

Arrivederci! Why young Italians are leaving in droves

AFP- Billie Fusto is not after a fat pay cheque: he is training to be an archivist and wants nothing more than “a quiet life” at home in Italy.

But like tens of thousands of other young Italian graduates, the 24-year-old fears he has little choice but to emigrate.

More than a million Italians have left in the past 10 years – a third of them aged 25 to 34 – national data shows.

Those leaving blame low salaries and little recognition for their skills. The proportion of graduates leaving in particular is on the rise.

“I’m not looking for wealth... or big responsibilities,” said Fusto, who comes from Calabria in southern Italy, and is studying for a masters in Rome.

“I want a quiet life, in which I don’t have to worry about whether I have 15 euros to go shopping,” he told AFP.

“And currently, in Italy that’s not guaranteed.”

While migration has become a hot-button issue, for every young foreigner who comes to settle in Italy, nearly nine young Italians leave, according to a report by the Italian North East Foundation.

“It is not normal that our country does not ask itself why, and does not remedy this haemorrhage,” Renato Brunetta, president of the National Council for Economics and Labour (CNEL), said during the report’s presentation in October.

– Real wages falling –

Some, particularly from Italy's poorer south, move to the country's wealthy northern regions to try their luck. The share of graduates among them has increased from 18 to 58 percent in the last two decades.

But even in the industrialised north, working conditions can be less than attractive than elsewhere.

Italy is one of the few OECD countries where real wages have decreased compared to 2019.

The youth unemployment rate is also higher than the European average, at 17.7 percent in October, compared to 15.2 percent across the EU.

Workplaces in Italy are seen as unmeritocratic. There is no national minimum wage, and salaries do not rise in line with the number of years spent in higher education.

Elena Picardi returned to Rome after studying political science in France – but her hopes of finding a job in Italy are fading fast.

“More often than not, when it comes to Italian offers, either the salary is not specified or it is generally lower,” the 24-year-old told AFP.

The difference can amount to several hundred euros per month for the same position in other European countries.

“I would like to contribute to the future of my country, and stay close to my family,” Picardi said.

“But why should I sacrifice my prospects when... my profile is more valued (abroad)?”

– Demographic time bomb –

The Italian “brain drain” cost the country an estimated 134

billion euros between 2011 and 2023, according to the North East Foundation.

Of those who do return, many say it is because they want to be closer to their families, their report said.

Others stay at home out of necessity rather than choice.

The average age for leaving the family home in Italy in 2022 was 30, according to Eurostat – among the oldest in the European Union, with only Spain and Greece

The exodus of youngsters is all the more worrying in view of the ageing Italian population.

The ratio between people in employment and those not working will increase from the current three to two, to around one to one in 2050, according to the National Institute of Statistics.

In a bid to reverse the trend, Italy offers tax incentives for highly qualified or specialist Italian workers living abroad who return home, with even bigger cuts offered to those who bring children with them.

AFP