

‘Pack your bags’: new Italian gov’t pledges mass migrant deportation

Rome: Italy’s new populist leaders commemorated the founding of the Italian republic by attending a pomp-filled military parade Saturday – and then promised to get to work creating jobs and expelling migrants.

“The free ride is over,” League leader Matteo Salvini, Italy’s new interior minister, warned migrants at a rally in northern Italy. “It’s time to pack your bags.”

The Frecce Tricolori Italian Air Force acrobatic squad flies over the monument to the unknown soldier on the occasion of the 72nd anniversary of the Italian Republic in Rome. *Photo: AP*

The pledge of mass deportations to come was a reminder that Italy has a staunchly anti-immigrant, right-wing party in its governing coalition – and that the European Union will face a whole new partner governing its fourth-largest economy.

Earlier, Salvini joined Premier Giuseppe Conte and the rest of the newly sworn-in Cabinet to view the Republic Day parade. Italy’s aeronautic acrobatic squad flew low and loud over downtown Rome trailing smoke in the red, white and green of the Italian flag.

The national pride on display is a feature of every Republic Day, but it took on a particular significance this year after Italy on Friday ended three months of political and financial turmoil and swore in a government whose populist and eurosceptic leanings have alarmed Europe.

Conte, a law professor plucked from relative obscurity to head an unlikely governing alliance of the anti-establishment 5-Star Movement and League, said the celebrations on Saturday transcended all the tensions of recent days.

Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte is greeted by citizens on during celebrations for Italy’s Republic Day. *Photo: AP*

“It’s the celebration for all of us, of our republic,” he said.

Conte's Cabinet was sworn in after a last-minute deal averted the threat of a new election that could have turned into a referendum on whether Italy stayed with the shared European euro currency. The political stability relieved financial markets on Friday but Italy's European neighbours continued to express concerns about the eurosceptic bent and the heavy spending agenda of Italy's new government.

"Italy is destroying itself - and dragging down Europe with it," read the headline of Germany's *Der Spiegel* magazine, the cover of which featured a forkful of spaghetti with one dangling strand tied up as a noose.

While *Spiegel* is known for such provocations, another *Spiegel* article last week drew an official protest from Italy's ambassador to Germany.

The Frecce Tricolori Italian Air Force acrobatic squad flies over Rome's skyline on the occasion of the 72nd anniversary of founding of the Italian Republic in 1946.
Photo: AP

On Saturday, German Chancellor Angela Merkel phoned Conte and invited him to visit soon. Merkel's office said both leaders emphasised the importance of continued close bilateral cooperation.

Conte has so far left policy specifics to the drivers of his improbable rise, his two deputies: Salvini and 5-Star leader Luigi Di Maio.

Di Maio, the new economic development minister, reported for work after the parade to his ministry, which would have otherwise been closed for the holiday.

"Starting today, we get to work to create work," Di Maio said in a Facebook video giving Italians a tour of the empty ministry. Di Maio is also the minister for labor, a combination he said made sense since the two ministries must work together.

Leader of the League party, Matteo Salvini, right, stands by Luigi Di Maio, leader of the Five-Star movement, prior to the swearing-in ceremony for Italy's new government at Rome's Quirinale Presidential Palace on Friday. Photo: AP

Offering the new government cautious support was Italy's small, far-right neo-fascist CasaPound party, which held its own Republic Day commemoration on Saturday. Banners featured images of a crossed-out EU flag and "(hash)exIT" written underneath, a reference to calls for Italy to leave the 28-nation bloc.

The 5-Star-League agenda has no such plans, but Conte made clear he was irked

by comments this week by European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, who said Italy had to stop blaming the EU for its problems and must take responsibility to address the poverty in southern Italy.

“That means more work, less corruption. Seriousness,” Juncker said in comments his spokeswoman later said he regretted.

In an unscripted blast from the parade route, Conte insisted Italy wasn’t alone in facing cases of corruption and declared that “we all have to work for legality.”

Conte’s government faces mandatory confidence votes next week in parliament, where the two governing parties have a slim majority.

Republic Day commemorates the day, June 2, 1946, when Italians voted in a referendum to abolish the monarchy in favor of a republic, Italy’s first.

The political upheaval that has created western Europe’s first populist government this week has been dubbed the start of Italy’s Third Republic.

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