

PHOTO OF THE DAY



MTVA/Attila Balázs

A soldier disinfecting a retirement home in Nyíregyháza, NE Hungary

UPCOMING EVENTS

Coronavirus updates

TOP STORY

HUNGARY TO GRADUALLY EASE RESTRICTIONS

The first phase of protective measures against the novel coronavirus will end next weekend and the government will introduce new rules to replace the curfew restrictions in order to gradually restart life, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán said.

The second phase will involve a strict schedule for restarting life in Hungary, Orbán told public Kossuth radio. The government will continue to protect the most vulnerable, including the elderly, the chronically ill and residents of big cities, he said. After May 4, rules will be put in place to authorise mayors in "special" cities to implement their own restrictions, he added. Concerning the decision to free up hospital beds, he said the government had to create the conditions to ensure that no patient gets neglected. "If we do not want to live life endlessly locked up, like being in a bunker, or until a vaccine is found, the timing of which is uncertain ... then we have two possibilities," he said. Once life has restarted, "there could be surprises" if the virus breaks loose, he said. Several tens of thousands of hospital beds and thousands of ventilators would be needed, which would be impossible to provide, he added.

Hungary is keeping an eye on Austria's schedule of reopening shops, schools and museums, he said, adding that Hungary should follow in a „disciplined" manner.

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ORBÁN: JOB PROTECTION A PRIORITY

Commenting on the economy, he said the situation was hardest for employees and this was why more jobs had to be created, in order to replace those that had been lost. The job-seekers' allowance is granted for three months and "we are only past the fortieth day, so it will last for a while longer", he added. He expressed hope that "by the time we get to the end of it", the job preservation measures introduced would return the economy to almost the same rate of growth as where it had been before the epidemic. He added that he expected a fast recovery.

Commenting on Thursday's European Union summit, he said Hungary had not received any extra money from the EU for protective measures against the epidemic. An agreement was made at the meeting to make more money from the 2021-2027 EU budget available in the first and second years to address the economic impact of the coronavirus pandemic, he said, adding that the "rigid" conditions for spending this money will be streamlined and made more flexible. Orbán said the leaders agreed that a budget of a "much larger scale" than earlier is necessary, requiring bigger contributions by all member states. "Everybody will pay more money, Hungary too," he said.

Orbán said the sides failed to reach an agreement on whether monies

exceeding the budget allocation that must be mobilised to deal with the economic fallout from the pandemic should be credit, backed by the EU, or grants. Commenting on attacks against the Hungarian law on protective measures, he said he was not concerned by the criticism voiced from capitals of nation states, such as from Berlin. "It has the same importance as what we in Budapest think about Berlin ... the difference being is that we are more polite and we do not always say what we think," he added. He said Brussels was a different case: "Brussels has been taken over by bureaucrats and the room for reason is more limited". Orbán noted that, as "the most important" piece of news during the week, the publication of a proposal by the US billionaire George Soros that the EU should issue perpetual bonds -- securities with no maturity date on which only interest, not principal, is paid -- to finance a fund to fight the pandemic. Orbán warned that the proposal, which he dubbed the "Soros Plan 2.0", is "at least as dangerous" to the EU as an earlier proposal by Soros to resettle migrants in Europe.

11 NEW FATALITIES, NUMBER OF CORONAVIRUS CASES RISES TO 2,383

Another 11 elderly patients suffering from chronic diseases have died in Hungary and the number of registered novel coronavirus infections has risen by 99 to 2,383, koronavirus.gov.hu said on Friday morning. So far, there have

been 250 fatalities and 401 people have left hospital after recovery. Fully 10,942 people are in home quarantine. So far, 58,251 coronavirus tests have been conducted at accredited laboratories. Budapest has the highest number of infections (1,221), followed by Pest County (329) and Fejér county (240). Békés county has had the fewest infections with 13.

CHIEF MEDICAL OFFICER: HUNGARIAN RESEARCH ON VIRUS ANTIBODY 'PROMISING'

Hungarian research into the antibody to the novel coronavirus is showing promising results, and doctors have started to administer it to a patient on Thursday, Chief Medical Officer Cecília Müller said. Speaking at the online press conference of the operative board coordinating the response into the novel coronavirus epidemic, Müller said Hungarian researchers were among the first in the world to produce the antibody to the virus, from the blood plasma of recovered patients. A gravely ill patient is already being treated with the antibody, she said, and called on recovered patients to donate blood plasma. Meanwhile, the National Centre of Public Health is examining the presence within the environment, and has reported that no trace of the virus has been found in the Budapest sewage system, she said. Currently, 877 are hospitalised with Covid-19, 61 of whom are on ventilators, Müller said.

The operative board's spokesman, Róbert Kiss, told the same press conference that an old border crossing between Austria and Hungary has been opened to commuters and people living close to the border. Re-opening the Hegyeshalom crossing is helping farmers as well, Kiss added, who cannot use the motorway with farming vehicles. Meanwhile, hospitals in Hungary are being supplied continuously with protective gear, Kiss said. On Friday, deliveries will arrive at four Budapest hospitals and in the cities of Veszprém, Székesfehérvár, Tatabánya, Ajka and Szekszárd, he added.

PALKOVICS: HUNGARY READY TO START REOPENING ECONOMY IN MAY

Hungary's timely response measures to the novel coronavirus outbreak have successfully slowed the virus's spread, and the country is ready to embark on a gradual reopening of the economy early next month, the innovation and technology minister has said. Thanks to the public's disciplined compliance with the government's social distancing measures, the number of personal interactions across the country has fallen by 70-90% in the recent period, depending on the type of locality, László Palkovics said.

Until April 21, the number of daily new confirmed coronavirus cases only exceeded 100 on five occasions, he said. Most Covid-19 cases have been registered in closed communities,

he said, adding that Hungary had successfully avoided a nationwide pandemic during what he said was the country's first phase of response measures. But maintaining wide-ranging restrictions would take a toll on the economy in the long run, Palkovics said. He said Hungary would enter its second phase of response measures in early May and would have to determine the conditions and schedule required for a safe and gradual easing of restrictions.

EU COMMISSIONER RAISES CONCERN ABOUT HUNGARY'S CORONAVIRUS LAW

The lack of a sunset clause in the Hungarian coronavirus law that hands the government the right to rule by decree is a cause for concern, Didier Reynders, European Commissioner for Justice, said in a teleconference of the legal and justice committee of the European Parliament (LIBE) on Thursday. Reynders also said the law handed the government powers that were too broad, insisting that measures to contain the epidemic must not harm fundamental rights, including the freedom of expression, even if they are aimed at preventing the spread of false rumours. He said the freedom and independence of the media must be guaranteed amid all circumstances, and civil organisations should be able to inform society and check the government's activities.

In response, ruling Fidesz MEP Balázs Hidvéghi said that the Hungarian

measures were fully in line with the rule of law, adding that the EU's institutions, however, "keep using double standards". He argued that the governments of "a number of countries" had powers just as great as the Hungarian government's, if not greater, adding that parliament could call off the coronavirus state of emergency "any time". In a subsequent statement, Hidvéghi told MTI that the EP's leftist and liberal deputies "have again made it clear that they have no idea what the Hungarian coronavirus law stipulates". "This, however, does not bother them; they keep on attacking Hungary's coronavirus measures in Brussels, based on lies".

Klára Dobrev, MEP of the opposition Democratic Coalition, said in her online contribution to the debate that the government's measures "are aimed at strengthening Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's powers rather than stemming the coronavirus epidemic". Anna Donáth, MEP of the opposition Momentum Movement, said the Hungarian law was "a step made towards assuming extraordinary powers", jeopardising the rule of law in Hungary. She called on the European Commission to act firmly because "investigations are not enough".

HUNGARY POPULATION DECLINE SLOWS IN JAN-FEB

Hungary's population decline slowed in the first two months of the year as the number of births increased by 8.8%

and the number of deaths decreased by 13% compared with the same period last year, the Central Statistical Office (KSH) has reported. Preliminary figures show that there were 15,148 births in January-February, up 1,230 from the same period a year earlier. According to leap day-adjusted data, the number of births for the period was up 7.1% compared with 2019.

The number of deaths was 22,818, down 3,431 from last year, KSH said. According to leap day-adjusted data, the number of deaths was down 15%. The rise in births and the drop in the death rate means that the rate of natural population decline was down 38% compared with the same period last year, or 39%, according to leap day-adjusted data. The number of marriages went up by an annual 121% to 7,381.

BUDGET DEFICIT REACHES HUF 831.9 BN IN MARCH

Hungary's cash flow-based budget deficit, excluding local councils, reached 831.9 billion forints (EUR 2.3bn) at the end of March, the finance ministry confirmed in a detailed release of data. The deficit swelled during the month as the government stocked up on medical supplies and rolled out measures to cushion the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the economy. Measures the government has taken so far to contain the spread of the novel coronavirus and protect the economy, such as a moratorium on repayments of corporate and retail loans and support for sectors of the

economy hardest hit by the pandemic, "have impacted the revenue and expenditure sides of the budget to a significant degree", the ministry said.

The ministry noted that government expenditures on procurements of personal protective equipment and ventilators came close to 190 billion forints in March. The central budget deficit reached 746.7 billion forints at the end of March and the social insurance funds were 86.9 billion in the red. Separate state funds had a surplus of 1.7 billion forints.

On the revenue side, VAT payments were up 90.3 billion forints from the base period, PIT revenue rose by 55.0 billion forints and corporate tax revenue climbed by 37.9 billion. VAT revenue stood at 22.7% of the full-year target, PIT revenue at 24.1% and revenue from payroll taxes at 24.2%. The ministry noted that government efforts to pre-finance European Union-funded projects continued to impact the budget: while payouts for such projects came to 691.2 billion forints by the end of March, transfers from Brussels reached just 63.4 billion forints. The government earlier announced that Hungary's ESA general government deficit target for 2020 would be raised from 1.0% of GDP to 2.7% because of the pandemic.

CREDIT CONTRACT ON BUDAPEST-BELGRADE RAILWAY UPGRADE SIGNED

The credit contract signed between China and Hungary for upgrading

the Budapest-Belgrade railway line is advantageous and secure for Hungary, Finance Minister Mihály Varga said. The signing of the document makes it possible for the development project to be started and for Hungary to become a logistic hub for the region, he said. Under the agreement signed with China's Exim Bank, Hungary will finance 85% of the investment costs from credit and the remaining 15% from its own funds, Varga said. The loan has a fixed interest rate and the agreement allows for prepayment, he added. Accordingly, the Hungarian government will initiate early repayment if justified by market conditions. Varga noted that the agreement for the upgrade was signed in spring 2019 with the Hungarian-Chinese contractor consortium. Work has already started on the Serbian section, which is expected to be completed by the end of 2022. The full project is scheduled to be completed by 2025, the minister said. China has said it will finance 85% of the cost of upgrading the line which will become part of a corridor for the delivery of Chinese goods to Europe from the Port of Piraeus in Greece.

PÁRBESZÉD CALLS FOR CANCELLATION OF SCHOOL-LEAVING EXAMS

The opposition Párbeszéd party has called on the government to cancel school-leaving exams, proposing that students should instead be offered grades based on their averages.

Addressing an online press conference, Párbeszéd deputy group leader Bence Tordai noted the exams are scheduled to begin on May 4, while Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has said the novel coronavirus outbreak was expected to peak the day before. “[Ruling] Fidesz is still refusing to listen to teachers, professional organisations and students despite warnings that it is extremely dangerous and irresponsible to organise the exams at this time,” Tordai insisted. He said the government was putting the fate and health of a hundred thousand students and hundreds of thousands of others at risk by organising the exams, arguing that it could result in the emergence of up to 2,000 clusters of infections. Tordai said students who wanted to improve their grades could be given the opportunity to take the exams, pointing out that this would affect “only a few thousand people”.

JOBBIK AGAINST ‘EMPTYING’ OF HOSPITALS

Opposition Jobbik has called on the government to create the capacity needed for the fight against novel coronavirus by converting hotels into hospitals instead of “emptying the beds” of health-care institutions. Jobbik leader and group leader Péter Jakab told an online press conference that Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s pledge in a radio interview broadcast earlier in the day that the government would not give up on any patient was “the greatest lie”. “When 36,000 beds

are being emptied, they are doing nothing else but giving up on 36,000 potential patients”, he said. The prime minister has absolute power and he must bear the responsibility for every life lost, Jakab added.

Jakab called it “appalling” that hospitals were being scaled back under the pretence of the state of emergency when hospital care and capacities should instead be developed. He reiterated a Jobbik proposal that secondary school students should not be expected to pass their school-leaving exams and instead receive marks based on their school performance.

GOVT EASES FAMILY SUPPORT MEASURES

The government is pushing out deadlines and easing conditions on family support tools to help families during the novel coronavirus epidemic, Katalin Novák, the state secretary for family and youth affairs, told commercial TV2. Deadlines during the epidemic are being pushed back until after the state of emergency, Novák said. The home purchase subsidy CSOK and prenatal baby support, which are conditional on the applicants’ age, also have been eased for those passing the age limit during the state of emergency, she said. Those who lose their jobs due to the pandemic will still be eligible for those supports if they find new employment within three months after the end of the state of emergency, she said. The moratorium

until the end of 2020 on loan down payments is extended to CSOK and the prenatal baby loan too, Novák added.

SZIJJÁRTÓ: ALL BORDER CROSSINGS OPEN TOWARDS CROATIA

Croatia is the only neighbouring country with which all of Hungary’s border crossings are open, Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó said at the Letenye-Goričan (Muracsány) border station after talks with his Croatian counterpart. Concerning his talks with Gordan Grlić-Radman, Szijjártó said he and his counterpart had agreed at the end of last month to open the Hungarian-Croatian border to commuters living within a 30km radius of the border. Hungary and Croatia also plan to open new border crossing points after the coronavirus pandemic subsides, he said. By 2023, the M6 motorway will be extended to the Croatian border and infrastructure-related preparations are under way for opening new border stations at Zákány and Sarok, Szijjártó added.

He said Hungary and Croatia had mutually helped out with the repatriation of each other’s citizens who were stranded abroad due of travel restrictions put in place because of the pandemic. Hungary helped repatriate 16 Croatians, while Croatia helped 64 Hungarian nationals return home. Hungary donated 100,000 face masks and 5,000 protective suits to Croatia and helped prepare the hospital in Osijek (Eszék) for the epidemic, Szijjártó added.

The two countries have a mutual interest in each other's success, Szijjártó said, arguing that most major Hungarian companies are also important players on the Croatian market. He noted that oil and gas company MOL had recently announced a 183 billion forint (EUR 511.6m) investment at a Croatian refinery, while OTP Bank now holds the fourth largest market share on the Croatian market. Bilateral trade turnover was record-high last year, exceeding 2.6 billion euros, Szijjártó said. Hungary's Eximbank has opened a 180 million euro credit line to ensure that bilateral business ties remain smooth once the pandemic subsides, he added.

Meanwhile, he said cooperation between the two countries was "exemplary" regarding the opportunities provided to minorities. The Hungarian government's economic development scheme in Croatia has so far generated 3 billion forints' worth of investments, the minister said. He noted that Croatia, which currently holds the rotating presidency of the European Union, has similar views to Hungary on issues like enlargement in the Western Balkans, migration and the need to preserve the current level of cohesion funding. "Despite being pressured by the international liberal mainstream, Croatia has not joined the chorus of attacks and stigmatisation levelled against Hungary over the past several weeks and months," Szijjártó said. He said it was "hard to resist that pressure", arguing that those who did "also end up becoming targets of the attacks". "But

in recent weeks, we've seen a serious level of solidarity from Croatia, as it didn't join in on the baseless, deceitful attacks against Hungary," he said.

Grič-Radman thanked Hungary for help it had provided Croatia in connection with the pandemic and the recent earthquake in Zagreb. Concerning minority affairs, he said the roughly 50,000 Croatians living in Hungary and the Hungarian community in Croatia enjoyed "the exact same rights". He also said EU ministers responsible for tourism will hold a video conference next Monday to discuss measures to be implemented for the coming tourist season.

SZIJJÁRTÓ: HUNGARY, AUSTRIA AGREE TO REOPEN OLD HEGYESHALOM BORDER CROSSING

Hungary and Austria have agreed to reopen the old border crossing point at Hegyeshalom after frequent tailbacks at the motorway crossing caused problems for daily commuters, the foreign minister has said. "Several tens of thousands of Hungarians commute to Austria for work on a daily basis, and given that only nine border stations are open due to travel restrictions, they are often forced to endure long waits," Péter Szijjártó said on Facebook. He said István Nagy, the minister of agriculture, had already indicated when the restrictions were first put into place that commuters living near Mosonmagyaróvár were having to deal

with heavy traffic at the motorway border crossing point at Hegyeshalom and that farmers could not even enter Austria because their vehicles are not allowed on motorway.

Szijjártó said that after discussing the issue with his Austrian counterpart Alexander Schallenberg, they had agreed to reopen the old Hegyeshalom border station on route 1 from early Friday morning. The border crossing is open to commuters and farmers between 5am and 10am and between 5pm and 8pm, the minister said.

IWF MOVING HEADQUARTERS FROM BUDAPEST TO LAUSANNE

The International Weightlifting Federation (IWF) is moving its headquarters from Budapest to Lausanne, according to a report from sports website insidethegames.biz. According to the report, the federation's executive board has extended the mandate of Ursula Papandrea, who was appointed the IWF's acting president in January. She will be leading the federation together with USA Weightlifting chief executive Phil Andrews, who has temporarily been named deputy director general of the IWF, the website said.

The federation's former president, Tamás Aján, resigned his position last week. Aján, who had served as the IWF's general secretary from 1976 to 2000 and its president over the past 20 years, asked for his suspension in January while an independent

investigation was carried out into allegations of graft levelled against him and the sport in a documentary broadcast by German state broadcaster ARD. The documentary aired on January 5 said weightlifting was fraught with systematic doping, going on with the knowledge of the IWF which had commissioned the Hungarian anti-doping body (MACS) with supervising all large-scale competitions and almost all world championships. The film also

alleged that since 1992, 23 million dollars have been transferred to two Swiss bank accounts connected to Aján, with no record of the monies in IWF ledgers. Aján and MACS both rejected the allegations.

HUNGARY SENDS AID TO MIGRATION-HIT GREECE

The Hungarian government is sending a consignment of pillows, sheets and blankets to Greece as

aid to handle illegal migration, the Hungarian Disaster Management Directorate said. Greece's minister for migration and asylum affairs turned to EU states' ambassadors in April, asking for help in tackling challenges connected to migration, Spokesman Dániel Mukics said. The Hungarian government is sending 1,000 bedsheets, pillows and blankets each, Mukics said. The two lorries are expected to arrive in Greece on Saturday, he said.