

Two decades of SGRI: Italy and the evolution of IR scholarship in the twenty-first century

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Abstract

This article marks the 20th anniversary of the Italian Standing Group on International Relations (SGRI), reflecting on its pivotal contributions to International Relations (IR) scholarship in Italy. Founded in 2004 under the Italian Political Science Association (SISP), SGRI sought to foster collaboration among scholars, promote research excellence, and enhance the discipline's international visibility. Over two decades, SGRI has evolved into a vibrant platform for academic exchange, supporting early-career researchers, organizing conferences, and encouraging participation in global projects. The article examines SGRI's role in addressing historical challenges in Italian IR scholarship, such as fragmentation, limited global engagement, and marginalization within academia. By promoting intergenerational mentorship, facilitating high-quality research, and adopting English as its primary language for events, SGRI has successfully bridged gaps between Italian and international academic communities. Its initiatives have bolstered Italy's presence in global IR discourse, fostering cross-disciplinary collaboration and enriching scholarly dialogue. Despite these achievements, challenges remain, including structural barriers in Italian academia and the need for greater integration of regional studies and subfields. The article calls for enhanced institutional support, further internationalization, and greater alignment with global standards. SGRI's journey highlights its critical role in shaping a more interconnected and impactful IR academic network in Italy.

1. Introduction

The year 2024 marks the twentieth anniversary since the birth of the Italian Standing Group on International Relations (SGRI). The Standing Group was created in the early 2000s within the structure of the Italian Political Science Association (SISP), as part of a broader effort to foster collaboration among political science scholars working in similar research areas. In March 2004, SGRI organised its first conference in Parma, bringing together researchers from Italy and abroad to explore challenges and opportunities in the development of the Common Foreign and Security Policy of the European Union. Since then, SGRI has promoted and encouraged the study of international politics, particularly among early career researchers, supporting the development of research projects and the dissemination of knowledge. The sixteenth SGRI conference, which took place in summer 2024, offered an opportunity to reflect on the group's contributions over the past two decades. Relying on data from SISP and SGRI conferences and organizational activities, this article examines such contributions, contextualising them within the evolution of the Italian International Relations (IR) scholarship in the twenty-first century.

The article shows that SGRI has contributed to the shaping of a more interconnected and internationalised IR scholarly network. Through its channels and initiatives,

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Italian Political Science. ISSN 2420-8434.

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Volume 19, Issue 1, 70–78. *The Profession*. DOI: 10.69101.IPS.2024.19.1.4

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SGRI has progressively turned into a platform for research development, building avenues for cooperation and innovation in the field. Such activities have advanced the scholarship at the national level. Still, major challenges for the expansion and consolidation of IR as an academic discipline persist, requiring sustained engagement from the research community.

The article proceeds as follows. The next section briefly traces the history of the Standing Group since its inception in the early 2000s. Then, the article examines the evolution of the IR scholarship in Italy, considering its trajectories in the twenty-first century while assessing the role played by SGRI within the process. Finally, the last section discusses challenges and opportunities for SGRI and IR research in the forthcoming years.

2. The creation of SGRI and its development

SGRI was instituted in 2004 on a specific proposal made to the Italian Political Science Association (SISP) by Filippo Andreatta, Fulvio Attinà, Luciano Bardi, Luigi Bonanate and Umberto Gori. The aim was to foster research on international politics and foreign policy, facilitating cooperation and stimulating synergies among IR scholars. The creation of SGRI was driven by a specific awareness among Italian political scientists of a growing demand for academic education in International Relations, particularly following the events of September 11, 2001. The first two generations of IR scholars laid the groundwork (see Andreatta and Zambenardi 2010), and the initial SGRI activities were carried out by a third group of young professors, including Filippo Andreatta, Marco Clementi, Alessandro Colombo, and Vittorio Emanuele Parsi. These academics sought to initiate dialogue with political institutions (like the Italian Ministry of Defence), think tanks (such as Istituto Affari Internazionali and Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale), and several other stakeholders, showcasing the success of an intergenerational handover.

The establishment of a Research Project on International Politics and Conflict Resolution at the Bruno Kessler Foundation (Trento, Italy) revitalized SGRI activities, expanding its international network through the involvement of a board of eminent IR scholars, who participated in the general conferences of the Standing Group (including Joe Grieco, Pierre Hassner, Dan Reiter, Ted Hopf, Christopher Hill, Jakub Grygiel, Richard Devetak and Pascal Vennesson). Between 2012 and 2019, seven of such conferences were organised in Trento, contributing to the dissemination of information and knowledge in the field, as well as to a robust cross-fertilization of methodological and research perspectives. In twenty years, SGRI has organized 15 conferences, gathering about 700 participants from over 40 Italian universities and 50 European and international academic institutions – featuring about 400 papers presentations, keynote speeches, roundtables and plenary lectures (see Table 1). Thanks to a new management policy of SISP, which in recent years has granted more autonomy to Standing Groups, SGRI now connects about 200 people through a regular newsletter and social media campaigns, with over half formally enrolled via SISP membership. The handover is ensured through a regular rotation of coordinators, who are elected by the more than 80 SISP members for renewable two-year terms.

Table 1. Data on SGRI conferences (2008 – 2023). Locations, participants, papers and panels.

	SGRI conference	Participants	Papers presented	Panels
2008	Bertinoro (FC)	-	21	4
2009	Milano	-	8	2
2012	Trento	-	33	4
2013	Trento	73	34	7
2014	Trento	53	22	5
2015	Trento	97	57	10
2016	Trento	75	34	7
2017	Trento	36	19	5
2018	Bologna	60	39	10
2019	Trento	101	59	18
2022	Perugia	62	22	6
2023	Catania	74	50	11

Source: own elaboration.

3. SGRI and the IR scholarship in the twenty-first century

As several works note (e.g., Attinà 1989; Bonante 1990; Morlino 1991; Sartori 2004), IR has historically faced substantial challenges in gaining traction as an academic discipline in Italy. During the Cold War era, the country experienced a progressive expansion of political science within national universities, with the creation of the Italian Section of Political Science in 1973 and the establishment of the first three chairs of IR in 1975 (Friedrichs 2004; Panebianco 2007). Still, politics and IR continued to occupy a marginal role within the Italian cultural landscape, often being regarded more as an “art” than a “scientific” discipline and fragmented into a multitude of disconnected notions taught by experts from fields such as law or history (Andreatta and Zambernardi 2010). Such a state of affairs was exacerbated by the constraints imposed by great power competition to the Italian foreign policy, which contributed to decreasing the demand for, and the interest in, IR expertise at a national level (Pasquino 1977; Friedrichs 2004).

The fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War brought new impetus to the discipline. Driven by the changing international scenario, an increasing number of Italian scholars turned their attention towards the study of peace and conflict, exploring the role of international actors in the promotion of global security. However, the production of IR research, along with the teaching of international politics in political science curricula, continued to remain relatively low during the 1990s (Lucarelli and Menotti 2002; Clementi 2013). Furthermore, despite some exceptions, the Italian IR scholarship maintained a limited visibility and impact beyond national boundaries. National conferences and seminars, frequently conducted in Italian as the primary language, tended to deter participation from international scholars, resulting in low resonance beyond Italy’s borders. At the same time, the engagement of Italian scholars in international projects and events, such as those hosted in the US or the UK, failed to reach substantial levels. As Lucarelli and Menotti commented at the beginning of the twenty-first century (2002: 124), “looking at the Italian literature from the viewpoint of the broader IR community, the picture is more that of a detached world that finds it difficult — and perhaps unattractive — to establish and maintain a systematic link with the outside.”

The last two decades have seen a gradual departure from such historical trends, registering substantial improvements in the IR scholarship. A commonly used indicator to

assess the health of a discipline is the number of publications by scholars (see e.g., Bornmann and Mutz 2015). In this perspective, several studies have noted a rising pattern in scholarly output, highlighting a greater vitality in the field. Clementi (2013), for example, examines the number of articles on IR topics published by Italian scholars in the Italian Political Science Review/Rivista Italiana di Scienza Politica (RISP) since its establishment. His findings show that IR articles were rare in the first fifteen years (1971-1985), but started increasing between 1985 and 1999, comprising about 10% of all articles published in RISP. Most notably, the proportion rose to one-third of all contributions from 2000 to 2011. Focusing on 25 high-impact international peer-reviewed journals and five Italian journals, Calcara and Vittori (2019) present even more encouraging data. A total of 340 articles published by Italian scholars were identified in the period between 2011 and 2017. Despite the substantial contribution from researchers based outside Italy (suggesting a brain-drain effect to foreign universities), such figures denote a growing focus on IR in the national academic environment as well as an increasing alignment with international standards among Italian scholars.

Participation in Italian Political Science conferences has reflected this trend (on this aspect, see also Caffarena and Costalli 2024). Evidence from the past decade shows that a consistent number of researchers have presented papers on topics related to international politics and global security. The IR section of the SISP general conference has received an increasing number of panel proposals, progressively expanding the themes and subjects covered. Out of the 13 to 14 sections typically organised at SISP conferences, the share of papers presented in the IR section has averaged about 14 per cent of all papers discussed, comprising between one sixth and one fifth of the entire conference programme in the last five editions (Table 2). Such figures have been accompanied by an increase in the overall attractiveness of the SISP conference, which has seen growing scholarly participation since the second half of the 2010s.

A comparison between the IR section and the other sections of SISP general conferences further reveals the increasing role played by the International Relations community within the academic landscape. The IR section has had the highest number of papers in most of the editions of the last ten years (Table 3). Particularly, since 2018, the section has been the most consistent in all but one instance.

Table 2. IR papers in SISP general conferences.

Conference	Year	IR Papers	Papers (total)	Share
Perugia	2014	42	269	16%
Calabria	2015	19	207	9%
Milano	2016	33	309	11%
Urbino	2017	18	296	6%
Torino	2018	75	446	17%
Lecce	2019	67	424	16%
Online	2021	57	376	15%
Roma	2022	61	371	16%
Genova	2023	98	544	18%

Source: own elaboration.

Table 3. IR Sections in SISP general conferences, 2014-2023.

Section	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2021	2022	2023
Political Regimes/Democracy and Democratization	16	10	24	18	29	15	22	40	32
Political Theory	23	7	22	15	45	29	14	0	25
Comparative Politics, Government, Parliament and Representation	3	15	8	27	42	69	55	22	33
Italian Political System/Party Politics	18	11	17	19	27	32	14	16	22
Administration and Public Policy/Political Science and Public Policy	15	16	31	23	37	22	35	29	46
Political Communication	27	16	29	29	18	26	48	36	40
Participation and Social Movements	32	22	41	30	38	50	40	38	35
Elections and Voting Behaviour	13	26	17	48	30	30	22	29	59
International Relations	42	19	33	18	75	67	57	61	98
Regional Studies and Local Policies	15	30	19	13	33	31	18	25	36
Research Methodology	8	6	18	16	19	16	5	7	28
Politics and Policies of the European Union	9	20	24	36	45	29	42	25	38
Gender and Politics	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	32	36
Politics and Religion	14	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Other	34	5	26	4	8	8	4	11	16
Total	269	207	309	296	446	424	376	371	544

Source: own elaboration.

Such figures have resulted from multiple changes and initiatives set in motion since the early 2000s. The implementation of international projects and the launch of new IR PhD programmes in several departments, for instance, have contributed to fostering a vibrant research environment and nurturing a broader generation of academics. Undoubtedly, the development of SGRI has played a key role in these processes, shaping their trajectory and horizons (see Attinà and Lucarelli 2012; Caffarena and Costalli 2024). The Standing Group has served as a catalyst for the consolidation of a more integrated IR community that in the last two decades has continued to expand, building the “critical mass” (Lucarelli and Menotti 2002, 119) that was lacking in the previous decades.

Key to SGRI’s success has been the promotion of research excellence and its particular attention towards the establishment of a dialogue between different generations of scholars. Through its channels, the Standing Group has operated as a platform for research collaboration, disseminating information on events and job opportunities within the field of IR. Conferences and workshops have regularly offered insights into the evolution of the Italian higher education system, exploring pathways for research empowerment while providing guidance for career advancement. Such guidance has also included advice on the obtainment of the Italian national scientific qualification (ASN) which, due to structural features discussed in the last section of this article, requires early career researchers to develop specific publication plans.

SGRI events have also been characterized by a close focus on the contribution and professional growth of PhD students and postdoctoral researchers, who have frequently benefited from mentoring and feedback. Such an intergenerational exchange has enhanced the scholarly discourse and supported the journey of new members within Italian universities. In so doing, it has cultivated a cohesive network that has increasingly transcended institutional boundaries, laying a solid foundation for the future of the discipline in the country.

SGRI has also encouraged the internationalisation of IR scholarship, enhancing the reputation and the visibility of the Italian research abroad. Differently from other Standing Groups of the Italian Political Science Association, SGRI has promoted a limited use of Italian, adopting English as the official language for its events. This has contributed to bridging the historical gap between Italy and the IR community, enriching the national academic framework with a more cosmopolitical outlook. An increasing number of international scholars have been attracted by the conferences and seminars sponsored by the Standing Group. Emerging links have favoured network expansion, allowing a greater exchange between different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The growing influx of Italian researchers returning into national academia after periods abroad has further catalysed these dynamics, enhancing collaborative efforts with foreign universities while shaping a transnational environment around SGRI. Such a connectivity has created a more inclusive context, providing Italian scholars with new opportunities to express their voices and benefit from resources and expertise.

SGRI's recognition and celebration of research achievements in IR studies has also facilitated the establishment of cross-national links over the last two decades. Initiatives such as the recently introduced "Best Conference Paper Award" have incentivised the production of high-quality scholarly work generating impacts at an international level. The Award, which was firstly presented at the 2023 SGRI general conference in Catania, acknowledges the production of outstanding research that advances the theoretical, empirical or methodological debate in IR scholarship, supporting an environment of academic excellence.

Finally, the internationalisation of Italian IR research has been promoted through collaborative projects and partnerships. SGRI has progressively consolidated connections with European and internationally based associations, aligning its profile and mission with those of longstanding institutions in the field. Such a process has provided Italian academics access to a broader network of scholars from diverse contexts, joining established forums for research development.

One way in which this has been done is through the launch of joint initiatives with IR organisations. SGRI has increasingly been involved in projects with counterpart entities from other countries. An example is the British International Study Association (BISA), which, since the early 1970s, has promoted the study of global politics in the United Kingdom. Links between SISP, SGRI, and BISA have intensified over the last few years, especially within the framework of the BISA annual conference. In 2021, the Standing Group participated in a special joint panel to further the study of Italian foreign policy at the BISA virtual conference. In 2024, a joint panel on EU-China relations was held at the BISA conference in Birmingham. Another example is the Mexican International Studies Association (AMEI), created in the late 1960s as a research platform in the area of international affairs. In 2021, a joint panel between SISP, SGRI and AMEI was established to investigate "Perspectives of Multilateralism in a Renewed World Order" at AMEI's 34th conference.

International connections have also been forged through the co-sponsoring of events. The Standing Group has strengthened its presence in the European research landscape, increasing cooperation with other institutions. Among these, the European Consortium on Political Research (ECPR) has recently been a key player. Founded in

1970, ECPR has constituted a global network for political scientists and IR researchers across and beyond Europe, fostering knowledge exchange and innovation. Collaboration between ECPR and SGRI has not only enabled the latter to enhance the scope of its initiatives but has also helped build bridges between Italian and European research, positioning Italian scholarship as an integral part of the European IR community. With ECPR support, SGRI launched an International Studies PhD workshop in 2024, offering PhD students from across Italy and Europe the opportunity to present their research and receive feedback from senior scholars in their respective fields. The event, which preceded the 2024 SGRI general conference in Parma, included interactive sessions on how to publish in leading journals and access academic positions. These featured interventions from the ECPR President and the President of the European International Studies Association (EISA), providing early career researchers with advice and insights about the state of IR research in Europe and at the international level.

4. The challenges ahead

SGRI achievements have wielded a significant influence on the advancement of the IR scholarship in Italian academia. However, multifaceted challenges persist. Several of these challenges concern the way in which the scholarship is still administered at the national level. Despite the progress registered since the early 2000s, the Italian regulation of higher education continues to be based on a longstanding categorisation that neglects the role of IR as a proper discipline. According to this system, “Political Science” (SPS/04) is the sole reference sector for different, and arguably distant, fields of study such as IR, Party Politics, or Political Theory. Furthermore, in contrast with most of the other European countries, the regulation traces boundaries between overlapping research subjects, treating the study of IR history, or the analysis of specific regions of the world (i.e. Area Studies), as disciplines separated from Political Science. As a consequence, Italian works on African or Asian politics fall within specific siloed sectors (SPS/13 and SPS/14). Still, these works not only speak directly to the IR and political science literature, providing in-depth insights into dynamics commonly examined by IR scholars, but often even draw on IR theories or methodologies to build their analytical frameworks.

The monolithic structure of the Political Science sector, along with its divisions from related areas, impose constraints on the obtainment of the national scientific qualification (ASN) and the construction of an international academic profile among Italian IR scholars. To be eligible for ASN, publications and research outputs must adhere to strict canons that frequently do not resonate beyond national boundaries. Only specific journals are recognised as aligning with disciplinary criteria, while even published books are evaluated based on their pertinence to the sector. This complicates classification within the SPS/04 realm. Outlets such as scientific journals prioritising more historical or regional perspectives on contemporary politics may not be considered—or may even be regarded as indicative of a research profile rooted in a different area. At the same time, such fragmentation furthers the marginalisation of Area Studies, imposing a limited and differentiated range of publication options to scholars with regional expertise.

As some authors note (e.g., Andreatta and Zambenardi 2009), sectoral divisions limit research diversity within the IR scholarship. One of the main consequence of this

in Italy has been the narrow focus on non-Western politics. Being separated from geographical and regional research, the Italian IR literature has historically tended to prioritise the study of domestic or European affairs over political dynamics in regions such as South Asia, sub-Saharan Africa or Latin America (see Calcara and Vittori 2019). IR conferences have reflected this trend. Less than a third of the papers presented at the SGRI general conference between 2013 and 2023 addressed global-South politics as their primary focus, with the majority concentrating on EU/Italian policies, Mediterranean politics, and the global political order.

Relatedly, divisions hamper the consolidation of a wider and more interconnected research network. Despite the increasing prominence of SGRI over the last two decades, participation in IR events and workshops has remained relatively limited among area study experts, and even IR historians, who have generally prioritised sectoral initiatives. This has reduced opportunities for collaboration, hindering the integration of multi-perspective and context-sensitive approaches into the study of global politics.

Besides recognising the role of IR in the Italian academic landscape, there is also a need for a greater acknowledgement and promotion of the branches and sub-fields that characterise the discipline. Subjects such as International Security, Modern Warfare or Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA), which are commonly taught in European academic curricula, continue to be excluded from most of Political Science and IR courses offered by Italian universities. As highlighted at the 2023 SISP general conference, such a state of affairs furthers a misalignment between the Italian scholarship and international standards. Furthermore, it contributes to fuelling the historical distance between Italian academia and policy making in the area of security and foreign policy. Despite recent improvements, the IR academic community continues to be rarely engaged in debates with practitioners this is a factor that reduces the practical impacts of scholarly research, limiting its visibility and influence on national decision-making processes.

The continuous development of SGRI can have a positive effect on these trends in the forthcoming years, increasing the impact of IR research both within and beyond academia. The Standing Group has been an active promoter of initiatives and panels exploring IR boundaries and horizons, addressing contemporary security challenges while raising awareness of the implications of current foreign policy decisions. Further investments in such a research direction may contribute to solidifying these areas as established fields of study within Italian university courses, enhancing public engagement. One way this could be done is through the shaping of a more comprehensive and institutionalised organizational framework recognising and incentivising research on specific branches of the discipline. Areas such as FPA could progressively turn into thematic sections, mirroring the very mechanisms through which SGRI, along with other Standing Groups, was formed within SISP. A permanent secretariat would help sustain research efforts and dissemination, supporting SGRI coordinators in the management of administrative tasks while amplifying external outreach and coordination. Such an operational structure would actively enhance the breadth and scope of the IR scholarship. In so doing, it would contribute to consolidating its relevance within the Italian research community, effectively building on the successes achieved in the last two decades.

Acknowledgements

Each of the authors has contributed equally to the manuscript.

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