

## PHOTO OF THE DAY



MTI/Balázs Mohai

Páva Street Holocaust Memorial Centre's permanent exhibition on International Day of Holocaust Victims

## UPCOMING EVENTS

**Stats office report on demographics in Jan-Nov 2018**

**International Holocaust Remembrance Day marked**

**Govt official attends Day of Hungarian Culture event in Vojvodina**

## TOP STORY

# GOVT TO SHUN EP HUNGARY DEBATE

The Hungarian government will not participate in next week's European Parliamentary debate concerning observance of the rule of law in Hungary.

Gergely Gulyás, the head of the Prime Minister's Office, told a press conference there was no basis for discussion.

The debate is set for Jan. 30 in Brussels on recent developments concerning the rule of law and fundamental rights in Hungary.

The rule of law issue is just a "pretext for sanctioning Hungary because it was the first country to state clearly its refusal to take in migrants", Gulyás said. The mandate of the current EP will expire in May, he noted, adding that the government is seeking an "anti-migration majority" to replace "the current, pro-migration majority" in the upcoming EP elections.

Gulyás said the EP had exceeded its powers and was seeking "new ways to support migration". European institutions should remain "within the scope of the treaties", he said. Plans to tie EU funding to the observance of the rule of law, he added, was "blackmail".

He said US financier George Soros had met European Commission leaders 21 times in the current cycle, and insisted that "it is an illegitimate attempt" to influence it. The commission's policies reflect Soros's intent, he added.

## **GULYÁS DISMISSES REPORT BIRNBAUM GOVT ADVISOR**

Commenting on remarks by US political advisor George Birnbaum concerning the government's Soros campaign, Gulyás said that neither the government nor ruling Fidesz had contracted Birnbaum, and he had not provided any advisory services.

Meanwhile, answering a question concerning reports that Prime Minister Viktor Orbán would visit Belarus in February, Gulyás dismissed them, saying: "Such a visit is not in the prime minister's diplomatic calendar".

Concerning domestic affairs, Gulyás said that recent cooperation between conservative Jobbik and the leftist parties reflected "attempts by the left wing to make racism and anti-Semitism presentable".

Regarding Budapest's Honvéd hospital, Gulyás said that "99%" of the employees had no objections to recently introduced changes to their work contracts, and those who had signed the modified documents would be granted a 35% pay rise. He added that operations of the hospital's neonatal unit, whose head recently quit his job, were uninterrupted. Concerning hospitals in general, he said that "some hospitals have no debt while others regularly get indebted". He said the problem may not be to do with central financing but rather may be a management one.

Concerning the Hungarian government support for hospitals abroad, Gulyás said "a few hundred million forints" given to Syria as humanitarian aid is "expected from a member of the international community".

Gulyás spoke about the strike that started at Audi Hungaria in Győr, in western Hungary, on Thursday morning, and said that the government would like to see an agreement between employees and company management, but it cannot intervene directly. "The current wage dispute is a consequence of competition," he said, adding that "there is no danger of a general strike".

Gulyás said several issues concerning Budapest had been discussed at the latest cabinet meeting. The government supports the preparation of plans to extend the third metro line to Káposztásmegyer and will provide the necessary resources, he said.

Concerning the revamp of the Buda castle, he said the aim was to restore buildings destroyed in the second world war and during the communist era, including the former foreign ministry building. However, the ministry is not planning to move there, he added.

Commenting on consultations about family protection, he said a cabinet meeting on Feb. 6 will finalise a detailed action plan which will be presented by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán in his state of the nation address on Feb. 10. The family support system

will be greatly expanded in 2019, he added.

Referring to the recent death of film-mogul Andrew Vajna, Gulyás said that Vajna would be buried in Budapest's Fiumei Street Cemetery, adding that the government would make arrangements for the funeral.

Gulyás also confirmed reports that the government will fully finance the renovation of the student halls for Károli Gáspár Reformed University in Budapest, the upper stories of which burned down on Wednesday night.

## **EU INFRINGEMENT PROCEDURE CONCERNING 'STOP SOROS' ENTERS SECOND PHASE**

The European Commission has entered its infringement procedure against Hungary concerning Hungary's "Stop Soros" laws in the next phase, the body announced on Thursday. The commission said they sent the Hungarian government a reasoned opinion, opening the second phase in the procedure.

The procedure allows Hungary two months to harmonise the criticised legislation with European law, or else the commission could file a case with the Court of Justice of the European Union.

"The Hungarian legislation curtails asylum applicants' right to communicate with and be assisted by relevant national, international and non-governmental organisations by criminalising support to asylum

applications. This is in violation of the Asylum Procedures Directive...and the Reception Conditions Directive..." the EC said in the reasoned opinion.

Hungarian lawmakers approved the package, dubbed "Stop Soros", referring to a plan for managing the migrant crisis earlier outlined by US billionaire George Soros, in June 2018. The package defines support for illegal immigration in the Criminal Code as offering to initiate an application for asylum to anybody who has arrived from, or passed through on the way to Hungary, any country in which that person was not persecuted.

The first offense is treated as a misdemeanour punishable by imprisonment up to 90 days; however, repeat offenses and the support of such illegal activity by material means may result in imprisonment for a period of up to one year.

The package also amended the act on asylum rights to prohibit the approval of any application for asylum by a person who has travelled through a country in which they were not persecuted or at risk of serious harm and could have applied there for asylum. The EC acknowledged on Thursday that EU law provides for the possibility to introduce non-admissibility grounds under the "safe third country" and the "first country of asylum" concepts, but said the Hungarian rules "curtail the right to asylum in a way which is incompatible with the Asylum Qualifications Directive...and the

EU Charter of Fundamental Rights". The EC added that provisions in the legislation which prohibit anyone subject to a criminal procedure under the laws from approaching the transit zones at Hungary's borders "unduly restricts the exercise of free movement rights of EU citizens". The infringement procedure was launched in July 2018.

The EC also decided on Thursday to send reasoned opinions to Hungary on two additional matters. The EC said Hungary had failed to implement correctly a directive on long-term residents, noting that non-EU nationals who are legal residents of an EU member state for at least five years enjoy equal treatment with nationals in certain areas, including access to employment. At present, Hungarian law prohibits veterinarians who are non-EU nationals from practicing their profession in the country, even if they obtained their degree there.

The EC said Hungary had failed to notify it of measures taken to implement the current EU standards on the qualification of third-country nationals for international protection. The directive on the standards "lays down common EU standards for the identification of non-EU citizens or stateless persons in need of international protection" and "ensures a minimum level of benefits and rights in all EU countries, thus providing a disincentive for secondary movements between EU countries and asylum shopping", the EC added.

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## **EC REFERS HUNGARY TO COURT OVER FOOD PRICING**

The European Commission on Thursday referred Hungary to the Court of Justice of the European Union over rules that require retailers to apply the same profit margins to domestic and imported farm and food products.

The referral to the court is the third and final step of an infringement procedure launched in February 2017. Hungarian authorities have maintained their position during the procedure. The EC said the rules run counter to the EU principle of the free movement of goods by preventing some retailers of imported goods from offering more attractive prices to consumers.

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## **RETAIL SALES CLIMB 5.0% IN NOVEMBER - 2ND READING**

Retail sales in Hungary rose by an annual 5% in November, the Central Statistical Office (KSH) said in a second reading of data released on Thursday.

KSH lowered the rate from 5.3% in a preliminary reading published on January 7. The fresh data show retail sales adjusted for calendar year effects rose by 4.9% year-on-year in November. Adjusted food sales increased by 2%, non-food sales rose by 8.2% and vehicle fuel sales were up by 5.6%.

## **WAGE TALKS ONGOING AT AUDI HUNGARIA**

Wage negotiations are ongoing between Audi Hungaria and the independent trade union AHFSZ despite a week-long strike that started at 6am on Thursday, the company's communications department said. The management's aim is to find a wage agreement acceptable to both sides as soon as possible, the statement added. The trade union said on Wednesday afternoon that a strike would be announced affecting the entire area of Audi's plant in Győr, in north-west Hungary, from 6am on Jan. 24 to 6am on Jan. 31.

AHFSZ deputy head György Csalogány said on Thursday morning that engine and vehicle production at the base in Győr were "practically 100% shut down". The strike committee was set up on Jan. 14 and a two-hour warning strike was held with the participation of over 4,000 employees on Jan. 18.

AHFSZ has 9,000 members and the Audi plant in Győr employs 13,000 people. The union is demanding a wage increase of at least 18%, but no less than 75,000 forints (EUR 235) a month. They also want the annual threshold for non-wage benefits raised to 787,000 forints from 620,000 forints. Management last proposed a wage increase on a scale "nearly the same" as an earlier offer to raise wages 20% over two years, union leaders said.

## **DEMONSTRATION HELD AGAINST PROSECUTOR'S OFFICE**

Several hundred people demonstrated against the activities of the Chief Public Prosecutor's Office in Budapest on Wednesday. At the event organised in front of the chief prosecutor's building, representatives of various opposition parties said that the office's decision not to declare unlawful the actions of security guards at the headquarters of public broadcaster MTVA last month against opposition MPs who were protesting inside the building had "decisively put Hungary on the path to dictatorship".

The politicians representing the Democratic Coalition, the Liberal Party, the Socialist Party, Párbeszéd and the Momentum Movement said Hungary could only turn back from this path if the opposition parties, trade unions and civil groups show solidarity towards each other and unite. Protestors carried national and EU flags and the flags of the various opposition parties could also be seen in the crowd. After the demonstration, around a hundred protesters blocked traffic between Váci Road and Bajcsy-Zsilinszky Road for roughly half an hour.

## **PM EXPRESSES SORROW OVER REFORMED CHURCH STUDENT HALLS FIRE**

Prime Minister Viktor Orbán expressed his sorrow over Wednesday night's

fire in which the upper stories of the Ráday College in central Budapest burnt down and a person died, in a letter to Bishop István Szabó. In his letter, Orbán offered help to the Reformed Church to restore the damaged building. The student halls, home to 130 students, were only partially occupied at the time of the fire, because many of the students are away preparing for their upcoming examinations, the church said in a statement. All others have been temporarily rehoused by the district municipality and the Lutheran Church, the statement added.

## **RIGHTEOUS AMONG THE NATIONS BARÁNSZKI DIES IN US**

Tibor Baránszki, who saved thousands of Hungarian Jews during WWII, died at age 96 in his Buffalo, NY, home, his family said on Wednesday.

Baránszki received the Righteous Among the Nations title in 1979, for saving Jews from deportation to death camps at the time of the Holocaust, when he worked for the Vatican's diplomatic mission in Budapest.

In the communist Rákosi era he was imprisoned on trumped-up charges, and emigrated to the US after the failed 1956 anti-Soviet uprising. In later years he was known for his efforts to promote dialogue between Judaism and Christianity.

## **DUTCH PEOPLE SMUGGLER SENTENCED TO OVER 4 YEARS**

A Hungarian court has sentenced a people smuggler holding Dutch citizenship but originally from Iraq to four years and four months in prison and the accused will be banned from Hungary for five years. The sentence by the Debrecen court, in eastern Hungary, on Thursday can be appealed. The person known as M.N. is accused of trying to smuggle Iraqi, Syrian and Iranian citizens to western Europe in a van. The court has established that M.N. travelled to Romania to help citizens from third countries for financial gain and to transport them in Hungary after they crossed the Hungary-Romania border. M.N. denies the charges and has lodged an appeal for his acquittal, stating that he had only picked up hitch-hikers near the village of Körösszegapáti, thinking that they were Hungarian workers.

## **OMBUDSMAN URGES MOVE OF NE HUNGARY SPECIAL NEEDS HOME CHILDREN TO FOSTER HOMES**

Children with disabilities living in special needs homes in a village

in north-eastern Hungary should be moved to foster homes unless conditions in the homes and their affiliated school are immediately improved, the ombudsman's office said on Thursday. A report released by the Office of the Commissioner for Fundamental Rights says an inspection of the special needs homes and school in Tornanádaska revealed that the children there live in isolation and "run-down conditions". The inspection also found that conditions at the homes "do not even meet the minimum standard required for caring for children in protective services". The report also raised concerns about how the children are being fed. Further, the operator of the local authority foundation-run homes has yet to begin the renovation works it had been ordered to carry out by social services, the report said.

László Székely, the ombudsman for fundamental rights, has asked the head of the Directorate-General for Social Affairs and Child Protection to explore closing down the homes and placing the children with foster parents or in different special needs homes, unless conditions in the Tornanádaska homes can be improved immediately. Székely has also asked the director of the Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén County Social

Affairs and Child Protection Centre to initiate a review of the children's current placement, taking extra care that siblings are placed in the same home.

## **GOVT OFFICIAL: POPE'S ROMANIA VISIT 'HISTORIC' OPPORTUNITY FOR REGION'S NATIONS**

Pope Francis's upcoming visit to Şumuleu Ciuc (Csíksomlyó), Romania is a "historic opportunity" for the region's nations to come together and make peace with one another, a government official said in Şumuleu Ciuc on Thursday. The Hungarian government will support the city's preparations for the papal visit with an initial grant of about 20 million forints (EUR 63,000), the state secretary for church, minority and civil society relations, Miklós Soltész, told a press conference. The government will soon receive a detailed funding request for the visit from Şumuleu Ciuc's Franciscan monks, he said, adding that Hungary will aim to transfer the funds as quickly as possible. Soltész urged Catholics to turn out for the pope's June 1 visit in as many numbers as they can, saying that it could help support the survival of Christianity and nations.