

5-Star, League May Score Surprise Gains in Italy's Election: Pollsters

ROME - The anti-establishment 5-Star Movement and the far-right League could do better than expected in Italy's election on Sunday and the head of the anti-immigrant League could be in a position to become the next prime minister, pollsters say. The 5-Star Movement was already the leading single party according to all opinion polls issued before their publication was banned two weeks ago, with around 28 percent of the vote. However, several pollsters told Reuters they thought 5-Star might reach 30 percent or above, though they dismissed the chances of it nearing the 40 percent threshold needed to form a government on its own.

"I think at the last moment a lot



of undecided voters will go for 5-Star and it will take them above 30 percent," said Federico Benini, head of the Winpoll agency. "These voters want change, and at this election that is represented by 5-Star."

Antonio Noto, head of the Noto polls agency, said he would not be surprised to see 5-Star reach 30 percent. Both pollsters said the League, which is running as part of a center-right election alliance, could also pull off a shock. Noto said he saw a more than 50 percent chance that the League, led by the blunt-spoken euroskeptic Matteo Salvini, would overtake former prime minister Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia (Go Italy!) as the leading party in the alliance. (Reuters)

SPD Coalition 'No' Vote Would Hurt Germany, EU: Party Official

BERLIN - Germany and Europe would both suffer if the Social Democrats (SPD) vote 'no' in a ballot on a coalition with Chancellor Angela Merkel's conservatives, a senior party official said.

The SPD's 464,000 members have been voting in a postal ballot on whether to endorse their party leadership's decision to renew for another four years the 'grand coalition' with Merkel's conservative bloc that took office in 2013. The result is due on Sunday.

Stephan Weil, SPD premier of the state of Lower

Saxony, said during his last visit to Brussels everyone he had spoken to was adamant Germany should not drift into uncertainty.

"It would be bad for Europe, Germany and the SPD. There would be a period of political uncertainty," he said.

French President Emmanuel Macron is keen to push ahead with reforms to the euro zone, but without a German government in place soon the window of opportunity to inject fresh dynamism into the European project will quickly close for this year. (Reuters)

Merkel, Trump Call for Syrian Ceasefire to Be Implemented

BERLIN - U.S. President Donald Trump and German Chancellor Angela Merkel agreed in a telephone call on Thursday that a U.N. Security Council resolution calling for a 30-day ceasefire in Syria must be implemented immediately.

"Both agreed that the Syrian regime and its Russian and Iranian allies should promptly and fully implement U.N. Security Council Resolution 2401 (2018). This resolution demands an immediate



ceasefire in Syria," Merkel's spokesman said on Friday.

"The chancellor and the president are also con-

cerned about Russian President Putin's latest remarks about arms developments and their negative impact on in-

ternational arms control efforts," spokesman Steffen Seibert added in a statement. (Reuters)

Germany Says 'Acute Threat' Of Hack Averted After Detection



BERLIN - A German security official says the immediate threat posed by a cyberattack on the government's secure computer network was averted soon

after it was detected. Following a report by news agency dpa on Wednesday, the government acknowledged its network had been infiltrated but down-

played the possible harm done. Johannes Dimroth, a spokesman for the interior ministry, told reporters Friday that "a certain period of moni-

toring" of the attack took place by German authorities but that "the acute danger was averted soon after it became known."

He declined to comment on reports that a Russian-backed hacker group called Snake was behind the attack.

Dimroth said authorities are trying to determine who tipped the media about the attack. Lawmakers expressed anger at not having been informed by the government before news broke. (AP)

Hungarian PM Steps Up Anti-Immigrant Campaign After By-Election Loss

BUDAPEST - Prime Minister Viktor Orban said on Friday opposition parties would unite to try to oust his ruling Fidesz in the April 8 election and would turn Hungary into a haven for immigrants, after his party suffered a surprise by-election defeat.

Orban's rightwing nationalist Fidesz is seeking a third consecutive term. The party is leading in opinion polls but suffered an unexpected setback at a municipal by-election on Sunday when an opposition-backed independent comfortably beat the Fidesz

candidate for mayor. Orban told state radio on Friday fragmented opposition parties would unite and present a single candidate to run against Fidesz in each constituency.

Political analysts have said the by-election result could change dynamics within the opposition, which had struggled to mount any serious challenge.

The Socialists, the strongest opposition party the nationalist Jobbik and the smaller leftist liberal parties have so far not presented a common nationwide front against Fidesz. (Reuters)

NATO Says Russian Warnings against Allies 'Unacceptable'

BRUSSELS - President Vladimir Putin's warnings to NATO allies are "unacceptable" and do not help efforts to calm tensions, the alliance said on Friday, a day after the Russian leader announced an array of new nuclear weapons. Already angry at NATO's expansion eastwards into its old Soviet sphere of influence, Putin said in a speech on Thursday that any attack on Moscow's allies would be regarded as an attack on Russia itself and draw an immediate response.

While it was unclear which ally Putin had in mind, the U.S.-led NATO said the speech, one of the Russian leader's most bellicose in years, did not help calm tensions that have surged since Russia seized Ukraine's Crimea four years ago. (Reuters)

Kremlin Rejects U.S. Charge Russia in Breach of Arms Control Treaties

MOSCOW - The Kremlin on Friday rejected a U.S. allegation that Russia had been developing destabilizing weapons systems for over a decade in direct violations of its treaty obligations.

White House spokeswoman Sarah Sanders made the allegation on Thursday after President Vladimir Putin announced an array of new nuclear weapons, saying they could hit almost any point in the world and evade a U.S.-built missile shield.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters on a conference call on Friday that Russia categorically denied it was in breach of any international arms control pacts.

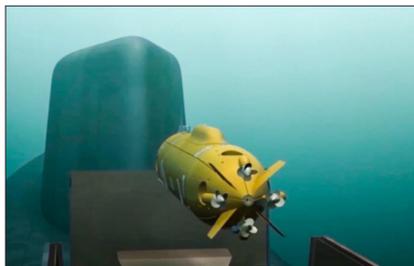
Peskov also rejected an assertion that Putin's speech, one of his most bellicose in years, would deepen Russia's international isolation and said it did not herald the start of a new arms race. (Reuters)

A New 'Kraken' Arises? Russians Eager to Name Doomsday Arms

MOSCOW - In just one day, the suggestions have been pouring in: "Kraken" for a new underwater drone capable of blasting coastlines with a powerful nuclear explosion. "Balalaika" for a futuristic nuclear-powered cruise missile capable of circling the globe.

Russians are showering the Defense Ministry with proposed names for the country's new nuclear weapons, relishing the on-line contest announced by President Vladimir Putin in his state-of-the-nation address Thursday.

Many of the entries Friday reflected the wry dark humor Russians are known for.



Someone suggested calling the missile "Sanction," an apparent reference to Western economic sanctions against Russia for its support of separatists in Ukraine. Another proposed calling it "Thaw," adding in a note of sarcasm that it would finally help warm the ties between Russia and the U.S.

The kraken - a fictional gigantic Arctic sea monster that was made popular by the "Pirates of the Caribbean" film series - seemed to reflect the nature of the nuclear-powered drone intended to sneak close to the shore unnoticed and slam a heavy nuclear warhead into the coast. (AP)

Stores Smashed in Greece in Support of Mail-Bomb Suspect

ATHENS, Greece - Greece's Public Order Ministry says it is adding 200 police officers to patrol Athens as anarchist groups continue a campaign of attacks in support of a jailed bombing suspect accused of wounding former Prime Minister Lucas Papademos.

The 70-year-old Papademos was seriously injured last year when he opened a parcel bomb in his car. A 29-year-old man accused of

mailing the parcel is on a hunger and thirst strike to protest his transfer from an Athens prison to a prison in a town in central Greece. The suspect has been hospitalized.

More than a dozen youths carrying hammers and iron bars attacked shops in central Athens on Friday, damaging several storefronts. It's the second such attack on a commercial street this week. No one was injured in either incident. (AP)

Neighbor News

Iran Bans Using Dollar as Base Import Pricing Currency

TEHRAN - Iran moved a step closer to a plan to ditch the dollar in its trade activities by announcing that purchase orders by merchants that are based on the greenback would no longer be allowed to go through import proceedings.

Iran's domestic media reported that the policy was in line with an official request by the Central Bank of Iran (CBI) and was specifically meant to address fluctuations in market rates of the dollar.

IRNA news agency quoted Mehdi Kasraeipour, CBI's director of Foreign Exchange Rules and Policies Affairs, as saying that the move had become effective from Wednesday by virtue of a letter sent to the Ministry of Industry, Mines and Trade.

Kasraeipour emphasized that this was not expected to create any

major trouble for traders, stressing that this was because the share of the dollar in Iran's trade activities was not high.

"It's been for a long time that Iran's banking sector cannot use the dollar as a result of the sanctions," he said.

US banks are still banned from dealing with Iran as part of an old US trade embargo that still remains in place. Accordingly, this is believed to have already effectively blocked any transactions with Iran which is based on US dollars because they would ultimately have to be cleared in the US.

"Considering that the use of the dollar is banned for Iran and traders are literally using alternative currencies in their transactions, there is no longer any reason to proceed with invoices that use the dollar as the base rate?" Kasraeipour said. (Press TV)

Tehran Slams UN Chief's Human Rights Reports On Iran as 'Incorrect, Biased'

TEHRAN - Iran has rejected a new United Nations report on the human rights situation in the Islamic Republic as "untrue" and "politically-motivated," saying the document holds no value as it ignores the many steps Tehran has taken to meet its rights obligations and development goals.

"As we have already witnessed time and again in the past, these reports are flawed both in nature and approach, and thus hold no value in the eye of the Islamic Republic," Iran's Foreign Ministry spokesman Bahram Qassemi said Friday.

He made the remarks in reaction to a new report by the UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres that is scheduled to be presented at the 37th session of the UN Human Rights Council,

which began on February 26 and lasts until March 23.

Guterres, who assumed office January last year, has in his previous reports accused Iran of a range of human rights violations from mistreating journalists to arbitrary detentions and unfair trials.

Qassemi said the UN chief's latest report has "many flaws and shortcomings" as it is based on a "political and unfair resolution," and is drawn up according to "inauthentic and totally incredible sources and data."

"Moreover, a total ignorance of Iran's progress and achievements in implementing human rights has contributed to the production of an unbalanced and particularly biased report," he said of Guterres' report. (Press TV)

Draft Convention Coordinated On Caspian Legal Status

ASHGABAT - The ministers of the Caspian littoral states have agreed on a draft Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea, the Russian Foreign Ministry said in a message on March 2. "The 50th meeting of the Ad Hoc Working Group on drafting of the Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea, dedicated to the implementation of the decisions made at the Meeting of Foreign Ministers of the Caspian states will be held in Moscow," the Foreign Ministry said.

Delegations of Azerbaijan, Iran, Kazakhstan, Russia and Turkmenistan attended the meeting. Following the meeting, the draft Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea was agreed upon and the texts of the draft Convention were checked in Russian, Farsi and English in order to prepare it for signing as soon as possible during the forthcoming Fifth Caspian Summit. The next meeting of the Ad Hoc Working Group will be held in Kazakhstan. (Trend)

Tajikistan, Pakistan to Strengthen Co-Op in Fight against Terrorism

DUSHANBE - Tajik Interior Minister Ramazon Rahimzoda met with a delegation from Pakistan led by National Coordinator at the National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA) Ihsan Ghani, Sputnik Tajikistan news agency reported with reference to the press-service of the Interior Ministry March 2. Ghani was accompanied by Pakistani Deputy Interior Minister Muhammad Siddiq and Pakistani Ambassador to Tajikistan Tariq Iqbal

Soomro. Rahimzoda expressed the readiness of the Tajik side to strengthen cooperation between the two countries in fight against terrorism, extremism, drug trafficking, other threats and challenges of the modern world. The head of the Pakistani delegation stressed the achievements of the Tajik authorities in creating peace and security in the country and thanked all those who contributed to the prosperity of the republic. (Trend)