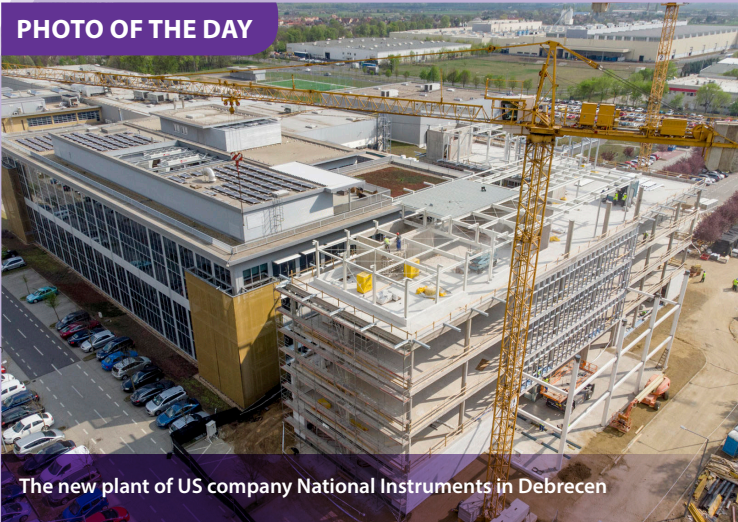


PHOTO OF THE DAY



The new plant of US company National Instruments in Debrecen

MTI/Zsolt Cséplédi

UPCOMING EVENTS

National Election Committee meets

Kövér attends Arab Culture Day

Budapest Spring Fair opens

TOP STORY

ORBÁN AT CDI MEETING IN BRUSSELS

Prime Minister Viktor Orbán addressed a meeting of the Centrist Democrat International (CDI), a Christian democratic political formation, in Brussels, discussing the issues of Brexit, the economic slowdown and the European parliamentary elections.

Orbán, as a deputy leader of the centre-right grouping, was asked to assess the political situation in Europe, Bertalan Havasi, his press chief, told MTI. As regards Brexit, the prime minister said that mere hours from an emergency EU summit on the issue, nothing was yet certain about Britain's exit from the bloc.

On the topic of the European economy, Orbán said the slowdown of the Italian and German economies gave cause for concern.

Concerning the EP elections, Orbán, citing polling data, said the European People's Party was expected to lose seats in the EP. Though it is still expected to be the strongest grouping in the legislative body, the question arises as to whether the EPP will be forced to form a coalition with the "pro-migration leftist and liberal parties", he said. "There's still a lot of speculation going on, but this strategic debate will be inevitable after the election," Orbán said, adding that central European Christian Democratic parties were in a better position ahead of the election than their western European counterparts.

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KOVÁCS: EU PARTY POLITICS DEFINED BY APPROACH TO MIGRATION

The issue of how to handle migration is Europe's new political partition, Zoltán Kovács, the government's communications chief, said in an interview. "What's the point of talking about European parliamentary elections if much of the European People's Party has, in effect, pivoted to the left and is voicing socialist and liberal views?" the state secretary for international communications and relations said on public radio. He said political forces that oppose migration saw Europe as nothing more than a grouping of nations and were looking to strengthen European families. Pro-migration forces, by contrast, favour a "united states of Europe" modelled after the United States of America, he said, adding that this view was "completely foreign" to the EPP's original positions.

Kovács also said political discourse in today's Europe, mainly in western Europe, was divorced from reality. "Instead people try to use artificial words and expressions and a projected reality to convey their views on what should be done in Europe," he said, adding that central European countries, on the other hand, had found a "pragmatic voice" and were talking about "the reality" experienced by the European people. European politics today is about the clash of these approaches, Kovács

said, arguing that western European countries and a significant segment of the EPP wanted these differences of opinion to "disappear". He said Europeans were dissatisfied with how the EU functioned, adding that one of the reasons for their frustration was the way the European Commission and EU institutions had handled the issue of migration.

SZIJJÁRTÓ: HUNGARY TO OPEN CONSULAR, TRADE MISSION IN PANAMA

Hungary will open a diplomatic mission to handle trade and consular affairs in Panama, the foreign minister said ahead of talks in Panama City. Péter Szijjártó told MTI by phone that he will meet with President Juan Carlos Varela Rodriguez, Vice President and Foreign Minister Isabel de Saint Malo de Alvarado and Trade and Industry Minister Nestor Gonzalez. A meeting is also scheduled with Archbishop Jose Domingo Ulloa Mendieta. The foreign minister said he will sign with his partners a higher education cooperation agreement on grants for Panamanian students to study at Hungarian universities. To promote bilateral economic cooperation, the government has opened a 160 million dollar credit line with Eximbank to support Hungarian businesses' investments in Panama, he said, noting prospective cooperation primarily in water management.

SOCIALISTS: EP ELECTIONS CRUCIAL

The European parliamentary elections next month will be crucial in deciding whether "self-serving nationalists" or democratic forces are ascendant, the head of the opposition Socialist Party's national assembly said. "The future of European Union nations is contingent on deepening integration," Ágnes Kunhalmi told a press conference in Debrecen, in eastern Hungary. "We can safeguard Europe's peace, welfare and the security of its people by cooperating with other nation states," she said, adding that the independence of the Hungarian nation cannot be preserved by pursuing a policy of "a tight fist".

If nationalists "like Le Pen, Orbán, Salvini and Kaczyński" gain momentum in the May ballot, Europe's peoples can be fearful of their security, welfare and sovereignty and will face an uncertain future, Kunhalmi said. She noted that the Socialists and allied Párbeszéd were the only opposition parties to put forward a joint opposition list of candidates for the EP elections. Kunhalmi vowed that their MEPs would fight for a Europe-wide minimum wage of 750 euros, a minimum pension of 300 euros and a family allowance of 150 euros. They will also lobby for land-based farm subsidies and a top VAT rate in Hungary of 20%.

The party alliance expects to win at least three mandates in the EP, she said.

FIDESZ, NGO SLAM ROMANIAN TOP COURT'S REJECTION OF ETHNIC HUNGARIANS' APPEALS

Fidesz MP István Bajkai and Zoltán Lomnici, head of the Human Dignity Council civil group, slammed as "unacceptable" the Romanian supreme court's rejection of the appeals of two ethnic Hungarians sentenced to prison for an attempted bomb attack in 2015. István Beke, a local leader of the self-defined radical nationalist Sixty-Four Counties Youth Movement (HVIM), and Zoltán Szócs, the movement's Transylvanian leader, were each sentenced to five years in prison for what the Romanian authorities saw as an attempt to detonate a home-made explosive device at a parade on Romania's national holiday on December 1, 2015. The authorities charged them based on intercepted phone conversations and petards found at Beke's home. "Transylvania's native Hungarian minority has been trying to survive in its homeland for a hundred years in the face of oppression and constant intimidation and persecution," Bajkai and Lomnici said in a statement. They said it had been proven in court that Beke and Szócs's convictions had been unfounded and that lawyers had also uncovered "countless serious procedural errors" in the criminal proceedings. But, the statement said, despite these findings, the supreme court made a "political decision", rather than a legal one. Bajkai and Lomnici

said the court's decision to reject the appeals served to protect the interests of the Romanian secret service and to uphold the earlier convictions, which they said only served to intimidate the ethnic Hungarian community. Bajkai and Lomnici said they would assist the two Hungarians in their ongoing appeals to the European Court of Human Rights and would exhaust every avenue of legal appeal available in the European Union in connection with the case.

EXIMBANK SIGNS DEAL WITH BANCOMEXT IN MEXICO

Hungary's Eximbank signed an agreement with Latin American development bank Bancomext of Mexico on supporting Hungarian corporate investments in Mexico, the foreign ministry said. Also, Eximbank staff will get training at the Mexican bank. Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó said at the signing event that Hungary had launched its "opening to the south" scheme to develop closer cooperation with countries in Latin America five years ago.

Hungarian exports to Mexico reached 877 million dollars last year, so they currently dominate bilateral trade which totalled over 1 billion dollars, Szijjártó said. Budapest is determined to further increase this figure, he said, adding that more and more companies were expressing interest in Mexico and Hungary should have flagship companies, such as Richter and Graphisoft, which are followed

by smaller companies, including medical equipment manufacturers, food industry companies, car industry suppliers and firms involved in water management. A Hungarian plant owned by Mexican company Nematik, which has signed a strategic cooperation agreement with the Hungarian government, supplies almost all large car makers around the world, he added.

The Hungarian government has opened a 620 million dollar credit line to help the activities of Hungarian companies in Mexico and finance Hungarian-Mexican intercompany cooperation through Eximbank, Szijjártó said. "I believe the next step in advancing Hungarian-Mexican economic relations would be to go beyond trading with each other, and in addition to us selling products here and you investing in our country, Hungarian companies would start investing here," he said.

BRIBERY CHARGES RAISED AGAINST FOUR IN ALSTOM CASE

Public investigation prosecutors have raised charges against four men, including a senior Alstom official, for bribery in a case involving a 2005 public procurement for the purchase of metro trains which was won by a consortium led by the French company. The Alstom official is charged with bribery in the range of millions of euros in the case involving Budapest transport company BKV purchasing trains for the M2 and M4 metro lines,

according to a statement by public investigations prosecutor Imre Keresztes. To make the payments in 2007 and 2009, Alstom signed three fictitious advisory contracts with Danish and Austrian companies that assisted in transferring payments totalling 8,463,643 euros, Keresztes said.

The prosecutor's office interviewed six suspects. The procedure was dropped in the case of two people and charges were raised against four, including two Hungarian citizens, one Austrian and one American, the statement added. The investigation was ordered in January 2011 and was initially carried out by the rapid-response police national bureau of investigation, but the chief public prosecutor's office transferred it to the public investigation prosecutors in September 2016.

The European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF) started an investigation in February 2012 and submitted its recommendation to the chief public prosecutor in November 2016, partly based on the findings in the case under way in Hungary. The public investigation prosecutors said in March this year that the number of suspects had been raised to six but did not include public figures.

Another investigation is under way connected to the metro 4 project, involving alleged mismanagement related to construction and advisory contracts and project management. The investigation was ordered in January 2017, but the Alstom case was separated from it. According to information released by the public prosecutor's office in March, nobody had been interviewed yet in this case.

GUEST NIGHTS UP 2% IN FEB

Guest nights in commercial lodgings in Hungary were up 2% year on year in February, rising to 1,592,000, the Central Statistical Office (KSH) said. The number of guest nights spent by foreigners was up 3.3% at 803,000 and nights spent by domestic guests edged up 0.6% to 789,000. Revenue rose by 7% to 28 billion forints in the period.

MELKITE PATRIARCH THANKS HUNGARY SUPPORT

Youssef Absi, the patriarch of the Melkite Greek Catholic Church, has sent a letter to Prime Minister

Viktor Orbán, thanking him for the Hungarian government's hospitality and financial support. The patriarch visited Hungary on February 26, and met the prime minister, Deputy Prime Minister Zsolt Semjén and other government leaders. At a press conference last Thursday, Gergely Gulyás, the head of the Prime Minister's Office, said that within its Hungary Helps programme, the government will allocate 794 million forints (EUR 2.4m) to the reconstruction of a Melkite Greek Catholic church in Syria, and 318 million to rebuilding houses and social institutes in Homs. The patriarch said in his letter that the programme helped "thousands of Syrian families" to stay in their homelands. The support also showed those mulling migration that life is "slowly getting back to normal in Syria" and motivated them to return to their homelands, he said. Absi praised Orbán's "courage" and his "vision" for the future of his country and Europe, and called Orbán a "genuine European Christian leader".