

---

# Homeless Refugees in Hungary

---

Adrienn Kiss

- › **Abstract\_** *This think-piece outlines the complexity of how recognized refugees and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection are becoming homeless in Hungary, broadly speaking, and their insufficient access to secure housing. Although it discusses the situation in only one country, it has indirect relevant for the care systems of other member states of the European Union. Due to the lack of national research, relevant statistics, or other indicators of a specific refugee aid system that could be used to explore this issue widely, only certain trends and patterns can be revealed. The relationship between the state and the internationally protected person is characterized by the exclusion of refugees from meaningful access to social rights. Two case studies will be presented in the latter half of this paper.*
  
- › **Key Words\_** *refugees, homelessness, housing exclusion, Hungary, integration policy, social security*

## Introduction

---

In Hungary, the political changes that occurred in 1990 and the radical changes in the economic system resulted in the loss of thousands of jobs, resulting, for some, in homelessness. In the past 21 years, a multi-level, professionalized and elaborate system of institutions has been constructed, yet the core of the problem has not been dealt with successfully. Social care policy primarily serves as crisis intervention, and does not offer a solution and a way for homeless people to reintegrate successfully into society. As a result of the austerity measures introduced by new legislation in 2011, entitlement to certain welfare benefits, including the housing support that facilitates access to independent housing and subsequent integration, have been taken away. While refugee law continues to maintain this type of welfare benefit, satisfying all the entitlement criteria is problematic in practice. In the Hungarian social care system, it is only possible for families to enter into temporary accommodation after a long waiting period. Furthermore, homelessness has become an issue of law enforcement. New legislation came into force on 1 December, 2011, which declares that anybody sleeping rough in the street can be fined an amount of 150000 HUF (€538), or can be punished by 90 days detention. This is the wider context of the current political power's approach to homeless people.

## Asylum Seekers in Hungary

---

The Hungarian Asylum Law is based on the 1951 Geneva Convention, and refugee status is granted a very high position in the Hungarian legal system. Under the asylum legislation, this status is almost equivalent to Hungarian citizenship, with refugees having, for all intents and purposes, the same rights and obligations as Hungarian citizens. The Office of Immigration and Nationality stated that there were 1 187 refugees and 391 persons with subsidiary protection in Hungary in December 2010. However, these statistics do not show the reality of life in Hungary for refugees and this think piece aims to highlight the difficulties that exist.

Hungary is not classically a target country for those who have to flee from wars and persecution in their country of origin – it functions more like a transit one. This tendency has increased in the past year. In the years after Hungary joined the EU, the number of asylum applications first increased, but then they dropped by half in 2010 (1 609 applications were registered in 2005, and after the peak in 2009, with 4 672 registrations, the numbers dropped to 2 104 in 2010). Approximately 160-170 persons were given refugee status each year between 2007 and 2009, declining to 74 in 2010; and 88 people were recognized as having subsidiary protection in 2008, 62 in 2009 and 115 in 2010.

Since the beginning of 2011, according to a new piece of law, foreign citizens who enter the territory of Hungary illegally will be detained in detention centres for 6 months, and this can be extended for another 6 months. The number of asylum applications has dropped significantly in the past year, with asylum interviews now taking place in detention centres; once an asylum-seeker is granted status, they can move to a reception centre. As refugees arrive from countries that are afflicted by war, persecution, extreme breaches of human rights or ethnic conflicts (e.g., Afghanistan, Somalia, Iraq, Sudan), most of them are seriously traumatized and victimized, a significant number have poor literacy skills, and some had never even left their country of origin or their villages before they escaped. Usually they do not have any relatives or family members in Hungary, so there are neither natural support networks nor any migrant or refugee communities that can provide stable and long-term resources for them. The Hungarian state finances only 520 Hungarian language lessons – a language that is one of the most difficult in the world.

### ***Homelessness and asylum***

Homelessness among refugees can be observed as a cause and as a consequence of intensive mobility towards western countries. On the one hand, many refugees and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection continue their journey directly after they are given status, presumably towards their original travel destinations. Due to the absence of accurate statistics it is difficult to estimate, but everyday experience in this area of social work suggests that due to illegal residence, deportations from another EU member state back to Hungary are quite frequent under the Dublin 2 regulation, which is in effect inside the Schengen area. The Hungarian Helsinki Committee provides a definition on Dublin procedure in their explanatory guide: *“In the European Union only one EU member state should deal with the case of an asylum-seeker. This country is usually the first country that the asylum-seeker entered. Therefore, in the admissibility procedure, the Immigration Office will first check which EU country is responsible for examining (...) asylum application.”* (Helsinki Committee, 2008).

On the other hand, a significant number of people have been making great efforts to integrate in Hungary; they look for accommodation, search for a job, learn Hungarian, or try to get a qualification. Where such persons experience a series of failures, perhaps most significantly unsuccessful job-seeking and housing insecurity or a lack of housing, they will explore options in another country.

Refugees can be found in many of the ETHOS typology homelessness categories. Homelessness amongst refugees is a dynamically changing phenomenon, which can include sleeping rough, or sleeping on public transport or in Internet cafés; mosques can also provide temporary shelter for Muslims. Actual *rooflessness* is rare in this group, as is the use of night shelters; the Hungarian state allows

foreigners to stay habitually in refugee reception centres, in detention centres, at community shelters, in the homes of unaccompanied minors and young adults, as well as in aftercare institutes of the child protection care system. However, these kinds of places can be defined as the scenes of *homelessness*; also included in this category is living in temporary accommodation for homeless people, women's shelters, or dormitories, where housing is not provided during the school holidays.

In the category of *insecure housing*, the most common solution is the use of a courtesy flat: staying for a shorter or longer period of time at the place of a compatriot who is able to rent a flat, something that is largely based on reciprocity. However, we have little information about these kinds of relationships, and we do not know what is expected in exchange for the help.

Living in rented flats creates a heterogeneous group of people, as many of them are not able to register an address, even with a valid tenancy agreement and by paying rent monthly. Thus, the address card they can acquire only states the name of the particular city/town (and district); this card is called a 'homeless address card', as it is actually assigned to a public place. In Hungary, both permanent and temporary addresses exist, but the latter cannot be created without the former. However, most landlords refuse the registration of a permanent address, and without this, submitting a citizenship application or starting a business is impossible.

For *recognized refugees*, there is only one institution available that is financed by the Hungarian state: a reception centre run by the Office of Immigration and Nationality, located at the outskirts of a rural town, Bicske. This centre provides accommodation for a maximum of 6 months, which can be extended for another 6 months in special cases. After leaving the reception centre, one is not allowed to move back in, even if one becomes homeless in the meantime, and even though the reception centre has the capacity – as the number of people being granted refugee or subsidiary protection status keeps falling, capacity has not been reached.

Whether one is kept in a closed, prison-like place or in an open institute that allows free movement but where a large number of people are accommodated, integration into the host society is difficult. Furthermore, no integration programmes or organized services exist at the national or regional level, in the capital, or in any other cities. Neither have we any information about the housing needs of internationally protected people, or about the scale of their access to any type of housing. According to the experience of the Menedék – Hungarian Association for Migrants, a non-governmental civil organization that has regular contact with, and provides social assistance to people in need, there is a cyclically returning problem that needs attention paid to it, and needs to be reflected upon by professionals – homelessness amongst recognized refugees and persons with subsidiary protection.

Menedék – Hungarian Association for Migrants ran a successful housing programme for refugee persons for years, financed by the European Refugee Fund, which offered eight beds. The application of selection criteria in choosing the participants included previous work experience, current level of employment suitability, level of Hungarian, or at least English language skills, and cooperation skills. The reformed Church Refugee Mission has also been providing 10-12 supported tenancy opportunities of a 2-year duration for single refugees and for refugee families.

In 2011, there was a total of 21 night shelters and special shelters in the mainstream social care system of the capital city, which could provide accommodation only for night-time and was free of charge. These shelters have rooms with 10-15, or 35-45 beds. This low-threshold social service can help those who are effectively homeless. In addition, there were 28 temporary hostels in Budapest available for a monthly fee, for which a regular income is necessary. Fewer people share the rooms of these hostels, with an average of 1-4 or 10-15 people. There are several problems in both of these types of mainstream homeless institutions, such as the lack of specific knowledge among the social workers about the situation of refugees, and the lack of any foreign language skills (although to acquire any degree in Hungary, a certificate of an advanced foreign language exam is necessary). The management of these institutions is also reluctant to receive refugee clients. In addition, there are some workers' hostels, run on a for-profit basis, but they are not available to homeless refugees, who do not usually have a regular salary or any regular social support.

Leaving the Bicske pre-integration camp is a determinant for the successful beginning of new life in the host country, and it can cause anxiety but also create the feeling of liberation for individuals. Before the new legislation, an amount of 171 000 HUF was available as an initial support for all refugees leaving the camp. However, the current eligibility criteria are determined by law in such a way that it is now all but impossible to meet them (in 2011 only one person received it). Many cash benefits exist only on paper; usually the only social income available is monthly support in the amount of 28 500 HUF, for a maximum of 1.5 – 2 years.

The official reason given by the Office of Immigration and Nationality for their dramatic tightening of the refugee support system is 'social justice', as they outlined in their explanatory guide to the new legislation.

There is no system of tax benefits or contribution allowances that supports labour market integration for refugees. The involvement in adult vocational trainings is quite impossible without one's own resources, and the acquisition of any type of driving licence is not possible either, because of the lack of primary school papers.

The mainstream Hungarian social (homeless) care system makes already disadvantageous processes even more so, including the housing of refugees because of the inequality of their treatment. The uncertainty and the fragmentation of aims and responsibilities in refugee (migrant) integration is well-reflected in the positions currently taken by professional bodies; prestigious representatives of a consultative body for homeless organizations have said that all of the above problems should be dealt with by border guards and not by social professionals. The following two case studies illustrate the issues highlighted above.

## Case Study 1

---

A 23-year old Afghan man arrived in Hungary at the beginning of 2008, but he planned to enter another European country. The asylum authority granted him subsidiary protection in the spring of the same year. According to this man, he wanted to avoid becoming homeless after leaving the reception centre, so he travelled to his brother in another Western European state. There was a kind of security web around him, and he had been working illegally for months in different jobs.

I became acquainted with him after his deportation from an EU member state back to Hungary (but not from the one where he originally went). He had left his official Hungarian documents behind him; he had no money, but carried only a bag; and he wanted to return abroad immediately. His mental state had deteriorated, he was very distressed, and his thoughts were completely focused on only one thing: leaving Hungary. Communication between us was difficult because of his intensified agitation and extreme distrust, though his English speaking skills were quite good. He wanted to give up his subsidiary protection status so that he could return to Afghanistan (“to die there rather than starve to death here”). Despite his crisis situation, he refused guidance to a homeless shelter. After two consultations he dropped out of our sight.

Two weeks later, a worker from the Office of Immigration and Nationality indicated that this young man had recently travelled abroad illegally and had been caught and deported again by the foreign authorities. He was in the same homeless situation; he rejected the possibility of any institutional accommodation, and he finally found a place for a few days in a mosque in Budapest. After a few more consultations and the completion of his Hungarian identity card, our contact ended again. The third time he turned up was in November 2010, when a third EU member state deported him back to Hungary. At that time he was suffering the results of physical abuse by policemen. He was in pain, so immediate medical aid was necessary, which caused serious administrative difficulties for the hospital that carried out the examinations as he could not show any kind of personal documents. In this period of our collaboration,

he asked for social assistance with a greater degree of trust and he had become much more cooperative than before. It had become more or less clear to him that a social worker does not function as a policeman.

We started working out his step-by-step personal integration plan, as his biggest wish was to get a job and start working. His personal documents were replaced and his health problems ceased. He started to use the accommodation of one of his Afghan friend's as a courtesy flat, and his situation was finally consolidated. His lack of Hungarian communication skills was a major barrier to the labour market (this deficiency is quite understandable, considering his intensive psychological resistance towards the country). During a 3-month period he came to our counselling office on a daily basis looking for an adequate job, but his frustration increased and increased –there were only a few unskilled job advertisements.

After December he disappeared for another 3 months, during which time he probably stayed in Hungary. Using money he had borrowed from his brother, he moved into a rented flat. He had tried to accredit his Afghan driving license, but due to the lack of an official school certificate of a minimum of 8 years this was unfeasible (the process is the same for Hungarian citizens, and no exception is made for foreigners even if they can be much more vulnerable); this young man had, in any case, completed only 6 years of school in his country of origin. He was totally fed up after encountering this extra obstacle and due to the difficulties of living in Hungary, and he never turned up at our counselling office again.

In November 2011 he sent a very polite e-mail from somewhere to find out whether the accreditation of his original driving license had become possible, but unfortunately the answer to this question was no.

## Case Study 2

---

The young man in this second case study first arrived to Hungary in January 2008 at the age of 20, also from Afghanistan. After his recognition as a subsidiary protected person, he travelled to another EU-member state. In the summer of 2009 he came back to the country, presumably not voluntarily (but we had no background information on the potential deportation), and he asked for social assistance in our counselling office. After applying for the specific refugee welfare benefits available, he was still faced with the problem of housing. The government-run homeless temporary accommodation with the biggest capacity in Budapest rejected his application for shelter. A smaller, temporary homeless institute, run by a non-profit organization, is located at the outskirts of the capital city, and they had accepted his request, but after he had realized that he would have to share the room with Hungarian (homeless) roommates, he did not move in.

He received some money on an irregular basis from his compatriots, and he was able to complete his missing Hungarian personal documents. He became a user of a courtesy flat when he moved into the flat of one of his Somali friends, but financial transactions were always quite chaotic and he always lost in 'negotiation situations'. In the end he had had enough; he moved into a workers' hostel that was run by an Afghan man and spent a few nights there. Later, he lived at his friend's flat again. In August he wanted to travel to Austria, but was captured at the border and deported back by the Austrian foreign police.

Independently from all of the above-mentioned problems, this young man, who was originally shy, started to become more self-confident and able – he managed his case almost alone. His job-seeking efforts ended with no result, but he later he told us that he had found a car mechanic job in a country town and was leaving. After this we had no contact with him. In March 2010 he appeared once again in our office, and there was only one consultation with him. He said that he had been working abroad for 7-8 months as a car mechanic. He was preparing to visit his family, who lived in an Asian country, in the spring.

One year later, in April 2011, we met again. The change that he had gone through was spectacular. From the totally timid and quiet 'adolescent' that he was, he had become an assertive young man. He had been working in Western Europe continuously and legally (albeit doing the work, according to what he said, of two people), he had been able to save some money, and he had concrete plans to come back to Hungary. As he had been repairing cars since childhood, he wanted to start a car mechanic business in Budapest and he had already found a partner.

At that time, he was totally out of homelessness and had rented a flat. He gave himself 2-3 months to start up his enterprise, and calculated his financial resources realistically. Becoming an entrepreneur would not have been an obstacle in and of itself, but he could not overcome the fact that he needed an original school certificate of car mechanic education; this requirement came as a shock. Our contact ceased once again, as he was unable to realize his aspirations for financial independence in Hungary.

## Conclusions

---

The two case studies illustrate several examples of the difficulties faced by internationally protected refugees in Hungary. They also reveal that many refugees are faced with very difficult situations. The most vulnerable of them are totally excluded from access to adequate housing for financial reasons, including joblessness and an inadequate social care system. Having a small number of non-profit organizations that are responsible for the integration of refugees and homeless refugees is important, but it is not enough, and public engagement is also essential. Accurate statistics and regular follow-ups of the number of refugee (migrant) service-users of different social institutes – particularly those who use homeless care services – are needed. The asylum legislation was modified without any impact assessment with regard to the radical reduction of visible public expenditures that the government intended.

This current system does not seem to be in any way beneficial in terms of solving the housing exclusion issue. The legal background allows wide discretion in the fragmented cost-of-living allowance system, which is confirmed by everyday practice. It is almost always unpredictable as to whether the applicant will get any kind of cash benefit or not. Professionals that provide social assistance to refugees must work in a regulated situation where there is no opportunity to give inaccurate information about entitlement to support and about the regulation of other segments of their lives (for example, the registration of birth of a baby born to refugee parents can be done smoothly in one Budapest district, but it is very problematic in another district). All these financial and administrative difficulties together weaken predictability and stability, and endanger the enforcement of social rights.

The government and local authorities, as well as non-profit and church organizations that provide social assistance to refugees, should fulfil an intensive role in elaborating the refugee (migrant) strategy in Hungary, as should, of course, refugees themselves. Without this collaboration, their plight may never be improved and they will continue to lose, or be excluded from access to accommodation, forcing them to change country of residence again.



### › References

Hungarian Helsinki Committee (2008) *Asylum in Hungary. A Guide for Foreigners who Need Protection* (Budapest: Hungarian Helsinki Committee).