

Italy is a rare example of a major world economy without a research funding agency that operates independently of a science or research ministry. The new ANR (Agenzia Nazionale per la Ricerca), 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 involvement from political representatives, fuelling fears that the agency will come under the influence of politicians. (F: Nature 575, 565, 2019)