

PHOTO OF THE DAY



MTVA/Tamas Soki

Flowering cherry trees in Pécs

UPCOMING EVENTS

EU heads of govt and state hold extraordinary meeting on Brexit

Stats office prelim report on commercial lodgings in Feb 2019

Budapest mayor, interior minister hold joint press conference

HR minister opens Hungarian Hospital Association congress

TOP STORY

TOP COURT: LAWS PASSED ON DEC 12 VALID

Hungary's Constitutional Court declared an amendment to the labour code and the law on the new administrative court system adopted by parliament on Dec. 12 last year to be lawful.

Opposition MPs had gathered a quarter of members of parliament to appeal the amendment and the legislation, which they argued were adopted amid a breach of parliament's rules and in conflict with the constitution. Among the lawmakers' objections was that parliament's speaker had not chaired the session from the speaker's podium. The court said that voting conditions had not breached so-called guarantee rules and that MPs were personally responsible for meeting procedural expectations of the house, noting that opposition lawmakers had prevented the speaker from accessing the podium. According to the court, a "constitutional necessity to ensure reasonable operations of parliament" could justify "measures to save majority decision-making from suffering unreasonably large drawbacks arising from the democracy of the assembly". The court cited a decision by the European Court of Human Rights, too, declaring that the freedom of debates in parliament is "not unrestricted" and "parliament has the right to intervene when its members disrupt the usual order of the legislative process".

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TOP COURT: PARLT SPEAKER HAS RIGHT TO ENSURE HOUSE'S DIGNITY NOT VIOLATED

The speaker of parliament "has the right and obligation to ensure that parliament's dignity is not violated," the Constitutional Court said in a ruling in which it declared that amendments to the labour code and legislation on the establishment of administrative courts were lawfully approved by parliament on Dec. 12. The court admitted that under the law, parliament should have two notaries on duty at any time, "possibly" one delegated by the ruling parties and the other from the opposition, but said that parliament's having two ruling party notaries on Dec. 12 was "not a violation of the rules but due to the pressure of circumstances". Addressing complaints concerning the technical procedure of voting, the court said that it is not stipulated that deputies can only cast their ballot electronically. The court said parliament's session on Dec. 12 had had the required quorum and the required number of votes was cast for the motions on the agenda for that day. The court turned down all appeals concerning the Dec. 12 parliamentary session in a unanimous vote of all 15 members.

OPPOSITION PARTIES SLAM TOP COURT RULING

Hungary's parliamentary opposition parties slammed a ruling by the

Constitutional Court declaring the lawfulness of amendments to the labour code and legislation on the establishment of administrative courts approved by parliament on Dec. 12.

The opposition Socialist and allied Párbeszéd parties said they would appeal to the European Court of Human Rights against the ruling. At a press conference in front of the Constitutional Court building, Socialist MP Ildikó Bangó Borbély said that the court "filled with Fidesz party soldiers" had ruled against Hungarian employees and in favour of the government. Párbeszéd MP Bence Tordai accused the court of cowardice for separating complaints about the voting procedure from objections to the content of the Dec. 12 bills and declining to discuss the latter.

The opposition nationalist Jobbik party said that "if Fidesz wants to stab a nation in the back, it can." Péter Jakab, the party's deputy group leader, said in a statement that the Constitutional Court's findings raised the question of "whom the court wants to please by aiding the illegal enslavement of a nation and the elimination of democracy".

The leftist Democratic Coalition (DK) called the court's ruling "outrageous". Gergely Arató, DK's deputy group leader, said in a statement that his party would continue to protest the "slave law". Arató criticised the court, saying that "instead of a Fidesz-run Fundamental Law Court, true patriots need an independent body that safeguards the preservation of law and justice with dignity."

ORBÁN INAUGURATES AVICENNA INSTITUTE OF MIDDLE EASTERN STUDIES IN PILISCSABA

The migration crisis in Europe has widened into a civilisational crisis, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán said in his speech at the inauguration of the Avicenna Institute of Middle Eastern Studies in Piliscsaba, near Budapest.

At the inauguration of the institute dedicated to the research of Islam and to boosting political and economic ties between Hungary and Islamic countries, Orbán said, "Islamic culture has conquered new territories" and "the number of Muslims settling in isolated blocks in western European cities is steadily growing". "The East has come to the West," Orbán said, adding that researchers should now study "what happens in the West as well as in the East". Hence, oriental studies have a strategic reach, he said.

Europe is under the "political illusion" that people arriving from Islamic countries will not transfer to Europe the "laws, customs and conflicts that have been present in that culture for centuries," Orbán said. Migrants coveting a German, French or Hungarian lifestyle want to obtain that on their own terms, Orbán said. "Is Europe prepared for that? Can it guarantee peaceful coexistence?" he asked. The Hungarian solution, taking help to where the trouble is, is the only one that allows all parties to keep their identities, he said.

Regarding the Avicenna Institute, Orbán noted that the internationally acclaimed institute had waited for 15 years to receive a worthy campus with a building designed by renowned Hungarian architect Imre Makovecz.

Hungarians' roots in oriental cultures are present in its words of Turkish and Persian roots, in cuisine, folk art, music and literature, Orbán said. Getting to know other cultures is known to strengthen the commitment to one's own, Orbán said. He expressed hope that the Avicenna Institute will do just that, helping the government and the country "to, strengthened in our Christian, European identity, become good partners with Arab countries."

SZIJJÁRTÓ TO SIGN AGREEMENT ON AID TO MEXICO CHURCH RECONSTRUCTION

Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó held talks in Mexico on economic issues on Tuesday and is scheduled to sign an agreement on Hungary granting 2 billion forints (EUR 6.23m) for the reconstruction of two Catholic churches in Mexico. Szijjártó told MTI by phone that he had met Mexican Minister of Economy Graciela Marquez Colin. The Hungarian government launched a policy of opening to the south in 2015 which placed emphasis on cooperation with Latin American countries with fast-growing economies, he added. The development of Mexican-Hungarian

relations has well demonstrated the success of the scheme, Szijjártó said. Mexico is Hungary's number one trading partner in the region, with bilateral trade exceeding 1 billion dollars last year, including 875 million dollars of exports, he added.

The Mexican economy is the second most significant one in Latin America, after Brazil's, he said. Mexico's growing car industry is seeking European partners and import demand is large for pharmaceuticals and health equipment. The challenges faced by Mexico's agriculture have generated interest in European irrigation technologies, he added. Opportunities for Hungarian businesses are available in the Mexican market in those four areas, Szijjártó said. Additionally, the government has opened a 620 million dollar credit line in Eximbank to help promote Hungarian companies' activities in Mexico, he said.

The fact that Mexico is the world's second largest Catholic country is also important, "creating a link with Hungary which has been a Christian country for a thousand years", he said. Szijjártó noted that Mexico was hit by a serious earthquake in 2017 which caused damages in churches. He added that he would sign an agreement with Minister of Culture Alejandra Fausto on support for the rebuilding of two Catholic churches. One of them is a cloister in the countryside and the other is in the centre of Mexico City. The latter's painted windows are illustrated with images of Hungarian saints, he said.

OFFICIAL: GOV'T WON'T OBSTRUCT ANY 'CONSTRUCTIVE' BREXIT DELAY

Hungary's government will not stand in the way of any "constructive agreement" on the extension of the deadline for Brexit if it offers a chance for Britain to leave the European Union in an orderly fashion, state secretary of the Prime Minister's Office Szabolcs Takács said. After attending a meeting of EU ministers in charge of EU affairs, Takács told MTI by phone that the government believed it was important to avoid a "hard Brexit" and to develop the tightest possible relations for the future. Commenting on next month's European Parliament elections, he said at stake was "whether the Brussels bureaucrats get to tell others what it means to be a good European and whether nation states can retain the right to decide about their future, preserving their social systems and sovereignty."

VARGA DISCUSSES BUDAPEST-BELGRADE RAILWAY UPGRADE IN BEIJING

Finance Minister Mihály Varga has met with leaders of the Export-Import Bank of China in Beijing to discuss upgrading the Budapest-Belgrade rail line, the Finance Ministry said. China is financing 85% of the cost of upgrading the line, which will become part of a

corridor for delivering Chinese goods to Europe from the port of Piraeus in Greece. Speaking in Beijing, Varga said preparation of the general contractor contracts is moving forward at a good pace and a decision on the Chinese-Hungarian consortium for the project is likely to be made by the end of April. To achieve the goal of completing the project by 2023, the government wants to speed up hiring and licencing procedures, Varga said. The Budapest-Belgrade rail line will complete the missing north-south links in central and eastern Europe, the finance ministry said in a statement. It is important that Chinese goods destined for Europe are delivered to the continent by rail from Piraeus, it said, adding that Hungary would miss out as a transport corridor without the upgrade.

OFFICIAL: EP 'PRO-MIGRATION MAJORITY' TRYING TO GET HUNGARY CONDEMNED ON 'TRUMPED-UP CHARGES'

The lack of progress in an Article 7 procedure launched against the Hungarian government in the European Commission shows that the European Parliament's "pro-migration majority" is using "trumped up charges" in an effort to get Hungary condemned, the state secretary in charge of European Union relations said. Judit Varga attended a meeting of EU affairs ministers in Luxembourg which included the procedure against Hungary on its agenda for the fifth time. Varga said

the meeting did not include an official hearing, only an assessment of the situation concerning the rule of law in Hungary, followed by representatives from certain member states trying to convince Romania, which holds the EU's rotating presidency, to advance the procedure to the next stage. She reiterated that the procedure only represented an attempt to exercise pressure on Hungary in order to get the government change its anti-migration policy. Varga said the Hungarian government was ready to act as a partner in a fair procedure because "once the discussion is focused on facts and legal details, the pro-migration majority loses ammunition".

NÉMETH: UKRAINE SHOULD SUSPEND LANGUAGE BILL DEBATE

Ukraine should suspend the debate on its language bill and pass a law that is in line with European norms and does not curtail the acquired rights of the country's minorities, Zsolt Németh, the head of parliament's foreign affairs committee, said in Strasbourg. Addressing a roundtable discussion on language rights in Ukraine, Németh said Ukraine's language bill gave cause for concern, arguing that it would restrict the use of minority languages to private life. Hungary is baffled by the bill, he said, adding that it had added to the bilateral tensions caused by the enactment of the country's education law. Németh said the only way to resolve the dispute was for Ukraine to submit

the bill to the Venice Commission and wait for the body to publish an opinion on the bill before approving it. "Isolation cannot be in Ukraine's interest," Németh said. "If there's a path to peace and if there's a perspective of Western integration, they can only lead through respect for human, and specifically, minority rights."

He said that based on the outcome of the first round of Ukraine's presidential election, there was reason to hope that the country could start down on a new path concerning its international ties, settle its geopolitical conflicts and base its domestic political activities on respecting minority rights.

Németh also said that Hungary's position on Ukraine's treatment of its minorities enjoyed strong backing in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE). He pointed out that over 80% of the body had backed a resolution condemning Ukraine's education law and calling on Kiev to turn to the Venice Commission in the matter. Romania has proposed another resolution in the matter that would lay out the norms Kiev would have to respect as regards the treatment of its minorities, Németh added. However, he expressed hope that such a resolution would not be necessary after the presidential election.

HUNGARY IN TALKS TO ACQUIRE STAKE IN CROATIAN LNG TERMINAL

Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó will meet Tomislav Corić, Croatia's minister

for environmental protection and energy, in Dubrovnik on Friday to discuss Hungary's potential purchase of a stake in the LNG terminal being built on the island of Krk, the foreign ministry said. In a statement to MTI, the ministry said that having the opportunity to import natural gas from the south would be a significant step forward in terms of the energy security of Hungary and the region. He noted that Croatia and the European Union recently greenlit the LNG terminal.

Corić said on Sunday that the Croatian government recently received the Hungarian foreign ministry's declaration of intent that Hungary is ready to acquire a 25% stake in the terminal, adding that talks on the matter were ongoing. The minister expressed hope that interest in the stake and the purchase of capacities in the terminal would increase over the coming months and years. Whether Hungary can acquire a stake in the terminal, he said, would depend on the outcome of the talks. The terminal, estimated to cost 234 million euros, is expected to begin operating in 2021.

GULYÁS: GOVT'S ROMA POLICY WORKING

The Hungarian government's decision to provide job opportunities instead of welfare to the Roma community has significantly reduced Roma unemployment over the past decade, the head of the Prime Minister's Office said. Government programmes aimed at helping the Roma between 1990 and

2010 proved unsuccessful, but 2010 marked the start of a new era in Roma policy, Gergely Gulyás told an event marking International Romani Day.

One of the lessons to be learned from the past decade, he said, was that the principle of subsidiarity was especially important in Roma communities. In order for a scheme to be successful, it had to have "local legs", Gulyás said. The government is looking for partners who can identify the opportunities of government spending on helping the Roma community, he said. Gulyás said there was still much to be done to close the opportunity gap between Roma and non-Roma Hungarians. But, he added, there was reason to hope that after another decade like the past one, the Roma community could also benefit from Hungary's economic progress.

IMF RAISES GDP GROWTH FORECAST FOR HUNGARY

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) raised its projection for Hungary's GDP growth this year to 3.6% in its fresh World Economic Outlook. The projection was raised from 3.3% in a forecast released last October, but is still under the government's latest forecast for 3.9% growth. The IMF sees Hungary's GDP growth slowing to 2.7% in 2020. The IMF projects average annual inflation will pick up to 3.2% in 2019, before edging back to 3.1% in 2020. It sees the unemployment rate dropping to 3.5% in 2019 and to 3.4% in 2020. The

current account surplus is set reach 0.5% of GDP in 2019, level with last year, before widening to 0.6% in 2020.

HUNGARY CPI UP 3.7% YR/YR IN MARCH

Hungary's consumer price index in March rose by an annual 3.7% compared with an increase of 3.1% in February, the Central Statistical Office (KSH) said. Analysts had expected a slightly slower rate of 3.5% in March. Apart from last October's annual rise of 3.8%, consumer prices have not grown to such an extent year on year since January 2013. Core inflation, which strips out seasonally volatile products, increased by an annual 3.8% in March, after 3.5% in February and 3.2% in January. KSH statistician Beáta Kollár noted that the last time core inflation had reached such heights was in December 2012, when it grew by 4.9%. In March 2018, core inflation grew an annual 2.5%.

AVERAGE HUNGARIAN HOUSEHOLD HAS NET ASSETS OF HUF 27 M

The net assets of an average Hungarian household stood at 27 million forints (EUR 84,000) at the end of 2017, up 48% from 2014, the National Bank of Hungary said in a study of survey results. The median value of net household assets reached 12 million, up 39%. The study shows the rate of home ownership in 2017 was over 80% in all but the

lowest two deciles of households, where it fell to 63% and 28%, respectively. The home ownership rate for all households was 84%.

Car ownership, which averaged 54% for all households, reached 82% in the top decile and was 30% in the lowest. The rate of households with home loans was 17% on average, level with the rate in the top decile. About 45% of households in the top decile reside in Budapest. The wealthiest 1% of Hungarian households held just over one-quarter of all net household assets. The wealthiest 10% held more than 56% of the total.

HUNGARIAN MARCH OF THE LIVING TO BE HELD ON SUNDAY

The 17th March of the Living in Budapest, commemorating the victims of the Holocaust, will be

held on Sunday, April 14. Marchers will leave from the Március 15 square at 6pm and proceed by torchlight to the Shoes on the Danube Bank monument in front of Parliament. This year's march will be dedicated to Jane Haining, leader of the Scottish Mission school in Budapest from 1932, who protected her Jewish charges from deportation until she was arrested in 1944. She died in Auschwitz aged 47. The opening speech will be given by David Mundell, the UK Secretary of State for Scotland. The event will be hosted by Gábor Gordon, board member of the Hungarian March of the Living Foundation, and Iain Lindsay, the UK's ambassador to Budapest. The commemoration will be followed by an outdoor screening of "Nicky's family", a film commemorating Nicholas Winton, a British man who saved 669 Czech Jewish children.

HUNGARY PLANTING TREES

Hungary's programme to plant trees will continue in state forests this year and next, with the total number of seedlings rising to fifty million, the daily Magyar Nemzet said. Due to the decades-long scheme, forested areas in Hungary are constantly growing, the paper said. State foresters have planted 22 million seedlings in February-March and a new planting season will begin next spring, the farm ministry told the paper. In the current spring season, most of the planting has taken place in the Danube-Tisza region. In addition to plantings in state-owned forests, millions of seedlings have been planted in private forests. Most of the new trees are acacia, poplar and oak.