

PHOTO OF THE DAY



Russian acrobat Evgenia Zavadskaya at the International Circus Festival in Budapest

UPCOMING EVENTS

Stats office prelim reports on consumer prices in Dec, industrial output in Nov

Events related to the wars in Ukraine, Israel

TOP STORY

HUNGARY, UKRAINE FMS TO MEET

The Hungarian and Ukrainian foreign ministers are slated to meet in Uzhorod (Ungvár) on Jan 29, Péter Szijjártó said.

The Hungarian foreign minister said a Hungary-Ukraine summit “would make sense only” if it was well-prepared. responding to a question at a press conference on another matter, he said that as part of those preparations, Szijjártó and Dmitro Kuleba will meet on Jan 29 to discuss bilateral cooperation and “to examine whether a top-level meeting would further bilateral relations”, and to review the tasks necessary “for a meeting between the leaders of the two countries to have a hope of success”. “I am ready. We have both dedicated January 29 for that meeting in Uzhorod.” He also signalled readiness to meet again Andriy Yermak, the head of the Ukrainian president’s office, “but a proposal of the date is yet to be forthcoming”. Regarding the EU funds withheld from Hungary, Szijjártó warned against conflating issues “that have nothing to do with each other”. “Hungary is entitled to those EU resources, independently from Ukraine...” “Those resources must be paid to Hungary. The European Commission has no right to withhold them,” the foreign minister said.

SZIJJÁRTÓ: EU MUST 'END HYPOCRISY' TO SPEED UP ENLARGEMENT

European Union countries must “stop being hypocritical and deceiving candidate countries” and speed up the bloc’s enlargement, Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó said at a joint press conference with Montenegrin counterpart Filip Ivanović. Szijjártó said Hungary would do everything possible in the interest of speeding up EU enlargement during its presidency of the Council of the EU in the second half of the year. The integration of the Western Balkans remains a priority of Hungarian foreign policy and will be given special attention during Hungary’s presidency, he added.

Szijjártó said the EU was gradually becoming weaker, falling to third place in the global GDP ranking last year, adding that Brussels appeared to be closing itself off rather than engaging in cooperation. “The European Union needs new momentum, new energy and new ambitions, which is something the Western Balkans can bring to the table,” he said. “These countries have the energy, momentum and ambition that could be of great help to the European Union in becoming stronger again.” He urged honesty on the issue of enlargement, lamenting that several member states were “hypocritical” in the matter. He argued that while all member states publicly supported enlargement, when it came time to make a

decision they were “less enthusiastic”. Szijjártó brought up the example of Montenegro as the country with which the EU has opened the most accession chapters. He noted that the country applied for EU membership in 2008 and entered into accession talks in 2012, but the process has yet to be completed in 2024. Szijjártó expressed hope that significant progress could be made in Montenegro’s accession this year, vowing that the Hungarian EU presidency would do everything it could to bring the country closer to EU membership. Hungary has been and will continue to be one of the most staunch supporters [of enlargement],” the minister said, adding that Hungary will continue to support the work of the two Hungarian integration experts working alongside Montenegro’s government.

Meanwhile, Szijjártó praised economic ties between Hungary and Montenegro, saying they contributed to the growth of both countries. He said Hungarian businesses were leaders in two key sectors of Montenegro’s economy. Hungary’s OTP Bank is the largest bank in Montenegro and IT company 4iG is the second biggest telecommunications company, Szijjártó said. The minister also said that Hungary offers scholarships to 35 Montenegrin university students each year. Meanwhile, Szijjártó said 2024 was set to be a critical year, with a record number of elections to be held worldwide amid the current crises and wars. He expressed hope that 2024

could bring about political change that would result in peace-making taking the place of war.

NOVÁK: 'HUNGARY WILL PROVE IT CAN BE A GOOD EUROPEAN COUNCIL PRESIDENT'

Hungary will prove it is capable of “being a good president of the EU Council” when it takes over the presidency in the second half of the year, President Katalin Novák told members of the diplomatic corps accredited to Hungary. Speaking at the event held in Budapest’s Museum of Fine Arts, Novák noted the falling demographic numbers in Europe. While one-fifth of the world’s population was European 50 years ago, now it is only one-tenth, she said. EU member states account for 6% of the planet’s population, and that ratio is expected to fall to 4% by 2070, she said. She said Europe was also losing economic importance. “The question is whether we can change this,” she said.

At the European parliamentary elections this year, 400 million EU citizens will have the opportunity “to determine the direction of European politics,” she said. Hungary will take over the presidency on July 1, shortly after the elections. Its priorities will include the EU’s addressing the demographic challenges and the carrying on with the enlargement process, with special focus on the Western Balkans, she said.

Novák said 2023 had been a difficult year, plagued by wars in Ukraine and Israel, economic woes, political uncertainty and early elections in many countries, environmental disasters, illegal migration, misinformation, the emergence of artificial intelligence on a large-scale, “non-political stakeholders with hidden political ambitions” and the influence of technology companies in a near-monopoly position. “The question is how the international community [and] world leaders will handle these challenges.” Meanwhile, 2024 would be a year of “democracy and elections”, she said. Fully 76 countries will hold elections impacting some 4 billion people. “I hope that the outcome of the elections will be respected everywhere.”

Among the memorable events of 2023, Novák highlighted the apostolic visit of Pope Francis, Budapest hosting the World Athletics Championships, and the Nobel Prizes of Katalin Karikó and Ferenc Krausz. In 2024, Hungary will again host a Demography Summit, as well as the first meeting of female heads of state, she said. Novák said diplomats’ presentation of a country in their own lands was crucial, as they were credible sources of information. She called on the diplomatic corps to seek good relations with Hungary. As a credible source of information, Novák said diplomats were crucial in projecting a favourable image of the country. Archbishop Michael Wallace Banach, the apostolic nuncio to Hungary, lamented the fate of the elderly, women and children suffering

in war-zones or due to other difficulties. He also expressed concern over the wars in Ukraine and Israel, and called for ending the conflicts by negotiation. He said he hoped Hungary would continue to play an active diplomatic role in finding peaceful solutions to international conflicts.

RULING PARTIES HOLD ON TO SUPPORTERS, POLLSTERS FIND

The ruling alliance of Fidesz and the Christian Democrats have held on to their supporters, while the left-wing parties have fewer voters than they did in the 2022 general election, five pollsters said at a roundtable discussion on Thursday. The Center for Fundamental Rights, Társadalomkutató, the Nézőpont Institute, Real-PR 93 and Századvég all found that Fidesz-KDNP, the leftist opposition Democratic Coalition (DK), radical Mi Hazánk and the satirical Two-Tailed Dog Party would be the parties to win seats in the European Parliament election, while some also had liberal Momentum clearing the threshold. The pollsters put Fidesz’s support between 47 and 51%. Four of them found DK to be the leading opposition party with the backing of 11-14% of voters, with Társadalomkutató having DK, Mi Hazánk and the Two-Tailed Dog Party neck-and-neck with 10% each. Mi Hazánk came third in three of the five polls and is supported by 7-10% of voters. Real-PR 93 found the Two-Tailed Dog Party to be the third most

popular behind Fidesz and DK, with 11% support. The other pollsters had the satirical party in fourth place with 8-10%. Nézőpont, Századvég and Real-PR 93 also see Momentum clearing the 5% threshold for EP representation, putting the party’s support between 6 and 8%. Nézőpont Institute director Ágoston Sámuel Mraz said a January poll by the think-tank predicts a record turnout of 55% in the EP elections.

RÉTVÁRI: ‘WAGE HIKES TO BENEFIT TEACHERS ACROSS THE BOARD’

Wage increases will benefit all teachers in Hungary, a government official said on Thursday. Hungary is set to receive EU operative funding of 530 million euros in this year, paving the way for a 32.2% wage hike for school and kindergarten teachers from Jan 1, Bence Rétvári, the interior ministry state secretary, told a press conference. Monthly pay will range between 528,800 forints (EUR 1,395) and 630,000 forints, while teachers who also carry out research will receive 750,000 forints, he said, adding that wages of special needs teachers will increase by 20%. The latest pay rise for teachers was “the biggest” of the post-communist period, he said, adding that another 21% increase would follow next year. The state secretary criticised Hungary’s left wing parties and their MEPs for their “attempts over the past couple of years to block the payment of EU funds”, money that was necessary for implementing the

pay hikes. Announcing the receipt of the EC approval on Wednesday, Gergely Gulyás, the head of the Prime Minister's Office, said that 530 million euros of EU funding would cover 12% of the raise until 2030. István Hollik, the communications director of the ruling Fidesz party, said in a video message that despite the Hungarian left wing's efforts "to obstruct" the payment of EU funds to Hungary, "it is now certain that teachers and kindergarten staff will receive a substantial wage hike ensuring that their salaries amount to 80% of average pay in 2025." He said left wing politicians "stood in line" in Brussels asking the European Commission to keep setting new conditions before making any payments to Hungary, but "their efforts have failed again". "The dollar left has again proved that when it comes to choosing between the interests of Hungary, the wage hikes for teachers and their petty political interests, they always opt for the latter," he said.

BAKONDI: 'NEW EU MIGRATION PACT COULD HAVE SERIOUS CONSEQUENCES'

The EU's new migration pact could have serious consequences for the continent, the prime minister's chief security advisor said. György Bakondi told commercial channel TV2 that the passing of the legislation had been "strange", calling it "a hasty, non-unanimous and clearly politically motivated vote held deliberately early

enough to finalise the issue before this year's EP election". He said that under the pact, migrants aiming for Europe had the option to wait through their application procedure in "migrant centres" in EU territory. "But the western experience is that only 20% of those rejected can in fact be expelled", he said, adding that the new pact could be an incentive for mass migration from Africa and Asia. Bakondi noted that a total of 355,000 migrants had come to Europe on the three main migration routes last year, a record number since 2016, adding that "atrocities were an indication of the serious national and public security threats posed by uncontrolled migration". He noted that Hungarian parliament last month had adopted a law amendment allowing the firing of warning shots to stop violent people who damage the border fence or threaten border guards.

ENERGY MINISTRY: SOLAR ENERGY CAPACITY UP AT 5,600 MW IN 2023

The capacity of Hungary's solar energy producers has grown by more than 50%, or 1,632 MW, to over 5,600 MW in 2023, the energy ministry said. The robust growth means that the capacity originally targeted for 2030 could be available as soon as this year, the statement said. The new target for 2030 is 12 MW, it said. Of the 5,649 MW capacity fed into the system in 2023, 3,332 came from industrial plants and 2,317 MW from households, the statement said. "Not only does the 2023 growth exceed

data from all recorded years so far, but also shows that more solar plants were set up than in the years leading up to 2020 altogether," the statement said. The number of household solar panels has already exceeded the number forecast for 2030 by 25%, it said.

TOURISM AGENCY: GUEST NIGHTS UP BY ONE-FIFTH IN HOLIDAY SEASON

Guest nights spent at Hungarian accommodations rose by 21% at Christmas and were up by 20% at New Year's Eve from a year earlier, the Hungarian Tourism Agency (MTÜ) said on Thursday. Guest nights spent by foreign tourists climbed 27% on New Year's Eve, it added. Between December 24 and 26 last year, 243,000 guest nights were spent in Hungary. Foreign visitors spent 25% more guest nights and Hungarians spent 18% more than a year earlier. Three-quarters of Hungarian tourists spent the festive season at hotel accommodations. Revenue of commercial accommodations increased above expectations. Outside of Budapest, revenues climbed by 23%. Budapest attracted the most foreign visitors -- mainly Italian, Greek and German tourists -- during the Christmas festivities. At New Year's Eve, it was also Italians, Germans and French visitors who spent the most guest nights. Outside of the capital, mostly Austrian, Czech and German tourists spent Christmas at commercial accommodations in Hungary, and Romanian, Czech and Austrian visitors

spent the days around New Year's Eve. Outside of Budapest, Lake Balaton, the Mátra-Bükk hills, the cities of Debrecen and Szeged, and spa towns Bük, Sárospatak, Hajdúszoboszló, Zalakaros and Eger were the most popular destinations.

MI HAZÁNK SAYS IT IS 'ONLY PARTY REJECTING EVERY FORM OF MIGRATION'

Opposition Mi Hazánk "is the only party in Hungary today that rejects every form of migration," its labour spokesman told a press conference. János Lantos cited Sándor Czomba, the economy ministry state secretary in charge of employment policy, as saying in a recent interview that "120,000 guest workers are in Hungary at present, compared with 80,000 in April 2023". "What is this if not mass migration?" Lantos said. "Politicians of ruling Fidesz keep citing the same arguments in favour of importing guest workers as their French and German peers did in the 1960s and 1970s, namely that it is a national economic interest and those people would go home in the end anyway," he said. "But we can see what is happening to western Europe: it has lost entirely its one-time character," Lantos said, asking whether "Fidesz wants the same kind of future for Hungary".

LMP TURNS TO TOP COURT OVER STRATEGIC INVESTMENTS

The opposition LMP party is turning to the Constitutional Court in connection

with a section of the law on buildings related to strategic investments, a party official said. Antal Csárdi, the green party's deputy parliamentary group leader, told a press conference that LMP hoped that other opposition parties would join its initiative, noting that a quarter of MPs can ask the court for a review of legislation. LMP repeatedly submitted a referendum question to the National Election Committee regarding strategic investments, but to no avail, he said, adding that the government was fearful of public opinion on the issue of speeding up such investments, knowing that the law was legally shaky. The classification of an investment as "strategic", he said, was a way of bypassing many regulations and the views of local residents, resulting in the opacity of projects. Csárdi said hopefully the court would declare the contested section of the law on buildings unconstitutional, insisting that it violated the rights of citizens guaranteed by the fundamental law.

MORE THAN 9,000 UKRAINIAN CITIZENS ENTER HUNGARY ON WEDNESDAY

Fully 4,680 Ukrainian citizens entered Hungary at the Ukraine-Hungary border on Wednesday, while 4,734 came to the country via Romania, according to the national police headquarters (ORFK). Police issued temporary residence permits valid for 30 days to 81 people.

SEMMELWEIS U COMPLETES FIRST LIVER TRANSPLANT WITH SHARED DONOR ORGAN IN HUNGARY

A clinic of the Semmelweis University, Budapest, was the first in Hungary to complete two liver transplants from one donor organ in early December, the clinic said on Thursday. The patients were a 3-year-old girl suffering from liver failure of unknown origin, and a 35-year-old man with liver cancer. Both are well, the man is convalescing at home while the girl is still being monitored at the clinic, the Department of Surgery, Transplantation and Gastroenterology said. Meanwhile, the clinic has completed another intervention, where the recipients were a 20-month-old boy and a man with a Hepatitis B infection. They are both well, the statement said.

HUNGARIAN HUNTER AWARDED WEATHERBY AWARD

Béla Hidvégi, a Hungarian hunter who was awarded the Weatherby Award for remarkable achievements in hunting and conservation, had also been an inspiration to the success of the Hunting Expo Budapest hosted in 2021, the state secretary for international relations said. In his laudation at the award ceremony in Dallas, Zoltán Kovács said Hidvégi also excelled in

raising awareness of the “beneficial effects of ethical hunting and its contribution to the protection of wildlife.”

DEBRECEN, MISKOLC TO HOST 2024 EUROPEAN UNIVERSITIES GAMES

The 2024 European Universities Games (EUG) will be hosted by the University of Debrecen and the University of Miskolc, a culture and innovation ministry official announced on Thursday. Hosting the games in Hungary is one of the ways the government “is bringing the whirlwind of international life” to Hungarian universities and “shifting international programmes to a higher gear”, Balázs Hankó, the state secretary for higher education, said at the Educatio international education expo in Budapest. Hankó noted that Hungary aims to have at least one university among the world’s top 100 universities and at least three among the top 100 European higher education institutions by 2030.

CJEU DISMISSES WIZZ AIR APPEAL

The Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) has dismissed an appeal by Hungary’s Wizz Air concerning a 36.6 million euro state rescue loan for Romanian airline TAROM cleared by the European Commission in February 2020. The General Court had dismissed an earlier challenge by Wizz Air of the state aid in May 2022, ruling that the loan was compatible with the internal market because it was intended to prevent social hardship or market failure that could be caused by a disruption of TAROM’s services for the connectivity of Romanian regions, but Wizz Air appealed the judgement. In the decision on Thursday, the CJEU dismissed that appeal and confirmed the judgement of the General Court.

In its case, Wizz Air had noted that it was the biggest airline in Romania in terms of share of seat capacity in 2019, with 40.8% on domestic routes, while TAROM’s market share was just 15.3%.

JÓN KALMAN STEFÁNSSON, FRANCE TO BE GUESTS OF HONOUR AT BUDAPEST INTL BOOK FESTIVAL

Icelandic novelist Jón Kalman Stefánsson and France will be the guests of honour at the 29th Budapest International Book Festival to be held from Sept 26 to 29, organisers said on Thursday. Jón Kalman is a world-renowned figure of contemporary Icelandic literature with multiple international accolades to his name, the Hungarian Publishers’ and Booksellers’ Association said in a statement. In 2011, he was awarded the Per Olov Enquist Literary Prize. In 2017, his novel Fish Have No Feet was nominated for the International Booker Prize, and in 2022, it won France’s Prix du Meilleur Livre Étranger for best foreign book. Jón Kalman first attended the Budapest International Book Festival in 2018.