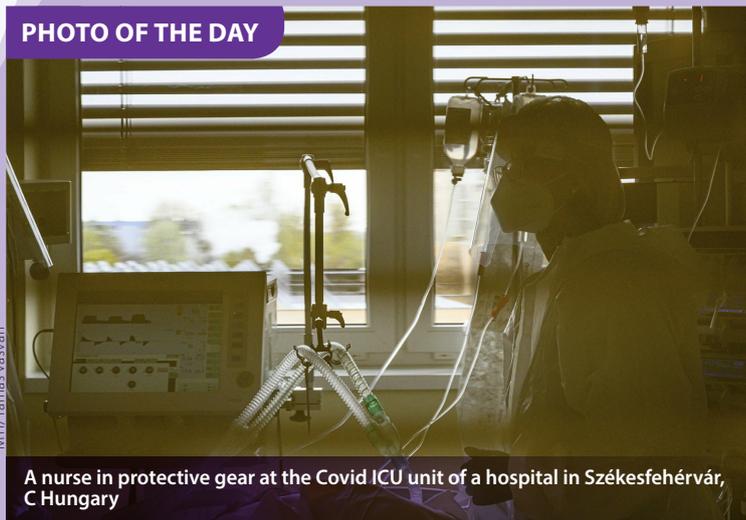


PHOTO OF THE DAY



MTI/Tamas Vasvari

A nurse in protective gear at the Covid ICU unit of a hospital in Székesfehérvár, C Hungary

UPCOMING EVENTS

Stats office releases March industrial production prices, demography figures

Plenary session of parliament

Coronavirus updates

TOP STORY

HUNGARY VACCINATION DRIVE 'OUTSTANDING'

The speed at which Hungary is implementing its vaccination plan is "outstanding" in comparison with the rest of the European Union, according to the prime minister's chief of staff.

Hungary and Malta are at the forefront of Europe's vaccination drive, Gergely Gulyás said at a government press briefing on Thursday. Thanks to the shots, the number of new cases has been "radically reduced" and the number of deaths is decreasing, he added.

By Friday, the number of inoculated Hungarians is expected to have reached 4 million, and the government may lift further restrictions, Gulyás said. The night-time curfew will start an hour later, at midnight, and shops will be allowed to stay open until 11pm. Eateries can also open their indoor sections and serve customers with vaccination certificates and minors in their company until 11pm. Hotels will open to people with vaccination certificates and their children, he said, adding that leisure venues such as zoos, museums, cinemas, theatres, and libraries, may also be visited with the certificates. Gyms and swimming pools will be available to certificate-holders and athletes. Certificate-holders and children in their company will be allowed to attend sports events, Gulyás said.

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**GULYÁS: GOVT
WORKING FOR MUTUAL
RECOGNITION OF COVID-19
IMMUNITY CERTIFICATES**

The government has authorised the foreign minister to conclude bilateral agreements on the mutual recognition of Covid-19 immunity certificates, Gergely Gulyás, the prime minister's chief of staff, told a news briefing. Hungary will seek to conclude a bilateral agreement with every country that is open to entering into such an agreement, he said. Under a prospective agreement, a holder of a Hungarian immunity certificate would be entitled to the same benefits as a certificate-holder of the partner country, Gulyás said, adding that Hungary, too, would recognise the partner country's immunity certificate. The government is also planning to amend the penal code, making forging immunity certificates and presenting them a serious offence, Gulyás said. Service providers could also face serious consequences if they fail to ask customers to present their certificates, with fines from 100,000 forints (EUR 280) to 1 million forints and even imprisonment possibilities, he added. Restrictions concerning family and private events will stay in force, the minister said, adding that wedding feasts would again be allowed once the number of inoculated Hungarians reaches 5 million; possibly by the third weekend of May. Mask-wearing continues to be mandatory in public areas, in shops and on public transport,

and restrictions on assembly will also stay in effect until vaccinations reach a viable threshold. Those who have not yet received their shots may get vaccinated in short order and receive an immunity certificate, he said.

Concerning vaccine-related information the government recently published, Gulyás said the figures showed that "every vaccine is effective and there are no great differences between them: all reduce the risk of infection to a minimum."

"The proportion of people who get sick among the inoculated is 0.4 %," he said, adding: "It's not worth trusting the left's anti-vax campaign." The government will establish clear rules of procedure for issuing immunity certificates for those who have not received one, which the prime minister will outline in his public radio interview on Friday, Gulyás said. He said government offices had received several complaints in connection with the certificates. Given that more than 4.5 million people are now eligible for the document and with their issuance being "the biggest logistical operation of the past decades", there were bound to be technical difficulties around them, he said. The government will do everything in its power to issue all missing certificates, he added.

Meanwhile, he said the cabinet had discussed the EU's post-pandemic recovery fund, adding that Hungary would soon have access to its share of the funds. Hungary, he said, was fortunate enough to be nearing the end of the pandemic.

The EU funds consist of both non-refundable grants and credit tied to

specific projects, Gulyás noted. While Hungary will draw down the entirety of the grant money it is entitled to, the government believes that it is best to manage the crisis with as little debt as possible, he added. Hungary has managed to "survive the crisis" with a public debt level of around 80%, Gulyás said, adding that the aim was to keep this figure as low as possible. He said most member states were of a similar mindset, noting that 21 of them had yet to say whether they would take up a loan. Talks on the matter were progressing well, he said, adding that Hungary would be among the first member states to submit its recovery and resilience plan to the European Commission. The commission, he said, recognised Hungary's recent health-care reform that included a significant pay rise for doctors. The government has asked the EC for some 300 billion forints of support to cover part of the costs of the reform for a period of one year, Gulyás said. Discussions in the matter are still ongoing, but the EC president is open to the request and agrees with the direction of the changes Hungary has made, he added.

Answering questions, he said that once Hungary passes 4 million vaccinations, those entering the country with immunity certificates would no longer be required to quarantine. Asked why it was enough for Hungarian spectators of the postponed Euro 2020 soccer Championship matches to present immunity certificates while foreigners had to present negative PCR tests,



Gulyás explained that while everyone in Hungary had a chance to get vaccinated by June, this was not the case in western Europe. As regards the 2022 draft budget, Gulyás said that thanks to the Covid vaccine, the degree of uncertainty around its planning had been “significantly lower” than with last year’s budget. “We trust that by late May or early June, the pandemic will be over, or at least it won’t disrupt the country’s return to normalcy,” he said. He said there was nothing standing in the way of approving next year’s budget, noting that the Fiscal Council had found that it was sufficient to reduce the public debt.

Asked about a joint statement adopted by the prime ministers of the Visegrad Group countries expressing their solidarity with the Czech Republic, which recently expelled Russian diplomats over suspicions of espionage, Gulyás said the document “reflects our joint opinion and we all agree with it”. In response to another question on the same topic, he said Hungary’s intelligence services had a duty to protect the country’s interests from anyone conducting intelligence operations on its territory “regardless of whether or not they’re an ally”.

SZIJJÁRTÓ: HUNGARY, SERBIA, MONTENEGRO TO MUTUALLY RECOGNISE COVID CERTIFICATES

Hungary has agreed with Serbia and Montenegro to mutually recognise immunity certificates, Peter Szijjártó,

the minister of foreign affairs and trade, said on Facebook on Thursday. With the prospect of 4 million Hungarians soon to be inoculated against Covid-19, “Hungary has taken another step towards normalcy, with agreements between certain countries to ensure that people can travel with no obligation to isolate or get tested,” Szijjártó said. Under the agreements signed with foreign ministers Nikola Selaković of Serbia and Đorđe Radulović of Montenegro, holders of vaccination certificates will be able to enjoy travel between Hungary and the two countries from Friday on, Szijjártó said. Talks on the same subject have started with Greece and Israel, too, Szijjártó said.

MINISTRY: PAKS II FINANCING CONTRACT TO BE MODIFIED

Under a new modification to the financing contract for the upgrade of the Paks nuclear power plant, Hungary will start repaying the Russian loan for the project in 2031 rather than from 2026 as originally planned, the finance ministry said on Thursday. Pushing back the start of the repayment period means that the project will ultimately pay for itself, the ministry said in a statement. The changes do not affect the loan’s interest rate, and Hungary will still have the option of repaying the loan early, it said, adding that the availability fee has been made more flexible. The ministry cited delays in earlier European Union investigations into the project as the main reason for the rescheduling of the financing.

It said the project would contribute significantly to the production of safe, affordable and climate-friendly electricity in Hungary. The plant’s upgrade will make it possible for the government to uphold its policy of reducing household utility fees, it said, adding that the project would also create new jobs and boost the regional economy. The ministry noted that altogether 10 billion euros of the 12.5 billion euro investment will be covered by the low-interest loan from Russia. Because Hungary has so far repaid every invoice early, the contract can be modified following parliament’s approval without any indebtedness to Russia, the ministry said.

ÁDER URGES NEW TREE- PLANTING DRIVE

President János Áder has said Hungary must increase green areas that absorb greenhouse gases, mainly by planting trees along roads, motorways and railways. According to official estimates, Hungary has about 40,000 hectares of free space for new trees, which could absorb about 400,000 tonnes of greenhouse gases a year, Áder told an online conference. The transport sector, he said, was in need of a “major technological shift”, otherwise the targeted reduction of emissions in the sector could not be met by 2050. Áder noted that transport accounted for 20% of Hungary’s emissions total, adding that the goal was to reduce that ratio to zero by the target date. The president said that in

the past nine years Hungarians had bought over 800,000 new cars, and he gave warning that the tendency could result in further significant increases in pollution. New technologies are needed because the reduction target cannot be met by simply improving the efficiency of engines or reducing the fuel consumption of cars, he said.

SZIJJÁRTÓ: HUNGARY-SLOVAKIA RELATIONS BETTER THAN EVER BEFORE

Hungary-Slovakia ties are at a high point, Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó said on Thursday after inaugurating a power line traversing the two countries above the River Danube at Gönyű, in north-western Hungary. Good neighbourly relations are being properly practised by both countries, with a focus on what binds rather than separates them, Szijjártó said in the presence of Slovak Deputy Prime Minister Igor Matovič. The power lines are 1.5km long between Gönyű and Gabčíkovo (Bős) and 23km between Sajóvánka and Rimavská Sobota (Rimaszombat). Last year, bilateral trade turnover totalled more than 10 billion euros, Szijjártó said, adding that Slovakia is Hungary's third most important trading partner.

MÜLLER: VISITORS ALLOWED TO RETURN TO ELDERLY CARE HOMES

The ban on visits to elderly care homes and social institutions is being lifted

with immediate effect on Thursday, the chief medical officer told a press conference of the body coordinating pandemic response measures. Cecilia Müller said all visitors must hold a vaccination certificate and can be accompanied by children under 18. Residents who hold a vaccination certificate are now allowed to leave the home without having to get tested on returning, she said. Those who do not hold a certificate and want to leave for longer than 72 hours can return only after a negative rapid antigen test result, she added.

OFFICIAL: READY, SET, GO FOR SECONDARY SCHOOL EXAMS

Everything is in place for final secondary school exams to start on Monday, according to the state secretary in charge of public education. Zoltán Marusza, speaking at a press conference of the central board coordinating the response to the coronavirus epidemic, noted that the exams will comprise written papers and that will be sat in line with epidemic-related rules. Fully 111,750 students will be taking the exams in the next few weeks at 1,159 locations, he said.

Concerning precautionary measures, Marusza said no more than 10 examinees will be seated in the same room, at a distance of at least 1.5m. Hand sanitisers will be provided while teachers will have to wear masks, he said, adding that mask-wearing was recommended to students but not compulsory.

HUNGARY RECORDS 186 CORONAVIRUS FATALITIES, 2,584 NEW INFECTIONS

Fully 186 patients, generally elderly with co-morbidities, died over the past 24 hours, while 2,584 new infections were registered, koronavirus.gov.hu said on Thursday. So far 3,870,222 people have received a first jab, while 1,822,655 have been fully vaccinated. The number of active infections went down to 245,928, while hospitals are treating 5,554 Covid patients, 662 of whom need respiratory assistance. There are 31,133 people in official quarantine, while 5,349,792 tests have been officially carried out. Since the first outbreak, 776,983 infections have been registered, while fatalities have risen to 27,358. Fully 503,697 people have made a recovery.

SZIJJÁRTÓ: HUNGARY RECEIVING ANOTHER 400,000 CHINA VACCINES

A shipment of 400,000 vaccines was scheduled to arrive from China on Thursday, the minister of foreign affairs and trade said, adding that the past few months had seen "extremely effective cooperation" between China and Hungary. Péter Szijjártó said Hungary had so far received 1.7 million doses of the Sinopharm vaccine, helping the country reach the second highest vaccination rate in the European Union. Speaking ahead of talks by phone between Prime

Minister Viktor Orbán and Chinese President Xi Jinping, Szijjártó said the new shipment arriving today would help raise the number of vaccinated Hungarians to 4 million in the next few days. "Supplies are continuous, and we will discuss the timing of deliveries for the coming weeks with the Chinese side," Szijjártó said. "Air transport will continue," the minister said. "We're now negotiating with China on the transport schedule for the following weeks," he said, adding that the 5,000,000 inoculation target could be reached soon.

OPPOSITION MEPS NOMINATE HUNGARY HEALTH-CARE WORKERS FOR EUROPEAN CITIZENS' PRIZE

MEPs of the Hungarian opposition parties will nominate the Hungarian Chamber of Doctors, and "by extension every Hungarian health-care worker", for the European Citizens' Prize. In a statement signed by MEPs of the Democratic Coalition, the Momentum Movement, the Socialists and Jobbik, the parties said the coronavirus pandemic had brought about unprecedented challenges for the health-care system and its professionals. "The past year has shown that we can count on Hungarian health-care workers, even in the greatest calamity; even when they have to work amid inhuman circumstances. They are without doubt the greatest heroes of the fight against the pandemic; thousands of truly brave people," the statement said.

OPPOSITION TO TURN TO CONSTITUTIONAL COURT OVER LAW ON FOUNDATIONS

The opposition parties are turning to the Constitutional Court over the law putting the operation of several universities into asset management foundations, the parties said in a statement on Thursday. The law on public interest asset management foundations, which the parliament approved on Tuesday, lists a total of 32 foundations, of which 21 will be in charge of running higher education institutions. The opposition Democratic Coalition (DK), Jobbik, LMP, Momentum, Socialist and Parbeszéd parties have asked the court to annul the law and they called on the government to "stop ransacking the country". The statement called it "unacceptable that the Orbán government, fearing an election defeat in 2022, is handing public funds to its strawmen."

Regarding the government's argument that universities would enjoy greater autonomy in the new system while their financial independence would remain guaranteed, the statement noted that the "best universities in Europe are state-owned". "This is nothing other than a money and power grab," it said.

TRADE VOLUME EXPANDS IN FEB

Hungary's trade volume expanded in February after contracting in the previous month, the Central Statistical

Office (KSH) confirmed in a second reading of data. Exports edged up by an annual 1.9 % to 9.698 billion euros and imports rose by 5.3% to 8.848 billion euros. In January, exports contracted by 5.2%, while imports declined by 10.5%. The trade surplus came to 849 million euros in February. Trade with other European member states accounted for 78% of exports and 73% of imports. For the period January-February, exports slipped 1.6 % year-on-year to 18.472 billion euros and imports dropped by 2.8 % to 16.768 billion euros. The trade surplus reached 1.704 billion euros.

GROSS WAGES AVERAGE HUF 414,400 IN FEB

Gross wages in Hungary grew by an annual 9.8 % in February, the Central Statistical Office (KSH) said. Gross wages averaged 414,400 forints (EUR 1,144) and 275,600 after tax. The average gross wage in the business sector, which includes state-owned companies, rose by 8.8% to 426,200 forints, excluding fostered workers. The average gross wage in the public sector, excluding fostered workers, increased by 13.3 % to 431,600 forints. Calculating with twelve-month consumer price inflation of 3.1%, wages rose by an annual 6.5%, KSH said.

Senior analyst of Takarékbank András Horváth said wage growth in February was above expectations. Employers are forced to continue raising wages in order to retain and attract workers and as a result of

the inflationary environment, he added. ING Bank senior analyst Péter Virováczi said the data surprised on the upside. Full-time employment increased in the business sector in February and it reflected workforce demands in sectors characterised by higher-than-average wages, he said. K&H senior analyst Dávid Németh said the growth in wages for doctors, judges, prosecutors and kindergarten workers greatly contributed to the wage statistics. He projected a real wage growth rate of around 5% for the whole of 2021.

FRIESLANDCAMPINA PLANS HUF 5.1 BN EXPANSION AT HUNGARIAN DAIRY

Dutch-owned FrieslandCampina Hungária will invest 5.1 billion forints (EUR 14.2m) at its dairy plant in Mátészalka, in north-eastern Hungary, Péter Szijjártó, the minister of foreign

affairs and trade, announced. The government is supporting the investment, which will preserve 784 jobs, with a grant of 980 million forints. The investment will boost output of fermented dairy products by 25 % as well as increase capacity for desserts, raising production of its Pöttyös brand of chocolate-covered cottage cheese snacks over one million a day, he added. Szijjártó said Dutch companies were the 10th most important investors in Hungary, offering 15,000 jobs. Dutch-Hungarian trade turnover exceeded 8.5 billion euros last year and The Netherlands became the 8th most important trade partner.

SIXTEEN HANDED PRISON SENTENCES FOR LAUNDERING COLOMBIAN DRUG REVENUES

The municipal court of Budapest has handed prison sentences to 16 defendants in a non-biding ruling

on charges of laundering cash from trafficking in Colombian drugs to the tune of billions of forints. According to the ruling, the defendants brought large amounts of euros and dollars from the Netherlands and Spain by car, which they then deposited in bank accounts in Hungary and Slovakia. The money was later transferred to Chinese companies. The gang, run by a Vietnamese, laundered funds over 18 billion forints (EUR 49.7m) in 2013-2014, the court said. The ringleader was arrested and sentenced in the United States. The organisation also smuggled Serbian and Ukrainian tobacco products from Hungary to Slovenia, France, and the UK in the same period, handling over 787,000 packets. Charges were pressed against 36 people in late 2017. Sixteen defendants received prison sentences ranging between two and nine years, while six people were sentenced to suspended prison and three others were fined.