

Strategic Planning, Demographic Transition and Talent Incentive

Mechanisms: The Example of #mareAsinistra

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Abstract: The article examines Puglia's position in the context of the European "development trap" and introduces #mareAsinistra, a regional strategy designed to attract and nurture talent. This strategy is structured around five action lines: three operational (people, businesses, brand) and two supportive (networking, management). The methodology employed entails the development of an integrated planning process that, through a multidisciplinary approach, combines socio-demographic and economic analyses to comprehend the phenomenon of talent outflow. The objective is to establish local partnerships that facilitate multilevel governance, optimize decision-making processes, and promote sustainable and inclusive territorial development.

Key words: strategy, decision making, development trap, multi-disciplinary approach, talent attraction

JEL codes: R, R1

1. Introduction

Every human potential requires specific conditions to manifest itself; talent is one of the most revolutionary and complex products that emerges from the environment in which it develops¹. In the knowledge society, talent is the foundation of a nation's competitive advantage. According to the OECD, structural weaknesses in the higher education system and in basic research limit Italy's ability to fully exploit potential productivity gains stemming from rapid technological advances. The rate of young people who are neither studying nor working nor engaged in training activities (NEET) is among the highest in OECD countries; this hinders the development of the skills needed for the long-term labor market. Additionally, the percentage of young graduates in Italy is one of the lowest in the OECD.

In a highly interconnected and specialized knowledge economy, it is essential to monitor the movement of talent. Talented people do not just "flee" but move in search of the best opportunities. For Italy, the gap between the skills we train and those we lose is alarming. Between 2012 and 2021, according to ISTAT data, more than one

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¹ It is only necessary to emphasize here how much the etymology of the term helps to corroborate the concept expressed: *τάλαντον*, "talanton", i.e., scales, weight; but also "tolanam", i.e., to lift, to weigh, are words that refer *prima facie* to the idea of inclination (in the beginning, that of the scales that weigh coins) and only later do they return the noun to its current and more common meaning, related to ability, to knowing how to do.

million people left the country, a quarter of whom were graduates. About 337,000 emigrants were aged between 25 and 34, with over 120,000 holding degrees. In the same period, only around 94,000 young people in the same age group returned to Italy, and only 41,000 were graduates. This results in a negative balance of approximately 79,000 young Italian graduates who are contributing to the knowledge economy in other EU countries.

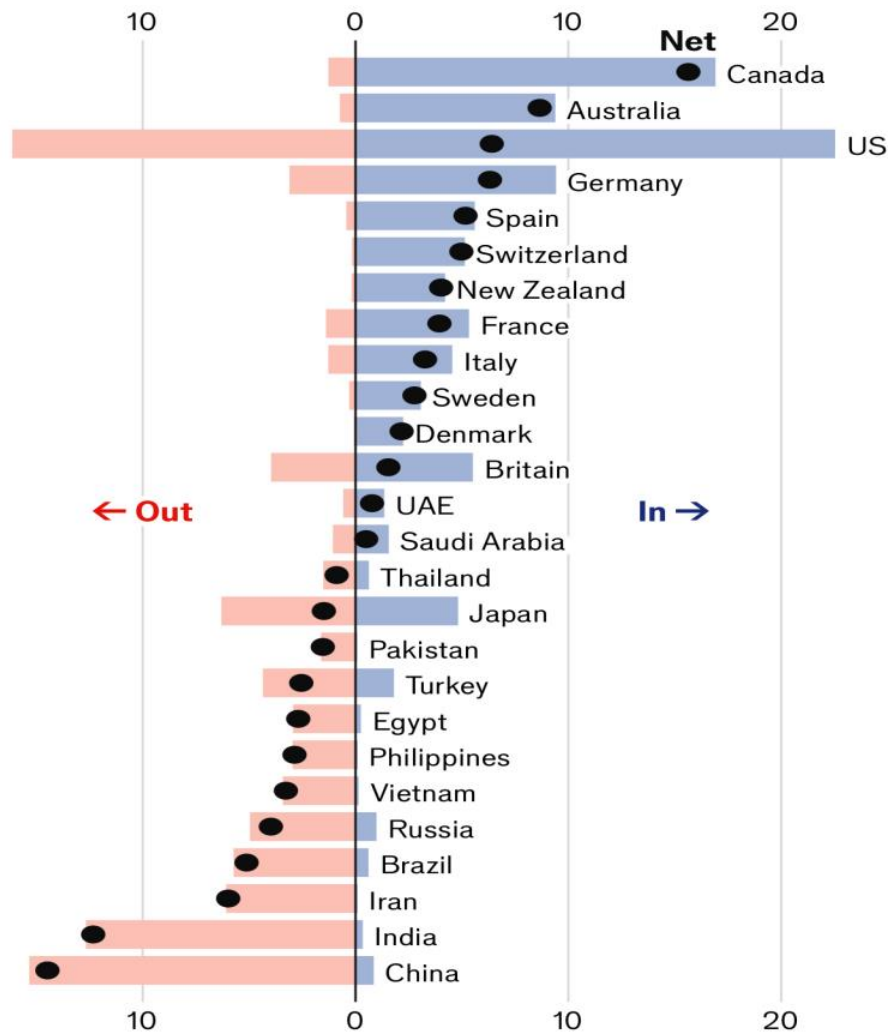


Figure 1 Potential Flow of Graduates: Based on Responses to Question: “Would You Like to Move Abroad Permanently? If So, Where?”

Source: Galup, The Economist, <https://www.economist.com/briefing/2024/08/15/talent-is-scarce-yet-many-countries-spurn-it>.

In a context like the one just outlined, youth emigration does not even seem to be compensated by an equivalent return in more mature age, indicating a significant and definitive brain drain. Despite some recent improvements, the quality of Italian universities, though partially reflected in the ranking of some among the world's top 200, remains lower compared to other major European countries like France, Germany, and the UK. Unsatisfactory results in higher education are partly attributed to inadequate funding, with Italy spending about 30% less per student than the OECD average. This misalignment between the skills we train and the ones in demand raises a crucial industrial policy question: Does Italy want to become an exporter of skills and talent, or does it

prefer to create the attractive conditions to develop and enhance its human capital? What would happen, in short, if the doors were opened to graduate migrants, if a higher-ranking paradigm was opted for, oriented toward attracting and welcoming foreign talents? A recent answer is offered, for example, by an article published in *The Economist*: a chart from the Gallup World Poll shows that the number of newly graduated youth who would like to come to live in Italy is about 3.5 times those who would like to leave.

In this context, Puglia stands out as the cradle of many of the best talents: people born and raised in the region who, after establishing themselves elsewhere, sometimes return. People who remain abroad after leaving but maintain a constant affection for their regional legacy, radiating intelligence, creativity, and ability.

Puglia boasts significant strengths: a central position in the Mediterranean, natural resources, scenic beauty, a high-quality human fabric, and a high academic and scientific level. It is a welcoming place, a land of experience creation, and a producer of knowledge. The region's human and social capital represents an invitation to stay, as well as to remain long-term.

Regional policies have allowed those working in economic development to travel, host visitors, meet investors, and engage in dialogue with public and private entities, promoting Puglia's identity and its specificities. The result is an evolving image of Puglia, drawing the attention of diverse targets, including new generations and digital nomads, and highlighting the quality of life and welcoming nature of the region.

Despite the vibrant participation of young people in the population, the arrival of major fashion brands, the increase in tourism (Scandale Luca, 2024) and the growing value-added of the regional industry, Puglia still faces a progressive loss of inhabitants. Each year, about twenty thousand people leave the region, a phenomenon set to intensify due to declining birth rates, population aging, and emigration.

Yet, the desire to stay, return, or move to Puglia is palpable. This desire represents a contradiction to the migratory phenomenon, which often entails a painful separation from one's place of origin.

Given all this, the Puglia Region has launched *mareAsinistra*² a strategy to attract and enhance talent, inspired by the sea that accompanies the journey to the region. The name has a "romantic" connotation, evoking the "return home" of our migrants who find the Adriatic Sea on their left on their journey to their homeland. This strategy aims to tell the story of Puglia's ecosystem, characterized by the relationships between people and the environment and oriented towards creating positive changes. To achieve this, the Region offers a real "toolbox": resources, ideas, and tools to counter the talent trap, a phenomenon that is also receiving attention at the EU level.

This document, the prelude to an action plan and a narrative of a generous and fertile context, highlights opportunities that need to be told and shared. The methodology, which will be illustrated in the following paragraphs, is intended to mirror all the processes of rethinking the relationship between humans and space, context, and dwelling, as recently discussed in anthropological and sociological literature. Whether it is "restanza" (Teti, 2022)³, of "tornanza" — the return after a period of absence (Prota Albano, 2024)⁴, of "arrivanza" — the

² Available online at: <https://www.regione.puglia.it/web/ricerca-e-relazioni-internazionali/mare-a-sinistra>.

³ Teti Vito (2022). *La restanza*. Einaudi. The volume's *incipit* makes it clear that "restance" is a phenomenon of the present that concerns the need, the desire, the will to generate a new sense of place. This is a time marked by migrations, but it is also the time, more silent, of those who "remain" in their place of origin and live it, walk it, interpret it, in a continuous vertigo of changes. The author had already dealt with this wide-ranging theme years earlier (*La restanza*. Being remained, neither an act of weakness nor an act of courage, is a fact, a condition. It can become a way of being, a vocation, if lived without subservience, without awe, but also without arrogance, without complacency, without narrowness and closure, with an attitude of restlessness and questioning. (Stones of bread: An anthropology of remaining, Quodlibet, 2011, pp. 21-22).

⁴ Prota Antonio-Albano Flavio (2024). *La Tornanza. Ritorni e innesti orientati al futuro*, Laterza Libreria. In the preface, Aldo Bonomi clarifies: "For them, the turnabout represents first and foremost a 'state of mind' and a 'revolutionary practice', a necessary

arrival of new talents and people (Dalla Massara, 2021)⁵, the regional government led by Michele Emiliano sensed the crucial importance of the topic and intended to promote the objective — that of counteracting the loss of people from the territory — within the methodological framework of strategic planning (Archibugi, 2004).

2. Strategic Planning in the Shadow of the “Talent Development Trap”: Objectives for Enhancing Territorial Identity and Long-Term Competitiveness

2.1 The EU “Talent Incentive Mechanism” as a Response to the Talent Development Trap

The “talent *development* trap” represents a significant challenge for many regions and countries that invest resources in skills and talent development without achieving the desired economic and competitive results. This trap occurs when, despite efforts and investments in training and professional development, the skills acquired do not translate into improved employment, innovation and economic growth. This problem is accentuated by the demographic dynamics of the European Union (EU), where the working-age population is declining.

EU Member States are therefore forced to face a sharp decline in the working-age population. Between 2015 and 2020, the population decreased by 3.5 million people and is expected to decrease by a further 35 million by 2050. This population decline poses a serious threat to the economic and social sustainability of the region, making the need to develop and retain talent even more urgent.

Finding oneself in the talent development trap (Chellino, 2023) represents a multidimensional and multi-level challenge; it poses a significant mortgage on long-term prosperity for those regions facing specific structural challenges, such as inefficiencies in the labour market, education, training and adult learning systems, as well as poor performance in the areas of innovation, public *governance* (De Caro Bonella, 2008)⁶ or entrepreneurial development. Ensuring that these regions become more resilient and attractive is therefore a crucial element of the EU’s commitment to leave no one and no place behind.

To address this issue, the European Commission, which had already launched a Communication to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions entitled “Attracting skills and talent to the EU” on 27 April 2022, which in turn twinned from the “Partnerships to Attract Talent” initiative of June 2021, published on 17 January 2023 Communication COM(2023)0032 entitled “Unlocking talent in Europe’s regions”, a document that aims to give new impetus to

open door on the world, which facilitates the interconnection between a global that is increasingly in pieces due to the new geopolitical configurations caused by new flows (pandemics, wars, energy and inflationary crises, etc.) and a local that, in the face of them, risks becoming increasingly closed in and shut off. [...] The hairpin bend, a generator of new relationships close and simultaneous to long networks based on trust, can facilitate further returns and nourish new collective hopes through the heterotopic dream, an oxymoron necessary for those who, as Simone Weil recalls, are not uprooted and therefore take root through the ‘culture of the Turning’, which amalgamates creative minds, linked to a space-origin, capable of going beyond the melancholy of departure”.

⁵ The “new arrivals” were referred to in 2021 by Dalla Massara Marilisa in her “The search for a new role for land, travel, tourism”, a post on the website presenting the School of Inspirational Tourism, available online at: <https://scuolaturismoispirazionale.it/nuovo-ruolo-per-il-territorio-il-viaggio-e-il-turismo>. The Region of Puglia took up and better articulated the concept during a main stage of “We Make Future 2024”, available online at: <https://percorsidimpresa.regione.puglia.it/magazine/una-nuova-missione-lets-make-future>, referring to the arrival of new talents from many different parts of the world, who choose to move to a certain area, attracted by the opportunities offered. The most notable example of such a process is that of digital nomads. On this topic, please refer to the Third Annual Report on Digital Nomadism, sponsored by the Puglia Region, available online at: https://www.nomadidigitali.it/report/AIND_report2023.pdf.

⁶ In the still topical words of De Caro Bonella, Carmela. 2008, governance refers to a dimension of “government beyond government” as an enlarged institutional framework of a social and political system in which a plurality of actors are given public prominence and intervene, enriching it, in the traditional decision-making process. In this configuration no one actor plays an exclusive role, but there are numerous interactions between a plurality of actors (De Caro Bonella, Carmela, 2008. Introductory note on governance, 28-29.03.2008, p. 3).

the re-skilling and up-skilling of regions. The document introduces the “talent incentive mechanism”, a set of policies and programmes designed to improve the effectiveness of investment in human capital and to ensure that the skills developed actually meet the needs of the market and industry. The document is itself a work of strategic planning

Articulated in eight pillars of the *Talent Booster Mechanism* provides:

- a European Commission technical assistance service to help regions, eleven in all, facing a talent development trap to design, consolidate, develop and implement customized and comprehensive strategies to train, attract and retain talent;
- a new initiative, “smart adaptation of regions to demographic transition”, which aims to help regions at risk of a talent trap to develop new approaches to demographic transition and talent development;
- a technical support tool for Member States to design and implement reforms at national and regional level;
- direct financial assistance under existing EU financial instruments (reference is made to the Instrument for Interregional Innovation — I3a European Commission instrument designed to promote collaboration between regions, including the creation of Regional Innovation Valleys to develop new value chains;
- specific measures for the challenges in shrinking cities (including the European Urban Initiative (EUI);
- information and signaling of EU initiatives that can support talent development directed at the regions concerned;
- an exchange of experience and dissemination of good practice;
- increasing analytical knowledge to support evidence-based policies on regional development and migration⁷.

Through the use of an atypical, soft-law instrument such as the Communication (De Luca P., 2016), the Commission has, on the one hand, synthesized previous activities implemented on the broad topic of talent attraction — a response to the much felt demographic decline (Rosina, 2024)⁸ — and, on the other, identified a “mechanism”, in turn a strategic option that has inspired some of the most interesting and emerging propositions of the European Council’s Strategic Agenda 2024-2029⁹, which expressly envisages the promotion of an innovative geographical context, favourable to people and businesses, and bearing a noticeable heterogeneity. It is precisely the “mechanism” that seems to result from an analytical reading of the broad European territory, from a selection of sustainable intervention priorities and from the guiding, around these priorities, of Union resources. These are all phases that are typical of strategic planning oriented towards the enhancement of territorial identity and long-term competitiveness (Berlingiero Visciano, 2008).

⁷ This pillar is called “Atlas of Demography”, available online at: <https://migration-demography-tools.jrc.ec.europa.eu/atlas-demography>.

⁸ The demographic winter in Italy and degrowth are dealt with by Rosina Alessandro, who recently clarified that “the fourth edition of the Sole 24 Ore’s provincial indicators on the Quality of Life of Children, Young People and the Elderly shows a sustained and homogeneous growth of the over-65s in all the geographical divisions. The increase expected over the next ten years is around 16% on a national scale with little variation between North, Centre and South (The choices of the new generations follow wellbeing and make it grow)”, Il Sole24 ore, 27 May 2024, available online at: <https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/le-scelte-nuove-generazioni-seguono-benessere-e-fanno-crescere-AGeSq0B>.

⁹ The document reads: “In an increasingly knowledge- and data-driven economy, in a competitive global marketplace, Europe will accompany, nurture and grow its businesses and industry, attract and retain talent and remain in an investment-friendly position [...] We will invest in skills, training and people development, lifelong learning and encourage the mobility of talent within the European Union and beyond”. Available online at: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/4aldqfl2/2024_557_new-strategic-agenda.pdf.

2.2 Economic Recovery Support Measures and Access to Services for Territorial Competitiveness

As just noted for the European framework, strategic planning is an instrument geared towards fostering the cooperation of actors — regional and local — for development. Territorial and local governments are entrusted with a directing role in ensuring that a shared vision is built and, consequently, that a course of action is implemented that takes into account the general interest of the community.

The economic revitalization of a region does not escape the topic, which requires a strategic and integrated approach, capable not only of stimulating economic growth, but also of guaranteeing fair access to the services needed to strengthen territorial competitiveness.

As emphasized by EU policies, in a rapidly changing global context, regions face complex challenges in attracting investment, supporting businesses and improving citizens' welfare. Support measures must therefore cover several areas, including financing and incentives, infrastructure development, environmental sustainability, and social inclusion (Tanese et al., 2006). The Economic Recovery Support Measures thus consist of:

- funding and incentives are essential tools for economic revitalization. EU structural funds like the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the European Social Fund (ESF+)¹⁰ support regional development and innovation. National programmes, such as the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRP), focus on recovery through investments in infrastructure, digitization, and sustainability. For SMEs, tax credits, loan guarantees, and financial concessions help with expansion and modernization, while innovation support programs provide funding for research, development, and technology adoption. Entrepreneurial culture is fostered through business incubators, accelerators, and training programs aimed at enhancing entrepreneurial and managerial skills (Esley Wu, 2020);
- improving infrastructure is vital for stimulating economic growth. Investments in digital infrastructure, such as expanding broadband and 5G networks, are crucial for ensuring internet access and supporting business digitization. Additionally, the development and renewal of physical infrastructure — including roads, railways, and ports — enhance the mobility of people and goods. Strategic investments in industrial areas and technology parks create favorable environments for attracting investment and fostering innovation, further driving regional development (OECD, 2022);
- policies of environmental sustainability and social inclusion are essential for balanced development. Circular economy initiatives promote recycling and resource reuse, while renewable energy projects reduce environmental impact. Employment inclusion projects and targeted programs for women and youth help disadvantaged groups access the labor market by addressing barriers and inequalities, fostering a more inclusive and sustainable society.

As for access to services for territorial competitiveness,

- advisory and support services are essential for businesses. Business assistance centres offer support in setting up and running businesses, while one-stop shops for productive activities facilitate the handling of administrative paperwork. Access to finance is improved through subsidized financing programmes and the support of foundations and private investors;
- *welfare* services are crucial to ensure the well-being of the population (OECD, 2023; Zamagni, 2023).

¹⁰ The European Programming 2021-2027 foresees in Italy the implementation of a total of 58 Italian-led programmes, co-financed by the Structural Funds (ERDF, ESF+, JTF). 38 are Regional Programmes, 10 are National Programmes and 10 are ETC (European Territorial Cooperation). Available online at: <https://politichecoesione.governo.it/it/politica-di-coesione/la-programmazione-2021-2027/piani-e-programmi-europei-2021-2027>.

Social and health care, together with services for social inclusion, ensure that all citizens can actively participate in economic and social life. Education and training services, such as vocational and continuing education and digital education programmes, improve citizens' skills and promote employability;

- transport and mobility services, including efficient public transport and sustainable mobility infrastructure, are essential to facilitate travel and support the local economy. *E-government* platforms and citizenship service centres, for their part, improve access to public services and facilitate administrative practices.

2.3 The Innovation Ecosystem Under the Test of Technological and Social Innovation: A Brief Outline of the Smart Specialisation Strategy (S3)

The broad theme of coordinating levels of government on one hand, and the goal of effective sustainability and interoperability of administrative activities aimed at significant and long-lasting economic and social impact, on the other hand, recall the complexity and dynamism of the innovation ecosystem. Granstrand and Marcus Holgersson recently offered a definition of an innovation ecosystem as “a set of actors, activities, and artefacts, and the institutions and relations, including complementary and substitute relations, that are important for the innovative performance of an actor or a population of actors” (Granstrand Holgersson, 2020; Ardrizzo, 2002; Longo, 2002)¹¹.

It is a system that the authors define as composed of “CS-relations” — i.e., cooperative and complementary relationships — of links and relationships between subjects and entities, whose outcome is not a single product but rather an entire activity. The involvement of various actors is therefore at the heart of the innovation process that sets a specific ecosystem in motion: public institutions, universities, research centers, businesses, and civil society organizations work synergistically to plan, implement, and execute multi-year strategies aimed at strengthening the competitiveness of a specific territory or area.

The effectiveness of the activities in question depends on the ability to adapt and create synergies, operating according to the principle of integration, to provide a collective and coordinated response to the challenges of technological and social innovation. In this context, the Smart Specialization Strategy (S3) is one of the key tools for guiding regions towards more focused and sustainable innovation, capitalizing on local strengths and addressing emerging needs (Gómez Prieto et al., 2019; Botseva et al., 2021; Rodriguez-Pose et al., 2014)¹². S3 was introduced by the European Union in the context of cohesion policy for the period 2014-2020, by the Common Provisions Regulation No. 1303/2013 as an *ex ante* conditionality to create critical mass and maximize the impact of investments dedicated to Thematic Objective 1, “research, technological development and innovation”.

This strategic approach aims to identify and exploit a region's unique competitive advantages and strengths, promoting targeted investments in research, development and innovation (Terziev Bogdanova, 2019), focusing their resources and efforts on a limited set of areas where they can achieve leadership, aligning their scientific and

¹¹ The reference to science and the concept of natural ecosystems is evident (“This idea of interconnected actor/artifact/activity subsystems of innovation ecosystems goes well in line with the concept of natural ecosystems, which are typically decomposable into subsystems”, Shaw & Allen, 2018). For an epistemological perspective on innovation, see Ardrizzo Giuseppe (cur.), 2002; Borderline Reasons. Paths of Innovation, Il Mulino. More particularly, Longo Giuseppe O., 2002. Appunti per un'epistemologia dell'innovazione, pp. 29-50.

¹² European Commission, “Made in the EU” Smart Specialization Inspires the World, 2018, available online at: https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/newsroom/news/2018/09/26-09-2018-made-in-the-eu-smart-specialisation-inspires-the-world.

technological capabilities with market needs and trends. The Puglia Region leads in Smart Specialization Strategy (S3) and territorial programming with its “Smart Puglia 2030” strategy. Developed through a participatory process involving public and private sectors, citizens, and associations, the strategy highlights key innovation sectors like sustainable manufacturing, human and environmental health, and digital, creative, and inclusive communities.

ISTAT has introduced a new classification system, under the National Operational Programme “Governance and Institutional Capacity 2014-2020”, to aid in regional investment planning. This project, in collaboration with the Agency for Territorial Cohesion, includes 34 economic indicator tables for regions and provinces, focusing on research, digitization, and sustainability. Key sectors include Aerospace, Agrifood, Green Chemistry, Energy, and Cultural Heritage, aiming to drive innovation and sustainable economic growth.

The strategy aims to foster regional economic development and innovation by focusing on sectors with high growth potential. “Potential S3 enterprises” are defined based on a framework comprising five main dimensions:

- research & development: expanding knowledge, production innovation, and R&D applications;
- innovation: advancing in product, process, organizational, and marketing innovation; promoting finance access, technological progress, sustainability;
- human capital: enhancing the quality and skills of the workforce;
- territorial development: strengthening networks, innovation capacity, and market expansion;
- performance: improving productivity.

These dimensions, divided into ten sub-dimensions and 35 indicators, serve as criteria for selecting and evaluating enterprises that align with the Smart Specialization Strategy (S3). This approach aids regional and national authorities in tailoring strategies to the specific needs and potential of businesses and territories (Di Cataldo et al., 2020).

Without claiming here to go into further detail on the specific theme of S3, it is sufficient for the overall economy of the analysis underway to point out that the theme of attracting and harnessing talent and that of intelligent specialization constitute an inseparable pair. Indeed, there can be no *talent retention* without skills for innovation and a strategy that, taking care to involve businesses, institutions, universities and research centres, and civil society, maps public needs for innovation and identifies priority innovation areas and sectors, using a consolidated system of governance and participation and monitoring and self-assessment tools to verify implementation. And it is equally clear that the need for skills and talent, particularly in disadvantaged regions, is in turn a real crossroads of territorial cohesion policies, of the targets set by the action plan of the European pillar of social rights, of the 2040 vision for rural areas, of the European Agenda for Innovation. The utilization of the so-called capital, human and social, available at regional level can contribute decisively to the effective development of innovation policies in the territory (Meyer, 2022).

3. Local Partnership Circuits to the Test of Demographic Decline: The Puglia Region and the Example of #mareAsinistra

Puglia boasts a modern, diversified economy that prioritizes innovation through smart specializations, fostering dialogue and networks for balanced economic, social, and territorial development in the Euro-Mediterranean region. The guiding principle of the Regional Government Programme is participation, institutionalized by Regional Law No. 28 of 2017. This law establishes a permanent system of citizen and stakeholder involvement, emphasizing transparency, consultation, and listening.

The law shapes key regional planning tools, such as the Regional Strategic Plan 2020-2030, “Piano Strategico Regionale 2020-2030, Smart Specialisation Strategy (S3, Agenda Digitale Pugliese, Agenda di Genere, #H2Puglia2030, Strategia di Sviluppo Sostenibile, Blue-Vision 2030”. Notably, #mareAsinistra strategy aims to attract top creative and technological talent globally, enhancing youth opportunities in Puglia. These strategies align with European initiatives supporting the twin transitions — digital and green — promoting widespread digital skills (e.g., Punti di facilitazione digitale) and fostering networks like Galattica, which guide young people toward social, professional, and civic participation.

Puglia supports its regional economy through key legislative initiatives. Recent examples include Regional Law 18/2022, which established the Regional Register of Benefit Societies and its corresponding trademark, as well as laws promoting renewable energy development. Additionally, draft laws on Open Innovation and on promoting Third Sector activities reflect the region’s legislative focus on fostering innovation and social welfare. In all cases, stakeholders were actively consulted. Some consultations occurred through established platforms, such as the Third Sector Table, while others involved hearings in relevant committees, as with the open innovation draft law. This inclusive approach, involving a multi- and intersectoral collaboration model, underlines the commitment to participatory governance. These initiatives demonstrate a clear path toward achieving significant, well-monitored objectives, emphasizing local partnerships, shared decision-making, and deliberative governance as central components of Puglia’s regional policy framework.

3.1 Context Analysis

Puglia is experiencing significant demographic decline, placing immense pressure on its socio-economic system, labor market, quality of life, and the sustainability of public services. Over the past five years (2019-2023), Italy’s population aged 15 to 34 has decreased by 2.2%, with a more pronounced decline of 5.7% in the 25-29 age group. In Puglia, the youth population has also fallen by 5.7%, particularly in the 25-29 age group, which has seen a dramatic 10% decline — especially in the provinces of Brindisi (-14.2%) and Lecce (-11.6%).

This depopulation trend is exacerbated by emigration, with the number of young people aged 18 to 39 moving abroad doubling over the last decade (2011-2021) — a staggering increase of 118% in southern Italy and 97% in Puglia. While there has been a reduction in school dropout rates among those aged 18-24 in southern Italy, Puglia still recorded a dropout rate of 14.6% in 2022, higher than the national average of 11.5%. The NEET (not in education, employment, or training) phenomenon is critical, with one in five young people aged 15 to 29 classified as NEET in Italy, and Puglia’s situation is even worse. Although the youth employment rate in the 15-34 age group has increased (+2.0 percentage points nationally and +2.2 in the south), the southern region still lags, with a youth employment rate of 31.7% in 2022, compared to the national average of 43.7%. Puglia’s youth employment rate stands at 35.0%, while the youth unemployment rate is at 22.5%, similar to the southern average but significantly higher than the national average of 14.4%.

These statistics underline the urgent need for increased investments in youth, which many respondents in the 2023 “Rapporto Giovani” from the Toniolo Institute consider insufficient. Demographic and employment trends demand greater attention to the economic and social well-being of young people in Puglia, as emphasized by national and European initiatives (IPRES, 2024).

3.1.1 Population¹³

Between 2012 and 2022, Puglia experienced a population reduction of 4.3%, mainly influenced by a significant migration flow and a negative natural balance. Approximately 380,000 Puglians¹⁴, or 9% of the regional population, live abroad, while 548,423 Puglians¹⁵ moved their residence to other Italian regions between 2002 and 2023. This emigration is characterized by highly educated young people, mainly under 30, who seek better opportunities elsewhere.

Puglia has one of the lowest fertility rates in the EU, with a value of 1.20 compared to the European average of 1.50. Since 2012, deaths have consistently exceeded births, culminating in 2021 with only 26,381 births compared to 46,286 deaths. This has led to an average annual reduction in the working-age population of 0.82% since 2015.

The ageing of Puglia's population is particularly accelerated, with an old-age dependency ratio of 37.3, above the EU average of 33. This means that for every elderly person aged 65 and over there are only 2.7 people of working age. Despite the relatively high life expectancy in the region (84.7 years for women and 80.7 years for men, compared to 82.9 and 77.2 in the EU, respectively)¹⁶ this demographic trend poses significant challenges, including a shrinking workforce, less economic dynamism and potential difficulties in providing essential services.

Projecting these trends into the future, it is expected that Puglia will lose more than 1.2 million residents in the next 75 years, from a population of around 3.95 million in 2023¹⁷.

3.1.2 The Economy and the Labour Market

In 2022, Puglia's GDP per capita was 65% of the EU average. More dramatically, this figure has been on a downward trend over the last decade, falling by 6.2 percentage points between 2010 and 2020, before recovering marginally¹⁸. Moreover, there are disparities in GDP per capita between the different Puglian provinces, with areas such as Bari and Barletta-Andria-Trani lagging behind. The former is the region's capital and its slightly better economic performance reflects family dynamics of agglomeration that tend to favour larger urban centres. The city hosts the highest concentration of universities in the region (three out of five), the largest commercial airport and the seat of the regional government.

The region faces serious youth unemployment problems, particularly pronounced among women. In 2023, the unemployment rate for the 15-24 age group was 39.3%, compared to an EU average of 16.6%¹⁹. Even for those who do find a job, conditions are often precarious, with more than 82% of contracts activated in 2021 being fixed-term contracts and an average duration of employment of less than three months in 60% of cases and even

¹³ For more details please refer to the *Atlas of Demography - Knowledge Centre on Migration and Demography (KCMD) Data Portal*, available online at: <https://migration-demography-tools.jrc.ec.europa.eu/atlas-demography>.

¹⁴ Central Statistical Office of the Ministry of the Interior, Register of Italians living abroad (AIRE), available online at: <https://ucs.interno.gov.it/ucs/contenuti/8067961.htm> (year 2022).

¹⁵ ISTAT, Registrations and cancellations by interregional transfer of residence by region 2002-2023, available online at: <https://demo.istat.it/tavole/?t=apr4&l=en>.

¹⁶ Eurostat, Life expectancy by age, sex and NUTS2 region, available online at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/demo_r_mlifexp/custom_11827881/default/table?lang=en.

¹⁷ Eurostat, Population on 1 January by age, sex, projection type and NUTS 3 region, available online at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/proj_19rp3/default/table?lang=en&category=proj.proj_19r.

¹⁸ For a detailed description of the summarized data please consult Centro Studi e Ricerche sul Mezzogiorno (SRM), Bollettino Mezzogiorno no. 1/2024, available online at: <https://www.sr-m.it/it-cat-prod-322815-bollettino-mezzogiorno-1-2024.htm>.

¹⁹ Eurostat, Unemployment rates by gender, age, educational level and NUTS 2 regions, available online at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/LFST_R_LFU3RT/custom_2544381/default/table?lang=en.

less than 30 days for 33%²⁰. Women, despite having a higher level of education on average, are severely underrepresented in the labour market, with a gender employment gap of 30.7 percentage points (ARTI, 2021). As previously reported, in the absence of an adequate welfare system, Puglian women are very often relegated to the role of carers and must therefore give up career prospects. The COVID-19 pandemic situation has probably aggravated the situation, also because of the impact it has had on tourism and trade, sectors that traditionally employ more women.

Key industries such as agriculture, manufacturing and tourism play a significant role in Puglia's economy. As of 31 December 2022, Puglia was home to 396 active companies engaged in wine production, ranking first in Italy, surpassing Sicily (328) and Veneto (223). The fruit and vegetable sector also contributes significantly to the Puglian economy, recording an export value of 648 million euro by the third quarter of 2022 and employing 39,833 people.

Puglia is the most industrialized region in southern Italy (Unioncamere Puglia, 2022), with important industrial settlements in the Bari-Brindisi-Taranto triangle, where there are steel and oil refining industries, as well as textile, pharmaceutical and plastic industries. Wine factories, canneries, tobacco factories and oil mills are also widespread (the food processing industry is largely linked to the local primary supply chain) (EURES, 2023). However, seasonal employment in tourism and agriculture and the high dependence on low-skilled jobs pose a challenge to the sustainability of livelihoods. Indeed, job offers available²¹ in these sectors are often rejected due to the precarious and irregular contracts offered, low pay and difficult working conditions. Illegal employment is also widespread, disproportionately affecting vulnerable groups who are denied their labour rights²².

In 2023, 41% of private enterprises in Puglia face challenges in filling job vacancies, primarily due to a lack of candidates (23.7%) and inadequate skills (12.9%). The most in-demand professions include specialized workers (52.7% difficulty) and technicians (49.4% difficulty). Key sectors requiring employees are hospitality, tourism, retail, mechanics, construction, commercial services, and logistics. The labor market shows a preference for technical and medium-skilled roles, with 197,190 vacancies for those with secondary diplomas compared to 35,940 vacancies for university graduates. This highlights the need for training programs to address skill mismatches²³. This shows that job opportunities for tertiary education graduates are lower than those for secondary education graduates, so actions are needed not only from the supply side (such as increasing the number of tertiary education graduates in the region), but also to stimulate demand for more qualified profiles (such as increasing innovation among SMEs, startups, etc.).

3.1.3 Entrepreneurial Culture

When we talk about entrepreneurial culture, we refer to the mindset, habits and practices that foster entrepreneurship and innovation within a society or community (Ioannidou, 2023; Rizwan et al., 2019; Kong et al., 2020; Micozzi, 2024; Danish et al., 2019). It is essential to promote actions and initiatives to stimulate the creation of new businesses, as these have a direct impact on innovation, economic growth and job creation.

Analyzing data from Puglia (Unioncamere, 2024), in the second quarter of 2024, the business birth rate in

²⁰ Report of the National CGIL Economics Office on Inps data 2022, available online at: <https://cgilpuglia.it/news/salari-bassi-il-42-dei-lavoratori-dei-settori-privati-in-puglia-sotto-i-10mila-euro-lanno-8>.

²¹ These sectors are effectively paralyzed by a substantial labour shortage, available online at: <http://www.conquistedellavoro.it/sindacato/lavoro-seasonal-in-puglia-about-20-thousand-employees-1.3115308>; <https://www.flai.it/dai-territori/assenza-di-manodopera-in-agricoltura-in-puglia-in-6-anni-persi-quasi-30mila-lavoratori-alert-flai-cgil/>.

²³ Excelsior Information System (2023). The demand for professions and training by Italian firms in 2023, available online at: https://excelsior.unioncamere.net/sites/default/files/pubblicazioni/2023/Domanda_professioni_formazione_impresa.pdf.

Puglia recorded a positive balance of 2,419 companies, with 5,298 new registrations and 2,879 terminations, bringing the total number of registered companies to 377,828 as at 30 June 2024. Compared to the national average growth rate of 0.50 percent, Puglia achieved a better result with 0.64 percent, also exceeding last year's 0.53 percent. The number of joint stock companies in Puglia grew by 1.26%, exceeding the national figure by 1%.

Partnerships and sole proprietorships showed modest but positive growth, with the exception of the province of Taranto, where partnerships saw a drop of 0.10%.

In 2023, Puglia has about 1,200 large enterprises (about 5% of the national total), with about 70,000 employees. Puglia's large enterprises are mainly distributed in a few key sectors, such as Manufacturing, Agrifood, Energy and Tech.

Since the early 2000s, the Puglia Region has invested significantly in non-formal education to promote the development of skills and growth of young people. Several programmes and initiatives have been launched to create opportunities for young people, including:

- “Active Principles”, a call for innovative youth projects;
- “Laboratories from Below”, an initiative that supported entrepreneurial projects originating from civil society;
- “Young Innovators in Enterprise”, a programme aimed at fostering innovation in enterprises;
- “Bollenti Spiriti” for the support of youth initiatives.

In 2016, the region also launched “PIN-Pugliesi Innovativi”, a measure aimed at supporting the business ideas of under-35s. This call, with a counter open for several years, introduced an online tool inspired by the *business model canvas* for the presentation of projects. PIN was dedicated to innovative business initiatives in the cultural, technological and social sectors, offering non-repayable funding to groups of two or more people aged between 18 and 35 years resident in Puglia.

The region has also promoted an entrepreneurial culture focused on innovation, sustainability and economic development through other initiatives:

- NIdI (Nuove Iniziative di Impresa)²⁴, which offers grants and repayable loans for newly established micro-enterprises.
- TECNONIDI, which supports small enterprises in the start-up or development of technology investment plans.
- “Percorsi d'Impresa”, an entrepreneurship accompaniment programme for young people, promoted by ARTI and the Puglia Region. This programme provides informal support to young entrepreneurs and helps consolidate start-up strategies and follow-up of project ideas; “Equity Puglia”, a financial engineering intervention aimed at giving them the opportunity to increase their level of capitalization and thus their equity strength, through the participation of specialized investors in the company capital.

In addition, the Puglia Region has supported young people in the post-university period through initiatives such as:

- “Pass Laureati”, which offers vouchers for attending university master courses in Italy and abroad.

²⁴ The measure was selected, in 2024, as the national winner of the European Enterprise Promotion Awards (EEPA) the European Commission's enterprise promotion awards in category 1 — dedicated to programmes for the promotion of entrepreneurship with special reference to those aimed at young people and women — and is therefore eligible to participate in the European-wide selection to be held in Budapest in November 2024, available online at: <https://www.regione.puglia.it/web/competitivita-e-innovazione/-/avviso-pubblico-nidi-nuove-iniziativa-d-impresa>.

- “Apprenticeship”, which promotes the training of young apprentices to support youth employment and professional development.
- Extraction of Talents, which provides funding for accompaniment and acceleration paths for aspiring innovative entrepreneurs.

Thanks to the commitment of various actors, Puglia’s entrepreneurial culture in recent years stands out for its inclusive, innovation- and sustainability-oriented vision, with an eye on international cooperation²⁵. The aim is to promote the economic and social development of the region through the creation of new opportunities in all sectors of the community. In order to continue to generate new globally competitive industrial sectors and contribute to regional prosperity, it is essential to stimulate the growth of high-tech entrepreneurship models, exploiting the skills offered by the Puglian university system and available regional resources.

3.1.4 Innovative Capacity

The 2023 Regional Innovation Scoreboard, by the European Commission evaluates the innovation performance of 239 regions across 22 EU Member States, as well as Norway, Serbia, Switzerland, and the UK. Regions are classified into four categories: Innovation Leaders (36 regions), Strong Innovators (70), Moderate Innovators (69), and Emerging Innovators (64). Puglia (ITF4) is categorized as a Moderate Innovator, with a performance improvement of 19.2% over time. However, it still lags behind national and European averages, achieving 76.5% of the Italian average and 84.7% of the European average. Since 2016, Puglia's performance has remained stable compared to the national average (77.5%) but has significantly improved from 63.8% to 84.7% against the European average. By early 2021, Puglia had 98 innovative companies, accounting for 5.5% of Italy’s total, and 506 innovative start-ups, representing 4.2% of the national total. In 2019, only 0.9% of Puglia’s workforce was employed in R&D, compared to 1.6% nationally, with R&D expenditure at 0.78% of regional GDP, well below the national average of 1.42%

3.1.5 Education and Training

Puglia faces significant challenges in education and youth employment, impacting social cohesion and economic development. The region grapples with high NEET rates (young people not in education or employment) and early school leaving, particularly among disadvantaged youth. In 2023, the NEET rate for ages 18 to 24 is 17.3%, well above the EU average of 9.2%, though it has improved by 7.3 percentage points since 2021. While early school leaving has decreased from 18.5% in 2020 to 12.8% in 2023, it remains high, especially among males at 14.8% compared to 10.6% for females²⁶.

Another major problem is the low rate of tertiary education in the region, with only 17.5 per cent of young people achieving this level of education, compared to the European average of 35.1 percent. Moreover, according to the latest available data on the population and dynamics of Puglia’s graduates, collected every year by Almalaurea (Almalaurea Consortium, 2023), the employment rate of Puglia’s graduates is 64.4 percent one year after graduation, against 74.1 percent at national level, with unemployment at 21.2 percent.

The vocational and educational training (VET) system in Puglia offers some successful opportunities, especially through the IFTS and ITS programmes, which are closely linked to the needs of the local labour market. The IFTS programmes, which generally last one year, have an average employment rate of 70%. ITS, present with

²⁵ To this end, we refer to the participation of the Puglia Region in various Interreg programmes (<https://interreg.eu/>) and initiatives in the field of international cooperation (<https://europuglia.regione.puglia.it/cooperazione-regionale>).

²⁶ Eurostat, Early leavers from education and training by gender and NUTS2 region, available online at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/edat_lfse_16custom_11846111/default/table?lang=en.

10 institutes in Puglia, cover key sectors such as tourism, ICT, agrifood and aerospace, and boast an average employment rate of 80% (Indire, 2023), one year after completion.

However, a mismatch persists between the skills trained and those required by the labour market. Over the next five years, a shortage of graduates is expected in areas such as healthcare, economics, statistics and STEM disciplines, while there will be an oversupply in the humanities, philosophy, history, art, psychology and languages.²⁷

These data indicate the importance of strengthening school and vocational guidance and improving the match between training and labour market demands, in order to foster greater employability of young people in Puglia and reduce the school dropout and NEET rates in the region.

3.1.6 Quality of Life

According to the Inapp Report 2023, titled Work, Training, Welfare: A Bumpy Road to Growth, this year has been designated the European Year of Skills, emphasizing the need to prioritize people's lives in future education, training, work, and welfare policies. Enhancing and attracting talent should be approached through this human-centered perspective. However, an annual survey by Il Sole 24 Ore ranks Bari as the most liveable city in Puglia, yet it sits at a low 69th among 107 Italian provinces. Other Puglian provinces fall below the 30th percentile, with Foggia ranking last²⁸.

Many residents live on low incomes, with an average household income of EUR 13,700, compared to the EU average of EUR 20,700. Approximately 32.2% of the population is at risk of poverty and social exclusion. To combat this, the Puglia Region has implemented the *Reddito di Dignità* (RED) which supplements the incomes of poor citizens with EUR 500 per month for a year and provides access to social inclusion pathways and training opportunities²⁹.

The European Social Progress Index (EU-SPI) indicates that while Puglia's scores align with Italy's, the region struggles in education, health, and environmental quality. Furthermore, the European Government Quality Index (EQI) highlights concerns about the quality and impartiality of public services, indicating areas for governance improvement. The ISTAT Report on Fair and Sustainable Welfare (BES) reveals critical issues, including an aging population, falling birth rates, NEETs, high unemployment, and lower female labor participation. Although Puglia performs relatively well in numerical competence and literacy, it still lags behind the national average in salaries and pensions.

3.2 The Regional Talent Attraction and Valorisation Strategy #mareAsinistra

The context analysis highlights the urgent need to tackle demographic decline and depopulation in Puglia, especially in inland areas. Key strategies include training qualified human capital, creating job opportunities, attracting external talent, and supporting local investment. In response, the region has launched #mareAsinistra, a talent attraction initiative emphasizing female involvement and collaboration among regional stakeholders. This strategy builds on prior efforts to retain and attract skilled talent, particularly women, by fostering a cohesive network that includes public authorities, private enterprises, the Third Sector, universities, and research centers. #mareAsinistra aims to empower youth, attract international talent, support research and innovation, and expand opportunities in innovative sectors. It envisions Puglia as:

²⁷ Excelsior Information System, Forecast of employment needs in Italy in the medium term (2023-2027), available online at: https://excelsior.unioncamere.net/sites/default/files/pubblicazioni/2023/report_previsivo_2023-27_0.pdf.

²⁸ Il Sole 24 Ore, Quality of life, available online at: <https://lab24.ilsole24ore.com/qualita-della-vita>.

²⁹ Available online at: <https://www.ambitomesagne.it/ambito/reddito-di-dignita-2/>.

- an attractive region for companies and young talent;
- competitive through technological, social, and territorial innovation;
- inclusive of vulnerable groups, including migrants, women, the disabled, and the elderly;
- environmentally and culturally responsible;
- nationally and internationally connected, particularly within the Mediterranean;
- integrated into development policies that promote convergence;
- attentive to training and innovation needs, while proactively developing strategic sectors.

This ambitious strategy focuses on local strengths, promotes collaboration, and fosters transformation through active listening and engagement with local authorities and the Third Sector.

3.2.1 The Strategy's Approach and Objectives

The strategy consists of 14 macro areas and 118 actions, divided into three main lines of action (people, business, brand) and two support lines (networking, management).

Specific objectives are identified for each line; it is a *toolkit* consisting of existing actions as well as new initiatives (which may also be the *restyling* of initiatives already started in previous programmes). The time horizon is short, medium and long term. Key topics are: optimization of initiatives, involvement of women, collaboration, alliances, talent attraction law and open innovation, monitoring and evaluation.

The following is a summary of the areas of intervention proposed in the strategy document.

Table 1 Areas of Intervention³⁰

Line of Intervention	Specific Objectives	Target	Toolbox	Time Horizon
People	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offering high quality accommodation with a focus on new lifestyles. • Retain regional talent by decreasing the exodus rate of students and workers from Puglia and increasing the immigration rate of qualified human resources from outside the region; • Becoming an attractive land for digital nomads. 	Students; Workers Returning Puglians Digital nomads Scientific researchers	New initiatives and existing projects, incentive programmes, youth return policies, improvement of public and social services.	Short, medium, long term
Companies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop and improve research and innovation capabilities and the adoption of advanced technologies. • Promoting diversity and inclusion in the entrepreneurial ecosystem by encouraging access to resources and support for entrepreneurs. • Fostering dialogue and developing new connections with local entrepreneurs • Strengthening sustainable growth and business competitiveness and job creation, including through productive investment. • Scale-up; assistance in the industrialization phase of company projects • Develop skills and interactions on a national and international scale. 	Startup	Tax incentives, start-up support, networking with investors, acceleration and incubation programmes.	Short, medium term
Brand	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promoting activities to enhance and animate the territory and major events in the fields of music, sport, agribusiness, art, dance, etc. • Promoting Brand Puglia: positioning the Puglia Region and making it attractive to innovative people in order to capitalize on skills. 	Digital nomads, Students, Returning Puglians	Marketing campaigns, promotional events, creation of a strong brand identity, valorization of local excellence.	Short, medium term

³⁰ Available online at: https://partecipazione.regione.puglia.it/uploads/decidim/attachment/file/3567/DGR_1989_2023_12_28_signed_signed.pdf.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote Business Diplomacy initiatives aimed at building alliances with foreign companies present in Puglia to promote the image of Puglia as a living and working destination • Promoting dissemination and collaboration initiatives in the region to illustrate the potential the area offers. 			
Networking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a vibrant community of start-ups, start-up services, investment funds, business angels, incubators; • Fostering collaboration between start-ups and local educational institutions to promote specific in-company training programmes on the one hand and entrepreneurship support programmes for talented people on the other; • Develop skills for smart specialization, industrial transition and entrepreneurship also through planning and/or regulatory instruments; • Carry out a needs analysis involving national and international companies to anticipate the level of skills required; • Facilitating the matching of talent skills and business needs through effective matchmaking platforms and a job opportunity signalling system, with the active collaboration of public and private actors; • Create a physical or virtual space dedicated to the meeting, collaboration and incubation of start-ups, providing resources, mentoring and support services; 		Networking platforms, matchmaking events, university-business collaboration initiatives.	Medium, long term
Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved management of resources and strategic initiatives. • Identifying European calls for proposals for the strategy at regional and local level, setting up systems to monitor results, developing a communication plan and implementing participatory consultation processes on the topic. 		Implementation of monitoring systems, training for managers, improvement of coordination processes between departments.	Short, medium term

3.3 The Participation Model: Levels and Subjects of Governance

The participation model of the #mareAsinistra strategy is structured to ensure an inclusive and collaborative approach to regional governance, with the aim of attracting and retaining talent in Puglia. This model is based on a series of levels and actors cooperating to achieve the outlined strategic objectives. Interaction between all stakeholders is developed through the regional enabling platforms, as well as in the working tables established or to be established. Co-design initiatives with local institutions are also enhanced, in the wake of projects already active in the area such as Galattica, Digital Facilitation Points, etc.

3.3.1 Levels of Governance

The proposed governance model is based on the quintuple helix of innovation, fostering active cooperation between public administration, industry, academia, civil society, and the environment, with a focus on territorial and environmental protection.

At the regional level, permanent working groups have been established, involving:

- Regional structures responsible for the actions outlined in the Action Plan, supported by Strategic Agencies, In-House Companies, and Intermediate Bodies;
- The Economic and Social Partnership (PES), composed of civil society organizations, business associations, and institutions managing European funds;
- Production districts and regional observatories, such as the Hydrogen and Digital Agenda Observatories;
- Local institutions, including ANCI and UPI;

- Puglian universities, through projects like the “Territorial Pacts for Higher Education of Enterprises”;
- The Managing Authority, responsible for implementing the operational program in line with principles of sound financial management.

At the national and international levels, a peer-to-peer approach encourages the exchange of experiences and tools, enhancing the ability to design more effective policies. Collaborations with European networks, such as NEREUS and ERRIN, strengthen territorial competitiveness. One key achievement is the region’s recognition as a “Regional Innovation Valley”, acknowledging efforts to align research and innovation policies with EU priorities, improving coordination of investments and boosting regional development.

3.3.2 Monitoring

The Regional Strategy envisages a rigorous accountability, monitoring and evaluation system to ensure the effective implementation of the planned interventions and to measure their impact on the territory and recipients. This system includes both in inter monitoring activities and ex post evaluations.

To ensure effective and transparent monitoring, a web-based dashboard system will be developed to provide real-time analysis; tracking of progress for each line of intervention and project activity, including costs, resources employed and effects produced; acquisition of information; on-going re-planning of project activities to adapt them to actual conditions; and communication to stakeholders on the development of planned actions, ensuring transparency and involvement.

3.3.3 The Instruments of Participation

The Regional Strategy is a dynamic agenda requiring continuous updates to adapt to emerging needs and historical contexts. Its effectiveness hinges on responsiveness to change, enhancing public administration efficiency and multi-level governance while fostering collaboration and involvement among local territories and strategic networks to address socio-economic challenges.

The participatory process is crucial to ensure that the Strategy remains relevant and aligned with the expectations of various stakeholder groups. This process takes place on two distinct levels:

- internal level: through the participation of regional structures;
- external level: through the involvement of external stakeholders, with the constant incorporation of feedback and suggestions from students, university researchers, startups, workers, entrepreneurs, digital nomads and representatives of organizations and institutions. This ensures that the strategy reflects a diverse range of perspectives and expertise. In addition, the “PugliaPartecipa” platform is used as a hub for dissemination meetings, insights and discussions.

The outcomes of the participatory process are essential for updating the Strategy, ensuring a responsive approach to emerging needs. They are also vital for effectively designing talent attraction and enhancement measures in Puglia, aligning initiatives with the expectations and requirements of the involved stakeholders.

3.3.4 For a Strategy Upgrade

Regione Puglia, the only Italian region selected, has applied for the #mareAsinistra pilot project under the European Commission’s Harnessing Talent - Pillar 1 platform. This initiative emphasizes continuous improvement of regional strategy through various tools and resources that facilitate the sharing of experiences, best practices, and innovative approaches between regions. The iterative nature of this process is crucial for the strategy’s success, allowing regions to adapt and refine their policies with expert support, updated data, and stakeholder feedback, while comparing themselves to other European regions. Through collaboration and engagement, Puglia aims to strengthen its capacities and enhance territorial attractiveness, fostering an environment conducive to economic

growth and sustainable development. The support for this initiative commenced in March 2024 and will conclude in February 2025.

3.4 Communication

The #mareAsinistra strategy attaches great importance to communication as a crucial tool to engage stakeholders, enhance the opportunities offered by Puglia and create a positive and attractive image of the region. The communication campaign aims to:

- promote and cultivate “restanza”, “tornanza” and “arrivanza”. The strategy aims to encourage the return and permanence of Puglians through a proactive attitude and a strong bond with their land. Puglia is the place where Puglians born and raised have learnt their memories and dreamt of the future. But it is also the home for those who, having studied and travelled in Italy, Europe and the world, have accumulated experience, knowledge and skills that they wish to share and develop in their homeland;
- draw a new human geography. The aim is to attract new companies and create job opportunities, showing that even those without family ties can choose to live in the south because of the quality of life, the optimal size of the cities, the networking opportunities and the cultural spaces available.

#mareAsinistra is also a bottom-up initiative, rooted in citizen participation and supported by local institutions. The strategy targets those who choose Puglia as the location for their activities, bringing new skills, values, energy and talent to the region. To actively engage these individuals and illustrate the opportunities offered by Puglia, we will use an ancient yet contemporary medium: stories.



Figure 2 Brand Identity of the #mareAsinistra Strategy

In terms of communication, #mareAsinistra aims to root the values and mission of the project in the collective imagination through a process of visual and verbal representation that emphasizes the essence of the initiative. This approach involves the creation of a distinctive visual identity and strategic communication that reflects the idea behind the project.

4. Sustainability and Interoperability of Administrative Activity for Economic and Social Impact: Governance and the Strategic Organization of Participation

4.1 Mobility and Return Between Global and Local

Mobility and return, between global and local, represent a complex dynamic reflecting the tensions and synergies between international expansion and community roots. Globalization has accelerated the flow of people, ideas and resources across borders, enabling unprecedented circulation. This global mobility offers economic opportunities, cultural exchange and technological innovation, but also presents significant challenges, such as the loss of local identity and cultural homogenization. On the other hand, a return to the local emerges as a response to the pressures of globalization, with a rediscovery of traditions, handicrafts and sustainable practices. Local communities strive to preserve their uniqueness, adapting to global changes without compromising their essence,

thus creating a dynamic balance between openness to the world and appreciation of their roots.

#mareAsinistra is an emblematic project that demonstrates how mobility and return between global and local can interact in a beneficial way to promote territorial development and enhance local resources. This project focuses on the connection between experiences and skills acquired globally and the local context, encouraging the return of knowledge and innovations to the territory of origin for:

- to build a link between global and local: networking young talents, professionals and local communities who, while gaining international experience, wish to contribute to the improvement of their local area;
- Promoting sustainable development: through initiatives that respect local identity, enriching it with a global vision, integrating new ideas, technologies and business models;
- valorising emigrant human capital: facilitating the return or remote involvement of these people in projects that have a positive impact on the region, thus contributing to the region's economic and cultural growth;

4.2 Strengths and Weaknesses of the Partnership Infrastructure

The partnership infrastructure, which is based on collaboration between public, private and local authorities, has numerous strengths and weaknesses. Among the strengths, the sharing of resources and expertise stands out, which allows complex projects to be tackled with an integrated and multidisciplinary vision. This collaboration can lead to significant innovations, greater efficiency and cost optimization, as well as greater inclusiveness in decision-making, better responding to community needs. However, weaknesses are not insignificant: the management of different expectations and interests can be complex, generating conflicts and slowing down decision-making processes. Moreover, the lack of a clear distribution of responsibilities and the need for constant coordination may hinder the effectiveness of partnership action. Finally, the risk of power disparities between partners may jeopardize the fairness and long-term sustainability of projects undertaken.

4.3 The Alliance: A Value in the Playing Field of Development

Strategic alliances are crucial in the playing field of development, as they enable the combination of different resources, skills and perspectives to address global challenges more efficiently and innovatively. These collaborations between governments, businesses, non-governmental organizations and local communities create synergies that accelerate technological progress and the deployment of sustainable solutions. Inclusiveness and participation are core values of alliances, ensuring that the different voices of stakeholders are heard and integrated into decision-making processes. This approach not only increases the legitimacy of development initiatives, but also improves their effectiveness, as solutions are closer to the real needs of communities. However, managing differing expectations and the balance of power between partners present significant challenges. Overcoming these obstacles requires clear governance mechanisms, transparent communication and fair decision-making processes. Strategic alliances, if well managed, offer a unique opportunity to generate lasting positive impacts, improving quality of life and promoting equitable and sustainable development.

The #mareAsinistra strategy highlighted the strategic importance of the Alliance between different actors in the context of development. This collaboration has proven to be an essential value in the development context, contributing significantly to creating an environment conducive to innovation and growth. One of the key aspects of the success of #mareAsinistra has been the inclusiveness and active participation of all stakeholders. Through consultation forums and transparent decision-making processes, diverse voices and interests were heard and integrated into development strategies. This not only increased the legitimacy and acceptance of the initiatives, but

also ensured that the proposed solutions met the real needs of local communities.

The Alliance formed under the project demonstrated how cooperation between public, private, local communities and international organizations can generate concrete benefits. By pooling resources, skills and knowledge, it was possible to tackle complex challenges and develop innovative solutions that meet specific local needs. The Alliance's strength lies in its ability to combine different perspectives and expertise, creating an integrated and coordinated approach to development. This cooperation not only enhanced the effectiveness of the actions undertaken, but also ensured greater sustainability over time, making the results obtained lasting and replicable in other contexts.

5. Final Considerations and Vision

As already extensively reported above, strategic planning is essential to face challenges and seize opportunities in a context of change and growth, in particular to cope with the phenomenon of demographic transition, characterized by a declining birth rate and an ageing population, a significant challenge for many regions, including Puglia. #mareAsinistra tackles this challenge through the attraction and retention of young people, to create opportunities for young people through incentives and attraction policies, promoting training and employment in the sectors of the smart specialization strategy; the valorization of local skills to train and guide the new generations, integrating tradition with innovation; the promotion of quality of life: improving the quality of life through interventions that make these localities more attractive to residents and visitors, fostering a dynamic and well-integrated community.

To attract and retain talent, it is crucial to implement incentive mechanisms that respond to the needs and expectations of potential migrants and residents. In the #mareAsinistra project, these mechanisms include: a) financial incentive programmes, to provide tax breaks, funding and rewards for start-ups and innovative companies operating in the sectors of the regional S3; support for professional networking, to facilitate access to professional networks and networking opportunities, fostering the connection between local and international talent; b) training and development initiatives to improve skills and prepare talent for emerging opportunities in the sector.

The vision of #mareAsinistra is based on three fundamental pillars: sustainability and innovation, to continue to promote sustainable and innovative practices that protect coastal and marine resources, stimulate economic development and improve quality of life; integration and inclusiveness, to ensure that all policies and initiatives are inclusive, respond to community needs and actively involve all local actors; attractiveness and competitiveness, to make Puglia a competitive and attractive region for talent and investment, creating an environment that fosters growth and excellence in the sustainability sector and beyond.

#mareAsinistra is an example of how targeted strategic planning, together with effective incentive mechanisms and a response to demographic challenges, can generate significant economic and social benefits. By continuing to develop and implement integrated strategies, Puglia can emerge as a model of sustainable and innovative development, capable of attracting and enhancing talent in an ever-changing global context.

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