

PHOTO OF THE DAY



MTI/Zsolt Czeglédi

The Debrecen zoo's two and a half week old reticulated giraffe calf

UPCOMING EVENTS

Hong Kong commerce secretary on city's business ties with Hungary

Delegation of parl't Hungarian-French friendship group on visit to Paris

Farm minister hands over awards on occasion of International Day of Forests

Finance ministry releases detailed Jan-Feb budget report

National Election Committee meets

TOP STORY

FIDESZ 'UNILATERALLY SUSPENDS RIGHTS IN EPP'

Hungary's ruling Fidesz has unilaterally suspended exercising its rights as a member of the European People's Party, the prime minister said at an international press conference after an EPP meeting in Brussels.

The EPP has asked "three wise men" to prepare a report, on the basis of which "the long-term future of the EPP and that of the relationship between the EPP and Fidesz can be decided", Viktor Orbán said. "We cannot be ejected or suspended; we have won four elections by the will of Hungarian citizens," Orbán insisted. He noted that Fidesz had garnered 47, 56, and 52% of the votes during the past three European parliamentary elections, respectively. "A party like that will obviously not allow itself to be ejected or suspended but will stand up and leave instead," he said.

Fidesz has decided to "suspend our rights for the period while we wait for the three wise men to complete their report, then we will have talks again with the EPP", Orbán said. The prime minister stressed that Hungary's policies remained unchanged, saying that he had made this clear at Wednesday's assembly. He said this applied to Hungary's goal of a strong Europe, a strong European Union, its immigration policy and its priority to protect Europe's Christian culture.

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ORBÁN: EPP MADE RIGHT DECISION

"The European People's Party made the right decision today, because it maintained its unity," Prime Minister Viktor Orbán said at an international press conference after an EPP meeting in Brussels on his Fidesz party's future in the centre-right bloc. He said the EPP had also made the right decision in the sense that the grouping would now be able to tackle the European parliamentary election campaign as a cohesive unit and because Fidesz could continue to support Manfred Weber as the EPP's Spitzenkandidat. Fidesz and the EPP, he said, had "not closed off any paths", and would be free to decide on their relationship after the elections. Orbán called Wednesday's EPP's debate "very interesting, exciting and instructive". He said the EPP's future had been "called into question" in recent weeks and this is what Wednesday's debate had been about.

He said Fidesz, like the EPP, had appointed "its own committee of three wise people" to be chaired by state secretary for family and youth affairs Katalin Novák. Judit Varga, state secretary for EU relations at the Prime Minister's Office, and Fidesz-Christian Democrat MEP József Szájer will be the other two members. Orbán said the three of them would be the ones to hold talks with the EPP's committee and draft their own report on how the EPP and Fidesz's relationship should be

shaped, whether Fidesz has a place in the EPP and if so, what kind of an EPP that should be.

He called the EPP an "unprecedentedly brave venture", pointing out that it was a grouping ranging from "liberal left-wing parties" to Christian conservative right-wing parties "like ourselves". He said it was the pursuit to keep these parties together that made the "experiment" he said was the EPP special. This has worked out reasonably well in the recent period, Orbán said, adding that it was this that had turned the EPP into the top political force in European politics. The prime minister added, at the same time, that in recent weeks, thirteen parties from "the leftist-liberal branch of this colourful community" had proposed that "those who are firmly on the Christian conservative side" should be expelled from the EPP. "Those are us," he said. Orbán said certain political forces were looking to turn the EPP into an organisation "with a much narrower profile whose centre of gravity is not where it is now but much further to the left, in a liberal direction".

He said that while the stakes of Wednesday's debate had been the future of the EPP and its ideological character, another question had been whether the EPP would be able to restore its unity for the European parliamentary elections. Orbán also said he had asked the heads of the thirteen parties to withdraw their proposal on Fidesz's expulsion because "this isn't good in terms of the

campaign, nor is it good for the EPP in the long run, but they weren't willing to withdraw it". If they had withdrawn the proposal, there would not have been a need for today's debate, he argued. "We want the EPP to remain the strongest party in European politics and to be able to mount a united campaign," Orbán said.

HUNGARY PARTIES COMMENT ON OUTCOME OF EPP MEETING

Ruling Fidesz and the opposition parties were divided on the outcome of Wednesday's meeting of the European People's Party's political assembly where Fidesz agreed to suspend its membership in the centre-right grouping. Fidesz declared the debate a failed attempt by the pro-migration delegates to expel the party while the opposition called it a defeat for Fidesz.

Fidesz's parliamentary group leader Máté Kocsis said that "while many demanded that the EPP expel Fidesz, including the European Socialists, Dutch MEP Judith Sargentini and -- using the liberal media -- [Democratic Coalition leader] Ferenc Gyurcsány," the group decided neither to expel nor to suspend the party. In fact, Fidesz has itself decided to "voluntarily suspend its participation" in the work of the EPP, he said.

The opposition Socialists said Fidesz had lost its interest representation powers [in the EU]. "Hungary, however, must not," Bertalan Tóth

said on Facebook. "It is now our job to defend Hungary's interests in the EU since [Prime Minister] Viktor Orbán will no longer be able to do that," he said. The Socialists will launch a signature drive so that Hungarians can express their will to keep the country in the EU, Tóth said. Jobbik deputy leader Márton Gyöngyösi said in a statement that even though the EPP "allowed" Fidesz to agree to the suspension of its membership, it was still "clear" that Fidesz had "taken the first steps towards quitting the European Union". Democratic Coalition (DK) MEP Csaba Molnár told a press conference that Fidesz "was basically ejected from the EPP". "They can try to prove that the opposite is true, but this is what has really happened," he said.

Leaders of the LMP party reacted by saying that "it is absolutely irrelevant from the Hungarian people's point of view what sort of a deal Fidesz and the EPP have made". Fidesz has proven on several occasions that it is "unwilling and unfit" to represent the Hungarian people in the European Parliament, they said in a statement. Benedek Jávor, an MEP of Párbeszéd, said on his Facebook page that Viktor Orbán's plan "to pull the EPP to the right" had failed and his "game of bluffs is over". The Hungarian Liberal Party said it regretted that the EPP "retreated" from ousting Fidesz from its ranks. A suspension of Fidesz in the group has made Hungary a weaker and more vulnerable country, the party said in a statement.

BAVARIAN MINISTER: ORBÁN 'ACCEPTS' BAVARIAN OFFER ON CEU

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has accepted the Bavarian provincial government's offer concerning scientific cooperation with the Central European University, Florian Herrmann, the Bavarian minister of state for EU and media affairs told Munich daily *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. According to the proposal, the Munich Technical University (TUM) would fund two faculties on democracy and governance at CEU. CEU was barred from issuing American degrees in Hungary last year, as the government said it had failed to comply with a law amendment requiring educational activity in the university's country of origin. TUM would co-fund a third faculty which would operate as a foundation, Herrmann said. He said Orbán had "guaranteed" that the CEU would be allowed to continue its research and educational work in Budapest. Herrmann said he believed the gesture on the part of the Hungarian prime minister was a clear sign that he wanted to dampen the controversy surrounding his Fidesz party within the European Peoples' Party (EPP).

SZIJJÁRTÓ CALLS FOR MORE EU AID FOR JORDAN

The European Union should increase its support for Jordan in light of its efforts to help refugees, Foreign

Minister Péter Szijjártó said in Amman. "Unless Jordan successfully handles the challenge of the refugee problem, hundreds of thousands will set off for Europe, creating further tensions," Szijjártó told a press conference, expressing appreciation for Jordan's accommodation of refugees from war-stricken neighbouring countries. "We think that aid should be delivered where it is needed. We should ensure that those forced to leave their homes can stay as close as possible and return once the conflict is over," Szijjártó said. He said the EU should strike a free trade deal with Jordan so that Jordanian goods and services can reach Europe's markets.

Szijjártó spoke highly of Jordan's approach to its Christian communities, and said that if all countries in the region treated Christians as Jordan, that region would "certainly be a happier and more secure" place. He noted that the Hungarian government had donated a total 1.3 million euros to Jordan's Christian communities to make tourism investments and contributed 700,000 euros to the construction of a church by the banks of the river Jordan where Jesus is believed to have been baptised.

Szijjártó noted Hungary's and Jordan's joint efforts to fight terrorism with special regard to the fight against the Islamic State organisation. Hungary currently offers an annual 400 scholarships to Jordanian students, the minister said, adding that foreign students graduating from Hungarian universities would be instrumental

in building bilateral ties in the future. Hungary's Eximbank has opened a credit line of 90 million dollars to promote business cooperation with Jordan, especially in the area of water management, the minister said, adding that Hungarian companies in the sector were outstanding.

On another subject, Szijjártó said that the Hungarian government was not planning to relocate the Hungarian embassy from Tel Aviv. Hungary's position concerning the Middle East peace process is in line with the European Union's official policy, he said.

SOCIALISTS LAUNCH SIGNATURE DRIVE ON PRESERVING HUNGARY'S EU MEMBERSHIP

The Socialist Party is launching a signature campaign so that Hungarians can express their will to keep the country in the European Union, Socialist MEP István Ujhelyi told a press conference in Brussels. Ujhelyi said Orbán presented a serious danger to Hungary's EU membership, regardless of the decision of the European People's Party, which is slated to decide on whether Fidesz remains in the EPP bloc on Wednesday. "Orbanistan", Ujhelyi said, is incompatible with the European community and the Lisbon Treaty. "Either Orbán leads Hungary from the EU or member states will eventually decide they have had enough of the Hungarian government flouting European values and we will drift away from the EU," he said. Ujhelyi

insisted that Orbán had lost all "moral authority and lobbying power" in the EU, "which is a huge danger to Hungary at the start of the real bargaining over the 2021-2027 financial cycle ... meanwhile, Orbán is pilloried even in his own party family."

TOP COURT RULES ON LOCAL COUNCIL FEES FOR PUBLIC AREA USE

The fees that local councils charge for the use of public spaces must be in line with the value of services offered there, the Constitutional Court ruled. The ruling annuls part of a local council regulation which forced mobile retail outlets to pay two hundred times the daily fee payable by permanent stalls. The top court said that whereas local councils had the powers to specify the rules and fees applicable for using public spaces, the fees should be commensurate with the business value of the services offered in the relevant public spaces. The fees charged for the use of public spaces should not serve purposes unrelated to the business value of their use, the ruling added.

HUNGARIAN INTERNET SUBSCRIPTION NUMBERS CONTINUE TO CLIMB IN 2018

The number of internet subscriptions in Hungary rose by an annual 5.4% in 2018, reaching 9.93 million, the Central Statistical Office (KSH) said. The number of internet subscriptions

has been continuously rising since 2011, when it stood at 4.33 million. The internet service providers' market continues to be highly concentrated as 10 companies were still responsible for more than 96%. At the end of last year, 80% of subscriptions were for private customers and 20% for business customers. Of all subscriptions, 68.7% are for mobile internet services, basically unchanged from a year earlier, but most data traffic still takes place using wired internet connections. In 2018, download traffic for wired internet connections was 2,617 PB and 937 PB of data was uploaded compared to the combined 239 PB of data of downloads, uploads and calls for mobile internet connections. The download traffic of wired connections increased by an annual 26.4%.

Fully 8.8% of subscriptions were for internet connections with less than 2 Mbit/s of guaranteed data rate, some 32% had a guaranteed data rate between 10 and 30 Mbit/s, around 5% had a guaranteed rate of at least 30 Mbit/s and the 33% a guaranteed rate of at least 100 Mbit/s. Net revenue of internet provider companies was 249 billion forints (EUR 796m) in 2018, up 12.8% year on year. Revenue for wired internet service provision was 125 billion forints and for mobile internet service provision 117 billion.

GUEST NIGHTS EDGE DOWN IN JANUARY

Guest nights spent in January in Hungarian commercial lodgings fell

by 0.7% year on year to 1,523,000, the Central Statistical Office (KSH) said. Guest nights spent by domestic travellers were down 0.1% at 743,000 and guest nights spent by foreign visitors fell by 1.2% to 780,000 during the period. Revenue increased by 9.4% to 29 billion forints. At hotels, the average occupancy rate stood at 44.1%, down 0.7 percentage point from the same month a year earlier. Total revenue per available room (TREVPAR) at hotels climbed 8.4% to 15,846.

PÉNZÜGYKUTATÓ FORECASTS GDP GROWTH OF 3.7% THIS YEAR

Economic research company Pénzügykutató expects Hungary's GDP growth to slow to 3.7% in 2019, researcher Éva Várhegyi said. Pénzügykutató attributes the slowdown to adverse changes in

the external environment, growing tensions in the global economy, and major difficulties facing Europe, the market for 80% of Hungary's exports, with Germany's economic growth projected at close to 1%. Várhegyi said the institute projects full-year inflation of 3.2% and twelve-month inflation of 3.3% at the end of the year. The forint/euro exchange rate will be 318 forints (EUR 1.01) on average in 2019, she added.

INTERCHURCH AID COLLECTS DONATIONS FOR REBUILDING SCHOOLS IN IRAQ

The Hungarian Interchurch Aid charity is collecting donations for rebuilding schools in Iraq, the organisation's president-director László Lehel said. Hungarian Interchurch Aid has been helping families return home after

the war since 2014, paying special emphasis to persecuted Christians, he said. In the autumn of 2017, they renovated residential homes and schools with the help of 125 million forints provided through the government's Hungary Helps scheme, he added. In the next phase, the charity plans to rebuild schools damaged in the war in Iraq and help equip them, he said. Under the aid scheme backed by a 375 million forint foreign ministry grant, six seriously damaged schools will be refurbished on the Nineveh plains, enabling 1,300 students to study there. Additionally, a drinking water network and reservoir will be restored to supply water for 26,000 people, he said. Donations can be made through the website www.segelyszervezet.hu and by calling the 1353 helpline which costs 250 forints (EUR 0.8) per call, he told a press conference.