

# IMMIGRANTS AND THE PANDEMIC IN A LEADING REGION OF NORTHERN ITALY: A QUESTION OF POSITIONING

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## ABSTRACT

### **Immigrants and the Pandemic in a Leading Region of Northern Italy: A Question of Positioning**

This paper examines the impact of the pandemic on immigrants in one of the most economically developed areas in Northern Italy. Using a qualitative approach, the author highlights the effects on the traditional dimensions of inclusion (work and housing) and the perspectives of the younger generations (education and transition to adulthood). The results indicate how the weak social positioning of immigrants strongly and selectively conditioned their response to the pandemic. The study also revealed the intense erosion of immigrants' social capital and the need for strategies to strengthen it.

**KEYWORDS:** pandemic, Italy, immigrants, social capital, inequalities

## IZVLEČEK

### **Priseljenci in pandemija v vodilni regiji severne Italije: vprašanje položaja**

Članek obravnava vpliv pandemije na priseljence na enem izmed gospodarsko najrazvitejših območij v severni Italiji. S kvalitativnim pristopom avtor je izpostavil tako učinke na tradicionalne dimenzije vključenosti, kot sta delo in stanovanje, kot tudi perspektive mlajših generacij, kot sta izobraževanje in prehod v odraslost. Rezultati so pokazali, da je slab socialni položaj priseljencev močno in selektivno vplival na njihov odziv na pandemijo. Študija je pokazala tudi na močno erozijo socialnega kapitala priseljencev ter na potrebo po strategijah za njegovo krepitev.

**KLJUČNE BESEDE:** pandemija, Italija, priseljenci, socialni kapital, neenakosti

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## INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of 2020, Italy was among the countries that suffered the most substantial impact of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic (World Health Organization, 2021), becoming an advanced front in the response capacities of European societies to an environmental challenge unprecedented in “magnitude” but certainly not unpredictable (GPMB, 2019). As illustrated by international documents, the pandemic has affected immigrants in European countries from a health and, more broadly, social point of view (OECD, 2020; Donà, 2021). For them, too, it was a “pan-syndemic” (Della Puppa & Perocco, 2021; Perocco, 2021). From the outset, the Italian regions most affected were those in the north, where most of the total population and most immigrants (and their children) reside.

This article draws from a qualitative investigation carried out in a central socio-economic area of Northern Italy: the Veneto region. Investigating the consequences of the pandemic among immigrants, the research started from the hypothesis that even in this relatively more developed economic area compared to the rest of the country, their deeper social exclusion (in comparison with the wider population) hindered them. The second hypothesis is that the responses to the difficulties triggered by the pandemic still passed through informal mechanisms and civil society actors (according to a model defined as “implicit” in the literature). Therefore, the analysis will reveal the most critical dimensions among those acquired through the study.

In the first part of the contribution, we will briefly reconstruct the features of the territory involved in the research. Then we will explain the methods used. Afterward, we will illustrate the most relevant results according to this scheme: firstly, we will analyze the consequences of the pandemic, paying attention to the historical issues that have emerged since the first migrations to Northern Italy (above all, work and housing); secondly, we will consider the consequences of the pandemic (especially among young children of immigrants) in perspective.

## THE INVESTIGATION TERRITORY

The Veneto region is one of Italy’s economically leading regions. It is now one of the regions with the highest percentage of residents with non-Italian citizenship out of the total resident population. The increase in immigrants occurred mainly between the late twentieth and the early twenty-first century. In those years, Veneto became the leading region of a wider area defined as the “North East” (Marini, 2012). At that time, the media would often refer to it as the “locomotive of Italy.” This development stems from several factors, but among the most important was the presence of small (often craft) firms that had taken on a configuration known as the “district” (Becattini, 2000). The district shares a common production specialization and is based on the

presence of the skills needed to guarantee that specialization: examples of districts have been (and still are today) footwear, tanning, or mechanics. Economic aspects, as well as similar cultural traits and strong territorial roots, characterize the districts. In the 1990s, the districts were characterized by extensive workforce use, which guaranteed almost total employment. From a cultural point of view, the Veneto of those years still presented culturally homogeneous traits, derived from a local history strongly permeated by Catholicism but already widely challenged by the processes of individualization of belief (Berger, 2014) and by a cultural landscape much more diversified than in the past (also through migrations). In political terms, however, the Veneto region became in those years the area of significant structuring of the autonomist movement called “Lega Nord” (Northern League, which later became Lega). The affirmation of the Lega in Veneto followed the crisis of the so-called “First Republic” in Italy and, in particular, of its most prominent party. In Veneto, too, indeed, the Democrazia Cristiana (Christian Democrats) had been the reference party for the Catholic roots mentioned above. The strong opposition to the central state and hostility toward internal and international immigration shaped the success of the Lega Nord in those years. However, in that phase of development, the presence of immigrants proved to be fundamental because they guaranteed a young workforce willing to be employed in jobs and, above all, under conditions that the local population mainly rejected. They also responded to an incipient birth rate crisis, which would explode in the following years. In those years, the social *status* of immigrants was confined to that of a “necessary workforce.” At the same time, they became the object of stigmatization as “invaders.” There were no strategic policies, and migration issues were dealt with from a bottom-up approach and entrusted mainly to “solidarity institutions.”

Since the early 2000s, the development trajectories of the Veneto have changed dramatically. The model of “widespread enterprise” has been challenged by growing international competition. Companies were progressively divided between the innovative ones (in terms of investments, management, and orientation toward international markets) and those that continued to focus on labor intensity and the domestic market (Marini, 2005). The former performed much better than the latter, which often disappeared, with consequences also regarding employment. The two-year period 2008–2009, which led several companies to a crisis and expelled many workers, significantly reinforced this process. This effect created a less dynamic labor market (Anastasia & Oliva, 2015) and less room for immigrants in manufacturing. The service sector, in particular, advanced services for businesses, grew. Still, this growth also concerned care services: in this area, immigrant family assistants have been crucial in responding to much smaller families (due to the birth rate crisis) and unmet care needs. Also, from this point of view, the model of immigrant participation in the labor market continued to be instrumental. However, the migration scenario has changed mainly due to the substantial increase in the number of children of immigration. The “second generations” required a great effort from the educational

institutions, which acted first and often in the absence of political strategies. The development of migration in Veneto has ultimately changed the territory's overall cultural landscape. Nevertheless, this has not led to more mature social representations of immigrants; they are still considerably linked to the idea of the immigrant as a "worker" or "guest" and still frequently seen as a danger or threat. These representations often extend to young children of immigrants born in Italy. Their transition to adulthood remains one of the main challenges for this part of the population: with a labor market that is still dual (segmented between "Italians" and "foreigners"), with weaker employment dynamics, and with the consequences of the recent pandemic.

## METHODS

We identified the field of investigation in the broader context of the Veneto region as follows: we divided the provinces of Veneto with the highest number of "foreign" residents (according to the definition provided by the National Institute of Statistics) between those that were more "metropolitan" and those with a more widespread settlement pattern. After choosing the province with the highest number of foreign residents among the two groups, we divided the municipalities into three groups: large, medium, and small municipalities. Finally, we chose the municipality with the largest number of "foreign" residents for each group.

In this field of investigation, we chose a qualitative approach to analyze the complexity of the phenomena of interest. For each territory identified according to the previous criteria, relevant actors with different profiles were involved: among them, cultural mediators, public administrators, experts on migration issues, social cooperation actors, social service operators, and association representatives. We conducted a total of 24 in-depth interviews, which, due to the limited mobility caused by the pandemic, were conducted *online*, recorded, and subjected to content analysis.

## THE WEAKENING OF THE "PILLARS"

The analysis of the main results shows that the pandemic has vigorously shaken the "pillars" that have historically guided the processes of participation of the immigrant population in Veneto since the early years, especially work and housing. Moreover, in the first months of 2020, there was a problem with communication and understanding experienced by immigrants with fewer language skills. The sharp generational divide between parents (less linguistically competent) and children (more competent by virtue of their school attendance) affected access to information. Immigrants with a poorer linguistic background tried to remedy this situation through television (and online) channels from their country of origin, "mediators" such as fellow

nationals or Italian acquaintances they had met during their experience in Italy, and through their children, if any.

We worked a lot with the mediators to make them understand what was going on, the importance of respecting the rules, why it was necessary to have social distancing, why it was necessary to be careful even with the people you were living with. Some of the things that were going on outside—for example, the so-called “conspiracy theories”—were also present among the population of foreign origin (AE1; in charge of the immigration desk).

The first thing we had to face was fear. Fear for one’s health, fear for their job, fear for loved ones living abroad. Being immigrants—I speak for the Albanians, but also for the other immigrants I always see when we have meetings—I saw this fear in everyone’s eyes. We felt alone in some cases. [...] Italians have family members who can help them in case of need, while those who are alone ask themselves: “Oh God, who will help me?” (OO1; cultural mediator).

For many of our parents, the difficulty was mainly understanding what was going on. [...] In the end, they relied more on the news that arrived directly in their own language or on the news in the Ghanaian news bulletins. I used to tell them: “You have to understand the Italian situation; if Italy is in a lockdown, it’s not like Ghana is too” (but it was difficult to let them understand) (AR2; association representative).

In this situation, clear concerns for employment developed immediately. Indeed, in 2020, Italy witnessed a marked economic and employment slowdown (ISTAT, 2021). Before the pandemic, the labor market had already changed significantly compared to the early 2000s, with more mobility and an increasing presence of less protected work and work “on the margins” (Barbieri & Scherer, 2005; Barbieri et al., 2018).

The interviews above all highlighted the personal and family implications of the employment dynamics involving immigrants during the pandemic. Two aspects emerged above all: the fear of losing one’s job and becoming infected in the workplace; the fear of no longer being able to guarantee remittances to the countries of origin.

Regarding the first aspect, the fear of losing their jobs mainly concerned immigrants employed in the catering, tourism, and seasonal work sectors as they were strongly affected by the national and international mobility freeze.

However, this reduction in the demand for labor did not give rise to any apparent compensatory or transitional phenomena in the employment basins that rocketed during the pandemic period, especially in the movement of goods linked to the gig economy.

One holding factor is the fact that immigrants constitute an important employment pool in sectors considered essential. Those who work in the countryside well or badly (make it) (RA3; Caritas representative).

In Verona, two important sectors have been affected by the so-called disappearance of foreign workers. The first is the seasonal sector. Everything (the pandemic) started in February, and March is the month traditionally dedicated to the recruitment of labor in agriculture. [...] Another sector that was canceled is tourism. [...] No longer having cleaning staff, kitchen staff, housekeeping staff in the hotels—mainly foreign staff—[...] has had a huge impact. [...] Italians are not fungible compared to foreigners because the contractual conditions are not advantageous (IC3; representative of employment centers).

Among migrants who worked in the so-called “essential” sectors (agri-food chain, some segments of manufacturing, personal services in facilities for the elderly, logistics, food delivery), there were fewer problems with the loss of employment. However, these were often working poor jobs.

The research thus confirms a highly diversified Italian labor market, with more “protected” (in terms of actual working conditions) and less “protected” work (Barbieri et al., 2018).

Compared to the fear of contagion, the difficult housing conditions and employers’ variable attention to strictly following the required measures, especially in the case of working poor jobs, proved to be the highest risks of exposure.

Another issue is that before becoming patients, these people [immigrants, Ed.] live in very confined spaces with other people. So their homes are overcrowded and, therefore, the possibility of contagion increases (A12; medical service representative for immigrants without residence permits).

Suddenly, there was an outbreak where I worked, and this was a concern not only for the company but for all of us because going to work—since we do grocery and chicken butchery—almost meant going out looking for trouble. All this meant that you left home, but you weren’t sure if you would come back healthy (AD3; cultural mediator).

Respondents also recalled a second major fear related to labor difficulties: the interruption of the flow of remittances to foreign countries, which is only guaranteed when you can count on a continuous income.

While in the first phase [the lockdown phase, Ed.], there was a surge in food, in the summer months, there was an incubation, and from September onwards, a tail-off—which we are still experiencing now—in which the problem is no longer food, but the

reduction of income that makes it no longer possible to fulfill certain commitments such as utilities, rent, the possibility of having to face an extraordinary expense (AC2; Caritas representative).

Another issue was that of remittances. Workers who were used to sending remittances to their countries of origin—people from Senegal, Ghana, and Nigeria who have children studying in their countries of origin—(had a hard time). I have a friend who used to work in a hotel in the center of Verona; this hotel has closed. He has a son studying in New York, and he sends remittances from here to that son. He can't anymore, and now he is in difficulty (EI12; cultural mediator).

The other major mainstay of participation affected by the pandemic is housing, which became fundamental during the first Italian lockdown in March–April 2020. Unfortunately, housing once again proved to be a marker of inequality for the area's immigrants (except for those who have been involved locally for a long time and therefore have more robust trust networks). Although the issue of housing for immigrants in Italy seems to have been partially overcome in the last decade, it has exploded again in recent times.

Another major issue (exacerbated by the pandemic) is the reopening of the housing question a few years ago. It took us fifteen years to get out of it, and now it's back. The issue is becoming an emergency again for families. [...] Access to rent has become difficult for the whole foreign population. [...] from a bureaucratic point of view, legislation protects tenants more than owners, and from a cultural point of view, there is a perception that foreigners are less reliable in terms of payments and housing tenure (RA6; Caritas representative).

The other big problem arising—which also affects Italians, but predominantly immigrants—is that due to rent issues, many have lost their homes. But above all, no one can get one anymore. You can't rent a house anymore (BA5; head of an immigration desk).

We have had people with an open-ended contract who, when it was time to sign the contract, were denied it just for having a foreign surname. And we have experience with both Italian and foreign families, and you get the Italian family that takes care of your flat as badly as the foreign one. These are really boorish stereotypes (AA5; head of a social cooperative).

## AN INTERRUPTED FUTURE?

The pandemic has not only weakened the foundations of immigrants' socioeconomic capital. It has also affected the educational paths of immigrant children and their transition to adulthood.

The impact of school closures has entailed difficulties for both students and their families. The impossibility of going to school has created three types of issues: those due to the digital divide, related problems of school dropouts, and the compression of social opportunities for the younger generations of foreign origin.

As for the digital divide, a first-level digital divide (devices actually available) and a second-level digital divide (competence in the use of the tools) emerged (Kenner & Lange, 2019).

Especially in the first phase of the pandemic, distance learning for immigrant parents was like Kilimanjaro, the Everest (i.e., unsurmountable) (E1; cultural mediator).

The closure of schools has increased the unpaid workload for immigrant women, as for all women. However, in the case of foreign women, there is a further critical element linked to socialization. Even fewer opportunities and possibilities to go out of the house, therefore even more confinement and an increase of the pressure of this negative factor (RA5; head of social cooperative).

The "confinement" during the lockdown had a significant impact on immigrant families. The higher number of family members in immigrant families meant that fewer devices were available for everyone and decision-making processes were more complicated than in Italian families. Family members with a more limited cultural capital also found it difficult to help their children with distance learning (second-level digital divide). The children often ensured communication with the school because they were linguistically more capable.

The closure of primary and secondary schools has created a regression in children, not only in education but also in terms of relationships. Of course, the family environment—in which the heads of the family were often away from home [for a long time]—also created a certain form of violence against children. I don't feel like giving you this as a "certain" fact, but ... [this form of violence] was maybe also linked to a form of difficulty of the family heads, who no longer felt like the breadwinners (AC3; head of social cooperative).

The side of minors and young people at home has become an important element [during the pandemic], leading to reports of youth depression and psychological support. Another important aspect related to minors is that in all municipalities, gangs, small gangs [formed], which, as they do not have hours at school, the same



access to sports or other side activities, which were harshly limited, have a large presence of foreigners (IU7; municipal councilor).

[...] You have to think that we are brought up in a context where you keep your origins, so going to school allows you to cultivate contact with the area in which you live. The closure was hard because it was difficult to live your own culture exclusively. Between me and my brother—who is younger—you can see that it is easier for me to live by the rules of our culture than it is for him (AR14; association representative).

This situation has contributed to a greater dropout risk (Vergolini & Vlach, 2020), especially for the younger generations with an immigrant background. With the schools closed, an occasion for sociability has disappeared (Besozzi et al., 2009), which, in the last fifteen years, had facilitated for the children of immigrants the development of a common generational horizon with their Italian peers and substantial participation paths still denied on the formal level (among these, the lack of citizenship reform). With the schools closed, the youngest found themselves much more often in contact with their parents and much less with their peers. This situation had two fundamental implications. The first took the form of taking refuge in the virtual world, with massive use of mobile phones and a loss of relational competence with their peers. The second saw the possible involvement of young people of foreign origin in more or less improvised “street organizations.” These places have represented a sort of re-appropriation of the social dimension, but with consequences in terms of sanctions and reinforcing the stigma against the “foreigner.”

Speaking of young people, the months of the pandemic also closed the access to spaces for those making the transition to the labor market. These were children of immigrants finishing secondary school and (to a lesser extent) university as well as young people concluding their humanitarian protection process who were included in apprenticeships useful for the conversion of their residence permit and, therefore, for the consolidation of their life path.

With the first phase of the pandemic, we noticed a forced halt of internships or integration in certain contexts, such as tourism or catering, in all the projects for the social and work insertion of people. There was an immediate stop there. We had activated a whole series of apprenticeships in the metalworking or welding sectors, and we suffered a sudden stop. All the pathways of inclusion of people suffered a fracture between before and after (AC4; head of social cooperative).

The closure of these spaces was disruptive because it called into question the future of the people involved.

## OVERALL CONSIDERATIONS

To conclude this work, we will underline the main aspects that emerged and provide an overall analysis of them.

One crucial aspect is information-communication, going beyond the “logic of documents translated into all languages” (words of one interviewee). Even when immigrants had a more solid cultural capital, communication with public offices was not always smooth. From this point of view, it is necessary to strengthen the resources of linguistic-cultural mediation and train operators to work with the complex demands such as those of a population of foreign origin. The powerful push toward digitalization observed in the pandemic months also requires overcoming the digital divide that still affects many immigrants.

The pandemic months have also highlighted three fundamental pillars on which to work in the coming years. The first is employment, by ensuring improved working conditions in which most immigrants still find themselves are improved. These jobs are often poorly protected and risky in a market that remains dual and where immigrants are in the weakest positions. This pillar will be even more critical for the children of immigrants, who have higher expectations than their parents. Then there is the issue of housing, which also predates the pandemic but has further exploded in recent months: mediation mechanisms left to the market alone have led to the exclusion of many immigrants from the housing market, weakening their social participation. Public intervention seems necessary to allocate Italy’s large unused real estate assets. Without it, the situation will hardly be solved. Another critical aspect sharply emerged during the pandemic months: immigrant children’s “difficult” school attendance. Even before the pandemic, they were among those who dropped out of school the most. The pandemic year has left many behind, and it will not be easy to make up for it. The answer cannot be left to individual families because schools are a fundamental public asset for the area’s future. It is so in terms of skills training and from a socio-relational point of view. The latter is a particularly valuable asset for those minors of foreign origin who, in recent years, have often “felt at home” through school.

The study highlights the “consumption of the social capital” caused by the pandemic among immigrants. The effects were, above all, a “matter of positioning”: the social condition in which immigrants found themselves strongly conditioned their ability to react.

It also confirms the hypothesis that, often, informal responses originated out of voluntary and collaborative processes developed at the local level. This dynamic, too, resulted in the “use of social capital.”

To reproduce and enhance the social capital consumed, it is now necessary to invest in “the fundamentals” (such as information, schooling, and housing) that make it possible to move from the logic of the emergency to that of the project. Such an investment will allow a large part of the population (such as those of foreign origin)

to feel at home and avoid processes of precariousness that can easily translate into dynamics of social invisibility. Long-term strategies are the only ones capable of reinforcing the banks so that the river does not overflow in times of flood.

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The study was conducted on behalf of the Veneto Regional Immigration Observatory from January to May 2021. The main results are contained in the article “I risvolti della pandemia tra la popolazione di origine straniera” (Girardi, 2021). This essay develops some of the results of the final research report. The considerations contained in this work must be attributed to the author and not to the commissioning body of the study.

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## POVZETEK

### PRISELJENCI IN PANDEMIJA V VODILNI REGIJI SEVERNE ITALIJE: VPRAŠANJE POLOŽAJA

Davide GIRARDI

Pandemija v severnoitalijanskih deželah je močno vplivala na priseljenško prebivalstvo. Čeprav gre za gospodarsko najrazvitejše regije v državi, je bila tam strukturna šibkost, ki je prizadela priseljence, v dvoletnem obdobju pandemije še hujša. V študiji je bil uporabljen kvalitativni pristop in je bila izvedena v Benečiji, eni izmed najrazvitejših regij v severni Italiji. Študija je pokazala, da je pandemija močno vplivala tako na zgodovinske dimenzije vključenosti priseljencev, kot je delo, kot tudi na dimenzije, ki so povezane zlasti s prihodnostjo novih generacij, kot je npr. šolanje. V obdobju pandemije so se pojavljale težave pri zagotavljanju informacij o tem, kaj se dogaja, prihajalo je do izločanja najšibkejših akterjev na trgu dela, poslabšale pa so se tudi delovne razmere, predvsem v smislu zaščite pred nevarnostjo okužbe. Poleg tega je s pandemijo postal še bolj pereč dolgoletni stanovanjski problem. Pandemija je tudi poglobila neenake pogoje otrok priseljencev, zlasti med zaprtjem šol in učenjem na daljavo. Zaradi manj dinamičnega in bolj zaprtega trga dela se je za generacije mladostnikov tujega porekla poslabšal prehod v odraslost. Težave, s katerimi so se soočali priseljenci, so večinoma reševali s pristopom od spodaj navzgor, kar kaže na tradicionalno pomanjkanje strategije v italijanskem odzivu na migracije. Zaključimo lahko torej, da je bil obseg težav, s katerimi so se priseljenci spopadali med pandemijo, odvisen predvsem od socialnega kapitala, ki so ga imeli. Mnogi med njimi so zaradi prekarne narave svojega položaja izgubili svoj socialni kapital. Potrebno je opredeliti nove strategije za okrepitev tega socialnega kapitala. Treba bo izboljšati kakovost informacij in tako poskrbeti, da bodo imeli priseljenci na voljo boljše življenjske in delovne pogoje. Nenazadnje pa bi morali imeti tudi otroci več možnosti za učinkovito šolanje, da kasneje ne bodo živeli v enakih pogojih kot njihovi starši. Samo tako bo lahko prispevek priseljencev v celoti prepoznan.