

## PHOTO OF THE DAY



Semmelweis University rector Béla Merkely getting inoculated with the Russian Sputnik V vaccine

MTI/Szilárd Koszticsák

## UPCOMING EVENTS

**Coronavirus updates**

**EU ministers of education meet in Brussels**

**National election committee meets**

## TOP STORY

# HUNGARY SET TO BECOME AIRCRAFT INDUSTRY HUB

The cities of Békéscsaba and Gyula, in south-eastern Hungary, are poised to become the centres of aircraft manufacturing in the country's defence industry, the Minister of Innovation and Technology has said.

László Palkovics inspected the Airbus plant under construction in Gyula and held talks on vocational education and the upgrade of the airport in Békéscsaba. He told a briefing that the Airbus factory's success was dependent on the development of the Békéscsaba airport. Also, Hungary must make sure that its education system has instructors with the required knowledge in aeronautics, he said, adding that the country must also develop its training equipment and convince Hungarian industry experts working abroad to return home. The government last year allocated 154 million forints (EUR 429,000) for the upgrade of the Békéscsaba airport. MTI understands that talks are ongoing on potentially extending the runway by 1,800 or 2,500 metres. Construction is expected to get under way next year. The airport must be able to handle both business and cargo flights. The minister also visited a vocational training centre in Békéscsaba where construction on a 2.2 billion forint metal industry training centre and advanced measurement technology and materials testing lab began this month.

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## **CHIEF MEDICAL OFFICER: HUNGARY 'ON CUSP OF THIRD WAVE'**

Hungary's rising coronavirus case numbers show that the country is "on the cusp of a third wave of the epidemic", the chief medical officer said on Thursday. Epidemiological trends in Hungary have been deteriorating over the last several days, with 2,853 new Covid infections registered on Wednesday, Cecilia Müller told a press conference of the operative board responsible for handling the epidemic. The number of Covid-19 patients treated in hospital has also been rising, with 4,021 people currently hospitalised, 332 of them on a ventilator, she said, noting that 104 people died on Wednesday. The number of active infections has also risen to 78,625, Müller added. "We're seeing worsening epidemiological data," she said, underlining the importance of implementing the government's vaccination plan.

Müller noted that Hungary has authorised the use of five Covid vaccines. Vaccinations are ongoing with the Pfizer-BioNTech, Moderna, AstraZeneca and Sputnik V jabs, while experts are still examining the Chinese Sinopharm vaccine, she said. Hungary is scheduled to take delivery of another 83,500 doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine on Thursday evening, the chief medical officer said, noting that this batch would be enough to inoculate

41,750 people. These vaccines will be delivered to general practitioners next week, she said.

Meanwhile, Müller said the government will again deploy mobile screening buses offering antigen rapid tests to those whose GP had ordered them to take a Covid test. Those who test positive will also be tested using a PCR test on the spot, she added.

## **GULYÁS: HUNGARY HAS MOST VACCINES IN EU PER CAPITA**

Hungary has the most vaccines in the European Union per capita, Gergely Gulyás, the Prime Minister's chief of staff, said on Thursday. At an impromptu briefing, Gulyás noted that the fast-spreading British variant of coronavirus is present in Hungary and the number of cases is steadily rising once again. Only efficient vaccination will nip a third wave in the bud, he said. "Hungary today has the best and the most vaccines in the EU relative to the population," he said, urging the public to register to be inoculated.

Gulyás also urged people to take part in the government's National Consultation survey to gauge people's opinions on how and when to relax restrictions. "I encourage everyone to take the opportunity to express their views," he said. "No matter how difficult the situation is the government can make a good decision with the support of the people behind it."

## **SZIJJÁRTÓ: SUCCESS BUILDS TRUST IN HUNGARY-ROMANIA TIES**

Success based on a recognition of mutual interests is building trust between Hungary and Romania, boosting hopes of success in sensitive issues regarding ethnic minorities, Foreign Minister Peter Szijjártó said in Bucharest on Thursday, after meeting several members of the Romanian cabinet. Szijjártó told Hungary's public media that the two nations were "bound by a thousand ties" and the economic, trade, energy and transport links between Hungary and Romania clearly made each other's development a mutual interest. The pandemic, he noted, had economic consequences, demonstrating that cooperation was the best approach to tackling them.

Romania is Hungary's fourth most important export market, he noted, adding that the large ethnic Hungarian community in Transylvania also made links between the two countries especially important. "We have common interests that we lobby for in Brussels jointly, and we have common investments," he said. "Based on the examples of Hungarian-Slovak and Hungarian-Serbian relations, practical successes can form the basis of trust ... paving the way for discussions of delicate topics, mostly concerning the rights of national ethnic communities," he added.

Szijjártó held talks with his Romanian counterpart Bogdan Aurescu, Claudiu Nasui, the economy minister, Catalin Drula, the transport minister, Virgil Popescu, the energy affairs minister, and Attila Cseke, the development minister. At the meeting, the ministers agreed to open the third highway connection between the countries, between Mátészalka and Satu Mare (Szatmárnémeti), by 2024. Another three further border crossings will also be opened, Szijjártó said, adding that it was "ridiculous" that the licences for ten completed roads crossing the border had not yet been approved. Hungary has agreed to build the border control infrastructure, and it is only asking Romania to approve the road licences, he said.

An agreement was made at the meeting that by 2024 Hungary will make the Budapest-Békéscsaba-Lökösháza railway line dual-track, and the Romanian side will carry out modernisations that will make travelling times between Budapest and Bucharest significantly shorter for both passenger and freight transport, he said. Szijjártó said launching gas exploration on the Romanian territories of the Black Sea as soon as possible was a common interest of the two countries and would result in a new source of gas. It was also agreed that once Black Sea gas exploration starts, the capacity of a Romania-Hungary pipeline would increase from 1.75 billion cubic metres to 4.4 billion cubic metres, opening the way for Romanian gas to reach other central and western European markets via Hungary.

He said there were several shared interests between Hungary and Romania that they want to promote jointly in Brussels, among which is nuclear energy that, he said, current European energy regulations tended to suppress. Another shared interest is the swift connection of Bulgaria's and Greece's gas pipeline networks, since this would offer Romania and Hungary access to a southern gas transport corridor carrying gas from the Caucasus and later from central Asia, he said. Hungary and Romania will also take joint action to prevent the enforcement of the EU "mobility package" in the future because this would disadvantage central European freight companies.

Szijjártó also met Hunor Kelemen, the head of the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (RMDSZ). He noted that Hungarians living in Romania now have representation in government, which he said also improved ties between Hungary and Romania. RMDSZ's decision to join the government coalition was a good one, he said, adding that the two countries were now even more interdependent. "This is no time for hostile attitudes," Szijjártó said. "If we're willing and able to take mutual interests as a starting point, both Hungary and Romania's weight, success and strength will grow," he added.

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## **EC LAUNCHES INFRINGEMENT PROCEDURE AGAINST HUNGARY**

The European Commission has launched an infringement procedure against

Hungary for flouting a ruling of the Court of Justice of the European Union concerning its law on civil organisations. In a "letter of formal notice" to Hungary, the EC called on Hungary to implement the CJEU's ruling from June 2020, when the court ruled that Hungarian regulation of foreign-funded NGOs violated EU rules on the free movement of capital as well as the fundamental right to protection of personal data and freedom of association.

A second infringement procedure was launched against Hungary for voting against the EU's standpoint at the United Nations Committee on Narcotic Drugs (CND), on the WHO's recommendations on cannabis and related substances. Member states are obliged under EU law to align themselves with the EU's standpoint on such matters, the EC said.

The EC has also stepped up its infringement procedure against Hungary concerning restrictions to its asylum laws introduced to curb the spread of the epidemic. In its "reasoned opinion" to Hungary, the body said the regulations ran afoul of EU migration laws. Hungary has two months to react to the arguments outlined in the documents before the EC steps up the procedures.

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## **SURVEY ON REOPENING GETS UNDER WAY**

The government's National Consultation survey on conditions for lifting restrictions after the coronavirus epidemic is under way,

the government’s website said. In the survey consisting of seven questions, the government is seeking the public’s opinion on whether the country should be reopened gradually or in one fell swoop once the epidemic has subsided. Opinion is also sought on whether people with immunity certificates should enjoy exemption from certain restrictions and whether foreigners should only be allowed into the country if they can show proof of inoculation or an immunity passport, according to information provided earlier by the Prime Minister’s Office. The questions can be answered online at [vakcinainfo.gov.hu](http://vakcinainfo.gov.hu) after registration.

**EMMI: NUMBER OF SEVERELY POOR PEOPLE IN HUNGARY PLUNGES OVER PAST TEN YEARS**

The proportion of people living in extreme poverty in Hungary has dropped from 23.4% to 8.7% in the past decade, the Ministry of Human Resources (Emmi) said on Thursday, citing Eurostat data. Hungary jumped from 6th from the bottom of the European Union list to 9th from the top. The number of people without enough savings to make emergency replacements of eg, a washing machine or refrigerator has halved, while 2.5 million more people can now afford a week on holiday. Ten years ago one in four people were struggling with mortgage arrears and other loan repayments; now

only one in ten people do thanks to foreign currency loan rescue packages. Also, the number of people who have trouble heating their homes has dropped to a third thanks to a government-mandated reduction in household energy bills, the statement said.

**NOVÁK: V4 SETTING ‘DEMOGRAPHIC EXAMPLE’ TO EUROPE**

Countries of the Visegrad Group “see it as their mission to set an example to Europe in terms of demography”, Katalin Novák, Hungary’s minister without portfolio in charge of family affairs, told a briefing attended by her Slovak, Czech, and Polish counterparts. Novák said that the four countries “refuse to give up their future and culture”. No European country sees a sufficient number of births, and “though their population is growing, that growth comes from mass immigration,” she insisted. “We central European countries will demonstrate that development could be based on internal resources, that we can cope with the demographic crisis and become a prosperous, young region within Europe,” the minister said. She said it was important for the group to preserve the composition of their population. “Ensuring growth while preserving culture, history, and traditions will be one of the most important challenges in the next decades,” she said.

**OPPOSITION PARTIES ACCUSE GOVT OF USING VACCINE REGISTRATION FOR ‘DATA COLLECTION’**

The opposition parties have accused the government of using the vaccine registration system for “data collection” and called on it to come up with a clear action plan to restart the country “instead of propaganda consultation”. The Democratic Coalition (DK), Jobbik, LMP, Momentum, Socialist and Párbeszéd parties noted in a joint statement that the National Consultation survey, seeking the public’s opinion on issues regarding the reopening, is accessible at [vakcinainfo.gov.hu](http://vakcinainfo.gov.hu), the website also used for vaccine registration.

The government “has made the vaccine registration system part of its election preparation”, the statement said. Voters submitting data on the registration site “agree to turning their data over to [Cabinet Minister] Antal Rogán’s propaganda ministry and Idomsoft, the company running the election system software.” The parties called on the government to “stop collecting data” from Hungarian citizens and to publish a clear action plan on restarting the country and on helping companies hard hit by the crisis, rather than conducting a “propaganda consultation”. They also called for guarantees for free choice of vaccine. No one should suffer discrimination for wanting a vaccine they trust more, the

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statement said. The government's "jumbled communication" on vaccines and the changes made by government decrees to long-standing professional procedures have undermined public trust in vaccines, it said.

## **HUNGARY RECORDS 104 CORONAVIRUS FATALITIES, 2,853 NEW INFECTIONS**

Fully 104 Covid patients, generally elderly and suffering from an underlying illness, died over the past 24 hours, while 2,853 new infections were officially registered, bringing the total number of infected to 394,023, koronavirus.gov.hu said. The death toll has risen to 14,035, while 301,363 people have made a recovery. The number of active infections stands at 78,625, while there are 4,021 hospitalised Covid patients, 332 on a ventilator. Altogether 22,893 people are in official home quarantine, and the number of tests carried out has risen to 3,434,878. Fully 365,021 people have been vaccinated so far, with 141,023 having received the second jab. The government has extended coronavirus-related restrictions until March 1. Most infections have been registered in Budapest (73,276) and Pest County (49,387) so far, followed by the counties of Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén (22,273), Hajdú-Bihar (22,106) and Győr-Moson-Sopron (21,930). The county least affected by the infection is Tolna (8,778).

## **GULYÁS: GOVT TO MEET ALL LOCAL MUNICIPALITY REPRESENTATIVE BODIES**

A government committee comprising representatives of the Prime Minister's Office, the interior ministry and the finance ministry will meet with representative bodies of every local municipality to discuss their finances, the head the PM's office said. Gergely Gulyás told a press conference after meeting mayors of towns with over 25,000 residents without county-seat status that local municipalities had seen a steep rise in revenues between 2011 and 2019 thanks to Hungary's high economic growth. The coronavirus epidemic resulted in a 5.2% recession last year but it was still "significantly below" the European Union average, he added. The central budget registered a deficit of several thousand billion forints and the government's position is that the burdens must be shared between the state and local municipalities, he said.

Despite this, he said the government wanted local municipalities to feel that while taking on extra burdens, they could still rely on the state. At the same time, he said it had been the right decision by the government to allow SMEs to pay only half of their local business tax to local councils. "This did not involve drawing money away, because the money stayed with the businesses ... and they can guarantee jobs and in best cases even create jobs," Gulyás said. He added that local

municipalities with fewer than 25,000 residents would get fully compensated for the loss in revenues. In response to a question, Gulyás said opposition and ruling party mayors had been represented in similar numbers at Wednesday's meeting.

Head of the local municipalities association MOSZ György Gémesi told a press conference after the meeting that 12 of the 23 local municipality representatives attending the meeting had three requests. They asked for full compensation for the loss of local business tax revenues, they wanted to discuss compensation options for the costs of anti-epidemic efforts and ways to get back vehicle tax revenues. None of these requests were met and Gulyás told them he had no authority to change the government's decisions, he said.

## **GOVT OFFICIAL: HUNGARY, IRAQ READY TO PUT AGRICULTURAL TIES ON NEW FOOTING**

Hungary is prepared to share its experiences in food security and agricultural production with Iraq, agriculture ministry state secretary Sándor Farkas said after meeting Ali Hadi Al-Bayati, Iraq's ambassador to Hungary, on Thursday. The agriculture ministry said in a statement that Farkas and Al-Bayati discussed eco-friendly farming technologies and potential developments in irrigation. The ambassador named aquaculture as an area of possible future cooperation

between Iraq and Hungary. Hungarian experts contributed to the spread of carp farming in Iraq in the 1960s and 70s, he said, adding that carp has been served as a "Hungarian fish" in the country ever since. Iraq could be a market for more processed Hungarian agricultural products, the ambassador said. The two officials also discussed the possible export of Hungarian agricultural products to Iraq and opportunities for bilateral cooperation in connection with developments in irrigation, the ministry said.

### **CONCENTRATION OF METAL POLLUTANTS IN SZAMOS RIVER BELOW THRESHOLD**

The concentration of zinc, copper, aluminium and iron has been below threshold value in water samples taken from the Szamos River near Csenger at the Romanian border, in north-eastern Hungary, the national disaster management authority OKF said on Thursday. The authority earlier reported above-threshold values of zinc, copper, aluminium and iron in samples taken early on Thursday. OKF said in a statement that it would

continue monitoring any changes in the environment. The national water management authority (OVF) said on Wednesday that it had been alerted of heavy metal pollution arriving in Hungary in the River Szamos from Romania. The Romanian side had sent information over the Principal International Alert Centre (PIAC) showing that heavy metal pollution resulting from mining spoil was expected to arrive in Hungary. The pollution reached Hungary at 1am on Thursday.

### **HUNGARY RETURNS CHILD ARMOUR OF KING SIGISMUND II AUGUSTUS TO POLAND**

Hungary is returning the child armour of Polish King Sigismund II Augustus to Poland in the name of the friendship between the two countries, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán said in Krakow. Presenting the armour at a ceremony at the Wawel Royal Castle, Orbán said "it wasn't easy" to decide who had rights to the artefact. "But after some time it became clear that the truth is on Poland's side and this precious object belongs to them,

though we, too, have become fond of it." The prime minister noted that the armour had ended up in Hungary because of a misunderstanding, with experts believing it to be that of King Louis II of Hungary. "We thought it was ours," he said. Hungary ultimately "bowed before historical facts and truth" and conceded that the armour belongs to Poland, Orbán said. When Poland's prime minister turned to Hungary with an official request, Hungary made the only right decision which the friendship between the two countries allowed and returned to Poland what was theirs, Orbán added. Hungary is returning the armour to Poland in the hope that everything in history will eventually end up in its rightful place, the prime minister said.

Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki thanked Hungary for returning the armour, saying it would henceforth be another symbol of Polish-Hungarian friendship. Morawiecki welcomed that the armour was returning to the Royal Castle where Sigismund II Augustus's ashes are kept. Sigismund II Augustus was King of Poland and Grand Duke of Lithuania from 1548 to 1572.