Imre Kertész and Ernő Rubik presented with highest state award

On 20 August, Hungary’s national holiday marking the country’s founding, President of the Republic János Áder presented internationally acknowledged Nobel Prize-winning author Imre Kertész and internationally renowned inventor Ernő Rubik with the Order of Saint Stephen at the proposal of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. The award is presented in recognition of the most prestigious special merit in the interests of the country, an outstanding life’s work and significant honours acquired within the international arena.

Imre Kertész was born in Budapest in 1929. He was interned in the Auschwitz and Buchenwald concentration camps at the age of fourteen, and returned to Hungary following their liberation in 1945. His most famous work, Fatelessness (Sorstalanság), was published in 1975 and immediately won great acclaim both in Hungary and abroad. On 10 October 2002, he was the first ever Hungarian to receive a Nobel Prize for Literature for Fatelessness, from which a film directed by Lajos Koltai was produced in 2005.

Ernő Rubik was born in Budapest in 1944. In 1974 while working as a professor of architecture at a Hungarian college, he invented the world famous three-dimensional puzzle, the Rubik's Cube. On the 40th anniversary of this invention, a major exhibition, titled “Beyond Rubik's Cube” has opened at the Liberty Science Centre in New Jersey, with financial support from the Hungarian Government. (Government)

GDP growth forecast for 2014 raised to 3.1 percent

The Ministry for National Economy raised its full-year GDP growth forecast for 2014 to 3.1 percent, Minister Mihály Varga said on Monday.

The Minister noted that the Government had projected GDP growth of 2.3 percent in the country's updated Convergence Programme in April. He attributed the stable and dynamic growth, supported by a healthy structure, to added value in the production sectors and to a pick-up in domestic demand.

The growth of the economy brings with it a rise in incomes, which will also increase future household consumption, and in addition will improve the budget balance and have a positive effect on the job market, he added. Data released last week showed Hungary's GDP grew 3.7 percent year-on-year in the second quarter, well over analysts' expectations and the highest rate of growth since the first quarter of 2006.
The faster than expected expansion of market services is probably behind the much higher than forecast second quarter GDP figures, he noted. According to the Minister, the favourable outlook is substantiated by improved order and contract portfolio data, an increase in the number of housing construction permits, higher consumer expectations, the improved domestic PMI (procurement managers) index and an increased willingness to invest. Among the positive risks involved in the 3.1 percent prognosis for this year, the Minister listed stronger than expected foreign demand, which could lead to further growth in industry, the construction industry and exports through a higher order portfolio.

Last year, the Government decided that teacher’s salaries would be increased again this year, which could contribute to an increase in consumption. In addition, household disposable income will increase thanks to foreign exchange debtor rescue measures, which could also lead to a further upswing in consumption, although this will have a more significant effect in 2015, he added. However, the Russia-Ukraine conflict continues to represent a non-assessable negative risk, and an escalation of tensions could damage the whole of European industry, and as a result could hinder Hungarian exports.

According to Minister Varga, this incalculable risk is why the 2.5 percent growth forecast for 2015 has not been revised as yet. “We will examine that issue too once the planning of the budget reaches that phase”, he said. (MTI Hungarian News Agency)

**Mothers return to work in greater numbers**

According to data of Q2 2014 compiled by the Hungarian Central Statistical Office (KSH), the number of women who returned to work after they had received maternity benefits and childcare allowance or had been stay-home mothers was up by 37 percent year-on-year, former Ministerial Commissioner Piroska Szalai, responsible for improving the labour market prospects of women, announced in a press release.

The significant increase is an obvious proof that the Government has been on the right track and measures aiming to assist mothers with small children are effective, she said. Piroska Szalai stressed that since 2013 under the Job Protection Action Plan employers have been exempt from paying contributions or it has provided contribution allowances in case they hire mothers who have been receiving maternity benefits or childcare allowance. In addition, since January 2014 – thanks to childcare allowance extra – parents are allowed to unlimited work and concurrently receive maternity benefits and childcare allowance.

In light of statistics, in Q2 2014 the employment rate of women reached the outstanding figure of 55.7 percent and thus the number of women in employment was 1 million 878 thousand – up by 92 thousand year-on-year. Within this increase, the growth rate of mothers with small children returning to work was 14 percent. In the second quarter of this year, there were 46 256 women in employment who had formerly been considered as statistically inactive as they had received maternity benefits, childcare allowance or had been stay-home mothers. This figure is 37 percent or 12 460 higher in comparison to the corresponding period of 2013. (Ministry for National Economy)
Semmelweis memorial year events in 2015

The state secretariat for cultural diplomacy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade plans a series of international thematic events to coincide with the Ignac Semmelweis memorial year announced by UNESCO for 2015, marking the 150th anniversary of his death, the ministry said on Thursday.

The events will be held with the involvement of embassies, foreign representative offices and the Balassi institute with the aim to promote Hungarian science, medical training, innovation and creativity around the world.

A working team has been set up by the ministry to coordinate the series and the team will comprise of invited representatives of the Ministry for Human Resources, the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, the National Innovation Office, the Hungarian UNESCO Committee and Semmelweis University.

Described as the "savior of mothers", Ignac Semmelweis discovered in the mid-19th century that the incidence of childbed fever could be drastically cut by the use of hand disinfection in obstetrical clinics. A collection of printed materials on his discovery published between 1847 and 1861 has been included in UNESCO's Memory of the World Register in 2013. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade)

The School Fruit Programme goes on

The School Fruit Programme will continue in the 2014-15 school year, within the framework of which more than 45 million portions of domestically grown fruit and one-hundred percent fruit juice will be distributed to students in grades 1-6 of the country’s primary schools, Deputy Head of Division Márton Bittsánszky from the Ministry of Agriculture stressed at a conference on the Programme in Budapest on Wednesday.

Thanks to the School Fruit Programme launched by the European Community in 2009, 538 thousand children in over two thousand Hungarian schools eat fruit regularly, meaning the public health aspects of the Programme are extremely significant, he added.

Since 2010, the Government has increased the national budget’s contribution to the Programme from 500 million forints to 1.2 billion forints (EUR 3.8 million), which has made it possible for children attending grades 5 and 6 to also be included in the Programme. Mr. Bittsánszky stressed that the Programme isn’t just about putting fruit onto children’s plates, but it is at least as important that children learn to enjoy eating fruit, because only in this way will they continue their healthy eating habits through adulthood.

According to information distributed at the press conference, the number of obese children in the EU is estimated at 22 million, and this number is expected to increase by 400 thousand every single year. (Ministry of Agriculture)
Sopron: the picnic that changed the world

Who would have thought that in the end the Iron Curtain would be brought down not with a bang, but with basketfuls of sandwiches and hot dogs? And yet that is what happened.

On August 19, 1989, at the instigation of the Austrian Euro MP Otto von Habsburg (a name of some resonance in these parts) and the reformist Hungarian Minister of State Imre Pozsgay, it was agreed to hold a “Pan-European Picnic” just outside the Hungarian town of Sopron, right on the border with Austria. The idea was to open the border for about three hours and allow participants to cross unchecked into Austria, taking a step further a process started two months earlier when the foreign ministers of Hungary and Austria, Gyula Horn and Alois Mock, had picked up some clippers and symbolically cut through the barbed wire.

The picnic organisers reckoned on a crowd of several thousand (it was over 10,000) who would come to enjoy a bite to eat and the removal, albeit temporarily, of the once impregnable Iron Curtain. What they hadn’t reckoned on was the presence of about 600 canny East Germans who, hearing what was planned, thought they would seize the moment to escape to the West. The Hungarian border guards turned a blind eye and let the East Germans through. Although the border was subsequently resealed, a chain of events had been set in motion that led, less than three months later, to the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Today the site of those dramatic scenes is an international tourist attraction. The Pan-European Picnic Park, as it is now termed, covers a large area of wild woodland (given how close it was to the border it was largely uncultivated). A solitary watchtower – from which soldiers were at one time authorised to fire – is a reminder of how things once were.

In addition to a gate and some stretches of the old barbed-wire barrier, the site contains photographic reminders of what happened here (with good explanations in English). There are also memorials, including a pagoda presented by the Japanese-Hungarian Friendship Society, some cherry trees and plaques containing weighty words on the joys of freedom from politicians such as the then West German Chancellor, Helmut Kohl.

Sopron itself is a delightful town dating back to Roman times that contains a wealth of medieval, baroque and rococo architecture second only to that found in Budapest itself. Just south of Sopron, the Lővérék district is a lovely spot for fresh air and bracing walks in pine-forested hills followed by spa indulgences. To the east, the reedy marshland on the banks of Lake Ferto, a sanctuary for white egrets, great crested grebes and wild geese and a Unesco World Heritage site, is another popular place to relax – and sample the local wines.