

PHOTO OF THE DAY



MTI/Szilárd Koszticsák

Costume designer Anna Weszelovszky's collection featured at Budapest Fashion Week

UPCOMING EVENTS

Events related to war in Ukraine

TOP STORY

ORBÁN: 'HUNGARY WON'T GIVE IN'

In times of crisis the government must take action to ease problems rather than waiting them out, Viktor Orbán told public radio. "Hungary won't give in," he declared.

The prime minister said in the interview to Kossuth Rádió that he had "led the country through three crises: the financial crisis left behind by the Gyurcsány government, the migration crisis, and the Covid crisis ... I've learned that even if problems emanate from outside, if you freeze, if you stop dead, then you're ruined." Orbán insisted that Hungary must stay pro-active and protect its fundamental values. "I often tell cabinet members that our starting point should be that Hungary won't give in."

A ceasefire and peace talks are needed to resolve the war in Ukraine, Orbán said. "Sanctions policies are another step towards war," he said. "Anyone who intervenes in a conflict [using sanctions] also takes a position which is a step towards one of the warring parties; in other words in the direction of war," he said. If Europe "sees itself as part of the war", it will be drawn into it, and the dangers to Hungary will grow, Orbán said.

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ORBÁN: EUROPE 'SLIPPING INTO' UKRAINE WAR

In his interview to public radio, the prime minister said: "It's clear that little by little we're slipping into this war; we're not being shot at yet, but we are very close to becoming party to the war ... What Europe is doing is very dangerous," he said, adding that Hungary talks the language of peace but "no one else is following that line". Hungary has never supported the policy of sanctions and will not support it in the future either, the prime minister said. Hungary cannot afford to exercise its right to veto at every stage, he said. Sometimes "we have to let some things go," Orbán said. "[But] we should keep fighting for exemptions that are in line with Hungary's interests." "Hungary has so far evaded the most devastating consequences of the sanctions," he added. Orbán said he was confident that if there were a ninth EU sanctions package, he would ensure that Hungary won exemptions in crucial areas, including nuclear energy -- though this would come at a high cost.

Concerning the National Consultation public survey, Orbán said it was highly important for the Hungarian government to feel the weight of public support during negotiations in Brussels. He said Hungarians and international policymakers should have a palpable sense that the government's rhetoric reflects the nation's interests.

The prime minister said that by maintaining caps on the price of certain produce and household energy bills, the government could mitigate -- though not fully counterbalance -- the negative effects of sanctions. The government has approved an action plan involving 11 measures, the latest of which is to fix potato and egg prices, Orbán said. The prime minister added, however, that the government cannot regulate all prices as this practice would imply the return of socialism and bring about the collapse of the economy. Orbán said the government scheme to cap energy bills was saving households around 180,000 forints (EUR 370) each month.

The government aims to bypass the trend towards recession in Europe, Orbán said. Also, over the next year, the aim is to maintain full employment and a growth rate above the European Union average, as well as "our national strategic goals: unification of the nation and support for families", Orbán said.

In order to preserve the country's achievements, the government has launched schemes to rescue factories and support small and medium-sized firms. It has also placed a cap on certain prices and interest paid on retail loans, while helping restaurants and accommodation providers, he noted. The government is canvassing public opinion on how to make the situation bearable for businesses and ordinary people, and feedback is constant, the prime minister said.

Regarding reports of foreign funding of left-wing opposition parties during

the election this spring, Orbán said: "It's not only illegal but also morally wrong while scamming Hungarian citizens." The government will hear the minister responsible for secret services and the heads of the investigating bodies, "but it seems certain that we have good reason for outrage", he said.

"It appears the case that before the Hungarian election and even after it ... the left-wing parties and their leaders, who sought the trust of the Hungarians, were paid from abroad; and perhaps they are still being paid," he said. Besides being unlawful, foreign interference in election campaigns through the funding of certain players is against the interests of Hungarians, Orbán said. "It's not just morally wrong; they're cheating Hungarian citizens who think they're voting for a party and a leader with sovereign integrity who is free from hidden commitments that could stop them from serving the interests of the country," he said.

ORBÁN: NUMBER OF HUNGARY'S FRIENDS, ALLIES HAS GROWN

Hungary today has more friends and allies than ever before, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán told a meeting of the Permanent Hungarian Conference (MÁÉRT) in Budapest on Friday. The kind of government in potential partner countries determines the opportunities for cooperation with Hungary's Christian nationalist government, Orbán said. Hungary, its government, and Hungarians living

across the borders “always have it easier when similar governments based on nationalist Christian foundations are in the majority, or at least present in Europe,” he said. The latest political developments have made that easier, he said.

The prime minister noted that MÁÉRT last met in person in 2019, adding that they had all become stronger since then. The key question of 2019 was whether ethnically unified Hungarian representation should move in the direction of ethnically mixed Hungarian representation, he said. Now it is clear that all Hungarian communities want political structures to be ethnically uniform, he added. Also in 2019, he argued that central Europe would become Europe’s economic engine, and this had indeed become the case, Orbán said.

There was also broad agreement then that the Balkans would be key to European security. Whereas the current war has eclipsed the issue, today the Balkans are witnessing serious power rivalries, he said, adding that countries of the western Balkans, especially Serbia, must accede to the EU as soon as possible to ensure security in the region.

Commenting on the Visegrád Group, the prime minister said its importance had been highlighted in 2019, but while it was still important today, the situation had changed, and he referred to “uncertainties” surrounding Czechia and Slovakia and their foreign policies.

“Neither is cooperation with the Poles straightforward,” Orbán said, noting tensions over the war in

Ukraine, even though both Hungary and Poland shared the view that “Russia should not threaten the region”, and a sovereign state as a buffer between Russia and central Europe was needed.

Orbán said that whereas Hungary concurred with Poland on the ultimate aims, they disagreed on the means, with Hungary backing a ceasefire and peace negotiations allowing Russia a designated place in Europe’s security structure which is “not disadvantageous or dangerous for us”.

Orbán said “the plan ... to organise central Europe to enable it to represent a significant force in Europe, rather than being defined by their relations to larger states, now has less of a chance of becoming reality.”

But new kinds of cooperation are emerging, he said, noting as an example Serbian-Austrian-Hungarian cooperation which would hopefully be long-lasting.

The prime minister said the war was part of a process whereby the world’s power relations were upended, and this was also part of a larger trend which encompassed the financial crisis and the migration crisis. Goods, resources and profits produced in the world are now distributed proportionally at variance to the status quo ante, and these changes are accelerating fast, he said. It was questionable, he added, whether this process could happen free of wars or whether conflict was a feature of it.

“If war is being waged in your neighbourhood, you are not out of

harm’s way either,” Orbán said, adding that restoring peace in Hungary’s neighbourhood as soon as possible was a strategic issue for the country. War claims lives and has economic consequences, too, Orbán said, calling it important that what happened in Poland three days ago, namely the missile incident which claimed three lives, should not become part of everyday experience.

It is not a rewarding role to be the only one to speak about the importance of ceasefire and peace talks in Europe, but this is what lies in Hungary’s strategic interests, he said. Orbán said that the 2014 conflict in Crimea, when Russia occupied the peninsula, did not spread because “the German-French axis successfully contained” it. In 2022, the countries with an interest in keeping the conflict local were not strong enough, he said.

“Botched” sanctions policies have resulted in skyrocketing energy prices, creating a 10 billion euro annual deficit in Hungary’s economy, he said. The economy will “swallow” some 6 billion of that deficit, and the budget will be left with a 4 billion euro hole, he said. That sum will be missing from social spending, wage hikes and tax cuts, he added. “From that point of view, Hungary’s policy demanding a review of the sanctions does not seem at all over the top,” he said. Energy prices could even halve if the pro-sanctions policy changed, he added. The original aim of introducing sanctions was to undermine Russian military power, he said. But the situation has escalated

more than ever since then, prolonging the war, and so “Hungary does not trust sanctions,” he said.

Orbán insisted the beneficiaries of the war were “not necessarily those who started it”, but rather the US and China. “We are among the losers because Europe has no leadership,” he said. “Europe cannot assert its interests because we don’t know who the defining forces and players are,” he said.

Orbán said that in this situation, Hungary should “refrain from adopting the European post-nationalist approach” and remain firmly on a national footing. Hungarians “stood together in peril” during the financial, migration and coronavirus crises, and have even successfully mended some “faulty systems”, he said, pointing to energy policy, which he said was on the verge of an overhaul.

Putting national interests first is an asset, Orbán said. Hungary condemns Russian aggression and is helping Ukraine, but will not put the latter’s interests before its own, he said.

The prime minister emphasised that Hungary will not endorse the policy of European Union member states raising joint loans to aid Ukraine. Instead, EU member states should work out how much money is needed for Ukraine to run its state and distribute the costs proportionately and fairly, Orbán said. Accordingly, Hungary would provide 60-70 billion forints (EUR 146-170m) annually from the national budget as part of a bilateral agreement concluded with Ukraine, he added. The

sums involved would not harm basic Hungarian national interests even if this amount would be missing from the Hungarian budget, he added. If Hungary allows the EU to take out a joint loan, the bloc will irreversibly transform itself into a “loan union”, he insisted.

The crisis at hand is also an opportunity, Orbán said. “If Hungary positions itself well, it will advance on competitiveness rankings,” and that is why the government is unwilling to give up Russian connections, he said. Ties with neighbouring countries should also be tightened, he said.

Regarding EU funding, Orbán noted that the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) set up to counter the fallout of the coronavirus pandemic was a joint loan rather than an accumulation of member state payments. Its distribution had been decided in advance, so the money “will have to be disbursed; it can only be delayed”, he said.

Hungary is the only country with whom the EU has not signed the agreement on the RRF yet, he noted. That could be accomplished in the coming days, he added.

Orbán said Hungary was on the cusp of concluding an agreement on EU funding for the 2021-2027 financial cycle, “although even if we sign it, it is uncertain whether it will be paid, and which parts of it would be suspended.” The funding would run to 800 billion forints, with the country’s GDP around 62,000 billion forints, he added.

Orbán said “political games” may well be played out but the EU should

not resort to using funding as a tool of blackmail. “We won’t be backed into a corner,” he said, adding that such a negotiating strategy would never reach its goal. He called the process “insolent and ruinous”, adding that without EU funding Hungary would turn to the world market and China for loans to finance the greening of Hungary’s economy.

The prime minister said the government would not abandon its national strategic goals even amid the current crisis. Family support will be expanded and jobs retained, while the government will continue pursuing the goal of national unification, he added.

Orbán vowed to the leaders of Hungarian communities across the border that discussions about investments by Hungary would focus on what can be achieved rather than what is not possible in the current environment, though, he cautioned, for the next couple of years no new large-scale investments were on the horizon.

JUSTICE MINISTER: HUNGARY WORKING TO REACH AGREEMENT WITH EC

Hungary is doing everything it can to meet the deadlines in respect of 17 commitments negotiated earlier with the European Commission which are necessary for unlocking the country’s EU funds, Justice Minister Judit Varga said in Brussels on Friday. Briefing Hungarian journalists ahead of a meeting of EU affairs ministers, Varga

said Hungary was engaged in an “intensive negotiation process, in-depth work with the European Commission; constructive and professional dialogue is taking place between Brussels and Budapest.” On Saturday, Hungary will send an official letter briefing the EC on the work done so far, she said.

Regarding the conditionality procedure launched against Hungary, which makes EU funding conditional on adherence to the rule of law, Varga said the procedure was raising hopes of becoming a “test case”, an “example of constructive dialogue, a symbol of unity boosting solidarity”.

At the same time, the procedure should not fall prey to political agendas as that would undermine European unity at a time of unprecedented challenges, she warned. Hungary sees the procedure as a “test case in building trust”, and is acting responsibly, not sparing human and financial resources, Varga said. Hungary expects its partners to do the same, “so we can finally turn to truly important tasks,” she said. Hungary has considered all commitments and proposals that could take it closer to an effective use of EU funds, she said. The measures are “exemplary” and could serve as examples for other countries, she said.

GERMAN OFFICIAL INSISTS ON MAINTAINING ARTICLE 7 PROCEDURE AGAINST HUNGARY

The Article 7 procedure against Hungary in defence of fundamental

European values should continue, as protecting democracy and guaranteeing human rights are now more important today than ever before, the German state secretary in charge of European affairs said on Friday. Hungary should make progress towards guaranteeing the freedom of the media, Anna Lührmann told reporters before a ministerial session in Brussels. Concerning the rule-of-law conditionality mechanism, she said Germany was awaiting the European Commission’s report on how Hungary has implemented its recommendations and what it did to protect EU funding.

Laurence Boone, the French state secretary of European affairs, said France and Germany would draft a report on Hungary’s rule-of-law record, covering the judiciary, anti-graft measures, academic freedom, and the enforcement of fundamental rights, with focus on the right of assembly and minority rights.

Marko Štucin, the Slovenian state secretary of European affairs, said Hungary had made positive steps to address the EU’s concerns.

SZÁZADVÉG: HUNGARIANS REJECT US INTERFERENCE IN DOMESTIC AFFAIRS

Fully 76% of Hungarians reject US interference in Hungarian domestic affairs, according to a survey published by the Századvég Foundation on Friday.

The US embassy recently tweeted a video depicting pro-government

Hungarian politicians and pundits in a bad light, Századvég said, adding that US Ambassador David Pressman also conducted “confidential talks” with two justices of the National Judicial Council.

Századvég conducted an opinion poll of 1,000 Hungarians in November. Fully 76% of respondents said the US should respect diplomatic norms rather than interfering in the country’s domestic affairs, the think-tank said. Some 18% said the active role of the US and criticism of Hungarian domestic affairs, when necessary, was “reasonable”. Fully 65% of respondents disagreed with the US embassy expressing its opinion of Hungarian domestic issues in public, while 31% approved, Századvég said.

EVERYONE’S HUNGARY MOVEMENT DEMANDS PUBLISHING SECRET SERVICE REPORT

The Everyone’s Hungary Movement (MMM) has demanded that the report compiled by the secret services on it should be published. The move would make it clear to all that “what we are seeing is merely a new chapter in Fidesz’s smear campaign,” MMM said in a statement on Friday. MMM said it had publicly accounted for every penny of support, and posted the relevant document on its website. “We’d like to see the Hungarian government follow our example. Namely it should publish files pertaining to pre-1990 secret service informers, the full list of migrants allowed to settle in Hungary,

including criminals and terrorists subject to international warrants, documents pertaining to the Pegasus spyware, the treaties concerning the Paks 2 nuclear plant project, and the classified documents related to the Chinese railway and the Chinese university," MMM said.

Máté Kocsis, the leader of the ruling party's parliamentary group, said after a recent meeting of parliament's national security committee, that he has initiated the declassification of the report. Given the "shocking" and "serious" evidence presented in a secret service report concerning the foreign financing of left-wing parties in the last general election, the material should be declassified, he said on Thursday. "The facts of the case are shocking and far more serious" than initially thought, he added.

HUNGARY TO TAKE OVER SECRETARIAT OF GENEVA CONSENSUS DECLARATION

Hungary is taking over the secretarial duties of the Geneva Consensus Declaration from Brazil, organisers told a conference on the second anniversary of the founding of the cooperation aiming to help women and the family.

At the conference held in the US Senate building in Washington, DC, Szabolcs Takács, Hungary's Ambassador to the US, said Hungary had been proud to join the initiative "representing the most important

values". Hungary's Fundamental Law, adopted in 2011, sees marriage and the family as the foundation of the nation's survival, he said. Protection of life, the family, and the nation are central elements of the Fundamental Law, he said. In a statement to public media after the conference, Takács said Hungarian family policy is seen as an "example to be followed" by an increasing number of US conservatives.

The Geneva Consensus Declaration, aiming to protect families and women, was initiated by US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo during Donald Trump's presidency and adopted in October 2020. It currently has 37 signatories. The Biden administration later withdrew the US from the initiative.

SOME 9,500 REFUGEES ARRIVE FROM UKRAINE ON THURSDAY

Fully 4,713 people crossed into Hungary directly from Ukraine on Thursday, while another 4,839 crossed from Romania, the National Police Headquarters (ORFK) said. Police issued 30-day residency permits to 157 people, ORFK told MTI on Friday. Budapest received 15 people by train, ORFK said.

MOL TEMPORARILY RESTRICTS FUEL DELIVERIES

Hungarian oil and gas company MOL has temporarily restricted fuel

deliveries to retailers with whom MOL has no service obligation, the company said in a statement on Friday. The restrictions are in place for unlimited time and are aimed at maintaining services in all regions of Hungary, the statement said. The measure was prompted by surging demand due to the fuel price cap and falling imports as pressure in the Druzhba pipeline has been low since the suspension of operations earlier this week. MOL's own Dunai refinery is also facing maintenance issues, the company said. The restrictions will affect 194 retailers, operating 10% of petrol stations in Hungary, it said. MOL is fulfilling all its contracts and reviewing its distribution strategy each week to stay on top of the situation, the statement said.

YOKO ONO SHOW TO OPEN IN HUNGARIAN NATIONAL MUSEUM

An exhibition entitled "War is Over! If You Want It - Tribute to Yoko Ono" will open in the Hungarian National Museum in Budapest next Sunday. The display featuring paintings, sculptures, installations and short films focuses on the desire for peace by the best-known Japanese performance artist and musician, John Lennon's widow, who will turn 90 in February. Incomes from ticket sales will be used for supporting Transcarpathian victims of the Russia-Ukraine war, László L Simon, the director of the museum, said. The exhibition will run until February 18, 2023.