

Acquirente Unico

July 24, 2024

This report does not constitute a rating action.

Credit Highlights

Overview

Key strengths	Key risks
Critical role for the Italian government as it is the entity in charge of building and managing the country's strategic oil reserve.	Financial and liquidity needs depend on market conditions and spot prices and are therefore subject to volatility.
Strategic importance as an intermediary in the energy market, providing services to vulnerable customers after market liberalization.	Significant funding needs to build oil reserves until 2026.
Very stable and solid legal framework, with full cost recovery principle and implicit support from the Central Government.	

Acquirente Unico S.p.A.'s role is critical for the Italian government, given its link is integral and its long-term debt is consolidated in Italy's general government debt. Acquirente Unico, through its internal unit Organismo Centrale di Stoccaggio Italiano (OCSIT), manages the strategic oil reserves of the country and guarantees prompt intervention in case of an oil crisis because it is also prescribed by European and international obligations. Additionally, despite the enhanced protection system (EPS) for the electricity market that ended in July 2024, as prescribed by law, the company is still a crucial intermediary as it provides energy to vulnerable customers. The Italian government, through the Ministry of Economy and Finance (MEF) and Ministry of Environment and Energy Security (MASE), fully owns and supervises its activity. All Acquirente Unico's debt is included in Italy's general government debt.

Outlook

The stable outlook on Acquirente Unico mirrors that on Italy (unsolicited BBB/Stable/A-2).

Downside scenario

We could lower our rating on Acquirente Unico over the next two years, all else being equal, if we lowered our rating on Italy or if we saw a weakening of Acquirente Unico's link with or role for the Italian government, which we deem unlikely.

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Upside scenario

We would upgrade Acquirente Unico if we raised our ratings on Italy and we continued to see an almost certain likelihood of extraordinary government support for the entity.

Rationale

We assess Acquirente Unico as having:

- A critical role for the government as the manager of Italy's strategic oil reserves. Through its unit OCSIT, Acquirente Unico has been legally assigned the strategic responsibility of fulfilling the government's oil stockholding obligations under EU and International Energy Agency (IEA) regulations. Additionally, Acquirente Unico acts as a centralized purchaser of electricity on behalf of "vulnerable" customers, after the liberalization occurred in July 2024 and the EPS ended. Furthermore, Acquirente Unico manages the integrated information system (IIS), which the Italian state often uses to execute payments and social policies; and two web portals for the management of information relating to the electricity markets.
- An integral link to the Italian government, which regulates all its activities. Acquirente Unico is wholly owned by Gestore dei Servizi Energetici SpA (GSE), which, in turn, is wholly owned by the MEF. The regulator is the National Authority for Energy, Networks, and the Environment (ARERA), which set financial conditions for the services that Acquirente Unico provides in the energy sector, and the MASE supervises the strategy for the acquisition and management of strategic oil reserves. GSE appoints the five members of Acquirente Unico's board every three years, and proposed members are subject to the MEF's agreement. The MASE establishes, annually and by ad-hoc decrees, the amount of specific oil stocks that OCSIT should hold and the contribution fees that market operators should pay, thereby ensuring the balance of OCSIT's accounts.

Acquirente Unico has a pivotal role as the manager of the country's strategic oil reserves and an intermediary in the energy market for certain customer categories. Acquirente Unico, through OCSIT, remains the entity in charge of managing Italy's strategic oil reserve, in compliance with the country's commitments to the EU and the IEA. The company is building up its reserves and is planning to reach its strategic reserve stock target by 2026. The EU and IEA targets of 90 days are met through a combination of public and private stock.

Following the energy-market liberalization in 2007, the government also extended Acquirente Unico's role to the electricity market in the EPS. Until July 1, 2024, Acquirente Unico acted as a centralized purchaser of electricity between power providers and customers that have not signed up for a liberalized service. However, since the EPS ended, Acquirente Unico is providing energy only to those customers considered as vulnerable--including elderly people, households with very low incomes, or inhabitants of remote zones, with slightly more than 3 million customers eligible for such a service. This switch should not have a material effect on Acquirente Unico, given that an increasing proportion of retail customers have already concluded the transition to the liberalized service. Even if activity volume decreases, Acquirente Unico will play a pivotal role as an intermediary between the market and customers through the management of the main data warehouse of the energy sector (IIS), which serves as a tariff benchmark with respect to provision of transparent free market access and to manage retail customers' electricity accounts.

Acquirente Unico

Moreover, in 2022 Acquirente Unico acquired all the relevant activities of Servizi Fondo Bombole Metano from Eni, which operates all technical and administrative services related to the management, maintenance, and replacement of methane gas cylinders for auto use.

Acquirente Unico's stable strategy, government ownership, and close supervision strengthens the company's link and role. Acquirente Unico executes strategic government policies, ensuring the supply of electricity to eligible customers and managing the national strategic oil reserve. The importance of Acquirente Unico's role for and link with the Italian government are reflected in the definition of its strategy by the sole shareholder the MEF (through GSE) and the close supervision by ARERA in the energy sector and the MASE for all the tasks performed in OCSIT's name.

A strong regulatory framework guarantees Acquirente Unico's balanced financial performance. All Acquirente Unico's activities, both in the energy sector and as strategic oil reserve manager, are carried out under the full cost recovery principle, and net income tend to zero. All the activities carried out in the energy sector are under the strict control of ARERA, which sets the financial framework for Acquirente Unico's operations, ensuring the balance of its accounts. Regarding OCSIT's activities, each year the MASE establishes the amount of specific stocks to be held and, jointly with the MEF, the average contribution fee to be paid by market operators. Market operators are jointly and severally liable for paying the contribution fee, limiting the risks of any possible delays in collecting fees from any operator. Unpaid fees are very marginal, at 0.8% of the total at year-end 2023, and are covered the following year by other market operators.

OCSIT's debt of €999 million is consolidated within Italy's general government debt, and is part of €1,175 million Acquirente Unico LT and ST debt. The company's long-term financial requirements are directly related to the pace of reserve build-up and the market condition. In 2023, OCSIT added 73,500 tons of oil in its stock, equivalent to €55 million. The reserves build-up plan is to reach the 30 days of consumption target level by year-end 2026, which would correspond to an additional €270 million for half a million tons. We note that the estimate changes periodically in line with market conditions and can be subject to swings. Despite the mandatory EU and IEA target level being met, Acquirente Unico is subject to swing and volatility in the commodity market when acquiring additional oil stock.

Acquirente Unico's debt pertains to the stock acquisition activity, which is capital intensive. We note that market value of stock amply covers total debt. We anticipate that Acquirente Unico will refinance its outstanding maturities (in December 2024 and 2026) ahead of time through a combination of bond issuances or loans and finance its additional stock acquisition through cash and additional financing.

Acquirente Unico's energy intermediation activity could generate structural liquidity needs, covered by short-term debt. In contrast with the OCSIT-related activity, which requires long-term financing, Acquirente Unico's energy acquisition business generates structural liquidity needs. This is due to a mismatch between the timing of the payment for energy purchases and the receipt of proceeds from energy operators. Acquirente Unico has several channels to cover these liquidity needs, disposes of €800 million of factoring line, €927 million of uncommitted credit line for banks, and €400 million credit line from GSE (parent company). However, we expect that the need should dramatically decrease after the end of the EPS and the reduction of client volumes, absent to external shocks.

Related Criteria

- General Criteria: Environmental, Social, And Governance Principles In Credit Ratings, Oct. 10, 2021
- General Criteria: Rating Government-Related Entities: Methodology And Assumptions, March 25, 2015
- General Criteria: Principles Of Credit Ratings, Feb. 16, 2011

Related Research

- Italy, April 22, 2024

Ratings Detail (as of July 22, 2024)*

Acquirente Unico SpA

Issuer Credit Rating	BBB/Stable/--
Senior Unsecured	BBB

Issuer Credit Ratings History

28-Jul-2022	BBB/Stable/--
26-Oct-2021	BBB/Positive/--
26-Oct-2020	BBB/Stable/--

*Unless otherwise noted, all ratings in this report are global scale ratings. S&P Global Ratings credit ratings on the global scale are comparable across countries. S&P Global Ratings credit ratings on a national scale are relative to obligors or obligations within that specific country. Issue and debt ratings could include debt guaranteed by another entity, and rated debt that an entity guarantees.

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