



ROMA
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ALAPITVÁNY



ROMANI REFUGEES' SPECIFIC VULNERABILITIES IN HUNGARY

POLICY BRIEF



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The Russian occupation of Ukraine has forced millions of people to leave their homes. According to estimates from several NGOs, since February 2022 100,000 Romani refugees have fled to neighboring European countries.¹ Hungary has become a main destination primarily for the Hungarian-speaking Roma of the Transcarpathian region. Although there are no official statistics to rely on, based on the mapping of currently operating shelters, thousands of Romani refugees reside in Hungary. Stemming from their extremely marginalised social status, Transcarpathian Roma refugees in Hungary heavily rely on state care and support services. However, the asylum system and social benefit system have not been adequately prepared for the reception of refugees ever since the war broke out. Without adequate systemic and centralized measures and infrastructure, the reception, housing, labor market integration, education, and overall assistance fall mainly on the already overburdened civil society, municipalities, and church organizations. Besides, Romani refugee families' living conditions and experience with infrastructures of everyday life are exposed to hidden and overt mechanisms of ethnic discrimination and racism.

Present report is primarily based on input collected between December 2022 and April 2023 during various consultation meetings with civil society stakeholders; and secondarily on prior research con-

¹ <http://www.chirikli.com.ua/index.php/en/library/item/275-since-february-2022-about-100-000-roma-fleeing-from-the-war-in-ukraine-to-the-eu>

ducted from June 2022 to September 2022.² The document highlights key issues concerning the issues Romani refugees face and provides a set of recommendations for moving towards more complex service provision for this group. The main area of recommendations formulated in this policy brief are the following: legal and administrative issues; housing; employment; and education.

LEGAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE ISSUES

Legal and administrative processes associated with refugees' status are under the jurisdiction of the National Directorate – General for Aliens Policing (Országos Idegenrendészeti Főigazgatóság, OIF).³ Since the outbreak of the refugee crisis, there have been a number of complications for authorities and refugees alike in navigating the regulations and procedures related to the protection of refugees. The most common legal and administrative issues are the following:

- *One of the general loopholes of the system is the lack of realistic data on refugees arriving in the system and their location.* According to the estimates of UNHCR, as of the 18st of April 2023, 35,030 individuals have applied for Temporary Protection status in Hungary, however, the a number of border crossings from Ukraine is much higher – around 2,5 million.⁴ The lack of reliable data impedes strategic and targeted service planning, delivery, and needs assessment.

² <https://romaversitas.hu/inclusion-of-roma-refugee-children-from-ukraine/>

³ <https://helsinki.hu/az-ukrajna-elleni-tamadas-es-a-magyar-menekultugyi-rendszer/>

⁴ <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine>

- *Applying for temporary protection is a lengthy and complex administrative process, which it is hard to navigate without proper assistance.* The application for temporary protection must be submitted in person at the closest office of the National Directorate-General for Aliens Policing. The authorities must make decision within 55 days. During this process, a proof of Ukrainian citizenship must be provided, (e.g. ID card or passport). In the lack of such documentation, the authorities would initiate a longer inquiry.⁵
- Based on our former research as well as data from other organizations, *of those who have received their financial benefit of the Temporary Protection Status (22,800 HUF), many reported that the amounts are too small to cover their basic needs.*⁶
- Another major legal issue affects those who *hold Hungarian-Ukrainian citizenship*. Since Hungarian citizens cannot register for asylum, they do not appear in the official data on registered refugees. As many of the Transcarpathian Roma hold dual citizenship,⁷ it is *difficult to estimate the actual number of Romani refugees specifically.*
- Even though Hungarian citizens cannot apply for asylum, they are entitled to the benefits of this status. However, practice shows that *often the authorities are not aware of the rules that*

⁵ <https://helsinki.hu/az-ukrajna-elleni-tamadas-es-a-magyar-menekultugyi-rendszer/>

⁶ https://voiceamplified.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/VOICE-CARE-Policy-Brief_Hungary-Food-Insecurity_Sept22.pdf

⁷ In our research conducted from June - September 2022, 27% of the respondents (161) held dual citizenship, 37% had successfully registered in the TP system, while the rest (36%) had not yet registered or had no knowledge of their status.

apply to dual citizens and thus of the types of benefits to which they are entitled. As a result, refugees holding dual citizenship – many Transcarpathian Romani refugees – often do not receive the subsistence allowance because they lack information on its administrative steps or are denied free health care.

HOUSING CONDITIONS

Due to structural inequalities combined with anti-Roma housing discrimination, Romani refugees are exposed to multiple forms of marginalisation and vulnerability in terms of housing:

- Primarily NGOs and civil society groups, church organisations, and municipalities established temporary and long-term accommodation facilities. *Most Romani families were accommodated in institutional housing*, which typically means shelters established out of homeless shelters, temporary shelters for families, summer camp houses and workers' dormitories. As shown in the figure below, in our research conducted between June and September 2022, out of the 161 respondents 110 lived in institutional housing with their families at the time of the survey. Currently there are at least 10 shelters in sight where only Romani families (usually between 10-40 families) reside.
- *Although there are large differences in Romani refugees' shelters, in general, these institutional accommodations are not adequate for long-term housing.* A common problem is that shelters are generally crowded and cramped and lack private spaces and facilities necessary for a more independent lifestyle, such as kitchens. *The lack of meaningful pathways out of shelters and affordable rental*

housing creates huge barriers for refugees to access independent housing, which is an essential pillar of long-term social inclusion.

- *In the absence of complex housing solutions and minimal standards, the conditions of different accommodations are varying.* There are shelters where the municipality provides three meals daily, but at others, refugees only receive dry food supply. Besides, while some shelters in Budapest mean more job opportunities for refugees, several shelters are located on the outskirts of the locality or in the countryside where local infrastructure is less accessible and employment possibilities are scarce.
- *Romani refugee families are particularly vulnerable in terms of housing, as they are usually not in a financially stable situation for being able to rent independently.* Besides, as the pattern shows, even if they find an ideal apartment that they can pay for, they often

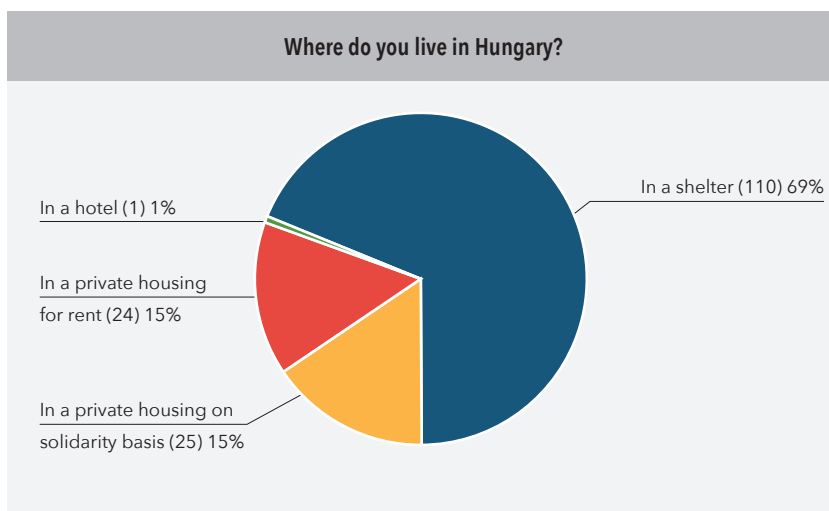


Figure 1, The housing situation of Romani refugees in Hungary, data collected between June – September 2022

face *discriminatory attitudes* from flat owners and are pushed out of the private housing market. The few Romani families in private housing typically received accommodation on a solidarity basis through individual flat owners' offers, or through civil organizations' medium-term housing programs.

EMPLOYMENT

For Transcarpathian Roma, Hungary has been the main destination for work over the past 6-7 years as specific sectors requiring unskilled labour have become increasingly open to workers from Ukraine. Even though men have access to certain jobs in Hungary, which provide them with a source of income, the specific economic status of these Roma families carries several uncertainties and vulnerability factors:

- *Women typically have little room for maneuver to find work that they can combine with their care responsibilities.* Employment opportunities are also hampered by the fact that many Romani women in Transcarpathia have not even completed their primary education and/or are illiterate. This means that very often the only source of income would be from men's work which might already mean an insecure economic status.
- *On top of that, due to high rates of illiteracy, early school leaving and poverty, as well as due to the widespread racial discrimination in the labor market, Romani refugees only have access to the most insecure low-income and low-prestige jobs.* In the refugee families Roma-versitas interviewed men typically worked in the construction, iron and steel industry and quite often without job contracts. Their involvement at the margins of the official labor market raises several issues:

- We have recorded accounts of not being paid after work or being downsized unexpectedly. The *high degree of uncertainty* involved in these jobs means impeded chances for a decent life and meaningful inclusion.
 - Besides, these jobs often include *physical work in dangerous settings*. Working in these fields without labour protections is a huge concern in terms of their wellbeing and health.
 - Lastly, these essentially low-prestige jobs are *not associated with more extensive local knowledge or network of contacts*, which would be essential for the social inclusion of Romani refugee families.
- The exploitative and uncertain labor market position of Romani refugees is of huge concern: *as long as they are not provided with the basic conditions of a decent job and financial stability, there is simply no meaningful way out for them from institutional housing.*

EDUCATION

In the overburdened Hungarian public education system, school enrolment and retention in formal education can be a complex administrative and emotional process for refugee parents and children, with Romani refugee children being a particularly vulnerable group in many respects. *The lack of central coordination and institutional cooperation at the local and national levels, and scarce harmonisation between education and asylum legislations* can easily lead to refugee children's

overall neglect and unaddressed needs in school settings. As detailed below, their specific education-related experiences and disadvantages seem to play out in various ways in school settings in Hungary:

- *School segregation in Transcarpathia* is one of the most significant factors of Romani children's pre-existing educational disadvantages. Based on the accounts of social workers, Romani refugee children in Hungary often *lack motivation and routine of attending school every day*, due to which despite officially being enrolled, *many children miss school frequently*. Besides, *Romani refugee children are often traumatized, have several mental and physical health problems* and experience classroom dynamics distressful. This can manifest in a variety of ways, e.g., inability to focus, hypervigilance, nervous activity, frequent startle reactions, aggressive behavior among others.
- *The lack of adequate conditions for attending school* is another issue that continues to impede the access of Romani children to education in Hungary. Romani children in Transcarpathia often missed school in the lack of everyday necessities such as proper clothing, shoes and food. Without basic necessities provided, including clothing items, school supplies and free meals, families continue to face hardship sending their children to school in Hungary.
- *Older Romani refugee youth are particularly vulnerable* – they usually already dropped out of the Ukrainian school system. As the compulsory school age in Hungary is 16, they are not detected by the system here, and rather enter the world of work. Furthermore, most often teenage Roma girls are increasingly involved in household chores and are at special risk of dropping out of school due to *early marriages and childbearing*.

- These cross-generational structural problems bring high rates of early *school leaving, drop-outs and illiteracy* in the Roma population in Transcarpathia. As a result, *Romani refugee children in Hungary are often downgraded* and/or struggle with educational weaknesses in Hungarian schools due to their pre-existing educational disadvantages. Since *Romani refugee parents are usually illiterate too*, they are unable to help their children in learning.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Romani refugees in Hungary face several structural barriers and forms of insecurity and vulnerability in all areas of life: housing, employment, education, health care, legal and administrative processes. Based on our consultations with civil society, we believe more specific support is needed for the integration of Romani refugees, along with coordination mechanisms established with civil society groups, Roma activists, and municipal actors. At several locations, their committed work with the support of large international donors significantly contributes to the overall well-being of a number of Romani refugee families. In line with these, our recommendations are the following:

- There are multiple actors and initiatives working on the ground focusing on various areas of Romani refugees' lives, but information flow and the cooperation is limited. There is a need for *a more structured cooperation and connection among various actors* through which referral mechanisms can be developed and good practices can be upscaled. Besides, *there is a need for considering the specific situation of Transcarpathian Romani refugees in migration and social welfare policy* and for the overall harmonization of the two frameworks.

- *Frontline organizations, including women and Roma-led community based organizations* directly involved in Romani refugees' assistance are heavily under-resourced. Their *capacities should be developed and financially supported* which would enable the provision of more complex services supporting Romani refugees. Providing platform and space for the psycho-social needs of Roma NGOs and social workers is also important.
- *Publicly available databases on refugee figures and systematic monitoring of refugees' situation* are essential for planning services to meet different needs and demands.
- The majority of Romani refugees still reside in shelters, which is only a short-term or intermediate-term housing solution. *Addressing the needs of Romani refugees requires actions beyond immediate crisis responses.* There should be an investment in inclusion policies and interventions that would facilitate long-term inclusion, an essential part of which is providing pathways out of institutional housing into (supported) independent housing.
- *It should be ensured that dual citizens from Ukraine and refugees entitled to temporary protection equally access the assistance that they are entitled to* under the temporary protection regime in housing, health care, subsistence support, employment, education. In line with that, the provision of information and assistance in bureaucratic and administrative procedures is essential.
- There is a need for *complex social work and support in everyday life and the inclusion of Roma experts in planning and implementing culturally-sensitive initiatives.* Based on the mapping of various practices and experiences, Romani refugees' overall well-being is better ensured at locations where there is a capacity for closed attention on their everyday life issues, with local Roma expertise involved as community mediators or social

workers. Besides, psychological and social support including awareness on and adequate responses to GBV/SEA-related issues and other safety risks should be ensured.

- Romani refugees are in a vulnerable position in the labor market, exposed to exploitative conditions. *There is an urgent need for programs and policies against anti-Roma discrimination and social security schemes ensuring the protection of rights of Romani refugee workers.*
- Romani refugee women have scarce access to jobs on the labor market which they could combine with their care duties, and high rates of illiteracy and early school leaving further impede their labour market opportunities. There is a need for *designing labour programs and schemes responding to the gender-specific needs of Romani refugee women*. Adult learning initiatives should widely be accessible for them, including literacy courses.
- Creating separate educational settings for Roma refugee children might be an adequate temporary solution for the precise assessment and dedicated attention to their school disadvantages; however in the long term it does not serve social inclusion and can deepen segregational mechanisms. *In the long run, ensuring that all refugee children access integrated education is essential.*
- There is a need for the *systemic implementation of supporting and mentoring services for the educational development of refugee children*, for the development of preliminary assessment measures and catch-up activities for early dropouts.
- There are several cases of discriminatory practices and attitudes from the side of authorities, state actors as well as helping professionals. *There is a need for mainstreaming anti-discrim-*

ination principles in working with Romani refugees, and for a system of monitoring and reporting cases of discrimination.

- *Communities and families can play a role in incentivizing and promoting the educational inclusion of their children.* Parental involvement and participation are of critical importance in the discussion and assessment on the needs of Romani refugee children and developing targeted assistance strategies.
- *There is a need for a comprehensive and systematic investment and state policies* ensuring the educational inclusion of Romani refugee children, including access to adequate information on administrative processes of school enrolment; resources and services essential for meaningful attendance; and the provision of quality education. This entails *universal policies of preparing educational systems for the reception of refugee children as well as targeted actions* ensuring a welcoming and culturally sensitive environment for Romani refugee students, that helps them with extra attention and support to lessen the disadvantages.

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