



## **“Employment and immigration: the integration and professional development processes of workers from central and eastern Europe” - Results of Research Project on Migrant Workers and Employers in the Trentino Region**

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The research activities carried out under the umbrella of the Equal Pontest project aimed to investigate the immigration/employment market situation through a multi-disciplinary approach (economic, social, legal and educational), focusing particularly on the type of integration and working conditions of immigrant workers, on the negative and positive aspects of joining the work force and the local socio-economic network. The research began and ended in the first 6 months of 2006 and was carried out using a questionnaire and through extended interviews with immigrant workers and employers whose companies hire foreign workers.

The research explored the processes of introduction and integration of foreign workers originating from central and eastern Europe into the companies and society of the province of Trentino, in northern Italy, while focusing particularly on the difficulties and opportunities generated by this migratory phenomenon.

***Design and aims of the research. Methodology and instruments used. Subjects involved in the collection of data***

The investigation involved both foreign workers and employers who employ foreign staff from the countries of central and eastern Europe, mostly small and medium-sized businesses located in the territory of the province of Trento.

Overall, around 40 companies were contacted using questionnaires and extensive interviews. The research activities relating to the workers involved the use of questionnaires at the office which is responsible for immigration in Trentino, known as Cinformi - Centro Informativo per l’Immigrazione, in order to monitor the effective flow of migrant workers in the various sectors of the economy, and the various fields of employment. In total, the number of foreign workers present in Trentino amounts to around 27,000 people and around 14,000 of these are from central and eastern Europe; about 10,000 are of working age: in particular, there are just over 7,300 foreign workers from central and eastern Europe aged between 18 and 40 years old.

The areas explored through the questionnaires were subsequently taken up again in the semi-structured interviews with a reduced number of foreign workers in order to examine in greater detail some of the themes which emerged from the quantitative research and in order to produce a more detailed snapshot of how their entry into the work place was achieved through their individual stories.

It is important to highlight that in the production of the questionnaires and the interviews, where relevant, workers and employers were asked the same questions in order to underline the diversity of their points of view and to understand the way they perceive each other. Since the project is intended to facilitate the integration of migrant workers into the workforce of Trentino, a real awareness of immigrants’ work situations, their values and priorities and a comparison to the image that their employers have of them may help to draw attention to the areas where there is room for useful

intervention to improve the introduction of migrant workers into the fabric of the economy of Trentino and identify the greatest obstacles.

### ***Characteristics of the sample***

With reference to the research sample, 223 questionnaires were completed; 60% of the respondents were women. Certain national groups featured a greater presence of women: for example, among those from the former Soviet Union, women represent 80%. The average age is quite low, 33 years, and half are under 30; 60% have had their present job for more than a year and about half have a permanent employment contract, while 40% have a temporary employment contract. These are quite high percentages considering the current Italian context of a general trend towards flexible working conditions, especially for young people.

In spite of their young age, 60% of respondents are married or cohabiting with a partner. More than a third have lived in Italy for more than 5 years.

### ***Where are they from?***

As regards their origins, the most numerous national group is from Rumania, almost 30% of respondents, and then almost 20% come from Albania; 14% from Moldavia, 13% from the Ukraine, just over 10% from what used to be Yugoslavia (Croatia, Serbia and Montenegro, Bosnia Herzegovina and Montenegro). The group from the old Soviet Union has the largest proportion of women, followed by Rumanians and Bulgarians.

### ***How long have they lived in Italy?***

A good 60% have been in Italy for more than 3 years while just 15% arrived in the last year. Macedonians and Albanians have lived in Italy for the longest, on average (2/3 have been present for more than 5 years), while among the Polish and Slovakian population there is a larger proportion of new arrivals (in Italy for less than a year).

### ***Qualifications: a high level of schooling***

The research confirms that the foreign workers have a high level of education: almost two thirds have at least a high school diploma (secondary education diploma, degree or post-graduate qualification) and just 16% did not continue their education after completing compulsory education. The difference between the sexes is interesting: women (especially those from the old Soviet Union) are significantly better educated than the men. 30% (compared to 12% for men) have a qualification no lower than a university degree.

### ***Work in their country of origin***

In their countries of origin, almost a third of those interviewed held more qualified, conceptual jobs such as office workers (15%), teachers (7%) or nurses (5%). More particularly, women from the former Soviet Union previously held positions requiring

higher qualifications: around 40% of the total interviewed and about 40% of the people from the old Soviet Union were office workers, teachers or professionals (engineers, architects...).

### ***Current positions held in Italy : a descending professional route***

On arrival in Italy the situation changes. Comparing the jobs held in their countries of origin with current jobs we can see the percentage of office workers has halved, nobody is a teacher or a professional, while there is a marked increase in waiters, shop assistants, factory workers, builders, painters and decorators and general labourers. On moving to Italy, immigrants have also begun professions which are entirely new for them such as homecare assistants and maids. So a generalised increase in jobs of a manual and generic nature and a drastic drop in the professions which require higher education qualifications (which many immigrants possess). More in particular, of the 21 people interviewed who were office workers in their country of origin, less than 30% are still in the same kind of work: 25% are homecare assistants or maids, 14% are general workers and 15% are factory workers. Half of those who were teachers are now homecare assistants or maids. Finally, only 10% of those interviewed are not currently employed and the majority of these people are women.

So the research has therefore confirmed the marked division between the immigrants' qualifications (high level of education) and work experience in the country of origin, and the job or jobs held after their arrival in Italy.

### ***How did they find their first job?***

The main channel through which immigrants find their first job in Italy is their acquaintances: over 44% get their first job through other immigrant friends, 24% through immigrant family members and 15% through Italian friends. Just 8% find their first job through direct application to employers and relatively few find it through job advertisements in newspapers, employment agencies, associations etc. In more detail, men make more use of friends and relatives to find a job: 57% (compared to 37% of women) find their first job in Italy through immigrant friends and 27% (compared to 21% of women) through family members. Older, and Polish immigrants make greater use of immigrant friends. Those from the former Soviet Union, however, make the greatest use of immigrant family members.

### ***How did they find their present job?***

Compared to how they found their first job, by comparison with how they found their current position, a reduction can be observed, though it remains important, in the importance of friends and relatives, and an increase in the importance of Italian friends (from 15% to 25%), which indicates an ongoing process of integration taking place over the years. Certain behaviour patterns of an active nature also increase, such as self-candidature, that is direct application to employers (from 8% to 11%) and direct demand from employers (from 1% to 5%). The use of job centres and private employment agencies increases but remains quite marginal.

On this subject, from the parallel investigation carried out with employers, the preference for the use of informal channels when recruiting foreign staff is confirmed: most companies interviewed made use of friends and acquaintances. A good percentage of them made use of contacts suggested by their own employees, confirming from the employers' side the use of internal human resources in the recruitment of foreign staff. The informal channel is a method used particularly in small to medium sized companies, in reality also when recruiting Italian staff.

Another interesting fact relates to behaviour according to sex: women who found their current job through contacts among other immigrants are a lower percentage than for men, while more frequently than men (31% compared to 19% for men) women make use of Italian contacts or choose to apply directly to employers (14% compared to 8% for men). This indicates, in our opinion, that the women are more integrated with the Italian population and this is probably to be ascribed to the relationships they establish while doing jobs of an assistential nature.

### *The difficulties in joining the labour market in Italy*

Upon joining the workforce in their present job, just under half those interviewed (44%) said they had had difficulty in expressing themselves in Italian and in understanding the language, while 35% experienced problems dealing with employee's rights and duties; it is worth bearing in mind on this subject that only 43% of those interviewed stated that they had received information relating to employment legislation when joining the company. A minority (17%) revealed that there had been problems in relations with their superior or colleagues, and an even smaller percentage complained of an excessive physical workload and difficulties in obtaining holidays and days off (about 12%). As for the duration of problems remaining after the initial induction into the company, it can be observed that only one interviewee in four continued to have problems in expression and/or comprehension in Italian, and only one in two continues to have problems understanding the rules and regulations of the workplace. Problems which were less widespread, such as holidays, time off and the management of working hours, are however, more persistent and remain problems where there is little room for intervention.

Even in this respect, through the investigation carried out with the employers, we find confirmation of the difficulties which they see in relation to induction into their companies. The critical areas are indeed those relating to language comprehension (for around half the companies interviewed) and in terms of safety regulations: an area which directly affects the employer's responsibility and where we can see a different level of perception among the workers (only 8% of foreign workers interviewed described "risks at work" as one of their difficulties). For most employers interviewed, however, there are no problems relating to working hours or shifts, or reconciling work with religious requirements; while understanding work related rights and duties (contracts etc.), relationships with colleagues, the performance of the tasks relating to the job and excessive physical fatigue are described as minor problems. Among the main problems which persist after the induction period, almost half of the employers referred to language comprehension, understanding and speaking and relationships with colleagues. We can highlight a difference here in the evaluation of the workers who, we

have seen, do not emphasise this problem referred to by the companies. It is worth mentioning, in any case, that overall nearly half the companies involved in the research describe the relationships between Italian and foreign colleagues as mainly featuring goodwill and collaboration, perhaps after an initial period of uncertainty and only a few cases where episodes of conflict are reported.

### ***Job satisfaction***

The immigrants interviewed are relatively satisfied with the jobs they are currently performing in Italy although the research does highlight the difficulties of immigrants, including those who have lived continuously in Trentino for several years, to make the most of their skills and develop some level of progression in their working lives.

The most critical aspect is the limited career opportunities: over 60% of those interviewed who have a job are dissatisfied. This comes as no surprise considering their high level of education and the downward trend in social mobility after their immigration. The most dissatisfied are the graduates (78% dissatisfied compared to 41% of those who left school after compulsory education), women, who we have observed held better qualified positions than men in their countries of origin, and those from the old Soviet Union.

The second greatest area of dissatisfaction, especially for women and graduates, is the level of independence, that is the opportunity to work with a certain level of discretion and the chance to take initiatives: it is mainly women (55% compared to 34% of men), people from the old Soviet Union (52%) and graduates (19% compared to 9% for those who just finished compulsory education). The third area of dissatisfaction is over working hours: once again it is the women who are the most dissatisfied.

On the other hand, a high level of satisfaction emerges in working relationships in the workplace, both with superiors and with colleagues (over 80% say they are satisfied or very satisfied).

One aspect which seemed quite surprising was the high level of satisfaction over health and safety at work: 75% say they are satisfied or very satisfied. This is surprising if we consider the growing trend of accidents in the workplace in Trentino, compared to other places which have noted a reduction. However, only a third of those interviewed reported receiving information on health and safety in the workplace on their induction into the company.

### ***The scale of priorities in the workplace***

Upon examining the scale of priorities in the workplace, that is what respondents consider most important, we find in first place “health and safety in the workplace”: so the respondents consider as very important one of the aspects they were satisfied with. In second place is “job stability”, bearing in mind that this aspect determines their permanence in Italy. In third place we find the chance “to do a job you enjoy”, especially among female respondents. “Pay” is only to be found in fourth place. We found this an interesting consideration because it demonstrates that the immigrants aspire not only to greater economic security, giving importance only to the economic advantages and benefits from work but also want to achieve self-realisation and

improvement, and thus to integrate socially into Trentino. There are no significant differences in the scale of priorities between men and women. It is however relevant that there is greater demand from women for jobs which are enjoyable, where personal as well as economic gratification can be found.

In this case, perhaps, there is the most significant diversity of perception between employers and workers. Company directors were asked the same question about what they considered the most important and motivating factors for immigrant staff : in first place for more than half the companies was pay, followed by job stability, while independence, career opportunities and doing a job they enjoy were all perceived as marginal.

### *What is important for employers?*

We asked the workers at interview what they thought was most important for employers, an attempt to see the picture they have of the labour market from the demand side. It emerged that, in their opinion, what counts most for employers are personal qualities such as reliability and good will: over 70% stated that these were “very important”. Meanwhile work experience, and in particular qualifications, are entirely marginal; these are both elements that immigrant workers possess and this outcome goes to confirm how this is a source of dissatisfaction.

At the same time, reliability and good will are also the two most important aspects sought by employers when hiring a worker, followed by a willingness to carry out the hours and the duties and knowledge of the language; previous experience and professional qualifications are considered less important. It is also worth noting that while trustworthiness is an element much sought after when employers are hiring an Italian worker, it becomes that much more precious in the case of a foreign worker since the employer has less opportunity to verify the worker’s formal credentials and their previous professional experiences. This aspect further explains the use of informal channels and internal human resources when recruiting immigrant workers.

It is worth noting that the immigrants have quite a clear idea of what the market requires, employers do not have an equally clear awareness of the immigrants’ aspirations, undervaluing the importance which immigrant workers place on self-realisation and a correct valuation of their work.

### *Difficulties in daily life*

Almost a quarter of those interviewed found that housing was the biggest problem they faced in their day to day lives. This is followed by the subsequent immigration of family members which 22% found “very difficult”, the quantity and quality of free time was considered “very difficult” by 21% while work was a greater worry to women: 23% considered it very difficult compared to 13% of men.

By comparison, the data from the enquiry among employers shows that they consider the problems immigrants have outside work which influence their jobs to be: the absence of their families, difficulties with social integration and the search for accommodation (for almost a third of the companies interviewed), an area in which

some companies intervene with support, followed by the concession of holiday extensions to allow foreign workers to visit their countries of origin.

### ***Training***

Over 57% of those interviewed have attended a training course since they arrived in Italy: this is quite a high percentage which confirms the desire of immigrants to find a more satisfactory occupation than the one they have which, in most cases does not allow them room for professional development. Courses were most frequently attended by those in the 26 – 30 age group (64% have attended a course compared to 39% of those aged between 40 and 60), graduates (65% compared to those who just completed compulsory schooling) and the people from Albania (60% attended courses compared to 50% for the Polish and Slovakian people).

In more than 43% of cases they are courses to pass the driving test for cars; 40% Italian language courses, followed by women in particular, and for 28% of cases, work preparation courses, attended especially by men and by the better educated groups (22% of graduates compared to just 3% of those who completed compulsory education).

Those who have not attended any training courses gave their reasons as lack of time, because of incompatible working hours (40%), whereas just 9% gave economic reasons. In any case, many would be prepared to attend a training course, in particular 38% would do so in order to learn a new profession (especially women who we have seen are on average better qualified and under-employed), young people under 25, and high school and university graduates. They are followed by those who want to improve their Italian (30%) and those who want to acquire a professional qualification (28%). A quarter of those interviewed would also like to attend a computer training course (particularly men, Albanians, high school and university graduates).

Employers indicate the area which regards the main difficulties and training requirements at induction for immigrant workers, even before the Italian language, as the awareness and understanding of the organisational culture of the company. A further area which requires action at induction is specific training in the job to be done, which is mainly provided by the companies interviewed through 1 to 1 training.

### ***Use of the Internet***

Internet is used daily by just over a third of those interviewed: of these, 60% use it for e-mail communications, 40% for self instruction, 38% use it to look for local information and 35% use it to look for work. At work it is used by hardly anyone because they rarely do jobs which involve the use of the Internet.

### ***Future prospects***

With reference to future prospects, almost a third of those interviewed would like to change job and a further third would like to improve their position within their present situation. 13% are considering starting their own business, especially younger men, Romanians and Bulgarians who have lived in Italy for a number of years. These are



therefore the people who have a better knowledge of the territory and the requirements for going into business independently. Here too we can see that a higher level of education often corresponds to a greater desire to change working situation.

As regards the prospects of life in the future more generally, over 40% of those interviewed expressed the desire to remain in Italy: this is quite a substantial percentage which is worth investing in. 28% are undecided and a similar percentage would like to return to their country of origin. Among the most motivated to stay in Italy are the women (almost half would like to stay compared to 30% of men, and just 20% would like to return to the mother country compared to 40% of men), people from the old Soviet Union (55% would like to stay in Italy compared to 32% of Polish and Slovakian immigrants, a third of whom are considering returning home or moving on elsewhere), those who live with family members (49% intend to remain compared to 33% among those who don't live with the family), university graduates and those who have been in Italy more than 5 years, confirming that integration increases over time (52% say they want to stay compared to 33% of those who have been in Italy a year or less).

Less than 3% intend to leave Italy to move to another country. This a small percentage which, in our opinion, should be interpreted as a sign of relative wellbeing, in spite of the difficulties caused by being away from home and the difficulties of being a foreigner.

### *Conclusions*

The research highlights certain aspects which characterise the gap between the skills possessed by immigrant workers (high levels of education, previous experience) and the jobs actually performed (low skilled positions). This gap is a cause of discrimination and often generates exclusion and self-segregation. The skills learned in the home country are often undervalued in the Trentino job market where the demand is for low level labour thus generating a situation of under-employment which has repercussions on the real opportunities for access to more qualified professions for immigrant workers. This situation is, in the end, is disadvantageous for the whole social and economic system which, as well as failing to make best use of the skills available but unused, has to absorb the costs deriving from the under-employment of a more and more substantial part of the working population.

