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## ITALY GAGS EU ON VENEZUELA CRISIS

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Italy has vetoed an EU statement on the Venezuela crisis amid political confusion in Rome.

"It was caused by ... divided domestic politics," an EU diplomat said.

"The Italian government is divided," another diplomat said.

"They [the Italians] haven't given a proper reason," a third EU diplomat added.

Italy had previously cited "concerns about Italian nationals in Venezuela", the diplomat said, but some EU capitals "suspected more the link between Russia and the 5MS," the diplomat noted, referring to the 5 Star Movement, a Russia-friendly party in Italy's ruling coalition.

The EU had planned to issue a joint statement recognising Juan Guaido as Venezuela's interim president, joining the US and most South American states in a bid to resolve the crisis, which escalated last week.

But instead, France, Germany, and the UK led the way on separate recognition by a group of 19 EU states.

The G19 roll-call also included Austria, Belgium, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Spain, and Sweden.

"They acknowledge and support Mr Juan Guaido, president of the democratically elected National Assembly, as president ad interim of Venezuela, in order for him to call for free, fair, and democratic presidential elections," the group said in its statement.

"Guaido has the legitimacy to hold presidential elections ... People are on the streets, the people want change," French foreign minister Jean-Yves Le Drian added.

At the same time, half the government in Rome took the line of Venezuelan president Nicolas Maduro and of Russia, who say Guaido is a US plot for regime change.

"Handing out ultimatums, sanctions, freezing Venezuelan goods \* It would mean opening the road to a military intervention," Alessandro Di Battista, a senior MP from 5MS, said.

"It takes courage to maintain a neutral position ... Europe should stop once and for all to obey US orders," he said.

But the other half of Rome, Italy's far-right and pro-Russia League party, has branded Maduro a "dictator" who must go, in a rare departure from Russian foreign policy.

"Our [coalition] allies think we need to act gradually and be more prudent," League head and Italian deputy prime minister Matteo Salvini said on Italian TV on Monday.

"We're not looking very good on this," he added, referring to Italy's image.

Italian president Sergio Mattarella compounded the muddle by coming out in favour of the EU line.

"We must demonstrate responsibility and clarity with a common line taken by all our EU partners and allies," he said at an event in the Italian capital.

"The day will come when [the Italian government] will be ashamed of having been on the wrong side of history," former Italian prime minister Matteo Renzi also said.

The Venezuela crisis escalated when Guaido declared himself interim president on 23 January after elections deemed invalid by the country's parliament.

Maduro's rule had earlier prompted mass protests, including fatalities, over food shortages and hyperinflation in the oil-rich country.

Guaido personally thanked each of the 19 EU recognisers on Twitter on Monday.

But Maduro told Italian TV station Sky Tg24 that the White House had "ordered and planned" a "coup" in Caracas.

"What would I say to Italy? What would I say to Europe? Do not let yourselves be carried away by [US president] Donald Trump's madness," Maduro said.

He was backed by Russia, which has funded his regime to the tune of billions and which, according to a Reuters investigation, has flown in forces from a Russian private security firm called Wagner to help keep him in power.

"The internal political crisis in Venezuela can only be resolved by the Venezuelans," Kremlin spokesman Dmitri Peskov said on Monday.

"The imposition of any solution or the attempt to legitimise the attempt to usurp power is, in our opinion, direct interference in Venezuela's internal affairs," he added.

Hungary's decision to join the EU-19 also represented a rare departure from Russian foreign policy by its pro-Russian leader, Viktor Orban.

But other Russia-friendly EU states, including Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece, and Malta, did not join the group after Italy blocked the EU-28 intervention.