

PHOTO OF THE DAY



President János Áder received with military honours in Ghana at Jubilee House

UPCOMING EVENTS

EU foreign ministers' meeting in Brest

KSH releases consumer price data for Dec, FY 2021, Nov construction data

Coronavirus updates

TOP STORY

BOOSTER NEEDED FOR VACCINE CERTIFICATE

From Feb. 15, a booster jab will be needed for a vaccination certificate to be valid, the prime minister's chief of staff said.

A certificate will also be valid if a second dose was administered within six months prior, Gergely Gulyás told a press conference. For those below the age of 18, two jabs will suffice to obtain a certificate. Omicron was a game-changer, he said. "It's the vaccine that ensures protection rather than having recovered from the disease." Taking the booster jab, available for adults from four months after the second dose, will be required for a valid vaccination certificate, he said, adding that the current cards displaying a QR code would not have to be replaced.

Also, the government has decided to shorten quarantine periods for people testing positive for Covid, he said. Adults will be required to self-isolate for a seven-day period and will be allowed to leave quarantine after five days if they are symptom-free and produce a negative Covid test, Gulyás said. Unvaccinated primary school children in grades 1-4 will be required to quarantine for five days if a positive case is confirmed in their class. Otherwise, classroom education will carry on uninterrupted, he said.

GULYÁS: OMICRON GAME-CHANGER

Concerning Omicron, Gergely Gulyás said the jab ensured protection against serious symptoms rather than the infection itself, adding that all vaccines licenced in Hungary were effective. Omicron, the PM's chief of staff added, accounted for a significant proportion of new infections, and warned that the number of new infections was "growing fast", with the number of people becoming sick expected to grow significantly in the next few weeks. He added, however, that Omicron caused less serious symptoms, and in other countries a higher number of infections had not resulted in a higher number of hospitalisations or deaths. He said he hoped the situation in Hungary would follow that pattern.

Gulyás said Hungary had a sufficient number of hospital beds, with only 25% of them occupied by Covid-19 patients, adding that 2,261 Covid patients and 596 patients whose Covid status was unconfirmed were currently hospitalised. Fully 8,546 beds in Hungarian hospitals are unoccupied, he said, adding that the capacity could be increased if necessary. Gulyás stressed that the primary protection against Covid was vaccination, adding that Hungary had a total 9.2 million doses of the Pfizer, Moderna, AstraZeneca, Janssen and Sinopharm vaccines. He welcomed the large number of shots administered during the recent vaccination campaign. Jabs without

registration will continue in February on Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays, he said, adding that currently 64% of Hungarians were vaccinated, "a good ratio in the region, though we are in the last third in European comparison." He also said the government will issue a decree this week on the option of a fourth Covid shot for those who ask for it after consultations with their doctor.

Meanwhile, Gulyás said last year's economic growth in Hungary could be as high as 6.5-7%, an "unparalleled economic achievement since 1989". Last year's economic figures, he added, were "encouraging", with indicators in November and December better than expected despite "a number of hardships" in 2021. He said the automotive sector could have performed better if not for the global chip shortage. Gulyás noted that rising energy prices had started "an inflationary spiral" in the world, and he insisted that the EU's energy policy would result in further price hikes. The government is determined to fight higher prices and save people from the burden of inflation as much as possible, he said, adding that the government's scheme reducing utility bills had helped each households save 500,000 forints, while he also hailed the government's move to put a cap on fuel prices, saying that the government would decide whether to maintain that measure in the middle of February.

As regards the prime minister's announcement on Wednesday that the government was ordering price cuts on basic foods, Gulyás said that

hopefully the measure would make life easier for those struggling to make ends meet. He noted that the price of sugar, wheat flour, sunflower-seed oil, pork leg, chicken breast and milk with 2.8% fat will be reduced to their price on Oct. 15 last year.

Meanwhile, Gulyás said the government welcomed the decision to hold the general election and a referendum on protecting children on the same day, pointing out that it would save the budget 7 billion forints (EUR 19.6m). He said hugely important issues were at stake in both ballots, and he added that the government asked everyone to express their opinion not only in the general election but also in the referendum.

Asked about recent comments by opposition prime ministerial candidate Péter Márki-Zay, Gulyás said the majority of his remarks "are in line with the positions held by the left over the past decades". "That's what it's been easy for the Hungarian left wing to support him," Gulyás added. A potential opposition coalition would also be tainted by anti-Semitism, he said. Referring to conservative Jobbik, Gulyás said that though anti-Semitism was not "a continuation of the left's past activities, they're still allying themselves with those who, just a few years ago, called for the listing of Jews".

Concerning the 13-month pension, Gulyás said the Socialist government of Ferenc Gyurcsány had scrapped the measure in the 2000s, and Márki-Zay, too, was against it. "So the 13th-month pension would obviously be under



threat if the left came to power," he said. Asked if a new left-wing government could be expected to privatise health care, Gulyás said the last left-wing government had wanted to privatise medical care and hospitals. "And now their prime ministerial candidate is saying that only privatisation can help the sector in the current situation," Gulyás said. "Péter Marki-Zay thinks health care is a business."

Asked if there would be a prime ministerial debate ahead of the April 3 general election, Gulyás said it was "best to wait for the start of the official campaign period" when it came to dealing with the campaign.

Commenting on the planned purchase of Budapest Airport, he said, "We will wait until after the [April 3 general] election" but the government's position remains unchanged: "We always considered it right for the national airport to be in state ownership, or at least in Hungarian ownership."

Meanwhile, Gulyás noted that the French president had participated in a Visegrad Group meeting during Hungary's presidency of the group, adding that the German chancellor, too, was welcome to attend a V4 meeting.

SZIJJÁRTÓ: EU FOREIGN POLICY SHOULD BE BASED ON COOPERATION, NOT SANCTIONS

Rather than "using sanctions only", the European Union should base its foreign policy on dialogue and

cooperation, "otherwise others will decide on European security without asking Europeans", Foreign Minister Peter Szijjártó told an informal meeting of this EU peers in Brest on Thursday. At the meeting, Szijjártó said the Hungarian government supported high-level talks between Russia and the United States, adding that "Hungary is interested in cooperation rather than conflicts between East and West". "We suffered many bad experiences in times of conflict between East and West; Hungary usually lost out in those situations," he said. The EU is expected to support Russia-US talks, too, Szijjártó said. "If the EU's foreign policy continues to be about sanctions only, Brussels would merely ensure that decisions on Europe's security are made without us Europeans, and this would not be right," he said. "We urge the EU to consider a more pragmatic, interest-based, and practical foreign policy, based less on ideology and rather supporting East-West dialogue," Szijjártó said.

COE CALLS ON HUNGARY TO STOP CURBING LGBTI RIGHTS

The Hungarian government "must stop instrumentalising and weakening the human rights of LGBTI people", Dunja Mijatović, human rights commissioner of the Council of Europe, said on Thursday. Mijatović called it "deeply regrettable" that the Hungarian government was planning to hold

a referendum on children's access to information on sexual identities simultaneously with the upcoming general election, adding that it weaponised LGBTI rights as an election issue. Referring to Hungary's child protection law, the commissioner said it "wrongly associates homosexuality with paedophilia and curtails the freedom of expression and education".

"I am worried that the proposed referendum will entrench stereotypes, prejudice and hate against LGBTI people and therefore have a strong negative impact on their rights, safety and well-being, by putting questions to popular vote that are ambiguous and misleading," she said. "The implication, for instance, that comprehensive sexuality education is detrimental to children's development is simply false. To the contrary, it is essential to prevent and combat sexual abuse against children, helps build safer, inclusive societies," she insisted. She also warned that the Hungarian referendum was a "striking illustration" of a "worrying trend" of politically manipulating, violating or neglecting human rights in Europe.

ÁDER: HUNGARIAN FOREIGN POLICY FAVOURS GHANA WITH 'PROMINENT ROLE'

Ghana, a country with a "promising economy and a stable, democratic system" occupies a "prominent role" in Hungary's Africa policy, President János Áder said after talks

with Akufo-Addo, his Ghanaian counterpart, in Accra. Áder said that the talks which were a part of a multi-day visit focused on areas of cooperation aimed at boosting foreign trade and securing mutual benefits. At the talks, Akufo-Addo pointed to similar objectives for the two countries, saying both Hungary and Ghana had “turned their back on an authoritarian past and built democratic governments with respect for the rule of law and human rights”. The two presidents confirmed their wish to cooperate in the areas of trade, pharmaceuticals, information communications, water management and environment protection, he said. They also agreed to set up a mixed economic committee to promote bilateral projects.

Akufo-Addo thanked Hungary for its help to Ghana in its endeavours to become a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council. The two presidents discussed security challenges around the Sahel region, especially concerning jihadist forces that pose a serious threat. The presence of UN peacekeepers in the area should be increased rather than reduced, Akufo-Addo said.

At a press conference held after the talks, Áder noted Ghana’s largest sewage treatment plant was built with Hungarian involvement in 2021, adding that two similar projects were in the pipeline. The talks touched upon two model farms built in Ghana with Hungarian assistance, using Hungarian experience in

developing grains and plants that tolerate various climates, Áder said, adding that that area offered further opportunities for bilateral cooperation. Áder noted Hungarian container technologies to purify drinking water in areas with little infrastructure, adding that Hungary would also share technologies to supply small settlements with desalinated sea water.

Áder and Akufo-Addo discussed educational ties and agreed on increasing the number of scholarships offered by Hungary to Ghanaian students. They noted that the number of Ghanaian students in Hungary had increased by 3.5 times during the past five years.

Áder is the first Hungarian president to visit Ghana since 1989. During his stay, he will visit Newill Academy in Koforidua, whose renovation was partly funded through the Hungary Helps programme, and view a sewage treatment plant in Kumasi, which employs Hungarian technology.

HUNGARY DONATING 400,000 MORE VACCINES TO GHANA

Hungary is donating another 400,000 coronavirus vaccine doses to Ghana, bringing the total number of doses donated to other countries to 3.8 million, Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó said on Facebook. Last November, Hungary donated 800,000 vaccine doses to Ghana with a view to helping

the country speed up its vaccination drive, Szijjártó noted. The current donation will be delivered to the West African country on Friday, he added. A total of 2.5 million of the vaccine doses Hungary has donated to other countries has gone to Africa, the minister said, noting that the pandemic situation on the continent was critical. Hungary is fortunate to have enough vaccines in stock to vaccinate everyone three times over and still be able to help other countries in an effort to prevent the emergence of new virus variants, Szijjártó said.

UNIONS TO DEMONSTRATE IN SOLIDARITY WITH TEACHERS ON JAN 31

The Hungarian Association of Trade Unions (MASZSZ) will hold a demonstration on Jan. 31 to express solidarity with a teachers’ strike called for the same day, MASZSZ said in a statement. The action will also be aimed at supporting the wage talks of the member unions of the association, it said in a statement. MASZSZ deputy president Tamás Székely said the demonstration would be coordinated with the teachers’ strike but declined to disclose further details. In its Thursday session, the association confirmed its support for extending the job seekers’ benefit from three months to 270 days. MASZSZ demanded this move several times, most recently after the massive lay-offs that stemmed from the coronavirus pandemic, the statement said.

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KÖVÉR SENDS CONDOLENCES OVER EP PRESIDENT'S DEATH

Parliamentary Speaker László Kövér on Thursday expressed his condolences over the recent death of David Maria Sassoli, president of the European Parliament. In a letter sent to Roberta Metsola, managing head of the EP, Kövér said he was deeply shocked at Sassoli's unexpected death, and spoke highly of the late official's efforts to promote dialogue on the future of the European Union and build closer ties with national parliaments. Sassoli, aged 65, died early on Tuesday.

HÖLVÉNYI: AFRICA NEEDS PARTNERSHIP, NOT 'LECTURING'

A change is needed in European Union's Africa policy because what the continent needs is "partnership rather than lectures", co-ruling Christian Democrats MEP György Hölvényi said on Thursday. Hölvényi cited a hearing held by the European parliamentary group of the European People's Party about Africa policies and said that in order to achieve change, expressing a well-defined right-wing position was necessary. The party family will soon approve a document "which will have a significant effect in the upcoming years", he added. "Development policy was hijacked by left-wing and liberal political

forces in the past thirty years," he said. "We in Hungary have already recognised that migration is not a solution. Instead, efforts must be made to offer help directly in place and to those that need it." All possible means must be found to help people succeed in their homelands so that they are not forced to leave it, he said. In addition to peace and security, education and economic partnerships are the best means, he added. The EPP group in the EP plans to publish its position on Africa policies ahead of the EU-African Union summit on February 17-18, he said.

AZBEJ: HUNGARY HELPS REACHES OUT TO 500,000 PEOPLE

The government's Hungary Helps programme has assisted 500,000 people worldwide during the past five years, Tristan Azbej, state secretary in charge of the scheme to help persecuted Christian communities, told public television. The programme not only helped persecuted people stay in their homeland, but "sometimes it was successful in reversing migration", the state secretary said. He noted that some 1,000 families returned to Syria with Hungarian assistance, adding that Syria's Christian community, which used to number 2.3 million people before the civil war, has now shrunken to less than one million. Azbej said that although there was

no more fighting over the larger part of Syria, residents suffered from an economic collapse and deep poverty. Many have left the country but local Christians cling to their homeland, which is among the oldest sites of Christianity.

HUNGARY RECORDS 9,216 NEW CORONAVIRUS INFECTIONS, 81 DEATHS

Altogether 81 patients died of a Covid-related illness during the past 24 hours, while 9,216 new coronavirus infections were registered, koronavirus.gov.hu said on Thursday. Fully 29% of new infections have been caused by the Omicron variant. So far 6,299,590 people have received a first jab, while 6,045,893 have been fully vaccinated. Fully 3,306,370 Hungarians have received a booster jab. The number of active infections has risen to 122,424, while hospitals are treating 2,647 Covid-19 patients, 249 of whom are intubated on a ventilator. Since the first outbreak, 1,318,093 have been registered with the virus, while 40,164 deaths have been recorded. Fully 1,155,505 people have made a recovery.

JOBBIK ASKS SZIJJÁRTÓ IF RUSSIAN INTERESTS SHAPING FOREIGN POLICY

Opposition Jobbik has called on Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó to clarify whether he wanted Hungary's foreign policy to be shaped by Russian interests or if it should remain "a part

of European civilisation, a member of the European Union and NATO". Jobbik MEP Márton Gyöngyösi told an online press conference on Thursday that on Dec. 15, Russia had sent two documents to NATO and the US that divided Europe in different spheres of interests. According to these documents, Russia openly considers former Soviet member states and former communist countries, including central and eastern Europe, as belonging to the Russian sphere of interest, he added. Around the same time as the publication of these documents, Szijjártó visited Moscow, where he met counterpart Sergei Lavrov and received an award granted in recognition of efforts to promote "Russia-Hungary relations, obviously from Russia's point of view", he added.

Russian President Vladimir Putin is scheduled to visit Hungary in mid-February, during the campaign for the general election, Gyöngyösi said. He described the planned visit as "more than a symbolic gesture", adding that "it seems [Prime Minister] Viktor Orban wants to lead Hungary out of the EU and western alliances in the direction of Russia". On behalf of all opposition parties, Gyöngyösi

promised that if they formed the next government, they would keep Hungary within the western system of alliances as a member of the EU and NATO.

OPPOSITION PARTIES CALL FOR 'SAFEGUARDS FOR CULTURAL FREEDOM'

The freedom of culture must be guaranteed in Hungary, four opposition parties told a joint online press conference. Zsolt Gréczy of the Democratic Coalition (DK) said the government-friendly "System of National Cooperation has taken over culture in the past 11 years ... and it aims to conquer the intellectual space and shape a new cultural elite by turning over all powerful positions to its own clientele."

Deputy House Speaker Koloman Brenner of Jobbik said the opposition committee for cultural affairs is proposing setting up an independent ministry of culture. The opposition will review the "excessive competencies" of the Hungarian Academy of the Arts, and restore institutions like the Office of Cultural Heritage, among others, he said.

PALKOVICS OPENS INTL EDUCATIO EXPO

Hungary's government has been working for 12 years to ensure that young Hungarians are "truly the winners of the future" and see their future in their home country, the minister of innovation and technology said, opening the 22nd Educatio international expo in Budapest. The government has earmarked more than 1,000 billion forints (EUR 2.8bn) in development funding towards the education sector for 2022, László Palkovics said, adding that education spending will reach 1.9% of GDP this year. Palkovics noted that the Hungarian government in 2014 embarked on a scheme to transform the higher education system, devising a structure aimed at making universities more competitive by having them tailor their programmes to the needs of the market. The scheme is aimed at creating universities founded on knowledge, innovation and talent which cooperate more closely and effectively with businesses, he said.