

PHOTO OF THE DAY



PM Viktor Orbán meets Slovak counterpart Robert Fico in Budapest

MTI/PM's press office/Vivien Cher Benkő

UPCOMING EVENTS

EP holds plenary session

President Novák at the Davos Economic Forum

Events related to the wars in Ukraine, Israel

TOP STORY

ORBÁN: HUNGARY-SLOVAKIA RELATIONS AT HIGH POINT

Hungary-Slovakia relations are at a high point as one backs the other in the European Union in economic and energy-security terms, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán said after talks with Slovak counterpart Robert Fico in Budapest on Tuesday.

At a joint press conference, Orbán welcomed Fico's return to office, adding that "we have long been waiting for this meeting". He noted that their first bilateral meeting had taken place in April 2012 with the current one being the 33rd, "perhaps a European record". Orbán said continuity, security and stability were the most important political values, calling long-term bilateral relations such as that of Hungary and Slovakia "highly valuable" which he said were serving the interests of both countries' peoples.

Orbán said that the interests of Hungary and Slovakia were "at least 99% in the same direction", and sovereignty was important for both countries. "On Hungary's part -- and I sense identical feelings here -- we are unhappy about Brussels' initiatives for a super state; we are not at all happy about efforts to make illegal migration legitimate, and we want to protect our borders and have a say about who we allow to enter the country," Orbán said. He also thanked Fico for Slovakia's police presence at the southern borders of Hungary.

ORBÁN: HUNGARY-SLOVAKIA ECONOMIC COOPERATION THRIVING

In terms of economic cooperation, Orbán welcomed as “fantastic data” that Slovakia is Hungary’s 3rd largest trading partner with a steady annual volume of 15 billion euros worth of bilateral trade. He noted that Hungary ensures the transit route for oil supplies to Slovakia while receives one-fourth of its electricity imports via that country. The agreement concluded with the Slovak prime minister in 2014 has been fully implemented, Orbán said, noting the opening of 20 new border crossings in addition to the existing 20 which he said “have greatly contributed to a tangible improvement of the quality of life of those living in the border area”. “Today, we also agreed on preparing a second Hungarian-Slovak cooperation package and decided to set up a committee tasked with the coordination,” said Orbán.

ORBÁN: HUNGARY EXPERIENCED IN FULFILLING EU PRESIDENCY

Regarding the approaching Hungarian EU presidency, Orbán said Hungary had experience in filling that post, albeit “in less

explosive times”. “We have an experience in representing national interests without harming the mediating role of the European Council president.” The EU affairs ministers of Slovakia and Hungary will cooperate closely in the while Hungary is preparing for the role, he said. In connection with European Council President Charles Michel leaving his post to run in the EP elections, Orbán said neither he nor his ruling Fidesz party had any ambition to fill “any European post”.

Asked about the EU summit set for Feb 1, Orbán said its agenda would focus on ways of further supporting Ukraine and the related modification of the common EU budget. Orbán said giving Ukraine 50 billion euros for four years in advance would mean that resources the member states are entitled to would also land in Ukraine. Any financial instrument for aiding Ukraine should be set up outside the EU budget, he said. He agreed that Ukraine needed further help, but said further assistance “should not hurt the EU budget”. “Hungary does not want to take out a joint loan, but it is ready to provide its share from central budget resources. If Brussels accepts this proposal, Ukraine will receive help from outside the [EU] budget, but if not, I will need to stop the whole process,” Orbán said. Regarding amendments to the EU budget, “Hungary is ready to support all points that are important for Slovakia,” he said.

FICO: SLOVAKIA AGAINST CURBING HUNGARY’S RIGHTS IN EU

Slovakia does not back the curbing of Hungary’s rights in the European Union, and “will never agree to a country being penalised for fighting for sovereignty and national independence,” Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico said in Budapest on Tuesday. Speaking after talks with Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, Fico told a joint press conference that developments “around Hungary and Slovakia” in the EU were reason for concern. The EP was planning to adopt a declaration on changes to the Slovak Penal Code and on the country abolishing the special prosecutor’s office, he said. Fico also slammed the Slovak opposition, saying “they harm the entire country just so they can harm the government.” Slovakia is monitoring the situation around Hungary too, as there have been proposals to strip the country of its voting and other rights, Fico said. He pledged to oppose any measures “aiming to punish countries for fighting for national independence and sovereignty.”

Fico said Slovakia also rejected the EU migration pact, and agreed with Orbán’s stance on the war in Ukraine and on the role of the Visegrad Group. Hungary’s rights can only be curbed with a consensus of all member states, “and I, President Robert Fico of Slovakia, shall never agree to such an

attack, because it would be contrary to my stance on the protection of sovereignty and national interests," he said. Fico invited Orbán to visit Slovakia, praised Hungary's proposals on the EU budget and support for Ukraine as "intelligent and sensible", and said Slovakia would back those proposals. Despite belonging to different political factions, Fico said he agreed with Orbán's stance on rejecting the migration pact, Ukraine and the future of the Visegrad Group, as well as Europe's future. He thanked Hungary's help in protecting Slovak airspace.

Regarding aid for Ukraine, Fico said Slovakia would continue to provide humanitarian aid but will reject delivering weapons.

Meanwhile, Slovakia would like to allocate more EU funding to the fight against illegal migration and the secondary effects of the war in Ukraine, he said. "It is tragic that the Visegrad Group has been hobbled," he said, and called on the Czech prime minister to convene a meeting of the heads of government of Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia "on matters concerning all four member states". On the future of the EU, Fico said scrapping the veto rights of member states and introducing majority decision-making in important security and political issues "would be the beginning of the end". On bilateral ties between Hungary and Slovakia, Fico called for opening further border crossings and said the Slovak government was planning to

hold sessions outside of Parliament, including the regions inhabited by ethnic Hungarians. The ombudsman for ethnic minorities will also be an ethnic Hungarian, he added.

FIDESZ MEP SLAMS EU 'DOUBLE STANDARDS' ON POLAND

Balázs Hidvéghi, an MEP of ruling Fidesz, on Tuesday slammed the European Union for applying "double standards" and remaining silent in the face of "blatant violations of the rule of law in Poland". Hidvéghi insisted the recently elected Polish government headed by former European Council President Donald Tusk had launched a political revenge campaign against its opponents. "It's trampling down on the principle of the rule of law of democracy. It's attacking independent organisations like the media or the courts and there is not even a question raised in this house about that," Hidvéghi said in a video of his speech in the EP posted on Facebook on Tuesday.

Tusk's government is not threatened with an Article 7 procedure, Hidvéghi said. "This is a textbook example of the double standards on the rule of law," he said, calling for respect for the same. "When your friend breaks the rules, you need to raise your voice, just as much as when you think somebody else does it." Hidvéghi wrote in the post of the video: "The Tusk government has demolished the Polish rule of law in a matter of weeks. And yet, no

procedures from Brussels. Just because it's a pal of theirs doing it. In times of the earlier right-wing government, a baseless accusation was enough..."

FINMIN: HUNGARY COULD BE AMONG EU COUNTRIES WITH HIGHEST ECONOMIC GROWTH IN 2024

The latest European Commission growth forecast shows that Hungary could be among EU countries with the highest economic growth in 2024, Finance Minister Mihály Varga said on Tuesday. The projected 2.4% growth for Hungary is well above the EU average of 1.3%, he told MTI. Varga, who attended a meeting of economic and financial ministers in Brussels, said EU member states placed an emphasis on competitiveness and wanted Europe to be set on a growth path. The EC projection of 2.4% growth was "good news", though the Hungarian government's projected 3.6% "is even higher", he said. "We very much trust that this will go together with an increase in competitiveness," he added.

Commenting on 50 billion euros financing to be offered to Ukraine, he said Hungary's position was that an annual review would be necessary, involving an assessment of how much support was needed and the utilisation of support received. A decision on support for the following year could then be made on the basis of the annual assessment, he added. "We ended the meeting with the hope

that during the [Feb 1] summit, when a final decision is made on the tool, Hungary's proposal will be assessed," he said. "Efforts must be made for the EU to prepare a solution acceptable to all countries," he added.

FIDESZ MP: HUNGARY EU PRESIDENCY PRIORITIES DEMOGRAPHY, COMPETITIVENESS

The Hungarian EU presidency's priorities will be addressing demographic challenges and competitiveness, Judit Varga, the (Fidesz) chairwoman of parliament's European affairs committee, said on Monday. Also, the issue of EU enlargement is important for Hungary, Varga said in a statement after participating in a meeting of the network of national parliamentary EU committee heads (Cosac) in Namur, in Belgium. She noted that Western Balkan countries have been waiting for 20 years to become EU member states, adding that accession should be based on merit, and "the double standard" of fast-tracking some candidates should be avoided. Hungary, Varga said, showed utter solidarity with Ukraine, and 1.5 million refugees crossed Hungary's borders since the war's inception. At the same time, no candidate country should be freed of observing the basic requirements of accession, she said. Meanwhile, she said the European Parliament was "once again" fomenting tensions in connection with Hungary. Varga said

the European Commission had given Hungary's justice system a clean bill of health, and "Hungary now has the most modern justice system that meets European standards," adding that 10.2 billion of EU funds were unfrozen. "The left-wing majority" of the EP, she said, was now preparing "another attack" with the intention of triggering the section of Article 7 on the withdrawal of Hungary's voting rights. Varga said the EP was acting beyond its remit since it was only the Council or the EC that could initiate such a procedure. She said the move was "political blackmail" and "an open political attack".

Regarding the proposal to grant Ukraine 50 billion euros in EU support, she noted that Hungary earlier criticised the plan "with rational arguments", but had also put forward constructive proposals, such as extending the financing outside of the EU budget. Questions arose regarding the amount and duration of the support, she added. Meanwhile, Varga said that "change in Brussels" was needed, "and sovereignist forces can act as the catalyst" for this to happen. A right-wing victory, she added, was needed to overturn ideology-driven politics that dominated EU institutions.

BÓKA ADVOCATES 'EU FINANCING ITS OWN UKRAINE STRATEGY'

Rather than financing Ukraine directly, the European Union should put money into its Ukraine strategy

which may include financial or other aid to Ukraine, János Bóka, Hungary's European affairs minister, told daily Corriere della Sera during a visit to Italy on Tuesday. Quoting from his interview, Bóka said on Facebook that the Hungarian government had proposed strategic negotiations concerning the EU's Ukrainian policy because "the earlier strategy, based on the assumption that Ukraine would win on the battleground and that would bring about a political change in Russia, has not worked and we have to adapt to that." The Hungarian government, he said, proposed "a more conservative planning approach" than the European Commission's proposal of granting Ukraine financing for four years ahead. Shorter periods, with a review at the end of each, would be necessary, he said. Hungary has also proposed that EU members and international financiers should volunteer to set up a special fund, he added.

Meanwhile, Bóka said it was in Hungary's strategic interest "to have a stable entity between Hungary and Russia, an entity which is as committed as possible to European structures." The conflict between Russia and Ukraine could only be resolved politically, "there being no military solution", Bóka said, and he underlined Hungary's call for an immediate ceasefire and talks between the parties. Bóka said there was no connection between the cause of European aid to Ukraine and issues around frozen EU funds. "We fully comply with the rules enabling us

to receive the European funds due to Hungary,” he said. Concerning the Hungarian prime minister, Bóka said Viktor Orbán was “one of the most important conservative points of reference in Europe, irrespective of which party group his Fidesz party joins.”

GÁL: CEASEFIRE, FAIR, LASTING PEACE NEEDED IN UKRAINE AS SOON AS POSSIBLE

The European Union and the Belgian presidency of the Council of the EU must consider achieving a ceasefire and peace talks resulting in a lasting and fair peace in Ukraine a priority, the head of ruling Fidesz’s group in the European Parliament said on Tuesday. Kinga Gál told Hungarian journalists after a debate on the Belgian presidency’s programme and help for Ukraine that financial support for Ukraine was important but it was necessary to clarify first how much money had been spent on the war already and how this support had been used. Hungary would not support the plan to take out a joint EU loan for helping Ukraine, she said. “The situation involving a prolonged war makes it difficult to plan ahead for four years; it is difficult to tell what type of financing Ukraine will need,” she said. It would be important to review the support annually, and European leaders should discuss this proposal at the extraordinary meeting to be held on Feb 1, she added.

The Belgian presidency should return to the discussion of “Brussels’ forced and faulty migration pact” because the consequences of Europe’s migration policy “are now suffered by innocent people in the streets of western Europe, while anti-Semitism is growing stronger,” she said. “Fundamental changes are needed to stop illegal migration at the external borders,” she said. “Member states that protect external borders should receive financial support from Brussels,” she added. She called for an end to “double standards concerning the rule of law in EU decision-making”. She said it was unacceptable that Hungary was regularly targeted while “Brussels has been deeply silent for weeks about violations of the law in Warsaw.” She expressed hope that the EP elections in June would bring about change and “the sovereigntist side can finally put an end to Brussels’ hypocrisy”.

FIDESZ MEP WELCOMES NEW EU REGULATIONS ON GREEN LABELLING

Fidesz MEP Edina Tóth, a member of the European Parliament’s Committee on Environment, Public Health and Food Safety (ENVI), welcomed the new EU regulations to be introduced against “greenwashing” in a speech on Tuesday. Tóth told a plenary session of the European Parliament that the new regulations would be an effective tool to ban misleading green labelling because it will require producers

to prove with a certificate that their products are environment friendly. “Generalisations and unauthenticated labelling such as eco, bio-based or climate friendly will no longer be possible to use,” she told the debate in Strasbourg. Tóth also welcomed that the new regulations will also ban double quality which she said would end the practice that consumers in central and eastern Europe were treated as “second-rate citizens” in the EU.

AGRIMIN: FARM SUBSIDIES ENSURED FOR 2024

Farm subsidies will be ensured in 2024, the minister of agriculture said on Tuesday, pledging 650 billion forints (EUR 1.7bn) of central budget funding to complement European Union rural development monies. Speaking at his year-opening press conference, István Nagy said EU sanctions against Russia and “the dumping of Ukrainian imports on the EU” were challenging, but the achievements of recent years underpinned the expectation that Hungarian agriculture would continue to thrive. The minister said agricultural subsidies awarded to Hungarian producers hit a record high in 2023, exceeding a total 1,300 billion forints, and thanks to central budget co-financing, the government had managed to hand over subsidies in 2024 that were generous “even by European standards”. The Hungarian government is planning to retain its ban on Ukrainian imports in 2024, and “relies on support from other

EU members”, the minister said. Ukraine’s possible accession to the EU would seriously impact European producers since “they could not compete with Ukraine’s farms of hundreds of thousands of hectares”, he added. The minister said ensuring subsidies and subsidised loans to farmers would continue to be a government priority. “While in other states of Europe producers are faced with cuts, in Hungary both large and small farms are offered opportunities to become more efficient,” he said. Hungary’s agricultural tenders “are transparent and predictable”, he added. Those tenders will ensure a total 1,500 billion forints for economic developments and 1,000 billion forints for projects “to build a green future”, the minister said.

Concerning Hungary’s European Union presidency in the second half of the year, Nagy said the government had “clear-cut” plans. The six months available must be used “to revise crisis-management measures with special regard to market and climatic conditions, and Europe’s food security,” he said. Fast changes necessitate boosting agricultural and food research to increase adaptability, he said, adding that increasing effectiveness, building systems to ensure joint purchases and sensibly using resources were top priorities. Shifting to specialised production or ecological production could be a viable option for many farms, the minister said, adding that such products would also apply for assistance from next year on.

WINTERMANTEL CALLS ON KARÁCSONY TO GIVE ANSWERS IN LANCHID REVAMP ‘SCANDAL’

Gergely Karácsony, the mayor of Budapest, must give answers in connection with a “scandal” surrounding the recent revamp of the city’s landmark Chain Bridge, the Fidesz-Christian Democrats group leader in Budapest, Zsolt Wintermantel, said on Tuesday. Wintermantel said on Facebook that the mayor had remained silent for several weeks, despite reports of a tax office raid of the company that Karácsony had opted for to carry out the project. He said the revamp ended up costing 5 billion forints (EUR 13.2m) more than originally budgeted, even though less work had been completed than originally planned. Wintermantel also insisted that the relevant company had been mired in scandal involving the use of false receipts for tax purposes. “Gergely Karácsony owes Budapest residents answers,” he said.

DK CALLS FOR EXCLUDING GOVT POLITICIANS FROM FOUNDATIONS OVERSEEING UNIVERSITIES

All politicians of the ruling parties should be excluded from the foundations that oversee universities in Hungary, while the assets of those universities should again be put under state control, the spokesman

of the opposition Democratic Coalition (DK) said on Tuesday. Balázs Barkóczi reacted to a government announcement of the launch of a programme aimed to boost international research cooperation involving Hungarian universities dubbed HU-rizont. Barkóczi noted that Hungarian students could not participate in the Erasmus exchange and researchers in the EU’s Horizon programme “because the government has captured universities and privatised them as foundations”. Launching HU-rizont, “a DIY scheme to replace Horizon” reflects that “the government has accepted that Hungary has been left out of European education and research cooperation programmes,” Barkóczi said. MEPs of DK will on Tuesday support a position in the European Parliament aimed at calling on the Hungarian government “to abide with the rule of law and implement reforms facilitating Hungary’s participation in the Horizon and Erasmus programmes,” Barkóczi said.

TRIAL OF VIKING IDUN CAPTAIN STARTS

Topal F, the captain of Viking Idun, the sister vessel of the Viking Sigyn which caused a deadly accident on the Danube in 2019, pleaded not guilty in the trial hearing the charge that he neglected to provide aid during the accident. In the accident on May 29, 2019, the Viking Sigyn cruise ship collided with the Hableány

sightseeing boat which had 33 South Korean tourists on board and a crew of two Hungarians. Seven tourists were rescued from the water after the collision and the rest died. One of the bodies has not been recovered. According to his testimony made earlier and read in court on Monday, the Viking Idun passed the Viking Sigyn twice around the time of the accident, but the crew had detected no trouble. Visibility had been extremely restricted due to bad weather and the manoeuvre they were performing, Topal F said. Radio communications from the smaller vessels that had witnessed the accident were all in Hungarian rather than German, the official language of Danube sailing, and the Ukrainian captain said he had not been able not discern what

had happened. Yuriy Chaplinsky, the captain of Viking Sigyn which was directly involved in the accident, was sentenced to 5.5 years in prison in 2023 for negligence by endangering river traffic and causing a lethal accident. He was not sentenced on charges of failing to provide aid to the victims.

OVER 7,700 UKRAINIAN CITIZENS ENTER HUNGARY ON MONDAY

Fully 3,823 Ukrainian citizens entered Hungary at the Ukraine-Hungary border on Monday, while 3,926 came to the country via Romania, according to the national police headquarters (ORFK). Police issued temporary residence permits valid for 30 days to 29 people, ORFK said on Tuesday.

N HUNGARY SUZUKI PLANT SUSPENDS PRODUCTION BETWEEN JAN 15 AND 21

Suzuki Magyarország's plant in Esztergom, in northern Hungary, is suspending production between Jan 15 and 21, the company's communications head said on Monday. The measure was prompted by delays of the delivery of engines for Vitara and S-Cross models, which are manufactured in Japan, due to attacks on commercial ships by Houthi rebels on the Red Sea, Zsuzsanna Bonnár-Csonka said. The ships are being rerouted, and production is expected to resume on Jan 22, she said.