

## PHOTO OF THE DAY



MTI/Zsolt Czeglédy

Beam just before sunrise in Debrecen (E)

## UPCOMING EVENTS

**Plenary session of parliament**

**State Audit Office presser on self-governments**

**State Audit Office presser on largest self-governments' finances**

**Stats office releases 2021 February wage data, foreign trade figures in 2nd reading**

## TOP STORY

# PARLT BACKS MINORITY SAFEPACK

Hungary's parliament adopted a resolution declaring its continued support for Minority SafePack, an initiative urging European Union protection for national and linguistic minorities in the bloc.

The European Commission earlier this year said that a wide range of measures had been taken to address the issues outlined in the initiative since it was launched in 2013, and that EU policies already in place provided "a powerful arsenal" to support the initiative's goals. Parliament in the resolution expressed its "shock" over the EC's decision to "completely reject" the initiative after it had been backed by a vast majority of MEPs. By rejecting the initiative, the commission had ignored not just the EP's support of it, but also "the will of European citizens", the resolution said. Parliament is convinced that by rejecting the initiative, the EC missed "a historic opportunity" to demonstrate its commitment to supporting European national minorities through the implementation of specific measures, the document said. The resolution was approved with 157 votes in favour and 1 against.

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## **SZIJJÁRTÓ COMMENTS ON SOLIDARITY WITH CZECH REPUBLIC**

The leaders of the Visegrad Group held talks as equals rather than exerted pressure on one another when they issued a statement of solidarity with the Czech Republic in its diplomatic conflict with Russia, Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó said on Wednesday, in response to a question at a press conference on an unrelated matter. The prime ministers of the Visegrad Group based on mutual respect and reciprocal benefits issued the statement at the initiative of Czech Premier Andrej Babiš, he said.

All signatories expressed solidarity “with their Czech friends” and the text reflected the positions of each prime minister, Szijjártó said.

Asked about press reports saying that Hungary “vetoed a firm stance against Russia”, Szijjártó said that Hungary had expressed its solidarity in a joint foreign ministerial statement as early as last week.

Hungary has also complied with the Czech Republic’s request to help guarding and operating the Czech Consulate-General in Ekaterinburg as long as Prague would be able to replace its diplomats expelled or recalled from Russia, Szijjártó said. Hungary’s solidarity with the Czech Republic cannot be questioned, he said, adding that the government was not planning to take further steps in this affair.

The Czech Republic recently expelled 18 Russian diplomats who were identified as working for the Russian secret service. In response, Russia expelled 20 Czech diplomats. On Monday the Visegrad Four prime ministers held a videoconference at the initiative of Polish Premier Mateusz Mazowiecki. Polish government spokesman Piotr Muller said later that solidarity with and support for Prague’s steps had been one of the issues on the agenda.

## **PARLT ADOPTS LAW ON PIT EXEMPTION FOR UNDER-25’S**

Lawmakers have passed legislation which exempts the income of Hungarians under the age of 25 from personal income tax. Under the law adopted with 166 votes in favour and one against, people under 25 will not have to pay PIT for wages below the gross average wage. The measure will cost the budget 130-150 billion forints (EUR 357m-413m) annually. Also, newlyweds will be eligible for new family tax benefits after they turn 25.

## **HUNGARY-ROMANIA MIXED CTTEE ON MINORITY ISSUES RELAUNCHED**

Restarting the work of the Hungarian-Romanian mixed committee on minority issues will open a new chapter in bilateral ties, Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó said, after meeting Romanian

counterpart Bogdan Aurescu in Gyula, southeast Hungary. Szijjártó said the mixed committee’s relaunch provided an opportunity to discuss and solve “problems that were earlier thought insurmountable”. The committee last met in 2011, he noted. He proposed a meeting as soon as possible to discuss important issues like the future of the Catholic secondary school in Targu Mures (Marosvásárhely). Szijjártó and Aurescu also signed an agreement to facilitate border traffic between the countries. Two 24-hour crossings will also open between Elek and Grăniceri (Ottlaka) as well as Dombegyház and Variaş (Kisvarjas), he said. The third motorway linking northern Hungary and northern Romania is expected to be opened in 2024, he said. Meanwhile, the railway line leading from Békéscsaba in southern Hungary to the Romanian border will be widened to improve traffic on the Budapest-Bucharest-Constanța line, he added.

The ministers also discussed energy security issues, Szijjártó said. Climate goals are important for both countries, but they see nuclear energy and a temporary reliance on natural gas as indispensable to achieve them, he said. “We will not allow Brussels to sideline those two forms of energy production,” Szijjártó said. The minister said that conflicts would be easier to solve if the two countries were linked in many ways. Last year’s challenges have cast light on the importance of international cooperation and good-neighbourly

relations, he said. Regarding minority rights, Szijjártó noted that Hungary had raised the funding of Romanian ethnic communities five-fold in the past decade, and that of the Romanian orthodox church seven-fold. The government also funds the education of 1,176 pupils in Romanian schools in Hungary, he said.

Aurescu also welcomed the restart of the mixed committee's work of which he was a co-chair earlier. Through this structure, the dialogue will include experts from both countries, and kindle the hope of restarting and developing the ties between the two countries, he said. Aurescu also expressed hope to see the launch of the Hungarian-Romanian Chamber of Commerce in the autumn as planned. Trade volume between Hungary and Romania reached 9 billion euros in 2020, although investments are currently skewed towards Hungary investing in Romania, he said. Aurescu praised the Hungarian government's support of quality Romanian-language education in Hungary, for ensuring the use of Romanian as a minority language, and for supporting the publishing of Romanian books and performers in Hungary.

**ITM: BUDAPEST-WARSAW RAIL LINE TO BRANCH OFF TO VIENNA, SZÉKESFEHÉRVÁR**

Plans are for a high-speed railway line linking the capitals of the Visegrad Group countries to also branch off

to Vienna and Székesfehérvár, in central Hungary, the Ministry of Innovation and Technology (ITM) said. Trains on the planned rail line to be built over the next decade will be able to travel at speeds of up to 320kmph, the ministry said in a statement. The line will also be used by domestic InterCity trains, it added. The project is expected to shorten travel times between Budapest and Vienna and Budapest and Bratislava to less than two hours, the statement quoted Innovation and Technology Minister László Palkovics as saying. Meanwhile, the journey from Budapest to Prague would take about three-and-a-half hours and the full Budapest-Warsaw trip would be five-and-a-half hours, he said. The rail line will be situated along Hungary's busiest traffic corridor, running from Budapest to the north-west, the ministry said, noting that a large chunk of the traffic there consists of international transit traffic. Plans are to have the line branch off towards Vienna at the Hegyeshalom border crossing, while the route to Bratislava would go through Rajka, the statement said. According to preliminary estimates, the rail line would serve over 20 million domestic and international passengers a year. Citing the feasibility study, the ministry said the roughly 1,000 billion forint project would recoup its costs through its favourable impacts on traffic, the environment, the economy and tourism. Given that the project is in line with the

European Union's goal to double high-speed rail traffic within the bloc by 2030 and to triple it by 2050, the investment is likely to be eligible for EU funding, the ministry said.

**SZIJJÁRTÓ: ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGES SHOULD REMAIN FOCUS POINT DESPITE PANDEMIC**

The challenges posed by climate change should not be neglected despite the hardships the coronavirus pandemic has brought on economy and health care, Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó said. In a video message addressing the opening ceremony of Ökoindustria, a two-day virtual green expo held for environmental enterprises, Szijjártó called for the coordination of sustainability and competitiveness. Hungary has succeeded in increasing its economic performance while curbing the emissions of harmful substances, he said. While Hungary makes up 2% of the EU's population, its domestic emissions only account for 1%, he said.

Carbon dioxide emissions have fallen by 32% since 1990, and energy consumption by 15%, he said. Hungary has also pledged to produce 90% of its electricity carbon-free by 2030, he said, adding the country aims to be carbon neutral by 2050.

Regarding sustainable energy resources, Szijjártó noted that the capacity of solar panels in Hungary has grown 13-fold since 2018. The



ratio of sustainable energy resources is planned to grow to 20% in ten years, he said.

Hungary's climate goals cannot be achieved without the use of nuclear energy, Szijjártó said. The Paks nuclear plant is estimated to prevent the production of 17 million tonnes of carbon dioxide once its upgrade is completed, he said.

Hungary is also a key player in making driving cleaner, with one of the largest battery factories of the world under construction in the country, he said.

In the face of global environmental challenges, Hungary's responsibilities cannot be limited to the Carpathian Basin, Szijjártó said. Last year, it disbursed over 120 billion forints (EUR 330.4m) in 110 countries to support some 550 international projects funding the responsible use of natural resources, he said. Hungarian funding of such projects has grown ten-fold in the past decade, he added.

With the cooperation of economic players, Hungary will transition to a circular economy and greener methods, the foreign minister said.

## **SOCIALISTS, PÁRBESZÉD TO FIELD JOINT CANDIDATES IN PRE-ELECTIONS FOR 2022 GENERAL ELECTION**

The Socialists and Párbeszéd will field joint candidates for the pre-elections, the selection of opposition candidates for next spring's general election, the

co-leaders of the two opposition parties said in a video message posted on Facebook.

Bertalan Tóth, the Socialists' co-leader, noted that the two parties had initiated and supported the idea of a six-party opposition for the 2022 parliamentary election early on.

"We are proud of the alliance's joint programme and the decision that we would nominate a joint prime minister candidate, enter a joint party list and field joint candidates in individual constituencies for next year's ballot," he said.

Gergely Karácsony, co-leader of Párbeszéd, said that "while the government is representing only 1% of [Hungarian] society, we are working for the remaining 99% who were humiliated and robbed in the past years". He called for a social and green turnaround.

## **OPPOSITION VOWS TO REFORM DISABILITY PENSIONS**

Hungary's opposition parties have promised to reform the country's system of disability pensions if they win next year's general election. The new government will compensate disability pensioners for any support they were deprived of following changes to the system in 2012, representatives of the parties said. Under an amendment approved by parliament earlier in the day, disability pensioners whose pension decreased following the

2012 reform are eligible for one-off compensation of 500,000 forints (EUR 1,400). The opposition criticised the amendment, saying it was "a step in the right direction but not enough".

Democratic Coalition MP Zoltán Varga called the compensation a "down payment", which he said would be increased if the opposition came into power. Jobbik deputy leader Róbert Dudás said the compensation was "nowhere near enough" to make up for the support disabled people had missed out on over the last nine years under the 2012 disability pension rules. LMP's Erzsébet Schmuck said disability pensioners should be given five times as much compensation as what they had received. She said the funds could be made available for increased compensation by scrapping certain "luxury investments" like the Liget project, the hunting expo, and the construction of Hungary's MotoGP racetrack. Anett Csordás of Momentum and the C8 civil group said disabled people should be compensated retroactively with interest for their losses in government support. Socialist Party MP Lajos Korózs also said the 500,000 forint compensation was not enough to offset the "financial and psychological damage" caused by the 2012 disability pension reform. Párbeszéd's Bence Tordai accused ruling Fidesz of trying to use the compensation money to "buy the votes of those who have lost millions due to the system's reform".

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## **HUNGARY RECORDS 188 CORONAVIRUS FATALITIES, 1,692 NEW INFECTIONS**

Fully 188 patients, generally elderly with co-morbidities, died over the past 24 hours, while 1,692 new infections were registered, [koronavirus.gov.hu](http://koronavirus.gov.hu) said on Wednesday. So far 3,774,221 people have received a first jab, while 1,773,900 have been fully vaccinated. The number of active infections stands at 250,143, while hospitals are treating 5,907 Covid patients, 702 of whom need respiratory assistance. There are 33,429 people in official quarantine, while 5,327,413 tests have been officially carried out. Since the first outbreak, 774,399 infections have been registered, while fatalities have risen to 27,172. Fully 497,084 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.

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## **VIRUS TRACES IN WASTE WATER FALLING**

The trace amounts of coronavirus in waste water, an indicator of the course

of the epidemic in the coming period, is falling nationwide, the leading infectologist of Budapest's South Pest Central Hospital said. János Szlávik told news channel M1 that while the number of hospitalised patients is falling accordingly, the caseload at ICU units remains extremely high. This points to a slower decline in the number of fatalities, he said. Currently, some 50-60% of the population is estimated to be protected from the coronavirus either through vaccination or because they have already recovered from the virus. Some 1-3 million more people still need to be inoculated for transmissions in the country to be halted, Szlávik said. He added that the pandemic situation was at a critical juncture and he called on the public to "stand together" and ignore "false prophets".

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## **HUNGARY TO RESUME CANCER SCREENINGS**

Hungary will resume organised cancer screenings on Thursday, after putting them on hold due to the pandemic, the human resources minister has said. Hungary in recent weeks was able to overcome the

most critical phase of the third wave of the coronavirus pandemic while guaranteeing care for all patients, Miklós Kásler said on Facebook. The minister underscored the importance of the Covid-19 vaccine in curbing the pandemic, encouraging the public to register for the jab.

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## **JOBLESS RATE FALLS TO 4% IN MARCH**

Hungary's jobless rate fell to 4% in March, down 0.5 percentage point from the previous month, but climbing 0.4 percentage point from twelve months earlier, the Central Statistical Office (KSH) said. The rate covers unemployment among people between the ages of 15 and 74. In absolute terms, there were 193,600 unemployed, down 19,400 from the previous month and 25,100 more than a year earlier. Meanwhile, in January-March, the average number of employees was 4,568,000, down 39,000 compared with the same period of the previous year. The number of employees in the 15-74 age group in March came to 4,616,000, up 41,000 from the previous year and 66,000 more than in the previous month.