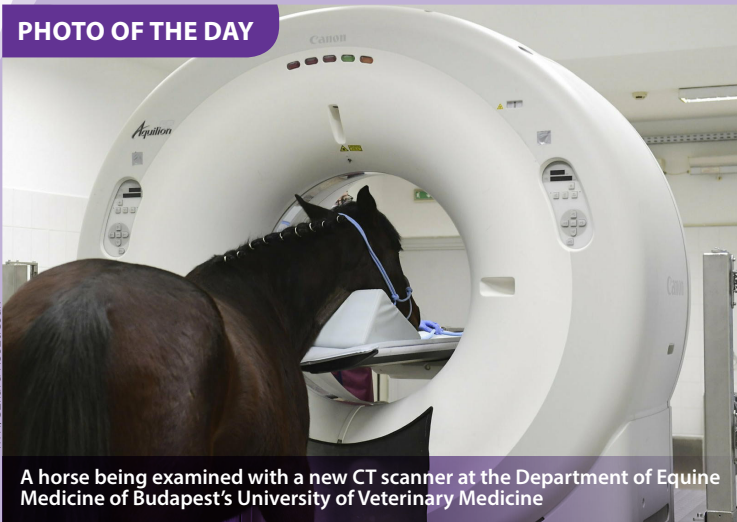


PHOTO OF THE DAY



MTI/Szilárd Koszticsák

A horse being examined with a new CT scanner at the Department of Equine Medicine of Budapest's University of Veterinary Medicine

UPCOMING EVENTS

Coronavirus updates

Cbank Monetary Council rate-setting meeting

Finance ministry releases detailed Jan budget report

EU affairs ministers meet

TOP STORY

LAW EXTENDING PANDEMIC MEASURES PASSED

Parliament has passed a bill on extending the special legal order in connection with measures to protect the country against the coronavirus pandemic.

The law which authorises the government to extend related decrees by 90 days was passed with 133 votes in favour, 55 against and one abstention. Justice Minister Judit Varga, in her reasoning attached to the bill, said the approval by lawmakers was "a political recognition of the government's efforts so far to stop the epidemic".

Under the new law, interim elections or referendums cannot be held while the special legal order is in force. Votes thus postponed shall be scheduled within 15 days of the special legal order's termination. The new law also stipulates that the government should provide regular information about its pandemic-related measures to parliament, or to the house speaker and group leaders when the assembly is not in session. The law will take effect on the day of its publication for 90 days.

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ORBÁN: HUNGARY IN RACE TO PROCURE AS MANY JABS AS POSSIBLE

Countries must quickly purchase as many coronavirus vaccines as possible, regardless of whether they come from the East or the West, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán said in an interview to German news portal Focus Online. Asked about Hungary's decision to buy Russia's Sputnik V vaccine, Orbán said that in a pandemic, a politician's job was to take responsibility and protect the health and lives of his country's citizens. He said there were no "Eastern or Western vaccines"; only good or bad ones. When the Hungarian authorities conclude that a vaccine is safe and effective, they authorise it, he added. "From that point on, to me, a vaccine that has been granted authorisation is a Hungarian vaccine I can use to save the lives of my compatriots," Orbán said.

The prime minister said it was possible to treat the procurement of vaccines and the tense relations between the European Union and Russia as separate issues. He underscored that human life and the protection of health took precedence over political, including geopolitical considerations.

"Looking at it objectively, it's clear that the eastern part of Europe developed a vaccination culture during the communist era which led to eastern Europe eradicating the polio virus a lot sooner than western Europe, where the Russian vaccine was

not adopted for ideological reasons," Orbán said.

Asked about the European Union's centralised vaccine procurement programme, Orbán said it had become clear that "this was the wrong decision." The United States, Britain, Israel and even Serbia "are well ahead of us EU member states", he said, adding at the same time that it was now "too late" to change course and "complaining is pointless". "Let the European Commission do what it has to do," Orbán said. "We won't get in its way and we'll support it wherever we can, but out of responsibility for our people, we'll exercise our national competences."

Asked why he did not consider Hungary to be bound by the EU decision on vaccine procurement, Orbán said: "Brussels follows its own logic. It doesn't take into consideration the importance of the time factor and is too slow to issue approvals and doesn't appear to be talking to suppliers from a position of strength." However, EU regulations do not bar member states from acting on their own, and the Hungarian government has taken advantage of this, he said.

Put to him that some believed the EU was also motivated by ideological considerations in its vaccine procurement programme, Orbán said: "I don't know exactly what's happening in Brussels or in the minds of the Brussels bureaucrats, but what I do know is that everyone who has died was someone's father, mother, sibling or child."

Put to him that several governments believed the EU could only challenge the US, Russia and China as a united bloc, Orbán said he did not support those who "want to bring back Cold War politics". The prime minister said he believed Russia and China were much more of "a big opportunity for Europe", adding that the bloc should "look for forms of cooperation that serve our interests".

Concerning the state of Europe's economy, Orbán said things were "going well" in central Europe. The region's economic indicators, he said, were "excellent", the budget "is in the best possible shape" and "our labour-based policies have resulted in near full employment", he said. Central Europe, Orbán added, was also "progressing well when it comes to digitalisation". Western Europe, on the other hand, "is pursuing an economic policy that's too reminiscent of socialism", he said, arguing that governments were raising taxes and implementing "complicated regulations" that hindered investment and businesses. "The EU should do much more to improve its competitiveness, but unfortunately its share in global economic output is falling, and this worries us," Orbán said.

SZIJÁRTÓ: EU TIES TO SOUTHERN NEIGHBOURS SHOULD REST ON EFFORTS TO STOP MIGRATION

The European Union's relations with its southern neighbours should be determined by efforts to stop

migration, Péter Szijjártó, the minister of foreign affairs and trade, said on the side-lines of a meeting of EU foreign ministers. Szijjártó said northbound migration into the EU could be stopped only in close cooperation with countries in north Africa and the Middle East. He said that migration, besides presenting cultural and security threats, also presented a “very serious” health risk. “It is in Europe’s security interest to stop migration. The discussion should focus on stopping rather than handling migration,” Szijjártó said in a video on Facebook. The Visegrad Group has started cooperation with Morocco, Libya and Tunisia to curb the waves of illegal migration, he noted. Resettlement quotas should not be mandatory in the EU as this encourages human smugglers and migrants, he said.

Regarding the discussion on EU-Russia ties, Szijjártó said the matter should be approached strategically and “not narrowed down to sanctions or the issues around Russian opposition politician Alexey Navalny.” Ties with Moscow have an impact on issues such as trade, the handling of conflicts that pose security risks, international cooperation in energy supply, and the effort against the coronavirus pandemic, the value of international cooperation has grown, he said.

Regarding Russia’s Sputnik V coronavirus vaccine, Szijjártó said: “The best vaccine is the one that gets here and is ready to be administered to

Hungarians.” “Hungary is still working to procure the largest possible amount of all the vaccines approved by Hungarian experts at the fastest possible pace, because that is the way to protect them from the pandemic,” Szijjártó said.

Regarding the debate on the ties between the EU and the US, Szijjártó said Hungary’s partnership with the US was based on “significant economic, defence and political cooperation”. “The Hungarian government is committed to maintaining and, if necessary, improving a high-level political network” in the US, he said.

Szijjártó also noted the “serious disruptions” to freight transport caused by recent German border restrictions. The minister said he agreed with his Czech, Austrian and Luxemburg counterparts to inform each other regarding the situation. Szijjártó said he would participate in a vote in parliament scheduled for Monday on extending the special legal order with a view to curbing the coronavirus pandemic in the country. “The lives and safety of Hungarians and a speedy relaunch of the economy can only be ensured if the government has the means to act swiftly and effectively,” Szijjártó said.

FIDESZ GROUP LEADER BLASTS LEFT FOR ‘POLITICISING’ PANDEMIC RESPONSE

Máté Kocsis, ruling Fidesz’s parliamentary group leader, slammed

Hungary’s left-wing opposition for “politicising” the country’s response to the coronavirus pandemic. “The third wave of the pandemic is upon us,” Kocsis said in parliament. “The left is also aware of this, yet they’re not willing to vote to extend the special legal order.” “Not even in our worst nightmares did we think that reality could hurl a third wave into our everyday lives, but it has,” the group leader said. “This is how things stand in Europe and how they stand in Hungary. The virus hasn’t spared anyone.” Kocsis said it was “baffling” as to why the left was engaging in “an anti-vaccine and anti-consultation campaign”, adding that their arguments against extending the special legal order introduced to contain the spread of the coronavirus were also “completely unfathomable”. He said that by refusing to back the extension of the special legal order, the left “might as well admit to their voters that if it were up to them, troubled sectors wouldn’t be getting any wage support”.

The left’s vote against the special legal order “also means scrapping the moratorium on loan repayments, payroll tax cuts and the rent waiver for businesses using state or local council for premises”, Kocsis insisted. “They’d also scrap wage increases for general practitioners, the home renovation subsidy as well as ever single protective measure [against the pandemic],” he said.

ORBÁN URGES VOTERS TO PARTICIPATE IN SURVEY

Prime Minister Viktor Orbán urged voters to participate in the government's latest National Consultation survey concerning possible removal of coronavirus-related restrictions. In a video posted on Facebook on Monday, the prime minister said: "The moment has come at last to have a sensible discussion on how we could ease the restrictions imposed due to the epidemic," the prime minister said, adding that "we have had enough of these [restrictions], we want to get rid of them". According to Orbán, epidemiologists will have the final say in the decision, but added that "everybody's opinion counts" as to when, and in how many steps, the restrictions should be removed. "That is why I am asking you to fill in the questionnaire," Orbán said in his video.

HUNGARY RECORDS 48 COVID-19 FATALITIES, 2,623 NEW INFECTIONS

Fully 48 Covid patients, generally elderly and suffering from an underlying illness, died over the past 24 hours, while 2,623 new infections were officially registered, bringing the total number of infected to 405,646, koronavirus.gov.hu said. The death toll has risen to 14,347, while 308,650 people have made a recovery. The number of active infections stands at 82,649, while there are 4,489

hospitalised Covid patients, 394 on a ventilator. Altogether 25,589 people are in official home quarantine, and the number of tests carried out has risen to 3,519,536. Fully 453,457 people have been vaccinated so far, with 201,005 having received the second jab. The government has extended coronavirus-related restrictions until March 1.

Most infections have been registered in Budapest (75,627) and Pest County (51,135) so far, followed by the counties of Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén (23,142), Hajdú-Bihar (22,723) and Győr-Moson-Sopron (22,655). The county least affected by the infection is Tolna (9,081).

GOVT NOMINATES CSEHI FOR CJEU JUDGE POST

The Hungarian government has nominated Zoltán Csehi for a judge's seat on the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU), the justice ministry said in a statement. The ministry said parliament's European affairs committee had heard testimony by Csehi on Monday and supported his nomination. Csehi is a member of the CJEU's General Court at present. He would replace Endre Juhász, who has been a CJEU judge since 2004.

ÁDER TALKS TO OLYMPIC CHAMPION SWIMMER HOSSZÚ IN 'BLUE PLANET' PODCAST

President János Áder discussed climate awareness, the effects of the coronavirus pandemic and

preparations for the Tokyo Games with three-time Olympic champion swimmer Katinka Hosszú in his 'Blue Planet' podcast on Monday. Fewer competitions and the postponement of the 2020 Tokyo Olympics left Hosszú time to "show her other side" last year, Áder said. Hosszú visited an orphanage set up by Csaba Böjte in Romania's Transylvania region, donated 1.5 million forints (EUR 4,200) for coronavirus research and held several speeches on climate change, sustainability and other topics, the president added. Áder noted that as one of the most polluting countries on Earth, greenhouse gas emissions per capita in the United States are three times higher than in Hungary. Hosszú said people in the US, where she attended university, "consume a lot and waste an incredible amount". Regarding China, Hosszú said athletes in the Beijing world cup always calculated with below-average results due to the smog. She said she sought to use sustainable solutions such as geothermic heating when it came to building her house. She also said she strove to buy only what she needed and to minimise waste. Speaking about the effects of the pandemic, Hosszú said cancelled competition events seriously hampered preparation for the Tokyo Olympics. She said she was pro-vaccination, adding that "whatever [vaccine] Hungarian authorities say is good is good". Hosszú said she had already received the first shot of the Pfizer vaccine, among other Hungarian Olympic athletes.

LMP TO SUBMIT RESOLUTION PROPOSAL PROTECTING LOCAL MUNICIPALITIES

Opposition LMP will submit a resolution proposal to parliament to protect local municipalities from “government restrictions”, group leader László Lóránt Keresztes said. He told an online press conference that LMP wants to ensure that local municipalities receive the necessary resources to operate public services. LMP will contact all government party lawmakers directly to highlight to them the problems caused by the shortage of resources in their municipalities, he added. As a result of the withdrawal of funding, several local municipalities are almost unable to function, and last week the government made it clear that it would not negotiate about this issue with them, Keresztes said. Less money is available for public lighting, drinking water supplies and public transport, and the situation is made even worse by the coronavirus pandemic, he added. LMP will involve professional organisations in preparing an action plan and a financial plan that will help address systemic problems after next year’s elections, he said.

FINANCE MINISTER: HUNGARY CONTINUES TO DRAW INVESTMENTS

Tax cuts, a supportive business environment, well-trained work force and good security continue to

draw investors to Hungary where the government focuses on investment and development, Finance Minister Mihály Varga told a meeting of Hungarian foreign mission heads. Although the coronavirus pandemic temporarily halted Hungary’s dynamic development, the country’s robust economy has bounced back to growth again by the fourth quarter of 2020, Varga said. As a result, Hungary’s Q4 GDP figures were the fifth best in the European Union, he said. Despite the pandemic, investments worth a total of 2,500 billion forints (EUR 7.0bn) have been announced in Hungary since the beginning of 2020, Varga said. Rating agencies continue to recommend the country for investment, where corporate tax is the lowest in the EU and tax cuts continued during the pandemic, he said.

Regarding post-pandemic prospects, Varga said restarting the economy was conditional on achieving herd immunity through vaccination. Efforts to procure vaccines and protective gear therefore “will never face budgetary hurdles”, he said. Once that goal is achieved, the Hungarian economy may bounce back with a record double-digit growth, Varga said. Hungary’s foreign missions have a primary role in restarting the economy and drawing foreign investment to Hungary, he said.

OFFICIAL: NUMBER OF HUNGARIANS LIVING IN POVERTY PLUMMETS

Eurostat data show that the ratio of Hungarians living in poverty has

dropped over the past ten years, a human resources ministry’s official said, visiting a foster family in a village in north-eastern Hungary. Whereas the ratio of those living beyond the poverty line was 23.4% in 2010, this dropped to 8.7% last year, elevating Hungary to the top ten EU member states from bottom of the list, Attila Fülöp, the state secretary in charge of social affairs, said in Tarpa. He said the favourable development was thanks to the government’s job-creation measures. “Jobs are key to developing communities that help improve a secure way of life,” Fülöp told a press conference.

He said a recent report by “leftist” Hungarian economic research institute GKI aimed “to prove” that poverty in Hungary had increased in the past ten years. “But, contradicting the Budapest institute’s report, the reality can be found here in Tarpa,” Fülöp said, adding that “authentic Eurostat data, a standard across Europe, prove that the number of those living in poverty has dropped.”

PALKOVICS: HUNGARY COMMITTED TO SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Hungary is committed to sustainable development and is working to become an European centre for 5G technology, the minister of innovation and technology told a conference organised by Chinese telecom giant Huawei. The Connected for Shared

Prosperity conference carried online was organised on the side-lines of the Mobile World Congress of GSMA, focusing on digitalisation as a tool to promote sustainable economic and social development. Citing a United Nations forecast, László Palkovics said in his address that global consumption would double in the next 40 years. "We must strive for sustainability, use our restricted resources efficiently and rely on renewables rather than non-renewables so that our planet stays liveable," he said, urging joint efforts "to resolve a global issue".

The Hungarian government has launched an ambitious development plan focusing on the social, economic, and environmental pillars of sustainable development, Palkovics said, adding that the social component was based on the country's "holistic family policy" aimed at reinforcing families and promoting a turnaround in downward demographic tendencies.

The government is "determined to solidify Hungary as a nation based on knowledge and innovation", Palkovics said, adding that 70% of the country's energy was produced in a carbon-neutral way, a ratio that was to be increased to 90% by 2030. Concerning the government's climate and environment protection plan, Palkovics said that the goals included reducing the amount of waste while it outlined commitments towards renewable energy and climate protection, too. Palkovics said that the government's digitalisation strategy was aimed at putting Hungary among the first ten

countries of the European Union by 2030, reducing the ratio of adults not using the internet to 2%.

The minister also said that Hungary's 4G coverage was an "outstanding" 99.5%, adding however that "the future belongs to 5G", which "offers a greener solution in many areas", thus contributing to a sustainable and environmentally friendly development. Hungary is committed to becoming a major European centre for 5G developments, he added.

**GOVT TO INTRODUCE
THREE-PILLAR
SYSTEM FOR FUNDING
UNIVERSITIES**

The government is introducing a new three-pillar funding system for universities from September to better support various aspects of university activities, László Palkovics, the innovation and technology minister, said. Speaking at an unrelated event at a faculty of the University of Veterinary Sciences in Üllő, near Budapest, Palkovics said the three pillars would fund the areas of education, research, and infrastructure and maintenance separately. Of the three pillars, the educational funding will be paid in proportion to the number of students taught at the university, he said, adding that the foundational model for running certain universities and the new financing model would contribute to greater competitiveness.

**OFFICIAL: UNPRECEDENTED
DEVELOPMENTS PLANNED
IN FOOD INDUSTRY**

Developments on an unprecedented scale are planned in Hungary's food industry by the end of the decade, with a significant increase in funding to become available during the current European Union budget period compared with the previous one, the state secretary in charge of food chain supervision at the ministry of agriculture said in the Monday edition of daily Magyar Nemzet. Norbert Erdős said that rural Hungary will have access to 4,500 billion forints (EUR 12.5bn) worth of funding between 2021 and 2027, with the highest available budget contribution of 80% by the Hungarian state. A tender is expected to be published in the first half of this year already which will enable micro and small businesses in the food industry to apply mostly for purchasing equipment, he said. The ministry has launched a series of online consultations with representatives in the sector in order to ensure that the tenders invited match demands, Erdős added. Hungary's food industry is expected to once again become a key player in international competition by the end of the 2027 budgetary period, he said, adding that Hungarian producers would get every opportunity to catch up with the most developed European competitors.



POPE APPOINTS HUNGARIAN HISTORIAN TO HEAD PONTIFICAL COMMITTEE

Pope Francis has appointed Hungarian historian Antal Molnár to head of the Pontifical Committee for Historical Sciences for five years, the Hungarian Catholic Bishops' Conference told MTI. Molnár has been director of the history institute of the Research Centre for Humanities within the Hungarian Academy of Sciences since 2019. The papal committee established in 1954 cooperates with ecclesiastical and non-religious bodies and institutions, focusing on ecumenical dialogue. Molnár is an expert on the early history of the Catholic Church with a focus on relations between Hungary and the Holy See, as well as the history of Hungary and the Balkans in the 16th-17th centuries.

HUNGARIANS ON WANTED LIST ARRESTED IN ITALY, BRITAIN

Three Hungarians with outstanding international warrants have been arrested in a coordinated operation by partner authorities in Italy and Britain, the Hungarian police said. Zoltán Róbert B., who has been accused of armed abduction and aggravated assault, was arrested by Italian police in Casarsa della Delizia, in northern Italy, on Friday afternoon, police.hu said. Péter B. and Anna L., were arrested on Friday in Dewsbury, in West Yorkshire. They received prison sentences for fraud and illegal restraint, respectively, in September 2018. The three Hungarians have been placed in extradition detention and are awaiting court decision.

SWIMMING POOL INAUGURATED IN SZEGED

A 16-billion-forint (EUR 45m), 50-metre indoor swimming pool was inaugurated in Szeged, in south-east Hungary, at the weekend. Gergely Gulyás, the prime minister's chief of staff, said he trusted that the facility funded in the framework of the government's Modern Cities Programme, would contribute to fostering both professional and amateur swimming in the city. The complex, with room for 1,165 spectators, was inaugurated with a test match between the Hungarian and Serbian water polo teams.