

PHOTO OF THE DAY



The municipality of Debrecen sending face masks to residents over 65

MTI/Zsolt Czegledi

UPCOMING EVENTS

Coronavirus updates

DK presser on health care

TOP STORY

ORBÁN: RESTRICTIONS TO STAY FOR NOW

A further easing of novel coronavirus-related restrictions will not come before the end of next week, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán said.

In an interview to public broadcaster Kossuth Rádió, Orbán said experts maintained that until the number of deaths start to fall, "we should be careful about reopening Budapest". Orbán asked decision-makers and journalists to resist believing "they understand [the coronavirus epidemic] better than the experts do". On the subject of whether schools should reopen before the summer holiday starting on June 15, Orbán said he had not seen "any great demand" for this to happen. If there is, the government will consider reopening schools, he said. Orbán praised the public education system and Hungarian teachers, saying that the transition to digital education "has turned out to have worked well ... and that we have excellent teachers". Teachers in Hungary have risen to the task "like nowhere else in Europe", Orbán said. Commenting on school graduation exams which started on May 4, Orbán said: "Some thought it was impossible to do ... but reality has shown otherwise". Only three percent of students decided to postpone their exams, he noted. "Our education system has done well," he said.

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ORBÁN: SITUATION UNDER REVIEW

Regarding equipment needed for the epidemic protection efforts, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán said he was "constantly monitoring" the situation to ensure no one was left untreated for lack of equipment. In an interview to Kossuth Rádió, he said it was a priority to ensure that Hungary itself is equipped to produce face masks, ventilators and other gear to fight the virus, as well as a vaccine when it becomes available. Meanwhile, the interior and finance ministers have been tasked with doubling capacity of Hungary's fostered work scheme, he said. "We're prepared to employ 200,000 fostered workers."

Regarding international backlash against Hungary's law to fight the epidemic, Orbán said: "We know they are lying and we are telling the truth." He said the "ongoing battle" within the bloc was about "whether we'll have an empire in Europe" or nation states. Hungarians don't want to be "dissolved" into any kind of an empire at all "just like they didn't want to be a part of the Turkish, Habsburg or Soviet empires over the course of history." But those who want to create an empire in Europe "want to break down nation states into an imperial order, the united states of Europe", the prime minister insisted. "We want to stay out of this and want to remain as Hungarians. We want Hungary to

remain Hungarian." "It is because of this stance that those committed to the imperial concept will take every opportunity they get to weaken the Hungarian government," Orbán said. "In fact, they're attacking things that an overwhelming majority of people support," he said, naming the utility bill cuts, the government's position on the issue of migration and its response to the coronavirus epidemic as examples. "The dispute is not about democracy, but rather about empire." But when the lives of tens of thousands in Hungary are under threat and half the country is fighting to save them, "and then you get kicked from behind, you have to strike a sharper tone and say 'stop', because if we don't then they'll do it again the next time", he said. "We have to make it clear that one can't pick on Hungarians without consequences," the prime minister said. "Especially in times of trouble; we won't forget it ... and we'll settle the score."

Asked if it was reasonable to talk about unity within the European People's Party (EPP) of which ruling Fidesz is a member, Orbán said it was, because "arguments happen in every family, but it's not by chance that we're in the same one". He said decent people worked to keep their family together for as long as possible, "though it may not always work out". "At that point, it's time to start a new chapter."

Commenting on the fall in industrial output in March, Orbán

said the figures would get even worse. He projected "brutal" figures for April, arguing that "the entire month was horrible in terms of the economy." The economic indicators for May are also expected to be poor, albeit slightly better, while June figures are likely to show a significant improvement, he said. The "antidote" for the economic fallout of the epidemic is the preservation of existing jobs and the creation of new ones, Orbán said. "We're prepared to employ 200,000 fostered workers ... and if this capacity is exhausted, we'll expand it." Orbán noted that fewer than 100,000 fostered workers are employed in Hungary today. So far 160,000 people have turned to the state for help after losing their jobs, Orbán said, adding that the government had a duty to provide them with an opportunity to work.

The prime minister also urged a boost to investments and economic developments, noting that his would help create jobs. The government is supporting new investments with thousands of billions of forints, he noted. "We're building a labour-based economy, therefore our focus is on job creation," he said, arguing that it was this policy and approach that had helped save the country in 2010, "and it'll work this time, too". Hungary will find its way back to the path of economic success "quicker than many would believe today", Orbán added.

JUSTICE MINISTER: ATTACKS ON HUNGARY 'WORK AGAINST A STRONG AND UNIFIED EUROPE'

The “political strategy” to attack the Hungarian government over its response measures to the novel coronavirus epidemic “works against a strong and unified Europe”, Justice Minister Judit Varga wrote in an op-ed for Brussels-based news portal Euractiv. The minister noted that Vera Jourová, the European Commission’s vice-president in charge of transparency and values, confirmed last month that the commission had no grounds on which to launch an infringement procedure against Hungary over its epidemic response law. Varga added, however, that Jourová’s use of the word “yet” regarding the decision not to take legal action against Hungary made a “mockery” of the principle of the equal treatment of European Union member states.

“The Commission either initiates an infringement procedure or it does not. There is no third way ...” she argued, adding that Hungary was an exception to this because “the presumption of guilt continues to be applied” in its case. The minister said it had taken “courage” from Jourová “to say no” to legal action against Hungary. “But some just refuse to take no for an answer,” Varga said in reference to those who had “built the image of an enemy out of Hungary”, claiming that it did not respect the bloc’s fundamental

rights. “The values that are self-evident and common to us have become a political tool,” Varga wrote. “Abused, they create division instead of unity.”

She suggested that the “blatant double standards” applied to Hungary suggested that the “real issue” was not about the EU’s fundamental values, but rather about deepening divisions within the bloc ahead of the real start of negotiations on the next seven-year budget. The minister speculated that the “actual objective” was to put pressure on member states “that are, probably by mere coincidence, also the ones who are projected to suffer in relative terms the most significant cuts under the current budgetary proposals”. Because the most severe budget cuts go against the main objective of cohesion, Varga said, “such proposals are impossible to defend from an economic or even moral point of view”. Hence the need to “demonise” the targeted member states, she added.

FURTHER 9 DIE, 3,178 REGISTERED CASES IN HUNGARY

A further 9 people, all of whom had underlying illnesses, have died in Hungary, bringing the total number of fatalities to 392, while the number of registered coronavirus infections has increased by 28 to 3,178, koronavirus.gov.hu said on Friday morning. Fully 865 patients have recovered. Currently 1,132 coronavirus patients are hospitalised, 74 of whom are on

ventilators. Fully 11,036 people are under official home quarantine. The number of tests carried out stands at 99,058.

The website noted that the aim now is to resume normal life gradually and according to a strict schedule, so full restrictions still apply in the most heavily infected areas, Budapest and Pest County. Elsewhere, physical distancing and a variety of other rules still apply. Budapest tops the list of registered infections (1,552 people), followed by Pest County (420), Fejér County (312) and Komárom-Esztergom County (162). Vas County has the fewest (14) infections in Hungary.

FACILITIES TO RECEIVE FOUR WEEKS' SUPPLIES OF PROTECTIVE GEAR

The authorities are distributing four weeks of supplies to staff of health-care services, retirement homes and social institutions, which are about to get 2 million face masks, 307,000 surgical gloves and 7,000 protective gowns, a spokesman for the board coordinating efforts against the Covid-19 epidemic said. Tibor Lakatos, the head of the body’s emergency centre, said that the military commanders assigned to oversee the institutions will be monitoring the supplies. Regarding border traffic, Lakatos said the greatest pressure is expected on the Hungary-Austria border, with 13,000 people expected to cross every day. The police have conducted 7,534 inspections of people

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in home quarantine, Lakatos said, and found that 1,580 of the 11,036 had violated the regulations.

Speaking at the same online press conference, Chief Health Officer Cecilia Müller said the number of new confirmed coronavirus cases had been declining four days in a row.

On Friday, Müller signed an agreement with Human Resources Minister Miklós Kásler and Zoltán Szilvássy, the dean of the Debrecen University, in eastern Hungary, on setting up a vaccine plant. This way, Hungary can become independent from outside sources in that respect too, she said, adding the plant would produce compulsory and other vaccines.

Regarding the lifting of movement restrictions outside Budapest and Pest County, Müller noted that although restaurants are now allowed to open, large gatherings are still banned. She asked cafes and restaurants to abide by physical distancing rules.

Answering a question on coronavirus infections at a retirement home on Budapest's Pesti Road, Müller said 303 residents and 26 nurses had contracted the virus. So far, 41 of them have died and 60 have recovered, she said.

Meanwhile, in a Facebook post, Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó noted that Hungary received over 6 million face masks, 25,000 protective gowns and 120 ventilators on Thursday and Friday. This week, over 600 ventilators arrived in Hungary, the largest number since the outbreak of the pandemic,

Szijjártó said. Ventilators are an essential tool in combating the phase of mass infections, he noted, adding that the government will be preparing for such a scenario in the coming days and weeks.

Szijjártó also said on Facebook that the government will discuss doubling the budget for supporting the investments of businesses that save jobs, in light of the success of the scheme so far. The government originally earmarked 50 billion forints (EUR 143.0m) towards a programme launched three weeks ago together with the Hungarian Investment Promotion Agency (HIPA) centred on subsidising the investments of companies that preserve jobs. So far, 280 companies have applied for the programme, undertaking a total of 138 billion forints' worth of investments to preserve 50,828 jobs, the minister added.

LMP SEEKS DEADLINE EXTENSION FOR EUROPEAN INITIATIVE ON PROTECTING NATIONAL REGIONS

The opposition LMP party has joined Romania's Szekler National Council in asking the European Commission to extend the deadline for collecting signatures in support of a European citizens' initiative on protecting national regions. Group leader László Lóránt Keresztes told an online press conference on Friday that although the European Citizens'

Initiative for the Equality of the Regions and Sustainability of the Regional Cultures had attracted some 1.2 million signatures, due to the novel coronavirus pandemic, the campaign had failed to collect the required minimum number of signatures from seven European Union member states.

The Szekler National Council, which launched the campaign, has therefore turned to the EC asking it to extend the deadline to collect the required number of signatures by several months, Keresztes noted, urging support for the council. He said LMP had succeeded in bringing together all parliamentary parties bar the leftist Democratic Coalition in support of the initiative back in February, adding that the campaign had also won the backing of artists, athletes, public figures and politicians, irrespective of political affiliation, in recent weeks.

The initiative aims to convince the EC to create a cohesion policy that pays special attention to regions with national, ethnic, cultural, religious or linguistic characteristics that are different from those of the surrounding regions.

BUDGET DEFICIT HUF 727.4 BN AT END-APRIL

Hungary's cash-flow-based budget, excluding local councils, posted a four-month deficit of 727.4 billion forints at the end of April, having recorded a surplus in that month, according to preliminary Finance Ministry data released on Friday. In April alone, the

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budget was 104.5 billion forints in the black, partly thanks to 249.8 billion in transfers from Brussels.

The central budget ran a 610.6 billion forint deficit at the end of April.

The finance ministry noted that the April surplus on the back of EU funding inflows had partially offset extra spending on epidemic and economic protection measures connected with novel coronavirus. By the end of April, medical equipment purchases related to the epidemic came to almost 400 billion forints, the ministry said. Fully 313.2 billion forints in EU revenue flowed into the budget in the first four months of the year, while EU-related spending came close to 842 billion, the ministry said.

Hungary's convergence plan submitted to the European Commission on Tuesday contains

a deficit target of 3.8% of GDP appeared as against 2.7% originally calculated by Hungary's debt agency AKK. Also in the convergence report, the economy is expected to contract by 3%. The commission's spring economic forecast published on Wednesday forecasts a 7% contraction in GDP and a budget shortfall of 5.2% this year.

TRADE SURPLUS EUR 436 M IN MARCH

Hungary posted a trade surplus of 436 million euros in March, the Central Statistical Office (KSH) said in a first reading of data. The surplus narrowed by 208 million euros from the same month a year earlier. Exports fell by an annual 7.3% to 9.003 billion euros, while imports dropped by 5.5% to 8.566 billion.

INFLATION DROPS TO 2.4% IN APRIL

Hungary's annual consumer price index dropped to 2.4% in April from 3.9% in the previous month, the Central Statistical Office (KSH) said. Prices in the category of goods that includes vehicle fuel dropped by 7.7% as fuel prices plunged by 22.7% due to the lockdown. Food prices grew by 8.7%, the biggest rise in years. Prices of tobacco and spirits rose by 7.2% because tax changes. The price of services increased by 3%.

Harmonised for better comparison with other European Member states, CPI stood at 2.5%. Core inflation, which excludes volatile fuel and food prices, was 4.3%. In a month-on-month comparison, consumer prices fell by 0.6% in April.