

PHOTO OF THE DAY



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UPCOMING EVENTS

Coronavirus updates

Stats office releases Q1 budget figures

TOP STORY

GULYÁS: NEARLY 3.5M VACCINATED

The number of Hungarians vaccinated against Covid-19 will probably reach 3.5 million on Friday, and restaurant and bar terraces may open the following day, the prime minister's chief of staff said.

Gergely Gulyás told a press briefing that open-air facilities and shops will stay open until 9.30pm, while the night-time curfew will begin an hour later at 11pm. Reopening catering facilities is "the first step towards regaining freedom", Gulyás said, adding that he hoped faster steps could follow. "A large amount of vaccine is expected to arrive soon," he said. During the next week, one million doses of the Chinese vaccine will arrive as well as 200,000 first doses of the Russian vaccine, Gulyás said, adding that the second dose of the latter would follow promptly. Over 300,000 doses of Pfizer will also arrive next week, he added. The number of vaccinated may surpass 4 million next week, and those registering now may get their jabs within a few weeks. So far, some 4.4 million have registered for the vaccine, Gulyás said. Hungary will need some 6 million people vaccinated to reach herd immunity, he added.

GULYÁS: BUDGET TO 'RELAUNCH THE ECONOMY'

Gergely Gulyás, the prime minister's chief of staff, told a press briefing on Thursday that the amended budget for this year and the 2022 budget would focus on relaunching the economy. Proposed changes to the 2021 budget have been tabled in parliament, while planned changes for next year will be submitted in a few weeks' time, he said. A fund equal to 12% of Hungary's GDP, or 6,000 billion forints (EUR 16.5bn), will be established within this year's budget to restart the economy once the pandemic has abated and the country is close to achieving herd immunity, Gulyás said. A similar fund of 7,000 billion will be created in the 2022 budget, he added. If parliament approves the two budgets, it will have ensured a "lifeline" for the economy and possibly spurred a vigorous growth as early as this year, he said. The number of job holders grew by 66,000 in March compared to February, Gulyás said. The government's pledge to restore all jobs lost to the pandemic will be met once a further 10,000 jobs are created, he said.

Restaurants will be eligible for wage subsidies regardless of whether they opened their terraces or not, he added. Gulyás said the payment of subsidies was "fast and effective," and the government has already disbursed 71.7 billion forints of the 72.2 billion requested. Gulyás insisted that the

decision to reopen schools and kindergartens had been a good one, with 60% of kindergarteners and 75% of 1-4 grade pupils back in school at the first week of in-person teaching, Gulyás said. Their numbers are continuing to grow, he added. At the same time, Gulyás slammed opposition political forces and "trade unions embroiled in opposition party politics", accusing them of "doing their utmost to sow uncertainty and fear regarding the reopening of kindergartens and the elementary schools."

Regarding the proposal now before lawmakers to extend the special legal order in Hungary, Gulyás said it was designed to ensure that the country retains its ability to take fast action to ensure protections against the coronavirus pandemic. Gulyás said Hungary was implementing "the most successful vaccination programme of the EU", with the number of vaccinated Hungarians increasing and new infections shrinking, but he warned that "the epidemic is not over", necessitating an extension of the current order. Under the proposal, the special legal order would be extended until fifteen days after the start of parliament's autumn session and the government may terminate the special legal order at any time when its powers were no longer necessary, he noted. Terminating the special powers would be "in our joint interest", he said, as this would signal the end of the epidemic. But the government must be able to make swift and effective decisions

while the virus is still around, he added. Gulyás lamented the lack of political unity on the issue and he called on the opposition to reconsider their combative stance. "Trying to discredit the health-care system with fake news and videos during the protection effort is hardly a political feat," Gulyás said. He insisted the opposition continued to attack the vaccines, and still had a draft proposal tabled in parliament which attempted to ban the "most effective vaccines," he added. Gulyás called on the opposition to abandon its anti-vaccination stance.

GULYÁS: 'MORE WOULD HAVE DIED' WITHOUT EASTERN VACCINES

Hungary would be "much worse off" and "significantly more people would die" had the government not purchased vaccines from the East, Gergely Gulyás, the prime minister's chief of staff, told a press conference. The minister said that one percent of those inoculated with at least the first shot had contracted coronavirus but their symptoms were "significantly milder". In the case of those fully inoculated, the figures were "even better", he said. Even though full protection is only achieved after the second shot, already one dose significantly reduces the risk of infection, Gulyás said. This is the reason why vaccination certificates are being issued after the first jab, he said. The "rights" certificate holders will be entitled to exercise will be

determined in the coming week and announced by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, Gulyás said.

Regarding the Hungarian research into the vaccines accredited in the country, Gulyás said the results will be published at a later date. At the moment, Sputnik V seems to be the most effective of all, and “Sinopharm seems better than Pfizer”, he said. At the same time, all vaccines are extremely effective, he said. Vaccine producers currently guarantee six months of protection for those inoculated, Gulyás said. Therefore, it is possible that some will need booster shots in September, he said. Gulyás warned that “anti-vaccination campaigns shaking the trust in vaccines” may cost lives. The average age of those dying after contracting Covid remains above 70 in Hungary, while some 20% of the fatalities is suffered by 50-65-year-olds, he said. There is currently one child with Covid-19 on ventilator, he said. Regarding the reopening of borders for Hungarians with family members in neighbouring countries, Gulyás noted that the inoculation rate across the borders lags behind that of Hungary. One of first steps in reopening the borders, however, will be to allow people to see their families, he said. In the coming days, Orbán will announce steps for the next stage of reopening the country, scheduled for when the number of those vaccinated reaches 4 million, he said.

Meanwhile, regarding the Chinese Fudan University’s campus planned

in Budapest’s 9th district, Gulyás said improving the quality of Hungarian higher education was in the entire country’s interest. Fudan has been cooperating with the Corvinus University for years, Gulyás noted. Hungary welcomes all top-50 universities, be they American, British or Chinese, Gulyás said. At the same time, he noted that the Central European University was banned from operating in Hungary because “it basically operated as a printing press for degrees, without a campus in its country of origin” and not because it was financier “George Soros’s university.” Regarding concerns in connection with the student housing project originally planned for the Fudan site, Gulyás said the government would honour all agreements with the Budapest municipality on the issue. The housing project will provide accommodation for at least as many students as originally planned, regardless of whether they are studying at Fudan or elsewhere, he said.

Regarding Hungary’s stance on the Russia-Ukraine conflict, Gulyás noted that Hungary and the Visegrad Group countries were among the first countries to express solidarity with Ukraine after Russia annexed the Crimean peninsula in 2014. Ties between Hungary and Ukraine have been strained, however, ever since the curbing of the Hungarian minority’s right to mother tongue education, he said. Hungary is thus the only EU member state to block

Ukraine’s accession to NATO, he added. Answering a question on foundations handling the assets of public institutions -- including universities -- Gulyás said the reorganisation of universities was vital to ensure the country’s competitiveness while expanding “academic freedom” as the state would no longer have direct influence over their operation. The assets of these foundations can only be used for public purposes, and not as private fortunes, he said. On another subject, Gulyás said the government aimed to avoid cancelling summer youth camps, adding that a decision may be made in the second half of May in light of pandemic indicators.

ORBÁN MEETS WHO EUROPE REGIONAL DIRECTOR

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán held talks with WHO Europe Regional Director Hans Kluge on Hungary’s vaccination drive, efforts to restart the economy and ties with WHO in his office on Thursday. Kluge expressed appreciation concerning Hungary’s measures to contain the epidemic. Orbán and Kluge agreed that the economy and everyday life should be restarted gradually. The prime minister outlined Hungary’s plans for reopening. The WHO director reiterated that schools should be closed last and reopened first. He praised Hungary’s “exemplary” vaccination drive, adding that vaccines should be handled as the most



important means to save lives. Orbán and Kluge agreed that vaccination should not be seen as a geopolitical issue because it is the only tool for subduing the epidemic and all vaccines are effective.

NÉMETH: COE BACKS UPCOMING HUNGARIAN PRESIDENCY'S GOALS

The Council of Europe and its Parliamentary Assembly (PACE) are prepared to support the priorities of the upcoming Hungarian presidency, Zsolt Németh, the head of parliament's foreign affairs committee, said in Strasbourg.

Speaking to MTI by phone on the sidelines of the PACE's week-long session, Németh said he had reviewed the priorities of Hungary's six-month chairmanship set to begin on May 21 with PACE Speaker Rick Daems, PACE Secretary-General Despina Chatzivassiliou-Tsovilis and CoE Secretary-General Marija Pejčinović Burić. Németh noted that the Hungarian presidency will focus on boosting respect for the nations' cultural, legal and historic traditions, the protection of ethnic minorities, family protection, on strengthening the dialogue between religions, and on meeting the challenges posed by artificial intelligence, cybercrime and climate change.

Németh said the CoE officials welcomed the assembly's approval of a comprehensive report on minorities compiled by Elvira Kovács, an ethnic

Hungarian politician from Serbia's Vojvodina region. The report aimed at monitoring compliance with the CoE's minority protection convention more effectively proposes, among other things, the creation of an online platform for reporting violations of minority rights, he noted. Németh said his talks with the CoE officials had also touched on the rights infringements committed against the Polish national minority in Belarus.

He also said the Hungarian presidency will organise a conference on fighting cybercrime in the autumn, which will be attended by Secretary-General Burić. In addition, the assembly's speaker and secretary-general will visit Hungary next month, he said.

SZIJJÁRTÓ DISCUSSES PANDEMIC, BORDER MEASURES WITH AUSTRIAN COUNTERPART

Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó discussed bilateral cooperation against the coronavirus pandemic and border measures with Alexander Schallenberg, his Austrian counterpart, at the Austria-Hungary border. At the meeting on the Austrian side of the border, Szijjártó said the two countries were working together closely to tackle the pandemic. Hungary and Austria helped repatriate each other's citizens during the first wave of the pandemic last spring and made sure that transit and freight traffic between them ran unimpeded, he said.

Recently the two countries renewed consultations with a view to making it easier for Hungarian commuters to cross into Austria and back, he said. Szijjártó said Schallenberg had been "enormously helpful" in getting Austria to deploy more soldiers and police officers to the border to speed up border crossings. Another measure that will help commuters, he said, was Austria's decision to increase the number of coronavirus testing centres. Concerning economic ties, Szijjártó said 31 Austrian companies had demonstrated their faith in cooperation with Hungary last year by investing a combined 18 billion forints (EUR 49.7m) in the country and saving 7,700 jobs in the process.

KARÁCSONY CALLS FOR 'GREEN SHIFT', GREATER FOCUS ON WELFARE

Hungary needs to make a "turnaround" and focus its attention on environmental issues and efforts to "ensure opportunities for a decent life", Budapest Mayor Gergely Karácsony said on Thursday, marking Earth Day, adding that those efforts should come "before the interests of the financial markets". In a video on Facebook, Karácsony quoted Pope Francis as saying that climate change and the destruction of the environment cannot be effectively combated unless efforts are made to eliminate poverty and to resolve welfare problems. "Damaging the environment and the planet as well as conserving huge inequalities

between people are not separate sins but different consequences of a single sin," the mayor said. Karácsony called for more sustainable and more humane policies both in Hungary and globally in the post-pandemic period. Systemic changes can no longer be postponed, he added.

Opposition LMP said it was similarly ready to make a "green shift" if it won next year's election. Erzsébet Schmuck, the party's co-leader, told an online press conference that "there is no reason to celebrate" Earth Day in light of an increasing climate crisis caused by human activity. She noted that average temperatures were rising in Hungary, average annual rainfall was decreasing drastically and unexpected floods were becoming more frequent. All this could compromise the country's food production and summertime heat waves could claim lives, she added. Schmuck accused the government of "failing to build a crisis-proof, environmentally friendly" economy, and insisted that the government's ideal was an agriculture of large farms using chemical technologies. The government should also seek ways to ensure sustainable water management and improve air quality in the country, she added.

GOVT OFFICIAL: HUNGARY HELPS PROJECTS LAUNCHED AGAINST DESERTIFICATION

Hungary's government has launched a series of projects under the Hungary

Helps banner designed to provide sustainable farming technologies to communities living in areas threatened by desertification, the state secretary overseeing the programme said. Tristan Azbej said that climate change was badly impacting the biosphere of Africa's Sub-Saharan region, while the technologies offered through the Hungary Helps scheme could help slow down those trends. The Hungary Helps schemes are part of the Great Green Wall programme aimed at assisting over 250 million people living in the region, he said. This was launched through a cooperation of 20 countries with a view to setting up drought-tolerant vegetable cultures in Africa, he noted.

KARÁCSONY CALLS ON GOVT TO MAKE FUDAN DOCUMENTS PUBLIC

Budapest Mayor Gergely Karácsony has called on the government to make public all decisions concerning a campus for China's Fudan University planned to be constructed in Budapest's 9th district. The government earlier agreed with the municipality to build a housing project for students in the area, Karácsony said on Facebook. If the government seeks to "renege" on that agreement, it should first publish all relevant decisions and contracts regarding the university project, he said. László Palkovics, the minister of technology and innovation, has initiated talks with the Budapest leadership and the mayor of the 9th

district on the issue, Karácsony said. He added that although he was "a great fan of talks", he was "more interested in seeing affordable housing for over 10,000 young people" than a Chinese university in Budapest.

LMP TO SUBMIT BILL ON POSTAL VOTING FOR HUNGARIANS ABROAD

Opposition LMP said it will submit to parliament a bill that would allow Hungarians living abroad to vote by mail in elections, László Lóránt Keresztes, the party's group leader, told an online press briefing. Hungarians "forced to move abroad to find work because of the government's flawed policies" over the past decade who still have a permanent address in the country should be given an opportunity to participate in elections, he said.

Gábor Vona, the former head of conservative Jobbik, told the same press conference that his foundation had recently organised an "online referendum" asking people whether they agreed that Hungarians who have a permanent address in Hungary but are abroad on election day should have the chance to vote by mail. Altogether 92.9% of the referendum's 22,396 participants voted in favour of postal voting, while 4.8% voted against it, he said. Vona said that besides resolving the issue of mail voting, another aim of the referendum had also been to introduce the concept of an online referendum into Hungarian public life.

HUNGARY RECORDS 214 CORONAVIRUS FATALITIES, 3,607 NEW INFECTIONS

Fully 214 patients, generally elderly with co-morbidities, died over the past 24 hours, while 3,607 new infections were registered, koronavirus.gov.hu said on Thursday. So far 3,419,450 people have received a first jab, while 1,453,300 have been fully vaccinated. The number of active infections stands at 265,374, while hospitals are caring for 7,507 Covid patients, 876 of whom need respiratory assistance. There are 41,857 people in official quarantine, while 5,205,923 tests have been officially carried out. Since the first outbreak, 760,967 infections have been registered, while fatalities have risen to 26,001. Fully 469,592 people have made a recovery. So far, most infections have been registered in Budapest and Pest County, followed by the counties of Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén, Győr-Moson-Sopron and Hajdú-Bihar.

KÁSLER SLAMS LEFT FOR ‘ANTI-VAXXER’ ATTITUDE

Hungary’s leftist parties “keep issuing anti-vaccination statements”, and try to “convince others not to get the jab while they get inoculated themselves”, the human resources minister told daily Magyar Nemzet. “As a doctor, I am shocked that they would go as far as risking other people’s lives to prolong the epidemic and obtain power,” Miklós Kásler said. The leftist parties’ propaganda is “aimed at creating uncertainty”, the minister insisted, stressing that “any vaccine is better than getting infected”. “Everybody must get inoculated as soon as possible because that provides the greatest chances to rein in the epidemic,” he said. Concerning hospital capacities, Kásler said that 40% of all hospital beds were ready to receive Covid patients, and 7% for intensive Covid care. He said that

“about half of the 40%” is currently used, while “intensive units are much busier”. Overall, the health-care system is “coping with the burden”, he added.

JAPANESE FIRM ANNOUNCES HUF 4.3 BN EXPANSION IN HUNGARY

The local unit of Japan’s Nissin Foods will spend 4.3 billion forints (EUR 11.8m) to expand its instant noodle soup plant in Kecskemét, in central Hungary, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade Péter Szijjártó said. The government is supporting the investment, which will preserve 320 jobs and create 20 new ones, with a 500 million forint cash grant, Szijjártó said. Nissin Foods Kft will add 20% to its instant noodle soup production capacity and triple its warehouse space, he added. Szijjártó noted that 180 Japanese-owned companies employ more than 30,000 people in Hungary.

