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The Impact of the First Covid-19 Wave on Migrant Workers: The Case of Romanians in Italy

Luisa Salaris*, Andrei Iacob*, Viviana Anghel**, Giulia Contu*

The Covid-19 pandemic is having an unprecedented impact on health systems, on many economic sectors and on the labour market. This critical situation is also accompanied by social destabilisation, which has exacerbated inequalities and severely affected the most disadvantaged population groups, such as migrant workers. This study provides insights into the consequences of the first wave and the lockdown period in Spring 2020 of the Covid-19 pandemic on Romanians living in Italy, using data collected by the International Association Italy-Romania ‘Cuore Romeno’, within a project financed by the Romanian Department for Diaspora and developed to support actions while strengthening the link with Romanian institutions during the pandemic. Findings show that, during the lockdown, two opposite situations occurred among Romanians. Workers in the ‘key sector’ become indispensable and experienced only small changes, while others lost their job or experienced a worsening of working conditions, with lower wages or an increase in working hours. Most workers chose to stay in Italy, relying on their savings or the support of the Italian government. Job losses, not having new employment, and having limited savings all influenced the decision of a smaller group to return to Romania. In conclusion, the analysis suggests that measures adopted should take into consideration that the Covid-19 pandemic might disproportionately hit population groups such as migrants, women, young people and temporary and unprotected workers, particularly those employed in trade, hospitality and agriculture.

Keywords: migrant workers, Covid-19 pandemic, labour market, Romania, Italy

* University of Cagliari, Italy. Address for correspondence: salaris@unica.it.

** National University of Political Sciences and Public Administration, Romania.

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Introduction

In 2020, world citizens were faced with an unprecedented emergency due to the spread of the Covid-19 virus. The impact on health systems in Europe and the rest of the world has been – and continues to be – important but the consequences of this pandemic are not limited to the health dimension, as containment measures and the restriction of mobility have given rise to an economic and financial crisis, with a major negative impact on the economy and the labour market. Some sectors and, in general, industries that rely on social interactions or travel – like that of tourism (accommodation and catering facilities were the most affected) – but also transport, the cultural sector, recreation services and trade have recorded significant losses both in terms of turnover and employment due to the implemented restrictions and the inability of workers to work from home (Angeloni 2021; European Commission 2021; Filippucci, Bassetto and Cerrato 2021; IOM 2021; Statista 2021). This period of emergency has exacerbated inequalities and severely affected the most disadvantaged groups in society, such as migrants and the poorest social classes (Bajos, Jusot, Pailhé, Spire, Martin, Meyer, Lydié, Franck, Zina and Carrat 2021; Blundell, Costa Dias, Joyce and Xu 2020; Carta and De Philippis 2021; ILO 2020a; Papadimitriou and Blaskó 2020).

The objective of this contribution is to provide some insights into the consequences of labour-market outcomes in the earlier period of the pandemic on a selected group of EU migrant workers in Italy – that of Romanians, as their community represents the largest diaspora in the EU, with 3.5 million citizens living abroad, of which one third is resident in Italy (Eurostat 2020; OECD 2019). The focus is on the outcomes of labour-market dynamics, in a bid to answer to the following questions:

- What has been the consequences on Romanian workers' occupational status?
- Which factors have influenced the decision to return to Romania?
- Have their working and economic conditions worsened after first pandemic wave?

The data used in this work were derived from the online questionnaire of a survey conducted in the autumn of 2020 within the project 'Romanians in Italy. Structural Problems and Socio-Economic Dynamics after the Covid-19 Pandemic' carried out by the International Association Italy-Romania 'Cuore Romeno' and financed by the Romanian Department of Diaspora, who were seeking to acquire information about its citizens in order to plan possible actions to support and strengthen the relationship with Romanian institutions during the pandemic.

In the first part, we describe the presence of the Romanian community in Italy before focusing on the impact of the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, presenting the situation in Italy. Secondly, we explore early evidence of the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic on migrant workers in general. In the third part, more details on data and methods are provided and the results of the analysis of the information gathered from the questionnaire survey are presented. Finally, the discussion and conclusion highlights possible relevant insights that emerge from the analysis of the data and which could contribute to our understanding of the main changes observed in the labour dimension during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Romanians in Italy

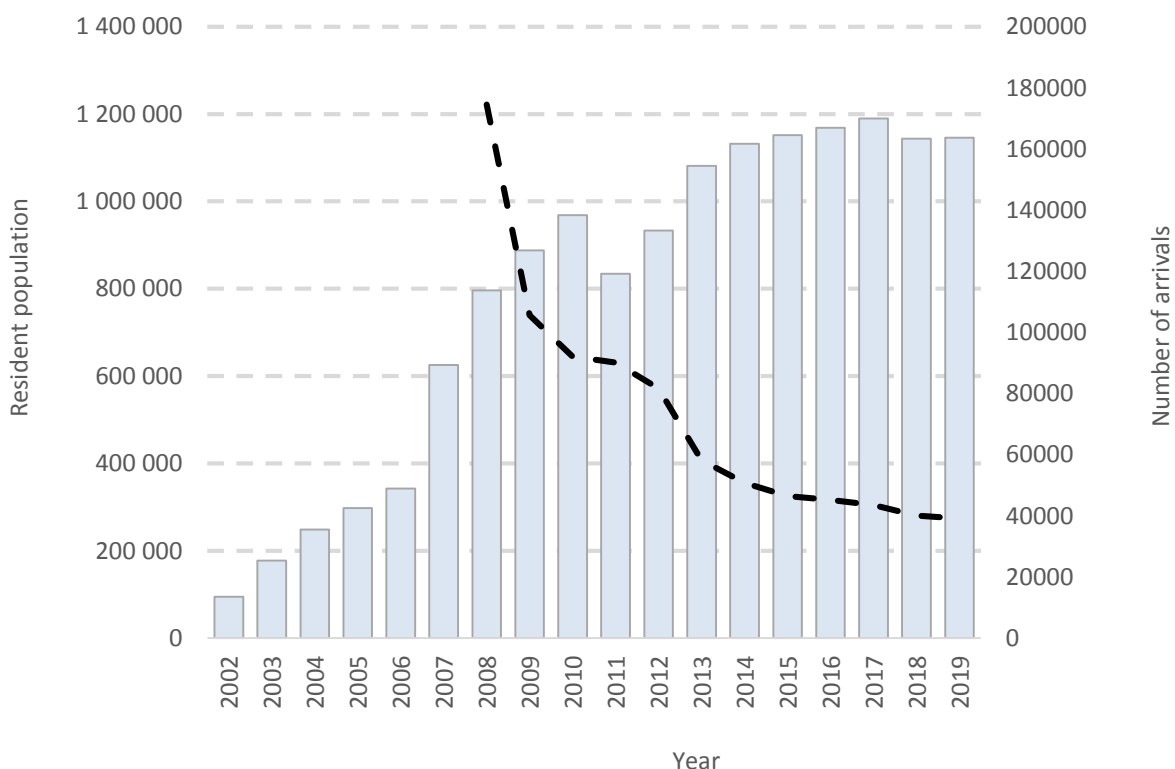
Since the abolition of controls in the Schengen area in 2002 and the subsequent accession of Romania to the European Union in 2007, the mobility of Romanian citizens has increased exponentially thanks to social links and networks, language skills and family reunification (Anghel 2008; Anghel, Botezat, Coşciug, Manafî and Roman 2016; Baldwin-Edwards 2007; Bleahu 2004; Sandu 2000, 2006, 2010). It is reported that, in Romania, at least one third of the country's population has been abroad for at least 6 months in the last 30 years (Anghel

et al. 2016). Data on temporary migration reveal that, in the period 2008–2018, 2,577,656 people have had a migratory experience abroad not exceeding 12 months (INS 2019).

According to Eurostat (2020) data, Romanian citizens of working age (20–64 years) living abroad in a European country counted for about a fifth (19.4 per cent) of the population of Romania. In 2019, Romanian citizens living in Europe (EU-28) totalled 3.5 million and there was a widespread presence in all European countries. However, some countries are privileged destinations for Romanian emigration – Italy (1.2 million residents), Spain (670,000), Germany (660,000) and the United Kingdom (422,000) – welcoming 85 per cent of Romanians living in Europe.

Italy is one of the top destinations for Romanian emigration due to the growing number of Italian investors in Romania, to the Catholic Church which supported the first flows (Anghel *et al.* 2016; Ban 2009; Cingolani and Piperno 2006; Jacob 2014) and to its informal economy because, especially in the early 2000s, it was possible to arrive in the country on a tourist visa and continue to work irregularly on the Italian labour market. During this phase, the migration was informal and highly circular (Ambrosini 2015; Fellini and Fullin 2018; Mara 2012; Reyneri and Fullin 2011).

Figure 1. Romanian residents in Italy (2002–2019) and yearly arrivals of Romanian citizens in Italy (2008–2019)



Data source: ISTAT (2020); Eurostat (2021).

From 2002 to 2006 (Figure 1) there was a significant increase in the number of Romanians resident in Italy. The official figures estimated that, in 2002, Romanians numbered just under 100 000 although, in the following years, their presence grew considerably thanks to a series of amnesties by the Italian government that allowed the emergence of a significant number of irregular workers. However, it was from 2007, with the accession of Romania to the EU, that an exponential growth began, which continued until 2010, when – for the first time

– the number of Romanian residents faced a phase of decline and subsequent moderate growth, reaching the threshold of 1 million in 2013. Eurostat data (2021) show how the number of arrivals has progressively decreased over time and stabilised in recent years at around 40,000 new residents per year. This has involved a slowdown in the total number but the Romanian presence in Italy continues to be significant (Figure 1). According to ISTAT (2020), more recent data show the number of Romanians regularly resident in Italy in 2019 at about 1.13 million, with a more marked female presence (57 per cent) compared to males.

According to data from the Labour Force Survey ISTAT (2019), Romanian citizens are actively involved in the Italian labour market, generally recording high levels of employment (respectively 75 per cent of males and 54.3 per cent of females are employed) which has allowed a flow of remittances to the motherland over time in support of families – for the purchase of food, the coverage of home-related expenditure, education and the provision of savings (Mehedintu, Soava and Sterpu 2020). Among women, however, there is a high inactivity rate (34 per cent) which might hide irregular work that escapes the LFS survey (AIIR-CR 2020).

The domestic, care and health sectors absorb more than half of Romanian female workers (59 per cent), while the remainder are occupied in the fields of hospitality, catering and industry. Men's participation in the labour market is more heterogeneous and they are predominantly employed in industry (30 per cent), construction (27 per cent), agriculture (12 per cent), and transport (11 per cent) (ISTAT 2019).

Italy in the first wave of the pandemic

Italy was hit the hardest by the pandemic in the earlier months of 2020. As a result, several measures were implemented to prevent infection. There was a general lockdown from March to May, starting with the closure of schools on 5 March, followed soon after by the cessation of most commercial activities, together with a ban on gatherings and the limitation of citizens' mobility. Within a few weeks, all non-essential activities were stopped. The government instated measures to support households and businesses in stages, first protecting workers and businesses and then – with the gradual recommencing of activities – allocating financial support for the purchase of goods in strategic sectors to revive spending (MEF 2021).

Closures and restrictions severely hit some activities, with heavy consequences for their workers. Many of them initially had their contracts suspended but the government banned the dismissal of employees in these activities and guaranteed the Redundancy Fund (*Cassa integrazione guadagni*, CIG), aimed at helping firms in financial difficulties, financing the costs of the unused workforce and supporting those workers who lost all or part of their income. It notably introduced a lump-sum bonus, of an average of about 600 euros per month, for almost all self-employed workers who were not protected by any social insurance programme prior to the emergency. These measures were accompanied by the promotion of remote working and support for the cost of child-care services (Carta and De Philippis 2021; MEF 2021).

During the first phases of the Covid-19 pandemic in Italy, families faced a period of high uncertainty, marked by a contraction in income and consumption during which they had to draw initially on their savings to be able to face everyday expenses – and especially those related to the mortgage of the house – while waiting for the implementation of support measures by the Italian government (Neri and Zanichelli 2020; Rondinelli and Zanichelli 2020).

For migrant workers living in Italy the first weeks of the pandemic were also a period of hardship and disorientation due to the initial lack of information about access for foreigners to the funds allocated by the Italian government to support workers and families – this even more so because, among the foreigners in Italy, there is a large proportion of irregular workers for whom access to welfare measures has proved to be more difficult during the pandemic (Caritas 2020).

Most Romanian workers remained in Italy, while a smaller group decided to go back to their home country during the spring closure period. The return to the home country of a large number of Romanians resident in Europe has not been well accepted by their fellow citizens in Romania and, during the first stage of the Covid-19 epidemic, the government adopted severe penalties for those return migrants declaring false statements about where they were arriving from and their health status (Romania Insider 2020). Public opinion, from the media and social networks, has often accused Romanian citizens returning from Europe to be the cause of the spread of the epidemic crisis created by Covid-19 in the country (Dascalu 2020). In this context, therefore, Romanian workers found themselves at a crossroads, having to decide whether to stay or to return home.

The impact of the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic on migrant workers: early evidence

From the early stages of the pandemic, numerous international organisations and researchers have highlighted that the spread of the virus may disproportionately hit population groups such as immigrants and their children, unprotected workers, women and irregular migrants (Guadagno 2020; ILO 2020a, 2020b; IOM 2020; OECD 2020). Today, the number of studies that can evaluate the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on society is progressively increasing. However, the occurrence of new pandemic waves makes estimation challenging, especially as the long-term effects remain unknown (see, *inter alia*, Foley and Piper 2020; Guadagno 2020; ILO 2020a, 2020b; OECD 2020).

As regards the labour market, the restrictions adopted and the closure of certain sectors of economic activity made it difficult, if not impossible, to find new employment. In many countries, this led to an increase in the unemployment level and to higher inactivity rates (Gelatt 2020; GLACOR 2020; OECD 2020). In destination countries, the increased pressure on the labour market – due to redundancies – exacerbated the adversity that public opinion has towards migrants who compete with natives on the labour market, effectively undermining the progress made in recent years in the integration process (OECD 2020). In the countries of origin, meanwhile, the local labour market had to cope with an increased demand for jobs by return migrants (Foley and Piper 2020).

In this emergency context, migrant workers prove to be generally disadvantaged, especially workers employed in the gig economy (with flexible, temporary or freelance jobs) and the informal economy, who have precarious and unprotected jobs, without health, insurance or wage protection (ILO 2020b). Often, migrant workers are engaged in close-contact professions – such as domestic workers or carers – or in tasks that cannot be remotely performed (Foley and Piper 2020; Guadagno 2020; OECD 2020), where the proportion of women is particularly high (ILO 2020a). The situation is also critical for seasonal and agricultural workers who have been severely affected by the pandemic (ILO 2020a; Palumbo and Corrado 2020; Tagliacozzo, Pisacane and Kilkey 2021) and among self-employed migrants, who usually have small activities and low capital stock (Caritas 2020; OECD 2020).

During the first pandemic wave, two major and opposing situations occurred. On the one hand, it was observed that many migrant workers lost their jobs and faced significant barriers to re-entering the workforce, finding themselves trapped and with limited networks to rely on (Foley and Piper 2020; Quinley 2020). Some of those who continued to work experienced wage cuts, the non-payment of wages and deteriorating working conditions (Fasani and Mazza 2020a; ILO 2020a).

On the other hand, there were groups of migrant workers who became indispensable within the labour market as they were the so-called ‘key workers’ who were employed in crucial tasks on the front line of the Covid-19 response (IOM 2020). In Europe, it was estimated that 13 per cent of key workers were migrants, who were over-represented among low-skilled workers – such as personal care-workers in the health service,

cleaners and helpers, drivers, transport and storage labourers and food-processing workers (Fasani and Mazza 2020b; ILO 2020a; OECD 2019), all in sectors that never stopped during the pandemic.

Generally, migrant workers had to deal with financial insecurity given the fact that they often had limited savings available to cope with hardship (Gavlak 2020; McCormack, Joudo Larsen and Husn 2015; Ruiz and Vargas-Silva 2010). There was also a particularly negative impact on the families in origin countries due to the reduction in remittances (FAO 2020). The World Bank estimated that job losses would imply a reduction of 20 per cent in international remittances, about US\$110 billion, with an impact on the well-being of families and communities who depend on these savings for their survival (Foley and Piper 2020; ILO 2020a; World Bank 2020).

Some migrants, due to school closures, were unable to continue working or look for a new job, as they had to cope with their family responsibilities. This also had relevant consequences for their children, who were at a disadvantage in the distance learning carried out during lockdown, as the native-born children of migrants were less likely to have access to a computer and an internet connection (OECD 2020).

The crisis experienced during the first wave of the pandemic also highlighted the limits and criticality of the care system in many European countries which increasingly depend on international workers, especially in countries where there are cash benefits, a culture of familism and a high percentage of care provided at home (Kuhlmann, Falkenbach, Klasa, Pavoline and Ungureanu 2020; OECD 2018). In recent decades, the continuous demand for workers in this sector has fuelled the flows of workers from Central and Eastern Europe in particular, which are the largest communities in this sector (Cangiano 2014; Eurostat 2011).

From the start of the pandemic, care and domestic workers have found themselves unprotected and exposed to greater risks, both to their health and to the economic impact. In Europe, among workers in long-term care (LTC), the proportion of migrants – with strong female participation – is particularly relevant as they are mostly employed in hospitals, households and residential homes where the latter – in some cases – became veritable pandemic hotspots, especially in the early stages of the pandemic (Kuhlmann *et al.* 2020). Instead, due to the native population's fear of contact with people coming from outside the family, many domestic workers were fired during the pandemic. For workers with a live-in contract, this implied the loss of their accommodation and, for non-EU workers, the loss of their work permit (Foley and Piper 2020). During lockdown, those who managed to keep their jobs in families with live-in accommodation had, in many cases, seen the suppression of days off and a continuous request for assistance from families (Guadagno 2020).

Data and methods

Data: the Romanian diaspora Covid-19 survey

As stated above, we used data from the survey of the institutional project 'Romanians in Italy. Structural Problems and Socio-Economic Dynamics after the Covid-19 Pandemic'. The project had two main objectives. The primary goal was to understand and assess the impact that the Covid-19 pandemic might have had on citizens residing in Italy in order to implement possible support action and initiatives that could help them to face emergencies. The second objective was to reinforce the presence and the connection of Romanian institutions with their citizens at a time of great uncertainty. The project was mainly addressed at Romanians living in Italy who actively continued to have links with their country of origin through participation in the activities of emigrant cultural associations, social groups and networks.

The study was developed through two approaches: a qualitative one with a series of in-depth interviews with key informers and a selected group of citizens, with the aim of investigating public opinion about the

pandemic; and a quantitative survey carried out through the administration of an online questionnaire (hereafter referred to as the Covid survey). In this work, data collected for the Covid survey were used, as the questionnaire focused on labour-market dynamics.

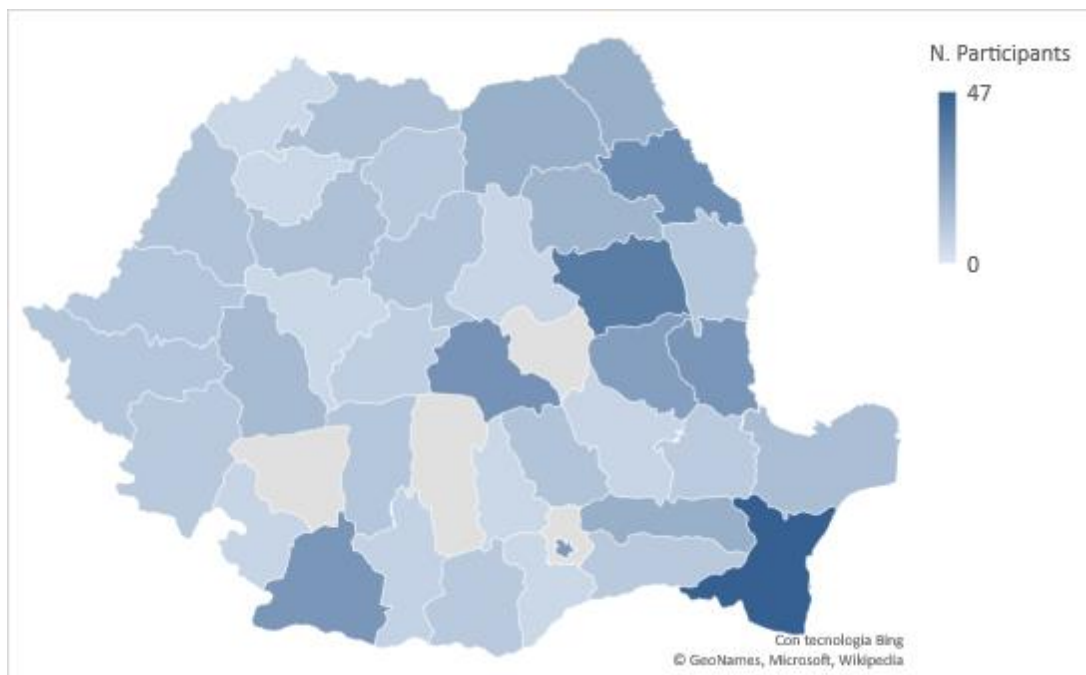
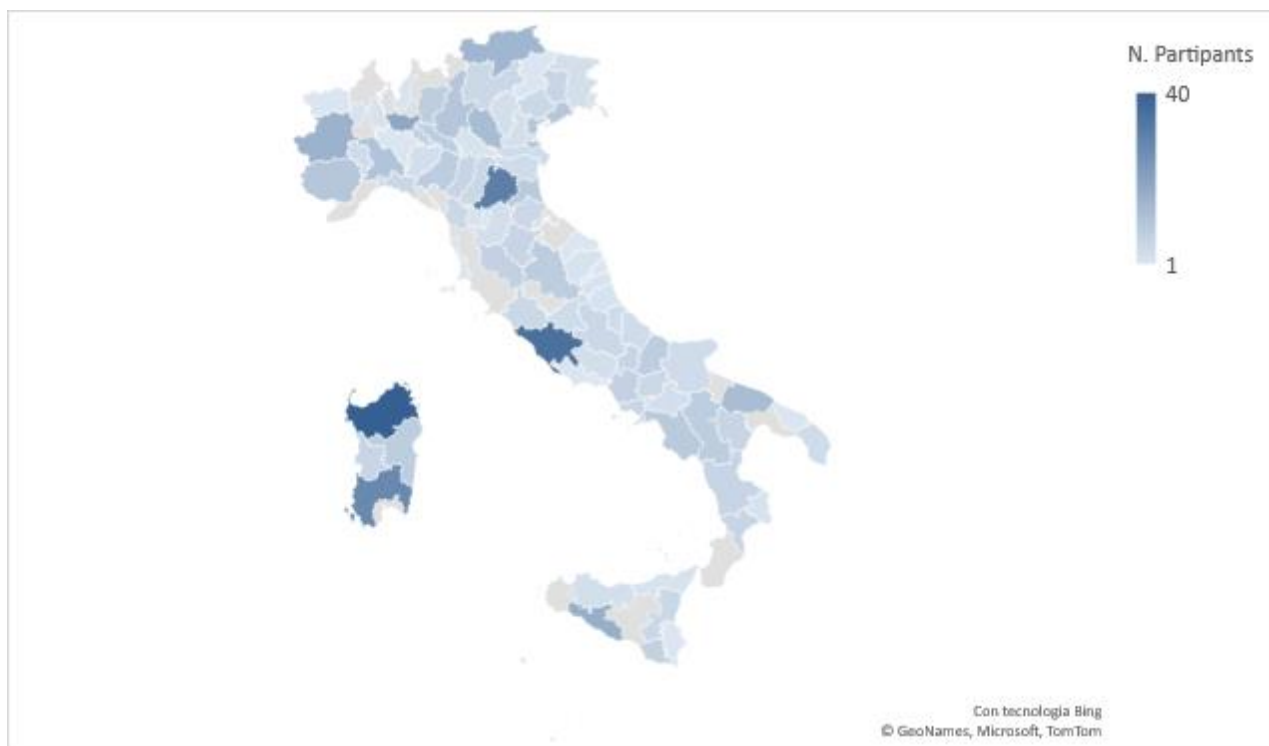
The administration followed a simple random sampling technique through the self-completion of a structured Covid-survey questionnaire, made available on the online platform *Survio* in the period from 9 October to 12 November 2020. To attain wide participation, the questionnaire was promoted and distributed twice a week on the project's Facebook page,¹ and on the Facebook pages of the Intercultural Association Italia-Romania 'Cuore Romeno', the project partners,² as well as on social networks and in several discussion groups of Romanian emigrants identified on Facebook (AIIR-CR 2020). The latter certainly represents a selected population but is in line with the focus of the Diaspora Department, which aimed to have feedback from citizens actively engaged and interested in the Romanian community. The questionnaire had an average compilation time of between 10 and 15 minutes in order to encourage wider participation and limit drop-out and non-completion rates (Corbetta, Gasperoni and Pisati 2001).

The multiple-choice questions focused on the demographic profile of respondents, their level of education and length of stay in Italy and considered the impact of the first wave of the pandemic and the Spring 2020 lockdown on employment, working opportunities, working conditions and the economic situation of respondents. This, despite the survey being conducted in October–November 2020, provides an *ex-post* evaluation of the pandemic period (Rondinelli and Zanichelli 2020).

Sample population

The questionnaire was started by 1 198 people, of whom only 44.4 per cent actually completed it. Despite the short amount of time required for completion, the response rate was affected by the presence, in the final part of the questionnaire, of a set of questions about the quality of relations and the level of trust that participants had with institutions such as migrant associations, relations with the consulate and the Romanian government. These questions turned out to be a sensitive topic and affected the respondents' decision not to complete the questionnaire, due to the general fear of being seen to publicly criticise institutions. To adjust for this behaviour, after the launch of the online questionnaire and the first uncompleted questionnaires, an *ad hoc* event was organised on Facebook to reiterate to the participants the anonymity of the survey.

Only completed questionnaires were considered for analysis (532 cases). Some 39 per cent of participants in the survey were men and the remaining proportion were women (61 per cent). Figures 2 and 3 show, respectively, the area of origin of the respondents and their province of residence in Italy. The most frequent areas of origin are the eastern provinces of Romania while, in Italy, their presence is quite heterogenous, with the greatest participation of workers resident in large urban centres and in Sardinia – the region of origin of the cultural association conducting the project.

Figure 2. Province of origin of Romanian Covid-survey participants**Figure 3. Province of residence in Italy of Covid-survey participants**

Looking at the distribution by age and sex of our respondents, we observe a predominance of the population in the age groups 40–54 years, especially among women (Figure 4), reflecting to a great extent the age structure of Romanian residents in Italy (AIIR-CR 2020).

Figure 4. Distribution by age group (20–65+ years) and by sex of Romanians in Italy (LFS) and of Covid-survey participants

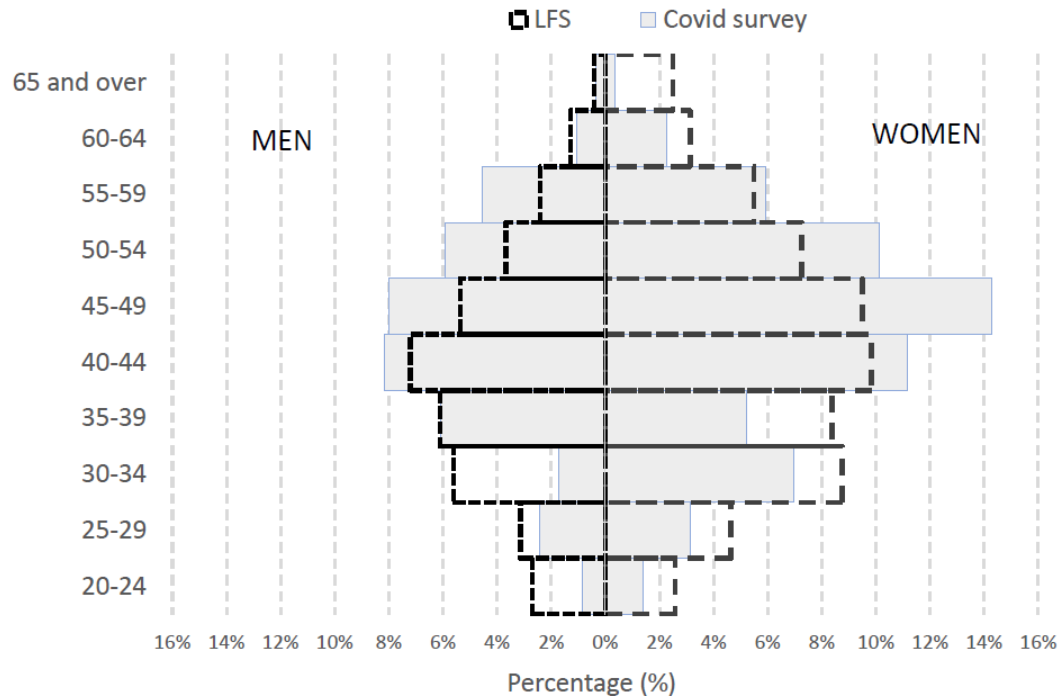


Table 1 reports the descriptive statistics of variables included in the MCA analysis and in the logistic model. We observe that the most frequently held qualification is upper-secondary education (67.5 per cent), followed by tertiary education – achieved by 1 Romanian in 5 (19 per cent). About two-thirds of respondents are long-term migrants which means that they have been in Italy for 10 years or more. Finally, as regards the working dimension, the distribution of respondents generally reflects that found by the LFS in 2019 (AIIR-CR 2020) for Romanian workers present in Italy. Accordingly, the high percentage of workers in health and care services can be attributed mainly to women while, for men, there is wider participation in all sectors of economic activity, even if agriculture, trade and industry confirm that they are the privileged sectors.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of Romanian participants in the Covid survey

VARIABLES	Number	Percentage (%)
SEX		
Male	213	40.0
Female	319	60.0
EDUCATION		
Lower-secondary or below	72	13.5
Upper-secondary	359	67.5
Tertiary	101	19.0
LENGHT OF STAY		
5 years and less	96	18.0
6–9 years	96	18.0
10 years and over	340	63.9
OCCUPATIONAL SECTOR		
Agriculture	35	6.6
Industry and construction	72	13.5
Commerce	46	8.6
Hotels and restaurants	37	7.0
Transport and communications	26	4.9
Financial and business services	140	26.3
PA, education, health	176	33.1
Social care and personal services	176	33.1
RESIDENCE IN ITALY		
North-West	116	21.8
North-East	142	26.7
Centre	90	16.9
South	113	21.2
Islands	117	22.0
TOTAL	532	100

Method and data analysis

The data were first analysed using Multiple Correspondence Analysis (MCA) which is an extension of Principal Component Analysis (PCA) and Correspondence Analysis (CA) (Abdi and Valentin 2007; Groenen and Josse 2016) and which enables the exploring and visualising of the categorical data. The analysis was carried out using *R software* and the two packages ‘FactoMineR’ – for computing principal-component methods – and ‘factoextra’, for extracting, visualising and interpreting the results (Kassambara 2017). MCA was used to gain an initial evaluation of the possible impact of the first pandemic wave and lockdown on Romanian workers, identifying groups of individuals with a similar profile in their answers to the questions while investigating the possible associations between variable categories.

Secondly, a series of logistic models were applied to estimate the possible effect of the selected variables on the adopted strategy (stay in Italy or return to Romania) and on possible outcomes on the labour market. Therefore, Model 1 in Table 2 estimates the effect of selected and relevant variables on the probability of

adopting a return to Romania as a strategy to cope with the impact of the Covid-19 emergency, while subsequent models (2 to 5) consider a set of outcomes on labour-market dynamics – such as job loss and changes in occupational status – and on working and economic conditions. All models include sex, education, length of stay in Italy and the occupational sector as key characteristics. Model 1 also includes the possible effect of job loss or of having received a new job proposal (recruitment), having experienced a deterioration in economic status (economic changes) and having no savings to deal with the emergency period (savings). All dependent variables were coded as dichotomous. Bootstrap was used to estimate the confidence interval of the parameters to test models' stability and the resampling data (James, Witten, Hastie and Tibshirani 2021), the results of which are reported in Table 2 (B=1 000).

Findings

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on Romanians in Italy

The exploratory analysis conducted through the MCA analysis of questionnaire responses provided by Romanians in Italy allows us to obtain our first insights into the experiences of this group of migrants during the first pandemic wave in Spring 2020. Figures 5 and 6 respectively show the distribution of respondents within each quadrant on the first two axes of MCA analysis (Figure 5) and the impact of the first Covid-19 wave and lockdown in Spring 2020 on Covid survey respondents, thanks to the association between the categorical variables included in the analysis (Figure 6). Based on the results of the analysis, it is possible to identify four groups of respondents with a similar profile, labelled as follows: the flexibles and the stables, the veterans and the recruits.

The flexibles

This is a group of respondents who have been in Italy for a period of between 6 and 9 years, time enough for them to be familiar with the dynamics and rules of the local labour market (Quadrant I); this is the largest group among those identified. Respondents who belong to this group responded to the Covid-19 pandemic with flexibility and managed to adapt to the required changes; during the lockdown phase, some of them even received new job proposals. They mainly live in the central area of Italy. However, these workers saw their economic and working conditions worsen during the first pandemic wave and the subsequent lockdown, as they were employed in economic sectors – such as trade and agriculture – which were highly subject to the restrictive measures taken. Despite the worsening of their economic conditions, they decided to remain in Italy.

The stables

Following the consolidated presence of Romanian workers on the Italian labour market, among our respondents, it is possible to identify a consistent group of workers whom we called 'stable' and who experienced limited changes during the pandemic (Quadrant II). These respondents were employed both before and after the pandemic and are so-called 'key workers'. They are mainly resident in the North-West (i.e. Piedmont, Valle d'Aosta, Lombardy, Liguria) and in the North-East (Emilia Romagna, Friuli Venezia Giulia, Trentino, Veneto) of the country and work mainly in health, assistance and care services as well as in industry – where they are predominantly male. Despite the significant impact of the pandemic on the labour market and on the general economic situation, this category of workers has not seen their occupational condition change; in some cases, they even reported an improvement in their economic, working and contractual situation during the lockdown as the result of new contracts with higher rates of pay – more frequent among workers engaged in home care and employed in hospital services.

Table 2. Confidence interval (95%) estimated with Bootstrap (B=1000)

VARIABLES	MODEL 1			MODEL 2			MODEL 3			MODEL 4			MODEL 5		
	Estimate	95% C.I.		Estimate	95% C.I.		Estimate	95% C.I.		Estimate	95% C.I.		Estimate	95% C.I.	
		2.5%	97.5%		2.5%	97.5%		2.5%	97.5%		2.5%	97.5%		2.5%	97.5%
INTERCEPT	0.69059	-1.221	2.519	-1.110	-2.460	-0.051	-0.454	-3.659	1.108	-0.061	-3.945	-0.282	-0.881	-17.645	-0.516
SEX															
Male (ref.)															
Female	0.024	-0.552	0.673	0.389	-0.050	0.842	0.364	-0.305	1.255	0.218	-0.615	0.709	0.277	-0.673	0.681
EDUCATION															
Lower-secondary or below (ref.)															
Upper-secondary	0.133	-0.560	0.967	-0.275	-0.878	0.378	-0.500	-1.671	1.136	-0.700	-0.857	1.075	-0.260	-0.938	1.252
Tertiary	-0.583	-2.382	0.583	-0.665	-1.571	0.162	0.170	-1.101	1.840	-0.292	-1.196	1.385	0.879	-1.190	1.434
LENGHT OF STAY															
5 years and less (ref.)															
6–9 years	-0.511	-1.343	0.273	0.284	-0.369	0.980	0.234	-0.980	1.497	0.625	-1.084	1.029	0.384	-1.194	1.304
10 years and over	-1.389	-2.240	-0.674	-0.698	-1.331	-0.099	-0.420	-1.377	0.597	-0.640	-0.774	0.959	-0.453	-0.812	1.116
OCCUPATIONAL SECTOR															
Agriculture (ref.)															
Industry	-0.544	-1.899	0.876	0.133	-0.919	1.334	-1.701	-18.332	0.672	-1.509	-1.496	1.978	-2.023	-1.642	15.576
Commerce	-1.391	-4.145	0.314	0.179	-1.010	1.413	0.480	-1.226	2.632	-0.122	-1.981	1.999	0.196	-1.966	15.548
Hotels and restaurants	-0.732	-2.619	1.033	-0.024	-1.209	1.153	-0.448	-2.918	1.895	-0.366	-2.145	2.130	-0.584	-14.161	15.659
Transport, communications, financial and personal services	-0.893	-2.364	0.694	-0.315	-1.314	0.773	-0.729	-2.567	1.294	-1.004	-1.541	2.048	-1.563	-1.494	15.570
PA, education, health	-0.571	-2.509	1.324	-1.111	-2.720	0.098	-0.131	-1.634	1.884	-0.318	-1.642	2.050	-1.474	-1.511	15.679

The veterans

As was pointed out earlier, the presence of Romanian workers in Italy is the result of migratory flows that have a history going back at least 2 decades. We found traces of this link among our respondents, as there is a small group of long-term migrant workers who have been in Italy for 10 years or more. They are labelled here as ‘veterans’ (Quadrant III). For this group of Romanians, no relevant changes in their economic, working and contractual situation during the lockdown can be observed. Their presence is well established on the local labour market and they were less vulnerable than other workers with more-recent migration experience. However, within the group of veterans, we can also detect a sub-group of migrants who were unemployed or who lost their jobs during the first pandemic wave and received no job proposals. This implied that some of them decided to return to Romania as a pragmatic strategy when the pandemic started.

The recruits

Between the various groups that the MCA analysis has allowed us to identify, there is one group of modest size which we have named ‘recruits’ – the members ended up being penalised in terms of occupational outcomes (Quadrant IV). Recent migrants belonging to this group mostly live in the South (i.e. Campania, Calabria, Puglia, Basilicata, Abruzzo, Molise) and the islands – i.e. Sardinia or Sicily. Consequently, due to the non-automatic transition from one job to another or possible difficulties in entering the Italian labour market, many of the members of this group were unemployed before the first wave of the pandemic and the lockdown and continued to be so after, due to the difficult access to the labour market as a result of limitations and restrictions in many sectors of the economy. This group mostly includes women and construction workers. They had little or no financial resources with which to confront the emergency, limited strategies to adopt and an inability to migrate away from Italy.

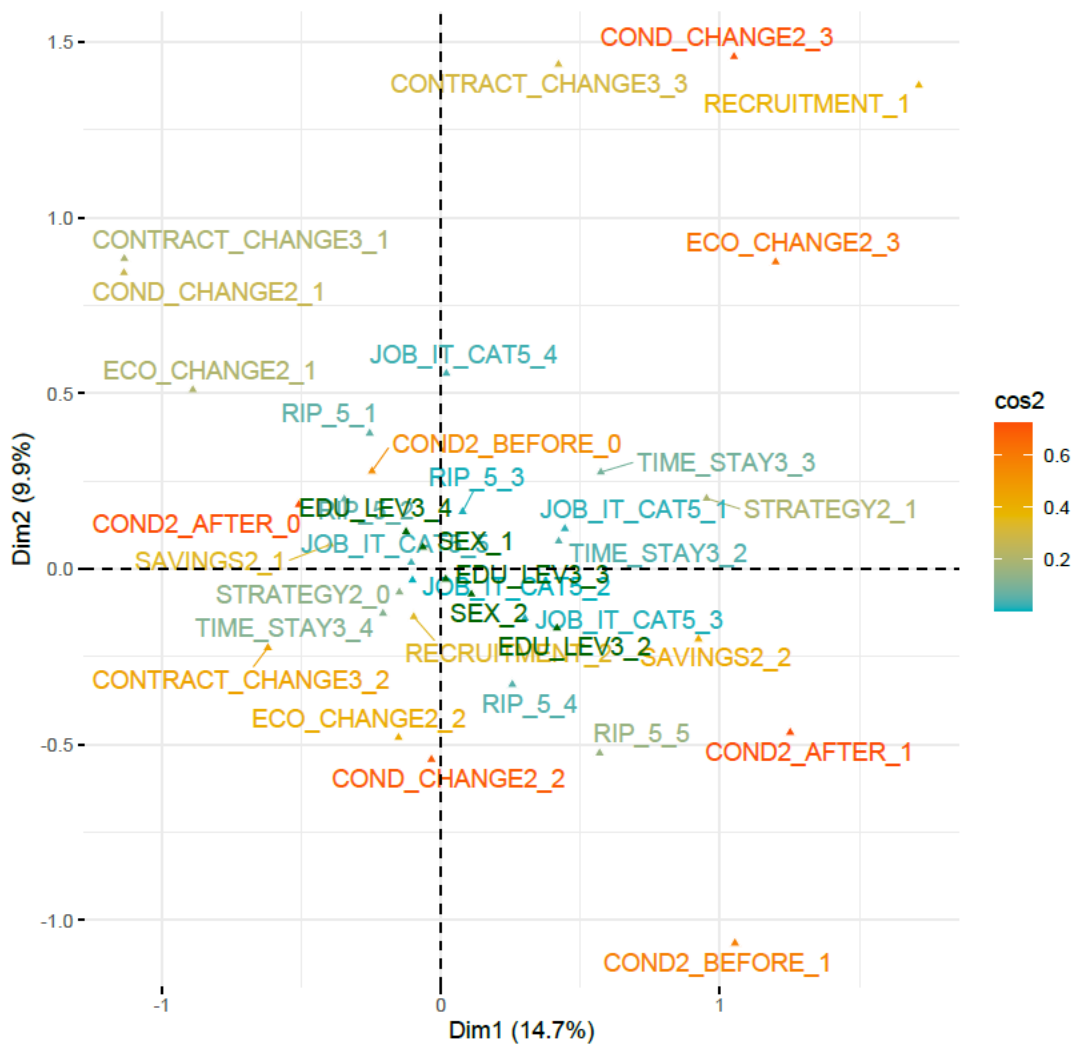
Figure 5. Distribution of Covid-survey participants within the first two axes of MCA analysis



Figure 6. Impact of the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown in Spring 2020 on Covid-survey participants: association between categorical variables on the first two axes of the MCA analysis

STABLES

FLEXIBLES



VETERANS

RECRUITS

Facing up to the Covid-19 pandemic: adopted strategies and impacts on occupational statuses and working conditions

The estimates of the logistic models reported in Table 3 show that controlling for the possible effect of individual variables on the decision to return to Romania – as a strategy to cope with the pandemic, a factor that has significantly influenced respondents' choice to leave Italy during lockdown – has revealed the loss of their job and not having received a new proposal as being decisive factors (Model 1). Moreover, the longer the length of stay in Italy, the fewer the respondents are who are likely to go back to Romania, regardless of the employment sector in which they are located, among which no statistically significant differences are observed, except for respondents employed in commerce. Moreover, it emerges that workers resident in the South of Italy record statistically significant lower probabilities of returning to their home country. A longer period of stay also corresponds to a lower associated risk of losing their jobs, which is statistically significantly low for long-time migrants and workers who arrived in Italy 10 or more years ago (Model 2). These estimates stress the importance of migrants' degree of knowledge of the mechanisms and rules of the local labour market when faced with the difficulties that arose during the first epidemic wave and lockdown. Respondents located in the central and southern regions of Italy or on the islands had a statistically significant lower risk of losing their job. Moreover, we observe that their level of education proves not to play a key role in the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic, as none of the estimates are significant.

Women are statistically at a disadvantage in job losses compared to men (Model 2) but in an advantageous position in the health sector in which it can be assumed that they are protected by contractual safeguards and the increased use of open-ended contracts.

With regards to working outcomes (working, contractual and economic conditions), the respondents working in industry are the least vulnerable as they are protected by their contractual conditions (Models 3–5). There is no negative outcome for these workers, which proves that changes in their working conditions during the emergency period occurred under the conditions laid down in the contract; in the event of the suspension of work, the protections provided for by the redundancy fund automatically took over. Industrial workers in Models 3 to 5 recorded statistically significant lower odds than those in other sectors.

In an attempt to gain a general assessment from respondents about the changes in economic conditions, the dependent variable of Model 5 – 'worsening economic condition' – can be considered as one that synthesises the self-reported general welfare status of survey participants and their households. This confirms that workers in key sectors (i.e. industry, health and social care) and whose functioning during the lockdown of Spring 2020 tended not to have suffered interruptions or contractions, have a low risk of experiencing possible losses in their welfare.

Discussion and conclusion

The present study provides some insights into the possible impact that the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic and the lockdown of Spring 2020 had on Romanian workers in Italy, one of the largest communities of European foreigners present in the country, focusing on their response during the early stages of the pandemic and the outcomes on the labour market.

Our findings indicate that this crisis has affected Romanians living in Italy to varying degrees. The analysis shows that there is a geographical gradient in the effects of the first wave that reflects the structural differences of the Italian labour market already present before the pandemic. We can observe, in fact, that workers in Central and Southern Italy have been more affected and are at greater risk of losing their jobs; for Central Italy these data are also associated with a greater probability of returning to Romania. However, Central Italy (which includes the regions of Lazio, Le Marche, Tuscany and Umbria) also records a meaningfully contained impact regarding the worsening of working and contractual conditions, as well as of general economic conditions.

Table 3. Logistic regression models, odds ratio and significance

VARIABLES	MODEL 1	MODEL 2	MODEL 3	MODEL 4	MODEL 5
	Return to Romania	Job Loss	Worsening working condition	Worsening contractual condition	Worsening economic condition
SEX					
Male	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000
Female	1.025	1.476**	1.440	1.244	1.319
EDUCATION					
Lower-secondary and below	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000
Upper-secondary	1.142	0.760	0.606	0.497	0.771
Tertiary	0.558	0.515	1.185	0.747	2.407
LENGHT OF STAY					
5 years and less	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000
6–9 years	0.600	1.329	1.263	1.868	1.468
10 years and over	0.249***	0.498***	0.657	0.527	0.636
OCCUPATIONAL SECTOR					
Agriculture	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000
Industry and Construction	0.581	1.142	0.183	0.221*	0.132**
Commerce	0.249*	1.196	1.615	0.886	1.216
Hotels and restaurants	0.481	0.976	0.639	0.694	0.558
Transport, communication, financial and business services	0.409	0.730	0.482	0.366	0.209**
PA, education, health	0.565	0.329*	0.878	0.728	0.229**
Social care and personal services	0.982	0.977	0.362	0.578	0.358*
RESIDENCE IN ITALY					
North-West	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000
North-East	1.238	1.120	0.228***	0.585	0.989
Centre	0.930	2.458**	0.636	0.732	1.338
South	2.062*	2.327**	0.211***	0.144***	0.183**
Islands	0.415*	3.639***	1.140	1.549	2.214
JOB LOSS	2.857***				

Table 3. Logistic regression models, odds ratio and significance (cont.)

VARIABLES	MODEL 1	MODEL 2	MODEL 3	MODEL 4	MODEL 5
	Return to Romania	Job Loss	Worsening working condition	Worsening contractual condition	Worsening economic condition
RECRUITMENT	0.163***				
ECONOMIC CHANGES	0.874				
SAVINGS	1.287				
Constant	2.913	0.329**	1.469	6.181	
Observations	532	532	388	388	388
Log Likelihood	-195.122	-275.309	-133.171	-151.455	-133.681
Akaike Inf. Crit.	422.245	582.617	298.341	334.910	299.363

Legend: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

In general, there are two opposing situations which, as the analysis shows, are strongly influenced by the employment sector of workers, their type of contract and the system of associated safeguards. On the one hand, we have the so-called ‘stable’ workers and the ‘veterans’, who experience little or no change in their working lives and, on the other hand, the so-called ‘flexible’ workers and ‘recruits’, who are the most disadvantaged.

Among the latter group, the most penalised appears to be the ‘flexible workers’ – that is, those employed in trade, hospitality and agriculture, which were among the sectors the most affected by restrictive measures and which often offer seasonal, fixed-term contract or irregular positions. This confirms what is suggested by other studies conducted during the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic (European Commission 2021; Filippucci *et al.* 2021; ILO 2020a; Palumbo and Corrado 2020; Tagliacozzo *et al.* 2021). Workers in these economic sectors often have no guarantees or safeguards in the event of the suspension or interruption of work – such as redundancy insurance or other social security benefits (ILO 2020b) – and might have greater difficulties entering the welfare system (Caritas 2020; Carta and De Philippis 2021). Moreover, due to the seasonality and temporary nature of their occupations, with movement restrictions during the pandemic lockdown and as they are generally highly mobile, they have found themselves unable to reach their places of work and forcedly excluded from the workforce.

Recent migrants, here called ‘recruits’ – as they had arrived in Italy just a very short time before and still had only a limited knowledge about the operating mechanisms and rules of the local labour market – have also been heavily penalised by the pandemic as they were proved to have limited resources with which to face up to the crisis and experience poor outcomes. Their employment position is often not yet consolidated or is sometimes irregular and this affects their economic stability and possibility to count on savings to cope with a decline in revenues.

The analysis presented here shows that the workers known to be ‘stable’ and ‘veterans’ instead experienced more-limited changes during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, a result which could mainly be interpreted through looking at the employment sector in which they worked. As is clear from the estimates of the logistics models, workers in industry and health experienced a low risk of losing their jobs and/or of seeing their economic situation deteriorate. These were sectors that continued their activities during the pandemic and in which most of the workers were covered by permanent employment contracts. These latter contracts during the pandemic, even in the event of closure or changes, were protected by the measures of the Italian government which had suspended any redundancies and guaranteed to cover the costs of any redundancies (Caritas 2020; Carta and De Philippis 2021; MEF 2021). What is observed for veterans also allows us to stress, in addition to their job position, that their level of integration into the labour market and their availability of savings are two factors that can strongly condition their capacity to cope with economic fluctuations and crises.

What we observe for Romanian migrants does not reflect the experiences of all migrant workers in general. It is worth noting that Romanian workers, as they are EU citizens, had the advantage of access to health care and of not facing problems with residence permits when losing their job. However, the latter event has more-relevant consequences for non-EU workers as it affects the validity of the legal title that allows them to stay and work in another country. This aspect stresses the weight of welfare regimes, legal frameworks and political settings on observable differences between groups of migrant workers (Finotelli and Ponzio 2018).

The Romanian community is also numerically important and this has allowed them to count – during the pandemic – on a support network of family members and friends who themselves live in Italy or on other members of this community, often organised in cultural associations or groups of co-nationals, whose presence becomes more relevant in times of hardship (AIIR-CR 2020; OECD 2020). However, it was also noted that, for some workers, the lack of relatives’ ties and/or support networks, as well as the economic fragility due to income reductions and the lack of their own savings to cover the essential expenditure of households, made them decide to return to their home country. In the data analysed here, it emerges that this return strategy is

adopted in the case of the loss of employment and the impossibility of finding a new job, or of having to rely on public support measures for those who have no access to the protections provided for certain categories of workers and unemployed persons. This decision to return to the country of origin was therefore taken in order not to remain trapped in a state of deprivation and to avoid being unable to cover the family's essential expenditure in the absence of revenue.

One can assume that, even in the case of the Covid-19 pandemic, the negative impact experienced by some groups of workers was also reflected in their penalisation before the pandemic crisis, as during the 2008 financial and economic crisis (Bonifazi and Marini 2014). This is particularly true for women, low-educated and low-skilled workers and young people, who have shown that they have been the most affected by the economic effects of the current crisis but who were already at a disadvantage on the labour market before the Covid-19 epidemic (Caritas 2020). This disadvantage not only concerns the Romanian migrant workers examined here but also all migrant workers, as well as by Italian nationals, as revealed in the increasingly numerous studies whose results head in the same direction.

Based on this early evidence, it seems necessary to point out that policy-makers today must take into account the different degrees of penalisation of population groups. More generally, the migrant groups who turn out to be the most penalised and most affected are women, temporary workers and workers in economic sectors that were the most affected by closure restrictions and economic fluctuations (Angeloni 2021; Caritas 2020; European Commission 2021; Filippucci *et al.* 2021; IOM 2021; Statista 2021). In many economic sectors such as hospitality, restaurants and catering, care services, cleaning services, transport and food processing – where migrants are certainly overrepresented – the presence of young people and women is also particularly significant; thus, we might expect that these groups have also been negatively affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. The effects of other pandemic waves on these groups, who are already disadvantaged, can worsen and generate in the long run a more serious cumulative effect.

The measures taken by the Italian government to support the labour market – such as the freezing of redundancies, lay-offs or emergency income – have certainly mitigated the economic effects of the sudden and widespread interruption of economic activities but, at the same time, had some side effects. The data disseminated by the Italian Chamber of Commerce, for example, show that there has been a significant increase in the number of inactive people and some distortion in unemployment levels which would have been much higher in the absence of government measures (Viviano 2020). In some cases, delays in payments or restrictions on access to certain measures have created great inconvenience, generally favouring those already in the welfare system while penalising 'new' beneficiaries (Caritas 2020).

Future efforts will need to be directed towards the complete restoration of the pre-pandemic conditions of the labour market to enable those who have lost their job or are inactive to re-enter the workforce, promoting the growth of employment levels and, at the same time, reducing the pressure on the labour market where, in the presence of high levels of unemployment, the conflict between autochthonous and migrant workers might be exacerbated.

Finally, a gradual recovery of the economic system in the international context must involve the maintenance of a solidarity approach not only in health management and vaccination but also in the provision of international agreements for the controlled recovery of labour migration and seasonal workers' flows, with a view to a shared management of migration flows.

Notes

¹ <https://www.Facebook.com/Probleme-structurale-și-dinamici-socioeconomice-după-pandemia-SARS-CoV-2-103209648223611>.

² Project partners: Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (Romania), Cultural Association ORA (Turin, Italy), Association ‘Diaspora Civica’ (Italy), Association ‘Collage Migranti del Sulcis’ (Iglesias, Italy), TVRi International (Media Partner, Romania) and Mapamond News (Media partner, Romania).


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Conflict of interest statement

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ORCID IDs

Luisa Salaris  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4824-156X>

Viviana Anghel  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3512-8261>

Giulia Contu  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9750-1896>

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