

Protect Italy's new funding agency

Lawmakers must ensure that the proposed ANR is independent and autonomous.

Italy is a rare example of a major world economy without a research funding agency that operates independently of a science or research ministry. For years, ministers and civil servants have had a say in what research gets funded. But that could be about to change.

Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte's government says it is committed to creating an independent National Research Agency (ANR) and has begun drafting its structure and functions. About time, too, say researchers who are tired of insufficient funds coming from opaque funding mechanisms. That said, they are worried that some politicians might wish to become too closely involved in the new agency's affairs (see *Nature* 575, 424–425; 2019).

It's a valid concern, and the fledgling agency will need to be protected. Paradoxically, it is politicians who must perform this crucial task, especially Italy's team of research ministers – led by political economist Lorenzo Fioramonti. It won't be easy, and Fioramonti and his team must steel themselves for the task ahead.

Conte pledged to establish the ANR in September, in his first speech as leader of a new coalition between the populist Five Star Movement and the centre-left Democratic Party. He added that financial support for research would also be increased.

The ANR, Conte said, would be modelled on science funding agencies in other European countries, which operate under the broad principle that politicians decide how much to allocate for research and have a say in strategic funding priorities. However, politicians do not decide which proposals are funded; nor are they involved in setting criteria for awards, or in evaluation. These tasks need to be performed independently, by subject experts chosen by the research community.

Under a proposal that has been presented to Italy's parliament as part of the 2020 budget, the ANR will receive €25 million (US\$28 million) for 2020, then €200 million for 2021 and €300 million annually from 2022. These are small sums by the standards of similar-sized economies, but it's a start. The ANR will coordinate research at universities and public research institutes. It will also fund "highly strategic" projects, and encourage participation in international research initiatives and cooperation with the private sector.

But the fine print – or lack of it – is causing concern. The current draft law says that the ANR's nine-member governing board will be nominated by university presidents, as well as representatives from the prime minister's office and government ministries. This is an unusually high level of



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involvement from political representatives, fuelling fears that the agency will come under the influence of politicians.

In line with international best practice, the ANR should also appoint a network of independent research advisers, drawn from various disciplines, to oversee the quality of funding calls and of funded applications. But the proposal presented to parliament has no such provision.

Many researchers are undecided on whether to see the glass as half empty or half full. They welcome the new support for research, but some would have preferred for Italy's existing funding bodies to be made part of the new agency. They are also unhappy that researchers and their representative organizations have been left out of the loop.

That said, researchers do have two things on their side. First, Fioramonti has said publicly that he is unhappy with the draft law and has promised to convince parliament to amend it. Second, a preliminary screening of the budget law by Italy's court of auditors has highlighted the question of independence and the auditors have asked for more clarity on how this will be achieved.

Fioramonti has said he is determined to do what he can to establish a healthy distance between the ANR and politicians, to consult the scientific community and to ensure that the ANR is governed to the highest possible standards of quality and probity.

Italy's researchers, and particularly the future generations whose careers the ANR will fund, need the minister and his team to follow through on these promises. Independence, transparency and trust are vital for an agency that could shape research in Italy for decades to come.

Egypt and the Egyptologists

Scientists everywhere are keen to share in the excitement of discoveries from Egypt's past.

It's been a busy few months for Egyptologists. Last week, the discovery of a cache of mummified animals – including the remains of lion cubs – dating back to ancient Egypt's 26th Dynasty (664–525 BC) was announced at the Saqqara necropolis, south of Cairo.

Last month, officials revealed that 30 sealed coffins and their mummified human contents had been found in the Assasif necropolis near Luxor. These are thought to be linked to the Amun priesthood, one of ancient Egypt's centres of power, which dates back to the tenth century BC. Further discoveries made in the country will be announced next month, according to Egypt's antiquities minister, Khaled El-Enany.

Researchers attending the annual congress of the International Association of Egyptologists in Giza earlier this month told *Nature* of their excitement about

the discoveries (see page 573). But some also expressed disappointment that Egypt's government will be restricting access – at least for now – to researchers at Egyptian institutions. There will be no open calls for research proposals of the type that museums and funding agencies typically publish to attract the best ideas and expertise.

The government has justifiable reasons for being careful about permitting further international involvement in its heritage. During colonial times, some of Egypt's most precious artefacts were taken, and many have wound up in Europe's leading museums.

The last time that coffins and mummies were discovered on a large scale was in 1891, at Bab el-Gasus ('the door of the priests'), not far from Luxor. Some of the surviving coffins from that find are now at the Rijksmuseum van Oudheden in Leiden in the Netherlands, and at the Vatican. Moreover, Zahi Hawass, Egypt's former antiquities minister, has long called for the return of the Rosetta Stone, which has been at the British Museum in London for more than 200 years.

But today's Egyptology bears little relation to the field's earlier era. Egypt hosts hundreds of teams of archaeologists from museums and universities around the world who are working in partnership with Egypt's universities and government. At last month's congress for Egyptologists, both Hawass and El-Enany were among the main speakers.

There are also many models for research collaboration. Egypt could, for example, issue calls for proposals in which international researchers are invited to join Egypt-led research consortia as co-investigators.

Every nation is the custodian of its heritage – a right that must never again be taken away. But at the same time, Egypt's rich history, which encompasses many civilizations, is also an example of how science and scholarship flourish when there are few barriers to talent. That is why, when Egypt feels the time is right, its government should consider inviting more of the world's researchers to work with its own, allowing them to contribute to the latest finds from the country's fascinating past.

Troubling trends

Attacks on scholars are on the rise at the same time as universities in several countries find themselves at the centre of student protests.

"Sowing corruption on Earth". That was one of the charges levelled at Iranian conservation biologists who were arrested in January 2018 and charged with spying. They were arrested for using camera traps to study endangered wildlife, especially the Asiatic cheetah (*Acinonyx jubatus venaticus*). There are fewer than 100 of the animals left in the world and most are believed to be in Iran.

All the nine researchers charged – Niloufar Bayani,

Taher Ghadirian, Amirhossein Khaleghi Hamidi, Houman Jowkar, Sepideh Kashani, Abdolreza Kouhpayeh, Sam Rajabi, Morad Tahbaz and Kavous Seyed Emami – were associated with the Persian Wildlife Heritage Foundation, a well-known Tehran-based wildlife conservation charity that had strong links to international conservation organizations and to the UN Environment Programme.

Emami died in unexplained circumstances in prison shortly after his arrest. The other eight were sentenced last week to between 6 and 10 years in prison, but are strongly protesting their innocence. The trial was held in secret, despite an international outcry from leading conservation charities and pleas from the United Nations for a fair and transparent process.

This tragic verdict came too late for inclusion in *Free to Think 2019*, an annual report from Scholars at Risk, an international organization that highlights human-rights violations against academic researchers and students. Now in its fifth year, the report records the experiences of scholars who have been subjected to violent or fatal attacks, wrongful prosecution or imprisonment, or who have been sacked or expelled from their institution without undergoing due process.

It isn't only in Iran that the law is being misused in such a way. The Scholars at Risk report highlights cases of rights violations in 56 countries. This year's tally of 324 recorded cases between 1 September 2018 and 31 August 2019 is higher than last year's 294, although the report points out that the examples are just a snapshot of a larger picture.

And there is another emerging phenomenon that has come too late to be highlighted in this year's study, but is likely to appear in the next. This is the scenes of campus unrest in such diverse locations as Chile, Hong Kong, Iran, Iraq and Lebanon.

Night after night, thousands of young people, as well as their teachers and lecturers, are taking to the streets or – in Hong Kong's case – have been protesting inside university campuses. Campuses are often places for dissent, but what is happening now is on a scale rarely seen in recent times.

These protests are often in response to a lack of jobs, rising prices, falling living standards, environmental concerns, or concerns about weak, unrepresentative or corrupt political leadership.

The response from university leadership depends on the context. In Iran's case, speaking out is not an option. In Lebanon, where there is much more academic freedom, students and lecturers have organized informal teach-ins and university presidents are calling on political leaders to heed their students' demands.

As 2019 gives way to 2020, it is unlikely that campus unrest will abate. There will be pressure from governments on university management not to allow premises to be used for demonstrations. And there will be pressure from the academic community and students not to give in to these, and more draconian, demands.

Researchers and students should not need to live in fear in the pursuit of their science. As this year's Scholars at Risk report demonstrates, that more are having to do so is a troubling trend.

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