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To cite this version:

Bruna Vendemmia, Agim Kerçuku. Internal Migration in Italy: Mapping Shrinking in Medium-Size Cities. CIST2020 - Population, temps, territoires, Collège international des sciences territoriales (CIST), Nov 2020, Paris-Aubervilliers, France. pp.307-311. hal-03114096

HAL Id: hal-03114096

https://hal.science/hal-03114096v1

Submitted on 18 Jan 2021

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Internal Migration in Italy: Mapping Shrinking in Medium-Size Cities

ABSTRACT
This paper aims at analysing the causes of internal migrations in Italy that provoke population decline and shrinking in some areas of the country, with a particular regard to medium-sized cities that, despite being considered in many cases central places for accessing services provision, are experiencing phenomena of shrinking. These territories are characterised by a recent but strong process of demographic contraction, poor mobility and lack of services, yet these areas have historically made the country's wealth and diversity. Contrasting and comparing different statistical data at national scale, this work projects to identify the emerging geographies of demographic loss in Italy, with particular reference to medium-sized cities. As matter of fact, observing these places and their populations allows us to grasp more radically the fragility linked to population shrinking in urban contexts, the reason behind it and the extent of the ongoing transformations.

KEYWORDS
Internal migrations, Territorial fragilities, Population decline, Accessibility, Research methods

RÉSUMÉ
Cette communication vise à analyser les causes des migrations internes en Italie, qui provoquent le déclin de la population et une contraction dans certaines régions du pays, en particulier dans les villes de taille moyenne qui, bien qu'elles soient considérées comme des lieux centraux pour l'accès aux services, connaissent des phénomènes de rétrécissement. Ces territoires sont caractérisés par un processus récent, mais fort, de contraction démographique, de faible mobilité et de manque de services, alors que ces régions ont historiquement fait la richesse et la diversité du pays. Contrastant et comparant les différentes données statistiques à l'échelle nationale, ce travail vise à identifier les géographies émergentes de la perte démographique dans les villes de taille moyenne. En effet, l'observation de ces lieux permet de saisir plus précisément la fragilité liée au rétrécissement de la population dans les contextes urbains, la raison qui la sous-tend et l'ampleur des transformations en cours.

MOTS CLÉS
migrations internes, fragilités territoriales, déclin de la population, accessibilité, méthodes de recherche

INTRODUCTION

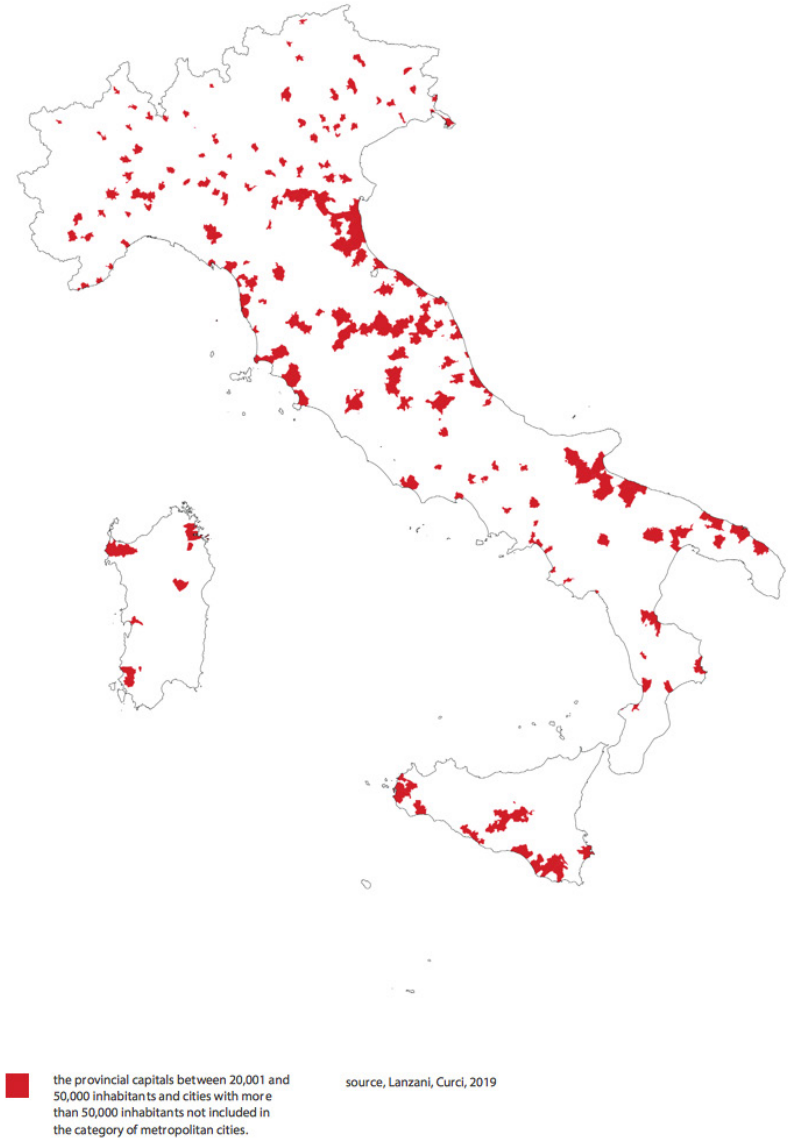
Demographic phenomena are shaping and changing spaces. Observing people, the way they live and move, allows us to better understand how territories work and how they are represented. At national scale, population migration arises in a fragmented and contrasting social topography which imposes new forms of economics, and shapes new structures of society (Piketty, 2014). Subject to the same dynamics, forms of living change according to population's growth and contraction. After years of obsession with growth and expansion, contemporary territories have to radically reorganise their identity based on the new obsession of demographic decline, and more generally shrinking.

Shrinking has a strong social and scientific value: it affects the field of economics, urban planning and politics; of course it is related to populations mobility at national and international scale (Franklin, 2019). Furthermore it may contribute to the development of a process of territorial fragilisation, which concerns not only the socio-demographic decline but also the retreat of the anthropic presence, the degradation of the social fixed capital and the abandonment of built and infrastructural heritage.

This paper aims at defining the geography of internal migrations in Italy, analysing the causes that determine it, provoking population decline and shrinking in some areas of the country, while concentration and accumulation in others. It pays a particular attention to the medium-sized cities that are experiencing phenomena of

population decline and shrinking, despite being considered in many cases central according to the National Strategy for Inner Areas (SNAI). The Strategy has been made by the Italian Agency for Territorial Cohesion and produced a map that distinguishes Italian municipalities in Poles (fig. 2) and Inner Areas. Poles host a station, secondary schools and a hospital, while Inner Areas are at least 20 minutes apart from these services (Barca *et al.*, 2014).

Figure 1. Medium-size cities in Italy



1. RESEARCH METHODS

The work will focus on medium-size cities, since observing these places and their populations allows us to grasp more radically the fragility linked to population shrinking in urban contexts, the reason behind it (such as for example lack of services or low level of accessibility), and the extent of the ongoing transformations. From a methodological point of view, following a definition of Lanzani and Curci (2018), we have built a map of medium-size cities in Italy which includes the provincial capitals between 20,001 and 50,000 inhabitants, and cities over 50,000 inhabitants not included in the category of metropolitan cities (fig. 1). Contrasting and comparing this map with different statistical data at national scale allows first of all to define a geography of medium-size cities in Italy; then to consider if, at national scale, they are classified as poles or inter-municipalities poles[1] (fig. 2); and to understand if these cities are losing population and to what extent (fig. 3), or as counter-stories if some medium-size cities are gaining population and why; finally to look at socioeconomic factors and mobility practices in order to understand if they are describing the same conditions of fragility (fig. 4).

1 According to the SNAI, "Poles" are the municipalities hosting all the selected services (station, secondary school and hospital), while if those services are located in an agglomeration of different municipalities they are defined "Inter-municipality poles" (Barca *et al.*, 2014).

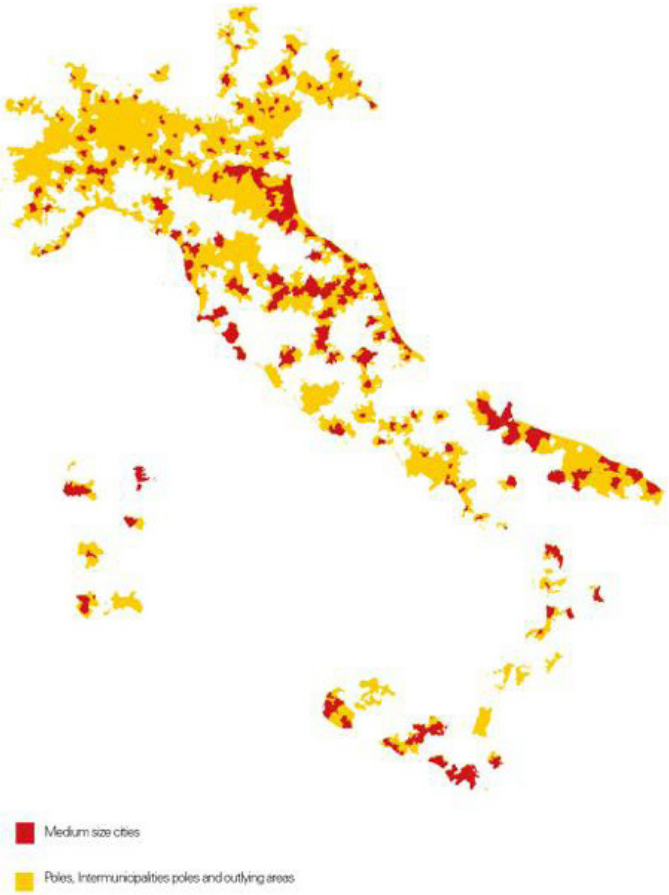
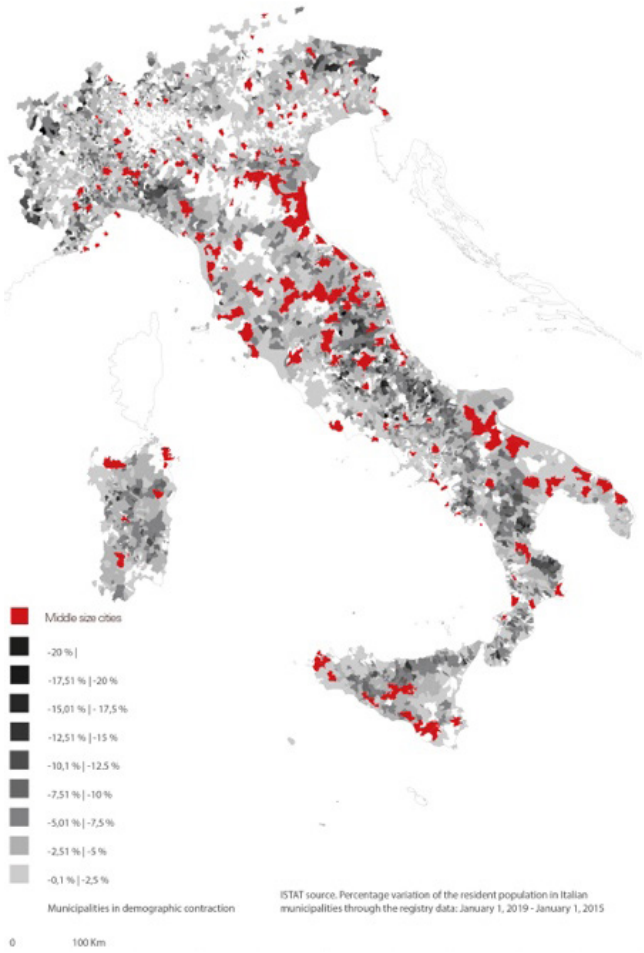


Figure 2. Poles (SNAI) and medium-size cities

Figure 3. Shrinking and medium-size cities



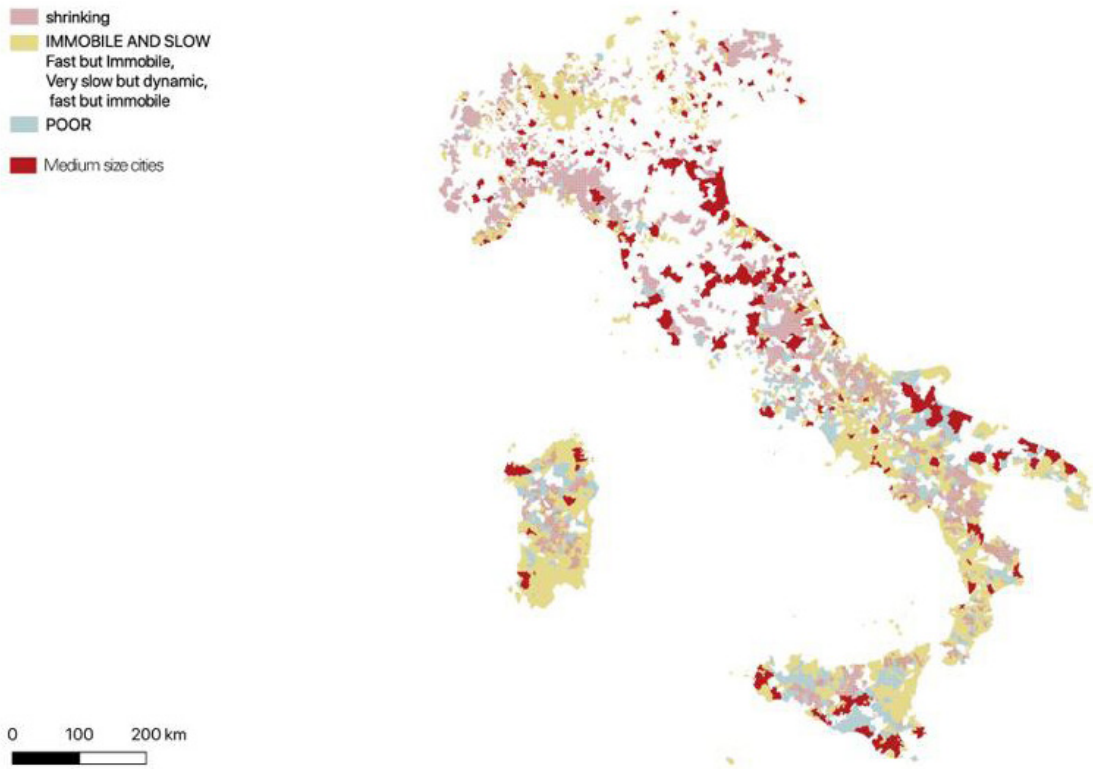


Figure 4. Fragilities and medium-size cities

2. CHOOSING ITALY TO ANALYSE SHRINKING IN MEDIUM-SIZE CITIES

Italy seems to be an interesting case study for several reasons. According to the most recent statistical data available at national level[2], in the period that goes from January 1st, 2015 to January 1st, 2019, 5,848 of the 7,926 Italian municipalities (74%) are in demographic contraction, 20% of which are medium cities and, according to the latest estimates from ISTAT, it is a process that will not decrease in upcoming years, so that nowadays de-growth and contraction are conquering urban agendas.

Even though Italy has not experienced harsh shrinking phenomena due to crises in the Fordist industrial systems (as seen in some North American contexts), nor to strong political upheavals (as in the case of Eastern European countries), Italian territories are characterised by both consolidated shrinking phenomena and emerging shrinking dynamics, that remain still little explored, especially in their 2008 post-crisis configuration. Furthermore, shrinking processes in Italy have never been historically linear neither homogeneous: At the beginning of the 20th century, there has been a gradual reduction of shrinking in some territories affected by the phenomena of "epochal" rural exodus (Lanzani, 2015), while, nowadays, demographic shrinking is accompanied by a city-country duality that seems to condemn rural areas and medium-sized cities to a condition of profound marginality and decline (Indovina *et al.,* 2005). Additionally, emerging shrinking has been not yet thoroughly described, and it is possible to recognise signs that could characterise, in a problematic way, some areas of the country in the upcoming decades. At national scale, for example, it is possible to identify a geography of articulated and molecular contraction that needs a clarification effort: some mountain villages but not all of them, some territories of the valley, some production territories, some pieces of widespread urbanisation and industrial districts, some areas of coastal unauthorised and mass tourism, some suburbs.

A last consideration needs to be done on policies. It is useful to consider that in Italy policies have been mainly polarised on two differing and opposing situations. On the one side, the Plan for the regeneration and security of peripheral areas in metropolitan and capital cities (*Piano per la riqualificazione urbana e la sicurezza delle Periferie nelle aree metropolitane e nelle città capoluogo*, promoted by the Italian government in 2016) offered financial support for the development of 120 projects distributed mainly into the 14 Italian metropolitan areas. On the other side, the National Strategy for Inner Areas (Barca *et al.*, 2014) concentrated interventions on those areas defined "Inner", *i.e.* over 20 minutes apart from the three main citizenship rights. However, the concentration towards both metropolitan cities and inner areas contributed to consolidate a rough image that has left behind a whole part in the middle. This in-between country is made of medium cities that may raise importance at national scale even more considering that they are distributed along a

2 Statistical data are issued by National Statistical Institute (ISTAT).

thick interconnected network that could be the country's backbone, both for the provision of services and as points of exchange between different mobility systems. It seems clear that the specificity of the Italian shrinking cannot be addressed only through understanding and contrasting central and remote contexts; it must also take into account territorial conditions that differ both from the central and the inner when considering settlements and socio-economic systems. Those in-between territories are included in the so-called "*Italia di mezzo*", a representation of Italy that has been suggested by Arturo Lanzani (Lanzani & Curci, 2018), characterised by poor mobility and lack of services, yet a part of Italy that had historically made the country's wealth and diversity, although in some forgotten cases, and considered as "places left behind" (Rodríguez-Pose, 2017) in Italian geography. Italy is what its places are, and the ability of medium cities to modify their vocations is what defines and gives strength to the Italian territory. Medium-sized cities over the years, have also become a place of attraction for foreign populations and, at the same time, a place where a recent but strong demographic contraction, together with economic, social and environmental crises, make these territories increasingly fragile. This investigation has been carried out by comparing a set of indicators that help to explain the phenomenon of shrinking in medium-size cities at national scale, in particular the indicator of accessibility developed by SNAI with an indicator of population decline based on national statistical data[2] and calculated over a 5-year period (2014-2019). Alongside a form of cognitive-quantitative research at national scale, some territorial biographies have been identified, to be analysed through a qualitative research method and direct observation in a more advanced phase of the work.

3. PRELIMINARY RESULTS

A first comparison between the map of inner areas elaborated by SNAI and the map of medium-size cities (fig. 2), elaborated by the authors, open some further questions. As a matter of fact, the National Strategy for Inner Areas (SNAI) classifies Italian territory in six main categories. Although this classification conceals many ambiguities as it includes in the same categories places that can barely be considered similar, such as Milan and Benevento[3]. Different tools and research methods are needed to highlight these differences and underline the specificity of medium-size cities on the geography of shrinking and territorial fragilities at national level. Shrinking or population growth also solicits, albeit with diametrically opposite effects, medium-sized cities, which sometimes also react dissimilarly to big metropolitan city. Nonetheless, it could critically be observed counter-stories experiences developed in some contexts of medium-sized cities that have reacted to decline, as underlined by the comparison between the map of medium-size cities and the map of population decline.

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3 Milan and Benevento are both classified as poles by SNAI although they are completely different from the socio-economic, demographic and mobility aspects: it is enough to say that Milan has a population of around 1,250,000 inhabitants, 3 airports, and 2 railway stations, while Benevento counts 59,200 inhabitants, no airport, and a train station without connection to the HSR network.