

PHOTO OF THE DAY



MTI/Zsolt Czeglédi

Farming in E Hungary, where draughts are causing severe revenue losses

UPCOMING EVENTS

PM Orbán unveils Fidesz's EP election programme

EU finance ministers meet in Bucharest

Stats office releases preliminary Feb industrial output data

Charity gala event for Transcarpathian Hungarians

TOP STORY

HUNGARY, US SIGN DEFENCE PACT

Hungarian Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó and US Deputy Secretary of State John Sullivan signed a defence cooperation agreement on the sidelines of the celebrations of NATO's 70th anniversary.

Bilateral defence cooperation will be further boosted by the agreement, Szijjártó said after the signing in Washington, DC. "Hungary is proud to have contributed to the success of the alliance as a reliable partner of both NATO and the US," Szijjártó said, adding that Hungary had always done its utmost to contribute to the fight against terrorism, and noting an earlier decision to raise the number of Hungarian troops combatting terror by 200. Fully 130 soldiers will be deployed to Kosovo, raising the headcount of Hungarian troops there to above 500, and 70 to Afghanistan. The number of Hungarians serving in Afghanistan will now exceed 1,200, he noted.

Szijjártó said that besides defence and economic cooperation, diplomatic relations had also been revived by US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's visit to Hungary. David B. Cornstein, the US Ambassador to Hungary, welcomed the agreement. "We look forward to an even stronger security relationship with Hungary," he wrote in a statement.

Twenty years ago Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic joined the alliance.

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GULYÁS: BRUSSELS 'MUST STOP MIGRANT CARD SCHEME'

Brussels "must stop its scheme of granting prepaid bank cards to migrants without delay", the head of the Prime Minister's Office said. Gergely Gulyás told a government press briefing that it was "worrying that terrorists are also able to get hold of the bank cards" and it was "unacceptable" that the European Union and the United Nations financially aided their travel arrangements and accommodation in Europe.

The government has information about the threat of a "migrant caravan", he said, adding that it was not yet known whether this threat would materialise. "But if it does, Hungary's border protection forces are prepared and capable of protecting the country." He said it was important that Hungary does not fall victim to migration. Hungary wants to help people, especially Christian communities -- even beyond its international obligations -- and the government has decided to support two projects in Syria, Gulyás said, referring to the Hungary Helps scheme, with 794 million forints (EUR 2.48m) provided for the rebuilding of a school and 318 million forints for revamping houses and social institutions in Homs. "The aim is to urgently create the conditions that encourage people to stay; instead of importing trouble to Europe, help

should be taken to those that need it," he added.

Gulyás said the European Union was "basically pro-migration" and the migration commissioner was "distinctly pro-migration", which was "unacceptable". He called for efforts to be made in the European Parliament election campaign that end with a clear message that "European and Hungarian citizens want an EC that is against migration", he said.

Commenting on ruling Fidesz's membership of the European People's Party, he said the EPP needed Fidesz more than the other way around. Fidesz, he added, wanted to stay in the EPP but if, for instance, the party group made concessions to pro-migration forces, then the Hungarian government would not cooperate. At the same time, he insisted that Fidesz aimed to normalise relations with the EPP. The March meeting in which the EPP decided to suspend Fidesz's membership was a "gathering which belongs to the entertainment industry", he said. He described the debate as "damaging" to the EPP and "tragi-comic", adding that the party was "trying to shoot itself in the foot" during the EP campaign by debating whether "its strongest member" should be sanctioned. Gulyás said EPP leader Manfred Weber appeared to be the best candidate, even if his position wavered on certain issues.

Regarding a letter Gulyás sent to European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker in February raising objections to EC First Vice-President

Frans Timmermans's campaign as the Spitzenkandidat of the Socialists while retaining his position in the EC, Gulyás cited Juncker's answer that Timmermans was able to keep the two functions separate. "Facts don't seem to support that," he said.

On another subject, Gulyás said that Interior Minister Sándor Pintér has invited Italian Deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini to visit Hungary. Hungary applauds Salvini's policies because he has shown that maritime migration, too, "can be stopped". The Hungarian government "fully agrees" with Salvini that the protection of external borders "is essential to stopping migration", Gulyás added. If voters support the ruling Fidesz-Christian Democrat alliance's anti-migration, anti-united-states-of-Europe policies in the upcoming European parliamentary election, it will be taken as an instruction in terms of the coalitions they enter into, he said.

GULYÁS: HOME PURCHASE SCHEME FOR VILLAGE RESIDENTS TO BE LAUNCHED IN JULY

The government will launch a special version of its Home Purchase Subsidy Scheme for Families, known by its Hungarian acronym "CSOK", targeting rural areas on July 1, the head of the Prime Minister's Office told journalists. The government adopted detailed regulations for the scheme at its latest meeting, Gergely Gulyás said. The programme will affect some 2,486

villages and will cover homesteads outside communities, he added. The government expects the scheme to help prevent the emptying of villages. In line with CSOK rules, 600,000 forints (EUR 1,890) support will be available for families with one child, 2.6 million forints for two children and 10 million forints for three children, he said. The money can be used for revamping homes or buying new or second-hand homes but only half of the money can be used for home purchase unless it's a new home, he added.

The same rules apply as with regular CSOK regarding minimum floor space requirements and the property must not be purchased from close acquaintances or from a company owned by the buyer, he added. The government expects to rely on savings cooperatives as special partners in transferring payments, and banks must not require clients to use additional services as a precondition for transferring CSOK, he said.

Meanwhile, commenting on the drought which recently hit farmers, he said the ministry had received 550 claims for compensation from the beginning of the year, covering a total 24,000 hectares affected. The government is also planning assistance to building irrigation systems to make farms less vulnerable to the weather, Gulyás added.

On another subject, he said that in spite of Europe's "worrying" economic indicators, the foundations of the Hungarian economy were stable, adding that it still had reserves for

future growth. The economy is therefore in good enough shape to avert a potential economic crisis, he added.

Gulyás also noted that the government was hard at work on an economic action plan with specific schemes that would help boost household savings.

On the topic of a handball arena to be built in Budapest's Népliget Park, Gulyás said the state had purchased the plot on which the arena will stand for 42 million euros from a foreign-owned company. Another section of the land will be handed over to the state by the 9th district council, he added.

As regards the reports of abuses in Budapest's street parking system, Gulyás said the matter was not a Budapest-wide problem. He said the situation was the worst in the 14th district. Developments in the district's parking system under the mayorship of Párbeszéd's Gergely Karácsony are "baffling", he said, adding that an investigative committee should be set up to look into the issue. Asked about hospital debts, Gulyás said 29 hospitals had accumulated most of the sector's debt. He said the solution required reviewing the financial management of hospitals with a potential solution being the allocation of more state funding.

Asked about next year's state budget, Gulyás said the finance ministry will submit the draft budget to parliament by May 28. The PM's Office chief also commented on a

Slovak law restricting the singing of foreign national anthems, calling the law "unacceptable". Gulyás said he considered the law's enactment a human rights issue, adding that Hungary's foreign ministry will take legal action regarding the matter. Asked about the potential relocation of the monument to Soviet soldiers who lost their lives liberating Hungary from Budapest's Szabadság Square, Gulyás said that due to international legal reasons, it could only be relocated with Russia's consent. In response to another question, he said Prime Minister Viktor Orbán will travel to China for bilateral talks later this month.

OPPOSITION PARTIES TO COORDINATE SENDING DELEGATES TO POLLING STATIONS

Opposition parties Jobbik, the Socialists, DK, LMP, Párbeszéd and Momentum will coordinate with each other when sending delegates to polling stations in the European Parliament elections at the end of May, the parties said. The parties' representatives told a joint press conference that they wanted to make sure that at least one opposition delegate was present in every polling station. DK deputy leader László Varju said they were in agreement that it was necessary to monitor ruling "Fidesz's election system". Conservative Jobbik lawmaker Péter Jakab said there may have been abuses in last year's parliamentary elections in the

polling stations the opposition was not represented. Socialist lawmaker Tamás Harangozó asked opposition voters to also undertake the task of guarding the fairness of the voting process.

DK: GOVT PREPARING GROUND FOR 'CENSORING' FACEBOOK

The opposition Democratic Coalition (DK) accused the government of laying the groundwork for censoring Facebook, citing a paper published on the website of the Századvég Foundation, a think-tank that DK says is close to the ruling Fidesz party. The leftist party's spokesman Sándor Rónai said social media was the last platform in Hungary free from government control. Századvég, which the DK politician referred to as "the government's cash register", now proposed several measures to curb activities on Facebook. Századvég published a document on April 3 that suggested that nation states should extend state jurisdiction and constitutional rules to cover social media, which should be "categorised as traditional mass media" and regulated accordingly, Rónai said. The foundation also proposed firmer legal steps against "self-appointed censors" who aim to curb the freedom of speech and opinion, he added. Should the government try to curb the social media site's activities, demonstrations on the scale of the 2014 protests against the "internet tax" could ensue, Rónai insisted. The Századvég essay

authored by Gábor Megadja, Zoltán Balázs Beky and József György Horváth is entitled "Századvég's proposals against Facebook censorship".

Századvég cites an op-ed in The Washington Post by Facebook's founder and head, Mark Zuckerberg, as saying that governments should regulate and control the internet because monitoring and filtering malicious content was too onerous a task for Facebook alone. It further noted that the Századvég Foundation had been investigating the issue of "Facebook censorship" and "freedom of expression in general". At first glance, Zuckerberg was exhibiting "naive goodwill", Századvég's paper said, adding that the foundation was proposing various measures that would genuinely guarantee freedom protections.

EU-BOUND MIGRANT CARAVAN SET TO LEAVE FROM GREECE 'AT ANY MOMENT' - TV

A caravan of illegal migrants could set off from Greece for inner Europe "at any moment", public television said. M1 on-site correspondent Attila Muci said the number of migrants at the Thessaloniki camp had grown significantly over the last few hours, with riot police also arriving at the scene. Muci said the hundreds of illegal migrants at the camp site had recently been joined by a group from another nearby camp. The migrants have reportedly said that they want

their numbers to grow to a "critical mass" so that they cannot be held back from their trek towards the inner continent. They plan on making their way through Macedonia, Serbia and Bosnia, the correspondent said. Muci said he had been told by the migrants that they are ready to leave the camps behind even if it means losing their benefits, as they have waited in vain for years for their asylum procedures to progress. Many migrants, he said, have reportedly been told to expect the first stage of their asylum procedures to be cleared in 2022, 2023 or 2025.

PARLT SPEAKER HAS TALKS IN ITALY

House Speaker László Kövér and Matteo Salvini, Italy's interior minister, have discussed illegal migration and the future of Europe. Kövér congratulated the League party's leader on Italy's results in thwarting maritime migration and noted that Hungary had shown that migration could be stopped on land.

On another subject, Kövér said that Hungary's ruling Fidesz "sees its future in the European People's Party". Salvini and his party wish to "stay partners and allies" with Fidesz. The idea that Fidesz may quit the EPP was not raised at the talks and "Fidesz is not planning to". The two parties share the position that the EPP should be "more open to political forces on the right, too, not only on the left", Kövér said and argued that it could enhance EPP's reputation and open up alternatives

to voters. Salvini is scheduled to visit Hungary later in April or early May, at the invitation of Sándor Pintér, Hungary's interior minister, Kövér said.

The speaker held had talks with Maria Elisabetta Alberta Casellati, president of the Senate, and Roberto Fico, speaker of the house of representatives focusing on ways to build closer ties between the parliaments of Hungary and Italy. During talks with Fico, a member of the Five Star Movement, Kövér urged cooperation concerning the EU's next budget aimed at avoiding cuts to the community's structural funds and common agricultural policy financing. He also held talks with Senator Maurizio Gasparri, delegated by Forza Italia, the head of the Senate's immunity committee.

JOBBIK CALLS ON GOVT TO FREEZE TIES WITH SLOVAKIA

The opposition Jobbik party has called on the government to freeze bilateral relations with Slovakia until it guarantees withdrawal of a recently approved law which "severely restricts" the singing of the Hungarian anthem there. The Slovak law is "revolting and unacceptable", and violates European Union norms, Jobbik lawmaker János Bencsik said. The Hungarian government failed to react to similar moves in recent years and Prime Minister Viktor Orbán described cooperation as "exemplary" after a

meeting with his Slovak counterpart last summer, Bencsik said.

SZIJJÁRTÓ DECORATES FORMER US STATE DEPT OFFICIAL

The Hungarian foreign minister has presented a high state award to Wess Mitchell, the US State Department's former Assistant Secretary of the Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs, in Washington, DC. Mitchell received the Order of Merit of the Republic of Hungary, Officer's Cross, in recognition of his outstanding achievements in advancing Hungarian-US relations. Presenting the state honour, Péter Szijjártó said that under Mitchell's direction of his department "a new chapter had opened" in relations between the US and central Europe with Washington considering the region again an ally.

With Mitchell in office, US-Hungarian relations were guided by "two magic words: mutual respect", Szijjártó said, noting his role in arranging a visit to Budapest by US State Secretary Mike Pompeo for the first time after seven and a half years. The Hungarian foreign minister commended the former US diplomat for his role in developing bilateral political relations which Szijjártó said "had in effect been non-existent" before his term in office. Szijjártó touched upon the "sensitive" issue of Ukraine, and said that Mitchell had seen that "Hungary cannot consider Ukraine from a purely geo-political aspect; for us, Hungarians,

minorities are a very important cause". Szijjártó voiced satisfaction that the incumbent US administration "sees the Hungarian government's policies aimed at preserving Christian values and which have the cause of security in the primary focus".

Accepting the honour, Mitchell said it was a love of freedom that bonded Hungarians and Americans. As an assistant secretary, he said, he had seen an outstanding opportunity in promoting active diplomacy towards central Europe, primarily Hungary.

SOCIALISTS-PÁRBEZÉD LAUNCHES EP ELECTION CAMPAIGN

The opposition Socialist-Párbeszéd alliance started its European parliamentary election campaign in Budapest with a nationwide bus tour. Socialist leader Bertalan Tóth said the politicians of the two parties participating in the tour will promote their programme dubbed "Homeland. Love. Europe" at one hundred locations across Hungary. The Socialist and Párbeszéd parties seek to build a "Europe of social welfare" promoting such goals as raising the minimum wage to an equivalent of 737 euros, the minimum pension to 300 euros and the per child family allowance to 147 euros in all EU countries. Tóth said the alliance would seek personal contact with voters because they "cannot compete with the government's billboards just ordered for a total 10 billion forints (EUR 31m)".

Ruling Fidesz said in response that the Socialists' bus is "heading towards the pro-migration coalition". According to the statement, the two parties "should also tell voters that they have supported all Brussels's pro-migration proposals such as migrant quotas, migrant visas, and the legalisation of migration". "MEPs of the Socialist Party and Párbeszéd have not been fighting for the Hungarian people in the European Parliament but for migrants," Fidesz said. Hungary needs MEPs that "represent Hungarians in Brussels rather than Brussels in Hungary", the party added.

**STRASBOURG COURT
REJECTS BUDAPEST
NIGHTCLUB OWNER'S
COMPLAINT**

The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) unanimously rejected a complaint by a former co-owner of Budapest's nightclub West-Balkan—

the venue of a fatal incident in 2011 which has been since closed down—as inadmissible. The case concerns an event on January 15, 2011, during which a stampede broke out in the overcrowded club and three young women seeking exit were crushed to death. The nightclub reportedly let far more people in than its official capacity allowed.

The club's former co-owner, Győző Szalontay was prosecuted as a principal defendant and was handed a prison sentence of three years and four months, with half of the term suspended for two years, in a final ruling by the Budapest High Court. Szalontay lodged a complaint with the ECHR claiming that Hungarian authorities had not complied with the requirements of the right to a fair trial which is in violation of the European Convention on Human Rights. The ECHR rejected the complaint saying in its final decision that Szalontay had not

complied with the rule of exhausting domestic remedies before applying to Strasbourg as he had not made a constitutional complaint.

**MVM TO BUILD SOLAR
PARK IN W HUNGARY**

The state-owned electricity works MVM has started building a solar park on a 2.4-hectare area leased from the municipality of the western Hungarian town of Kisbér, mayor Zoltán Sinkovicz said. The solar park is expected to start commercial operations at the end of 2019. The investment is part of a 6 billion forint (EUR 18.7m) project to build 21 small photovoltaic power plants in Transdanubia. These will have capacity to generate a combined 13.2GWh a year on average. European Union funding will cover one-third of the investment costs, with the remainder financed from central budget funds.