

## PHOTO OF THE DAY



Bulgarian, Romanian cars cross Hungary border at Hegyeshalom

MTV / Csaba Kirzsán

## UPCOMING EVENTS

Coronavirus updates

Szijjártó presser on talks with Turkish counterpart Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu

## TOP STORY

# PRIME MINISTER ANNOUNCES MEASURES TO EASE ECONOMIC IMPACT OF EPIDEMIC

The prime minister announced a number of measures to ease the economic impact of the coronavirus epidemic.

In a video on his Facebook page, Viktor Orbán said moratoriums on repayment of principal as well as interest on all retail and corporate loans would be in place until the end of the year. The maturities of short-term corporate loans will be extended until June 30, he said. Annual percentage rates on new personal loans will be capped at five percentage points over the central bank's base rate of 0.90%. Orbán said businesses in the tourism, catering, entertainment, sport and culture sectors, as well as taxi businesses, would not have to pay payroll tax this year. Employee contributions in these sectors will be "significantly cut", he added, explaining that pension contributions will not be taken out of paycheques and the health insurance contribution will be reduced to the minimum allowed by law until June 30. He said rental contracts these businesses have could not be cancelled, nor could rental rates be raised. He said the tourism development contribution would be suspended till June 30.

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**CONFIRMED CASES IN HUNGARY RISES TO 58**

The number of confirmed Covid-19 cases in Hungary has risen to 58, koronavirus.gov.hu said. Of the patients, 9 are Iranian, 1 is British, one Kazakh and 47 are Hungarian, the website said. So far, two have recovered and one has died. Currently, 122 people are quarantined and the authorities have taken 1,803 samples, the website said. The government information website on novel coronavirus noted that the epidemic has reached a new phase in the country, spreading in clusters, not just from one individual to another. It is now impossible to trace individual cases, it said.

**HUNGARY SENDING A PLANE FOR HUNGARIANS STRANDED IN MOROCCO, PANAMA**

Hungary is sending a special plane for the 146 Hungarians stranded in Marrakesh after the Moroccan authorities suspended scheduled flights in response to novel coronavirus, Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó said on Facebook. He noted that travel restrictions have prevented tens of thousands of foreigners from returning home from Morocco.

“A few hours ago I managed to agree with my Moroccan counterpart

that the Hungarian plane will be allowed to land in Marrakesh on Thursday morning and bring back the Hungarians before Morocco’s airspace is totally closed,” the minister said. The affair clearly shows there are fewer and fewer scheduled flights available to passengers, he said.

Szjijártó asked all Hungarians staying abroad and wishing to return home to make travel arrangements as soon as possible.

Meanwhile, a foreign ministry official said that Hungary’s consulate in Panama was arranging to fly Hungarian citizens out of the country, where they attended a music festival that the authorities have quarantined. The Panama army enforced quarantine at the festival due to novel coronavirus, state secretary Levente Magyar said in a statement. The eleven Hungarians are now at the Colombian embassy and the Panamanian consulate awaiting transport to Hungary.

“The case shows the importance of a wide network of Hungarian representations worldwide,” Magyar said. Hungary currently has 155 foreign representations, up from 85 in 2014, Magyar noted. The consulate in Panama opened a year ago.

**LAKATOS: SUPPLIES SECURED FOR PEOPLE**

Supplies for the population continue to be secured, the head of the emergency centre set up by

the operative board coordinating the epidemic response, told a press conference. Tibor Lakatos said government measures were aimed at slowing down the spread of the virus and guaranteeing supplies to all Hungarians. Extraordinary measures introduced remain in force and anybody allowed to enter Hungary or pass through the country must undergo screening. Only those foreigners are allowed to enter whose passage through the country is secured, he added. Since March 12, home isolation quarantines have been ordered in 2,817 cases and 5,094 on-site checks have been made to ensure that regulations were observed, Lakatos said.

Fines totaling 350,000 forints (EUR 1,000) have been imposed against seven people who violated the rules so far, he added.

Lakatos said efforts were being made at the borders to act humanely but the opportunity offered to Romanians and Bulgarians to pass through Hungary resulted in a 29 kilometre tailback developing by this morning on the Austrian side of the motorway border crossing at Hegyeshalom. After coordination talks by the government and police, transit and passenger traffic was successfully restarted to Serbia, Romania and Bulgaria and waiting times at the border were reduced to less than an hour, he added. Freight transport was restarted also at the Kópháza

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and Rábfűzes border crossings and has been going smoothly in the country, he said.

He expressed thanks to those working at border crossings and in health care, and in the retail sector, securing steady supplies. All food supplies have reached Hungarian depots so far, despite occasional delays, Lakatos said.

Answering a question, he said the operative board had so far not proposed the introduction of curfews but this may be necessary in the future.

### **KARÁCSONY: BUDAPEST HOMELESS SHELTER CAPACITIES TO BE EXPANDED**

Budapest is expanding the capacity of homeless shelters and preparations are being made to set up separated facilities for homeless people in response to the new coronavirus epidemic, Mayor Gergely Karácsony said. The epidemic will have a severe effect on a high proportion of homeless because they are generally older and more of them have poorer than average health conditions, Karácsony told an online press conference on his Facebook page. Budapest is also preparing to set up tents to keep those affected by the epidemic isolated, he added. Registered jobseekers in Budapest continue to get free passes to use public transport and last month's

passes continue to be valid in order to minimise the need for face-to-face meetings, he said.

### **SZIJJÁRTÓ: HUNGARY GAS SUPPLIES GUARANTEED FOR THIS YEAR**

Hungary will be able to purchase an additional 2.2 billion cubic metres of natural gas from Gazprom this year, so the country's gas supplies are fully guaranteed, Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó said. A deal for next year already agreed involves Hungary purchasing 1.5 billion cubic metres of gas, Szijjártó said at a joint press conference with Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov in Moscow. Talks will begin on increasing this amount to 4.2 billion cubic metres, he added.

Hungary has an interest in purchasing gas from the south, too, via the TurkStream pipeline. This may take place from the end of next year, he said. As a first step, Hungary will start building a 15km stretch of the pipeline connecting the Serbian-Hungarian border to the national grid, he said. This will enable the supply of 6 billion cubic metres of gas in the initial period, he added.

Szijjártó noted that the sides had earlier decided that they would try to minimise the effects of European Union sanctions and Russia's counter-measures by offering Hungarian government support to Hungarian investments in Russia.

He praised Richter Gedeon's 5 billion forint (EUR 14.3m) development in the Russian market, the construction of a 6 billion forint Hungarian-Russian meat plant and the fact that a Hungarian company participated in the modernisation of Russian poultry farming with 15 billion forints. Bilateral trade totalled 6.5 billion dollars last year and the earlier negative trend stopped and turned into expansion, he said. He noted that Wednesday's meeting was held under difficult international circumstances, amid challenges posed by the spread of the new coronavirus. He said it was good news that Hungarians wanting to return home from Russia would be able to fly with Aeroflot which was still operating between Budapest and Moscow.

He also expressed satisfaction about two projects supporting Christian communities in Syria representing a total value of 120 million forints.

"Hungary traditionally has serious interest in maintaining effective cooperation with Russia based on mutual respect," Szijjártó said.

"Exactly the same way as western European countries, except we openly talk about it," he added.

"Being a small central European country, our interest lies in effective cooperation based on mutual respect between the eastern and western sides of Europe," he said.

During his visit in Moscow, Szijjártó also held talks with Nikolay

Fyodorov, first deputy chairman of the Federation Council, Russia's upper house, and the head of the Hungarian-Russian friendship chapter group.

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## **MOST INTL RAIL PASSENGER SERVICES SUSPENDED**

International rail passenger transport affecting Hungary has been suspended, bar a few border stations, due to novel coronavirus, rail company MÁV said.

MÁV is replacing suspended services with trains running on domestic sections between the border and home stations. No restrictions to domestic services are being made, with the exception of the suspension of the Children's Railway.

Rail links with Austria are still being maintained on MÁV's networks. Austrian railway OBB on Tuesday suspended services on the GYSEV network between Szentgotthárd and Fehring and Jennersdorf. A rail service to Serbia is still up and running via the Kelebia border station.

Slovakia suspended international trains on March 13 while Romania did so on March 14, with the exception of services via the Lökösháza and Biharkeresztes border stations. Slovenia suspended international services on March 16. Services across the Croatian and Ukrainian borders have also been suspended.

Nor are trains operating between Hungary and the Czech Republic, Poland and Switzerland.

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## **DK URGES GOVT TO PROCURE PROTECTIVE CLOTHING FOR MEDICS FROM CHINA**

The opposition Democratic Coalition (DK) has called on the government to order protective clothing for medics from China as a matter of urgency. DK lawmaker Lajos Oláh said it would be possible for such a shipment to arrive in Hungary before the end of this week. The epidemic in China is almost over and the country has vast production capacities, he told a press conference on Wednesday, adding that he had talked to the leaders of various Chinese provinces who expressed their readiness to send supplies to Hungary. Also, China has respirators available and rapid coronavirus tests, Oláh said. He urged the government not to waste time, adding that Italy and the Czech Republic had already made similar moves. Oláh said that protective face masks should be made available in pharmacies with price controls in place.

Meanwhile, the opposition Socialists called for unemployment benefits to be extended to at least 9 months from the current three for people who lose their jobs in connection with the virus

epidemic. Socialist MP Ágnes Kunhalmi told a separate press conference that the benefit should be raised to a monthly 100,000 forints (EUR 286). Also, she said social security contribution payments should be waived for small businesses during the state of emergency. She also called on the government to ban layoffs at multinationals. In addition, the Socialists want people working in health care, public transport, the postal service and welfare services to receive a bonus, given the health hazards involved, Kunhalmi said, adding that people failing to pay their social security contributions should not be excluded from services during the crisis.

Kunhalmi also called on the government to send letters to everyone over 60 asking them not to leave their homes.

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## **PÁRBESZÉD CALLS ON BILLIONAIRES TO OFFER 1% OF THEIR WEALTH**

Opposition Párbeszed has called on Hungary's billionaires to contribute one percent of their assets to a community fund to finance efforts to handle the novel coronavirus epidemic. Richárd Barabás, the party's spokesman, said the business elite in other countries had set up similar funds, adding that Hungary's rich are "obliged to use their wealth for a good purpose". The proposed fund could

be used to provide people with protective gear and disinfectants, as well as digital devices for school children learning from home, Barabás said.

The spokesman also called on members of his target group to offer some of their properties to be used as isolation hospitals, and to support health workers and the unemployed.

### **NBH INSTRUCTS BANKS ON RETAIL BORROWER REPAYMENT MORATORIUM**

The National Bank of Hungary (NBH) said it is instructing banks to introduce a repayment moratorium for all retail borrowers until the end of 2020 because of the impact of the novel coronavirus epidemic. If lenders fail to go ahead with the moratorium, the NBH said it would ask the government to implement the measure by decree. The central bank also instructed lenders to reduce annual percentage rates on personal loans to a level no higher than five percentage points over the base rate (0.90%). Days earlier, the NBH instructed banks to introduce a repayment moratorium for all businesses.

### **SUZUKI ESZTERGOM, MERCEDES KECSKEMÉT PLANTS TO SHUT DOWN**

Car maker Magyar Suzuki has decided to close down its plant in Esztergom, in northern Hungary, from March 23 to April 3 due to the spread of novel coronavirus, the company said. The Mercedes-Benz car plant in Kecskemét, in southern Hungary, will suspend production on Monday for at least two weeks, the company has said. The company noted on Tuesday that its parent company, Daimler, has decided to suspend production and some administration at most of its European sites for two weeks.

### **EC ANNOUNCES EUR 145 M SUPPORT FOR HUNGARY FLOOD PROTECTION, WATER MANAGEMENT**

Hungary will receive more than 145 million euros in project funding from the European Union cohesion fund for developing flood protection and water management, a European Commission spokesperson said on Tuesday. Some 49 million euros will be allocated for developing flood safety in the Tisza valley and 96 million euros

for sustainable water management, the spokesperson said in Brussels. In addition to Hungary, six EU members including Croatia, the Czech Republic, Poland, Portugal, Romania and Spain received a total of over 1.4 billion euros in EU support. The supported projects are in line with the European Green Deal targets, covering such key areas as environmental protection, transport and energy management.

### **MOL ANNOUNCES DISCOVERY IN NORWEGIAN NORTH SEA**

Hungarian oil and gas company MOL announced an offshore discovery in the Norwegian North Sea. Preliminary evaluation of the main discovery shows recoverable resources between 12 million and 71 million barrels of oil equivalent, MOL said. The successful test at the main discovery produced a combined oil and gas maximum flow rate of 550.6 cubic metres per day, or 3,463 barrels of oil equivalent per day, it added.

"The discovery is consistent with MOL's stated strategy of replenishing reserves through a combination of exploration and acquisitions," the company said.