

The Reception Infrastructure for Asylum-Seekers in Hungary

A brief information note by the Hungarian Helsinki Committee (HHC) for the Seminar on the Right to Asylum in Europe – Models and Challenges in the Reception of Individuals in Need of International Protection, Barcelona, 9-10 June 2016



Hungarian Helsinki Committee

Detention vs. reception?

Hungary is one of the very few European states that **regularly detain first-time asylum-seekers for several months**. Decisions as to whether asylum-seekers should be detained or allowed to go to open reception centres are often quite arbitrary, and the judicial review of “asylum detention” is ineffective, as confirmed not only by NGOs and the UNHCR, but also the Supreme Court of Hungary. As the massive refugee influx experienced throughout 2015 (over 177 000 asylum claims registered) calmed down by November, the **hyper-restrictive detention regime** reached its peak, with the majority (52%) of first-time asylum seekers in detention, and only the minority in open reception centres – a practice unprecedented in most of Europe. On 30 May 2016, 702 asylum-seekers were in detention, 1583 of them were accommodated in open reception facilities. Note that in 2015-2016, the vast majority of asylum-seekers arrive in Hungary **from war- and terror-torn countries**, such as Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq.

Reception centres - where?

There are currently **4 open reception centres** in Hungary in addition to a specific **shelter for unaccompanied children**. All reception centres are located in smaller towns. The facilities in Bicske, Balassagyarmat and Vámoszabadi include standard buildings, with an overall capacity of around **770** persons. The recently opened facility in Körmed is a tent camp, which is not suitable for longer stay (especially in winter), its approximate capacity is around **200** persons. The temporary reception facility in Nagyfa (with a capacity of 300) was closed down in April 2016, while the largest refugee camp in Debrecen (with a capacity of over 800 persons) was closed down in November 2015. The closing of reception centres is in blatant contradiction with the high number of refugee arrivals. The shelter for unaccompanied minor asylum-seekers is situated in Fót (in the vicinity of Budapest) and has an official capacity of 20 persons.

Physical conditions

Reception centres in Hungary have been providing **varying physical and hygienic conditions**, from poor to medium-good, largely depending on the size of the facility (smaller facilities usually offer better conditions), occupancy rates, as well as the attitude of the management. With the mass influx of 2015 and the Hungarian government’s inadequate response thereto **overcrowding** has become a regular phenomenon in Hungarian reception centres. During several months of 2015 occupancy rates varied between **150-250%**, with asylum-seekers having no other choice than sleeping in the courtyard or using common areas such as corridors and sports halls to sleep, with no private sphere whatsoever. In such situations men and women are often obliged to use the same bathrooms and showers, and hygienic conditions deteriorate spectacularly. With increasing arrivals, overcrowding is once again a significant phenomenon, for example, at the moment, the Bicske camp hosts over 800 asylum-seekers, nearly twice as many as its official capacity.

Ownership - management

In Hungary, since the creation of the national asylum system it is the **Office of Immigration and Nationality (OIN)** that manages all reception centres (the Fót shelter for unaccompanied minors is managed by the Ministry of Human Resources). This **exclusively state-run** system has been long criticised for a number of reasons. It upholds an **over-centralised, overwhelmingly bureaucratic and inflexible structure** that tries to keep away asylum-seekers as much as possible from the Hungarian society, instead of creating positive opportunities for encounter. It is unreasonably **“massive”** – refugee camps with several hundreds of asylum-seekers coming from dozens of countries are hotbeds of conflicts and violence, as well as with this size, maintaining order and acceptable hygienic conditions result in exponentially growing costs and difficulties. Most Hungarian reception facilities have a strong **hospitalising effect** on asylum-seekers and basically all positive initiatives to counter-balance these problems have been exclusively dependent on EU funding. The location of reception centres is usually inadequate, with local populations often having a **hostile attitude**.

The Hungarian government has never seriously considered the option to move towards a more diverse and more modern infrastructure, with smaller shelters, involving non-governmental or charity organisations in a more active manner. Free-of-charge legal assistance, professional social work, and psychological-psychiatric care are **only ensured by non-governmental organisations** (the Hungarian Helsinki Committee, the Menedék Association and the Cordelia Foundation – respectively), for which **no state funding** is made available. These services are therefore entirely dependent on project-based funding by the EU, UNHCR and other international donors.

Vulnerable asylum-seekers

The OIN has **no protocol or standard operating procedure for the identification** of vulnerable asylum-seekers with special needs. Even when an asylum-seeker has been identified as a vulnerable person, targeted medical or psycho-social assistance is still mainly dependent on NGOs. Hungary has **no specific reception facility** for vulnerable asylum-seekers (except for unaccompanied minors). Single women, female-headed families, victims of torture and rape, as well as gay, lesbian or trans asylum-seekers are accommodated in the same facilities as others, with no specific attention, there are **no protected corridors or houses** either. Several trans asylum-seekers complained to the HHC about regular harassment by other asylum-seekers, against which the OIN did not take the necessary measures.