


RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Advising the prince: the pluralization of the internal policy advisory system in Italy (2019–2021)

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## Abstract

This paper investigates the composition of the internal policy advisory system (PAS) in a Napoleonic country, Italy, where policy formulation and advice have traditionally been dominated by the Ministerial Cabinets, legal competences, and with a clear influence of political parties in the selection of experts. Based on the literature on the PASs, we argue that the role of the governments in shaping the systems of advice is growing and discuss how different trends push towards a pluralization of the advisers in the Napoleonic systems. Our research undertakes a unique mapping of the internal PAS in the second Conte government (2019–2021), in order to show if the Italian PAS is becoming more plural, and who are the advisors (in terms of how varied are their characteristics, skills and mandates). Our analysis combines the descriptive mapping of the internal PAS with qualitative interviews aimed at better understanding the move from the domination of the Ministerial Cabinet towards a complex and loosely coupled network of advisors.

**Keywords:** bureaucracy; COVID-19; experts; government; policy advice

## Introduction

In a world where policy problems are increasingly complex, governments need expertise for a variety of purposes, including the instrumental use of expertise for evidence-based policy making (EBPM), and its political use for nurturing political legitimation (Boswell, 2008). This emphasis highlighted the importance of how policy advice is provided in the different countries and, more specifically, by who. Since the end of 1990s, scholars in public administration and public policies focused their attention on the composition and dynamics of change of the policy advisory systems (PASs), intended as the interlocking sets of actors in each sector and jurisdictions that provide advice to the government (Halligan, 1995). Studies on the PAS describe how the provision of advice change over time, by moving out of the public administration towards a pluralized network of advisors that are both internal and external to the government, ranging from civil servants, political appointees, special commissioners, academics, independent researchers, think tanks, interest groups and private consultants.

This literature highlights that the PAS are experiencing different dynamics of change, both in Westminster and in Napoleonic countries. These dynamics of differentiations produce a pluralization of the actors involved in the PASs and a mix of formal and informal practices (Craft and Halligan, 2020). While politicians are increasingly concerned with controlling experts' advice (Hesstvedt and Christensen, 2023) the role of expertise in policymaking is extending well beyond

the traditional forms of technocracy (i.e. the appointment of technicians or experts at the head of the executive instead of political personnel).

The present study investigates how the governmental PAS is structured and who the advisors are in Italy. In this Napoleonic country, the use of EBPM is traditionally scarce (Marra, 2018), the Ministerial Cabinets (MCs) are the domini of policy formulation, bureaucracies are traditionally isolated (Cassese, 1999), and experts are traditionally politicized (Lippi, 2012). At the same time, Italy is a country where EBPM might have been pushed forward by concurrent trends regarding the changes in the political *élites*, the Europeanization of public policies, and the changing relationships between political parties and the experts. Our research thus revolves around the composition of the governmental PAS in the Conte II government (2019–2021), a period of dramatic increase for the demand of expert advice, due to an unprecedented government coalition led by the populist party Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S) and to the challenges of the Covid-19 crisis (Tronconi and Verzichelli, 2021). Against this backdrop, our study investigates different research questions (RQs). A first RQ regards the composition of one part of the Italian advisory system after the onset of the pandemic, namely the advisors involved in the government arena (Brans *et al.*, 2022: 19). This arena includes civil servants, ministerial advisers, personal advisors, experts appointed in the advisory bodies and in the governmental research institutes. We will also compare the emerging advisory arrangements with the preexisting one. A second RQ explores who the advisors are, where they are located, what their social and professional characteristics are, and what is the type of formal engagement (as expressed in formal assignments or mandates). Our main research hypothesis is that the configuration of the governmental PAS during the Conte II government shifted from a dominance of the MCs to a widened network of actors that does not replace the MCs but make policy advice more contingent, informal and loosely coupled.

The paper will proceed as follows: in section ‘Pluralization of the PAS’ we use the literature on PAS to discuss the causes and the implication of their pluralization; in section ‘PAS in Italy from MCs to networks’ we focus on the scarce evidence on the traditional Italian PAS and on current trends that may have pushed towards a pluralization of the internal governmental arena of advice; in section ‘Research design’ we present the research design; section ‘Findings’ describes the configuration of the internal PAS and presents the main characteristics of the advisors; section ‘Discussion and conclusions’ discusses the findings and concludes.

### Pluralization of the PAS

Policy advice is a set of activities that support decision making by analysing policy problems and proposing solutions (Vesély, 2017: 141). As a constitutive element of the policy process, policy advice is part of a broader policy work of maintaining, producing and serving a public policy, and it implies also a differentiated range of policy analysis (Aubin and Brans, 2021). The actors of policy advice coalesce into PASs with varying degrees of institutionalization (Halligan, 1995). Scholars have observed an increasing trend towards the pluralization of both actors and activities involved in PAS (Halligan, 1995: 160; Craft and Howlett, 2012, 2013; Craft and Halligan, 2017).

With pluralization, we experience an increase of the number of internal and external advisors (Blum and Brans, 2017; Pattyn *et al.*, 2019), and a diversification of advisory practices and influence, both in Westminster (Craft and Halligan, 2020) and non-Westminster countries (Hustedt and Veit, 2017; Howlett, 2019). Regarding the pluralization of actors, scholars pointed to the risks of loss of policy capacity for the public administration, due to greater externalization of policy advice outside the civil service (and to academia, consultancies, think tanks, research institutes and other stakeholders) and greater politicization in the selection of the advisors and in the content of advice (Craft and Howlett, 2012). Regarding the diversification of practices, policy advice has increasingly been understood “to involve a broader suite of techniques and activities (...) in support of policy work” (Craft and Halligan, 2017: 49). Overall, the pluralization of the PAS makes advice more variable and contingent (Veit *et al.*, 2017).

Halligan (1995), Veselý (2013, 2017) and Craft and Halligan (2020) pointed out that the pluralization of actors and practices prominently depends on the degree of control of government on the sphere of new advisory units surrounding it, but also on changes in the political systems and on the need to avoid policy failures (OECD, 2007). At the same time, Christensen (2021) highlights that the diversification of advice is resisted by the public administration, considered as the actor possessing the greatest policy competence and a central role in formulating the policies.

In Westminster countries, this situation implied a (de)institutionalization of the traditional advisory practices based on the dominance of the advice of civil service as the primary source for advice, and a move towards a networked landscape of advisors (Craft and Halligan, 2020).

In Napoleonic countries, where the civil service is traditionally politicized at the top (Peters, 2008), the monopoly of advice is in the hands of the politically appointed MCs, but this traditional arrangement seems threatened by new developments (Fobé *et al.*, 2013; Brans *et al.*, 2017; Gouglas *et al.*, 2017; Meert *et al.*, 2023). In France, Belgium, Greece, Spain, Portugal, and Italy, the MCs are composed 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” (Walgrave *et al.*, 2004: 7). As Meert *et al.* (2023a) recall MCs develop the policy work, control and coordinate the whole decision-making process and are involved in personnel selection, very often by side-lining public servants to mostly implementation roles. While MCs have long been institutionalized, in the recent years there is a trend towards a “decabinetization”, defined as attempts to “reduce and revise the MCs in favour of strengthening the administration’s role in policy making” (Brans *et al.*, 2017: 58). At the same time, the MCs are further diversifying their role, acting more as brokers and transmitters of policy ideas than advice producers (Squevin and Aubin, 2023), while civil servants are emerging as incidental advisors who work alongside the MCs (Aubin and Brans, 2020).

Therefore, the milieu of the advisers is becoming more crowded in Napoleonic countries too, with policy advice gradually shifting from the MCs to widened networks of advisors, with different competences and know-how, and a varied set of formal and informal engagements (Aubin and Brans, 2020). Besides the MCs and the civil servants, also the external experts became emerging stakeholders in policymaking thanks to a growing demand of technical expertise from both politicians and senior officers (Manwaring, 2019).

These dynamics look particularly relevant and have not yet been explicitly studied in relation to important countries in the Napoleonic traditions, such as Italy, thus offering a clear opportunity to fill both empirical and theoretical gaps.

### PAS in Italy from MCs to networks

The Italian PAS was traditionally characterized by the incisive role of MCs and a flourishing network of informal contacts strictly related to political appointment (Di Mascio and Natalini, 2016). Both elements stood for a significant politicization, since policy formulation was almost entirely delegated to mass parties, and the involvement of experts in decision-making was subjected to a manifest party patronage (Di Mascio, 2012). Intellectuals and academics were politically engaged in mass-party politics and provided their support thanks to their ideological affiliation and membership (Lippi, 2012).

Until the 1990s, the overall demand for advice from policy makers was generally episodic and circumscribed to the provision of technical appraisal. Advisors were called to support the leaders only whenever the politicians were not able to do it by themselves. Hence, politicians were presumed to be self-sufficient in coping with challenging decisions and had the needed knowledge. They were also generally highly educated and resorted to a limited number of (prestigious and trusted) advisors thanks to their party affiliation. More relevantly, the contribution of technical knowledge was relegated to legalism and procedural know-how (Christensen and Forato, 2022).

The MCs were directly appointed by politicians, and performed a variety of tasks through a widespread bargaining with the staff of the Ministers, the bureaucrats, the parties and the groups of interest. As for policy advice, MCs acted as (the only) institutionalized advisory players (but also as vehicles of political control) (Di Mascio and Natalini, 2013: 337), providing juridical knowledge, and sometimes legalism (Di Mascio and Natalini, 2016). They were large and dominated by professionals from the legal field (in particular of the Magistrates, the *Avvocatura Generale dello Stato*, the *Consiglio di Stato* and the *Corte dei Conti*) who were skilled at legal drafting, but lacked policy competences (Melis and Natalini, 2023).

Other than the MCs, the only advisory board explicitly envisaged by the Constitution to carry out an advisory role was the National Council for Economy and Employment (CNEL), but it has never significantly influenced the decision makers, and was constantly bypassed by the political parties (Dente and Regonini, 1989).

More relevant to policy advice was the advisory role played by official opinions regarding the drafts of various types of regulation delivered by the abovementioned *Consiglio di Stato*, the court of final appeal in the field of administrative law, and the *Avvocatura Generale dello Stato*, the organization grouping Italian state lawyers.

Against this background, some emerging trends in both the political system and in governance arrangements may have triggered a pluralization in the preexisting Napoleonic arrangement.

A slight adjustment towards a more pluralized arrangement took place after the change of the party system in the 1990s (Chiaromonte and Emanuele, 2022) and thanks to the growing relevance of the executive both in the policymaking and in the rulemaking processes (Rebessi and Zucchini, 2020).

Along the last 30 years, the political system underwent a straightforward transformation through the recruitment of a new political *élite* against the traditional 'old' politicians trained in the parties (Kakepaki *et al.*, 2018). The new MPs and the incoming Ministers lacked political experience, strong connections with the social partners, and policy competence, having more propensity for requesting orientation from experts and technocrats to support decision making both in Parliament and within the MCs (Valbruzzi 2018; Tronconi and Verzichelli 2023, 2021).

Furthermore, some specific contingencies, like Europeanization and austerity, made technical backgrounds, scientific competence, professional expertise and evidence-based policy making more important than in the past (Radaelli, 2004). Similarly, the dramatic challenges raised by the Covid-19 pandemic have emphasized the need for more expertise of varied knowledge, from medicine to economics, to governments in the different phases of the pandemic (Galanti and Saracino, 2021).

Therefore, new actors might have entered the inner circle of the MCs since the policy formulation incrementally moved out of the parties towards the Ministries (Minister advisory body and top management). New actors such as academic experts, think tanks, lobbyists and Government research Institutes accessed the PAS and put the premises for a pluralization and layering of the former approach (Diletti, 2011; Pritoni, 2017; Galanti and Lippi, 2023).

Against this backdrop, our main hypothesis is that the configuration of the Italian governmental advice is changing from a clear dominance of the MCs towards a widened network built upon political appointments and policy contingencies.

## Research design

Change inside PAS has been scrutinized in recent years on trajectories towards externalization. In the case of Westminster PAS, it dealt with their propensity to include private stakeholders in the public sphere (Craft and Halligan, 2020), while in Napoleonic countries externalization corresponded to a de-cabinetization in the direction of a more plural and heterogeneous arrangement (Meert *et al.*, 2023).

Our empirical investigation is aimed at describing these changes in a case of a consolidated Napoleonic arrangement, Italy, looking at the pluralization of the governmental PAS. The study is specifically focused on the Conte II government (2020–2021) as a unit of analysis. Two hypotheses support the research on the change in PAS in Italy. The first one is whether the Italian governmental PAS also shifted from a strict Napoleonic arrangement towards a widened network of advisors where the MCs are no longer the unique advisors. This hypothesis assumes the change is prominently related to a broader institutional transformation of the state and of the political system described above. The second hypothesis explores whether the pandemic played a specific role in enhancing any process of change as an intervening variable. This hypothesis specifically concerns the influential role played by the experts called in to counter the crisis.

These hypotheses can be substantiated in some empirical expectations. First, we expect that the government arena of advice (Brans *et al.*, 2022: 19) is gradually pluralizing, thus including new collective and individual advisors, with the Presidency of the Council of Ministers playing a crucial role in this transformation. Second, we expect that the type of assignments for the advisors are extremely variable, and that they include informal practices of advice. Third, we expect that the sociographical characteristics of the advisors during the pandemic reflect some of the peculiarities of the Italian *élites*, where senior male figures advanced in their careers are predominant. Finally, we expect that the type of knowledge brought by the advisors is not only juridical, but open to a variegated scientific background.

The analysis has been possible thanks to the evidence provided by a dataset of individuals providing advice to the Conte government, elaborated thanks to a research project funded by the Scuola Nazionale dell'Amministrazione (SNA) of the Presidency of the Council of the Italian Government (SNA, 2021). Evidence for the dataset has been collected through two steps of inquiry.

A first step was taken by mapping inductively from official documents and statutes all the governmental actors that were potentially involved in policy formulation, and more specifically in advice activities. This inductive strategy for the mapping of the governmental PAS was needed because 'policy advisor' is not a formalized position in Napoleonic administrative systems. Instead, advisory functions have to be deduced from explicit assignments (contained in formal documents such as the Constitution, the ministerial internal regulation, the statutes and in the acts of appointment) and from implicit assignments reported by expert knowledge. Therefore, the mapping of the different types of advisors was developed by studying the organizational charts of the executive, in order to select the head of the MCs and of the ministerial departments involved in policy formulation, and by cross checking our selection with two interviews with Bernardo Giorgio Mattarella, Professor in Administrative Law and highly reputed expert in public administration and senior advisors. Additionally, a sample of 13 expert interviews with extremely high reputed officials and advisors helped identify the implicit and additional advisory assignments of the senior officers in senior ministerial positions.<sup>1</sup> This first step of inquiry led to a map of advisors with different assignments, partially internal and partially external to the administrative bodies. This mapping produced a dataset of 712 records of assignments<sup>2</sup> having a role as advisors during the Conte II government (2019–2021). This population blended politicization and bureaucracy, since it includes individual advisors, members of committees, top civil servants, the heads of some specific public bodies (such as the CNEL and the 20 Government Research Institutes), the Heads of the Avvocatura Generale dello Stato, Corte dei Conti and Consiglio di Stato.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Each interview proposed to each interviewee a list of top civil servants in charge as heads of departments and asked him/her to indicate who concretely undertook an advisory role during the second Government led by Mr. Conte (September 2019–February 2021).

<sup>2</sup>The total number of people in the survey is 646, with some having more than one assignment as advisors.

<sup>3</sup>For the Governmental Research Institutes, the Courts and the State Attorney we examined only the positions of the heads since we assumed that the members (researchers, judges, lawyers, etc.) operating in those organizations and eventually involved in an advisory activity, are anyway authorized and supported by their head when providing an advice to the government. The same criterion has been implemented for the Cabinets: we collected all the heads of the MCs (Capo di

The second step consisted in the analysis of the dataset with regard to the main characteristics of the scrutinized population in terms of their status, social background and assignment. The information to feed the dataset was collected through different documental sources. The Register for Transparency of every Ministry or public body in general provided a starting list of names of potential advisors, thus we scrutinized the related CVs of the people who were formally assigned tasks of analysis and formulation of policy recommendations. We also identified and coded all the explicit advisory assignments for collective bodies and individuals.

Through this inductive strategy we used both a positional and a reputational approach that helped us to identify who is really playing a role of advisor towards the Conte government.

## Findings

To assess whether the convergence of different factors paved the way for differentiating the advisors towards a pluralized advisory system, we will compare the pre-existing Napoleonic arrangement of advice with the picture of advisory actors emerging from our mapping.

### *Pre-existing ecology and the rising of loosely coupled network*

All these aspects triggered a new ecology in the Italian PAS as a stratified patchwork whose dynamics are based on an intertwining of three information: (i) the actors actually involved in advisory activities, (ii) the relevance of their role; (iii) the nature (explicit/implicit) of advice assignment (see [Table 1](#)). A graphical representation of [Table 1](#) is offered in [Figure 1](#).

[Table 1](#) displays a comparison between the pre-existing Napoleonic arrangement (1945–1990) grounded on the MCs, and its contemporary evolution, while [Figure 1](#) provides a graphic representation of the different arrangements.

As we can understand looking both at [Table 1](#) and [Figure 1](#), the distinct Napoleonic system is now overstretched into a hybridized one. The Napoleonic PAS was effectively configured as a triangle between the government, the MCs and the parties. The triangle was tightly coupled and somehow coherent, it depicted a consolidated inner circle of power and knowledge, through both explicit and implicit assignment, although the explicit one was prominent and pinpointed a clear and formal politicized system. Here, the MCs were the real core of the (legal) policy advice, also brokering insights from the parties and mediating them to the government (Di Mascio and Natalini, 2013, 2016). At the same time, the parties exerted influence directly on the government through their intellectuals and experts (Lippi, 2012).

At the same time, out of the triangle, we could find relevant, but complementary, advisors: the Ministerial departments, individual advisors (both directly engaged in the game by the MCs), the Courts (the Consiglio di Stato and the Corte dei Conti) and the Avvocatura Generale dello Stato. All these were influent, but peripheral, and their influence was entirely relegated to occasional legal assistance. Lastly, a marginal role was also played by the CNEL, an independent representative body envisaged by the Constitution for supporting economic and labour policies and prominently representing experts from the trade unions, business associations and academics. The influence of CNEL was anyway negligible.

All these elements have become more confused over the last few decades. The combination of formal and informal relationships has grown: informal advice spilled out of the triangle and invested other institutions that started to mediate legal assistance.

The picture is now multifaceted. The MCs are not endowed with exclusive access to the government, as in the past. On the contrary, MCs are a relevant ‘intermediary junction’ since most of the access is anyway directed to them. Secondly, Ministers’ personal advisors enjoy

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Gabinetto, Capo Ufficio Legislativo, Capo Ufficio Stampa, etc.) inside the cabinet and according to the 13 preliminary interview, we also selected some relevant and autonomous collaborators (technical secretariat, public relations, personal office, etc.).

**Table 1.** The Italian PAS: the pre-existing and the new arrangements compared

	Suppliers of advice in the pre-existing arrangement	Relevance (e.g. involvement in advice: high or low)	Suppliers of advice in the new arrangement	Relevance (e.g. involvement in advice: high or low)
Explicit assignment	Ministerial cabinets	<i>Very high and specifically oriented to legal support</i>	Ministerial Cabinets	<i>High, now mingling brokering, advice and broader policy work</i>
	Ministerial departments	<i>Very low</i>	Ministerial departments	<i>Low but increasing</i>
	Ministerial commissions and study groups	<i>High, but episodic</i>	Ministerial commissions and study groups	<i>High, but episodic</i>
	Individual advisors (e.g. academics)	<i>Low and Subdued to Both MCs and Political Parties</i>	Individual advisors (e.g. academics, professionals, consultants...)	<i>Very high and directly responsive to the Minister</i>
	CNEL	<i>Negligible/Low</i>	CNEL MCs of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers Presidency of the Council of Ministers' departments Presidency of the Council of Ministers' individual advisors Covid Task forces	<i>Negligible/Low High and growing High and growing High and growing Medium to high</i>
Implicit assignment	Courts (Avvocatura Generale dello Stato, Corte dei conti, Consiglio di Stato)	<i>Low to medium, particularly regarding legal assistance</i>	Courts (Avvocatura Generale dello Stato, Corte dei conti, Consiglio di Stato)	<i>Very high and growing</i>
	Mass parties	<i>Very high</i>	Interest groups and partisan think tanks	<i>Low and external, but growing</i>
	-	-	Government Research Institutes	<i>Medium but Growing</i>
	-	-	Other state's agencies (e.g. Agenzia delle Entrate)	<i>Low but growing regarding specific issues</i>
	-	-	State enterprises (e.g. Cassa Depositi e Prestiti, ENI, etc.)	<i>High but only regarding specific issues</i>

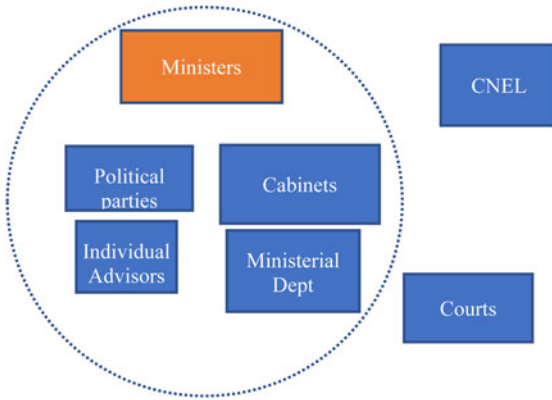
Source: own compilation from documental analysis (Constitution, official documents and 13 expert interviews).

more freedom than in the past, since they increasingly play a proactive role towards the decision-maker and can act as an additional (temporary) mediator between a wide range of interests, inexorably plural and sometimes even opposed to one another, represented in the scope of decision making.

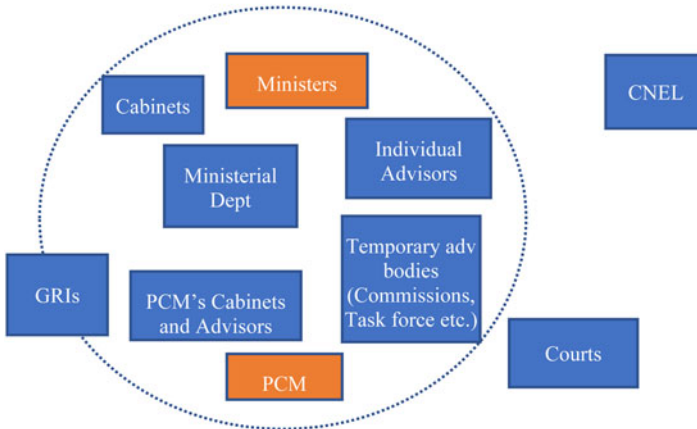
Again, MCs still play a significant role – now mingling brokering, advice and a broader set of tasks – but they are no longer the centre of the system, as highlighted by the literature for other national cases (Squevin and Aubin, 2023). Here, the role of the Presidency of the Council of the Ministers (PCM)<sup>4</sup> has grown and became pivotal, according to the so-called ‘administrative presidency’ function: an instrument in the hands of the President effectively devoted to the coordination of policies as a mix of management and advice (Criscitello, 2019: 1,644). The mixed nature of PCM, a hub of management of specific policy goals and staff of experts at the same time, contributed to disrupt the consolidated triangle. The PCM is so relevant since it plays the role of a subset, a core structure in the system gathering its own cabinets, departments and individual advisors.

<sup>4</sup>The Presidency of the Council is the Italian Prime Minister’s office, an organizational unit founded in 1988 and increasingly grown up during the 1990s and the 2000s. It is not a Ministry, but a hub of many different organizational staff and departments devoted to a heterogenous number of tasks, also including policy work and policy advice. It counts more than 4,000 employees and coordinates some relevant policies also steered by specific Ministries.

Pre-existing arrangement



New and pluralised arrangement



**Figure 1.** The pre-existing and the new arrangement in the Italian internal governmental advisory system. Orange squares: advice demanders; blue squares: advice suppliers; the circle indicates the proximity to the government. Source: own compilation.

The Courts and the *Avvocatura Generale dello Stato* also increased their informal influence through a web of informal contacts with the officers and the MCs, in a way inversely proportional to the influence by intellectual and academics in the parties. Equally, other public bodies, like Government Research Institutes owned by the State (Galanti and Lippi, 2023), agencies, state enterprises and staff of the Ministries were slightly involved in the milieu of advice, while the CNEL continued to play a marginal role. Indeed, the role of consultants and individual advisors directly recruited by the Ministers grew even further, as the parties ceased to supply expert knowledge and experts were no longer recruited by the parties to support policymaking. In place of the parties, a rising role was externally played by interest groups and partisan think tanks.

The large number of individual advisors directly appointed by the Ministries, on the one hand, and the temporary task forces envisaged by the government to cope with the pandemic, on the other, became essential stakeholders in this network (Galanti and Saracino, 2021). All the remaining stakeholders are involved depending on contingencies (e.g. the type of political majority, of policies and of political climate, type of policies, etc.).

As shown in Figure 1, there is a widened network of heterogeneous and interconnected influences that enlarged the triangle. This network depicts a loosely coupled arrangement, since it includes a large number of “interdependent elements that vary in the number and strength of



**Table 2.** Type of advice in the Italian internal government arena

Type of advice	(n)	(%)
Individual advice	237	33
Cabinets advice (Uff. di diretta collaborazione)	176	25
Covid-19 advice (Collective task force)	130	24
Bureaucratic and institutional advice	169	18
Total of assignments	712	100

Source: Dataset SNA 2021.

their interdependencies. The fact that these elements are linked and preserve some degree of determinacy is captured by the word coupled in the phrase loosely coupled. The fact that these elements are also subject to spontaneous changes and preserve some degree of independence and indeterminacy is captured by the modifying word loosely” (Orton and Weick, 1990: 204). As Orton and Weick pointed out, this system is simultaneously open and closed, indeterminate and rational, spontaneous and deliberate. It deals with a network of potential contacts that can be activated, sometimes they work intensely and linearly, at others they are seemingly silent and represent autonomous initiatives by the nodes of the network. The network is not a consolidated structure, but a dynamic and situational (on demand).

As a result, the loosely coupled network displays a *milieu* of stakeholders working and acting in the same environment with different rationalities and pursuing specific aims. This *milieu* is based on a network that shows a web of intertwined relationships which can result in a blurred and messy arrangement. Indeed, the relations of the network are activated, influential (or not) and incisive (or not) according to the contingency. The network is not the opposite of the triangle, but its evolutionary hybrid, more an adjustment to the new times, rather than a degeneration of the former one.

#### *The advisors in the loosely coupled network*

According to the dataset, the current network comprises 712 assignments carried out by 646 people, where 39 persons have double assignments and 6 persons a triple assignment. Table 2 displays the current distribution of assignments across the different types of advisors. Four groups of assignments emerge distinctively: (i) individual advice (e.g. those individuals who are appointed by the minister with a responsibility for technical appraisal and consultancy) which amount to 33% of the total; (ii) cabinet advice (which includes the MCs staffs – namely the Head of the Cabinet, the Chief of the Legislative office, the Technical Secretariat, the Diplomatic Advisor (if present), and the Public Relations/Press office, and the heads of the ministerial committees, which are all appointed when the minister takes office), which amount to 25%; (iii) bureaucratic and institutional advice (e.g. officials who play a role of advice from a position of top civil servants, including members of institutional advisory bodies such as the CNEL and the head of the Consiglio di Stato, the Corte dei Conti and the Avvocatura Generale dello Stato) which amount to 18%; (iv) the Covid-19 task forces advice (e.g. the members of the temporary advisory boards appointed by the Presidency of the Council of the Ministers and other Ministers during the first phases of the Covid crisis) which amount to 25%. This mapping allowed us to assemble new and more comprehensive evidence of the pluralization of the advisory system in Italy.

First, the number of appointments to individual advisors is extremely relevant: these individual advisors are academics, professionals and managers directly appointed by the minister upon the following assignments: the personal advisor (‘Consigliere giuridico, economico’, etc.) directly advice the Minister over strategic issues; the expert (‘Esperto’) offers on demand consultancy in a specific area of expertise; the consultants (‘altri consulenti e collaboratori’) have more informal assignments and usually perform limited study and support tasks.

Secondly, another dense cluster of nodes is represented by the MCs’ staff. MCs are still influential and gather a significant percentage of assignments. Cabinet members usually come from the Administrative Corps and their background is still predominantly in law.

Thirdly, the bureaucratic and institutional advisors is a multifaceted and quantitatively slightly less relevant cluster, but potentially influential. As anticipated, it deals with top civil servants who are in charge in senior position and who have the formal assignment or who can also have a formal mission (among others) to support decision making, or who may have an informal influence and personal access to decision makers thanks to the expertise they derive from their organizational position. This cluster encompasses the Heads of selected Ministerial Departments, of the 13 PCM Departments, of the CNEL, of the GRIs, of two Administrative Courts (the Corte dei Conti and the Consiglio di Stato) and the Avvocatura Generale dello Stato (which is in judicial proceedings). While the Court of Auditors also has the (largely residual) task of legal support on budget and expenditure towards both the parliament and the Government, the Consiglio di Stato and the Avvocatura Generale dello Stato deliver their (intense and very well reputed) advice in entirely informal way. The know-how of these institutional advisors is multi-disciplinary (i.e. for the GRIs the background is prominently from STEM; for the CNEL economy and labour), in the case of the Courts and the State Attorney the valued background is legal.

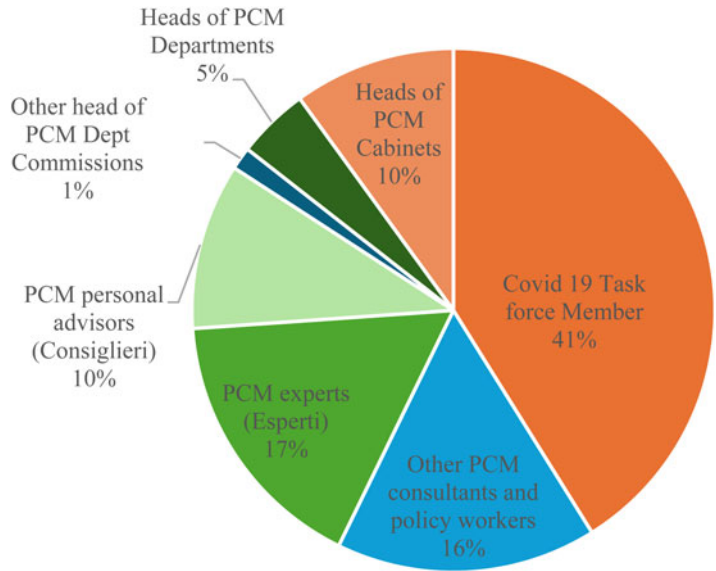
Fourthly, the task force includes 176 assignments of the 7 temporary advisory boards – the so-called Covid-19 task forces – that were called into being as advisors of the Presidency of the Council of the Ministers (PCM) and some specific Ministries (education, gender equality, and innovation) in spring 2020. All of these received a task to provide advice on specific policy issues related to the pandemic outbreak, and all of them were mostly active for a short period of time (from March to July 2020), producing reports and performing hearings that hardly accessed to the public debate and proved to be quite uninfluential, with the notable exception of the Technical Scientific Committee, which continues to be a crucial actor in the policy process during the pandemic years. These temporary advisors are mainly academics, public and private managers. Notably, the Covid advisors were not exclusively jurists, but also economists and medical specialists. All in all, the Covid times significantly influenced this ecology.

As we look at where all these advisors are located (Table 3), clear evidence relates to the centrality in the loosely coupled network of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers (PCM), with its own offices (such as the Segreteria generale) and the related departments (headed by the so-called ‘Ministri senza portafoglio’). Table 3 shows that while the number of advisors located in the MCs remains relevant but not exclusive (16% of the total assignments), most of the advisors are located into the Ministries (35% of the assignments), and, more importantly, that a very significant portion of the total assignments (45% of the total assignments) is located in the PCM, though formal appointment which are attributed respectively by the Presidency (31%) and by the PCM’s departments (14%).

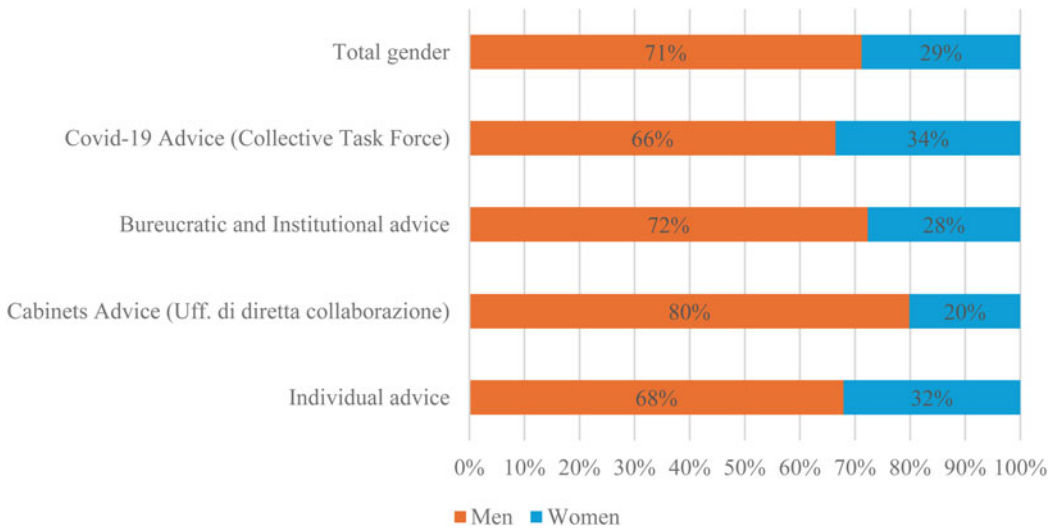
**Table 3.** Location of advisors (with evidence of Ministerial Cabinets)

	(n)	(%)
Ministerial departments	251	35
Presidency of the Council of Ministers (PCM)	224	31
Cabinets (Ministerial departments and PCM departments)	111	16
PCM departments	99	14
Government Research Institutes (GRI)	20	3
Other institutions and agencies	7	3
Total of assignments	712	100

Source: Dataset SNA 2021.



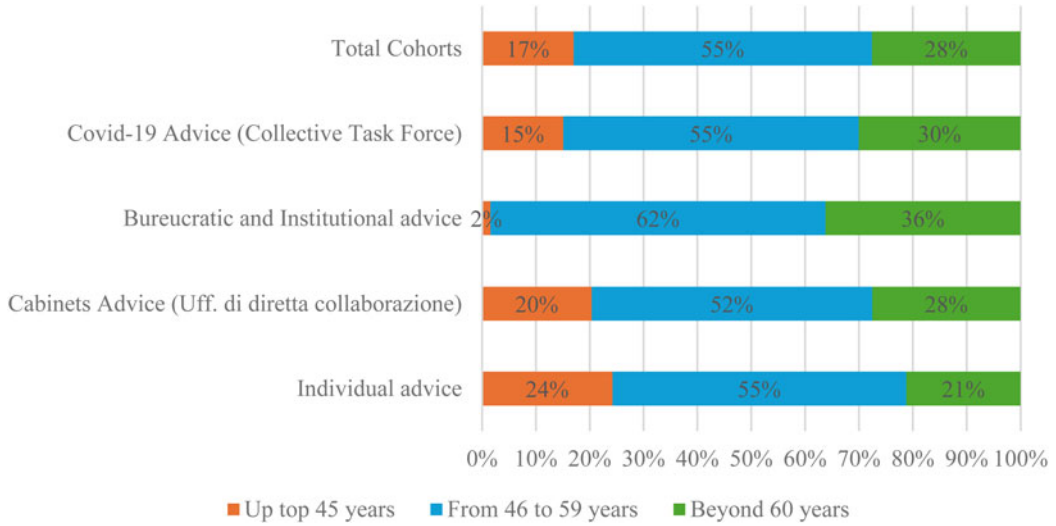
**Figure 2.** The advisors of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers (PCM) and related Departments.  
 Source: Dataset SNA, N = 360 assignments, corresponding to the total of appointments by both the Prime Minister Offices and by the other PCM departments.



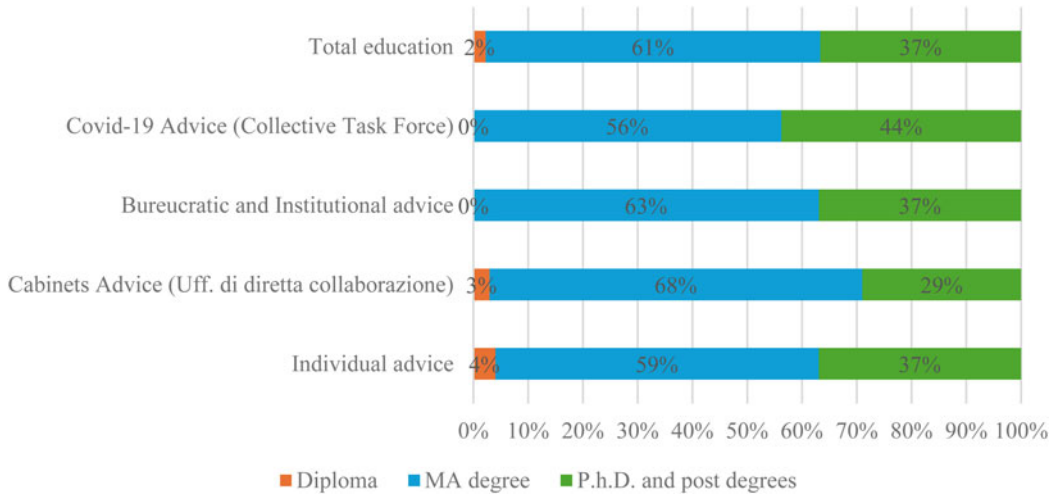
**Figure 3.** Type of advice by gender (%).  
 Source: Dataset SNA 2021, N = 712 advice assignments corresponding to 646 people.

Figure 2 allows us to focus on the advisors of the PCM only, in order to unpack the variety and the relevance of these advisory assignments. Figure 3 includes all the advisors of the PCM plus PCM’ cabinetiers included in our database, for a total number of 360 assignments up to a total of 712.

Indeed, 41% of the PCM advisors are engaged in task forces, which again is novelty and a peculiarity of the pandemic advisory system. Apart from the Covid-19 task forces, while the head of the PCM departments and of the PCM cabinets amount to 5% and 10% of the assignments respectively, the greatest part of the assignments is attributed to the PCM experts (17%) who deliver technical appraisal; to the PCM consultants who deliver different types of



**Figure 4.** Type of advice by age cohorts (%).  
 Source: Dataset SNA, N = 699, as there are 13 rows where data about the age of the advisor was not disclosed in the CV.



**Figure 5.** Type of advice by education (%).  
 Source: Dataset SNA 2021, N = 712 advice assignments corresponding to 646 people.

policy work and technical assistance (16%), and to personal advisors (consiglieri) who deliver evidence based and strategic advice (10%).

*Sociographical characteristics and status*

Additional evidence concerns the socio-demographic dimensions, such as gender, age and educational qualifications. Figures 3–5 summarizes all three dimensions.

With regards to gender, the overall majority are men (71%). This evidence varies across our four categories of policy advice. Women are better represented within the Task Forces (34%)

**Table 4.** Type of advice by type of career

	Individual advice (%)	Cabinets advice (Uff. diretta collaborazione) (%)	Bureaucratic & institutional advice (%)	Covid-19 advice (collective task force) (%)	Total type of career (%)
Political career	3	1	0	1	1
Mixed career	15	7	1	7	9
Technical career	82	92	99	92	90

Source: Dataset SNA 2021,  $N = 707$  advice assignments, as there are 5 rows where information about the type of career and related politicization was not disclosed in the CV.

and the individual advice (32%), while their presence drops among the MCs (20%) and bureaucratic and institutional advice (28%).

As far as age is concerned, evidence shows a decidedly mature population. The 55% of those investigated were between 45 and 69 years old, 28% were more than 60 years old. It consists prominently of retired people, showing that politicians have a propensity to ask for advice from older and presumably more wise people. Those under 45 years old (17%) played a definitely marginal role, although there is a significant variance among different clusters. Advisors under 45 years amount to 24% of the individual advice, to 20% of the Cabinet advice, to the 15% of the Covid-19 task forces, while there are very few in bureaucratic and institutional advice (2%). As a result, policy advice in Italy is not considered as ‘a business for young professionals’ indeed, within the remit of the Italian PAS, competence is correlated with the length of careers.

In terms of education, almost all of the advisors have a high level of education: 61% have a university degree, 37% have a post-graduate diploma, while only 2% have a secondary school diploma. The post-graduate (Ph.D and specialization and/or training courses) rate is higher when we consider the Covid-19 task forces (44%) and bureaucratic and institutional advice, therefore contributing to the prototype of advisors as an highly educated, male and mature elite.

### *The career*

The career of the advisor is characterized by an academic or civil service background. Table 4 confirms that the scrutinized population of advisors is mainly recruited (90%) thanks to a purely technical profile – as they are not engaged in active politics. *Pantouflage* is very limited. Political advisors with a career in politics (i.e. militant political consultants, affiliated with and involved in supporting the career of politicians) constituted only 10% of the total, but 1% of them were formerly in charge as politicians, therefore, these are cases of outgoing political careers, 9% of them, instead have a mixed profile, i.e. they work in a professional sector other than politics, but have played or still play a role in active politics (as candidates in elections, secretaries of political parties at local level, etc.).

As it was reasonable to expect, of the subjects who carry out professional political activities and who in various capacities exercise the role of advisor, the great majority (85%) belonged to the main parties in power in the Conte II government, as shown in Table 5.

**Table 5.** Political affiliation of the advisors with political and mixed careers (in %)

Political affiliation	(%)
M5S	37
PD	28
Centre-left (including LeU)	20
Centre-right (FI, LN, FdI)	4
Others (+Europa, IV, IdV, others)	11
<i>N</i>	(71)

Source: Dataset SNA 2021,  $N = 71$  advice assignments.

**Table 6.** Advisors by professions (%)

	Individual advice (%)	Cabinets advice (%)	Bureaucratic and institutional advice (%)	Covid-19 advice (%)	Total professions (%)
Academics	23	17	13	39	24
Senior civil servants	7	15	70	14	22
Professionals	35	13	2	11	18
Other civil and public servants	7	22	9	14	12
Judges	14	13	5	1	9
Journalists	6	7	0	5	5
Corporate managers	2	0	0	13	4
Military and police	1	10	1	1	3
Politicians	3	1	0	0	1
Not available	2	2	0	2	2
Total	100	100	100	100	100
N	(237)	(169)	(130)	(176)	(712)

Source: Dataset SNA 2021, N = 712 advice assignments corresponding to 646 people.

**Table 7.** Assignments of advice to academics by scientific area (%)

CUN Macro areas taxonomy	(%)
Technology & applied sciences	11
Natural sciences, maths & physics	10
Health & life sciences	13
Social sciences	57
Humanities	9
Total	100
(N)	(168)
Social sciences ‘Macro area’ only	(%)
Economics & statistics	49
Law	46
Political & social sciences	4
Total	100
	(95)

Source: Dataset SNA 2021.

*Professions and scientific background*

More relevantly, professional status and scientific background are significant elements that contribute to understanding the nature and the aim of policy work for the government. Table 6 shows the prominence advisors with public careers. 43% of the total assignments are attributed to senior civil servants (22%), to other state officials such as Prefetti, diplomats, bureaucrats working in other state institutions, Regions, etc. (12%), and to judges from the administrative courts (9%). The other professions are academics (24%), and professionals such as lawyers, engineers, architects, medical doctors etc. (18%). Academics prevails in the Covid-19 task forces; advisors with a former public career prevail in the MCs; professional advisors are prominent in the individual advice. Other professions are marginal: journalists amount to 5%, private managers to 4%, politicians to 1%.

As previously observed, academics represent a ruling class in the field of policy advice and seem to represent a *tertium genus* among politicians and bureaucrats. It comprises 168 academics from 55 universities (Italian and foreign universities): more than half of them come from a limited number of Italian universities, mainly based in Rome (38%), Milan (17%) and Naples (8%). 37% of academic advisors come from a large number of universities and other research institutions, mainly from Central and Northern Italy and, to a lesser extent, from abroad (11).

**Table 8.** The Italian Covid-19 task forces: overview of the information contained in the SNA Dataset

Task force name	Members	Tasks	Outputs	Hearings
A Committee of experts (Ministry of Education Task Force)	18	Policy Proposals (education)	Report (not public)	1 parliamentary hearing by the chairman/woman
B Committee of experts in economic and social matters (Colao Task Force)	24	Proposals	Report	Written communications to the PCM
C Technical Scientific Committee (TSC)	26	Generic	Minutes	Parliamentary hearings by the chairman/woman
D Data-driven working group for the Covid-19 emergency (Task Force Data)	74	Generic	Report	Written communications to the PCM
E Women for a New Renaissance Task Force	13	Policy proposals (gender-related)	Report	None
F Task Force for the efficient and rapid use of liquidity support measures	10	Coordination of implementation	None	Written communications to the Minister; hearings by the components
G Monitoring unit to combat the spread of fake news relating to Covid-19 on the web and on social networks	11	Policy proposal (fake-news related)	Report	None

Source: Dataset SNA 2021; own compilation from the analysis of the official documents.

More relevant, however, is the evidence concerning the scientific background of the academic advisors.<sup>5</sup> Table 7 displays that social sciences definitely prevail (57% of the academics), even if within this category we notice a slight prevalence of economics (including statistics) (49%) over law (44%), while the representation of political scientists and sociologists is definitely residual. These disciplines are followed by medical sciences (13%), technologies such as engineering and architecture (11%), natural sciences and mathematics (10%) and humanities (9%). The most relevant evidence from this data is the end of the monopoly of a legal background, and the correlated novelty of a widespread diffusion of an assorted range of competences. Also the emerging number of economists is certainly a significant element, since a relevant contribution from an economic background is still rarely required by the bureaucracies and MCs, where the leading background is still prominently legal. This emerging scientific pluralism surrounds the juridical monopoly of the MCs and explains the dynamics of enlargement of the original milieu of the Napoleonic arrangement. This pluralism was reinforced by the academics involved in the Covid1-9 task forces, where scholars from all CUN areas were involved. This can be interpreted as a need of politicians to seek new perspectives and visions to face a crisis that challenges policy making.

To sum up, data confirms that legal scholars still have a decisive and pre-eminent role in supporting decision making, however, there is a growing presence of economists and statisticians.

#### *Relevance of the COVID task forces*

Table 7 describes the Covid task forces, which played an incisive role in the arrangement of the observed network during the Conte II government.

The analysis focuses on four analytic dimensions: size of the committees, type of function (generic or specific), type of output and hearings by the parliament. The number of members inside each committee varies considerably, ranging from 10 (F) to 74 (D), the analysis of the functions and tasks confirm this heterogeneity. Task force F played only a coordinating role in the implementation. On the contrary, both task forces C and D played a multi-task function both in formulation and in decision making. More precisely, the STC had the leadership in the policymaking during the pandemic. It has had the dual task of consulting and scientific evidence-based support to the PCM. Being a body enshrined in the government's architecture and fully inserted in the decision-making

<sup>5</sup>Grouped into the five macro-areas identified by Consiglio Universitario Nazionale – CUN.

process of the PCM, the STC was able to strongly orient political decisions especially in the first phase of the emergency, providing the scientific basis of the prophylaxis to be followed and therefore the legitimacy of the choices made (the first March 2020 lockdown). On the other hand, task force D carried out tasks of evaluating and proposing data-driven technological solutions.

The other task forces pursued tasks of elaborating proposals for the management of the crisis and for the post-pandemic relaunch. In particular, task forces B and E contributed to policy design for post-pandemic development. We also note that most of the task forces have published policy reports as outputs, though with different timing (Table 8).

While these commissions were organized in different ways, they represented an innovative method to draw on experts to support formulation, decision-making and, sometimes, even implementation. As such, they represented a very significant break, even numerically, with the history and tradition of the Italian central administration. Except for task forces B and E, which are headed by a President, all the task forces are organized around a formally appointed Coordinator. All the task forces worked in sub-groups, thus facilitating collaboration between components and the in-depth study of specific topics, also in consideration of the conduct of activities mainly at a distance. The task forces, being *pro tempore* structures, did not have their own technical secretariats. Finally, in almost all cases, the task forces had access to a public hearing at the Parliament to provide advice on specific topics. A final consideration needs to be given to the contractualization of the Covid experts, who carried out their assignment *pro bono* and under confidentiality agreements. This fact reinforces the idea that the Italian governmental PAS displays a mix of formal and informal elements where advice is interpreted as a service to the country more than a professional duty.

## Discussion and conclusions

The SNA dataset shows a moderate change in the Italian governmental PAS through a pluralization and a diversification of the stakeholders. Overall, the main hypothesis about the widening and hybridization of the PAS is confirmed.

The advisory arrangement characterized by a high degree of politicization at the top and grounded on a triangle among Ministers, MCs and the parties slightly widened. It now includes an increasing number of new components recruited both through explicit (as for the PCM, the task forces) and through implicit assignments of ‘incidental advisors’ (such as the GRIs and other state agencies). At the same time, the importance of the magistrates and of top civil servants grew a lot, while the CNEL continued to play a peripheral role. As a result, the ecology of the new system gathered a heterogeneous population of stakeholders that have been gradually assimilated into the former arrangement: cabinetiers, bureaucrats and institutional top civil servants, on the one side, individual advisors and task forces, both directly recruited by the Ministers and particularly by the PCM, on the other. Hence, the Napoleonic arrangement continued to be politicized, but in a different way. The politicization is not now induced by party patronage, but by indirect relations and personal ties with specific politicians in charge.

In the loosening of the pre-existing triangle of advice, a significant role was anyway played by the PCM, its cabinets, advisors and task forces, being a distinct subset in the rising network. Since 1988, the PCM gradually became the main locus of the new emerging milieu of relationships thanks to its multitasking institutional nature, made of administrative coordination, management of specific lines of activities and its vocation of experts’ staff.

The depicted transition made the Napoleonic arrangement now less lined, more heterogeneous, with a layering of formal and informal advisory practices, in line with the de-institutionalization of the Italian the political system. As a matter of fact, the internal PAS enlarged numerically, widened spatially out from the MCs to virtually embrace a range of venues, assignments and varied expertise. Individual advisors became pivotal through the engagement of academics (prominently from Rome and Milan universities) and other type of professions. The ministerial advisors engaged as



consultants are numerically relevant. The legal competence is now balanced by economics, but also new disciplines are entering into this milieu.

Hence, the network of policy advisors resembles a *tertium genus* between politicians and bureaucrats in the elite of the state. The role of the Covid-19 task force qualitatively and quantitatively influenced the work and size of the current arrangement, highlighting the role of the crisis as an accelerator of a pre-existing trend. Furthermore, the heterogeneity of scientific fields, the mix among professions and the status of the advisors (still prominently male, still prominently jurists, still prominently of mature age) shows that something has changed, but it is no revolution, but a layered, gradual hybrid.

The informal nature of this milieu is volatile and contingency driven, layered by specific policy climates and emergencies, like the breakdown induced by the pandemic. The resulting arrangement confirms the main hypothesis of a loosely coupled system. It deals with a PAS that gradually moved towards a more plural and contingent networked structure (instead of that of a triangle), prominently grounded on informal relations and partially hybridized. All in all, the Napoleonic arrangement still prevails, but many things are changing around it and the overall framework is adjusting to new times and new needs.

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**Data.** The replication dataset is available at <http://thedata.harvard.edu/dvn/dv/ipsr-risp>

**Competing Interests.** The authors declare none.

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