

## PHOTO OF THE DAY



Prime Minister Viktor Orbán delivers his annual state of the nation address.

## UPCOMING EVENTS

**EU foreign ministers meet in Brussels**

**LMP presser on party's child protection proposals**

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

## TOP STORY

# ORBÁN: NO PARDON FOR PAEDOPHILE CRIMES

The prime minister, in his state of the nation address, said that there must be no pardon for paedophile crimes, adding that President Katalin Novák's and former Justice Minister Judit Varga's resignations had been the "correct step" and would "strengthen us".

Viktor Orbán said in his address on Saturday that the government would reinforce Hungary's child protection system. "Children must not be violated and any abuse should entail the strictest punishment," Orbán said. He said the resignations were "a bad start" for the year, adding that it was up to the government "to restore moral order and offer legal remedy for the current situation." "A political mistake is annoying, even if there is an explanation, but even more so when there is none," he added. According to the prime minister, an uproar in the wake of the president's pardon in right-wing circles arose because it was not a decision made in a difficult situation but an "unforced error". "For right wingers the rule is simple: there must be no pardon for paedophile crimes," he added. He said that the resignation should be "sufficient compensation and an example for the country, a chance for Hungary to come out stronger from a difficult situation ... and we will do so,".

## **ORBÁN: PRESIDENT'S RESIGNATION WAS 'A GREAT LOSS FOR HUNGARY'**

The prime minister in his state of the nation address said that President Katalin Novák's resignation was "a great loss for Hungary" and thanked both Novák and former Justice Minister Judit Varga for their work. He added that the two had "more dignity in their little finger than in all of the leaders of the leftist parties put together." Orbán praised Novák as a "greatly respected, appreciated president working, moreover, fighting for her homeland, the Hungarian people and their families ... seen by all as a person fit for her presidential position." He referred to Novák as an "embodiment of the good characteristics of Hungarians, a kind and prepared mother, who sought not to prove her abilities against men and according to men's measures." Novák "demonstrated in her natural way that women's way of thinking and feeling are indispensable in all walks of life including politics," he added. Novák resigned because she pardoned a man sentenced for covering up a crime against children, and "the vast majority of Hungarians rejected that pardon", Orbán said. "The president's pardon impacted national unity and she could no longer restore that unity," he added. "A toppled equilibrium can be restored, the high waves of indignation tamed, the nation reunited over issues around family and child protection only

through the president's resignation and electing a new president," the prime minister said.

Concerning the former justice minister, Orbán said Judit Varga had countersigned the president's pardon "following the constitutional custom and an unbroken practice of the past 25 years." "Her departure is an unavoidable and, I think, unfair, consequence of the laws of the state," he said. "Sometimes good people, even the best, will make bad decisions, and ... if they could fly back in time they would certainly correct the mistake. But it is not possible and now it is up to the government ... to restore moral order and offer legal remedy for the situation," Orbán said. "Serving the nation also requires personal humility ... you need to know that no matter how high up you are you can never be clever enough by yourself and there are no protected positions, even in the highest office one can make a mistake," he said. "A political mistake is annoying, even if there is an explanation, but even more so when there is none," he added.

Hungary's child protection system must be strengthened, from the constitution to the level of ministerial decree, the prime minister said. "The tribulations of the victims compel us", Orbán said, adding that the leadership and oversight of children's protection institutions as well as regulations and restrictions for the staff who work there would be strengthened. He said a new package of child protection legislation would be submitted to parliament.

Orbán said electing a new president was an "urgent task" and asked the parliamentary group of governing Fidesz-KDNP to start the process of electing a replacement for Katalin Novák on the day she left office.

## **ORBÁN: HUNGARY EMERGES FROM DIFFICULT 2023 'BY THE SKIN OF OUR TEETH'**

Hungary has emerged from a very difficult 2023 "by the skin of our teeth" but "can't be dissatisfied" with the results, the prime minister said in his state of the nation address. Viktor Orbán said that Hungarians had been living and working under "extreme pressure" for the fifth year in a row, trying to "protect that which we've achieved". Workplaces have been successfully preserved, he said, noting that never before had so many people been in jobs in Hungary.

Hungary's employment rates stands at 75% today, but the government "wants and will" raise that to 85%, he said. Orbán put the number of Hungarians who could be brought into the workforce at "at least 300,000" and added that more Hungarians were returning home each year than were leaving to work abroad. He said the annual pensioners' bonus, equivalent to a full month's pension, which the "left wing had snatched from people", had also been preserved.

Orbán said Hungarians living beyond the borders had been "brought closer", noting the construction of three new bridges over the Ipoly river, on the

border between Hungary and Slovakia, ten daily trains between Szeged, in the southeast of the country, and Subotica (Szabadka) in neighbouring Serbia, and three flights a week connecting Budapest with Cluj-Napoca (Kolozsvár) in Romania. Inflation has been reduced from a record 25% to below 4%, the budget deficit has been kept on a downward path, and the minimum wage for unskilled labourers has been raised by 15%, he added.

Addressing the green transition, Orbán said the era of green energy had “not come knocking, but kicked the door in”. The future belongs to green energy and to those who can make the transition “quickly and sensibly”, he added. He said the stability of Hungarian politics, the two-thirds majority in parliament of the governing alliance, was accommodating to “rapid adaptation”, adding that Hungary could make the green transition faster than anywhere in Europe. Orbán said Hungary could “kill two birds with one stone” with the green transition: making the country more liveable and freeing it from energy dependency by adding blocks at the Paks nuclear power plant, extending the lifespan of the existing blocks there and building up industrial and home solar power capacity. Hungary’s solar power capacity now stands over 5,600 MW, he said, adding that 255,000 homes were outfitted with solar panels and solar energy now accounted for 15% of energy consumption. He said that capacity was needed to store green energy as well as to generate it,

adding that it was a “matter of a few years” before battery storage devices would be ubiquitous, in cars, homes, workplaces and factories. He said Hungary’s government was spending “several hundred billion forints” toward that end. Hungary has built interconnectors with the power grids and gas networks of neighbouring countries and it’s a “few years away” from becoming energy independent, he said.

Orbán said Hungary was at the forefront of a technological revolution that would allow it to “rescue” its vehicle manufacturers. Hungary must avoid the fate of car plants in the west that are being shut down and moved elsewhere, Orbán said. “Imagine Győr without Audi or Kecskemét without Mercedes!” he added. Hungary’s automotive industry output exceeds 13,000 billion forints (EUR 33.4bn) and provides the livelihood for several hundred thousand families, he noted. He said Hungary was “world class” in terms of pharmaceuticals, seed production, the food industry and ICT, in addition to vehicle manufacturing. Hungary has become a “centre of gravity” in the Carpathian basin in terms of politics, culture, and the economy, the prime minister said.

### **ORBÁN: ‘YEAR 2024 WILL AGAIN BE “A YEAR OF SUCCESS”**

Year 2024 will again be “a year of success”, Orbán said in his address, adding that last year had been “a

year of failure” for the EU, while dragging Hungary down, too. “Brussels has only brought trouble for us ... Brussels’ Ukraine strategy has failed spectacularly, not only on the battlefield but in international politics, too,” Orbán said. Despite the conflict being “a war between two Slavic brothers” the EU “nearly threw itself” into the conflict, leaving Hungary alone with its “pro-peace position”. Hungary’s position will prove to be the right one, “but the tragedy is that hundreds of thousands of people will die till then,” he said. The Hungarian position is unchanged: “we will not let ourselves be dragged into the war,” Orbán said, adding that the country would not deliver weapons to Ukraine even if that didn’t win the favour of some big powers. Orbán said the EU’s “pressure on Hungary” was now so great that ambassadors would come to parliament to “check up on the behaviour of the dollar left” but added that “sooner or later everybody will realise they are better off if they leave us alone.”

Meanwhile, the prime minister said it was “good news that our dispute with Sweden is nearing a conclusion”. Together with the Swedish prime minister they made important steps to rebuild trust, he said, adding that the Hungarian parliament could ratify Sweden’s NATO accession at the start of its spring session. Orbán said the US was increasingly reluctant to provide financing to Ukraine, putting a growing burden on Europe, which was struggling with an “ailing” economy.

Joint EU credit is “a road Hungary won’t go down again”, he added. “Brussels has abandoned Europeans ... never has there been such a huge gap between Brussels’ policies and the interests and will of the European people,” he said. He pointed to the need for change in Brussels but said that change would “not happen by itself ... Europe must recapture Brussels”.

Concerning the EU’s new agricultural regime and the opening of European markets to Ukraine, Orbán said they had created “an impossible situation” for European farmers. “Rather than healthy food produced domestically we are forced to accept cultivated meat and GMO junk,” Orbán said. Farmers protesting all over Europe don’t want regulations to be decided by “climate fanatics” and “ivory tower experts”, he added.

On the subject of migration, Orbán said he had “bad news only”. He said migration posed a security risk and was a “hotbed for anti-Semitism”, while it would also “uproot European societies”. “They lured the migrants, sitting in Brussels and in Berlin with cotton candy in the hot sun, and now are surprised to be surrounded by wasps,” he said. “It is time to face reality: Europe’s competitiveness has been compromised by the war, the sanctions and emerging blocs with the upcoming, fatal consequences of an impoverished middle class, which will also mean the end of democracy,” Orbán said.

Touching on EU enlargement, Orbán said the process had become “a communications tool” serving Ukraine policy goals while Brussels had “abandoned the Balkans, because Ukraine needs the money”. Orbán said 2024 could be “a turning point” with elections in the European Union, in the United States, in India and a dozen other places. “The global political stage will look completely different at the end of the year...and if God helps us, Hungary’s room from manoeuvre will increase to an extent not seen for a long time,” he said.

The prime minister said he would like to see Donald Trump return to the White House and make peace on the eastern side of Europe. “We cannot have a say in the elections of other countries, but we would very much like Donald Trump to return,” he added. “Let there be a ‘Make America Great Again’ presidency in America,” he said. “A revival of greatness in America and Europe. Connectivity, strengthening regional cooperation between Hungary and Slovakia, Austria and Serbia, and a sovereigntist turn in Brussels. That’s what we want under the Christmas tree this year,” he added. He said that the “bureaucrats in Brussels” wouldn’t bring Europe out of the crisis and that a new European right wing, of which Hungarians were a part, could bring “real change”. The new right wing is “not an alternative to Europe, but a European alternative”, he added.

## **US SENATORS TRUST HUNGARIAN LAWMAKERS WILL RATIFY SWEDEN’S NATO ACCESSION SOON**

United States Senator Jeanne Shaheen said a bipartisan delegation of her peers trusted that Hungarian lawmakers would soon ratify Sweden’s NATO accession bid, speaking at a press conference in Budapest on Sunday, but expressed disappointment that nobody from the Hungarian government had met with them. The delegation, on a mission focused on strategic issues confronting NATO and Hungary, included Senator Shaheen, a Democrat, and Senator Thom Tillis, a Republican, who both co-chair the Senate NATO Observer Group, as well as Senator Chris Murphy, a Democrat and member of the Committee on Foreign Relations. Shaheen noted at the press conference that Hungary was the last NATO member whose parliament had still not ratified Sweden’s accession to the alliance, adding that Prime Minister Viktor Orbán had earlier said it wouldn’t be the last one to do so. Shaheen said she trusted Orbán would honour a pledge made in his state of the nation address on Saturday that Hungarian lawmakers would ratify Sweden’s NATO accession at the start of parliament’s spring session. The senators stressed that Sweden’s accession to NATO would

strengthen the alliance and the security of the United States and Hungary in the current situation. Shaheen stressed the importance of NATO being the strongest and most unified alliance possible considering the challenges facing Europe in the context of the war in Ukraine.

Senator Tillis said Russia's invasion of Ukraine was a threat against democracy, against Hungary and against Europe, which was why NATO needed to be enlarged. Senator Murphy said there was no reason for the Hungarian parliament to further delay the ratification of Sweden's NATO accession. Fielding questions, Tillis said the US respected Hungary's independence and sovereignty, but added that the country needed to support Sweden's NATO accession, just like the other members of the NATO family.

Asked to comment on remarks by Péter Szijjártó, the foreign minister, suggesting Russia was not a threat to NATO members, Shaheen said she didn't agree at all. The senators had wanted to review with representatives of the Hungarian government bilateral economic ties, the situation of human rights and matters related to the upcoming presidential election in the US. Shaheen noted that the US was the second-biggest foreign investor in Hungary. She said a declaration assessing the situation of Sweden's NATO accession would be submitted with her co-chair of the Senate NATO Observer Group upon their return to the US.

## **GULYÁS: GOVT TO TIGHTEN CONDITIONS FOR APPOINTING CHILD PROTECTION OFFICIALS**

The government has decided to set stricter requirements for the appointment of the heads of child protection institutions and will review and tighten child protection rules, the head of the Prime Minister's Office said on Friday. Gergely Gulyás told a government press briefing that President Katalin Novák and former justice minister Judit Varga had taken responsibility for the clemency case of the former deputy head of the Bicske children's home "in exemplary fashion". He noted that Wednesday's cabinet meeting had been the first since Novák and Varga's resignations, and the first chance for the government to draw the political conclusions from the case that had defined Hungarian public life in the last two weeks. Gulyás said the government had placed "a uniquely high emphasis" on supporting families and protecting children over the last 14 years. He said the left wing had not supported the family tax preferences, the CSOK home purchase subsidy schemes, the child protection law or the anti-paedophile law. The government supported families "more than anyone else" by introducing measures such as home purchase subsidies and tax cuts for families raising children, and PIT exemptions for women raising four or more children, he said. The ruling parties' majority

in parliament adopted the strictest child protection law in Europe and tightened the Penal Code's provisions on paedophilia, he said. They created a register of paedophile offenders so the authorities can monitor them once they have served their sentence. Further, "the government protected the stringent child protection law in a referendum, too." He said Novák had achieved more than anyone else in the interest of family policy after 2014, and highlighted Varga's role in tightening the Penal Code and approving the family protection law. It was understandable, he added, that the majority of Hungarian society had been baffled by the presidential pardon. But "inevitably" the president and the former justice minister had had to take responsibility and had done so "in exemplary fashion", he added.

Gulyás said the government was focused on the future. In addition to a constitutional amendment proposal filed by the prime minister to prevent a pardon from being granted to perpetrators of crimes committed against minors, the government will set stricter conditions for the appointment of the heads of child protection institutions, and child protection laws, too, must be reviewed, he said. After the "issue of the presidential pardon", the prime minister submitted an amendment to the Fundamental Law to ensure "there is no mercy" for those committing crimes against minors, he said. In addition to the stricter regulations introduced in

2017, the government now wants to introduce a psychological evaluation, expansive vetting and a comprehensive assessment of a candidate's trustworthiness before appointing leaders to such positions, he said. Child protection regulations must also be reviewed, and stricter yet "sensible" measures introduced, he added. Gulyás said people who had "attacked child protection measures up to now" were now "styling themselves as their apostles", so an opportunity had arisen to form a consensus on issues that had divided the left and the right.

Parliament must accept the president's resignation, Gulyás said. "That will happen on February 26." The new president then must be elected within 30 days. Candidates must be backed by one-fifth of MPs to be eligible, he said. Regarding proposals that presidents should be elected directly by voters in Hungary, Gulyás said the procedure "will definitely not change". The procedure of presidential elections is enshrined in the constitution, and presidents have been elected accordingly since 1990, he added. "The left wing only has problems with electoral procedures when they are not in a majority in parliament," Gulyás said. Asked whether the government was planning to investigate who had put forward the names of the former director of the Bicske children's home and his deputy for state awards, he said such an investigation "has already been conducted, mostly with the help

of the press". The awards were handed out before their crimes had come to light, he said. Former Budapest mayor István Tarlós proposed that the awards be withdrawn, he added. Incumbent mayor Gergely Karácsony also voted for the awards, Gulyás said, adding that "no mayor or city assembly can be expected to visit every single Budapest institution personally". "The mistake must have been made at the social affairs department, by those who made the recommendation."

Asked whether Reformed Church Bishop Zoltán Balog should also resign, Gulyás said the government "does not have an opinion on the internal affairs of the Reformed Church. We can, of course, have a debate about the counsel given ... but the responsibility belongs to those making decisions, and Katalin Novák, who made this decision, has resigned." Asked if the government considered the matter closed, Gulyás said that "given that everything that could happen has" and the president and the former justice minister have resigned, they considered it closed, but a new president had to be elected and child protection regulations had to be tightened. He said he would be open to making clemency procedures public, adding that no matter who the next president will be, they will certainly consider all of their decisions to be public. This, he added, was another argument in favour of making the decisions fully public.

In response to another question, Gulyás said Prime Minister Viktor Orbán

and he himself had found out about the pardon granted to the children's home deputy director Endre K. from the press, adding that neither Novák nor Zoltán Balog had consulted with the prime minister. Gulyás said he did not know whether any member of government had asked Novák about the reason of the pardon. He said the former justice minister was, too, "being made a target for criticism by everyone" for countersigning the pardon even though the justice minister had always countersigned every presidential pardon over the past 25 years regardless of whether it was the right or the left in power. Answering another question, Gulyás said President Novák had made the right decision when she pardoned radical activist György Budaházy, arguing that that case "had clear pros and cons", whereas he believed this current one "only has cons". Gulyás said he knew whether Varga had supported or opposed the clemency request when she submitted it to the presidential Sándor Palace, but did not want to disclose it, as he did not want to give any more statements on the matter after the resignations. He noted that both the president and the former justice minister had apologised to the victims.

Asked what his message was for the children of the Bicske orphanage who were abused, Gulyás said the government believed the current child protection law needed to be made even stricter. "To the victims we say that we sympathise with them, and we

would like to help everyone we can," he said. Asked about a proposal on the chemical castration of paedophiles, Gulyás said the government had not taken a position on this, adding that he believed any decision on possible punishments for child abuse needed to be thought over carefully. He said the sexual abuse of children was "without a doubt the most serious offence", so not even the most stringent proposals should be ruled out immediately, but human dignity was a fundamental principle of Hungary's constitutionality.

Asked to comment on Momentum MP András Fekete-Győr's refusal to resign after a second-instance court this week found him guilty of assault against a police officer at a demonstration in 2018, Gulyás said that while there were always consequences for errors and mistakes on the right, on the left, there were none "for even the gravest sins". Asked about a "scandalous" opinion piece posted on Klubradio's website by its director András Arató, Gulyás said he was certain that "Arató, too, should resign from his post". "And as long as this does not happen, a decent person won't set foot in Klubradio either as an employee or for the purpose to be interviewed," Gulyás added. He was also asked about statements made by Péter Magyar, the ex-husband of Judit Varga. Gulyás said he had last spoken with Magyar several months ago "partly because he warned ahead of time that he'd do what he's doing now should his assignments received from the state be terminated". Asked about whom

ruling Fidesz would nominate to fill Varga's position to lead the joint EP election list of the governing Fidesz-Christian-Democrat alliance, Gulyás said party MEP Tamás Deutsch would be an "excellent choice", adding that once taken, the decision would be announced.

The head of the Prime Minister's Office said that a planned meeting between Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky would make sense only if it yielded tangible results. He noted a meeting that had already taken place between the Hungarian and Ukrainian foreign ministers at which the Hungarian side had made clear on which issues it hoped to make progress. "If there is openness towards such progress then an Orbán-Zelensky meeting makes sense," said Gulyás. Asked whether Hungary's parliament will ratify Sweden's NATO accession bid, Gulyás said "there are ongoing talks with the Swedish government giving hope". He said that parliament's decision can also be signed by László Kövér, Hungary's acting president.

In connection with the timing of the approval of the EU's new migration pact in Brussels earlier this week, Gulyás said "they hurried with it probably because they are afraid of what we in fact hope: that the composition of the next European Parliament will be much more favourable for the right wing, conservative and anti-immigration

parties". "The biggest problem with that pact is in fact not its timing, but the fact that it sets requirements for member states to fulfil which are not obligatory for them to fulfil under their EU accession treaties," he added. Commenting on proposed EU sanctions against Israel, Gulyás highlighted the requirement of unanimity for any decision to pass on a foreign policy issue. "Hungary can therefore prevent the formulation of a common EU position on the matter on its own," he said. Commenting on recent inflation data, Gulyás said those "are getting close to the below-3% rate which is acceptable". "In a best-case scenario, inflation could next year return to below 3%, and it surely will not cause such a problem that it did in the past 2 years," he said.

## **BALOG RESIGNS AS PRESIDENT OF REFORMED CHURCH SYNOD**

Reformed Bishop Zoltán Balog resigned as president of the Synod of the Reformed Church in Hungary on Friday. He said he was resigning for the sake of the church. He said he had made a "grave political error", but in a case of clemency. He said he had requested clemency for someone, "and if for that I must leave now, do not think that that will be a solution". Balog said he was "stepping back" because the unity of the church was more important to him "than to allow it to be torn apart".

## **OPPOSITION PARTIES REACT TO PM'S STATE OF THE NATION SPEECH**

Viktor Orbán has "failed to address the cardinal question: why the accomplice of a paedophile was granted a presidential pardon," the Democratic Coalition (DK) said in reaction to the prime minister's speech. "The prime minister would not provide an answer, he refuses to take responsibility and will not apologise to the victims," DK said. Jobbik-Conservatives said it was "obvious that Hungary is in the greatest political scandal and moral crisis of the past 30 years" and Orbán should have taken responsibility for "the disgrace of the pardon case". The Socialist Party said Orbán had "made it clear the scandal was resolved" with the resignation of the president and of the former justice minister, while "fleeing responsibility". Radical nationalist Mi Hazánk said Orbán's speech "depicted an idyllic Hungary that is very far from reality". "The prime minister will not take any personal responsibility for the pardon scandal that has shaken the whole country," the party added. Párbeszéd-Greens said they regretted that "no honest reflection took place" in Orbán's speech. "The prime minister should have made amends for this disgusting paedophile whitewashing". In addition to President Katalin Novák, former Justice Minister Judit Varga and Reformed Bishop Zoltán Balog "he should have admitted that he is politically responsible" for the scandal,

they added. LMP said "we still do not know why Endre K. has been granted a pardon." Momentum said the prime minister had "not addressed the most important questions".

## **DEMONSTRATION HELD FOR CHILD PROTECTION IN BUDAPEST HEROES' SQUARE**

Civil groups organised a demonstration in support of victims of child abuse and for "a healthy society" at Heroes' Square in downtown Budapest on Friday evening. The demonstration was organised by online content creators, saying they considered it important to speak out for the protection of victims, transparency, human decency and honest social dialogue. Activist Márton Gulyás of the YouTube channel Partizán thanked those attending the demonstration for standing up for victims and a child protection reform. Influencer Zsolt Osváth of the channel ZSHOW Time, who mentioned that he, too, had grown up in a children's home, said he wanted to raise awareness of "systemic problems ... of which the clemency case is just the tip of the iceberg". He said an institute will never be able to fill the void left by the absence of a family, but the state had to do everything possible to mitigate that absence. Osváth said he was not there to "topple the government or call on ministers to resign". "Though it matters who makes the decisions, but right now those whom the decisions

are made for are far more important," he said. "We won't be silent," he said, praising the investigative work that had exposed the director of a children's home of having the children who were entrusted to his care. "And then another monster tried to convince the victims to say that they lied," he said.

Singer Azahriah (Attila Baukó) addressed the event in a video message, saying that the government "was using parents' concern to incite opposition, then convert it into political gain". He called for improving the safety of children. "It's time to wake up," he said, calling for change through joining together. Digital content creator Orsi Tapasztó, who spoke as an adoptive parent, said some 7,000 children in Hungary were living in children's homes, most of whom will never be taken in by a family. She thanked children's home teachers for teaching children how to love and giving them back the ability to trust. She asked decision-makers to ensure that all children in institutional care can live in safety. YouTuber Edina Pottyondy, former board member of the Momentum party, criticised the absence of an independent investigation into the decision behind the president's pardon. She said real child protection would be the improvement of education, the social and health-care sectors and child protection authorities. She called for a child protection law that protected victims. "This demonstration won't change the world, but it can change people's mentality," she said.