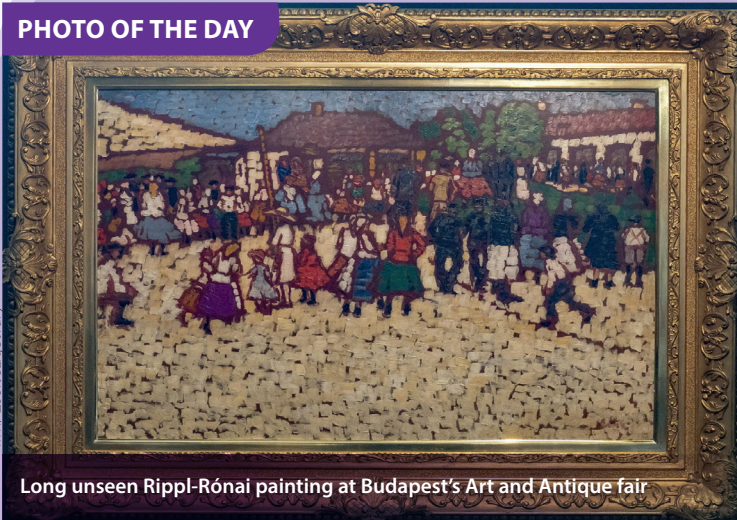


PHOTO OF THE DAY



MTI/Zolt Székely

Long unseen Rippl-Rónai painting at Budapest's Art and Antique fair

UPCOMING EVENTS

Stats office prelim reports on demographics for Dec, investments Q4, industrial producer prices Jan

Events related to the wars in Middle East, Ukraine

TOP STORY

SZIJJÁRTÓ: HUNGARY-ITALY COOPERATION KEY FOR SECURITY, ECONOMY, ENERGY

Hungary and Italy already maintain significant cooperation in security and the economy, while developing energy cooperation will add another dimension to existing relations, Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó said in Rome on Wednesday.

The ministry cited him as saying after talks with Italian counterpart Antonio Tajani that Italy had never before played as important a role in the Hungarian economy as currently, with Italy being the second most important target of Hungarian exports after Germany. Bilateral trade was record high last year, exceeding 8 billion euros, he added. Italy is among the ten largest investors in Hungary and cooperation is also increasing in the defence industry, with a growing number of joint investment projects, he said. "Our defence cooperation in NATO has reached a new level, with Italians making the largest foreign contribution of 250 soldiers to the enhanced forward presence multinational battalion in Hungary, and there are ongoing talks about how to further expand security cooperation within NATO in this area," he said. The development of energy cooperation will add another dimension, with a recent agreement with Slovenia on natural gas interlinks that will open the way for establishing a Hungary-Slovenia-Italy natural gas supply corridor, he said.

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SZIJJÁRTÓ: GOVT STANDS UP FOR THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS BOTH AT HOME AND IN INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS

Attending a meeting of the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva on Wednesday, Péter Szijjártó, the foreign minister, said Hungary firmly upheld the protection of human rights both at home and in international organisations. Given present global dangers and a century so far marked by wars and crises, terrorism and mass illegal migration, serious debates are taking place regarding human rights, a ministry statement quoted the minister as saying. As rights are continually violated, it is important to distinguish between what counts as a universal human right and what does not, he said in his speech. Szijjártó said everyone had the right to lead their life in safety and in their own place of residence, to be free to practise their religion and to identify with their nation. But no one had the right, he added, to violate the borders of two safe countries, to kill for an ideology or religion, or to stop people from using their mother tongue. He noted that millions of ethnic Hungarians live outside the country's present-day borders, around 150,000 in neighbouring Ukraine, where until 2015 they enjoyed a broad array of rights. Then, in the areas of education, culture, media

and public administration, their mother-tongue rights were severely restricted with the result that 99 minority schools shuttered recently, he noted. Hungary, he said, insisted on the soonest possible restoration of rights of the Transcarpathian Hungarian community. "They're not asking for anything more than they previously had..." he said.

Meanwhile, referring to migration pressure on Hungary's borders -- the European Union and Schengen external borders -- these past nine years, he said that the country had witnessed "firsthand how dangerous migration is". Terrorism and migration, he added, formed a "vicious circle", as the greater the terrorist threat, the greater the migration pressure. And the more people died in migration waves, the greater the chance that future assassins would hide among them, he added. Szijjártó said "parallel societies" and "modern anti-Semitism" had sprung up in several Western countries. International law must be respected, he said. "People forced to flee can stay in the first safe country temporarily, not the second, third or fourth safe country," he said. On the topic of Christian persecution, the minister said that Hungary was a Christian state of one thousand years and felt particular responsibility for Christian communities around the world. It has spent 100,000 million US dollars on supporting Christian communities "so their members can remain where they have lived for hundreds of years" he said.

ORBÁN TO ADDRESS INTL CONFERENCE IN TÜRKIYE ON FRI

Prime Minister Viktor Orbán will participate in the Antalya Diplomatic Forum (ADF) at the invitation of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on Friday, according to information from the PM's press office. The forum, to be held between March 1-3, will be attended by heads of state and government, as well as government members, diplomats, business leaders, scientists, and the media. Orbán is scheduled to address the event early on Friday evening. This year's ADF is dedicated to the topic of finding peaceful solutions to current challenges including wars, terrorism, illegal migration, xenophobia and islamophobia, as well as risks posed by AI, climate change, natural disasters, pandemics, and the growing gaps in the economy and in society.

SZIJJÁRTÓ ON 'ITALIAN ATTEMPTS TO INFLUENCE COURT PROCEDURE IN HUNGARY'

"Some in Italy present Ilaria Salis, imprisoned in Hungary, as a kind of victim or martyr," Foreign Minister Peter Szijjártó said in Rome, adding that the woman and her accomplices had "deliberately beat nearly to death innocent people in the street." Szijjártó said he was shocked at some reactions to the case in Italy, and said the woman had "arrived in Hungary

as a member of a radical, extreme leftist group" and "with a clear plan to catch defenceless and innocent people in the street and beat them to death." "They nearly killed people in Hungary ... then she is seen as a martyr or subject to an unfair procedure," Szijjártó said, adding that similar acts in Italy "would probably be penalised, too." He said he hoped Salis would be handed her "due punishment" in Hungary because "no extreme leftist group should consider Hungary a kind of boxing ring where ... they could beat somebody to death."

FIDESZ MEP: HUNGARY HAS A NEED FOR PEACE IN UKRAINE

Hungary has a need for peace to emerge in Ukraine, and its interests lie in preserving stability and prosperity in Europe, Kinga Gál, the leader of the Fidesz European Parliament (EP) group, said in Strasbourg on Wednesday. After the EP plenary debate on strengthening European security and defence, Gál told Hungarian journalists that Hungary condemned Russia's aggression against Ukraine and stood by Ukraine in upholding its territorial integrity, while providing humanitarian support "beyond its means". She said, however, it was "unacceptable" that Hungary had been attacked because it stood for peace. Meanwhile, Hungary supports common defence policy and strengthening Europe's defence industry, something that Hungary's EU presidency will prioritise, she said. But Hungary rejects "ideological statements"

contained in the reports discussed in the EP today, she added. Europe's "real interests", such as stopping its slide in competitiveness, should be the real focus of debates, Gál said.

The MEP decried "repeated attacks" in EP reports against Olivér Várhelyi, the commissioner for enlargement and neighbourhood policy, adding that he deserved credit for getting enlargement policy moving again. Speeding up the European integration of the Western Balkans "is a fundamental strategic interest of the EU", Gál added. Regarding qualified majority voting, she said related proposals were "intolerable" and ran contrary to the EU's basic treaties. Scrapping unanimous decision-making would gravely harm the sovereignty of member states, especially smaller ones, she said.

FIDESZ MEP REJECTS EP RULES ON POLITICAL ADS AS 'OPPORTUNITY FOR BRUSSELS CENSORSHIP'

An MEP of ruling Fidesz has rejected new European Union regulations on political advertising, saying the rules would give Brussels an opportunity to "exercise censorship during election campaigns in member states and to influence their outcome". The regulation will "clearly curb member states' sovereignty," Edina Tóth said in a statement after the EP's plenary session on Tuesday, where the new rules on the transparency of political advertising were adopted with 470 votes in favour, 50 against and 105 abstentions.

The measures' objective was clearly "to set up rules in Brussels on what a political campaign can talk about, curbing the competencies of member states", Tóth said, saying the measure amounted to "curbing the free expression of opinion". "We shall stand up to the attacks on our freedom! We shall not give in to stealthy attempts to expand Brussels' competencies," she said.

Hungary saw the step as a politically motivated attempt to influence election rules in member states, and a violation of the principle of subsidiarity, she said. "It is sad to see the chief advocates of freedom of opinion violating the freedom of speech and working constantly on censoring opinions they don't like," she added, rejecting that EU institutions should have power over opinions criticising the EU. At the plenary session on Tuesday, the EP adopted rules on regulating political adverts to make elections and referendums "more transparent and resistant to interference", the EP said in a statement. "Under the new rules, political advertising will have to be clearly labelled. Citizens, authorities and journalists will be able to easily obtain information on whether they are being targeted with an ad, who is paying for it, how much is being paid, and to which elections or referendum it is linked. All political advertising and related information will be stored in a public online repository. To limit foreign interference in European democratic processes, sponsoring ads from outside the EU will be prohibited in the three-month period before an

election or referendum," the EP said. The regulation bans the use of special categories of personal data such as ethnicity, religion or sexual orientation, the statement said. The regulation is yet to be adopted by the European Council.

GYÜRK: HUNGARY DEMANDS IMMEDIATE ACTION BY BRUSSELS CONCERNING GERMAN GAS TAX

Hungary demands immediate action by Brussels concerning a tax imposed by Germany on exports of natural gas to other countries because "the unfriendly move undermines the competitiveness of central European countries and clearly goes against EU regulations," a ruling Fidesz MEP said on Wednesday. András Gyürk said in a statement that Germany's move also went against the principle of energy solidarity. The tax makes energy supplies for central European countries more expensive, undermining their competitiveness and making the diversification of natural gas supplies more difficult, he added. After a similar initiative by the Visegrad group countries and Austria, Hungary has submitted questions to the European Commission demanding immediate response, he said. Hungary expects answers on what concrete steps the EC was planning concerning the German tax which undermines the European energy market and whether Brussels plans to launch an infringement procedure. "This would be important in order to remove double standards," he added.

FIDESZ MEPS SLAM NEW EP REGULATION AGAINST JUDICIAL INTIMIDATION

MEPs of ruling Fidesz have rejected European parliamentary legislation aimed at defending critical voices from judicial intimidation, saying that the measure would "create a regime where organisations and members of the Soros network would be above the law". At a plenary on Tuesday, the EP adopted legislation to protect "individuals and organisations working on matters of public interest such as fundamental rights, allegations of corruption, protection of democracy or the fight against disinformation are given EU protection against unfounded and abusive lawsuits", the EP said in a press release. The legislation will apply to cross-border cases, not those where both the defendant and claimant are from the same EU country as the court or when the case is only relevant to one member state, the EP said. Fidesz MEP Ernő Schaller-Baross slammed the law for "exempting NGOs, self-appointed rights activists, climate activists causing serious economic damage and organisers of illegal migration from lawsuits just because that would violate their rights to participate in public affairs", saying the practice could lead to the cover-up of unlawful activities. "The new EU law casts doubts on national courts' ability to decide when to launch proceedings and which side is in the right," Schaller-Baross said.

MEP delegation head Balázs Hidvéghi said: "The underlying goal

is clearly to exempt members of the Soros network from the law". "The aim is to enable certain journalists and NGOs to do whatever they like without being held accountable. No one stands above the law," Hidvéghi said. The law was adopted with 546 votes in favour, 47 against and 31 abstentions.

MEP CALLS ON BRUSSELS TO STOP PROMOTING 'RADICAL LEFTIST IDEOLOGIES'

Brussels should stop its "aggressive promotion" of "radical leftist ideologies", lest it should damage opportunities for member states to cooperate, Balázs Hidvéghi, MEP of ruling Fidesz, said in Strasbourg on Wednesday. Speaking to Hungarian journalists, Hidvéghi said the European Parliament was "totally confused" about its role and was trying to act as a "moral police" over member states. He said it was an ill-advised approach to "disguise political and moral discussions as a legal debate" and impose sanctions on countries that "protect traditional values". The European Parliament is not to pass judgement over "such crucial moral issues" as life, death, the family, marriage, or the education of children, Hidvéghi said. He insisted that the norms concerning those notions had developed over thousands of years, and rules governing those areas should stay a sovereign right of nation states. He added that each country could have different positions on those areas, which should be respected by the community.

V4 PMS AGREE ON UKRAINE NEEDING AID

The Visegrad countries agree that Russia is the aggressor in the war in Ukraine, and that the latter must be aided, the prime ministers of Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia told a joint press conference on Tuesday after a summit in Prague. Petr Fiala of Czechia and Donald Tusk of Poland reiterated that their countries would continue supporting Ukraine "in all areas including weapon and ammunition deliveries". Fiala said Czechia had committed to organising ammunition procurement from third countries "since European countries have run out of free reserves". The scheme is supported by some 15 countries, Fiala said. Tusk called Russian President Vladimir Putin a "war criminal". Viktor Orbán of Hungary and Robert Fico of Slovakia called for peace talks as soon as possible. "The differences between the Visegrad countries are not as large as they seemed earlier," Tusk said.

BUDAPEST ASSEMBLY TO SET UP COMMITTEE OVER EVENTS AT BICSKE CHILDREN'S HOME

The Budapest Assembly decided on Wednesday to set up a case committee in connection with abuses uncovered at a children's home in Bicske, in central Hungary, with the aim of restoring public trust in the institutions. The

assembly voted unanimously for the proposal submitted by Gergely Karácsony, the city's mayor, and amended according to the proposals of Zsolt Wintermantel of Fidesz. Karácsony said it was the Assembly's task to "assign political responsibility and to adopt an action plan to restore public trust in state and local authority child protection services." The five-member committee will make its recommendations at the March assembly meeting. The Assembly also voted unanimously to adopt a strategy on preventing domestic violence and protecting the victims of violence. The strategy proposed by deputy mayors Anett Bósz and Ambrus Kiss aims to prevent and curb domestic violence and to protect the victims of violence of any kind. It also takes a stand against discrimination against women and aims to promote equality between men and women by strengthening the position of women in society, the assembly said. The strategy will lay the ground for policy measures in the municipality.

It approved a cooperation agreement regulating a revamped public transport system in the city and its satellite localities on Wednesday. The new cooperation agreement between the municipality, Minister of Construction and Transport János Lázár, Budapest transport centre BKK, national bus service provider Volánbusz and railway company MÁV-Start is set to come into force on March 1 and will expire in 2036. Under the agreement, the signatory companies

accept and distribute each other's tickets. The agreement also regulates the distribution of the revenues generated and other issues arising from synchronising services, such as setting up timetables, price policy and others. According to a previous agreement between Mayor Gergely Karácsony and Lázár, Budapest season tickets will be valid on all services operated by state-owned companies within the city boundaries, and the county and country passes will be valid on Budapest public transport.

FIDESZ COUNCILLOR CALLS ON BUDAPEST MAYOR TO RESIGN

Péter Kovács, a representative of Hungary's ruling Fidesz in the Budapest Assembly, on Wednesday called on Gergely Karácsony, the city's mayor, to resign over what he said were financial irregularities in connection with the reconstruction of capital's iconic Chain Bridge. Kovács, who is also the mayor of Budapest's 16th district, said it was increasingly clear that "the reconstruction exceeded the budget by 5 billion forints [EUR 12.8m] and the contents of works completed reduced because money was being siphoned off". "It is time for you to resign from leading the city while you can do so with your head held high. You should show similar decency to that shown by the [former head of state]," he said, referring to the resignation of Katalin Novák. According to media

reports, at least 1.5 billion forints had been “funneled through a lawyer called Vig... then turned into campaign funds”, Kovács said. Kovács said Karácsony’s support was failing, and even leftist parties were calling for an inquiry into the matter. “Karácsony is finished”, Kovács said, insisting that Democratic Coalition leader Ferenc Gyurcsány was already “working on plan B”. Responding to Kovács, Karácsony said the costs of the reconstruction had come to 8 billion forints less than planned. He noted that the works done on the bridge had indeed been changed in the course of the project’s two public procurement processes. He said he did not know the “questionable businessman” mentioned, and the municipality had had no contract with him. He said the websites “writing falsehoods” on the issue “are getting the timeline wrong”, as most contracts and money transfers between the businessman in question and A-Híd, the company tasked with the reconstruction, had been done before the municipality’s business dealings started with the latter. Noting that the local elections were a mere 100 days away, Karácsony said Kovács’s proposal should be put in voters’ hands. “They will respond to Fidesz’s platform that lacks a true political message and looks down on Budapest residents and constantly tries to bleed the city dry... They will also respond to the politics we conducted, perhaps imperfectly but with a pure heart and good will.”

TOROCZKAI LEADS MI HAZÁNK’S EP LIST

Mi Hazánk on Wednesday asked its leader, László Toroczkai, to lead the radical opposition party’s European parliamentary election list, with deputy party leader Dóra Dúró placed number two, but both have pledged to make way for other party members to represent the party in the EP, while they themselves would keep their seats in the national assembly. Toroczkai said Mi Hazánk took “all Hungarians” into consideration while fighting against “anti-nationalist ideological networks” that had an outsized influence in the world. Germany’s Alternative für Deutschland, he said, was one of the party’s most important allies. In the event new party alliances are established in EP after the elections, Mi Hazánk would be ready to join an “anti-globalist party family working to achieve a Europe of nations”, he said. Dúró said the party was working to build a “Hungarian future rather than a globalist dictatorship”. Toroczkai and Dúró are followed on the list by historian Zsuzsanna Borvendég, Vojvodina engineer Szilveszter Kispalkó and János Árgyelán, the party’s foreign affairs spokesman.

HUNGARY JAN GUEST NIGHTS UP 11% YR/YR

Guest nights at commercial and private accommodations in Hungary rose by an annual 11% to 2.1 million in January, with the number of guests

rising by 10%, the Central Statistical Office (KSH) said on Wednesday. The number of guest nights spent by domestic travellers rose by 8.9%, while those spent by foreign visitors rose by 12%. The number of guest nights at commercial accommodations, which gave 74% of the total, grew by an annual 9.6%. Nights spent at private and other accommodations grew by 13% year on year.

CULTMIN: FORMER LITERATURE MUSEUM DIRECTOR DEMETER APPOINTED NATIONAL MUSEUM DIRECTOR

Szilárd Demeter, the director of the Petöfi Museum of Literature (PIM) has won the bid to serve as next director of the Hungarian National Museum, the minister of culture said on Tuesday. Speaking to an evening round table programme on public cultural TV channel M5, János Csák said Demeter “is in the first place a philosopher, but is one of the rare people who has worked in the EU, led a whole institutional system while preserving its profile as a literary author”. Demeter has been selected from among ten contenders and will take up his post on March 6, the minister said. He said that a new centre named Széchenyi Ferenc Public Collection Centre comprising six cultural institutions would be set up and operated “as a holding”. It will bring under one roof the National Museum, the National Széchenyi Library, PIM, the Hungarian Natural Science Museum, the Museum of Applied Arts and the Hungarian Museum of Commerce and Hospitality.