

PHOTO OF THE DAY



(L-R) Slovak President Zuzana Čaputová, Polish President Andrzej Duda, Hungarian President János Áder and Czech President Miloš Zeman at a V4 summit in Warsaw

UPCOMING EVENTS

PM's Office Head Gergely Gulyás holds regular press briefing

Coronavirus updates

Stats office reports on Dec 2020 commercial lodgings

European Parliament holds plenary session

TOP STORY

ÁDER: COVID JABS KEY TO EASING RESTRICTIONS

Hungary will hopefully be in a position to further ease its coronavirus-related restrictions in May if “good progress is made” in the vaccination of residents, which could result in “another quite successful summer” for tourism, the president said.

Speaking after a meeting with his Visegrad Group counterparts in Warsaw, János Áder said that “the sooner and the larger quantities of vaccines are delivered, the sooner we’ll be able to lift restrictions in tourism, too.” Áder said he hoped that vaccination could be sped up “by Easter or in the period after Easter, until end-April, the latest.” “Thus, similarly to last year, we could reopen in May,” he speculated and voiced hope that “this summer will be as successful for most people in tourism as it was last year”.

Concerning energy, Áder said that participants in the summit had agreed that the use of coal must be reduced. Basic power plants are needed, however, and “if we take emissions targets seriously, all four Visegrad countries will need nuclear energy and – at least in the next 20-25 years – gas-operated plants, too,” the president said. He added that the group would lobby for European support for gas projects.

The participants also marked the anniversary of the Visegrad Group, and concluded that the past 30 years have been successful, Áder said.

KARÁCSONY ASKS BUDAPEST RESIDENTS TO TRUST VACCINES

Budapest Mayor Gergely Karácsony has appealed to Budapest residents to put their trust in experts and get vaccinated against coronavirus. Karácsony said the number of coronavirus infections had been on the rise in recent weeks after a decline in January. He said he understood that it was increasingly difficult to live with restrictions. "We're all impatient and can hardly wait for this to end." But until enough people get inoculated, the best protection is wearing masks and physical distancing, he added. "It is only with vaccination that we can return to our old lives," Karácsony said, adding that it was very important for as many people as possible to get vaccinated. "It's now that we must prevent a potential third wave from flaring up," he said.

MINISTRY: BILL AIMS FOR BETTER, MORE SECURE UTILISATION OF NATIONAL DATA ASSETS

A bill submitted by the ministry of innovation and technology to lawmakers identifies the tasks of the national data assets agency (NAVÜ) and council and seeks to regulate national data asset management and protection in order to enable better and more secure utilisation of the country's data assets, the

ministry said. National data asset management represents a key element of Hungary's Artificial Intelligence strategy, the ministry said. Data generated from state administration needs to be utilised more efficiently, and this requires developing an institutional system that can help the comprehensive use of national data assets while providing data services based on fresh analysis of state data, it added.

NAVÜ's tasks will include operating a national public data portal, setting up and managing a national public data cadastre, processing and analysing anonymised databases and offering data analysis services to the government, markets and citizens, the ministry said. Under the proposal, the agency will generate new data sets after contacting organisations that handle the relevant data. In order to ensure the full protection of personal data, cooperating data managers will be obliged to properly anonymise the data they handle, the ministry said. The proposal focuses on professional processing of large databases and does not affect regulations on access to data in the public interest, it added. The national data assets council is to be established as a government committee comprising ministers whose portfolios are affected by data management, and its tasks will include developing directives and principles for the operation of NAVÜ and the government's data utilisation policy.

HUNGARY RECORDS 98 CORONAVIRUS FATALITIES, 1,279 NEW INFECTIONS

Fully 98 Covid patients, generally elderly and suffering from an underlying illness, died over the past 24 hours, while 1,279 new infections were officially registered, bringing the total number of infected to 380,013, koronavirus.gov.hu said on Wednesday. The death toll has risen to 13,347, while 285,022 people have made a recovery. The number of active infections has declined to 81,644, while there are 3,747 hospitalised Covid patients, 296 on a ventilator. Altogether 19,414 people are in official home quarantine, and the number of tests carried out has risen to 3,298,814. Hungary began rolling out the coronavirus vaccine in December. So far, 292,627 people have received their first jab, and 113,570 have been fully inoculated. The government has extended coronavirus-related restrictions until March 1. Most infections have been registered in Budapest (70,500) and Pest County (47,384) so far, followed by the counties of Hajdú-Bihar (21,447), Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén (21,271) and Győr-Moson-Sopron (21,098). The county least affected by the infection is Tolna (8,373).

SOCIALIST MEP CALLS FOR EUROPEAN PHARMA INDUSTRY DEVELOPMENT

The European Union needs to develop its own pharmaceutical industry to curb its reliance in vaccine development on continents with better infrastructure, Socialist MEP István Ujhelyi told an online press conference. Referring to delays in the rollout of the coronavirus vaccine in the bloc, Ujhelyi said “the current political blame game” was a result of certain manufacturers’ inability to deliver the contracted amount of coronavirus vaccines in the first month of inoculations. Meanwhile, the Hungarian government is blaming Brussels for the delays, he said. Ujhelyi has requested data in the public interest on the details of Hungary’s vaccine procurement efforts from the relevant ministries and Hungary’s public health authority. He noted that the EU’s vaccine procurement was supervised by a committee comprising representatives of all member states. He said he wanted to know who represented Hungary on that body and whether they had lodged any objections to the plans at the time of the talks. The requested data also contains information on the government body responsible for Hungary’s individual agreements with manufacturers, and the amounts ordered as well as delivery times, he said. “We have to push the manufacturers together to deliver

the contracted 2.5 billion doses of vaccine to Europe as soon as possible. Meanwhile, the Hungarian government has an obligation to organise the vaccination in Hungary in a fair, safe and transparent way,” Ujhelyi said.

KARÁCSONY CALLS ON GOVT TO COOPERATE WITH LOCAL COUNCILS ON EU RECOVERY FUND

Budapest’s mayor, Gergely Karácsony, has called on Prime Minister Viktor Orbán to consult all associations of local councils on the use of the European Union’s pandemic recovery fund before submitting Hungary’s plans to the EU. In an open letter posted on Facebook, Karácsony said local councils were ready to cooperate with the government to ensure that EU funding would “truly help those it was intended to help: Hungarian people and companies.” Karácsony noted that the European Parliament has obliged governments to consult local authorities on the use of the recovery funds.

Consulting local authorities is also vital to implementing many of the EU’s goals such as digitalisation and green development, he said. Local councils are key to solving local crises, he added.

Meanwhile, he called on the government to change its practices concerning how EU funds are used. In the past decade, Hungary had jumped to the top of the EU anti-

fraud body OLAF’s “shame list”, he insisted. Monies allocated to the government’s plan to protect the economy had been largely spent on goals “that have nothing to do with the protection of the economy or with preserving jobs,” he said.

Karácsony cited Balázs Orbán, a state secretary, as saying earlier that the government had consulted with 15,000 experts and several local authority organisations but three local council organisations and several mayors he had asked had no knowledge of such talks. He called on Orbán to publish the list of experts and organisations, and the date and outcome of the talks. “I’d like to believe the government hasn’t fallen into its old trap of consulting with government-friendly mayors exclusively. That would strengthen the impression that it is splitting the country into first-class and second-class citizens and localities, and that would be unacceptable,” Karácsony said.

EC VOICES CONCERN OVER KLUBRÁDIÓ CASE

The European Commission has expressed concern over the case of Hungary’s Klubrádió, a private broadcaster popular with opposition listeners that will go off the air at the end of the week after losing an appeal to extend its licence.

“The case of Klubrádió only aggravates our concerns” over media pluralism in Hungary, European Commission spokesman



Christian Wigand told a press conference on Wednesday. Wigand said the EC had expressed its concerns over the state of Hungary's media landscape in its rule-of-law report issued last year.

The commission has reached out to the relevant Hungarian authorities over the issue "to ensure that Klubrádió can continue to operate legally", he said. Wigand added that the EC would assess the compatibility of the court decision to reject Klubradio's appeal with EU law and whether the relevant EU rules had been respected during the legal procedure. Media freedom and pluralism are part of the foundations of European democracy, Wigand said, adding that the commission would take action over the issue if necessary.

The Budapest Municipal Court on Tuesday rejected a legal challenge by Klubrádió against a decision by Hungary's media authority not to renew its licence. The court said that under the relevant law, the Media Council of the National Media and Communications Authority (NMHH) had no room to consider Klubrádió's appeal due to "repeated offences" committed by the broadcaster.

Last September, the NMHH announced that it would call another tender for the 92.9 MHz frequency in Budapest, as it was not renewing Klubrádió's licence due to its violations of Hungary's media law. The licence will expire on Feb. 14.

The court noted that the Media Council's decision not to extend

the licence had been based on its findings of the broadcaster's offences which Klubrádió had not challenged, which meant its appeal could not be deliberated.

Dunja Mijatović, the Council of Europe's commissioner for human rights, has also expressed concern over the court ruling. "Another silenced voice in Hungary. Another sad day for media freedom," Mijatović said on Twitter.

JOBBIK FILES REPORT OVER RIVER POLLUTION NEAR EASTERN BORDER

The opposition Jobbik party said it has filed an environment pollution report with authorities over communal waste drifting on the Hungarian section of the river Tisza and its tributaries, the Kraszna and Szamos rivers, near Hungary's eastern borders. Speaking at a press conference in front of Ukraine's consular office in Nyíregyháza, in eastern Hungary, Béla Adorján, a councillor of the local county assembly, said Jobbik had clear evidence that the waste causing continued pollution on the rivers over the past several years originates in neighbouring Romania and Ukraine. He said "courtesy moves in diplomacy" had led nowhere in the past twenty years, adding that government programmes of removing drift waste from the river had only been "ad-hoc emergency steps" and had not resulted in

the eradication of the pollution. Csaba Gyüre, a lawmaker for the party, said that under international treaties, Hungary could have sought reimbursement of waste removal costs by the two neighbouring countries, but had failed to make use of that option.

PREMONSTRATIENSIS CELEBRATE 900TH ANNIVERSARY

Cardinal Péter Erdő, archbishop of Esztergom-Budapest, and leaders of the Premonstratensians delivered a mass in Saint Stephen's Basilica on Wednesday to mark the 900th anniversary of the order celebrated this year. Miklós Soltész, state secretary at the Prime Minister's Office in charge of church and state relations, said in his address that the Premonstratensians were part of "Hungary's history, past and present". He thanked the community for educating students, caring for people in need and "giving faith" and "showing the path ahead".

Erdő said in his homily that the respect of liturgy was an especially important part of the Premonstratensians' heritage today. The service offered by female members of the order, caring for the poor and needy represent essential parts of the Premonstratensians' mission which, he added, they fulfilled in exemplary fashion.

NBH: 'SIGNIFICANT UNCERTAINTY' FOR ECONOMIC OUTLOOK

National Bank of Hungary (NBH) policymakers noted at a monthly policy meeting in January the recovery in the industrial and construction sectors and the positive impact of government stimulus, but warned that "significant uncertainty" arose from the possibility of rising risk aversion, the inflationary effects of higher indirect taxes, and the pace of vaccinations. Monetary Council members said government support "to mitigate the adverse economic effects of coronavirus and measures to stimulate credit market growth" had helped to keep the jobless rate low. "Despite favourable data, Monetary Council members agreed that a potential increase in risk aversion vis-a-vis emerging markets, the inflationary effects of changes in indirect taxes and future developments in vaccination created significant uncertainty in terms of Hungary's macroeconomic outlook," according to the minutes of the meeting released on Wednesday.

The policymakers noted in a statement released immediately

after the January policy meeting that changes to indirect taxes were expected to raise inflation by 0.8 of a percentage point in 2021. They also said the increase in risk aversion with regard to emerging markets "continues to pose the greatest risk" to the inflation outlook. The Council voted unanimously at the meeting on January 26 to keep the central bank base rate unchanged at 0.60%.

NBH PUBLISHES FINANCIAL AND ECONOMIC DIGEST IN CHINESE

The National Bank of Hungary (NBH) published a Chinese translation of its Financial and Economic Review, a digest of the best banking and economy papers of the previous year. The NBH has published a Chinese translation of the digest each year since 2018, aiming to "support scientific education and the further promotion of Chinese-Hungarian economic policy relations". The papers in this year's issue examine measurement of inflation, geopolitical changes, reduction of public debt, coordination between economic policy branches, fiscal stabilisation policy, and the Budapest Eurasia Forum 2020 conference.

NIGERIAN SENTENCED TO PRISON FOR MONEY LAUNDERING

The Budapest Court of Appeal has sentenced a Nigerian national to three years in prison and three years' expulsion from Hungary for money laundering, the prosecutor's office said. The court also ordered the seizure of 1,000 euros from the primary defendant, the prosecutor's office said. The Nigerian national and his accomplices were charged in 2018 with operating the Budapest branch of an international fraud and money laundering ring. Starting in 2016, they paid Hungarian and Slovak citizens relatively small fees to open bank accounts and withdraw the monies transferred there. The payments came from an international fraud scheme which tricked market players into making payments to those accounts by pretending they belonged to their business partners, the prosecution said. The organisation defrauded Romanian, Vietnamese, Malaysian, Indonesian, Chinese and US companies, as well as a well-known French football team. A Budapest court handed a sentence to the primary defendant in February 2020. The ruling became binding with the decision of the Appeals Court on February 2.