

PHOTO OF THE DAY



Hungarian president addresses CoE meeting in Reykjavik

UPCOMING EVENTS

Prime minister attends Centrist Democrat Intl meeting in Slovakia's Bled

Events related to the war in Ukraine

TOP STORY

GOVT NOT TO APPROVE EPF TRANCHE UNLESS OTP REMOVED FROM BLACKLIST

The government will not grant its approval to the next tranche of the European Peace Facility to Ukraine unless Hungary's OTP Bank is removed from Ukraine's list of war sponsors, the foreign minister said in Vienna on Wednesday.

For the same reason as well as because of restrictions concerning Chinese investments the government will not support any further sanctions against Russia, Péter Szijjártó said. Following a working lunch with Alexander Schallenberg, his Austrian counterpart, Szijjártó said "further, serious proposals have been tabled in Brussels, expecting European people to take further sacrifices while they would not bring peace a centimetre closer", according to a statement by the foreign ministry. Szijjártó said the EU's planned eleventh package of sanctions was "fully contrary to common sense", and insisted that the previous ten had failed. He raised serious concern about the EU's mulling measures against eight Chinese companies which could "certainly aggravate or even thwart" ties with China, and could "lead to a certain negative spiral of reactions". Since we have "practically severed ties of cooperation between the EU and Russia one by one, we would consider it extremely harmful ... if the same happened to Europe-China ties," the minister said.

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EC BUDGET CONTROL CTTEE CALLS ON GOVT TO MEET CRITERIA FOR RELEASING EU FUNDS

The delegation of the European Parliament's Committee on Budgetary Control called on the Hungarian government to act more responsibly in distributing EU funds, include regional authorities in decision-making instead of a "top-down" approach and meet the criteria required for releasing the funds withheld from Hungary, the head of the delegation told a press conference on Wednesday.

An effective implementation of the 27 "super milestones" defined earlier and the related 17 remedial measures under the conditionality regulation is required for unblocking the 28 billion euros which is more than 10,000 billion forints in EU Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) funding, Monika Hohlmeier, the head of the delegation, said after the conclusion of their three-day visit to Hungary. EU funds "represent a very big opportunity for the development of Hungary", she said, noting however the committee's "core concern is how the money can reach Hungarian citizens, businesses and regions". Hohlmeier said the committee has identified shortcomings, noting that the State Audit Office could not provide information on the use of 1.48 billion euros in 29 cases over which concerns had been raised before. The delegation

head also noted the committee's concern over the implementation of public procurements in line with free market rules and over failure in involving local governments and civil organisations in the distribution of EU funds. She raised concern over government measures distorting competition such as the introduction of "unfair special taxes", "arbitrary change of laws" without preliminary consultation and intimidation. She raised further concern over ad hoc decision-making, referring to the amendment of the budget law in a decision made "overnight". Hohlmeier said the committee noticed several positive developments such as the setting up of the Integrity Authority, reforms at the tax office and the strengthening of the national judicial council.

Tamás Deutsch, an MEP of ruling Fidesz, said the delegation's visit was "part of Brussels's exerting political pressure" on the Hungarian government. He noted that the committee had no "powers of an authority over Hungary" therefore "it will do neither good nor harm what they do". Deutsch suggested the committee had come to Budapest "to increase the pressure and force Hungary into the war in Ukraine". He also insisted that "Brussels does not like that Hungarian voters had said no to illegal migration in a referendum, and that Hungary had adopted a very rigorous child protection law to prevent the sexualisation of minors". The EU

expects member states to adopt a pro-migration stance and would "make the gender ideology madness the norm in Europe". "But we say no war, no migration, no gender," the MEP said.

NAVRACSICS HAS 'SUBSTANTIVE DISCUSSION' WITH EP BUDGET CONTROL CTTEE DELEGATION

Tibor Navracsics has said his meeting on Wednesday with the European Parliament's Committee on Budgetary Control delegation included discussions which may result in support for Hungary's access to European Union funds.

The minister of regional development told journalists that the talks achieved a foothold in mutual understanding, and he was "confident" members of the committee had been convinced on several issues by the Hungarian side's objective arguments. The delegation was briefed on the ways in which Hungary intends to use EU funds, he said, adding that he sensed, however, that the delegation had not read background materials sent to them in advance. Also, "the political prejudices of many representatives" were evident and "factual mistakes" were made when questions were put to him. As an example, Navracsics said the government was accused in a blanket way of political bias when it came to the distribution of EU funds,

and this is something the Hungarian side strove to refute. Answering a question, he said it appeared that on several issues at least, the committee's opinion formed thus far had been nuanced. "I may risk saying that in some areas we have managed to convince them with data and facts," the minister said. "So, I trust that we managed to gain a supporter in the longer term when it comes to accessing European Union funds." Meanwhile, Navracsics said that from the questions formulated by the delegation's members it could be deduced that the mayor of Budapest, who recently had his own meeting with the committee, considered the government was "treating him unfairly". The minister said he had told the delegation that the government's dealings with the municipality were not a matter of party politics. Rather, he explained to them, affluent local councils must take their fair share of the burden during straitened times to offset lower contributions by struggling localities. This, he added, not only applied to Budapest but richer councils such as Debrecen, Győr, Székesfehérvár and Veszprém. Navracsics said the aim here was to boost financial support for regions which barely reach half of the EU average level of development. On the subject of public procurement, the Hungarian side told the delegation that the government has pledged to reduce the proportion of single-bid procedures to 15%, the EU average.

He said significant progress was being made in this area. Navracsics said he was "moderately optimistic" regarding the delegation's visit, though their opinion overall was "unlikely to be very high". Hopefully, the government's data would be accepted in areas that could objectively verified or refuted, he added. Asked about discord between the EU and the government over the Erasmus student programme, Navracsics said the matter was not discussed with the delegation.

The minister noted that he discussed Erasmus issues in Brussels on Tuesday, and he promised to send the government's negotiating position to the European Commission next week. Though the government wants negotiations to go swiftly on this topic too, the situation was hindered by the fact that the commissioner dealing with this issue from Bulgaria was new and would have to be contacted.

Later in the day, the delegation met State Secretary János Bócai at the justice ministry. After the talks, the ministry said in a statement that the delegation had "put forward political expectations beyond the EU's conditionality procedure and super milestones" adding that the ministry "rejected" those expectations. "Political pressure jeopardises the credibility of procedures," it said. "In Hungary EU funds are utilised well and in legitimate ways, guaranteed by recently established model institutions that serve as examples for the whole of Europe," the ministry said.

NOVÁK IN REYKJAVÍK: FINDING 'OPPORTUNITY FOR FAIR PEACE' A PRIORITY

Hungarian President Katalin Novák said in Reykjavík on Wednesday that as a Christian conservative politician she considered it the most important task to seek out the possibility of bringing about a fair peace to end the war in Ukraine.

Addressing a meeting of the Council of Europe, Novák said if all conditions of a just peace were met that would clear the path not only for a ceasefire but reconciliation under an enduring peace. The heads of state and government of the Council of Europe have an extraordinary responsibility in advancing and ensuring peace for the citizens of their countries, she said and welcomed that an increasing number of leaders supported a fair and just peace which she said was "the universal desire of all our citizens". The Council of Europe is key in promoting and protecting human rights, and has done much for democracy and fundamental freedom rights, she said. "This is the right time and place to send a firm message, that of the right to peace," she said.

At the same time, it is a priority that the fight for freedom does not curb the rights of minorities, she said. "Respect for minorities' rights is one of the foundations of

European cooperation, and cannot be set aside," she said. The summit should have been an opportunity to celebrate achievements, she said: "Our economies have never been this advanced, we have left the coronavirus pandemic behind, we learnt to bolster common values and to handle cultural, historic and linguistic differences...". At the same time, Europe is facing grave challenges: "there is a war in continental Europe and our peaceful lifestyle is under attack," she said. "Russia's mad decision to attack Ukraine, a neighbour of Hungary, has upended our world," she said. Aggression and attack on a sovereign state is unacceptable, she said. War crimes must be investigated and the perpetrators held to account, she added.

PRESIDENT NOVÁK HOLDS TALKS ON SIDELINES OF COE MEETING

President Katalin Novák held talks with French counterpart Emmanuel Macron in Reykjavik on Tuesday during the Reykjavik Summit of the Council of Europe. Novák said in a bilingual post on Facebook that there has not been a summit like the one beginning in Reykjavik for the last twenty years.

"Ahead of the session, I had a meeting with President of France Emmanuel Macron," she said. "Europe needs strategic autonomy to be able to make decisions in its own best interests. However, for this, peace in

Ukraine is needed as soon as possible. We count on each other," she added. "I stand up for peace at international forums as well: now, at the Council of Europe Summit, a meeting of European leaders in Reykjavik, and on Thursday in New York at the UN," Novák said.

On Wednesday, Novák held "friendly talks" with Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni. "We are allies in good times and bad," Novák said on Facebook. The president said both took a common stand for traditional family values and against migration. Reykjavik is hosting a meeting of heads of state and government from 46 countries this week.

ORBÁN CONGRATULATES NEW SLOVAK PM ÓDOR

Prime Minister Viktor Orbán on Tuesday congratulated L'udovít Ódor on becoming Slovakia's new prime minister. In his message to Ódor, Orbán said Slovakia was an important ally and strategic partner of Hungary, underlining the two countries' effective cooperation in recent years in spite of the pandemic, the economic crisis and the war in Ukraine. Orbán assured his new Slovak counterpart that he was prepared to work with him in the interest of developing cooperation based on mutual respect.

In another letter, Orbán thanked Slovakia's former prime minister Eduard Heger for the two countries' constructive cooperation in recent years. Orbán said he was convinced that "the strong alliance

binding central European nations is especially important now when Europe faces historic challenges". He underscored the Hungarian government's commitment to strengthening Hungarian-Slovak ties and the cooperation between the four Visegrad Group countries.

ORBÁN TRAVELS TO SLOVENIA TO ATTEND CENTRIST DEMOCRAT INTL MEETING

Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, the leader of ruling Fidesz, travelled to Slovenia on Wednesday to attend a meeting of the executive committee of the Centrist Democrat International alliance of conservative parties in Bled, his press chief told MTI. Established in 1961, the CDI-IDC is an alliance of 80 conservative parties from around the world. Orbán is a vice president of the organisation.

ORBÁN WELCOMES COMPLETION OF SZERENCs-GESZTELY ROAD SECTION

Prime Minister Viktor Orbán on Wednesday welcomed the completion of the upgrade of a road section between Gesztely and Szerencs, in northern Hungary.

In a Facebook entry, Orbán said the government had met "an old pledge" through broadening the 19 kilometre-long section of Road 37, a project that cost the central budget 38

billion forints (EUR 100m). In his entry, Orbán encouraged drivers to “feel free to use the renewed section but drive carefully!”.

OMBUDSMEN OF TURKIC STATES MEET IN HUNGARY

The Turkic States Ombudsman Association is holding its next international conference in Budapest, the Hungarian Ombudsman’s Office said in a statement on Wednesday. A delegation of the association has arrived in Hungary comprising of ombudsmen from Türkiye, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan. They visited north-eastern Hungary’s Beregsurány to observe the legal and humanitarian support provided to people fleeing Ukraine by the Hungarian Ombudsman’s Office, the statement said. The delegation is scheduled to visit regional ombudsman offices in Debrecen, in eastern Hungary, as well as meet the president of the Constitutional Court and other officials, it said.

WEBSITE: EC PRESIDENT PROPOSED TO UKRAINE THAT IT ‘STOPS OIL DELIVERIES TO HUNGARY’ THROUGH DRUZHBA

News portal Index.hu reported an account that European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen had proposed to Ukraine that it “stops oil deliveries to Hungary” through the Druzhba pipeline. Hungarian oil

and gas company MOL has stopped direct negotiations with Ukraine’s Ukrtransnafta, alleging that the company had “blackmailed” its Hungarian partner, Index said on Wednesday. Citing leaked documents of phone taps by the US secret service, Index said that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said in February that the Druzhba pipeline, a crucial element of Hungarian energy supplies, should be “blown up”, because the country was “pro-Russia”.

A cabinet member, asking not to be named, told Index after the article was published that the government was “outraged” by the words attributed to Zelensky. The cabinet member added the fact that Hungarian OTP Bank was now also on a list of sanctions “makes matters worse”, adding that Hungary has blocked the use of the EU’s peace funds as a result. The pipeline delivers 8 million tonnes of Russian oil to Hungary every year. Stopping deliveries would deal a serious blow to the country, Index said.

Ukrtransnafta CEO Volodymyr Tsependa on Monday sent a letter to MOL, saying that Ukraine found Hungarian steps to stem the glut of Ukrainian grain into the country too harsh. According to Index, Tsependa also said they had received “a message from Ursula van der Leyen and others suggesting that crude deliveries to Hungary should be halted if this is how Hungarians approach things.” Tsependa added that he was ready to negotiate. The

article said that MOL saw this as blackmail and it would not negotiate directly with the Ukrainian company. “There is no direct information on whether Ursula von der Leyen or others have really sent such a message to Ukrtransnafta; it is much more likely that the letter to MOL was sent on the instruction of domestic political actors,” Index said. Meanwhile, Ukraine has been steadily increasing its transit fee for Russian oil to Hungary, it added.

MOL turned to Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó on Tuesday and briefed him about the letter. Ukraine’s ambassador to Budapest has also been contacted, Index said.

EC CLEARS MOL ACQUISITION OF OMV SLOVENIJA

The European Commission approved Hungarian oil and gas company MOL’s acquisition of Slovenian peer OMV Slovenija on Wednesday. Austria’s OMV had agreed to sell MOL its Slovenian unit, including 120 petrol stations and a wholesale business, in June 2021. The EC aired concerns over the deal, in its initial form, as it would reduce the number of significant retail motor fuel operators in Slovenia from three to two and significantly reduce competition in the market for retail motor fuel sales from non-motorway fuel stations. In March 2023, MOL said it agreed to part with 39 of its petrol stations in Slovenia to win EC approval of the deal. On Wednesday, the EC said commitments,

including the divestment of the 39 petrol stations to Shell Group, “fully address” competition concerns identified earlier.

INDUSTRY ASSOC: STRICT REGULATIONS COULD HINDER AI DEVELOPMENT

The European Union’s planned regulation of artificial intelligence (AI) may bring about overly strict regulations and a substantial burden of compliance, hindering developments in the sector, Hungarian industry association IVSZ said on Wednesday. Noting the EU’s proposed AI legislation, in its final stages, designed to ensure safe and ethical development, IVSZ said that the digital transformation presented a “historic opportunity for the Hungarian economy to move away from the trap of mid-field development”, and AI would provide a serious competitiveness asset.

The market expects that compliance with the new regulations to cost up to 300,000 euros for companies in crucial sectors, which may prove an unbearable burden for SMEs, the statement said. IVSZ head Balázs Vinnai called for EU support for SMEs and startups in the sector.

HUNGARY RECORDS 312 NEW CORONAVIRUS INFECTIONS, 6 DEATHS LAST WEEK

Fully 312 new Covid-19 infections were confirmed last week, while six fatalities were registered in connection with the virus, the Coronavirus Press Centre said on Wednesday. The number of active infections stands at 2,861. Currently, 185 coronavirus patients are being treated in hospital, two are on ventilators. Altogether 6,422,362 people have been vaccinated against the coronavirus, with 6,210,831 having received a second jab, 3,905,383 a third, and 425,816 a fourth. The number of registered infections since the start of the pandemic has reached 2,202,491 in Hungary, while there have been 48,865 deaths. Fully 2,150,765 people have made a recovery.

AUTHORITIES SEEKING TUNISIAN WHO MANAGED HUNGARIAN PEOPLE SMUGGLERS FROM ABROAD

Hungarian authorities are searching for a Tunisian man who, having been expelled from Hungary,

managed a gang of Hungarian people smugglers from abroad, law enforcement agencies said on the police website. Four Hungarian men are suspected of aiding the transport of more than 60 migrants to western Europe on nine occasions in May and June 2020, according to the statement on police.hu.

At the time, investigators succeeded in identifying members of the gang but were unsure about who was controlling it. After 18 months, they identified its leader, Mohamed Abdelhak, 44. In 2017, Abdelhak was sentenced in Hungary to 3 years and 6 months in prison for people smuggling and was deported for 5 years after his release on parole. He departed on a plane in the summer of 2019, but continued his criminal activities from Tunisia via the internet, managing the four Hungarian men in the spring and summer of 2020. The prosecutor’s office of Tolna County, which is supervising the investigation, charged Abdelhak in absentia. The authorities are still seeking the man under a national, European and international arrest warrant, the statement said.