

PHOTO OF THE DAY



President Katalin Novák receiving Armenian counterpart Vahagn Khachaturyan with military honours in Budapest

UPCOMING EVENTS

Events related to the wars in Ukraine, Israel

European Parliament holds plenary session

TOP STORY

SZIJJÁRTÓ: PAKS UPGRADE ON SCHEDULE

The upgrade of the Paks nuclear plant is on schedule, the minister of foreign affairs and trade said, adding that the project would ensure Hungary's energy security, preserve the utility bill caps and further boost environmental protection.

Speaking on the sidelines of a cabinet meeting in Sopronbánfalva, in north-west Hungary, Péter Szijjártó said he had recently talked to Alexey Likhachev, the CEO of Russian Rosatom tasked with the upgrade. Szijjártó said the talks had been one of a series of regular consultations to review the progress of the project. The works are proceeding according to plan, with soil stabilising works currently under way, he said. "The first concrete pour, a watershed moment in the construction of a nuclear plant, is expected to happen by the end of the year," he said. Meanwhile, the Hungarian Atomic Energy Authority had green-lighted the current phase of the construction, and the procurement of further permits is under way, he added. Recent amendments to the nuclear energy act had cut the red tape around the investment, significantly easing the paperwork while adhering to all safety requirements, he added. The upgrade will double Hungary's nuclear capacity, he said, adding that the two new reactor blocks and planned solar capacity increases would bring Hungary close to self-sufficiency.

Hungary Matters is an English-language newsletter produced and distributed by the Media Service Support and Asset Management Fund (MTVA) with content provided by Duna Media Service Provider exercises copyright over all content. No part of this publication may be copied, reproduced, redistributed or transmitted without prior written permission from the publisher, with the exception of copies made by individuals for private use, educational purposes or scholarly research, provided that such transmissions do not exceed the extent justified by the purpose and are not aimed at financial gain, even indirectly, and the source name are indicated at all times.

All rights reserved. Enquiries should be made to the English Help Desk at +361 441 9340
For MTI's real time coverage please visit <http://english.mti.hu>, <http://econews.hu>



NOVÁK CALLS FOR CLOSER TIES WITH ARMENIA

President Katalin Novák, receiving Armenian counterpart Vahagn Khachaturyan in Budapest on Tuesday, said ties between the countries should be strengthened and “filled with content”. During his first official visit to Hungary, the Armenian president and Novák discussed “issues around peace in the world, Hungary’s efforts to provide humanitarian aid to Armenia, demographic challenges, bilateral ties, minorities, as well as a European outlook for Armenia,” Novák said. Diplomatic ties with Armenia were re-established in 2022, and Khachaturyan is the second Armenian president to visit Hungary, Novák noted. At their talks, the two presidents also agreed to launch a cultural cooperation schedule for Hungary and Armenia. The agreement signed on behalf of Hungary by Balázs Hankó, the deputy state secretary for higher education, caters to strengthening bilateral relations in higher education, science, technology and culture.

Regarding the Hungary Helps programme, in which Hungary has donated 40 million forints (EUR 10.4m) to Armenian families for medical care, another aspect of the scheme will enable around 1,000 children forced to leave their homes to camp in Hungary. The president said the Armenian minority in Hungary, which was awarded government support of 2 billion forints between 2011 and 2023,

was strengthening and developing, and the community has expanded by 18% since 2011. Trade turnover grew eleven-fold to 29 million dollars over the span of 20 years. Hungary also offers 30 Stipendium Hungaricum scholarships to Armenian youth, she noted, adding that Hungary Helps also aids members of persecuted Christian communities. Novák pledged its support for Armenia in forging close ties with Europe and advancing visa liberalisation when it takes over the presidency of the Council of the European Union.

Meanwhile, asked about Sweden’s NATO accession, Novák said she favoured early ratification and she had asked the Hungarian MPs to vote for it. She said she had spoken yesterday with Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson by phone and encouraged him to visit Hungary as soon as possible for talks with herself and the prime minister. Regarding the political opposition furore over a presidential pardon given to an official connected with a paedophile, the president said that paedophilia was “disgusting and the most serious crime”. There would be no pardon for paedophiles during her presidency, she said, adding that she had led action against child abusers with the introduction of a register of sex offenders. The justification for the presidential pardon could not be made public for legal reasons, she said.

Khachaturyan welcomed “a new era in Armenian-Hungarian relations” when the two countries “have an opportunity to restart ties, which may offer huge

opportunities.” Meanwhile, he said both Russia and Ukraine have large Armenian communities and “they are now fighting each other, which is unacceptable.” The Armenian president thanked Novák for Hungary’s support for ethnic Armenians.

AZBEJ DISCUSSES JOINT EFFORTS TO MITIGATE CRISES IN EUROPE, AFRICA

Tristan Azbej, the foreign ministry state secretary in charge of aid to persecuted Christian communities, has travelled to Ethiopia to meet representatives of the European Union and the African Union. Discussions focused on “challenges such as pandemics and other health-related issues ... as well as joint humanitarian action,” Azbej said on Facebook on Tuesday, noting that he was representing Péter Szijjártó, the foreign minister. Amid the current consecutive crises, “we must not forget about our African brethren in need”, Azbej told a panel discussion. He referred to Hungary as “an emerging donor country expressing its solidarity through the Hungary Helps programme”, adding that the Hungarian government’s actions were also “within the bounds of common sense and promote Hungary’s interests”. “We need to handle challenges at their root,” he said, adding that migration may be prevented through aid provided where the problems arose. Efforts in the Sahel and at other parts of Africa “have proven that policies based on solidarity will contribute towards preventing people from leaving their homeland,” he said.

Hungary's upcoming European Union presidency will also focus on support for people living in crisis zones, and "call attention to the fact that preventing migration is in the interest of all parties," Azbej said. "Providing aid on the spot and creating food security are key," he added. "We urge involving religious organisations in providing humanitarian aid, because in many cases the supply systems of the affected countries cannot be effectively supported without their assistance," he said. "We will also speak up in the interest of protecting human rights, especially when it comes to ensuring the right to an education," the state secretary said.

FIDESZ: ONLY PRESIDENT CAN EXERCISE RIGHT OF CLEMENCY

The right of clemency is one that only the president can exercise, "irrespective of whether or not we individually agree" with a given pardon, ruling Fidesz's parliamentary group leader said on Facebook on Tuesday. Regarding the opposition furore over a presidential pardon given to an official connected with a paedophile, Máté Kocsis said the left wing should be "silent" on the issue after it had refused to vote for Hungary's child protection law in 2021, opposed the creation of a registry of paedophile offenders and wanted to make the 2022 referendum on the child protection law invalid. "This is the same left wing that today would still let gender propaganda into schools and kindergartens and which, together with their Western

allies, challenged the child protection law imposing stricter punishment for paedophilia at Brussels-based forums," he said. Kocsis said it was "interesting" that the left "wasn't this vocal" when an activist linked to an opposition MP "was found to be in possession of 70,000 paedophilic images", or when a Democratic Coalition politician and business weekly HVG "defended one paedophile offender after another". He said the left and the "dollar media" had also not been bothered by the opposition mayor of Budapest's 8th district "campaigning together" with a "notorious paedophile" or by a Jobbik politician getting caught committing a crime related to child pornography. "Hungarians see through ... the left's deceitful and two-faced stunts and constant lies," Kocsis said. "The left and the dollar media kept attacking the child protection and anti-paedophile measures, so it's best for them to keep silent right now."

DEUTSCH: HUNGARIAN INTERESTS FULFILLED AT LAST WEEK'S EU SUMMIT

"Despite a series of attacks that Hungary was subjected to before last week's European Union summit", the decision made at the meeting in many ways represented a fulfilment of Hungary's national interests, ruling Fidesz MEP Tamás Deutsch said on Tuesday. Deutsch told MTI in Strasbourg that thanks to a position Hungary had been holding consistently in connection with 50

billion euros support for Ukraine, the leaders at the summit decided "not to write a blank check", and instead obliged the Council to hold an annual discussion concerning the use of support for Ukraine based on the assessment of the European Commission. The other important decision made at the summit was that EU leaders gave a clear guarantee that the monies due to Hungary but so far held back "mostly unlawfully" would not end up in Ukraine, Deutsch said.

Meanwhile, Deutsch insisted that the European Parliament was "at the forefront of political violence and harassment" against Hungary. Commenting on a plenary debate held by the EP on Tuesday morning, he said Hungary's "dollar left" had once again demonstrated "its habit of scheming against its own country". Katalin Cseh, an MEP of the opposition Momentum, demanded that the EU should change the basic treaty to ditch the requirement of unanimity in certain decisions, Deutsch said, adding that this could end up blanking out the opinions of average or smaller-sized member states.

DEUTSCH: 'DOLLAR LEFT' TRIED AND FAILED TO CAUSE HUNGARY-ITALY CONFLICT

The "radical dollar-left" tried and failed to provoke a political dispute between the Italian and Hungarian governments, Fidesz MEP Tamás Deutsch said in Strasbourg on

Monday, referring to the case of an Italian woman who is being kept in a Hungarian prison. Ilaria Salis "is a foreign, progressive, radical left-wing, neo-communist thug who came to Hungary with nineteen others" to attack "people they deemed to be neo-fascists based on their appearance and clothing", the ruling party MEP said in a statement after a debate on conditions in Hungarian prisons held in the European Parliament. He noted that Salis, who stands accused of physically attacking several randomly selected Hungarian and foreign citizens, had been smiling in court. He accused the "Hungarian dollar media" of "showing solidarity with the perpetrator" and "peddling blatant lies" about her detention, which she had "invented". Deutsch, at the same time, called on the Italian authorities to intensify efforts to find and arrest an Italian perpetrator "whose identity and contact information they are in possession of".

EC APPOINTS GÁBOR ZUPKÓ AS HEAD OF REPRESENTATION IN HUNGARY

The European Commission has appointed Gábor Zupkó as new head of representation in Hungary, the body said on Tuesday. The date of effect of his appointment will be determined later, the statement showed. Zupkó has extensive diplomatic and management experience gained from senior positions at the Commission

and in Hungarian diplomacy over the past 25 years, it added. "Notably, he already held the position of Head of Representation of the European Commission in Hungary from 2015 to 2022, during which he adeptly represented the Commission in dealings with various partners, stakeholders, and citizens in Hungary, honing robust diplomatic, negotiation, and representation skills," the EC said. Currently he holds the title of principal adviser at the Commission, working with the Hungarian Ministry of EU Affairs, where he assists preparations for the upcoming Hungarian Presidency of the Council. "From 2012 to 2015, he served as the Director for Resources in the Directorate-General for Communication. Prior to that, he was Director of the Office for Infrastructure and Logistics (OIB) in Brussels for a period of 7 years," it said. "Before joining the Commission, Zupkó served as the Hungarian Ambassador to Finland and Deputy State Secretary in the Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs," it added.

FINMIN: HUNGARY RECEIVES INTL AWARD FOR GOOD DEBT MANAGEMENT

Hungary has received the International Financing Review's 2023 emerging markets award for its dollar bond issue last January, Finance Minister Mihály Varga said on Facebook on Tuesday. Varga quoted the IFR as saying that the bond issue, worth 4.25 billion US

dollars, ensured predictable and secure financing for the country. "We'll keep the economy on a growth path, reduce the budget deficit and the state debt this year," the minister said.

TENDERS FOR HUF 450 BN IN BUSINESS FUNDING TO LAUNCH FROM Q2

The government will start calling tenders for 450 billion forints (EUR 1.16bn) in European Union and state funding for businesses from the second quarter, the national economy ministry said on Tuesday. The ministry said it had initiated talks with business chambers on finalising the details of the tenders. Tenders for microbusinesses and SMEs in the framework of the Economic Development and Innovation Operative Programme Plus (GINOP Plusz) will be called in "the shortest time possible", it added. The resources, which will mostly be used for credit and to a smaller degree grants, will support investments in digitalisation, and energy efficiency to allow businesses to preserve their competitiveness.

HUNGARY DEC INDUSTRIAL OUTPUT DOWN 13.7% YR/YR

Industrial output in Hungary was an annual 13.7% lower in December 2023, the Central Statistical Office (KSH) said on Tuesday, reporting its first estimate. Based on working-day adjustments, it was 8.7% lower

year on year, as there were two fewer working days compared with the same month in 2022. Month on month, output fell by 0.3%, according to seasonally and working day-adjusted data. The war in Ukraine and sanctions weighed on the economy, while low demand linked to a weak European economy also dragged down industrial exports, the national economy ministry said, commenting on the data. Output was also held back by the shutdown of some companies at year-end, especially in vehicle production, the ministry said in a statement. The government's aim this year is to restore growth and for the economy to grow by around 4%, the statement said, adding that this meant restoring consumption and boosting labour market activity further, while the investment level must be kept above 25%. The government

operates various schemes to help entrepreneurs dismantle any obstacles to growth, ensuring the right amount of energy is available at a decent price, a qualified and sufficient workforce is provided, and that there are financing opportunities for investments, the statement added.

HUNGARY DEC RETAIL SALES DOWN 1.0% YR/YR

Retail sales in Hungary fell by an annual 1.0% in December, the Central Statistical Office (KSH) said on Tuesday. Retail sales edged down by 0.2% when adjusted for calendar year effects. Adjusted food sales rose by 1.3%, while non-food sales dropped by 3.0%. Vehicle fuel sales were 3.8% higher. Month on month, sales were 1.4% higher. In absolute terms, retail sales came to 1,811 billion forints

(EUR 4.7bn) in December. Food sales accounted for 49% of the total, non-food sales for 37% and sales at petrol stations for 14%. In the full year, retail sales dropped by 7.9%.

MERCURY RISES ABOVE 20°C

The temperature rose above 20°C for the first time this year on Tuesday, weather service HungaroMet said on Facebook. South-westerly winds resulted in milder weather than usual at this time of the year, and a measurement of 20.4 C was recorded at Sopronhórács, in western Hungary. The last Feb 6 Hungarian record high was 21°C, recorded in Kiskunhalas in 2004. At the same time, Budapest saw dawn record-high temperature of 10.3°C on Tuesday, HungaroMet said. The previous record was 8.4°C measured in 2004.