

## PHOTO OF THE DAY



MTV/ Zoltán Mihádkó

A pedestrian crossing being disinfected in Budapest's 9th district

## UPCOMING EVENTS

**Stats office releases Jan wages, Feb industry figures (9am)**

**Coronavirus updates**

## TOP STORY

### ÁDER SIGNS LAW ENHANCING GOVT POWERS

President János Áder on Monday signed the law that grants the government enhanced powers to contain the spread of novel coronavirus.

Among the measures, flouting quarantine regulations is punishable by up to three years in prison. Also, anyone who disseminates fake news or distorted information in a way that obstructs the effectiveness of the response to the epidemic is a crime punishable by 1-5 years in prison. The bill passed with 137 votes in favour and 53 against in a fast-tracked procedure. In a statement, Áder said the law accorded with the constitution and did not infringe on any international agreement. Regarding opposition objections to the "lack of time limits" on the government's enhanced powers, Áder insisted the new powers were not open-ended and would only last until the end of the epidemic. As for the contents of the law, Áder said the government's powers were limited to preventing, handling and eliminating the spread of the epidemic, as well as to mitigating its effects. Parliament still maintains oversight, and the government is obliged to brief lawmakers about measures taken, he noted, adding that once the epidemic is over, parliament will be responsible for deciding any special measures.

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**ORBÁN: GOVT HAS SPENT HUF 225 BN ON EPIDEMIC RESPONSE SO FAR**

The government has so far spent 225 billion forints (EUR 630.3m) on buying protective equipment, building a container hospital and making other preparations in connection with the novel coronavirus epidemic, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán said in parliament.

Orbán dismissed a remark by conservative Jobbik’s Péter Jakab, who slammed the government’s epidemic response bill as the prime minister’s “coronation”. And responding to Democratic Coalition MP Gergely Arató’s criticism of the government’s handling of the epidemic, Orbán said: “Everyone should calm down. The government’s powers are no threat to you or democracy.”

The prime minister noted that 15 people have died from the virus so far, adding that their average age was 72. Altogether 447 people have been confirmed as testing positive for the virus in the country so far, 16 of whom have severe underlying illnesses. A total of 103 of the confirmed cases do not require treatment and 279 are asymptomatic, he said. Hungary has “deployed the necessary hospital capacities for treating patients,” Orbán said. So far, 13,301 samples have been tested in seven laboratories, he said. Orbán said Hungary had “nothing to be ashamed of” regarding its handling of the virus, arguing that the government

had acted more swiftly to introduce the necessary response measures than many other countries.

Responding to a question from the Socialist Party’s Tamás Harangozó as to whether the government would use its emergency powers to raise wages in the health-care and social sectors and advance pensioners their payments, Orbán said the government will outline Hungary’s “most comprehensive economic stimulus action plan of all time” on April 6 or 7. Asked whether the government would uphold the state of emergency after the epidemic subsides in order to stabilise the economy, Orbán said that under the law passed on Monday, he personally would “not have the power to extend anything”. The prime minister stressed that parliament alone would have the power to decide when the state of emergency ends.

Reacting to the opposition Párbeszéd party’s questions on whether the government planned compensation for anyone who loses their job or earns below 100,000 forints (EUR 280), Orbán said the government was working to ensure jobs and “decent wages”, and the action plan being drawn up would mean “everyone will have a job”. Orbán said that since coming to power in 2010, the Fidesz government had “very nearly made good on its promise” to create one million jobs in ten years, yet, he added, the opposition just sneered at the promise at the time.

Green LMP’s László Lóránt Keresztes called on the prime minister to provide

information and resources for local authorities facing new tasks due to coronavirus. Orbán said the local epidemic response bodies are the forums for local leaders to disseminate information and make decisions.

Asked by Jobbik MP György László Lukács about the anticipated duration of the epidemic, Orbán said it was “impossible to say”. The priority, he said, is to slow down the spread of the virus in order to ease pressure on the health-care system.

Regarding infections among health-care staff, Orbán said infected doctors were being replaced by resident doctors for the most part, and those above 65 were being separated from Covid-19 patients. In answer to another question, Orbán said infections of health-care staff “are to be expected”.

**ORBÁN: BUDGET NEEDS RADICAL RESTRUCTURING**

This year’s budget must be radically restructured in order to manage the crisis caused by the coronavirus outbreak and to revitalise the economy, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán said after holding a videoconference with representatives of the government and the economic chambers. Orbán said the 2020 budget needs to be adjusted to the current situation and changes forecast until the end of the year. “For next year, we need to draw up a stripped-down budget that will leave the most room for crisis management and revitalising the economy,” the prime minister told

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senior officials of the central bank, the economic chambers and employers' associations. "We must launch the biggest economic stimulus action plan of all time, setting growth, job creation and job retention as our goals," he said. Concerning the 2020 budget, Orbán said it would be wrong to implement across-the-board cuts. He said the ministries must retain the resources that are absolutely necessary in their budgets while the funds that can be released should be used to set up funds for crisis management and revitalising the economy.

He also said preparations were under way for drawing up the 2021 budget.

"Together with the central bank, we need to plan how monetary and fiscal instruments can be used in a way as to give the greatest possible boost to the Hungarian economy," the prime minister said.

**BUSINESS CHAMBER PROPOSES MEASURES TO EASE ECONOMIC IMPACT OF EPIDEMIC**

The Hungarian Chamber of Industry and Commerce (MKIK) unveiled a new package of proposals it has sent to the government on ways to ease the economic impact of the coronavirus. MKIK is proposing the government help preserve jobs and manage the rise in unemployment with a mix of grant money and credit to be repaid in 2021 or 2022. The chamber is also proposing that the Small Business Tax (KIVA) rate be lowered from 12% to 9%.

Businesses that opt for KIVA pay the tax on a base of payroll expenditures plus dividends and capital transfers. KIVA businesses are exempt from the payroll tax, training tax and corporate tax.

MKIK wants the government to roll out targeted payroll tax preferences up to 50,000 forints per employee, capped at 12.5 million per business, but only for staff that companies keep on payroll. The preferences would apply only to blue collar workers in certain sectors. The chamber proposes workers reach agreements with their employers on taking their holiday days, after which time they would stay home while still getting a pay cheque. Employers would cover 60% of those wage costs and the state 20%, while employees would agree to a 20% pay cut.

MKIK proposes that Hungarians laid off after March 1 get one-off material support from the state as a show of solidarity and goodwill. They also propose making broadband internet free of charge. The chamber proposes introducing a new kind of fostered work programme and urges the government to extend the eligibility period for jobless benefits from three months to 180 days.

**CHIEF MEDICAL OFFICER CONFIDENT CURFEW WILL HELP SLOW EPIDEMIC**

Hungary has seen a rise in confirmed Covid-19 cases but it has averted a surge thanks to the nationwide curfew imposed on Saturday, the chief medical officer said. The curfew

will continue to be effective in preventing the virus from spreading, Cecília Müller told an online news conference after a meeting of the operative board coordinating the response to the epidemic. Hungary is still at the stage of group infections spread in communities with a roughly even distribution of cases across the country, she said, adding that no dense clusters had been identified in any given area. The number of confirmed cases is rising steadily, she said, adding that Hungary was "on the brink of mass infections". So far, Hungary has reported 15 deaths out of 447 confirmed coronavirus cases, Müller said, adding that 15 are in intensive care. More than 13,300 samples have been tested, she said.

In response to a question, she said the National Ambulance Service has made additional ambulances available for testing suspected coronavirus patients in their homes. She noted that positive tests carried out by private laboratories were not being counted among the official number of confirmed cases.

Asked about the coronavirus infection at a nursing home in Nagymágocs, in southern Hungary, she said no new cases have been detected at the home since the seven cases that were confirmed on Sunday. The patients are being treated in the nearby town of Szentes and the nursing home has been disinfected, she added.

Róbert Kiss, an official of the emergency centre set up by the

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operative board coordinating the response to the epidemic, told the same news conference that the authorities have registered 739 irregularities concerning the curfew. So far, the authorities have issued warnings to 660 people and fined 15 for violating the restrictions, he said.

### **OPPOSITION DEMANDS INCLUSION OF TIMEFRAME IN EPIDEMIC RESPONSE BILL**

Before the law on enhancing the government's powers was passed, Hungary's opposition parties said they would only support the government legislation if it contained a sunset clause. Tamás Harangozó, group leader of the Socialist Party, told a press conference that the opposition would only support the proposal to grant the government extra powers if the legislation stipulates the end date for an extended state of emergency. Tímea Szabó, co-leader of Párbeszéd, said her party would support joint efforts against the virus, "but not [Prime Minister] Viktor Orbán's unrestricted power". She argued that no government in Europe had appealed for unlimited power. Conservative Jobbik's MP László György Lukács said his party "believes in the strictest measures when democracy is protected, too", and warned that parliament's controls over the government should be maintained. Parliament should "hear the voice of those that say that Orbán must not use the epidemic to build a monarchy",

he said, adding that parliament's operations were a fundamental requirement for democracy. László Varju, deputy leader of the Democratic Coalition, said that the government's powers should be "justified and proportionate", and ensure an opportunity for the opposition to appeal to the Constitutional Court, adding that the legislation must not curb media freedoms. Antal Csárdi, an MP of green LMP, said that his party also insisted on including a time limit, adding that such a restriction would not reduce the efficiency of the government's measures. Momentum spokesman Miklós Hajnal said that "eliminating parliament would equal eliminating democracy". He added that "no other country has requested such broad powers as Orbán desires".

### **HUNGARY REPORTS 447 CONFIRMED CASES, TWO MORE DEATHS**

Two more people, aged over 90, have died in Hungary of the novel coronavirus infection and the number of confirmed cases has increased to 447, the government website [koronavirus.gov.hu](http://koronavirus.gov.hu) said on Monday morning. The number of deaths has gone up to 15. The epidemic in Hungary is at the stage of group infection spread in communities, the website said. Infected people can now be found all over the country, it added. Of the 447 confirmed cases in the country, 10 are Iranian, 2 are British, one is Kazakh, another Vietnamese,

and the remaining 433 are Hungarian. Altogether 71 people are in quarantine in hospital and a total of 13,301 test samples have been taken. Thirty-four people have fully recovered.

### **SZIJJÁRTÓ: GOVT NOT LEAVING ANYONE WITHOUT SUPPORT**

The government will not leave anyone in Hungary without assistance, the foreign minister said in parliament, adding that "we will bring Hungarians stranded abroad back home and we will restart the economy".

Péter Szijjártó said that the government had acted in a timely manner to ensure that the country has sufficient supplies to fight the coronavirus epidemic. He noted that seven aircraft had arrived in Hungary with such supplies last week and another 20 cargo flights with "hundreds of tonnes" of supplies are expected. The deliveries will include over 10 million face masks, 2.5 million rapid tests, 100,000 protective clothes, 300,000 pairs of gloves, and over 2,000 respirators to help the country with its efforts and ensure protection for health care workers, the minister said.

On another subject, Szijjártó said that Hungary was conducting "the greatest repatriation operation in modern times", helping thousands of Hungarians return home from other countries. So far, the government has thus helped 5,538 Hungarian nationals, and is working to make

travel arrangements for another 2,026, he said.

Currently, there are 477 Hungarians stranded in the United States and Canada, and the government will send two aircraft on Tuesday to bring them back, Szijjártó said. In South America and in the Caribbean there are 243 Hungarians waiting for help, he said, adding that “the European Union has been late with its coordination” and the government is working with other central European countries. Hungarians will be flown back from India in cooperation with Poland, Szijjártó said. Over 200 Hungarian employees will be taken home from Kazakhstan, he added.

**HUNGARY READY TO JOIN COMMISSION’S ‘RESCUE’ SCHEME**

Hungary is prepared to join the European Commission’s RescEU programme, an element of the Union Civil Protection Mechanism which shores up emergency response capabilities, the Catastrophe Protection Directorate of the Interior

Ministry has said. In an effort to support the fight against novel coronavirus, the EC has decided to establish a strategic stockpile of medical equipment. Member states that choose to store the RescEU stockpile may ask for support from the EC, which covers the cost of 90% while member states pay the remaining 10%. Hungary’s government has weighed the matter in recent days and decided to actively participate in the RescEU programme, setting up a storage facility and stockpiling medical equipment, the directorate said. The government declared its intent to participate to the European Union on March 29, it added.

**SZIJJÁRTÓ: HUNGARY, SLOVAKIA TO OPEN NEW BORDER CROSSING STATIONS**

The Hungarian government is working to open new crossing points at its border with Slovakia this week, Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó said. “Such difficult situations ... show just how far Hungary and neighbouring countries rely on each other.” He

noted that Slovakia is Hungary’s third major trading partner, adding that Hungary was similarly important to Slovakia. Ties between communities on both sides of the Hungary-Slovakia border are very close, with hundreds of thousands of local Hungarians and Slovaks for whom a legal possibility to cross into the other country is crucial, the minister said.

Szijjártó noted that the crossing at Somoskőújfalu will be reopened for Hungarian and Slovak nationals on Tuesday, under a recent bilateral agreement, bringing the current number of crossing points to nine. The two governments will find a way to add further crossings to ensure a free flow of goods between Hungary and Slovakia, he said, adding that a joint proposal was expected to be prepared by mid-week, and the facilities in question could be reopened in the second half of the week.

The minister said that construction of a new bridge between Hungary’s Komárom and Komarno on the other side was under way and to be completed before the end of the year.

