

PHOTO OF THE DAY



MTI/Péter Komka

Moonrise as seen in Karancskeszi (N Hungary)

UPCOMING EVENTS

EU summit in Brussels

Hungarian, Polish presidents hold talks in Kielce

World Water Day

Hungary-UAE economic mixed committee meets in Budapest

TOP STORY

HUNGARY'S GAS SUPPLIES SECURED FOR NEXT YEAR

Hungary's gas supplies are secured for next year even if Moscow and Kiev fail to sign a new gas transit deal by the end of the year, Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó said after talks with Gazprom CEO Alexei Miller in Moscow.

"Today we signed an agreement with the CEO of Gazprom ensuring that the company will supply Hungary with gas next year regardless of whether or not Russia and Ukraine sign a new transit deal," Szijjártó told MTI. "The issue of energy supply has taken on a geopolitical dimension with the expiration of the transit agreement between Russia and Ukraine at the end of the year and the absence of a new deal," the minister said. "So the situation may arise that Russia will stop delivering gas to Europe via Ukraine. This is what we have to prepare for, because we always have to prepare for the worst-case scenario when we're planning the country's energy supplies." Hungary will next year again purchase a portion of its gas imports through Austria, Szijjártó said, adding that Hungary will also have to use its "unmatched gas storage capacities" to its advantage. He noted that Hungarian reservoirs can store 6.3 billion cubic metres of natural gas. Hungary has also agreed to purchase the gas to be stored for 2020 before the end of the year, he added.

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NEW GAS ROUTES AHEAD

Referring to Hungary’s long-term energy security, Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó said the government was counting on the eventual availability of a new southern gas supply route. Gazprom is working with Bulgaria and Serbia on delivering gas to Hungary and Austria via the Turkish Stream gas pipeline, he noted. The minister vowed that Hungary will have the necessary infrastructure for that supply route ready by the beginning of next year. Szijjártó said Miller had told him that Gazprom was not expecting any delays in the construction of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, with one-third of the pipeline already completed. Concerning Turkish Stream, Miller said Gazprom was in advanced talks with Bulgaria, Greece and Serbia, and that the completion of the new supply route was “completely realistic”. Szijjártó also held talks with Nikolay Fyodorov, first deputy chairman of Russia’s Federation Council, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Vladimir Titov and Energy Minister Alexander Novak.

WEBER: ‘WISE MEN’ TO SCRUTINISE HUNGARY

A council of “wise men” will be appointed to monitor the situation in Hungary over the coming period and it will evaluate the ruling Fidesz party’s policies, the European People’s Party’s group leader and Spitzenkandidat Manfred Weber

said in Brussels. Addressing a press conference after a meeting of the EPP’s political assembly where Fidesz’s EPP membership was suspended, Weber said the council would be headed by former European Council president Herman Van Rompuy, with former European Parliament president Hans-Gert Pöttering and former Austrian chancellor Wolfgang Schüssel also serving on the panel. Weber said Fidesz’s potential expulsion from the centre-right bloc was not off the table. He said it would take “a long time” to restore trust between the EPP and Fidesz. In practice, the suspension of Fidesz’s EPP membership means that its members may not attend party meetings, propose candidates or shape the EPP’s policies, he added. At Wednesday’s EPP political assembly, 190 delegates voted in favour of the compromise to suspend Fidesz’s membership in the grouping with three delegates voting against it.

SOCIALISTS: FIDESZ HAS LOST LOBBYING POWER IN EU

With the suspension of ruling Fidesz’s membership in the European People’s Party, the party has lost its lobbying power in the European Union, Bertalan Tóth, the leader of the opposition Socialist Party, said. “Whichever way it is interpreted”, Fidesz can no longer exercise its rights within the largest party group of the European Parliament, the body that makes decisions on the EU budget

and elects leaders of the European Commission, he said. Both Hungary and its government have lost out, as the country has a vested interest in access to the EU funds supporting Hungarian companies and families, he said.

“So the only force left to represent Hungary’s interests from now is the Socialist Party, within its own party family, the Party of European Socialists,” he said. Hungary could either leave the European Union or be expelled from it, he added. “That is why it is important for Hungarian voters to cast their ballots on pro-European forces in the forthcoming EP elections.”

The Socialist and Párbeszéd parties will disclose their joint list for the election on Saturday, Tóth said. Párbeszéd MEP Benedek Jávor will feature in third place on the list, and will also be the “face” of the alliance’s environmental campaign, Tóth said.

HONG KONG, HUNGARY OFFICIALS IN TALKS ON STRENGTHENING ECONOMIC TIES

Hong Kong and Hungary wish to strengthen bilateral economic ties, Edward Yau Tang-wah, Hong Kong’s secretary for commerce and economic development, told a press conference after meeting Hungarian officials of the foreign and finance ministries in Budapest. Hungary is an important partner of Hong Kong in central Europe, Yau said. The aim is to further strengthen those ties, he added. Bilateral trade between Hungary and

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Hong Kong jumped by 13.2% to 2.3 billion dollars in 2018. Yau is leading a delegation of Hong Kong Trade Development Council on a two-day official visit to Hungary. The delegation will meet Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó, and Gábor Gion, the state secretary of the financial ministry, and will visit the National Bank of Hungary as well as Hungarian companies to obtain information about investment and development opportunities.

LMP: PAKS UPGRADE 'A MEANS TO CEMENT RUSSIA'S INFLUENCE'

The upgrade of Hungary's nuclear plant in Paks is a means to boost Russian President Vladimir Putin's influence in the region, lawmakers of green opposition LMP and an MEP of the European Green Party said. LMP co-leader Márta Demeter, Gábor Vágó, the party's lead candidate in the EP elections, and Dutch MEP Bas Eickhout said that instead of increasing their dependence on foreign energy, member states should invest in sustainable resources.

Demeter called the Paks project undertaken by Russian energy giant Rosatom "dead on arrival". She insisted that the project was a national security risk and would be loss-making. She said that the European Commission had greenlighted the project under pressure from several multinational companies that were to profit from it. "The influence of multinationals should be curbed," she added.

Eickhout said Russia uses its energy resources as a "political weapon" to influence EU member states and EU policies. Energy networks that can be implemented independently are needed, he said. Governments, however, hesitate to promote renewable energy resources because citizens can profit from them directly, he said. Vágó said "the most important thing" was to sweep lobbyists of multinational companies out of the EU. "The energy dependence brought on by the Paks upgrade is not in Hungary's interest," he said. Yet "lobbyists" have succeeded in obtaining the EC's blessing, he added.

FORMER JOBBIK MP HEGEDŰS RETURNS PARLIAMENTARY MANDATE

Former conservative opposition Jobbik lawmaker Enikő Hegedűs said that she had returned her mandate to parliament after quitting the party and its parliamentary group in late February. Hegedűs told MTI that she did not want to sit in parliament as an independent because she did not want to share the same platform as those "pursuing pseudo activities or playing a destructive role" in parliament. Hegedűs said that by announcing her departure on March 21, the centenary of the Hungarian Republic of Soviets, she wanted to make it clear that she found "the revival of the spirit of red terror" and the heritage of Hungary's post-1956 communist leaders "unacceptable".

Before her departure from Jobbik, Hegedűs was deputy leader of the party. Explaining her decision in late February, she said that "any form of solidarity with post-communists completely goes against my upbringing and my personal beliefs."

DK: 'HUXIT' AT STAKE IN EP ELECTIONS

At stake in the upcoming European parliamentary elections is whether Prime Minister Viktor Orbán succeeds in driving Hungary out of the European Union, the top candidate of the opposition Democratic Coalition has said, commenting on the European People's Party's decision to freeze the ruling Fidesz party's rights within the bloc. Klára Dobrev said that it had been the EPP that had voted to suspend Fidesz's rights on Wednesday and not the other way round. Under the Article 7 procedure Brussels launched against Hungary last year, the country could end up losing access to EU funds along with its voting rights, Dobrev noted. Now the EPP has decided to examine the state of the rule of law in Hungary, she said, also referring to a vow by Manfred Weber, the EPP's group leader and Spitzenkandidat, to ensure that member states observe basic European democratic norms after the May ballot. Unless there's a change of course after the May ballot, Viktor Orbán could end up freezing Hungary out of the EU just as he succeeded in doing with Fidesz from the EPP, she insisted.

KÖVÉR AT TALKS WITH FEDERAL ASSEMBLY LEADERS IN SWITZERLAND

House Speaker László Kövér held talks with leaders of Switzerland's federal legislature, the Federal Assembly, on Wednesday, parliament's press chief said. During Kövér's visit, a Hungarian-Swiss friendship group was set up within the Swiss parliament, Zoltán Szilágyi said. It was formed by 31 representatives of the bicameral legislature, which is composed of the 200-seat National Council and the 46-seat Council of States. The head of the group, Andreas Glarner of the Swiss People's Party, said at the founding session that the group would work closely together with the German-Swiss-Liechtenstein friendship group of Hungary's parliament and promote regular consultations between Swiss and Hungarian parliamentary committees. Kövér held talks with Maria Garobbi Guscetti, head of the National Council, Jean-Rene Fournier, head of the Council of States, and Roberto Balzaretto, deputy head of the foreign ministry.

The negotiating parties were in agreement that Hungarian-Swiss relations were balanced and excellent and said that cooperation would be further strengthened based on mutual respect. Switzerland's democratic system sets a high standard to Europe including Hungary, for which

Hungarians have high respect for the Swiss people, Kövér said. "Next to a common European past and concerns for the future, and beyond excellent economic relations, our countries are linked by their dedication to preserve independence and national sovereignty," he added.

HUNGARY PARLT DELEGATION MEETS FRENCH COUNTERPART

A Hungarian delegation has met the French parliament's French-Hungarian friendship chapter in Paris with a view to strengthening ties between the two countries, Socialist MP Zita Gurmai said. The other members of the delegation were Katalin Novák, the state secretary for family affairs, and Fidesz MP Katalin Csöbör. Gurmai said traditionally warm feelings towards Hungarians "have unfortunately changed in recent years" in France, but that the exchange of information and experiences should "focus on serving national interests..."

"Good French laws can be adapted in Hungary, regardless of the party affiliation of lawmakers. In certain causes, a national consensus is of paramount importance," she said. As examples of adaptable French laws, Gurmai cited ratification of the Istanbul Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, a law ensuring the equality of men and women before the law,

and measures against food waste which require French department stores to donate leftover foods to humanitarian organisations.

BUDGET MAINTAINS HUF 67.3 BN SURPLUS BY END-FEB

Hungary's cash-flow-based budget, excluding local councils, ran a 67.3 billion forint (EUR 213m) surplus at the end of February, the finance ministry said in a second reading of data. The deficit target for the full year is 998.4 billion forints. In February alone, the budget deficit came to around 177.2 billion forints but January had a surplus of 244.5 billion forints. Main expenditure items in February included spending on measures to promote social goals and development programmes, the ministry said. The ministry said the numbers reflect rising wages stemming from the government's six-year wage agreement with employers and unions, higher number of employed workers, increasing household consumption, government support for families' home purchases and measures to whiten the economy. The government has a full-year deficit target of 1.8 percent of GDP calculating with EU methodology and expects the level of government debt to fall. Reaching the deficit target is supported by the government's economic policy and balanced growth that ensures the sustainability of the budget, the ministry said.

NEW RAILWAY LINE CONNECTING HUNGARY, SERBIA, ROMANIA TO BE BUILT OVER NEXT 10 YEARS

Hungary is set to build a new 500km railway line over the next decade connecting major cities in Hungary, Serbia and Romania, Fidesz MP János Lázár told the local daily Délmagyarország. The project is expected to cost 800 billion forints (EUR 2.6bn), he said. The railway line will connect the cities of Pécs, Baja, Subotica (Szabadka), Szeged, Hódmezővásárhely, Békéscsaba, Salonta (Nagyszalonta), Oradea (Nagyvárad) and Debrecen. The Hungarian and Serbian governments are expected to discuss the project at a joint cabinet session next month, he said, adding that the Serbian government was ready to help finance it. Lázár said the project could also potentially receive European Union funding, noting that the plan was in line with the EU's transport development strategy. Certain sections of the railway line will also function as suburban railway lines like the tram-

train line being built to connect Szeged and Hódmezővásárhely, Lázár said. He said certain sections like the Pécs-Baja and Szeged-Békéscsaba lines will be completed by 2022, with the total project likely taking 8-10 years to finish.

GOVT OFFICIAL: TUBERCULOSIS CASES IN HUNGARY DOWN TO 10 IN 100,000

The number of new tuberculosis cases in Hungary has fallen to 10 in 100,000 on average in the past few years from 500 five decades ago, a steeper decline than in many other European countries, a government official told a press conference. At the press conference held to mark World Tuberculosis Day on March 24, Ildikó Horváth, state secretary for health care at the human resources ministry, said that in 2018, fully 618 new cases were registered. "This is a great achievement in terms of professional and social cooperation," she said, adding that the presence of rare related diseases still warranted vaccination against the bacterium. Hungary and the World Health Organisation (WHO) cooperated to develop an effective screening

system, Horváth said. Ledia Lazeri, the director of WHO's Hungarian office, called for international cooperation to further curb the disease and praised cooperation between the government and Budapest's Korányi Hospital to create a patient-centered care system.

BUDAPEST ART WEEK TO HOST SOME 100 EXHIBITIONS IN 74 VENUES

The fourth Budapest Art Week will host nearly 100 exhibitions at 74 venues between April 9 and 14, organisers told a press conference. This year, some 100 fringe events and an art education programme involving some 500 students will also be held, Director Linda Bérczi said. New venues include the Hopp Ferenc Asia Museum and the Museum of Fine Arts, she said. The main exhibition of the festival will be shown in the Mikve Gallery and focus on connections between contemporary Russian and Hungarian art, in parallel with the Budapest Spring Festival in which Russia is a guest of honour. The exhibition will feature work by acclaimed artists such as the Blue Noses Group, Oleg Kulik, Chto Delat and the AES+F collective.