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Europe's centre-right leaders join Berlusconi in urging Monti to stay

By James Fontanella-Khan
and Peter Spiegel
in Brussels

Leaders of Europe's centre-right parties, including some of the continent's most powerful prime ministers, have urged Mario Monti to run for prime minister in next year's Italian election, Silvio Berlusconi has told the Financial Times.

The former Italian prime minister, who precipitated Mr Monti's resignation as head of a technocratic government last week by announcing he would seek the premiership, said leaders expressed their support during a closed-door meeting that both men attended in Brussels before the EU summit yesterday.

"Everyone [at the meeting] asked him to continue," Mr Berlusconi said after the meeting of the European People's party, the EU's centre-right grouping. "All of us have asked him to stay... It is clear that the EPP is keen that Italy doesn't fall in the hands of the left like in France, where everyone is desperate and is running away because of the high taxes."

Senior German officials denied that Angela Merkel, the German chancellor, who attended the meeting along with about a dozen other European heads of government, specifically asked Mr Monti to run. "She wouldn't put him in a situation like that," said one, adding that Ms Merkel had simply repeated that it was up to the Italian people to make their choice.

Other officials in attendance said no explicit request was made. But Finland's Jyrki Katainen, one of the centre-right prime ministers present, said his fellow leaders expressed support for Mr Monti, an account confirmed by several others there.

"It is not a secret that Monti's colleagues here are supporting him very strongly or what he has done," said Mr Katainen. "If they manage to find an alliance of moderates behind Monti, it would be very good."

Participants in the meeting, which Mr Monti agreed

to attend only at the last minute, said Mr Berlusconi reiterated an offer made on Wednesday to stand aside if Mr Monti decided to run. But they added that Mr Monti gave no indication if he would do so, and leaders said they did not press him.

"Monti didn't say anything," said Mr Katainen. "But we didn't want to put him in the hard place where he should say something, because he obviously didn't want to say anything."

Although the pre-summit caucusing of centre-right leaders is a regular occurrence, Mr Monti has never attended in the year he has been prime minister.

Mr Monti attended with the full knowledge that Mr Berlusconi would be in attendance, aides said. The media tycoon and former prime minister is still head of Italy's primary centre-right party, People of Liberty, and was invited as the party president.

The men each addressed the group and sat a few seats from each other. Aides said the two men did not have a separate bilateral meeting, however.

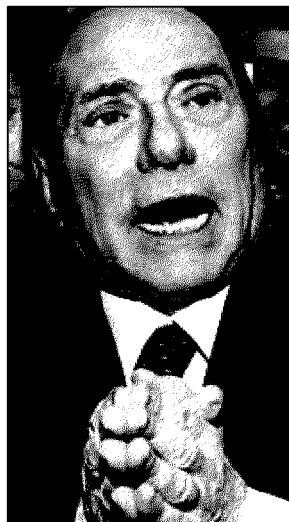
Officials in attendance said they believed that Mr Monti's attendance was a signal he was preparing to run, but his aides insisted he had made no decision.

"Monti's decision to come to the EPP is a positive sign," said Mr Berlusconi. "If Monti doesn't run, if we can't put together all centre-right parties, the centre left will win. Monti is a personality that can unite all the moderates in Italy."

In the interview, Mr Berlusconi said he first offered to stand aside and allow Mr Monti to lead Italy's centre right two months ago. "Now let's hope," he said. "I know it's hard for him because, for somebody used to being supported by everybody, it can be diminishing to take one side."

*Additional reporting by
Quentin Peel in Brussels*

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Silvio Berlusconi: 'Everyone asked [Monti] to continue'

