

PHOTO OF THE DAY



MTI / Györcy Varga

Reed cutting in the wetland of Little Balaton

UPCOMING EVENTS

National Election Cttee meets

LMP presser on group meeting

EU interior ministers' informal meeting in Bucharest

TOP STORY

HUNGARY OPENS CONSULATE IN MIAMI

Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó opened a Hungarian consulate in Miami, Florida.

The new consulate will help maintain relations with ethnic Hungarian communities in the region and improve economic links. It will also perform consular duties for Hungarians spending their holidays there, he said.

At present seven European Union members have consular offices in Miami, including Germany, Italy and the Netherlands, but Hungary is the first central European country to set up one there.

Political and economic relations with the US have been "dynamically expanding and improving", Szijjártó said. US companies represent the second largest investment community in Hungary and the US is Hungary's largest non-EU export market, he added.

Florida has the fourth largest economic output among US states and trade between Hungary and Florida totalled 230 million dollars last year. The economic policy priorities of Hungary and Florida are very similar, both maintaining a focus on foreign economic links, keeping taxes low, having SMEs play a major role in economic output and acknowledging the need for continual innovation and modernisation, the minister said.

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NÉZŐPONT: RULING PARTIES RETAIN MASSIVE LEAD DESPITE PROTESTS

The ruling Fidesz-Christian Democrat parties have retained a massive lead of 54% among decided voters and 39% across the whole sample despite anti-government protests in December, pollster Nézőpont reported citing its latest poll carried out on a representative sample of 5,000 voting-age adults in January.

Nézőpont head Ágoston Sámuel Mráz told public media that conservative Jobbik would garner 13%, the Socialist-Párbeszéd parties 10%, Democratic Coalition 7% and LMP 5% among decided voters if elections were held this weekend. The Momentum Movement with 4%, the satirical Two-Tailed Dog and radical Mi Hazánk with 3% each would not clear the parliamentary threshold.

According to the poll, the ruling parties would have 14 mandates out of a total 21 if the European parliamentary elections were held this weekend. Jobbik could send 3 MEPs to the European Parliament, while Socialists-Párbeszéd would have 2 deputies, and the Democratic Coalition and LMP one each.

Mráz said that Jobbik was “the loser” of the beginning of the year, having lost 250,000 voters, who joined either Fidesz or the Mi Hazánk movement. He said that those that quit Jobbik mostly belong to the 18-29 age group, in which Jobbik has enjoyed its largest support.

SOCIALISTS-PÁRBESEZÉD PROTEST HOUSE SPEAKER’S PLANNED SANCTION

Representatives of the opposition Socialist and Párbeszéd parties have protested against a fine House Speaker László Kövér has pledged to impose on them for a demonstration they staged in parliament during a vote on labour code changes in December.

The house speaker applies “double standards” and made an “arbitrary” decision when he said he would deny participants in the protest one month’s salary, Párbeszéd’s Olivio Kocsis-Cake said.

Kocsis-Cake rejected Kövér’s argument that the opposition deputies had been aggressive and violated the dignity of parliament during the December 12 vote. He insisted that it had been the deputy speaker chairing a previous session, delegated by ruling Fidesz, “who violated parliament’s dignity through not allowing a debate on the slave bill”. Kocsis-Cake also announced a demonstration the two parties were planning to stage in the Castle District on Sunday, to “protest against Fidesz’s arbitrary rule”.

Parliament’s house committee will discuss Kövér’s proposal on Thursday, under which 29 opposition deputies, including ones representing the Socialists, Jobbik, the Democratic Coalition, Párbeszéd and the Liberal party, could lose a month’s pay for “violating the law on parliament through physical violence and

threats of direct force, inciting others to violence or hindering the removal of others”. The house speaker also proposed that one third of a month’s salary should be denied to nine other deputies for “seriously violating the order of parliament”.

JOBBIK DEMANDS MORE TRANSPARENCY OF MPS’ ASSETS

The current system in which members of parliament are required to make public asset declarations once a year should be made more transparent, opposition Jobbik spokesman György Szilágyi said.

Family members of the same household as the MP should also be obliged to make similar declarations. Also, “an independent tax authority” should screen the MPs and their families to keep abreast of the assets they accumulate during a parliamentary cycle, he said.

The families of Jobbik’s MPs have made their assets public, Szilágyi noted. He praised opposition LMP for volunteering to do the same.

Szilágyi also announced that Jobbik would hold a special congress on Feb. 23 to discuss a recent fine the State Audit Office ordered the party to pay. Jobbik considers the measure as well as an earlier fine by the same authority “illegitimate” and will seek remedy in international forums, he added. Paying the two fines amounting to a combined one billion forints (EUR 3.2m) would make it impossible for Jobbik

to run in the upcoming European Parliament elections, he added.

At its congress, Jobbik will discuss "one option to terminate the party" as well as "ways to pursue national resistance", Szilágyi said.

DK WANTS 'UKRAINIAN VOTER IMPORTS' INVESTIGATED

The opposition Democratic Coalition (DK) will ask notaries of localities in north-eastern Hungary to launch an investigation into suspected fictitious Hungarian addresses claimed by Ukrainians who may have then fraudulently participated in the 2016 Hungarian general election, the party's deputy group leader said.

DK will first contact officials of 176 localities near the Ukrainian border to investigate how many Ukrainian citizens claimed to have an address in Hungary after having taken up Hungarian citizenship in the region, Ágnes Vadai said.

Under a government scheme, ethnic Hungarians living beyond the border can apply for Hungarian citizenship. But citizenship does not entitle them to an address which confers to Hungarians living in Hungary the right to vote for both a national list and for an MP candidate in an individual constituency. Citizenship alone, however, does give Hungarians living in neighbouring countries the right to a postal vote for a national list.

The DK politician referred to the public prosecutor's office

acknowledging on Monday that Hungarian citizenship had been granted to Ukrainian nationals with no Hungarian ancestors or connections to Hungary as well as no Hungarian language skills. The prosecutor's office said an investigation was under way into 307 cases, Vadai said, adding that DK had information suggesting that in one instance, altogether 203 people claimed to live at a single address.

She said DK had already given warning of election fraud by ruling Fidesz who may have "imported Ukrainians" to vote in the 2018 general election. It is now feared that the same "Ukrainian voter business" will compromise the transparency of the upcoming European Parliamentary elections and Hungary's local elections in the autumn, Vadai said.

GOVT NOT TO RECEIVE DUTCH PARLT DELEGATION PROBING RULE OF LAW

The Hungarian government will not receive the Dutch parliamentary delegation visiting Budapest to investigate the state of the rule of law in the country, a foreign ministry official told public media.

Tamás Menczer, state secretary for communications and international representation, said The Netherlands was not a Hungarian oversight body, and Dutch pro-migration politicians had no right to carry out an investigation here.

"What if a Hungarian group were to look into how the previous Dutch

ambassador to Budapest compared the Islamic State to Hungary just because we say no to illegal migration?" he said.

He noted that MEP Judith Sargentini and European Union vice commissioner Frans Timmermans were also Dutch, and billionaire "George Soros's people".

BAKONDI: OVER 700 MIGRANTS DETAINED AT SERBIAN BORDER IN JAN

Border agencies detained more than 700 illegal migrants at the Hungarian-Serbian border in January, the prime minister's chief domestic security advisor told public news channel M1. Most of them sought to enter Hungary by hiding in a vehicle, György Bakondi said.

Hungary has strengthened its double border fence with technical equipment, increased its police staff, reviewed the sources of support for NGOs helping migrants, and trained its authorities to handle an increased wave of migrants. "Tight border control is where the stability of Hungary's domestic security starts," he said.

There are more than 70,000 migrants en route through the Balkans to Europe, most of them from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran and Algeria, Bakondi said.

CHARGES FILED AGAINST BULGARIAN LINKED TO PARNDORF MIGRANT SMUGGLERS

The Bács-Kiskun County prosecutor has filed charges against

a Bulgarian national, a one-time member of the people smuggling ring connected with the deaths of 71 migrants in a sealed truck found near Parndorf, in Austria, in 2015.

The defendant was active in the gang for a brief period in 2015, and was no longer working for the gang at the time of the Parndorf disaster, local chief prosecutor László Nánási told MTI. The man is charged with activities such as recruiting and managing the drivers of vehicles they used to smuggle migrants across borders in three instances.

Nánási noted that in the third instance, in August 2015, right before the Parndorf deaths, the gang smuggled 40 people to Germany crammed in a car and a van. "Limited movement, a lack of water, food, or fresh air, high temperatures and high humidity caused those people significant physical and spiritual suffering," he said.

An Afghan and three Bulgarian nationals were sentenced to 20-25 years imprisonment last June on charges of organising the 2015 smuggling action during which all of the people they had hidden in a sealed refrigerated van died.

HUNGARY RETAIL SALES UP 3.7% YR/YR IN DEC

Hungarian retail sales increased by an annual 3.7% in December, the Central Statistical Office (KSH) said. Adjusted for calendar year effects, retail sales were up 4.1%. Adjusted food sales

were flat, but non-food sales grew by 8% and vehicle fuel sales increased by 4.9%. In the full year, retail sales rose by 6%. Food sales increased by 3.4%, non-food sales by 9.1% and vehicle fuel sales by 6.4%.

ING Bank chief analyst Péter Virovác noted that the headline increase in December retail sales was the lowest rate of the entire year, in spite of the holiday season, suggesting recent strong growth may not be sustainable.

Takarékbank analyst Gergely Suppan also noted the slowdown around the holidays and said stagnating food sales in retail shops suggested that Hungarians must have eaten out more.

AGREEMENT ON IIB BUDAPEST HEADQUARTERS SIGNED

An agreement on establishing the headquarters of the International Investment Bank (IIB) in Budapest was signed by Finance Minister Mihály Varga and IIB chairman Nikolay Kosov.

Moving the IIB headquarters to Hungary will further strengthen the role of the country and Budapest as an international financial centre, Varga said after the signing. From Budapest, IIB can network better with European financial institutions and other international development banks, allowing it to take on a significant role in supporting investments in central Europe, in corporate lending and in international financial affairs, he added.

The IIB's board of governors took a unanimous decision in December

to relocate the lender's headquarters to Budapest. IIB is headquartered in Moscow at present.

Kosov said the signing of the agreement was "large-scale, historical and unprecedented". He expressed his gratitude to the government of Hungary, noting that the renewal of Hungary's membership in IIB in 2015 "gave the bank a revival and an additional impetus to development".

"A European address will help IIB to expand its international capital markets base, improve credit ratings, ensure a substantial increase in capital, boost lending and investment activity, increase brand awareness and attractiveness of the institute for new shareholders," the IBB said on its website.

IBB plans to begin operating from Budapest in the first half of 2019 after the agreement signed on Tuesday is ratified by Hungary's Parliament.

IBB's outlays in Hungary have reached 100 million euros over the past three years, Kosov said.

AUDI STRIKE CAUSED 10,000-CAR BACKUP ON INGOLSTADT ASSEMBLY LINE

A week-long strike at German carmaker Audi's plant in Győr, in northwest Hungary, created a backup of more than 10,000 cars on assembly lines at its headquarters in Ingolstadt, business daily Világgazdaság said.

More than 10,000 cars were not produced at Audi's plant in Ingolstadt

because of the strike in Győr, Audi communications director Joachim Cordshagen told the paper. He declined to estimate the resulting losses, but said production was back on schedule at Audi's plants in Ingolstadt and Neckarsulm by Monday.

The week-long strike at Audi Hungaria finished last Wednesday, after management and union representatives reached an agreement over pay rises. Management agreed to raise workers' base pay by 18%, but at least 75,000 forints (EUR 235) per month, meeting a union demand. The strike forced interruptions in production at a number of Audi plants in Germany as engine deliveries from Hungary came to a halt.

HUNGARIAN POLICE CONTINGENTS LEAVE FOR SERBIA, MACEDONIA

New Hungarian police contingents have left for Serbia and Macedonia, the national police headquarters said. A total of 30 police have left for Macedonia and 15 to Serbia.

In addition to border patrol, they will also be patrolling minor roads inland in Macedonia and Serbia in order to stop human smugglers.

Both contingents have been equipped with SUVs, night-vision equipment and hand-held heat cameras. The contingent in Macedonia will also support border protection efforts with mobile heat cameras, the statement said.

CITY THWARTS CONTESTED RED BULL AIR RACE

The municipality of Budapest will not grant a permit to this year's Red Bull Air Race, planned to be held over the city's innermost parts in July, the mayor's office told MTI.

City leaders have considered local residents' "complaints and interests" and informed the event's organisers that "due to inadequate conditions" the city would deny the permit, it said. Mayor István Tarlós suggested that the event could be held at the Danube Bend or over one of the larger lakes in the country, the statement said.

The annual event has often been criticised for the large noise and air pollution it involved, as well as for safety reasons.

BUDAPEST WINS BEST EUROPEAN DESTINATION 2019 TITLE

Budapest has won the best European destination 2019 title, the tourism organisation European Best Destination (EBD) told Mayor István Tarlós in a letter posted on budapest.hu.

More than half million travellers voted for their favourite European destinations between January 15 and February 5, and Budapest won first place.

No other previous winner received as many votes from abroad as Budapest, with 77% of supporting votes submitted from other countries, mostly the UK, the US, Germany, France, Austria and Italy. Budapest alone received more votes than Paris, Athens, London, Florence and Geneva combined.