

LOSING THE FUTURE: SECOND GENERATIONS, CITIZENSHIP DENIED AND THE NEW ITALIAN EXODUS

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Abstract: *This article examines the recent surge in “second emigration” from Italy, focusing on second-generation youth and newly naturalized citizens – “new Italians” – who are leaving the country in growing numbers. Drawing on recent demographic trends, the study argues that this outflow constitutes a structural loss of qualified human capital with far-reaching economic, demographic, and civic implications. While labor-market precariousness and skill underutilization matter, the analysis shows that the primary drivers lie in deficits of social and symbolic recognition: delayed and restrictive citizenship pathways, persistent occupational segregation, and subtle yet durable forms of exclusion that undermine belonging. Comparative evidence from other European contexts (France, Germany, Benelux, Nordic countries) indicates that more permeable citizenship regimes and meritocratic career channels both accelerate inclusion and reduce the need for outward mobility.*

The article situates these dynamics within Italy’s broader “demographic winter,” highlighting feedback loops between shrinking working-age cohorts, weakened innovation capacity, and the export of domestically trained talent. It further interprets the failed June 2025 referendum on citizenship reform and the contemporaneous tightening of ius sanguinis transmission (DL 36/2025, L. 74/2025) as emblematic policy signals: a simultaneous contraction of diasporic inclusion and reluctance to recognize second generations at home. The combined effect is a symbolic and material message of exclusion that intensifies one-way mobility and erodes civic cohesion.

The conclusion advances a policy agenda that reframes citizenship as a lever of inclusion and nation-building. It calls for a coherent reform aligning residence-based access with European standards, targeted “brain gain/return” instruments, and systemic measures that translate educational inclusion into professional and civic inclusion. Without such a shift, Italy risks consolidating a training system that subsidizes more inclusive economies while deepening its demographic and productivity challenges.

Keywords: *second emigration; second generations; new Italians; citizenship reform; ius sanguinis; integration policy.*

Introduction

Italy, a country historically shaped by both emigration and immigration, is today confronted with a dynamic that challenges the established paradigms of migration policy: the mass departure of the so-called “new Italians”. This term refers to second-generation youth, either born in Italy to foreign parents or arriving at a young age and later naturalized.

The most recent data point to a significant increase in this phenomenon. Between 2023 and 2024, approximately 87,000 young people of migrant background left Italy, representing a 53.8% increase compared with 2022. In total, over the past two years, youth emigration has involved 270,000

individuals¹. These figures underscore the scale of a trend that cannot be reduced simply to the realm of highly skilled mobility. Instead, they compel broader reflection on policies of inclusion, citizenship, and social recognition.

A Qualified Human Capital Outflow

The departures of recent years do not concern Italian youth in general but disproportionately affect the most qualified segments of the population. Available data show that these are primarily young people with medium to high educational attainment – high school graduates and university degree holders – often trained within Italian universities and frequently enriched by international experiences such as Erasmus programs, internships in supranational organizations, or participation in European youth networks².

This profile of emigration is particularly significant for at least three reasons. First, it highlights a systemic contradiction: Italy, through its schools and universities, produces high-level competencies but proves unable to translate them into stable opportunities in its domestic labor market. Second, it reveals the inefficiency of public investment in education, whose returns are ultimately “capitalized” by other countries able to offer better conditions of professional and social integration. Third, it illustrates a pattern of negative selection: those most equipped with tools for mobility – languages, networks, qualifications – are precisely those who leave most easily, while the more vulnerable and less resourced segments remain behind.

The paradox is therefore twofold. On the one hand, Italy faces a dramatic demographic decline: the working-age population is shrinking, natural growth is persistently negative and the median age continues to rise³. On the other hand, instead of retaining its most dynamic and creative young people, the country propels them toward contexts better able to recognize their potential. This haemorrhage results not only in immediate economic and occupational losses but also in the long-term weakening of Italy’s prospects for innovation and competitiveness.

Alongside the economic dimension, there is also a powerful symbolic one. Those leaving are often the very youth who most embody the plural and multicultural character of contemporary society: second generations, naturalized citizens, individuals of migrant background who have built their educational and social biographies in Italy. Their departure is not merely another chapter in the history of Italian emigration but a negation of Italy’s capacity to present itself as an inclusive space.

¹ ISTAT, *Migrazioni interne e internazionali della popolazione residente. Anni 2023-2024*, Statistiche Report, Rome, June 20th, 2025.

² For further information, please refer to: Paolo Attanasio, Antonio Ricci, „Come Saturno, l’Italia divora i propri figli? Le dimensioni reali, le motivazioni a partire e le narrazioni delle nuove migrazioni italiane in Europa”, in Benedetto Coccia, Antonio Ricci (eds), *L’Europa dei talenti*, IDOS-Istituto di Studi Politici “S. Pio V”, Rome, 2019, pp. 46-49.

³ ISTAT, *Rapporto annuale 2024. La situazione del Paese*, Rome, 2024.

In this sense, the highly qualified youth emigration becomes an indicator of the failure of integration policies⁴: guaranteeing access to education is insufficient if it is not accompanied by recognition and full valorization in professional and civic life.

The Drivers of Departure: Beyond Economics

While factors such as precarious employment, barriers to qualified positions and the underutilization of skills play a role, the primary motivations prompting new Italians to leave must be sought elsewhere.

At the core lies the issue of social and cultural recognition. The material dimension of work, though important, does not exhaust the problem. What emerges most forcefully is the frustrated need to feel fully part of the national community. Research on second generations in Italy has shown that, even in the presence of strong educational achievement, young people of migrant origin experience forms of symbolic marginality that translate into subtle but persistent exclusions⁵.

Abroad, particularly in other European countries, these young people often encounter contexts in which their capacities are evaluated independently of their family origins. In France, Germany, or the Netherlands, for instance – despite persisting discrimination – citizenship acquisition and career pathways are generally faster and less conditioned by identity barriers. In Italy, by contrast, the absence of an organic reform of citizenship law leaves tens of thousands of young people in a legal limbo that becomes an existential limbo as well: “born and raised here, but never truly considered part of the country”⁶.

Discrimination manifests itself on multiple levels. In the labor market, occupational segregation often confines youth of migrant background to low-skilled sectors regardless of their qualifications. In the social sphere, stereotypes and prejudices persist, fueling dynamics of symbolic exclusion that hinder full participation in public life. Institutionally, delays and difficulties in obtaining citizenship undermine the sense of belonging and reinforce the perception of a “closed” national community.

The feeling of being “forever foreigners,” even after an entirely Italian educational trajectory, produces a profound rupture. This is not merely about formal rights but about one’s place in the social

⁴ <https://www.dossierimmigrazione.it/indesiderati-e-discriminati-perche-i-giovani-italiani-di-origine-straniera-abbandonano-litalia/>.

⁵ Benedetto Coccia, Antonio Ricci, *Orizzonti condivisi. L'Italia dei giovani immigrati e con background migratorio*, IDOS-Istituto di Studi Politici “S. Pio V”, Rome, 2025.

⁶ Giulia Marroccoli, “Tra rivendicazioni e legittimità: la partecipazione politica dei giovani di origine straniera”, in Benedetto Coccia, Antonio Ricci, *Orizzonti condivisi. L'Italia dei giovani immigrati e con background migratorio*, IDOS-Istituto di Studi Politici “S. Pio V”, Rome, 2025, pp. 212-219.

order: feeling perpetually an “outsider” rather than a citizen. Over time, such perceptions generate frustration and fuel strategies of mobility toward more inclusive contexts.

In this light, departure is not simply an individual choice but the outcome of a collective failure: the inability of the system to translate educational inclusion into civic and professional inclusion. For this reason, second-generation youth, even more than their native peers, perceive emigration not just as an opportunity but as a necessity to fully realize themselves.

Citizenship and Belonging: An Unresolved Issue

Citizenship constitutes one of the most unresolved issues in Italian migration policy. The current legislation, almost exclusively anchored in *ius sanguinis*, makes Italy one of the most restrictive countries in Europe⁷. The consequence is that tens of thousands of young people born and raised in Italy, fully integrated into its schools and society, do not enjoy automatic access to citizenship and must wait until reaching adulthood to apply, facing long, bureaucratic, and often arbitrary procedures.

This condition of legal limbo has effects far beyond the legal sphere. It is not only a matter of passports but of symbolic recognition. The message transmitted is clear: despite attending Italian schools, speaking the language, and internalizing cultural codes, these youth remain “outsiders” to the national community. A form of suspended belonging is thereby produced, feeding frustration and eroding trust in institutions⁸.

Studies on second generations underscore that the legal recognition of citizenship is not merely an administrative act but a fundamental lever for constructing a positive identity⁹. Its absence, conversely, generates negative psychological and social outcomes: feelings of exclusion, marginalization, and sometimes the internalization of stereotypes and prejudices. In terms of civic cohesion, the cost is extremely high, as a significant segment of Italian youth grows up with the perception of not truly belonging.

Thus, the citizenship issue cannot be read solely as a matter of legislative or parliamentary debate. It is at the very heart of politics of belonging: it determines who is fully included and who remains at the margins, defining the symbolic boundaries of the national community. As long as the system continues to exclude second-generation youth, Italy will send them an implicit yet powerful message: “you are not truly one of us”. And it is precisely this message that contributes to propelling them toward other countries where citizenship and inclusion are perceived as more accessible.

⁷ Enrico Gargiulo, „Tra inclusione ed esclusione. La vicenda della cittadinanza in una prospettiva mondiale”, in *Sociologia e Ricerca Sociale*, 85, 2008, pp. 71-99.

⁸ Luca Di Sciullo, „Cittadinanza, conflitti identitari e comunità educanti: il futuro che passa dai giovani con *background* migratorio”, in Benedetto Coccia, Antonio Ricci, *Orizzonti condivisi. L'Italia dei giovani immigrati e con background migratorio*, IDOS-Istituto di Studi Politici “S. Pio V”, Rome, 2025, pp. 159-163.

⁹ Maurizio Ambrosini, *Sociologia delle migrazioni. Terza edizione*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2020.

Destinations and Trajectories: Europe as a Space of Inclusion

The preferred destinations of new Italians are not determined solely by economic logic but by the search for recognition and inclusion. France, Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, Spain and more recently the Nordic countries represent the main poles of attraction. These are contexts perceived as offering not only better professional opportunities but also social and institutional environments less dominated by the logic of „perpetual otherness”.

The comparison with these destinations¹⁰ further underscores the specificity of the Italian case, which clings to an obsolete system that delays and obstructs the recognition of new generations. In France, for example, the principle of tempered *ius soli* allows children of migrants relatively early access to citizenship, facilitating more linear inclusion. In Germany, reforms enacted in the 2000s made citizenship accessible to minors born on the territory, provided that their parents had legally resided there for a certain number of years. In Belgium and the Netherlands, more inclusive welfare systems and dynamic labor markets offer greater opportunities for valorizing competences, even for those with migrant backgrounds. Even in traditionally restrictive countries such as Spain, the link between residence and citizenship has been strengthened over recent decades. These contexts are not free of discrimination or social tensions, yet they appear more permeable to the aspirations of young people than Italy.

Perhaps most significant is the growing internationalization of the expectations of new generations. Italian youth and new Italians move within a Europe where youth mobility has become normalized. EU programs such as Erasmus+, the freedom of movement guaranteed by the Schengen Agreement and digital interconnection have contributed to making intra-European migration appear not as a rupture but as a possible and often desirable transition. For many European countries this translates into circulation of skills and return flows. In Italy, however, the phenomenon remains largely one-directional: departures are not matched by significant returns. Unable to present itself as an attractive pole for its own second-generation citizens or for foreign talents trained in its universities, the country suffers a structural impoverishment of its social and productive fabric, aggravated by the absence of effective “brain gain” policies or return incentives.

Differences also emerge in career trajectories. In many European countries, young people with international profiles more easily find employment in sectors linked to innovation, research and public administration, without surnames or skin color serving as barriers. In Italy, by contrast, access to certain professions is still conditioned by extra-meritocratic factors: family networks, patronage,

¹⁰ European Commission, *EU Citizens Report 2023*, Brussels, 6.12.2023 (COM (2023) 931 final).

and – particularly for youth of migrant background – implicit discrimination that constrains upward mobility (the so-called „ascensore sociale”).

Thus, the migratory trajectories of second generations should be read not merely as geographic movements but as identity and emancipatory strategies¹¹. Choosing Germany or France means opting for a country where one can be recognized as a full citizen; choosing Belgium or the Netherlands means seeking contexts where competences outweigh stereotypes. In this sense, departure often constitutes a form of self-affirmation that overturns dominant narratives: not an enforced escape, but an active decision to invest one’s energy and talent elsewhere.

For Italy, the consequences are twofold. First, it loses valuable resources trained within its own educational system. Second, it is continually measured against other European countries that appear more adept at transforming second generations into assets rather than problems. This is a terrain on which not only economic competitiveness but also the country’s credibility as an inclusive, modern society is at stake.

Political and Social Implications for Italy

The phenomenon of so-called „second emigration” carries profound implications that extend well beyond statistical dimensions, intersecting migration policies, the labor market, demographic dynamics and social cohesion.

First, it represents a structural loss of human capital. Italy, already affected by an unprecedented „demographic winter”, is further depleting its youthful and active base. The outflow of qualified young people – predominantly high school and university graduates – is not offset by equivalent inflows, nor by effective return policies. This undermines the country’s economic competitiveness and curtails its capacity for innovation in a global context where knowledge and skills are decisive drivers of development¹².

Second, the departure of second-generation youth generates a significant symbolic and political cost. These young people constitute the litmus test of inclusion: their success in Italy would demonstrate the country’s capacity to transform immigration into citizenship, the foreigner into a fellow citizen, diversity into a resource. Their decision to leave instead signals the opposite: Italy appears unable to retain its own children, not only the „native-born” but also those raised between two affiliations. In this sense, second emigration becomes an indicator of the failure of integration policies, a fissure in the national narrative of a welcoming country that, in practice, continues to symbolically exclude.

¹¹ Roberta Ricucci, „Where Is My Place? The Second Generation in Italy as a New Kind of Transnational Migrant”, *CEEMR – Central and Eastern European Migration Review*, vol. 11, n. 2, 2022, pp. 137-154.

¹² OECD, *International Migration Outlook 2024*, Paris, 2024.

Third, this dynamic affects civic cohesion. New generations of migrant origin, seeing their peers leave, internalize the idea that recognition can only be achieved elsewhere. This fuels mistrust in institutions and in the citizenship pact, with the risk of crystallizing into a genuine generational rupture. In the long term, such mistrust may have consequences for democratic participation, the sense of belonging and the stability of the social fabric.

On the level of public policy, Italy lacks a coherent strategy. There are no structured tools to incentivize the return of young emigrants, nor programs to strengthen the rootedness of second generations within the country. Existing measures are fragmented, episodic, often linked to local initiatives or volunteerism, and fail to amount to a national vision capable of addressing the phenomenon in its complexity¹³.

To this must be added the persistent delay in citizenship reform: a topic that enters political debate cyclically but never results in legislative change. Each year, tens of thousands of young people raised in Italy reach adulthood without certainty about their legal status, while their European peers gain easier access to full rights. This disparity feeds the perception of living in a country that fails to deliver on its promises and imposes invisible yet powerful barriers.

In short, second emigration is not simply a migratory issue: it is a systemic indicator exposing the fragilities of contemporary Italy. It concerns how the country conceives of citizenship, its ability to valorize its youth, its management of cultural pluralism, and the resilience of the social contract. To neglect this phenomenon is to condemn oneself to a spiral of demographic, economic, and cultural decline. To confront it, on the other hand, could transform it into an opportunity: to recognize second generations, invest in their rootedness and valorize their skills not as resources to be exported but as pillars of the national future.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the emigration of qualified human capital cannot be reduced to a mere statistical fact but must be interpreted as a strategic issue for Italy's future. The ability to retain its most educated youth, regardless of origin, is a necessary condition for demographic, economic, and cultural renewal. Without a reversal of this trend, Italy risks becoming a training system at the service of more inclusive economies, continuing to export skills without building credible pathways of internal recognition.

The phenomenon of „second emigration” among new Italians cannot be understood in isolation from the broader context in which citizenship plays a crucial role. The decision of many young people

¹³ Antonio Ricci, „Ali spiegate, ali spezzate. L'emigrazione italiana tra nuove opportunità all'estero e ostacoli al rientro”, in IDOS, *Dossier Statistico Immigrazione 2024*, IDOS, Roma, 2024, pp. 95-99.

to leave is a symptom of a structural problem: Italy struggles to formally and symbolically recognize its own children, born and raised on its soil yet regarded as „other” because of their family origins.

This was made evident by the „desertion failure” of the referendum on citizenship, held on 8–9 June 2025, which collapsed due to the failure to reach a quorum. The referendum, admitted by the Constitutional Court through ruling no. 11/2025, sought the partial abrogation of Article 9 of Law no. 91 of 5 February 1992. Specifically, it proposed reducing from ten to five years the requirement of legal and continuous residence for the naturalization of non-EU foreigners regularly residing in Italy.

The scope of the proposed reform was significant. It would have affected one of the most restrictive conditions of Italy’s current citizenship regime, aligning it more closely with European standards, where residence requirements generally range between five and seven years. If approved, the measure would have made citizenship accessible to hundreds of thousands of foreigners stably present in Italy, including many second-generation youth raised in the country but not yet in possession of civic status. Unsurprisingly, several estimates spoke of more than one million potential direct beneficiaries within the first years of implementation¹⁴.

The outcome of the referendum, however, was marked by extremely low turnout: only just over a quarter of eligible voters went to the polls, far below the constitutional quorum of 50% + 1. This result must not be read merely as a technical defeat for the promoters but as a symptom of a broader disconnect between civil society and democratic participation. Citizenship, though a crucial issue for the country’s future, continues to be perceived by much of the electorate as a sectional matter—concerning „others” rather than the national community as a whole.

The lack of participation carries substantial political and symbolic significance. On the one hand, it confirms the difficulty of mobilizing consensus around a reform that would have altered deep-seated balances of inclusion and belonging. On the other, it highlights the persistence of a conception of citizenship as a tool of exclusion rather than integration, delegitimizing claims for recognition advanced by new generations of migrant origin.

Looking ahead, the June 2025 episode joins a long list of missed opportunities in the history of Italian citizenship policy. Yet another failed reform confirms that Italy remains among the most reluctant European countries to modify legislation strongly anchored in *ius sanguinis*, incapable of fully recognizing the reality of a plural and multicultural society. At the same time, it underscores the

¹⁴ According to estimates by the IDOS Research and Study Center, the approval of the abrogative referendum of 8–9 June 2025 would have extended eligibility for naturalization (through the reduction of the residence requirement from ten to five years) to approximately 1.42 million non-EU citizens, over one quarter of all legally resident foreigners in Italy. Of these, 1.136 million were adults holding long-term residence permits and 284,000 were minors. The estimate, which excludes EU citizens, provides a minimum–maximum range and identifies the median interval as the most plausible. Yet, due to administrative barriers – especially of an economic nature – up to 700,000 residents would not, in practice, have been able to access citizenship (IDOS, 2025, available at: <https://www.dossierimmigrazione.it/referendum-cittadinanza/>).

widening gap between institutions and second-generation youth, who – finding no prospects of legal and social inclusion – continue to orient their life and career trajectories toward other European countries.

In this context must also be placed the recent reform introduced by the Meloni government, which imposed severe restrictions on the transmission of Italian citizenship by descent. Until March 2025, the law permitted virtually unlimited *ius sanguinis* acquisition, even by very distant descendants of Italian emigrants. With Decree Law no. 36/2025, converted into Law 74/2025, this possibility was drastically curtailed: the right was limited to those with a parent or grandparent who was exclusively an Italian citizen, or to those able to demonstrate the prolonged residence in Italy of a parent prior to the child's birth¹⁵.

This legislative choice produces two contradictory effects. On the one hand, it responds to managerial and diplomatic concerns: the potential pool of beneficiaries abroad had become vast, and in some contexts – such as Latin America – a gap had emerged between „Italians on paper” and communities maintaining genuine ties with the country. On the other hand, however, the restriction on citizenship transmission appears incoherent and paradoxical when read in combination with the refusal to open citizenship to the new Italians born and raised in Italy.

Thus, the horizon is narrowed for distant descendants of emigrants abroad, but not widened for the children of contemporary migrations. The symbolic message is one of exclusion in both directions: outward, by denying many emigrant descendants the possibility of maintaining a link with Italy; inward, by refusing to fully include those who already belong to Italian society.

The risk is twofold: on the one hand, Italy diminishes its symbolic and diasporic capital worldwide, interrupting a long tradition of cultural and economic ties with communities abroad; on the other, it continues to neglect the new generations raised within its borders, who increasingly choose the path of emigration.

A critical reflection on these recent legislative changes must therefore go beyond political contingency. It raises the fundamental question of the model of citizenship Italy wishes to adopt in the twenty-first century: one based on closure, identity defensiveness, and selective exclusion, or one capable of recognizing the plurality of affiliations, integrating second generations and coherently redefining the relationship with Italian communities abroad.

Transforming this crisis into an opportunity requires a citizenship reform that is no longer „halfway” – restrictive for some and denied to others – but one that reconciles the recognition of

¹⁵ Corrado Bonifazi, Salvatore Strozza, „Gli italiani nel mondo e il nuovo quadro normativo: la stretta sulla discendenza, le sfide della cittadinanza”, in IDOS, *Dossier Statistico Immigrazione 2025*, IDOS, Rome. 2025, pp. 97-102.

historical ties with the inclusion of new citizens. Only in this way can Italy reverse the spiral of human capital loss and reaffirm a credible role as an inclusive and European society.

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