

PHOTO OF THE DAY



MTI / Balázs Mohai

The Beijing Dance Academy's performance in the Budapest Palace of Arts on Feb 5, the Chinese New Year

UPCOMING EVENTS

V4 PMs meet German Chancellor in Bratislava

Foreign minister meets US officials

PM's Commissioner Balog meets US Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom

Stats Office first estimate on industry in Dec 2018

TOP STORY

GOVT TO EC: WITHDRAW VP FOR CAMPAIGN

Hungary has called on the European Commission president to withdraw vice president Frans Timmermans, the Spitzenkandidat of the Party of European Socialists, from the commission's work for the duration of his campaign for the EC presidency.

Gergely Gulyás, the head of the PM's Office, addressed a letter to Jean-Claude Juncker, noting that the commission had been represented in the recent EP debate on the rule of law and fundamental rights in Hungary by Timmermans, its first vice-president. "We regretted to see, however, that Mr. Timmermans, as a long-standing critic of Hungary, did not hesitate to use his intervention as an opportunity for his own electoral campaign echoing statements of the Hungarian leftist opposition," Gulyás said in the letter.

He added that commissioners are expected to perform their duties "with complete independence, integrity, dignity, with loyalty and discretion," in compliance with the commission's Code of Conduct. He noted that recent changes to the Code do allow commission members to remain in office while campaigning but "politically biased behaviour as was demonstrated during the debate should not be tolerated while carrying out his duties as a Commissioner," he wrote. Gulyás requested for Timmermans to be withdrawn from the work of the commission for the duration of his campaign.

SZIJJÁRTÓ: HUNGARY READY TO KEEP FIGHTING ISIS

Regardless of the military successes against the Islamic State, the terrorist group still poses a grave global and regional threat, and Hungary is ready to keep fighting it, Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó said in Washington. Addressing a foreign ministers' meeting convened by US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo focusing on the global coalition against ISIS, Szijjártó said Hungary was aiding the fight against the group on three fronts.

The first front, he said, constituted Hungary's efforts on the battlefield. He noted that Hungary had 200 troops stationed in Iraq carrying out training, advisory and assistance tasks. As the second front, Szijjártó named the help Hungary provides to displaced Middle Eastern Christians in returning to their homelands. He voiced Hungary's concern that if these communities cannot return to their homelands, the "vacuum" created by their departure would be filled by ISIS, "and then we will really find ourselves in a situation that we clearly have to avoid". Therefore, Hungary is helping Christians return home by building and rebuilding homes, schools, hospitals and churches in their communities, the minister said. The third front of the fight against terrorism, Szijjártó said, was stopping ISIS's international fighters from returning to Europe in light of the group's defeats. He said

ISIS had about 5,000 fighters who had joined the group from Europe. Therefore, he said, the coalition had to do everything in its power to protect their countries' borders in a way that ensures that ISIS militants cannot return to the continent.

ORBÁN TO ATTEND V4- GERMANY BRATISLAVA SUMMIT

Prime Minister Viktor Orbán will travel to Bratislava on Thursday to participate in a Visegrad Group summit attended by German Chancellor Angela Merkel. The meeting begins at noon in Bratislava Castle and is expected to last for around 90 minutes, after which a joint international press conference will take place, Bertalan Havasi, the PM's press chief, said in a statement. V4 leaders will have separate consultations in the afternoon. The chief topics to be discussed are the European Union's financial framework for 2021-2027, the forthcoming European elections, the future of the EU and European societal changes in recent decades.

V4 FARM CHAMBERS DISCUSS CAP FUTURE IN HUNGARY

The future of the European Union's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) was among the main topics of discussion at a two-day meeting of the agriculture chambers of the Visegrad Group countries that wrapped up in

Veszprém, in western Hungary, on Wednesday.

Balázs Győrffy, the head of the National Chamber of Agriculture, told a press conference after the session that the farm chamber leaders had all argued for keeping the budget of the CAP at its current level. They also called for either increasing or keeping subsidies on agricultural production at 15%. The first day of the meeting covered the need for increasing the share of biocomponents in fuel blends, Győrffy said. The session was attended by the leaders of an organisation comprising 31 central and eastern European biofuel manufacturers. He cited the grouping as saying that by increasing the share of biofuel, the region could reduce its dependence on oil. Furthermore, the GMO-free byproducts of biofuel could help reduce the dependence on genetically-modified soya imports, he added. Industry leaders had recommended that the V4 agricultural chambers should urge their countries' decision makers to increase the share of biofuel to 10 volume percent in petrol and 7 volume percent in diesel fuel, Győrffy said.

SOCIALISTS CALL ON GOVT TO WITHDRAW FROM EBRD PACT

Hungary's 2015 agreement with the European Bank of Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) on the financing of foreign currency loans has handed Hungary's banks political

influence over the government to the detriment of FX loan-holders, the deputy leader of the opposition Socialists said, demanding Hungary's withdrawal from the pact. László Szakács said that moratoriums on home evictions are not allowed under the agreement, neither are measures that may harm banks' bottom line. The interests of FX loan-holders were not served at all since Prime Minister Viktor Orbán "executes the pact to the letter", he said. Szakács said the Socialists will submit a bill on scrapping the pact so that the ruling Fidesz party can vote in a way that demonstrates "the prime minister governs the country independently of the banks".

József Szabó, leader of a civil organisation representing FX loan holders, said borrowers not once had been consulted on any decision concerning FX loans over the past few years. He expressed doubt that talks between the National Bank of Hungary and the Hungarian Banking Association on redrafting 300,000 loan contracts to allow repayment at a fixed interest rate would yield a positive solution.

Meanwhile, on the subject of the European parliamentary election, Socialist leader Bertalan Tóth told MTI that the party will hold a vote on its list of candidates for the election at its congress on Feb. 16.

Ruling Fidesz responded that the Socialists "drove over one million families to taking out FX loans ... and then left them without any safety

net, failing even to vote for the rescue measures [proposed by Fidesz] in parliament." If it had been up to the Socialists, "several hundred thousand families would have been evicted by now," Fidesz said in a statement.

SZIJJÁRTÓ: LEADING US FIRMS TO INCREASE R&D SHARE IN HUNGARIAN INVESTMENTS

Leading US firms operating in Hungary are not only expanding and upgrading their operations and investments but are also boosting their R&D, the minister of foreign affairs and trade said after his talks in Washington, DC. Péter Szijjártó had talks with the chief executives of 16 companies, including GE, Google, ExxonMobil and AT&T. All were satisfied with Hungary's business and investment environment, Szijjártó said.

They also welcomed Hungary's "rational economic policymaking" with an emphasis on low taxes, he said. US investors are an important pillar of bilateral relations and account for the second largest investment community in Hungary, Szijjártó said, noting that 1,700 US companies employ 105,000 people in the country. "These firms have created lots of high value-added jobs and this plays an important role in putting Hungary's economy on a new footing," he said. He called cooperation with them highly important for the Hungarian economy in its transition to a new era focusing on innovation.

DK DEMANDS TO KNOW HOW THOUSANDS OF FOREIGNERS RECEIVED HUNGARIAN RESIDENCE PERMITS

The opposition Democratic Coalition has asked Prime Minister Viktor Orbán to explain how come thousands of foreigners have got hold of a Hungarian residence permit. Zsolt Gréczy, the leftist party's spokesman, told a press conference on Wednesday that around 20,000 came to Hungary with golden residence bonds and he cited a press report suggesting that the Immigration and Asylum Office had issued residence permits to over 9,000 people in the past two years "for other purposes". He insisted that as in the case of those with residency bonds, these people had not been screened and the authorities had been unaware of their nationality. The DK politician said that ruling Fidesz was unprepared to accept people fleeing from violent conflict yet had "installed" 30,000 people in the country "without controls".

Meanwhile, on the topic of opposition cooperation in the upcoming EP and autumn local elections, Gréczy said that "everyone should work together" when it came to "national affairs" but DK would go it alone in the EP elections. In local elections, however, the party wants the best opposition candidate to emerge in each electoral district to face the pro-government candidate, he added.

PÁRBESZÉD ASKS FOR SMALL DONATIONS

Gergely Karácsony, the opposition Párbeszéd party's co-leader, has appealed to opposition voters to make small donations to the party to plug the gap following state fines. "ÁSZ has become a political tool for [ruling] Fidesz," he said, adding that the audit office had fined almost every opposition party. This could force some parties to fold, he said. Karácsony said Párbeszéd was asking people to contribute 1,000-2,000 forints (EUR 3.13-6.27) to help the party make up for "ÁSZ's illegal and absurd" fine.

Answering a question about cooperation with other opposition parties, Karácsony said a divided opposition only benefited the ruling Fidesz party, and so they were working to unite the opposition forces. Asked about the conservative nationalist Jobbik party, he said Párbeszéd did not judge the party by its radical past, and cooperation would depend on Jobbik continuing to renounce hatred. Karácsony said he did not consider Márton Gyöngyösi, Jobbik parliamentary group leader, to be a Nazi. Gyöngyösi in 2012 called for the compilation of a list of Jewish ministers and MPs, saying they posed a national security risk.

SHARE OF SINGLE-BID HUNGARIAN PUBLIC PROCUREMENT TENDERS FALLS

The proportion of public procurement procedures in Hungary published in

the European Union's TED journal that received only one bid fell to 24.2% last year from 26.4% in 2017, the chairman of the Public Procurement Authority (KH) said.

The value of the contracts these procedures produced accounted for 12.8% of total procurements, down from 15.6% in the previous year, said Csaba Balázs Rigó. Procurement contracts exceeding thresholds laid down in an EU directive must be published in the EU's Tenders Electronic Daily (TED) journal. These thresholds range from 144,000 euros to 5,548,000 euros, depending on the party calling the tender. The number of single-bid tenders accounted for 11.1% of contracts with values under these thresholds, down from 11.8% in 2017, Rigó said. In value terms, these contracts' share of total public procurements dropped to 12.2% from 13.8%, he added. Only 3.8% of the 5,411 tenders called for construction investments with values over 2 billion forints (EUR 6.2m) received a single bid. SMEs won public procurement contracts worth 1,911.5 billion forints last year, 58% of the 3,294 billion total.

HUNGARIAN HELSINKI CTTEE EXPRESSES CONCERNS OVER MIGRATION RULES

Rights group the Hungarian Helsinki Committee has expressed concerns over the negative effects of several Hungarian legal regulations approved in connection with migration in

recent years, a study presented at a conference of international NGOs in Brussels showed. The study dubbed "How EU Countries Undermine the Right to Liberty by Expanding the Use of Detention of Asylum Seekers upon Entry" assesses migration-related measures introduced by Bulgaria, Greece, Italy and Hungary last year.

In the concluding observations on the sixth periodic report of Hungary, the researchers expressed concern that Hungarian law allows for the automatic removal to transit areas of all asylum applicants for the duration of their asylum process, except unaccompanied children identified as being below the age of 14 years. The document said this did not meet the legal standards included in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) because it allows a lengthy and indefinite period of confinement, and because there was an absence of any legal requirement to promptly examine the specific conditions of each affected individual and a lack of procedural safeguards to meaningfully challenge removal to a transit area. Hungary should bring its legislation and practices relating to the treatment of migrants and asylum seekers into compliance with the Covenant, the document said. It added that Hungary should limit the overall duration of immigration detention, provide for a meaningful right to appeal against detention and other restrictions on movement, and ensure that children and unaccompanied

minors are not detained, except as a measure of last resort and for the shortest appropriate period of time. Further, Hungary should improve the conditions in the transit areas and ensure that migrants are held in appropriate, sanitary, non-punitive facilities and that immigration detention does not take place in prisons, the document said.

MORE THAN 80% OF HUNGARIAN WORKERS FEEL THEIR JOB IS STABLE

About 82% of Hungarian workers feel their current job will remain stable for more than five years, according to a representative survey by insurer BNP Paribas Cardif and Medián, conducted in December 2018 and sent to MTI on Wednesday. The survey is based on interviews with 1,200 people.

The labour market stability index of BNP Paribas fell 1 point from the same period of 2017 and 3 points from the previous quarter to 68 points in December. Answering a question as to how much they trust that their job

will survive, workers gave responses averaging 94 points compared to 91 points and 88 points in the previous two years. When workers were asked how secure they feel their own position, the index showed 92 points, up from 88 points measured in 2017 and 84 points in 2016. The survey also shows a rising trend concerning the perceived chance of finding employment after losing the current job but there was some concern among employees who said their workplace would not last the next five years. By sector, the survey showed a job stability index of 69 points in industry, construction and trade, 68 points in public administration and 67 points in farming. By age group, workers in their forties were slightly more optimistic than other generations.

PLASTIC SURGERY ON BANGLADESH SIAMESE TWINS SUCCESSFUL

A team of Budapest's Semmelweis University has

successfully performed plastic surgery on a pair of Siamese twins conjoined at their skulls and brains, the university said. The operation was part of the second phase of a series on interventions aimed at separating the two-year-old twins. The first phase, including groundbreaking work to separate the blood flow of the brains, was conducted by a Hungarian team led by Dr. István Hudák in Bangladesh in August 2018. During the Jan. 25 operation, led by dr. Gergely Pataki, a tissue expander system of Hungarian design was implanted. The twins, Rukia and Rabia, are in good health and have already been released from the hospital, the statement said. The children have also undergone diagnostics and examinations in preparation for the operation to separate their skulls and brains. A final decision on that operation will be made in view of the results, the university said.