



# Central Europe and the Baltic States

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## Recent developments

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During the first six months of 2005, some 12,500 asylum applications were recorded in this region (excluding Turkey), a 17 per cent decrease compared to the same period in 2004. The ten new European Union member States received 11,800 new asylum requests, 34 per cent less than during the first six months of 2004. Three countries reported very marked decreases: Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Poland (78 per cent, 48 per cent and 25 per cent respectively). Conversely, a few countries such as Cyprus and Slovenia reported an increase (26 per cent and 38 per cent respectively).

Having acceded in May 2004 to the European Union, the ten new member States have assiduously amended their national asylum legislation in order to transpose asylum-related EU directives and the Dublin Regulations into national legislation. In order to support this process of transposition and implementation, UNHCR has issued annotated comments to all asylum directives. The Office continues to provide regular updates on the implementation and monitoring of the relevant directives. Additionally, UNHCR has outlined

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



strategies to ensure that the transposition of directives on asylum and asylum-related issues builds on existing law and good practice, closing gaps and improving protection standards.

A gaps analysis exercise recently undertaken in certain new EU member States revealed that shortcomings in some areas necessitate further changes to national policies on the reception of asylum-seekers, refugee status determination (RSD) and the integration of recognized refugees.

Hungary and Bulgaria have made noticeable progress in their efforts to fully implement their national law on asylum and refugees, which is broadly in compliance with the 1951 Refugee Convention. They have also improved reception conditions for asylum-seekers and strengthened RSD structures.

Romania has made considerable progress in the asylum field and is working towards improving its local integration capacities. UNHCR is very grateful to the Government of Romania for the

temporary stay provided since July 2005 to some 450 Uzbeks facing an immediate security risk in the Kyrgyz Republic.

UNHCR is concerned by the actual and potential pressures on the new EU member States that find themselves located on the external borders of the Union, some of which have limited asylum capacity. The Hague Programme, adopted by the EU Council of Ministers in November 2004, reflects the need for improved practical cooperation among EU member States and the need for greater burden and responsibility sharing.

UNHCR is gradually moving towards the reconfiguration of its presence in Europe around regional representations. The advantages of this change lie in the formulation of subregional

strategies, economies of scale and a rationalized management span. As such, UNHCR established a Regional Representation in Budapest in January 2005, covering Hungary, Slovenia, Slovakia and Poland. Following EU accession, Bulgaria and Romania will also be covered by the same Representation.

## Strategic objectives

Central European countries need to develop stronger and more coherent asylum systems, as well as greater integration capacities which adhere to the international protection standards enshrined in the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol. UNHCR will continue to encourage new EU countries to develop asylum systems which share the refugee burden more equitably. The Office will continue to advocate that the next phase of the transposition of EU directives focuses on reinforcement of the right to seek and obtain asylum in Europe. Through advice and

technical expertise, UNHCR will contribute to the promotion of harmonized asylum policies within countries of Central Europe.

In line with the UNHCR Strategic Framework for Europe (2005-2010), UNHCR's offices in the region will work towards achieving the following: access for asylum-seekers to the territories of European States; robust asylum systems in which the misuse of asylum procedures is avoided; asylum systems and practices which are responsive to issues of gender and age; a reduction in xenophobia and racism directed at refugees and asylum-seekers; effective promotion of the integration of refugees; asylum policies informed by a spirit of solidarity and burden sharing; and conformity with international standards through a common EU asylum system.

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## Operations

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Information on UNHCR's operations in **Turkey** is provided separately in the next chapter. This section covers the rest of Central Europe and the Baltic States.

### **Access to asylum systems and procedures**

As part of an overall trend in Europe, Central European countries are applying more restrictive policies that make obtaining asylum increasingly difficult for those in genuine need of protection. Existing EU asylum instruments place the burden of responsibility for determining an asylum claim and providing a durable solution primarily on the State through which the claimant entered the Union. This could lead to increased pressure on the new EU member States, most of which are situated on the external border of the Union. As a means to preserve and strengthen access to asylum systems and procedures across Europe, UNHCR is strongly advocating for the development of appropriate systems of responsibility and burden sharing.

The Office will also pursue its efforts to assist in the development of asylum systems that are

sensitive to the situation on both sides of the new EU border. The Cross-Border Cooperation Process ("Söderköping Process") has proven to be an important forum and vehicle for communication amongst the States of the Western Newly Independent States and between them and the European Union, notably the new EU member States.

### **Strengthening asylum systems**

Strengthening asylum in the broader Europe continues to be one of the main priorities for UNHCR. The environment, however, presents increasing challenges as focus on border control and public security measures impact negatively on attitudes towards refugees and asylum-seekers. With the enlargement of the European Union, UNHCR will continue to work with the countries of entry and transit to develop effective asylum systems, that ensure access to territory and procedures that conform with international protection standards.

Despite some concrete achievements, a number of European Union member States in Central Europe and the Baltic States are still in the process of strengthening their asylum systems and the institutions dealing with asylum remain weak. UNHCR will continue to work with these countries to make sure that international asylum and protection standards are upheld. In this respect, UNHCR will continue to build on the achievements under way in the region, sharing lessons learned and best protection practices, with a view to setting standards at the highest levels.

### **Public information, advocacy and partnerships**

In the context of the asylum debate in the new EU asylum space, UNHCR will continue to promote a powerful public information campaign. The Office will engage in more awareness-raising campaigns and media events designed to bring the plight of the refugee to the attention of target audiences. UNHCR will counter xenophobia and highlight refugees' and asylum-seekers' contributions to their hosting areas. In addition to human rights advocacy and outreach work, the Office's advocacy strategy will consist of planning of activities



Czech Republic: A Belarussian asylum-seeker talking to a counsellor at Vysni Lhoty reception centre for new arrivals, in northern Moravia. *UNHCR / L. Taylor*

with the participation of refugees, inter-agency workshops, seminars, production and distribution of visibility materials, and effective information targeting legal decision makers and the media.

UNHCR will continue to maintain reasonable levels of support for NGO implementing partners, while assisting them in their efforts to expand and diversify their funding base through new EU funding mechanisms.

### Resource mobilization

UNHCR has expanded its donor base by engaging a number of Central European States in the funding process which has led to increased contributions. The Office will continue its advocacy role among governments, organizations, private individuals and corporations in the region encouraging them to contribute and increase their levels of funding for UNHCR through the annual budget and/or special budgeting processes.

Budget (USD)	
Country	Annual Programme Budget
Bulgaria	1,042,971
Cyprus	838,791
Czech Republic	927,603
Hungary	2,364,094
Poland	955,036
Romania	1,092,737
Slovakia	762,151
Slovenia	380,121
Turkey	7,065,521
Regional activities <sup>1</sup>	300,000
<b>Total</b>	<b>15,729,025</b>

<sup>1</sup> Includes the promotion of refugee law.