

UKRAINIAN REFUGEES HOSTED BY BMSZKI IN BUDAPEST, HUNGARY

When Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, FEANTSA member BMSZKI, located in Budapest, converted former shelters into first reception centres for those fleeing from Ukraine. Over time, these centres have become temporary accommodation for families. In this article, Boróka Fehér reflects on the developments so far, current challenges and on what is still to come.



By **Boróka Fehér**, Policy Officer, BMSZKI

[BMSZKI](#), the Budapest Methodological Centre of Social Policy, is the largest service provider for people experiencing homelessness in the capital of Hungary. Upon request from the City of Budapest, we opened a reception centre for people fleeing the war in Ukraine on 26 February with the capacity of accommodating 100 people – formerly a shelter that had not been frequented by many people living in homelessness. As it filled up very fast (on 28 February, 125 people spent the night there), we rapidly opened a second centre for 60 people (and relocated the elderly homeless people who had stayed there). The war started on a Thursday; the first refugees arrived at our doorstep on Saturday. The original plan was to serve as a first reception centre, offering accommodation for a few nights to the people fleeing war, on their way to something more permanent. However, people fleeing from Ukraine were welcome to stay as long as needed. The first guests only spent a few nights, but later families with numerous children arrived, who did not have anywhere else to go, nor the financial means to pay for a hotel. During these initial stages, NGOs set up help booths at the main train stations of the city, and the City Hall provided buses to transport people to reception centres – or the airport, another train station, whatever was needed. Accommodation was coordinated by the 24-hour homeless hotline, operated by former FEANTSA member [Menhely Foundation](#). The City Hall of Budapest as well as those of the districts opened summer holiday homes and transferred refugees

there – however, as these became full most families tended to stay in Budapest, in the shelters that were supposed to serve as first reception centres only.

BMSZKI first offered basic emergency services: accommodation, a hot shower, laundry, food three times a day, Wi-Fi and charging of phones and health care. In the first weeks, many of the refugees, especially the children, had health issues from exposure to the cold and stress. Most families arrived with only the basics so we had to provide them with clothing, toiletries – basically, everything. The refugees staying at our two centres were either smaller nuclear families speaking Ukrainian, independently organising their onward travel, or larger, mostly Hungarian-speaking Roma families from rural, segregated areas of Western Ukraine, who were not able to find their way around the city on their own. The fathers of these families had usually been working abroad (either in Hungary, or neighbouring Austria, even Germany) and now their families had joined them.

Since their opening, both first reception centres have become temporary accommodation services for families. With financial support from the City of Budapest and numerous NGOs (SOS Children's Villages Hungary, United Way Hungary, Terre des Hommes, Budapest Bike Mafia – Age of Hope etc.) as well as a myriad of private donors,

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BMSZKI has transformed its night shelters for people experiencing homelessness to accommodate families (installing playrooms for example). Furthermore, we have also hired staff to be able to respond to the families' numerous needs day and night; for instance, we employed social workers to support the families in settling in and claiming benefits. BMSZKI, a public service provider, had not cooperated with volunteers on a large scale before – now several NGOs as well as schools have been providing free time activities to the children we support on a regular basis. After the initial plans failed, we managed to get children enrolled in kindergartens and schools with support from the local family support unit. Pregnant women were offered healthcare – some had not seen a doctor or nurse despite being close to delivery. [Utcáról Lakásba Egyesület](#) (Association from the Street to Housing - ULE) coordinates short-term, affordable rentals in and around Budapest, also offering floating support for families who are moving out of the first reception centres. [Menedék Egyesület](#), an NGO supporting refugees, has held information days for the families, as well as offering activities to the children. The zoo has invited children staying at our centres to take part in their day camps.

Under the Temporary Protection Directive, the Hungarian state has been forced to change many of its policies regarding migration. Prior to the war in Ukraine, refugees had to ask for protection at the border or outside of Hungary, and there was a severe limitation on the number of demands to be accepted. Since the beginning of March, Ukrainian citizens and third country nationals fleeing Ukraine can request [temporary protection](#) – since May, it is also possible to do so online, and applicants no longer need to personally appear at the offices of the National Directorate-General for Aliens Policing. Those requesting temporary protection have the right to lodging, food and healthcare (which NGOs provide to everyone in need, even those not demanding this status), a monthly subsistence support (the same as Hungarian citizens, 57 eur/month!), employment, schooling for children, and free Hungarian courses. There was some ambivalence as to the situation

of those who also have Hungarian citizenship – originally, they were excluded from the benefits. Employers hiring Ukrainian citizens are entitled to a subsidy.

Currently, we are pursuing two aims: organising summer activities for children and supporting women in finding employment (many of whom do not read or write) while fighting traditional gender roles (many men do not want their wives to work). One of the people we are trying to help this way is a Ukrainian-speaking mother alone with two kids (8 and 9) – the father left behind in Ukraine. She had found employment despite the language barrier, but her work is from 10 AM to 10 PM. She left her kids alone in the centre until she arrived home. Although there are staff on duty 24 hours of the day, this is not feasible. They have found daycare for the kids, but she cannot pick up her kids after work. Now we are looking for volunteers – or a different job for her.

The current challenge is that it is impossible to plan anything: nobody knows how long people need to stay for, partially due to the war but also due to the emotional state of the families. Although most families have been with us for several months, there are also sudden changes: in the beginning of June, several families went back to Ukraine from one of the centres, some only on a temporary basis. Our other centre is still completely full. We are still working on an emergency basis. Funding from NGOs has been offered for a year, with the possibility of turning services more towards floating support for refugees who have moved out.

No one knows what the following year will bring: will children be here long enough to finish their whole academic year in school? Will parents have time to learn to read and write? Will they have the possibility to move out and live in rented apartments, much more adapted to the needs of families? Can homeless people re-occupy these buildings by winter? Only the future will tell.