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Italy: Political Update

ensions among the five parties that support the Spadolini government have been building in recent months, giving rise to speculation that still another "crisis" and an early dissolution of parliament may lie ahead. Spadolini's appointment to the Prime Ministership was seen by the Christian Democrats and the Socialists, the two major parties of the governing coalition, as an interim solution. It was clear from the beginning that Spadolini--whose Republican Party commands only 3 percent of the electorate--would have little scope to initiate policies on his own. But Spadolini has done better in the intervening months than expected. While he has carefully sought to cultivate the support of the key members of his coalition, he also has tried to limit the intrusion of coalition politics into the workings of his office. In the broader sense, the problems Spadolini faces result both from the longstanding rivalry between the Christian Democrats and the Socialists and from Italy's troubled economy. The more immediate pressures on the coalition, however, can be traced to Socialist party frustration over parliament's rejection of its candidate to the constitutional court; the resurgence of terrorism and criticism of Interior Minister Rognoni; events in Poland and disagreements over whether to proceed with the gas pipeline deal; and growing sentiment that the country's ills require a more far-reaching program than this government, as presently constituted, can develop and execute.

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*This memorandum, requested by [redacted]

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Leaders of all the political parties have devoted considerable time since the start of the year-end holiday period to pondering the future of the Spadolini government and to calculating how current tensions can be turned to their advantage. While the press has speculated that a new government crisis followed by an early dissolution of parliament could occur at any time, most political leaders continue to treat the issue gingerly, keeping in mind that Italian voters have a history of punishing the party that foments a "crisis" the next time they are called to the polls.

No one is following developments more closely than Socialist Party Secretary Bettino Craxi. Craxi has long aspired to become Prime Minister, and in recent weeks he has been working behind the scenes to weaken Spadolini. Craxi has left it to his principal lieutenants to carry the case for a change in government and national elections to the public, however. This has allowed him, in theory, to maintain some distance from the fray and may provide him an avenue for retreat should it become necessary. But according to the press, Craxi believes that the Socialist Party's reformist credentials are now so firmly established that the voters will reward the Socialists for pushing Spadolini's government over the precipice instead of punishing them. Indeed, Craxi hopes that bringing Spadolini down will enhance his credentials as a strong leader capable of elaborating a program that comes to grips with the country's problems and then seeing it through.

For his part, Christian Democrat leader Piccoli is arguing publicly that a crisis at this time simply will not produce a stronger government. In private, he is greatly concerned that Spadolini's fall would trigger national elections before the badly divided Christian Democrats have had time to pull themselves together.

Piccoli is also anxious to shore up his own position within the party. He can expect to draw harsh criticism from the left wing of his party once again at the April congress. His recent comments about "reopening the Communist question" were almost certainly designed in part with these dissidents in mind. These same words were calculated also to act as a brake on the Socialists. Piccoli's statement made no mention of bringing the Communists into the government, but Christian Democratic leaders hope that, reading between the lines, Craxi will see a subtle warning that there is nothing sacred about the present governing formula.

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In trying to decide whether the time is ripe to move against Spadolini, Craxi may be heavily influenced by the disarray within the Communist Party. Craxi believes that his party stands to profit at the polls from the wrangling taking place among the Communists over Poland. At the same time, he is concerned that this advantage may be only temporary and that it could turn out to be only a matter of time before Communist Party leader Enrico Berlinguer, one of the country's most able politicians, manages to calm the situation within his party and perhaps ultimately turn things to his advantage.

Berlinguer and his supporters are preoccupied for now with trying to explain their position on Poland to the party base. In a recent statement on that question, party leaders hoped both to underscore their democratic credentials with the broader Italian electorate and to avoid alienating that part of the rank-and-file--almost 25 percent--that remains firmly wedded to Moscow. The communique's criticism of the Soviet system and its backhanded blame of Moscow for developments in Poland has thrown many party supporters into a state of confusion. Efforts to avoid an internal split have been complicated by the decision of Armando Cossutta--a long time member of the Central Committee and a Stalinist stalwart--to take the leadership to task publicly for its stand. While the PCI statement on Poland does not represent a break in relations with Moscow, it almost certainly represents an ideological break; and while it may be some time before the statements' full impact on events in Italy and abroad is understood, it is clear that things will be very different when the dust settles. Based on past performance, Berlinguer probably can avert a formal split within his party's ranks, but it may be several months before current tensions can be laid to rest. In the meantime, Berlinguer will hope to avoid early elections.

Spadolini has attempted to thwart his antagonists by insisting that he will not resign and pledging to carry his fight to the floor of parliament. Although pressure on the Prime Minister continues to grow, he still hopes that the Socialists and their allies will shrink before the risks associated with bringing him down on a vote of confidence. Spadolini will be strengthened in his determination to remain in office by recent opinion polls showing strong public approval of his performance. In the end Spadolini's strongest defence may lie in Socialist President Pertini's opposition to a government crisis and early elections. While the Socialists may be able to bring

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Spadolini down despite Pertini's objections, the President must agree to any solution to the crisis that they put forward. To become prime minister Craxi must get Pertini's nod. The constitution also gives Pertini the final say on whether or not to call new elections. There too, Pertini could frustrate Craxi's aim. For Craxi and his allies as well as Spadolini, the coming weeks will be especially hectic as each of the parties searches for clues about how the game can best be played out.

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