IX Report on liberal professionals in Italy – 2024 edition

(Abstract)

Part I. Liberal Professions in the European context

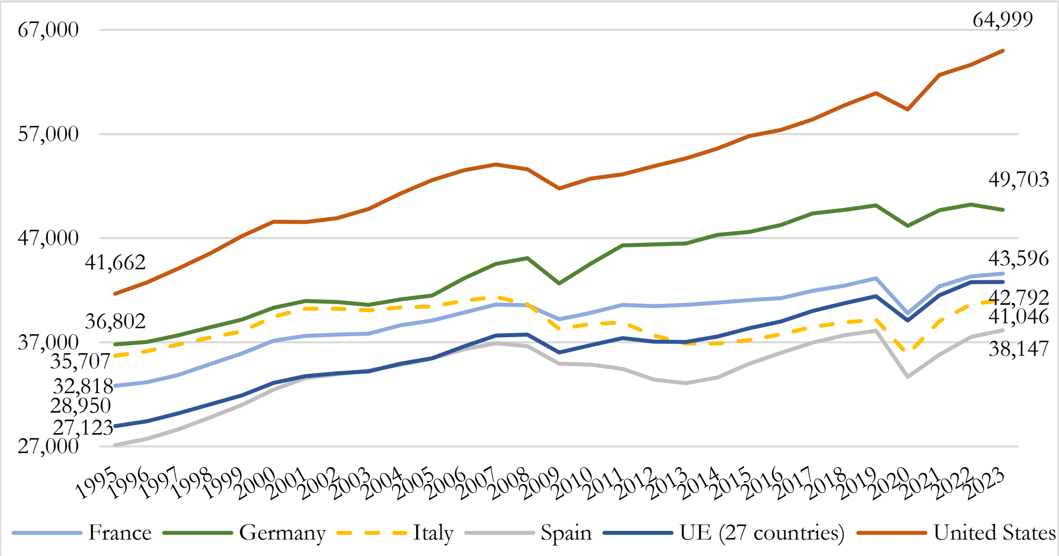
1 Trends in the international economy

The Report of liberal professions in Italy opens with a section dedicated to international comparisons. This chapter offers an overview of key indicators of the European economic situation and a detailed examination of several structural elements of the Italian economy (Gdp, productivity, wages, employment) from a comparative perspective. The indicators uniformly show a definitive recovery from the economic downturn caused by the pandemic, accompanied by a return to more moderate growth rates.

In 1995, Germany and Italy each had a per capita Gdp of approximately 36-37,000 dollars, only about 4,000 dollars less per capita than the U.S. By 2023, United States per capita Gdp had reached a record level of around 65,000 dollars, surpassing Germany by 15,000 dollars and Italy by 22,000 dollars (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Gdp per Capita in Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) in France, Germany, Italy, Spain, European Union, and United States

Values in $, base year 2015. Years 1995-2023.



Source: elaborations on Oecd data by Osservatorio delle libere professioni

The most recent quarterly Gdp trends (2022-2024) indicate consistently growth rates across the Eu, with only two exceptions: Q4 2022 (-0.1%) and Q4 2023, which remains stable. Particularly noteworthy over the past two years has been Spain's performance, as it has achieved growth rates exceeding those of other economies. Between 2000 and 2023, Italy's Gdp rose by 7.7%, a growth rate significantly lower than that of others European countries: France (+31.9%), Germany (+27.9%), and Spain (+39.7%).

Italy's overall increase in Gdp volume is attributable to growth in employment and hourly productivity, up by 12.9% and 1.4%, respectively, despite a decrease of 6.3% in hours worked per employee. The primary factor contributing to Italy's low Gdp growth is hourly productivity, which has seen significantly larger increases in other countries, ranging from 15.1% in France to 21.5% in Germany (18.7% in Spain).

From 2013 to 2023, gross annual wages per employee in Italy rose by about 16%, an increase amounting to just over half the European average (+30.8%). In particular, Spain and France recorded increases of 22.7%, while in Germany the increase was even higher (+35.0%).

An analysis of real wages reveals an even more pronounced gap between Italy and other major economies. In 2023, Italy was the only country with an average real wage level lower than in 2013. Compared to that year, the purchasing power of gross wages in the Eu rose on average by 3.0%, while in Italy it fell by 4.5%. In France, Spain, and Germany, real wages rose by 1.1%, 3.2%, and 5.7%, respectively. Over the past two years, marked by high inflation, Italy recorded the worst performance in real terms (-6.4% compared to 2021), followed by Germany (-4.1%). France and Spain saw more contained losses (-1.5% and -1.9%, respectively).

France and Spain are moving toward greater service-sector employment, while industry retains a significant role in Italy and Germany. Italy remains the only country with less than 70% of employment in the service sector. Growth in advanced services employment and its contribution to Gdp have been more limited in Italy (+1.3% for both employment and Gdp) compared to France and Spain, where the increases are more substantial both in employment (+1.8% in Spain and +2.0% in France) and in Gdp (+3.0 points in Spain, +4.5 points in France).

In 2023 gender employment gap in Italy stands at over 18 percentage points, with a male employment rate of 70.4% and only 52.2% of women employed. No other European country shows such a stark gender disparity. Italy's situation is particularly critical when it comes to youth employment: among those under 25, the employment rate is just 20.4%, meaning only one in five young people has a job. This figure is alarming compared to Germany, where more than half (50.8%) of those under 25 are employed, and to the European average (35.2%; Table 1).

Table 1: Employment rate by age class in France, Germany, Italy, Spain e European Union and gap Italy-Ue

Values %. Year 2023.

	2023					
	15-24	**25-34**	**35-44**	**45-54**	**55-64**	**15-64**
France	35.2	80.3	83.2	84.2	58.4	68.4
Germany	50.8	83.4	85.5	86.8	74.6	77.2
Italy	20.4	68.1	76.1	75.8	57.3	61.5
Spain	23.6	75.0	80.4	78.1	59.5	65.3
EU (27 countries)	35.2	79.6	83.7	82.9	63.9	70.4
Gap Italy-EU	**-14.8**	**-11.5**	**-7.6**	**-7.1**	**-6.6**	**-8.9**

Source: elaborations on Eurostat data by Osservatorio delle libere professioni

Germany's exceptionally high employment rates can also be attributed to widespread part-time work (28.7% in 2023); in comparison, Italy's rate is 17.6%, while France, the Eu, and Spain show rates of 17.8% and 13.1%, respectively. In Germany, 94.5% of part-time workers have chosen this arrangement; in Spain and Italy, by contrast, half of part-time workers would prefer full-time work for higher earnings but have accepted part-time positions due to a lack of full-time opportunities. In Italy, 10% of the total workforce was in this situation in 2023.

Across Europe, part-time work averages 9.6% among men and 29.3% among women, a gap of nearly 20 percentage points. Netherlands has the highest prevalence of part-time work for both men (25.7%) and women (64.1%). In Germany and Austria, roughly half of female employment is part-time, compared to around 13% of male employment. In Italy, around 8% of men and 31.5% of women are employed part-time. Italy's share of involuntary part-time employment is 50.2% for women and 69.3% for men. Comparatively, in Germany and other countries with high rates of part-time employment, the share of involuntary part-time is between 3-9% for men and 2-6% for women.

2 **Education in Italy and Europe**

The chapter analyzes the education topic in the European Union in recent years, highlighting similarities and differences across national contexts. The final section further explores the spread of online universities in Italy and the movement of students within Italy for study purposes.

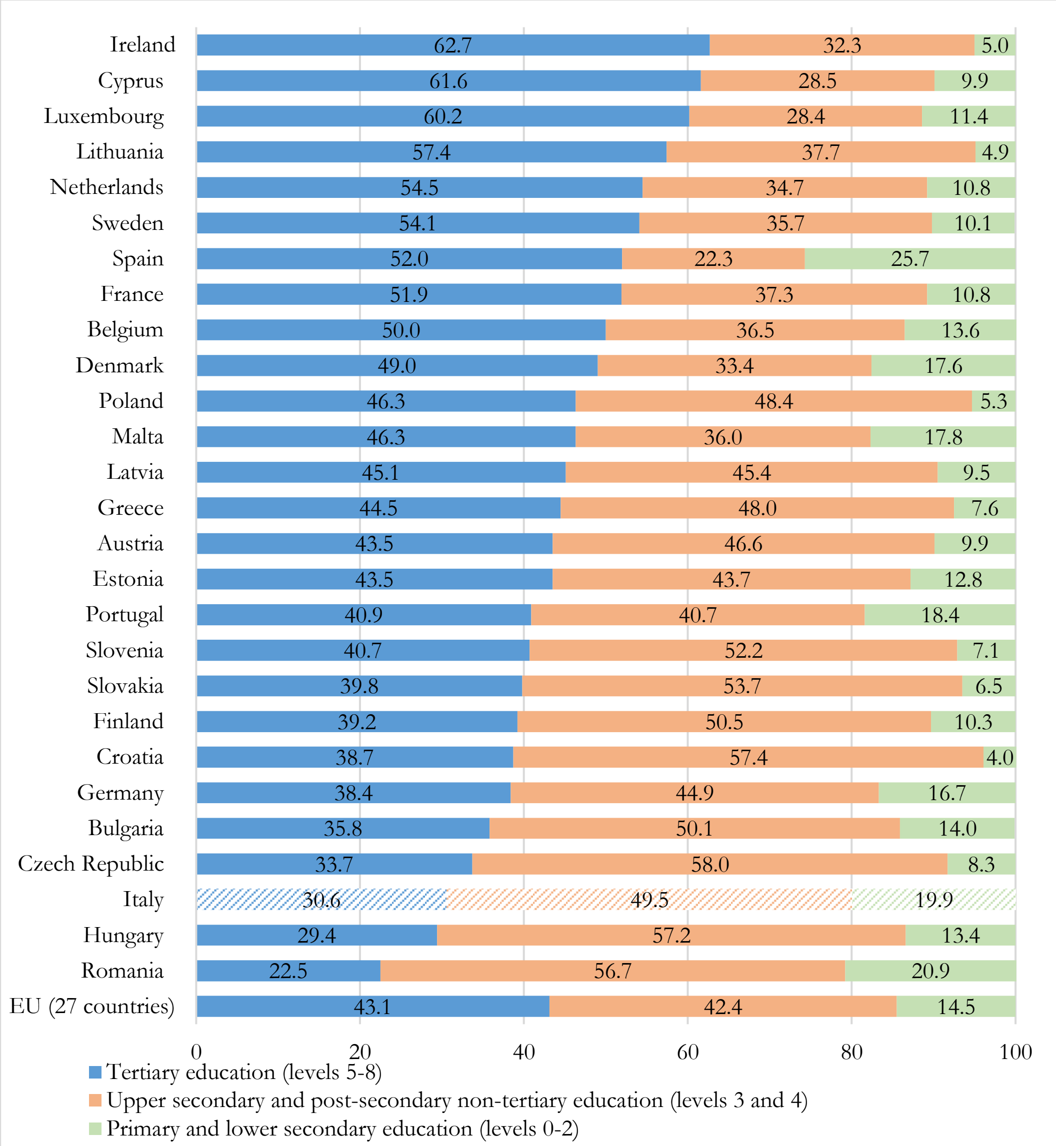
Looking at the education levels of young people between the ages of 25 and 34, the EU average reveals an equal proportion of tertiary education qualifications (43.1%) and upper secondary education (42.4%). Examining data from individual countries, two groups can be distinguished: on the one hand, countries where holding a university degree or another tertiary qualification is the majority condition (Spain, France, Sweden, with a population share of graduates exceeding 50%); on the other hand, a larger group of countries, including Italy and Germany, where the most widespread level of education is upper secondary, with rates ranging from 45% to 57% (Figure 2).

In Italy, there is an almost complete absence of short tertiary programs that are not university-based. Its (Higher Technical Institutes) or Ifts (Higher Technical Training Institutes) account for only 0.2% of tertiary qualifications among 25-34-year-olds. First-level university degrees have a share lower than that of specialist degrees (12.8% vs. 17.2%). A similar situation is observed in Germany. The comparison with two of the countries with the highest levels of tertiary education – Ireland and Sweden – is revealing: these two countries, which over the past twenty years have increased their levels of tertiary education by over 20 percentage points, owe much of their excellent performance to short programs (first-level degrees and non-academic short tertiary education). In Spain and France, where more than 50% of young people hold tertiary education qualifications, short-term higher technical education is also widespread: 15.7% in Spain and 12.1% in France of 25-34-year-olds hold this qualification.

In recent years, Italy has seen the rise of online universities, which, from having slightly more than 1,000 students enrolled in the academic year 2004-2005, have grown to over 250,000 enrollments in the 2022-2023 academic year, accounting for 13.1% of total enrollments. Online universities appear to be characterized by a good productivity index: while they account for 13.1% of enrollments, they contributed 16% of new graduates in 2023.

Figura 2: Population composition aged 25-34 in the European Union and individual countries, by education level

Values %. Descending order for tertiary education. Year 2023.

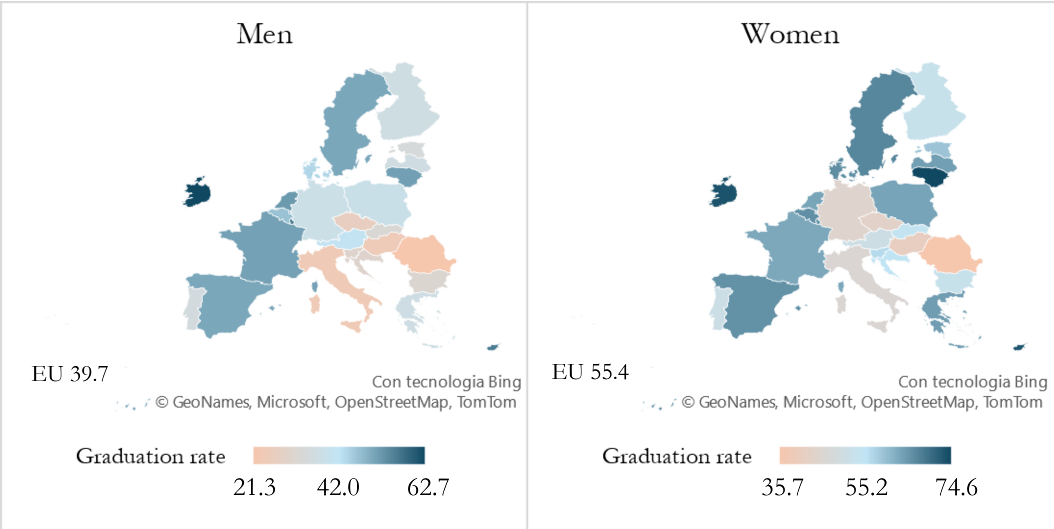


Source: elaborations on Eurostat data by Osservatorio delle libere professioni

The percentage of Stem degrees among total graduates in 2022 is also analyzed, broken down by specific fields of study. In the EU, the contribution amounts to 26.5%, with the component "Engineering, manufacturing, and construction" (14.7%) being the largest, followed by "Natural sciences, mathematics, and statistics" (7.3%) and "Information and communication technologies" (4.5%). Noteworthy in this ranking are the positions of Germany (35.9%), Austria (31.1%), and France (30.6%), with Italy at 23.4%. However, Italy ranks among the top countries in terms of female contribution to Stem degrees, with a percentage of women at 39%, higher than the European average of 35.4%, and only France performs better with 42.6% of women among Stem graduates. Tertiary education is notably more common among women than men. In the Eu, 37.6% of men have a degree or other tertiary qualification, compared to 48.8% of women aged 25-34; in Italy, the share of graduates is 24.4% for men and 37.1% for women as of 2023. It is observed across all European countries that higher educational qualifications are more frequent in the female population. However, this difference becomes more pronounced when looking at the employed population: the percentage of graduates among young employed people (aged 25-34) is significantly higher for women than for men. This trend is observed in most European countries, but it is particularly evident in labor markets that perform less well, such as Italy, where the percentage of female graduates among young workers is almost 50%, compared to 24.0% for men. In other words, women need a higher level of education to gain stable access to the labor market (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Graduation rate of employed in age class 25-34 year in European Union countries, distribution by gender

Values %. Year 2023.



Source: elaborations on Eurostat data by Osservatorio delle libere professioni

Italy ranks as having the lowest percentage of employed students (only 3%) among major European countries. The German system stands out for its ability to integrate students into the labor market: 23.5% of students are employed, thanks to measures that allow for the reconciliation of study and work, with part-time employment being notably widespread.

3 Numbers and trends in Europe

This chapter is dedicated to illustrating the growth dynamics of the liberal professions in Europe and in individual European countries. The data presented in this chapter for Italy, sourced from Eurostat, are based on smaller sample sizes, as they refer exclusively to professionals working in "Professional, Scientific, and Technical Activities" and in "Health and Social Care" (Ateco codes M and Q) for international comparison purposes. The analysis covers the period 2009-2023, examining both overall changes and those occurring in the most recent economic context. In this framework, characterized by strong employment growth and a general crisis in self-employment, the liberal professions have progressively expanded and consolidated their role in the European labor market, with a single setback in 2021, following the repercussions of the pandemic crisis. Between 2009 and 2023, the EU-27 experienced a significant decrease in unemployment (-5.7 million) and an increase in employment of nearly 16 million units. The increase in employment for employees – approximately

16.6 million units – absorbed the losses recorded in the independent labor sector, which amounted to around 700,000 units. In the 2020-2021 period, the decline in VAT numbers across Europe exceeded 1 million. The subsequent biennium (2022-2023) fully recovered this drop, returning to pre-2019 levels; this recovery involves the major European countries (Italy, France, Spain), while Germany saw a slight decline in the last year.

The dynamics of the liberal profession sector in Europe has been growing steadily for years: +24.9% between 2009 and 2019, +3.8% in the last year, and +7.3% between 2019 and 2023. Italy, which is characterized as the country of professions par excellence, has recorded a decline since 2019, which continued through 2022. In Italy, the negative change compared to 2019 is -4.5% (-54,300 units), with a tendency to recover in the last year. Intellectual work carried out independently now involves nearly 3 workers per 100 in Europe (it was 2.3 in 2009). In Italy, nearly 5 self-employed professionals serve the public and businesses for every 100 employed (Table 2).

Table 2: Number of liberal professionals*, percent change 2009-2019, 2019-2023, 2022-2023 and gap 2023-2019 in the European Union and individual countries**

Values in thousands. Descending order for 2023-2019 gap. Years 2009, 2019, 2022 e 2023.

	Absolute value				Percent change			Gap
	2009	2019	2022	2023	2009-2019	2019-2023	2022-2023	2023-2019
Italy	**1,018.0**	**1,195.2**	**1,117.2**	**1,140.9**	**17.4%**	**-4.5%**	**2.1%**	**-54.3**
Germany	973.3	1,010.8	923.7	969.3	3.9%	-4.1%	4.9%	-41.5
Czech Republic	113.4	145.1	131.3	126.4	28.0%	-12.9%	-3.7%	-18.7
Slovakia	51.7	66.2	56.7	54.2	28.0%	-18.1%	-4.4%	-12
Finland	49.5	67.5	65.2	62.9	36.4%	-6.8%	-3.5%	-4.6
Greece	153.8	167	164.1	165.6	8.6%	-0.8%	0.9%	-1.4
Cyprus	6.8	8.1	7.5	7.7	19.1%	-4.9%	2.7%	-0.4
Luxembourg	6.0	8.3	10.2	9.2	38.3%	10.8%	-9.8%	0.9
Estonia	7.3	11.9	9.8	13.0	63.0%	9.2%	32.7%	1.1
Malta	2.3	4.3	5.4	5.5	87.0%	27.9%	1.9%	1.2
Romania	29.0	32.9	54.9	34.4	13.4%	4.6%	-37.3%	1.5
Denmark	51.5	53.3	56.2	56.4	3.5%	5.8%	0.4%	3.1
Slovenia	10.8	19.6	23.9	23.1	81.5%	17.9%	-3.3%	3.5
Latvia	11.0	11.8	13.9	15.6	7.3%	32.2%	12.2%	3.8
Lithuania	7.2	15.4	19.2	21.0	113.9%	36.4%	9.4%	5.6
Ireland	46.6	46.7	54.9	54.5	0.2%	16.7%	-0.7%	7.8
Croatia	18.2	22.7	27.7	31.3	24.7%	37.9%	13.0%	8.6
Bulgaria	36.7	40.3	46.8	50.0	9.8%	24.1%	6.8%	9.7
Austria	85.1	113.1	111.6	124.0	32.9%	9.6%	11.1%	10.9
Portugal	68.4	101.9	111.0	114.1	49.0%	12.0%	2.8%	12.2
Hungary	60.1	74.8	95.2	90.1	24.5%	20.5%	-5.4%	15.3
Belgium	148.9	184.6	219.2	220.5	24.0%	19.4%	0.6%	35.9
Spain	361.9	468.2	475.4	508.8	29.4%	8.7%	7.0%	40.6
Sweden	93.5	101.2	129.0	149.5	8.2%	47.7%	15.9%	48.3
Poland	210.8	361.6	402.9	449.1	71.5%	24.2%	11.5%	87.5
Netherlands	248.0	395.5	481.0	498.6	59.5%	26.1%	3.7%	103.1
France	541.1	782.5	881.8	914.3	44.6%	16.8%	3.7%	131.8
EU (27 countries)	**4,410.3**	**5,510.4**	**5,695.5**	**5,910.2**	**24.9%**	**7.3%**	**3.8%**	**399.8**

*Data refers only to liberal professionals engaged in professional, scientific, and technical activities or working in the healthcare and social services sector.

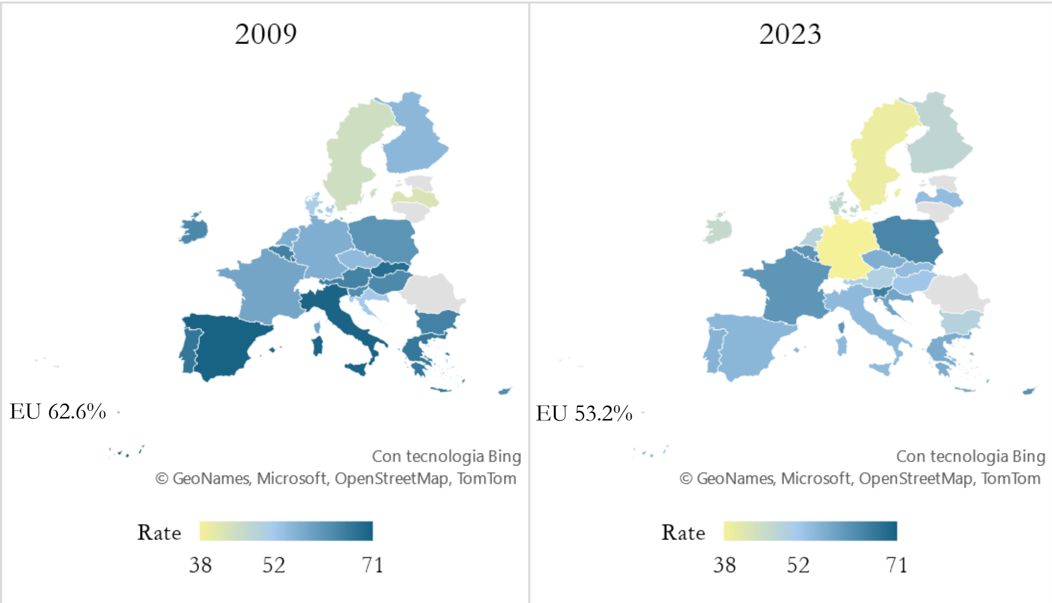
**In the absence of data, the following substitutions were made: Estonia 2010 value for 2009; Malta 2012 value for 2009 and 2018 value for 2019; Lithuania 2014 value for 2009.

Source: elaborations on Eurostat data by Osservatorio delle libere professioni

Across Europe, from 2009 to 2023, "Professional, Scientific, and Technical Activities" increased by +23.1%, while "Health and Social Care" saw an increase of +28.4%. There is greater dynamism in the medical and social sectors, which recorded a +9.8% increase in 2023 compared to 2019, with a significant acceleration in the last year (+5.1%); other activities saw a +5.9% increase between 2019 and 2023. Italy, in contrast to the general trend, shows negative changes both in technical and scientific professionals (-2.1%) and, more significantly, in health professionals (-11.3%). The positive balance in the last year of observation is not sufficient to offset the job losses resulting from the pandemic crisis. Germany ranks first for losses in the technical and scientific professional sector, with a -12.5% decrease, which translates to -72,000 units compared to the pre-pandemic period. On average, in the EU, about a third of self-employed professionals work in health, and the remaining two-thirds in other professions. In Italy, approximately a quarter of professionals are engaged in the medical sector, and three-quarters work in professional, scientific, and technical activities. The employment growth in the liberal professions has also led to a rebalancing of male and female representation: the percentage of women has been steadily increasing in recent years in Europe, although a slight male majority persists. The proportion of female professionals increased from 41.9% in 2009 to 47.9% in 2023. Italy is not among these countries: it has a low female labor market participation rate, which results in a lower female presence even in the self-employed sector.

Figure 4: Share of liberal professionals under 50 of the total self-employed in the European Union and individual European countries*

Values %. Years 2009 and 2023.



*Data refers only to liberal professionals engaged in professional, scientific, and technical activities or working in the healthcare and social services sector, aged between 25 and 49 years.
**Estonia, Lithuania, Malta, and Romania have been excluded due to lack of values. In the absence of data, the following substitution was made: Luxembourg 2022 value for 2023.

Source: elaborations on Eurostat data by Osservatorio delle libere professioni

As a result, Italy remains, as it did in 2009, at the bottom of the gender balance rankings, although with growing values (from 35.5% in 2009 to 40.0% in 2023). Additionally, a demographic shift is observable in Europe, with a marked decrease in those under 50, from 62.6% in 2009 to 53.2% in 2023. Therefore, today, nearly one in two self-employed professionals in Europe is over 50 years old. This aging process is occurring in nearly all countries (Figure 4).

Part II. Self-employed professionals in Italy

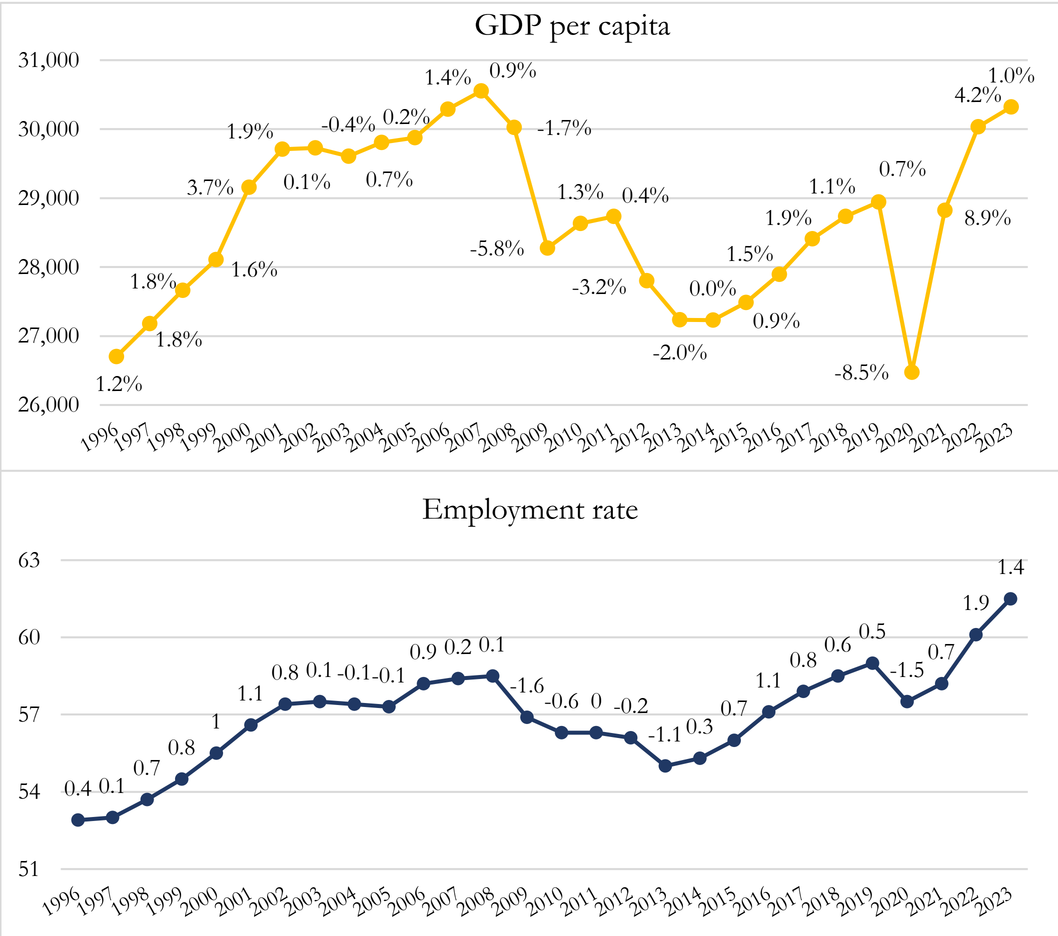
4 Trends of national economy

The focus is particularly on the trend of Gdp and employment in the post-pandemic period. Italy showed a stronger recovery response than other national economies, especially in the early phase of emerging from the crisis.

The gradual slowdown in the growth dynamic led to a modest increase of 1% in 2023. The employment rebound, however, continued at a sustained pace over the past two years, bringing the Italian employment rate to 61.5%, a level never previously seen in the national labor market (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Dynamics of Gdp per capita and employment rate, with variation compared to the previous year

The labels show the percentage change in Gdp and the difference in the employment rate, both compared to the previous year. Years 1996-2023.



Source: elaborations on Istat data by Osservatorio delle libere professioni

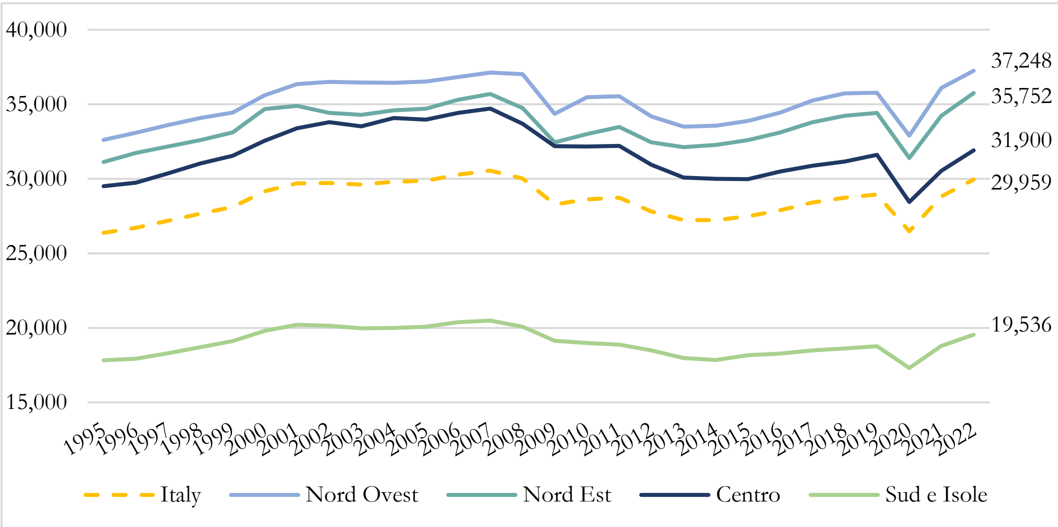
In 2023, the reduction in the debt-to-Gdp ratio, which had surged to 155% in 2020, continued. By 2023, this ratio stands at 137.3%, more than three percentage points lower than the previous year (140.5%). However, this reduction trend occurred alongside the ongoing expansion of public debt, which has been rising steadily since 2013. The growth in permanent contracts has been continuous since the first quarter of 2022 and is partly driven by the transformation of temporary contracts. The increased use of permanent employment contracts represents a positive sign of consolidation in the growth prospects of businesses, which aim to stabilize and retain their workforce. However, the data on wages is less positive: between 2021 and 2023, consumer prices increased by 16.3%, while contractual wages grew by just 4.5%. Between 2021 and 2023, gross contractual wages grew at a significantly slower pace than prices, with a particularly noticeable difference by the end of 2022. Consumer prices increased by 16.3% in total, while contractual wages only grew by 4.5%.

5 Italian territorial disparities

One of the key characteristics that distinguishes Italy's economy from other European countries is the persistent territorial disparities. Since Italy's unification, the imbalances between Nord and Sud have worsened, making this issue increasingly structural and entrenched. This chapter examines key economic and employment indicators that highlight the gaps between Mezzogiorno and Centro-Nord, and explores recent trends. In addition to the commonly used indicators such as Gdp and employment rate, other measures like education levels, part-time workers, internal and international migration balances, with a focus on students, and demographic indicators are also discussed.

Figure 6: Long-term dynamics of Gdp per capita in Italy and its regions

Chained values, base year 2015. Years 1995-2022.



Source: elaborations on Istat data by Osservatorio delle libere professioni

In Sud e Isole, Gdp per capita is just over €19,500, which is over €10,000 lower than the national average, and €15,000–€17,000 below Nord Est (which has an average Gdp per capita of nearly €36,000) and Nord Ovest, the wealthiest region with over €37,000 in Gdp per capita (2022 data; Figure 6).

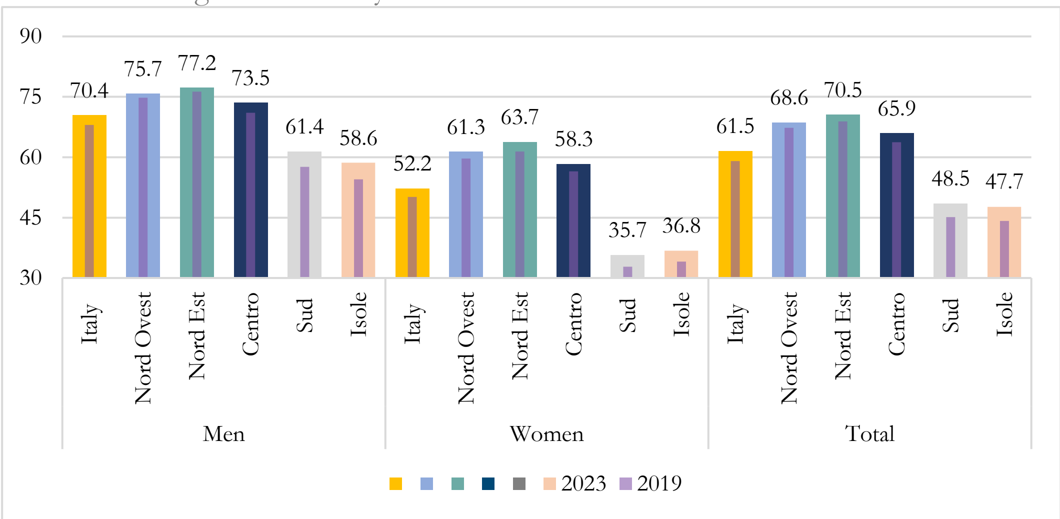
Territorial disparities are also evident in employment: in 2023, the employment rate in Sud e Isole is about 48%, while in Nord Est, the highest-performing region, it is 70.5% (Figure 7).

Between Q2 2019 and Q2 2024, Mezzogiorno saw a 4% increase in employment, a decrease in unemployment by 4.9 percentage points, and a larger drop in inactivity compared to other regions. While this positive trend reduces some of the gaps with Centro-Nord, Mezzogiorno remains disadvantaged, especially for 25–34-year-olds, with an employment gap of nearly 30 percentage points compared to Nord Est. Mezzogiorno also has a higher percentage of NEETs (not in education, employment, or training) among 15-34-year-olds, nearly double that of Nord.

Sud has the lowest percentage of 25-34-year-olds with tertiary education. Isole have the lowest share of graduates at 22.9%, almost 13 percentage points lower than Centro, and the proportion of young people with at most a middle school diploma is higher at 29.5%.

Figure 7: Employment rate by gender in Italy and its regional divisions

Values in %. Age class 15-64 years. Years 2019 and 2023.



Source: elaborations on Eurostat data by Osservatorio delle libere professioni

In 2023, female employment rates in Sud e Isole are between 35% and 37%, with a gender gap of 25.7 percentage points in Sud and 21.8 in Isole. In Nord e Centro, female employment rates are higher, ranging from 58.3% in Centro to 63.7% in Nord Est, and the gender gap is narrower, at around 13.5 percentage points (Nord Est) and 15.2 (Centro).

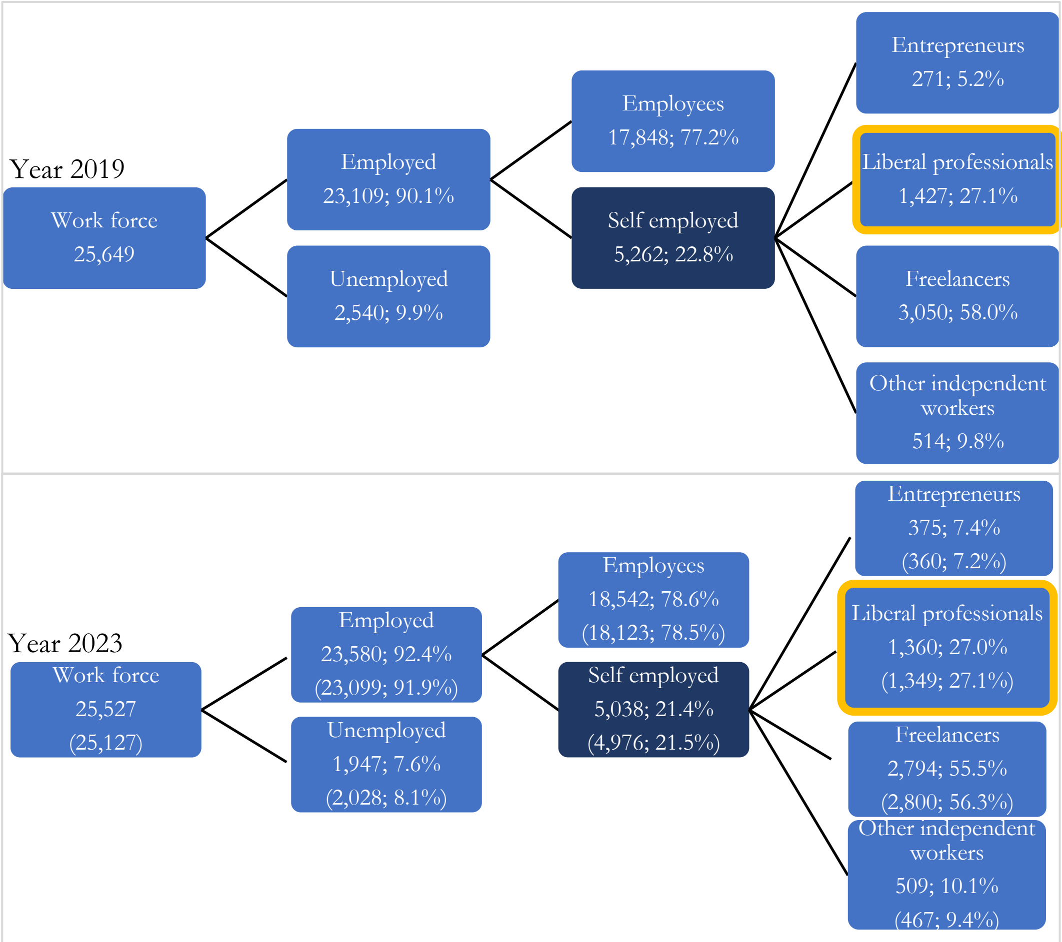
The percentage of part-time male workers increases from Nord to Sud, especially in the Isole, where it is nearly double that of the Nord (10.7% vs. 5.7%). Internal migration has a major deficit in regions like Basilicata (-6.2‰) and Calabria (-5.3‰), while Emilia-Romagna (+3.4‰) and Friuli-Venezia Giulia (+2.2‰) have positive internal migration balances. Additionally, student mobility shows that the wealthiest regions in terms of university students are Emilia-Romagna, Lombardy, and Lazio. The largest losses in absolute numbers are in Apuglia (-36,917), Sicily (-29,322), Campania (-21,801), and Calabria (-20,371). Lastly, demographic trends in Sud have aligned more closely with Centro-Nord in the past two decades, particularly in terms of fertility rates, with declining birth rates and an aging population.

6 Numbers and trends

Here, as in the subsequent Chapter 7, the analyses rely on data from the Labour Force Survey provided by Istat. It should be clarified from the outset that this survey does not only include professions related to the Ateco codes of section M "Professional, scientific, and technical activities" and Q "Human health and social work activities," but also covers all activities carried out in a self-employed capacity, including those in occupational segments other than the two mentioned. This clarification is important to highlight the discrepancies compared to the data presented in Chapter 3 for Italy, sourced from Eurostat, which is based on lower numbers as, for international comparison purposes, it refers exclusively to professionals working in "Professional, scientific, and technical activities" and "Human health and social work activities" (Ateco Codes M and Q).

Figure 8: Composition of the workforce in Italy for 2019 and 2023 (2022 values in parentheses)

Absolute values in thousands and percentages on higher level aggregate.



Data refers to the main employment

Source: elaborations on Istat data by Osservatorio delle libere professioni

The focus is on the numbers of self-employed professionals in Italy and the developments that have accompanied this sector, with particular attention to the extraordinary circumstances of the recent period (2019-2023). Limiting the observation to the dynamics of independent employment in the past year (between

2022 and 2023), there has been an increase in employment among liberal professionals, entrepreneurs and other independent workers, while the number of freelancers has shown a slight decline. By 2023, the total number of liberal professionals reaches approximately 1,36 million, accounting for 5.8% of total employment and 27.0% of the entire independent workforce (Figure 8).

At the territorial level, the only exception is Nord Est region, which shows a decline in 2023 (-5.5%), while Centro (+4.5%) and Mezzogiorno (+3%) show positive results. The near-continuous growth that characterized the sector up until 2019 sharply reversed in 2020, when the number of self-employed professionals fell by about 75,000 compared to the previous year. The dynamics of the following three years appear to be fluctuating, resulting in a more encouraging employment volume by the end of 2023 compared to 2022. Focusing on the recent years, it can be observed that until 2021, the reduction in the number of liberal professionals mostly affected those with employees. Since 2022, the trend has reversed, and in the past year, there has been a positive change of 4.0%, with nearly 8,000 employer professionals recovering, and 20,000 if considering the last two years (Table 3).

Table 3: Number of liberal professionals with and without employees, composition for 2023, and percent change 2019-2023 and 2022-2023, by region and in Italy*

Years 2019-2023.

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	Comp. 2023	Change 2019-2023	Change 2022-2023
Nord Ovest	**440**	**394**	**426**	**406**	**406**	**100.0%**	**-7.7%**	**0.1%**
With employees	60	53	58	60	62	15.2%	2.6%	2.7%
Without employees	380	341	368	346	344	84.8%	-9.3%	-0.4%
Nord Est	**283**	**265**	**277**	**270**	**255**	**100.0%**	**-9.7%**	**-5.5%**
With employees	46	41	38	40	36	14.3%	-20.8%	-8.6%
Without employees	237	224	239	230	219	85.7%	-7.6%	-4.9%
Centro	**350**	**339**	**329**	**317**	**332**	**100.0%**	**-5.2%**	**4.5%**
With employees	50	40	42	47	47	14.2%	-6.0%	0.6%
Without employees	300	299	286	271	285	85.8%	-5.1%	5.2%
Mezzogiorno	**354**	**355**	**370**	**356**	**367**	**100.0%**	**3.5%**	**3.0%**
With employees	46	51	47	50	59	16.2%	28.7%	19.1%
Without employees	307	304	323	306	307	83.8%	0.1%	0.3%
Italy	**1,427**	**1,352**	**1,402**	**1,349**	**1,360**	**100.0%**	**-4.7%**	**0.8%**
With employees	203	185	185	196	204	15.0%	0.6%	4.0%
Without employees	1,224	1,168	1,216	1,153	1,155	85.0%	-5.6%	0.2%

Data refers to the main employment
*It should be noted that the data for self-employed professionals with employees, by region, may exhibit a higher sampling error compared to the Istat standard due to the smaller sample size.

Source: elaborations on Istat data by Osservatorio delle libere professioni

The sector where liberal professionals are most concentrated is "Scientific and technical professions, real estate, rental, and travel agencies," which includes 54.2% of those employed in the self-employed professions. Another significant category is "Health and education," which accounts for 18.2% of those employed in self-employed professions.

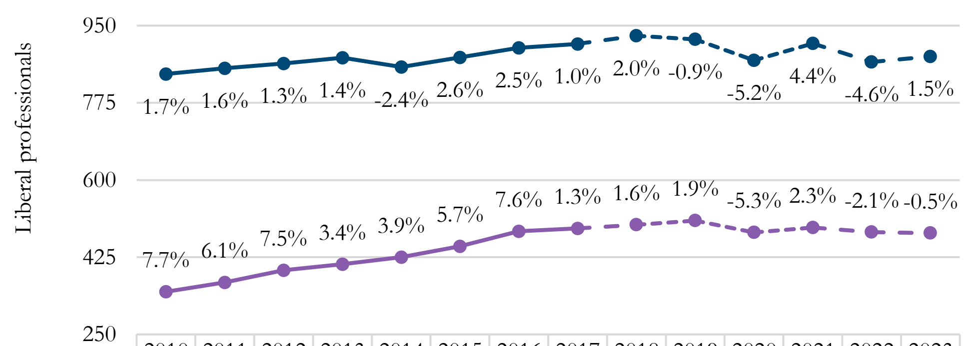
7 Socio-demographic attributes

This chapter analyses the socio-demographic characteristics of the liberal professional sector in Italy. The data highlight how employment growth rates, much stronger among women, lead to a clear gender rebalancing within the liberal professions: the female share has increased from 29.2% in 2010 to 35.3% in 2023. In recent years, the female component has grown everywhere, particularly in Mezzogiorno.

The number of employers has increased, maintaining the trend of the previous year, with about six thousand male employers and one thousand female employers added. The proportion of women varies greatly depending on the sector of activity. In the "Health and Social Assistance" sectors, women are the majority (51.9%); in legal professions, gender parity is almost achieved (43.1%). Within the liberal professions men and women are radically different in terms of sector composition. Men are more employed in technical professions (19.7%) and in business services and leisure (19.5%). Among women, the predominant sectors are social and health professions (24.1%), non-ordained business services and leisure professions (17.5%), and legal professions (16.2%). The sectoral specialization profile is also correlated with education level, which is higher among women: in 2023, 77.7% of liberal professionals' women hold a degree compared to 58.7% of their male counterparts (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Growth dynamics of liberal professionals and annual growth rates, by gender

Values in thousands. Years 2010-2023*.



	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Men	840	854	864	877	856	878	900	909	927	919	871	909	868	880
Women	347	368	396	409	425	449	484	490	498	508	481	492	482	480

Data refers to the main employment
*Since 2018, the data refers to the new Istat survey on the labor force

Source: elaborations on Istat data by Osservatorio delle libere professioni

The aging of the population, which Italy has been experiencing since 2013/2014, has also affected the age structure of liberal professionals: the average age in 2023 is 48.2 years, compared to 45.5 years in 2013. Female liberal professionals are relatively younger than their male counterparts, but the aging process affects both genders. Women between the ages of 15 and 34 made up 25% of liberal professionals in 2013, and by 2023, they are 19%, while young men are 13% in 2023. There is an even greater gap between the genders in the intermediate age range: women between the ages of 35 and 44 account for 59%, while men account for 49%. Furthermore, among men, those over 55 make up 38%, an 11-percentage point increase compared to 2013.

Looking at employment variations, it is notable that the decline has particularly affected the youth sector (-13.8%), but also those between 35 and 54 (-8.6%). The gender composition within age groups (15-34, 35-54, and 55 and older) has remained largely stable from 2019 to 2023, showing almost gender parity among the younger group and a growing gender gap in older generations, with a ratio exceeding 3:1 (in favor of men) among professionals aged 55 and older.

8 Income: A comparison between multiple sources

In this chapter, the analysis of the incomes of self-employed professionals is presented. The proposed elaborations rely on multiple sources: data derived from the 2023 financial statements of the private pension funds, which concern the incomes of regulated self-employed professionals; the Synthetic Indices of Fiscal Reliability (Isa) from the Ministry of Economy and Finance (Mef) for regulated professions for which the pension fund data is not available; data related to the Separate Management of Inps – Professionals, which primarily involves non-regulated self-employed professionals but also includes some professionals registered with associations and councils without their own pension fund, such as healthcare technicians, social workers, alpine guides, and ski instructors; and finally, information provided by the Mef's Statistics Office regarding the standard and simplified tax regimes.

Part III. The size of the business and self-employed professionals

9 The size issue of italian businesses

This chapter explores the issue of business size, with a comparative perspective, focusing particularly on sectors typical of the self-employment world. As repeatedly emphasized, the limited size of businesses constitutes a barrier to the competitiveness of the national economic system.

Table 4: Distribution of enterprises and employees by size class in France, Germany, Italy and Spain

Year 2022.

	France	Germany	Italy	Spain
Comp. % enterprise	**100.0%**	**100.0%**	**100.0%**	**100.0%**
From 0 to 9 employees	96.2%	84.0%	95.0%	94.7%
From 10 to 19 employees	2.1%	9.4%	3.1%	2.9%
From 20 to 49 employees	1.1%	4.2%	1.3%	1.6%
From 50 to 249 employees	0.5%	2.0%	0.5%	0.6%
250 employees and more	0.1%	0.5%	0.1%	0.1%
Comp. % employees	**100.0%**	**100.0%**	**100.0%**	**100.0%**
From 0 to 9 employees	27.1%	20.2%	41.8%	34.0%
From 10 to 19 employees	6.9%	10.2%	10.2%	8.3%
From 20 to 49 employees	7.9%	10.3%	9.5%	10.1%
From 50 to 249 employees	12.2%	15.8%	13.5%	13.8%
250 employees and more	45.9%	43.5%	25.0%	33.8%

Source: elaborations on Eurostat data by Osservatorio delle libere professioni

The analyses examine the differences between Italy and the main European countries and show how the business size structure in Italy has changed over the past ten years. The comparison reveals that, as of 2022, Italy has a share of microenterprises (businesses with fewer than ten employees) similar to that of Spain and France: about 95% of businesses employ between zero and nine people. In contrast, Germany has a significantly lower share of microenterprises, at 84%. However, the most significant data is employment-related: it is from this data that the relevance of the "size issue" becomes apparent, reflecting the specificities of the Italian entrepreneurial system (Table 4).

One initial observation about the Italian case is the higher concentration of employment in microenterprises. It is worth noting that Italian microenterprises are slightly larger than their Spanish and French counterparts, with an average size of 1.7 employees (Spain: 1.6; France: 1.2). Another important finding concerns the share of employment in larger enterprises (250 employees and more), which is remarkably low in Italy (25.0%), especially when compared to France (45.9%) and Germany (43.5%). In Italy, employment predominantly exists in microenterprises, while in France and Germany, dependent work is mainly concentrated in larger enterprises.

National specificities are further emphasized when focusing on sectors most closely related to liberal professions, namely activities included in section M of the ATECO code: in the four analysed European countries, microenterprises strongly dominate, representing over 90% of all business activities; in Italy, this dominance is overwhelming (98.9%). This figure is significantly influenced by the large number of liberal professionals without employees in Italy (it is important to remember that Eurostat statistics here include businesses without employees). When looking at the distribution of employees in professional, scientific, and technical activities, we see that nearly three-quarters (73.6%) of them work in microenterprises in Italy. This concentration is much higher than in the other major European countries, where the percentage is much lower.

If we examine national statistics based on Inps data, where business size is defined by the number of employees, rather than the number of total workers, we can observe that between 2012 and 2022, Italy experienced a contraction in the total number of businesses (-2.8%) alongside a strong increase in employment (+17.2%). The decline in business numbers primarily affects companies with one employee (-10.4%) and those with 2-3 employees (-1.2%), while all other business size categories saw growth. Overall, we observe that a portion of employment has "shifted" from microenterprises to larger businesses, with employment growth primarily driven by businesses with more than 100 employees.

Although the sector of professional, scientific, and technical activities is structurally characterized by smaller businesses compared to most other sectors, the growth in business size recorded in this sector is particularly significant. Between 2012 and 2022, businesses with employees grew by 6.5%, and dependent employment in the sector increased by more than 40%. Even in the typical professional sector, a revolution has taken place, leading to an expansion in business size, which has altered the sector's employment structure: by 2022, more than half of employees (56%) worked in businesses with at least 10 employees, compared to 44% in 2012.

A significant growth was also recorded in the health and social assistance sector. Here, the increase in businesses with employees between 2012 and 2022 (+13.6%) was even stronger than in professional, scientific, and technical activities, while employment growth also saw a similar rise (+40.2%). Growth rates particularly favoured businesses with 6-9 employees (+51.2%) and those with 10-14 employees (+45.5%). Employment growth, however, was concentrated mainly in larger businesses, which accounted for 65% of all new dependent jobs created in the decade.

10 The Demand for Labor in the Self-Employment Sectors

This chapter presents an analysis of the demand for dependent labour in the sectors of professional, scientific, and technical activities. Through data on hirings, terminations, and transformations of dependent labour contracts made available by Inps, the chapter will show on the one hand how the demand for labour mobilized by the sector has increased, and on the other hand how the use of different types of employment contracts has changed.

In 2023, there were 751,000 new hires in sectors related to professional activities, about 30,000 more than in 2019 (the year before the pandemic crisis) and 221,000 more than in 2014. Employment balances in dependent labour are positive in all three years under examination: 2023, in particular, shows a net job growth of 62,133 dependent positions in professional sectors, significantly higher than those in 2014 and 2019. This performance is mainly driven by the increase in permanent contracts, which in 2023 account for a net employment balance of 51,568 positions. The number of fixed-term contract hires has further increased in 2023, rising from 318,000 in 2014 to about 503,000 in 2019, and then to 537,000 in the last year. The number of apprenticeship contracts activated by employers in professional sectors has also grown from 18,000 hires in 2014, to 31,000 in 2019, and 34,000 in 2024 (Table 5).

Table 5: Demand for dependent employment in the liberal professions sectors* (excluding temporary and intermittent work)

Years 2014, 2019 and 2023.

	2014	2019	2023
Overall employment balances	**38,821**	**39,702**	**62,133**
Hires	530,585	721,677	751,417
Terminations	491,764	681,975	689,284
Permanent employment balances (A + Permanent - C)	**24,600**	**48,620**	**51,568**
Hires (A)	194,292	187,657	180,096
Conversions to Permanent (Permanent)	49,378	104,693	111,681
Terminations (C)	219,070	243,730	240,209
Apprenticeship employment balances	**-600**	**6,145**	**4,632**
Gross Activations (Q)	18,446	31,154	34,300
Conversions to Permanent (Permanent)	7,897	9,547	11,211
Terminations (S)	11,149	15,462	18,457
Fixed-Term employment balances (A - Permanent - C)	**14,817**	**-15,070**	**5,926**
Hires (A)	317,847	502,866	537,021
Conversions to Permanent (Permanent)	41,485	95,153	100,477
Terminations (C)	261,545	422,783	430,618

*For liberal professions sectors, this refers to professional, scientific, and technical activities - administration and support services.

**Including seasonal contracts.

Source: elaborations on Inps data by Osservatorio delle libere professioni

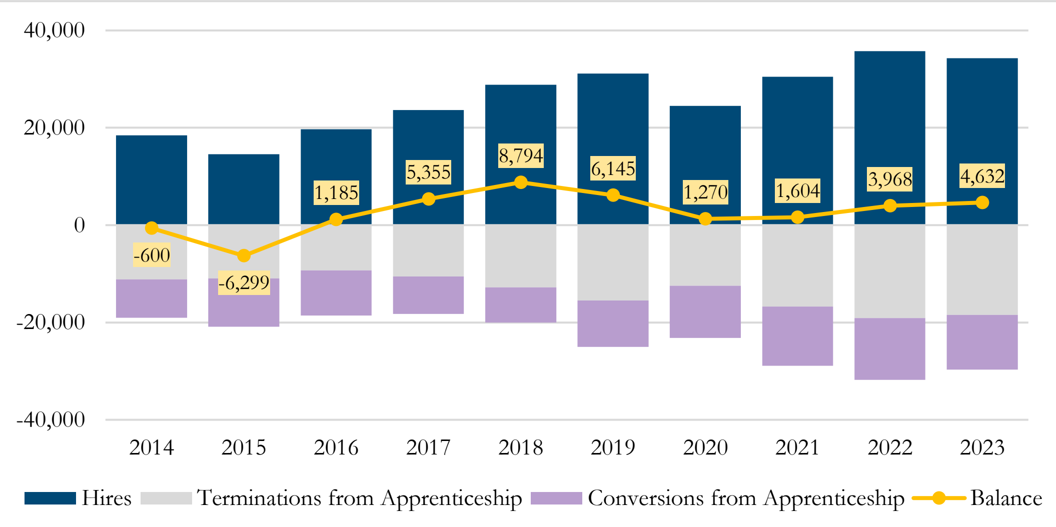
By 2023, the typical sectors of liberal professions show positive employment balances in all regions concerning dependent labour positions. Notably, Lombardia stands out with a positive balance of 16,000 positions, followed by Lazio with over 14,000 units. Another region with significant positive employment balances in absolute terms is Campania, which reports a positive balance of about 5,000 units in the dependent labour market of professional and related sectors.

The employment growth achieved in 2023 is driven by permanent contracts, partly due to the substantial contribution of stabilizations, which refer to the transformation of fixed-term contracts into permanent ones. Stabilizations predominantly result from the conversion of fixed-term contracts (approximately 89% by 2023), while transformations from apprenticeships contribute 10%, and those from seasonal contracts make up a residual 1.3%.

Finally, it is interesting to briefly focus on apprenticeship data, a contractual tool aimed at integrating young people up to the age of 30. The number of apprenticeship hires has been trending upward over the years, except for the setback during the pandemic crisis. Over the past decade, apprenticeship hires have almost doubled, from around 18,000 in 2014 to 34,000 in 2023. From this perspective, the data reflect a positive dynamic. However, when looking at the exit flows from apprenticeship, the data show a significant increase in terminations: an increasing proportion of apprenticeship contracts do not convert into permanent positions (the "natural" outcome of the apprenticeship process, which follows the achievement of the qualification), but are instead terminated prematurely, either due to dismissal or, more frequently, voluntary resignation by the worker. In 2023, there were about 18,000 terminations and 11,000 transformations into permanent contracts: for every 100 early terminations of the relationship, about 60 apprentices obtained the qualification and stabilization in the company (Figure 10).

Figure 10: Hires, terminations and conversions of apprenticeship contracts in the liberal professions sectors*

Years 2014-2023.



*For liberal professions sectors, this refers to professional, scientific, and technical activities - administration and support services.

Source: elaborations on Inps data by Osservatorio delle libere professioni

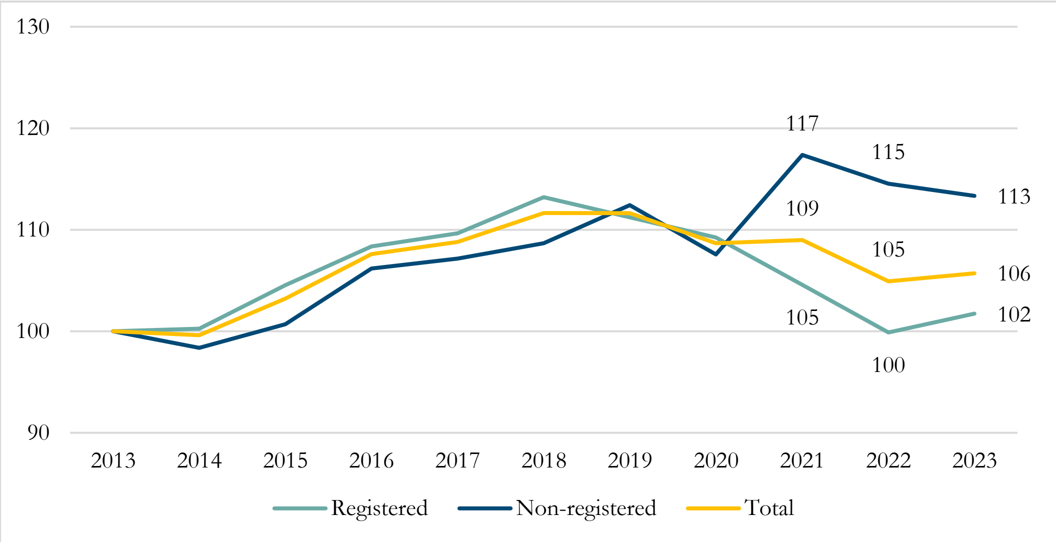
11 Liberal Professionals: registered and non-registered

This chapter focuses on the internal differences within the liberal professional sector and provides a comparative analysis of registered and non-registered professions, examining the evolutions of both components and the specific characteristics of each professional segment. The analyses utilize microdata from the labour force provided by Istat and present a picture of significant heterogeneity between traditional and emerging professions, highlighting the complexity of the phenomena related to professionals.

Between 2014 and 2018, there was strong growth in the liberal professional sector, driven by both traditional and new professions. The dynamics began to diverge in 2019: registered professions experienced their first setback, while non-registered professions continued to grow. In 2020, the entire professional sector experienced a temporary slowdown, but the 2021 recovery was limited to the non-registered segment. In contrast, 2023 saw growth in registered professions and a slight decline in non-registered professions. Up until 2018, the growth of the two components was similar. However, the contraction in registered professions after that period led to a return to 2013 employment levels by the end of 2022, while non-registered professions reached their peak expansion in 2021. By 2023, compared to 2013, the non-registered segment had seen a 13% increase, much stronger than the 2% growth of the registered professionals over the same period (Figure 11).

Figure 11: Trend of liberal professionals, division by registered and non-registered professions

Base 2013=100. Years 2013-2023.



Data refers to the main employment

Source: elaborations on Istat data by Osservatorio delle libere professioni

The two segments of self-employment differ significantly in the sectors they operate in: registered professionals are mainly concentrated in professional, scientific, and technical activities (64.7%) and in healthcare and social assistance (24.9%), while non-registered professionals work in a wide variety of fields. Specifically, a quarter of non-registered professionals work in sectors close to traditional liberal professions, followed by professionals in commerce, which includes a large group of agents and commercial representatives; next, with 10%, are professionals in information and communication services (data analysts and software designers), a highly specialized and fast-growing sector (+36% from 2013 to 2023). The aging of the workforce affects both categories; however, the proportion of professionals over 55 is lower among non-registered professionals: in 2023, they make up 28.5%, compared to 34.9% in registered professions. The female component is more present in traditional professions, although gender equality is still far from being achieved. In 2023, female registered professionals make up 37.7%, while female non- registered professionals are 31.0%. In 2023, the percentage of employers is 16.2% among registered professionals, while for non-registered professionals, the figure is slightly lower at 12.9%. Geographically, registered professionals are more prevalent in southern Italy and less so in northern Italy. Among non- registered professionals, the highest concentrations are found in Lazio, Lombardy, Campania, and Piedmont.

Parte IV. Legislation of interest for self-employed professionals.

12 Rules for stabilization and reform of the Iscro

The chapter analyzes the content of paragraphs 142-155 of Article 1 of the 2023 budget law (Law No. 213 of December 30, 2024), through which the Government intervened to make the Iscro – Indennità Straordinaria di Continuità Reddituale e Operativa – structural, starting from January 1, 2024. This measure is a social safety net for self-employed workers enrolled in Inps Gestione Separata. The welfare measure was designed to create a universal protection system in cases of work suspension and business contraction due to exceptional reasons, in accordance with the principles set out in Article 35 of the Italian Constitution. Initially, Iscro, created and designed within the Consultative Committee for Self-Employment of Cnel, was conceived as an experimental measure for the 2020-2023 period. Therefore, in the absence of legislative confirmation, it would have ceased to function, interrupting a virtuous path aimed at protecting work in all its forms and applications. The Government, in addition to stabilizing the measure, modified some parameters to introduce less stringent access requirements and expand the pool of potential beneficiaries, responding to requests from the liberal professions sector. The chapter, after listing the access requirements and methods of benefiting from the measure, outlines the subsequent changes to the Iscro regulations regarding professional training and updating, through the so-called "Decreto Coesione".

13 Implementation of the mandate for tax reform

In the past year, the Government has been engaged in the implementation of the enabling law for tax reform (Law No. 111 of August 9, 2023), through the adoption of thirteen implementing decrees. The chapter reviews and briefly comments on the legislative decrees implementing the enabling law, particularly those provisions of specific interest for the category of self-employed professionals. In December 2023, the legislature intervened to implement the first module of reform for personal income tax and other measures related to income taxes, while also reforming the *Statuto dei diritti del contribuente*. Also in December 2023, the tax dispute system was revised with the aim of reducing the time taken to conclude tax disputes, reducing the overall number of disputes, and enhancing the digitalization of tax justice.

In order to strengthen the collaborative compliance regime, some modifications were introduced to encourage voluntary compliance by taxpayers.

In January 2024, the legislature exercised its mandate regarding the rationalization and simplification of rules for tax compliance. The reform of tax assessments and the biennial preventive settlement process was initiated in February 2024. The delegated legislator then intervened again with an additional decree containing supplementary and corrective provisions related to the collaborative compliance regime, rationalization and simplification of tax compliance, and the biennial preventive settlement process.

Also as part of the tax reform mandate, Legislative Decree No. 87 of June 14, 2024, carried out a revision of the tax penalty system. Finally, the draft legislative decree concerning the revision of the taxation regime for income (Irpef and Ires), eagerly awaited by the liberal professional category, introduces the principle of tax neutrality regarding extraordinary operations involving contributions, transformations, mergers, and demergers of companies among professionals; contributions to associations without legal personality established between individuals for joint practice of arts and professions or in simple partnerships; contributions of participatory positions in professional associations or simple partnerships into other associations or companies set up for the joint practice of arts and professions or among professionals.

14 **Implementation of the mandate for the revision of the business incentive system**

The chapter focuses on the approval of the draft delegation law regarding the revision of the business incentive system (Law No. 160 of October 27, 2023). The goal of the delegation is to curb the extreme fragmentation of the current incentive policies, leading to a new system of more homogeneous, simple, and functional incentives. Furthermore, the Government is tasked with harmonizing and rationalizing the framework by drafting a "*Codice degli incentivi*", which will serve as a comprehensive set of rules for both public decision-makers and economic operators (businesses and professionals). The chapter then delves into the provisions of particular interest for liberal professionals, especially the principle of equal treatment between businesses and professionals for accessing incentives, introduced through a parliamentary amendment later reworded by the Government, as part of the general principles and guidelines of the delegation (Art. 2). The issue of access to incentives has garnered significant attention from the professional world, which has long highlighted the need to ensure equal opportunities for all economic actors contributing to the country's growth, in order to eliminate the disparities that have hindered the organic development of liberal professions in Italy.

15 **Incentives for promoting self-employment**

The chapter is dedicated to the analysis of “Autoimpiego Centro-Nord Italia” and “Resto al Sud 2.0,” measures introduced by the so-called “Decreto Coesione” (Decree-Law No. 60 of May 7, 2024), aimed at promoting the establishment of self-employment, entrepreneurial, and freelance activities (including those requiring mandatory registration with professional Orders or Associations), both individually and collectively. These initiatives target young people and women under 35, currently excluded from the labour market, and consist of the provision of employment services and the granting of self-employment incentives, with amounts varying depending on the type and amount of investments made (e.g., the purchase of goods and services related to the goals of ecological and digital transition) for the establishment of new businesses. The self-employment promotion tools introduced by the "Decreto Coesione" represent significant interventions for the professional services sector, as they can help counter the trend of abandonment of the liberal professions, which has been particularly affecting the younger segment (ages 15-34) of the liberal professional sector since 2020. However, it should be noted that the implementation of "Autoimpiego Centro-Nord Italia" and "Resto al Sud 2.0" is still pending the publication of the respective interministerial implementation decrees, which are expected to define the terms, criteria, and funding methods for the two measures.

Part V. Representation and professions: a year of activity

16 The main novelties of the renewal of the Ccnl for professional studies

The renewal of the Ccnl for Professional Studies and Activities, signed on February 16, 2024, by Confprofessioni, Filcams-Cgil, Fisascat-Cisl, and Uiltucs, introduces significant novelties in the economic and regulatory framework of employment relations, with the aim of providing adequate responses to the numerous challenges induced by labour transformation processes (such as the spread of smart working, the emergence of new professions and new organizational work models) and the national socioeconomic context (including the pandemic, rising inflation, and ecological and digital transitions). In this regard, the renewal provides for an increase in minimum wages and a one-time payment (covering the period of contractual vacancy) which can also be provided through welfare goods and services as outlined in tax regulations, with the goal of ensuring the recovery of purchasing power of wages and promoting job growth within professional settings. Moreover, significant innovations are introduced in the area of supplementary welfare, a long-standing distinguishing feature of professional studies and activities, including the extension of healthcare coverage for the families of workers enrolled in the sector's supplementary health assistance fund (Cadiprof); the introduction of a paid daily leave on an annual basis for carrying out preventive activities as part of Cadiprof's health plan (a unique element in collective bargaining); the increase in the monthly funding allocated to the sector's bilateral institutions (Cadiprof and Ebipro) to enhance healthcare and supplementary welfare services (e.g., reimbursement for university fees, sports activity subscriptions, daycare fees, etc.); and the strengthening of the protections granted to liberal professionals through Ebipro's specific self-employed management (the Professional Management, another unique feature in the Italian context). Particular attention is also given to the topics of organizational flexibility and work-life balance, apprenticeship, and fixed-term employment.

17 The bilateral entities of the sector

The chapter describes the bilateral entities of the sector (Cadiprof, Ebipro – Gestione Ordinaria, Ebipro – Gestione Professionisti, Fondoprofessioni, Fondo di solidarietà per le attività professionali) and outlines the main updates adopted in the past year. 2023 was characterized by an enhancement of services for the employees of professional studios and liberal professionals.

18 The istitutional relations of Confprofessioni (1° september 2023-31 august 2024)

The chapter provides a detailed overview of all the parliamentary hearings and government and ministerial meetings that Confprofessioni participated in during the twelve months covered by the report, which essentially corresponds to the second year of activity of the government led by Hon. Giorgia Meloni. During this period, the government reaffirmed its willingness to engage in dialogue and involve social partners on the key dossiers and reforms affecting the country, through the convening of numerous ministerial and interministerial meetings. At the same time, Confprofessioni's interactions with Parliament, through hearings on legislative proposals and inquiries, increased both in terms of quantity and the quality of the topics addressed, enabling the views of self-employed professionals to be shared and representing the sector's needs on current measures and challenges.

Finally, with regard to government meetings, a brief focus is dedicated to Confprofessioni's participation in two key tables that were particularly significant both for the issues discussed and the interest they generated within the liberal professional sector: a) the Steering Committee for the Pnrr (National Recovery and Resilience Plan), chaired by the Minister for European Affairs, il Sud, le Politiche di Coesione e il Pnrr, Raffaele Fitto; b) the permanent technical working group on self-employment, established by the so-called "Job's Act," aimed at coordinating and monitoring interventions related to self-employment, chaired by the Minister of Labour and Social Policies, Maria Elvira Calderone. Confprofessioni actively participated in the meetings, contributing ideas on many topics discussed, including professional aggregations, profession attractiveness, incentives, fair compensation, social security, subsidiarity, training and orientation, digitalization, and Artificial Intelligence.

19 The activities of the Council for self-employment and liberal professions of the Cnel

The chapter analyses the activities of the Council for self-employment and liberal professions, established within the Cnel and chaired by the President of Confprofessioni, Gaetano Stella. The Council's task is to address the transformations in professional work and the condition of professionals, and to promote legislative initiatives beneficial to the sector.

The Council includes representatives from sector organizations, as well as some members of the Cnel and experts in the field.

From the early meetings, the Council shared the need to prioritize the strengthening of welfare protections for self-employed professionals enrolled in the Inps Gestione Separata. A framework of potential legislative interventions was identified with the aim of equalizing welfare guarantees among workers in a universalistic perspective. The Council will prepare, on the topics discussed, a legislative initiative draft to be submitted first to the Cnel assembly and then to Parliament.

20 Confprofessioni in Europe

The chapter lists the main activities carried out by Confprofessioni's European Desk, which, during the past year, has maintained its constant commitment to monitoring

European legislative dynamics of particular interest to professionals and lobbying activities, strengthening relations with Members of the European Parliament and European officials, and ensuring the Confederation's impactful presence in the decision-making processes of the Union.

The European Desk has collaborated within European bodies where Confprofessioni holds key positions: CEPLIS (European Council of Liberal Professions) and UMPL (Union of Liberal Professions). It has also worked actively with Apriformazione on a series of events in Brussels, held under two different projects funded by the FSE Veneto, which allowed dialogues with members of the European Parliament and the European Commission. These events facilitated discussions on how to effectively implement gender equality strategies within European policies, promoting policies that foster equity and inclusion in the professional context.

During the European Parliament election campaign, the European Desk intensified its efforts by organizing a series of strategic meetings with candidates and, subsequently, with newly elected parliamentarians, to ensure that key issues for liberal professions were discussed, understood, and incorporated into the party platforms.

Finally, the adoption of the Own Initiative Opinion CCMI/231, titled "Professional Services in the Green Transition," was welcomed. This document represents a significant step in recognizing the central role that professional services play in the transition to a more sustainable, low-carbon economy.

21 **Professionals and internationalization**

The chapter reviews the main activities and initiatives carried out by Apri International, which, in the 2023-2024 period, has intensified its role in promoting internationalization and supporting the development of Italian professionals abroad, with a strategic focus on institutional and professional relations. The activities of the second half of 2023 were mainly concentrated on organizing the mission of a delegation of professionals to New York and Washington.

In 2024, the second edition of the Annual International Meeting (AIM2024) took place. The event focused on Africa and Piano Mattei: a strategic initiative to strengthen economic relations between Italy and the African continent. The involvement of Italian professionals in development projects in Africa is crucial, as their expertise in engineering, architecture, healthcare, finance, and law can play a key role in supporting sustainable development, addressing both infrastructural and social challenges.

During AIM2024, Aprilink was also launched, a free platform created by Apri International to network Italian professionals. Aprilink aims to provide resources and support to expand their businesses abroad, facilitate the creation of international partnerships, and participate in cross-border cooperation projects.

In 2024, Apri International continued its commitment to involving Italian professionals and businesses in international development projects, organizing a mission with an institutional delegation to Kenya in October 2024, aimed at strengthening commercial ties and promoting growth opportunities in Africa.

Part VI. Thematic Insights

22 The trends of EU law on issues of interest for liberal professionals

The just-concluded legislature (2019-2024) marked a turning point in the way the European Union engaged with liberal professionals. The landscape of liberal professions in Europe is expanding and rapidly changing, not only in terms of skills and operational tools but also with regard to economic conditions, legal frameworks, and social protections.

Following the adoption of the European Pillar of Social Rights in 2017 – which aims to set the course for the Union's social policies until 2030 – the European Commission has launched an intensive regulatory effort to implement the Pillar. The developments for the liberal professional sector are highly significant: the Council Recommendation on access to social protection for both employees and the self-employed in 2019, and the Guidelines on collective bargaining for the self-employed in 2022. Both with respect to social protection and collective bargaining, there is a clear expansion of Eu law towards universalizing protections, in line with a paradigm of equal treatment between employees and freelancers, which has already been established in the case law of the Court of Justice.

23 The One Health approach and the role of self-employed professionals

The term One Health refers to a holistic view of health based on the interconnection of three different components: human health, animal health, and ecosystem health, which are interconnected and interdependent. As a unifying approach to diversity, One Health requires, on one hand, strong governance at the central level, and, on the other hand, a grounding in local territories that takes into account the profound differences existing at the local level. The One Health approach is at the core of the Un's 2030 Agenda and the European Commission's Green Deal, the most important ongoing global sustainable development projects. The Pnrr (National Recovery and Resilience Plan) also allocates space for specific investments inspired by One Health within the Health mission, as well as its theoretical application across all missions. The multidisciplinary nature of the One Health approach involves the interaction of all professions that have a direct or indirect impact on health and that are called to pool their knowledge to become protagonists of sustainable development. In this regard, the massive innovation effort outlined in the Pnrr provides structural and infrastructural support for a new system of collaboration within healthcare personnel and between them and other external parties, stemming from the sharing of information and the joint planning of health interventions.

24 Self-employed professionals facing Artificial Intelligence

The current evolution towards the widespread use of artificial intelligence systems in the liberal professional sector requires unprecedented reflections. This evolution is irreversible and must be managed correctly in order to promote sustainability, productivity, and improve working conditions. The European regulation on artificial intelligence, approved on May 21, 2024 ("AI Act"), adopts an anthropocentric vision that views the use of artificial intelligence as a mere support tool for the organization and simplification of human work. Interpreting the vision of the AI Act in relation to the use of artificial intelligence systems in liberal professions means focusing on three objectives, which must be the foundation of the actions of institutions and social partners on these issues: preventing, meaning containing the risks that threaten the principle of individuality in professional services. Rethinking, in order to be aware that the correct use of artificial intelligence systems can greatly enrich professional activities, provided the conditions for such use are created. Supporting the infrastructural and technological strengthening of professional offices and the radical renewal of professional training and culture to adapt to the challenges of the present.