

Linguist Takes Over as Italy's Science Minister

A linguist and former university administrator has been appointed to Italy's top science policy position. On Friday, Italy's new prime minister, Matteo Renzi, announced that Stefania Giannini will be his minister of education, universities, and research. Giannini will have the unthankful job of preserving what's left of Italy's scientific legacy at a time of shrinking budgets.

Giannini, 53, is a professor of linguistics and comparative linguistics at the University for Foreigners of Perugia; between 2004 and 2013, she also served as the university's rector, a position she gave up when she was elected to the Senate for former Prime Minister Mario Monti's centrist party, Civic Choice, in February 2013.

"I hope that Giannini will be able to appreciate the strategic importance of scientific research and its applications, despite her background in the humanities," says Piergiorgio Strata, a neuroscientist at the University of Turin.

The third minister on the post in less than 3 years, Giannini doesn't have an easy job ahead of her. Public spending on research and development in Italy is just 1% of its gross domestic product, a low rate compared with neighbors like Switzerland and France. A key funding instrument, the Italian Research Project of National Interest, shrunk from €170 million in 2010 and 2011 to €38 million in 2012, and may drop to zero in 2014. Italy's Ordinary Fund for Higher Education, which provides block funding for universities, has shrunk from €7.5 billion in 2009 to €6.6 billion in 2013.

"A country cannot spend €275 billion on pensions and €53 billion on education," Giannini said in an interview yesterday with [La Repubblica](#). But her two predecessors, [Francesco Profumo](#) and Maria Chiara Carrozza, have been unable to reverse the trends, and the mood among academics is gloomy. "I am extremely skeptical about the political situation overall," says physicist Francesco Sylos Labini of the Enrico Fermi Center in Rome, who's a member of the grassroots campaign group [Return On Academic Research](#). "Once again, this government coalition did not have a consensus from the electorate, which makes the whole scenario very shaky," he says.

Italy is hoping that E.U. funds will help make up for the declines. A new [National Research Program \(NRP\) 2014 to 2020](#), presented by outgoing Minister Carrozza on 31 January, has a 7-year timeline, just like Horizon 2020, the European Union's new research program; that's an "important signal," Strata says. But for E.U. grants to have a real impact, Italian researchers would have to become more successful in bagging them. "It requires a mindset that Italy doesn't have yet," Giannini said in the *La Repubblica* interview.

NRP has a 7-year budget of €6.3 billion, or €900 million per year. But Sylos Labini is not sure that the government will actually find the money to fund the plan. He says it's urgent that the government spends more money on basic research, without which innovation isn't possible. "Italian basic research

is in peril," Sylos Labini says.