

Galanti M.T., Lippi A., (2022) Government research institutes in the Italian policy advisory system, *International Review of Public Administration*,

<https://doi.org/10.1177/00208523211070510>

versione dicembre 2021 pre print per pubblicazione

Government research institutes in the Italian policy advisory system

Abstract

In a Napoleonic country such as Italy, ministerial cabinets have traditionally served as central advisors in the politicised policy advisory system (PAS), while evidence-based policy-making has usually been marginal. Nevertheless, recent developments in political systems have pushed for the pluralisation of the Napoleonic PAS toward a stronger demand for scientific and expert advice. Against this backdrop, the role of government research institutes (GRIs) as advisors represents an interesting change that could potentially fuel the development of an evidence-based approach in a period of changing advisory practices. We investigate these developments through a case study concerning 20 Italian GRIs that are engaged as influential advisors or recruited to support implementation through policy work. We obtained evidence through document analysis, in-depth interviews, and a questionnaire administered to the 20 GRIs. The overall picture displays a shift in conceiving policy advice in the political system and opens the door to innovation.

Keywords (7):

policy advisory system; Italy; policy advice; policy work; pluralisation; research institutes; evidence-based policy-making.

1. Introduction

The literature on policy advice systems (PAS)—which comprise an ‘interlocking set of actors and organisations with unique configurations in each sector and jurisdiction that provides recommendations for action to policy-makers’ (Halligan 1995 cited in Craft and Howlett 2012)—distinguishes between actors that are internal or external to the government (Halligan 1995). The *pluralisation* of the advisory process triggered different combinations of internal and external advisors (Halligan 1995, 160) and the hybridisation of their advisory logics (Hustedt et al. 2017). In sum, the contemporary PAS more resembles ‘an assemblage of advisory units and practices’ that involves actors beyond public services (Craft and Halligan 2020, 4).

In Anglo-Saxon countries, where roles and influences are marked by a high degree of institutionalisation (Craft and Howlett, 2012; Craft and Howlett 2013), pluralisation can be driven by politicians’ desire to regain control over bureaucracy, bringing to politicisation an increasing need for coordination (Diamond 2020). At the same time, the diversification of advisors is present in non-Westminster countries, where policy advice is not monopolised by civil services, but shared with other actors (Veselý, 2013; Veit et al.,

2017). While traditional advisors, such as advisory boards and commissions in more institutionalised systems, have received the attention of scholars (Fobé et al., 2013; Pattyn et al., 2019; Christensen 2018), other knowledge actors have received less attention. This the case of the government research institutes (GRIs).

GRIs are public institutions outside of the academy, but are often located in the proximity of government. They are internal since they are included in the public sector and report directly to the central government. At the same time, they have been historically excluded from decision-making (Veselý 2013, 201). As reported by some scholars (Thunert, 2013), they have remained on middle ground and have only recently (and incidentally) been attracted to the dynamics of advice. This is not only the case in Germany, but also in Belgium and the Netherlands.

As argued by this limited set of studies, the advisory role of these research institutions was recently induced by an increasing request for knowledge and legitimacy by representative bodies (Veselý 2013). At the same time, scholars noticed the end of the historical trend of ‘pure science’ that characterised their tradition (Thunert, 2013), suggesting that their contribution to policy-making might not be limited to scientific research, but could involve more nuanced policy work (Vesely 2017).

In this article, we examine a case study regarding the role of GRIs in the pluralisation of the PAS in Italy, a Napoleonic country where policy advice is not a formalised role in bureaucracy, and the PAS is characterised by party patronage and by the dominance of ministerial cabinets¹ as advisors (Di Mascio and Natalini 2013; 2016). While changes in the political system have occurred in recent years, knowledge and expertise have become increasingly needed. As a result, the government’s inner circle of advisors has gradually become more plural and now includes some additional actors (such as the research institutes) without replacing existing arrangements. A turning point was represented by a law in 2016 that rationalised the number of GRIs and their governance and funding while introducing policy advice as a new, mandatory task.

Relying on a research strategy on document analysis, in-depth interviews, and a questionnaire given to the 20 Italian GRIs, we used a case study to explore the role that the GRIs have played in the Italian PAS by looking at advisory practices in terms of activities, products and relations. We did so by asking the following research questions:

RQ1: What role do GRIs play in the pluralisation of the Italian PAS? What type of advice do they offer?

RQ2: What factors affect the delivery of policy advice by GRIs? Does political demand matter? Do the independence and reputation of the GRIs matter as advisors?

The findings show that GRIs are gradually becoming members of a plural system of advisors but play different roles in a contingent relationship involving the demand and supply of advice. The rise of GRIs as advisors internal to the government has not replaced traditional advisors such as ministerial cabinets, but has rather been layered upon them, thus making the internal advisory system more complex. This paper proceeds as follows. After reconstructing the theoretical background of the pluralisation of the PAS (Section 2) and presenting the research design (Section 3), we describe the main evidence about GRIs in Section 4. In Section 5 we discuss the evidence and offer a conclusion.

2. State of the art: The pluralisation of advisory systems and the complexity of policy work

The literature on the PAS reveals a trend toward the pluralisation of advisory practices (Halligan 1995, 160), with an extension of the PAS’ boundaries to non-traditional advisors in different countries (Pattyn et al. 2019). On the one hand, this pluralisation can be described as ‘externalisation’ (Craft and Howlett 2012; Craft and Howlett 2013) when advisory activities previously performed inside government

¹ Walgrave et al. (2004, p. 7) in Meert et al 2019 defined a ministerial cabinet as consisting of ‘a staff of personal advisers, who are hired when a minister takes office, and are not part of the administrative hierarchy. They assist the minister in identifying and formulating problems, in outlining policy, and in everyday decision-making’.

organisations are relocated to places outside of government (Vesély 2013, 200). On the other hand, it is possible that advisory capacities have been ‘internalised’ into specific branches of government because of democratic, administrative and financial developments (Vesély 2013, 202; Fobé et al. 2013). At the same time, the dynamics of pluralisation have been matched with the growth of politicisation, intended as the government’s attempts to increase control over advisory processes through various means (Diamond 2020). While the externalisation of policy advice has received great attention, especially in Westminster countries, internal advisory systems have received far less attention.

Prominent actors in the pluralisation of internal advisory systems are research institutions such as public institutions of applied research, which gather and analyse data and offer policy advice as part of their mission (Vesély 2013, 201), as well as non-academic research institutes (Thunert 2013). However, studies on these institutes tend to focus on their research activities and not on the content of their advice (Craft and Howlett 2012), thus leaving their advisory role largely unexplored. One exception is a study on the internal advisory system of the German federal government, with a focus on government research agencies, ministerial departments, and government advisory bodies (Veit et al. 2017). The findings of this study indicate that the pluralisation of the PAS matches with the hybridisation of the typical advisory logics of these internal advisors: It is not only scientific credibility that matters in advisory practices, but also considerations about political issue salience and stakeholder representativeness (Veit et al. 2017, 83).

Pluralisation is also present in Napoleonic countries, with dynamics of de-institutionalisation that do not necessarily bring more politicisation (Craft and Halligan 2017). In these countries, the civil service is traditionally politicised at the top (Peters 2008), and the monopoly of advice is in the hands of the ministerial cabinets, which are politically appointed. Nonetheless, this monopoly seems threatened by new developments in public administration, thanks to a rebalance of influence between the cabinets and the administration in favour of the latter (Brans and Aubin 2017, 58; Gouglas et al. 2017; Meert et al. 2019) to the changing role of traditional advisory bodies (Fobé et al. 2013; Pattyn et al. 2019). In other words, the literature on the Napoleonic PAS suggests that the system is increasingly diversified inside government, thus requiring further investigation.

All these aspects clearly indicate that pluralisation involves not only the composition of the advisory system, but also the diversification of advisory practices as part of complex policy work. Policy advice is characterised by different activities ranging from the pure production of knowledge through the actual creation of policies such as ‘research, data analysis, proposal development, consultation with stakeholders, formulation of advice for decision-makers, guiding policy through governmental and parliamentary processes, and the subsequent evaluation of the outcomes of the policy’ (Gregory and Lonti, 2008, 838). Because of this, scholars have highlighted that policy advice can be conceived as a subtype of complex policy work (i.e. the activities related to the analysis and formulation of public policy, which require specific knowledge and skills, not limited to strictly scientific or academic ones) (Vesély 2017, 141).

In this sense, the conceptualisation of policy advice as a subtype of policy work developed by Vesély is very helpful in understanding what role GRIs play in the pluralisation of the PAS, as it shows that the boundaries of policy advice are blurred, and that policy advice overlaps with other activities such as research, decision-making, implementation, and the production of values (Vesély 2017, 143). In so doing, different advice content is possible, from long-term ‘cold’ advice to short-term ‘hot’ advice (Craft and Howlett 2012). At the same time, this conceptualisation captures the complexity of policy advice beyond formal roles, as it acknowledges that policy advice is also offered by several ‘incidental advisors’ who are neither formally called nor generally understood to be policy advisers (Vesély 2017, 142; Hoppe and Jeliaskova 2006; Aubin and Brans 2020).

Therefore, it is interesting to analyse how the policy advice of GRIs relates to other policy work activities, such as pure research, decision-making, implementation, and considering the possibility for these actors to have a function of negotiation, brokerage, or coordination (Radin 2013; Mukherjee and Giest 2020).

While the literature acknowledges that ‘the role of the adviser is a contingent one, reflecting different and multiple roles and varied influence’ (Connaughton 2015, 251), it is still not clear what factors determine

a given mix of policy work activities and the type of policy advice delivered. In this sense, policy advice can be conceived as the result of reconciling policy-makers' supply and demand for science (Sarewitz and Pielke 2007). Thus, it is interesting to investigate this exchange relationship by looking at how the supply of policy advice by research institutions corresponds with political demand by proximate policy-makers, who actively shape the advice relationship (Manwaring 2019, 271) to rationalise complex problems and legitimise their decisions (van den Berg et al. 2017).

Therefore, focusing on GRIs as new entrants to the PAS can be useful to better understand what type of policy work and policy advice they deliver and what factors will affect this delivery.

A qualitative, exploratory study on Italian GRIs in the Italian PAS could contribute to the literature in two main ways. On the one hand, it contributes to the literature on the pluralisation of the Italian PAS by providing new evidence of GRIs' advisory activities in the internal policy advisory system of a Napoleonic country.

On the other hand, it contributes to the literature on policy advice as complex policy work by investigating how the policy advice of GRIs is shaped by the characteristics of political demand and the overall economic context (austerity) in a Napoleonic country where the role of policy advisors is not formalised and often not even recognised.

3 Case selection and research design

Although the Italian PAS has not been studied in detail, the existing literature underscores some aspects of a scarcely formalised ecology of institutions and actors of policy advice. First, policy-makers' overall demand for advice was generally episodic and circumscribed to the provision of technical appraisal upon urgent matters (especially environmental or health emergencies). Indeed, the involvement of experts in decision-making was subjected to manifest politicisation (Lippi, 2012), and policy formulation was almost entirely delegated to mass parties (Dente and Regonini 1989). Second, ministerial cabinets progressively became the main actors in policy advice, providing juridical and legalistic knowledge (Di Mascio and Natalini 2013; 2016). Cabinets were directly appointed by politicians and performed different policy duties, playing a role of intermediation with personal secretaries, bureaucrats, parties and groups of interest (and academics). Ministerial cabinets acted as institutionalised advisory playgrounds (but also as vehicles of political control) (Di Mascio and Natalini 2013, 337). Further, the extended network of government advisors involved administrative courts such as the Court of Auditors, the Council of State, and the State Attorney (Rebessi and Zucchini 2020). At the same time, the civil service maintained a passive role in policy-making and in giving advice, with the central bureaucracy described as an 'ossified world' (Cassese 1999). Finally, the Italian PAS lacked a system of institutionalised advisory bodies, such as in Central European (Pattyn et al., 2019; Fobé et al. 2013) and Nordic countries (Christensen and Holst, 2017), while the only constitutionally independent advisory council, the National Council for Economy and Employment (CNEL), never significantly influenced the decision-makers. Finally, a plethora of ministerial committees and individual advisors produced a highly fragmented, politicised, and scarcely influent system.

In this setting, GRIs' role as internal government actors providing formal advice to the government was extremely marginal in the past. Some of these research institutions were initially created as government agencies aimed at doing activities other than pure research, whereas others were focused exclusively on research. While few of them remained stable and gained a solid reputation, most of them experienced several organisational restructurings.

In addition to this consolidated arrangement, a slight adjustment toward a more plural, hybrid PAS took place without dismantling the original system, but instead making it more heterogeneous. First, the demand for expert advice from politicians became more frequent and vague at the same time. This was due to changes in the political system and in new political elites (Chiaromonte ed Emanuele, 2015; De Giorgi and Grimaldi, 2017; Castaldo and Verzichelli, 2020) who lacked political experience (Pedrazzani & Pinto 2015). Second, the rise of think tanks and a new generation of lobbyists (Pritoni, 2017) gathered

experts who had the potential to become external advisors in the cabinets. Third, the *Europeanisation* and ‘technicisation’ of domestic policies made policy-making more dependent on technical know-how (Radaelli 2003) and ultimately led to an increasing request for both external and internal experts, especially after periods of crisis (Peters, Pierre and Randma Liiv, 2011) such as the ‘austerity wave’ and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Overall, this dynamic nurtured the diversification and pluralisation of the Italian PAS, reinforcing the pre-existing ecology and contaminating it with new actors. In fact, the central role of ministerial cabinets in policy formulation remained unchanged, but advisors’ personal networking increased significantly (Di Mascio and Natalini 2013, 338) and impacted the same cabinets, resulting in the overall decreasing professionalisation of appointed cabinet members (Di Mascio and Natalini 2016) while favouring access to non-traditional internal advisors, such as GRIs.

Against this backdrop, we aim to understand to what extent Italian GRIs are involved in policy advice activities. Our research strategy is articulated in different steps. First, we studied all 20 GRIs through document analysis (Spring 2019) to grasp their organisational characteristics and institutional aims following their reform in 2016 (see *infra*). Document analysis concerned the statute, the organisational chart, the budget, and the plan of activities. For each institute, we (i) collected and coded the statute, (ii) the organisational chart, (iii) the plan of activities (a 3-year programming document approved by the minister), (iv) the last available budget, and (v) the last available information about the numbers and types of employees (including managers). Second, we conducted semistructured interviews (Spring 2019 and Spring 2020) to capture the behavioural aspects of policy advice in a country where this role is not formalised and the advisory system is scarcely institutionalised. Third, we used a questionnaire (Autumn 2020 to Spring 2021) to triangulate the results of the interviews and to gather more evidence about the frequency of advisory activities and the types of advisory products, as well as about the demand for and offers of advice in advisory relations. The 20 semistructured interviews and 19 questionnaires involved managers (or their delegates) who are responsible for institutional relations in each single institute, specifically those from whom advice is requested and from whom advice is delivered. The semistructured interviews and the questionnaire allowed us to reconstruct the network of actors and informal practices. Each interview lasted 1 hour at minimum, and the interviewees were anonymous. A list of the interviews and the questionnaire are both reported in the appendix (see Forms A and B in the Appendix).

4. Findings

4.1 Organisational features and formalised research and advisory functions

The document analysis describes the GRIs in terms of independence, stability, and reputation. The 20 Italian GRIs were recently rationalised through Legislative Decree n. 218/2016, which enlisted the institutes and established a common organisational framework in terms of funding, supervision and tasks. The decree also introduced a new form of coordination, the College of the Chairmen performing brokering functions towards the core executive. Further, a Committee of Experts, with advisory and monitoring tasks, is established *inside* the Presidency of Ministers.

The GRIs enjoy organisational and managerial autonomy, but the supervising ministry approves the fundamental acts, including strategic addresses and budget, and annually decides on ordinary funding. All institutes have been reorganised in line with the goal of fiscal retrenchment. For other means of political control, the government proposes appointing the chairman every four years. The chairman officially represents the institute in parliament, while the general director oversees the activities.

Each institute is internally organised by research field. In some instances, research institutes are charged with monitoring and evaluating single pieces of legislation and reporting their findings to the parliament.

Table 1 offers an overview of the main organisational characteristics. The institutes have quite different features in terms of organisational complexity (with some of them having decentred structures). For their

size, the personnel vary greatly in terms of the distribution between actual researchers and administrative staff.

The GRIs are active in different policy domains. As for research activities, 15 of them are in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM, with the CNR being prominently, but not exclusively, STEM), and 5 are in the humanities, arts and social sciences (HASS). All of them are subjected to the evaluation system of ANVUR, the Italian National Agency for the Evaluation of the University and Research Systems.

Interestingly, 13 GRIs out of the 20 are supervised by the Ministry of Education, which surely possesses policy analytical capacities in education, but not in other policy domains. This suggests that the GRIs are able to deliver substantive advice on highly technical matters and thus go well beyond the relationship with the supervising ministry.

Regarding their advisory functions, while 7 out of the 20 GRIs have displayed such functions in their statutes since their foundation (ASI, CNR, INDIRE, INGV, ISS, ISTAT, SZN), most of them have only recently acquired the function of 'providing technical/scientific advice' to the government as part of their institutional mission.

Therefore, an initial outcome of our document analysis is that most of the Italian GRIs have acquired an advisory function only recently while sharing quite different organisational characteristics. In this regard, the interviews revealed that the perception of the institutes' scientific credibility mattered for their independence. While some of them have a recognised reputation (such as ISTAT, ISS, INFN, INAF, CNR, INRIM, SZN), others have often been reorganised and are now trying to reinforce their scientific credibility (INAPP, ISPRA, CREA, INDIRE, Enrico Fermi, AREA). At the same time, the interviews indicated that, with few exceptions, these institutes are struggling to secure the financial resources needed through constant negotiation with the supervising ministries, and through the increasing search for external sources of funding.

Table 1 – Public research institutes according to Legislative Decree n. 218, 2016.

Name	Year of establishment	Supervising Ministry	Budget in euro (year)	Employees (year)	Territorial offices (yes/no)	Organizational restructuring (Yes/No)	Policy domain	Branch of science (STEM/HASS)	Advisory function
Area Science Park - Area di Ricerca Scientifica e Tecnologica di Trieste	1978	Ministry of Economic Development	18.610.500 (2014)	77 (2014)	Yes	Yes	Innovation & technological transfer	STEM	Recently acquired
ASI – Agenzia Spaziale Italiana	1988	Ministry of Education	814.145.372 (2017)	217 (2017)	Yes	No	Space	STEM	Traditional
Centro Studi e Ricerche “Enrico Fermi”	1999	Ministry of Education	3.881.511 (2017)	8 (2017)	No	No	Physics	STEM	Not mentioned
CNR – Centro Nazionale di Ricerche	1923	Ministry of Education	909.756.383 (2017)	8.164 (2015)	No	Yes	Multi sector	STEM	Traditional
CREA – Consiglio per la ricerca in agricoltura e analisi dell’economia agraria	1999	Ministry of Agriculture	242.930.490 (2017)	1.983 (2015)	Yes	Yes	Agriculture	STEM	Recently acquired
ENEA - Agenzia nazionale per le nuove tecnologie, l’energia e lo sviluppo economico sostenibile	1952	Ministry of Economic Development	343.255.586 (2017)	2.361 (2017)	Yes	Yes	Energy, research and development	STEM	Recently acquired
IISIG – Istituto Italiano di Studi Germanici	1931	Ministry of Education	2.444.578 (2019)	10	No	yes	German Humanities	HASS	Not mentioned
INAF – Istituto Nazionale di Astrofisica	1999	Ministry of Education	164.134.332 (2017)	1.214 (2017)	No	Yes	Astrophysics	STEM	Recently acquired
INAPP – Istituto Nazionale per l’Analisi delle Politiche Pubbliche	1972	Ministry of Labor	116.968.562 (2017)	323 (2017)	Yes	Yes	Labor and welfare	HASS	Recently acquired
INDAM – Istituto Nazionale di Alta Matematica	1939	Ministry of Education	5.206.186 (2016)	10 (2016)	No	No	Mathematics	STEM	Recently acquired
INDIRE - Istituto Nazionale Documentazione Innovazione Ricerca Innovativa	1925	Ministry of Education	161.859.493 (2017)	243 (2017)	Yes	No	Education	HASS	Traditional
INFN – Istituto Nazionale di Fisica Nucleare	1951	Ministry of Education	449.664.068 (2017)	1.808 (2017)	Yes	No	Nuclear Physics	STEM	Recently acquired
INGV – Istituto Nazionale di Geofisica e Vulcanologia	1999	Ministry of Education	114.604.852 (2017)	748 (2016)	Yes	No	Geophysics, earthquakes	STEM	Traditional
INRIM – Istituto Nazionale di Ricerca Metrologica	2004	Ministry of Education	36.775.382 (2017)	217 (2017)	No	Yes	Engineering	STEM	Recently acquired
INVALSI – Istituto Nazionale per la Valutazione del Sistema Educativo di Istruzione e di Formazione	2004	Ministry of Education	27.287.370 (2017)	42 (2017)	No	Yes	Education and evaluation	HASS	Recently acquired
ISPRA - Istituto Superiore per la Protezione e la Ricerca Ambientale	2008	Ministry of Environment	112.217.152 (2017)	1.211 (2018)	Yes	Yes	Environment	STEM	Recently acquired
ISS – Istituto Superiore di Sanità	1941	Ministry of Health	284.949.109 (2017)	1.968 (2017)	Yes	No	Health	STEM	Traditional
ISTAT – Istituto Nazionale di Statistica	1926	Prime Minister Office	228.012.369 (2017)	2.493 (2017)	Yes	No	Economic and social statistics	HASS	Traditional
OGS – Istituto Nazionale di Oceanografia e di Geofisica Sperimentale	1999	Ministry of Education	44.850.377 (2018)	214 (2018)	Yes	No	Oceanography	STEM	Recently acquired
SZN Anton Dohrn - Stazione Zoologica Anton Dohrn di Napoli	1872	Ministry of Education	23.504.199 (2018)	272 (2020)	no	yes	Marine Biology	STEM	Traditional

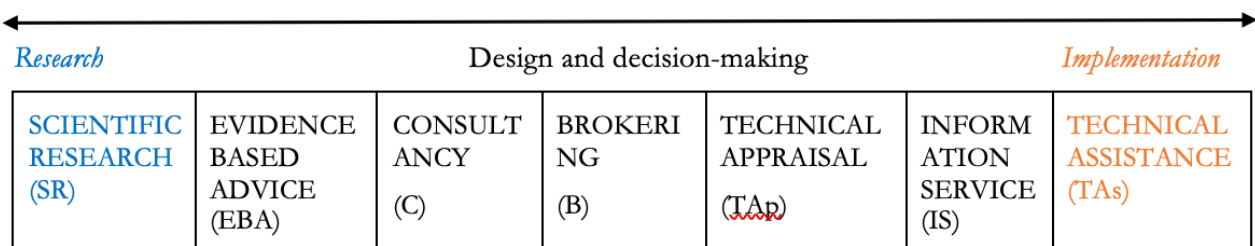
4.2 Different types of activities: Policy advice and policy work

The interviews and the questionnaire describe the policy work performed by the GRIs beyond formal attributions.

GRIs are commonly involved in different kinds of policy works, from proper advice to pure research, from (indirect) involvement in decision-making to support and the (direct) undertaking of implementation tasks. Following the conceptualisation of Veselý (2017) and in line with the literature on policy analysis and policy work (Page and Jenkins 2005; Radin 2013), we organised these heterogeneous activities along a continuum between the extremes of pure research and pure implementation. In between, activities of support for design and decision-making are displayed (Figure 1). Research activities are considered almost entirely cognitive, and implementation is considered primarily operational and practical. Design and decision-making processes mingle cognitive and operative activities while including the function of brokering.

Starting from the claims of the interviewees, we identified 7 types of policy work with blurred boundaries: scientific research (SR); evidence-based advice (EBA); (b) consultancy (C); brokering (B); technical appraisal (TA_p); information service (IS); and technical assistance (TA). While SR and TA can be considered different from proper advice, the other categories imply a nuanced, more explicit involvement in policy advice (i.e. covering the analysis of the problems and the proposing of solutions).

Figure 1 The continuum of GRIs' policy work



Source: elaborations of the authors from the interviews.

Scientific research (SR) includes the policy work of 'mere' knowledge production, independent of the supervising ministry's input. These activities do not necessarily imply the delivery of policy recommendations. This type of 'pure research' is considered the core mission of most institutes in the hard sciences. Some of them do not consider this type of research to be aimed at explicitly advising the government or at explicitly contributing to policy-making or to proper advice, but are mainly devoted to the country's overall scientific progress (especially in physics and maths).

Evidence-based advice (EBA) is perceived as the 'pure advice' that GRIs crave. It consists of a role of 'ex cathedra' influence represented by the image of 'pure science' that 'tells the truth' to policy-makers. Advice is intended as the translation of scientific results into policy-making through the provision of long-term/cold advice (Craft and Howlett 2012). It explicitly concerns all institutes in STEM (energy, environment, geology, medicine, etc.) where advice is conceived as the actual use of scientific evidence in the design and drafting of policies. EBA is reputed as not jeopardising the integrity of the pure scientific mission. It also seems close to high-prestige advisors and a limited set of contingencies.

Consultancy (C) is more generic and concerns all situations where a GRI has been committed to support a cabinet or a ministry regarding specific issues of concern thanks to the provision of short-term/hot advice (Craft and Howlett 2012). Consultancy denotes the original, strategic thinking about a problem and the elaboration of creative solutions. In other words, scientific knowledge and expertise give GRIs the chance to influence policy-making from a strong position of prestige (beyond their primary technical mission) and to gain visibility.

Brokering (B) concerns activities that occur when GRIs connect cabinets and ministries' staff to other private or public institutes, universities, or international research centres (Mukherjee and Giest 2020). It is an indirect action of policy advice, but still influential, since it is aimed at searching for other advisors playing an EBA role. The brokering particularly pertains to the role of bargaining with respect to the monitoring ministry. The case in point is provided by the CNR (National Centre for Italian Research), which provides the Ministry of Education with specific contacts with specialised laboratories or departments for each problem.

Technical appraisal (TAp) is an advisory activity ruled by formal procedures and provides the expert reading of data and technicalities or an expert appraisal by one or more ministries. It specifically concerns committees for health, earthquakes and volcanoes, the environment, civil protection risks, pollution, and energy. Expert appraisal has low political salience but high legal and bureaucratic relevance. While consultants take part in the formulation of a policy through direct involvement and original thinking, technical appraisers are only indirectly involved by 'giving expert reading of data on demand since they own the skills to interpret them' and to give recommendations according to scientific competence.

Information service (IS) is a request of data that is not regulated by procedure and activated by discretion. This means that GRIs are at the ministry cabinet's disposal to deliver the information and data already produced by the institute. It is a sort of 'on demand' or 'desk delivery' provision of data from existing databases and archives.

Finally, technical assistance (TA) is not real advice but a substitute for bureaucracy in implementation (Page and Jenkins 2005). This contribution concerns the delegation of highly expert pieces of procedures that the bureaucracy awards to the research institutes. It pertains to the search for highly qualified personnel to implement challenging tasks or to support implementation through expert knowledge, often in English, but entails technical support.

The questionnaire captured the frequency of these advisory activities (Table 2).

Table 2 – Frequencies of types of advice

	Never or rarely (few times a year) (in %)	Occasionally (once a month or more) (in %)	Frequently (once a week) or very frequently (once a day) (in %)	total responses (n.)
Scientific research	5	32	63	19
Evidence-based advice	26	42	32	19
Consultancy	26	26	47	19
Brokering	21	21	58	19
Technical appraisal	53	16	32	19
Information service	16	32	53	19
Technical assistance	53	16	32	19

Sources: questionnaires. Question: How often does the Institute do these types of activities? Please mark each row only once

The GRIs are currently doing different policy works, with proper advice being only one of them. Sixty-three percent of the interviewees considered the sheer transmission of knowledge (without the delivery of any policy recommendation) to be a frequent or very frequent activity of their institute. Interestingly, 58% of respondents considered brokering to be a frequent or very frequent activity, such as information service, regarding the delivery of data upon request. EBA and consultancy are also claimed not as core but as very important policy works, carried out occasionally (once a month) or frequently (once a week or more). At the same time, 26% of the respondents declared that their institutes never perform EBA or consultancy (maths, physics, humanities). Instead, TA was considered less frequent, even though TA, during implementation, was considered one of the core activities at the institute in 32% of the responses (education, agriculture, labour).

The interviews also revealed the perception of a different attitude toward advice. Being a prestigious and strictly influential contribution oriented to defining problems and issues, EBA and consultancy convey a proactive attitude; in contrast, IS and TA are passive because they are essentially subordinated to the needs of politicians and bureaucracies. In IS and TA, GRIs support decision-makers in a complementary position through the expertise and skills that the executive does not have during the implementation. Interestingly, the interviewees affirmed that all GRIs present both proactive and passive attitudes at the same time.

5.4 The relations of advice: A contingent matching of demand and supply

All interviewees perceived the GRIs' delivery of advice as a relationship between the research institute (as the advisor) and several institutional (and non-institutional) actors (as advisees). These relationships vary according to who is asking for advice, what the motivation is for demanding and offering advice, and ultimately what the correspondence between the demand and supply of advice is.

As shown, the GRIs are asked to perform a number of activities beyond 'pure' policy advice. This variety is due not only to the tight relationship with the supervising ministry, but also to the increasing demand for knowledge coming from other advisees. Both the interviews and the questionnaire indicate a considerable amount of regular advice for each institute. This certifies a diffuse appeal of the advice offered by the GRIs, not only for a single institution. While the supervising ministry is the main 'client', institutes with more reputation and stability often receive requests from other ministries or directly from the Prime Minister's office. Similarly, institutes dealing with crosscutting policy sectors are solicited by more than one ministry. It also happens that the political representative (the minister or the state secretary) directly and informally addresses the chairman of the institutes with specific requests.

Most importantly, the main interlocutor inside the ministry varies considerably. In most cases, it is the head of a ministerial department or the director-general of a division (civil servants) (10% of responses in the survey), but often these requests arrive from the head of the cabinet or from the minister's personal secretary (9,3%), and are usually addressed to the general manager of the GRI. These data suggest that ministerial cabinets are increasingly acting as intermediaries of knowledge for the ministry while demanding advice themselves when knowledge and skills are lacking. Furthermore, the interviews showed that institutes with more technical expertise (for example, in the environment, health, and agriculture) are often delegated as technical experts to represent the ministry and the country at the supranational level. This is typically the case of technical committees or panels of the European Commission, the WHO, and the FAO, where the GRI acts as a de facto substitute for the ministry.

Indeed, the parliamentary commissions are increasingly asking for the advice of the institutes and that it is not infrequent that the supervising minister ask the institute to respond to hearings and question time on his behalf.

Depending on the type of policy sector, other important clients may be regions and territorial agencies (15,3% of responses).

Finally, most of the institutes that produce applied research are increasingly offering their knowledge (through policy briefs, notes, reports, and in some cases even legislative drafts) not only to the supervising ministry, but also to specific MPs. Further, they are increasingly selling their knowledge in the market in the form of technological transfer and patents, and are trying to collaborate with universities and civil society.

The questionnaire explicitly addressed the question about the increase in advisory demand in the last year, considering the high proportion of political newcomers in both the parliament and the government after the 2018 elections. In this regard, the perception is of a clear increase in the demand both from the side of more traditional advisors and of the new ones (see the table below).

Table 3 – Trends in advising demand from policy-makers since 2018

	n.	in %	<i>of whom traditional advisors in %</i>	<i>of whom new advisors in %</i>
Highly increased	11	58	21	37
Increased	6	32	11	21
Identical	2	10	5	5
Decreased	0	0	0	0
tot	19	100	37	63

Source: questionnaires. Question: Considering the period before the reform (d.lgs. 216/2018), these requests are... (please indicate only one answer)

Both the interviews and the questionnaire further investigated the characteristics of the demand for advice and the perceived motivations for both the demand and supply of advice.

First, the demand for advice is perceived as larger in number and more pressing in timing. Irrespective of the topic or policy sector, all interviewees described the practice of ‘receiving a phone call from the ministerial offices on Thursday, to be ready to respond to a parliamentary hearing on Tuesday—if not before’. Some interviewees emphasised these practices as a mix of improvisation and urgency (of the cabinets, but also of the civil servants) that perturbs ordinary business, but that is nonetheless inevitable given the financial dependency of the supervising ministry. The institutes capable of coping with this overwhelming number of requests are those that are more stable and skilled (such as in the environment and health), those with have a solid scientific reputation (such as in physics and other natural sciences), and finally those who are substantially independent (such as the national statistical institute).

The questionnaire also indicated that the perceived motivations for this increased demand for advice are very different (see Table 4). Most of the interviewees thought that policy-makers were asking for advice because they wanted to obtain information (30,6%) or due to a hierarchical relation whereby the ministry needed to comply with a formal duty (26,5%). Interestingly, 18,4% of the interviewees thought that the demand for advice was motivated by the need for legitimacy (e.g. the need to make a justification in the eyes of the public), and 10,2% thought it was a matter of shifting blame in the case of difficult decisions to make. A total of 10,2% thought that the demand for advice depends on relations of mutual trust, while only 4,1% of the respondents thought that receiving advice from a GRI is a means to increase the

ministry's prestige. Therefore, both the interviews and the questionnaire confirmed that the new advisory role of GRIs is also due to an increasing demand for advice driven by both technical and political motivations.

Table 4 – The main motivation for demanding advice

	n	%
Information	15	30,6
Hierarchy	13	26,5
(Political) Legitimacy	9	18,4
Blame-shifting	5	10,2
Trust	5	10,2
Prestige	2	4,1
Other	0	0,0
	49	100,0

Source: questionnaire. Question: what is the main reason for asking the advice of the Institute? Please indicate (more than one option is possible)

Regarding the motivations for offering advice (Table 5), both the interviews and the questionnaire show that the GRIs use their knowledge and expertise to reinforce both reputation and independence. At the same time, they are trying to resist pressing requests, and ultimately, control by the ministry. Table 7 points to obligation as the main reason for offering advice (31,3% of the responses), but other important motivations are the expansion of collaboration with other institutions (network, 27%) and the need to strengthen both the credibility (18,8%) and resources (16,7%) available to the institutes.

Table 5 – The main motivation for offering advice

	n.	%
Obligation	15	31,3
Network	13	27,0
Credibility	9	18,8
Resources	8	16,7
Trust	2	4,2
Other	1	2,0
	48	100,0

Source: questionnaire. Question: What is the main reason for the Institute offering advice? Please indicate (more than one option is possible)

These findings suggest that the relationship of advice is unique and diversified. The interviewees described the matching between the demand and offer of advice as ‘depending on situations’, thus as a contingent relationship that depends not only on the personal relations between individuals, but also on the need to gain or reinforce its reputation in terms of scientific credibility and policy capacity, or to exercise leadership in a complex network of advisors. As one interviewee put it by citing Granovetter, ‘it is the strength of the weak ties’ but also the need for autonomy that binds all these actors together.

6. Discussion and conclusions

We aim to demonstrate how and to what extent a scarcely institutionalised PAS is gradually moving from the traditional cabinets and party appointment arrangement toward a pluralisation of sources and modes. We investigated the role of GRIs in Italy, looking at the degree to which they are involved in policy advice and what type of relationship they have at the central level.

Our findings highlight the role of GRIs in Italy as potentially influential advisors. This goes against expectations, as the institutional setting once relegated them to a complementary and specialistic position. In contrast, we ‘discovered’ the influence of GRIs as complementary advisors, at first glance latent and secondary, but upon deeper scrutiny as intense and incisive. Three findings support this claim.

First, GRIs build scientific knowledge on policy matters and are increasingly involved in advisory practices that were previously exclusive to cabinets (and residually of ministerial offices). This is a novelty in the Italian system. The interviews confirmed that such an advisory role is not perceived as such by some of them (particularly by those in STEM), while document analysis confirmed this new mission. Nevertheless, their politicisation did not occur according to classical party patronage, but rather followed an exchange relationship.

A second finding proved that the GRIs not only offer policy advice, but also engage with a number of different policies. They scrutinise types of policy works that vary from pure research to technical assistance and include an assorted range of contributions (EBA, consultancy, brokering, TA, and IS), well beyond the classical dichotomy between the ‘technical versus political’. The interviews suggest that these differentiation activities depend not only on the features of institutional demand, but also on the need for GRIs to gain credibility and, most importantly, to secure financial resources for scientific research in times of austerity.

Third, the configurations of actors in Italian policy advice are highly contingent. Politicians and civil servants tend to cherry-pick the advisors needed, while the content of the advice might be negotiated. They can easily do so thanks to the supervision of the ministry. Personal knowledge and the continuity of senior civil servants might facilitate advice-based relationships.

Last, the demand for policy advice has also increased, now being more frequent and pressing than in the past. On the other hand, the supply is expanding and becoming more plural. This seems particularly evident in recent years, a period where national institutions have experienced the entrance of new political parties and an overall de-institutionalisation of the party system. The consolidated arrangement of cabinets + politicisation has also been contaminated by innovative roles and modes. This is particularly telling if we consider the characteristics of the Italian politico-administrative system: This increasing and differentiated demand for policy advice could be driven by politicians’ need to deal with the complexities of policies and to justify or legitimise their actions. This could also be true for bureaucrats, given the traditional lack of expertise other than legal knowledge. Hence, there is a search for legitimacy at both the political and bureaucratic levels.

Overall, pluralisation corresponds to a wider trend. The hybridisation of the traditional Italian PAS was triggered by the institutional system, but we acknowledge that the involvement of the GRIs shows their leakage from the ivory tower of science toward contamination in a political-technical-scientist milieu.

Next steps for research in this field will pave the way for more intense scrutiny on the pluralisation of the post-Napoleonic PAS toward hybridisation, and to a comparison among countries to obtain a generalisation and to survey the dissimilarities. Second, we ‘discovered’ the influence of incidental advisors, such as GRIs, but this means that perhaps other incidental advisors can be detected and, more specifically, that the role of research institutes across Europe has yet to be scrutinised and described.

References

- Aubin D and Brans M (2020) Policy advisory styles in the francophone Belgian civil service. *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, 86(3): 463-478.
- van den Berg CF (2017) Dynamics in the Dutch policy advisory system: externalization, politicization and the legacy of pillarization. *Policy Sciences*, 50(1): 63-84.
- Brans M and Aubin D (eds) (2017) *Policy analysis in Belgium*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Cassese S (1999) Italy's senior civil service: An ossified world. In: Page E and Wright V (eds) *Bureaucratic Elites in Western European States*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 55–64.
- Castaldo A and Verzichelli L (2020) Technocratic Populism in Italy after Berlusconi: The Trendsetter and his Disciples. *Politics and Governance* 8(4): 485–495.
- Chiaromonte A and Emanuele V (2015) Party system volatility, regeneration and de-institutionalization in Western Europe (1945–2015). *Party Politics* 23(4): 376–388.
- Christensen J and Holst C (2017) Advisory commissions, academic expertise and democratic legitimacy: the case of Norway. *Science and Public Policy* 44(6): 821-833.
- Christensen J (2018) Economic knowledge and the scientization of policy advice. *Policy Sciences* 51(3): 291-311.
- Connaughton B (2015) Navigating the borderlines of politics and administration: Reflections on the role of ministerial advisers. *International Journal of Public Administration* 38(1): 37–45.
- Craft J and Halligan J (2020) *Advising Governments in the Westminster Tradition: Policy Advisory Systems in Australia, Britain, Canada and New Zealand*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Craft J and Howlett M (2012) Policy Formulation, Governance Shifts and Policy Influence: Location and Content in Policy Advisory Systems. *Journal of Public Policy* 32(2): 79-98.
- Craft J and Howlett M (2013) The Dual Dynamics of Policy Advisory Systems: The Impact of Externalization and Politicization on Policy Advice. *Policy and Society* 32(3): 187-197.
- De Giorgi E and Grimaldi S (2015) The Italian political system in the last twenty years: change, adaptation or unfinished transition? *Contemporary Italian Politics* 7(1): 3-9.
- Dente B and Regonini G (1989), Politics and Policies in Italy, in Regini M and Lange P (eds), *State, Market, and Social Regulation* Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge University Press, pp. 51-80.
- Diamond P (2020) Polycentric governance and policy advice: lessons from Whitehall policy advisory systems. *Policy & Politics* 48(4): 563-581.
- Di Mascio F and Natalini A (2013) Analysing the role of ministerial cabinets in Italy: legacy and temporality in the study of administrative reforms. *International Review of Administrative Sciences* 79(2): 328-346.

- Di Mascio F and Natalini A (2016), Ministerial advisers between political change and institutional legacy: The case of Italy. *Acta Politica* 5 (4): 517–538.
- Fobé E Brans M Vancoppenolle D and Van Damme J (2013) Institutionalized advisory systems: An analysis of member satisfaction of advice production and use across 9 strategic advisory councils in Flanders (Belgium). *Policy and Society* 32(3): 225-240.
- Gouglas A Brans M and Jaspers S (2017) European Commissioner Cabinet Advisers: Policy Managers, Bodyguards, Stakeholder Mobilizers. *Public Administration* 95(2): 359-377.
- Gregory R and Lonti Z (2008) Chasing shadows? Performance measurement of policy advice in New Zealand government departments. *Public Administration*, 86(3): 837-856.
- Halligan J (1995) Policy advice and the public service. In: Peters BG and Savoie DJ (eds) *Governance in a Changing Environment*. Montreal: McGill/Queens University Press, pp. 138–172.
- Hoppe R and Jeliaskova M (2006) How policymakers define their jobs: A Netherlands case study. In: H K Colebatch (eds), *The Work of policy: An international survey*. Lanham: Lexington Books, pp. 61–82.
- Hustedt T and Veit S (2017) Policy Advisory Systems: Change Dynamics and Sources of Variation. *Policy Sciences* 50(1): 41-46.
- Lippi A (2012) *La politica degli intellettuali*. Acireale-Roma: Bonanno editore.
- Manwaring (2019) Political demand and policy advice: a framework for analysis. *Policy Studies* 40(3-4): 270-286, DOI: 10.1080/01442872.2018.1557622
- Meert A Brans M Gouglas A (2019) Undoing the cabinets ministériels. A scoping review on “decabinetisation” in Napoleonic systems, paper presented at ICPP Conference 2019 Montreal T05P01 Politics and Public Administration within Core Executives Paper to be presented on June 27, 2019
- Mukherjee I and Giest S (2020) Behavioural Insights teams (BITs) and policy change: An exploration of impact, location, and temporality of policy advice. *Administration & Society* 52(10): 1538-1561.
- Pattyn V Blum S Fobé E Pekar-Milicevic M and Brans (2019). Academic policy advice in consensus-seeking countries: the cases of Belgium and Germany. *International Review of Administrative Sciences* Epub ahead of print: 20 December 2019. doi: 0020852319878780 .
- Pedrazzani A and Pinto G (2015) The electoral base: The ‘Political Revolution’ in the Evolution. In: Tronconi F (eds) Beppe Grillo’s Five Star Movement. Organisation, Communication and Ideology. London: Routledge, pp.75-98.
- Page EC and Jenkins B (2005) *Policy Bureaucracy: Government until a Cast of Thousands*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Peters BG (2008) The Napoleonic tradition. *International Journal of Public Sector Management* 21(2): pp. 118 – 132.
- Peters BG Pierre J and Randma-Liiv T (2011) Global financial crisis, public administration and governance: Do new problems require new solutions? *Public Organization Review* 11(1): 13-27.
- Pritoni A (2017) *Lobby d'Italia. Il sistema degli interessi tra Prima e Seconda Repubblica*. Roma: Carocci.
- Radaelli CM (2003) The Europeanization of public policies in: Featherstone K and Radaelli CM (eds) *The Politics of Europeanization*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 27–56.
- Radin BA (2013) Policy Analyses Reaches Midlife. *Central European Journal of Public Policy* 1(1): 8-27.
- Rebessi E and Zucchini F (2020) Courts as extra-cabinet control mechanisms for secondary legislation: evidence from Italy. *Italian Political Science Review* 50(2): pp. 159-172.
- Sarewitz D and Pielke RA (2007) The neglected heart of science policy: reconciling supply of and demand for science. *Environmental Science & Policy* 10(1): 5-16.

Thunert M (2013) Non-university research institutes: between basic research, knowledge transfer to the public and policy analysis, in Schubert K and Blum S (2013) (eds) *Policy analysis in Germany*, Chicago, Policy Press, pp. 247-264.

Veselý A (2013) Externalization of policy advice: Theory, methodology and evidence. *Policy and Society* 32(3): 199-209, DOI: 10.1016/j.polsoc.2013.07.002

Veselý A (2017) Policy Advice as Policy Work: A Conceptual Framework for Multi-Level Analysis, *Policy Sciences* 50(1): 139-154.