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FAO chief inaugurates 'Russian Room' atop UN agency

Ceremony fuels concern over top poverty-buster's pro-Putin tendencies

By JAN FILIPOWICZ

ROME – Disregarding Western criticism of his pro-Moscow stance, the FAO Director General Qu Dongyu has inaugurated a “Russian room,” funded by the Russian phosphate fertiliser giant PhosAgro, on the top floor of the UN agency’s labyrinthine headquarters, evidently underlining again his at least tacit support for Russian President Vladimir Putin’s invasion of Ukraine.

The inauguration ceremony last week was attended by Mr Qu, a member of the Chinese communist party, and the Russian Ambassador to the FAO and other UN food agencies, Viktor Vasiliev. In a speech, Qu stressed that the Room’s design “reflects the distinctive character of Russian culture and stimulates the imagination.” Decorated with ma-

as Ukrainians struggle to survive the winter following a constellation of vicious Russian attacks on civilians, is sure to be seen as in extremely poor taste by Western donors to the FAO such as the United States, the largest donor, Britain and other OECD countries, diplomatic sources said.

The Ukrainian community in Rome has staged a series of protests outside FAO headquarters this year to protest the presence of high level Russian officials in senior posts at the UN agency.

Mr Vasiliev claimed that the Russian Room will be used to demonstrate “Russia’s achievements as a major agricultural producer” while also serving a model of public-private partnership, as the project was implemented with assistance from PhosAgro and the participation of

than 100 countries around the world are harvesting high yields of crops that are safe for human health.”

The FAO and PhosAgro have established a global network of 800 soil laboratories covering more than 150 countries. In May 2022, the project launched a Russian network of soil laboratories as part of the GLOSS-LAN system.

In December 2021, PhosAgro and the FAO announced that they had renewed their cooperation agreement for a joint project to develop sustainable agriculture to 2023 and also expanded their cooperation. In the new phase of their collaboration, the FAO and PhosAgro are focused on solving the problem of soil pollution, including by heavy metals.



FAO DG Qu Dongyu and Russian Ambassador Viktor Vasiliev. Photo credit: FAO

tryoshka dolls and works exemplifying Russia’s traditional folk arts, the Russian Room also offers a panoramic view of the adjoining Circus Maximus and the rest of the Eternal City. It is located on the top floor of the FAO building, where Qu has his sprawling offices and the most important formal meetings are held with top hungercrats from the agency.

Mr Qu was criticised heavily in February when FAO official statements on the Russian invasion of Ukraine echoed official Moscow propaganda, calling the war a “military operation.” The timing of the opening of the Russian Room

the Russian Ministry of Agriculture.

Mikhail Rybnikov, PhosAgro’s CEO trumpeted that “this project represents a continuation of many years of fruitful cooperation between PhosAgro and the FAO. As a responsible producer of mineral fertilisers set apart by their outstanding environmental performance, PhosAgro plays an active role in international initiatives aimed at protecting soils and human health, such as the FAO’s Global Soil Partnership. Together with the FAO, we are building the capacity of farmers to carry out sustainable agriculture and training them on how to get the most out of their land. We are making every effort to ensure that farmers in more



Pope Francis aboard popemobile at his first general audience after his Lenten retreat. PHOTO CREDIT: ERIC VANDEVILLE

'Pay us our back wages,' UK lecturers tell Meloni

By JOHN PHILLIPS

ROME – British and other foreign lecturers at Italian universities appealed to Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni to adhere to an ultimatum by the European Commission and “introduce clear measures and allocate adequate funds to put an end to 33 years of unlawful discrimination.”



David Petrie

The European Commission gave Italy two months to pay arrears of wages and pensions to hundreds of *lettori* teaching at a constellation of Italian universities or else Brussels will take the case of racist discrimination to the Court of Justice of the European Union. Italy, which for decades has sought to avoid paying compensation to *lettori*, has not replied officially to the EU ultimatum that is part of infringement proceedings against Rome for the discrimination violating blatantly EU freedom of movement rules.

David Petrie, chairman of the pugnacious foreign lecturers’ union ALLSI, said in a letter to Ms Meloni: “I am writing to you on behalf of non-Italian lecturers working in Italian universities, as president of the ALLSI union, which was founded in 1997 to guarantee and safeguard the rights of lecturers; rights that derive from the European Treaty; rights that have been neglected by the traditional trade unions that exist in Italy, which are more concerned with bargaining for Italian employees.”

“ALLSI has submitted many petitions to the European Parliament on the issue of unlawful discrimination, based on nationality, perpetrated by Italy in the treatment of *lettori*, demonstrated by six judgments of the Court of Justice of the European Union, between 1989, 1993, 1997, 2001, 2006 and 2008. Judgments were handed down in 2001 and 2006, following the Commission’s action against Italy, where the Court found that Italy had failed to fulfil its obligations to respect and faithfully implement the provisions of the Treaty of the European Union,” Prof Petrie added.

Insurer slammed for nixing Joy Center clinics

By PHILIP STRINGER

NAPLES – American military families living near the Sixth Fleet base are up in arms after the U.S. government health insurer Tricare in a bizarre decision ruled that they may no longer be reimbursed for treatment for their children at the long-standing pediatric clinic Joy Center, U.S. military sources said. Joy Center, a U.S.-based clinic founded in Naples in 2010 that offers psychological, psychiatric, speech-language and occupational therapy for children and their families, was no longer a Tricare in-network provider as of the end of 2022, clinic founder and supervisor Amy Zier told the Italian Insider.

Parents who want coverage for those services must switch to a different provider that now appears to be the only authorized similar clinic in Italy and Spain, based on a search of Tricare’s online list of in-network overseas providers. That provider, Reach Aut, was founded by at least one former worker of Joy Center

in 2020, Zier said. Reach Aut now has clinics in each of the same cities overseas in Italy and Spain as Joy Center.

Natalia Stiefel, who is married to an active-duty Navy sailor, told the U.S. army newspaper Stars and Stripes that the couple’s six-year-old son has been receiving speech therapy at Joy Center near NSA Naples for nearly a year. Ms Stiefel was hoping to get approval from Tricare for an out-of-network referral to Joy Center, but the request recently was denied without explanation.

Their only other option is to change to another Tricare health care program. That would mean an out-of-pocket expense of about 20 percent of their son’s therapy costs, Stiefel said.

“His therapy isn’t cheap, so it becomes a financial strain to continue what we’ve been doing,” she said.

A play area for children receiving therapy is included at a Joy Center clinic.

Continued on page 2



Striker Victor J. Osimhen presents Foreign Press Association president Esmá Cakir with a Napoli jersey after being named best foreign athlete of the year in Italy



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Berlusconi slams Zelensky, threatening to fracture Italy's coalition

By SARA ZAAT

ROME - Silvio Berlusconi, Italy's former prime minister and a longtime personal friend and business associate of Vladimir Putin, has criticised Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni for her support of Ukraine, claiming that if he were currently head of government he would not have met with Ukrainian Prime Minister Volodymyr Zelensky. The Forza Italia leader's remarks are sure to revive NATO allies' concern that Italy may waver in its support for Ukraine.

Berlusconi, 86, who has strong ties to Moscow and visited Russian-occupied Crimea after it was seized by Russian troops in 2014, condemned Zelensky, saying he had made "a negative judgement," on the heroic Ukrainian leader. Berlusconi also took a swipe at his coalition ally Meloni for having met with the Ukrainian leader claiming that: "If I had been the prime minister, I would never have gone to talk to Zelensky because we are witnessing the devastation of his country and the massacre of its soldiers and civilians."

"It was enough for him to stop attacking the two autonomous republics of Donbass and this would not have happened, so I judge this gentleman's behaviour very, very negatively."

The former prime minister then con-



Silvio Berlusconi, Italy's former Prime Minister

tinued to criticise Zelensky's character claiming that Zelensky's motivations are stemmed in violence and greed when he said: "to get to peace I would think Mr. American President should take Zelensky and say to him: 'A Marshall Plan is at your disposal after the war is over to rebuild Ukraine. A Marshall plan of 6, 7, 8, 9 trillion dollars, on one condition: that you order a ceasefire tomorrow, also because starting tomorrow we will no longer give you dollars and we will no longer give you weapons.'" Further stating that only a sum of this magnitude could persuade Zelensky to cease fire. His comments were met with much

appreciation from Moscow, which claims that Russia wants peace, with the Russian foreign minister Maria Zakharova saying that "Minsk accords be applied for peace in Ukraine. But this was not what the West had in mind." Zakharova further accused Zelensky of having launched an anti-Russian advertisement campaign aiming to show the world that Russia is bad and Ukraine is good, further stating "it is a message that appears everywhere - from football matches to your Sanremo Festival. It's absolutely ridiculous".

Despite these comments from both Berlusconi and Russia, the position

taken by Palazzo Chigi remains unchanged. With sources from the Prime Minister's office, saying that "The support for Ukraine by the Italian government is firm and convinced, as clearly foreseen in the program and as confirmed in all the parliamentary votes of the majority that supports the Executive."

Antonio Tajani, Italy's foreign affairs minister, also commented shortly after Berlusconi's rant, evidently distancing himself from his party boss, saying "Forza Italia has always been in favour of the independence of Ukraine, on the side of Europe, NATO and the West. In all the seats we will continue to vote with our government allies respecting our program."

Other members of Forza Italia attempted to salvage the situation by publishing a note reading "President Berlusconi's support for Ukraine has never been in doubt. He only expressed his concern to avoid the continuation of a massacre and a consequent serious escalation of the war, without ever failing in FI's adherence to the government majority, to the position of NATO, Europe, and the USA. Berlusconi has never named Putin, from whom he has repeatedly stressed that he was disappointed, he only explained that no one is exempt from responsibility."

IN BRIEF

Italian army nurse murdered

ROME - A corporal major of the Italian army, Danilo Salvatore Lucente Pipitone, has been kicked to death in the latest incident in a rash of violence hitting the Eternal City in recent weeks, police said.

The attack happened in Centocelle, in the southern part of Rome. Pipitone was assaulted but the motive is yet not clear, witnesses said they saw a man flee the scene in a car - the police are currently investigating and have reportedly interrogated two people. A man of Turkish origin is now wanted by the police.

There is a hypothesis of a failed robbery. Pipitone still had his wallet on him by the time he arrived at the Vannini hospital where he was first taken to by ambulance. However, due to his critical condition, he was immediately transferred to Umberto I Hospital, where he died after a day spent in a coma.

The man worked as a Nurse at the military hospital Del Celio.

"That past week there had been multiple reports of violent events. On the same day, a couple of friends aged 21 and 27 were shot and wounded in Morena, the eastern part of Rome - they are now both in stable condition."

A young married couple and their new-born child were fired at from the back by two gunmen on a scooter in the Infernetto area - there is a hypothesis that an organised criminal group is behind this as the area is known for the 'Spada Clan'.

Two nights previous, a 36-year-old woman has been punched repetitively in the face, her screams were heard by some neighbours who notified the police.

A few days later, a 46-year-old man originally from Milan was approached by three men robbed and stabbed in Termini.

Italy sends back asylum seekers

ROME - Italy's centre right government is sending back to Slovenia hundreds of asylum seekers and migrants trying to enter the country in freezing temperatures along the so-called Balkan land route from the Middle East and Africa, il Fatto Quotidiano newspaper reported. The policy change represents a harsh approach in keeping with the Government's anti-migrant stance that a Rome court has deemed illegal as contravening EU law.

The policy change was signed formally by Maria Teresa Sempreviva, chief of staff of Italian interior Minister Matteo Piantedosi, in the form of a directive to allow "informal readmissions" of the migrants, official sources said.

The measure first was introduced by Piantedosi, under Conte's first government (2018-2019), when he was interior minister secretary general, following the example of a bilateral treaty of 1996 between Austria and Slovenia. The measure subsequently became a dead letter as it was never ratified by Italy's parliament and last year the Rome Tribunal court ruled that "informal readmissions" of asylum seekers were illegitimate.

Mobster unlocks cell to escape from 'understaffed' high security prison

By JOSEPHINE DŁUGOSZ

ROME - Marco Raduano, a Gargano mafia boss escaped from the Bedu 'e Carros 'maximum security' penitentiary in Sardinia, by acquiring a set of keys to unlock his cell and make his way out of the prison, red-faced investigators said.

Following his escape, two investigations began that revealed that Raduano used the stolen keys to escape from the prison's boundary wall, first using a rope of knotted bed sheets to lower himself from the building. A manhunt has begun throughout the city of Nuoro and in the ports and airports of Sardinia to recapture him.

"A fugue of this kind is carefully prepared," said the Deputy Minister of Justice, Francesco Paolo Sisto, to TeleNorba. "You don't flee alone, it seems clear to me. Whether fellow



Raduano and the rope of bed sheets outside the prison

inmates or others helped him. It remains a disturbing episode, especially in that type of prison. It cannot leave us indifferent, due to the seriousness of what happened and the dangerousness of the escaped person."

The 39-year-old prisoner was first arrested in 2018. He was sentenced until 2046 for various mafia-related crimes, including drug trafficking, murder, and crimes against the person, against property, and in the field of weapons and drugs.

Raduano was under high security 3, but due to budget cuts, there were only 50 guards watching the 180 prisoners at Bedu 'e Carros when Raduano made his escape.

Giovanni Conteddu of Osapp Nuoro, the city's trade union organisation of the penitentiary police, said that the lack of personnel at the prison had been "denounced" for years.

"Sooner or later, it had to happen, the prison is full of surveillance failures," said Conteddu.

"In the high security department where there are about 30 inmates belonging to organised crime from Puglia, Calabria, Campania and Sicily, there is only one guard officer, and in the room where the keys and control cameras are kept, there is nobody, the place is discovered. This is the first leak that proved to be decisive for Raduano's escape."

cont. from page 1 (Joy Center)

Tricare's decision to end Joy Center's status as an in-network provider in Italy and Spain has upset as many as 100 parents, who now face difficult decisions regarding their children's care.

Zier and parents whose children were treated at Joy Center say the decision puts patients' continuity of care at risk, potentially undermining progress and development at a time when children are most vulnerable.

"I'm upset that Tricare would do this," Stars and Stripes quoted Katelyn Cunningham as saying. Her 5-year-old daughter has been receiving treatment at Joy Center near Naval Support Activity Naples since July. "That's our kids. They are messing with our kids. They are messing with all these children, all of the services they need to thrive and ... be successful at life."

Stiefel said she visited the other clinic and did not find it suitable.

"I feel at this point, if I don't stay with Joy Center, it's pretty much there's not going to be any therapy (for my son)," she said.

In a Nov. 23 post to its official Face-

book page, the U.S. naval hospital in Rota, Spain, said it had been notified by Tricare that Joy Center no longer was an authorised provider and would not be for the "foreseeable future."

As a result, military hospitals in Italy and Spain no longer will refer patients to Joy Center. Parents who want to keep their children enrolled in the center's programs likely will have to pay part of the cost of services previously covered in full by Tricare.

Zier said she was notified of the termination in November by Tricare's Italian country representative, who said Joy Center had been dropped from the network based on an analysis of beneficiaries' needs and current network providers.

Previously, Tricare had asked Joy Center to add services in Vicenza and Aviano, in 2015 and 2019 respectively, because there was no other provider, she said. But a January 2021 letter from Tricare's overseas management division said there wasn't a need for Joy Center in Aviano, she said. "It was confusing because we had so many people coming to us for help, either for their children or for themselves," she said.

cont. from page 1 (Lettori)

"You will be aware that on Jan. 26, 2023, the European Commission once again notified a reasoned opinion to Italy regarding the ongoing infringement and non-payment to the lecturers of the salaries, seniority and pension contributions owed to in line with the 2001 and 2006 judgments of the Court of Justice, as well as under the interpretative ones mentioned above."

"Instead of simply implementing Law 63 of 2004, which converted Decree Law 2 of 2004, considered by the Court of Justice to be the appropriate legal basis to end the ongoing discrimination, the Italian legislature introduced a few years later the so-called Gelmini Law 240/2010, and other subsequent economic measures, which have hindered and sometimes prevented its implementation, producing a legislative and jurisprudential 'pastiche', whereby lecturers are treated even radically unequally in the

same universities and by the same local courts, or Courts of Appeal and up to the Court of Cassation."

"We trust that your government will do what no previous government has done: introduce clear measures and allocate adequate funds to put an end to 33 years of unlawful discrimination."

"A necessary legislative measure to dismantle the current 'legislative pastiche' must stipulate that all lecturers working in Italian universities must be paid the arrears in salaries and pension contributions owed to them, pursuant to Law 63 of 2004, regardless of whether or not they are suing their universities, regardless of whether they have won or lost cases, and regardless of whether or not they have ever sued."

"Italy, in order to fulfil its obligations, was and is legally obliged to fully implement Law 63 of 2004." Prof. Petrie concluded, "We respectfully request you to do so now."

There was no immediate response from Palazzo Chigi, the prime minister's office.

Insider View

Italy's not fit for purpose education system

Every Italian prime minister for the past 30 years, from Carlo Ciampi's administration up to the present government led by Giorgia Meloni has been told by the European Commission to intervene and bring an end to one of Italy's most egregious scandals – ongoing legally proven illegitimate discrimination based on nationality against non-Italian lecturers, called *lettori*, in its universities. None of them have listened.

A Stanford University P.H.D. accrued copious empirical evidence on Italy's baronial universities, termed "the Resistant Guild," finding "institutional patterns of behaviour working against the goals of EU integration."

Yet not even Italy's most prominent Europhiles Mario Monti, Romano Prodi or Mario Draghi, all of them academics, two of them former European Commissioners and the latter a former European Central Bank president, were willing or able to do anything against what former Senate speaker Marcello Pera described as "a political class that is

irresponsible, guilty, short-sighted, homicidal and suicidal."

Pera added that "the net losers are the talented Italian students who are obliged to flee the country to study and work; the less fortunate ones stay despite having no realistic possibility of acquiring from an Italian university the skills that would render them employable."

Italy is under caution from the European Commission, that reserves the option to take Italy before the Court of Justice of the European Union if it does not pay the *lettori* what is owed them in unpaid wages and pension contributions, by March 26, in line with one of six previous Court rulings in their favour.

Leaving aside the threat from Brussels, Ms Meloni faces the far more challenging task of facing down and dismantling Italy's not fit for purpose higher education system, which thwarts freedom of movement and contributes to the much-lamented brain drain that forces thousands of young, talented Italians out of their own country.



GCC drone output can counter Iran

By MARIANA SOMENSI

ROME - Defence experts proposed at a Euro-Gulf Information Centre (EGIC) roundtable that drone manufacturing in GCC countries could help establish a balance of power with the Iranian drone industry.

Concerns over the use of drones in warfare and the rise of AI technology in combat escalated with the recent discovery of Iranian drones buzzing the skies of Ukraine and the appearance of a Chinese balloon flying over North America.

A Ukrainian intelligence assessment obtained by CNN found that parts made by US and Western companies were found inside a single Iranian drone downed in Ukraine, indicating that sanctions are not effectively preventing the transfer of this technology to Iran.

To contain the development of the Islamic Republic's drone force and discourage the creation of new drone industries in the region, European countries should be less hesitant in dealing with the Gulf and should sell their drones to countries like the UAE, which are already developing their own unmanned aerial vehicle manufacturing capabilities, an Italian defence expert suggested.

Despite acknowledging that drones have become a fundamental tool of statecraft, the table has also discussed the ethical and legal concerns of their use in warfare.

International humanitarian law dictates that wars should only be fought between combatants and should not involve civilians. However, instances of civilians being killed in drone strikes carried out by AI have been reported, which is a clear infringement of the Geneva Convention.

The decision-making process of the algorithm used by AI is also difficult to trace, making it hard to explain why certain targets were chosen and who is responsible for the consequential deaths, a researcher specialising in AI pointed out.

Following this initial discussion, EGIC hinted at the potential of setting up ongoing gatherings to periodically discuss the legal and political issues related to the use of drones.

Universities have become degree-producing factories



By FRANCESCO TERRONE

ROME - Today an undergraduate degree in Engineering costs just 3,500 euros. This degree factory has made it possible for a dunce to obtain at least three degrees. These are the same dunces who, unable to find space in the free market because they lack useful knowledge and a suitable forma mentis, are hired in public schools to teach. Dunces that train other dunces in an interminable chain will produce the debacle of culture and provide a ruling class that will not even know how to draw

a circle using the bottom of a glass. What soulless animals!

The few who study will certainly make the difference, but they will probably be the ones who will create further damage as they could give rise to a true cultural dictatorship, a single thought destined to produce neither confrontation nor the coveted dialectical discussions and proceedings, the only ones to give rise to a fervent and essential agora of ideas and thoughts harbouring new things on which to converge the interests and intentions that are the essential basis for proceedings to the construction of culture, market and life flourishing with seeds for the future.

As far as I am concerned, the blame for the disaster linked to the overabundant 'junk universities', as I like to call them, began with Minister Berlinguer who, with his reform, introduced the '3+2 system' - the creation of the three-year degree and the specialist degree, a sort of points-based pathway. I, however, would

have put the points on his head.

We are faced with a complete lack of responsibility that, I believe, stems first and foremost from the families who have little interest in the real education and training of their children and who, wanting to protect them from rigorous teaching and the difficulties connected to it, cause a real flight to easy schools and even to universities, the online ones, which ensure the passing of exams, and therefore, the infamous graduation. This, however, does not produce completeness of education nor does it encourage curiosity, an essential resource for doing better and deepening knowledge.

Online universities are reduced to the brute mechanism whereby you simply have to pay and then you can pick up as many degrees as you want: just crash courses and pop quizzes. Very little is needed.

I believe, however, that universities must invest and make themselves available to expand their education-

al offerings by launching new degree courses, above all by adapting to the market and guaranteeing seriousness and quality. Merit, talent and skills must be valued. Neither the need to minimise the use of online universities nor the danger of cultural dictatorship or hegemony can be neglected. It is necessary for everyone to take the risk of sailing on the open sea and among the waves of the storm to find footholds to ground knowledge and the pillars of a wise and ethical life.

In conclusion, I cannot avoid emphasising the extent to which online universities have facilitated, in an unworthy manner I would say, many men and women who represent us, state officials, men from the military corps or other important categories who, using this easy way of obtaining qualifications, have had no qualms about moving up the ladder to advance their careers, contributing to the increased costs that the state has to bear.

Italy warns of further Russian naval threat in Mediterranean

By ELENA BUCCISANO

ROME - Admiral Enrico Credendino, Chief of the Italian Navy, warned Tuesday of a "dramatic increase" in military manoeuvres carried out in waters close to Italy by the Kremlin's warships. The admiral's remarks in a speech to Italy's parliament were echoed by the Italmilradar website.

According to the Italian Armed Forces, who continue to monitor the movements of this Russian fleet composed of a dozen units, these actions are not particularly worrying for the moment. Admiral Enrico Credendino spoke of the "aggressive attitude" of the Russian vessels, which could become an issue in the future.

Italmilradar indicates the presence of the tanker Akademik Pashin and the frigate Admiral Kasatonov, which are currently sailing in the Sicilian Channel after having left from the Syrian port of Taurus. The most

likely hypothesis is that the two ships are sailing towards the Strait of Gibraltar and then back to Russia. The Pashin and Kasatonov may soon be replaced by the tanker Kama and the frigate Admiral Gorshkov, which will shortly enter the Mediterranean through the Suez Canal. In this way, the Russian presence in the basin will not decrease.

A few days ago another tanker, the Kola, entered the Mediterranean via Gibraltar. The ship is currently in the Ionian sea south of Corfu and is heading north. It may enter the Adriatic Sea, where the group 'Combat strike' on the U.S. aircraft carrier 'George Bush' is located. These movements lead on from the Sep. 2022 incident when the Russian oceanographic research ship, Akademik Ioffe, arrived in the Strait of Gibraltar, directly in the crosshairs of the Atlantic Alliance, presumably, as reported by Italian newspaper *Repubblica*, "not



for research purposes, but rather aimed at studying submarine cables and conduits." This presence led to NATO affirming that increased maritime surveillance would continue. As of today, the movements of the

Russian fleet fall within the realm of possible provocation between the powers – and must be carefully monitored to avoid incidents which would increase the risk of a clash in the Mediterranean.