

## PHOTO OF THE DAY



Morning fog in northern Hungary

## UPCOMING EVENTS

**NATO defence ministers meet in Brussels**

**Events related to the wars in Ukraine, Middle East**

## TOP STORY

# MEP: MIGRATION PACT 'EXPOSING EU TO MIGRATION'

The EU's proposed New Pact on Migration and Asylum which was supported by the European Parliament's civil liberties committee (LIBE) would "leave Europe wide open to illegal migration", a Fidesz MEP said after the committee's meeting on Wednesday.

"By approving the draft, LIBE has given its consent to the implementation of the Soros plan," Balázs Hidvéghi said, noting the plan's provisions enforcing illegal migrant distribution quotas and fining member states that refuse to accept the scheme. He said the new pact would allow illegal migrants to enter EU territory as it bans processing asylum applications outside the bloc. "This will make the control and expulsion of illegal immigrants impossible," the MEP added, insisting that this would lead to the emergence of migrant ghettos.

Hidvéghi said that "the only system that works effectively in stopping illegal migration is that of Hungary". Hungary protects its own and the EU's territory against an inflow of illegal migrants with a fence erected on the border and laws and will maintain the related decisions taken several years ago. "The new EU pact and its approval is an attack against the well-working Hungarian system," he said, adding that "we will continue to protect Hungary from illegal migration and will not allow it to become an immigrant country," said the MEP.

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## **SZIJJÁRTÓ: CLOSE COOPERATION BETWEEN EU, ANDORRA IN HUNGARY'S INTEREST**

Hungary has a vested interest in closer cooperation between the European Union and the Principality of Andorra, as it would contribute to a stronger EU while strengthening Hungary's position, Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó said in Andorra on Wednesday, after talks with his counterpart, Imma Tor Faus.

Szjijártó told a joint press conference that Hungary was taking over the EU's rotating presidency in July, at a time when the EU was steadily losing competitiveness. An antidote to that is to strengthen the bloc's ties with other countries, Andorra among them, he added. "We want the association agreement between the EU and Andorra to come into force as soon as possible," he said, noting that the talks leading to the agreement had been started during Hungary's presidency in 2011. "We would like the EP ... to ratify the agreement in the second half of the year."

Closer cooperation with Andorra, a state which has based its competitiveness on low taxes, among other factors, would boost Hungary's position at a time when "there is an aggressive attempt in Europe" to harmonise taxes, thereby raising rates, Szijjártó said. "Neither Hungary nor Andorra are willing to give up their sovereign right to determine their own tax system," he said.

Another important issue is the protection of national minorities, he said. "Hungary and Andorra ... are proud of their traditions and identity, and we have cooperated closely to protect national minorities in international organisations before." The foreign ministers have agreed to keep up that cooperation, he added. To boost economic ties, Hungary and Andorra are planning to sign an investment protection agreement in the near future, he said.

## **PINTÉR HOLDS TALKS WITH EU HEALTH AND FOOD SAFETY COMMISSIONER**

Interior Minister Sándor Pintér held bilateral talks with European Commissioner for Health and Food Safety Stella Kyriakides, his ministry said on Wednesday. Areas related to health care Hungary plans to focus on during its upcoming EU presidency include the fight against cardiovascular diseases, strengthening supply security when it comes to organ transplantation, the affordability of medicine, preparation for potential future health emergencies, as well as treating the effects of climate change on mental health, the ministry told MTI. Pintér and Kyriakides were in agreement that the programme of the Hungarian presidency will also serve to boost the security and welfare of EU citizens. They also agreed to do everything necessary to ensure the success of Hungary's EU presidency in the second half of the year.

## **PARLT SPEAKER HIGHLIGHTS IMPORTANCE OF NATIONAL REMEMBRANCE AT CTTEE'S 10TH ANNIVERSARY**

There is no nation without common remembrance as there is no nation state without a nation, the house speaker said on Wednesday, in his address marking the 10th anniversary of the National Remembrance Committee (NEB). Addressing an international scientific conference held on the occasion of the anniversary, László Kövér called national remembrance "one of the strongest components of a human community".

"Today, in the western world every nation is a victim of mental and cultural aggression," he said. "National remembrance today needs courage, because in the western world forces that seek to seize power again want to deprive nations of their remembrance," Kövér said. He said it had to be ensured that "nobody could ever again colonise national remembrance". The house speaker noted that NEB's work over the past ten years had been marked by 71 scientific conferences, the publication of over 1,000 scientific papers and 70 Hungarian and English language studies, and the operation of 9 thematic websites and online databases. NEB also organised over 120 exhibitions across the Carpathian Basin and hosted more than 150 history classes, he said.

Also addressing the conference, Ladislav Kudrna, director of the Czech Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes (USTR), Rafał Rogulski, director of European Network Remembrance and Solidarity (ENRS), and Jergus Sivos, chair of Slovakia's Nation's Memory Institute (UPN), underlined the importance of international cooperation and addressing young people.

### **BALOG APOLOGISES OVER OPINION GIVEN IN SUPPORT OF PRESIDENTIAL PARDON**

Reformed Bishop Zoltán Balog said on Tuesday that he had been asked to give his opinion and agreed with supporting a presidential pardon granted to Endre K, but added that the decision was not made by him. Balog, who is pastoral president of the Synod of the Hungarian Reformed Church, said in a video message that he had made a mistake, he expressed regret and apologised to all affected persons. In a message posted on reformatus.hu, Balog said he had called a meeting of his church's officials on Tuesday to discuss "the attacks directed at him and the church". He added that the meeting had been attended by four-fifths of the officials and it ended in a secret vote where 86% of those present expressed support for him. Balog reacted to recent press allegations according to which it had been on his advice that Katalin Novák, who resigned from the post

of President of Hungary on Saturday, granted a presidential pardon to a former deputy head of a children's home in Bicske, near Budapest. Balog said the request for a presidential pardon had not been submitted by him but he was one of the persons whose opinion was asked about it.

"Based on preliminary opinions and information about him [Endre K] and his life, I agreed with granting him a pardon, but I was wrong and I made a mistake," he said. "I apologise to everyone I must apologise to," he added. Balog said it was not him who made a decision concerning the request for a presidential pardon and added that it was above question that he was clearly rejecting the crime of paedophilia. "We have full consensus about this, too, in the Reformed Church," he added.

### **LMP TO NOMINATE UNI PROFESSOR HACK FOR HUNGARY'S NEXT PRESIDENT**

Opposition LMP will nominate university professor and lawyer Peter Hack for the post of Hungary's next president, Péter Ungár, the party's co-leader, said on Wednesday. Ungár said on Facebook that he would contact all lawmakers about their proposal in a letter. A joint nomination of Hack would enable Hungary to have a president representing the unity of the nation, and one who guards the rule of law and the constitutional order, he said. Hack has been a

teacher at Budapest's ELTE university for 41 years, and his areas of research include judicial independence, the organisation and operation of justice administration, the enforcement of human rights in criminal procedures, and the legal means of fighting corruption, he said. Hack has political experience, too, but he is not a party politician, Ungár added. He noted that Hack had served as an MP from 1990 until 2002 when he retired from politics.

### **HUNGARY GDP FLAT IN Q4, CONTRACTS BY 0.9% IN 2023**

Hungary's GDP stagnated in the fourth quarter and contracted by 0.9% for the full year, the Central Statistical Office (KSH) said in a first reading of data on Wednesday. Adjusted for calendar year effects, GDP rose by an annual 0.4% in Q4. For the full year, adjusted GDP dropped by 0.8%. KSH said the performance of the economy rose mainly in the farm, health-care, social services and ICT sectors. That growth was countered by declines in the industrial and construction sectors, and part of market services, mainly trade, it added. Quarter on quarter, GDP was flat, adjusted for seasonal and calendar year effects.

Commenting on the fresh data, Economy Minister Márton Nagy attributed stalled growth mainly to weak external demand, noting the recession in Germany and stagnation across the European Union. He

added that “extraordinarily high” real interest rates had also negatively impacted GDP by giving businesses an incentive to save rather than make investments. Sustainable and speedy economic growth cannot be achieved without a healthy credit market, he said. Nagy said signs of improvement in the economy were already visible, noting data indicating a pickup in retail sales and tourism in recent months. State-subsidised lending schemes and a voluntary programme among commercial banks to offer businesses favourable lending rates could accelerate the recovery on the credit market, he added. Achieving GDP growth of 4% in 2024 is a “priority” goal for the government, the minister said.

In a video message posted on social media after the release of the data, Finance Minister Mihály Varga said Hungary's GDP growth could reach 3 to 4% in 2024, supported by disinflation, rising real wages, stronger consumption, exports and investments, and record employment levels. The European Commission expects Hungary could be “among the frontrunners” in terms of GDP growth in the EU, he added. While domestic factors are reason for confidence,

external factors justify caution, Varga said, pointing to shortages of raw materials and fixtures caused by the war in Ukraine and conflict in the Middle East, as well as the German economy's weakening. “This situation requires solidifying the balance and cautious planning,” he added. The government will continue to reduce budget deficit and state debt levels, while putting the economy on a sustainable growth path in 2024, said Varga.

### **CONSTRUCTION SECTOR OUTPUT DOWN 4.3% IN DECEMBER**

Output of Hungary's construction sector in December last year dropped by an annual 4.3%, the Central Statistical Office (KSH) said on Wednesday. Output of the buildings segment fell by 6.0% while civil engineering output edged down 0.5%. In absolute terms, construction sector output was worth 882 billion forints (EUR 2.8bn) in December last year. The buildings segment accounted for 66% of the total. Month on month, construction sector output rose by 5.1%, adjusted for seasonal and

working-day effects. Construction sector output fell by 5.0% in 2023 compared to 2022.

### **FERTILISER MAGNATE ACQUITTED ON CHARGES OF ACCEPTING KICKBACKS**

László Bige, the owner of Nitrogénművek, Hungary's biggest artificial fertiliser maker, has been acquitted on charges of accepting kickbacks in a final ruling of the Debrecen Appeals Court, in eastern Hungary, the court said in a statement on Wednesday. Bige had been charged with taking kickbacks from a trader for the partially unbilled sale of artificially discounted product in 2009. According to the charges, thousands of tonnes of fertiliser had been sold in that manner. Bige was alleged to have received a total of 135.4 million forints (EUR 350,000) in kickbacks for several transactions between Jan and Oct 2010. In the first instance ruling, the court found no evidence the trader had accepted any illegal advantage from the defendant and could not prove a kickback. The appeals court upheld the ruling, the statement said. The court's ruling may not be appealed.