

PHOTO OF THE DAY



MTI/György Varga

The Blue Ribbon sailboat competition on Lake Balaton

UPCOMING EVENTS

Stats office releases Jan-May wages, May trade figures

Coronavirus updates

TOP STORY

GOVT MAINTAINS CORONA RESTRICTIONS

The government aims to prevent a second wave of the novel coronavirus epidemic and it has decided to maintain the current level of restrictions, the Prime Minister's chief of staff has said.

Gergely Gulyás told a regular press briefing that changing the current restrictions would be risky and the government wants to avoid this. The aim is to ensure that the school year starts on time, on Sept. 1, he said. The current ban on gatherings of more than 500 people will be extended after Aug. 15.

The government will provide 5.3 billion forints (EUR 15.3m) to support the music industry, including 800 million forints to help Roma musicians, he added.

Gulyás said Hungary was among countries that had handled the first wave of the epidemic most successfully. He cautioned that a surge is under way in many other countries such as Serbia, Romania, Kosovo, Albania and Montenegro, and a slight increase in cases has been reported in Sweden, the UK and Italy, indicating a global trend. The number of active infections, however, is falling in neighbouring Croatia and Slovenia, he added. Under the current circumstances, infection levels in Hungary can be kept stable, he added. Gulyás called on citizens to respect social distancing rules and regulations on wearing a mask, he said.

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GULYÁS: IMPORTANT TO KEEP LID ON VIRUS

Every effort should be made to keep any second wave to a minimum, Gergely Gulyás, the Prime Minister's chief of staff, said. If active infections in Hungary exceed 1,000-1,500, then a second wave would get under way, he said, adding that there are currently 500-600 active infections. He confirmed that a decision has been made to keep simplified rules on medicine subscriptions in force after the Sept. 17 regulation expires. Commenting on screening requirements for travellers returning from countries classed as yellow and red, he said tests could be used from both state and private health-care providers for people who want to leave quarantine. The ministry will release detailed instructions on the requirements after Aug. 1, he added. In response to a question concerning police sanctions for the violation of mask-wearing rules, he said the law allows for fines up to several tens of thousands of forints, and this had been applied in a few cases. At the same time, he said the government was asking people to observe the rules voluntarily.

Meanwhile, Gulyás said the Hungarian government will turn to the European Commission to facilitate higher wages for employees of the national postal service. Gulyás noted that the national economy was much worse off than before the coronavirus crisis, but Hungarian postal employees were "earning undeservedly low wages

in relation to the high quality services they provide". The postal service is not a profitable enterprise and any pay rise requires the European Commission's approval, he said, adding that the government was also in talks with the relevant trade unions concerning the magnitude of a potential pay rise.

On the subject of reported development plans for Budapest's Hajógyári Island, Gulyás said that the government would not support any such construction on the island.

Asked about issues around news portal Index, the prime minister's chief of staff said: "There is mounting evidence that this is a power struggle within the [opposition] left wing". "The media will remain free in Hungary as long as the government does not get involved in these cases in any way," he said. "The government is happy to see that everybody is doing their job freely and without restrictions," he added. Answering a question about a letter by Fidesz MEPs to the European People's Party on the subject, Gulyás suggested that opposition MEPs were spreading "lies", and Fidesz would inform the EPP about this. "From the point of press freedom -- regardless of what false claims leftist MEPs may have made in the European Parliament -- not even the players concerned would deny that all guarantees for that freedom are in place."

Commenting on unemployment, Gulyás cited official figures as showing that 4.5 million people are currently employed, 38,000 fewer than before the coronavirus outbreak but 100,000

more than last year. He said hopefully employment would return to the level of 2019 before the end of this year. Gulyás said it was difficult to forecast economic growth, but a 3% contraction "may not be far off the mark". August figures and the economic effects of a possible second wave should also be considered, he added.

Answering a question concerning government plans to transfer the ownership of a handball stadium now under construction in Budapest's 9th district to sports club Ferencváros, Gulyás said Ferencváros would be "a good manager" of the new facility. He added that the stadium will also host state-organised events.

Gulyás was asked about a European Union infringement procedure concerning the segregation of the Roma minority. Consultations with the European Commission are under way, he noted, adding that the situation of the Roma in Hungary was "tangibly better" than under previous governments. Figures indicating school attendance and education, as well as Roma youth entering higher education, are "incomparably better than before", he insisted.

On the subject of a referendum initiated by the opposition Socialists aimed at protecting free beaches around Lake Balaton, Gulyás said that even though those beaches are owned by local councils, the central government last year financed the renovation of thirty, while this year 26 others are being revamped from central funds.



REGISTERED CORONAVIRUS INFECTIONS IN HUNGARY INCREASE BY 19

The number of registered coronavirus infections in Hungary has increased by 19 to 4,484 over the past 24 hours, koronavirus.gov.hu said on Thursday morning. The number of fatalities remains unchanged at 596, while 3,346 people have made a recovery. There are 542 active infections and 76 coronavirus patients are being treated in hospital for Covid-19, six on ventilators. Fully 7,819 people are in official home quarantine, while the number of tests carried out stands at 336,461.

New restrictions on entering the country came into force on July 12, with the aim of preventing the import of infections from abroad. Foreign countries have been classed into three categories: red, yellow, green. The authorities are screening arrivals and taking action based on the severity of the infection rate in each country. This can include ordering home quarantine for 14 days and compulsory testing. The government and the chief medical officer review the classification of the countries on a weekly basis. To avoid a flare-up of the epidemic, the government has cancelled the celebrations that draw large crowds on the August 20 national holiday, including the fireworks and the air show. Meanwhile, gatherings of more than 500 people are banned until August 15. Most infections have been registered in Budapest (2,044), followed by Pest County (682) and the counties of Fejér

(380), Komárom-Esztergom (312) and Zala (265). Tolna County and Békés County have the fewest infections (15 each).

SZIJJÁRTÓ: HUNGARY STRIVING TO HELP W BALKANS JOIN EU

Hungary will continue to make every effort to advance the EU accession of Western Balkan countries, which is in Hungary's economic, strategic and security interests, the foreign minister said on Facebook after talks with his Montenegrin counterpart. Péter Szijjártó said he discussed with Srđan Darmanović the status of talks on Montenegro's EU integration by phone. He said that the Hungarian foreign ministry has already assigned integration experts to work with the governments of EU aspirant Western Balkan countries. Darmanović praised the Hungarian expert helping the Montenegrin government and asked for an extension of the expert's assignment by another 12 months, which the Hungarian government approved, Szijjártó said. He welcomed the EU opening the last chapter in accession talks with Montenegro, adding that hopefully the EU would have new members by 2025.

APPEALS COURT ORDERS NEW PROCEDURE IN SZEVIÉP CASE

The appeals court of Pécs, in southern Hungary, threw out an earlier ruling and ordered the district court of Szeged to conduct a new procedure in the case of local construction company Szeviép, whose leaders have been

charged in connection with gross violation of bankruptcy regulations. Three leaders of the company have been suspected of syphoning some 1.5 billion forints (EUR 4.3) off the company while it was being liquidated, thus preventing payments to Szeviép's debtors. A local court in Szeged earlier sentenced the defendants to prison, while the district court acquitted them in a secondary ruling. The Pécs appeals court ordered a new procedure, saying the district court had passed the secondary decision without a trial.

Concerning the secondary ruling, a spokesman for governing Fidesz earlier raised suspicion that the court may have been tainted by corruption. János Halász suggested that the opposition mayor of Szeged may have "given benefits to members of the court" that acquitted the defendants. According to Halász, the Szeged city council, headed by Mayor László Botka, had "stuffed Szeviép with hefty contracts" worth a combined 34 billion forints (EUR 102m). "The billions disappeared" while Szeviép failed to pay off its subcontractors and "made 500 small companies bankrupt", Halász insisted.

KSH: HOME CONSTRUCTION UP, NEW BUILDING PERMITS DOWN IN H1

The number of completed homes increased by 34.4% to 8,697 in the first half of 2020, compared to the same period last year while the number of new building permits dropped by 32.6% to 12,475 during

the period, the Central Statistical Office (KSH) said. The number of home building permits issued in Budapest dropped by 20.9% to 4,867. The number issued in county seats and cities with over 50,000 residents plunged 50.6% to 1,964. The number in other cities was down by 33.6% at 3,213, and the number in smaller communities dropped by 25.4% to 2,431. The number of completed homes in Budapest went up by 22.2% to 1,657. In county seats the number rose by 40.1% to 2,605 and in other cities it soared 47.2% at 2,637. Smaller communities saw a rise of 22.6% to 1,798. KSH noted that because of the coronavirus outbreak there was a temporary setback in the issuing of home building permits: in March the number of permits was down by around 33% and in April and May by almost 50%. By June a recovery had started and the number of permits was down only by 10%. In

Budapest the April-May fall was more pronounced as was the June recovery. The coronavirus did not affect the number of completed homes, KSH added.

GREECE'S GOLDAIR ENTERS HUNGARY GROUND HANDLING MARKET

Greece's Goldair group has entered the ground handling services market in Budapest, business daily Világgazdaság said, citing a report by aviation industry website Airportal.hu. Goldair group has acquired Hungary's BHS Handling which obtained licences to offer the full range of ground handling services in January. Public records show the company's name was changed to Goldair BHS on July 20. Goldair group's ground handling business is among the market leaders in Southeast Europe,

serving 120 airlines, including many that fly to Budapest.

Goldair BHS will face three competitors at Liszt Ferenc International: British-owned Menzies, Turkey's Celebi and Hungarian-owned Airport Service Budapest. Another peer, state-owned Malév Ground Handling, became insolvent in June.

PANDEMIC IMPACT LIFTS ONLINE SALES IN HUNGARY 34% IN Q2

Online sales in Hungary reached HUF 188bn in the second quarter, climbing 34pc from the same period a year earlier, data compiled by consultancy GKI Digital and internet marketplace Jofogas show. The scale of the increase was the largest in five years, with sales of food, electronics, home furnishings and DIY products rising the fastest, boosted by a pandemic lockdown and the temporary shift to online learning.