

## Italy's EU Semester Kicks off Wednesday

(July 01, 2014)



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ROME - With a speech in which he will announce Italy's program for Europe, Italian Premier Matteo Renzi, 39, assumes the six-months presidency of the Council of the European Union on July 2. But even before announcing his proposed program goals Renzi spoke movingly of the reason for the existence of a united Europe, in which Italy today, with 59.7 million people, represents both 12% of the total European population, and, with a GDP of E 1.560 billion (\$2.13 billion), 12% of the European economy. Italy's immediate predecessors for the presidency were, in order of time, France, Lithuania, Greece.

"Don't you get a thrill," the 39-year-old premier asked rhetorically, "at the very thought of being called upon, today, to achieve that dream of the United States of Europe, born from the postwar generation's desire to create something new out of the desolation of war? We of the Erasmus generation want to tell our children that today's Europe can be the place where hope is possible." The Premier was referring to the two Erasmus exchange programs: the Student Network, or ESN, which lasts from three months to a year, and the Erasmus exchange program for young EU



businessmen, for work up to six months.

Renzi's words, quoted on the official Italian website serving the EU Council presidency [www.italia2014.eu](http://www.italia2014.eu), take on particular meaning in the light of today's Euro-skepticism, especially visible in the UK.. But he was also speaking to Italy, where some still see the Euro as the scapegoat for the lingering economic recession. The new website also launches the official logo for the Italian presidency, a stylized swallow designed following a competition won by an Italian technical high school in Lombardy, the G. Meroni Liceo Artistico Design e Tecnico Grafico.

In a press conference June 29 Renzi spoke of the need for Italy and Europe in coming months to show growth in the economy and employment, as well as to deal with the multiple problems of immigration. He referred specifically to North Africa, regarding not only to the instability of Libya and Egypt but also the flood of immigrants reaching European shores. European countries must make common cause in facing their problems, said Renzi; "otherwise populism and anti-Europeanism will take the day.". Another goal: flexibility for Italy in dealing with its huge public debt. Asked by a newsman about the wave of corruption emerging in daily installments in Italy, Renzi heatedly replied that Italian laws are not at fault, but that the law-breakers are, and that, in his personal opinion, those in public office who take kickbacks are guilty of betrayal of the state. At the same time the government announced a review of the system for dispensing contracts.

The eighth legislature of the European parliament will hold its first session in Strasbourg in the course of the next two weeks. For the event Beppe Grillo is expected to be on hand with his Euro MPs and probably seated, if only physically, together with the parties on the far right led by Marine Le Pen. A crucial date is July 16, when the plenary session in Strasbourg is to elect the president of the European Commission. The EU Council has nominated the controversial Jean-Claude Juncker, opposed the United Kingdom.

Elsewhere behind the scenes former Premier Silvio Berlusconi, 78, has been converted from making endless tasteless jokes about gays to a reportedly more tolerant attitude. The change is supposedly due to the influence of his young blonde partner Francesca Pascale, who has just taken membership in Arcigay as a sympathizer on grounds that she shares the gay association's battles for civil rights. Only a few months ago Berlusconi, introducing his younger acolyte Giovanni Toti, 44, said, "You'll see a lot of us together but don't think we are gay." Said leftist commentator Serafino Massoni, "I guess they are doing it to be popular, and for publicity. Well, okay. Renzi can, too." From the right a comment on *Il Giornale's* website: "At this point is there no limit to the worst, joining that odious lobby?" From the gay world came, instead, invitations to gay events, including from the trans Luxuria, herself a former member of Parliament.

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His appeal for Europe to share a commitment to address the problems of the immigrants flooding into Italy - 65,000 so far this year - was highlighted by the latest sea disaster June 30, in which 30 refugees locked into the cabin of a derelict boat died of suffocation. "They were shut in worse than



animals," said Ezio Mauro, editor-in-chief of La Repubblica daily. "They are like our immigrants in the 19th century." Six hundred refugees from Syria and sub-Saharan Africa were crammed into the small craft which landed at Pozallo off Sicily. Among them were two tiny babies.

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