

Italian PM breaks with EU, backs Trump's call for Russia to return to G8



Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte is shielded from the rain by an aide as he arrives in Quebec | Geoff Robins/AFP via Getty Images

New Italian PM agrees with US president that Kremlin should be back at the table.

LA MALBAIE, Canada — Italy's new prime minister, Giuseppe Conte, broke sharply with the EU on Friday at his first international summit, and joined U.S. President Donald Trump's call for Russia to be reinstated to the exclusive club of industrialized nations.

Trump called for Russia's reinstatement as he left the White House to travel to the G7 leaders' meeting in Quebec.

The Western powers and Japan ejected Russia from the G8 in 2014 in response to the Kremlin's invasion, and subsequent annexation, of Crimea.

Conte posted his support for Trump's view on Twitter, apparently between meetings with European Council President Donald Tusk and European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker. It's unclear if Tusk or Juncker were aware of Conte's statement before their meetings.

At a news conference, Tusk and Juncker mostly sidestepped questions about Conte's position, saying they expected there would be overall agreement on Russia policy. But they also pushed back on Trump's suggestion that Russia rejoin the club.

"I see a lot of speculation about G6 plus 1 or G7 minus 1, or G7 plus one," Tusk said. "But let's leave seven as it is. It's a lucky number. At least in our culture."

Tusk added that the G7 faced enough obstacles in their quest for unified positions without adding Russia back into the mix. Juncker, meanwhile, noted that EU

leaders were re-engaging Russia in other formats, such as a recent economic forum in St. Petersburg attended by French President Emmanuel Macron.

But he said Russia still had to be held accountable for its actions.

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“As we see it, Russia is in violation of international law because of its annexation of Crimea, equally because of what it has done in the east of Ukraine,” Juncker said. “Over and above that, of course, there are good reasons leaving these factors aside to renew our relationship with Russia and this is something which we intend to do,” he said. “I expect that it will be something we discuss.”

“But,” he added, “we need to take a stand against an aggressive approach and aggressive action on the part of Russia.”

Since Russia’s ejection, Western nations, including the U.S. and all EU countries, have been unified in the need to maintain economic sanctions and other pressure on Russia over its military intervention in Ukraine, in Crimea and in the eastern Donbas region, where the Kremlin continues to support an armed insurgency.

-Other G7 powers have not indicated any willingness to ease the pressure on Russia.-

Conte’s statement adds further diplomatic chaos to the G7 leaders’ summit, which

was already descending into a chaotic war of words on Twitter. Trump on Thursday lashed out at the summit host, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, and French President Emmanuel Macron, who criticized Trump for imposing unilateral tariffs on steel and aluminum.

While Trump was still traveling, and expected to arrive late at the summit, his comment calling for Russia to be reinstated is certain to further inflame tensions in Quebec.

On the South Lawn of the White House, Trump claimed to be Putin's worst nightmare but then said "Russia should be in this meeting. Why are we having a meeting without Russia being in the meeting? And I would recommend, and it's up to them, but Russia should be in the meeting. They should be a part of it.

"You know, whether you like it or not — and it may not be politically correct — but we have a world to run. And in the G7, which used to be the G8, they threw Russia out. They should let Russia come back in. Because we should have Russia at the negotiating table." It was unclear what negotiation Trump had in mind.

A spokesman for Russian President Vladimir Putin, Dmitry Peskov, who was on an official trip to China, told reporters Russia was focused "on other formats."

Other G7 powers have not indicated any willingness to ease the pressure on Russia, and the EU's foreign policy chief, Federica Mogherini, has worked hard to maintain unity on the issue in Brussels.

Conte's statement will be especially problematic for Mogherini, who is Italian.

The first draft of the contract drawn up between the two parties in Conte's government — the far-right League and the anti-establishment 5 Star Movement — contained a line calling for the end of Russian sanctions "immediately." The text was amended in later versions.

In his first speech in the Italian parliament this week, Conte said that Italy remains a committed NATO partner but he added that "we will promote a revising of sanctions, starting with those that demean Russia's civil society."

Yet he didn't indicate whether this should take place "immediately." That's because Rome has not yet decided whether to veto the rolling over of the sanctions during a meeting of EU leaders at the end of the month.

“We have to think about it,” said the League’s leader Matteo Salvini on Thursday at a reception at the Russian embassy in Rome.

Russia had been scheduled to host the G8 summit in 2014, and was planning to hold the leaders’ gathering in the Black Sea resort city of Sochi, which was also the site of the Winter Olympics that year. Instead, officials quickly rescheduled the G7 summit for Brussels, the capital of the European Union, which participates in both the G7 and the G20 but normally does not host summits. Russian remains a part of the G20.

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