

Venezuela's Crisis: Italy Clashes with the EU Common Approach

by Nicola Bilotta

Juan Guaidó's self-proclamation as interim president of Venezuela on 23 January has exacerbated the country's crisis, threatening Nicolas Maduro's authoritarian power. Venezuela's institutional chaos has forced international actors to take a stand, particularly in light of the quick recognition of Guaidó by the US, Canada and many South American countries.

The succession of events has confronted the European Union with a dilemma: back the US strategy and increase international pressure on the Maduro government or adopt a more moderate approach, calling instead for a return to democratic elections and a transition of power.

Against this backdrop, EU member states were again divided on the course of action to pursue. First, on 26 January, a number of EU countries – including Spain, the UK, France and Germany – officially threatened Maduro with an ultimatum: call democratic elections

within eight days or we will recognize Guaidó's interim presidency.¹ Then, on 31 January, with just four days left in the ultimatum, the EU's twenty-eight foreign ministers met in Bucharest to informally discuss a united European response. The meeting resulted in an official statement demanding free and credible elections, but fell short of officially recognizing Guaidó, the head of the opposition controlled National Assembly, as interim president of Venezuela.

It was in this meeting that Italy reportedly blocked a joint EU statement supporting Guaidó, leading instead to the issuing of a statement calling for a return to democratic elections in the country.²

¹ "Venezuela Crisis: Maduro Given Ultimatum by European Leaders", in *BBC News*, 26 January 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-47014322>.

² "Divided Italy Blocks EU Statements on Recognizing Venezuela's Guaidó", in *Reuters*, 4 February 2019, <https://reut.rs/2GnY0hN>.

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At the EU level, and as recently reminded by High Representative Federica Mogherini, EU institutions do not have the authority to formally recognize either states or institutions within states, as this competence lies with member states.³ As a result, and in light of the differences among member states, the EU instead decided to establish an International Contact Group (ICG) on 31 January.

The International Contact Group is reflective of the broad international differences on the crisis in Venezuela. Membership includes the EU and eight member states such as Italy, Germany, France and the UK, flanked by further Latin American countries, including Bolivia, Ecuador, Costa Rica and Uruguay, which hosted its first ICG meeting on 7 February. In this respect the ICG contains the full spectrum of views on the crisis and is aimed at facilitating dialogue to favour a political transition to democratic elections with a 90-day mandate.⁴

Yet, on 4 February, when the eight-day ultimatum officially expired, the bloc of biggest European states – Germany, France, Spain and the UK, among others – formally recognized Guaidó, implicitly undermining the mediation efforts of the international Contact Group of which they themselves were members.

³ European External Action Service (EEAS), *Remarks by High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini at the Press Conference Following the First Day of Informal Meeting of the EU Foreign Affairs Ministers*, Bucharest, 31 January 2019, <https://europa.eu/!Hw49Kp>.

⁴ Ibid.

Meanwhile, to complicate matters further, another group of countries – Belgium, Finland and Sweden, among others – have acknowledged support for Guaidó avoiding however to directly recognize his interim presidency.⁵ Lastly, a smaller number of EU nations – including Italy, Ireland, Bulgaria, Greece and Cyprus – have refused to endorse Guaidó, instead demanding a political transition to elections.

Italy's coalition government – composed of the right-wing League party and the populist anti-establishment 5 Star Movement (*Movimento 5 Stelle*, M5S) – has announced Italy's "neutrality" on the crisis in Venezuela, refusing to recognize either side or to be seen as intervening in the internal affairs of a state.⁶ While the governing coalition is itself divided on the stance to take vis-à-vis Venezuela, on this occasion it was the M5S party which came out on top, directing the Italian foreign ministry to refuse any unilateral recognition of Guaidó and to block a united EU statement to that effect in the 31 January meeting of EU foreign ministers.

Matteo Salvini, head of the League party and Italy's Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of the Interior, had instead strongly come out in favour of the 31 January ultimatum, demanding that Italy recognize Guaidó's interim

⁵ David M. Herszenhorn, "Venezuela's Chaos Exposes EU Disarray on Foreign Policy", in *Politico*, 4 February 2019, <https://www.politico.eu/article/venezuela-president-inf-treaty-chaos-exposes-eu-disarray-on-foreign-policy-federica-mogherini>.

⁶ "Divided Italy Blocks EU Statements on Recognizing Venezuela's Guaido", cit.

presidency.⁷ The League's approach towards the crisis in Venezuela was predictable. While it does not align with Russia's stance and is rather supportive of the EU position, Salvini holds an ideological hostility towards Maduro's "socialist" government which plays a key role in explaining his orientation, as does Salvini's vicinity to the US Trump administration.

In contrast, the M5S has openly refused to support Maduro's opponent. Alessandro Di Battista, a charismatic member of the Italian anti-establishment party who has recently returned from a prolonged stay in South America, announced that "this government will never recognize people who appoint themselves president".⁸ The M5S has couched its stance in accordance with the principle of non-interference in foreign affairs, as argued by Manlio Di Stefano, Italy's Undersecretary of State for Foreign Affairs, during a recent interview on Venezuela.⁹

Italy's M5S party maintains that its policy of neutrality is aimed at preventing Venezuela from descending into a bloody civil war or inviting foreign interventionism, with Rome

instead encouraging plans for democratic elections and a political transition.¹⁰

Meanwhile, Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte has tried to find a middle way between the two stances of Italy's governing coalition parties. In this he has renewed calls for a credible transition of power while warning against the negative fallout from foreign interferences in Venezuela. Nevertheless, this stance has not satisfied many, particularly within Europe, where Italy is already suffering from an increased isolation.

It was in this context that, on 4 February – the same day in which key European states formally recognized Guaidó's interim presidency –, Italy's President, Sergio Mattarella, issued a rare and strongly worded statement, reprimanding Italy's government and demanding increased efforts by Rome to find a common stance with the EU.¹¹

Mattarella's statement reflects the perceived gravity of Italy's growing isolation in Europe, but is also a warning about the need for clarity to overcome the current incongruences dominating Italian foreign policy.

⁷ "Salvini: 'Sul Venezuela abbiamo fatto una figuraccia'", in *Corriere della Sera*, 4 February 2019, https://www.corriere.it/politica/19_febbraio_04/salvini-sul-venezuela-abbiamo-fatto-figuraccia-23364590-28a9-11e9-a9a8-f8d43e37edc8.shtml.

⁸ "Divided Italy Blocks EU Statements on Recognizing Venezuela's Guaidó", cit.

⁹ "Venezuela, Di Stefano (M5S): 'L'Italia non riconosce Juan Guaidó'", in *TGcom24*, 31 January 2019, https://www.tgcom24.mediaset.it/mondo/venezuela-manlio-di-stefano-l-italia-non-riconosce-juan-guaido-_3189035-201902a.shtml.

¹⁰ Raffaele Binelli, "'Venezuela, l'Italia non riconosce Guaidó'. Di Stefano spiega perché", in *Il Giornale*, 31 January 2019, <http://www.ilgiornale.it/node/1637279>.

¹¹ "Mattarella Calls for Venezuela Clarity", in *ANSA Politics*, 4 February 2019, http://www.ansa.it/english/news/politics/2019/02/04/mattarella-calls-for-venezuela-clarity_4276a315-d688-486f-9d39-3ba8d3877459.html; Italian Presidency, *Intervento del Presidente della Repubblica Sergio Mattarella alla cerimonia di inaugurazione del Centro di accoglienza "Matteo Ricci"*, Rome, 4 February 2019, <https://www.quirinale.it/elementi/22169>.

International and domestic pressure on Italy has also increased following a recent interview by Venezuela's Guaidó who directly called for Italy's support. Venezuelans of Italian origin are a large and influential community in the country. According to official data, there are 160,000 registered Italians living in Venezuela, of which 65 per cent hold dual nationality. However, taking into account descendants without Italian citizenship, the number increases to more than one million people.

Italy's approach to Venezuela is the product of infighting within its governing coalition, both of which remain stuck in a perennial electoral campaign mode, particularly in light of the upcoming European elections this May. It does not reflect a reasoned and carefully thought-out foreign policy strategy.

Italian foreign policy priorities have long revolved around the three pillars of NATO and the transatlantic alliance with the US, European integration and the Mediterranean region. Seen in this light, Italy's policy towards Venezuela's crisis, and its public opposition to European majoritarian views and stances, could damage Italy's credibility and further increase its international isolation.

This would not only reduce Italian leverage within the EU, but may also carry over to have implications on the other traditional pillars of Italian foreign policy, where Italy can expect increased challenges in finding support from allies and partners to defend its national interests.

Foreign policy is a game of compromises and *quid pro quo*. A more careful balancing of Italy's multiple interests and concerns would be preferable, as Italy is in dire need of support from external partners when it comes to key dossiers such as Italy's economic recovery and growing budget deficits, its concerns vis-à-vis Europe on the migration issue and broader issues tied to Mediterranean security, including in the energy domain.

One must hope that Italy's governing coalition find a common approach to foreign policy. Otherwise, the two ruling parties will risk deadlock each time a new crisis emerges on the world stage.

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