

IS INTERNATIONAL RETIREMENT MIGRATION (IRM) A POSSIBLE STRATEGY FOR THE REGENERATION OF THE INLAND AREAS? THE CASE STUDY OF IRSINA IN BASILICATA: PRELIMINARY INSIGHTS

LA MIGRATION INTERNATIONALE DES RETRAITÉS (MIR) EST-ELLE UNE STRATÉGIE POSSIBLE POUR LA RÉGÉNÉRATION DES RÉGIONS INTÉRIEURES ?

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Abstract

While demographic decline continues to reshape several regions of the Italian peninsula, particularly its inland areas, where depopulation has reinforced their “marginal” status, tangible initiatives are taking root to revitalize these areas through local social, cultural, and economic innovation. Rather than defaulting to conventional tourism-centric approaches, these efforts aim to strengthen territorial assets, including collective expertise, environmental resources, and traditional trades, while integrating the needs of residents and local actors to breathe new life into these inland areas. Numerous examples of territorial regeneration exemplify what we may term the “re-centralization of the margin”, showcasing ingenious strategies for the re-functionalization and adaptive reuse of abandoned and forgotten housing heritage, as well as bottom-up experiments that prefigure new housing possibilities and tentative “instances” of repopulation. These encouraging developments provide the context for the case study of Irsina, a municipality in the province of Matera (Basilicata), which, despite partial abandonment, is witnessing efforts – led by its inhabitants and municipal administration – to revitalize its social and economic fabric through a “repopulation” project by pre-retirement and retirement foreign citizens. Though still limited in scale, this initiative, which capitalizes on the phenomenon of International Retirement Migration (IRM), represents a promising step toward the regeneration of this small town and other marginal territories in Italy.

Keywords

International Retirement Migration, territorial regeneration, inland areas, repopulation, Basilicata

Résumé

Malgré le déclin démographique de nombreuses zones, surtout intérieures, de la péninsule italienne, qui génère une situation de dépeuplement, des actions concrètes se répandent sur le territoire, qui peuvent stimuler des voies de développement local de nature sociale, culturelle et économique qui ne sont pas exclusivement centrées sur le tourisme. Ces pistes s'intéressent à la valorisation des talents territoriaux (compétences collectives, ressources environnementales, métiers traditionnels, etc.), en vue d'intégrer les besoins des habitants et des acteurs territoriaux qui gravitent autour du monde de l'arrière-pays. De nombreux exemples de régénération territoriale remettent en question ce que l'on pourrait appeler la “recentralisation de la marge”, en mettant en évidence des stratégies de re-fonctionnalisation et de réutilisation de centres habités ayant subi un processus progressif de dépeuplement au fil des années. Des expérimentations et des projets de régénération, principalement issus de la population locale, laissent entrevoir de nouvelles possibilités de logement et de nouveaux « épisodes » de repeuplement. Telles sont les prémices de la réflexion sur l'étude de cas de la commune de Irsina, dans la province de Matera (Basilicate), qui, bien que caractérisée par un processus initial et partiel d'abandon de son centre historique, est le théâtre d'efforts - menés par les habitants et l'administration municipale - pour revitaliser son tissu social et économique grâce à un projet de “repeuplement” par des citoyens étrangers en âge de préretraite et de retraite. Bien que sa portée soit encore limitée, ce phénomène peut s'inscrire dans la catégorie plus large et plus fluide des “Migrations Internationales de Retraités” (MIR), représentant une étape importante vers la régénération de ce contexte ainsi que d'autres territoires marginaux en Italie.

Mots-clés

Migration Internationale des Retraités, régénération territoriale, zones intérieures, repeuplement, Basilicata

I. TOWARDS THE REVITALIZATION OF PERIPHERAL AREAS

A. Introduction

Statistical data paint a bleak picture of Italy's demographic future. For several years – specifically since 2007 – the country has undergone sustained population decline, with resident numbers projected to drop from 59.6 million (1 January 2020) to 58 million by 2030, 54.1 million by 2050, and only 47.6 million by 2070. By 2050, the ratio of young people to the elderly will be 1 to 3, while the working-age population is expected to shrink from 63.8% to 53.3% of the total over the next 30 years (ISTAT, 2021). This demographic crisis is anticipated to have profound territorial consequences: strikingly, within a decade, 81% of municipalities will experience population decline, rising to 87% in the case of rural municipalities (ISTAT, 2021)¹. Between 2020 and 2030, inland rural areas alone are forecast to lose 6% of their population, plummeting from 10.2 million to 9.6 million residents.

Depopulation is particularly acute in Southern Italy, where 93% of municipalities report a negative population balance, with the overall population dropping by 8.9% – a trend that is particularly pronounced in smaller municipalities. The situation is even more critical in inland areas (1,060 municipalities), where the share of municipalities with a negative population balance is projected to rise to 95% during the 2020-2030 period. According to ISTAT data updated in July 2022, Southern Italy has lost one million residents since January 2012, and the region is expected to be home to just over 10 million people, the majority of whom will be elderly.

This demographic collapse, linked to a structural imbalance between births and deaths, emigration, and weak population-retention capacity, is associated with a persistent one-way internal migration flow from south to north, draining the Southern regions, and especially their inland areas, of young and educated residents (Cersosimo, 2022). Reversing this trend is a complex task, as demographic shifts can only be addressed over the long term, provided that appropriate policies support families, employment, and welfare. However, a glimmer of optimism has emerged in the post-COVID-19 era: from 2023 onwards, international migration to It-

aly is expected to rebound to pre-pandemic levels (2015-2019 averages); with an estimated 280,000 annual immigrants, the central scenario foresees a significant return to normalcy, contingent on the country's economic recovery (ISTAT, 2021).

If immigration – particularly through the integration of growing foreign-born populations – represents a potential lever to counteract Italy's depopulation, why not also consider International Retirement Migration (IRM) as a complementary strategy? Though still modest in scale, retirement migration could offer a viable, if partial, contribution to repopulating Italy's marginal and depopulated areas. This consideration is particularly relevant given that, despite national and EU policies ostensibly aimed at revitalizing smaller settlements, such initiatives remain fragmented and uncoordinated, lacking a cohesive strategy to engage effectively with the endogenous assets of these territories – namely, their resource potential, cultural specificity, and other elements of territorial capital (Barbera *et al.*, 2022).

Even recent large-scale national initiatives like Italy's National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR, 2021), while indicative of positive intent, fall short of delivering systemic change. Its substantial financial resources, while useful, lack the transformative impact necessary to regenerate Italy's inland areas, as the PNRR functions more as “a modernization program rather than a [real] structural transformation plan for Italy”² (Cersosimo, 2022). What remains absent is a broad-based collective mobilization. In light of this, given the persistent ineffectiveness of national and EU policies in reversing depopulation trends – in the smallest Italian towns and especially in the southern regions – it becomes imperative to explore initiatives rooted in a bottom-up approach. Nevertheless, such an approach should not exclude the possibility of integrating bottom-up and top-down actions, which must prioritize habitability by repopulating marginal and abandoned places. This revitalization should begin with the diversification of production activities, the provision of necessary services, and the introduction of innovative work and production models.

B. Methodology

These premises inform the case study of Irsina, a municipality in the province of Matera, Basilicata,

initially marked by the progressive abandonment of its historic center (see §3.2 for recent demographic data on Irsina). This trend, however, appears to have been counteracted by the purchase and restoration of properties by foreign nationals, mainly pre-retired or retired individuals who have chosen Irsina as their residence. We include this trend within the broader framework of International Retirement Migrations (IRM), a mobility phenomenon that is gradually taking hold in Italy. The territorial implications of retirement migration extend across both demographic dynamics – by repopulating areas affected by “demographic winters” – and cultural and social dimensions, as they can promote local development by facilitating the recovery of rural towns, mountain villages, and hilltop settlements threatened by abandonment and depopulation.

This study undertakes a detailed analysis of this specific migration of retirees and pre-retirees, mainly from Northern Europe and non-European Anglophone countries, who have chosen to establish permanent or semi-permanent residency in Irsina. Classified as one of the 126 “marginal” municipalities within the internal areas of Basilicata according to the Strategy for Inner Areas (SNAI), Irsina stands apart from other small municipalities in Southern Italy, which are often noted for the abandonment of their historic centers and the exodus of their younger populations. Unlike towns that have resorted to token property sales – such as the one-euro house schemes, which have largely failed to trigger meaningful revitalization or territorial regeneration – Irsina’s distinctive trait lies in a participatory and collaborative process involving the local community and the municipal authorities. Our research employs a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative analysis, to provide insights into the factors that attract these retirees as well as the challenges they face while living in the municipality. The study examines how the foreign community perceives its living experience in Irsina and, in particular, its vision for Irsina and Basilicata as potential IRM destinations. Adopting an interpretative geographical perspective, our approach challenges conventional notions of the margin as a “place that doesn’t matter” (Rodríguez-Pose, 2017), instead foregrounding the perspectives of both the local community and institutions on one side, and those of retired migrants on the other.

II. INTERNATIONAL RETIREMENT MIGRATION: EXPLORING AN EVOLVING PHENOMENON

IRM has existed since around the 1980s, initially emerging through the movement of US citizens within North America (Rogers, 1990) and British retirees relocating mainly to selected areas in southern France (Hoggart & Buller, 1995). However, it was only in the late 1990s that international scholarly literature began addressing the issue more systematically, particularly following the publications of a special issue of “Population Space Place”, edited by King, Warnes, and Williams (1998), which was devoted to “International Retirement Migration in Europe”. The said issue marked a turning point, foregrounding “retirement migrations” as a previously unexplored domain within demographic and geographical research. Obviously, The lack of earlier studies on IRM in population geography can largely be attributed to the methodological difficulty of obtaining reliable statistical data, as well as the prevailing focus of migration studies on South-to-North movements, which were considerably more widespread (King *et al.*, 2019, p. 1)³.

However, pioneering work did exist (King, Warnes, Williams, 1998, p. 92), including that by Andrei Rogers (1990), who focused on estimating age-specific interstate migration flows in the United States. Rogers’ research was motivated by the awareness that net migration among older adults could significantly influence regional demographic projections. Other contributions, such as that by Grave and Waldman (1991), examined the push and pull factors shaping both permanent migration and seasonal circulation among retirees. Since then, research on IRM has expanded, mapping out the geographical distribution of preferred destinations, particularly in Spain (Rodríguez *et al.* 1998; Williams *et al.* 1997) and France (Barou, Pradol 1995; Hoggart, Buller 1995). From the early 2000s onward, studies increasingly emphasized the scale and impact of IRM, laying the groundwork for assessing its broader significance (King, Warnes, Williams 1998, p. 93). It is clear that factors like tax incentives for residents and businesses, vacant properties, or lower housing costs represent major pull factors for this new migratory flow. Moreover, IRM has significant economic implications for host countries: retirees and pre-retirees often rely

on specialized agencies – operating both online and locally – that facilitate settlement, triggering a multi-layered process involving multiple actors across different levels, and ultimately contributing to a kind of retirement settlement industry (Toyota, Xiang 2012). In this way, retired migrants have the potential to become a source of income for the host countries, stimulating both private spending and service-related sectors.

The demographic profile of IRM participants differs markedly from that of migrants from the Global South, not only in terms of education, social status, and economic standing, but especially in their motivations. Their primary drivers are typically the pursuit of a higher quality of life, especially in terms of environmental and cultural factors. Attracted by the perceived wholesomeness of a place and, often, by its cultural heritage, these migrants willingly cross national borders, seemingly undaunted by the remoteness of their chosen destinations. Paradoxically, such remoteness often enhances the appeal of these locations, promising slow living, authenticity, and environmental quality. The motivations underlying IRM are largely related to active aging and the improved health and longevity of retirees, who have greater economic resources and more time for self-care. The destinations chosen by these ‘migrants’ during their working lives for holiday breaks may later inform seasonal or permanent relocation. Nonetheless, beyond these general patterns, new IRM actors and motivations have recently emerged: “people who are in some degree of financial difficulty and looking for places where their pension has more purchasing power (Hayes, 2014, 2015), single, widowed, or divorced retirees looking for a fresh start” (Gambold 2013, Jaisuekun, Sunanta 2016; Sampaio 2018; Scuzzarello 2020) (Iorio, 2022, p. 58). In parallel, IRM destinations are also shifting: while traditional retirement hubs have become saturated (King *et al.* 2021), new ones are increasingly being chosen, especially in developing countries, including Southeast Asia (Toyota and Xiang 2012), South America (Hayes 2014; 2015), North Africa (Bolzman *et al.* 2021; Escher and Petermann 2014; Faranda 2016; Therrien, Pellegrini 2015), and Eastern Europe (Ertuğrul 2016; Fauser 2020; Kahveci *et al.* 2020).

As Iorio explains, “Behind the latest international retirement migrations there is a kind of ‘geographical arbitrage’ [...], for which retirees choose to

move to places where the cost of living is significantly lower than in their country of origin and where they can relatively easy to spend their later years in an active, comfortable and emotionally engaging way” (2022, 66).

However, among the main forms of IRM, distinct subtypes of migrants with no prior ties to the host country can be identified: (1) pre-retirees who invest time, energy, and capital into launching or engaging in economic ventures – often arts or culture-related – with the long-term intention of relocating permanently after retirement; (2) individuals nearing on in retirement who continue working, albeit on a reduced, occasional, or part-time basis (King, *et al.*, 2019, p. 3; Dingemans, Henkens, van Solinge, 2016; Heisig, Radl, 2017); and (3) retirees drawn to lower living costs, a more tranquil environment, or access to relatively efficient services. This last category represents the most specific case of IRM⁴ (Marengo, 2021).

III. STUDY AREA. FROM REGIONAL TO LOCAL SCALE

A. Basilicata, a region in crisis

As highlighted in the recent report by the Italian Association for Population Studies (AISP, 2021), Basilicata is facing a dual crisis – both demographic and migratory: to low birth rates corresponds a significant outflow of younger generations, which has progressively intensified since the 1960s. Such a loss has been partially offset by incoming migrants, primarily from Europe (56.2%), Africa (25.8%), Asia (14.9%), and the Americas (3.1%). However, their presence has not significantly reversed the region’s declining birth rate, as confirmed by the latest ISTAT data (2022) (Fig. 1).

Since the onset of large-scale migration in the 1960s and up until the end of 2021, Basilicata’s resident population has decreased by over 100,000 inhabitants (103,129), dropping from 644,297 to 541,168 (Fig. 2). Recent data shows no signs of reversal: between 2020 and 2021 alone, the population fell by approximately 3,962 individuals.

Across the region, a total of 126 municipalities are experiencing population decline, particularly those with 1,001-5,000 residents and those with fewer than 1,000 inhabitants (Tab. 1)⁵. Alongside depopu-

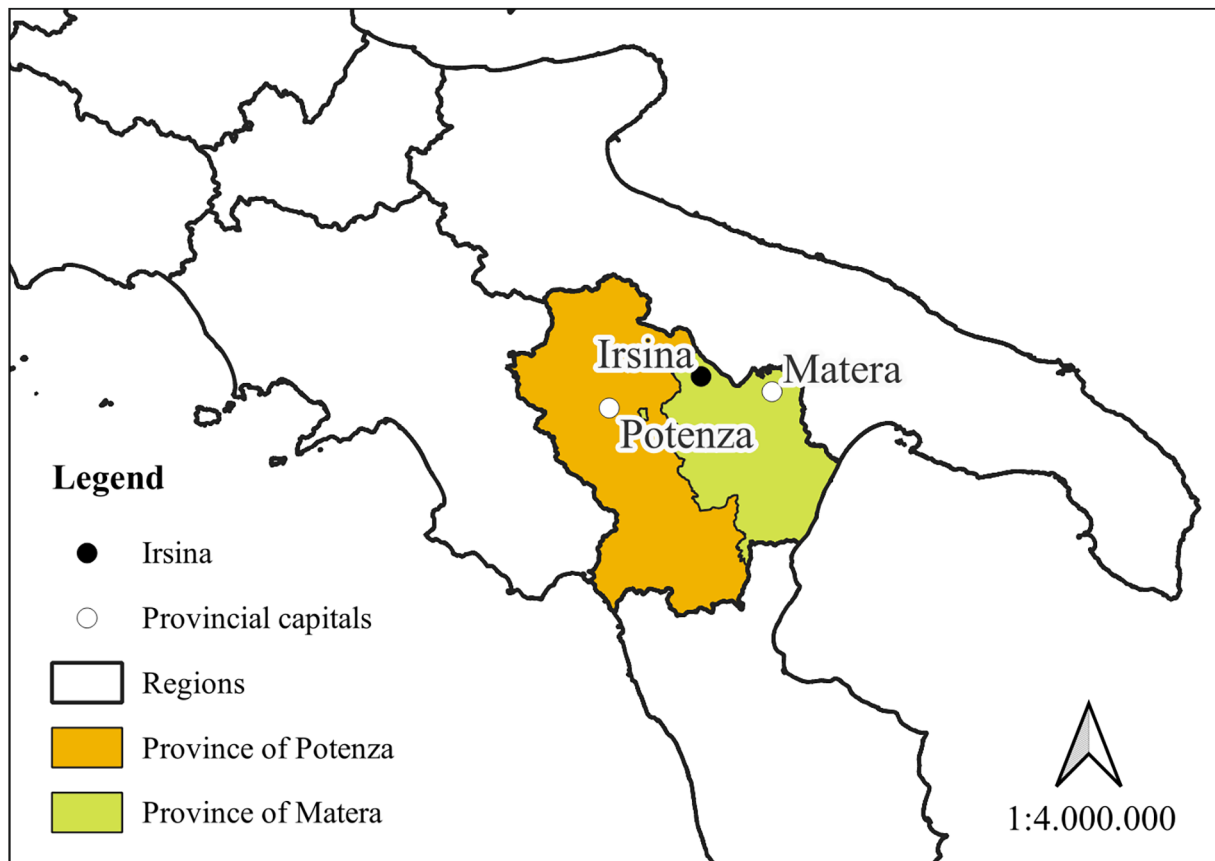


Figure 1. Basilicata region and the municipality of Irsina. Source: Author's elaboration on ISTAT data

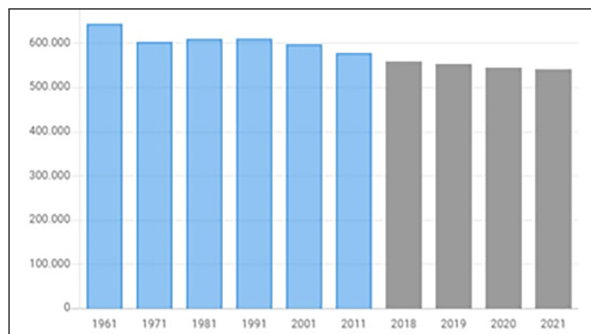


Figure 2. Basilicata, resident population – historical series, 1961-2021. Source: Author's elaboration based on ISTAT data

lation, these municipalities have been experiencing the abandonment and progressive degradation of their historic housing stock, leading to socio-cultural and economic impoverishment. Furthermore, the aging index has also risen sharply, from 200.8 in 2019 to 206.6 in 2020.

Basilicata's role as a host region for foreign residents is particularly significant in maintaining its demographic stability. The proportion of foreign residents aged 55 and over has steadily increased from 2001 to 2021 (Tab. 2). As a matter of fact, between the 2001 and 2021 censuses, the foreign

resident population grew from 3,416 to 22,184, with only a slight dip in 2020 (22,011).

In an effort to attract 'new residents', Italy has implemented targeted policies similar to those of other European and non-European countries to promote the relocation of retirees. Law No. 25 of 28 March 2022, which amended Legislative Decree No. 4/2022 (the so-called *Sostegni-ter* Decree), introduced a 7% flat tax for foreign retirees relocating to specific municipalities. Eligible locations include towns in Sicily, Calabria, Sardinia, Campania, Basilicata, Abruzzo, Molise, and Apulia with populations not exceeding 20,000 inhabitants, as well as municipalities with fewer than 3,000 residents affected by the 2016 and 2017 earthquakes⁶.

Despite this incentive, Basilicata remains somewhat marginal in terms of IRM, particularly compared to other Italian regions where retirement migration is either well-established or growing rapidly⁷. However, as new frontiers for IRM are being explored worldwide, Italy's IRM landscape has expanded, leading to the emergence of alternative destinations being added to the historically popular Tuscany. One such example is the Marche region, which has

Absolute values						
Up to 1,000	1	0	31	-393	32	-393
1,001-5,000	1	7	74	-4,365	75	-4,358
5,001-10,000	2	208	11	-1,219	13	-1,011
10,001-20,000	1	117	8	-770	9	-653
Over 50,000	0	0	2	-1,709	2	-1,709
TOTAL	5	332	126	-8,456	131	-8,124
Percentage values						
Up to 1,000	3,1	0,0	96,9	-1,8	24,4	-1,8
1,001-5,000	1,3	0,0	98,7	-2,3	57,3	-2,3
5,001-10,000	15,4	0,2	84,6	-1,4	9,9	-1,1
10,001-20,000	11,1	0,1	88,9	-0,6	6,9	-0,5
Over 50,000	0,0	0,0	100,0	-1,3	1,5	-1,3
TOTAL	3,8	0,1	96,2	-1,5	100,0	-1,5

Table 1. Basilicata. Municipalities with increasing or decreasing population based on size class. 2020 census data, including absolute values and percentage values. Source: ISTAT, Permanent Population Census of Basilicata, 2020

	ITALIAN	FOREIGNER/STATELESS	TOTAL
2001	594.352	3.416	597.768
2018	536.377	22.210	558.587
2019	530.685	22.569	553.254
2020	523.119	22.011	545.130
2021	518.984	22.184	541.168

Table 2. Foreign resident population in Basilicata. Source: Author's elaboration on ISTAT historical series

recently been perceived as a more authentic and affordable alternative to its neighboring Tuscany (King *et al.*, 2019).

A comparison of 2011 Census data (Table 2) for Italy, Marche, Tuscany, and Basilicata, focusing on the foreign resident population aged 55 and over, reveals that Basilicata has a very small share (86 individuals) compared to the emerging IRM hub of Marche (1,401) and the well-established retirement enclave of Tuscany (4,524). Despite these lower figures, the most represented nationalities among foreign residents in Basilicata include Germans (24), Britons (30), and Americans (16).

Although Basilicata as a whole cannot yet be considered a representative case of a new IRM frontier, it is reasonable to assume that, given the characteristics sought by retirees in the Marche region (authenticity, scenic beauty, quality of life, low cost of living, and affordable real estate oppor-

tunities), it may eventually emerge as a viable IRM destination in the years to come.

Given the challenges in obtaining quantitative data, some figures (for 2021 and 2001) remain unavailable, and official statistics do not account for non-resident foreigners. As a result, a predominantly qualitative research approach was adopted for this study. Accordingly, field research was conducted, in which semi-structured interviews with both foreign residents and the local population were conducted, and a questionnaire was administered (see §3.2).

B. Results. Irsina as a testing ground

The main results presented in this study set out to explore the impact of IRM on Irsina, a town long affected by severe depopulation. However, in recent years, various forms of social, cultural, and economic regeneration have begun to emerge, driven by a combination of top-down and bottom-up initiatives.

TERRITORY				
NATIONALITY	ITALY	BASILICATA	MARCHE	TUSCANY
Belgium	1.367	7	50	142
Germany	12.129	24	542	1.850
Ireland	429	1	11	60
United Kingdom	7.950	30	557	1.373
Australia	537	3	-	62
Canada	588	5	20	46
United States	4.071	16	80	698
TOTAL	29.060	86	1.401	4.524

Table 3. Foreign nationals aged 55+ residing in Basilicata, categorized by nationality. Source: Author’s elaboration on the Population Census (2011)

Since the 1960s, Irsina has experienced a steady decline in population, losing more than half of its population over the past 60 years – from 11,327 registered residents in 1961 to 4,441 in 2021.

This decline has primarily led to the gradual abandonment of the historic town center, leaving a significant portion of its housing stock vacant. According to ISTAT data, in 2019, approximately half of Irsina’s residential units were unoccupied, with 1,958 vacant dwellings out of a total of 3,923 (2019 Housing Census).

In recent years, however, the town has witnessed a gradual shift, as an increasing number of foreign nationals have purchased and renovated properties in the historic center of Irsina. Some have opted for permanent residence, while others maintain flexible living arrangements, depending on the length of their stay, thus dividing their time between Irsina and their country of origin.

In this context, one of the primary challenges of this study (and IRM research more broadly) has been assessing the number of foreigners who have purchased and renovated homes in Irsina without formally registering their residence. This figure is not reflected in the official ISTAT statistics, which only record a sevenfold increase in the number officially registered foreign residents, rising from 56 individuals in 2002 to 355 in 2022.

Therefore, to gain a more comprehensive understanding of retirement migration dynamics in Irsina, it was necessary to start from available statistical data, which provided an initial measure of the flow

of migrants affecting the municipality. However, given the limitations of quantitative data, and for the specific context of analysis, the research adopted an eminently qualitative research approach, aiming to estimate the total number of migrants fitting the characteristics of IRM.

In order to achieve this, the survey was predominantly field-based, involving the collection and analysis of municipal data⁸, as well as the elaboration and administration of open-ended interviews and structured questionnaires directed at key stakeholders: (1) local government officials; (2) professionals involved in real estate renovation (businesses and independent contractors); (3) associations and cooperatives engaged in revitalizing the town; (4) local business owners; (5) long-term Irsina residents, and (6) retirement migrants⁹.

To maximize outreach and participation, interviews were conducted using the “snowball” or “avalanche” sampling method, in which initial respondents helped recruit additional participants, thereby expanding the scope of the study organically (King, Cela, Morettini, Fokkema, 2019, p. 5).

C. Categories of retired migrants in Irsina: an analysis

A thorough study of data collected from municipal offices and analyzed in light of the characteristics of retirement migration (age group and country of origin) shows that, among the 355 foreigners officially recorded in Irsina by ISTAT in 2022, 24 residents fit the profile of retirement migrants, coming from ten different countries: Belgium,



Figure 3. A glimpse of Irsina's historic center. Source: Author's picture

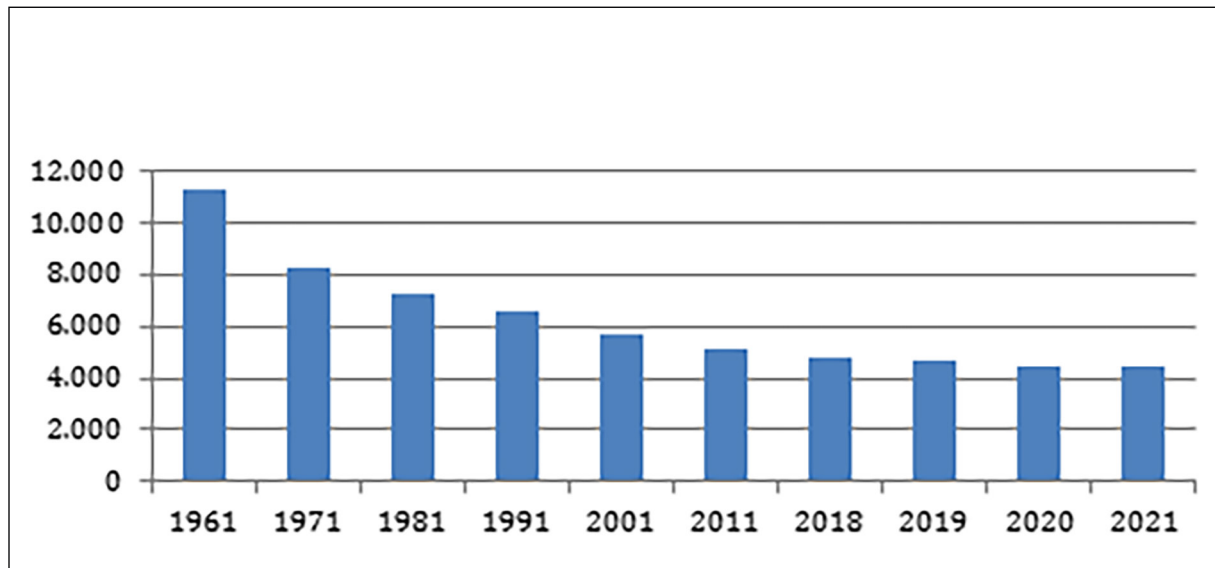


Figure 4. Irsina, resident population, 1961-2021. Source: ISTAT data, graphic elaboration by the authors

Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Canada, Norway, South Africa, New Zealand, and France.

However, determining the exact total number of retirement migrants in Irsina remains challenging, as these figures fluctuate due to multiple dynamics, including the mobility patterns of individuals between their country of origin and their residence

in Italy. This, in turn – which affects the highly variable average length of stay – makes it difficult to track the full extent of IRM in official statistics. As a result, the qualitative research approach has proved to be very meaningful in our case study. With regard to age groups and educational backgrounds, responses from survey participants indicate an average age of 63 years; of these, most are fully retired, with only a very small proportion

still working¹⁰. The majority of respondents hold university degrees, reflecting high educational attainment.

In relation to the length of stay, defining its duration becomes crucial to understanding the phenomenon of IRM and its evolution from permanent stay forms, typically associated with the start of a new life project, to modes of international mobility that are more difficult to categorize (O'Reilly 2000; 2003). Some of these mobility patterns can be outlined as forms of seasonal or residential tourism (Janoschka and Haas, 2014). Drawing on O'Reilly's classifications, four key categories of IRM residents were identified: (1) permanent residents, who live in Irsina almost year-round; (2) semi-permanent residents, who stay for at least six months annually in the town; (3) seasonal resident-tourists, who stay for three months or more during specific seasons¹¹; and (4) pure tourists or occasional visitors, who stay up to one month. In this study, semi-permanent and occasional stays appear to be the most common, closely followed by seasonal residency and, to a lesser extent, by permanent residency. Survey data indicate that the average length of stay across all respondents is approximately 111 days per year.

However, questionnaire responses reveal that mobility patterns are far from uniform¹². This variability gives rise to distinct mobility lines, characterized

by different durations and motivations, ultimately revealing a multifaceted community deeply rooted in IRM¹³.

The picture presented by respondents is extremely varied, reflecting the complex correlation between retirement and migration, reinforcing the idea that IRM is an intrinsically fluid phenomenon, challenging to classify within rigid categories, as previously noted in the discussion on different types of retirement migrants.

D. The genesis of the phenomenon: principal catalysts and key factors

Overall, this study aimed to address a series of questions: does the case of Irsina represent a re-centralization of so-called "marginal" areas? Have new value chains emerged as a result of IRM?

Through open-ended interviews, the origins of IRM in Irsina have been traced back to two key catalysts; started in 2005, it has been more thoroughly recorded since 2016 thanks to two main factors: (1) a cultural driver (endogenous factor), in which art has been the driving force, with some artist residencies that have attracted mainly retired Belgian citizens; (2) a real estate-driven factor (exogenous influence), linked to a Rome-based real estate agency that actively promoted Italy as a destination for British retirees¹⁴.

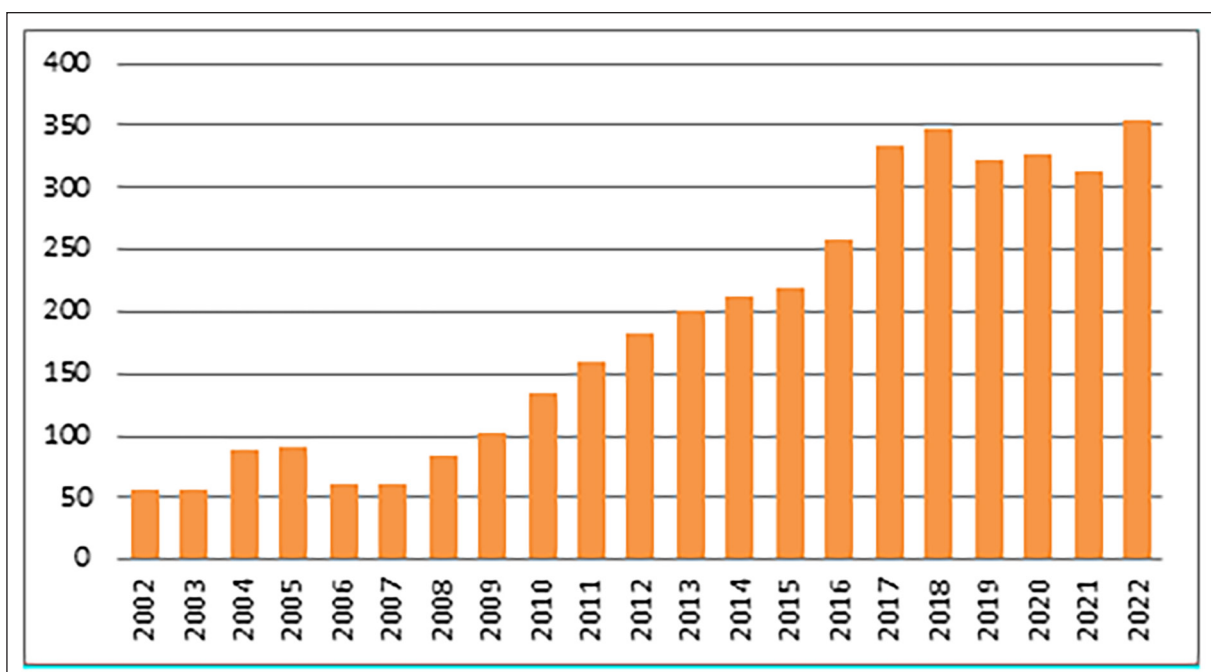


Figure 5. Irsina, foreign resident population – 2002-2022. Source: Istat data, graphic elaboration by the authors

While the latter initially raised concerns about potential speculative real estate practices, the situation turned into a more structured, entrepreneurial opportunity, when a local professional launched a business assisting foreign buyers. This community-driven approach fostered a climate of trust between newcomers and the local community, an essential element reflected in the high satisfaction levels expressed by foreign buyers in the questionnaires¹⁵.

The motivations driving foreigners to relocate in Irsina align broadly with global IRM trends. According to respondents, the main pull factors include: (1) scenic beauty and natural surroundings; (2) mild climate and high quality of life (rated “excellent” by 60% of respondents); (3) peace and tranquillity; (4) affordable cost of living (cited by 52% of respondents); (5) welcoming local community. Additional contributing factors include the local culture and traditions, the distinctive architecture of the old town, the presence of other expatriates, walkability and access to local markets, clean water and air, high-quality food and, finally, the absence of an “aggressive consumer culture”¹⁶.

For most respondents, these motivations for purchasing property overlap with the perceived benefits of migration to the town. Among the most strategic advantages, respondents also highlighted Irsina’s strategic geographical position, nestled among hills with easy access to both the coastline and the main nearby cities (Naples, Rome, Bari); proximity to Bari Airport, although most respondents expressed a desire for better infrastructure, which is currently rated as “good” by 42% and “sufficient” by 33%.

As already mentioned, the narratives collected during interviews confirm that trust and honesty are key elements of Irsina’s appeal. Many foreign retirees first visited as guests of friends or acquaintances before deciding to purchase a home. This word-of-mouth dynamic, largely driven by community engagement, has limited speculative real estate effects that have been observed in other Italian IRM destinations¹⁷.

E. Social value creation: interaction between locals and retirement migrants

To qualitatively assess the social and cultural impact of IRM in Irsina, questionnaires were administered

to both foreign buyers and local residents. The findings show a remarkably positive level of interaction between these two groups. Foreign residents state they are actively participating in the main local festivals and traditional cooking classes; at the same time, they also contribute to the community by organizing translation activities; events (photography exhibitions, book presentations, guided walks, winery visits); art classes (painting workshops); English and computer classes (in particular for children and teenagers); and Italian classes (for newly arrived expatriates), thus creating opportunities for knowledge exchange and social interaction.

By way of example, one of the foreigners interviewed said, “I joined a local group, Anteus, and did cooking, handicraft, and sewing classes with them, while also teaching English. I’ve traveled with groups to Naples and religious sites. My neighbor from Irsina and others have taught me how to make traditional foods and drinks – vincotto, limoncello, nocino, pasta, passata, pizza, focaccia – and where to find wild vegetables and herbs, how to clean them, and prepare them for cooking or freezing. I help her with online searches and drive her to other towns when necessary. I also translate letters in English from a half-brother in the USA to his long-lost sister in Irsina. I’ve picked grapes and helped prepare for wine-making”.

The positive impact of IRM is also widely acknowledged by the majority of Irsina’s residents (see footnote 10). When asked about their perceptions of social and cultural integration between foreigners and locals, they provided largely positive responses, citing specific instances of collaboration and community-building efforts. For example: “At school, we work with them on educational projects; there is also personal collaboration in cultural events, such as presenting and discussing their books”. In addition, respondents expressed, “For many of them, there is good integration as they have learned Italian and participate in cultural initiatives, often even initiating them”; or, “Now I am learning English, and they help me see the world from a different perspective”.

However, despite these positive interactions, both foreign residents and locals acknowledge that integration remains incomplete, due in part to linguistic limitations and, to some extent, cultural distinctions¹⁸.

F. Benefits for the Irsina community

Nevertheless, Irsina's citizens have become keenly aware of the various economic benefits brought about by the influx of foreigners, especially for businesses located in the historic center. Survey responses underscore these gains, highlighting "significant economic advantages, especially for construction companies and local artisans, as well as small businesses and restaurants in the area"¹⁹. From the point of view of benefits, the purchase and renovation of properties have indeed generated economic value within the community (construction companies, architects, accountants, notaries, craftsmen, electricians, carpenters, etc.)²⁰. Moreover, beyond private economic activity, the local government has reaped financial rewards, with increased revenues from building permits, property taxes (IMU), and waste disposal fees (TARI)²¹. According to data from the municipal technical office, foreigners contribute about € 30,000 annually in tax revenue.

In addition to these factual evaluations regarding the restoration of the architectural heritage, Irsina residents, as highlighted in the questionnaires they filled out, have noted less tangible yet equally significant changes due to the arrival of foreigners. For instance, "their presence has made locals more aware of the beauty and potential of the historic center. Along with the objective observations regarding the restoration of the architectural heritage, the residents of Irsina, in response to the distributed questionnaire, have emphasized that the arrival of foreigners has brought about more intangible changes, such as "They have awakened in the hearts of the locals an awareness of the beauty of the historic center and its potential. Some have returned to live here, others have opened businesses, and there are more events than there used to be. The presence of foreigners in Irsina has almost become a tourist attraction [...]"²².

Also from the point of view of the local administrators who participated in the study through open-ended interviews (see footnote 10), the arrival of foreigners in Irsina has not only generated a knock-on effect in terms of renewing abandoned housing stock (thus encouraging other local homeowners to do the same), but has also led to a gradual improvement in the quality of life in the city, with the implementation of services like ultra-broadband

infrastructure, fiber optics, and a widespread Wi-Fi system, which has led to Irsina becoming part of the "Smart Working Places" network.

Furthermore, there has been an increased focus by the local authority on the historical, cultural, and architectural heritage of the area. In an effort to preserve the authenticity of the area, local authorities are implementing projects aimed at enhancing the unique characteristics of the territory.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

In light of our findings, it is evident that while IRM is not a definite solution to depopulation²³, it presents a significant opportunity for the gradual regeneration of abandoned and marginal areas by reclaiming existing building heritage, repurposing unused spaces, and, in doing so, fostering new economic, social, and cultural value chains.

Hence, IRM stands out as a potential possibility for the rebirth of certain inland areas of the Italian peninsula. However, ensuring that IRM serves as a sustainable model for territorial regeneration requires careful governance. A key challenge is preventing real estate speculation: in fact, there have been cases in which the majority of requests have come from foreigners who have not formally established their residency in Irsina, leading only to the property renovation and a self-contained form of tourism that, while beneficial in some respects, has failed to initiate a genuine process of repopulation or broader territorial regeneration.

Irsina, by contrast, offers a different model. Although the initial wave of foreign home purchases was largely speculative, the local community has since evolved into a mediator, launching initiatives aimed at supporting foreign buyers. These efforts include facilitating both property sales and offering reasonably priced renovations, which, while advantageous for foreign buyers, have also contributed to broader economic activity within the town. Paradoxically, the very marginality of Irsina has acted as an attractive factor for new residents, despite the persistent need for service improvements, as highlighted in the interviews. The awareness of living in a context rich in scenic, environmental, and cultural resources, far removed from the typical fast-paced rhythms and pressures of bustling urban life, positions Irsina and Basilicata as significant

sources of attraction. Consequently, they have the potential to emerge as new frontiers for the IRM program in the future.

While IRM alone cannot be the sole driver of Irsina's recovery or that of other inland towns, it represents a valuable complement to wider development and repopulation strategies. Integrated within a broader framework, it can nevertheless contribute – along with other development and repopulation strategies – to changing the trajectory and effectively representing a favourable opportunity for the growth of local and regional economies. In this sense, Irsina represents an emblematic research context and a field of experimentation in which geographical research is tasked with validating strategies, policies, programs, and practices in order to forge new alliances between stakeholders and territories.

Through this case study, we have tried to understand the role that IRM can play in the rehabilitation of Irsina and similarly marginal areas. The repopulation strategy should not be understood only as the necessary result of public policies or national and EU programs; rather, and above all, they should be recognised as the result of collaborative efforts that bring together various stakeholders in the world of marginal inland areas: institutional actors, the local population, businesses, cultural associations, all of whom, together with the new inhabitants, can effectively contribute to the design of a genuine project for the recovery of marginal and fragile areas. In our specific case of Irsina, a climate of trust and cooperation has been cultivated between the local community and the retired (or pre-retired) foreigners; this has not only fostered integration, but has also cultivated a sense of optimism among the town's inhabitants, who are increasingly recognizing the potential of the area. It is equally true, however, that without appropriate policies in place, IRM may degenerate into real estate speculation and property value escalation, as has been observed in Portugal. There, a country that has long been a preferred destination for many foreign retirees, tax exemptions for new foreign residents will no longer be granted after 2024. Will similar results be observed in other territorial contexts where IRM has already taken root? What will the implications be for Irsina and Basilicata? Is the opportunity for sustainable IRM-driven revitalization still open? These key questions are at the heart of ongoing

reflections on the impact of retirement migration on territories and communities.

NOTES

¹Italy's National Strategic Plan (PSN), in agreement with regional authorities, adopted a classification methodology for identifying rural areas based on the OECD framework, which initially relied on provincial-level population density. However, this approach proved inadequate in capturing the territorial complexity of Italy, a country characterized by significant internal heterogeneity – not only in population distribution, but also in socio-economic conditions within individual province. To address these limitations, the methodology was refined to include additional criteria, such as municipal elevation and the extent of agricultural land within provincial capitals. This revision resulted in a three-tier classification of rural areas, alongside the designation of urban centers. Although rural areas share certain defining characteristics – like low population density and limited access to services – significant disparities persist, particularly in terms of economic development and living conditions, which are further exacerbated by their relative isolation from urban hubs. (Rete Rurale Nazionale, <https://www.reterurale.it/flex/cm/pages/ServeBLOB.php/L/IT/IDPagina/551>).

²Unless otherwise stated, all translations of quotations into English are our own.

³“Among the various migratory flows, there are several minority movements that have received comparatively less attention in the scientific literature than those primarily related to employment and job-seeking migration. However, despite their still limited numbers, these flows are rapidly increasing, driven both by the accelerating aging of populations and by improvements in health and quality of life among older adults [...]” (Todisco, Tattolo, 2007, pp. 228-229).

⁴Retirement has become a gradual transition for many people, characterized by continued engagement in work, albeit in a reduced or intermittent capacity (Dingemans, Henkens, van Solinge 2016; Heisig, Radl 2017).

⁵In terms of demographic size, population decline has affected 98.7% of municipalities with 1,001 to 5,000 residents and 96.9% of those with up to 1,000 residents.

⁶Within the framework of existing regulations, a facilitated scheme has been introduced for recipients of foreign pensions who chose to relocate to Italy.

⁷Several countries, mainly in Southeast Asia (e.g., Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines), Latin America (e.g., Costa Rica, Panama, Ecuador, and Mexico), and Europe (Portugal, Malta, and more recently Greece and Cyprus), consider foreign retirees as ‘desired’ migrants. These states have established programs to encourage the arrival of retirees by facilitating visas or residence permits and providing tax breaks (King et al., 2019, p. 2; Iorio, 2022, p. 58).

⁸Currently, the municipality does not maintain a comprehensive record specifically identifying migrants as “retired”. Consequently, the data analyzed in this study was gathered through extensive fieldwork, involving the systematic collection and cross-referencing of information spanning the period from 2002 to 2023. This process relied on key municipal departments, including the Civil Registry (to determine the main nationalities of origin and age groups), the Tax Office (to account for foreigners who, despite not officially transferring their residence to Irsina, have purchased property and contribute to municipal taxes), and the Technical Office (which records building permits required for renovation projects).

⁹The open-ended interviews were designed to engage key local actors who have significantly contributed to the growth of retiree migration in Irsina. Among them were the esteemed Mayor, the Cultural Councillor, who is also involved in the local ProLoco organization, and the owner of the company managing property acquisition, renovation, and administration for foreign buyers. Furthermore, extensive interviews were conducted with the president of the Arenacea Cooperative, the driving force behind the initiation of the Artist Residency Program. This grassroots initiative was the catalyst for the initial arrival of Belgian retirees, who today form the largest segment of the expatriate community. Municipal authorities estimate that each artist residency led to an average of one real estate purchase. The interviews with retired migrants covered a range of topics, including their place of origin, age, educational background, occupation, as well as their motivations for choosing Irsina as a retirement destination, their length of stay, and the challenges faced in purchasing and renovating property. Additional topics included the support received from the municipality, their perspectives on the advantages and disadvantages of living in Irsina, cost of living, and the quality of services like infrastructure, accessibility, and healthcare services. The respondents were also asked about their employment intentions in Irsina, their participation to social, cultural, and community activities, and their contributions to the local life. Similarly, Irsina residents were asked about their age, education, and occupation, as well as their reasons for living in Irsina, the perceived benefits and drawbacks of living in the community, and their observations regarding economic, cultural, and social changes since the arrival of foreign residents. In addition, their perspectives on the extent and impact of cross-cultural exchanges were also explored. In total, responses were collected from 41 Irsina residents and 16 retired migrants.

¹⁰Of the 16 responses collected from foreign buyers, a notable majority – 12 individuals – are retirees, while only 4 belong to the working-age group.

¹¹In the IRM literature, seasonal or residential tourism is notably prevalent among retirees from Nordic countries, who are commonly referred to as “snowbirds”. This term derives from their bird-like migratory patterns, in

which they spend the summer in their home countries and seek warmer climates during the winter months (see Gavanas, 2017; Gustafson, 2001, 2009; Haug, Dann, & Mehmetoglu, 2007). Interestingly, among the foreigners interviewed in Irsina, several expressed a strong preference for tourism-oriented mobility, particularly among those of working age. As one respondent recounted: “I bought in 2007/2008 when looking for a holiday home that I could eventually retire to. I found a house with vaulted ceilings and wonderful views, and I thought Irsina had a Mediterranean climate – only to discover later that it is not warm all year!”.

¹²In response to the question, “How often do you live in Irsina? (permanently, semi-permanently, only for holidays, other)”, 16 replies were received: 2 stated “permanently”; 4 “semi-permanently”; 5 “only for holidays”; 5 “other”. Of the 5 “other” responses, three included additional comments: “Other: 3–4 months out of the year for now, but hoping for semi-permanently in the future”; “Holidays, but also work from ‘home’”; “9 times per year”.

¹³For example, one participant described their current presence in Irsina as “3–4 months out of the year for now, but hoping for semi-permanence in the future”. Among those who have opted for semi-permanent residency, responses indicate an evolving permanence, with statements like: “I am now retired, so it should be more in the future than in the past”; meanwhile, those classified as permanent residents shared their experiences, with one respondent stating: “Permanently since 2016; my husband and I are here permanently, but before that, we spent about three months a year in Irsina during holidays”. In particular, external factors, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and Brexit, have had a negative impact on the length of stay. When asked about the average length of stay for foreigners in Irsina, two participants provided insights. One noted: “Up to 180 days. This is due to Brexit. We are applying for elective residency”, while another stated: “35 days a year, more or less. Less during COVID-19 times”.

¹⁴The agency marketed ‘furnished and ready-to-use’ houses starting at €30,000. It operated in small Italian municipalities and relied on local contacts, usually professionals living in the sponsored places.

¹⁵Some respondents who initially purchased their homes through the Roman real estate agency expressed dissatisfaction with their experience: “The house was in a liveable holiday state, but since then, we have probably spent another 200% making it more suitable for longer-term stays”. Others pointed to common issues: “When we bought our house, we specifically stated all furnishings were to be included. They asked if they could take one specific cabinet, and we agreed. However, once we finalized the paperwork and got our keys, we arrived to find that everything was gone. When we pointed it out to the person who helped us with the buying process, we were just told ‘Oh so sorry’. I have heard about this same issue many times from others buying homes in

Italy. Also, getting quotes for work and getting work done can sometimes take a while, or sometimes navigating relationships and not hurting feelings (who you chose to do work for example) can be tricky". In contrast, those who received assistance from local professionals reported significantly better experiences. One respondent shared: "The first company I dealt with for buying and renovating the property was not honest. The second property I bought was a simple, straightforward procedure because by then (2016), I understood the system, had people helping me who were honest and trustworthy, and I knew some Italian"; and then: "I received support from an Irsina-based architect who worked with me at every stage of the process of the buying of my second house and the renovation process. She had already managed the second renovation of the first house, which I later sold. Having professionals who understand foreigners' needs and having other foreigners already living in Irsina, makes it much easier to attract new people to the town".

¹⁶The following are some remarks by the interviewees: "Weather, cost of living, people and it was beautiful"; "Quiet, sunny and friendly people"; "History and culture, beautiful nature, spectacular views, affordable prices, and relaxed, slow-paced rural life to get away from the stress of everyday work"; "The location is beautiful and close enough to other desired locations to make it an excellent 'home base'. It is small enough to feel like a second home. You get to know the people"; and then: "Peaceful, beautiful views, lovely people, great food, close proximity to airports, centrally located, vis-a-vis making trips to Rome, Naples, Bari, the seaside, etc."; finally: "A small community where it is easy to get to know people; the locals are friendly and welcoming; excellent quality food at reasonable prices and mostly grown nearby and sold in small local shops and supermarkets; clean air and water; good weather; reasonable property prices; and a lack of an aggressive consumer culture".

¹⁷An examination of Irsina's real estate market performance over the last ten years shows that the value of properties in the historic center has remained almost unchanged.

¹⁸In the questionnaires distributed to Irsina residents, some responses highlighted specific challenges: "Language remains a significant barrier to true integration", while others noted: "In my perception, foreigners often tend (understandably so) to form groups and communities among themselves, with limited integration with local residents, except for businesses owners, with whom foreigners have more opportunities for social interaction".

¹⁹In response to the questionnaire, some residents of Irsina have emphasized remarkable changes within their community: "Every house has been bought and renovated, and foreigners are fully integrated into the city, seldom venturing out for purchases", or "The local economy has primarily shifted due to the purchases and renovations of houses", or "Economic boost, undoubtedly. They've revitalized homes, engaged local

professionals, and shopped within the city"; "Local enterprises, professionals, and commercial ventures have reaped benefits from the presence of foreigners"; "We've transitioned from a dilapidated historic center to a bustling city with meticulously restored homes and a plethora of establishments, including restaurants, bars, tourist hubs, museums, and media libraries".

²⁰Data from the local agency overseeing most of the renovation works indicate that an average of €90,000 per house was spent on approximately 70 properties, including both purchase and renovation costs. The study shows that the majority of these renovation expenses have circulated within the local community, particularly benefiting local businesses. However, tracing the financial flow for property purchases, which often involve multiple heirs, is a more complex challenge, especially given the significant number of emigrants living abroad and in other regions of Italy.

²¹From a regulatory perspective, building permits are necessary documents required to start renovation works and must be prepared under the supervision of qualified professionals, usually for a fee. IMU (Municipal Property Tax) is a tax levied by the municipality on the owner or holder of other titles (usufruct, use, habitation, etc.) or on the concessionaire or lessee for the ownership of buildings (excluding principal residences classified in cadastral categories other than A/1, A/8 and A/9), building areas and agricultural land. On the other hand, TARI (Waste Tax) is a levy intended to finance the costs of waste collection and disposal services and is applicable to anyone who owns (in any capacity) premises or areas that may generate waste. See <<https://www.finanze.gov.it/it/fiscalita-regionale-e-locale/Imposta-municipale-propria-IMU/>>; and <[https://www.finanze.gov.it/it/fiscalita-regionale-e-locale/Tassa-sui-rifiuti-TARI/disciplina-del-tributo/#:~:text=La%20tassa%20sui%20rifiuti%20\(TARI,di%20produrre%20i%20rifiuti%20medesimi](https://www.finanze.gov.it/it/fiscalita-regionale-e-locale/Tassa-sui-rifiuti-TARI/disciplina-del-tributo/#:~:text=La%20tassa%20sui%20rifiuti%20(TARI,di%20produrre%20i%20rifiuti%20medesimi)>

²²In the responses to our questionnaires, other residents of Irsina state: "[...] They are true promoters of the territory. They appreciate 'the landscape', the aroma of our food, and our sunny disposition. They share with others the well-being that comes from living in an area as vast as Irsina. Certainly, these are people who have lived for years in cities like London, in countries like Belgium and in the United States of America, and they have chosen to live in Irsina, which offers them something. This should make us think"; or, moreover: "They have repopulated the historic center and 'forced' the locals to preserve its beauty; they have shown that it is possible to live well in our town without owning a car; they have encouraged the locals not to take for granted what has become commonplace and habitual..."; or also: "They have given us, the citizens, the opportunity to experience other cultures, to broaden our horizons, and to encourage investment in the abandoned historic center, making us realize that our city is not so bad after all..."; and finally: "They made the local population understand the importance

of the historic center of Irsina, which was previously considered an old village”.

²³Some responses from the residents of Irsina underscore this situation: “They have saved many homes from neglect and abandonment. However, due to their predominantly retired status, their economic impact has been primarily tourism-oriented. It would have been promising to see an influx of younger people who could breathe new life into this community”, said one resident. Another added, “It hasn’t helped, and probably won’t help, to stem the demographic decline and the aging of the population”. It is acknowledged that while the role of IRM in Irsina has not significantly altered demographic trends, its social and cultural impact has been substantial. While taxation and economic contributions are viewed positively, the broader implications of IRM for long-term revitalization remain under assessment.

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