

Italy's incoming Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte faced the second of two parliamentary votes Wednesday, the final hurdle before his populist government can officially take the reins.

The alliance of the anti-establishment Five Star Movement (M5S) and far-right League Party is almost certain to win the vote in the chamber of deputies, where the two parties enjoy an ample majority.



AFP / FILIPPO MONTEFORTE. Italy's incoming premier Giuseppe Conte (C) shakes hands with far-right leader Matteo Salvini (L) and Five Star Movement head Luigi Di Maio after Tuesday's successful Senate vote

Conte's coalition was sworn in on Friday, after months of political turmoil that alarmed EU officials and spooked financial markets.

The cabinet comfortably won approval in the Senate on Tuesday evening after Conte delivered his first policy speech, in which he called for "obligatory" redistribution of asylum seekers around the EU and a review of sanctions against Russia.

A lawyer with little political experience, Conte was nominated by League leader Matteo Salvini and Five Star head Luigi Di Maio — both of whom are now his deputy prime ministers.

In his address, Conte reaffirmed several of the coalition's key manifesto pledges, including a tough line on migrants and rejection of austerity in an economy weighed down by the eurozone's second-largest debt ratio.

"We want to reduce our public debt, but we want to do so with growth and not with austerity measures," he told senators.

Conte also called for the so-called Dublin Regulation to be overhauled in order to obtain "a fair distribution of responsibilities" and "an automatic system of compulsory distribution of asylum seekers".

Under the Dublin Rules, would-be asylum seekers must submit their applications in their

country of arrival, leaving Italy to deal with the huge numbers that have landed on its shores from North Africa, in particular, Libya.

On Russia, which faces EU punitive measures over the Ukraine crisis, Conte said his government “will promote a review of the sanctions system”.

Summits on horizon

The 53-year-old Conte will quickly have to step up to the plate — on his agenda in his first weeks in office are a Group of Seven summit in Canada this week and a key EU summit at the end of the month.

Ahead of his first engagements, Conte reiterated the government’s intention to stay in the EU.

“Europe is our home,” Conte said, adding that he wanted a “stronger but also fairer Europe”.

But the government’s ambitious anti-austerity policies — which include rolling back pension reform, slashing taxes and a basic universal income for Italy’s poorest- have worried Brussels, given Italy’s huge public debt.

“We will get through the summer without difficulties, but there will be problems in the autumn if the new government implements even only 50 percent of what it has planned,” head of the European Stability Mechanism (ESM) Klaus Regling told the German newspaper Handelsblatt on Wednesday.

Exporting ‘convicts’

Since being sworn in as interior minister, Salvini has already made waves.

He wasted no time addressing immigration, stressing at the weekend that Italy “cannot be Europe’s refugee camp” on a visit to Sicily, one of the country’s main refugee landing points

The 45-year-old said the “good times for illegals are over” in a country where around 700,000 migrants have arrived since 2013.

The bullish minister also caused a diplomatic gaffe with Tunisia after accusing the North African country of exporting “convicts” to Italy.

Tunisia’s foreign ministry summoned their Italian ambassador and expressed their “deep surprise” at Salvini’s comments in light of the two countries’ “cooperation in the fight against illegal immigration”.

Salvini capped off an eventful few days by getting into a spat with Italian international footballer Mario Balotelli.

In an interview, Balotelli — whose parents are Ghanaian immigrants — lamented that he was not granted Italian citizenship until the age of 18 despite being born and raised in Italy.

“I’m not a politician, but I think the law should change,” he said Tuesday.

Taking to Twitter the new interior minister wrote:

“Dear Mario, ‘Ius Soli’ (birthright citizenship) is not my priority, nor the priority of the Italians. Regards, and have fun chasing the ball.”

AFP

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