

Frustrated by politics—and under investigation—Italian bird flu scientist heads to the United States

By **Luca Tancredi Barone** Jun. 7, 2016 , 5:00 PM

Italian virologist-turned-politician Ilaria Capua has thrown in the towel. After 3 years in politics, she is leaving Italy and going back to science, frustrated by what she says is an antiscientific attitude among fellow politicians. Capua, an expert on avian influenza, will become director of the **One Health Center of Excellence for Research and Training** at the University of Florida (UF) in Gainesville on 20 June.

In 2013, Capua took a leave of absence as director of the Division of Biomedical Science of the **Istituto Zooprofilattico Sperimentale delle Venezie** in Padua, Italy, a government lab for veterinary research, after being elected a member of the Chamber of Deputies for Scelta Civica, a party led by economist and then–Prime Minister Mario Monti. Capua has been under criminal **investigation since 2005, resulting** in a formal accusation in 2014 that she sold and trafficked in avian flu viruses between 1999 and 2008. She says the charges are baseless but that they have made her a “lame duck” in Parliament.

Capua entered politics at Monti's invitation; he wanted candidates with technical expertise to join his new reformist party. But her experience since then has been “surreal,” she says. In **a book** published in January, Capua observed the bombastic behavior of her colleagues and the overly formal procedures in Montecitorio, the seat of the Chamber of Deputies, much like a scientist studying an unknown insect. “Politics is a complicated world, especially if you think in a rational and fact-related fashion. I often feel dismayed,” she says.

She chafed at Italy's uneasy relationship with science—for instance, when lawmakers **ordered €3 million worth of clinical trials** for a stem cell treatment that most scientists said was bogus, or when prosecutors halted measures to control the spread of *Xylella fastidiosa*, a bacterium that kills olive trees, **and accused scientists of spreading the disease**. “Italy lacks a culture in science-based policies,” she says.

A **bill** to strengthen the position of researchers who win a European grant at Italian institutions and to implement some elements of the **European Charter of Researchers**—which contains guidelines for scientific career development—was never even debated in the Chamber, despite being supported by 60 other deputies. It shows “a clear lack of interest for research issues,” Capua believes.

Yet Capua says she is proud of a handful of initiatives that the Parliament did adopt, such as resolutions **to curb the rise of antibiotic resistance** and to implement evidence-based **European regulation** on animal experiments, a hot topic in Italy. She also managed to get a real estate **tax exemption** for research passed.

What will happen to the judicial investigation against Capua—which also targets 40 other people, including executives of the Ministry of Health, managers of private companies, and leaders of government labs—is unclear. The accusations are very serious, spanning from attempts to spread disease—which is punishable with life imprisonment—to criminal conspiracy aimed at corruption, handling stolen goods, and administration of drugs that endanger public health.

The inquiry, which has taken more than a decade, is based on extensive wiretapping. But Capua and others have claimed that investigators at the Carabinieri, Italy's military police, have misinterpreted their conversations, and a top official at the Carabinieri's health investigation department (NAS) recently told a judge that the investigation has produced no evidence beyond the taped calls. (Marco Datti, the head of NAS and the author of the report that started the case, will have to stand trial himself **in an unrelated case**.)

A judge could decide to close the whole case against Capua and the other defendants as early as next month. For most of the accusations, the strict Italian statute of limitations has already expired. A prosecutor in Verona, where Capua will stand trial, has already issued a motion to dismiss the most serious accusation, that of "spreading epidemics," while a prosecutor in Padua who handles another part of the investigation has moved to dismiss all charges.

"One thing I learned: I am much more careful in my phone conversations, and I now try to leave no room for interpretation," says Capua, who denies any wrongdoing. She says she fully disclosed her involvement in the case when she was interviewed by UF and was told that the issue "did not concern them at all." (University representatives were unable to respond to requests for comment today.)

The investigation exposed Capua to intense attacks by political opponents, says Maria Chiara Carrozza in Rome, an industrial bioengineer who served as Italy's education minister from 2013 until 2014. Such attacks tend to be "even more ferocious" when the accused is a woman, says Carrozza, now a deputy for the Democratic Party, who says she "understands" Capua's choice to leave. "Italian politicians aren't used to listening to the opinion of researchers," Carrozza adds.

At UF, Capua will be in charge of a research and training program in "one health," an approach that seeks to link the fields of animal, human, and environmental health. Despite

several high-profile disease outbreaks, politicians and the media still don't realize the urgency of battling emerging diseases, she says. "We have to insert the existing expertise in biomedical and veterinary science in an integrated approach that encompasses more disciplines and engages policymakers and citizens. "

Capua became well-known in the world of influenza for making a stand for public access to genetic data about influenza **and refusing to participate in a database** that made such data available to selected researchers only. She feels that more recent pleas for **open science on Zika**, Middle East respiratory syndrome, and Ebola prove that she was right.

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