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# Draghi's very Italian fall

The resignation on 21 July 2022 of Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi was a classic example of the machinations of Italian politics, argues **Martin Bull**. The outcome of a manufactured crisis and a manipulation of events by the parties of the right, Draghi's fall was neither inevitable nor expected

Mario Draghi's **resignation as Prime Minister of Italy** on 21 July was a surprise to many observers. Indeed, it is difficult to find many politicians or members of the public who wanted to see Draghi fall. International observers were left open-mouthed. Since February 2021, Draghi, had headed **a government of 'national unity'** in which all parties joined except the far-right Fratelli d'Italia / Brothers of Italy. This government had appeared largely immune from the infighting that characterises Italian politics.

## A tale of two resignations

There was also some confusion since this was, in fact, Draghi's second resignation. His first resignation, the week before on 14 July, was over a confidence vote on a government bill offering support to Italians for rising energy prices. The government won the vote handsomely, but one of the government's coalition partners (Movimento 5 Stelle / the Five Star Movement) boycotted the vote. Draghi interpreted that as a signal that the pact of trust at the basis of his government had been broken, and he chose to resign.

*It is difficult to find many politicians or members of the public who wanted to see Mario Draghi fall, and yet in the space of a week he lost three of his coalition partners. How?*

**President Mattarella rejected this first resignation** in the absence of parliament issuing a formal clarification of the situation. The clarification took place through a debate in the Senate a week later. The government **won a confidence vote**, but with only 95 votes in support (and 38 votes against). That was because this time, three of the big parties (Lega / the League, Forza Italia and the Five Star Movement) boycotted the vote. Their refusal to express their explicit confidence sounded the death knell for the government. Draghi went to the Presidential palace and resigned for a second time. This time, President Mattarella dissolved parliament, and elections were then announced for 25 September.

In the space of a week, therefore, Draghi lost three of his coalition partners. How did it come to this?

## Draghi's first resignation

Draghi's first resignation was politically unnecessary. The atmosphere in the Five Star Movement was febrile, and it had just experienced **a significant split**. Foreign Secretary Luigi di Maio had walked out over the party's stance on the Ukraine war, taking 60 MPs with him to form a new political grouping. Five Star leader Giuseppe Conte claimed to be at odds with Draghi **over several issues** related to the economy, tax and support. But most politicians would have seen his decision not to support a government bill as mere flexing of his muscles.

We could interpret Draghi's resignation in response as unnecessarily 'purist'. But he is not a politician. He has rarely engaged in the sort of political horse-trading that characterises the behaviour of most Italian Prime Ministers. In any case, it laid the basis for Draghi's subsequent fall.

## The possibility of survival

Mattarella's rejection of Draghi's first resignation raised the distinct possibility of him surviving. In the days running up to the debate there was a **mass mobilisation of pro-Draghi supporters** among local mayors, civil society associations, and the general public. All encouraged him to

stay on. Moreover, on numbers alone, it was clear that Draghi could still win a formal confidence vote without Conte's support. That would then require Draghi to modify his original position about the sacrosanct nature of his national unity government.

*Mattarella's rejection of Draghi's first resignation raised the distinct possibility of him surviving. Supporters in civil society mobilised, and a substantial pro-Draghi component emerged from the fractured Five Star Movement*

After all, the Five Star Movement had split, with a substantial pro-Draghi component now parading under a new party banner. And in the run-up to the confidence debate in the Senate, it was clear that other Five Star Senators (as many as 30–40) were unhappy with Conte's anti-Draghi line. Indeed, there were rumours of a second split in the offing. If so, the argument went, the 'national unity' coalition had to be re-thought anyway. Why not win the confidence vote and stay on?

Draghi evidently wished to keep this possibility open. In the Senate confidence debate he said he would continue to lead the government if the political forces were willing to '**reconstruct from the beginning**' a government pact 'with courage, altruism and credibility'. **The confidence motion** (tabled by Democrat Senator Pierferdinando Casini) which the government chose for the confidence vote could not have been simpler. 'The Senate, having heard the communication of the Prime Minister, approves it'.

Survival, in short, was within reach.

## The end of Draghi

However, by this time, the parties of the right had smelled blood. They saw an opportunity to bring down the government and advance the prospect of a right-wing majority at subsequent elections – as **current polls** indicate. And in doing so, the Conte-Draghi conflict allowed them to escape responsibility for causing early elections (never popular in Italy).

Taking Draghi's original cue that the national unity pact had collapsed, the League and Forza Italia turned the tables. They insisted that there must now be a sharp break with the current government through the exit of Five Star. The League expressed this in its proposed confidence motion for '**a profoundly renovated government** both in its political choices and in its composition'. At the same time, the League indicated that this reformed government should be led by Draghi.

*The parties of the right smelled blood, and saw an opportunity to bring down the government without being held responsible for doing so*

That was a step too far for the government. It selected Casini's confidence motion over the League's motion to put to a vote. The League and Forza Italia responded with a boycott. Rather

League's motion to put to a vote. The League and Forza Italia responded with a boycott. Rather than striking a blow, they simply walked out of the Senate. This ended any prospect of the government's survival, while letting them continue to support the *idea* of a Draghi government.

## Draghi: banker, not politician

Had Draghi been willing to play the politician he might well have survived. But as a former banker, that role does not come naturally to him. His fall was not inevitable, but the result of a manufactured crisis, exploited by certain parties for their own interests. In classic Italian political tradition, Draghi was brought down by politicians supporting him all the way.

This article presents the views of the author(s) and not necessarily those of the ECPR or the Editors of *The Loop*.



Brothers of Italy

Five Star Movement

Forza Italia

Fratelli d'Italia

Giuseppe Conte

Italian parliament

Italian politics

Lega

Mario Draghi

Movimento

Movimento 5 Stelle

Sergio Mattarella

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POLITICS, SOCIETY AND INSTITUTIONS AT THE END  
OF THE GREAT RECESSION

Edited by  
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