

## PHOTO OF THE DAY



MTI/Péter Komka

Foggy landscape near Salgótarján, N Hungary

## UPCOMING EVENTS

Events related to the war in Ukraine

## TOP STORY

# GULYÁS: EU UNITY POSSIBLE ALONG NATL INTERESTS

European identity only exists through national identities and therefore European unity can only be achieved along national interests, Gergely Gulyás, the head of the Prime Minister's Office, said in an interview with commercial atv.hu on Saturday.

Hungary's government represents the rule of law and the preservation of national diversity in Brussels and believes in the need to accept differences of opinion, Gulyás said.

Hungary always strives to reach an agreement and puts forward proposals before exercising its veto power, Gulyás said, noting that the country had backed the 18 billion euro aid package for Ukraine and the global minimum tax after being guaranteed that it would not have to raise taxes or approve taking out another joint European Union loan. Gulyás said the European Commission had been pressured by the European Parliament to withhold funds from Hungary, adding that MEPs had painted a false picture of the country. Hungary has already received from the EU an advance payment 130 billion forints (EUR 324.8m), he said, noting that this accounted for 1.5% of the funds the country was entitled to. Hungary has agreed with the EC on the details of the amendments to the law on the judiciary, which will be passed by parliament in March, Gulyás said.

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## **GULYÁS: PACE OF TEACHERS' WAGES HIKES DEPENDENT ON EU MONIES**

In an interview with commercial news site atv.hu on Saturday, the head of the prime minister's office said he agreed with President Katalin Novák that the financial recognition of teachers could not be dependent on the receipt of EU funds or the state of the Hungarian economy. "We will act accordingly, because right now teachers' wages can only be raised using the resources of the budget," Gergely Gulyás said. "We agree with teachers that they are making too little, and it is only the pace of the wage increases that is dependent on EU funds." Gulyás said Hungary needed the monies it was entitled to from the EU in order to implement bigger and immediate pay hikes.

Teachers' wages will be nearly doubled by Jan. 1, 2025, but this requires that Hungary receive the EU funds it is entitled to, Gulyás said. The government has the political will to raise teachers' wages, "but the left does not", Gulyás said. He said that if Hungary's left-wing MEPs "quit lobbying" against the monies Hungary is entitled to "it will be better for everyone."

On another subject, Gulyás said he saw no need to amend Hungary's child protection law. "The red line is the aim of the law, which is that children's sex education is the responsibility of parents and not NGOs, aging

Hungarian-American billionaires, or women with man-like characteristics," he said. "We'd be happy to draft even better regulations, but the aim is unquestionable." Gulyás said Hungary and the EC had already engaged in "meaningful dialogue" on certain issues, adding that it was possible that they could do so on the child protection law as well.

Put to him that the bloc was withholding 1.95 billion euros from Hungary over the "violation of academic freedom", Gulyás said the government believed that reducing the influence of the state did not weaken, but rather strengthened academic freedom. Moreover, he added, parliament had already approved the related amendment requested by the EC.

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## **GULYÁS: HUNGARY TO VOTE IN LINE WITH NATL INTERESTS IN EU**

Asked in an interview if Prime Minister Viktor Orbán would vote in favour of extending the sanctions imposed on Russia at the EU summit scheduled for February, the head of the prime minister's office said that if Hungary got the exemptions it had been granted so far, then its interests lay in upholding European unity. Concerning energy prices, Gergely Gulyás told commercial news site atv.hu that if the price of gas or electricity fell significantly on the European energy exchange, then market prices -- meaning the price exceeding the

utility bill cap -- could be reduced instead of having to modify the threshold for average consumption.

As regards next year's state budget, Gulyás noted that the government had been forced to raise the target deficit to 3.9% of GDP in the interest of keeping the energy price caps in place. Gulyás said local councils were set to receive 80 billion forints (EUR 200,000) in the first round of a government utility support scheme. Budapest district councils that have engaged in talks with the government irrespective of party affiliation will receive state support to finance their increased energy costs, he added.

Concerning inflation, Gulyás said rising demand generated by the recovery from the coronavirus pandemic had driven prices up, which was then aggravated by the effects of the war and the related sanctions, including "brutal energy prices" and the weakening of the forint's exchange rate. Ensuring price stability and achieving the inflation target of less than 3% is the responsibility of, "but does not depend solely on" the central bank, Gulyás said. "The aim is to bring inflation down into the single digits by the end of next year, and I think this is a realistic goal," he added. He said this was the aim of the price caps introduced by the government. This, along with the strengthening of the forint in the past month have helped curb inflation, he said. But because of increased freight costs, high import volumes and increased consumption, it is important to keep the prices of certain basic

products capped at last year's levels, he added. Meanwhile, Gulyás said no meetings between the Hungarian prime minister and either the Ukrainian or Russian president were on the agenda.

On another topic, Gulyás said he was in agreement with the prime minister and Interior Minister Sándor Pintér that teachers who neglect their duty citing civil disobedience despite receiving multiple warnings should be terminated. "No employer is going to tolerate having their employee no show three times in a row," he argued.

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### **PRESIDENT NOVÁK: 'NOW IS NOT THE TIME FOR DISCOURAGEMENT BUT TO CLEAVE TOGETHER'**

"Now is not the time for discouragement but to cleave together," President Katalin Novák said in her New Year's address to the nation. "It is God's miracle that our homeland still stands," Novák said in her speech televised at midnight, quoting 19th-century poet and revolutionary Sándor Petőfi. "How true this is again today after the unexpected hardships of recent years."

"Starting a new year that might be more difficult [than the last one] would be better if Hungarians could all rid themselves of their problems together," the president said. "If they could leave behind the fatigue of the struggle to make a living, the anxiety over an uncertain future, the fear of the threat of war and the disappointment of having to start all over," she said,

adding that hardship did not go away with the start of the New Year. "And how could it?" the president said. "But we have enough to build on." With life and circumstances becoming increasingly difficult, many choose to multiply their efforts instead of running from their problems. "They stay on their feet," she added.

Novák said she had seen this personally from farmers, shop owners, school headmasters, factory workers, border patrols and families. "We're a strong, fighting, crisis-resistant nation," she said, adding that Hungarians needed to earn their success through hard work. "History has also taught us that our biggest weakness is discord and our biggest strength is unity," the president said. "Now is not the time to be discouraged, but to cleave together. This is the time to let even the loneliest feel that they're not alone."

If the strong stand with the weak, if young people reach out to the elderly and if those who are financially better off notice those of more modest means "then we'll be putting our shared achievements of the last decade to good use", Novák said. She said the only way economic performance mattered was "if we extend our responsibility beyond our immediate family to other Hungarians as well". The president urged Hungarians to help those in need the same way they had helped Transcarpathian ethnic Hungarians and Ukrainian refugees this past year.

"At the same time, we expect decision-makers to make this struggle

easier," whether it be about helping parents raise their children, curbing price increases, supporting young people and pensioners, giving teachers the recognition they deserve or sound economic decisions, Novák added.

"The year 2023 is but a few minutes old," the president said. "We mothers know what it is like to hold a newborn for the first time. We forget about the pain and the hardship while being full of hope, anticipation, love and smiles". "Let us take 2023 into our hands together and smile at the person next to us," Novák said. Concluding her address, the president wished Hungarians a New Year of peace.

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### **ORBÁN SENDS CONDOLENCES TO VATICAN ON DEATH OF POPE BENEDICT**

Prime Minister Viktor Orbán on Saturday sent a telegram to the Vatican, expressing his condolences over the death of Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI. Benedict will be remembered for his courage and commitment for the dialogue among religions, the message said. Orbán recalled his private audience with the pope in 2010, saying the talks on faith, the sanctity of family and of the protection of "our common Christian roots" had shaped his views since. "Now, at a time of bereavement, we join in the prayers and express our heartfelt condolences to the clergy of the Catholic church and its congregation," Orbán said in the message.

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## **ERDŐ: POPE BENEDICT 'DEFINING PERSONALITY OF THE CHURCH'**

Pope Benedict, as a theologian, cardinal, incumbent and then pope emeritus, was a defining figure in the life of our church, Cardinal Péter Erdő, Archbishop of Esztergom-Budapest, said on Saturday. "Even during years of weakness and ill-health, he radiated serenity," Erdő wrote in a statement. "The greatest Catholic theologian of our time has left us." "He felt and understood the signs of the times. He carried the 2nd Vatican Council in his heart," the head of the Hungarian Catholic Church added. Benedict was aware of the dangers facing the Church, Europe and humanity, Erdő said, but he also saw new vistas and reason for hope.

In his last great encyclical (*Caritas in veritate*), Benedict saw truth as love manifested in society and he proclaimed the truth of Christ's love in that spirit. The Cardinal also referred to Benedict as "a true European". "He knew how to listen to others' opinions with patience ... He was a man of dialogue," he wrote. Erdő added that Benedict had "understood the problems and joys" of Hungarians, and had followed the International Eucharistic Congress in Budapest "with love and interest". He cited Pope Francis as saying: "We all feel his spiritual presence ... his theological work still bears fruit and is effective."

The Hungarian Catholic Bishops' Conference (MKPK) also paid tribute to Benedict, saying his knowledge and wisdom had guided entire generations. "The members of the Hungarian Catholic Bishops' Conference were touched to hear that Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI has completed his earthly journey and returned to the house of the Heavenly Father," the MKPK said in a statement.

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## **KARÁCSONY: 2023 TO BE DEDICATED TO 'RESTART'**

"Let 2023 be a year dedicated to restart", Budapest Mayor Gergely Karácsony said in a New Year's message on Sunday. Karácsony said on Facebook that wishing peace for the new year bore a special significance, with millions suffering in Hungary's neighbourhood from a war caused by "the aggression of a Russian tyrant". It is high time that "we should not accept things as normal just because we got used to them", he said. "Let us use the fact that global capitalism is teetering under the weight of the war and the energy and climate crises, and that all responsible leaders and citizens are asking themselves: what had gone wrong and how can we find other ways forward," he said.

Budapest will celebrate its 150th anniversary in 2023. Early in the year, the revamped 3rd metro line will be opened to the public, and 150 new buses and 40 new trolley buses will be put in service, more community bike stations will be built and some

20,000 trees will be planted later on, he said. He added that public transport on Chain Bridge has been restarted following its revamp and a decision on the future use of the bridge will be made in line with "the wish of the public". Karácsony said the strategic plan remains to make public services in Budapest energy neutral by the end of the decade. Inflation is "cautioning to prudence" but the municipality will stick to solidarity, opening institutions such as libraries that can help people suffering from the energy crisis, he said.

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## **OPPOSITION MOMENTUM SLAMS RECENT 2023 BUDGET AMENDMENT**

Opposition Momentum on Friday slammed the government over the amendments it has submitted to the 2023 central budget, saying that next year's budget will be one "triggering, not managing a crisis". Next year's amended budget envisages GDP growth of 1.5%, a declining budget deficit and falling public debt, the finance ministry said in a statement on Thursday. Momentum in response said the budget is not sufficient in tackling the deepening economic crisis and stopping the deterioration in the standard of living of Hungarians and the inflation triggered by price caps. "This budget will be one of austerities and uncertainty," the party said, adding that it contained target figures that could not be kept. "And because of the mistaken government measures, the standard of living of Hungarian

families will further deteriorate and the situation of SMEs and municipalities will become more critical," the party said, demanding that the "irresponsible and corrupt" government "should face up reality and tell people the truth".

### **BORDER CONTROL LIFTED ON HUNGARY-CROATIA BORDER**

Border control was lifted at 15 border crossings between Hungary and Croatia at midnight on January 1, as Croatia joined the Schengen Area. At the celebratory event at the Letenye-Goričan (Muracsány) border crossing, Croatian Foreign Minister Gordan Grlić-Radman said Croatia had fulfilled strategic goals by joining the Schengen Area and the euro zone on the same day. Uninhibited travel is a "great step forward" for Hungary and Croatia, two countries with 800 years of shared history, Grlić-Radman said. Tourism and economic ties will both benefit,

he said, and thanked Hungary for its friendly support. Péter Cseresnyés, the region's representative in the Hungarian parliament, said free travel provided new opportunities for cooperation for entrepreneurs and eased contact with the motherland for ethnic minorities. The ambassadors, minority representatives and leaders of border localities also attended the event.

### **AIR QUALITY IN N HUNGARY 'DANGEROUS'**

Air quality due to pollution is "dangerous" in five settlements in Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén County, in north-eastern Hungary, and in Vác, north of Budapest, the National Centre for Public Health (NNK) said on Saturday. Air quality is in the "unhealthy" category in Budapest, Esztergom, Kecskemét, Nyíregyháza, Salgótarján, Százhalombatta, Várpalota and Veszprém. Poor air quality (the category above

"unhealthy") affects twelve localities, including Szombathely, Győr, Székesfehérvár, Pécs and Dunaújváros. In the northeast, concentrations of particulate matter (PM10) in the air are expected exceed what is considered to be safe until Wednesday, according to forecasts by the National Meteorological Service (OMSZ), while air quality is expected to improve in most areas over the weekend.

### **MORE THAN 4,500 UKRAINE REFUGEES ENTER HUNGARY ON SATURDAY**

Fully 2,871 refugees entered Hungary at the Ukraine-Hungary border on Saturday, while 1,722 came to the country via Romania, according to the national police headquarters (ORFK). Police issued temporary residence permits valid for 30 days to 204 people. Altogether 69 refugees, 41 children among them, arrived in Budapest by train, ORFK said on Sunday.