

PHOTO OF THE DAY



MTV/Péter Lakatos

Bathers in Veresegyház lake near Budapest

UPCOMING EVENTS

Coronavirus updates

Plenary session of parliament

Stats office releases first estimate for GDP in Q4 2020

TOP STORY

ORBÁN OUTLINES CRISIS MANAGEMENT PLANS

Prime Minister Viktor Orbán outlined his government's Covid-19 vaccination and economic recovery action plans in an address to lawmakers.

By the end of May, Hungary can have 3.5 million more people vaccinated against Covid-19 than a European Union country of similar size that only uses vaccines procured from the West, Orbán said in a speech ahead of the agenda at the first plenary meeting of parliament's spring session. Hungary also has a realistic chance to have more than 2 million people vaccinated by early April, with everyone over the age of 60 who has registered for a Covid shot being inoculated, the prime minister added.

The government has also launched an action plan to relaunch the economy, he said. The plan's seven steps will include a temporary reduction in the VAT rate on home construction from 27% to 5%, home renovation subsidies for families with at least one child, wage support for hard-hit sectors, an unprecedented wage increase for doctors, the gradual re-introduction of the annual pensioners' bonus, a personal income tax exemption for Hungarians under the age of 25 and interest-free microloans for small businesses, Orbán said.

ORBÁN: GOVT TO BEGIN EASING RESTRICTIONS ONCE ENOUGH VACCINES ARE IN STOCK

The government will begin to gradually lift coronavirus-related restrictions once it has access to enough vaccines, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán told lawmakers at the first plenary meeting of parliament's spring session. Orbán said Hungary's number one task was to procure as many vaccines as possible as quickly as possible. "We need every type of vaccine that works, is safe and has been used to inoculate millions of people worldwide," he said. The prime minister noted that over a span of three months, Hungary will receive enough doses of Russia's Sputnik V vaccine to inoculate 1 million people. Meanwhile, Hungary has also purchased enough doses of China's Sinopharm jab for 2.5 million vaccinations, he added.

The cabinet has left its protective measures unchanged since November, which has helped Hungary rein in the pandemic, Orbán said. Countries that continuously make changes to their response measures, he said, had seen the start of a strong third wave of the pandemic. Orbán added, however, that case numbers were rising all across Europe, including in Hungary. Cases in Hungary have not declined for 10 days now and the pandemic's downward trend has come to a halt, he said, adding that the country could see a possible uptick in cases again due

to the easier spread of mutant variants of the virus. This was why, Orbán said, it was important for parliament to extend the special legal order and for the public to continue observing restrictions.

Concerning a reopening in the country, Orbán said the government's aim was not only to "flip the 'Closed' sign over" but to fully reopen the entire economy and social civil life. "We want to emerge stronger from this pandemic, stronger than how we entered it," the prime minister said, calling vaccines procured in large enough quantities a precondition for a new start in Hungary. He noted that the government is launching a National Consultation public survey concerning when to lift restrictions, in which people will be asked to respond to seven questions.

ORBÁN: GOVT TO INTRODUCE LARGE-SCALE INVESTMENT SUPPORT SCHEME

The Hungarian government's action plan to restart the economy will be followed by a large-scale investment support scheme which will be co-financed with the European Union, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán told lawmakers at the first plenary meeting of parliament's spring session. The higher education sector will be the greatest beneficiary of this scheme, involving an unprecedented 1,500-2,000 billion forints (EUR 4.2-5.6bn) to

be used for developing universities, he said.

Orbán said the current logic of crisis management was very different from that seen before 2010 when it had been mostly pensioners who were forced to pay the price of crises.

Commenting on the gradual re-introduction of the 13th month pensioners' bonus, Orbán said it was an obligation to express respect for those that have built the country with their life's work. As regards the personal income tax exemption for Hungarians under the age of 25, he said the government considered it important that "young people should be able to stand on their own two feet and start an independent life".

Orbán said Hungary was a strong country which "stood the test" of the pandemic. The prime minister said that so far, the government's crisis management measures had focused on protecting jobs. The cabinet introduced a moratorium on loan repayments, a wage support scheme for troubled businesses, took over half of the wage costs of sectors most affected by the pandemic, scrapped the social contribution tax and halved the business tax, he noted. The government has disbursed 80 billion forints to struggling businesses as part of its wage support scheme, helping them save 250,000 jobs. The investment support scheme has helped 1,434 companies so far, helping preserve 280,000 jobs, he added.

SZIJJÁRTÓ: HUNGARY TO ASK AUSTRIA TO HELP COMMUTERS

Péter Szijjártó, the foreign minister, said on Monday that Hungary will ask Austria to make border crossing more flexible and possibly faster for Hungarian commuters, after a meeting with lawmakers representing the electoral districts in the western border region. As one of the European countries fighting to combat the current wave of the coronavirus epidemic, Austria last week tightened its border controls, which has put a significant burden on Hungarian workers commuting to the neighbouring country on almost a daily basis, Szijjártó said. Under the new rules introduced on February 10, anyone wishing to enter Austria must register in advance. They must also present a negative Covid-19 test taken within 72 hours, or be tested within 24 hours of their arrival in the country. The registration rule also applies to cross-border commuters who must also present a negative Covid-19 test no older than one week. Szijjártó said that having reviewed the effects of the new border controls at Monday's meeting, they had seen that the measures had caused "serious disruptions" on the first week of their implementation. It must be acknowledged, he said, that Austria had made great effort to minimise the disruptions, but commuters still face more difficulties than before border controls had been tightened. He said one major problem was the long waiting time at border crossing points. "We will

therefore ask our Austrian colleagues to open up more lanes for vehicle traffic where possible during the morning and the evening hours and increase administrative staff to speed up entry on that side of the border," Szijjártó said. He called testing another major issue, noting that Hungarian contract workers have been in many instances required by their Austrian employer to travel to its testing spot far away from the border. "This is why we are also going to ask Austria to allow the testing of Hungarian commuters at a spot near the border," Szijjártó said.

HUNGARY SENDS PLANE FOR FIRST SHIPMENT OF SINOPHARM VACCINE

The state of Hungary's aircraft has taken off for Beijing to pick up the first delivery of the Sinopharm Covid-19 vaccine, state secretary Tamás Menczer said on the Facebook page of Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó early on Monday.

Menczer said in a video that 550,000 doses of the vaccine would be loaded on the aircraft which is expected to return to Hungary around noon on Tuesday.

He noted that more than 30 million people around the world have been inoculated with the Chinese Covid-19 vaccine, including some half a million in neighbouring Serbia. At present, Hungary is using the BioNTech/Pfizer, Moderna, AstraZeneca and Sputnik V vaccines to inoculate its population against the coronavirus.

ORBÁN: HUNGARY DEDICATED TO ENHANCING HUNGARY-ITALY TIES

Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has sent a letter to Mario Draghi to congratulate him on his appointment as Italy's next prime minister, Orbán's press chief said on Monday. Orbán said in his letter that the year 2020 had resulted in unexpected challenges and extraordinary changes that threatened "our most basic values: the security of our citizens and the stability of our countries", Bertalan Havasi told MTI. The prime minister said he was convinced that the hardships would strengthen "our respective nations" and "help transform uncertainties" in a way that they gain momentum.

Orbán assured Draghi that the Hungarian government remained dedicated to "enhancing bilateral ties and strengthening European cooperation based on mutual respect" in every area including security, competitiveness and international interest-representation, Havasi said.

KARÁCSONY: GOVT IN 'SHAM' TALKS OVER RECOVERY FUNDS

The government has engaged in "sham talks" with "partners selected by itself" concerning utilisation of the European Union's coronavirus recovery funds, Budapest Mayor Gergely Karácsony said. Karácsony said on Facebook that the 7 billion

euro European programme was aimed at helping member states “not only to recover from the deep economic crisis caused by the coronavirus pandemic, but also to invest in progressive and crucially necessary projects fostering sustainability, social justice and digitalisation”. To that end, governments should cooperate with municipalities focusing on local aspects, Karácsony said, adding that the relevant EU decree clearly stipulated that national governments should have talks with their local counterparts.

Karácsony insisted that “the Hungarian government disregards cities with an opposition leadership, such as Budapest, as partners in distributing the European funds”. He said he was concerned that “the future of Hungary, the fate of millions of Hungarian citizens could be sacrificed in [PM] Viktor Orbán’s political game”.

Karácsony published a statement signed jointly with the mayors of Bratislava, Prague, and Warsaw, in which they voiced concern that “the national governments in several member states stay away from meaningful consultations with local governments”. “Negotiations in several countries are merely symbolic, concerning a fragment of the funds, or there are no such talks whatsoever,” the statement said. The mayors called on the governments of member states to observe the rules governing the bloc’s recovery mechanism, and also called on the European Commission to ensure that those regulations are met.

LMP ACCUSES GOVT OF ABUSING SPECIAL POWERS

Opposition LMP on Monday accused the government of abusing its special powers to fight the coronavirus pandemic, saying it had taken away a significant amount of funding from local councils and had “launched a final attack on universities”. The government’s “insufficient management of the crisis” has “pushed the country into a deep social and economic crisis”, LMP group leader László Lóránt Keresztes told an online press conference ahead of the first meeting of parliament’s spring session. “Meanwhile, the cabinet is engaging in a deceptive and baseless communication campaign,” he insisted.

“While they say that small and medium-sized companies are getting more support than ever before, they’re not helping the families who are struggling the most,” Keresztes said. He accused the cabinet of using taxpayer money to prop up companies with ties to the government.

HUNGARY RECORDS 46 COVID FATALITIES, 1,337 NEW INFECTIONS

Fully 46 Covid patients, generally elderly and suffering from an underlying illness, died over the past 24 hours, while 1,337 new infections were officially registered, bringing the total number of infected to 388,799, koronavirus.gov.hu said on Monday.

The death toll has risen to 13,752, while 298,008 people have made a recovery. The number of active infections has declined to 77,039, while there are 3,883 hospitalised Covid patients, 314 on a ventilator. Altogether 20,718 people are in official home quarantine, and the number of tests carried out has risen to 3,388,457.

Most infections have been registered in Budapest (72,340) and Pest County (48,681) so far, followed by the counties of Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén (21,943), Hajdú-Bihar (21,832) and Győr-Moson-Sopron (21,621). The county least affected by the infection is Tolna (8,650).

FINANCE MINISTER ANNOUNCES RECOVERY PLAN TENDERS

Finance Minister Mihály Varga announced tenders for almost 30 billion forints (EUR 83m) in funding that will be called during the week in the framework of the government’s Economic Recovery Action Plan in a video message posted on Facebook on Monday. Companies that employ people in disadvantaged regions may apply for support of between 2 million forints and 60 million forints in a tender that launches on Thursday, Varga said. Another three tenders will target businesses in the food, plastics and fashion and design industries, with support of between 5 million forints and 500 million forints available for expansions, upgrades, training or even to cover part of payroll costs, he added.

KARÁCSONY: BUDAPEST PAYS MORE TAX THAN GOVT SUPPORT RECEIVED

Budapest pays more tax than the government support it receives, Budapest Mayor Gergely Karácsony said on Facebook on Monday in response to Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's remarks in parliament concerning the city's finances. The city leaders elected in October 2019 must pay nearly four times as much municipal tax during the coronavirus epidemic than the previous city leaders did, Karácsony said.

"The recovery of the country, including Budapest, must not be an issue focusing on a war of numbers," he added. Orbán said in parliament concerning accusations that the government is "bleeding local governments dry" that Budapest's account showed 122 billion forints at the end of December last year. Orbán insisted that 44% of all government support or 3,000 billion forints went to Budapest last year as against 6-12% to some regions in the Hungarian provinces. Karácsony said that despite the crisis, it was not the government supporting the metropolitan council but the other way round.

DÖMÖTÖR BLASTS OPPOSITION FOR REJECTING PROPOSAL TO FAST TRACK DEBATE ON EXTENDING SPECIAL LEGAL ORDER

Csaba Dömötör, a state secretary of the Prime Minister's Office, has slammed Hungary's left-wing opposition parties for their rejection of a proposal to fast track a parliamentary debate on extending the special legal order in connection with the coronavirus pandemic.

Dömötör said on Facebook that the ruling Fidesz and Christian Democrat parties would do everything in their power to put the extension of the special legal order to a vote as quickly as possible.

"It's already clear that the left has returned to a form of politics whose essence is that the worse it is for the government and the country, the better it is for them," Dömötör said.

CONSTRUCTION OUTPUT EDGES 0.3% LOWER IN DEC, CONTRACTS 9.1% FOR FULL YEAR

Output of Hungary's construction sector edged down 0.3% year-on-year in December, the Central Statistical Office (KSH) said. Output of the buildings segment climbed 15.1%, but civil engineering output dropped 16.5%. In absolute terms, construction sector output reached 482.8 billion forints (EUR 1.3bn) in December, including 285.6 billion forints in the buildings segment and 197.2 billion forints for civil engineering. For the full year, construction sector output dropped 9.1%, as the buildings segment contracted 5.7% and civil engineering output declined 13.1%. In absolute terms, construction sector output came to 4,270.4 billion forints. Building segment output reached 2,414.8 billion forints and civil engineering output 1,855.6 billion forints.