

World News Roundup

Italy

Renzi quits party helm

Italy's left mulls 5 Star deal to end deadlock

ROME, March 6, (AFP): Senior members of Italy's vanquished Democratic Party on Tuesday were defying outgoing leader Matteo Renzi and eyeing a possible deal with the triumphant Five Star Movement after an election that ended in deadlock.

Anti-establishment Five Star Movement (M5S) leader Luigi Di Maio declared his party "the winners" after obtaining nearly 33 percent of the vote, but they need to form alliances in parliament if they are to govern.

Renzi ruled out the prospect as he announced his resignation on Monday, following disaster at the polls that saw his party's centre-left coalition slump to third place with 23 percent of the vote.



Renzi

"During the campaign, we said we would not do a government with extremists. We have not changed our mind," Renzi said, adding that the Democratic Party (PD) would "not be a crutch for anti-system forces".

Political expert Giovanni Orsina said Renzi's departure meant "a convergence between the PD and the M5S is much more probable because Renzi was an obstacle to this."

But Renzi on Tuesday said he would only step down once a new government is formed, and would act as a "guarantor" that his party made no compromise with what he called the "wind of extremism" that swept Italy in Sunday's election.

However other leading voices in his party disagree and he now faces pressure to bring forward his resignation.

Michele Emiliano, governor of the Puglia region and a leading PD member said his party could offer "external support" to a M5S government.

In an interview with Il Fatto Quotidiano daily, Emiliano berated Renzi for not stepping down immediately.

"In order to cling on, he is willing to stall the political system," Emiliano said.

Lead

With almost all ballots counted, the main right-wing alliance was in the lead with 37 percent, followed by the M5S and the centre-left alliance led by the PD.

The vote has drawn comparisons with the Brexit referendum in Britain and the election of US President Donald Trump because of the anti-immigration and anti-establishment rhetoric, raising concern in European capitals about instability.

Far-right leader Matteo Salvini of the League party, the biggest grouping in the right-wing coalition after Sunday's election, has claimed his right to govern.

Salvini campaigned on an anti-immigration platform, promising to deport hundreds of thousands of "irregular" migrants, and has called the euro a "failed currency".

Media mogul Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia (Go Italy) party came second in the coalition -- a humiliating setback for the three-time former prime minister.

With no party or alliance commanding an overall majority, M5S leader Luigi Di Maio also wants the prime ministerial nomination after his party hoovered up votes from Italians fed up with a slow economic recovery. Di Maio, who is due to visit his hometown of Pomigliano d'Arco, an industrial base near Naples later Tuesday, will now face a difficult balancing act.

Any perception of cosy deals with other parties following the election risks alienating his core support from Italians angered by traditional politics.

A deal with the Five Star Movement could also divide the PD, where many are smarting from the movement's victories in traditional leftist heartlands.

"The key question for the coming days is what the PD will do," said Orsina.

"Neither the right-wing alliance nor M5S are able to form a government alone. The question is therefore what the third bloc will do," he said.

Commentators said any compromise would be far from easy and would take time, at least until newly-elected lawmakers meet for the first time on March 23.

"The world of Italian politics as we have known it for the last 25 years is over," wrote Corriere della Sera's editor Luciano Fontana.

Changed

"Nothing will be as before. The players, and the political landscape of the country have changed," he said.

Meanwhile, Ibrahim, a 35-year-old Moroccan who hawks bracelets weaved out of multi-coloured fabric in front of Milan's cathedral, teared up when he spoke of the family he left behind and which relies on the money he sends home.

"I really hope they don't make it even more horrible to stay in this country," he said. "I want to stay here."

Up and down Italy on Monday, migrants, both legal and not, were pondering their future after the anti-immigrant League surged in popularity in elections the day before. Ibrahim, who declined to give his last name, is one of the lucky ones. He has permission to stay because he once worked in a factory, but it comes up for renewal every two years.

"It often happens that we have problems, that people shout at us 'go back to your country'," he said.

That is precisely what the League, which shot up 14 percentage points from the 2013 national election, and its three centre-right coalition partners, would like to see happen: immigrants going back where they came from, by force if necessary. The centre-right has vowed to deport hundreds of thousands of migrants if they are able to form a government, even though that promise will be hard to keep.

Surveys show Italians are increasingly uneasy after more than 600,000 migrants reached Italy by boat in four years. Last month, a neo-Nazi wounded six migrants in a shooting spree in central Italy.

"These 600,000 people, we will pick them up using police, law enforcement and the military," former prime minister Silvio Berlusconi, of the Forza Italia (Go Italy!) party, said during the campaign.

League leader Matteo Salvini said irregular migrants would be rounded up and sent home "in 15 minutes" if he and his allies take power.

League supporters were thrilled that they had overtaken Berlusconi's party as the largest in the centre-right bloc for the first time since he entered politics nearly a quarter of a century ago. "With Salvini in government, the problem of immigration can and must be resolved," said Severino Damiolini, 43, an office worker from Sellero, near Brescia in northern Italy.

The immigration debate also highlighted splits between immigrants who have been in Italy for years or decades and more recent arrivals, with the former fearing that their reputations are tainted by the newcomers.



Britain's Queen Elizabeth II looks at a model of the RMS Queen Mary 2 transatlantic ocean liner during a visit to the International Maritime Organization in London on March 6, to mark the 70th anniversary of its formation. (AP)

Britain

Skrupal, daughter sick in hospital

UK warns Russia over spy's illness

SALISBURY, England, March 6, (RTRS): Britain threatened on Tuesday to pull out of the soccer World Cup in Russia if Moscow was shown to be behind the mysterious illness that struck down a Russian former double agent convicted of betraying dozens of spies to British intelligence.

Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson named Sergei Skrupal, once a colonel in Russia's GRU military intelligence service, and his daughter, Yulia, as the two people who were found unconscious on Sunday on a bench outside a shopping centre in southern England.

Skrupal, 66, and his 33-year-old daughter were exposed to what police said was an unknown substance in the English city of Salisbury. Both are still critically ill in intensive care.

"We don't know exactly what has taken place in Salisbury, but if it's as bad as it looks, it is another crime in the litany of crimes that we can lay at Russia's door," Johnson told the British parliament.

"It is clear that Russia, I'm afraid, is now in many respects a malign and disruptive force, and the UK is in the lead across the world in trying to counteract that activity."

If Moscow was shown to be behind Skrupal's illness, Johnson said, it would be difficult to see how Britain could attend the World Cup in Russia in June and July.

England is the only British national team to have qualified for the tournament, which is held every four years.

A previous British inquiry said President Vladimir Putin probably approved the 2006 murder of ex-KGB agent Alexander Litvinenko with radioactive polonium-210 in London. The

Brexit agreement on citizens' rights close-EU's Verhofstadt

LONDON, March 6, (Agencies): The European Parliament's chief Brexit negotiator Guy Verhofstadt said on Tuesday negotiators were close to agreeing a deal with Britain on the rights of expatriate citizens after a disagreement over how they will be treated during any transition period.

"I think it is possible in the coming days and coming weeks we make progress on this and we can conclude on this," Verhofstadt told reporters after a meeting with Prime Minister Theresa May in London.

"It should be fine that the citizens rights' chapter is done, it is finished, it is concluded and everybody knows UK nationals and EU citizens knows that their status is in the future."

Meanwhile, the Northern Ireland party that props up the government of British Prime Minister Theresa May insists that European Union

proposals to avoid a hard border in Ireland after Brexit are "not acceptable."

Democratic Unionist Party leader Arlene Foster said after a meeting with the EU's chief Brexit negotiator, Michel Barnier, that there can be no division between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK to accommodate for a soft border with the EU.

The border on the island will be the only land border after the UK breaks away as of March 2019 and maintaining open trade and passage is proving to be one of the more intractable issues during the Brexit talks.

In related news, a lawyer helping British expatriates in a legal battle over their rights as EU citizens after Brexit said Monday more than 67,000 euros was raised in four days to fight an appeal in the case.

Kremlin has repeatedly denied any involvement in Litvinenko's killing.

Litvinenko, 43, an outspoken critic of Putin who fled Russia for Britain six years before he was poisoned, died after drinking green tea laced with the rare and very potent radioactive isotope at London's Millennium Hotel.

It took some time for British doctors to discern the cause of Litvinenko's illness.

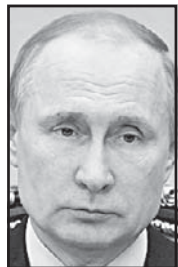
His murder sent Britain's relations

with Russia to what was then a post-Cold War low. Relations suffered further from Russia's annexation of Crimea and military backing of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad against rebels trying to topple him.

While the British authorities said there was no known risk to the public from the unidentified substance, they sealed off the area where Skrupal was found, a pizza restaurant called Zizzi and the Bishop's Mill pub in the centre of Salisbury.



Former Russian military intelligence Colonel Sergei Skrupal attends a hearing at the Moscow District Military Court in Moscow on Aug 9, 2006. Sergei Skrupal, a former Russian double agent whose mysterious collapse in England sparked concerns of a possible poisoning by Moscow, has been living in Britain since a high-profile spy swap in 2010. (AFP)



Putin



Moehring

Europe

German anthem in gender row: Germany's equality commissioner sparked an outcry Monday over her call for changes to the national anthem's lyrics to reflect greater gender balance.

Kristin Rose-Moehring suggested in an internal circular of the Ministry of Family Affairs that stanzas containing the word "fatherland" (Vaterland) should be replaced by "homeland" (Heimat).

"Brotherly with heart and hand" should be replaced with "courageously with heart and hand," she wrote, noting that Austria had tweaked its national anthem for gender balance.

In 2012, Austria substituted "sons" with "daughters and sons" in parts of its national anthem. (AFP)

EU OK's 1st defence projects: A group of European Union countries agreed on Tuesday to develop their first joint defence projects under a pact that excludes Britain, giving London a taste of life outside the bloc's foreign policy decision-making process.

The 25 signatories to the pact also delayed a decision on whether to let non-member states join the projects, prolonging uncertainty over any future role for Britain after it leaves the EU next year.

As Europe's biggest military power along with France, Britain is central to European security efforts but has long blocked defence integration, fearing the creation of an EU army. (RTRS)

'Don't underestimate Russia: Foreign ministers from the Baltic states, three exposed allies on NATO's eastern flank, visited Washington on Monday to urge Western leaders not to respond naively to Russian threats.

The envoys from Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania brought a stark message to meetings with top officials a city already gripped by political infighting and fears of Kremlin intrigue. Sven Mikser of Estonia, Edgars Rinkevics of Latvia and Linas Linkevicius of Lithuania were careful to thank President Donald Trump's administration for its support for NATO.

But, in an interview with AFP after their joint meeting with US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, the ministers shared their concerns about Russia's "hybrid" threat to the West.

Russia's current President, Vladimir Putin, has never made any secret that he resents this and regards former Soviet republics as

belonging in Moscow's zone of influence. (AFP)

Blok picked as Dutch PM: Seasoned Dutch politician Stef Blok was Monday named the country's new foreign minister, stepping in after his predecessor was caught lying about meeting Russian President Vladimir Putin.

"On the recommendation of the prime minister, His Majesty the King hereby appoints S.A Blok as minister of foreign affairs," the palace said in a statement Monday.

Blok will take up the post after being sworn in by King Willem-Alexander on Wednesday, it added.



Blok

The previous foreign minister, Halbe Zijlstra, quit on Feb 13, tearfully offering his resignation to MPs after admitting he lied about attending a 2006 meeting with Putin.

He had also misquoted the Russian leader as saying he wanted to ensure a "Greater Russia", comments which drew anger and scorn from Moscow. The move sparked an unsuccessful vote of no-confidence in Prime Minister Mark Rutte. (AFP)

Wind-up radio creator dies: Trevor Baylis, creator of the clockwork or wind-up radio, has died. He was 80.

David Bunting, CEO of Trevor Baylis Brands, says Baylis died Monday after a lengthy illness. Baylis developed his best-known invention after seeing a television program on AIDS in Africa and learning that people weren't getting lifesaving information because they didn't have electricity and couldn't afford batteries to power radios. (AP)

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