

# Central Europe and the Baltic States

## Recent Developments

In the first six months of 2002, the governments of Central Europe and the Baltic States registered approximately 13,750 applications for asylum, about half as many as during the equivalent period in 2001. This trend can be attributed to: fewer Afghans seeking asylum in the region; new visa requirements in Bosnia and Herzegovina; and enhanced border controls in the region. A decrease in arrivals was noted in Hungary and Slovenia, while a significant increase was observed in Slovakia and Bulgaria. Overall, the number of decisions on refugee status failed to keep pace with the number of applications. This would appear to reflect weaknesses in the asylum systems of the countries concerned, though the ratio of decisions to applications is also influenced by the continuing tendency of asylum-seekers to pursue irregular movements to Western European countries.

Bulgaria  
Cyprus  
Czech Republic  
Estonia  
Hungary  
Latvia  
Lithuania  
Poland  
Romania  
Slovakia  
Slovenia  
Turkey



## Strategic Objectives

In July 2002, UNHCR's Bureau for Europe issued an updated version of its Strategic Directions (2002-2004), taking into account changes in the working environment, operational progress and constraints, the High Commissioner's priorities, the outcome of UNHCR's Global Consultations on International Protection and the need to implement the Agenda for Protection. The document outlines four complementary asylum goals that are relevant to the Office's operations in Central Europe and the Baltic States: 1) persons in need of international protection must have access to the territories of European States; 2) asylum-seekers must have access to fair, efficient and effective asylum procedures and must be treated in accordance with international protection standards; 3) refugees must be afforded high standards of protection, and effective durable solutions must be found for them; and 4) public opinion must be receptive

to the refugee's need of protection and lasting solutions.

The year 2003 will be a critical transition period for the ten countries in the region that are expected to join the EU in 2004. It will be particularly important for UNHCR to safeguard the regional co-ordination and co-operation strategies developed over the past decade. At the same time, financial resources and expertise will be devoted to the development of asylum institutions, support systems and public awareness initiatives. UNHCR will intervene to reduce the incidence and risk of statelessness, while ensuring that stateless persons enjoy, at the very least, a status corresponding to the standards of the 1954 Convention on Stateless Persons.

These issues figure prominently on the agenda for negotiations on the Justice and Home Affairs chapter between the European Union (EU) and the EU candidate States. The ten prospective new members will in due course take on responsibility for control of the Union's external borders. For many of these countries, an even greater challenge will be to offer durable asylum to refugees on their territory, and to resist the xenophobic tendencies which are so detrimental to the institution of asylum.

Within this context, it is regrettable that the shortages of funds in 2001 and again in 2002 have led to setbacks in the process of building the capacity of organised civil society to help asylum-seekers and refugees along the road to successful integration.

UNHCR's top priority will be to promote a supportive environment for asylum-seekers and refugees in the countries of Central Europe. However, UNHCR will at the same time create the relationships and mechanisms needed to broaden political and donor support within these countries for the refugee cause at the international level.

## Operations

UNHCR's operations in Turkey are described in a separate chapter. The following covers all other countries in the region.



Czech Republic: Afghan refugee children in a primary school. UNHCR / L. Taylor

### Access to Asylum Systems and Procedures

UNHCR's main priorities will be to ensure that all asylum-seekers have access to the territories and protection systems of States in the region, most of which are in the delicate position of "guarding" the external border of the EU. To this effect, UNHCR will monitor the implementation of measures to combat illegal migration and ensure that they contain safeguards against refoulement and are otherwise respectful of the rights of asylum-seekers. Particular attention will be paid to border and airport procedures, as well as referral mechanisms. In 2003, UNHCR will convene a follow-up meeting to the Regional Conference held in Budapest in June 2001, within the context of UNHCR's Global Consultations. This meeting, which brings together countries on both sides of the EU's eastern and south-eastern borders, will attempt to define practical criteria for the sharing of responsibilities in the areas of return (of unsuccessful asylum applicants) and re-admission (of asylum-seekers). It will also take stock of, and give renewed impetus to a series of sub-regional "border co-operation enhancement" initiatives, such as the Soderkoping and Uzhgorod processes. These initiatives, in which UNHCR plays a major co-ordinating role, bring together border officials of neighbouring countries on the future eastern border of the EU.

### Strengthening Asylum Systems

While much progress has been made by States in the region in meeting EU standards in several areas of substantive and procedural asylum law, these new systems will continue to require sustained support and guidance for some years after accession to the EU. UNHCR will help to enhance the capacity of States to manage the entire asylum process correctly: from the reception of asylum-seekers to decision-making on their claims. The Office will also call for the study of refugee law to be included in university curricula, in order to strengthen vital academic and professional sources of support.

Regional co-ordination and the exchange of experience are amongst the channels through which UNHCR has chosen to develop asylum systems in Central Europe. The success to date of this approach has led to a decision to expand the small regional support unit, based in Budapest, from two to four professionals by mid-2003. The unit will continue to co-ordinate a number of regional projects, in order to disseminate positive national experiences, foster consistency of approach and maximise human and financial resources. Priority areas for co-ordination will include the development of legal and social clinics; expanding the network of asylum judges in the region; rationalising the production and use of country of origin

information; and enhancing the skills of NGOs and the participation of refugees in areas of concern to UNHCR. In addition, the regional unit will advise UNHCR field offices and partners on the design and implementation of action plans in two key policy areas: 1) introducing a gender perspective into refugee integration work, particularly through refugee women's own initiatives; and 2) following up on the Separated Children in Europe Project, which is being mainstreamed into national and sub-regional programmes as of 2003.

No asylum system can be considered complete unless it provides real opportunities for refugee integration. NGO skills development and support for refugee associations must be supplemented by the necessary welfare resources and longer-term integration programmes (which in some central European countries are all but non-existent). In 2003 UNHCR will, whenever possible, foster and support governmental efforts to design or revise such integration programmes, bearing in mind the experiences and concerns of the refugees themselves and of the NGO service providers.

### Public Awareness, Advocacy and Partnership

Popular support for protection and integration policies is critical to their success and sustainability. In all countries of the region, public awareness campaigns and specific events (such as Refugee Days or Weeks) will be organised to help the public at large understand the plight of refugees and recognise the contribution refugees make to their host societies. In some countries, the focus on inter-communal tolerance and co-existence will have a preventive aspect, for instance, where UNHCR co-operates with the Council of Europe, the OSCE and the EU to combat discrimination against Roma and other minorities.

An NGO Liaison Officer, based in the regional support unit in Budapest, will *inter alia* ensure that UNHCR's NGO partners benefit from a new project, managed regionally by the European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE), that will focus on developing the capacity of NGOs to raise funds. An independent evaluation of the UNHCR-ECRE partnership has warned, however, against a dollar-to-dollar reduction of UNHCR contributions when NGOs expand their donor base. Financial

disengagement plans, probably covering several years, will need to be agreed with UNHCR's NGO partners before the close of the ECRE project in 2004.

### Resource Mobilisation

Central European countries are increasingly becoming donors to UNHCR. Offices in the region will advocate with governments, regional organisations and private individuals and corporations to help fund UNHCR operations worldwide. Public information and awareness campaigns, including schoolchildren and their teachers, aim to build broader-based and better-informed support for UNHCR and the refugee cause.

Budget (USD)	
Country	Annual Programme
Baltic States	270,000
Bulgaria	964,959
Cyprus	758,098
Czech Republic	828,405
Hungary	1,914,037
Poland	747,232
Romania	1,108,865
Slovakia	674,578
Slovenia	657,026
Turkey	5,580,422
Regional Activities <sup>1</sup>	323,600
<b>Total</b>	<b>13,827,222</b>

<sup>1</sup> Includes promotion of refugee law in Central Europe.