

PHOTO OF THE DAY



Closing event of project dubbed traffic training and testing centre

UPCOMING EVENTS

European Parliament holds plenary session

Events related to the wars in Ukraine, Israel

TOP STORY

KOVÁCS: BRUSSELS 'ABUSING EU FUNDS'

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen has "admitted" that the EU has withheld funds from Hungary "with regard to LGBTQ rights and migration", the state secretary in charge of international communication said.

"Brussels is trying to blackmail us to accept their LGBTQ and migration rules," Zoltán Kovács said on Facebook on Wednesday, suggesting that the EU was "abusing" its powers over community funds. Kovács quoted von der Leyen as saying in the European Parliament earlier in the day that some 20 billion euros for Hungary would stay frozen due to issues around gay rights, the freedom of higher education, and concerns about refugee rights. Kovács said it was "ironic" that gay rights and migration policy, as well as the freedom of higher education and research were national competencies ... "areas in which the EU has no power whatsoever." The state secretary said the Hungarian people had backed the government's position on both matters in two separate referendums. He said Hungary's child protection law, "which Brussels calls the LGBTQ law is actually about the protection of our children", while migration policy "is way beyond the red line". "There will be no compromise over those two issues," Kovács added.

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VON DER LEYEN: EC TO WITHHOLD EUR 20 BN UNTIL HUNGARY 'FULFILS ALL REQUIREMENTS'

While Hungary has fulfilled requirements on judicial reform, the EU will continue to withhold some 20 billion euros of cohesion funds until other concerns are addressed, Ursula von der Leyen, the European Commission president, said on Wednesday. Speaking in the European Parliament's plenary debate on the state of the rule of law in Hungary, Von der Leyen said Hungarian legislation on judicial reform guaranteed judicial independence and curbed the danger of political interference. "Hungary did what we asked," she said. At the same time, resources frozen due to concerns over the rights of sexual minorities, academic freedom and asylum rights would be withheld until Hungary fulfilled those requirements, she added.

The EC president said that the EU had always aimed to foster changes in member states that improved the life of all Europeans. Meanwhile, Hungary has received pre-financing from the resources of the REPowerEU funds, earmarked for programmes aiding economic recovery. REPowerEU funds are disbursed unconditionally to all member states, she noted. The EC will continue to monitor the use of the funds to protect the interests of the EU and its budget, she added.

Von der Leyen also touched on the situation in Ukraine, noting that in the span of months, Kyiv adopted new legislation on expanding the rights of ethnic minorities, developing the judiciary and on curbing the influence of oligarchs. She said those "significant results" showed Ukraine's commitment to Europe, adding that Ukraine's democratic institutions were fulfilling the "aspirations of their people as well as our recommendations".

Belgian Foreign Minister Hadja Lahbib said Belgium, which took over the EU's rotating presidency on Jan 1, was concerned about the state of the rule of law in Europe. To avoid any further infringements, the Article 7 procedure against Hungary would be pursued even as the presidency engaged in dialogue with the Hungarian government, she said. Maintaining the rule of law and introducing institutional reforms to protect the EU's budget would be key to Hungary gaining access to EU funds, she added.

FIDESZ MEP CALLS ON EU TO 'PAY EVERY EURO CENT' HUNGARY IS ENTITLED TO

Hungary must receive "every euro cent" it is entitled to "without further delay", an MEP of ruling Fidesz said on Wednesday, adding that "ideological blackmail" was unacceptable. Balázs Hidvéghi said at the European Parliament's plenary session in a debate on the rule of law in Hungary that the EP wanted to suspend the

country's voting rights because they didn't agree on important political matters. This "is an absolute new low", he said, adding: "that is a dictatorship." Regarding Ukraine, Hidvéghi called for an immediate ceasefire and peace talks. Member states should support Ukraine independently from the EU's budget, and not from a joint loan, he said, adding that Hungary was ready to contribute to such a facility from its own budget resources.

Fidesz MEP Ádám Kósa noted that according to the European Commission, Hungary has fulfilled all rule of law requirements regarding the judiciary, and warned that the EP had "no role in those issues". He also slammed the European leftist parties for a "revenge campaign" against Hungary solely because a Christian Democrat, civic government had won four consecutive elections there with a two-thirds support. "If MEPs indeed apply no double standards, they should stand up against violations of the law in Poland, to show they are truly concerned for the rule of law."

Katalin Cseh, an MEP of opposition Momentum, said the EC was unaware of the "damage it has done by giving in to Viktor Orbán's blackmail." She said the step had "invited not just Orbán, but every single aspiring European autocrat to follow the same old extortionist tactics." Besides the judiciary reform praised by the EC, Hungary also adopted a Sovereignty Protection Act, which she said would hinder the work of international NGOs, gag free media and everyone who

would “stand up against this regime”. “The European Parliament will not stay silent; we will remain the only protector of democratic values among the EU institutions,” she said.

Márton Gyöngyösi, an MEP of the opposition Jobbik - Conservatives, called it “extremely detrimental” to Hungary that “Orbán’s politics resulted in such initiatives as the suspension of voting rights in the EU Council, stripping Hungary of the EU presidency, or withholding EU funds.” While the EU institutions stood up for democratic values, “they also override sections of the treaties with politically motivated initiatives,” he warned. “If they really want to do something against Orbán and his regime, they shouldn’t shame Hungary as a whole and propose measures that hit all Hungarians, but rather ones targeting the leader of the regime and his oligarchs,” Gyöngyösi said.

SZIJJÁRTÓ: GENOCIDE CHARGE AGAINST ISRAEL ‘NONSENSE’

The genocide charge against Israel “is nonsense”, the foreign minister said in Jerusalem on Wednesday, pledging Hungary’s full support for the country in all forums where it is under attack for its counter-terrorist operations launched in response to the “hellish” October 7 attack. “Such accusations against a country that had to face such a hellish terrorist attack is clearly nonsense,” Péter Szijjártó said after talks with Israeli counterpart Israel

Katz, adding that successful Israeli counter-terrorist operations were “in the interest of the entire world”. Szijjártó said that whereas outsiders “from hundreds or thousands of kilometres away” may see Israel’s actions as a geopolitical issue or an armed conflict in need of a resolution, it was clear from close up that the conflict was made up of “thousands ... of human tragedies”. “So Hungary will stand up for Israel in all forums where it is attacked for its counter-terrorist operations,” he said. Szijjártó called on the international community to support Israel’s manoeuvres to enable the region to return to “the path of the Abraham Accords”, which he said offered an opportunity to normalise the situation in the Middle East. “One of the goals of the attacks against Israel was clearly to stop that normalisation procedure, and to further poison relations in the Middle East,” the minister said.

Further, the international community must work to avoid escalation, he said. Unless it gets the Islamist militant group Hezbollah to withdraw from the border between Israel and Lebanon, “the danger of escalation is dire”, he said. Szijjártó said he had talked to his Lebanese counterpart, Abdallah Bou Habib, on several occasions, and Habib had also emphasised the importance of avoiding the conflict’s escalation.

Hungary’s foreign minister said the third big task before the international community was to ensure that the hostages taken by Hamas were freed. Of the five Hungarian citizens taken

by Hamas, three are now free, one remains in captivity and one has died, Szijjártó said. The government is doing everything in its power to free the last Hungarian hostage, too, and remains in contact with the Qatari authorities that play a key role in negotiations, he said.

Szijjártó said the tasks of the international community were to conclude a successful counter-terrorist operation and foster a return to normalisation. Hezbollah must be turned back from the Israeli-Lebanese border and the hostages freed, Szijjártó said. “Hungary is doing everything it can,” he added.

The conflict also showed the importance of keeping channels of communications open, he said. Szijjártó cautioned against allowing the conflict to escalate to the point of the outbreak of a third world war. Warning that Hungary was living in the shadow of a similar threat, he said: “If the war in Ukraine and the conflict in the Middle East escalate, only the good Lord can save the world from the consequences.”

PRESIDENT NOVÁK IN DAVOS: PREVENTING ESCALATION OF UKRAINE WAR ‘VITALLY IMPORTANT’

It is vitally important to avoid a third world war and prevent the escalation of the war in Ukraine, President Katalin Novák told a panel discussion at the World Economic Forum in Davos on Wednesday. Answering a question by the chair of the panel entitled

Defending Europe's United Front, Novák argued in favour of the EU continuing to help Ukraine in order to prevent Russia from winning the war, and she said Hungary continued to support this aim.

Novák noted that neither NATO nor the EU were military participants in the war, and, she added, this must remain the case. "We mustn't get involved militarily in the conflict," she said, adding that it was vitally important to preserve peace and security.

Asked about Ukraine's chances of winning the war and whether Ukraine's victory was key to maintaining Europe's security, Novák said: "Russia cannot win". Novák said Russia's aggression must be condemned and it must be stated clearly which side was the aggressor and which one was being attacked. "It is clear that Russia has crossed the Rubicon," she said. Russia's aggression had a direct impact on Hungary due to its geographic location and in light of the ethnic Hungarian community living in western Ukraine, Novák said. "War and aggression cannot be a solution," she said. Hungary has signed up to the peace plan put forward by Ukraine, she noted, adding that work must be done to establish peace.

On Tuesday, Novák met European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen. "We had to discuss many difficult issues," Novák said on Facebook. The talks focused on Hungarian youth and the Erasmus+ programme, she said. "I hope that

Hungarian students won't be stripped of the opportunities brought about by studies abroad."

DEUTSCH: 'EP ATTACKING HUNGARY OVER ITS REJECTION OF MIGRATION, GENDER MADNESS'

The European Parliament "is attacking" Hungary because it rejects migration and the "gender madness" and stands by its position calling for an immediate ceasefire and peace talks as regards the war in Ukraine, Tamás Deutsch, an MEP of ruling Fidesz, said in Strasbourg on Wednesday, after participating in an EP plenary debate on the rule of law in Hungary. Speaking to Hungarian journalists, Deutsch noted European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen "making it clear" during the debate that Brussels would continue to withhold part of the EU funding until Hungary changed its position on migration and "the gender ideology madness." "This is something that has been denied over many years, but now had to be admitted by the EC president, too," he said.

As regards the extraordinary EU summit called for February 1, Deutsch indicated Hungary's readiness to provide further assistance to Ukraine, adding however that Hungary's position was that any financial support should be extended independently of the EU's budget. "Hungary does not want to take out a joint loan, but it is ready to make contributions from its national budget," he said. He reiterated

Hungary's firm position calling for an immediate ceasefire and starting peace talks, "no matter how loud the voice of the pro-war camp is." Deutsch said he and fellow Fidesz MEP Kinga Gál had written a joint letter to EP President Roberta Metsola and European Court of Auditors President Tony Murphy, asking them for a scrutiny of remarks made recently by Finnish MEP Petri Sarvamaa, who Deutsch said had called Fidesz and the Hungarian right "Nazis".

FINMIN: HUNGARY RECEIVES ANOTHER EUR 140 M IN EU FUNDING

Hungary received 140 million euros transferred by Brussels on Wednesday in pre-financing grants under the EU's Resilience and Recovery Facility (RRF), the finance minister said on Facebook. With this transfer, over the past week Hungary has received a total of 1.4 billion euros in unfrozen EU funding, Mihály Varga said. At the end of December, 779.5 million euros were transferred in RRF funding and earlier this month another 445 million euros arrived as part of the EU 2021-2027 budget cycle, he said.

DEUTSCH: 'DOLLAR LEFT SEEKING TO BLOCK HUNGARIAN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' STUDY OPPORTUNITIES'

Fidesz MEP Tamás Deutsch said on Tuesday that "Hungarian MEPs of Momentum linked to the dollar left

are working to prevent Hungarian university students, researchers and professors from participating in EU student programmes". In a video, Deutsch noted that the plenary session of the European Parliament adopted a proposal on the EU's Erasmus programme that included "an amendment with a shocking content" submitted prior to the vote by Momentum MEPs Katalin Cseh and Anna Donáth. "They initiated that Hungarian students should not have access to the EU's education and scientific programmes," he said, adding that "Hungarian students and professors have the right to know this".

The plenary session adopted a report about the implementation of the Erasmus+ 2021-2027 programme and related challenges. It also adopted an amendment submitted by a group of Renew Europe MEPs including Donáth, Cseh and France's Laurence Farreng and Germany's Moritz Körner. The amendment calls on the Hungarian government to observe the rule of law and basic EU values and to implement reforms required for Hungarian participation in the Erasmus+ schemes. The plenary however voted against another amendment submitted by MEPs of Fidesz, the allied ruling Christian Democrats and Romania's ethnic Hungarian RMDSZ party. The amendment called for "fair, lawful and transparent procedures agreed on with the European Commission that allow Hungarian students, teachers and researchers to fully benefit from

the Erasmus+ programme". In their statement, the Fidesz MEPs said that "initiated by the dollar left's MEPs, the EP continues its political blackmail by unlawfully withholding EU funds Hungarian students, researchers and professors are entitled to".

GOVT OFFICIAL: DIASPORA PROGRAMME TO BE ANNOUNCED ALSO FOR 2024

The Prime Minister's Office, in partnership with the Rákóczi Alliance, is organising this year's Diaspora Programme, Árpád János Potápi, the prime ministerial state secretary for Hungarian communities abroad, said on Wednesday. The scheme launched in 2016 is tailored to reach the around 2-2.5 million diaspora Hungarians who want to preserve their national identity, Hungarian language and culture, he told a press conference. Its aim is "to bring back" young Hungarians to the Carpathian Basin and the mother country, and teach them about the birth place of their ancestors, Potápi said. He noted that in its second year more than a thousand diaspora Hungarians applied to participate, and almost 700 young people from 32 countries attended summer camps and programmes last year. Potápi said an online platform was launched for the Diaspora Programme on Wednesday with details posted in Hungarian and English. Various programmes are open for application until March 15.

SOCIALISTS STRIVE FOR A HUNGARY OF CLOSE-KNIT COMMUNITIES

The opposition Socialist Party has pledged to create a Hungary of close-knit communities able to handle issues such as housing, education, health, security, the environment, the elderly, families, local councils as part of the European Union. Europe should be strengthened, but this required stronger local communities and local councils rather than "more Brussels", Kata Tüttő, head of the Socialists' European Parliament list, said in a video posted on Facebook on Wednesday. She added that it was not a case of "either Hungary or Europe", but of "Hungary and Europe", and the number-one priority was to ensure EU funds were unfrozen.

Tüttő said the Socialists had "brought Hungary into the EU" and now it was working to make sure it stayed in the bloc. Countries in which local councils were well-functioning showed greater resilience in times of crisis, she insisted, adding that European social democracy needed strengthening, and a path must be forged along which every member of the community could progress, a path built on security, equal opportunity, sustainability and solidarity. The Socialist politician also said that women needed an EU

that understood them and saw issues such as security, family, work and the future of children through their eyes.

MORE THAN 8,000 UKRAINIAN CITIZENS ENTER HUNGARY ON TUESDAY

Fully 4,052 Ukrainian citizens entered Hungary at the Ukraine-Hungary border on Tuesday, while 4,265 came to the country via Romania, according to the national police headquarters (ORFK). Police issued temporary residence permits valid for 30 days to 51 people, ORFK said on Wednesday.

WIZZ AIR TO RESUME BUDAPEST-TEL AVIV FLIGHTS IN MARCH

Hungarian low cost carrier Wizz Air will re-launch its Budapest-Tel Aviv flight on March 1 and operate the service three times a week, it said on Wednesday. Wizz Air suspended its flights from Budapest and Debrecen on Oct 7 because of the air strikes launched by Israel, the airline said in a statement. Wizz Air will launch flights to Tel Aviv also from Bucharest, Kraków, London-Luton, Rome-Fiumicino and from Sofia in the spring, it said.

BIRD FLU DETECTED IN SW HUNGARY

The H5N1 avian influenza subtype has been identified in samples from a turkey farm in Somogy County, in south-western Hungary, food safety authority Nébih said on Wednesday. Protection and surveillance zones have been established around the farm in Kaposvár and around 39,000 turkeys have been destroyed. The authority added, however, that restrictions in a large part of the country could soon be lifted.