

# ITALY – ROMANIA: AN ANCIENT HISTORY RICH IN FUTURE

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## **ABSTRACT: Italy, Romania: an Ancient History Rich in Future.**

This essay explores the historical, cultural, and socio-economic bonds between Italy and Romania, framed through Mircea Duțu’s evocative notion of the “*closeness of the soul*.” Beyond linguistic or historical affinities, this closeness reflects a shared destiny marked by migration, resilience, and the quest for renewal. Both nations – deeply rooted in their common Neo-Latin heritage – have experienced massive emigration waves following periods of political upheaval: post-Fascist reconstruction in Italy and the post-Communist transition in Romania. These parallel trajectories reveal not only demographic and economic vulnerabilities but also comparable crises of governance and meritocracy.

The essay situates these dynamics within broader European challenges: depopulation, labor shortages, and the need for inclusive and sustainable growth. It argues that both countries must transform emigration from a symptom of systemic failure into a catalyst for societal regeneration – one based on openness, cooperation, and recognition of talent. The shared Italian–Romanian experience, grounded in human and cultural proximity, becomes a paradigm for rethinking Europe’s future: a continent that can thrive only by embracing diversity and rediscovering solidarity as the true engine of progress.

**Keywords:** *Italy-Romania relations, Migration and demography, Neo-Latin heritage, Talent and meritocracy, Inclusive society.*

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## **A Closeness of the Soul and Shared Roots**

The beautiful expression “closeness of the soul” with which Mircea Duțu defines the relationship between the Romanian and Italian peoples, besides having inspired a proliferation of studies and initiatives aimed at

deepening this connection, seems to us to aptly and precisely represent – despite its vivid imagery – a relationship based only in part, and certainly not exclusively, on mere factual elements, but rather on a feeling, an aspiration of a meta-empirical nature.

This closeness stems not so much from the more recent events that have led a significant portion of Romanian migration toward Italy – making Romanians the largest foreign community in our country (almost 23% of the total foreign population residing in Italy) – but rather from their shared Neo-Latin origins, which have, since antiquity, given these two peoples solid common philosophical, legal, and cultural roots<sup>1</sup>.

Although brief – from 106 to 274 AD – the Roman presence in Dacia left traces that, while perhaps barely noticeable or seemingly insignificant to Italians, are deeply meaningful to Romanians. Naturally, as history unfolded, the destinies of these two peoples diverged considerably, yet this common origin appears, particularly on the Romanian side, to have remained alive and the subject, even recently, of further studies and reflection.

### **Parallel Migrations, Demographic Pressures, and Economic Strains**

An additional element of similarity, referring to contemporary times, could perhaps be added to those that have historically bound the two countries. Italy ranks among the top five EU countries – along with Romania, Poland, Portugal, and Bulgaria – for the number of emigrants, and this shared propensity toward migration is not a recent phenomenon. By comparing the historical data of migration in the two countries over the past century, one can clearly detect parallels. Without forcing history through risky analogies, we can say that both Italy and Romania have experienced significant waves of emigration – the former long ago, the latter more recently – each following the collapse of totalitarian regimes that had deeply impacted the social and economic life of their respective nations.

For Italy, we refer to the post–World War II period, when twenty years of Fascist rule had led the country into war and a painful military

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<sup>1</sup> Sinagra Augusto, Tudor Florin (a cura di), *Romania e Italia, la cultura della memoria condivisa degli ultimi cento anni. Memoria e identità nel dialogo romeno-italiano: spazi simbolici, aspetti giuridici, storici e filosofici*, Aracne Editrice, Roma, 2018.

and moral defeat, as well as into a severe economic and social crisis. For Romania, we refer to the fall of the Communist regime in December 1989. In both cases – despite the temporal and contextual distance, and the very different historical and international settings – we witnessed a similarly massive migratory phenomenon<sup>2</sup>.

Regarding Italian emigration from the postwar period to the present – its scope, causes, and consequences – it is unnecessary to dwell long, given the vast existing literature on the topic<sup>3</sup>. We will cite only a few figures for context: between 1946 and 1950, more than 225,000 Italians emigrated each year on average; in the following decade (1951–1960), almost 300,000 per year. In the subsequent decades, due to improved economic and social conditions, emigration declined markedly, only to rise again significantly in the second decade of the new century (120,000 Italians moved abroad in 2018).

As for Romania, starting from the fall of Ceaușescu's regime in December 1989, emigration followed an irregular pattern. In 1990, just under 24,000 Romanians left the country – mainly ethnic Germans, Hungarians, and Roma – and this continued, with ups and downs, until Romania's accession to the European Union in 2007. The great exodus toward Western Europe began in 2008 (over 300,000 in that year alone), causing Romania to lose about 3 million citizens since the fall of communism – 15% of a population that today numbers under 20 million and is projected to shrink to just over 16 million by 2050.

This phenomenon, which Ivan Krastev<sup>4</sup> poignantly described by saying that “the democratic revolution of 1989 turned into a demographic counterrevolution,” has raised over the years a number of crucial issues

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2 Simion Belea, “Imigrantul român în Italia între integrare și discriminare. Un punct de vedere italian”, *Buletin Științific, Fascicula Filologie, Seria A*, Vol. XXI, 2012, p. 183. Emigration from Romania is the result of a large-scale process which began in the years following the collapse of the communist regime, registering a spectacular increase especially after 2002 followed by a stabilization of emigration flows after Romania's accession to the European Union.

3 Among the various, see: Coccia Benedetto, Pittau Franco (eds), *Le migrazioni qualificate in Italia. Ricerche, statistiche, prospettive*, Istituto di Studi Politici S. Pio V and Idos, Roma, 2016; Coccia Benedetto, Ricci Antonio (eds), *L'Europa dei talenti. Migrazioni qualificate dentro e fuori l'Unione Europea*, Istituto di Studi Politici S. Pio V and Idos, Roma, 2019.

4 Krastev Ivan, *After Europe*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2017.

for Romania's present and future. Mass emigration has, on the one hand, eased domestic unemployment and ensured a steady inflow of euros into the national economy through remittances (in 2017 alone, nearly €4 billion were sent from Italy – 2.2% of Romania's GDP). On the other hand, it has reached such proportions as to generate significant social and political repercussions.

We might recall the issue of the diaspora – those Romanians who, having emigrated recently, still maintain strong ties with their homeland and, viewing it from abroad, see the suffering and crises that deeply affect its civic and economic life. The massive demonstration held in Bucharest on August 10, 2018 – organized by Romanians returning home for the summer, who gathered in front of the government building to protest against corruption and mismanagement – made explicit what many Romanians at home thought but rarely said aloud.

The aspect we would like to dwell on – and which, in some ways, mirrors the Italian experience – concerns the demographic crisis resulting from the emigration of such a large and vital portion of Romania's population. Like the rest of Europe, Romania is undergoing what Michel Schooyans aptly called a "demographic winter"<sup>5</sup>. This stems from a combination of social, economic, and cultural factors common to the entire Western world and long studied by the scientific community. Moreover, Romania's predominantly young mass emigration only accelerates and amplifies the inevitable consequences of population decline and aging.

The collapse of the communist regime also meant the collapse of a centralized, planned economy that, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, had to face the challenges of the free market and capitalism. Within a few years, Romania's entire productive system – industrial and agricultural alike – seemed to implode, also due to misguided and often opaque economic policies. The substantial European funds the country has received have done little to reverse the situation. Since joining the EU in 2007, Romania has had access to Structural Funds aimed at implementing economic and social cohesion policies to reduce regional disparities.

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5 For a more in-depth analysis of the demographic decline in Italy and its consequences for the country's present and future life, see: Coccia Benedetto (a cura di), *Niente figli siamo italiani. Un Paese con sempre meno bambini e un futuro sempre più incerto*, Apes, Roma, 2015.

Between 2007 and 2013, Romania received €19.21 billion; for the 2014-2020 programming period, the available resources totaled around €43 billion, distributed as follows: €22.9 billion for Cohesion Policy, €19.7 billion for Agricultural Policy, €0.17 billion for the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund, and €0.44 billion for the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived. Considerable funding indeed, yet with little visible transformation of the country's economic and productive system.

The pandemic crisis naturally worsened matters, striking Romania in two ways: damaging its economy as it did everywhere, and prompting the return of many members of the diaspora who had lost jobs abroad (in 2020, an estimated 1.3 million Romanians returned home because of the pandemic).

### Shared Challenges, Shared Horizon

Returning to our comparison, Italy too, at the end of World War II<sup>6</sup> benefited from major foreign aid – then from the United States – which allowed it to launch industrial and economic reforms that led, in the 1960s, to the so-called economic boom, halting emigration for several decades. Later, Italy also received substantial European Union funds, yet despite this, the “national system” today seems stalled – almost paralyzed by an economic and structural crisis that leaves little hope for younger generations. Hence the renewed wave of Italian emigration: between 2008 and 2017, about 1.6 million young people – 500,000 of them university graduates – left the country<sup>7</sup>. Added to this is the deep demographic crisis that for decades has made Italy the nation with the lowest birthrate in Europe and among the oldest in the world.

One of the effects of population decline and aging is the steady shrinking of the working-age population. The concrete risk is that any “new start” – such as the one expected after the pandemic and backed by massive EU funds – may lack the minds, hands, and energy needed to make it happen. Even today, Italy faces severe labor shortages in the agri-food sector, and during the height of the health emergency it became clear that we lacked sufficient medical personnel. Pandemic's fault? Not

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6 See: *How the pandemic reversed old migration patterns in Europe. Many Eastern Europeans have left the west and gone home.* Economist.com 30 January 2021.

7 See: Coccia Benedetto, Ricci Antonio (a cura di), *L'Europa dei talenti* (cit.).

only. Already in 2016, the European Commission's European Agenda on Migration warned that by 2020 Europe would face a shortage of one million doctors and qualified healthcare workers, and according to Eurostat, Italy would need over 3.5 million additional workers to reach the EU's average employment rate<sup>8</sup>.

Italy should learn to harness its immense human capital – offering real opportunities to the many young people forced to emigrate, as well as to those who already have – and to develop a serious model of integration that enables newcomers to contribute productively without being marginalized, rejected, or exploited, and perhaps even to have their professional or practical skills recognized<sup>9</sup>. In short, what is needed is the capacity to build an open society that values competence and talent, ready to invest in anyone willing to take part, regardless of origin – a society finally free from the plagues of bureaucracy, an incompetent and corrupt ruling class, nepotism, and the suffocating familism that in recent years has stifled so much of the country's healthy energy.

Beyond the recurring and hypocritical analyses of the so-called “brain drain,” we must find the courage and intellectual honesty to acknowledge that this is in fact a “banishment of talent” – a system that leaves no space for merit, preferring mediocrity that happens to be well-connected. Unsurprisingly, the many initiatives over the years to bring back our talented expatriates have yielded meager results<sup>10</sup>.

The reflections made so far for Italy, with due differences, also apply to Romania. Like Italy – and perhaps even more so – Romania suffers from large-scale emigration, a frequently inadequate or corrupt political class, a struggling economy and production system, and rapid population aging. The cancellation of the December 2024 presidential elections – linked as well to the tense geopolitical situation in the region – also signals some fragility in democratic life. Similarly, in recent years Romania too has begun to experience significant immigration flows.

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8 See: Coccia Benedetto, Ricci Antonio (a cura di), *L'Europa dei talenti* (cit.).

9 For a careful and in-depth reflection on the theme of integration in our country, see: Coccia Benedetto, Di Sciuillo Luca (a cura di), *L'integrazione dimenticata. Riflessioni per un modello italiano di convivenza partecipata tra migranti e autoctoni*. Istituto di Studi Politici S. Pio V, IDOS, Roma, 2020.

10 See: Coccia Benedetto, Pittau Franco (a cura di), *Le migrazioni qualificate in Italia. Ricerche, statistiche, prospettive*. (cit)

But above all, like Italy, Romania must envision a more open model of society – one that allows those forced to emigrate to return home if they wish, and welcomes those who seek to build their future in Romania, thus contributing to the nation’s economic revival.

In moments of crisis such as the one humanity is now facing, the temptation is to turn inward – to see one’s community or country as a reassuring refuge to be defended from external threats. The COVID-19 crisis – which, in light of today’s global challenges, already feels distant, and from which we seem to have learned little – nonetheless left us one clear lesson: isolation is not an option. Only cooperation among peoples made it possible to control the virus’s spread and to imagine a “new beginning.” Likewise today, no one can be saved alone, apart from or at the expense of others.

## Conclusions

The future will not tolerate exclusive, identity-based selfishness; it cannot be shaped by “small homelands” intent on defending their borders against real or imagined enemies, for such countries would soon suffocate. The development of the COVID-19 vaccine within months was the result of collaborative research among scientists from all over the world – people of different ethnicities, nationalities, cultures, languages, and religions – who, by working together and contributing their distinct knowledge, succeeded in creating and testing a vaccine faster than ever before in history.

This ability to turn diversity into shared wealth must be the guiding light of the “new beginning” we all hope for and look toward with confidence amid these uncertain and perilous times – times in which the hard-won achievements of civilization and the protection of the vulnerable, once humanity’s shared heritage, seem now to be denied by the criminal actions of entire peoples asserting the right to dominate others.

The challenge before us, therefore, is to imagine and build inclusive societies – open to the free circulation of creative energy, ideas, and people willing to commit themselves to their country of birth or adoption – societies in which diversity is not seen as a problem but as a catalyst for development and progress. Only such societies can face the future with courage and confidence, overcoming the dark shadow of fear that seems to have fallen over Europe.

I am convinced that Italy and Romania, strengthened by the “closeness of the soul” that binds them, will be able to meet – and win – this challenge together.

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