

## PHOTO OF THE DAY



MTV/Noémi Bruzák

President János Áder and First Lady Anita Herczegh in Ghana

## UPCOMING EVENTS

Coronavirus updates

## TOP STORY

### ORBÁN: EXPERTS SUPPORT 4TH DOSE

Experts have proposed that the government support the promotion of a fourth dose of the coronavirus vaccine, which is now available for anyone after a consultation with their GP, the prime minister has said.

The fourth dose can be taken four months after the third, and it is highly recommended after six months, Viktor Orbán said in an interview to public broadcaster Kossuth Rádió. The vaccine will be available on Fridays and Saturdays in January in hospitals and in major GP surgeries under a simplified system, with no need for an appointment, he said. GPs will also administer vaccines on weekends this month, he said. Hungary's public services and health-care system are prepared to inoculate all citizens, he said. Over 2 million Pfizer and 700,000 Moderna vaccines are at hand, he said. Experts agree that Omicron is much weaker than previous variants of the virus, "but that doesn't mean we shouldn't protect ourselves", Orbán said, calling on Hungarians to accept the next dose whatever their vaccination status.

Meanwhile, the quarantine period will be cut to seven days, and it can be exited after five days in possession of a negative test, he said.

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## **ORBÁN PRAISES HEALTH-CARE PERFORMANCE AMID PANDEMIC**

“Last year’s Christmas was almost the way one imagines it,” Prime Minister Viktor Orbán said in an interview to public broadcaster Kossuth Rádió, with families coming together, albeit “under the shadow of the pandemic”. He praised Hungary’s “fantastic hospital capacities, especially in terms of human resources”. Currently, 2,611 Covid-19 patients are hospitalised and 243 are intubated on ventilators, with over 10,000 beds available, he said.

Regarding current economic issues, Orbán said the inflation plaguing Europe was “pushing the economy off track”. Hungary’s government is working to soften the blow by raising wages and pensions and by capping prices where possible, he said. Besides cutting utility fees, the government has capped fuel prices, he noted. This week, it capped the prices of basic food at the level of October prices and will take steps to ensure those products are available in shops, he said. By the time this measure runs out in 90 days, European inflation will hopefully also subside, he said. At the same time, the next steps from Brussels are unpredictable as “they are ruled by dogmatic market ideologies rather than common sense,” he said. “While I accept many of those dogmas, they cannot be used exclusively,” Orbán said.

Besides the rules of the market, the government must also take into

account “considerations of the entire population and society,” Orbán said. The prime minister said that in critical situations the main question was “to what extent is it good to interfere in the operation of the economy”. “The cabinet has at its disposal methods to raise wages and pensions and keep control over price increases,” he said, adding that he was prepared to defend such measures in Brussels.

Meanwhile, he said the security of Hungarian families was a government priority. “Attacks from Brussels connected with measures affecting families will be forthcoming, but these can be thwarted partly by relying on European regulations that also guarantee our rights and partly because Hungarians have proved in the past ten-plus years that we are not timid and we will protect our interests,” Orbán said. Hungary is a free country where adults can choose their way of life, but parents’ rights must be respected when it comes to how they want to raise their children in such sensitive areas as sexuality, he said. Germany is a civilised country, yet a paedophile network of several hundred members was recently uncovered there, Orbán said. “Hungarian laws handle such issues well,” he added.

## **SZIJJÁRTÓ CALLS ON EU TO CHANGE ‘MISGUIDED’ AFRICA POLICY**

Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó on Friday called on the European Union to change its “misguided” Africa policy and start focusing on helping people

to stay in their homelands rather than encouraging migration. Szijjártó told an informal meeting of EU foreign ministers in Brest, in north-western France, that the measures so far had led to “migration waves increasing in the past years”. The EU should therefore focus on ensuring optimal circumstances for potential migrants to stay in their homelands, he said. Hungary has already provided health-care, economic and military means to that end, he said. So far, Hungary has donated 2.5 million doses of the coronavirus vaccine to African countries and implemented developments in humanitarian projects to the tune of 15 billion forints (EUR 42.3m), he said. Hungary also provides 2,500 university scholarships to African students, offering knowledge they can later use in their homelands, he said. Regarding the Post-Cotonou Agreement, which the EU is slated to sign with 79 African, Caribbean and Pacific countries, Szijjártó said the agreement was “essentially a migration agreement, the little sister of the UN’s migration pact.” Hungary will not agree to sign the document, he said. “We do not need migrants but to ensure that African people can stay at home amid decent conditions,” he said.

## **SZIJJÁRTÓ MARKS 30TH ANNIVERSARY OF DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS WITH CROATIA**

Thirty years ago Hungary was among the first nations to establish diplomatic relations with Croatia, Hungary’s

minister of foreign affairs and trade said on Facebook. Hungarian-Croatian friendship has remained unbroken since then, Péter Szijjártó said, adding that he and his Croatian counterpart Gordan Grlić-Radman are committed to making it even stronger.

### **OPPOSITION COLLECTS 170,000 SIGNATURES FOR REFERENDUM ON FUDAN, JOBSEEKER'S ALLOWANCE**

The referendum drive of the united opposition aimed at preventing a campus of Fudan University being built in Budapest and calling for an extended period of jobseekers' allowance has garnered 170,000 signatures, the opposition parties said at a joint press conference on Friday. Péter Márki-Zay, the prime ministerial candidate of the Socialist, Democratic Coalition (DK), Párbeszéd, LMP, Jobbik and Momentum parties, said the referendum would show whether Hungarians wanted a "Chinese communist migrant university" in Budapest's 9th district or the municipality's original plans to build a student city providing affordable accommodation. Commenting on trade and economic policy, Márki-Zay said the opposition was working towards "Hungary looking westwards rather than to the East, a country where competent economic policymaking keeps inflation in check rather than the government capping prices."

"The true referendum", he added, would be the general election on April 3, when Hungarians will vote "for or against Fidesz".

Anna Orosz, a board member of the Momentum Movement, said: "Prime Minister Viktor Orbán is only interested in retaining power, not in people's everyday problems." She referred to the current weak level of the forint and wages which she said were worth less than in any other Visegrad Group country. Pensions, she added, had not grown since 2008. Meanwhile, the government was taking out "hundreds of billions in loans to build the Chinese Fudan University, exposing Hungarians to the despotic Chinese state," she said.

Budapest Mayor Gergely Karácsony said the referendum drive aimed to shape a country where "decisions would be made based on whether they served the interests of the Hungarian people." The Fudan University campus, he said, would "ruin a project that enjoyed bipartisan support", namely housing for Hungarian students who are not residents of Budapest. The Student City would "lift the city and rural areas alike", he said. Extending the jobseekers' allowance to 270 days from 90 days would show solidarity with people who found themselves in trouble, he said.

### **OPPOSITION VOWS TO INJECT EXTRA HUF 1,200 BN INTO HEALTH CARE**

The united opposition plans to spend an extra 1,200 billion forints (EUR 3.4bn) in four years on Hungarian health care, its prime ministerial candidate told a forum. The extra funding would reform health care in line with

European market methods rather than operating a centralised "communist system", Péter Márki-Zay told a press conference in front a district health clinic in Budapest. He accused the Fidesz government of regarding health care purely as a business and running public health care into the ground so that the only option remaining to the sick would be to use hospitals owned by "Fidesz oligarchs". The politician vowed to revamp Hungary's health care and to fund it through a single national insurance model. He said patients waiting more than six months for surgery would be referred to a private provider and the state would pick up the bill.

Márki-Zay claimed to be in possession of "inside information" suggesting that Fidesz planned to privatise health care after the election. He said Hungarians currently pay 30% of their health-care costs out of their own pocket, which, he added, was "the highest rate in the EU". Funding for Hungary's health-care system, he said, would increase to 7% of gross national product -- the EU average -- from 4.5% last year in four years. Márki-Zay also promised health professionals a "significant salary increase".

### **HUNGARY INFLATION 7.4% IN DEC**

Hungarian annual inflation was 7.4% in December, the Central Statistical Office (KSH) said on Friday. Higher cigarette and vehicle fuel prices continued to be the main drivers, though food and

consumer durables prices rose above headline inflation. Spirits and tobacco prices increased by 8.9%, including a 12.7% rise in the price of tobacco products. Prices in the category of goods that includes vehicle fuel grew by 11.7% as vehicle fuel prices jumped 25.9%. Food prices increased by 8% and consumer durable prices were up 7.5%. Core inflation, which excludes volatile fuel and food prices, was 6.4%.

CPI calculated with a basket of goods and services used by pensioners was 6.7%. Month on month, inflation was 0.3%. Average annual inflation was 5.1% in 2021, while adjusted for a better comparison with other European Union member states, the figure was 5.2%.

The central bank noted in response to the data release that inflation remained unchanged from the previous month in December, putting Hungary among European countries which saw the acceleration of inflation halt by the end of the year. Core inflation and core inflation excluding the effects of indirect taxes grew by 1.1 percentage point to 6.4%. This increase was counterbalanced by more moderate inflation in the price of fuel, alcohol and tobacco, it added.

Commenting on the data, analysts said that inflation grew on the back of the “surprisingly steep” rise in food prices.

K and H lead analyst Dávid Németh said inflation was expected to slow within 6-12 months. Annual inflation is expected around 5.5%, with the December data possibly falling below 4%, he said. Government measures such

as price caps on basic foods and on fuel would reduce inflation, he said, but uncertainties regarding the duration of the fuel price cap make the extent of that effect unpredictable, he said.

Péter Virovác of ING Bank said the price cap was expected to reduce inflation by 0.1-0.2 percentage points. Meanwhile, January is expected to see even steeper price rises before the price caps are introduced, he said. ING is calculating with 5.6-5.7% inflation in 2022, he said. ING also expects the central bank will further hike interest rates in the coming months. By how much will depend on the January data, he said.

Takarékbank’s Gergely Suppan said the 6.4% core inflation, an “unexpectedly steep jump”, was due to rocketing food prices. Inflation is expected to slow in the coming months, although international trends will keep it higher than expected earlier, he said. Further risks include the wage hikes, rising wage costs and growing consumption, he said. Takarékbank is raising its inflation forecast to 5.5% for 2022, he said.

Gábor Regős of Századvég Gazdaságkutató highlighted the importance of the January inflation data, which will show retail price rises and have a bearing on monetary policy in the coming year. Századvég expects inflation to be above 5% in 2022, he said. Wage hikes will drive an uptick in retail turnover, he said. Normalising markets, the easing of supply difficulties and a stringent monetary policy would curb inflation, he said.

János Nagy of Erste Bank said the price caps on basic foods would curb flyaway prices in the sector but do little to slow inflation, which is expected to reach the target by 2023 the earliest. Several sectors have forecast a 10-20% price hike in 2022, he said. The expansive fiscal policy planned for the year is also a risk regarding prices, he said. The inflation rate in 2022 is expected to surpass 5%, he said.

## **CONSTRUCTION SECTOR OUTPUT UP 12.3% IN NOV**

Output of Hungary’s construction sector rose by an annual 12.3% in November, the Central Statistical Office (KSH) said on Friday. The pace of the increase slowed from 14.5% in the previous month. Output of the building segment climbed by 11.6% and civil engineering output increased by 14.8%. Month on month, construction sector output rose by 4.9%, adjusted for seasonal and working day effects. In absolute terms, the output was at 599.7 billion forints (EUR 1.7bn) in November. The building segment accounted for 55% of the total.

## **HUNGARY RECORDS 8,921 NEW CORONAVIRUS INFECTIONS, 73 DEATHS**

Altogether 73 patients died of a Covid-related illness during the past 24 hours, while 8,921 new coronavirus infections were registered, [koronavirus.gov.hu](http://koronavirus.gov.hu) said on Friday. Fully 29% of

new infections have been caused by the Omicron variant. So far 6,304,323 people have received a first jab, while 6,050,416 have been fully vaccinated. Fully 3,321,659 Hungarians have received a booster jab. The number of active infections has risen to 128,268, while hospitals are treating 2,611 Covid-19 patients, 243 of whom are intubated on a ventilator. Since the first outbreak, 1,327,014 have been registered with the virus, while 40,237 deaths have been recorded. Fully 1,158,509 people have made a recovery.

### **SZÁZADVÉG: HUNGARIANS SAY GOVT EPIDEMIC MANAGEMENT BETTER THAN AVERAGE**

Hungarians are significantly more satisfied with their government's pandemic measures than other Europeans are with theirs, Századvég Foundation said on Friday, citing a survey based on interviews with 30,000 European residents. The survey dubbed Századvég Európa Projekt 2021 covering 30 European countries showed that in a minority of countries, including Hungary, respondents said they were basically satisfied with vaccination and job-protection measures, while in the majority of countries people were generally discontented with government measures to soften the economic consequences of the pandemic.

Some 82% of European residents considered the coronavirus pandemic

a cause for concern, and only 5% said concerns were exaggerated. Top of the list were southern countries including Portugal (92%), Malta (90%) and Spain (89%), while the other end of the list included some central and eastern European countries such as Latvia (61%), Czech Republic (66%) and Slovenia (69%). Hungary was near the middle, with 79% saying they were more or less concerned about coronavirus and 7% saying fears were exaggerated.

Hungary was in the top third of European countries in terms of public satisfaction with the vaccination drive. The country led the European list, with 44% of those saying they had maximum satisfaction with the vaccination drive, followed by the UK and Malta. Some 47% of Europeans said they were dissatisfied with the government handling of economic consequences. At the same time, 58% of Hungarians said they were basically satisfied with government measures to soften economic damage, and nearly a third said they were fully satisfied, which was the highest figure in Europe. At the same time, a relatively high proportion of 22% said they were not satisfied with the measures.

### **TOURISM EXPECTED TO REGAIN KEY INDUSTRY STATUS**

Efforts will continue this year to help tourism regain its key industry status in Hungary, the deputy managing director of the Hungarian Tourism

Agency said on Friday. László Könnöy said on Facebook that special attention would be placed this year on developing tourism services for expats and further improving the catering industry, religious tourism and health tourism. Considering that "the country was almost closed for half of 2021", it was a huge success that tourism reached record high for the year, he added. Nearly 10 million guests spent 29 million guest nights in Hungarian accommodation services last year, representing a 20% and 25% increase, respectively, compared with the year before, he said. Revenues of commercial accommodations exceeded 360 billion forints (EUR 1bn) after a 22.5% increase last year and revenues of catering businesses grew by 36% to 970 billion forints, he added.

Spending with SZÉP cards, a low-tax benefit that employers can give their employees, increased by over 55% last year compared to 2020, he said. Thanks to amendments to the tourism law last year, accommodation services are ranked in a standardised system now resulting in a more transparent and consumer friendly market, he said. Significant resources are being channeled to renovating thermal baths this year, while special attention will be placed on improving job quality in the sector, with better educational opportunities and career development, he added.

## **SZIJJÁRTÓ: WIZZ AIR TO LAUNCH FLIGHTS BETWEEN BUDAPEST, CHISINAU**

Hungarian low-cost airline Wizz Air from March will operate flights twice a week between Budapest and Chisinau, the Moldovan capital, the minister of foreign affairs and trade said on Friday. Tourism and transport were among the biggest casualties of the coronavirus pandemic, and increasing flights to the European Union's eastern neighbours is an important step in rebuilding air travel, Péter Szijjártó said. Hungary and Moldova mutually accept each other's vaccination certificates, so vaccinated Hungarians are free to enter Moldova, he said.

## **KARIKÓ ELECTED TO FRENCH ACADEMY OF SCIENCES, AWARDED LIPID SCIENCE PRIZE**

Hungarian-born biochemist Katalin Karikó has been elected to the French Academy of Sciences as a foreign associate member and awarded the Lipid Science Prize of the Swedish Camurus Lipid Research Foundation. Karikó, the vice president of BioNTech, which has led research on mRNA-based medicine since the 1990s, has played a major role in developing new vaccination strategies which have been used in the fight against Covid-19. Karikó also received

the Grande Medaille, the most prestigious award of the French Academie des Sciences, last autumn, the University of Szeged, Karikó's alma mater, noted on Friday. Foreign associate membership is awarded to scientists who contributed to the international prestige of the Academie, and the number of foreign associates is limited to 150. The inauguration ceremony will take place on June 14 in Paris, the university said. The Camurus Lipid Research Foundation lauded Karikó as proof of scientific excellence going hand in hand with innovation and entrepreneurship. Karikó's pioneering work has been the foundation of mRNA-based vaccines today, they said.