



Minsk Plans Another Round of Ukraine Talks, Slovaks to Vote on Gay Marriage

Plus, Serbia's military chief faces new Kosovo allegations, and Mongolia gets a taste of SMS democracy.

1. Belarusian government hosting new Ukraine cease-fire talks - maybe

As the situation on the ground in eastern Ukraine becomes more desperate and the EU extends sanctions against Russia for its involvement in the conflict, Belarus' Foreign Ministry says it will host talks today on reaching a new cease-fire.

Representatives of the Russian and Ukrainian governments, Kremlin-backed separatists, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe were expected in Minsk today, Radio Free Europe reports, citing the Foreign Ministry.

From other accounts, however, it is unclear if the meeting will take place and who will be there if it does. A representative of the so-called People's Republic of Donetsk said he was heading to the Belarusian capital, Reuters writes, citing separatist-run media. But spokespeople for Ukraine's president and Foreign Ministry said "they had no information whether a Ukrainian envoy was traveling to Minsk for talks," and the OSCE declined to comment, according to the news agency.

Meanwhile, EU foreign ministers agreed 29 January to extend until September sanctions against Russia that had been due to expire in March. The European diplomats threatened to expand the list of individuals covered by the sanctions when they meet again 9 February, RFE reports.

In other Ukraine developments:

- Controls on the movement of people and goods into and out of rebel-controlled territories are stopping the flow of medicines to seriously ill people, health workers say. Travel measures "designed by the Ukrainian government to force Russia to take responsibility for the 3 million people living under control of their proxies" are endangering up to 10,000 people addicted to drugs or suffering from tuberculosis or HIV/AIDS, according to the *Kyiv Post*.

Methadone and anti-retroviral drugs are getting scarce in rebel-held territories. Although some in those areas are able to go to government-controlled regions to get medications, those who most

need them “are the poorest and least able to travel outside the war zone,” the newspaper writes, citing doctors and aid workers.

- A member of Ukraine’s parliament said a separatist-run online newsletter inadvertently revealed that Russians were behind attacks in Donetsk on 22 January that left at least eight people dead, the *Kyiv Post* writes in a separate article.

“Three people were traveling by car and shelling the city from a mortar. All of them are Russian citizens: two are from Krasnodar, and one is from Krasnodar Oblast,” the newspaper quotes the Svodki Novorossii (Novorossiia Newsletter) separatist website as saying.

The twist is that the newsletter suggests the Russians are fighting for the Ukrainian side, but the lawmaker, Anton Gerashchenko, said that was a bit of misdirection. He said the attackers were likely Russian agents “sent there to fuel the hatred for Ukraine by organizing the murder of Donetsk civilians,” the *Kyiv Post* reports. Russia’s Defense Ministry declined to comment for the newspaper.

- A Russian woman has been arrested for allegedly calling the Ukrainian Embassy in Moscow because she suspected troops stationed near her home were headed for the war zone, RFE reports. Svetlana Davydova’s apartment in the town of Vyazma about 240 kilometers (150 miles) west of the capital overlooks a military base, which she saw “emptied-out” and assumed its forces were en route to Ukraine, her husband said.

Davydova, a 36-year-old mother of seven described by her husband as an opponent of the Ukraine war, also allegedly made notes on an overheard conversation in which a soldier talked of going to Moscow in civilian clothes to receive weapons before being “sent on assignment,” the *Kyiv Post* writes, citing Russian expat website meduza.io. She is being held in pretrial detention on suspicion of treason and faces up to 20 years in prison if convicted.

2. Voters to decide on LGBT rights in Slovakia

Slovakia is due to hold a referendum 7 February in which voters will decide whether same-sex couples will be allowed to marry or adopt children, Visegrad Insight reports.

The ballot measure promulgated by a Catholic Church-backed family organization also seeks to bar schools from requiring children to “participate in education pertaining to sexual behavior or euthanasia” if they or their parents object to the class content.

More than 400,000 people – 50,000 more than required – signed the petition launched in April by the Alliance for Family to get the questions on the ballot. The group said it aimed to “put to rest any attempts to equalize LGBT rights with the rest of the society,” according to Visegrad Insight.

The Constitutional Court gave its approval to the questions after President Andrej Kiska requested a review to determine whether the balloting would impede fundamental and human rights.

Slovakia's parliament passed a constitutional amendment in June defining marriage as "a unique bond between a man and a woman," but proponents of the referendum want to expand prohibitions to include the issues of sex education and gay adoption, *The Slovak Spectator* reported in September.

Some gay rights activists have declined to campaign against the measures, instead discouraging people from participating in the referendum, which would need to see a voter turnout above 50 percent to be valid.

Alliance for Family has framed the campaign as one for children's rights, even though the referendum could limit the pool of adoptive parents in a country with the most abandoned children of 22 EU countries examined in a 2012 study, *The Economist* reports.

Gay marriage is not high on the agenda of most Slovak political parties, but for Prime Minister Robert Fico the controversy could serve as a distraction from the country's "rampant corruption, chronic unemployment, and the intergenerational poverty of the sizeable Roma population," Cato Institute policy analyst Dalibor Rohac wrote in a *New York Times* opinion piece last month.

3. Report alleges Serbian army chief led '99 attacks on Kosovar civilians

A new report by the Humanitarian Law Center in Belgrade implicates Ljubisa Dikovic, the head of Serbia's armed forces, in deadly attacks on civilians during the Kosovo war in April and May 1999.

Using military and police documents as well as testimony from survivors of attacks, army officers, and Interior Ministry officials, the report says the 37th Brigade of the Yugoslav Army commanded by Dikovic led the assault on civilians in the central Drenica region, then removed the bodies.

So far, the remains of 52 Kosovar Albanians have been exhumed from a mass grave in Rudnica in southern Serbia, near the Kosovo border.

This is not the first time Dikovic has faced such allegations. Three years ago he filed a libel suit against Natasa Kandic, then the director of the Humanitarian Law Center, over a report linking him with war crimes committed in Kosovo.

Serbia's Defense Ministry strongly denied the recent allegations and said the report was an attempt "to directly diminish the reputation of Serbia and its army," *Balkan Insight* writes. Dikovic was named chief of staff of the country's armed forces in 2011.

Law center head Sandra Orlovic told *Balkan Insight* the organization had compelling evidence of the 37th Brigade's involvement, including "documents from the Hague tribunal and witness testimonies that without doubt show that [Dikovic's] unit was present in the villages when the attack took place, and was later in charge of the removal of the bodies."

That evidence was also available to the Serbian Defense Ministry before Dikovic was appointed to his current position, Orlovic said.

4. Mongolia holding SMS referendum on economic future

Mongolian Prime Minister Saikhanbileg Chimed has invited citizens to vote by text message on whether the ticket to improving the country's economy is to keep investing in proposed multibillion-dollar mining projects or to cut back on spending and introduce austerity measures, Bloomberg reports.

The four-day SMS balloting is set to begin 31 January and could solve a longstanding dispute over a plan for the expansion of the Oyu Tolgoi copper and gold mine. Anglo-Australian mining group Rio Tinto is locked in a stalemate with the Mongolian government over terms for the project's financing. Critics in the government claim that Mongolia would not get a fair share of earnings from the expanded mine, the *Financial Times* reports.

One analyst told Bloomberg the prime minister, who took office in November, "is acknowledging he needs the public mandate to break the current stalemate, which is caused by a large group of decision makers."

"I give him credit for going to the public because the one thing that all these people will listen to is the public opinion," said Dale Choi, head of Independent Mongolian Metals & Mining Research.

Mongolian observers predict that the referendum could help Chimed push ahead with the Rio Tinto plans. The non-binding vote is the latest attempt by the newly appointed prime minister to tackle the country's economic slump, which he has named as a key priority. Prices of copper, gold, and coal, Mongolia's main exports, are falling, and growth has slowed to around 7 percent last year from a record 17.5 percent in 2011, according to Bloomberg.

The expanded Oyu Tolgoi mine could generate up to a third of Mongolia's GDP at full capacity, FT reports.

A solution to the stalemate is becoming more urgent as the delay is reducing the potential returns for Rio Tinto.

The delay and indecision over Oyu Tolgoi has also worried other potential foreign investors, Reuters reports. Foreign investment from January to November 2014 fell by 71 percent compared with the same period in 2013.

5. A slip of the tongue sends Belarus' bond yields soaring

Skittish investors swiftly dumped Belarusian bonds 29 January after President Alyaksandr Lukashenka said the country might look to "restructure" some of its foreign debt, Bloomberg reports.

Lukashenka revised his remarks less than three hours later, asserting he had meant to say Belarus would refinance the debt. By that time there had been a “record selloff” in the country's bonds, according to Bloomberg.

As a result, the yield on \$1 billion worth of bonds due in August tripled, the news agency writes.

“Volatility has returned with a vengeance,” Nicholas Spiro, managing director of Spiro Sovereign Strategy in London, told Bloomberg in an email, citing the possible contagion from Russia’s economic meltdown across most of the post-Soviet sphere.

That potential fallout and the 30 percent drop in the Belarusian ruble against the dollar is leading investors “to reassess the probability of the government’s willingness to pay,” Alexander Moseley, an expert in emerging-market debt at New York asset-management house Schroders, told *The Wall Street Journal*.

Belarus is vulnerable to the slowdown in Russia, the destination for about half of Belarusian exports.

Bloomberg estimates that Belarus has \$5 billion in debt and interest payments due this year. Lukashenka said his country will meet its obligations.

“Please calm down,” he urged bondholders. “My wish was to refinance our debts – did I say this right? Refinancing our debt. I just said that we have to repay around \$4 billion this year,” he said, according to Bloomberg.