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Italy has 'window' to reverse brain drain

By Guy Dinmore in Rome

Tired of the nepotism, corruption, social prejudice and lack of opportunities in their native Italy, Luca and Gustav, a gay couple in their 30s, consider joining their many friends in seeking a better life abroad.

In the road-movie documentary *Italy – Love It or Leave It*, recently released in Rome – and the winner of the Best Film award at the Milan Film Festival – the two men set off from the capital in their old Fiat 500 on a six-month grand tour to see if they can fall in love with their own country again.

The film was made in the dying months of Silvio Berlusconi's slowly imploding government. Now, however, there is a sense that perhaps something is starting to change after years in which hordes of talented young Italians gave up hope and left.

Italy produces proportionally fewer graduates than its European peers, and yet surveys indicate its exodus ratio is significantly higher. Few reliable statistics exist, although Confimprese Italia, a business association, estimates that 120,000 young Italians went abroad in 2008-09, of whom 70 per cent were graduates.

Since then the economic backdrop has worsened. Nearly one in three 15- to 24-year-olds are jobless, the highest rate for at least seven years.

Sergio Nava, a journalist who tracks the brain drain from Italy in a weekly radio broadcast *Flight of the Talented*, is leading a campaign to reverse the trend. With the collapse of Mr Berlusconi's coalition in November and its replacement by Mario Monti's emergency team of technocrats, Mr Nava feels mildly optimistic, saying Italy has a "window of opportunity" to change for the better.

"Before, politicians looked like Martians and talked of things that didn't make sense. Now the debate has shifted," he says. "Finally the themes that young people have spoken about for years in leaving Italy are on the agenda. We need a new Italy, a new country with new ideas and best practices – liberalisation, investment in young people, new start-ups."

Mr Nava calls Italy a "country of privileges" jealously protected by corporations and vested interest groups. The system of *raccomandazione* – where people get jobs through personal contacts rather than on merit – lies at the heart of the problem. A recent survey sponsored by the ministry of labour showed the recession is entrenching the system, with 61 per cent of companies relying on personal introductions for recruitment, up from 50 per cent a year earlier.

Mr Monti, a blunt-talking economist who at most has just over a year left in office, is moving quickly to liberalise Italy but is already meeting heavy resistance – from trade unions to political parties and powerful professional guilds. But his emphasis on getting more young people and women into employment is winning public support.

Pierluigi Celli, director-general of Rome's Luiss university, triggered a national bout of navel-gazing two years ago when he published an emotional letter urging his son Mattia to leave Italy and go where "merit and results" are valued.

"Mattia was stubborn and stayed, even though the situation is now much worse," says Mr Celli. His son became part of the army of what Italy calls "precarious" workers, living on fixed short-term contracts.

“Now we have greater hopes with Monti after the nightmare of policies of hope is over. But how long will it last? That is always the problem,” Mr Celli adds.

Once abroad, the longing to return is powerful but the incentives few. In Italy you are young – and hence not taken seriously – until at least 40. The average age of Mr Monti’s ministers is 63.

Sara Perria, a 30-year-old journalist who moved to London, says opportunities are scant in Italy. “All in all, the sensation is that the experience, languages, the moving around, this makes things harder not easier to go back,” she says.

At the end of their odyssey, co-directors Gustav Hofer and Luca Ragazzi are filmed unpacking boxes in a new home. The camera pans to a window looking onto Rome’s Altar of the Motherland, the grand monument to national unity – the couple has decided to stay.

Mr Nava, the radio host, likes the movie, despite its sentimental conclusion. Maybe it reflects a reality that Italy is starting to turn a corner. However, he adds: “I am not so sure.”

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