

PHOTO OF THE DAY



Veteran actor Ferenc Bessenyei commemorated near National Theatre

MTI/Zsolt Szibetváry

UPCOMING EVENTS

Spring session of parliament starts

EU foreign ministers meet in Brussels

Parliament's immunity, European affairs, economic, sustainable development cttees hold meetings

V4 prime ministers hold summit in Israel (until Feb 19)

TOP STORY

GOVT TO LAUNCH INFO CAMPAIGN

The government is launching an information campaign on "plans" by Brussels to promote migration.

All Hungarians have a right to know about the proposals that "fundamentally threaten Hungary's security," government spokesman István Hollik told a press conference. Hollik justified the need for the campaign by saying that while Hungarians have already expressed their opposition to immigration in a variety of ways, Brussels was still trying to force through plans that support it. "They're still forcing migrant quotas," Hollik said, insisting that Brussels was aiming to weaken the border protection rights of EU member states. He said that in addition to distributing anonymous debit cards to migrants, Brussels was also looking to introduce "migrant visas". "The latter has already been approved by the European Parliament," he said. Brussels' plans, he said, also include giving more money to organisations that support immigration. At the same time, the European Union would punish member states that oppose immigration by cutting their funding, he added, warning that if these steps were to be carried out, Hungary would become "a country of immigrants".

HUNGARY SUMMONS SWEDISH AMBASSADOR OVER MINISTER'S CRITICAL REMARKS

Hungary's foreign ministry has summoned the Swedish ambassador over critical remarks by a Swedish minister concerning the Hungarian government's recent family assistance measures, the foreign minister said.

In a tweet, Annika Strandhäll, the Swedish minister for social affairs, said that Hungary's "alarming" policies were "reeking of the 1930's". She suggested the Hungarian prime minister, who she said seeks to promote the birth of "more true Hungarian" babies, was a "right-wing populist trying to obscure the consequences of those policies to the independence women have fought for".

Answering a question at a press conference on a different subject, Péter Szijjártó said the tone of Strandhäll's tweet was "unacceptable". He said the Swedish ambassador had been told at the ministry that Strandhäll's comments, too, were unacceptable. Szijjártó said the ambassador had taken note of Hungary's stance and promised to convey it to Stockholm.

SZIJJÁRTÓ: BUDAPEST PROCESS TO BECOME SYMBOL FOR STOPPING PRO-MIGRATION FORCES

The Budapest Process interregional forum on migration will become a

symbol for stopping pro-migration forces, Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó said on Saturday, commenting on the forum's next meeting held in Istanbul. At next Wednesday's meeting, the Hungarian government will not allow the forum named after Budapest to become a platform for bringing more migrants to Europe, Szijjártó told MTI. The meeting will see a fight between pro-migration and anti-migration forces, as usual in the recent period, he added. "[US financier George] Soros and his network, United Nations officials and Brussels want to use the Budapest Forum to start another wave of migration towards Europe," he said. They plan to approve a resolution at the end of the meeting which states the need to open further routes for migrants, he said, adding that the Hungarian government "is most resolutely against this". A fight is expected because ever since the UN managed to get its global migration compact approved, various international organisations have attempted to "force through" parts of the compact at various meetings, he said. They also want to use the Budapest Process for this purpose, but Hungary and others that promote an anti-migration stand will not approve the new resolution, he added.

The over 50 governments and numerous international organisations involved in the Budapest Process focus on migration issues concerning the Silk Routes Region, which refers to Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Iran, Iraq and Pakistan. The forum was named

after Budapest because the city hosted its first official meeting in 1993. In addition to the 52 member states, seven countries including the US have observer status. Hungary fulfils the role of co-chair and the forum has been chaired by Turkey since 2006.

KOC SIS SAYS FIDESZ REJECTS BRUSSELS IMMIGRATION PLANS

Hungary's ruling Fidesz-led alliance rejects the pro-migration plans of Brussels, Máté Kocsis, Fidesz's parliamentary group leader, told public radio. Kocsis told Kossuth Rádió in an interview that "Brussels bureaucrats" were "full of plans" that would end up creating a continent of immigrants according to the plan of US billionaire George Soros. He blasted what he characterised as proposals to weaken border protection rights of European Union member states, to introduce a migrant visa and to increase support for Soros organisations that aid migration while punishing anti-migration countries financially or by administrative means. Kocsis said it was "incomprehensible" that the compulsory quota system that Hungarians had rejected in the referendum that had the country's largest ever turnout was among the plans. He added that Brussels was thereby ignoring people's views.

Meanwhile, the Fidesz politician said the government's family protection action plan was expected to affect four laws: the budget law, the health

insurance law, the labour code, and tax laws. The government plans to submit the relevant proposals possibly as soon as by the end of the month.

Kocsis, referring to the start of the spring session on Monday, said the ruling parties would not succumb to any provocations by the opposition. He said that whereas opposition politicians supported the policies of Brussels, Hungary's government thinks Europe is being led in the wrong direction. Fidesz is hopeful of a change in Brussels following the European parliamentary elections. Instead of reacting to provocations, the ruling alliance is more determined to make decisions in the interest of Hungary, such as the family protection action plan and measures to help children.

VARGA: S&P HUNGARY RATINGS UPGRADE 'ABOUT TIME'

Finance Minister Mihály Varga, commenting on the recent Standard & Poor's ratings upgrade for Hungary, said "it was about time" to recognise the economy's long-standing performance and to accept the market consensus.

S&P Global Ratings raised its long- and short-term foreign and local currency sovereign credit ratings on Hungary to 'BBB-/A-2' from 'BBB-/A-3' with a stable outlook. "The upgrade reflects Hungary's sound growth prospects, supported by high private savings and real wage gains sustaining domestic demand,

as well as the ongoing expansion of export capacity in the automotive and services sectors," S&P said in its rationale for the ratings action. "While we expect growth to slow toward 2% by 2021, we think Hungary's small open economy will be able to weather a period of weaker external demand, as well as the expected decline in EU funding," it added.

Varga told a press conference that the decision was an acknowledgement of the sustainability of Hungarian economic growth and the reduction of the country's external vulnerability. The other big rating agencies are likely to follow suit shortly, he said. He argued, however, that based on the assessment of the market, Hungary's rating should have improved by two notches. The minister said foreign investors would continue to see Hungary as a key investment destination as a result of the upgrade, and Hungary would continue to have cheaper access to market funding. For the time being, however, the government does not plan to issue an FX bond, he added.

Varga said the government is drawing up measures to protect the economy in case growth slows in Europe. The ministry targets growth of 4% this year after 4.8% in 2018, he said.

Addressing risks S&P brought up in the area of demographic trends, Varga noted the government's seven-point plan related to family benefits. The government's competitiveness programme, he added, aims to improve the productivity of small and medium-sized firms, "the country's

biggest reserve". The performance of the SME sector is a risk factor when it comes to Hungary's credit rating, he said. Varga said more still could be done to improve the efficiency of the state.

In recent years, Hungary's growth has not been debt-fuelled, and the public debt has fallen for the seventh year, reaching 71% by the end of last year, he noted, adding that last year, the budget deficit was 1.8-1.9%, and this also contributed to the lower public debt.

Varga said the government's family protection measures can be covered from reserves this year, and next year's budget plan to be adopted by July 5, will incorporate the related spending for 2020.

SOCIALIST CONGRESS VOTES FOR BERTALAN TÓTH TO HEAD EP LIST

Opposition Socialist party leader Bertalan Tóth will head the party list for the European parliamentary elections. A vote was held during a party congress on Saturday, where 72% of participants approved the list.

Tóth will be followed by István Ujhelyi, MEP Tibor Szanyi, national board member Kata Tüttő, Independent Student Parliament representative Dániel Kálló and board member Gábor Harangozó. Head of the women's chapter and board member Zita Gurmai and the party's EU expert Barnabás Mester come next. Two former European commissioners,

László Andor and László Kovács, are in 9th and 10th place of the list.

Tóth said the list is not considered final because the Socialists expect other parties to join. Párbeszéd has already indicated that it would run on a joint list with the Socialists. He added that he would not take his mandate in Brussels and would not exclude the possibility of withdrawing altogether if the outcome of future consultations demanded it.

Socialist electorate chairwoman Ágnes Kunhalmi said this year's EP elections would be decisive for the future of Hungary, the EU, the left wing and the Hungarian opposition as a whole.

Deputy parliamentary speaker István Hiller said the Socialists would make every effort in the EP to push for a standard wage and pension system and to scrap wage discrepancies between men and women. He added that his party would not dismantle Hungary's southern border fence and would never abandon border-free travel within the EU. The Socialists, he said, would not move migrants to Hungary and would scrap the law that enables "thousands of wealthy migrants" to settle in the country. "Migrants have been brought to Hungary not by us but by the government, with the residency bond scheme," he said.

He also said the Socialists were determined to "open a new chapter after thirty years" and proposed that the congress should ask the party leader to prepare a proposal for a

package of reforms by the summer of 2020.

TIMMERMANS CALLS FOR FAIR WAGES IN EU - SOCIALIST CONGRESS

Frans Timmermans, addressing a Hungarian Socialist Party congress in Budapest on Saturday, called for fair wages in the European Union and closing the wage gap between women and men. The First Vice-President of the European Commission, who is the European Socialist Party's Spitzenkandidat, told the congress held to vote on the Hungarian Socialist Party's European Parliament list that he would not enter into deals with the far right should he become commission president. He said the Socialists should turn their attention to young people and stand by them, creating conditions in Hungary so they do not leave for abroad. Referring to a student who recently addressed anti-government demonstrations, Timmermans said: "You must stand by young people, as the Hungarian Socialists did in the case of Blanka Nagy".

He said the so-called "slave law" was not the right response to Hungary's labour shortage. Instead, the government should ensure decent working conditions, appropriate wages and a good education, he added. If elected as EC president, he would close the 40% gap between the wages of men and women, he said, adding that

this would also be true in the case of pensions.

Timmermans insisted that stimulating the birth rate did not hinge on tax relief but on providing a good education and child care. He vowed to fight against corruption and questioned why the Hungarian government refused to sign up to the European Public Prosecutor's Office. Doing so would ensure that EU money is spent properly, he added.

Timmermans said patriotism was preferable to nationalism, which he argued was fuelled by a fear of other peoples. No one, he said, was born to hate and no one was born to anti-Semitism. The response to hatred by the Socialists should not be more hatred, he added.

He said the upcoming EP election was all about "Europe's beating heart" and at stake was whether a Europe of solidarity would emerge.

"We demand academic freedom, press freedom and freedom of civil organisations," he said. No compromises should be made when it comes to the independence of the judiciary, the equality of citizens and the rule of law, he said.

A top ruling Fidesz party official has called on European Commission First Vice-President Frans Timmermans to make clear to Hungarian Socialists at their congress on Saturday "whether it is acceptable for the Socialists to be cooperating with Nazi parties". Fidesz communications director Balázs Hidvéghi told a press conference on Saturday that Socialist leader Bertalan

Tóth had “personally initiated joining forces with the Jew-hating, anti-Semitic [conservative opposition] Jobbik”.

On behalf of the European Greens, Philippe Lamberts, who leads the Greens–European Free Alliance, has already announced that Hungary’s green opposition LMP would be excluded if it were to join forces with Jobbik, he said. Fidesz now expects the same “straight talk” from Timmermans, he added. Hidvéghi also said that Timmermans was under the thumb of US financier George Soros, “who wants to turn Hungary into an immigrant country”. The Socialists and other opposition parties “are his allies”. Timmermans holds regular consultations with Soros and he is the EU commissioner who has met Soros most frequently in recent years, he added.

SZIJJÁRTÓ: INCREASED COOPERATION WITH THAILAND IN HUNGARY’S INTEREST

Given that Thailand has the largest economy in its region, it is in

Hungary’s interest to intensify cooperation with the Southeast Asian country, Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó said in Budapest at a joint press conference after talks with General Chatchai Sarikulya, Thailand’s deputy prime minister. Szijjártó noted that Thailand is Hungary’s number one Southeast Asian trading partner. Thailand is a huge market where Hungarian companies have been successful in the past, the minister said, adding that Hungary intends to tighten bilateral economic relations. Bilateral trade turnover increased by 18% last year from 2017, reaching 700 million dollars, Szijjártó noted. Hungarian exports to Thailand were up 41%, he added.

To promote bilateral economic ties, Hungary’s Eximbank will open a 630 million dollar credit line, he said, adding that a session of the Hungarian-Thai mixed economic committee has also been convened.

With the European Union having lifted its restrictions concerning Thai air carriers, Hungary and Thailand have begun talks on launching a direct flight between the two countries, Szijjártó said. In addition, talks are under way on

Hungarian participation in Thailand’s air traffic control, he said.

The minister named water management as one of the main subjects of his talks with Sarikulya. Thailand has approved a 10-year strategy for modernising its drinking water distribution and flood protection systems and the construction of wastewater treatment plants, he said.

Szijjártó voiced Hungary’s support for restarting free trade talks between the EU and Thailand, saying that the fewer obstacles there are to international trade, the better it is for Hungary and Hungarian companies.

Sarikulya said the main goal of his visit to Budapest was to find out as much as possible about Hungary’s water management solutions, as it is one of the areas that present opportunities for mutually beneficial cooperation between the two countries. He also said Thailand could serve as a gateway to East Asia for Hungary, just as Hungary could be a gateway to Europe for Thailand. The deputy PM thanked Hungary for having granted scholarships to 28 Thai university students.

