

**ROMANIAN COMMUNITY IN ITALY. ANALYSIS FROM THE
PERSPECTIVE OF PUBLIC DISCOURSE AND PUBLIC POLICIES IN ITALY
(2000-2020)***

Claudia Dărăban**

Abstract: *At the beginning of the 21st century, with the opening of the prospect of joining the EU and NATO, the Romanian society began to adapt to the new internal and external realities and a massive migration of the population became a painful reality. The degradation of economic life and the opening of perspectives in West have led to the largest wave of migration in peacetime in Europe. Over 5 million Romanians have left Romania and over 1,5 million have settled in Italy. With the presence of an increasingly large community of Romanian citizens, the issues of integration and interaction have become more complex. Various factors disrupted their relationship with Italian communities, often leading to incidents that marked Romanian-Italian relations and were the basis of Italian political discourse in the election campaign. The present study aims to make an analysis of these evolutions and to offer an image on the way in which the presence of the Romanian community has modified the process of elaboration some public policies. In addition to this approach, the study also seeks to analyze the mechanism and political actors that have contributed to these changes in discourse and public policy.*

Keywords: immigration, Italy, Romania, economic immigration, public policies

Migration of individuals and larger communities has been an element of population mobility during all the ages of human history. The basis for this phenomenon are different, from geographical and climate change issues, to social, religious or economic issues. In the XXth century Europe, this phenomenon was

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** Postdoctoral Researcher, Babeş-Bolyai University Cluj-Napoca; e-mail: daraban.claudia2014@gmail.com

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present in every region, but usually was associated with some conflict or consequences of the post conflict years. It is unusual for the European countries to witness a large population migration in peace time like the one of Romanian citizens to several western European countries in the first two decades of the XXIth century¹.

Romanian citizens started to search for new better paid jobs in the Western countries after the unsuccessful reform attempts by the end of the last years of the previous century. By 2000 it became clear for them that their living standard will not be secured by their own government and in the light of the newly signed Treaty of Nice, the European future of Romania will be on a positive track, but not soon enough. The first clear step for joining the EU was made by the social democratic government lead by Adrian Nastasă, but the government was unable to secure a lasting economic development and the creation of working places for its citizens.

On the other hand, the slow development and the expanding corruption were perceived by the Romanian citizens as a lasting trend in their society. In this context, the migration toward Italy was on a positive track, so in 2007 (the moment of Romanian joining the EU) every 9th foreigner in the peninsula was from Romania. By 2012 this proportion changed and every 5th immigrant in Italy was a Romanian citizen². This massive mobility created some issues³ of its own, and became a major issue in the relation between the Romanians and Italians⁴. Slowly, the number of Romanian immigrants rose above 1 million individuals and by 2012-2013 they reached 1.3 million immigrants⁵. On the other hand, there was always an issue of the real number of Romanians in Italy, some official statistics showed a much smaller presence but in time it became clear that the real number is rising up to 1.5 million immigrants.

Immigration was regarded during the history with suspicion by the local populations, and in our case the tensions and lack of trust became a main issue between the Italian population and the Romanian immigrants. To this basic issue was added the developing economic context and the financial crisis of 2006-2009, which raised the unemployment rate across all of Europe and stretched the capacity of governments to handle this type of economic migration. By default, the Italian economy had always issue with unemployment and geographical differences between the north and the south. Economic immigrants were regarded as intruders and contributors to the raising

¹ G. J. Abel, *Estimation of international migration flow tables in Europe*, "Journal of the Royal Statistical Society: Series A (Statistics in Society)", 173 (4), 2010, p. 797–825.

² <http://www.programmaintegra.it/wp/2014/01/istat-i-cittadini-romeni-sono-la-principale-comunita-straniera-in-italia/> accessed on 29.08.2020.

³ David T.Graham, Nana K. Poku, *Migration, Globalisation and Human Security*, London, New York, Routledge, 2000.

⁴ Eurostat, *Immigration in the EU*. Brussels: European Commission, Report 2014a.

⁵ <http://dati.istat.it/Index.aspx> (Italian Statistic Service) accessed on 01.09.2020.

rate of unemployed people among the citizens of the peninsula. On the other hand, social problems, corruption and rising criminality⁶ were spiking in several cities and regions in the context of economic decline of the country. This type of attitude can be observed in the case of the Polish plumbers that allegedly invaded the United Kingdom and pushed out from the field of work the local population. In the case of Romanians in Italy this stereotypic approach was more acute and due to several socio-political factors managed to get out of hand and create some diplomatic clashes between the Italian and Romanian foreign ministers. By 2012⁷ the tensions raised at a high level due to the lack of real measures of integration or economic policies toward the poorer communities in Italy. If we want to summarize the main problems in this context we can group them in two categories.

The first category is an objective one where the relation between the local population and Romanian immigrants were mainly based on the effects of economic decline, social issues or the ever rising cheap workforce in the country. To this we need to add the high criminality rating of some elements of the Romanian immigrants that managed to discredit the whole mass migration phenomenon and to create the basis for the second category of issues.

In this second category we can group the ones that are more related to the subjective nature of the immigrant community and less related to the realities in the field. Here we need to talk about the presence of some sort of xenophobia, nationalism and stereotypical behavior in the core conservative layer of the Italian society.

For almost 13 years this second set of issues managed to monopolize the debate related to the presence of Romanians in Italy and was the base for several aggressive or demagogic public discourse or public policy proposals by local, regional or central political representatives. In this registry of public policy proposals we can find from funny ideas to dangerous ones. Limiting the right of work, harsher punishment for criminals or deporting Romanian citizens from Italy were the main ones.

In this context and development the issue of Romanians in Italy became the main subject for emerging far right parties and leaders who find not only political inspiration, but a very engaged public by using the anti-Romanian rhetoric. It is not clear that there was a real fear or belief in the negative contribution of the immigrants to the development of Italian society or it was just a mean to achieve political success by the emerging political figures of the post economic crisis Italy. Nonetheless the

⁶ Ioan Marius Grec, *Emigranții români și fenomenul de infraționalitate în Italia*, 2012 (https://www.researchgate.net/publication/256547462_emigrantii_romani_si_fenomenul_de_infractionalitate_in_italia_romanian_migrants_and_infractionality_phenomenon_in_italy) accessed on 01.09.2020.

⁷ National Report Romanian immigrants in Italy, Milan, January 2012: <https://www.participation-citoyenne.eu/sites/default/files/report-italy.pdf> accessed on 01.09.2020.

effect of this rhetoric managed to bring not only sympathies of the crisis-stricken part of society, but managed to antagonize the local population and the Romanian community. Of course, we cannot say that this type of action were the only ones used by the public policy makers or politicians, there was a real concern related to the search of clear and satisfactory solutions for the Romanian immigrant's issue. Collaboration between the interior ministry of Italy and Romania managed to develop a crime reduction program and repatriation process for non-law-abiding Romanian citizens, which managed to create a positive reaction from the part of local communities and eased the sensation of existence of a no man's land in the local communities.

The transformation of public discourse and radicalization managed to transform the social perception of Romanians in a negative way in the eyes of the Italians. We can say that in this context the press, social media or extremist public figures managed to create of a permanent siege mentality and mass hysteria in some local communities and to exploit the fear from immigrants. This development can be followed clearly by reading the topics discussed in the major newspapers in Italy: *La Stampa*⁸, *Corriere della Sera*⁹, *La Repubblica*¹⁰, *Il Giornale* etc. On the other hand, the national newspapers were less attached to the typical Italian journalistic approach impregnated by the pathos and sensationalistic style of presentation of the regional newspapers. If we can say, the national newspapers public discourse reflected some type of restraint in comparison with the regional or local ones. The language and the aggressiveness of public discourse reached its maximum at regional and local level probably due to the administrative characteristics of the Italian elections and due to the importance of the issue for the newspapers itself. One of the most critique newspapers was the *La Padania*¹¹, we cannot say that this was the only, but it was from far one of the pivot platforms for anti-immigration messages.

Of course, the Romanian immigrants and the real or artificial issues created around their presence in the peninsula managed to become one of the main political arguments of the emerging extremist, xenophobia and anti-immigrants political movements. The horse of the bad Romanian community was quickly ridden by the Lega or Frateli d'Italia or Movimento political parties. The last one managed to achieve a fair electoral score in the 2010-2012 local elections, general elections of

⁸ Example: <https://www.lastampa.it/cronaca/2009/02/24/news/in-italia-il-40-dei-latitanti-romeni-1.37085802> accessed on 05.09.2020.

⁹ Example: <https://www.corriere.it/elezioni-europee/100giorni/romania/> accessed on 05.09.2020.

¹⁰ Example: <https://espresso.repubblica.it/palazzo/2007/07/23/news/1-invasione-dei-romeni-1.4418> accessed on 05.09.2020.

¹¹<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/italy/10576630/Italian-MP-blacks-up-in-Parliament-in-anti-immigration-tirade.html> accessed on 05.09.2020.

2013 and European Parliament elections in 2014, based only on a radical public discourse the so called new-right political rhetoric. We must be clear that their success was not based mainly on the anti-immigrant agenda, but on the complex circumstances of immigration created issues and a decreasing economic stability of Italy. At the peak of their power the anti-immigration parties managed to pass in 2019 the so called Salvini laws, designed to stop and manage the incoming flow of immigrants in Italy¹². Of course, these laws were not designed to stop intracommunity immigration, but the policy shift and hysteria managed to spin and to affect already existing Romanian communities in Italy and raise a new wave of xenophobic discourse for a short time.

This new discourse was based on the sad fact that some part of the Romanian immigrants managed to create a new networks of criminality or to participate and collaborate with local criminal groups. A large number of these outlaws came from the poorer regions of Romania, where already existed strong organized crime groups. In some ways, it was an export of criminal activity from Romania to Italy, which managed to raise eyebrows in the midst of Italian communities. These behaviors were not specific to the whole Romanian community, but due to the economic, social and political context, they became subject of the public discourse. By 2010, it was clear that some elements of the Romanian community in Italy were there only to promote illegal activities, like theft, prostitution, pimping, drug traffic and human traffic. On a higher level, there allegation regarded to more serious illegal activities as organ trafficking, and illegal weapon selling. These groups were tied to other Eastern European criminal organizations from Serbia, Albania, Bulgaria, Ukraine and Russia.

One of the most significant cases that managed to create a wave of revolt in the Italian society was the case of Romulus Nicolae Mailat, a Romanian citizen of Roma ethnicity, whom was accused of robbing, raping and killing of Giovanna Reggiani, the wife of a rear admiral of the Italian Naval Forces¹³. The case managed to create not only a public outrage, but also to polarize the radical political movements which started to ask more restrictive measures regarding the Romanian and especially the Roma emigrants. In the following ten years, the case became a flagship in the Italian radical discourse, shaping not only the regional elections, but the national ones. From time to time, the crime of Mailat became the basis for the arguments against the Roma community and Romanian citizens, in several regional and national newspapers¹⁴.

¹²<https://euobserver.com/opinion/145671>, accessed on 03.09.2020.

¹³https://roma.corriere.it/roma/notizie/cronaca/09_luglio_9/reggiani_richiesta_ergastolo_mailat-1601551510522.shtml?fbclid=IwAR1a6AXESf3Ywlm4pDXL2V3_3qM7K6vr3kfmDmDv4zD0vG1EMWWmU62thQY, accessed on 05.09.2020.

¹⁴ <https://ilmanifesto.it/ricordate-il-caso-giovanna-reggiani/?fbclid=IwAR2FApL4Ooc6q7L-33JFm0yD2YWLkv14tbmJtN3ReCA2rfO4lh-CJIViwlc> (article from 2016), accessed on 05.09.2020.

For this reason, the Italian and Romanian governments started a tighter cooperation in the field of prevention and illegal immigrant detection or the management of their repatriation to Romania. In some way, these cooperation programs managed to reduce the rate of criminality, but did not manage to make a clear change in the dynamic of the issue. At this point, several regional authorities tried to push in the Italian parliament special laws regarding the immigrants from Eastern Europe, mainly from Romania and Bulgaria. Due to the *acquis communautaire*, the hands of the government were tied and harsher or restrictive legislation was considered against the principle of free movement inside the European Union. In this context, the political relations between Bucharest and Rome entered in a stage of permanent accusations and tensions. Only during the government led by Victor Ponta, the relation between the two countries stabilized in some way due to the closer relation of the Romanian Social Democratic Party with the Italian Democratic Party led by Matteo Renzi, who served as Prime Minister of Italy from 2014 to 2015. By this time, it was clear for both the Italian and the Romanian government that the problem of immigrants from Romania is not and it will not become a temporary problem for the Italian society.

By 2015 and 2016 the presence of a permanent Romanian minority in Italy became a fact and the transformation of economic immigrants in permanent or long-term residents changed the public discourse and public policy plans of political leaders shifting the attention from the Romanians to other new type of immigrants, mainly from the Middle East or Africa. It is not clear or there is no clear evidence that this shift of attention was based on the achievements of Romanian diaspora in Italy to convince the local population that their presence is not a threat or simply due to the fact of the attention shift to some other type of immigrants.

The Syrian war and the instability in Northern Africa managed to start a new wave of immigrants, which represented a threat more serious than the immigration from the Eastern European countries. From the point of view of the national security, the new wave was more dangerous and was perceived more harmful for the Italian society than the previous one. For the southern provinces of the peninsula, the incursion and arrival of refugees became a serious problem; many of these individuals have ties with radical Islamic groups or terrorist organizations from the Middle East and Northern Africa¹⁵. In the public discourse, we can perceive a switch from the Eastern European anti-immigration discourse to a new approach targeted against the immigrants and refugees from outside the European Union. These internal debates and tensions were added to the European agenda, where Italy urged the other member

¹⁵ Elizabeth Collet, Camille Le Coz, *After the storm: learning from the EU response to the migration crisis*, Bruxelles, Migration Policy Institute, 2018, Chapter II.

states to adopt new European regulations regarding the process of external immigrants and asked, more or less diplomatically, financial aid for the management of the crisis.

In conclusion, we can say that the Romanian community in Italy had a rough ride due to the economic and cultural context in both countries. By now, the relation between the two nations is more or less on a normal track and the presence of Romanian immigrants in Italy is regarded with more tolerance by the local authorities and press.

