

To return or to stay? The situation of Romanian badanti in Italy during the Coronavirus pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The study explores the situation of Romanian work migrants employed in elderly home care (badanti) in Italy, in the context of temporary restrictions on the freedom of movement within the European Union during the coronavirus pandemic. The general objective of the research consists in contributing to the understanding of how a particular situation of crisis and the subsequent restrictions enforced may impact the socio-professional category in question. In this context, an exploratory investigation was conducted, by the use of semi-structured interviews with people who have or used to have this occupation in Italy. The aim of the interviews was to identify particular, subjective aspects of their experiences, and, at the same time, to investigate their perception of the transformations occurred due to this crisis. The results of the study offer insight on the individual decision-making process in the matter of remaining in Italy, returning to the country of origin or re-migrating, and the ways in which short-time legislative changes affected these decisions, as well as the effects of the pandemic on this specific socio-economic category.

Introduction

Although numerous studies document the situation of Romanian migrants in Italy, the global context associated with the coronavirus pandemic is unprecedented in regard to the spatial mobility of persons. The impact of the

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restrictions on free circulation within the European space was even more severe, being given the previous initiatives that used to allow European citizens to live, work and study in any Member State of their choice. Starting from this *de facto* situation, this paper initiates a scientific approach exploring the situation of Romanian migrants employed in home caregiving services for elders in Italy (*badanti*). The research is set in the context of temporary restraint of the freedom of circulation, and can be regarded as a tool in developing better understanding of the migration trajectories in time of crisis and decision-making processes.

The hereby study starts by briefly presenting the general context of the Romanian *badanti* in Italy and their situation during the Covid crisis, as reflected in various scientific research, and, after explaining the research methodology and tools employed, the analysis of the most significant results of the research follows. In this regard, the focus was on scrutinizing the incentives behind the decision to stay in Italy or return to Romania during the lockdown and the following restrictions period, and also to capture the individual experiences of the respondents, as recalled by them during the interviews. After explaining the limitations of the study, the final part is dedicated to the discussion and conclusions of the research.

If until now, within the European Community space, regarding the freedom of movement of people, there was a decision-making consensus and the application of common rules in the relationship between the state and the European Union was defined by uniformity, the years following the outburst of the coronavirus pandemic have brought to the fore an atypical, temporary situation, but with short and medium-term effects that influence individual choices and decisions (Porumbescu 2022).

As explained above, the general objective of this study consists of exploring the situation of Romanian women working in Italy in elderly home care during the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic and the effects of the restrictions enforced during this period on their status. Based on the expected structure of the research, a series of specific objectives were assumed, aimed at designing a complex picture of the studied issues. First of all, the intention

was to get a clearer understanding of the general situation of the reference group in the Italian society, in order to estimate the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the migrant care workers. Another part of the investigation was designed to evaluate their social and economic status in the destination communities as well as in the areas of origin. The third specific objective taken into account is exploring the individual decision-making process behind the staying/returning act during the coronavirus pandemic. The exploratory research was carried out in the period July-November 2022, through the use of semi-structured interviews with Romanians who were, during the Covid crisis, employed in Italy in home caregiving services.

Recent data (OECD 2022) shows that during the pandemic, people employed in care and domestic sectors have been benefiting from fewer protection initiatives, and were generally more exposed to severe threats, concerning their health as well as in terms of economic impact. In addition, they have had to cope with a wave of fake news about jobs, vaccination, or restrictions imposed by the authorities. (Stănescu 2020). If several domains were adaptable to telework, providing care would be among the activities that can only be performed face-to-face (Pogan 2021). In addition to this, studies show that the significant presence of female migrant workers in the long-term care sector is noteworthy, especially since they are predominantly employed in hospitals, households, and residential homes, which were often pandemic hotspots during the initial stages of the outbreak (Kuhlmann et al. 2020). The fear of the native population towards outsiders during the pandemic resulted in the termination of numerous domestic workers, while in the case of those with a live-in agreement, this resulted in losing their accommodation, and for non-EU employees, it translated to losing their work permit. Even those who did manage to retain their jobs in families with live-in provisions, came to experience a reduction in days off and an incessant demand for assistance from their employers during the lockdown (Salaris, Iacob, Anghel and Contu 2022, 27).

In this context, during the COVID-19 epidemic, some Romanian workers stayed in Italy, while others returned to their home country.

Romanian citizens returning from Europe were criticized for spreading the virus in Romania, and the government implemented severe penalties for those making false declarations regarding their health status and travel history. Moreover, some scientific studies also conclude that COVID-19 started to spread in Romania due to the return migration, “through case importation from Italy”, adding that “the largest share of the Romanian diaspora is concentrated especially in the northern parts of Italy, heavily affected by COVID-19” (Hancean, Perc, and Lerner 2020). In this context, returning migrants were often accused of spreading the virus in their country of origin (Dascalu 2020), and Romanian workers had to decide whether to remain in Italy or return to their home country. Similar reactions, both from public persons and civil society, were also observed in the case of Romanian migrant workers wishing to return from other countries, such as UK (Dolea 2022).

Context

In regard to Romania, the effects of the liberalization of movement on the mobility of the population inside the EU borders are analyzed in various academic studies, often placing our country in the category of source countries for migrants (Sandu 2014; Anghel and Horvath 2009; Matichescu *et. al.* 2015). Furthermore, numerous previous research approached multiple dimensions of the Romanian emigration phenomenon (Anghel and Horvath 2009), including the situation of Romanian migrants in Italy (Sandu 2018), or identifying the migration routes (Ricci 2002), estimating the impact of the economic implications in emigrating decision-making and the destination area (Simionescu 2017), up to more complex aspects, such as the degree of integration and acculturation in the host-society (Anghel 2012; Mazza and Punzo 2017), or, depending on the situation, reintegration in the community of origin (Vlase 2011), the returning options for other types of occupations (Croitoru and Cosciug 2021) or identitarian dimensions of migration (Ciocea 2016).

On the other hand, from the point of view of the age structure of the population, the demographic picture of Italy is a special case among the European states (Nicolescu 2019), and recent data provided by Eurostat indicate that in 2022, 23.8% of Italians were over 65 years old (Eurostat 2023), therefore, almost a quarter of the population is in need of dedicated care and assistance services. Some of these services are provided, in Italian society, the same as in other Western European countries (Porumbescu 2018) by immigrants, especially women. The term *badante* is also used for them, and their status is defined as being at the limit of legality in several studies (Ambrosini 2013; Barbiano di Belgiojoso and Ortensi 2019). The term *badante* was introduced relatively recently into the Italian vocabulary; it is used to determine a reductionist and devaluing view of the work of family assistants. Although they are often called upon to perform paramedical tasks, their profession is not yet culturally recognized, the popular idea being that in order to carry out this activity, no specific training is required (Bezzi&Papa 2016). According to the family model characteristic for Italian society, these women are engaged in performing tasks previously performed free of charge by other women in the family. In this context, having no clearly defined legal status in the country of destination, and being extremely limited in terms of mobility in the pandemic context, they represent a particularly vulnerable category. Furthermore, amidst various challenges, the sanitary crisis has shed light on the vulnerabilities of those working with at-risk populations, specifically migrant care workers. In Italy, elderly care in homes would not be feasible without the approximately 960,000 care workers, of which more than 75% were born outside the country (De Luca et al. 2019). Italy is one of the primary receiving countries of migrant care workers in Western Europe, and the migrant-in-the-family model is the primary form of paid eldercare. Most migrant care workers spend their working hours in isolation with older care-receivers, often informally employed and working extended hours (Seiffarth 2021, 502). Women coming from Romania are, in fact, the main group working in the care sector in Italy, this type of work being carried out almost entirely by migrants (King-Dejardin 2019, 36). Regarding the situation of Romanian

mothers working abroad, several studies in the field address this category, revealing that regardless of social category, a majority of women who resided in foreign countries experienced a state of temporary suspension in the transnational context. This entailed living in the destination country for an unspecified period without a desire to assimilate or integrate temporarily while maintaining transnational connections with family members back home. While temporarily suspending one's existence in the transnational realm is more manageable for adults, it poses greater challenges for individuals born abroad, particularly those who have already entered the educational system. Consequently, for them, returning or migrating to Romania proves to be arduous (Ducu 2018; Telegdi-Csetri and Ducu 2019). On the other hand, research addressing the typology of Romanian migrant care workers in Italy (Toc and Gutu 2021b, 87) reveals the existence of three main categories. The largest category is the "care worker in transit," comprising women who stay in Italy for extended periods (over 10-15 years) but do not intend to settle permanently. They provide welfare support to their families back home and often reside permanently in the same household as the elderly individuals they care for. Despite initially planning a short stay, they prolonged their time in Italy due to limited opportunities elsewhere. This category tends to resist fully embracing their migrant status, leading to their isolation. The "settled migrants" category includes women who transition from live-in care worker roles to permanent settlements in Italy. This process is often facilitated by their family joining them or finding a partner. Although they continue working in the care or housekeeping sector, they do not reside in the same household, allowing for better integration into the host society. Lastly, the "seasonal care workers" category comprises women engaged in temporary care work in Italy, often on rotational shifts. These individuals supplement their income from care work and take advantage of affordable flights to Italy.

A large number of migrant workers have been deemed essential in the labour market as they were employed in critical tasks on the front line of the COVID-19 response (IOM 2020). Migrants make up 13% of key workers in

Europe, and they are over-represented among low-skilled workers (ILO 2020; OECD 2019). These workers are employed in sectors such as health care, transportation, food processing, and cleaning services and play a crucial role in tackling the COVID-19 crisis (Salaris et. al. 2022, 27). Besides changing individuals' trajectories, the disruptions brought by the Covid pandemic impacted both the origin countries of the migrant workers (reduced remittances, returning home) and the destination ones, as they were confronted with increased problems regarding the workforce (Pogan 2021).

The purpose of the study is to explain migration as a "broader process of social change" (de Haas 2021) in which the desire to migrate, re-migrate or returning to the country of origin, is only part of the more complex equation involving the capacity and opportunity of the migratory act and the individual aspirations of the subjects of the research, as a result of their specific life contexts. Furthermore, in some contexts, the decision to return to Romania does not necessarily mean returning to the area of origin, but internal relocations may occur, especially in the case of female migrants, as observed in other studies, stating that "women, for instance, are more likely to relocate upon return than their male counterparts, whereas older returnees have lower odds of a J-turn trajectory compared with younger migrants" (Croitoru and Vlase 2021).

Research methodology

1. Data collecting methods employed in the study

The study was developed through a qualitative approach, with a series of in-depth interviews with a group of Romanian citizens, employed in Italy in home care-giving, with the aim of investigating their situation during the outburst of the coronavirus pandemic, and the specificities of individual decision-making process regarding the return to the country of origin or remaining in the country of destination.

Qualitative methodology was used to accomplish this task, employing a combination of literature review, interviewing, transcribing, in order to

collect and analyse data. Through in-depth interviews and secondary research, a framework was developed to explain the situation of Romanian migrant care workers in Italy and their decisions. 32 semi-structured interviews were conducted, both face-to face, or via internet tools, and they were meticulously documented and recorded as an extra precaution against any potential data loss.

When the interviews were conducted, all participants were or had been working in Italy in home care giving for at least six months. The interviews lasted between thirty minutes and one and a half hours, and an interview guide was developed in order to direct the discussion, covering topics such as the family context of the respondents, their social and economic background, their migration trajectory (the story), work conditions in Italy, relationship with the care-recipients, future plans, and so on.

2. Data analysis methods employed in the study

The interviews were transcribed by the researcher, and, in order to analyse the data, two techniques were employed, namely content analysis and thematic analysis, and an inductive approach was used to determine the themes based on the interview data, in order to capture particular, subjective aspects of the migrants' experience, and also to investigate their perception of the transformations occurring as a result of the coronavirus pandemic.

3. Sampling procedure

As of January, 1st, 2022, 1.083.771 Romanian citizens were living in Italy, representing the biggest group of foreigners in this country, and about 20% of the total foreign population (ISTAT, 2022). However, there is no data evidence keeping track of the number of Romanians employed as home care givers in Italy, including both official and informal work relations, nor information about their location or means of contact. In this context, in order to reach potential participants in the study, the personal network of the researcher was employed, starting from contacting acquaintances with migration experience in Italy, who were able to identify and contact people working in adult home

care. In addition to this, brief research on on-line social network groups created by Romanian migrants in Italy allowed to identify and directly contact persons working in this field, via instant messaging. At first, they were offered a short description of the purpose of the study and the interview, and, after expressing their agreement to participate, an on-line meeting was set up. Snowball sampling technique was also used, and the recommendations offered by respondents led to the identification of new possible subjects. A total of 65 persons were contacted via the methods depicted above, out of which 32 agreed to carry on with the discussion. Most of the negative responses received were related to the lack of time available, the difficulty or reluctance in using on-line communication tools that would allow recording, or the reluctance in sharing personal information and experiences.

Results analysis

In terms of migration decisions, the aspiration-capabilities framework links the individual characteristics of the people in question and their particular situations with the migratory outcome (de Haas, 2021; Cojocaru, 2016). In this context, the hereby study starts by examining the socio-demographic characteristics of the scrutinized group in an attempt to identify possible incentives to migrate back to the country of origin or reasons to remain in Italy. Thus, circumstances such as age, family situation, type of employment, housing can be used in an explanatory manner to better understand the individual capability of the respondents to realize their aspirations, as explained further as reasons to return/reasons to stay.

General overview of the respondents

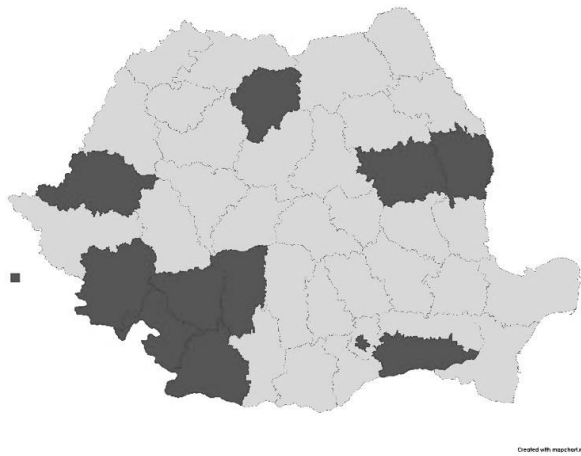
In terms of age and gender distribution, a not equitable distribution is to be observed, mainly due to the characteristics of the type of occupation in question, which is usually performed by women. Therefore, we have not been able to identify any male respondents, and the age of the subjects varies between 32 and 60 years. Regarding the geographical distribution, mainly the central and northern regions of Italy are represented, as can be observed in

Figure 1 below, the respondents being located in eight of the Italian provinces, namely: Turin (6), Bergamo (4), Verona (3), Rome (7), Bologna (3), Reggio Emilia (3), Treviso (4) and Macerata (2).

Figure 1. *Provinces of Italy where respondents lived*



As for the areas of origin of the participants in the research, illustrated in Figure 2 below, it can be observed that the south-western region of Romania is represented best, as 24 of the interviewees came from Dolj (7), Gorj (5), Valcea (4), Mehedinti (5) and Caras-Severin (3) counties. The remaining respondents were distributed as follows: 2 from Calarasi, 2 from Bucharest, and 1 from Bacau, Vaslui, Bistrita-Nasaud and Arad. As explained above, the selection of participants was based on the personal network of the researcher and social media channels, combined with referrals from previous respondents, thus leading to this type of geographical representation concentrated in certain areas of the country of origin.

Figure 2. *Romanian counties of origin of the respondents****The stay/return decision-making process***

One of the most important aspects to be taken into account when discussing migratory behavior and intentions is the age of the subjects and the amount of time spent in the destination area (Wanner, 2020; De Jong, et al, 1985).

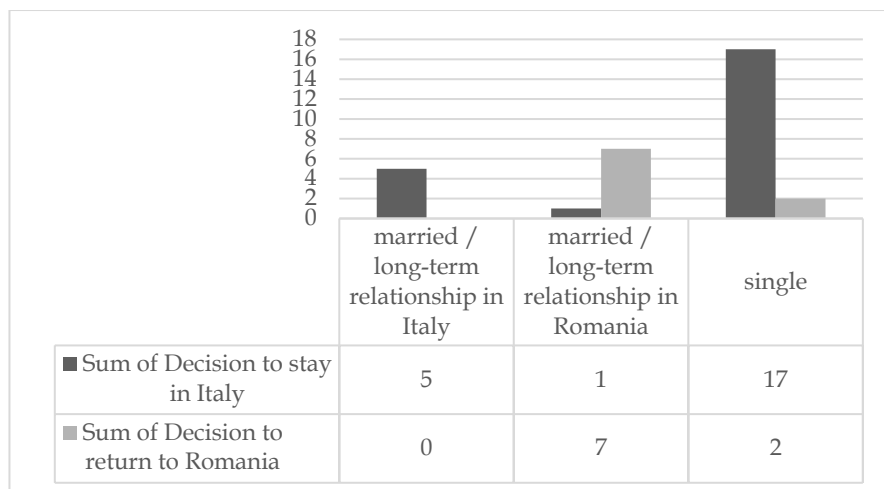
Figure 3. *Respondents' age, time spent at destination and decision*

Time at destination	Age	No. of resp. stay	No. of resp. leave	Total
6 months-1 year	30-45	1	2	3
	46-55	4	2	6
	55-60	1	0	1
1-5 years	30-45	1	3	4
	46-55	2	1	3
	55-60	3	0	3
More than 5 years	30-45	1	1	2
	46-55	5	0	5
	55-60	5	0	5
Total		23 71,87%	9 28,13%	32 100%

As can be observed in the above table, in the case of most of the interviewees the decision was to stay in Italy during the crisis, and, as the information in the interviews reveal, most of them remained employed in the same families. For instance, B.23. (37, Valcea) indicates that *“I felt safer there than in Romania. I knew the hospitals were better, and since we lived in a small community, the risk of getting the infection was not so high. I would have wanted to be with my parents, to help them. But how could I have helped with no money?”*. However, as the amount of time spent in Italy previous to the outburst of the pandemic increased, the decision to return to Romania was less frequent, with only one person that lived for over five years in this country deciding to return. Also, considering strictly the age, no person aged 55-60 returned to Romania during the period in question.

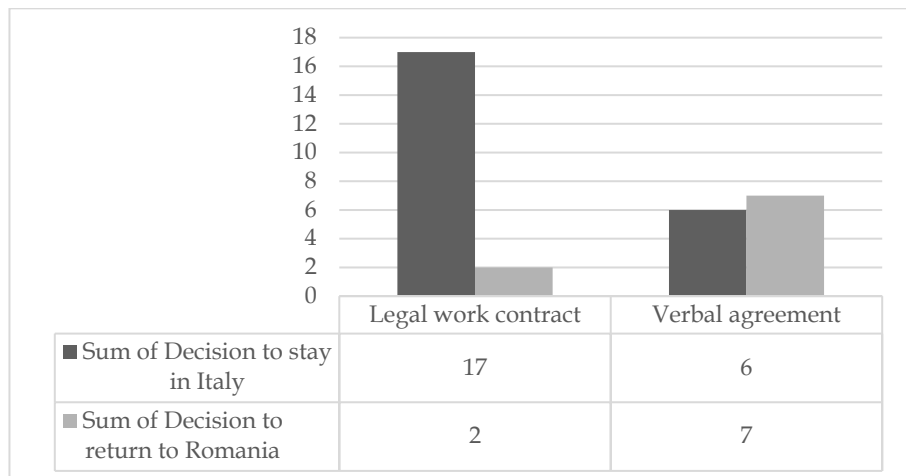
Migration trajectories, especially in the situation of female migrants, are most often influenced by their family context (Ducu, 2018). The decision to stay or return is also linked to the marital status of the respondents, and generally to the type of family they belong to. Under these circumstances, among the participants in the research, we identified a strong connection between the decision to return to Romania and the location of the respondents' family, in the situation that they were married.

Figure 4. *Marital status and decision*



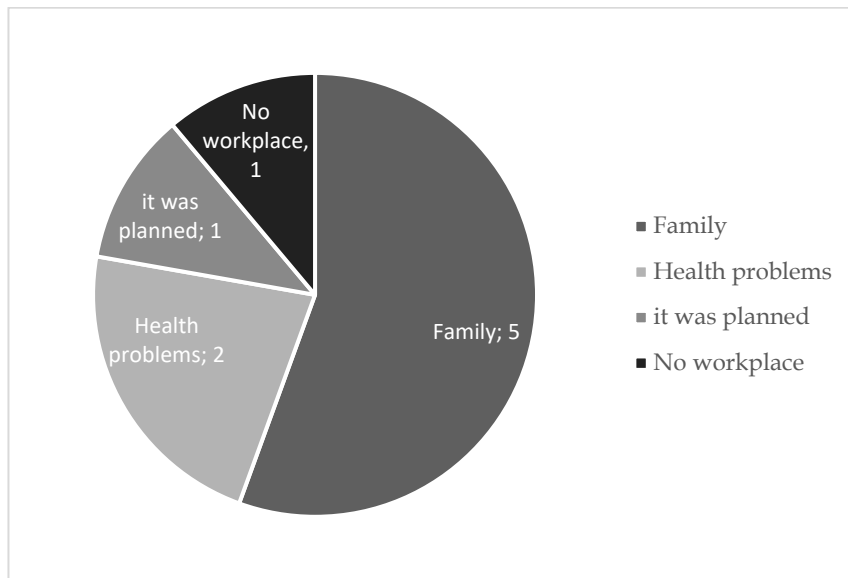
As can be observed in Figure 4, among the nine participants who returned to Romania, seven were married or involved in a long-term relationship in the country of origin, and the other two reported being single, while, on the other hand, none of the respondents who were married or involved in a long-term relationship in Italy chose to return to Romania. As for the subjects that reported not being in a relationship at the time of the coronavirus pandemic, most of them decided to remain in the country of destination. As they explain, other factors were taken into consideration in their decision: *“I didn’t have anyone in Italy, but at least I had a place to stay, a good salary, a good family that I was working for. You know, it didn’t feel right to leave them like that, they would have needed to hire someone else, and then what would I do when it was all over? Now I’m happy I stayed”* (B.3., Dolj, 37). On the other hand, for those who had families in Italy, the decision-making process seem to have been much simpler, as B.12, (45, Arad) explains *“There was no question for us. Everything we have was here, what to do in Romania? My husband and I both have jobs, the kids in school.”*

Figure 5. *Type of employment and decision*



The type of work status subjects have in the country of destination is also likely to influence very much their decision of staying or leaving, especially in times of crisis. As can be observed, among the 19 participants employed based on an official contract, only 2 decided to return to Romania, while in the situation of those employed based on only a verbal agreement, the figures are almost equal. The highest rate of migrant care workers deciding to remain in Italy during the Covid crisis, over 50%, was observed with those who had a work contract with their employer. Furthermore, the specificities of the working arrangements each respondent had with her employer influenced the final decision. For instance, B. 20 (56, Dolj), who remained in Italy despite not having a registered contract, explains: *“You may think I didn’t have any security at work, since I had no contract, but I was like part of the family. I lived with the family, and they said they would keep my job if I wanted to go home for a month or two, because they were also living in the same with the lady I took care of. But I didn’t want to go.”* In the situation of migrant care workers legally employed the decision seems to have been even more clear *“why go to Romania? To stay in quarantine, and then have no job? Here, I had a contract, I just had to be careful not to get infected and pass it on”* B.15 (45, Bacau).

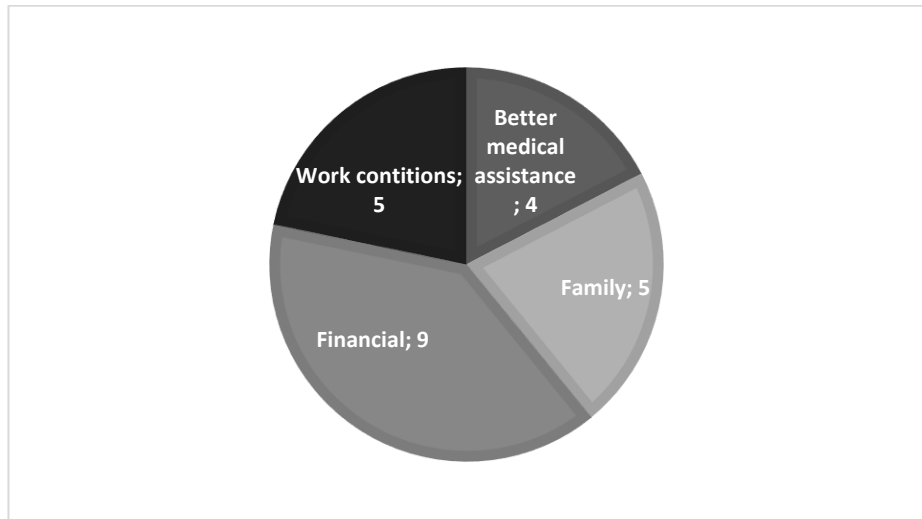
Related to the type of work arrangements each of the respondents had when the coronavirus pandemic started, it is interesting to note that the number of work contracts has increased from March 2020 until June 2020. The subjects explained that this was especially due to the frequent controls performed by authorities, and the fear, both for them and their employers, of being caught in a semilegal/illegal situation: *“The good thing was that they finally decided to record my contract. I couldn’t get to work otherwise, because I had to explain why I was in the street.”* B.10, (44, Dolj) explains. Another situation is that of B.15. (45, Bacau): *“the daughter of the man I was taking care of then was afraid he would get sick and I would need to call an ambulance or take him to the hospital, and they would ask who I was and she could be in trouble. So she said it was better to have a contract and everything”*.

Figure 6. *Reasons to return to Romania*

During the interviews, subjects indicated that it was difficult for them to point towards a single reason for their return to Romania, the decision being based rather on a complex process of deliberation, with various aspects taken into account. Thus, they named several reasons which influenced their trajectory, and the ones that ranked first in their answers were selected: family circumstances, health issues, no prospect of finding a new work place in the case of unemployment and the situation in which the return was already planned ahead. As Figure 6 indicates, family ties had the most significant input in the interviewees' decisions, but issues related to the medical situations were also important: *"I have this health problems, and I was afraid they could get worse if I got infected. So I went home, at least there I could stay safe in my own house, I live in a small village"* A. 2. (51, Dolj).

A particular situation was also identified, in the case of A.7. (49, Mehedinti), who explained that the death of the care-recipient led to the loss of her job, and, due to the difficulty in finding a new one, she decided to return to Romania.

Figure 7. *Reasons to stay in Italy*



As explained above, most of the participants in the study (71,87%) decided to remain in Italy during the coronavirus pandemic. Out of them, 73,91% had a working contract, and only 21,73% were married or involved in a long-term relationship in Italy. According to the responses provided for the question “Why did you decide to stay in Italy?”, the most important reasons to remain in Italy during the coronavirus pandemic respondents indicated to be financial needs, the fact that the beneficiaries of home care needed them or having a family in Italy. In addition to this, some interviewees explained that the fact that the Italian medical system is considered to be more modern and generally more efficient than the Romanian one influenced their decision very much: “*I didn’t even think of coming to Romania, where we don’t have a hospital, and the nearest one is 75 km away and people leave sicker than then enter*” (B.7., Gorj, 55).

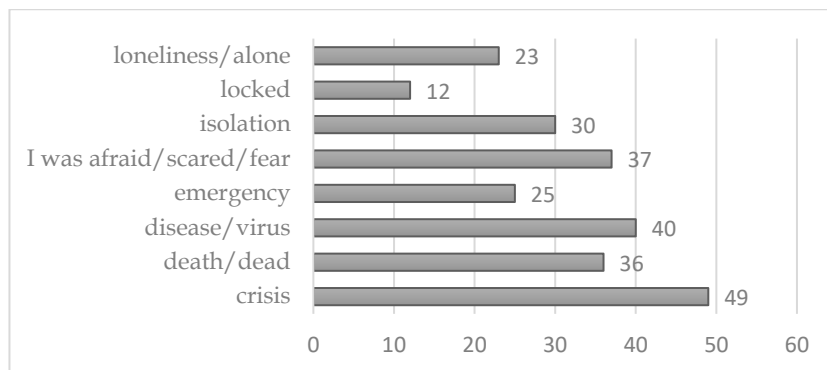
Figure 8. *Intentions for the future*

One of the most important aspects that need to be taken into consideration when discussing migration trajectories is related to the plans for the future, or the intentions of the migrants. In this regard, most of the participants in the research indicated they intend to remain in Italy (61%), while only 17% plan to remigrate to another country. Most of the respondents who have been living in Italy for a longer period of time (over 5 years) are determined to remain there, as some of them are already settled and integrated in the host societies, while those who returned in Romania during the coronavirus pandemic or those who had been living in Italy for fewer years at the time of the interviews indicated they are considering other destinations: *"I think we will go to Germany, in a year or two, after I finish the medical school here. My sister-in-law lives there, and she says I can easily get a job as a nurse with a better salary than I would earn here. My husband is on the roads most of the time anyway, so it wouldn't be that big of a difference, and the kids are still young"* (B.21, 39, Gorj). Depending on the individual situation of each of the respondents, several reasons are being taken into account into designing their future plans, but the most frequent aspects taken into consideration are similar to those that determined their decision to stay in Italy or return to

Romania, namely the family situation and the financial outcome of the migratory act.

The development of the discussions during the interviewing process revealed the fact that, apart from the objective aspects that contributed to the final decision of the interviewees of staying in Italy or returning in Romania, a series of more personal, subjective aspects were taken into consideration, aspects that are connected to their general state of mind and feelings towards the ongoing events. Thus, in order to better understand the individual experiences of the participants in the study during the coronavirus pandemic, and the way they were emotionally affected by this crisis, a thematic analysis was developed. Several words and expressions generally related to a state of insecurity that appeared more frequent among the interviews were extracted, and the figure below indicates how many times each of these were used by the subjects during the discussions.

Figure 9. *Expressions associated with insecurity identified in the interviews*



The recollection of the personal experiences of the respondents and their stories describes a preminent attitude of fear, insecurity, by the frequent use of words and expressions such as “I was afraid” (identified with different variations 37 time throughout 25 of the interviews), and a state of loneliness experienced by 15 of the subjects, mentioned 23 times throughout the interviews. The word related to the coronavirus pandemic used most of the

times during the discussions was “crisis” (49 times in 28 interviews), and it was associated with negative aspects “*it was not just the medical crisis, it was the lack of everything, the fear, the empty streets*”(A.7, 49, Mehedinti) or “*I knew we (the immigrants) wouldn’t be a priority in this crisis, everyone said go back to your country, but in our country they told us to go back abroad*”(A.4., 36, Dolj).

When asked about the lockdown period, respondents confessed they experienced feelings of fear, and, in general, felt the limitations on their freedom negatively impacted their general wellbeing: “*It was not recommended to leave the house, and there were days when I had no one to talk to*” (B. 4., 42, Calarasi), or “*the fact that we weren’t allowed to go out made me feel like in prison. There were only police everywhere, and the alarms*” (B.2., 58, Caras-Severin). In addition to this, the media portrayal of the events increased the anxiety and feeling of fear: “*I stopped watching the news, because every time I did, I started to cry, I was sure I was going to get the virus and be very sick*” (B.15. 45, Bacau).

Study limitations

One of the limitations encountered in this research is related to the fact that the socio-professional category studied is rather undocumented, therefore making it more difficult to identify possible respondents, issue that is also to be taken into account regarding the total size of the discussed group. In addition, the process of data collection was based on voluntary participation and time availability of the subjects to answer all questions, thus determining the composition of the group based on the principle of opportunity. Similar shortcoming regarding the composition of the respondents’ group is related to the fact that the primary source of participants was the researcher’s personal network and acquaintances, people with similar migration backgrounds and experience, thus making it more difficult to gather a wider diversity of answers.

The limitations in the geographic spread of the respondents can also influence the relevance of the conclusions extracted, especially in regard to the location in the destination country. As previously explained, the

interviewees lived and worked especially in the central and northern areas of Italy, while in this country, in particular, there are significant differences between the southern and the northern regions. Furthermore, the effects of the coronavirus pandemic were more important in the north, where the main outbreaks of the disease were located. In this context, it would have been relevant to interview people spread all over the territory of Italy. Also, given the location of the researcher (south western Romania) and the fact that some of the respondents were selected from the personal network, or through personal recommendations, the geographical representativity is disproportioned also in terms of area or origin, with more participants from the south-western counties of Romania.

Another difficulty encountered throughout the interviewing process was due to the context of on-line communication. Although applications such as Zoom or Google meet, which allow for the video communication in addition to the audio one, were used, based on the preference of the interviewees, these types of communication most often do not provide full transmission of the non-verbal elements of the dialogue, and sometimes the respondent may participate to the interview in an uncomfortable environment, preventing him/her to offer accurate and comprehensive answers.

In regard to the existing data and literature on the analyzed topic, it should be taken into account the fact that in recent history there was no other similar event, or with comparable effects in terms of spread and population affected, therefore there is limited research and knowledge on the topic.

Discussion and conclusions

The study of the 32 interviews presented indicates that it is difficult to point out specific reasons determinant to the decision of staying in Italy or returning to Romania during the coronavirus pandemic. Identifying classical push/pull factors is not a viable option, as the situations are in many ways different for each of the individuals in the group in question, and in most of the cases a combination of various factors leads to a certain behavior. On the other hand,

the aspirations-capability framework designs a better approach for understanding the migratory trajectories of the respondents, and to contribute to explaining similar migrant behavior in general. In addition to this, as other studies point out (Cojocaru 2016, 16), constrains approach becomes a useful tool in explaining nonmigration and emphasizing the contrast between the aspiration and the capacity to migrate. In terms of behavior, regarding the plans for the future, it seems that, similar to other recent crisis (Anghel and Cosciug 2018), the coronavirus pandemic halted intentions of long-term migration, and determined respondents to redesign their migratory intentions towards short-term movements.

After collecting and analyzing the responses, the main aspects taken into consideration by each of the migrant care workers were identified, indicating similar influences in terms of family ties, work place determinants, financial needs and gains, and also factors of a more intrinsic value, such as their emotional response to the events. As a general conclusion of the study, based on the responses of the interviewees, the decision to remain in Italy was made by women employed with a formal contract, who were married or had a family in Italy, and had already been working there for a longer period of time. On the opposite, Romanian care givers with families back in Romania were more likely to return, even if for an indefinite period of time, while an informal working arrangement also encouraged the badanti to return.

Due to the characteristics of this profession, which often include living in with the care-recipient, or being available during the nights or weekends, less women employed in this field have families (husband, children) in the country of destination. Also, women are more likely to decide on professional matters taking into account other aspects of their lives, such as “marital status and the timing of their transition to motherhood” (Croitoru 2018, 94). In this research, most of the respondents were not married or involved in a long-term relationship either in Romania or in Italy during the coronavirus pandemic (19 out of 32 reported being single). However, the information collected throughout the interviews indicates that for those involved in relationships, family was the most important reason to return to Romania, and also the top

reason to remain in Italy, in the situation when the family of the subjects was located there, so those who decided to return had spouses and/or children at home.

Another important factor involved in the stay/return decision-making process was related to the working conditions of each interviewee, and there are several dimensions that need to be observed. First of all, as pointed out above, the type of legal agreement that the work relationships were based on had a strong influence in the decision. One of the key findings concerns the fact that in the situation of some of the respondents, their situation has improved, by becoming legally employed, due to the fact that numerous controls were taking place, and they needed to account for their situation. Similar findings were reported in other studies regarding the situation of migrant worker during Covid (Țoc and Guțu 2021a, 26), which point out that more workers have been legally employed since the outburst of the coronavirus pandemic, due to the fact that various forms of population control have been enforced. In addition to this, especially in critical periods such as the coronavirus pandemic, workplace stability is crucial to individual decisions, thus the period of time that a personal had already spent with their current employer can determine their staying or leaving.

Another particular aspect that the participants in the study have taken into account is related to their housing conditions, as, in the situation of the respondents who don't own a living place in Italy, living in with the care-recipient seems to have brought along more stability, and they didn't experience so much insecurity.

In regard to the differences between the group of respondents who chose to stay in Italy and those who returned in Romania, several topics need to be scrutinized. Most of the respondents decided to stay in Italy, and, beyond the family related reasons, the second most important aspect considered by them was related to individual financial calculations, while for the returning group the second most important reason was related to health issues. In addition to this, the intention to remain in Italy was more frequently expressed by those who had been living there for a longer period of time. Due

to the relatively small number of migrants involved in the research, it is difficult to issue general conclusions regarding the reasons behind the decision to stay or leave, and the respondents also indicated that most often there were several reasons combined. Furthermore, it is important to note that the stay/return decision making process refers, in the frame of this study, strictly to the pandemic period, therefore the context needs to be taken into consideration as having a significant impact on the individual trajectories.

In terms of personal experience and response, many subjects explained they had a general feeling of vulnerability and insecurity, often fueled by the media presentation of the events. Although there is no clear evidence on how this influenced their decision to stay in Italy or return to Romania, it is worth noting that this outcome had a serious impact on their general wellbeing. Another aspect to be taken into consideration is that of the limitations on the individual freedom enforced during the lockdown periods in both the country of origin and that of destination, which affected the personal decision-making process.

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