilling life.

The empirical research in both studies employed two ethnographic techniques: in-depth interviews and some exercises of participant observation (both online and in-presence) on Italian communities in Valencia and Athens. The fieldwork, which stopped at the beginning of the first lockdown, due to Covid pandemic<sup>3</sup>, began in February 2017 with multisite virtual ethnography on the social networking site Facebook. A participant observation was undertaken in Facebook groups of the Italians communities in the two cities. Following Spradley's (1980) classification, our observation was at degree 2 (passive observation) during the first four to five months, rising to degree 3 (moderate participation) for the remainder of the time. The researchers used the observation work to accurately formulate the research problem, considering the main issues emerging from the online community by adopting a bottom-up perspective. Observation was also useful, on one hand, to select the people to be interviewed (people with profiles more common in the community as for job and age, those abler to reflect on their conditions, to share information, to critically discuss the issues arising in the virtual communities) and on the other hand, as a way of verifying the information obtained through in-depth interviews, to check its quality and to see at what extent it was shared in the community.

Nevertheless, both research pathways focus above all on in-depth interviews with Italians living in these cities (30 in Valencia, 34 in Athens, 64 in total). About the selection of the subjects to include in our sample, we have selected the criteria to diversify the interviewees as for the main socio-demographic features potentially having an impact on the content of the interviews namely gender, age, occupational status, years staying in the destination country, area of origin, educational level. The

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<sup>3</sup> This means a highly significant discontinuity in the life of the immigrants belonging to the communities observed. In other words, we could not analyse the pre-pandemic and post-pandemic data as the context were the same.

saturation criterion was used to decide to stop interviewing: when the contents of new interviews did no longer provide any new insights, the fieldwork was concluded. As for using in-depth interview techniques, this is a frequent choice when studying migration, since it is often very difficult to find (or to bring about) conditions for a quantitative survey on this topic. It is very difficult to obtain the exact number of an immigrant population at a given time and extract a statistically representative sample from it. Moreover, carrying out a field survey by means of qualitative interviews can allow a better understanding of the meanings attributed by the actors to their actions in the context of their *lebenswelt*. This allows for the definition of categories that can subsequently be used for further research in the same field. This is particularly the case for research areas – such as migration studies – which seem to be evolving rapidly and for which there can therefore be no great accumulation of knowledge (Payne & Payne, 2004, pp. 175-179; Zapata-Barrero & Yalaz, 2018).

In both cases, the core of the research project – the realization of in-depth interviews – has been carried out quite in the same period (spring 2017–spring 2018, in the case of Valencia; summer–autumn 2017, in that of Athens).

The main methodological difference between the two research pathways refers to the target population. The research carried out in Athens was aimed at the whole population of Italian citizens living in this city and its surroundings. Therefore, it is closer to studies on the whole of migrant communities. The research carried out in Valencia, instead, focused mainly on immigrants at working age who have moved from Italy in recent years. It means that it is closer to studies on the effects of the crisis on mobility. However, this difference has not to be overestimated. Only three interviewees in Athens are inactive or retired, that is to say out of the labour market. All the others are at working age. Much of the Italian immigration to Athens is very recent, as the migration flow to Valencia. Moreover, many Italians in Valencia seem to focus more on their quality of life than on working career and economic success, suggesting that it has not been a working migration. The same happens among the Italians in Athens, as we shall see later. Therefore, the differences in the target population can be considered as not particularly significant and make the comparison possible in the framework of the main aims of this paper.

The results were elaborated starting from the texts of the interviews through the discourse analysis from a sociology of knowledge approach. The analysis focused on how the interviewees re-construct their experience as for the main issues explored during the interviews (Keller, 2011). The interviews focused on: socio-demographic characteristics, employment situation prior to migration, previous migration experience, the migration decision (how the idea originated, how they made the

decision, how they found the information etc.), motivation, the migration process, labour and social insertion in the hosting context, perceptions of life in the destination city and an overview of the experience, its satisfactory and unsatisfactory elements.

### *3.2. The group of respondents: general socio-demographic features*

The respondents'<sup>4</sup> main features are described in this section. As far as gender is concerned, the interviewees in Valencia are mostly men (19 out of 30). This gender distribution reflects the gender composition of the Italian community in Valencia (Ingellis & Esteban, 2018)<sup>5</sup>. This even though Italian (highly skilled) migrant women have been growing rapidly in Spain recently (Bruzzone et al., 2016). On the contrary, there is a higher presence of women among the respondents in Athens (19 out of 34). What seems to make the difference is the greater presence of marriage migrants in this community.

As for the region of origin, in both cases half of the sample comes from southern Italy (the less developed area of the country), 14 out of 30 interviewees in Valencia, 16 out of 34 on Athens, the other half comes from the central and northern regions of the country, an area richer than the two destination cities and the *Comunidad Valenciana* and Attica in general, according to the main economic indicators<sup>6</sup>. The theoretical framework of economic migration could find it difficult to explain why there is such an intense flow of people moving to this area at a working age. The differences between the research programs affect particularly the distribution of respondents by age group. As we have mentioned before, the research in Valencia was focused on people at core working age (30-49). The research in Athens was aimed at the whole community of Italians living in Athens. In the Athenian case, 6 people are less than 30 years of age, 15 of them are between 30 and 49, and finally 13 are more than 50. In the following section we will consider basically respondents of core working age, in order to increase the comparability of results between the two research programs.

A common feature of both groups is that they consist mainly of highly skilled people. In the Athens case, 20 out of 34 have a degree. In the case of Valencia, they are 17 out of 30, four having studied almost two years at university, while the remaining had completed secondary education. Furthermore, many people included in the two groups of respondents had an experience of migration before the current one. Therefore, even many respondents with a relatively poor institutionalized cultural capital (Bourdieu

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<sup>4</sup> See the table in annex.

<sup>5</sup> More precisely, the gender composition of the collective of Italians registered in the lists of the municipality of Valencia - that is, the most stable part of Italian immigration in this city.

<sup>6</sup> In the case of immigrants to Athens, 13 interviewees come from the more developed regions, while 5 were born in Greece.

1979), seem to have already acquired some “embodied” cultural capital before their current life abroad. They already knew something about how to behave in a different social and cultural context, how to manage complex and unknown situations, how to learn and practice a foreign language, and so on. On the other hand, it is worth considering that – even within the legal framework of the European Union – it is not always possible to transfer one’s educational credentials or skills from one country to another. This means that, both in Athens and Valencia, some respondents may have given up the use of certain elements of their CVs.

Finally, it is certainly useful to have some ideas about the working status and career of the respondents. Among those living in Athens, 23 people started their working life in Italy, 5 in Greece and 4 in other countries. Their career paths seem to be characterized by a high level of precariousness. Most of them tell of 3 or more work experiences during their working life and 5 of them currently have more than one job. As far as the professional status of the respondents is concerned, 11 of them are self-employed while 14 of them are employed.

As for employment of Italians interviewees in Valencia, 10 were in traditional professions (lawyer, architect, medical doctors etc.), 8 were new-generation professionals with jobs related to the digital media, 4 were professionals in the field of wellness and beauty (physiotherapists, personal trainers), 2 are owner of real estate agencies, 4 were chefs in Italian restaurants, 2 were employed in multinational companies.

Nevertheless, it is perhaps useful to note that among self-employed, 8 respondents worked as employees before starting up their own business or professional activity. Besides, most of the respondents began working in Italy or in a country different from Spain. Only 6 people reported to have started their career path in Valencia.

#### **4. Results. Reasons for living in Valencia and Athens in the Italians migrants’ perspective**

Coming now to discuss our research results, in this section we will basically use extracts from the in-depth interviews in order to highlight them, with reference to the individual motives to stay and live in Athens and Valencia. As we have said before, we are mainly focusing on individual reasons related to the so-called “pull” factors, since literature on recent Italian migration has already highlighted the structural factors underlying the decision to leave the country (see above, sections 2). So, what are the reasons that have led some Italians to choose Athens or Valencia as places to live? Under this respect, we have to say – as a preliminary remark – that issues relating to

employment, the working environment or job career often arise in respondents' speeches. Each of them is fully aware that having a job (and the income that comes with it) is a prerequisite for living in Athens, Valencia or anywhere else. Moreover, the extent and density of the social ties of many respondents depend to a large degree – especially at the beginning of their migration experience – on their work activity.

Anyway, in each group of respondents the reasons supporting the decision to live in Athens or Valencia go very often well beyond the job search. Under this respect, we can identify 8 semantic areas or narrative patterns. They are as follows.

#### *4.1. The cost of living*

To both groups of Italians living abroad, these aspects seem to qualify very positively life and work in the destination cities. Although this factor is mainly economic in nature, its sociological significance is quite different from the search for opportunities for professional fulfilment or upward mobility. Apparently, these actors compare the relationship between income from work and cost of living at local level with what could be obtained instead in the area of origin or elsewhere in Italy<sup>7</sup>. “... so if you have the thousand euro here, in short, you're fine, [you] put the money aside, you feel a little almost a privileged [guy]” (M, 37, Athens) “... here you spend much less on rents, you rent a room and the prices are those that were in Italy 20 years ago, so I can do it.” (M, 41, Athens). “Here in Valencia you live much better, life is very cheap, because with the salary you receive, you can pay the rent on your own and be able to go out and have a social life. In Valencia, electricity is much less expensive than in Italy and Ibiza.” (F, 31, Valencia).

The aims pursued seem to be mainly defensive (to maintain the social status at a certain average level) rather than offensive (to improve this status, reaching a higher position).

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<sup>7</sup> For a quantitative comparison on the *cost of living* in European countries, see for instance the figures shown in: [https://www.numbeo.com/cost-of-living/rankings\\_by\\_country.jsp?title=2019&region=150](https://www.numbeo.com/cost-of-living/rankings_by_country.jsp?title=2019&region=150). Apparently, in 2019 Italy ranked 13<sup>th</sup> out of 40 European countries as regards the average cost of living. Greece ranked 17<sup>th</sup> and Spain 18<sup>th</sup> in this ranking - that is, the cost of living in these two countries is lower than in Italy (Last visit: December 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2021). As regards the *quality of life*, a recent comparison shows that Spain ranks 10<sup>th</sup> and Greece 32<sup>nd</sup> out of 151 countries, whilst Italy shows a worse performance, placing in 37<sup>th</sup> position. See <https://www.worlddata.info/quality-of-life.php> (Last visit: December 4<sup>th</sup>, 2021).

#### 4.2. *The burden of bureaucracy*<sup>8</sup>

Both Valencian and (albeit to a lesser extent) Athenian respondents tend to think that local bureaucracy is better than the Italian for two reasons: on the one hand they find it easier to manage, because of less requirements (the case of Athens) or because of its digitalization (the case of Valencia); on the other hand, they find the public services more efficient and able to give rapid responses to citizens' problems. "Here being self-employed is much easier, less taxes are paid, you have less paperwork to do and get more services in return ..." (F, 44, Valencia). "Furthermore, we have discovered that here, with the public administration, everything is much easier... in the public health system they rapidly care about you, respond to your needs. It seems to be in Germany, everything works much better than in Italy." (F, 40, Valencia). "Some things are done quietly through self-certification, there are centres, of ... let's say so, services to the citizen, which are there precisely for self-certifications, these things here ... so the only effort that a person must make is to go there ..." (F, 38, Athens)

Less paperwork is considered a very positive aspect as it makes life and business easier. We can observe, anyway, a difference between the two groups of respondents as regards their opinion on the public services locally available. Many interviewees in Valencia justify their migration choice arguing also that a better life is possible in that city thanks to better infrastructures and services – namely health, public transports, urban facilities, children's playgrounds, and so on. All this makes their lives less stressful than what it was in Italy. This positive opinion is not so widespread among Italians who live in Athens. Their views on the public services locally available are mixed, but they are often negative.

#### 4.3. *The safety of public spaces*

This aspect is often contrasted with the problems of urban and social degradation in the country of origin. A general sense of insecurity perceived when being in public spaces in Italy is transmitted by many interviewees. By contrast, they find the "street life" in their destination cities much safer and comfortable. "Our country is beautiful, but I believe that Italians have lost the awareness of where they live and very often the country [has been] mistreated for many years, and so there has been a great

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<sup>8</sup> With regard to this, as with the other points highlighted below, it is difficult to offer an international comparison from which a disadvantage for Italy in relation to Greece or Spain can be deduced. However, the reasons given by the interviewees appear to be widespread among many recent emigrants from Italy, as shown by many websites on the new Italian emigration. See for example: <http://www.arrivederciitalia.it/perche-andare-via-dall-italia/> (last update: December 10<sup>th</sup>, 2017). See also: <https://italianiemigrati.com/scappare-dallitalia-5-motivi-per-andarsene-subito-senza-pensarci-troppo/> (last update: May 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2020).

degradation, not only from the aesthetic point of view but its quality of life as well.” (M, 44, Valencia)

“I love my city, I love everything, but I do not like the environment, I do not ... the fact of being in the street, keeping your eyes open and being alert wherever you go, you stop in the car at the traffic light, “look at this guy with the scooter that is standing next to my car, who is he?”, someone wants this, someone wants that, this is not a quality of life acceptable to my standards.” (M, 33, Athens)

“...here I live a quiet life, in a village where I can go out in the street at night, doing outdoor sports in a peaceful way. Many Italians move to Spain because they can no longer stand living in a degraded context without any solution and try to find whatever way to escape”. (Facebook group post Valencia\_ 02 April, 2017)

This is not an individual perspective, but a public issue with a positive impact on an individual's everyday life in terms of self-perceived well-being.

#### *4.4. The geographical proximity*

Both Athens and Valencia have good flight connections with many Italian cities, allowing the Italians living there to reach their hometowns in just a few hours. For the same reason their relatives and friends can easily go there to spend some days with them. Together with contacts through social media, these mobility facilities almost spontaneously create a transnational social field (Levitt and Glick Schiller, 2004) in which expatriates can still feel themselves involved in the Italian life. “[My Italian friends] come [here], they have come quite often, actually because of an economic issue, flights are cheap, and the place is reasonable, here the summer is lived with great ease, and it becomes all very low-priced (...) there are many people, many friends who have come here to visit me anyway. (M, 32, Athens) “We chose Valencia because it is close to Italy, [it's] easy to go and see the family, with children it is important.” (F, 40, Valencia).

Indeed, they do not want to distance themselves from Italy, on the contrary, they are interested in maintaining the links with their community of origin and it is considered to be as a plus in terms of quality of life.

#### *4.5. The weather conditions.*

These two cities on the shores of the Mediterranean benefit from weather conditions that are very similar to the Italian ones. In turn, this allows to live in the open air for most of the year. This is one of the most frequent issues when searching for residential

tourism (Huete, 2009) and lifestyle migration (Benson & O'Reilly, 2009; Benson & Osbaldiston, 2014).

“I leave Dublin on Sunday morning, [there were] 2/3 degrees, rain, I arrive on Sunday evening in Athens, 19 degrees, a [sense of] freedom ... I leave this airport, I arrive at ... smell of oranges (...) eh, olive trees ... warm air, I did ... as I set foot that evening in Athens, as I set foot, I looked around (...) buildings, trees, olive trees and everything, (...) I feel at home (...) I am already setting off on the right foot, I feel at home” (M, 33, Athens)

“I could have moved to UK because of my origin [his father is English] but the weather is not as good as in Valencia, and it is important to me.” (M, 36, Valencia). This migration flow suggests that the individual project is considering not only economic and work-related issues of life, but other intangible aspects as well.

#### *4.6. The quality of social relations*

By this dimension, we basically mean the open, relaxed and fluid character of social relations at both interpersonal and group level (colleagues, friends etc.). In turn, this “community-like” feature related to social relations may be linked to weather conditions and the subsequent possibility to live outdoor in the street for most of the year<sup>9</sup>. “Well, in Greece, I like that there is this ... I don't know if you noticed there are always people everywhere at any time [...] this is an aspect that I really enjoy, at any time you can meet people, talk to people whenever, this I've always found ... It's an open people.” (F, 35, Athens)

“Even when walking in the street, alone, with small children, I have had problems, as it happens to all people, and I have received help [from the people in the street]. Everyone looks you in the eye, they listen to you, if you talk to people, they are solar and so this thing, this empathy ... that is created even with unknown people, this thing ... has ... makes me feel very close to people here.” (M, 44, Valencia)

#### *4.7. The local culture*

Many interviewees report that they “feel at home” also because of the similarity between the cultures of the destination countries and that of the country of origin. Besides, this dimension seems to be connected to the previous one, to the extent that

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<sup>9</sup> Anyway, this does not prevent Italians living in these areas from sometimes being disappointed by native citizens for their behavior, which they may consider superficial in their friendship, or, on the contrary, possessive in their affective or family relationships.



the world of rituals and values is linked to the sphere of social and interpersonal relations<sup>10</sup>.

“I’ll always say it. As soon as I opened the door of the plane I felt at home.” (F, 44, Valencia).

“It is very easy to meet a lot of people. Valencian people practically live in the street. Nevertheless, it is not so easy to have friends in a deeper way.” (M, 32, Valencia).

“The weather is ... It plays a very important role on the choice (...) first, the opportunity to go to the beach, go swimming, and even lifestyle, food as well as music, or people, is not much more ... It is very close to what [our] culture of origin is.” (M, 41, Athens)

#### *4.8. The social identity*

Generally, both Italians in Athens and Italians in Valencia tend to define themselves not as “emigrants”, but rather as people who are trying to live a “good life” in a country that recognizes them the same citizenship status as the native residents.

“No, absolutely not [I don’t feel like an emigrant] ... maybe I could define myself an emigrant if, maybe, instead of coming [here], I had gone to Germany (...) there [I could have found] such a different reality and particularly far from the country, the city I come from (...) here I haven’t had that issue, I haven’t made much effort perhaps at all, to adapt myself to the city.” (M, 33, Athens)

“Ours is not a choice that depends on a bad economic situation, which is emigration, we do not feel like emigrants, we feel like people with children who are looking for a place where the quality of life is more in line with our values ...” (M, 44, Valencia).

Overall, these opinions seem to highlight the importance of not purely economic aspects in the mobility choices of Italian people abroad. The most satisfactory aspects of their migration experience could be classified in two main areas. The first one is related to the similarities with the Italian context (weather, relationship, local culture etc.), which include the last 4 aspects described above. The second one is related to significant differences with the context of origin. The results we have obtained therefore support the views expressed by those scholars who have shown the importance of issues such as the search for a better quality of life, the criticism of the “Italian way of life” as it has become today, and the relative security of being mobile people within the institutional framework of the European Union (Recchi, 2013; Gjergji, 2015; Ricucci, 2017; Tomei, 2017).

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<sup>10</sup> The comments made in the previous footnote can therefore be extended to this dimension.

Compared to what is already known in the literature on migration, the results presented here highlight that these aspects of life condition matter for destination areas – such as those of southern Europe – now judged by the actors not just “at the same level”, but in better conditions than Italy. This is not to say that economy doesn’t matter anymore, that today Italian migrants to Spain, or Greece, live only happy lives, or that there are not precarious or marginalized situations in their pathways abroad. This is to say that many Italians *who have some degree of freedom* in their mobility choices (that is, the middle and upper classes) may choose to migrate to another southern European country and that their decision are mainly more related to the (expected and experienced) quality of life than to job opportunities.

A wide range of factors are influencing the migrants’ decision-making processes, most of them centered on making life easier and improving their quality of life in a holistic sense, including a general well-being of individuals and families. Not surprisingly, they often describe themselves as “expatriates” (Ricucci, 2017; Tomei, 2017), rather than “migrants” – particularly if they are professionals or highly skilled workers. Their migration experience seems to be positively influenced by two main elements. On the one hand, they can find the possibility to preserve *a way of life* like the Italian one regarding its most satisfactory aspects – which cannot be easily found in a northern European country. On the other hand, they can find the opportunity to improve their quality of life as regards those aspects in which other southern European countries have also done better than Italy.

## **5. Conclusions and further research questions**

As examined in the section 2, a wide range of studies have examined the multiple forms of Italians emigration, highlighting the features of this new wave of migration (Pugliese, 2018). On this respect, and from a more general point of view, we have to say that «Post-fordism, space-time compression, and the embeddedness of migration and mobility in the forces of globalization and the New World Order have introduced new mobility forms where none existed before» (King, 2012a, p. 9). The two migration flows examined in research presented in these papers are two of them in our view.

Certainly, these migration flows have occurred in the scenario of the new internal mobility (Favell, 2008; Recchi, 2013; Valisena, 2016) in a European context, perceived as a new homeland, especially by young people. It is no coincidence that the interviewees don’t perceive themselves as emigrants, but as citizens with the same rights of the natives in the destination country. The intra-southern European migrants add similarities in climate and lifestyle to this perception. Moreover, the facility of

communication with relatives and friends, thanks to the digital media, the possibility to travel easily to the destination country and to maintain social ties “here and there” also contribute to make the emigrants feel not living abroad but living in a better homeland.

Another point to be highlighted is that our research show that there are flows of high skilled migration not oriented toward the core areas of Western Europe. In our cases the migration flows come from a semi-peripheral country towards two peripheral European areas according to the Seers et al. (1979) definition.

Furthermore, and as put forward by Staniscia and Benassi (2018), the new Italian migration come mainly from the Northern areas of the country, which are most developed and closer to the western European core. This is true also for our sample (see annex). This could mean that the two flows studied in our research are core/periphery-to periphery flows. This would imply that our research is quite different from the great majority of studies on high-skilled migration from the South to the North Europe.

Therefore, the results presented above seem to support the idea that some flows of international migration can be understood not only as the effects of highly skilled individual mobility plans motivated by structural factors, but also as consequences of individual / familial strategies aimed at a “good life” in a post-materialistic perspective.

The majority of our respondents are not Erasmus students or young people freely moving in Europe. They are mainly adults with families, searching for a “good life”. In some case, Erasmus or tourist experience have likely facilitated the first contact and the rising of the idea that a better life is possible thanks to some distinguish features of a destination country not so far from Italy. The sample we analysed is considerably different from the “prototype” of young high skilled or high qualified people, such as the Eurostars depicted by Favell (2008) searching for adventure and cosmopolitanism in an economically and culturally vibrant metropolis such as London (Varriale, 2021). Nor are they highly skilled people searching for work and professional opportunities in the destination country. Furthermore, the research presented in this paper contribute to clarify what they define as “a good life, a better life”. They are adults searching a new place where many institutional conditions (cost of living, quality of public services, feeling of security) allow for a better balance reducing the main problems they experimented in their life in Italy, that is, to maintain the main features of Mediterranean lifestyle while improving their well-being in a post-materialistic perspective.

Therefore, the research results suggest that most of the Italian emigration towards other southern European countries could be best understood under some different – albeit intertwined – perspectives. It could be seen, first, as a pathway to escape from a

country living a systemic crisis (Maddaloni, 2016) – something worse than a purely temporary downturn. An exit solution (Hirschman, 1970) easily available to those who want to change something, but not everything, for example because they appreciate Mediterranean lifestyles or because they do not want to move too far from Italy. At a deeper level (O'Reilly, 2012), these mobility pathways could be understood as the result of complex, reflexive lifestyle choices in which the economic dimension is balanced by a post-materialist one. They prefer a more relaxed lifestyle than a strong fight for achieving or constantly maintaining a good economic status and level of consumption in a unfavourable and more competitive context. Besides, they could also be seen migrants searching for an individual strategy of social distinction, aiming at the maintenance of a middle (or upper) class *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1977; see also Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) in an age of increasing inequalities and decreasing expectations for most people. With reference to the latter two points, our fieldwork brings to light that, in the interviewees' perspective, the level of consensus towards alternative habits and lifestyles is higher in the other countries of southern Europe than in Italy. Similarly, to Italians to London interviewed by Kings and colleagues (2016), these Italians seems to live the same “process of ‘disidentification’ with Italy and the Italian way of life as represented by the Italian *mentalità* ... [showing] profound disillusionment with Italy ... They still identify strongly as ‘Italians’ but as ‘Italians’ who have left the country out of frustration ... The Italians in London thus see themselves as different ‘kind’ of Italian - as having a different *mentalità* to those who live in Italy” (14). Therefore, competition for status (particularly through the acquisition of status symbols by means of conspicuous consumption) would be less fierce in these countries (Pumares et al., 2017). This would partly explain the perception shared by many respondents, both in Athens and Valencia, that life is “easier”, “more relaxed” there. They are using their migration project to try to maintain their social class status, in a different context more in line with their value: less conspicuous consumption, more sustainability, better quality or relations, less competitiveness, less work, more free time.

These results also seem to give us some indications for future research in this field. First, it could be useful to broaden the comparison to other Italian communities, both in southern Europe (such as Portugal) and in other countries. Comparing different destination areas, we could improve our understanding of the relevance of some specific traits of the “Mediterranean way of life” for some recent migration trends. Secondly, we could build a well-integrated and stable typology of the new Italian migrants. Finally, in the same line of Varriale (2021) for Italians emigrated to London, we need to examine in more details the impact of inequalities in gender, age, social

class, territorial origin and educational level on Italians recently moving to other Southern countries.

## Annex

Table 1. Respondents' features - summary table

Code		Area of origin	Education	Job	
N	Sex-Age		*ISCED indicator	Sector	Occupational position
<b>Valencia</b>					
1	M_41	Campania (South)	ED 3_4	Real estate	Owner
2	F_31	Lombardy (North)	ED 5_8	Graphic design	Self-employed
3	M_49	Lombardy (North)	ED 5_8	Spirits distribution	Owner
4	M_45	Sardinia (South)	ED 5_8	Software production	Self-employed
5	M_34	Campania (South)	ED 5_8	Wellness and sport	Self-employed
6	M_40	Trento (North)	ED 5_8	Catering services	Owner
7	F_27	Lazio (Centre)	ED 5_8	Flat renting	Self-employed
8	M_40	Campania (South)	ED 5_8	Wellness and recovery	Self-employed
9	M_34	Palermo (South)	ED 5_8	Legal services	Self-employed
10	M_45	Lombardy (North)	ED 5_8	Flat renting	Self-employed
11	M_31	Veneto (North)	ED 5_8	Real estate	Self-employed
12	F_42	Campania (South)	ED 5_8	Catering services	Owner
13	M_45	Apulia (South)	ED 5_8	Building	Professional
14	M_40	Tuscany (North)	ED 5_8	Translation services	Professional
15	M_33	Emilia-Romagna (North)	ED 5_8	Translation services	Professional
16	F_40	Sardinia (South)	ED 5_8	Tax and accounting services	Self-employed
17	M_55	Piedmont (North)	ED 3_4	Tax and accounting services	Self-employed
18	M_43	Calabria (South)	ED 5_8	Legal services	Professional
19	M_39	Lazio (Centre)	ED 3_4	Real estate + Marketing and advertising	Owner
20	M_40	Campania (South)	ED 3_4	Catering services	Owner
21	M_34	Apulia (South)	ED 5_8	Photo services	Self-employed
22	F_40	Tuscany (North)	ED 5_8	Flat renting	Owner
23	M_45	Apulia (South)	ED 5_8	Wellness, sport and Photo services	Self-employed
24	F_43	Apulia (South)	ED 5_8	Beauty care services	Self-employed
25	F_45	Sardinia (South)	ED 5_8	Beauty care services	Self-employed
26	M_36	Marche (Centro)	ED 5_8	Web services	Self-employed
27	F_32	Campania (South)	ED 5_8	International youth exchanges	Self-employed
28	F_30	Lombardy (North)	ED 5_8	Clothing retail	Self-employed
29	F_36	Puglia (South)	ED 5_8	Transnational company	Professional / Manager
30	F_46	Sardinia (South)	ED 3_4	National-level business	Employee

Athens					
1	M_28	Marche (Centre)	ED 5_8	Transnational industry	Manager
2	M_37	Abruzzo (Centre)	ED 5_8	Transnational private services + Translation services	Employee + freelance
3	M_54	Lazio (Centre)	ED 3-4	Catering services + Export	Owner
4	F_33	Molise (South)	ED 5_8	Transnational private services	Employee
5	M_29	Greece	ED 5_8	Transnational private services	Employee
6	F_59	Sicily (South)	ED 5_8	/	Inactive
7	F_50	Campania (South)	ED 5_8	Primary school teaching	Employee
8	F_34	Liguria (North)	ED 5_8		Unemployed
9	M_39	Piemonte (North)	ED 3_4	Transnational private services	Employee
10	F_35	Greece	ED 5_8	Transport services	Employee
11	M_41	Sardinia (South)	ED 5_8	Transnational private services	Employee
12	F_33	Greece	ED 5_8	/	Unemployed
13	F_53	Liguria (North)	ED 5_8	Social welfare services	Professional
14	F_57	Abruzzo (Centre)	ED 5_8	Primary school teaching	Employee
15	M_32	Campania (South)	ED 3_4	Transnational private services	Employee
16	F_57	Sardinia (South)	ED 3_4	National-level shipping services	Employee
17	F_50	Lazio (Centre)	ED 3_4	Real Estate	Owner
18	F_55	Campania (South)	ED 5_8	Translation services	Self-employed
19	M_41	Sicilia (South)	ED 5_8	Translation services + Tourism + Cultural services	Self-employed + employee
20	F_24	Puglia (South)	ED 5_8	/	Unemployed
21	F_56	Calabria (South)	ED 5_8	University teaching + Cultural services	Employee + manager
22	M_43	Sicilia (South)	ED 5_8	Building	Professional
23	M_62	Greece	ED 5_8	Import-export	Entrepreneur
24	F_33	Piemonte (North)	ED 3_4	Catering services	Owner
25	M_33	Campania (South)	ED 5_8	/	Unemployed
26	F_29	Greece	ED 5_8	/	Unemployed
27	F_57	Puglia (South)	ED 5_8	Public health services	Professional
28	M_28	Calabria (South)	ED 5_8	Secondary school teaching	Employee
29	M_76	Friuli-Venezia Giulia (North)	ED 3_4	/	Retired
30	F_23	Emilia Romagna (North)	ED 5_8	Cultural services	Trainee
31	M_44	Toscana (North)	ED 3_4	Craftsmanship	Self-employed
32	F_38	Lombardy (North)	ED 5_8	Marketing services + Social media	Employee + Self-employed
33	F_60	Trentino Alto Adige (North)	ED 5_8	/	Inactive
34	F_33	Piemonte (North)	ED 3_4	Catering services	Owner

\*International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED)

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