

PHOTO OF THE DAY



MTI/Szilárd Kosztescsák

Memorial day of the victims of communism marked in Budapest

UPCOMING EVENTS

Stats office reports on 2019 wages

Coronavirus updates

Budapest assembly meets

Presser on European Day of Speech and Language Therapy

TOP STORY

COMPENSATIONS FOR PRISONERS SUSPENDED

Parliament on Tuesday voted to suspend compensation payments to inmates who have sued the state over conditions in overcrowded prisons until June 15.

The new legislation also stipulates that the government must prepare a proposal for rules governing compensation to the victims of crime before May 15, based on the results of a national public survey now under way. Under the new law, the government is obliged to ensure that by Sept. 30 the occupancy rate of prisons does not exceed 100%. In the future, any amount paid in compensation to a prisoner will be transferred directly to their bank account or added to their deposit managed by the prison to avoid abuse of payments.

Ruling Fidesz lawmaker Gyula Budai said after the vote that the left wing had "again sided with criminals and the Soros network". Neither the Democratic Coalition (DK), nor the Socialists, nor Párbeszéd voted in favour of the suspension of payments, he told a press conference. Referring to US financier George Soros, Budai said that international attacks are expected from "the Soros network that will attack us on all fronts to protect themselves" and so that they could continue their "multi-billion business".

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MEP: FIDESZ BACKS SPEEDING UP ARTICLE 7 PROCEDURE

Hungary's ruling Fidesz party and its government support speeding up the European Union's Article 7 procedure against the country, Fidesz MEP Balázs Hidvéghi said, reacting to a letter urging the European Council to step up the procedure, signed by the leaders of five European parliamentary party groups. The letter was sent to European Council head Charles Michel. Manfred Weber, the head of Fidesz's party family, the European People's Party (EPP), was among the signatories. Hidvéghi said that the party's MEPs have earlier called for a speedy conclusion of the procedure, which he called a "political witch hunt". Fidesz is ready to face all hearings and reviews but rejects double standards, Hidvéghi added. On the other hand, Fidesz rejects the letter's other demand to involve the European Parliament in the procedure, Hidvéghi said. Such a step would be "uncalled for and against the [Lisbon] European Treaty", he said, as the EP's role ended with voting on the report of Green MEP Judith Sargentini in September 2018 which led to launching the procedure. Hidvéghi insisted the proposal was part of a long-standing aim of the EP to expand its authority, and said the procedure was politically biased. The letter is also part of a "pro-migration effort" to keep anti-migration countries such

as Hungary under constant pressure, Hidvéghi said. He also noted that the EPP, where Fidesz's membership was suspended last March, is divided in its support of the procedure against Hungary concerning the state of the rule of law in the country, and another procedure against Poland, reviewing the independence of the judiciary.

VICTIMS OF COMMUNISM REMEMBERED AT MONUMENT OF NATIONAL MARTYRS

House Speaker László Kövér and Human Resources Minister Miklós Kásler laid wreaths of commemoration at the monument of the martyrs of the nation in Budapest, marking the day of victims of communism. The event was organised jointly by the Parliament Office and the Rákóczi Association. Speaking at another commemoration, Gergely Gulyás, the head of the Prime Minister's Office, said communist dictatorships had some 100 million victims worldwide. An estimated 700,000 Hungarians were deported to Soviet forced labour camps, where nearly half of them died. "There have been no statistics about the disabled, those with permanent physical or mental wounds," he said. Gulyás said the communist rule ended in Hungary in 1989, but insisted that "the communists and their crimes are still with us". Gulyás criticised Budapest's management over their

support to an exhibition on the liberation of Budapest in 1945, which Gulyás said evoked memories of Hungary's Soviet occupation and the death of thousands of Hungarians. "Those that seek to find excuses for the murderers ... cannot be believed even if they talk of democracy," he said. Victims of communism are remembered each year on February 25, the anniversary of the arrest and deportation to the Soviet Union of independent smallholder politician Béla Kovács in 1947.

GOVT OFFICIAL: HUNGARIAN SUSPECTED OF CONTRACTING CORONAVIRUS QUARANTINED

Another Hungarian national suspected of carrying the coronavirus has been quarantined, a government official said. The truck driver recently returned from Italy's Lombardy region, foreign affairs state secretary Tamás Menczer said, adding that though the individual in question does not have a fever, they have reported feeling unwell. The truck driver is already being transported to hospital, he said. Meanwhile, citing Hungary's honorary consul in Tenerife, Menczer said there were Hungarian citizens staying at a hotel on the island that was recently locked down after a coronavirus case was identified there. A consul from Madrid is set to travel to the island and if necessary, Hungary will send more officials to Tenerife, he said. The

hotel with around 1,000 guests and staff members had to be quarantined after an Italian guest was diagnosed with coronavirus.

TEACHERS: 10% HIKE OFFERED BY MINISTER 'TOO LITTLE'

The 10% pay rise for teachers Minister of Human Resources Miklós Kásler announced on Monday is “good for a bonus but too little for a hike”, teacher trade union PSZ said. “After nearly 18 months of talks, the government has grasped so little of what concerns teachers,” the statement said. PSZ also criticised the ministry for its decision to implement the hike in July rather than immediately. The union insisted that the hike was announced as a bonus “which the government could cancel at any time”. They added that even with the new hike, teachers’ salaries would remain below the national average. A 10% hike is not enough to prevent young teachers from changing careers, the statement said. The ministry’s pledge of a managerial bonus to head teachers could increase the salaries of some of them to a monthly 821,000 forints (EUR 2,430) before tax, which would further divide teachers, the document said, adding that that “dream salary” would only be available to 0.1% of Hungary’s teachers. It added that auxiliary staff in kindergartens and schools would not benefit from the hike at all.

JOBBIK CALLS ON GOVT TO PUBLISH CORONAVIRUS ACTION PLAN

The opposition Jobbik party is calling on the government to publish its 28-point action plan for protective measures against the coronavirus. The government has so far failed to provide sufficient information about protective measures, János Stummer, an MP of the conservative party, told a press conference. Neither has information from the interior ministry or the chief medical officer been made available, he added.

He criticised Minister of Human Resources Miklós Kásler for recently saying that panic associated with the virus was a much greater problem than the virus itself, which has not yet appeared in Hungary. He said this suggested that the government had not properly followed international press reports or the way the Chinese and Italian governments were communicating in this matter, Stummer said. Panic and concern could actually arise if the government failed to give detailed information about the situation, he added.

SOCIALISTS: RIGHT-WING FAMILY POLICY NOT WORKING

A Socialist politician said the government’s attempts to boost

Hungary’s population with measures to help families were not working. Ildikó Bangó Borbély told a press conference that 2019 was the worst year of the past six in terms of the declining birth rate. Hungary’s population fell by 40,400 in 2019 as a result of 89,200 live births and 129,600 deaths during the year, the Central Statistical Office (KSH) said. She said the Fidesz government’s overhaul of family policy starting in 2014 had only led to the rich getting even richer and the poor getting poorer. “In the meantime, the birth rate has been declining,” she added. The essence of right-wing family policymaking is: “get married, earn well, have at least three children, and then you’ll receive state support”, the Socialist politician said. Meanwhile, she slammed the government for “ignoring pressing issues like the housing crisis, emigration, and health and education”.

NBH LEAVES BASE RATE ON HOLD

Rate-setters of the National Bank of Hungary left the base rate unchanged at 0.90% and the central bank O/N deposit rate at -0.05% at a regular meeting. The Monetary Council has not changed the base rate since May 2016. In a statement issued after the meeting, the Council said it would continue to decide on adjustments to monetary policy on a quarterly basis, saying it would carry out a “comprehensive assessment of

macroeconomic developments” in the next Inflation Report, due to be published when the rate-setters meet in March. The Council reiterated that it expects CPI to “return to the [+/- 1pp] tolerance band by the end of the first quarter of 2020, and to stabilise at the 3% inflation target in the second half of the forecast horizon”. The Council said sentiment on global markets had “rather deteriorated” since the last policy meeting, citing the coronavirus outbreak as a reason. The Council noted a slowdown in Hungary’s growth rate, but said the economy was expected to continue to expand at a clip of “at least two percentage points” over growth in the euro zone.

HOME CONSTRUCTION UP 20%, NEW BUILDING PERMITS DOWN IN 2019

The number of completed homes increased by 20% in 2019 from the previous year, while the number of new building permits dropped by 4.3% from 2018, the Central Statistical Office (KSH) said. Last year, a total of 35,123 home building permits were issued in Hungary. The number of home building permits issued in Budapest rose by 1.1% to 12,158. The number issued in county seats and cities with over 50,000 residents fell by 11.9% to 7,200. The number in other cities was down 10.2% at 9,434, and the number in smaller communities was up 4.7% at 6,331. The number of completed homes increased by a fifth to 21,127 in 2019.

The number of completed homes in Budapest jumped 50.7% to 5,838. In county seats the number rose by 11.5% to 4,563 and in other cities it was up 3.7% at 5,726. Smaller communities saw a 21.3% rise to 4,269.

Finance Minister Mihály Varga said more homes were built in Hungary last year than in any of the previous ten years. The number of new homes completed in Budapest last year was 51% up compared with 2018 and the increase was 21% in municipalities around Hungary, he told a press conference. The boom is thanks to an increase in real wages, low interest rates and the government’s family support scheme, he said.

HUNGARY’S POPULATION SHRINKS BY 40,400 IN 2019

The population of Hungary declined by 40,400 in 2019 as a result of 89,200 live births and 129,600 deaths during the year, the Central Statistical Office (KSH) said. Hungary’s population fell by 41,238 in 2018, when there were 89,807 live births and 131,045 deaths. According to the preliminary data, the number of live births increased by 8.2% in December 2019, while the number of deaths fell by 8.1% compared with the same month of 2018. The rate of population decline in December eased by 32% year on year. A regional breakdown shows that population figures declined in every county and region of the country last year. KSH noted that

the estimated total fertility rate was 1.49%, the same as in 2018. There were 65,300 marriages conducted in 2019, about 28.5% more than in 2018. More couples tied the knot in 2019 than in any year since 1990. The estimated total population of the country, including the net effects of migration, was 9,769,000 at the end of 2019.

KÁSLER: NEW CURRICULUM TO BE INTRODUCED IN SCHOOLS FROM SEPT

Hungary’s new national curriculum (NAT) and the detailed regulation of specific subject areas will be introduced in schools from the next academic year in September, the human resources minister said. “The textbooks will be ready and the publication and distribution of textbooks can be guaranteed,” Miklós Kásler told public Kossuth Rádió, adding that he saw no obstacles to the introduction of the new curriculum from the next academic year. He said that out of around three thousand schools, only seven had objected to the introduction of the new national curriculum, with a few university lecturers joining them. The proportion of opponents, at under 1%, is low, he said. Out of the 19 subjects affected, a few objections have been raised in connection with Hungarian literature and history. But these objections, he added, were “politically motivated” and

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were not “substantive”, he said, adding that several attempts to get secondary school students involved in such matters had been “rather unfortunate”.

PARLT SUPPORTS SZEKLER NATIONAL COUNCIL’S EUROPEAN INITIATIVE ON NATIONAL REGIONS

Parliament approved a resolution to support a European initiative by the Szekler National Council on the protection of national regions. The proposal by green opposition LMP, supported by the ruling parties, conservative opposition Jobbik and by the Socialists, was approved unanimously with 158 votes in favour. The decision has symbolic significance as 2020 has been declared a year of national cohesion marking the 100th anniversary of the Trianon Treaty, the resolution states. The Szekler National Council fought for six years to achieve a European court ruling which obliged the European Commission to consider a proposal submitted for the European initiative.

In line with the resolution, parliament welcomes the initiative dubbed European Citizens’ Initiative for the Equality of the Regions and Sustainability of the Regional Cultures which aims to convince the European Union to pay special attention to regions whose national, cultural, religious and ethnic characteristics are different from those of the surrounding regions.

Parliament calls on Hungarians inside and outside Hungary to support the initiative with their signature. For the initiative launched on May 7 last year to be successful, at least one million supporting signatures are needed from seven member states by May 7 this year. After the vote, Katalin Szili, the prime minister’s commissioner, urged public support for the European initiative. She said that Europe has 400 ethnic minorities and one out of seven EU citizens belongs to an indigenous or regional minority, and called on ethnic Hungarian communities and organisations in the diaspora to promote the initiative.

HUNGARIAN GOVT IN TALKS TO REPURCHASE STAKE IN RAIL CARGO HUNGÁRIA

The Hungarian government and Austria’s Rail Cargo Group are in talks on the state repurchasing a stake in Rail Cargo Hungária, the daily Magyar Nemzet said. Imre Kovács, RCH’s chairman who is on RCG’s board of directors, said such an agreement would be mutually beneficial. The move would fit with the Hungarian government’s aim to reacquire strategic companies that were privatised before 2010, he said, adding that RCH would benefit from government support in public service undertakings. Kovács noted RCG is Europe’s second largest railway freight group and a major player in the Hungarian railway exports. RCH has 45 state-of-the-art locomotives and highly trained staff, he added. Pointing out sustainable development and climate protection goals in Europe, he noted the opportunity to increase the share of environmentally friendly rail freight transport as opposed to heavily polluting road transport.

