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Enhancing the Democratic Nature of Market-Based Evaluation Services in Italy

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Abstract

This chapter, based on Italy's structural funds spending data on evaluation contracts, explores funding trends and the commissioning processes for procuring evaluation services. It reveals critical political economy issues surrounding the dominant large-scale procurement model, which affects market concentration, service quality, and management practices in evaluation. The findings emphasize the democratic implications of the commissioning process, advocating for more collaborative and inclusive procurement choices. Additionally, the study suggests empowering both commissioners and evaluators to focus on key evaluation questions and adopt theory-based designs, ensuring the production of high-quality evaluations that are robust and relevant for informing public policies.

Keywords: Evaluation Commissioning; Evaluation Policy; Policy/Administrative Capacity.

Introduction

Over the past two decades, European Cohesion Policy (Furubo et al., 2002; Jacob et al., 2015) and the global performance management movement have driven the institutionalization of evaluation across various institutional settings. National administrative reforms and European Union (EU) Structural Funds have supported the development of performance regimes in EU member states, including Italy (European Commission, 2007; Martin et al., 2016), while creating significant space for market-based evaluation services.

Research offers critical insights into the market dynamics of evaluation services across different institutional and jurisdictional scales. Studies in economics and public policy on governance and state reform examine how public agencies procure technical assistance services, highlighting factors that enhance public sector productivity, policy and administrative capacity, especially under European Cohesion Policy frameworks (Barca, 2009; Allen, 2013; Rodríguez-Pose, 2013; Rodríguez-Pose et al., 2015, 2020; Polverari et al., 2020; Bachtler et al., 2023).

Evaluation studies explore the institutionalization of evaluation within democratic institutions (Furubo et al., 2002; Jacobs et al., 2015; Stockmann et al., 2020), the design of performance regimes (Martin et al., 2016), and the development of an evidence-based policy culture (Christie & Lemire, 2019; Trochim, 2009). Institutionalization studies focus on public sector demand for evaluation, which has fostered a market for evaluation services and expanded technical skills and professional profiles across EU countries, including Italy (Furubo et al., 2002; Jacobs et al., 2015; Marra, 2021).

In examining the commissioning process, scholars have raised concerns about bureaucratic hurdles and quality issues (Pattyn & Brans, 2013; Cox & Barbrook-Johnson, 2020; Schneider et al., 2016; Broer et al., 2017). Conflicting views between evaluators and commissioners on evaluation quality and priorities highlight the need for more collaborative models. Gates (2017) suggests shifting from a client-service model to a partnership model involving shared goal-setting, flexible

contracts, and increased commissioner engagement in evaluation activities. Other studies identify barriers like political influence, tight budgets, restrictive timelines, limited evaluation culture, cautious expectations, and skills gaps among commissioners (Schneider et al., 2016).

Recent research on evaluation supply has increasingly examined privately organized services, with *New Directions for Evaluation* (issue 160) providing an in-depth look at the evaluation markets in the US (Nielsen et al., 2018; Lemire et al., 2018)), Canada (Lahey et al., 2018), and the UK (Davies et al., 2018). Earlier studies have taken a broader approach, exploring evaluation services across Europe (Leeuw et al., 1999, 2009), Australia (McTaggart et al., 1991), the Netherlands (Leeuw & Rozendal, 1994), and globally (Jacob et al., 2015). These works have raised concerns about the professional skills and ethical standards within the field (Nielsen et al., 2018; Peck, 2018; Lemire et al., 2018). However, they often overlook the democratic implications of evaluation commissioning processes. This chapter seeks to address this gap by exploring two key questions:

- What evaluation demand have government agencies articulated over the past two decades?
- How has this demand been met, considering the democratic values central to the evaluation function in mature democracies?

To address these questions, this chapter analyzes procurement and contracting trends in Italy during the 2007-2013 and 2014-2020 EU Structural Fund programming phases. By focusing on Italy's evaluation policies as institutionalized over the past two decades (Marra, 2018, 2019, 2021), the study draws on structural funds spending data and a number of interviews with key evaluation contractors. These data sources provide insights into how evaluators are contracted out, the types of products procured, the organization of relationships between evaluators and commissioners, and the mechanisms used for technical management of evaluations.

This analysis intersects with three major themes in the research of evaluation (ROE): the evaluation market, evaluation policy, and their interactions within political economy frameworks. Thus, the findings contribute to political economy debates on how evaluation policies, particularly commissioning processes, can strengthen democratic practices in procurement, enhance administrative capacity, and improve public sector productivity. The insights offered may resonate with scholars of state reform and appeal to practitioners interested in evaluation capacity building and effective service delivery, both domestically and internationally.

The chapter is organized as follows: Section 1 outlines the study design and data sources for examining evaluation services in Italy; Section 2 presents the study results; Section 3 discusses key democratic issues arising in commissioning processes; and Section 4 offers concluding recommendations for reforming the commissioning process.

1. The study design and data

Leveraging our extensive expertise in the field of evaluation within the public and third sectors in Italy, the study merges qualitative and quantitative information to yield insights into (i) the procurement of evaluation services over two programming phases (2007-2013 and 2014-2020) at the national and regional levels in Italy, and (ii) the development of a privately organized provision of evaluation services alongside the critical areas related to the evaluation market, contracts, as well as the quality of knowledge produced. In particular, the analysis reconstructs the financial investment made by public agencies in assessing Structural Fund Programs, while examining the national and regional distribution of the evaluation expenditure, the number and value of contracts awarded alongside the leading contractors that have adjudicated evaluation assignments over the two programming cycles considered in the study. In addition, the analysis highlights how the demand for evaluation services has been operationalized, and identifies the methodological issues that may pose challenges to the quality of the evaluation services offered,

jeopardizing the democratic nature of the evaluation process. We have collected quantitative and qualitative information as primary and secondary sources as elucidated in the subsequent sections.

The first data source comprises a database published by the National Cohesion Agency for Italy's Structural Fund Programs, covering outsourced and in-house evaluation assignments between 2018 and 2021. However, since this database only encompasses financial data for four fiscal years, we have supplemented it with a second, more comprehensive source of information. This secondary source comprises all tender notices issued by public agencies over the past two decades, specifically from 2009 to 2022. This extensive database was compiled by the authors with the assistance of Lattanzio, a leading consulting firm in Italy, which has monitored tenders related to Structural Fund Programs and participated in bidding processes over the two programming cycles examined in this study.

More specifically, our database encompasses prime recipient contracts and spending for evaluation studies commissioned within the 2007-2013 and 2014-2020 Structural Fund programs, including the European Social Fund, the European Regional Development Fund, and the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development. We analyze financial data pertaining to outsourced evaluation assignments, which typically span multiple years, with spending commitments and disbursements distributed over the contract period. We have identified companies that adjudicated evaluation contracts during the two programming phases considered in this study. Despite potential underestimation of administrative expenditure committed to market-based evaluation services mostly related to the 2007-2013 data, we present the number and value of contracts associated with both programming phases. Regarding in-house spending information, we can only refer to the National Cohesion Agency data, available solely for the years 2018-2021.

Subsequently, we conducted more detailed analyses of the contracting practices related to evaluation services, drawing on insights from ten interviews with professional evaluators. Through this qualitative analysis, we aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the procurement and

contracting practices characterizing the current evaluation marketplace. Our objective was to reconstruct the privately organized evaluation supply and glean insights into the logic of evaluation service provision and market dynamics from a democratic perspective. While acknowledging potential limitations, such as underestimation of contract values adjudicated between 2007-2013, the ensuing analysis represents a robust overview of Italy's evaluation industry and marketplace to date.

2. Results

Here, we present three aspects core to the commissioning of evaluation services in Italy: (i) the funding trends with a geographical breakdown of evaluation expenditure, and the types of evaluation products procured; (ii) the market building, (iii) the procurement approach and the management of contracts.

2.1 Funding trends, their geographical distribution, and the procured services

Available data show that, over the past two programming cycles, the number of evaluation contracts has grown, shifting from over 77 in 2007-2013 to over 88 in 2014-2020 (see Table 1). The number of contracts increases to 109, if we add ex ante evaluation services to the count. In financial terms, we reckon a 63 percent increase in the total amount of committed resources between 2007-2013 and 2014-2020.

Table 1 Number and value of evaluation tenders and contracts in Italy

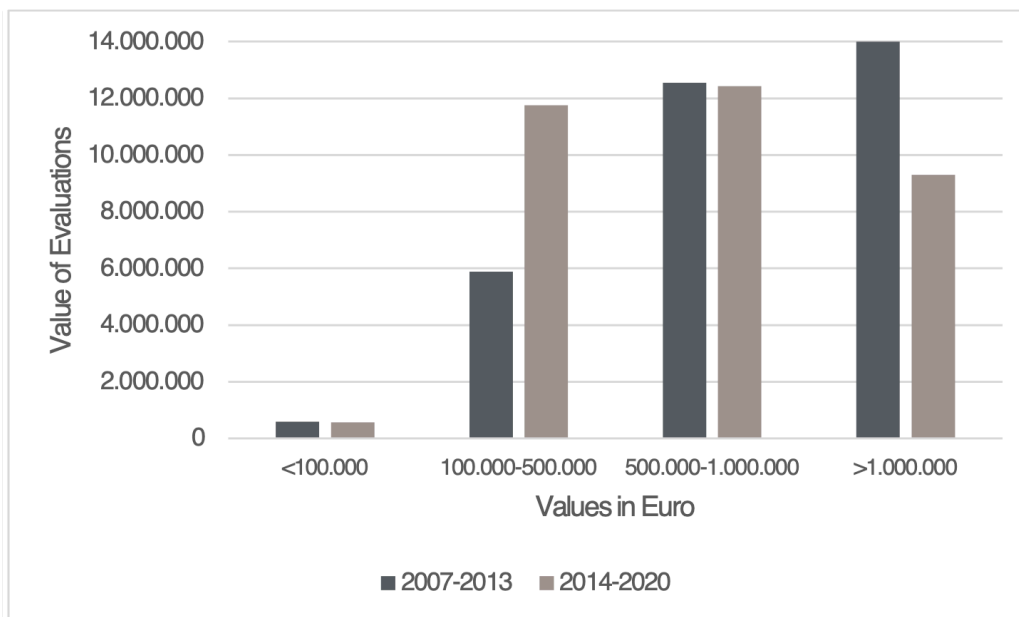
Programming phase	No. of tenders	Auction base of all contracts	Value of all adjudicated contracts	Average amount per contract
2007-2013	77	47,053,720	33,128,735	430,243
2014-2020	109	76,702,503	53,710,157	492,754
TOTAL	186	123,756,223	86,838,892	466.876

Source: our elaboration on public tenders and Cohesion Agency data, 2007-2020.

Yet, if we compare these evaluation spending data with the overall allocation of resources to Cohesion Policy in Italy over the two programming phases, the increasing trend observed in the expenditure for evaluation results quite modest in percentage terms. Specifically, the investment in evaluation has increased by 34 percent, rising from 33 million euros to almost 54 million euros from the 2007-2013 to 2014-2020 programming. By contrast, the overall volume of resources invested in Italy within the Structural Funds Programs has risen from 75 million euros in 2007-2013 to almost 140 million euros in 2014-2020, accounting for an increase of over 46 percent. Against this backdrop, less than 0.044 percent of resources were allocated to evaluation in 2007-2013, and only 0.038 percent in 2014-2020.

In the same time span, the average amount of an evaluation contract has ranged from 430 thousands to almost 500 thousands euros. Figure 1 shows that the value of evaluation contracts has increased in the 2014-2020 programming phase and has moved to the class of contracts ranging between 100 and 500 thousand euros.

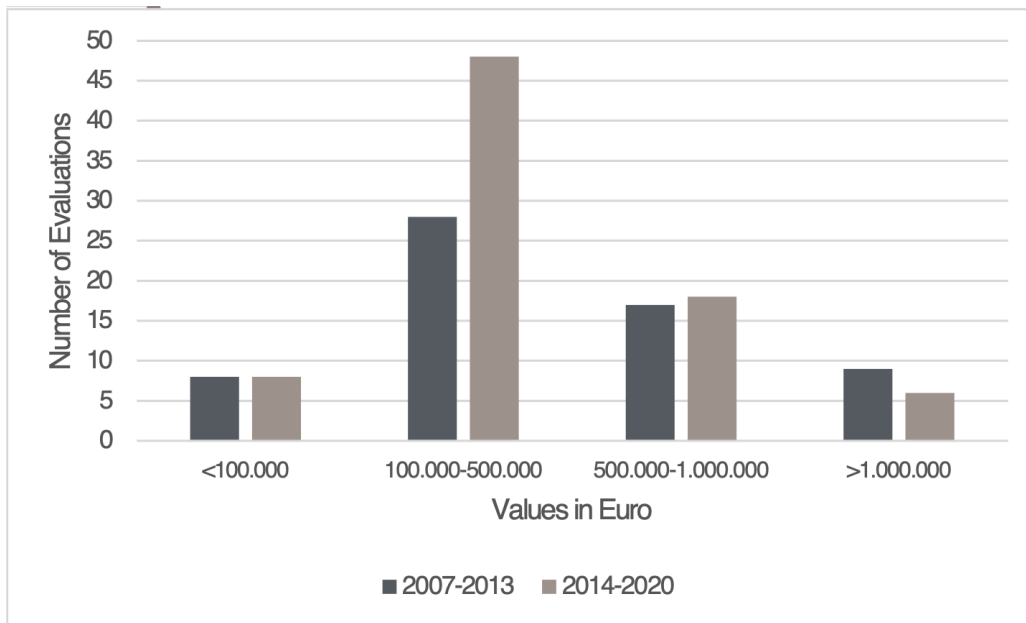
Fig. 1 - Value of evaluation contracts awarded by financial class and programming phase



Source: our elaboration on evaluation tenders issued and Cohesion Agency data (2024).

In 2014-2020, compared to 2007-2013, the number of specific evaluation assignments has increased, while the value of contracts awarded to independent evaluators has polarized, trending towards higher financial values, as shown in Figure 2.

Fig. 2 - Number of evaluation assignments per cluster value and programming phase



Source: our elaboration on evaluation tenders issued and Cohesion Agency data (2024).

Through a finer analysis, most evaluation contracts have clustered between 100 to 200 thousand euros both in 2007-2013 and 2014-2020 phases. The latter phase has shown an almost one-third increase in the number of evaluation assignments, shifting from 16 in 2007-2013 to 23 contracts in 2014-2020. Significant is also the increase in contracts within the cluster ranging between 300 and 400 thousand euros in the 2014-2020 phase compared to the previous period.

During the second phase of Structural Fund programming (2014-2020), there has been a notable surge in interest in evaluation, accompanied by a corresponding increase in investment in the evaluation function outsourced to private organizations and independent evaluators. However, as illustrated in Table 2, the average rebate applied to the auction base has considerably diminished the actual financial resources allocated to evaluation contracts. The prevalence of discounts and

auction rebates indicates that such practices have become standard, both for the agencies that accept them and the contractors that propose and carry them out.

Table 2 - Number evaluation assignments and the value of evaluation contracts by financial classes

Cluster value (euros)	2007-2013 programming phase			2014-2020 programming phase		
	No. of contracts	Auction base	Rebate	No. of contract	Auction base	Rebate
N/A	15			20		
0-100	8	594,310	24	8	563,771	16
>100-200	16	1,980,200	30	23	3,290,497	27
>200-300	4	1,005,500	26	10	2,399,914	21
>300-400	6	2,060,600	32	8	2,968,109	18
>400-500	2	835,000	30	7	3,090,379	40
>500-600	3	1,565,000	32	6	3,123,575	36
>600-700	5	3,306,100	30	4	2,285,780	22
>700-800	3	2,184,750	32	3	2,285,940	43
>800-900	2	1,724,000	28	3	2,522,008	51
>900-1 mln	4	3,762,500	30	2	1,910,590	43
> 1 - 1,5 mln	6	7,616,775	24	4	4,417,796	49
> 1,5 mln	3	6,494,000	32	2	4,881,676	26

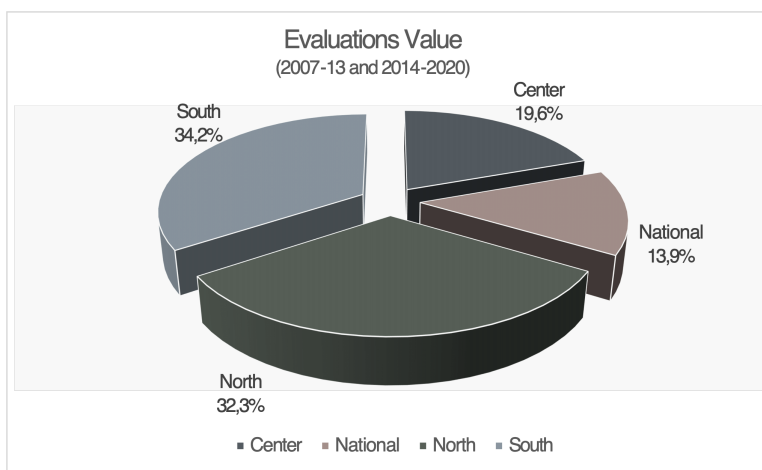
Source: our elaboration on evaluation tenders issue and Cohesion Agency data (2007-2013 / 2014-2020).

Particularly noteworthy is the fact that rebates, averaging almost 50 percent of the auction base for higher value ranges, highlight a significant gap between committed and disbursed expenditure for evaluation services. A comparison between the two programming cycles also reveals a trend towards consolidating funds for evaluation services (see Table 2). The escalating contract values are likely to influence the types and quality of evaluation supply, as well as the characteristics, size, and practices of evaluation contractors. Thus, the question is whether the commissioning process is effective and assures a qualitatively high standard of reports, as further analysed in subsequent sections.

- The geographical distribution of evaluation expenditure

Moving toward a more nuanced characterization of the contracts and services that comprise the national and regional evaluation landscape shown in Figure 3, the distribution of the evaluation expenditure appears equally shared among the three macro areas of the country including regional governments and ministries at the national level. However, within the three macro areas of the country, the Southern regions disburse a lower amount of resources for evaluation, considered the overall Structural Funds disbursements. As approximately 75 percent of Cohesion Policy appropriations are allocated to the South, over the past two programming cycles, the value of evaluation contracts, within this macro-area, barely reaches 35 percent, as illustrated in Figure 3.

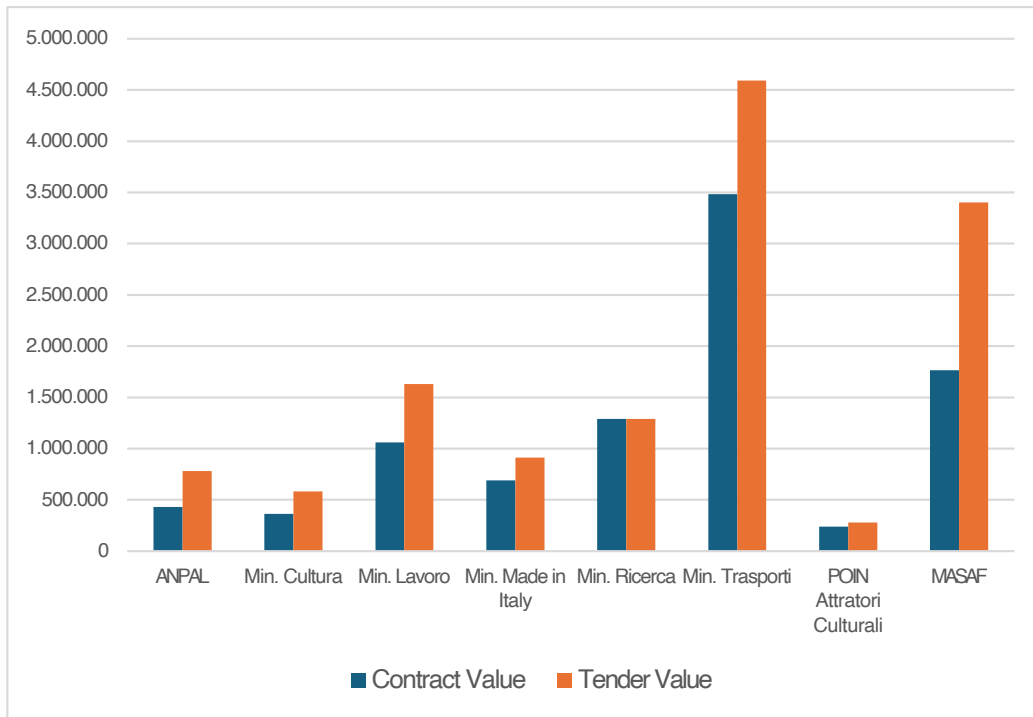
Fig. 3 - Distribution of evaluation expenditure per macro-areas in Italy



Source: our elaboration on evaluation tenders issued and Cohesion Agency data (2024).

Upon closer examination of the national and regional distribution of evaluation expenditure depicted in Figures 4 and 5, several notable trends emerge. While the Ministry of Education, closely followed by the Ministry of Transportation, stand out prominently, Lombardy, Veneto, Apulia, and Tuscany demonstrate the highest expenditures for evaluation contracts, despite substantial discounts applied through auction mechanisms. Insights gleaned from interviews indicate a growing administrative capacity in these regions to procure evaluation services and leverage evaluative information in decision-making and programming.

Fig. 4 - National distribution of expenditure at the national level



Source: our elaboration on evaluation tenders issued and Cohesion Agency data (2024).

In contrast, Campania and Sicily, recipients of the highest Cohesion Policy allocations in Southern Italy, exhibit relatively modest expenditures on market-based evaluation services. This data underscores that while block transfers to these regions represent nearly 23 percent of the total Structural Fund programs in both programming cycles, the value of evaluation contracts barely surpasses 11 percent of the total evaluation expenditure in Italy. While Campania and Sicily show a preference for in-house evaluation assignments versus outsourced evaluation services, these regions have also underperformed due to weaker administrative capacity in keeping up with disbursements of Cohesion Policy committed expenditure.

Fig. 5 - EU and national evaluation contract funds labeled evaluation by regions



Source: our elaboration on tenders issued and Cohesion Agency data (2024).

- Types of evaluation services procured

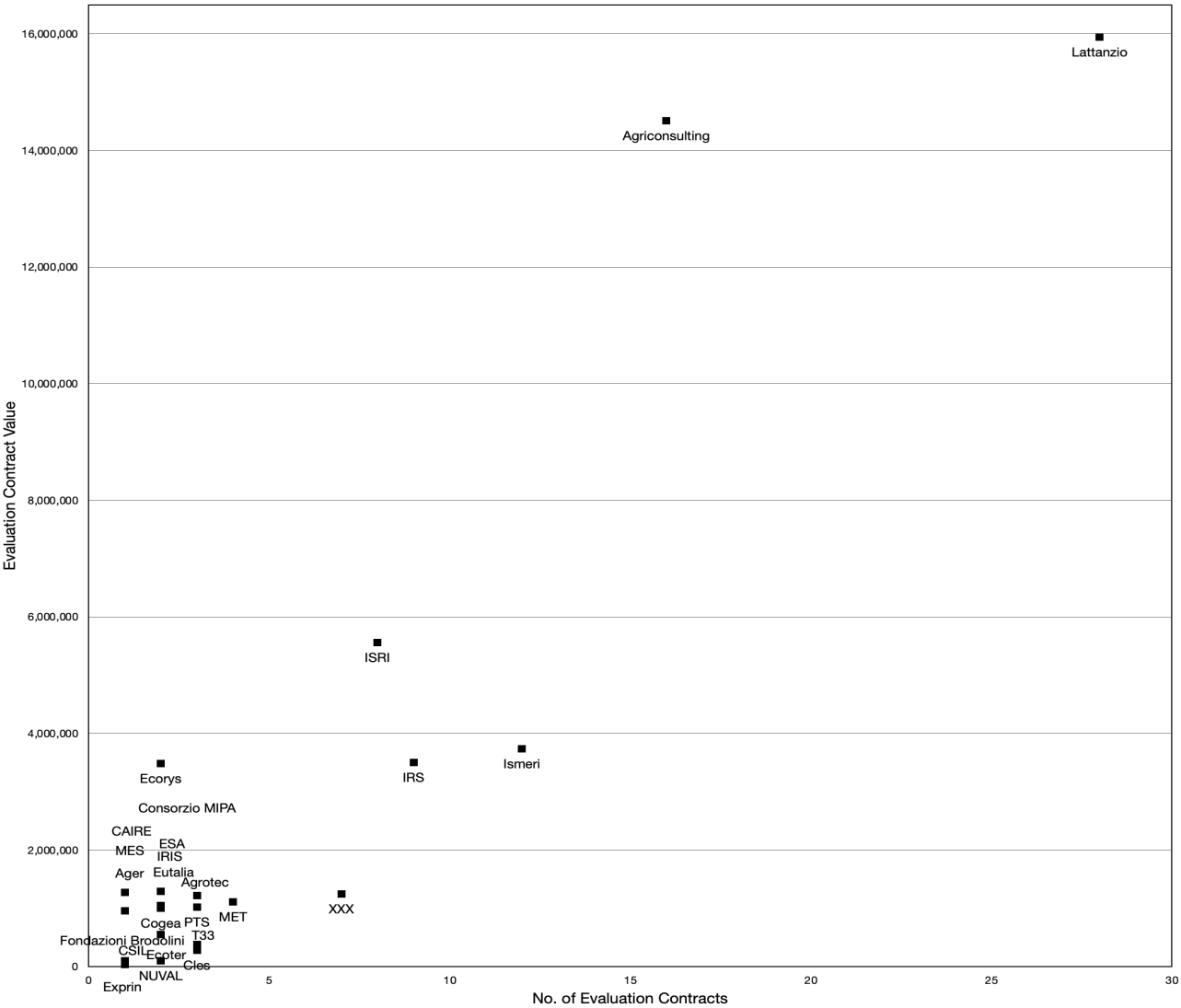
Publicly funded evaluations encompass a wide (and perhaps still widening) range of services, including descriptive studies and mappings, as well as a broad range of management consulting services. Reflecting on the diverse nature of evaluation services, a closer inspection of the National Cohesion Agency funds reveals contracts for traditional program and policy evaluations, ex ante studies and syntheses, context analysis and needs assessment, and other program review and development services. According to this source of information, evaluation assignments include ex-post assessments, monitoring, and mid-term analyses, technical assistance services, or a combination of these (see also on this Marra, 2021; Buscemi & Cristiano, 2024). Although the exact nature of the evaluation services procured is often difficult to discern from the financial information contained in the database, the nature of evaluation assignments ranges between services supporting program implementation and management, and the ex-post impact assessment. The latter has become predominant in the 2014-2020 programming phase, as opposed

to the earlier phase (2007–2013), confirming an increasing trend in the practice of ex post evaluation both housed within public agencies and outsourced to the private sector.

2.2 Building the market

Regarding the privately organized supply of evaluations, data from tender notices associated with Structural Funds programs reveals that just over fifty percent of the total evaluation assignments are outsourced to the market.

Fig. 6 - The configuration of the evaluation marketplace in Italy



Source: our elaboration on tenders issued and Cohesion Agency data (2024).

Figure 6 illustrates the key evaluation contractors active in Italy, detailing the number of contracts awarded and their corresponding values, sourced from the evaluation tender database. While this dataset provides an estimate of Italy's evaluation market size and structure, it highlights a notable concentration of market-based evaluation services. The presence of prominent, specialized companies participating in bidding processes and securing contracts over the last two programming phases is evident. Considering both leading companies and consortia that incorporate smaller evaluation firms and university departments, a total of 26 contractors have executed 147 evaluation assignments totaling over 86 million euros. Yet, while the actual number of consulting firms engaged in evaluation services may be higher, as many businesses often serve as partners in consortia or subcontractors, the companies depicted in Figure 6 are not subsidiaries of large foreign consultancies. This local grounding of businesses is characteristic of Italy's evaluation industry, contributing to its dynamics, processes, and product quality.

As already highlighted, the data extracted from national and regional evaluation tenders paints a picture of a relatively compact marketplace, with a few major consultancies clinching the majority of contracts at both national and regional levels. Smaller consulting firms or consortia predominantly operate at the regional level with fewer assignments. Interviews with evaluation contractors corroborate the outlined scenario, indicating the emergence of a 'quasi-market' for evaluation services driven by public sector outsourcing practices. In this landscape, entry barriers primarily hinge on contractors' economic and financial capacity rather than their previously demonstrated quality of evaluation work. Public procurement requirements, such as financial collateral and turnover thresholds, act as prerequisites for securing evaluation contracts. This financial criterion contributes to the expansion of evaluation assignments and the market's polarization between large-scale consultancies and smaller firms specialized in evaluation. These trends have been exacerbated by the global financial crisis of 2008-2009, which heightened market

polarization and fragmentation due to the combined effects of the industry restructuring and the public sector austerity spending.¹

Interviews indicate that the concentration and polarization within the evaluation industry are heavily influenced by public funding, thus confirming the government's role in shaping the market for evaluation services at both the national and regional levels. Concerning the relationships between consulting firms and public commissioners, interviews reveal that, in addition to the required financial guarantees, the ability of medium-sized consultancies to secure evaluation contracts also depends on their reputation. This attribute has increasingly become an asset for expanding within the industry and gaining access to a network of potential evaluation commissioners. Consequently, the mobilization of political connections and influential experts is perceived to be crucial in contract adjudication, alongside the assessment of bids based on pricing, quality of deliverables, and experience in the field.

2.3 The procurement approach and the management of contracts

Interviews underscore a critical aspect of evaluation contracts: the substantial financial investments required to procure evaluation services for national and regional operational programs. When these contracts range from 1 to 4 million euros, they are initiated by regional or national administrative agencies seeking comprehensive assessments of programs supported by the ESF or the ERDF. While conspicuous contracts exceed the so-called 'community threshold' and thus require safeguards that make auctions more cumbersome, complicating the process of selecting the evaluator, such procurement strategies entail a wide array of evaluation deliverables, including annual reports, assessments of communication strategies, examinations of program contributions to EU strategies, outcome evaluations, ex-post evaluations, and thematic evaluations.

¹ The report of the association AssoConsult including Italy's management consultancies highlights that over the past decade, the weight of large companies on the total turnover of the sector has risen while that of medium and small companies has remained stable, with micro-enterprises seeing their market share decrease even further (AssoConsult, various years).

Yet, despite the substantial financial investment, the value of these contracts may not always suffice to comprehensively assess all measures within an operational program. Contractors may face the significant challenge of addressing evaluation questions while designing a study that seamlessly integrates all deliverables for contract completion. The collection and analysis of primary source data, coupled with the formulation of qualitative judgments, may remain shallow with descriptive evaluations that merely account for the multitude of interventions within a regional or national operational program. Consequently, large procurement contracts with multiple deliverables may present serious challenges in terms of evaluation quality.

Procurement choices also affect the management of evaluation services showing a significant variation of administrative arrangements. Some administrative agencies set steering groups that are internally diversified to address both thematic and methodological issues in the evaluation design, the process of data collection and analysis, and the dissemination of evaluation findings. Interviews support that these organizational and management arrangements are associated with commissioners' capacity and willingness to develop a constructive relationship with evaluators. Commissioners ask a clear set of evaluation questions and actively engage in the evaluation process. With a single manager or unit put in charge of handling the whole evaluation process according to the orientations of political governance, transparency, participation and the very democratic nature of the evaluation processes may be undermined including the quality and the policy relevance of the evaluation products.

3. Discussing democratic implications

From a democratic perspective, three key points warrant attention. First, commissioners play a critical role in market formation, as large-scale contractors with political influence and bargaining power increasingly dominate high-value contracts. This trend parallels findings on evaluation contracting-out in the US Federal Government (Lemire et al., 2018; Peck, 2018) and other public-

sector outsourcing, where large contracts are awarded to firms for planning, coordinating, and assessing programs, including technical assistance (Le Grand, 2017; Henrik, 2019; Scott et al., 2022; Mazzucato & Collington, 2023). Commissioners should reconsider contractor requirements, timelines, and product specifications in terms of reference.

While using a single contractor offers continuity and economies of scale, it also risks concentrating evaluation capacity within one provider, potentially limiting specialization and diversity in evaluation approaches. EU programs often require varied expertise, suggesting the need for market segmentation to allow smaller firms to compete. Dividing contracts into specialized tasks could enhance transparency, independence, and methodological diversity. On the other hand, a single contractor across a programming period may provide a cohesive vision and an integrated understanding of policy impacts, while enabling participatory processes that enhance democratic accountability (Buscemi & Cristiano, 2024). From the perspective of the evaluation commissioner, the use of a few select evaluation providers may simply be the result of the types of evaluations being contracted out. The types of evaluation commissioned by national and regional government agencies through contracts have varied over time. However, external evaluation contractors often have fulfilled the role of conducting large, multiyear evaluations, which demand a high degree of methodological expertise and significant human capital to design and implement. Large consulting firms with a history of designing and implementing these types of evaluation studies may be viewed as one of few providers with the capacity and experience to deliver on these. This trend reflects similar procurement choices in the US evaluation system (Lemire et al., 2018; Peck, 2018).

Second, hiring practices and the perceived value of evaluation firms affect democratic accountability. While consultancies can enhance efficiency by lowering transaction costs, some critics argue that large firms prioritize reputation over substantive contributions (Mazzucato & Collington, 2023). Political connections often influence contracts and pricing, which raises questions about whether evaluations should be outsourced or handled in-house. While this choice

depends on evaluation skills internally available and perceptions of contractor value, investments in evaluation capacity building in Italy's Southern regions may enhance their administrative capacity to manage outsourced evaluation services.

In addition, evaluators' reputational capital is built through networking directly with potential buyers, which is complemented with the capacity of large consulting firms to respond to competitive funding opportunities (Peck, 2018; Hwalek & Straub, 2018). Given the fact that small sellers' marketing success often comes through networking, and that large sellers have incentives to apply significant rebates in auction-based contracting-out, the evaluation industry as a whole might benefit from the creation of opportunities for networking between large and small sellers.

Finally, large-scale contracts that bundle multiple services challenge evaluators' ability to address essential research questions, gather primary data, and analyze diverse information. Addressing this requires both commissioners and evaluators to recognize the non-standard nature of programs and the heterogeneity of beneficiaries and contexts. Theory-based evaluation approaches can bridge these gaps, ensuring relevance and facilitating the use of findings in decision-making (Weiss, 1998; Rogers & Funnell, 2011).

4. Conclusions

This chapter has examined how commissioning processes, including funding trends and procurement approaches, have influenced privately organized evaluation services in recent regional cohesion policy phases. Issues of transparency, quality, and market concentration in evaluation are shaped by how evaluators are hired, expected outputs, relationship structures between evaluators and commissioners, and technical management mechanisms.

To enhance a more democratic nature of the commissioning process, a collaborative learning approach is essential, with commissioners guiding market dynamics and contractors deepening their understanding of program-specific knowledge needs. Tenders should prompt evaluators to explore

diverse perspectives and local contexts, shifting focus from merely measuring outcomes to fostering organizational learning within agencies capable of posing relevant evaluation questions and selecting skilled evaluators. Availability of valid, reliable market data could assist the government in garnering a better understanding of the effects market forces such as changes in administrative agencies, national and regional government agencies' evaluation policies, and procurement practices have on the amount and types of evaluation, performance, and broader knowledge production services commissioned through contractual mechanisms. Knowledge management systems based on artificial intelligence and machine learning could tease out key findings and data from evaluation reports to create a transparent evaluation data environment informing more democratic decisions.

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