

PHOTO OF THE DAY



PM Viktor Orbán welcomes foreign speakers attending media conference

MTI/Prime Minister's Press Office/Zoltán Fischer

UPCOMING EVENTS

Meeting of EU justice and home affairs ministers in Stockholm

Stats office reports on demographics, employment in December 2022

Events marking International Holocaust Remembrance Day

Events related to the war in Ukraine

TOP STORY

'DROP WAR RHETORIC, FOCUS ON PEACE'

Instead of ratcheting up war rhetoric and risking escalating the conflict in Ukraine, the international community should focus on creating peace, Hungary's foreign minister, has said, adding: "Dialogue is needed as soon as possible."

Péter Szijjártó welcomed the fact that the UN Security Council was holding a meeting and a "timely" debate on how to create and keep the peace, the foreign ministry said, but the minister lamented how "peace is rarely spoken about, and those who do speak about it are criticised and stigmatised". Given its close proximity, Hungarians are acutely aware of the war's effects and severity, he said, noting that one million refugees had departed Ukraine through Hungary. Also, the war and "failed" sanctions have increased the cost of Hungary's energy imports to 17 billion euros from 7 billion, he added. The minister noted that Hungarians living in Transcarpathia, in western Ukraine, were being conscripted into the Ukrainian army, and many were dying, "sometimes brutally". Besides the untold suffering, European countries must contend with ever higher inflation and an unclear future in terms of its energy supply, so the international community -- big and powerful countries in particular -- has a big responsibility to ensure that peace-making is put on the agenda, he said.

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SZIJJÁRTÓ: HUNGARY 'NOT AT WAR WITH ANYONE'

Hungary's foreign minister told journalists in New York on Thursday that Hungarians wanted to stay out of the war in Ukraine. Responding to a passage of a speech made by his German counterpart which referenced the war in Ukraine, Péter Szijjártó said: "Hungary is not at war with anyone." In a speech to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, Annalena Baerbock said: "Russia's war of aggression is not only a war against Ukraine, it is a war against the common European peace order." In reaction, Szijjártó said: "We are not at war with anyone, we do not want to be at war with anyone ... our top priority is the security of Hungary and the Hungarian people." The minister added that Hungarian voters in last year's general election made clear that staying out of the war was their chief aim, and this motivated government's decision-making and its efforts towards securing peace talks and a ceasefire.

Asked about corruption cases in Ukraine, Szijjártó said a key principle of Hungarian foreign policy was "not to meddle in the affairs of other countries".

Szijjártó said that Hungary supported Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty, and he vowed to continue Hungary's "largest humanitarian aid operation of all time" as long as it was needed.

FINMIN: STRONG HUNGARY-KAZAKHSTAN ECONOMIC TIES GOOD FOR BOTH COUNTRIES

Strong Hungary-Kazakhstan ties benefit both countries economically while boosting Hungary's energy security, Finance Minister Mihály Varga said at a meeting of the Hungarian-Kazakh Business Council, the ministry said on Thursday. Kazakhstan "is an important strategic partner" in Central Asia and a key player in the development of Hungary's eastern relations, the ministry said quoting Varga in a statement. He said the government's Eastern Opening policy announced in 2010 had produced tangible results for both countries. Bilateral trade turnover exceeded 420 million dollars in 2021, with Hungarian exports concentrated in pharmaceuticals, Varga noted, adding that the green economy, water management, agriculture, and the energy and health sectors were promising areas of cooperation. The minister noted the cultivation of hybrid corn seeds by Hungarian companies in Kazakhstan and prospective natural gas extraction there by Hungarian oil and gas company MOL. Hungary can form a bridge between Kazakhstan and the European Union, Varga said. The 8th meeting of the Hungarian-Kazakh Economic Cooperation

Intergovernmental Committee is being held in Budapest in the next few days, with a large delegation headed by Alibek Kuantyrov, Kazakhstan's economy minister.

Varga is the co-chairman of the Hungarian-Kazakh Intergovernmental Economic Cooperation Committee and president of the Hungarian-Kazakh Friendship Group of parliament.

OFFICIAL: REMARKS BY NEW FRONTEX HEAD 'DANGEROUS'

Remarks by Hans Leijten, the new head of the European Border and Coast Guard Agency Frontex, about the tasks of the agency "are dangerous" because they suggest that instead of protecting Europe's borders, he wants to focus on providing legal services to illegal migrants, an interior ministry official said.

Bence Rétvári said after a meeting of EU justice and home affairs ministers in Stockholm that illegal migration was among the topics discussed, and Hungary maintained the view that instead of opening up Europe, its borders must be protected. Rétvári said Leijten's remarks were "very dangerous" because he "expressly attacked the notion of turning back illegal migrants at the borders". Speaking as if Frontex were an immigration agency, the new leader considers it most important to work together with NGOs, and

help illegal migrants, informing them about their rights, he added. "It is totally absurd that those originally placed at the border to protect it are not actually protecting the border, turning back people who want to cross it illegally over the green border, but providing legal assistance with entering the country," he said.

Hungary is protecting its southern borders, and together with Austria and Serbia, it also maintains a presence at the southern border of Serbia, he said.

Rétvári also said it was "perverse" that Frontex had a Dutch leader, because the Netherlands had no land border affected by migration. The new leader of the border protection agency should come from a country that is closer to a migration route, he added. He said another topic discussed at the meeting was deportation. When people staying illegally in the European Union are deported to the Western Balkans, the success of deportation is usually below 50%; if they are deported to Asia, then the success rate is only 5-8%. "This also shows that deportation is not an effective method for stopping illegal migration", he added.

SZIJJÁRTÓ, RUSSIAN DEPUTY PM AGREE TO SPEED UP PAKS UPGRADE

Péter Szijjártó, Hungary's minister of foreign affairs and trade, has talked by phone with Alexander Novak,

Russia's deputy prime minister for energy affairs, and they agreed to accelerate the pace of the upgrade of Hungary's Paks nuclear power plant wherever possible. Hungary will not support any proposals by Brussels that make Hungarian-Russian nuclear cooperation harder or render it impossible, Szijjártó said on Facebook. Nuclear energy is the energy of the future, Szijjártó said, adding that the swift construction of the Paks plant's new blocks was crucial for Hungary. Hungary's government welcomes that the Russian government also assigns great importance to the upgrade of the plant, he said. The current energy crisis has made it clear that the countries that can produce most of their own energy will be the ones that are truly secure, he said.

Szijjártó and Novak also reviewed the situation of natural gas deliveries to Hungary. The minister said that thanks to the TurkStream gas pipeline, which he said was the only east-west pipeline in Europe operating at 100% capacity, gas deliveries to Hungary were uninterrupted and the country was receiving more than 12 million cubic metres of gas a day.

ORBÁN, MUNI COUNCILS ASSOC HEAD DISCUSS STATE SUPPORT FOR LOCALITIES

Prime Minister Viktor Orbán discussed state support for troubled localities with Károly Szita, head of

the Association of Cities with County Rights (MJVSZ), on Thursday. At the meeting at the Castle District premises of the Prime Minister's Office, the two officials agreed that Hungary has "entered the age of dangers", noting that many Hungarian localities were in a difficult situation due to the war in Ukraine, the "flawed sanctions" imposed by Brussels and the energy crisis. The government's aim is to protect the residents of Hungary's localities, pensioners, families, the caps on household energy bills and jobs, he added.

NAVRACSICS: ERASMUS+, HORIZONT EUROPE PROGRAMMES 'NOT IN DANGER' IN HUNGARY

Hungary's participation in the Erasmus+ scheme and Horizont Europe research programme are "not in danger", applications can continue to be submitted, the regional development minister said in Brussels after talks with two EU commissioners on the matter. Tibor Navracsics held talks with Mariya Gabriel, the Commissioner for Innovation, Research, Culture and Education, and Johannes Hahn, the Commissioner for Budget and Administration, with the aim "to seek a compromise", the minister said. Students of universities run by asset management foundations after a government reform, which the EU has said to raise concerns of corruption,

will not need to worry about participation in the programmes, he said. The Hungarian government is ready to address concerns raised by the European Commission over the 21 universities in question, the minister said. The EC has said that almost half of the universities have active politicians sitting on their boards, with unlimited terms. "Amending those rules is not a problem for the Hungarian government; the situation can be solved via enacting appropriate regulations," Navracsics said, adding that "the EC at the same time must make clear that our cooperation would continue uninterrupted". He said that the two relevant "not too complicated" law amendments could be adopted by Hungarian parliament in March.

ORBÁN SAYS 'IMMEDIATE CEASEFIRE' IN UKRAINE NEEDED

Prime Minister Viktor Orbán said on Thursday that an immediate ceasefire should be agreed in Ukraine and peace talks launched, even if negotiations may take months or even years to conclude. Speaking informally in his office to participants of an international media conference organised by the Mathias Corvinus Collegium (MCC), Orbán warned of the danger of an escalation of the war. Also, asked about the "political leadership crisis in Europe", the prime minister said European leaders had difficulty recognising and articulating the bloc's interests.

MINISTER: ECONOMY EXPECTED TO 'SKYROCKET' IN 2024

Economic growth may slow to 1.5% this year, but Hungary can avoid recession, and GDP might jump as high as 4% in 2024, the economy development minister told the weekly Mandiner. Last year was "one of the hardest since the change of regime" in 1989, with skyrocketing energy prices accounting for 10% of GDP, presenting a bill of 10 billion euros, Márton Nagy said. Growth in 2023 may be boosted by subsidised loans for companies, and the growing performance of the tourism, industry and agricultural sectors, he said. Consumption is also expected to grow, he added. Inflation is expected to peak above 25% early in the year and fall into single digits by the end of 2023, he said. Price caps on basic foods will be phased out if inflation falls steeply by April, he said.

Regarding monetary policy, Nagy, a former deputy governor of the National Bank of Hungary (NBH), said the current 18% interest rate is one of the highest in the world. Only war-torn Ukraine and "countries like Ghana, Sudan, Venezuela, Argentina and Zimbabwe" exceed that rate, he said. Even considering the 50 basis point drop in the yield curve the market has priced in for the coming month, real yields will still be "well above 5%" if inflation falls into the single digits by year-end, he added. Regarding the government's purchase

telecommunications company Vodafone, Nagy said government involvement in the strategic sector was a national interest. Public IT company 4iG has acquired a 51% share in Vodafone Magyarország, and state-run Corvinus International Investment 49%, he noted.

GOVT EXPANDS CIRCLE OF BODIES ELIGIBLE FOR FIXED GAS PRICES

The government is enabling universities run by asset management foundations and companies owned by ethnic minority authorities to opt for fixed gas prices, rather than paying indexed prices, the energy ministry has said. The fixed prices will be in place until the end of September. So far, the option has been open only to state, municipality and church institutions. Bodies originally targeted by the scheme will have to decide by Friday. The deadline for those newly included is Feb 2. Although international gas prices are much lower now than they were last year, the market is still plagued by uncertainty, the statement said. The scheme aims to help institutions in making their utility costs more calculable, it said.

LMP: BATTERY PLANTS HEALTH RISK IN N HUNGARY

A battery plant near Komárom, in northern Hungary, might be endangering citizens' health

as the cumulative effect of the plant's multiple units on the environment has not been tested, opposition LMP said after a public hearing at City Hall. Party spokesman József Gál told a press conference that the drinking water supply of the city would not be able to cover the needs of the plants. The use of water from spring-water wells around nearby Tata are already depleting karst water in the area, he said. Humidity in the air around the plants might concentrate pollution there, he added. Gál slammed the Fidesz mayor of Komárom, Attila Molnár, for not answering questions regarding the battery plant. LMP has initiated a referendum to make new battery plants conditional on residents' consent, he noted. At the public hearing, which was originally on the city budget, Molnár called the dispute on the plant expansion "political profiteering".

PÉCS UNIVERSITY SETTING UP HUF 4.5BN SCIENCE AND INNOVATION PARK

The University of Pécs, in south-western Hungary, has started work on a 4.5bn science and innovation

park that will be completed in the autumn. The park, supported by European Union funding, is being set up in two former hospital buildings with combined space of 2,600sqm. The science and innovation park will be one of 14 around the country.

E.ON HUNGÁRIA LAUNCHES HUF 74BN OF NETWORK INVESTMENTS

Electricity distributor E.ON Hungária has announced the launch of 74 billion forints-worth of network investments in the period until 2026. Half of the investment cost will come from Hungary's European Union Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) funding, which the government is pre-financing, deputy-CEO in charge of the network Ádám Katona said. The investments will add 726 MW of capacity to the network, he added.

State secretary for energy Attila Steiner noted that the EU has cleared 163 billion forints in RRF funding for Hungary that will allow 3,000 MW of solar power capacity to be hooked up to the electricity network. Katona said E.ON Hungária last year received 130,000 requests to hook up household solar panels to the network, more than the combined number in the preceding ten years.

GOVT AWARDS OVER HUF 523BN IN HOME RENOVATION SUBSIDIES

The government has awarded over 523 billion forints in home renovation subsidies to 250,000 families in the framework of a two-year programme that concluded in December, the state treasury said, noting that over 100,000 applications for the subsidies arrived in December and said processing the last-minute rush would require more time. The government offered to cover up to half of home renovation costs, with a grant capped at 3 million forints for families with at least one child. Families could take out a subsidised loan to cover the other half of project costs.

The average subsidy awarded in the framework of the scheme was 2 million.

ALMOST 9,000 UKRAINE REFUGEES ENTER HUNGARY ON WEDNESDAY

Fully 5,035 refugees entered Hungary at the Ukraine-Hungary border on Wednesday, while 3,826 came to the country via Romania, according to the national police headquarters (ORFK). Police issued temporary residence permits valid for 30 days to 146 people, ORFK said on Thursday. Budapest received 73 people, 24 children among them, by train.