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Paper

Fratтини shuns Paris-Berlin pre-cooked deals

By Guy Dinmore in Rome and Quentin Peel in Berlin

Franco Fratтини, Italy's foreign minister, has lashed

out at France and Germany for trying to "pre-cook" agreements for the rest of the European Union, most recently at the Deauville summit where Nicolas Sarkozy and Angela Merkel hammered out their compromise on budget rules and sanctions to prevent another Greek-style crisis.

Speaking to the Financial Times, Mr Fratтини proposed that the 27 EU member states establish what he called a "vanguard group", or G6, of the six largest EU countries to widen the consultative process.

"Pre-cooked decisions put on the table to be taken or left by others is not acceptable for other coun-

tries like Italy and other big players," he said. "We can have consultations but not pre-cooked decisions taken by Paris or Berlin."

Mr Fratтини referred to the October 18 meeting in Deauville between the French president and the German chancellor that came just as national finance ministers were in Luxembourg holding their final negotiating session with Herman Van Rompuy, the European Union's permanent president, who chaired a task force formulating the new rules.

European diplomats had spoken privately of resentment towards the Franco-German axis, which they believe undermined Mr Van Rompuy's task force. But Mr Fratтини is the most senior official to air such grievances in public.

Mr Fratтини's proposed G6, which he described as an informal consultative mechanism, would bring together France, Germany, the UK, Italy, Poland and Spain and be enlarged

depending on the particular issue under discussion. He cited as a precedent an annual meeting of interior ministers from the six.

He said Europe could become a more "powerful player" on the international stage only if its leadership were collective.

Berlin flatly rejects any suggestion that the Deauville deal was a "diktat" to the other EU members. German officials argue it was a necessary step to secure French agreement on negotiating changes in the EU treaty, in order to clear the way for the subject to be discussed at the EU summit last week.

Ms Merkel phoned 16 or 17 fellow EU leaders in the course of pre-summit negotiations, they added.

Ms Merkel and her finance minister, Wolfgang

Schäuble, are still keen to establish political as well as fiscal sanctions to enforce stricter debt and deficit rules in the eurozone.

But they accept that it cannot be done without a more substantial treaty change. "She will not give up the fight," one official said.

According to Mr Fratтини, Italy and other governments would oppose substantial changes to the Lisbon treaty requiring ratification by parliaments or national referendums.

"That would open a Pandora's box," Mr Fratтини said, referring to an earlier German proposal to suspend the voting rights of EU states that break the new rules.

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Franco Fratтини: proposes a vanguard G6 within the EU