

Vodka Gift: Berlusconi in Fresh Row Over Putin Ties

By [AFP](#)

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Vladimir Putin and Silvio Berlusconi. kremlin.ru

Italy's ex-premier Silvio Berlusconi was under fresh scrutiny Wednesday over his friendship with Vladimir Putin after being recorded describing a birthday present of vodka from the Russian leader and expressing concerns about arming Ukraine.

His aides insisted he had been misrepresented, but the row risks embarrassing Berlusconi's coalition allies, led by far-right leader Giorgia Meloni, as they prepare to form a new government following last month's elections.

Meloni strongly supports Ukraine, and the EU sanctions on Russia, but both Berlusconi — and her other coalition ally, League leader Matteo Salvini — have long had warm ties with Moscow.

"Meloni hostage of pro-Russians," was the headline on Wednesday's *La Repubblica*

newspaper.

Other reports described her private outrage at the latest gaffe from the billionaire media mogul.

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Supporters of political veteran Berlusconi initially denied reports of his comments, until Italian news agency LaPresse released extracts of the recording.

In it, he explains how he rekindled ties with President Putin, an old friend, it emerged late Tuesday.

LaPresse said the comments had been made during a meeting of his Forza Italia party lawmakers this week.

"I reconnected a little bit with President Putin... for my birthday he sent me 20 bottles of vodka and a very kind letter," he could be heard saying.

"I responded with bottles of Lambrusco (red wine) and an equally sweet letter."

Putin 'person of peace'

A spokesman for Berlusconi, who turned 86 last month, denied he had rekindled relations with Putin.

Berlusconi had been telling parliamentarians an "old story relating to an episode dating back many years," he insisted.

Immediately preceding the anecdote, Berlusconi can be heard describing his concerns about sending weapons and cash to support Ukraine.

He also described Putin as a "person of peace," although this was not included in the audio published.

Berlusconi issued a press statement Wednesday saying that his personal position and that of his Forza Italia party "do not deviate from that of the Italian government (and) the European Union" either on "the crisis in Ukraine or on the other major subjects of international politics."

He also said it will be "impossible to achieve peace if Ukraine's rights are not adequately protected."

A senior Forza Italia lawmaker, Alessandro Cattaneo, said Wednesday that Berlusconi's comments had been taken out of context. "Soundbites can be copied and pasted," he added.

In April Berlusconi had said he was "deeply disappointed" by Putin's behavior in Ukraine — but in September he was then forced to clarify remarks suggesting the Russian president had been "pushed" into the invasion by his entourage.

'No joke'

A close aide to Meloni, senior Brothers of Italy lawmaker Francesco Lollobrigida, also tried to calm the storm.

"We remain with the Ukrainian people and in defense of democracy in that country, but also fiercely in the Western axis... Regarding the comments of others, you must ask others," he told reporters.

But the opposition insisted the comments could not be lightly dismissed.

"This is no joke," wrote Democratic Party leader Enrico Letta on Twitter. This was the first step "towards an increasingly ambiguous position towards Russia," he argued.

Fresh extracts of the recorded conversation were released on Wednesday evening, in which Berlusconi appeared to blame the war in Ukraine on the country's president, Volodymyr Zelensky.

And he repeated his remarks from last September, suggesting that Putin had been "pushed" into invading Ukraine.

Talks are still ongoing on the formation of a new Italian government, with Meloni expected to be confirmed as prime minister by the end of next week.

But the process has been rocky.

Berlusconi lost his temper in the Senate last week, later admitting "deep annoyance" in his party over coalition discussions on how to share out ministerial posts.

But he and Meloni had a meeting on Monday to clear the air, afterwards issuing a photo of the pair smiling.

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