

Giorgia Meloni sworn in as Italy's first female prime minister

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Italian President Sergio Mattarella (2nd L) welcomes new Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni (C) as she arrives for the swearing-in ceremony of the new Italian Government at the Quirinal Palace in Rome on October 22, 2022.

Rome, October 22 (RHC)-- Hard-right leader Giorgia Meloni was sworn in as Italy's first female prime minister amid looming questions over her coalition partners' stance towards Russia. The 45-year-old leader recited the ritual oath of office before Italian President Sergio Mattarella on Saturday after her party Brothers of Italy won more than 25 percent of the vote in snap elections in late September.

She pledged to act “in the exclusive interests of the nation” – a promise then repeated by her 24 ministers, six of them women.

The ceremony took place a day after Meloni along with her coalition partners – hardliner Matteo Salvini of the League party and Forza Italia’s TV tycoon Silvio Berlusconi – unveiled their cabinet. The government is expected to face confidence votes in parliament next week.

Forza Italia’s Antonio Tajani is now the country’s foreign minister. He has a long history with European institutions and was president of the European Parliament in 2017. The economy ministry will be in the hands of League’s Giancarlo Giorgetti who is considered relatively pro-Europe, and one of the most moderate among party members.

Another key department, the defence ministry, is going to Brothers of Italy’s co-founder and close adviser to Meloni Guido Crosetto – a defence industry expert who was head of the Federation of Italian Aerospace Companies.

“Throughout Europe, patriots are coming to power and with them this Europe of nations,” said French far-right leader Marine Le Pen, referring to Meloni and Salvini, on Twitter. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban hailed a “big day for the European Right”.

The ceremony comes after days of tensions within the ruling coalition and infighting over who to appoint in key ministries. As the new parliament held its first session last week, a clandestine photo taken of Berlusconi’s notes showed a list of adjectives describing Meloni as “overbearing, domineering, arrogant and offensive.”

The standoff was triggered by the leader of Brothers of Italy refusing to consider a close ally to Berlusconi as justice minister. Just hours after the two seemed to have mended ties, an audio clip of Berlusconi was leaked to the media with the octogenarian boasting about his personal relationship with Russian President Vladimir Putin – which included gift exchanges of vodka and red wine – and offering his party members an explanation of how Ukraine’s President Volodymyr Zelenskyy was the one responsible for the war.

The audio sent a tremor throughout the coalition after Meloni made a concerted effort throughout the campaign to reassure Italy’s Western allies over the country’s pro-NATO stance and its support for Ukraine in the conflict.

“Italy with us in government will never be the weak link in the West,” Meloni snapped back after the audio leak. “I intend to lead a government with a clear and unequivocal foreign policy line ... Anyone who does not agree with this cornerstone cannot be part of the government.” But if she has been firm, her coalition partners have been wobbling, spurring doubts over what is going to be the country’s position in the long term.

“Foreign policy is definitely one of the most critical aspects to tackle. Doubts over Italy’s collocation have been ongoing for years,” said Gregory Alegi, professor of history and politics at Luiss University, referring to the Five Star Movement’s past sympathies towards China and openly pro-Russia stance of several other politicians.

Among them are Salvini and the newly elected speaker of the Chamber of Deputies, Lorenzo Fontana, who have repeatedly insisted on lifting sanctions against Moscow.

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