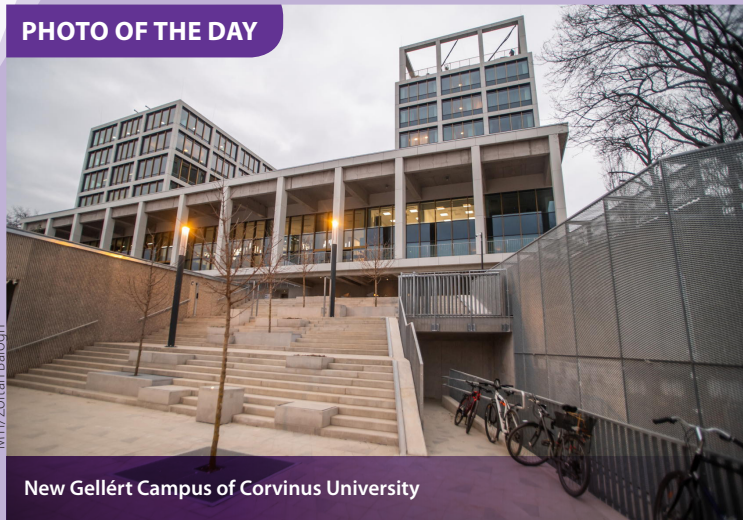


PHOTO OF THE DAY



MTI/Zoltán Balogh

New Gellért Campus of Corvinus University

UPCOMING EVENTS

Events related to the wars
in Ukraine and Middle East

TOP STORY

TOP COURT'S SULYOK NOMINATED

The ruling parties have decided to nominate Tamás Sulyok, the current head of the Constitutional Court, for head of state.

MPs will decide on accepting the resignation of the outgoing head of state, Katalin Novák, on Monday, Máté Kocsis, the Fidesz group leader, said in Balatonalmádi, where the ruling Fidesz and Christian Democratic parties held a meeting of their parliamentary group. Kocsis said it would be preferable to appoint Sulyok as soon as possible, but the timing also depended on whether the opposition parties decided to nominate a candidate for the post, and more would be known once a meeting of the house committee meeting is held on Friday. He said the head of the top court embodied "great authority" and was someone that everyone could take seriously. Meanwhile, new members of the top court will be elected in line with established parliamentary procedures, he said. Also, Kocsis announced that Tamás Deutsch will lead the Fidesz party's list in the European parliamentary elections. The rest of the EP list and candidates running in the local council elections will be decided by Fidesz's national board in March, he said, adding that the party's candidate for mayor of Budapest will be named then, too.

KOC SIS CALLS ON CONVICTED LEFT-WING POLITICIANS TO QUIT PUBLIC LIFE

The Fidesz parliamentary group leader, Máté Kocsis, called on the left wing to put an end to “public violence, bullying and lies”. Commenting on domestic political developments, Kocsis told the press conference that László Varju of the opposition Democratic Coalition and András Fekete-Győr of Momentum should quit public life. Noting that Varju was convicted of assault and Fekete-Győr was sentenced for a violent act against an official, he said that anyone convicted of acts such as disorderly conduct and causing bodily harm should step down from their public duties. Kocsis insisted that acts of public aggression were increasing, and he referred to the recent actions by the antifa movement in Hungary. He said political responsibility must be taken in the absence of legal responsibility, and he referred to András Jám bor and the Szikra Movement, saying that while he had not been convicted, he should also step down from public life.

Regarding the issue of child protection, he said a second child protection law package will be debated in the spring session, involving the proposed amendment of around 20 laws. Penalties for crimes against children will be

tightened further, he said, adding that proposals would include scrapping the statute of limitations in the case of sex crimes committed against anyone under the age of 18 as well as the possibility of parole. Further, such criminals would never again receive a certificate of attesting to the absence of a police record.

Anyone who commits crimes of child abuse will be stained for life, he added.

Referring to a planned amendment to the child protection law, Kocsis said a “completely new” child protection system would be introduced with “clear rules and controls”. He said there were problems in child protection, but warned against a general bias under which “everybody working in child protection should be stigmatised as criminals”. “There are many fair and honest people working in child protection, but some sick and perverted people might have infiltrated, who must be removed by every means”.

Answering a question on the subject, Kocsis said Hungary “is sure to come under attack by Brussels for tightening the child protection law. Kocsis also said there did not appear to be any need to tighten the law on the sovereignty protection law in the spring session of parliament.

Regarding Sweden’s NATO accession, he said the impending visit of the Swedish Prime Minister and talks over the past few days had taken the bilateral relationship “in a

very good direction”. “This was the gesture we were waiting for,” he said, adding that he did not fear that MPs would withhold their vote for Sweden’s accession to the alliance. “We presented our earlier grievances, but now it’s right to step beyond this and open a new chapter with the Swedes,” he said.

TAMÁS SULYOK - BRIEF BIOGRAPHY

Tamás Sulyok, the current president of the Constitutional Court who has been nominated for head of state, was born on March 24, 1956 in Kiskunfélegyháza.

In 1980, he graduated from the Faculty of Public Sciences and Law of the József Attila University of Szeged. In 2004, he gained a qualification in European law from Budapest’s ELTE university and obtained a PhD from Szeged university in 2013, his thesis being on the constitutional status of the legal profession, the regulation of the internal market of the European Community and the connections between legal services. Between 1997 and 2014 he headed a private legal practice, and from 2000 until his election as a constitutional judge in 2014 he was the honorary consul of Austria in Szeged. Since September 2005, he has taught constitutional law as a visiting lecturer at Szeged university. He was deputy president of the Constitutional Court from April 2015 and in November 2016 parliament elected him as the court’s president.

ORBÁN: 'WE WILL WIN EP ELECTION'

"We can and we will win the European parliamentary election," the daily Magyar Nemzet quoted Prime Minister Viktor Orbán as saying at a meeting of the ruling Fidesz-Christian Democrats' parliamentary group in Balatonalmádi, in western Hungary. "Brussels needs change," Orbán said, adding that Hungary would be punished under the European Union's new migration pact unless the country was willing to accommodate migrants. He said the war in Ukraine would not end soon, while an increasing burden was weighing on Europe in the wake of diminishing US aid to Ukraine. "There is a huge political price for assisting Ukraine ... farmers are protesting across Europe and soon nobody will believe in Ukraine's victory," Orbán said. Concerning Hungary's opposition, Orbán said the leftist parties "represent Brussels in Hungary rather than representing Hungary in Brussels ... they are mercenaries."

Meanwhile, referring to the recent resignations of Katalin Novák and Judit Varga, the former head of state and justice minister, respectively, he said their decisions had been "correct". "The resignations will strengthen us ... it has been made clear to everybody that on the national side there is no pardon in child protection cases." The daily

also quoted Orbán as saying that the resignations "weren't triggered by some problem but simply a mistake ... nobody can be clever enough on their own, even in the highest positions".

According to the paper, Orbán concluded his speech by assessing the upcoming elections and tasks ahead. He said the government had struck an agreement with the EU concerning community funding and had raised the salaries of teachers and kindergarten staff. It has reached an agreement concerning wage rises in other sectors, paid a 13th month pension to the elderly and reined in inflation. Concerning the European elections, he hoped both Brussels and Washington would see changes and "the European parliamentary and US presidential elections could at last bring hope to Europe". "In nine months' time we will be stronger than we are now ... it is worth working because each EP mandate will add to the joint force that will help us in the 2026 national election," Orbán said.

SZIJJÁRTÓ: HUNGARY, IRAN HAVE INTEREST IN COOPERATION IN NON- SANCTIONED SECTORS

Hungary and Iran both have an interest in developing economic cooperation in sectors not subject to sanctions, such as the pharmaceutical industry, the health and food industries and water management, Foreign Minister

Péter Szijjártó said in Tehran. The broad international sanctions imposed on Iran do not make economic and trade cooperation easy, Szijjártó told a Hungarian-Iranian business forum. "What we think about sanctions in general is irrelevant right now, and is a topic for another speech, but the point is that building economic cooperation isn't easy," Szijjártó said. "But 'not easy' doesn't mean that it's impossible." The minister said there were a number of areas that are not subject to sanctions, such as the pharmaceutical industry, the health and food industries and water management. He added that it was a "happy coincidence" that these are among the most-developed sectors of the Hungarian economy and global technological leaders.

Szijjártó said Hungary is the world's 20th most significant pharma exporter, and that Iran has been using Hungarian-made X-ray machines for over 15 years. The minister noted that he was accompanied on his visit by representatives of the most high-tech Hungarian agricultural firms which were technological leaders in seed production, animal and plant health as well as premix production. "We have the food industry companies here with us ... representing sectors ranging from milk processing to energy drinks," he said. He added that water management businesses exporting modern technologies to Africa, Southeast Asia and the Western Balkans were also present. Szijjártó asked the company executives to take advantage of the opportunity to

boost cooperation between Hungary and Iran in the areas not affected by sanctions.

Meanwhile, the minister touched on recent crises such as the pandemic, the war in Ukraine and the Middle East conflict, emphasising that the world had entered “an era of dangers” and a new global economic order was emerging. Hungary, given its geographical location and economic structure, has a vested interest in the global economy “operating under open, peaceful and fair conditions”. Szijjártó said Hungary was concerned about a potential re-emergence of geopolitical blocs in the world, noting that the country had already lost out on such a divide in the past. “That’s why we’d much rather like the coming period to be one of connectivity,” he said, adding that Hungary saw cooperation between East and West as an opportunity, rather than a threat or a risk.

Speaking after a meeting of the Hungarian-Iranian Joint Economic Committee later in the day, Szijjártó said a new bilateral agriculture cooperation agreement would present new trade opportunities in agriculture and the food industry. Trade turnover between Hungary and Iran exceeded 50 million dollars in 2022 despite the serious security and economic challenges, and reached a similar level last year, too, Szijjártó told a press conference, according to a ministry statement.

At a joint press conference with Iran’s finance minister, Szijjártó

welcomed that the investment protection agreement between the two countries has entered into effect, and said Hungary’s and Iran’s tax and customs authorities will work together to eliminate barriers to bilateral business cooperation. He said an agriculture cooperation agreement signed by the two countries could present new trade opportunities in agriculture and the food industry and boost the presence of advanced Hungarian farming technologies and food products on the Iranian market. Hungarian pharmaceutical and medical technology products, which have already enjoyed considerable recognition in Iran, are expected to expand their presence on the market in the future, the minister said. As regards water management cooperation, Szijjártó said Hungary and Iran are in talks on the export of more Hungarian water management technologies to the Middle Eastern country. Hungary and Iran will also uphold an agreement under which they issue 5,500 transport permits a year to each other’s companies, he said.

He noted that Hungary offers scholarships to 100 Iranian university students each year, adding that currently there are more than 2,000 Iranians studying in Hungary. There are six Hungarian universities cooperating with nine Iranian institutions, he said, adding that the next rectors’ conference is set to be held soon.

SZIJJÁRTÓ: IRAN TALKS CONTRIBUTE TO AVOIDING ESCALATION IN MIDDLE EAST

The top priority for the international community is to prevent an escalation of the conflict in the Middle East, which requires “parties of diverging opinion talking to each other”, Péter Szijjártó, the foreign minister, said in Tehran at a joint press conference held with Iranian counterpart Hossein Amir-Abdollahian. Szijjártó said representatives of European Union and NATO countries “do not turn up in Iran often”, adding that “diplomacy aims to bring parties together even if their views diverge”. “Bad-mouthing others doesn’t require all that much courage... The real achievement is if they talk to each other, especially under such difficult circumstances,” he said.

Szijjártó said an escalation of the conflict in the Middle East would pose a huge danger to global security. “If just one more country is involved in the conflict, it will not stop at the border of that country but will lead to at least a regional war, not to mention further consequences,” the minister said.

Hungary and Iran “may see several aspects of the serious security challenges facing the world differently”, he said. But his visit was aimed at “creating an opportunity to prevent an even more serious situation”, he added.

Hungary, he said, was “deeply concerned” about the situation in the

Middle East and “would not want to see another attack like the terrorist acts in Israel on October 7 anywhere in the world or against anybody.”

Szijjártó said “Iran is clearly needed” in the international community’s efforts to avoid escalation. Concerning the Iran nuclear deal, Szijjártó said Hungary had a vested interest in improving global security, adding that full implementation of the agreement could serve that end. He voiced support for the International Atomic Energy Agency’s efforts, adding that the IAEA had asked Hungary several times to train Iranian nuclear experts. The Hungarian government has met those requests and is ready to continue, he added. Szijjártó said that “mutual respect between the two countries” had offered an opportunity to for the talks, “even if the Iranian government is aware that Hungary is Israel’s strategic partner”. The minister noted that Hungary and Iran next year will celebrate the centenary of the establishment of diplomatic ties. He also mentioned that Hungary currently offers 2,000 scholarships to Iranian students at Hungarian universities.

NATL ECONOMY MINISTER HOLDS TALKS WITH EU JOBS COMMISSIONER

Márton Nagy, the minister of national economy, held talks with Nicolas Schmit, the European Commissioner for Jobs and Social Rights, in Budapest on Thursday. Nagy briefed the commissioner on the situation on

the Hungarian labour market and key employment policy issues, the ministry said in a statement. He emphasised that, due to demographic and structural changes, the management of the labour shortage was currently the biggest employment policy challenge in the EU, adding that the government focused on mobilising internal workforce reserves. The goal is to raise the activity rate of 15-64-year-olds from the current 78% to 85% in the long term, Nagy said. This will be helped by the GINOP Plusz programme, through which the government will spend 460 billion forints (1.19bn) to boost the activity rate and employment. The sides also discussed the issue of the regulation of the rapidly growing digital platform economy. The commissioner thanked Nagy for Hungary’s support and cooperation in negotiating the latest draft directive, and Nagy emphasised that, from the beginning, Hungary had strived to create a balanced regulation that takes into account the needs of the economy as well.

NATL ECONOMY MINISTER HAS PROFESSIONAL CONSULTATION WITH AMCHAM REPS

Márton Nagy, the national economy minister, had a professional consultation with AmCham representatives to the European Union on Thursday. The officials discussed Europe’s attractiveness as an investment destination, its

labour market, the single market, and economic developments, according to a ministry statement. US companies form the third largest investor community in Hungary, with US FDI amounting to almost 9.4 billion dollars in 2021, or 9 percent of the total FDI stock, the statement noted. Nagy said it was vitally important for the EU to boost its competitiveness and keep pace with the US and China, which back their own industries with consequential support -- in contrast to the restrictions of the strict fiscal policy demanded by the Maastricht rules. The minister briefed AmCham officials about his idea to provide European-level incentives for electric vehicle purchases. Referring to the goals of Hungary’s upcoming EU presidency, Nagy told them that Hungary wants red tape that stymies economic players and member state authorities and obstacles to the single market to be removed. Also, he said affordable energy was key to EU industrial competitiveness, and a mix of renewables and nuclear energy would be necessary to attain low prices. Nagy said his ministry was examining the American Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) and how it affected EU industrial and trade policy. Also, regarding the Artificial Intelligence Ordinance (AI Act), Nagy said Hungary wanted to ensure that measures in support of European businesses and developments should not end up

increasing red tape while allowing EU member states enough freedoms to pursue their own policies. The officials agreed on the importance of keeping contacts with reliable intermediaries who build bridges between decision-makers and businesses. They said a business environment that underpinned competitiveness and economic performance rather than holding it back was desirable, the statement said.

HUNGARY REPRESENTATIVE WARNS UN COURT AGAINST ISSUING POSITION ON ISRAEL

Issuing a court position would not contribute to settlement and could even fuel tension in the Middle East, Attila Hidegh, deputy state secretary at the Hungarian foreign ministry, said on behalf of Hungary at the United Nations International Court of Justice on Wednesday. At the hearing, concerning the legitimacy of Israel's occupation of Palestinian territories since 1967, the Hungarian official said the procedure itself "may be considered as provocations in the ongoing conflict". Issuing a relevant position he said would not contribute to avoiding an escalation of the conflict or to an immediate settlement. "A potential utilisation of the court for political purposes could continue to fuel tension in one of the most severe conflicts in recent history," he warned.

VÁRHELYI ADDRESSES OPENING OF EXHIBITION ON UKRAINE REFUGEE AID EFFORTS

Olivér Várhelyi, European Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement, addressing the opening of the exhibition "Am I My Brother's Keeper" in the building of the European Commission in Brussels on Thursday noted that Hungary has been helping Ukrainians, Ukrainian Jews and everyone in need jointly with the Jewish community ever since the outbreak of the war there.

Várhelyi said aid provided to the Jewish community in Ukraine had so far remained invisible, but it was now important to show what people were capable of, as this would serve as an example to others. "The exhibition shows human suffering in war. Everyone, even those who look at the conflict from afar, should see the human suffering," Várhelyi said, adding that those affected have found shelter and safety in Hungary.

Slomo Köves, chief rabbi of the Federation of Hungarian Jewish Communities, Mazsihisz, said the individual stories presented at the exhibition were special examples of the aid given, noting cooperation between European and Israeli Jewish organisations, and cooperation between the European Union and Hungarian government, which provided assistance to the member of the Hungarian community in

Ukraine as soon as the war broke out, he said.

"The exhibition is proof that, by working together and striving for peace, there is much we can do for each other," Köves said, adding that the biblical quote serving as the title of the exhibition "reminds us that we must all responsibility for each other".

Ákos Bíró, director of the archives of the Hungarian Autonomous Orthodox Jewish Community (MAOIH), noted that the government has opened the former government resort in Balatonőszöd to host the Jews who have fled the war in Ukraine.

WW2 RESISTANCE FIGHTERS, INCLUDING HUNGARIANS, REBURIED IN PARIS PANTHEON

Twenty-three martyrs of the French resistance movement including three Hungarians were reburied in Paris's Pantheon on Wednesday, the 80th anniversary of their execution. The resistance fighters belonging to the partisan group of Armenian poet and journalist Missak Manouchian were "foreigners, yet our brethren", French President Emmanuel Macron said at the ceremony. "Jews, Hungarians, Poles, Armenians, communists that sacrificed their lives for our homeland," Macron said in an interview to the daily L'Humanité. The group including Tamás Elek, Imre Békés Glász and József Boczor belonged to the French Communist Party and carried out guerrilla attacks on the occupying

German troops around Paris until they were captured by the Gestapo. They were executed on February 21, 1944.

DEC GROSS WAGES UP 16.4% YY

The gross average wage in Hungary amounted to 655,600 forints (EUR 1,694) in December, increasing by an annual 16.4%, while net pay including supplementary payments came to 451,300 forints, the Central Statistical Office (KSH) said on Thursday. Net wages were up 16.3% year on year, while real wages rose by an annual 10.3%. In the full year 2023, the gross average wage amounted to 571,200 forints, while net pay came to 393,700 forints. Gross and net wages both rose by 14.2%, while real wages fell by 2.9% from a year earlier.

Sándor Czomba, the state secretary for employment policy, said real wages grew by more than 10% in December thanks to the government's successful measures which pushed down inflation to 5.5% by the end of last year. The rise in the purchasing power of salaries has also been helped by the increase in the basic minimum wage by 15% and the one for skilled employees by 10% from December, he added. The dynamic growth in real wages will contribute to restoring consumption and economic growth, the state secretary said.

BUDGET POSTS HUF 54.4 BN SURPLUS IN JAN

Hungary's cash-flow-based budget surplus came to 54.4 billion forints (EUR 140.3m) at the end of January, the finance ministry

confirmed in a detailed reading of data published on Thursday. The central budget deficit was 37.4 billion forints and the social security funds had a surplus of 50.2 billion forints. Separate state funds posted a 41.6 billion forint surplus. The ministry noted that the budget had ensured resources for a 6% pension rise as well as the continuation of the regulated price scheme for household utilities and family subsidies. "The government aims to strengthen growth this year, while continuing to reduce budget deficit and state debt levels," it added.

Expenditures related to the regulated utilities price scheme for households came to 181.3 billion forints by the end of January, 8.3 billion forints more than in the same period of last year. European Union transfers came to 226.0 billion forints, over 191 billion forints more than in January 2023, as a suspension of some of Hungary's EU funding was lifted after the country complied with the European Commission's conditions regarding judicial reforms. Expenditures on pensions increased as the government raised pensions by 6% in January.

Central budget revenues rose by 16.9% to 3,321.7 billion forints at the end of January. Central budget expenditures were up 9.5% at 3,267.3 billion forints. Central budget debt rose by 2,064.5 billion forints in January 2024.

DEMO HELD FOR CHILD PROTECTION IN BUDAPEST

A group of organisations held a demonstration to support the protection of children in central Budapest on Wednesday evening. Organised by the Országos Közös Akarat (National Common Will) civil group, the participants gathered at St Gellért Square and marched across Szabadság Bridge to Kossuth Square in front of Parliament. Speaking at the event, Sándor Meleg, the head of the Association of Hungarian Social Workers, said the government's recently announced measures related to child protection including an amendment to the Fundamental Law and vetting the leaders of social institutions would not solve the problems prevalent in the institutional network. He called the recent measures announced in response to the Bicske children's home affair "improvised pseudo steps" which would not be sufficient "to prevent further abuses". Meleg urged decision-makers to prevent, rather than sanction retroactively, cases of abuse and transform the institutional network so that any such cases could be prevented.

Lola Giay, board member of Egységes Diákfront (United Student Front) said that "the sexual abuse of children that had gone on for years in the Bicske children's home has ruined the life of children" and "all this could happen because those in power had failed to act despite warnings". "A couple of resignations and a legislative amendment is good for a start, but not enough," she said, announcing the setting up a child protection round-table together with Közös Akarat.