



# Being a Refugee

Age, Gender and Diversity Mainstreaming Report 2007

PHOTO: BELA SZANDELSZKY



How Refugees and Asylum Seekers Experience Life in Central Europe

## Table of Contents

3	Foreword
5	Bulgaria
10	Hungary
16	Poland
21	Romania
25	Slovakia
31	Slovenia
37	Statistics
42	Map

Published by UNHCR Regional Representation for Central Europe,  
Budapest, August 2008

## Foreword

Refugees, internally displaced persons and returnees must be at the centre of decision-making concerning their own protection and welfare. The participation of refugee women, girls, boys and men of all ages in the definition of problems and the design of programmes for their benefit is crucial to effectively serving, assisting, and protecting them, as well as for their empowerment.

As a means to ensure better participation of all people of concern in programmes and decision-making affecting them, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has developed a tool for Participatory Assessment in Operations to structure the gathering and analysis of information received. Participation is particularly important for those who are often excluded, such as women, children and adolescents, the elderly and other groups suffering from discrimination. During Participatory Assessment missions Multi-Functional Teams (MFTs) visit refugee facilities, talk to focus groups composed of persons of the same origin, gender and age range and take note of all issues that come to their attention for later follow up.

PHOTO: UNHCR



Multi-Functional teams interview male and female asylum-seekers in separate discussion groups.

In Central Europe, the methodology has been adapted to the needs of the region. In each country, UNHCR has led the formation of an MFT consisting of UNHCR staff, government officials and non-governmental organisations. In the preparatory phase, the team members are trained in the methodology and assessment locations and groups are identified. Then the MFT splits up as appropriate and visits asylum seekers and refugees to listen to their concerns, and to assess the situation for themselves.

Individuals and groups are not only selected according to gender, age and cultural background, but also according to their legal status. In the Central European context, it is often the legal status that determines the set of problems and challenges that individuals are confronted with. The interviews are recorded and evaluated jointly by the team members. This summary regional report is based both on views articulated by asylum seekers and refugees, and on observations of the Multi-Functional Teams.

Autumn 2007 was the third time that Participatory Assessments took place in Central Europe. They covered Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia. The assessment methodology not only provides information on the views and situation of asylum seekers and refugees, but, with its systematic choice of persons from different gender, age, legal status and cultural backgrounds, over three consecutive years, it enables drawing more general conclusions and analysing long-term developments.

As a result, the assessments have become indispensable tools for planning and adapting asylum related programmes and policies to the needs of the beneficiaries. While the focus is necessarily on the problems and gaps that need corrective action, the assessments also find that previous problems have been solved.

In 2007, the assessments brought the problems of a particularly vulnerable group to the attention of MFTs in most counties: children. Asylum seeker and refugee children often come from a traumatic past, face a difficult present and have uncertain prospects for the future. They suffer from poverty, xenophobia, difficult family situations and education deficits. Also, refugee facilities are designed to meet the basic needs of the average adult. Thus, “at home” children find themselves in an environment where many of their special needs are not adequately met.

It is hoped that by highlighting these findings in this summary report, they will receive the specific attention required, so that the affected girls and boys will have happier, safer and more productive lives in the future.

**Lloyd Dakin**

**Regional Representative  
UNHCR Regional Representation for Central Europe  
Budapest**

*Bulgaria received 53% more asylum applications (975) than in 2006. However, from the point of view of numbers, Bulgaria remains second last among the six countries in the region, having received only 4.6 % of all asylum-seekers arriving in Central Europe in 2007. Regarding the composition of asylum-seekers, the largest groups were Iraqis (54.7%), followed by Afghans (7.9%), Armenians (6.6%) and Iranians (3.4%). Bulgaria registered the highest number of stateless persons asking for asylum: 80 applicants or 8.2% of all asylum-seekers. The refugee recognition rate in Bulgaria is relatively low: 2.2 % (13 Convention refugees), but the total recognition rate including subsidiary protection status (322 persons) was at 57.6%.*

## Methodology of the 2007 Participatory Assessment

In Bulgaria, participatory assessments were conducted in the period July - September 2007. The Multi-Functional Team (MFT) consisted of 15 persons representing UNHCR, the State Agency for Refugees, the Bulgarian Red Cross, the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, Caritas, the Council of Refugee Women and the Association for Integration of Refugees and Migrants.

The MFT met with 184 individuals in household discussions and focus groups. Out of those, 120 were asylum seekers and 64 refugees with humanitarian and convention status. Of those met, 148 were male and 36 female. Among the interviewed persons, there were 29 children (21 girls and 8 boys) below the age of 18. During the time when the meetings took place no separated children were present in Sofia or Banya.

The MFT met with families and with focus groups in the following locations:

- Reception and Integration Centres in Sofia
- Reception Centre in Banya
- A summer camp for refugee children in the village of Voneshta Voda
- Offices of the Red Cross and the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee in Sofia
- Private accommodations in Sofia.

To facilitate the dialogue and ensure consistency and quality of results, two questionnaires – one for adults and one for children – were used. They covered the main aspects of asylum seekers' and refugees' lives starting from access to territory, reception conditions, quality of the asylum procedure, legal assistance, integration services, quality of language tuition, access to information, accommodation, employment, education, health care, acts of xenophobia and intolerance, cases of corruption etc.

The MFT's report was based both on the results of the interviews and on observations made by the team members. The Multi Functional Team found out that unlike in 2006, the majority of newly arrived asylum seekers were literate and had completed at least primary education.

The interviewed individuals came from a large variety of countries of origin, including Afghanistan, Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Burkina Faso, Cote d'Ivoire, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Guinea Conakry, Guinea, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, Sudan, Syria, Tanzania, Turkey as well as number of stateless persons.

## Xenophobia Makes Refugee Lives Miserable

Bulgaria is a country with a high level of xenophobia that is often openly expressed by locals. A shocking example of this was found in Nova Zagora, a town in East Bulgaria, where it was reported that three General Practitioners flatly refused to treat asylum seekers.

But it is not only access to medical care that is impeded by the hostile local attitudes. Refugees also reported that they face cultural stigmas:

- They are sometimes abused when they do not speak correct Bulgarian or when Muslim women walk the streets in their traditional headdress.
- Accommodation for recognised refugees is hard to find. In spite of refugees' precarious economic situation, it happens that landlords ask higher rents from them than from local tenants. Refugees also have to pay high deposits and the MFT heard of several cases where refugees were asked to leave after a few months but were not given back their deposits.
- When dealing with authorities, refugees are often confronted with government officials that are ignorant regarding the status of refugees and their rights.

As a result of all these difficulties, some refugees said that they lost motivation to socialise with the host community and want to leave the country.

*“When I go to the shop and they hear the way I speak, they call me Taliban and Osama Bin Laden. I keep quiet, but I would like to shout that this is the reason that I fled my country and I seek protection against the same things.”*

*Single male asylum seeker*



## Access to Health Services is Difficult

Many of the complaints that the MFT heard were related to health services. Doctors and administrative staff in health care institutions sometimes reject refugees, be it for ignorance about their status or for language barriers. There were also systemic issues such as the obligation to pay a minimum medical fee when seeing a doctor, but the amount was too high for some of the asylum seekers to pay.

PHOTO: IVAN GRIGOROV



During the asylum procedure, the State Agency for Refugees pays medical insurance

During the asylum procedure, the State Agency for Refugees (SAR) pays medical insurance for the asylum seekers, but this is not immediately reflected in the computer system of the National Health Insurance Fund. Thus, if an asylum seeker requires medical attention, SAR needs to issue a referral letter. This document takes up to one month to get and sometimes is not recognised by medical service providers. There have been cases when the system did not work when hospitalisation was needed.

Vulnerable cases face additional obstacles. Elderly refugees, unable to attend the compulsory Bulgarian language classes, are not covered by the National Integration Programme and have to find alternative ways to pay medical insurance, although they are the ones who are most likely to need medical care and least likely to earn money.

The procedure for obtaining disability papers is very complicated and refugees are able to go through the system only with support from the NGOs.

## Women Suffer for Multiple Reasons

Life in asylum facilities is difficult and affects the entire family. The participatory assessment revealed that there is an increased level of domestic violence among the refugee populations in comparison with their home countries. Frustration, idleness, change of social roles in the family and social isolation make some men more aggressive, so that they turn against their wives. The MFT was concerned to find that there is no reporting mechanism for cases of domestic violence, and victims do not know where to turn for help. Also, the management

of the reception centre is said to be reluctant to intervene when such incidents occur.

PHOTO: IVAN GRIGOROV



Life in asylum facilities is difficult and affects the entire family

Muslim girls and women reported that they are torn between their own cultural identity and the standards of the host society. Girls reported that they had less freedom to leave the house than their male siblings. Women are sometimes uncomfortable with the common dress codes.

*“My husband and son made me take off the scarf because when we went out people would stare and shout things. My son said he would no longer walk with me because he is ashamed. My husband said that if I did not take it off he would look for another wife. I no longer wear the scarf but I feel naked.”*

*Female asylum seeker*

As is the case in other countries, asylum seeking women in Bulgaria face more difficult conditions than men when in detention. Female asylum seekers, while in detention at Bussmantsi, reported that the – predominantly male – staff is not sensitive to the needs of women. They face harsh detention conditions and do not even get enough hygienic items.

More often than men, women in the focus groups complained about the quality of nutrition in reception centres. They reported that there was no baby food and no supplementary nutrition for pregnant women. They also told the MFT about the lack of hot water and heating in the reception centres after 5 p.m. and during weekends. In Banya, there were no adequate cooking facilities in the reception centre.

*“My life in Bulgaria is the same as in Afghanistan. The only difference is that I do not wear the scarf. Nothing has changed. My life is still controlled by my husband.”*

*Afghan refugee woman*

Female asylum seekers complained that it was impossible to make ends meet. The monthly subsistence allowance, though equal to the one for Bulgarian citizens, did not suffice to provide for food and medicine.

## Children’s Fate Determined by Poverty

Meetings with parents and discussions with the children themselves revealed problems with education. There are no Bulgarian language courses for asylum seeker children in the centres, so they have difficulties catching up at school.

Without the required knowledge of Bulgarian language, older children have to enter school at a much lower grade than their natural age would indicate.

Asylum seeker children not only have to sit in class with children that are much younger, but they are sometimes the target of harassment causing considerable drop-out rates.

PHOTO: IVAN GRIGOROV



Asylum seeker children have difficulties catching up at school

The MFT learned of cases of child labour. In particular, boys with inadequate education are sent to work by their parents. Also, poverty discrimination leads to increased aggressive behaviour. The MFT learned of incidents where children were stealing food or money from each other and in shops.



## Recommendations of the MFT

In addition to a detailed follow-up on the issues raised by the interviewed persons, the Multi-Functional Team approved the following recommendations:

- Follow up in detail with the State Agency for Refugees on all the points that are within the sphere of their responsibility;
- Organize a meeting between SAR, the National Health Insurance Fund and the National Insurance Institute to address health care problems,
- Adopt a more comprehensive National Program for the Integration of Refugees and for the broader participation of the NGOs and the refugee community organizations in its implementation. In the meantime, UNHCR will adapt its 2008 program in order to fill in the gaps most threatening to the physical and social survival of the newly recognized refugees.
- UNHCR will publish an information leaflet for asylum seekers explaining the basics of the asylum procedure in Bulgarian, English, Arabic and Farsi. In addition, by mid-2008 a Handbook on Refugees' Social Rights will be published in Bulgarian and later abridged versions will be produced in Arabic and Farsi.
- NGOs and UNHCR will participate in drafting the multi-annual Program for the European Refugee Fund III (2008-2013) and in the absorption of the ERF II funds in 2008, so that issues identified by the MFT will be addressed.

## Changes since the 2006 Participatory Assessment

The MFT found that in comparison to 2006, findings related to the security and safety in the SAR reception centres were improved. After the change of the security company, the asylum seekers expressed their satisfaction with the security guards in the centre in Sofia. In addition:

- The period of detention at the border after illegally entering the territory was decreased.
- The registration procedure at SAR has been accelerated. The IDs are issued in a timely manner upon registration.
- The governmental Program for Integration of Refugees for 2008-2010, adopted by the Council of Ministers on 17 April 2008, will provide for school support for 30, and kindergarten for 20 refugee children, transportation during the language and social orientation courses for 100 adults, Bulgarian language tuition in Nova Zagora, two seminars for 40 people each for social workers, teachers and doctors working with refugees and one educational study trip in the countryside; all of which did not exist in the previous Program.
- In order to obtain a more meaningful overview of the refugee population, SAR started to break down statistics of children – both accompanied and separated – by age, and not only by countries of origin as before. As of 2007, SAR has started to collect and share with UNHCR and NGOs statistics on Dublin II cases as well.
- The UNHCR Representation in Sofia published a brochure on the activities of all organisations dealing with refugees in Bulgaria. The brochure is provided in Bulgarian and English.

*In 2007 the number of asylum applications in Hungary rose by 61.8% compared to the previous year, from 2,117 to 3,425. The largest group of asylum-seekers, like in 2006, were from Serbia and Montenegro (26.6%) followed by Vietnamese (25.2%), Chinese (12.2%), Iraqis (4%) and Georgian (3.8%). Altogether 238 persons were granted international protection, including 169 Convention refugees and 69 persons with subsidiary protection status. This constitutes a 60% rise in refugee recognition rates, from 7.5% in 2006 to 11.9% in 2007.*

## Methodology

The Multi-Functional Team (MFT) in Hungary consisted of 16 members, two each from the Ministry of Justice and Law Enforcement, the Office of Migration and Nationality, the Hungarian Helsinki Committee, the Hungarian Association for Migrants (Menedek), the Cordelia Foundation (for victims of organised violence) and from UNHCR.

The Ministry of Justice and Law Enforcement and Cordelia were new to the MFT and their participation had an immediate impact. The experts from the Ministry could directly feed their proposals into the then ongoing legislative process of drafting a new Asylum Law that entered into force on 1 January 2008. Cordelia's psychologists were able to assess the psychological condition of the interviewees and intervene where immediate action was required.

As the diversity of the asylum seeker and refugee populations would have resulted in very small focus groups if clustered by nationality, age, sex or ethnic background, the most frequently applied method of participatory assessment in Hungary were semi-structured discussions with households.

The MFT split in two sub teams and visited the following locations:

- Győr (Border Guards detention centre)
- Bicske and Békéscsaba (reception centres, municipality schools, kindergarten)
- Budapest (individual recognised refugees, school)
- Nyírbátor (Border Guards detention centre and community shelter)
- Debrecen (reception centre and municipality school)
- Nagykanizsa (home for separated children)

In total, the MFT met 179 asylum seekers and persons with protection status, of whom 56 were females and 123 males. Out of 27 detainees interviewed, there was only one female. Interviews were conducted with 34 children (24 boys, 10 girls) out of which 9 were separated children, all of them male.

## System not Equipped for Children

Asylum and migration systems are usually created with adult beneficiaries in mind. However, children and adolescents form a significant part of refugee populations coming to Hungary either with their families or on their own. The MFT found a number of shortcomings regarding the treatment of minors.

The gravest concern pertained to children in detention. The MFT met a 17 year old boy in administrative detention in Nyírbátor. According to international legal standards, minors should never be detained, regardless of whether they arrive with families or unaccompanied.

The participation of separated children from the Child Home in Nagykanizsa in education was unsatisfactory. Local schools have never had experiences in teaching foreign children in multicultural classes and, therefore, they were reluctant to accept teenagers from the Home. In addition, the fact that refugee children do not have school certificates from their previous countries and they do not speak Hungarian was also seen as problematic by the schools. The arrangement of the Home (neighbouring a Border Guard facility) prevents their effective local integration as it rather isolates them. Muslim minors cannot observe Ramadan easily as there are no adequate arrangements at the Child Home.

PHOTO: BÉLA SZANDELSZKY

*“If children can go to school, they will have many friends and they can forget about their problems”*

*8 year old Kosovo Roma asylum-seeker boy in Békéscsaba*

*“For my kids, school breaks and week-ends in the camp are awful. It’s better for them in the school where they can speak the language and they have friends”*

*Kosovo Roma mother of three in Békéscsaba*



Refugee babies start having problems the moment they are born. The nationality of children born to asylum seekers, refugees and persons with humanitarian status are registered as “unknown” in their birth certificates. This may in the long run lead to statelessness and have a negative impact on their future.

In some Refugee Reception Centres, special meals are provided for babies. However, above the age of 2 years, children are expected to eat the same as adults not taking into account the need for more dairy products and fresh fruit for children.

## Women Live in Harsher Conditions

While women usually find it easier to keep themselves busy with work and not get bored by the monotony of refugee camp life, the MFT found that their circumstances are more difficult in many respects than those of male residents. For example:

- There are very few or no specific leisure or training programmes for women in the reception centres.
- Women complain that they do not receive sufficient sanitary items such as sanitary napkins, washing powder to maintain their hygiene and that of the family.
- Single parents and mothers with small children face difficulties in attending language classes or taking jobs as they have no one to take care of their children.
- Women who reject their traditional role are sometimes ostracised by their fellow refugees. A Cameroonian single asylum-seeking woman complained that liberated women are defamed as “prostitutes” by their own communities.

*“My husband doesn’t allow me to go to the language class because there are many men there. He would allow me to go to a class for women, but that one should be in the morning when my kids are at school”*

*Kosovo Roma mother in Békéscsba”*

In detention, women usually face harsher conditions than men. They may find themselves in a dark sublet of the detention facility with no direct access to communal areas while male detainees have at their disposal a community room with TV.

As there are significantly fewer women in detention, it is not unusual that a woman spends weeks or even months isolated in detention without being able to communicate with a fellow detainee. Needless to say, most of the Border Guard officers are male as well.

## Psychological Problems Often Stay Undetected

Psychological problems of different degrees often occur among asylum seekers and refugees because of traumatic experiences before, during and even after their flight. There are certain programmes for traumatised adults, but the MFT observed that there are no psychologists to treat adolescent asylum seekers and refugees with traumatic disorders. Also, there are no screening mechanisms to identify survivors of torture and other kinds of violence in detention which is alarming as such people easily get re-traumatised when incarcerated.

PHOTO: UNHCR



A legacy from the war in the Balkans: elderly patients from a mental ward in Bosnia

A legacy from the war in the Balkans, the Reception Centre in Debrecen has a very specific group of refugees, elderly patients from a mental ward in Bosnia, who were evacuated to Hungary and

for whom a durable solution has not been found so far. At the time of the participatory assessment, 22 patients were remaining in the separate department that has been created for them. The MFT spoke to three patients who were able to articulate their and their fellow patients' needs. Apart from their medical conditions, the two main problems that these refugees suffer from in the ward are depression and the lack of activities to keep them busy. They are homesick and hope to be able to return some day. It is impossible for them to understand that the lack of family structures and medical facilities in post-war Bosnia prevents their return.

*"I would like to return to my home town and have coffee in the local coffee shop with my friends and neighbours. And I would like to go to the mosque."*

*Bosnian mental patient*

However, the patients themselves propose two simple solutions that could ease their suffering: they would like to have Bosnian meals from time to time and a doctor or a nurse who speaks their language. Also, regular activities are needed to activate the patients and improve their mental conditions which currently are only controlled by drugs.

## Detention Stricter than for Criminals

The MFT found that asylum seekers in detention are unable to make informed decisions about their legal situation as they do not have access to understandable information on the Dublin II procedure and on the refugee status determination in general. In many cases, detainees do not even understand why they are kept in custody. The situation is not helped by the fact that they cannot communicate with the guards due to language problems.

The MFT found that the rules for administrative detention have generally become far too strict. Foreigners who only committed a minor offence have to endure harsher conditions than criminals as their freedom of movement is very much restricted. Cells are locked even during daytime in two of the facilities. Chairs and tables are fixed to the floor.

Residents can only see their visitors through an opening in a separation wall. In one facility telephone calls are limited to one call of a maximum of 5 minutes per day. While the facilities in Nyírbátor and Kiskunhalas adhere to this exceptionally rigorous regime, the detention ward in Győr allows for a slightly more humane treatment and some freedom of movement within the facility.

General living conditions in detention are appalling. Food is not satisfactory, hygienic conditions are bad with dirty premises and bed sheets that are rarely washed. Also, there are no social services or daytime activities such as sport facilities, reading material or internet access, and Muslims have difficulties observing the Ramadan fast.

*"They just keep us like animals in the zoo"*

*Elderly Kosovo man in detention in Nyírbátor*



## Life in Refugee Centres: Between Boredom and Conflict

When talking to the MFT the asylum seekers complained that there were no meaningful leisure time activities nor vocational training programmes. They also said that there was a need for external mediation when conflicts among residents arise. Conflicts sometimes develop between persons of different cultural background, between men and women, or between residents and the camp management. Another source of conflicts was that some residents do not respect house rules, which disturbs others and leads to arguments.

"We just sit here and wait for the day to go by"

Kosovo Roma woman in Békéscsaba

PHOTO: UNHCR



The MFT also heard complaints about the food served - it does not contain enough vegetables, fruit or dairy products, and there is only one hot meal per day. Portions were too small for some of the residents.

Clothing is also a problem. Many residents need good shoes and warm clothes for the winter.

*"Food is horrible: one day it's a red sauce, the next day it's a yellow sauce and rice or potato with it".*

*Serbian refugee woman in Bicske*

## Recommendations of the MFT

In addition to a detailed follow-up on the issues raised by the interviewed persons, the Multi-Functional Team approved the following recommendations:

- Asylum seeker children should start Hungarian language classes immediately upon arrival to make sure that their school attendance is meaningful. Parents also should be coached and provided with interpretation services to be able to interact with teachers and school authorities.
- Teachers and headmasters of schools with asylum seeker and refugee children should be trained in teaching in a multicultural context.
- Given that education is a basic need, secondary education of asylum seeker children should be funded by the government to ensure sustainability (currently it entirely depends on the European Refugee Fund.)
- Refugee Reception centres should have child specific programmes, especially in summer, so children are busy and active.
- Reception conditions in detention should be upgraded to meet basic standards.
- The nationality of refugee babies born in Hungary should be registered properly in order to avoid statelessness.

- A psychiatrist should treat adolescent asylum-seekers and refugees with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). A screening mechanism should be introduced for PTSD victims in detention, in order to avoid re-traumatisation.

## Changes since the 2006 Participatory Assessment

- Reception conditions have improved considerably in Refugee Reception Centres due to many projects that were introduced with external funds. Many residents expressed their satisfaction with the services and the number of complaints decreased considerably compared to the previous years. In general, the interviewed persons were much more worried about the forthcoming legal changes due on 1 January 2008 than about reception conditions.
- The Regional Representation in Budapest provided dispensers for information leaflets to be posted in places accessible to newly arrived asylum seekers. The MFT learned that those dispensers were indeed located in the detention facilities and well stocked with relevant information material.
- The Separated Children Home in Nagykanizsa should become part of the Hungarian child protection system to ensure that the same standards would be applied as for Hungarian minors. [Comments: Since 1 January 2008, the SC Home does not operate in Nagykanizsa, but in Bicske, under an ERF-funded project of the Ecumenical Aid Service and the Bicske Refugee Reception Center.]
- During 2007, the main problems related to the education of asylum seeker and refugee children were addressed in a series of roundtable discussions and in a meeting with the Minister of Education.

## New Asylum Law in Hungary

The 2007 assessment missions coincided with the final stage of drafting a new asylum law. It has been in force since 1 January 2008 and includes changes based on findings of the missions, including:

- Asylum seeker and refugee children are now entitled to school starting benefits and the reimbursement of expenses for travelling to school and home.
- In the reception centres children younger than 14 years of age are now also entitled to the monthly allowance so that families can meet the special needs of their children.
- In addition, the new Act on Aliens decreased the length of administrative detention from twelve to six months, and asylum seekers will spend no more than a maximum of 15 days in detention.

# Poland

*Poland saw a large increase (62.6 %) of asylum claims, with 10047 asylum applications in 2007 compared to 7093 asylum claims in the previous year. In the regional context, Poland received the largest number of asylum seekers, 47 % of all applications in Central Europe. As in past years, the overwhelming majority (more than 90%) of all asylum-seekers were ethnic Chechens from Russia. Despite the increase in asylum claims, the recognition rate decreased from 12.7% to 3.9%: 212 persons received Convention refugee status, compared to 485 a year earlier. This decrease, however, was compensated by granting subsidiary protection to 33.8% more applicants (2919 persons) in 2007, as opposed to 2110 a year earlier.*

## Methodology

At the time of the assessment in September 2007, 4,035 asylum seekers in Poland were accommodated in 17 refugee centres, located in three voivodships. 693 asylum seekers received state support while staying outside the centres.

The interviewees were grouped into eight categories defined by gender and age. During the three rounds of assessment missions, the MFT met close to 200 asylum seekers and persons with protection status.

Interviews were conducted in:

- Lublin, Łuków and Niemce (Lubelskie Voivodship)
- Łomża, Czerwony Bor and Iga (Podlaskie Voivodship)
- Siekierki and Bielany centers in Warsaw (Mazowieckie Voivodship)

In previous years the assessments had taken place during one week and in one voivodship, in 2007, the interviews stretched from May through October and were conducted in a larger geographical area. The 2007 exercise was concluded with a conference where the findings were discussed and recommendations concluded.

## Monotonous Life in Crammed Conditions

In most reception centres the MFT regularly heard complaints about living conditions. The centres are so overcrowded that sometimes several families have to share one room. In several centres the facility is run down and rooms are damp. This is especially true in the reception centres of Niemce and Lublin which are in urgent need of refurbishment.

Communal facilities such as cooking stoves and washing machines are in deplorable condition. The kitchens are often dirty and sometimes even infested by bugs. Refugees requested more appliances but also admitted that residents should be informed on how to use them properly so as to keep kitchens clean and in good shape.

Among the visited centres, residents were satisfied with the food only in the Bielany. It turned out that they have regular meetings with the catering company where their ideas and complaints are discussed. The MFT considered this a very positive example which should be followed in other centres as well.

Children miss having playgrounds and sports facilities

PHOTO: UNHCR



Another frequent complaint the MFT heard was about the monotony of camp life and the lack of leisure time activities. Practically all children and adolescents miss having playgrounds and sports facilities as well as sports equipment in reception centres. Among adults, it was the males who mentioned this problem more often than females. Adults as well as some of the children would like to have access to reading material, especially books in their mother tongue.

Most centres are equipped with computers and Internet but there are no transparent rules about their use. In Lublin a TV set was given to the centre but it is said to be used by the security guards. In Warsaw, the TV set was destroyed by some of the residents.

Security was an issue the residents of reception centres were reluctant to raise. The MFT learned that there were conflicts among asylum seekers, but that the residents do not want to involve the management or police to resolve them. Alcohol and drug abuse and domestic violence were also vaguely mentioned as problems, but they are rarely reported to the management or security personnel.

## The Limbo of Subsidiary Protection

In Poland the number of people granted subsidiary protection outnumbers persons with full refugee status by nearly 20 times. The MFT received the information from people with subsidiary protection that they are largely uninformed about their rights and the possibilities of getting help. Provision of information material is limited, and NGO lawyers mostly focus on asylum seekers and do not have the capacity to deal with this caseload.

People with subsidiary protection see themselves as particularly vulnerable and exposed. Many Chechens said it was difficult for them to understand why they were denied refugee status. They do not have access to integration programmes such as Polish language classes and assistance in finding employment and accommodation. Hence, many of them do not see Poland as a country where integration is possible for them.

The most crucial moment for people granted subsidiary protection as well as for refugees is when they leave the reception centre. The MFT found that there is little support for them during that transitional period, although the pre-integration program with counselling, provision of accommodation and other support worked in some centres. Hence, initial attempts to find accommodation and employment often fail and many persons choose an easy escape route by filling in another application for refugee status.

## Negative Experience with Teachers and Classmates

School attendance of asylum seeker children has increased substantially over the last two years and the MFT heard no complaints about children not being admitted to school. It turned out, however, that both teachers and Polish children still need to get used to having multinational classes. Both children and parents told the MFT stories of negative attitudes displayed towards them by many teachers and classmates.

PHOTO: BÉLA SZANDELSZKY



Apart from language barriers, the economic situation of asylum seeker families also reflects on their children. They have difficulties buying text books or paying for extra-curricular activities or may spend the food allowance given for school children on other things. As a result, some children were hungry at school.

Many parents raised the issue of pre-school and suggested that kindergartens be established with Polish speaking teachers. That way, children would learn the language before starting school.

The economic situation of asylum seeker families also reflects on their children

## Many Health Complaints and One Glowing Example

Most interviewed groups complained about access to and quality of medical services. Apart from language problems, asylum seekers and refugees face a number of difficulties with health service providers. They complained about xenophobic attitudes of medical staff and about the low quality of medical services in general. Many asylum seekers claim that General Practitioners are reluctant to transfer them to specialists.

When members of the MFT heard complaints that emergency services are not accessible to residents when necessary, they immediately tried to verify this information. They were informed that calls had repeatedly been made in cases when there was no real emergency and that in such cases the intervention has to be paid.

However, in the Bielany Centre in Warsaw the contact with the doctor was described as “ideal”. Residents very much appreciated the physician’s commitment and her preparedness to sacrifice her free time to provide medical assistance.

## Active Involvement Instead of Passive Camp Life

The MFT concluded that one major characteristic prevalent in the refugee population in Poland is a passive approach towards their situation. While there is a large number of objective factors that have a negative impact on living conditions and integration prospects, the MFT also found that the majority of asylum seekers think that solutions for their problems should be found by others and have high expectations of external actors such as the government and the management of reception centres.



When the refugees and asylum seekers were asked to think about solutions they could find for themselves or within their communities, they found it difficult to do so.

The MFT found that the perspectives of refugees who are proactively integrating in Poland were markedly better compared to people in reception centres. Therefore, the nature of problems identified varied greatly between these two broad groups. Also, different experiences in Poland and differences in the cultural and educational backgrounds and family structure of refugees and asylum seekers result in different chances for later integration in the society.

The MFT found that the length of stay in the reception centres is a key factor. Prolonged idleness often leads to a decline in personal initiative and an increase in expectations for ready-made solutions coming from outside. By speeding up the asylum procedure and providing solutions that would encourage persons not to file subsequent applications for sole social reasons, this vicious circle of prolonged dependency and uncertainty about the future could be avoided.

The guiding principle should be the active involvement of beneficiaries

PHOTO: BÉLA SZANDELSZKY



The MFT also concluded that the guiding principle of refugee assistance in Poland should be the active involvement of beneficiaries at all stages of the refugee cycle. If people were empowered to participate in decisions about their living conditions and integration right from the start, many of the problems mentioned in this report could be resolved at an early stage. Incentives should be given for creating refugee committees and self-help initiatives.

## Recommendations of the MFT

- Standard operating procedures on sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) should be developed and introduced in reception centres to avoid and resolve conflicts. The number of social workers should be increased. [Comment: On 25 March 2008 The Office for Foreigners, Police, La Strada, Halina Niec Legal Aid Centre and UNHCR signed the agreement on Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) on SGBV. Since then the implementation of the SOP started in regards to reception centres for asylum seekers.]
- Living conditions in reception centres in Niemce and Lublin should be improved. Washing machines and cooking appliances should be provided in sufficient amount and residents should get instructions on how to use them properly.
- Refugees should be involved in planning the menus following the good practice in Bielany centre.
- Some problems related to vandalism in reception centres could probably be addressed by introduction of a system that includes some responsibility of residents for the premises.

- Centres should have playgrounds and sports facilities. Rules for accessing computers and Internet should be transparent.
- A moderated dialogue between schools and asylum seekers and refugee communities should be supported. Active involvement of asylum seekers into the life of schools is crucial.
- Day care with Polish speaking pre-school teachers should either be organized in the centres or children should have access to public kindergartens.
- Interpreters should be provided for communication with medical staff or language training for the medical staff should be provided.
- The MFT recommends providing Polish language classes especially tailored to the needs of people looking for jobs. Vocational training and courses meeting labour market needs should be made available to asylum seekers.
- System of free legal assistance and counselling programmes should be provided by the government.
- Integration programs should be extended to persons granted complementary protection. The quality of existing integration programs should be reviewed by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy. [Comment: on 29 May 2008 the new law on granting protection to aliens came into the force. This regulation grants access to integration programmes for persons with subsidiary protection.]
- Refugee awareness in the Polish society should be strengthened to prevent discrimination.
- Refugees and persons granted complementary protection should be supported in creation of new associations to better address their needs.
- Access to and management of EU and governmental funds by non-governmental organizations should be simplified.

## Changes since the 2006 Participatory Assessment

The 2007 participatory assessment was the third such exercise in Poland. Reports from previous rounds have contributed to the debate on the needs and problems of asylum seekers in Poland.

- Following the findings of the 2005 assessment, UNHCR, governmental institutions and non-governmental organizations undertook activities aimed at improving access to schools for refugee and asylum seeking children. As a result, attendance rate of the minors of concern to UNHCR improved significantly (71 % in 2006 in comparison to 52 % in 2005; nearly 100% in 2007)
- In 2006, participants stressed the problems they had accessing language and vocational training. As a result, additional activities and trainings were organized in the centres.

# Romania

*In 2007, Romania received the lowest number of asylum-seekers in the region — 3% of all asylum-seekers in Central Europe, even though there was an increase of 43.3% (659 applications) compared to 2006 (460 applications). On the other hand, the recognition rates were high: the refugee recognition rate was 26% (143 persons received Convention refugee status), constituting a 75,7% increase compared to the previous year, and 17 persons benefited from subsidiary protection, resulting in a total recognition rate of 29% and a 70% increase compared to 2006. The main groups of asylum-seekers in Romania were Iraqis (43%), Serbians (28.2%), Turks (6.8%) and Chinese and Somali asylum-seekers (4.8% respectively.)*

## Methodology

Participatory assessments in Romania took place in September 2007. The Multi-Functional Team (MFT) consisted of 12 members, out of which nine were female and three male. They represented UNHCR, the Directorate for Asylum and Integration and non-governmental organisations.

In total, the MFT spoke with 87 persons of concern, 64 asylum seekers and 23 persons with protection status from Iraq, Serbia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Congo-Brazzaville, Somalia, Nigeria, Egypt and Turkey. Among the interviewed persons there were seven children between 13 and 18 years of age (two boys, five girls) and 80 adults (53 men and 27 women).

In order to ensure a wide geographical coverage, the Multi-Functional Team split in smaller groups and conducted the assessment in the following locations:

- Stolnicu Reception Centre in Bucharest
- Radauti Reception Centre (North-East of Romania)
- Somcuta Mare Reception Centre (North-West of Romania)
- Galati Reception Centre (East of Romania)
- Timisoara Reception Centre (West of Romania)
- NGO offices (ARCA – Romanian Forum for Migrants and Refugees, Romanian National Council for Refugees, Refugee Women Association, Save the Children Romania, all in Bucharest and Generatie Tanara Association in Timisoara).
- UNHCR Office in Bucharest.

Prior to the assessment missions, the MFT had agreed to look primarily into the following topics: the asylum procedure and living conditions for asylum seekers as well the mechanisms of local integration for those who have been granted protection status.

## The Asylum Procedure Has Many Weaknesses

Asylum seekers in Romania face a number of difficulties, especially outside of the capital where shortcomings are even graver than in Bucharest.

The Romanian office for immigration produced an information film about the status determination procedure and the rights and obligations of asylum seekers. However, the film is only available in Romanian, English and Arabic versions. Individuals who do not speak any of those three languages have no access to vital information.

Not only do asylum seekers often not understand the Romanian legal procedures, the MFT also detected a lack of knowledge regarding Dublin II Procedures.

*“The Dublin Regulation is something against the freedom of movement.”*  
Asylum seeker from Iraq

Many asylum seekers who speak rare languages told the MFT that there are no interpreters for them outside of Bucharest. This negatively affects their access to social, legal and medical assistance.

Asylum procedures are complex legal processes that can hardly be carried out without the assistance of experts

PHOTO: TUDOR VINTILOIU



Asylum procedures are rather complex legal processes that can hardly be carried out without the assistance of experts. The volume of free legal aid provided by the Bar Association and by NGOs with UNHCR funding is not sufficient to meet the basic needs of asylum seekers in Romania. In addition, specialised lawyers are not available in other locations than Bucharest.

When assessing the credibility of an asylum claim, the decision makers often do not take into account the latest developments in the asylum seeker’s country of origin which can result in incorrect decisions.

Female asylum seekers feel particularly exposed during the asylum procedure. There is a lack of female interpreters for rare languages and government officials are not trained enough to carry out interviews in a gender-sensitive manner, nor to properly identify gender-based persecution.

Many interviewed persons complained that their monthly allowances do not cover their material needs. In such circumstances there is no way to fund any needs beyond the most basic ones. For example, parents reported that their children cannot participate in any extra-curricular activities because they cannot afford the expenses.

In Somcuta Mare, asylum seekers felt that their medical needs are not met properly. Problems occur when asylum seekers are referred to local hospitals.

## Lack of Information Hampers Integration

Persons who enjoy protection status in Romania are confronted with ignorance. When refugees approach government welfare offices, they mostly face officers who rarely deal with refugees and therefore do not know which assistance they are eligible for.

Refugees face a similar situation when they look for jobs, especially outside of the capital. Employers are hesitant to hire refugees as they do not understand their status, nor their skills and qualifications.

*“Employers don’t know refugees and don’t want to work with us.”*

*Male Somali refugee*

Usually good formal education facilitates the integration of refugees in a new society. In Romania, refugees with good qualifications are confronted with the fact that in most cases the diplomas and degrees they obtained in the country of origin are not recognised by Romanian authorities. Romania does not yet have a system of validation and recognition of foreign diplomas.

PHOTO: TUDOR VINTILOIU



Naturalisation procedures in Romania are lengthy and far too costly for refugees

Naturalisation is usually the final step in an individual’s integration process and a number of persons told the MFT that they would like to become Romanian citizens, but naturalisation procedures in Romania are lengthy and far too costly for most of the refugees.

One of the more unusual findings of the MFT was the fact that in theory Romania’s new Law on Integration foresees a number of

very promising integration measures. However, this information has not been disseminated and potential beneficiaries do not know about those programmes and hence do not take advantage of them.

To access medical assistance, persons granted protection before 2004 have to pay medical insurance retroactively. The required amount is considerably high and cannot be paid in instalments.

## Recommendations of the MFT

- Relevant actors should organize information campaigns among potential beneficiaries which include the distribution of flyers and intensified social and legal counseling to enhance awareness regarding the latest content of the Government integration programme.
- The Ministry of Education, Youth and Research should be encouraged to develop a methodology for the recognition of diplomas and degrees, stipulated in the amended provision of the Law on integration of persons granted a form of protection in Romania (Integration Law).
- The process for amending the legal provisions regarding the monthly allowance for asylum seekers should be speeded up in order to increase the amount.



- The Government should be encouraged to develop a free legal aid scheme for asylum seekers and to train lawyers outside Bucharest as well as decision makers on credibility assessment. Also, the use of country of origin information should be improved.
- Budget allocations required to cover interpretation and travel costs should be increased in order to ensure coverage of beneficiaries in the process. Furthermore, strategies should be developed to include persons of concern who live in other locations than Reception/Accommodation Centres and have not requested assistance from non-governmental organisations, to find out if they face any protection risk.
- The duration of participatory assessments should be increased to ensure wider participation and to enlarge the Multi- Functional Team.

## Changes since 2006 Participatory Assessment

Since the last assessment mission, a significant change in the caseload profile had taken place. At the time of the assessment, over 30% of asylum-seekers population in Romania were of Serb origin. Recommendations from the last assessment led to the following improvements:

- The Romanian Immigration Office produced a film on steps of the refugee status determination procedure in Romania;
- Refugee assisting NGOs jointly drafted a leaflet on services provided by them to persons of concern for UNHCR; the leaflet was translated in English, Arabic, Somali and Turkish languages;
- Refugee community workers translated the internal regulation of the Reception centres into Somali and Turkish;
- The Directorate for Asylum and Integration started to communicate to concerned asylum-seekers the grounds for reduction of material reception conditions.

# Slovakia

*Slovakia, unlike most other countries in Central Europe, received fewer asylum seekers in 2007 than in 2006, 2,643 persons compared to 2,871, a decrease by 8%. Refugee recognitions, on the other hand, increased by 22%, although recognition rates remain extremely low: 14 persons, received Convention refugee status (the refugee recognition rate was thus 1.1%), while 82 persons were granted subsidiary protection (so the total recognition rate was 7.5%). The largest groups of asylum-seekers were from Pakistan (24.6%), India (23.4%), the Russian Federation (11.6%), Moldova (7.9%) and Georgia (5%).*

## Methodology

The Multi-Functional Team (MFT) in Slovakia consisted of eleven members, four from UNHCR, two from governmental institutions (Ministry of Interior and Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family) and five from non-governmental organisations (Human Rights League, Goodwill Society, Slovak Humanitarian Council and the Ecumenical Council of Churches).

Interviews were carried out in the second half of September 2007. The MFT split up into groups of two or three as practical. This allowed them to visit eleven locations situated throughout the country:

- Rohovce (accommodation centre)
- Medveďov (detention centre)
- Gabčíkovo (accommodation centre)
- Opatovská Nová Ves (reception centre)
- Zvolen (integration centre)
- Horné Orechové (orphanage for separated children)
- Zavar (accommodation for those working for Peugeot Trnava)
- Bratislava (where recognised refugees live)
- Humenné (reception centre)
- Košice (where recognised refugees live)
- Sečovce (detention centre)

## Doubting the Fairness of the Procedure

Wherever the MFT talked to asylum seekers, the leading issues were their concerns over the fairness of the refugee determination procedure. The main problem raised by almost all persons was the long duration of the asylum procedure and the unpredictability of its results. Asylum seekers were displeased with the length of appeal procedures before regional courts and the Supreme Court of the Slovak Republic as well.

*“Do they watch TV? Do they know what is going on in my country and why I came?”  
Asylum seeker in Gabčíkovo*

The MFT found that the asylum seekers were well aware of the very low number of recognitions of refugee status in comparison to other EU countries and doubted whether they could find protection in the Slovak Republic. Generally, the asylum seekers' confidence in the procedure is low and they felt that officers are not well informed about the situation in their countries of origin and do not do their cases justice.

Asylum seekers lack understanding of why their claims are rejected

PHOTO: BÉLA SZANDELSZKY



Also, decisions are only available in the Slovak language. Only the conclusions of the decisions are being orally interpreted to asylum seekers together with the instruction on the possibility to lodge a legal remedy. The reasoning is not translated for them and asylum seekers lack understanding of why their claims are rejected.

## Idleness and Tensions in the Asylum Centres

As far as living conditions in the refugee facilities are concerned, the most frequent concerns were related to security attributed to overall tense situation and aggression in asylum facilities, sometimes erupting into mutual attacks. The asylum-seekers themselves see the lack of meaningful activity during their stay in the facility as the main cause of such aggression.

Asylum seekers strongly desire to engage in gainful employment, but the Slovak law allows them to start legally working only after one year in the asylum procedure. Also, asylum seekers complained about the lack of leisure activities in the asylum centres. Among all the centres visited, asylum seekers were least satisfied in Gabčíkovo centre where concerns over overall hygiene in the facility, including kitchen and canteen were raised. They also pointed out the difficulties in communication with the canteen personnel.

At the time of visit of MFT in Opatovská Nová Ves, this centre was still functioning with a closed quarantine regime. The only shop available to asylum seekers was a kiosk with groceries and other consumer goods. The MFT members found that there were no price tags on certain goods and the prices asked were too high. Following an immediate intervention by the MFT, the centre management entered into a discussion with the owner and made him display the prices of all goods. MFT recommended withdrawal of the license in case shortcomings were not improved. Later in 2007, this facility was reclassified into an accommodation facility and the residents can now move around freely. This fact allowed the management to close the kiosk as asylum-seekers can now shop in the regular stores in the village.

Detained persons in Sečovce and Medveďov complained about the way the confiscation of their personal belongings is handled during detention. They reported that they did not receive any written record regarding the seizure of their financial means. Upon request by the MFT, the facility manager was able to produce detailed financial records of detained aliens. However, it was acknowledged that the police should issue certificates of seized financial means or property to detained foreigners and it was promised that the practice would be changed.

*“The police took cash from us and never gave it back. They did not explain why and how much we have to pay.”*

*Detained men from India*

The lack of space for social activities is the general problem of the centre in Gabčíkovo. Usually, women meet in the kindergarten which is not the most suitable place for such meetings because it is mainly for children purposes. In Medveďov, though, a common room for women exists, but it would necessarily need reconstruction and refurbishment.

## Separated Children Need More Care and Counselling

One of the most alarming places visited by the MFT during the participatory assessment in Slovakia was Horné Orechové, the centre where separated children are placed. While the establishment of this centre specifically for separated children in 2005 was an achievement in itself, many gaps still need to be addressed in order to improve care for this group of minors.

PHOTO: BÉLA SZANDELSZKY



Many gaps still need to be addressed in order to improve the care of children

The lives of the children and adolescents is very monotonous and isolated there. The personnel of the facility is not able to communicate in foreign languages, therefore the children face difficulties in communicating their needs to adults. Interpreters are only called for official procedures. As a means of solving such situations, those children who have some command of Slovak or Russian language are asked excessively to help instead of using interpreters.

Out of the six boys that were present in the centre at the time of the MFT mission, only one Afghan boy attended school regularly. More regular Slovak language lessons are needed in the centre. Although there are some computers available in the facility, they are not functional.

The protection situation is very poor. The children understand neither their rights nor their status. Written information available to minors in this facility in form of leaflets is insufficient owing to the low level of translation of the text, the limited languages in which the text is available, and the content is not adapted to the comprehension of underage readers.

*“No, I do not understand what I am waiting for in this place. All I want is being safe and going to school. I want to be as Slovak kids are.”*

*Boy from Afghanistan*

For unaccompanied minors a guardian is to be appointed to act and decide on their behalf. The Office of Labour, Social Affairs and Family in Trenčín has only one employee who acts as a guardian for all unaccompanied minors placed in Horné Orechové with only 10 hours per working week devoted to guardianship. The guardian does not even have an office at the centre.

Also, the appointment of guardians by court is lengthy. The courts often are obliged to send the case to another court when the unaccompanied minor is relocated from the place of original detention to one of the orphan houses, which makes the procedure even longer.

The MFT found that confidentiality of personal information is not always respected. For example the names of some residents together with their medical diagnoses were pinned up on the entrance door leading to the part of the facility where medical quarantine is being performed.

In the facility, there is no playground. Sports equipment is scarce given the remote location of the centre, the local swimming pool and other sports facilities outside the centre are difficult to reach.

Psychologists are being called to the facility only in cases of extreme urgency, for example, due to aggressive behaviour. Unaccompanied minors have often experienced complicated life situations accompanied by unpleasant and traumatizing events in their past. MFT saw potential symptoms of traumatising in children interviewed. The support of psychologists is needed to prevent problems in the facility.

*“My mother was killed. I was left alone. I want to go to Spain where I have relatives.”*  
African boy

During discussions with MFT members, minors pointed out that the personnel of the facility have practically no knowledge of the culture and religion in countries they come from. This often leads to misunderstandings and culturally insensitive approaches by the personnel. For example, the MFT found that in particular the menu did not take into consideration religious requirements.

## Parents Concerned about Meals and Education

Asylum seeker mothers expressed their concerns about the meals they receive. They reported that these often do not correspond to the needs of their small children. They find the food unhealthy and lacking in dairy products and especially fresh fruits, and sometimes too spicy for their little children as well. Mothers of these children said they would like to be provided tea bags, to be able to prepare tea for their little children in small kitchens any time they need it.

In the detention centre of Sečovce there is no access to education for children of school going age which is a cause of worries expressed by a number of parents.



## Jobs Make All the Difference to Men

The MFT found a major difference between two groups of male asylum seekers of a similar ethnic background, one was a group of 17 male asylum seeking residents in Gabčíkovo and the other eight working for a car manufacturer in the city of Zavar. Discussions with the MFT revealed that the quality of life described by working asylum seekers is more satisfactory than life in one of the asylum centres.

The Gabčíkovo group complained about general living conditions, and the pocket money that does not cover their needs. In their view the house rules negatively affected their free movement since for leaving the area where the centre is located it was necessary to obtain leave permits. The time in which it is possible to apply for such a permit is too short and they have to ask for permit to leave one day in advance. They complained also about a lack of leisure time activities and the quality and quantity of their monthly packages of hygienic items.

Working asylum seekers are more positive about their situation than asylum seekers staying in Gabčíkovo

PHOTO: BÉLA SZANDELSZKY



In stark contrast, working asylum seekers seem to be able to cope much better with the challenges of everyday life. They were much more positive about their situation in comparison to asylum seekers staying in Gabčíkovo. They said that they lived together peacefully and there were no conflicts. They also reported that they have better social relations and more contacts with the local population in Zavar than they ever had in Gabčíkovo.

Although the men in Zavar are still worried about their families and whether they will get protection in Slovakia, they said they regained their self-esteem by working and earning their own living.

*“In the camp we lived rough, but here, after work, it is like coming home even if we share the rooms with other men. Working in the city gives me opportunities to have many contacts, I am not isolated and I can study.”*

*Iraqi asylum seeker*

The problems raised by men in Zavar were mainly related to their labour and social rights as employees. They are not well informed about their health insurance entitlements and about the way their salaries are calculated. Also they want to receive pay slips that they understand. However, there is only one NGO social worker whom they can revert to, but regular provision of support services of social and legal counselling, as well as Slovak language lessons are missing.

## Recommendations of the MFT

The MFT worked out detailed suggestions to address all practical problems raised in the interviews such as hygienic conditions of the dining rooms, extra rations of tea for families with small children, provision of sports facilities and playgrounds etc.

As far as structural issues are concerned, these were the main recommendations:

- More concise courses of Slovak language should be offered, tailored to the needs of diverse target groups
- In the separated children centre in Horné Orechové, the regular presence of interpreters or the use of alternative methods of interpretation by means of technical devices should be established. In addition, psychological personnel for unaccompanied minors should be provided in the centre.
- Staff dealing with refugees and/or unaccompanied minors should receive training with regards to cultural diversity. Decision-makers and lawyers of the Migration Office as well as judges of asylum boards in regional courts should be trained on refugee law.
- The number of judges working on asylum cases should be increased, and other legislative changes are necessary to further raise the efficiency of legal review of asylum decisions without detriment to the quality of decision-making.
- The number of persons performing the guardianship should be increased so that it corresponds to the number of minors placed in the facility offering them consultations on a daily basis.
- As for the more effective integration of asylum seekers and refugees in the labour market, the one-year ban on employment for asylum seekers should be reduced and the Migration Office and the NGOs should cooperate in finding appropriate jobs for asylum seekers.

## Changes since the 2006 Participatory Assessment

- The climate between residents and centre staff has obviously improved. Unlike previous years, the MFT did not hear about problems with security guards. There were also very few complaints about staff working in the premises with exception of Gabčíkovo kitchen staff. The staff who did not behave correctly in the past has either changed the attitude or has been released from the service.
- Problems with the quality and quantity of meals, in contrast to last year's findings, were not dominating among those mentioned by asylum-seekers. Indications of certain shortcomings in meals included only complaints of asylum-seekers originating from Muslim countries when practicing Ramadan.

# Slovenia

*In all of Central Europe, Slovenia again had the smallest number of refugee recognitions, and the lowest refugee recognition rate: 0.6%. In 2007, only two persons were granted refugee status. There was one recognition in 2006. At the same time, Slovenia saw the biggest decrease (-18%) in the number of asylum claims. A total of 425 applications were lodged in 2007 in comparison to 518 in the year before. More than half of all applicants came from Serbia (55.8%), followed by Turkish nationals (9%), and applicants from Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Macedonia (5% respectively).*

## Methodology

The MFT in Slovenia was composed of three Government officials (two staff members of the Asylum Home and an officer from the Section for the Integration of Foreigners and Refugees) four NGO representatives (two from Slovene Philanthropy and two from the Legal Information Centre PIC) as well as one representative from UNHCR's Regional Office in Budapest.

The team interviewed 88 persons of concern, out of which 55 were male and 33 female. The largest group of interviewed persons were asylum seekers (76 individuals) and the rest were recognised refugees. As for age distribution, the MFT met 11 children (two of them unaccompanied) and seven persons over the age of 40. The vast majority of persons were between 18 and 40 years of age.

Interviews took place in the following locations:

- Asylum Home, Ljubljana
- Integration House, Ljubljana
- Office for the Integration of Refugees in the Ministry of Interior, Ljubljana
- Integration House, Maribor
- Private accommodation, Maribor

## Strict House Rules and Body Checks

Most residents of the Asylum Home in Ljubljana, Slovenia's only accommodation centre for asylum seekers, feel that this is not a pleasant place to live in. It is not the facilities they complain about, those are modern and clean, it is the way they are being treated.

*"They treat us like difficult children, but we are normal, free adults"*

*Asylum seeker from Russia*

House rules are very strict in the Asylum Home. Residents can only leave the house if they obtain exit passes. The officials authorised to issue such papers are often not available and residents are required to stay at the premises.

While going out is difficult, coming back is no less problematic. Practically all groups complained that the guards excessively check their bags and perform body searches at re-entry. Also, they have the impression that certain groups of asylum seekers are scrutinised more rigorously than others, which is perceived as highly discriminatory behaviour.

PHOTO: BÉLA SZANDELSZKY



The asylum home is not a pleasant place to live in

Often there is no female guard on duty, so men perform checks both on male and female residents.

According to the house rules, residents are allowed to stay out only until 10 p.m. (or 11. p.m. during summer). If they overstay the permitted time outside, they claim that they are punished, first orally, then in writing, and finally, by a prohibition to go out at night.

Many residents, especially families with children, complained

about the high level of noise during the night caused by a few residents who play loud music. However, guards do not always enforce house rules, even when asked to do so by residents.

Another cause of dissatisfaction among asylum seekers is the unwillingness of some staff members to communicate with them and provide information. This was raised by practically all focus groups. Men from Russia sent a letter to the management complaining about excessive checks and the behaviour of the guards but have not received a reply. Some asylum seekers sent requests to the Asylum Section asking that their cases be transferred to another inspector, but they also did not receive an answer. The same happened to an asylum seeker from Russia who in writing requested additional information regarding the asylum procedure.

Some asylum seekers told the MFT that there were instances when personal and confidential information was spread widely at the Asylum Home by staff members.

*“This is not a government institution, this is a bazaar. Even the guard knows details from my interview.”*

*Male asylum seeker*

A number of women, especially those with children, felt that the kitchen personnel was unfriendly and uncooperative. Roma women felt that the distribution of clothes is done in a discriminatory manner, giving preferential treatment to some groups of asylum seekers.

Problems with health services were also raised. The MFTs heard several complaints about the nurse in the medical ward. Asylum seekers claim that she is uncooperative and does not provide the required medication. What worries the residents even more is the fact that after working hours the guards have the power to give them medication according to the instruction the nurse gives them over the phone. In cases of more severe health problems, patients have to wait until a commission decides whether they are eligible for the treatment. The MFT was told that for emergency cases, the emergency service is called only as a last resort.

Both men and women living in the Asylum Home complained about the lack of leisure time activities. Recreational possibilities at the Asylum Home are scarce. There is not enough reading material in certain languages, notably in Albanian and Russian. Tea rooms and the computer rooms should be accessible more often.

Most asylum seekers feel discontented at the Asylum Home, but they are not allowed to live outside even if they have the financial means to afford it. This issue was raised in many of the focus groups who pointed out the mental stress caused to them by the atmosphere at the Asylum Home.

PHOTO: BÉLA SZANDELSZKY



Included in the Asylum Home premises, there is also a detention section placed in a separate wing. The MFT observed that the only outdoor space for the detainees is a confined area of a few square metres in the yard of the Asylum Home. However, this space is perceived as and actually looks like a small cage and detainees said it was a humiliating experience to be confined there in full view of other residents, including children. The detainees asked to be provided at least additional sports equipment.

Asylum seekers are not allowed to move outside even if they can afford it

## Growing Dissatisfaction over Legal Procedures

The MFT was concerned about the frequency and gravity of complaints regarding the asylum procedure. Compared to the findings in previous years the dissatisfaction with legal procedures appears to have increased further in Slovenia.

In detention, the majority of asylum seekers complained that they did not understand the reasons for the detention nor did they receive adequate information.

Asylum seekers reported that some lawyers requested fees which they are unable to afford and requested an updated list of lawyers whose services are truly free. The MFT heard that sometimes lawyers who are supposed to represent asylum seekers during the procedures do not even show up for court hearings. This might be caused by the fact that lawyers' fees in asylum cases are much lower than the usual charges for administrative procedures.

One major concern is about translation services. Mongolian asylum seekers told the MFT that there is no translation for them at all. Even persons speaking more common languages pointed out deficits. Russian asylum seekers told the MFT that they are often asked to sign documents which they do not understand. Also, they are under the impression that Russian language documents which they have submitted to support their cases are not translated into Slovenian and sometimes not even put on record.

Asylum seekers have expressed their wish that notices on blackboards be translated in more languages and that the Act on International Protection is available in their languages, too.



*“At home I am involved with the opposition and I managed to escape from prison. Now I am sitting in prison here. Why?”*

*Detained male asylum seeker from Middle East*

A few older asylum seekers raised a particularly grave allegation claiming that they received negative decisions without even having been interviewed.

## Refugees Struggle with Landlords and Doctors

Interviews with recognised refugees in Maribor and Ljubljana revealed much the same problems as in the previous two years. Once recognised, refugees often have to wait for an extended period until they get their work permits issued.

They find it hard to get affordable accommodation because they are not entitled to social housing as this is reserved solely to Slovene citizens. Private landlords often refuse to issue official contracts for reasons of tax evasion. However, refugees need a written contract to receive rental subsidies and to have an official permanent address which in turn is a prerequisite for obtaining a work permit.

PHOTO: BÉLA SZANDELSZKY



Interviews with recognised refugees revealed much the same problems as in previous years

Slovene citizenship is difficult to obtain for recognised refugees as they often do not have the required income. This particularly applies to elderly and vulnerable persons.

Non-Europeans face additional problems when looking for housing and employment and clearly feel discriminated against.

The health care situation has not improved compared to earlier assessments. Refugees are still issued insurance papers that look very different from the health insurance cards common in Slovenia and are therefore are rejected by specialist care providers.

## Recommendations of the MFT

The MFT suggested a wide range of measures to address the concerns and problems raised by the interviewed persons, including:

- Much of the dissatisfaction voiced by the residents of the Asylum Home could be mitigated by increasing the number and availability of social workers who can immediately deal with problems of everyday life.
- House rules should be more flexible to meet the needs of the asylum seekers, especially with regards to late returns.
- There is a need to have female guards in every shift.
- Fees of lawyers dealing with asylum cases should be raised to the level of fees in comparable cases. Asylum seekers should regularly be given lists of lawyers that are available free of charge. Where there are clear indications of unethical behaviour of certain lawyers, their access to asylum seekers should be restricted.
- All relevant information should be translated into the necessary languages to keep residents informed and ensure the quality of the asylum procedure. Sufficient numbers of interpreters should be available to ensure adequate communication between asylum seekers and government officials.
- It is recommended to create a legal basis for asylum seekers to live outside the Asylum Home where feasible.
- The administrative procedure for issuing work permits to recognised refugees should be accelerated.
- The Ministries of Interior and of Health are requested to finally resolve the problem of health insurance cards for refugees.
- NGOs, in cooperation with labour offices are encouraged to promote a counselling system regarding employment and self-employment possibilities for refugees.
- The Government of Slovenia together with NGOs and European agencies should engage in awareness raising activities against xenophobia and racial discrimination.

## Changes since the 2006 Participatory Assessment

- Accommodation facilities are better than in 2006. However, the population of asylum seekers staying in the Asylum Home tends to continue to raise a number of concerns, especially the Russian asylum seekers and more concerned with the general atmosphere.
- Breaches of confidentiality seem to be a new problem at the Asylum Home as that issue has not been mentioned in previous years. Especially guards are said to receive and divulge information on individual asylum seekers that was revealed during interviews in asylum procedures.
- Complaints about overcrowded premises and two families sharing one room which were an everyday problem until 2006 did not come up.
- For the first time, there seems to be an increasing interest among asylum seekers in living outside the Asylum Home in private facilities.
- This year the problem of theft from rooms did not come up. However, the MFT heard several complaints that single men are able to access the unit for single women unit and unaccompanied minors and take their food from refrigerators.

# Asylum Trends in Central Europe in 2005-2007

The figures indicate **first applications**. Data on administrative review cases is only available for Poland, thus the country table for Poland includes these more detailed statistics. The regional summary table includes both first applications and administrative review cases in Poland.

The term “**complementary protection**” covers different legal terms in different countries, such as tolerated stay, subsidiary protection and humanitarian status.

**Refugee Recognition Rate** = number of cases recognized divided by the total number of cases recognized, granted complementary protection and rejected.

**Total Recognition Rate** = number of cases recognized and granted complementary protection divided by the total number of cases recognized, granted complementary protection and rejected.

Central European Region			
(grand total for Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia)			
Status	2005	2006	2007
Asylum applications	16690	17920	21375
Recognized refugees	533	656	553
Complementary protection	2055	2310	3416
Rejected	5733	4276	5662
Refugee recognition rate	6.4%	9.1%	5.7%
Total recognition rate	31.1%	41%	41.2%

## Bulgaria

Number of asylum applications 2005-2007

Status	2005	2006	2007
Asylum applications	822	639	975
Recognized refugees	8	12	13
Complementary protection	78	83	322
Rejected	386	215	247
Refugee recognition rate	1.7%	3.9%	2.2%
Total recognition rate	18.2%	30.6%	57.6%

2007 Countries of Origin (Top 5)

Asylum-seekers	Recognized refugees	Complementary protection
1. Iraq (533)	1. Afghanistan (5)	1. Iraq (276)
2. Stateless (80)	2. Syrian Arabic Rep. (4)	2. Afghanistan (18)
3. Afghanistan (77)	3. Iraq (2)	3. Islamic Rep. of Iran (9)
4. Armenia (64)	4. Islamic Rep. of Iran (1)	4. Armenia (3)
5. Islamic Rep. of Iran (33)	5. Turkey (1)	5. Sudan (3)

## Hungary

Number of asylum applications 2005-2007

Status	2005	2006	2007
Asylum applications	1609	2117	3425
Recognized refugees	97	99	169
Complementary protection	95	99	69
Rejected	758	1118	1183
Refugee recognition rate	10.2%	7.5%	11.9%
Total recognition rate	20.2%	15%	16.7%

2007 Countries of Origin (Top 5)

Asylum-seekers	Recognized refugees	Complementary protection
1. Serbia-Montenegro (911)	1. Iraq (64)	1. Serbia-Montenegro (16)
2. Vietnam (862)	2. Somalia (30)	2. Iraq (5)
3. China (417)	3. Cuba (28)	3. Afghanistan (5)
4. Iraq (136)	4. Unknown (9)	4. Nigeria (5)
5. Georgia (131)	5. Turkey (5)	5. Turkey (3)



## Poland

Number of asylum applications 2005-2007

Status	2005	2006	2007
Asylum applications – first instance	6860	7093	10047
Administrative review	1422	4222	3201
Recognized refugees – first instance	312	422	148
Administrative review	23	63	64
Complementary protection – first inst.	1832	2048	2875
Administrative review	24	62	44
Rejected – first instance	2283	939	1835
Administrative review	376	290	513
Refugee recognition rate – first inst.	7%	12.4%	3%
Administrative review	5.4%	15.2%	10.3%
Total recognition rate – first instance	48.4%	72.5%	62.2%
Administrative review	11.1%	30.1%	17.4%

2007 Countries of Origin (Top 5)

Asylum-seekers	Recognized refugees	Complementary protection
1. Russian Fed. (9238)	1. Russian Fed. (104)	1. Russian Fed. (2834)
2. Belarus (83)	2. Iraq (5)	2. Iraq (18)
3. Pakistan (61)	3. Belarus (3)	3. Sri Lanka (9)
4. Sri Lanka (57)	4. Armenia (1)	4. Turkey (4)
5. Ukraine (55)	5. Cameroon (1)	5. Stateless (2)

## Romania

Number of asylum applications 2005-2007

Status	2005	2006	2007
Asylum applications	594	460	659
Recognized refugees	54	51	143
Complementary protection	14	10	17
Rejected	416	283	391
Refugee recognition rate	11.2%	14.8%	26%
Total recognition rate	14%	17.7%	29%

2007 Countries of Origin (Top 5)

Asylum-seekers	Recognized refugees	Complementary protection
1. Iraq (283)	1. Iraq (113)	1. Iraq (6)
2. Serbia-Montenegro (186)	2. Somalia (18)	2. Turkey (4)
3. Turkey (45)	3. Jordan (6)	3. Somalia (3)
4. Somalia (32)	4. Turkey (5)	4. Occ. Palestinian Terr. (2)
5. China (32)	5. Afghanistan (2)	5. Cameroon (1)

## Slovakia

Number of asylum applications 2005-2007

Status	2005	2006	2007
Asylum applications	3549	2871	2643
Recognized refugees	25	8	14
Complementary protection	-	-	82
Rejected	812	878	1177
Refugee recognition rate	3%	0.9%	1.1%
Total recognition rate	3%	0.9%	7.5%

2007 Countries of Origin (Top 5)

Asylum-seekers	Recognized refugees	Complementary protection
1. Pakistan (650)	1. Cuba (3)	1. Iraq (42)
2. India (619)	2. Islamic Rep. of Iran (3)	2. Syrian Arabic Republic (11)
3. Russian Federation (307)	3. Syrian Arabic Rep. (2)	3. Somalia (9)
4. Moldova (208)	4. Ukraine (1)	4. Afghanistan (6)
5. Georgia (134)	5. Sudan (1)	5. Armenia (5)

## Slovenia

Number of asylum applications 2005-2007

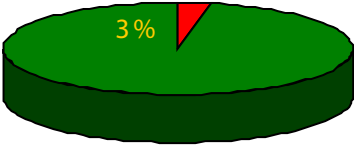
Status	2005	2006	2007
Asylum applications	1834	518	425
Recognized refugees	14	1	2
Complementary protection	12	8	7
Rejected	702	553	316
Refugee recognition rate	1.9%	0.2%	0.6%
Total recognition rate	3.6%	1.6%	2.8%

2007 Countries of Origin (Top 5)

Asylum-seekers	Recognized refugees	Complementary protection
1. Serbia-Montenegro (237)	Dem. Rep. of Congo (2)	1. Serbia-Montenegro (5)
2. Turkey (38)	-	2. Albania (1)
3. Bosnia-Herzegovina (22)	-	3. Afghanistan (1)
4. Albania (21)	-	-
5. FYR Macedonia (20)	-	-

## Unaccompanied and Separated Children in 2007

Asylum applications by unaccompanied and separated children		
	2007	% of total applications
Bulgaria	23	2.3%
Hungary	73	2.1%
Romania	246	2.4%
Poland	30	4%
Slovakia	154	5.8%
Slovenia	27	6.3%
<b>total</b>	<b>553</b>	<b>3%</b>

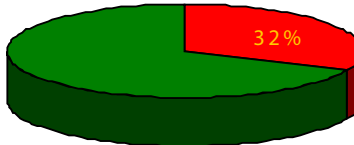


■ unaccompanied and sep.children  
■ total asylum applications

Figures above are included in the tables Asylum Trends in Central Europe in 2005-2007.

## Female asylum-seekers in 2007

Asylum applications by female asylum seekers		
	2007	% of total applications
Bulgaria	98	10%
Hungary	650	19%
Romania	4725	47%
Romania	Not available	
Slovakia	247	9.3%
Slovenia	82	19.3%
<b>total</b>	<b>5802</b>	<b>31.8%</b>

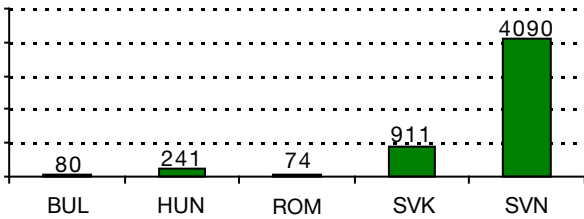


■ female asylum seekers  
■ total asylum applications

Figures above are included in the tables Asylum Trends in Central Europe in 2005-2007.

## Stateless Persons in 2007

Total number of stateless persons	
	2007
Bulgaria	80
Hungary	241
Romania	74
Poland	Not available
Slovakia	911
Slovenia	4090
<b>total</b>	<b>5322</b>





### LEGEND

- country boundaries
- major roads and highways
- EU external border entry point
- Schengen external border entry point
- EU internal border entry point
- EU sea border entry point
- ◆ international airports
- country capitals
- other towns and villages
- Ⓜ UNHCR office
- Ⓜ Border Guard / Police Detention Centre
- Ⓜ Detention Centre
- Ⓜ Accommodation Centre
- Ⓜ Integration Centre
- Ⓜ Entry Facility / Reception Centre
- Ⓜ Separated Children Centre
- Ⓜ Open Shelter
- Ⓜ Government office linked to RSD (Migration office)
- Ⓜ Government / Police Office for border management and aliens policing
- Ⓜ Court of Law
- Ⓜ Quasi-tribunal
- Ⓜ Refugee Social Clinic
- Ⓜ Refugee Assisting NGO (Non-legal services)
- Ⓜ Refugee Law Clinic
- Ⓜ Refugee Assisting NGO (Legal services)
- Ⓜ Main point of entry in the country