

## PHOTO OF THE DAY



Christmas decorations in Székesfehérvár

MTI/Tamás Vaszári

## UPCOMING EVENTS

**LMP presser on rail service development**

**Events related to the wars in Ukraine, Israel**

**Stats office publishes data on wages for Oct 2023**

## TOP STORY

# ORBÁN: ECONOMIC GROWTH IN 2024 'REALISTIC' GOAL

Putting the Hungarian economy back on a growth path is a "realistic goal", Prime Minister Viktor Orbán said in an interview to commercial television TV2 on Wednesday.

The prime minister said he "could not exclude" inflation falling to around 7% by the end of December. While the government planned next year's budget with inflation at 6%, "it now seems more likely that inflation will be lower, even as low as 5%," he added. "My feeling is that we are on a good path," Orbán said.

"In 2023 we were fighting that the situation should not be worse, next year we will work to make it better," he said. "From this aspect 2024 looks like a much more hopeful year than 2023 was," he added.

Answering a question about the recently adopted sovereignty protection act, Orbán said it had been prompted by the transfer of foreign funds to the Hungarian opposition before the 2022 general elections. "The law has been designed to make sure that Hungarians can decide for themselves what should happen in their country" and to prevent foreign influence, he said.

Asked what Hungary can be most proud in 2023, the prime minister noted the Nobel prizes received by Hungarian scientists Katalin Karikó and Ferenc Krausz.

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## **ORBÁN: NO SUPPORT FOR UKRAINE EU ACCESSION**

Speaking in an interview to commercial television TV2, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán said he did not support that country's EU accession. He said it was unprecedented for the EU to start integration talks with a country at war, adding that questions about the size of the country would be raised and "if those parts of Ukraine should also be integrated that Russia has occupied". As Ukraine is a large country, the ramifications of its integration should be assessed "with the precision of an engineer".

Orbán said farmers in central Europe were already in trouble and "agriculture could be destroyed through Ukraine's integration". Hungarian, Polish, and Slovak hauliers also have a problem because "Ukraine has been granted permission to enter the EU market".

The EU has not provided an "objective analysis" of the possible impacts of Ukraine's accession, Orbán said, adding that some estimates put "the extra amount the EU should somehow raise" between 150-190 billion euros "if it really wanted to integrate Ukraine". All countries that have received assistance from the EU would "no longer be in the circle of assisted countries and all the money that has so far come to central Europe would go on to Ukraine, including agricultural subsidies," he said. Providing EU financial support to Ukraine is a "complicated and difficult

question because we don't know yet where 50 billion euros for the purpose will come from," Orbán said. "Should it come from the common budget, as currently planned, the budgets for other countries will miss that sum," he said, adding that it meant that "we would also give Hungarians' money to Ukraine". Hungary will not consent to those plans, Orbán said, and called for further talks on "how much, for how long, from what sources and through what methodology should be given to Ukraine." Financial aid to Ukraine "must be ensured outside the EU budget or else members, including Hungary, will suffer a drawback," he said.

Answering a question about next February's EU summit, Orbán said he expected "thunder and lightning". The Hungarian government aims to "ease a great part of the tension" at preparatory talks to create a situation in Brussels in which "decision should be made about a solution acceptable for everybody".

Concerning Hungary's staying away from a European Council vote on starting accession talks with Ukraine, Orbán said it had had to be avoided that the 26 other members "should force their will upon Hungary". "It was difficult to stay out of all this and to stay alive at the same time," he said. He said the vote should have been preceded by "more deliberation, calculations, and talks between ourselves before embarking on this adventure".

"It is important to know what Europeans and Hungarians think about Ukraine's EU accession," the

prime minister said. "People in Europe live in democracies after all, that is why the Hungarian government has put Ukraine's accession in the focus of the National Consultation public survey," he said, adding that "apart from Hungary no other country wants to, is able to, or dares to ask the opinion of their citizens".

Concerning the war in Ukraine, he said it was "not a war of the whole world, it is an internal issue between Slavs, which they have to settle between themselves." He said the conflict must be prevented from "escalating into a war engulfing the whole world," and urged a ceasefire and peace talks.

## **SZIJJÁRTÓ: HUNGARY GOVT FIRMLY REJECTS NEW EU MIGRATION PACT**

Hungary rejects in the strongest possible terms the political agreement reached on the EU's new pact on migration and asylum, Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó said on Wednesday. Answering a question at a joint press conference with his Slovak counterpart in Budapest, Szijjártó said he was strongly opposed to the agreement reached by negotiators of the European Parliament and the European Union, according to a ministry statement. Asked about the "crisis regulation" component of the migration pact, Szijjártó said "no one can force Hungary to let anybody in".

"We reject this migration pact, we will not let anybody in against our will,"

he said, adding that “we cannot be told either from Brussels or anywhere else whom we should allow in and we reject in the most resolute terms to be punished for that”. “This is Hungary, a Hungarian country, and in this country the Hungarian people have empowered us, not the Brussels elite, to govern,” the foreign minister said. The new migration pact will have to be formally adopted by the European Parliament and the European Council.

### **DÖMÖTÖR: MIGRATION PACT ‘IN CONFLICT’ WITH HUNGARY GOVT POSITION**

The European Union’s New Pact on Migration and Asylum is “in conflict with what the Hungarian government represents”, Csaba Dömötör, state secretary at the prime minister’s cabinet, said on Wednesday. Referring to the agreement reached on the pact by negotiators of the European Parliament and the European Council, the state secretary said “we did not expect a Christmas present like that”. Concerning elements of the pact, Dömötör said it included the “long-contested” redistribution quotas, which determine “how many migrants each member state should accommodate”, adding that in an emergency there would be no cap on those numbers. “They will define what an emergency is,” he said in a video posted on Facebook. “The new pact overwrites Hungary’s migration procedures, which could lead to the emergence of migrant ghettos in the country,” said Dömötör.

### **SZIJJÁRTÓ: HUNGARY- SLOVAKIA TIES IN PEAK SHAPE**

Hungary-Slovakia relations are in peak shape, and both sides have a mutual interest in developing them further, Péter Szijjártó, the minister of foreign affairs and trade, said on Wednesday. Addressing a joint press conference with Slovak counterpart Juraj Blanár, Szijjártó said his visit, barely weeks after the Bratislava government was formed, was a clear testament to the “great importance attached to enhancing relations on both sides of the Danube”. Both governments, he said, were interested in developing good neighbourly ties with a view to finding similar responses to the serious challenges facing the world today. Both, he added, wanted peace in Ukraine and no solution could be found on the battlefield. Also, both countries wanted a strong and competitive European Union based on strong member states that could preserve their national sovereignty, Szijjártó said, adding that both supported integrating the Western Balkans and they were against the world being divided into blocs. Regarding joint action against illegal migration, the minister said both countries insisted on deciding for themselves whom to allow in and whom they were willing to live with. Szijjártó said “Brussels can be sure” both countries rejected mandatory resettlement quotas.

On the subject of security, he noted that the Hungarian and Czech air forces will protect Slovakia’s airspace from Jan 1, indicating “mutual trust greater than ever before”. Regarding optimising the permeability of the 654km common border, he said since the 2014 agreement between the two countries’ premiers, Viktor Orbán and Robert Fico, multiple new links have been built. This year alone two bridges over the River Ipoly were inaugurated, while the next will be handed over on Jan 12. Both sides are ready to enter into a new agreement on infrastructure developments, he added. Regarding energy security, Szijjártó said Hungary and Slovakia were fully behind nuclear energy and the energy mix was a sovereign matter. Neither would agree to sanctions that imperilled their energy supply, he said, adding that Hungarian-Slovak teamwork in negotiating exemptions from the latest EU sanctions package had been noteworthy. “We look forward with great excitement and anticipation to Prime Minister Robert Fico’s visit to Hungary,” he said, adding that this would likely take place early next year.

Blanár also hailed bilateral ties and expressed sharp protest against “any kind of mandatory EU resettlement quota” or fines for non-compliance. Slovakia, he added, would return to the flexible solidarity it had previously shown, helping to protect Hungary’s southern border by sending police officers there, for instance. On the issue of the war in Ukraine, he said there was no military solution to the conflict, and Slovakia would “demand peace even more loudly”.

## **SZIJJÁRTÓ BLASTS 'SILENCE' ON TRUMP'S DISQUALIFICATION FROM COLORADO BALLOT**

Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó has slammed "the silence" surrounding the Colorado Supreme Court's decision to disqualify former US President Donald Trump from the Republican primary ballot. "Let's take a moment to consider what would happen if something similar happened in a central European country led by a patriotic government..." Szijjártó said on Facebook. "How many minutes would it take for the European Parliament to declare the death of democracy?" the minister said. "How long would it be before the US State Department put out a statement condemning the ruling? How many minutes would pass before the European Commission froze the blocked EU funds even more, and how many minutes would it take for articles on all platforms of the global liberal media network to declare the destruction of the rule of law?" "And what do we have now? Silence. But not because of Advent," he added.

## **PRESIDENT ORDERS PROMULGATION OF SOVEREIGNTY PROTECTION ACT**

President Katalin Novák has ordered the publication of the recently passed national sovereignty protection act, the president's office said in a

statement on Wednesday. According to the statement, Novak had received several appeals concerning the new legislation both from abroad and from Hungary. "Messages from abroad support parliament's goal: there is a need to protect our national identity and sovereignty," the statement said, but added that powers of the new sovereignty protection office, to be set up under the law, should be "interpreted in line with the constitution". The new office will "meet its obligations as outlined in the constitution if its activities do not impact the freedom of the press or the freedom of expression," the statement added. The statement also said Novak had vetoed and returned to parliament another piece of legislation, on the sustainable development of certain parts of the cultural heritage. It said the concept of transferring state-owned chateaus "could be supported" but cited a lack of guarantees "to ensure appropriate protection to state assets".

## **FINMIN: SPANISH PRESIDENCY CHANGES EU ECON GOVERNANCE REFORM 'IN LINE WITH HUNGARY'S INTERESTS'**

The Spanish presidency has amended the draft of the European Union's economic governance reform "to suit Hungary's interests", the finance ministry said on Wednesday. The ministry quoted Finance Minister Mihály Varga after an online ECOFIN meeting as saying that the changes

"reflect the government's extremely strong position to promote its interests". Participants in the meeting agreed on the need of a financial reform to govern the budgets of member states saying that "after a pandemic and in the vicinity of war the EU must meet challenges around high debt levels and investments", Varga said. He noted a long-standing debate around the reform, with "some countries demanding more stringent, while others more flexible rules". The Hungarian government wants to see a "well-considered system acceptable for all members", he said, adding that the Spanish presidency's draft would meet "all expectations". Hungary has always taken the stand that in the area of fiscal policy national governments' room for manoeuvre, not the European Commission's, must be increased, Varga said. "We have managed to secure that ... the adopted draft will strengthen the roles of member states and the Council as opposed to that of the EC," he said. Hungary's proposal to account for additional defence expenditures when calculating Maastricht deficit levels has also been included in the draft, Varga said.

## **PM'S POLITICAL DIRECTOR MAKES CASE FOR CONNECTIVITY IN NEW BOOK**

Balázs Orbán, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's political director, said a strategy aiming for a return to a world of blocs was not good for Europe

and “certainly not in the interest of Hungary”. Presenting his new book, *Huszárvágás - The Hungarian Strategy of Connectivity*, in Debrecen on Tuesday, Orbán said, the traditionally dominant position of the Western world was weakening as the global balance of power shifted, and some were addressing this change by pressing for a return to the “logic of the Cold War”. “We think this isn’t a good strategy ... we need to follow an alternative path, we believe in connectivity, instead of a world of blocs,” he added. He said Hungary needed to concentrate on finding “mutually beneficial economic cooperation” and harnessing the potential of the country’s geographical location, its historical attributes and the structure of its economy.

Orbán said Hungary’s traditional alliances such as NATO and the European Union had weight, but also noted the growing importance of complementary international initiatives for cooperation such as China’s Belt and Road Initiative and the Organisation of Turkic States. The world, he said, was becoming multipolar and Hungary must forge its own path, “establishing ties of the right depth and quality with all poles in line with its own interests”, he said. Addressing the role of Russia, Orbán said the country should not be isolated, and he argued for “pragmatic cooperation”, especially in the area of energy. The book, whose title in Hungarian means “masterstroke”, is published by MCC Press. An English

version is planned to be available in early 2024. Orbán is the author of *The Hungarian Way of Strategy*, also available in English.

### **HANKÓ: GOVT LAUNCHING SUPPORT FOR INTL EXCHANGE PROGRAMMES IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

The government is launching a 10 billion forint (EUR 26m) scheme supporting international exchanges at Hungarian universities run by public foundations, an education official said on Wednesday. Funding will be available next year for students, lecturers and researchers of foundational universities so they can connect with the world’s leading universities, Balázs Hankó, the state secretary for higher education of the ministry of culture and innovation, told a joint press conference of the ministry and its strategic partner, the Tempus Public Foundation. He said the government had revamped higher education in recent years and instituted a turnaround in competitiveness, adding that 12 Hungarian universities are now in the top 5% of the world’s best higher education institutions.

At least one Hungarian university should be among the top 100 universities by 2030 and at least three should be among the top 100 European higher education institutions, he added. Currently 10,000 students, teachers and researchers participate in exchange programmes,

and with the new government scheme dubbed Pannonia Program, by 2030 this is expected to reach 20,000 people each year. Next year, the scheme will support 8,000 students, teachers and researchers. The scheme also provides a monthly scholarship of worth 350,000-500,000 forints. Fully 20% of the funds, 2 billion forints, will be used to help Hungarian students, teachers and researchers get into one of the world’s 250 best universities, he added. Universities can lodge applications between Jan 15 and 29, Károly Czibere, the chairman of the Tempus Public Foundation’s board of trustees, said.

### **DK: 2023 ‘YEAR OF ORBÁN’S AUSTERITY’**

The opposition Democratic Coalition (DK) has slammed economic measures taken by the government over the past year, saying that 2023 had been “the year of [Prime Minister Viktor] Orbán’s austerity measures”. Olga Kálmán, the party’s spokeswoman, told a press conference on Wednesday that “the year’s biggest austerity measure, Orbán’s inflation” had resulted in the “largest price increases in Europe”. She said the “400% in extra profits the Orbán government made on the price of natural gas” had “caused a serious rise in utility prices for millions of hard-working Hungarians”. Kálmán criticised last December’s lifting of the fuel price cap as “a brutal austerity measure”, adding that the increase of the excise tax would raise the per-litre price of petrol and



diesel by 41 forints. She also slammed next year's "drastic" rise in motorway vignette prices and the "weakening" of state public transport, pointing out that the government had shut down 17 railway lines earlier this year.

"Those who still have some savings left will be forced from July 1 to pay a 13% social contribution tax besides the 15% personal income tax," Kálmán said. Meanwhile, she said the cabinet had lowered the age threshold for eligibility for prenatal baby support loans to below 30 and "scrapped" the CSOK home purchase subsidy scheme. Kálmán said that while annual inflation had reached 18%, pensioners had only received a 3% top-up in November. She added that the government had cut spending on health care by more than 13% and on social services by 12%.

### **LMP CALLS ON GOVT TO RAISE TEACHERS' WAGES FROM JAN 1**

Opposition LMP has called on the government to raise the wages of teachers to 700,000 forints (EUR 1,800) from Jan 1 "as promised by the head of the Prime Minister's Office". Antal Csárdi told a press conference on Wednesday that there was "nothing left to wait for" now that the European Commission has released funding for Hungary. He

said his party had submitted a question to the interior minister querying whether teachers would receive a wage hike given the extraordinary restructuring of funds or if the budget would be amended in parliament's spring session. He added that LMP also wanted to know when the amendment would enter into effect. Csárdi said the 10% pay rise teachers are set to receive from January would still mean that their real wages would decline. "The ball is now in the government's court," he said, noting that it had to raise teachers' wages which would later be covered by the EU.

### **MOMENTUM MEP DONÁTH TO RETURN AS PARTY LEADER**

Anna Donáth, an MEP of opposition Momentum is slated to fill again the post of party leader, the party said on Wednesday. The post has been filled by Ferenc Gelencsér for the past one year and a half, who has now asked Donáth to take up the post again "as she is now standing ready for it again after the birth of her child," Momentum said in a statement. It cited Donáth as saying that she was ready to return as party leader with the mission "to renew the opposition". "We need a strong liberal party that does not bear on voters with

populist promises and does not want cohabitation with pre-2010 politicians on the opposition's side," she said.

### **BIRD FLU IDENTIFIED IN NW HUNGARY**

The national food chain safety office (Nébih) on Wednesday confirmed the presence of a highly pathogenic bird flu virus at a turkey farm in the county of Győr-Sopron, in north-western Hungary. A 3km protection zone as well as a 10km observation zone were established after the virus subtype H5N1 was detected at the farm in Bőny, Nébih said. The stocks in question, 26,500 turkeys, are in the process of being destroyed and an epidemiological investigation is under way, the authority said.

### **MORE THAN 9,600 UKRAINIAN CITIZENS ENTER HUNGARY ON TUESDAY**

Fully 5,222 Ukrainian citizens entered Hungary at the Ukraine-Hungary border on Monday, while 4,468 came to the country via Romania, according to the national police headquarters (ORFK). Police issued temporary residence permits valid for 30 days to 48 people, ORFK said on Wednesday.