

Italy: PM Conte passed the confidence vote in the Senate, but failed to get an absolute majority

Conte's government now looks weakened. A new phase starts, and PM Conte looks set to try to reinforce his parliamentary backing around a new programme aimed at completing the legislature. A reshuffle would likely follow



Italian Prime Minister
Giuseppe Conte

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PM Conte passed both confidence votes

After managing to gain an absolute majority in the House of Deputies (321 votes in favour, with the absolute majority at 316), PM Conte could not replicate it yesterday in the Senate, where the challenge was clearly steeper. After a speech which sounded like a verbatim copy of that cast on Monday, he reiterated his appeal for support to pro-European moderates. His attempt was only partially successful: he obtained 156 votes in favour (140 against), doing better than the simple majority with the support of three life senators, but falling short of the 161 absolute majority. As it was the case with Monday's vote, the group of Senators from Renzi's Italia Viva abstained, a move which we read as an attempt to prevent defections among his ranks rather than an indication of a

conciliatory attitude.

Not a final solution but the opening of a new, difficult, phase

A positive conclusion of the confidence vote by something more than a simple majority was widely expected, with the focus being how far the result would be from the 161 absolute majority threshold. Only an outcome clearly breaking that level would have allowed Conte to close the crisis not weakened.

Conte to restart as a quasi-minority government

As this was not the case, it thus seems likely that PM Conte will now try to buy some time, restarting his government (without Renzi's support), aiming at strengthening parliamentary support along the way, by coagulating new backers under a common flag. This move should in principle make such a solution more palatable to President Mattarella, who will likely be consulted frequently in the near future. In the meantime, the government will be able to count on external support from Italia Viva and some opposition parties on specific issues such as the allowance for a higher deficit (possibly voted already today) and a new upcoming compensating decree.

As a renewed government would explicitly eye the completion of the current legislature with a new programme very likely involving a non-negligible re-shuffle in the roster of ministers, a big question mark is whether this will be possible without passing through an orderly formal snap resignation and a new mandate for PM Conte.

The risk of political instability remains high

In its current weakened format, the Conte government will be vulnerable, with a growing risk of incidents in the working of parliamentary commissions, particularly in the Senate. The degree of vulnerability will likely depend on whether Conte will manage to get permanent support from the ranks of Italia Viva. Having exited the government coalition, Renzi will have free hands and can be expected to work hard not to lose his political capital and to continue playing a role in Italian politics.

For the time being, alternative political options will be put to rest, but might be resurrected soon should Conte's attempt to reinforce his government's parliamentary backing prove unfruitful.

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