

PHOTO OF THE DAY



Calving season in Hortobágy, eastern Hungary

MTI/István Derencsényi

UPCOMING EVENTS

Stats office reports on Nov commercial lodgings

Events related to the war in Ukraine

TOP STORY

FM: NO HOPE FOR PEACE WITHOUT COMMUNICATION

Hungary's foreign minister has warned that the hope for peace in Ukraine would be given up if communication channels are not kept open.

Péter Szijjártó talked by phone with Syarhey Aleynik, his new Belarussian counterpart, and they agreed on the importance of keeping communication channels open, as blocking them would mean "giving up hope for peace". Posting on Facebook on Wednesday, Szijjártó said he had told Aleynik that the war in Ukraine "is causing [Hungary] much damage as a neighbouring country in terms of economic and energy problems." The minister told his counterpart that any decisions or measures that risked prolonging or escalating the war was "against our national interests", and peace should be secured as quickly as possible. Cooperation in economic areas not affected by sanctions, mainly in pharmaceuticals, medical devices and agriculture, will continue, Szijjártó said. The minister also asked Aleynik to intervene to lift a blockade of Hungarian truck drivers stranded on Belarus's western border. Meanwhile, Szijjártó said the death in November of Vladimir Makei, Aleynik's predecessor, had "hit them hard".

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THINK-TANK: HUNGARY GUIDING FORCE IN INTL CONSERVATIVE COOPERATION

“God, home, family” can be the basis for European-American cooperation, and Hungary can be a guiding force realising this, Miklós Szánthó, head of the Budapest-based Centre for Fundamental Rights, told a conservative event in Washington, DC. Attending the event entitled Conservatism in Europe and Hungary - why it matters in the United States, organised by the Conservative Partnership Institute and the Counterpoint Institute, Szánthó told Hungarian public media that work was under way to hold the next Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in Hungary this year.

Meanwhile, the think-tank head also said at the event on Tuesday that European Union membership was in Hungary’s interest and underpinned its interests rather than being for its own sake, as left-liberals often stated.

Regarding the war in Ukraine and Russia, he said it was indisputable that Russia was the aggressor and had violated Ukrainian sovereignty, but sanctions were wrong. It would not be in the interest of the United States to separate Russia from Europe and push it towards China, he added. Counterpoint Institute head Shea Bradley-Farrell told public media that Hungary’s role

was important, given the traditional conservative values upheld in the country which were under constant attack by the liberal-left.

JUSTICE MIN: WORKING GROUP SET UP TO BOOST CRIMINAL PROCEDURES’ EFFICIENCY

A working group has been set up under the auspices of the justice ministry with the aim to further improve the efficiency of criminal procedures, Justice Minister Judit Varga said on Tuesday. In a post on Facebook, Varga noted that the duration of court procedures has substantially been reduced since the introduction of the new law on criminal procedures in 2018. In 2020, some two-thirds of cases tried in lower courts were closed within 3 months, the minister said, adding that the duration of criminal procedures had gone down to 262 days on average from 362 in 2016. As a result of speeding up criminal procedures, the number of ongoing cases in administrative county district courts has dropped by half, from 29,967 to 15,043 in the past four years, said Varga. She said there still were substantially complicated cases with a court procedure taking longer than the average duration of cases. “To tackle these exceptional cases, a new working group has been set up today under the coordination of the Ministry of Justice to further improve the administration of justice’s efficiency,” Varga said, adding that the group’s task would

be to examine the criminal procedure in its entirety, from the investigation all the way through the indictment to the closing of the case in court. Members of the working group include representatives of the justice ministry, the interior ministry, the Supreme Court (Kúria), the National Judicial Office, the Chief Prosecutor’s Office, the National Police Headquarters and National Tax and Customs Office NAV, the minister said.

SZÁZADVÉG: FOUR-FIFTHS OF EUROPEANS SAY BRUSSELS RESPONSIBLE FOR ENERGY CRISIS

The proportion of Europeans stating that “the misjudged energy policy of the European Commission” was partly to blame for the energy crisis in the European Union increased from 75% in a pre-war survey to 79% in December, the Századvég Foundation said on Wednesday. Századvég said that already after the first significant price increase in the autumn of 2021, several experts expressed the belief that structural problems of the European energy market were partly the result of ideology-driven Brussels policies in the field. Following the outbreak of the Ukraine war, Brussels’ energy policy focused on sanctioning Russian energy and this only further narrowed down the European energy market’s room for manoeuvre, it added. Europeans’ dissatisfaction with Brussels’ policy of sanctions and the resulting increase in

energy prices increased during 2022, Századvég said, citing data from its Europe-wide surveys conducted between Jan. 3 and Feb 14, before the start of the war, and between Oct. 13 and Dec. 7. The survey concluded in December showed that among European countries the highest proportion of people that considered Brussels' efforts responsible for the energy crisis were in Greece (86%) Croatia (also 86%) and Germany (85%). The figures showed an increase compared to the pre-war survey, Századvég said. Responses about Brussels' responsibility were the most divided in Denmark (60% against 40%), Hungary (65% against 35%), and the Netherlands (67% against 33%), Századvég said. The results in Denmark and the Netherlands probably resulted from higher social support for the sanctions, while in Hungary from the government measures that dampened the negative effects of the sanctions, it added.

MINISTRY: PUBLIC DEBT FELL MORE THAN EXPECTED LAST YEAR

The war in Ukraine and "failed Brussels sanctions" changed the economic dynamics last year, and the government responded by doubling down on schemes to protect jobs and strengthen families amid the resulting crisis, the finance ministry said on Wednesday, noting that, at the same time, the public debt is expected to

have fallen more sharply than initial projections, to 73.5% from 76.8% in 2021. The economy expanded by over an annual 4%, the number of employed grew to over 4.7 million, while the jobless rate remained below 4%, the ministry said in a statement. Hungarians still pay the lowest energy bills in Europe, and owing to measures to shore up energy security and supply, the budget ended with a deficit of 4,753.4 billion forints (EUR 11.9bn) in 2022, it added. Protecting pensioners has been a priority, and the government paid the full 13th month pension as well as additional pension increases. In 2022, 4,791.5 billion forints was spent on retirement benefits, the statement said.

Based on EU methodology, the budget deficit is expected to be 4.9% of GDP, as planned, while taking into account spending on building up the country's gas reserves, the deficit may come in at 6.1% of GDP. The government targets a further reduction in the public debt this year and sees a budget deficit of 3.9%, the statement added.

BUDAPEST MAYOR VISITS KYIV

Budapest Mayor Gergely Karácsony arrived in Kyiv on Wednesday, at the invitation of Vitaliy Klychko, mayor of the Ukrainian capital, Karácsony's office said. Karácsony is scheduled to participate in official talks between mayors of capitals in the Visegrad Group and senior Ukrainian officials

and European Union diplomats. The talks will focus on infrastructural and humanitarian aid to Kyiv from Budapest, Bratislava, Prague, and Warsaw, the mayor's office said. The statement quoted Karácsony speaking at an international press conference on arrival as expressing solidarity with the Ukrainian people and the residents of Kyiv suffering from the war in Ukraine.

"Budapest stands by Ukraine. The Hungarian government is not the same as Hungary. Though the Hungarian government often acts in line with the interests of aggressor [Russian] President Putin, millions of Hungarians, with many Budapest residents among them will demonstrate their solidarity with attacked Ukraine and reject attempts to obscure the difference between the aggressor and the victim," the statement quoted Karácsony as saying. "Peace is not possible unless the endeavours of the Ukrainian people are successful, unless Ukraine's territorial sovereignty is restored and Russian troops leave Ukrainian territory," the mayor added.

OVER 12,000 UKRAINE REFUGEES ENTER HUNGARY ON MONDAY

Fully 5,279 refugees entered Hungary at the Ukraine-Hungary border on Tuesday, while 6,801 came to the country via Romania, according to the national police headquarters (ORFK).

Police issued temporary residence permits valid for 30 days to 241 people. Altogether 95 refugees, 25 children among them, arrived in Budapest by train, ORFK said on Wednesday.

DK TO FILE CRIMINAL COMPLAINT ON SUSPICION OF MISUSE OF EU FUNDS

The opposition Democratic Coalition (DK) on Wednesday said it is filing a criminal complaint on suspicion of the misuse of European Union funds by the government. "It can now clearly be proven that the government of Viktor Orbán is the sole reason why EU funds are being withheld from Hungary," DK MEP Sándor Rónai told an online press conference. The cabinet is failing to fulfil the EU's conditions for unlocking funding and failing to stop "billionaires linked to [ruling] Fidesz from stealing EU funds", Rónai insisted. The government is also refusing to remove "the Fidesz affiliates making millions" from the leadership positions of universities, and is failing to ensure the independence of the judiciary, too, he added. "The prime minister would rather deprive students hoping to study at foreign universities of their dreams, but won't suspend the industrial-level theft of EU monies even for a minute," Rónai said.

Fidesz reacted by saying that the "corrupt Hungarian and Brussels left" were the ones to blame for EU funds being withheld from Hungary. The left is "swimming in corruption

both in Brussels and at home", the party said in a statement, calling on DK to "come clean" about why businesses affiliated with it had received financial support from the United States.

INFECTOLOGIST: NEW COVID VARIANTS CAUSING MILD SYMPTOMS

New Covid variants present in Hungary are no reason for concern because they are causing only mild symptoms despite being more contagious than previous variants, János Szlávik, chief infectologist at the South Pest Centrum Hospital, told public broadcaster M1 late on Tuesday. Szlávik said the latest sub-variant spreading in Europe dubbed Kraken may also be present in Hungary but had not become dominant. In the case of the variants present in Hungary, three vaccinations can effectively prevent serious illness and the need for hospitalisation, he added. The flu virus is expected to spread more actively in Hungary in the months ahead, so children under 5, adults over 60, pregnant women and people suffering from chronic illnesses are advised to get vaccinated, he said.

CORONAVIRUS - 1,597 NEW INFECTIONS, 32 DEATHS LAST WEEK

Fully 1,597 new infections were confirmed last week, while there were 32 fatalities in connection

with Covid-19, the Coronavirus Press Centre said on Wednesday. The number of active infections stands at 11,349, they said. Currently, 727 coronavirus patients are being treated in hospital, 36 intubated on a ventilator. Altogether 6,420,987 people have been vaccinated against the coronavirus, with 6,207,423 having received a second jab, 3,903,953 a third, and 416,083 a fourth. The number of registered infections since the start of the pandemic has reached 2,190,334 in Hungary, while there have been 48,578 deaths. Fully 2,130,407 people have made a recovery.

MINISTRY: GAS CONSUMPTION DOWN BY OVER 20% IN DEC

Household gas consumption in December fell by more than 23% year on year, while businesses cut down gas use by almost 25%, the energy ministry said on Wednesday. Also, Central Statistical Office data shows that annual gas consumption last year shrank by an annual 17%, the ministry said in a statement. Meanwhile, electricity consumption was down more than 7% in December and approaching a drop of 3% for the full year. Mild weather and conscious consumer energy savings were behind the drops as energy prices spiralled upwards on the back of anti-Russia sanctions. Even with no further flows of gas entering the country, domestic reserves are sufficient

to supply around three months of consumption, even based on the winter demand of previous years. A government priority is to safeguard caps on household energy bills, and it has quadrupled the relevant protection fund from 670 billion forints (EUR 1.7bn) to 2,610 billion, the statement said.

In December 2022, Hungarian households enjoyed the cheapest gas and second-cheapest electricity among European consumers, it added.

HUNGARY BUDGET ENDS 2022 WITH HUF 4,753 BN SHORTFALL

The Hungarian budget, excluding local councils, was 4,753.4 billion forints (EUR 11.9bn) in the red at the end of 2022, as against the official target of 3,152.7 billion forints, according to preliminary data released by the Finance Ministry on Wednesday. The deficit was 1,287 billion forints at the end of November

The central budget posted a shortfall of 4,611.5 billion at the end of December. Social security funds were 405.8 billion in the red, while the separate state funds had a surplus of 263.9 billion.

MOL NAMES WASTE MANAGEMENT CONCESSION UNIT MOHU

Hungarian oil and gas company MOL on Wednesday announced it has named its unit responsible for a 35-year municipal waste management concession MOHU MOL Hulladékgazdálkodási Zrt. The nationwide concession to manage 4-5 million tonnes of municipal waste which MOL won last summer dovetails with its 2030+ strategy to invest in new, low-carbon, circular economy businesses. Since then, the company said "several hundred" applicants have responded to a call for subcontractors. Talks have also started with the operators and owners of waste management facilities on securing the capacity necessary for the concession, MOL added. MOHU MOL will be headed by Zsolt Pethő, the former head of MOL's petrochemicals unit and a director of the company's trade and optimisation division. MOL deputy-CEO Oszkár Világi said the goal of MOHU is to establish "competitive, sustainable and transparent" waste management, taking the view that waste is a "raw material".

MAN INJURED IN 2006 STREET CLASHES LAID TO REST

László Nagy, a man blinded in one eye in clashes between anti-government protestors and police in the autumn of 2006, was laid to rest in Budapest on Wednesday. He died in early December. Nagy lost his eye after being hit by a rubber bullet by police at then opposition Fidesz's commemoration of Hungary's 1956 revolution. He reported the incident to the authorities but the Budapest prosecutor's office dropped the case in 2007, saying the identity of the perpetrator could not be determined. His demand for compensation was rejected in early 2007. He was later paid 4.5 million forints (EUR 11,300) by police under an out-of-court settlement. Addressing the funeral, Tamás Gaudi-Nagy, the managing director of the National Legal Defence Service, said there were few victims of the 2006 clashes who had done as much as Nagy had to spread the truth about "how hard the terror of [then PM Ferenc] Gyurcsány came down on commemoration-goers and protestors".