

PHOTO OF THE DAY



MTI/István Derencsényi

A herd of Hungarian Grey cattle in Hortobágy, the heart of Hungary's Great Plain

UPCOMING EVENTS

Stats office releases prelim report on Feb wages

Budapest municipal assembly meets

Events related to the war in Ukraine

TOP STORY

AZERBAIJAN, CEE COUNTRIES SIGN GAS SUPPLY MOU

Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia on Tuesday signed a memorandum of understanding on natural gas deliveries to central and eastern Europe through the so-called Solidarity Ring, Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó said in Sofia.

At the signing ceremony, Szijjártó said Hungary, which has little natural gas of its own, is striving to diversify its energy resources "rather than just changing the geographical direction of the dependence". Natural gas from Azerbaijan is the most realistic option for central and eastern Europe to diversify its supplies, but this will need adequate transport routes, he said. Organising and preparing infrastructure development should be a task of eastern and south-eastern European governments, while the European Union should play a role in financing the investments, he said. Hungary's network operator is prepared, and the government is willing to undertake further developments to raise the capacity of the Hungarian stretch of the Solidarity Ring, to transport 5 billion cubic meters of gas a year between Romania and Slovakia, he said. President Ilham Aliyev of Azerbaijan and Rumen Radev of Bulgaria also attended the event, as did energy ministers Parviz Shahbazov of Azerbaijan, Rossen Hristov of Bulgaria and Virgil-Daniel Popescu of Romania, and Slovak economy minister Karel Hirman.

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FINMIN: HUNGARY, GEORGIA COOPERATION KEY TO ENERGY SECURITY

Georgia is a strategic partner of Hungary in the southern Caucasus and their cooperation is key to Hungary's energy security, Finance Minister Mihály Varga said after meeting his Georgian counterpart, Lasha Khutsishvili, in Budapest on Tuesday. The two countries are planning to hold a joint cabinet session this year, to boost ties based on shared values and interests, he said. Hungary also supports Georgia in its bid to become a candidate for European Union membership, especially since its views on geopolitics, war and peace are close to Hungary's, Varga said. A planned electricity line connecting Georgia and Romania under the Black Sea is key to ensuring European energy security, Varga said. The unique, 1,200km long line could deliver green electricity from Azerbaijan to Hungary via Georgia and Romania, he said. Prime Minister Viktor Orbán signed an agreement on the investment last spring, and has supported Georgia in obtaining funding from the World Bank, he said. Bilateral economic ties between Georgia and Hungary grew by 40% last year, with Hungary exporting mainly pharmaceuticals, vehicles and machines there, he said. Khutsishvili was briefed on Hungary's strategies to finance state debt and its bond programme. Hungary has

successfully restructured state debt so a large part is now in domestic hands, and Georgia is working to achieve similar results in handling its own, the ministry said.

JUSTICE MINISTER: TECHNICAL NEGOTIATIONS ON JUDICIAL COMMITMENTS CONCLUDED WITH EC

After a clarification of political matters, technical negotiations on judicial commitments have been concluded between Hungary and the European Commission, Justice Minister Judit Varga said on Monday. European Commissioner for Justice Didier Reynders has confirmed that the technical negotiations are concluded and only the approval of the European college of commissioners is needed, Varga said in Brussels.

Monday's talks represented a milestone in building confidence between the EU and Hungary, she added. "In line with an agreement made last December, Hungary has considered the judicial package a priority issue since the start of this year for access to cohesion funding and recovery funds," she said.

Varga said that while the negotiations were under way, various left-wing European and Hungarian media outlets were spreading fake news. "Whenever they saw that the talks were progressing well, they started kicking up a storm," she said. "[Opposition DK leader] Ferenc

Gyurcsány recently admitted in an interview that they had put a lot of work in getting the Commission to raise newer and newer obstacles to the fulfilment of the agreement," she added. She said she did not expect the EC to raise further requirements, but the body was under political pressure. "It depends on the courage and professionalism of the European Commission how much they will be able to resist the European Parliament's politically motivated pressure which lacks any professionalism and is purely political blackmail and a power play," she said.

SZIJJÁRTÓ: TWO MORE HUNGARIANS RESCUED FROM SUDAN

Two more Hungarian citizens have safely made it out of Sudan, Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó said on Facebook on Tuesday. "Staff members from our embassy in Cairo have already picked up our compatriots at the agreed spot on the Egyptian side of the Sudan-Egypt border," the minister said. Szijjártó said earlier that an additional eight Hungarian citizens would be in safety in Sudan soon, adding they were all well and communication with them was ongoing. The ministry cited Szijjártó as saying at the airport in Sofia that his colleagues were in personal contact with Hungarians evacuated to Ethiopia and Djibouti. He said paperwork was being prepared for them to return home.

NOVÁK PRAISES PONTIFF AS 'MAN OF PEACE'

President Katalin Novák has called Pope Francis a "man of peace" and said she hoped that his visit to Budapest at the weekend would restore a sense of hope after the coronavirus pandemic and the war in Ukraine, in an interview published in Magyar Kurír on Tuesday. "The Bible teaches that the future belongs to men of peace. Francis is such a man, and so are we Hungarians," she said.

It appears that Pope Francis aims to meet as many Hungarians and real communities as possible during his visit between April 28-30, she said. She noted that during his visit to Budapest during the Eucharistic Congress in September 2021, Francis highlighted the importance of cooperation between the churches.

Regarding the war in Ukraine, Novák said the priority there was to "assure victims of our support, condemn aggression and find a way to peace." Her visit to Kyiv last November was such a show of support, she said. At the same time, she noted that the rights of Hungarians had been curbed in Ukraine recently, which she called "unacceptable". The issue should not be "swept under the carpet", she warned. Hungarians living in Ukraine should be able to make a living in their own community and homeland, using their mother tongue, she said. On finding a way to peace in Ukraine, Novák praised Francis's Easter message

in which he said that he stood by Ukrainians under attack "but will not forget or give up on Russian people either." To find solutions, dialogue must be fostered between warring parties and the forces supporting them, she said. "That needs, first of all, a strong decision to end the war," she said.

"It seems clear to me that the war must not end with Russia achieving its aims, even though they have not declared a concrete goal. It cannot end with Russia allowed to stay in Ukrainian territories," she said. At the same time, a growing number of countries getting involved in the conflict could lead to escalation, she said. "War will not necessarily stop at the borders," and its spilling over into Hungary should be avoided at all costs, she said.

KOVÁCS: ALL PREPARATIONS COMPLETE FOR PAPAL VISIT

"Everything is set" for Pope Francis's upcoming visit to Hungary, the state secretary for international communications said after a meeting on Tuesday of the operative body in charge of preparations. Zoltán Kovács said making preparations was a state responsibility, though the pope's visit would "basically be an apostolic event". Organisers have been working "in line with decisions by the Hungarian Catholic Church and the papal delegation" in terms of selecting venues and planning programmes, he added. Bishop András Veres, the head of the Conference of Hungarian

Catholic Bishops, said the visit would be an "honour and joyful meeting" not only for Catholics but for the whole nation. He noted that Francis could not visit outside Budapest due his fragile health, but organisers were "mobilising the country" and inviting believers and priests to come to Budapest during the three-day visit starting on Friday.

DEMONSTRATION HELD AGAINST LAW ON TEACHERS' STATUS IN BUDAPEST

A demonstration was held in Budapest on Monday in protest against draft legislation changing the employment status of teachers. Protesters marched from downtown Kálvin Square to the building of the interior ministry chanting slogans such as "The status law is revenge law", "General strike", "Pintér resign" referring to the interior minister, and "police state is no rule of law".

In front of the interior ministry on Roosevelt Square, Erzsébet Nagy of teachers' union PDSZ called on the government to withdraw the draft, "as it aims not to improve education but to discipline teachers". Instead, the government should come up with legislation in line with its commitments to the European Union during negotiations on accessing its recovery and resilience funding, "which would improve public education and money would also flow in", Nagy said. Nagy noted that "all the large groups of the European Parliament" had turned to

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen in a letter, asking that the EC put pressure on the government to withdraw the legislation.

After the demonstration in front of the ministry, some demonstrators marched to the Prime Minister's Office in the Castle District. The Budapest police headquarters said late on Monday that an unregistered protest had been held at the Prime Minister's Office where many of the protesters acted aggressively with police who used tear gas against them. Earlier on Monday, opposition Párbeszéd also held a protest in front of the ministry.

**DEPUTY SPEAKER
ADVOCATES SOVEREIGN
EU 'RESPECTING TREATY'**

Hungary wants to see "a sovereign European Union independent of other powers and influences ... which preserves the European values as laid out in the founding treaty", István Jakab, the deputy speaker of Hungary's parliament, said in Prague on Tuesday. Speaking at a conference of the community's parliamentary speakers, Jakab said it was "not the European Commission or the European Parliament that must be competitive, but the nation states making up the European Union, too." The EU, he insisted, was not a federal structure but "a sui generis organisation of nation states".

Europe's energy security, he said, was "an issue of sovereignty, economy, and national security, rather than one

of ideology". "Due to central Europe's geopolitical situation we expect more understanding and respect, since Hungary in the medium term does not have a realistic alternative to instantly giving up Russian gas imports or nuclear energy," Jakab said. Discriminating between energy sources on a political or ideological basis made no sense, he said, adding that "no single ideology should become an exclusive gauge; such exclusivity was characteristic of dictatorships such as Communism and Nazism."

"The so-called mainstream media, striving to be exclusive, and pseudo-civil organisations engaged in ideological promotion will destroy our greatest European value: unity in diversity," Jakab said. "Legalising drug abuse or sexualising our children are unacceptable, no matter through what insidious or even aggressive drug lobbying or LGBTQ propaganda," he added.

At a meeting on Monday evening, Jakab said Hungary has condemned Russian aggression from the start and stands by Ukrainian sovereignty and integrity. Hungary has spent more than 100 million euros on support for Ukraine and has accepted some 4.8 million refugees, he said. Hungary has a vested interest in a strong, sovereign, democratic Ukraine that ensures the livelihood of the minorities living there, he said. "Recent events in Transcarpathia, unreasonable firing of Hungarian teachers and the removal of Hungarian symbols are obvious signs

of an anti-Hungarian campaign in Ukraine. This is not a bilateral problem as Ukraine is an EU member candidate, and the protection of ethnic minorities is a fundamental value of the EU," he said. Hungary will support Ukrainian integration into the EU and NATO if they restore the 2015 rights of ethnic minorities, he said.

**HUNGARY CBANK
LEAVES BASE RATE
ON HOLD AT 13%,
CUTS O/N COLLATERALISED
LOAN RATE**

The Monetary Council of the National Bank of Hungary (NBH) decided to leave the base rate on hold at 13.00%, but voted to cut the central bank's O/N collateralised loan rate by 450 basis points to 20.50% at a monthly policy meeting on Tuesday. Deputy governor Barnabás Virág had flagged the cut in the O/N collateralised loan rate, the top of the central bank's "interest rate corridor", a week earlier.

In a statement released after the meeting, the Council said it was necessary to maintain the current level of the base rate over a prolonged period, which it said would ensure that inflation expectations are anchored and the inflation target is achieved in a sustainable manner. They said the risk environment, including Hungary's risk perception, has "improved significantly", driven by both external and internal factors. The decision to narrow the interest rate corridor was taken "in response to the reduction in

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the risks of extreme scenarios”, they added. The Council noted that the transition to the increased mandatory reserve requirement ratio, from 5% to 10% from April 1, was “smooth”. They added that disinflation was expected to accelerate in the next months, “which will also be supported by the growing impact of base effects from the middle of the year”.

BUDGET DEFICIT HUF 2,090 BN IN MARCH, MINISTRY CONFIRMS

Hungary’s cash-flow-based budget shortfall at the end of March was 2,089.7 billion forints (EUR 5.6bn), the finance ministry confirmed on Tuesday. The central budget deficit was 2,019 billion forints, while social security funds were 89.6 billion in the red. Separate state funds posted a surplus of 18.9 billion. The deficit in the month of March came to 564.6 billion, well

below the 875.7 billion forint shortfall in the same month a year earlier. The government targets a deficit of 3,400.2 billion forints for the full year. In 2022, the budget was 4,753.4 billion forints in the red. The ministry noted the war and energy crisis as having “changed the economic environment radically”, adding that families, jobs and pensions would enjoy government protections nonetheless. The ministry confirmed the full-year accrual-based deficit target of 3.9% of GDP and a public debt below 70% of GDP.

PASSENGER CENTRE AT KELETI RAILWAY STATION REVAMPED FOR HUF 1.9 BN

The passenger centre of Budapest’s Keleti railway station has been revamped for 1.9 billion forints (EUR 5m) with European Union and national funding, state secretary of the Ministry

of Construction and Transport Bálint Nagy said on Tuesday. The 1,542 sqm passenger centre has been upgraded to allow disabled access for ticket office counters, elevators and toilets, which have been equipped with vandal-resistant sanitary ware. The new centre will be opened on the first week of May. Keleti railway station is the main international and intercity railway terminal in Budapest. It receives almost 11 million people annually.

OVER 9,000 UKRAINE REFUGEES ENTER HUNGARY ON MONDAY

Fully 4,613 refugees entered Hungary at the Ukraine-Hungary border on Monday, while 4,643 came to the country via Romania, according to the national police headquarters (ORFK). Police issued temporary residence permits valid for 30 days to 33 people, ORFK said on Tuesday.