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THE CURRENT: After the prime minister's resignation, what's next for Italy?

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PITA: You're listening to The Current, part of the Brookings Podcast Network.

Italy's Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte will be resigning following the collapse of the coalition government between the nationalist League party and the anti-establishment Five Star Movement party. With us today to talk about this is Giovanna De Maio, a visiting fellow here in our Center on the US and Europe.

Giovanna, what led to Prime Minister Conte's decision to resign and the break-up of the coalition government?

DE MAIO: Giuseppe Conte resigned today following a government crisis that was triggered by Salvini, leader of the League. Following a vote on Aug 8 on an infrastructure project, a high-speed train between Turin and Lyon, the government majority voted in a different way. According to Salvini, this disagreement within the government coalition was a sign that this coalition could no longer be in power because there was no agreement on this project. Before Salvini asked Conte to resign, in the meantime, he addressed the crowd near Rome asking Italians to trust him and trigger new elections.

Now, Giuseppe Conte refused to resign after the request of Salvini because he firmly believed that this resignation should have happened in a Parliamentary setting, therefore he was waiting for a no-confidence vote & proposal that the League tried to schedule for August 14 just before the break of August 15. But this did not happen. This resolution proposed by the League, Parliament did not approve, and therefore Conte was scheduled to intervene in front of the Senate today.

In his speech, he said that he didn't feel like this government majority was going anywhere, because he didn't have the trust of his interior minister and all the ministers belonging to the League. Therefore he said he would resign. As a next step, he will present his resignation to the president of the Republic, Sergio Mattarella. After his speech in the Senate today in which he accused Salvini of having anti-institutional behavior, he also mentioned all the achievements that the government coalition has done and winked at the League deputies, the MPs, and recognized/acknowledged that the success of the government has also been based on the collaboration of the League, basically blaming Salvini for the government crisis while appreciating the work that has been done between 5 Star and the League.

PITA: So what will happen next? Are elections automatically called or will there be some time? How soon will that be?

DE MAIO: Elections are not automatic. At this stage, the president of the republic, in the absence of a non-confidence vote, he will receive Giuseppe Conte, he will accept his resignation, and at this stage, the president needs to conduct the so-called consultations between political leaders of different parties in order to explore if there's the chance of creating an alternative majority, an alternative government coalition that would address specific issues that are particularly urgent for Italy right now, first of all, the budget bill that needs to be completed by the end of December.

In the meantime, while triggering the government crisis, Salvini had bet not only on the consensus that he had that was quite clear after the European elections at the end of May, in which the League got over 34%, and his own personal consensus that is around 36-38%, but he also decided to bet against this alternative majority, based on the fact that the Five Star Movement and the Democratic party, which is the center-left and the candidate most likely to form an alt majority with Five Star – he bet on the fact that these two forces would not be able to create this alt majority b/c of the history and divisions within the Democratic Party. The center-left, the Democratic Party, has two main trends within. One is led by former Prime Minister Matteo Renzi. In the current Parliament, most of the MPs of the Democratic Party are loyal to Matteo Renzi. And the other trend is led by [Nicola] Zingaretti, who is the secretary, the leader of the Democratic Party, who instead would be interested in a longer collaboration with Five Star in order to have an alt government lasting the rest of the other four years that this government's supposed to be in power and therefore leaving Salvini in the opposition for another four years. While Renzi is interested in having a transition government that would just do a few important reforms such as approve the budget law which is urgent for Italy.

PITA: Speaking of Salvini's rising popularity, as you mentioned, in the European parliamentary elections earlier this year, the League gained a strong amount of support. If it does come to elections being held again, is it likely that the League will have enough support to form their own majority, making Salvini prime minister, or are they not yet at that state?

DE MAIO: It depends when the elections will be held. At the moment, yes, the League has a huge amount of support, but in order to form a government, the League would need 40% of preferences. At the moment, it's not the case, it's prob around 32-34%, so it would still need support from another political force, and in this case the most likely one would be Fratelli d'Italia, Brothers of Italy, who is a far-right formation who is v close to Salvini in terms of ideas, sovereigntist approach to foreign policy and conservative values, that in the recent European elections reached 6.8%, and therefore could be a valuable ally for Salvini. Probably supported as well by part of the center-right, and some MPs from the formation of Sforza Italia might also choose to side with Salvini.

PITA: There has been growing concern about Russia's growing ties with a lot of the nationalist movements and parties across Europe. Earlier this year, audio recordings came to light that appeared to expose potential financial ties between the League and Russia. Was there any fallout from that for Salvini and the League? How has Italy reacted to those disclosures?

DE MAIO: The reaction of the press was very harsh. The press decided to cover broadly and extensively this "Russiagate" – "Moscopoli" it was called in the Italian press. This turned into a lot of political disagreement with the Five Star movement because the Five Star Movement has always been very proud of the fact that they didn't take support from public fundings, specifically from foreign agents, of course, but the interesting thing is that a similar case in Austria has led to a crisis in the government, and in Italy this was not the case. For mainly 3 reasons: First, the Italian public opinion

doesn't seem to be concerned with Russia on any level, in part because of historical ties, the fact that Russia was never perceived as a threat to national security. Second, Salvini's popularity was even growing after this Moscopoli issue because his narrative was even stronger and was supported by strong propaganda concerning immigration and sovereigntist stances toward the EU, anti-immigration stances most importantly. Lastly, the Five Star Movement was not considering itself at that time strong enough to push back against Salvini and trigger elections, because the Five Star Movement did not perform well in the European elections so Five Star Movement was not wanting to hold responsibility for a government crisis.

At the moment, the Milan prosecutor's office has opened an investigation. The man in the eye of the storm, Gianluca Savoini, who has been very active in the League since 1991 and is very close to Salvini, he's organized all these trips to Moscow, he'll be having a hearing with the prosecutor's office on September 5. So we will see how it goes from there.