

PHOTO OF THE DAY



MTI/István Biró

Training at the Szeklerland Hockey Academy in Marosszentgyörgy

UPCOMING EVENTS

Plenary session of parliament

Stats office releases construction data for Dec

Coronavirus updates

TOP STORY

HUNGARY VACCINATION RATE ABOVE EU AVERAGE

The government has shown great agility in procuring vaccines, giving the country a head-start on its European peers, according to a government official.

Fully 3% of the Hungarian population has been vaccinated against coronavirus, compared with the European Union's average 2.7%, the human resources minister has said. Miklós Kásler said he believed that Hungary's advantage would increase, referring to the government's "extreme agility" when it came to making vaccine purchases from other countries. In a video posted on Facebook the minister said Hungary's vaccination programme was "highly organised" and the pace of vaccination was dependent exclusively on the speed the country could obtain the vaccine. Shipments through the EU are "uncertain in terms of time and quantity", that is why the government is "gathering information on all continents". All five vaccines licenced for use in Hungary, he added, were reliable "in all sense". He insisted that Hungarian health authorities would only licence a vaccine if they were effective and the risk of side effects or complications was negligible.

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SZIJJÁRTÓ: EURO-ATLANTIC INTEGRATION ‘KEY TO SUCCESSFUL FUTURE’

Euro-Atlantic integration based on shared values is the key to central Europe and Hungary’s future, Péter Szijjártó, the foreign minister, said in a letter to US Secretary of State Antony Blinken. Szijjártó thanked his US counterpart for congratulating the Visegrad Group on the 30th anniversary of its establishment. As V4 president from July this year, he said Hungary wanted to “build on the successes of the past 30 years”, further strengthening central Europe, while deepening cooperation with the US “based on shared interests and values”. Hungary, he added, was “proud of the successes achieved with its V4 allies”, also noting its membership in NATO and the European Union. The minister said the Visegrad Group had become “the engine of cooperation and development in central Europe”.

GYURCSÁNY HAILS OPPOSITION COLLABORATION

Ferenc Gyurcsány, leader of the opposition Democratic Coalition, said in a keynote speech on Saturday that the decision by Hungary’s opposition parties to cooperate was of “historic significance”. The former Socialist prime minister said: “The best thing to happen over the past year is the birth

of a patriotic, European, democratic opposition to the Orbán regime.”

“It’s taken a good while for people to understand that democratic competition doesn’t exist in Hungary,” Gyurcsány said. “Only a joint political and electoral force that’s fundamentally opposed to an autocratic and, in many respects, dictatorial system has a chance to win [the 2022 general election] and restore normality.” He said the decision to form a unified opposition was not down to any particular party or political leader but rather the result of the opposition’s joint acknowledgment of their patriotic obligation.

On the subject of Covid, Gyurcsány said the opposition had often been accused of turning the virus situation into a political issue. He added that politics, however, was about how to manage “our common lives”, and there was no subject of public affairs greater than the global pandemic. So the issue of “whether our common affairs are well managed by those who have a special responsibility to do this” should be a matter of public debate, he said, adding that the opposition should be “treated as a partner” on matters of such national importance. Gyurcsány insisted that the pandemic had dispelled “a myth” that, “at the very least, the Fidesz party could govern”. “Now it has become apparent that they can’t govern,” he said, referring to “tardy action, contradictory statements and measures never seen”. “The Hungarian government confronted reality and reality defeated the Hungarian government,” he said.

The DK leader accused the government of mounting an attempt to hijack higher education through university privatisations, handing the running of these institutions to “people close to the government”.

Gyurcsány said the Fidesz government set great store by the concept of national community. He accused the government of “all kinds of sin” under the cover of patriotism. “It isn’t patriotism if someone steals or threatens their fellow citizens,” he said. “Patriotism isn’t usury or a lack of compassion.” He said Fidesz was close to Poland’s Law and Justice Party, “which has introduced perhaps the most extreme abortion regulations in Europe”.

Meanwhile, he said Joe Biden’s victory was a source of great hope. “Not only has Donald Trump fallen, but also the kind of politicians whose family includes our prime minister,” he said, referring to “nationalist, anti-elitist, populist politicians”. Gyurcsány insisted Prime Minister Viktor Orbán had lost ground in Europe. “He may still be dominant at home but in Europe today he’s just a troublemaker,” he added.

Fidesz lawmaker Máté Kocsis said in a Facebook post in reaction that Gyurcsány had “once again made clear that he is the boss on the entire left wing.” The Fidesz parliamentary group leader accused Gyurcsány of dissimulating “on many points”, adding that Gyurcsány had not explained in his speech why opposition figures had produced “fake news, fake videos and fake statistics” in the middle of

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a pandemic. Kocsis also accused the opposition of attacking people involved in Hungary's fight against the virus, including health-care workers, and of undermining Hungary abroad, while refusing to vote on decisions needed to control the epidemic. He said Gyurcsány had at once referred to the challenges of the epidemic while at the same time attempting to cast doubt over vaccinations. The Fidesz politician said the opposition's "inhuman strategy" was to hope for the collapse of Hungary's health-care system, illness and death in order to reap political gains in 2022, adding that Gyurcsány was "capable of anything" in order to assume power.

KOVÁCS WARNS AGAINST POLITICISING PANDEMIC

Zoltán Kovács, the state secretary for international communications and relations, warned against politicising the fight against the coronavirus pandemic in a letter to the editor of Dutch daily De Telegraaf in response to a recent op-ed published in the paper criticising Hungary's decision to use Russia's Sputnik V Covid jab in its vaccination campaign. If the Netherlands wants to endanger the lives of its people "by politicising access to Covid-19 vaccines, it is free to do so", Kovács said in his letter. Hungary, however, prioritises saving the lives of its citizens and slowing the spread of the virus, he added.

Kovács said the op-ed on Hungary's procurement of the Russian vaccine

"shows why the Netherlands, with a per capita vaccination rate that is half the Hungarian percentage, unfortunately lags behind all EU countries", with the exception of Latvia and Bulgaria. The state secretary noted the example of Serbia, which he said had not been "delayed by a joint EU vaccination procurement programme" and had not had to wait for approval from the European Medicines Agency (EMA) to start mass vaccinations. Hungary's decision to use the Russian vaccine was not made in haste, Kovács said. The Hungarian public health authority approved the jab after conducting rigorous tests on it, he added.

FIRST SPUTNIK V JABS IN HUNGARY ADMINISTERED

The first shots of the Russian Sputnik V coronavirus vaccine in Hungary have been administered in Budapest, koronavirus.gov.hu reported. The first batch of 2,800 doses of the vaccine are being given to elderly citizens who have registered and meet the vaccination criteria in four hospitals of Budapest, the portal said. The Russian vaccine was granted a licence for use in Hungary on Jan. 20. The portal said that a further 40,000 doses of the vaccine, received on Feb. 2, were still being tested by Hungarian authorities. The vaccine can be given to people older than 18. Two shots will ensure protection against Covid-19, administered 21 days apart. The Hungarian medicines authority decided that the vaccine should not

be applied to patients with certain chronic illnesses in view of the Russian documentation, which suggested due care in the case of those patients, the portal said, adding that there was no age limit to applying the vaccine.

DK MAYORS DEMAND ONLY VACCINES APPROVED BY EMA USED IN THEIR LOCAL DISTRICTS

The mayors of five districts of Budapest have turned to the minister of human resources with the demand that only vaccines approved by the European Medicines Agency (EMA) be used in their districts. At an online briefing on Sunday, Erzsébet Gy. Németh of the opposition Democratic Coalition stressed the importance of vaccinations, adding that it would only be responsible, however, to use jabs approved by the European Medicines Agency. Németh, who is a deputy mayor of Budapest, accused the government of lobbying heavily for the Sinopharm vaccine, adding that the matter of people's health "must not be turned into a political or business issue". The letter by the opposition mayors to the minister also calls for the option of allowing individuals to choose between authorised vaccines.

Ruling Fidesz said in response that the mayors were in effect aiming to block people in their districts from getting access to certain vaccines. In a statement, Fidesz noted that a third wave of the epidemic was spreading across Europe and countries were

working against the clock to obtain vaccines in competition with each other. "The political strategy of the left wing is to prolong the epidemic, ensure there are more sick people and that more people die and that the economy is brought down," so that the opposition has a basis on which to savage the government in their 2022 election campaign, the statement said.

SOCIALISTS CALL FOR NARROWING THE GAP BETWEEN RICH AND POOR

The opposition Socialists have called for narrowing the gap between rich and poor. Speaking in an online press conference on Saturday, the party's deputy chairman, Imre Komjáthi, said that ever since Fidesz came to power in 2010 the government had introduced many unfair measures that increased inequality, making the rich richer and the poor poorer. Komjáthi said Fidesz liked to cite averages, but the reality was that the incomes and pensions of a great portion of the population were below average. He said narrowing the gap between rich and poor would be a task for "the pro-republican" parties after 2022, he said, adding that the Socialists insisted that all Hungarians had the right to fair wages and a fair pension. Citing data from the National Employment Service, he said there were 300,000 jobseekers in January, almost half of whom do not receive any state benefits. Ever since the outbreak of the pandemic, the Socialist Party has demanded that eligibility

for unemployment benefits should be raised to 9 months and should be worth at least 100,000 forints (EUR 279).

LMP CALLS ON GOVT TO PRESENT PLANS FOR LOCAL IMPLEMENTATION OF EUROPEAN GREEN DEAL

The opposition LMP has called on the government to submit to parliament its plans to implement the European Green Deal in Hungary and to develop a plan for the domestic green economy by the end of March at the latest. LMP co-leader Erzsébet Schmuck told an online briefing on Saturday that LMP awaited guarantees that these European Union funds would be spent on Hungary's sustainable development. She said the government's green space investments had eliminated a significant part of the natural environment in the past ten years, and even though Hungary is particularly vulnerable to climate change, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán vetoed the European Union's stricter climate targets for a long time. Schmuck insisted that Orbán still did not understand the importance of switching to renewable energy. Schmuck said the prime minister did not want to hear about the EU's green deal programme either, but he had cottoned on to the huge sums contained in the recovery fund and EU budget to develop the green economy and to establish circular farming. "In

today's Hungary, environmental considerations do not count, neither does endangering people's health," Schmuck said.

KARÁCSONY, UJHELYI TURN TO EC OVER EUROPEAN RECOVERY FUND

Gergely Karácsony, the mayor of Budapest, and Istvan Ujhelyi, an opposition Socialist MEP have turned to Ursula von der Leyen, the European Commission's president, over 5,472 billion euros of European Union recovery funds that Hungary is slated to receive. Ujhelyi told an online briefing that the EP had made funding conditional on the government submitting a recovery programme in the next few weeks with the involvement of municipalities, trade unions and NGOs. He said the government had failed to present such a plan to lawmakers and a parliamentary debate had therefore not taken place, adding that details of the proposals and a spending plan had not been forthcoming. At the same time, the government has insisted to the EC that broad social dialogue in Hungary was under way, he said.

Ujhelyi said the reason why they wrote their letter to Von der Leyen was to point out the discrepancy between the government's claims and the reality, and to request an investigation of whether the government had engaged in social dialogue and whether funding would actually be spent on priority areas.

SZIJJÁRTÓ INAUGURATES CONSULAR OFFICE IN DURRES

Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade Péter Szijjártó inaugurated Hungary's new consular office in Durres. "In current times of trouble there is no reason to argue at length in favour of having representative offices all over the world," the minister said at the ceremony. He noted that last year, after the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, the diplomatic missions had played a crucial part in what was "Hungary's largest repatriating operation of all times". Cooperation between Hungary and Albania is based on friendship and mutual trust, he said, adding that the new consular office would help further boost bilateral relations. Hungary has a vested security and economic interest in the success of Western Balkan nations, Szijjártó said, adding that the government supported Albania's endeavours for European integration, and Hungarian companies' efforts to play a growing role on the Albanian market.

KLUBRÁDIÓ: MEDIA COUNCIL'S PROCEDURE 'UNLAWFUL, DISCRIMINATIVE'

The Hungarian media authority's Media Council has stripped commercial Klubrádió of its frequency "unlawfully and discriminatively",

while it granted another seven-year licence to other broadcasters, Klubrádió said on Friday, in response to a recent statement by the council head. The document published by Media Council chief Mónika Karas on Thursday "hardly contains a statement of truth", Klubrádió said, arguing that while Karas had insisted that the body had "no room for manoeuvre", it granted a licence to InfoRádió and other broadcasters with "the same antecedents".

Concerning Klubrádió's regulation breaches, the broadcaster said they had not failed to provide required reports, although they missed two deadlines which at the time had not been enacted. Klubrádió found it "strange" that Karas had referred to a restricted range of available frequencies, while "dozens" of such frequencies were currently unused. They also added that the fact that they had had the opportunity to broadcast for ten years rather than seven was due to "the power of court decisions passed in the wake of a series of breaches by the Media Council between 2010 and 13".

In her statement on Thursday, Karas defended a council decision not to extend the broadcast licence of the opposition-leaning radio channel, 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. 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 added.

HUNGARY RECORDS 70 FATALITIES, 1,707 NEW INFECTIONS

Fully 70 Covid patients, generally elderly and suffering from an underlying illness, died over the past 24 hours, while 1,707 new infections were officially registered, bringing the total number of infected to 383,735, koronavirus.gov.hu said on Sunday. The death toll has risen to 13,706, while 296,173 people have made a recovery. The number of active infections has declined to 77,583, while there are 3,755 hospitalised Covid patients, 312 on a ventilator. Altogether 19,927 people are in official home quarantine, and the number of tests carried out has risen to 3,377,187.

Hungary began rolling out the coronavirus vaccine in December. So far, 335,188 people have received their first jab, and 128,195 have been fully inoculated. The government has extended coronavirus-related restrictions until March 1.

Most infections have been registered in Budapest (72,077) and Pest County (48,457) so far, followed by the counties of Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén (21,859), Hajdú-Bihar (21,752) and Győr-Moson-Sopron (21,564). The county least affected by the infection is Tolna (8,613).

VARGA: CREDIT RATING AGENCIES UPBEAT ON HUNGARY ECONOMY

The two big rating agencies have reaffirmed their confidence in Hungary, which is classed as investment grade, suggesting that it is not only investors that have confidence in the Hungarian economy, Minister of Finance Mihály Varga said on Facebook. Both Standard and Poor’s and Fitch noted the effectiveness of Hungarian crisis management, good debt structure and funding opportunities. Fitch Ratings and Standard & Poor’s on Friday reaffirmed Hungary’s sovereign debt rating with a stable outlook, giving long-term sovereign forint and foreign currency debt a “BBB” rating, while S&P maintained a separate “A-2” rating for short-term Hungarian debt. S&P Global Ratings said Hungary’s economy is likely to grow by 4.6% this year after having probably contracted by 6.3% in real terms last year on the back of the Covid crisis. Fitch said GDP was projected to grow by 4.9% this year.

FÜRJES: NEW PHASE IN BUDA TRAM NETWORK DEVELOPMENT GETS UNDER WAY

The next phase of the Budapest tram network on the Buda side of the city is under way, the state secretary responsible for developments in the capital and its agglomeration said. Balázs Fürjes said the first phase of

the project unveiled in early 2016 had been the most successful transport development in the city in the past decade, and now work has begun to expand the network to the south of St. Gellert Square on the Buda banks of the Danube. The new line will benefit students reaching various university campuses running along the river as well as Infopark, a business campus, and the Kopaszi leisure area with its new office and residential developments, he added. Fürjes insisted that public transport in and around Budapest was a government priority and the ultimate aim was to create a liveable capital with clean air and fewer traffic jams.

Meanwhile, he said that after having received 85 billion forints last year, local councils of the capital would receive 116 billion forints to cover the city’s operating expenses this year. The state public transport subsidy of 12 billion forints this year is unchanged from the previous year, he added. Also, the government is funding various upgrade projects, including the ongoing renovation of Metro 3, to the tune of 200 billion forints, he said. In addition, the government is providing a 3.2 billion forint subsidy for bus purchases, he said. Further, it is channelling 10 billion forints to preparations to complete upgrades to suburban rail (HEV) lines as well as train replacements, and to finance the design of two new Budapest bridges on the city’s outskirts. Other urban developments in Budapest worth 60 billion forints are also being

financed centrally, he said, noting this eased burdens on the metropolitan council’s budget. These include the new phase of the Buda tram network development, he added.

CONSTRUCTION WORK ON NYUGATI RAILWAY STATION ROOF STRUCTURE COMPLETED

Construction work on the roof structure of Budapest’s Nyugati (Western) Railway station has been completed; the railway station will reopen in September, state-owned railway company MÁV said. As part of the project, the roof of the train shed, the adjoining glass structures, the cash register hall, the fast food restaurant and six facade towers are being renovated across 8,200sqms. At both ends of the building, on a total of 2,200sqms, the glass curtain wall will be completely new, and the other roof sections of the station building that have not been renovated so far will also be repaired. Rainwater drainage will be partially rebuilt, and a new digital passenger information system and an overhead line network will be installed in the train shed, MÁV said in the statement.

MÁV is carrying out further passenger service and accessibility developments using government and EU funds, replacing the entire paved area in and around the station, renewing the passenger areas of the cross tunnel, replacing the currently out-of-service lift, setting up ramps,

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and building a footpath with tactile paving for the blind and partially sighted, the statement said.

JESUIT PRIEST FERENC JÁLICS DIES

Jesuit priest Ferenc Jálics, author of books on Christian spirituality and the founder of the school of contemplative worship, died at the age of 94 in Budapest on Saturday, the Hungarian Society of Jesus said on its website. Ferenc Jálics was born

in Budapest in 1927. After attending military school in Kőszeg, he was sent to Nuremberg towards the end of the Second World War. He returned to Hungary in 1946, where he joined the Jesuit order. Due to the Communist dictatorship, he had to leave the country along with many other young Jesuits two years later, first studying in Germany before graduating in philosophy at the Catholic University of Leuven in Belgium.

In 1956, the order sent him to Chile, then a year later to Argentina,

where he was ordained a priest in 1959. He became a professor of theology and the spiritual director of young Jesuits. While doing social work in Argentina in 1976, he was abducted along with a Jesuit companion and held captive for five months. In 1977, he moved to the US, and a year later to Germany. In 1984, he founded his retreat house in Gries, which became a place of pilgrimage for Christians looking for contemplation. He returned to Hungary in 2017.