

## PHOTO OF THE DAY



Folk craftsman Endre Rosta working on a mask in Busóudvar in Mohács

## UPCOMING EVENTS

**Stats office reports on Dec industrial output, retail sales**

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

**European Parliament holds plenary session**

## TOP STORY

# GOVT 'POSITIVE' ON SWEDEN'S NATO BID

Péter Szijjártó has said the government maintains a “positive approach” to Sweden’s NATO accession.

After talks by phone with Estonian counterpart Margus Tsahkna on Monday, the foreign minister said he had reassured him that the government’s positive approach to Sweden’s NATO bid was unchanged, and that the bill approving Sweden’s membership had long ago been submitted to parliament. “I informed the minister that we have invited Sweden’s prime minister to Hungary, and I hope he will accept the invitation and come, because that will prove that this is indeed an important matter for Sweden,” he said during a break in a cabinet meeting in Sopronbánfalva, in north-western Hungary. Szijjártó said he and Tsahkna had also discussed the sanctions imposed on Russia, underlining that Hungary’s position was clear on this matter as well. “We believe the sanctions policy has failed, so we don’t see a reason to approve more sanctions packages,” he said, noting that the European Union plans to approve more sanctions against Russia on the occasion of the coming second anniversary of the outbreak of the war.

## **HUNGARY 'WON'T BACK SANCTIONS' ON ENERGY SECTOR, NUCLEAR INDUSTRY**

Péter Szijjártó, the foreign minister, noted that the government made it clear at meetings in Brussels this past weekend that Hungary would not approve any kind of sanctions affecting the energy sector or the nuclear industry, or any that endangered the EU's foreign relations.

After talks by phone with Estonian counterpart Margus Tsahkna on Monday, the foreign minister said also said he and Tsahkna were in agreement that though there were issues on which their two countries disagreed, this was natural, and there were far more things that bound them together, and they had "far more shared strategic interests than we would think". He said they had agreed to boost bilateral ties, and that he had invited Tsahkna to Budapest. Tsahkna, he added, had "gladly accepted the invitation, and he will hopefully pay us a visit before the start of our EU presidency."

## **SPECIAL PARLT SESSION CALLED BY OPPOSITION ON SWEDEN'S NATO MEMBERSHIP LACKS QUORUM**

In the absence of the governing parties, the special session of parliament initiated by the opposition,

which was to have included a vote on Sweden's NATO accession, lacked a quorum. At Monday's session proposed by the Socialists and backed by the Democratic Coalition (DK), Momentum, Jobbik, Párbeszéd and LMP, lawmakers were set to discuss two opposition proposals as well as Sweden's NATO accession. Parliament debated the latter last March, but the ratification vote was not held.

Addressing the session, LMP lawmaker Máté Kanász-Nagy called it "sad" that none of the members of government were in attendance, adding it was "embarrassing" that the governing parties kept on blocking Sweden's NATO accession without giving a reasonable explanation.

Bence Tordai, the group-leader of Párbeszéd, cited Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's pledge that parliament would ratify Sweden's accession "on the first possible" occasion. He said the government had not been guided "by Hungary's national interest, but by something else", adding that "we should not forget who it is in both the EU and NATO who represents the interests of an aggressor [who started] a war".

Előd Novák, deputy head of Mi Hazánk, called for Sweden's accession to be vetoed, arguing that its accession "would be another step towards a [third] world war and a provocation". "Maintaining a neutral buffer zone between Russia and NATO would serve to preserve the fragile balance," he added.

Koloman Brenner, group leader of Jobbik-Conservatives, said the "sad game" played by the government

against Finland and Sweden's NATO accession went against Hungary's national interest. "Viktor Orbán and Fidesz is becoming Putin's puppet in the eyes of our NATO allies and the European public," he said, calling the absence of Fidesz lawmakers at the session "shameful and a disgrace".

## **KOCSIS: MEETING OF HUNGARIAN, SWEDISH PMS 'NECESSARY' FOR NATO BID RATIFICATION**

Hungary's parliament could ratify Sweden's NATO accession "early in the regular spring session", but a meeting between the Hungarian and Swedish prime ministers in Budapest is necessary for that to happen, the group leader of ruling Fidesz said on Monday. "If joining [NATO] is important for the Swedes, they will come here, just like they went to Türkiye," Máté Kocsis said in a Facebook post.

## **POTÁPI: '2024 YEAR OF NATIONAL COOPERATION'**

The year 2024 will be about "the nation of cooperation", the state secretary in charge of policies for Hungarian communities abroad said on Monday, outlining programme plans for this year. In addition to strengthening and supporting the Hungarian institutional system abroad, the State Secretariat plans to build networks in all areas of life and implement programmes aimed at promoting cooperation of these networks, Árpád János Potápi told a

press conference. Similarly to last year, students participating in Hungarian language education in kindergartens, primary and secondary schools, as well as at universities beyond the borders, will be awarded a 100,000 forint (EUR 260) grant, he said. Around 12,000 Hungarian teachers beyond the borders will continue to receive support, Potápi added.

The Sándor Kőrösi Csoma and Sándor Petőfi scholarship schemes will also continue to run this year after participation of 132 youth in the schemes last year, Potápi said, noting that under the Kőrösi Csoma scheme 25 young Hungarians would begin their nine-month programme in the southern diaspora communities overseas next week. This year's plan includes organising the 9th meeting of Carpathian Basin Hungarian Entrepreneurs and economic forums in the region, the state secretary said. Building cooperation with local self-governments will also continue, he said, noting the establishment of 1,100 such partnerships so far in the Carpathian Basin. The programme dubbed Without Borders supporting visits by Hungarian primary school seven-graders to Hungarian regions beyond the borders will be expanded to include a higher number of students. Last year 47,000 students participated in the programme, Potápi said, adding that the aim is to facilitate a visit for all of Hungary's seven-graders to those regions.

Asked about his "message" to the Hungarian community of Slovakia's

southern-most region ahead of the upcoming Slovak presidential and EP elections, the state secretary said the two ballots "will be the next test" of Slovakia's Hungarian Alliance party. "Without joining together, a Hungarian community forming 8.5% [of the Slovak population] will not be able to clear the 5% parliamentary threshold," Potápi said.

### **OPPOSITION CALLS ON PRESIDENT TO WITHDRAW PARDON OF MAN CONVICTED FOR ABETTING PAEDOPHILIA**

The opposition LMP has called on President Katalin Novak to revoke presidential clemency granted to a man convicted for coercing victims of paedophilia to withdraw testimonies. LMP spokeswoman Anna Süveg told a press conference on Monday that Novák had pardoned a man who used his position as the deputy director of a children's home in Bicske, in central Hungary, to blackmail residents to withdraw their testimony against the "paedophile director". Süveg called the decision "despicable", noting that Novák had also pardoned György Budaházy, "who had been convicted on terrorism charges". LMP is requesting access to the documentation leading to the decision, and calling on Novák to address the issue publicly. "Sentencing the perpetrators is something we owe the victims," she said, adding that Novák was abusing the right to grant pardons, "a special and exclusive right of the country's president".

Meanwhile, the opposition Democratic Coalition (DK) is launching an impeachment procedure against Novák over the issue. Parliamentary group spokeswoman Olga Kálmán said on Monday that "someone pardoning an accessory to paedophilia ... is not worthy to serve as Hungary's president."

The opposition Párbeszéd party proposed that Novák provide reasons for her decisions related to the pardon and sign a related document, which should be published in the official Hungarian Gazette. The president's decision to release the accomplice of a paedophile criminal was "shameful", Bence Tordai, the party's group leader, told an online press briefing. He said a part of Novák's job was to represent the unity of the nation and its moral dimension, and she had abused her position and power, adding that she had lost the trust of the people and "can no longer be president of the republic of Hungary".

Meanwhile, the opposition Jobbik-Conservatives on Sunday called on Novák to resign over her decision. Koloman Brenner, the party's candidate for Budapest mayor, told a press conference that members of the Jobbik-Conservatives parliamentary group had called on Novák to resign and they invited all lawmakers to join the initiative. Brenner also said that "Hungary should have a president elected directly by the people, who does not execute party orders ... but indeed represents the unity of the nation, and grants presidential pardon only in cases when there is a serious moral or political reason".

Deputy party leader Anita Kőrösi told the press conference that the residents of the Bicske children's home had endured over several years that the director sexually molested them. The deputy director, who was granted presidential pardon last April, "had assisted to this and wanted to persuade children to sign fake documents", she added. Kőrösi demanded that Novák withdraw the presidential pardon and the deputy director should serve his sentence.

### **EIB GROUP OUTLAYS, GUARANTEES IN HUNGARY REACH EUR 490 M IN 2023**

The European Investment Bank Group, including the EIB and the European Investment Fund, supported Hungary's economy with 490 million euros of new loans and guarantees in 2023, the EIB said on Monday. Nearly two-thirds of the outlays supported climate action and environmental sustainability. The EIB signed an agreement with the Hungarian Development Bank (MFB) committing 100 million euros to support energy efficiency

investments and renewable energy projects. It also extended an additional 50 million euros for energy-efficient renovations and upgrades. The EIB provided backing for a 40 million euro loan to SG Equipment Finance Hungary to offer new financing for SMEs and mid-caps, mainly in the industry and services sector, with a focus on green investments. A 200 million euro loan agreement, co-financing the Hungarian Rural Development Programme, will boost sustainable development in farming, food production, and rural areas, the EIB said. The lender provided 48 million in backing for rooftop solar panels. The European Investment Fund committed 43 million euros in support for Hungarian businesses last year.

### **TRADE DEFICIT EUR 188 M IN DEC**

Hungary posted a trade deficit of 188 million euros in December with the balance of trade improving by 110 million euros, the Central Statistical Office (KSH) said in a first reading of data on Monday. In volume terms, exports fell

by an annual 7.8% to 10.4 billion euros, while imports dropped by 8.6% to 10.5 billion euros, KSH said. In a month-on-month comparison, exports dropped by 20%, while imports were down by 7.6%. KSH said the negative turn was the result of a deteriorating energy balance on the import side and a decline in exports of the machinery industry. Trade with other European Union member states accounted for 75% of Hungary's exports and 66% of its imports during the month of December.

### **SZIJJÁRTÓ EXPRESSES SYMPATHIES OVER CHILE FOREST FIRES**

Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó has conveyed Hungary's sympathies over the victims of the deadly forest fires raging in Chile to his Chilean counterpart. In a message to Chilean Foreign Minister Alberto van Klaveren Stork, Szijjártó said he was "shocked" to learn of the devastating fires in central Chile's Valparaiso region. The minister expressed Hungary's solidarity with the disaster's victims and their families, as well as with the people of Chile.