

## PHOTO OF THE DAY



MTI/Péter Komka

Frost-work in northern Hungary

## UPCOMING EVENTS

**Coronavirus updates**

**DK leader Ferenc Gyurcsány evaluates 2020**

**Civilian victims of the siege of Budapest remembered**

## TOP STORY

# ORBÁN: CHINA JAB TO ACCELERATE VACCINATIONS

If Hungary can begin using China's Covid-19 vaccine then all those who have registered for a shot can be inoculated by Easter, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán said.

In his regular interview to public broadcaster Kossuth Radio, Orbán said it was "good news" that some 700,000 people in Hungary are now protected against Covid-19, with 310,000 having received their first shots and 383,000 who are confirmed to have recovered from the disease. He noted, however, that the decline in new daily cases has come to a halt, with 99 deaths and 1,860 new infections recorded on Thursday. A total of 3,828 people are hospitalised with Covid-19, 299 of them on a ventilator. "The rules must remain in place," the prime minister said. Orbán attributed Hungary's recent rise in cases to the spread of the UK variant of the virus.

He added, at the same time, that Hungary did not need to impose further restrictions to combat the epidemic, saying that the country now had enough vaccines to offset the rise in cases. Orbán said that if Hungary could start vaccinating people with China's Sinopharm jab, which he said would happen soon, all 2,448,000 people who have registered for a Covid shot could be inoculated by Easter.

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## **ORBÁN: 6.8 MILLION PEOPLE COULD BE VACCINATED BY LATE MAY**

By late May and early June, fully 6.8 million people could be vaccinated, Orbán said in his regular interview to public broadcaster Kossuth Radio. This would mean Hungary would have 3.5 million more people inoculated than a country with a similar size and population. People in Hungary are currently being vaccinated at 7,189 vaccination points, the prime minister said.

Orbán also noted that it was not yet known how long immunity lasts after a person has been vaccinated, saying the country needed to be prepared for the possibility that people will have to be vaccinated every 6-8 months. Hungary therefore has to be procuring vaccines on a continuous basis, he said.

"We need to have prowlers and scouts on the move all the time ... and whenever it looks like a few thousand or hundred thousand vaccines fall off a truck, a Hungarian prowler has to be there to catch it," Orbán said.

As regards the European Union's vaccine procurement strategy, the prime minister said the business plan itself was sound, but the problem was that it was taking too long. "And those who are able to buy time can save lives, which is why Hungary needs the Chinese and Russian vaccines as well," he said. "Those who waste time will lose lives."

Concerning the Chinese vaccine, Orbán said Hungary's public health authority had yet to assess the job, adding, at the same time, that there was a good chance that it would be safe to use. Put to him that many believe Hungary should wait for the European Medicines Agency (EMA) to approve the Sinopharm vaccine, Orbán said Hungary's health experts were "at least as qualified" as any European expert, adding that he was more confident in the judgement of the Hungarian public health authority than in that of the Brussels-based body. "We have to trust ourselves, [Chief Medical Officer] Cecília Müller and her staff and Hungarian professors," the prime minister said. "Every day we spend waiting, the country loses another person, so I'm not going to wait."

On the topic of the government's latest National Consultation public survey concerning when to lift coronavirus restrictions, Orbán said the questions would be finalised on Friday afternoon and the survey would be accessible online at the website [vakcinainfo.gov.hu](http://vakcinainfo.gov.hu). Orbán said the government was making plans for introducing a vaccination certificate. If the national consultation survey shows that respondents believe more freedoms should be given to people who are protected from the virus, there should be no technical obstacle to immediately giving them these freedoms, he added. It would be correct to give protected status also to those that "have antibodies

which means they have already had the infection" even without realising it, Orbán said.

Commenting on economic issues, he said vaccination, the lifting of restrictions and the restart of the country would give the most important help to sectors in trouble. Tens of thousands of jobs could be saved if at least those who have been vaccinated or recovered from the infection could use hotel and restaurant services, he added.

A 10 million forint interest-free loan to be launched in the near future to micro and small businesses in trouble will be an important element of economic recovery, he said. He added that once demand for the credit exceeds the allocation limit of 100 billion forints, he would like to see the limit lifted and make the allocation "open from the top".

Thanks to a new home renovation scheme, the increase in home creation subsidies and the decrease in VAT for home construction to 5%, Orbán said he expected a labour shortage, especially in the construction industry. At the same time, he said a "home construction boom" could start.

Economic recovery is a "tough job" but "we will push on" and Hungary's economy will quickly return to pre-crisis levels, Orbán said.

Pensioners are to receive in a few days the first week's worth of 13th month pension which the government has reintroduced in line with a four-year plan. As a result, the "last sin committed by the previous left-wing

government” would be corrected, he added. “The left wing is not in an easy position ... we are clearing away the traces of all their sins,” Orbán said, adding that in addition to the 13th month pensions, the left wing also scrapped the 13th month salaries of civil servants, doctors and nurses.

**HUNGARY RECORDS 99 COVID FATALITIES, 1,860 NEW INFECTIONS**

Fully 99 Covid patients, generally elderly and suffering from an underlying illness, died over the past 24 hours, while 1,860 new infections were officially registered, bringing the total number of infected to 383,735, koronavirus.gov.hu said on Friday. The death toll has risen to 13,543, while 289,520 people have made a recovery. The number of active infections has declined to 80,672, while there are 3,828 hospitalised Covid patients, 299 on a ventilator. Altogether 22,525 people are in official home quarantine, and the number of tests carried out has risen to 3,338,289.

Hungary began rolling out the coronavirus vaccine in December. So far, 310,448 people have received their first jab, and 120,649 have been fully inoculated.

The government has extended coronavirus-related restrictions until March 1.

Most infections have been registered in Budapest (71,219) and Pest County (47,920) so far, followed by the counties of Hajdú-Bihar (21,598), Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén (21,557) and

Győr-Moson-Sopron (21,323). The county least affected by the infection is Tolna (8,512).

**SZIJJÁRTÓ CALLS FOR START TO EU ACCESSION TALKS WITH ALBANIA**

The European Union should begin accession talks with Albania as soon as possible, Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó said after talks with his Albanian counterpart in Tirana on Friday. Albania plays an important role in guaranteeing the security of the Western Balkan region, the minister told a joint press conference with Olta Xhaçka. Meanwhile, developments in the region have an impact on progress in central Europe and the amount of migration pressure on the continent as a whole, he added. “It is in Hungary’s national security and economic interest that things should go well in the Western Balkans and we are therefore dedicated to the European and Euro-Atlantic integration of the region,” he said. He added that it was regrettable that talks had not properly started in the past four years.

Hungary is asking countries “less sensitive to enlargement” and Brussels to start the relevant talks, he said. Hungary is also supporting Albania’s membership in the United Nations Security Council in 2022-23, he added.

Szjijártó said the EU should work closely with the countries of the region in order to avoid being “flooded by illegal migrants again”, adding that migration now also

posed health risks to the continent due to the pandemic. The pressure of migration is again on the rise in the Western Balkans, with 13% more illegal migrants arriving at Albania’s borders last year than in the previous year, he added. He said that following the examples of Wizz Air and OTP Bank, another Hungarian company, Gémtech, was carrying out significant investment in Albania, involving 4.6 billion forints (EUR 12.9m) to build a 10 MW solar park. This will boost the country’s internal electricity capacity and reduce its dependence on import energy, he added. Gémtech is getting 2.5 billion forints in state support for the project and further Hungarian companies are preparing water management and information technology investments in Albania, Szijjártó said. He said economic cooperation between the two countries had solid foundations, as proven by the over 100 million euros in trade turnover registered despite the pandemic last year.

Xhaçka expressed thanks to Szijjártó for the 260,000 euros that Hungary contributed to help the recovery of damage caused by an earthquake in November 2019 and for donations of health supplies to support efforts against the pandemic. She welcomed an education cooperation agreement signed earlier in the day which enables twenty Albanian students to attend Hungarian higher education institutions each year between 2021 and 2024.

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## **SEMJÉN, POTÁPI MEET ETHNIC HUNGARIAN PARTY LEADERS FROM ABROAD**

Deputy Prime Minister Zsolt Semjén and state secretary for Hungarian communities abroad Árpád János Potápi met ethnic Hungarian party leaders from abroad on Thursday. The purpose of the meeting was to review plans affecting Hungarian communities abroad for 2021, the state secretary's office said. The sides discussed the situation in the various regions as well as current problems. They were in agreement that in 2021, dubbed the year of national renewal, it was especially important to think in terms of a unified Carpathian Basin, cooperation between the mother country and regions abroad, and to further strengthen the system of relations between those various regions, the statement said.

The meeting was attended by Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (RMDSZ) leader Hunor Kelemen, Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians (VMSZ) leader István Pásztor, Transcarpathian Hungarian Cultural Association (KMKSZ) leader László Brenzovics, leader of the Party of the Hungarian Community (MKP) Krisztián Forró, leader of the Hungarian Self-Governing Ethnic Community of Pomurje (MMONK) Ferenc Horváth and Democratic Union of Hungarians of Croatia (HMDK) leader Róbert Jankovics.

## **SZIJJÁRTÓ: HUNGARY SUBMITS PROJECT PROPOSALS FOR THREE SEAS INVESTMENT FUND**

Hungary has joined the Three Seas Investment Fund and submitted proposals for 16 projects covering the areas of digitalisation, shipping and energy, Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó said at an online meeting of foreign ministers focusing on the Three Seas Initiative on Thursday.

Szijjártó said at the meeting, the video of which he posted on Facebook, that Hungary had always been a dedicated supporter of the Three Seas Initiative, which he said chimed with the economic interests of central and eastern European countries. He added it was important at the same time for the initiative not to be a talking shop, and it would only prove useful should projects that promote the development and cohesion of the region be implemented. The minister said it was clear from Europe's infrastructure map that central Europe was relatively under-developed along the north-south axis in terms of energy and transport, lacking, for example, a high-speed rail network east of Germany. Three Seas offers an excellent framework to address such gaps, he said. Szijjártó noted that Hungary is already building gas pipelines with Slovakia and Romania, and there are plans for links with Slovenia too. The construction of a 230km stretch of Via Carpatia is planned to be completed

in Hungary this autumn, he noted. Visegrad Group countries have taken the first steps to build high-speed rail lines connecting their capitals, and Bucharest is planned to be linked to this network, he said, adding that Hungary and Croatia have successfully begun to jointly operate an LNG terminal on Krk Island.

Hungary signed the accession contract to the Three Seas Investment Fund last December, and Eximbank has already transferred 20 million euros to it.

Hungary has submitted proposals for several projects, he added. Szijjártó highlighted the diversification of gas supplies, emphasising that this was a matter of national security.

A Slovenia-Hungary gas pipeline securing gas supplies for the two countries could be expanded to Italy, he said. Also, existing networks between Hungary and Slovakia must be further developed, he added.

These projects will come into their own once pipelines between Bulgaria and Greece are finalised, he said. Szijjártó encouraged the other ministers to support the inclusion of this project among the priorities of the Three Seas Initiative. Hungary is interested in the Three Seas Initiative being broadly inclusionary and is working to cooperate with neighbours to the East and West. "Connectivity and joint projects are highly important," he said, adding that the coronavirus epidemic had shown how "we are mutually dependent" and should act in concert.

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## **OFFICIAL: GOVT AIMS TO TRANSITION TO GREEN ECONOMY**

Systemic transformations are needed because the energy market is changing and the government aims to transition to a green, circular economy, the state secretary in charge of developing the circular economy, energy and climate policy told daily Magyar Nemzet. Attila Steiner, who was appointed on January 15, said in an interview that energy management and waste management in Hungary would undergo transformation as a result of a series of investments. He said he had been tasked with coordinating these and utilising as much European Union resources as possible in the best possible way. Energy and waste management are connected in several areas and it is therefore logical to handle them together, he said. He added that he had participated in the talks about the seven-year EU budget and gained a good understanding of the logic of EU financing.

Some 37% of the 672.5 billion euros in the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) will have to be spent on green transition which he said offered a great opportunity for the government to reach its goals. The European Commission has basically accepted that the EU cannot fulfil its 2050 climate neutrality goals without nuclear energy, he added. It has been understood that nuclear energy is vital for the security of supplies and affordable electricity,

he said. Steiner said that stricter fines could be introduced against illegal waste and a new waste management authority is planned to be set up to operate the system of sanctions.

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## **MEDIA COUNCIL HEAD ON KLUBRÁDIÓ CASE: 'I BELIEVE IN THE RULE OF LAW'**

The head of Hungary's Media Council on Thursday defended a decision not to extend the broadcast licence of opposition-leaning Klubrádió, saying the country's top media authority "did not take the frequency away" from the station and it would still have a chance to operate in the future. In a statement, Mónika Karas denied that the station had been discriminated against, saying the Media Council had made several conciliatory gestures towards Klubrádió, but ultimately the authority had to abide by the country's media law. All Media Council decisions can be appealed, she said. All radio broadcasters are held to the same standard, Karas said, adding the authority showed neither negative nor positive discrimination. Karas denied press reports suggesting the council had "taken away" Klubrádió's frequency, but rather the radio had been awarded a licence for a specific period of time which it had enjoyed without interruption.

She said the extension of the licence without an application was not permitted by the media law due to various violations of the law by the broadcaster. The Media Council's head said her

authority's decision on the matter was therefore circumscribed by the law. Karas said the broadcaster itself acknowledged the breaches by not appealing the decisions against it at the time.

Hungary's media market, she said, was free and diverse, with 393 television stations, 156 terrestrial radio stations, 78 internet radio channels, 6,731 printed media and 3,540 internet outlets offering information to the Hungarian public.

Karas said that notwithstanding the international spotlight on the Klubrádió case and the "hysteria" surrounding it, the Media Council could not be expected to treat Klubrádió with any special favours. Klubrádió, she added, was the only radio to operate through a tender for ten years instead of seven.

All council decisions can be challenged in court, she added. In a law-governed state, neither the Media Council nor Klubrádió "can circumvent the law", she added. If the station makes a successful application, then it has the option of using the same frequency or any other frequency in the future, she said.

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## **OFFICIAL: GOVT TAKES LEGAL STEPS OVER 'FAKE NEWS' ON CONDITIONS AT S HUNGARY ORPHANAGE**

The government has taken legal steps over "fake news" on conditions at an orphanage in Kalocsa, in southern Hungary, the state secretary in charge of social affairs at the human resources ministry said.

Attila Fülöp said on Facebook that the orphanage was carrying out “important and serious professional work”. He slammed “opposition media for making baseless and unlawful remarks that unsettle and cause disadvantage to children’s lives without consequences”.

The children under care and staff “must never become tools for political games”, he added. Fülöp said news portal 24.hu operated by the Central Media group had been repeatedly publishing fake reports about the orphanage. As a result, a request has been submitted to the Budapest Municipal Court to establish that legal violations had been committed, a correction must be issued and a fine imposed, he added. The fine will be used to finance developments in the education of children at the Kalocsa orphanage, he said. The office of the ombudsman for fundamental rights said on Monday that the ombudsman had ordered a review of the conditions at the children’s home in Kalocsa based on media reports and lawmaker accounts of “serious concerns” and allegations regarding the institution. Independent MP Bernadett Szél announced that she was turning to the ombudsman and the human resources ministry over reports of child abuse at the Kalocsa orphanage in August last year.

## **BUDAPEST TO BEGIN UPGRADE OF DANUBE EMBANKMENTS**

The Budapest municipal council will begin the upgrade of the Danube

embankments by renovating the section of the Pest embankment between Kossuth Square and Margaret Bridge, Gergely Karácsony, the city’s mayor, said. Because the original plans for the upgrade which were submitted early last year had reflected the ideas of the previous Budapest administration, the project has had to be redesigned, Karácsony said on Facebook.

The new plans include a wider sidewalk and a longer section of road with reduced traffic. The guardrail will be removed from the side of the road and trees will be planted in its place, Karácsony said.

A 4-5 metre wide pedestrian path will be installed and the speed limit on that section of the embankment will be reduced by 30 kph, the mayor said.

The design of the pedestrian path will fit the look of the embankment section in front of Parliament and 35 trees will be planted along the path.

To make room for the pedestrian path, the exit lane at Markó Street will also have to be modified in line with monument protection regulations, Karácsony said. Due to a lack of room for a bicycle path within the project, cyclists will have to continue using the upper embankment, he said.

The municipal council on Friday invited public procurement tenders for the project, Karácsony said, adding that construction was scheduled to begin in June and end on Dec. 31 this year. Bidders for the project have until March 17 to submit their offers, the Budapest Mayor’s Office said in a statement.

Meanwhile, Balázs Fürjes, the state secretary in charge of development

projects in and around Budapest, said the government is contributing 787 million forints (EUR 2.2m) to the project under a decision by the municipal public development council. “Our goal is clear: renovating the embankment and building a pedestrian path on the bank of the banks of the Danube,” Fürjes said on Facebook. “This means that this section would connect to the Jászai Mari Square section [of the embankment] from the north and to Kossuth Lajos Square in front of Parliament from the south.” Both sections had been built using government funding over the last ten years, he said, adding that the new project “shows that our commitment to keep developing Budapest hasn’t changed”. The technical details of the project were finalised by the public development council last year, he said, adding that cooperation between City Hall and the Budapest Development Centre had been strong ever since.

Talks are still ongoing between the government and the municipal council on the financing of upgrade of the embankment section extending to Blaha Lujza Square, Fürjes said.

## **HUNGARY CPI STEADY AT 2.7% IN JANUARY**

Hungary’s annualised consumer price index was 2.7% in January, unchanged for the third month in a row, data released by the Central Statistical Office (KSH) on Friday shows. Higher prices for spirits and tobacco -- lifted by compulsory excise tax increases

-- continued to lift headline inflation. Prices in the category were up 9.9% in January, including a 16.5% jump in the price of tobacco products. Food prices increased by 3.9%, the slowest rate in more than two years. Consumer durable prices rose by 3.1% and clothing and footwear prices fell by 2.1%. Household energy prices edged up 0.3% and service prices increased by 1.7%. Prices in the category of goods that includes vehicle fuel inched down 0.1%, as vehicle fuel prices dropped 3.5%.

### **INDUSTRIAL OUTPUT DOWN 6.1% IN 2020**

Industrial output in Hungary was down by an annual 6.1% in 2020, the Central Statistical Office (KSH) said,

confirming its first reading of data. Headline industrial output increased by 5.8% year-on-year in December, a rise that was supported by two additional workdays in the period. Adjusted for those extra workdays, industrial output rose by 1.1%. In a month-on-month comparison, industrial output fell by a seasonally and workday-adjusted 2.4%. Industrial sector sales rose by 4.9% year-on-year in December. Domestic sales decreased by 1.2% but export sales climbed 9.4%.

### **AIR QUALITY WORSENS ACROSS HUNGARY**

Air quality has deteriorated across Hungary due to a high concentration of airborne

particulates, the National Public Health Centre (NNK) said. NNK declared air quality to be "unhealthy" in Putnok, in northeast Hungary, and in Nyíregyhaza, in the east. Concentrations of particulates are also considered to be too high in Budapest, Debrecen, Miskolc, Salgótarján, Dunaújváros, Székesfehérvár, Szolnok and several other cities and towns, NNK said. Forecasts show air quality is expected to deteriorate further in most places, it said. NNK advised vulnerable groups such as children, people suffering from respiratory diseases and the elderly in those cities to spend less time outdoors as the effects of the air pollution level can be dangerous for them.