



Italian prime minister Mario Monti (left) with virologist Ilaria Capua, newly minted political candidate.

ITALY

Reforms at stake in Italian election

Italy's researchers want change they can believe in.

BY ALISON ABBOTT

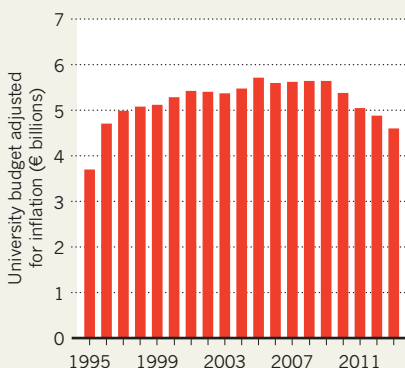
Virologist Ilaria Capua spent the Christmas holiday planning her exit strategy from Italy, where she is currently director of research at the IZSve (the Experimental Institute for the Prevention of Animal Diseases), a public veterinary institute in Legnaro, in north-east Italy. Internationally renowned for her work on the H5N1 avian flu virus — and more patient than most with Italy's notoriously obstructive bureaucracy — she finally snapped last November after administrators at her institute blocked her from accepting an offer of generous lab space in a new research centre in a hospital in Padua.

Then, out of the blue on 6 January, she got a call from Mario Monti, Italy's outgoing prime minister, who was appointed on 12 November 2011 to head a caretaker government that has attempted to tackle Italy's economic problems and debt. He offered her a safe seat in the parliament if she agreed to stand for his newly created party Civic Choice in the national elections, which take place this weekend. Capua, until now dedicated single-mindedly to her research, agreed. "I hope I can help promote the meritocracy that we desperately need in Italy," she says.

All the major parties, including ex-prime minister Silvio Berlusconi's People of Freedom party and the populist Five Star Movement party, have acknowledged the importance of science. But Monti has gone further: nearly a third of the candidates he has chosen are scientists or academics rather than career politicians — a reflection of his belief that only technical expertise can save Italy from decline. Although the next government is likely to be led by Pier

IN DECLINE

University funding in Italy has been cut in real terms since 2005.



Luigi Bersani's centre-left Democratic Party, a coalition called 'With Monti for Italy' (*Con Monti per l'Italia*), including Civic Choice and two other centre and centre-right parties, may become a junior partner.

The country's researchers are counting on the next government to reverse the trend of annual budget cuts for universities and research institutes. They also hope it will allow a series of radical reforms to Italian universities and research institutes, introduced over the past three years, to go forward without interruption.

The sweeping reforms were designed to clean up bad habits such as nepotism and to cut the bureaucracy that hampers everything from academic appointments to buying lab equipment. The research institutes of all 12 national research agencies have been reorganized and the practice of government appointment of their presidents abandoned, so that candidates are appointed on the basis of merit rather than by political fiat.

New rules for academic appointments require universities to select their professors from a national list of qualified candidates (non-Italian candidates will not need to qualify for the list). PhD courses will have to be approved by a national committee and the organizers must prove that they have sufficient teaching staff. All public research money will now be distributed only after a peer-review panel, which must include some foreign researchers, has vetted the applications.

Central to the reforms has been the creation of a national evaluation agency, ANVUR, which launched a massive exercise to evaluate universities and research agencies in May 2011. The outcome should determine how at least 13% of government funding to universities is distributed, and some researchers, especially in the humanities, have criticized the metrics used.

But the noisy resistance to ANVUR has raised concerns that politicians will be tempted to tinker with the reforms or stall them. "The worse thing for us would be that the reforms would be stopped or new ideas forced upon us," warns chemist Dario Braga, dean of research at the University of Bologna. "We are in transition and need to be left in peace."

Crippling budget cuts have amplified the tensions. University budgets have fallen by more than 10% since 2009, to €6.7 billion (US\$9 billion), and research-agency budgets have stagnated. To save money, the government has allowed only around one in five retiring professors to be replaced since 2008, reducing the number of academic staff from more than 62,000 to less than 55,000 in 2012. Competitive research money is minimal: just €38 million for basic research across all disciplines this year. "This revolution needs to be funded with more money, not less," says Braga. ■

Additional reporting by Nicolò Musner.