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EESC fact-finding missions on the situation of refugees, as seen by civil society organisations



MISSION REPORT – HUNGARY
17 AND 18 DECEMBER 2015



European Economic and Social Committee

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In December 2015 and January 2016, EESC delegations visited eleven EU Member States to meet civil society organisations working with migrants in order to identify the problems, needs, failures, success stories and best practices of the various actors in the current refugee crisis, with the ultimate aim of providing input into EU policy-making. The delegation to Hungary included Janusz Pietkiewicz (Poland, Employers Group), Erika Koller (Hungary, Workers Group) and Ákos Topolánszky (Hungary, Various Interests Group), supported by Ana Dumitrache and András Egyedi, EESC secretariat.

INTRODUCTION

Hungarian organisations and local branches of international organisations got involved and played an important role in helping refugees during the peak of the crisis. In addition, a new phenomenon emerged, as several new volunteer organisations were set up, which organised themselves and coordinated their actions through social media. Their great strength was the speed of mobilisation and action to help refugees on the ground. Often in contrast to official policy, tens of thousands of ordinary citizens, including doctors and nurses, volunteered to welcome and help refugees after their normal daily work programme.

Organisations and volunteers distributed water, food, hygiene packs, childcare products, blankets, mats and sleeping bags to refugees. Universities gave blankets and businesses gave donations, both in money and kind, such as heated tents for women and families, Wi-Fi access, etc. Organisations and private individuals provided accommodation for refugees. Apartments were rented and facilities for families were created. Some organisations provided social and psychological assistance to relieve post-war traumatic stress or stress due to maltreatment by traffickers.

Some organisations, within the limits of their possibilities, provided information on procedures and orientation, as well as interpreting services for refugees in English, French, Arabic, Farsi and Urdu. However, they themselves stressed that this was not enough to remedy the general lack of information available, especially in the asylum-seekers' native languages.

Some organisations, within the limits of their possibilities, also initiated awareness-raising campaigns to inform the public about forced displacement, migration and asylum, and to advocate for the cause of refugees. These efforts, however, only produced a limited effect on society as a whole.

Cooperation with local authorities was perceived by the organisations as being quite good, especially in Szeged, a large city near the Serbian border. There was some effective cooperation with local authorities in Budapest, as well as in other municipalities.

According to civil society organisations, the police also behaved in a very professional manner (except for one incident at Röszke) and was praised by these organisations, including those that are very critical of government policy.

CONCLUSIONS BASED ON COMMENTS GATHERED DURING THE VISIT

Comments on the handling of the refugee crisis

In summer and autumn of 2015, when confronted with the massive influx of refugees, many organisations felt that the government took a "law and order" approach and did not recognise the

humanitarian emergency. Public authorities wanted to make sure, under the Dublin and Eurodac Regulations, that people were taken to registration centres - which refugees usually did not want, as in most cases they were attempting to continue their journey as quickly as possible to Germany or Sweden.

A lack of coordination between various services such as the police or fire brigade was observed on the ground.

In line with the Reception Conditions Directive, the state was obliged to provide some services to refugees, such as accommodation, food and medical assistance; however, at the peak point of the crisis in Hungary these services were mainly provided by spontaneously created grass-roots organisations of volunteers, who, at least initially, also perceived a lack of involvement on the part of big charity organisations.

Open centres were overcrowded: e.g. 3000 people were accommodated in the Debrecen reception centre, which has a maximum capacity of 1100 places.

According to some of those interviewed, refugees did not receive enough official information on procedures and working possibilities, and often no information was provided in a language other than Hungarian. A similar problem was signalled by some of our contacts concerning the lack of interpreting services in legal procedures. The lack of appropriate information could have resulted in refugees mainly receiving information from traffickers, who were trying to mislead them by saying, for example, that if people registered they would be detained.

Unaccompanied minors who were more than 12 years old were usually left without special assistance.

Basic relief items mainly came from volunteers and the authorities did not use the facilities and procedures at their disposal for providing accommodation in the event of natural catastrophes such as floods.

Although all asylum seekers should normally be entitled to state-provided legal aid, that duty was not systematically fulfilled according to one person we spoke to. However, according to a number of others, one NGO in particular did a great job in this regard.

The civil society organisations did then what, according to some of them, the public authorities should have done to help refugees, however were criticised by the government for encouraging and attracting more refugees. Some of those interviewed believed that even large NGOs were afraid to expose themselves at the first peak of the crisis.

In general, organisations regretted the lack of cooperation and communication from the government and the unpredictability of access to information and to the refugee centres (even for attorneys). Some other organisations felt no hostility from the government and were considered partners.

Organisations mentioned that the good cooperation at the local level, which was cost-effective, could have been used at the national level.

At a later stage, in October 2015, the government appointed 3 organisations (the Hungarian Charity Service of the Order of Malta, Hungarian Interchurch Aid and the Hungarian Red Cross) and provided them with funding to provide medical services and assistance to refugees. Tasks were then divided between the 3 organisations (e.g. only the Red Cross has access to open reception centres). Some of those we spoke to regretted the division of organisations into a restricted circle of selected authority

partners and the rest, whose involvement and activities were hardly acknowledged by the government and often criticised in official declarations. Government officials maintain that, given that the issue relates to immigration procedures, government cooperation with civil society organisations and volunteers must be based on mutual trust.

General comments on the asylum system in Hungary

Some organisations found that there is a general lack of protection for refugees in Hungary and that detention is extensively used, possibly with the purpose of deterring refugees from coming to Hungary. Some organisations did not agree with this statement.

According to UNHCR guidelines, detention should be a measure of last resort and should be kept to a minimum duration. People must not be detained for an undetermined period of time.

Some organisations criticised the low number of cases in which asylum status was granted by Hungary. However, it was also stressed that the overwhelming majority of asylum-seekers left the country before the end of the procedure, which may partly account for the low number of successful asylum applications.

There is also a trend to grant only subsidiary protection instead of asylum.

Regarding policy-making in the field of asylum, UNHCR is consulted on draft legislation, which worked smoothly until 2015. More recently, however, consultation has not taken place or was merely formal (not enough time given to read and comment on texts).

In July and September 2015, Hungary amended various aspects of its asylum legislation and adopted a National List of Safe Countries. These changes, also criticised by some of the people interviewed, led to an infringement procedure launched by the European Commission against Hungary.

SHORT DESCRIPTION AND SPECIFIC ACTIVITIES OF THE ORGANISATIONS MET BY THE EESC DELEGATION

➤ UNHCR Hungary

UNHCR Central Europe (based in Budapest) covers 8 Member States: Hungary, Croatia, Slovenia, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Romania, Poland and the Czech Republic. It monitors asylum institutions and the application of laws to ensure that asylum-seekers have access to territory, fair and efficient asylum procedures, and humane reception conditions. UNHCR also promotes the integration of refugees into their host societies, or resettlement elsewhere if it is not possible for these people to stay in the country in which they first sought refuge. The UN Refugee Agency also works to protect stateless people in the region by lobbying for the development and strengthening of laws to tackle and reduce the problem.

UNHCR aims to ensure that when making decisions about programmes, people – and their protection and welfare – are the priority.

UNHCR is especially attentive to the needs of the vulnerable, such as children, women, the elderly, and people with disabilities.

Informing the public about the displaced and stateless is an important part of what UNHCR Central Europe does. The agency gets the word out by publishing information leaflets and reports (both digital and printed), running websites in all the countries of the region and working with the media.

UNHCR cooperates with the Hungarian government on the basis of the UN convention. During the refugee crisis, UNHCR played a coordinating role, inviting the most important NGOs and volunteer organisations to coordinate, fill gaps and avoid overlap. That coordination experience was also important on the ground, at the border with Serbia.

➤ **Confederation of Hungarian Employers and Industrialists - Munkaadók és Gyáriparosok Országos Szövetsége (MGYOSZ)**

MGYOSZ is the largest employers' organisation in Hungary, representing large and medium-sized enterprises.

Individual members of MGYOSZ helped during the peak of the crisis (donations, free Wi-Fi access, etc.), but the organisation as such did not discuss the issue and was not consulted by the government.

As refugees only transited through the country, they did not have an impact on the labour market. Enterprises are facing a lack of qualified workers in specific sectors such as healthcare, and there is also the problem of ageing; however, integrating refugees into employment is perceived as a great challenge, for reasons partly related to language skills. According to MGYOSZ, enterprises currently give priority to integrating unemployed young people from the EU into the labour market.

➤ **Forum for the Co-operation of Trade Unions (SZEF)**

The Forum is one of the country's largest union confederations and unifies the interest protection organisations of some 70 000 employees in the public sector, including in the areas of education, health and social services, public collections, cultural and art institutions, central and local administration, law enforcement, and public order and security.

The confederation was not consulted by the government on the question of refugees, and neither discussed the issue of refugees nor issued any position papers on this subject as its members were perceived as being reluctant to express themselves on the issue. Generally speaking, trade unions in Hungary account for only 10% of the workforce.

However, the SZEF academy plans to work with researchers to promote good governance and anti-populism and to work for more understanding for refugees and migrants.

➤ **Hungarian Helsinki Committee**

The HHC is a leading human rights organisation in Hungary focusing on various areas such as detention, access to justice, the rule of law, anti-discrimination, asylum, statelessness and nationality. As an implementing partner of the UNHCR, the HHC has been the only non-governmental organisation to provide professional legal assistance to asylum-seekers in Hungary free-of-charge since 1998. HHC is helping some 1400 people per year. It also monitors reception and closed centres for refugees and migrants, challenging return decisions when needed. They are one of the more well-established NGOs that have managed to develop excellent cooperation with the new grass-roots organisations. At the same time, although very critical of the Hungarian government, they have an agreement with the government allowing them to provide legal aid to asylum-seekers free of charge.

➤ **MIGSZOL Szeged**

MIGSZOL Szeged was probably the first grass-roots initiative (and the first important player) to address the humanitarian situation of migrants in Hungary. Based in Szeged, a city close to the Serbian border, they were among the first to recognise the humanitarian needs. According to their mission statement, they are an informal, independent group of Hungarians, immigrants and refugees that advocate for the enforcement of the political and social rights of refugees and asylum seekers in Hungary. They believe that through grass-roots efforts, a diverse and tolerant Hungary and Europe are possible. Consequently, they contribute to social change by campaigning against deportation and detention, by raising awareness of the rights of refugees and asylum seekers, and by ensuring that their group does not speak for refugees and asylum seekers, but together with them. They are working towards a Hungary where the label of "refugee" or "immigrant" is no longer needed, and they combat the notion that people's identities are determined by bureaucratic categories. MIGSZOL Szeged does not receive financial aid from the European Union, from the Hungarian government, nor from any political party or company.

Their non-hierarchical and consensus-driven work is firmly based on the values of equality between different genders, nationalities, religions, ages and sexualities.

➤ **Maltese Charity Service**

The Hungarian Maltese Charity Service was founded as a relief organisation of the Sovereign Order of Malta in 1989 and is one of the largest NGO charity services in Hungary. It provides relief to people in need, especially the sick, the elderly, the disabled, the disadvantaged and the homeless. All age groups are covered; however, elderly people represent the majority of beneficiaries in Hungary.

HMCS has a national centre and 7 regional branches which consist of regional centres and local groups. It also runs more than 200 primary and secondary care units.

Although confronted with refugees for the first time, it undertook to provide assistance to those in need.

The charity started providing basic healthcare at the station where refugees were waiting for trains to Austria. It followed the everyday life of migrants who passed through the country, providing refugees with food, clothing and medical care at a number of locations. On the ground, mobile ambulances proved to be very helpful, moving quickly from one place to the other. Services were provided day and night for several weeks and, when necessary, volunteers of the Hungarian Charity Service of the Order of Malta also provided aid in Croatia, Serbia and Slovenia.

➤ **Migration Aid**

Migration Aid is a new volunteer civil initiative that was initially established to help refugees arriving in Hungary reach their assigned refugee camps or travel onwards. It is one of the new grass-roots organisations with considerable outreach (their Facebook group has approximately 10 000 members).

They played a crucial role at Budapest railway stations during the peak of the crisis and they initiated the creation of transit zones at these railway stations. Their advocacy activities have also been quite significant.

Migration Aid has developed an "InfoAid App" that aims to provide refugees arriving in Hungary with quick and reliable information in their native language.

Active as of June 2015, Migration Aid was formally established in October 2015 as a British charity (due to the faster procedure).

➤ **Hungarian Interchurch Aid**

Hungarian Interchurch Aid is the largest organisation in Hungary providing aid to families, children and homeless people, regardless of the beneficiaries' religion or gender. They have 300 employees and are active in several countries through ACT Alliance. They have offices in Ukraine and Afghanistan where they support education and work in agriculture.

During the refugee crisis, they used tools they usually use to help other groups of people, focusing on families, pregnant women and unaccompanied young people. Their flexible mobile teams and their 24 volunteers worked day and night to help deal with the refugee flows. They also provided information when refugees were registered, as well as some interpreting services. They currently offer activities for children (3hours/week) in reception centres.

➤ **Menhely (Shelter) Foundation**

The Shelter Foundation's core belief is that every human being has the fundamental right to feel safe legally, physically, and socially in an apartment, in a town or in a country. The main goal of the foundation is to ensure that no one is deprived of this fundamental right.

The Shelter Foundation was founded in 1989 in Budapest. The foundation was the first independent, secular organisation dedicated to helping homeless people change their lives for the better, to help them in their plight, and to reduce and prevent homelessness. The foundation has also striven to make the lives of those living on the streets more bearable and it continues in these aims today.

The Shelter Foundation has been active in the current refugee crisis. They helped refugees and also tried to find out how homeless people relate to refugees.

They provided accommodation and hygiene facilities, and organised transport to take refugees to shelters and back. Other organisations were allowed to use their services and facilities. They were among the well-established NGOs that developed good cooperation with the newly established grass-roots organisations.

➤ **Diaconal Department of the Evangelical Church of Hungary**

During the refugee crisis, they provided help to refugees to the best of their abilities and were present on the ground, in reception centres, at the border with Serbia, as well as in Budapest, mainly at the Keleti railway station. It is one of the church organisations that developed an excellent working relationship with the new grass-roots organisations.

They collected clothes among parish members and church employees and also organised a network for collecting other donations, such as bandages, blankets, mats, which were distributed, along with warm food, in reception centres and at railway stations.

They also collected and donated money to Interchurch Aid to be used for childcare products. Together with Migration Aid, they published an information booklet in several languages, including Arabic, Farsi and Urdu. They are also carrying out a "mindset-changing" campaign to inform the public and advocate for more understanding for refugees. Presentations are given in congregations, schools and other institutions. This is a fairly unique practice in Hungary.