

## PHOTO OF THE DAY



MTI/Tamás Vasvári

Photojournalist Tamás Vasvári's (MTI/MTVA) image that won 1st prize in nature, science category at the 42nd Hungarian Press Photo contest

## UPCOMING EVENTS

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

## TOP STORY

# TÜRKIYE 'KEY TO HUNGARY, EU SECURITY'

Türkiye is key to the security of Hungary and the European Union, the foreign minister, said in Ankara.

"It would be impossible to overcome challenges" facing the bloc without Türkiye's input, Péter Szijjártó told a joint press conference with Turkish counterpart Hakan Fidan, listing challenges that were physical, economic and connected to energy. Türkiye, he added, was especially important in handling growing migration pressure. He said Europe would be lost if migration were not prevented, and he praised Türkiye for "doing everything possible to keep migration under control". He said both Hungary and Türkiye held the same position that migrants should return home, given the right security conditions. He said that Türkiye was key to Hungary's energy security, and it was a reliable transit partner, with the majority of imports passing through the country. Szijjártó thanked his counterpart for not using energy as a "political or economic weapon". Türkiye's handling of terrorism amid today's threats on a global scale, he said, was highly important. Meanwhile, the minister said Europe could regain its competitive edge lost in recent years, given closer cooperation with partners like Türkiye.

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## **SZIJJÁRTÓ: HUNGARY PRESIDENCY TO PRIORITISE EU-TÜRKIYE CUSTOMS UNION**

Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó said Hungary's EU presidency later this year would prioritise the upgrade and expansion of the customs union between the EU and Türkiye, and it would also take steps to advance a visa liberalisation accord. He added that the EU-Türkiye association council should meet again during Hungary's presidency.

Regarding the war in Ukraine, the minister said the "transatlantic world suffers from a kind of war psychosis, and only very few have the courage to argue for peace". Within NATO, only Hungary and Türkiye took this position, he added. "There's no solution to the war on the battlefield," he said, adding that the longer the war lasted and the more weapons were delivered, "the more people will die". Szijjártó said the only mediation effort to bring the war to an end had been on the part of Ankara. He said Türkiye put "common sense first" and regularly promoted "NATO's initial decision" to do everything possible to avoid direct confrontation with Russia.

Meanwhile, Szijjártó said trade turnover between Hungary and Türkiye reached a record high last year, adding that the two countries had taken important steps in the interest of further boosting their economic relations. Given that Türkiye is one

of the biggest economies in Europe, cooperation with the country is clearly in Hungary's national interest, Szijjártó said after a meeting of the Hungarian-Turkish Joint Economic Committee. Bilateral trade turnover came to a record 4.3 billion US dollars last year, up 18% from 2022, the minister said. This has put Hungary and Türkiye closer to the goal set by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of reaching a trade turnover of 6 billion dollars, he added. Hungarian exports to Türkiye increased by 29% to a record high, contributing to Hungary's export record of 150 billion euros, Szijjártó said. Also, Hungary's 9.3 billion euro trade surplus means that the country had made up for the losses incurred in 2022 due to the rise in energy prices, he added. Szijjártó, whose delegation included 11 Hungarian business executives, said 2023 had been about the successes of Hungarian businesses on the Turkish market. He noted that the medical equipment maker Medisor will soon start production at its plant in Ankara, and that the State Printing Company is involved in the printing of the new Turkish passport.

Meanwhile, soft drink maker Hell Energy sold 19 million cans in Türkiye last year, and agribusiness Hunland sold 71,000 cattle. Also, a Turkish-Hungarian defence industry joint venture has been established to fulfil the Armed Forces' order of 400 armoured vehicles, while Hungary's V-Hid has entered into an alliance with Türkiye's biggest rail construction company to cooperate in as many

projects in and outside Europe as possible, Szijjártó said.

Turning to energy cooperation, the minister welcomed the finalisation of the text of the gas purchase agreement, allowing Hungarian energy company MVM and Türkiye's BOTAS to sign the deal that will enable the start of gas deliveries from Türkiye to Hungary in the second quarter. Hungary is set to receive 275 million cubic metres of gas from Türkiye this year, he added. "This makes Hungary the very first country not directly bordering Türkiye to which Türkiye will export natural gas," Szijjártó noted. The minister also announced that Hungarian oil and gas company MOL and Turkish peer TPAO will begin preparations for the joint extraction of oil and gas fields recently discovered in south-eastern Türkiye. The two countries are also set to start cooperating in the area of nuclear energy, given that they are both building nuclear power plants with the same technology, Szijjártó said.

Meanwhile, the minister welcomed that the two countries are close to modifying an air transport agreement that will enable an increase in the number of direct Budapest-Istanbul and Budapest-Ankara flights.

## **KOVÁCS: GOVT POLICY NOT INFLUENCED BY WESTERN MEDIA**

Hungarian government policy is not influenced by what is said about it in the Western media, the state secretary for international communication

and relations told a conference on Thursday. The “media attacking Hungary” aim to “completely stymie and quarantine the government that has won four consecutive two-thirds majorities,” Zoltán Kovács told the Nézőpont Institute’s event on Hungary’s image in the international media. Kovács said there had been “no chance to change this narrative” over the last 14 years, arguing that “the other side ... has no interest in such a dialogue”. The state secretary said Hungarian politics and the Hungarian narrative “rest on reality”. He said the government aimed to pursue policies based on national interests even if its decisions did not align with what other countries or those working at European institutions thought. Kovács said it was unlikely that there would be fewer conflicts between Hungary and the Western media in the future, mainly because of Hungary’s pro-peace position on the war in Ukraine, the European Parliament election campaign and Hungary’s upcoming European Union presidency.

Bánk Levente Boros, the Nézőpont Institute’s director for political analysis, said that according to a study analysing 19,153 mentions of Hungary in 100 politically relevant media platforms of 18 countries, Hungary has been getting more and more media attention in recent years. He attributed this to Hungary’s pro-peace stance on the Russia-Ukraine war, adding that increasingly often, a neutral perception of Hungary tended to become either positive or negative.

In the Anglosphere in particular, news stories about Hungary now tended to be more critical in tone compared with a more neutral view in the past, while most Russian news stories now tended to mention Hungary in a positive context. Boros said the number of positive pieces written about Hungary had increased slightly in French, Spanish, English and Italian-speaking territories, while the number of Polish-language pieces with a positive tone had decreased last year.

In a panel discussion about perceptions of Hungary in the Western media, German journalist Georg Gafron said there were more critical opinions of Hungary than positive ones. He said journalists should present reality instead of being “propagandists” or “philosophers”, adding that four-fifths of German reporters covered the news from the perspective of the Greens and the Social Democrats. As regards Hungary’s pro-peace stance on Ukraine, Gafron said more than two-thirds of Germans were in favour of supporting Ukraine and “very afraid of the Russians”, which was why it was harder for them to understand Hungary’s position.

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## **DEFMIN: COMMITTED NATO MEMBER**

Hungary as a committed member of NATO will continue to develop its armed forces, the defence minister said after a meeting of NATO defence ministers in Brussels on Thursday. Kristóf Szalay-Bobrovniczky told

MTI that an increasing number of member states aimed to meet the NATO requirement of spending at least 2% of their GDP on defence. “Hungary has fulfilled that requirement since 2023, for which the country has received NATO’s recognition,” he said, adding that it also showed the Hungarian government’s commitment to ensuring security for the Hungarian people and fulfilling NATO’s requirements. “Today’s meeting highlighted again the need for NATO member states to increase spending on their own security,” Szalay-Bobrovniczky said. He noted that the meeting’s main focus was to review and prepare defence issues for a meeting of heads of state and government to be held in Washington, DC, in July to mark the 75th anniversary of NATO. These include finalising NATO’s plan on enhancing the alliance’s collective defence force, and its effectiveness will feature high on the July meeting’s agenda, the minister said.

The need to expand defence industry capacities was also highlighted at Thursday’s meeting, the minister said, adding that Hungary was “at the forefront in this regard since the country already began building its own defence industry base before the war broke out in Ukraine”. “We must continue modernising the Hungarian Armed Forces, and as a member on NATO’s eastern flank we must take a significant share in strengthening the alliance’s defence capabilities,” the minister added.

He called it a priority for Hungary to further strengthen NATO's multinational division headquarters in Székesfehérvár, in central Hungary, in partnership with Croatia and Slovakia. The NATO-Ukraine Council also held a meeting on Thursday at which the Ukrainian defence minister gave an outline of the situation in his country, while NATO members reviewed support provided to Ukraine so far, Szalay-Bobrovniczky said, adding that Hungary's position was unchanged in that it would not supply weapons to Ukraine and only a prompt ceasefire and peace negotiations could end the war.

## **AGMIN: FOOD IMPORTS MUST COMPLY WITH EU REGULATIONS**

Hungary insists that produce imported to the European Union must comply with the regulations that the EU imposes on its own producers, István Nagy, the minister of agriculture, said on Thursday, after meeting Virginijus Sinkevicius, the European environment, oceans and fisheries commissioner. Nagy also said that Hungary's EU presidency would strive for a productive working relationship with partners by holding large international conferences, according to a ministry statement. Farmers more than anyone had a vested interest in maintaining a healthy climate as this was the basis for their livelihood and future, he said, adding that it was wrong to blame farmers for climate change.

The Common Agricultural Policy, he noted, already contained incentives to reduce pesticides, while precision farming employing technologies such as drones were far more effective, he added.

The two officials also discussed water management. Hungarian agriculture contended with floods as well as drought, he noted, adding that irrigation farming was especially effective. More EU resources and subsidies should be made available for this purpose, he argued, noting that water can be returned to the landscape efficiently through the use of precision technologies. The minister also referred to opportunities in freshwater fish farming, noting that social needs must be met as sea catches waned. Hungary wants to effect a change of attitude in this area, he said, and it will highlight this during its EU presidency. Meanwhile, he said Hungary has launched a system for monitoring soil which could be expanded to cover the rest of Europe, he said.

## **EC LEAVES FORECAST FOR HUNGARY 2024 GDP GROWTH AT 2.4 %**

The European Commission projected Hungary's GDP would grow 2.4% this year in an interim forecast published on Thursday, unchanged from its autumn forecast released in November. The EC also left its forecast for 2025 GDP growth at 3.6%. Hungary's economy is set to recover gradually in

2024-2025, supported by decreasing inflation and interest rates over the forecast horizon, the EC said. The EC acknowledged the "substantial boost" to household income provided by a 15% minimum wage hike in December. Real income growth and improving consumer confidence are projected to spur household consumption, while a reduction in central bank interest rates is expected to contribute to the gradual recovery of investment, the EC said. New FDI projects are set to boost exports over the forecast horizon, it added.

Hungary's economic outlook remains sensitive to global investor sentiment, the EC said, also noting the country's exposure to energy price changes and potential supply disruptions due to its large dependence on energy imports and its limited scope for import diversification in the short term. The EC puts Hungary's average annual CPI at 4.5% in 2024, down from 5.2% in the autumn forecast.

## **DK TO REQUEST ACCESS TO DOCUMENTS RELATING TO PRESIDENTIAL PARDON CASE**

The opposition Democratic Coalition will submit a public-interest data request and file a lawsuit asking for access to documents in connection with the clemency case of the former deputy head of the Bicske children's home, Olga Kálmán, the spokesperson of the party's

parliamentary group, said, adding that people had a right to know “how the accomplice of the paedophile head of the children’s home” could have been pardoned. Who submitted the pardon application, “who pushed it through Katalin Novák and Judit Varga”, who is moving the strings in the background, the opposition MP asked.

### **DONÁTH DEMANDS ANSWERS FROM THOSE ‘ACTUALLY RESPONSIBLE’ FOR PRESIDENTIAL PARDON AFFAIR**

Anna Donáth, leader of opposition Momentum, demanded answers from “those who are actually responsible” for the affair around a presidential pardon granted to the deputy director of a children’s home who was found complicit in child abuse, at a demonstration in Budapest on Wednesday. Addressing protesters in front of the Castle District premises of the Prime Minister’s Office, Donáth said “the system has failed from a moral standpoint”, accusing the government of ignoring the protection of children. She said no responsibility had been taken in connection with the presidential pardon, adding that what had been done “is a sin, rather than a mistake”. She called for demonstrations to be held “until those actually responsible take responsibility” and until an explanation was given and the victims received an apology.

### **TRANSTIBISCAN REFORMED CHURCH DISTRICT BISHOP ASKS BALOG TO RESIGN**

Károly Fekete, Bishop of the Transtibiscan Reformed Church District, asked Zoltán Balog to resign as president of the church’s Synod. Balog on Tuesday apologised for having supported a presidential pardon granted to the deputy director of a children’s home who was found complicit in child abuse. He said a meeting of the church’s officials had been attended by four-fifths of the officials and ended in a secret vote where 86% of those present expressed support for him. Fekete said in a statement on Wednesday that he had asked Balog at the meeting, “with a theologically-based argument”, to reconsider his decision and resign as president of the Synod in view of the situation. The majority of the deacons and chief elders present at the meeting gave a vote of confidence to Balog, who released a video message about the outcome of the vote, Fekete said, noting that he and Balog had spoken again on Wednesday. “With all due respect to the outcome of the vote of confidence, today I once again suggested to Bishop Balog that he reconsider and resign from his position as synod president,” Fekete said, adding that he trusted that “keeping the unity of our church in mind, and consulting with the members of the Presidency Council,

he will be willing to do so”. He asked the members of the church communities and pastors to be patient until a decision is made.

The Presidium of the Synod of the Reformed Church in Hungary, the four bishops and the three chief elders present did not take part in Tuesday’s vote of confidence held in respect of Reformed Church Bishop Zoltán Balog, the president of the church’s Synod, Dániel Pásztor, the Synod’s vice president, has said. In contrast with press reports, the bishop of the Cistibiscan District said in a statement that he had not taken a position “on whether Zoltán Balog should stay or go at the conference preceding the meeting of the deans and the chief elders.” “I will acknowledge and support the decisions of the president of the Synod in this situation, whatever they may be,” Pásztor said.

### **KARÁCSONY: EU FUNDS TO BE USED TO REVAMP LANDMARK BUDAPEST SQUARE**

The Budapest city administration plans to use 2-2.5 billion forints-worth of European Union funds to revamp a landmark square at the Buda bridgehead of Chain Bridge, the capital’s mayor said on Thursday. The reconstruction plans for Clark Ádám Square in the 1st district are ready, Gergely Karácsony told a press conference. While preserving the “iconic flower bed” on the



roundabout, the plan is create far more extensive pedestrian and green areas, he said. Asked about the case of a children's home in Bicske which has been embroiled in a child-abuse scandal, Karácsony said he had ordered an internal investigation regarding the role of the previous Fidesz city administration in connection with the home which operated in the capital until 2013. He said the Budapest municipality had received "a very serious" report in 2011 about events which were "covered up" by the city's administration at the time. Karácsony accused the metropolitan leadership of having failed to investigate reports concerning child-abuse allegations at the time, adding that this had been a "serious omission". He also accused the administration of having "misled" the city's assembly representatives, insisting that its leaders had known about "very serious doubts" regarding the head of the orphanage.

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### **SOCIALIST CO-LEADER CALLS FOR OPPOSITION COOPERATION IN LOCAL, EP ELECTIONS**

Ágnes Kunhalmi, co-leader of the opposition Socialists, has called for opposition parties to cooperate in Hungary's upcoming municipal elections, and proposed setting up a joint list for the EP elections. At a press conference in central Budapest, Kunhalmi said the opposition "must not allow" the ruling party to divide them lest the ruling Fidesz party "takes back Budapest and also wins the municipal elections". "Democratic parties joined together and won in 14 districts at the past election in 2019," she said, calling for support for incumbent opposition mayors. Kunhalmi said her party backed the nomination of incumbent 8th district mayor András Pikó, who represents the Momentum, DK, Socialist, Párbeszéd

and LMP parties. She said the Socialists will continue their signature drive seeking public support for opposition cooperation in the municipal and EP elections in Budapest and across the country.

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### **FEBRUARY 'ALMOST APRIL'**

February so far has been akin to a cooler April, with an average temperature of 8.1 degrees Celsius in Hungary, HungaroMet said on Facebook. This reading was 7.6 C above the equivalent average for the 1991-2020 period and almost 3 C milder than the previous record in 2016. Also, the first two weeks of February saw temperatures 2.3 C higher than the March average seen in the 1991-2020 period. Temperatures between Feb 9 and 11 exceeded the record for this period during the last 124 years. On Feb 10, the national daily average was 12.7 C, the second mildest day on that date since the start of the 20th century.