

Policy Brief

Relationships between migration and labour policies in the production of irregular labour in Italy

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Labour entry mechanisms as an engine of irregularity

Entry for work in Italy has been regulated since the early 1990s by a quota system. The mechanism requires employers to recruit workers by name call from abroad without knowing them in advance.

This route seems all the more impractical where small businesses, which are the majority in Italy, or families seeking care workers are involved. Additionally, the system is extremely complex, requiring checks and authorisations from multiple state bodies (Prefecture, Police Headquarters, and Labour Inspectorate). Rather than ensuring compliance, this complexity often produces the opposite effect. In fact, it pushes many employers and workers to rely on the intermediation of private, often

informal, not always competent and sometimes ill-intentioned agencies.

And, even where the entire procedure takes place according to the law, as with the quotas reserved for employer associations, a year can pass between the application to hire a worker from abroad and the actual possibility of employing him or her, since the timelines for issuing visas are very long.

The result is that, in today's rapidly changing market, employers often find alternatives, while migrants who enter Italy legally risk falling into irregular status when their prospective employers withdraw.

In sum, the lengthy and uncertain timeframes of procedures are among the main factors that

make the current entry-for-work mechanisms completely misaligned with the dynamics of the labour market.

Below we list in more detail some of the most critical points. Moreover, we provide a set of policy recommendations addressed to the national government, with the potential to benefit both employers and foreign workers.

The bet of the "click day" and the complexity of procedures

Employers have to submit their applications online in certain days spread throughout the year (so-called "click days"), so quotas have to be filled in a matter of minutes and the ability to recruit workers ends up depending more on chance than on thoughtful assessments.

The procedure for applying online appears very complicated, and the instructions for filling it out are often unclear and communicated with little notice.

The steps involved in the issuance of a residence permit are many and cumbersome: the procedure first involves the issuance of a nulla osta by the Prefecture (subject to inspections by the Labour Inspectorate or by professionals and employers' associations), then that of the issuance of a visa by the consulates, and finally, after the worker enters Italy, the simultaneous signing of a labour and residence contract at the Police Headquarters. This procedure can take up to a year, with the high risk that the employer will be forced to find an alternative solution in the meantime.

The shortage of personnel in public administrations

The structural shortage of dedicated and adequately trained staff in the bureaucracies involved (especially Prefectures, Police Headquarters and the Labour Inspectorate) contributes significantly to the length of procedures. The hiring of temporary staff to cope with this workload is often delayed and does not solve the problem permanently, since they are often temporary staff or seconded from other public administration offices.

The intermediation of informal subjects

Less than half of the quotas (and only in the context of entry for seasonal work) are reserved for employer associations, while the rest are for individual employers (whether individual companies or individuals, as in the case of domestic work), who currently cannot send more than three applications per year. The difficulty of the procedure prompts many employers and workers to rely on the more or less formal intermediation of private entities, which are not always competent and sometimes with fraudulent intent.

In agriculture—both in wine production and fruit picking—employers increasingly rely on foreign-owned private companies.

These entities manage entry permits, labour contracts, housing, and transportation for workers, offering quicker solutions than official channels.

At the same time, less well-equipped employers tend to lose control of many elements, while remaining co-responsible in the event of any irregularities related to the residence permit or work contract, thus incurring the risk of sanctions.



Figure 1. The steps of the entry procedure

The sum of the above-mentioned factors has major consequences in terms of regularity of stay and employment of migrant workers, turning into a kind of revolving door of entry and exit from regularity.

Quotas as a mechanism of irregularity

According to data from the ["Ero Straniero"](#), in 2024, only 7.8% of initial applications for employment were successful (resulting in the issuance of a residence permit for the worker). The clearances issued were only 56% of the available quotas, and the visas issued accounted for 28.9% of the work clearances granted. In 2024 about 14,000 workers (out of 24,151 visas issued), once they entered Italy, found themselves without an employer still willing to hire them, with the risk of becoming undocumented.

Quotas as a regularisation mechanism

Historically, the vast majority of applications have involved people already in Italy who use this channel to regularize themselves: applying for a nulla osta, citizens return to their own country, and then re-enter Italy once the visa is obtained. Thus, a well-known and widely accepted fiction has been created, but one that is also demanding and costly for all parties involved: public administration, foreign worker and employer.

Policy recommendations

If the main entry channel for work is to be prevented from being misused, it would serve to act on several fronts.

Simplifying extra-quota entries

Recently, the extra-quota entry of those who, in their country of origin, benefit from vocational and language training courses, promoted by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, or the Ministries of Education and University and Research, has been strengthened. The courses are organized by associations and training institutions, public or private, and in 2023-2024 they could be developed jointly with employer associations (present in the CNEL, including their sectoral and territorial branches)¹.

However, further steps are to be taken.

First, there would need to be a clearer and more up-to-date definition of professional skills that is less territorially fragmented (to date it is in the hands of individual regions). In addition, employers are increasingly demanding training that is targeted and in line with their specific needs, so it becomes important to expand opportunities to training migrants who can then enter in Italy.

Issuing a residence permit for pending employment

Workers who arrive in Italy with regular entry visa but can no longer count on an employer interested in hiring them because too much time has passed since their application, could be given a permit for seeking employment. This mechanism is not new, having already been adopted for previous regularisations, in case the employer is no longer available when it is time to sign the residence contract. Applying this tool to entry mechanisms would therefore require the extension of a known and broken-in mechanism. The alternative is often irregularity.

Facilitating the transition from study to work

Currently, the conversion of study permits, which allow only 20 hours per week of part-time work, can take a long time, even up to a year. Speeding up this procedure is essential so that many young foreigners do not miss out on important job opportunities or accept black/grey work just because the conversion does not happen in time to be employed.

¹ See Article 23 D. Lgs. 286/1998, as amended by Decree Law 20/2023, conv. L. 50/2023.

Streamlining rules and expanding staff

While obvious, procedural simplification remains a priority that cannot be omitted. It means not only more linear and quicker procedures, but also clearer and more stable over time, so as not to make recruitment from abroad a market in which many people improperly enrich themselves, fuelling the distrust of citizens and economic operators in the public administration.

Procedures also become rapid when public administrations can rely on adequate and trained staff and can do so on a permanent basis and not through temporary hires to plug emergencies.

Introducing regularisations on an individual basis.

Collective regularisations are increasingly difficult to achieve in the European Union except in exceptional circumstances such as a pandemic. And, even the one initiated at that time in Italy yielded disappointing results because of the many alleys and very long time frames to process applications. Instead of forcing the public bureaucracies and civil society organisations that assist workers and employers to do so much work for little or nothing, less work could be done, and far different results achieved by establishing individual regularisation mechanisms as is done in Spain and Portugal and, to a lesser extent, also in France and Germany.

Using AI for bureaucracy but not for people

Artificial intelligence could facilitate the work of offices in processing paperwork. It raises more concerns, however, if it were to be used for matching labour supply and demand, due to its rigidity and inability to take into account soft skills and living conditions that greatly influence the path to employment, as well as certain characteristics of the workplace in terms of its potential for inclusion.

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About DignityFIRM

Towards becoming sustainable and resilient societies we must address the structural contradictions between our societies' exclusion of migrant workers and their substantive role in producing our food.

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