

A woman with dark hair, wearing a dark top, is looking down at a document she is holding. The background is a light blue gradient with a faint image of a building.

Central Europe and the Baltic States

Major Developments

In 2001, applicants for asylum in Central Europe came from as many as sixty different countries. As asylum systems improved in the various countries involved, the number of asylum-seekers continued to rise. More than twice as many arrived during the period 1999 to 2001 (110,083) than during the period 1995 to 1999. As in previous years, in 2001 there were more applicants in the Czech Republic (over 18,000) and Hungary (over 9,000) than in the other countries. The total number of applicants in Slovakia increased most dramatically, from 1,554 in 2000 to 8,000 in 2001, while the total in Slovenia decreased equally remarkably from 9,242 in 2000 to 1,508 in 2001. The numbers of persons receiving refugee status, however, did not keep pace with the numbers applying and many asylum-seekers continued to transit through Central Europe in order to seek asylum in Western European countries.

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

All Central European and Baltic States, with the exception of Bulgaria and Romania, completed negotiations for accession to the European Union (EU), with regard to regulations in the areas of Justice



and Home Affairs. These countries are expected to join the EU in 2004. The European Commission monitors progress in implementation of the EU acquis and pre-accession advisers on immigration and/or asylum matters are present in the region. The PHARE “horizontal” assistance programme on asylum came to a close at the end of 2000, and activities in the area of institution and capacity-building have since been conducted through national programmes. UNHCR consistently recommended enlarging the asylum component of these programmes.

A broad range of organisations is becoming involved in refugee work, at the same time as refugee associations are being established. UNHCR and the European Council of Refugees and Exiles (ECRE) decided to submit their decade-long cooperation in NGO capacity-building to an independent evaluation, the results of which will be published and discussed in 2002.

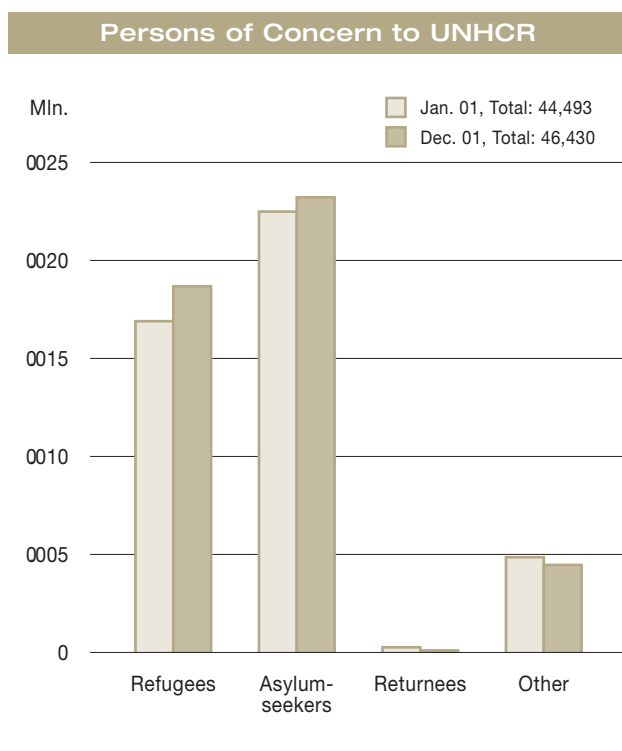
Several legislative changes occurred in the region in 2001, mostly reflecting a strong input from UNHCR. The Hungarian Parliament approved legislation reducing the maximum period of detention for illegal migrants and asylum-seekers from 18 months to 30 days. The Czech Republic, Slovakia and Slovenia adopted legislation on other forms of protection than those based on the 1951 Convention. The Polish Aliens Law was thoroughly revamped to include several improvements in asylum procedures. The Government of Cyprus announced its decision to take over refugee eligibility procedures from UNHCR by 1 January 2002. Hungary joined the States that have ratified the 1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons.

Challenges and Concerns

When thousands of asylum-seekers are in transit, the challenge is to ensure that asylum questions remain on the political agenda and amendments to relevant legislation are treated as a priority in parliaments. Decision-makers, interpreters, legal counsellors and other actors understandably become frustrated when they realise that refugees are not intent on settling down in Central Europe. The reality, however, is that the potential for integration is extremely limited in most countries in the region. This potential cannot be expanded without greater involvement by line ministries (social affairs, labour, youth, education, etc.) and support for civil society initiatives.

Much of the transit of asylum-seekers through Central Europe is in the hands of smugglers or, worse, traffickers. Faced with this growing phenomenon, governments in the region must strike a balance between controlling borders to combat illegal migration and ensuring that those who need

international protection are allowed to seek asylum. In 2001, groups of persons have been denied access to Cyprus, with the risk of asylum-seekers being forced to return to their country of origin. Following the terrorist attacks of 11 September on the USA, security concerns led to a tightening of immigration controls in Central Europe, as elsewhere in the world. A few States took discriminatory action, fortunately of short duration, against specific groups of asylum-seekers on the basis of their nationality.



The continuing high numbers of Roma from the region seeking asylum abroad posed challenges to the countries of origin, as well as to the international community's efforts to promote greater attention to improving the situation of Roma. In 2001, there was the ever-present threat that governments might impose visas on nationals from the region, as well as checks at airports. UNHCR remained in close contact with the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities and with the ombudsmen throughout the region who address the issue of Roma rights. UNHCR also launched a pilot project in the Czech Republic to help address some of the most glaring failings in provision for and protection of selected Roma communities. The project had the explicit aim of reducing further population displacement.

Some countries responded slowly to an influx of asylum-seekers from Chechnya, resulting in long

periods before their refugee status was determined. However, unlike other groups, many of the Chechen asylum-seekers preferred to stay in Central Europe, and were well received. Although many of the Chechens had genuine refugee claims, in some countries they were offered temporary protection only, and in some instances they preferred to remain as asylum-seekers rather than accept this status.

Problems relating to separated children and child asylum-seekers persist throughout the region. UNHCR monitored the implementation of re-admission agreements, particularly where children are concerned. Arrangements were also made with the authorities for guardianship and for children to benefit from accelerated asylum procedures. A dialogue was initiated with judges involved in these cases. In some countries, an alarming number of child asylum-seekers have disappeared from reception centres, and there is a fear that they may be the victims of illegal trafficking and smuggling gangs. In all these areas of concern, the Separated Children in Europe Programme, run jointly by UNHCR and Save The Children, provided assistance in areas of sensitisation, skills development and networking.

Operations and Progress Toward Solutions

Asylum Systems Development

It is UNHCR's policy to promote a regional perspective and a process of regional synergy through facilitating joint events, training and sharing of best practices. A regional unit within UNHCR's office in Budapest is tasked with playing a catalytic role in fostering regional co-ordination.

In June, the **Hungarian** Government and UNHCR co-hosted a regional meeting in Budapest in the context of the Global Consultations on International Protection. Some twenty Central, Eastern and South-Eastern European States were represented there, as were the European Commission, NGOs, IOM, the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD) and the academic world. The meeting adopted conclusions on three subjects of particular relevance to the respective sub-regions, namely: legal and practical aspects of

the return of persons not in need of international protection; the application of the “safe third country” notion; and inter-State agreements on the re-admission of third-country nationals and identification of the State responsible for examining the substance of an asylum claim.

Another example of regional interaction was the meeting organised by the Swedish Migration Board and UNHCR in May 2001 to foster closer co-operation among border and migration officials from **Lithuania, Poland, Belarus** and **Ukraine**. UNHCR also promoted cross-border networking between border officials in Bulgaria, Greece and Romania, by facilitating shared training opportunities and information-sharing.

Governments in the region increasingly turned to UNHCR for country of origin information. Together with the Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research and Documentation in Vienna (ACCORD), UNHCR organises annual seminars on country of origin information for officials dealing with asylum-seekers in Central Europe and the Baltic States. The seventh such gathering took place in Berlin in June 2001. Furthermore, country of origin documentation centres are being strengthened throughout the region, and gradually linked to ACCORD, in order to improve the quality of refugee status determination.

Partnerships

As part of its protection work, UNHCR has developed essential contacts with legislators, legal practitioners and ombudsmen. Refugee law clinics attached to law faculties, in which students supplement their theoretical knowledge of human rights and refugee law with practical counselling work with asylum-seekers and refugees, are among the most promising initiatives in Central Europe. These clinics are spreading fast, and a healthy competition is developing among them. The success of this effort has led UNHCR and its partners to envisage setting up social clinics (counseling/advice centres) which would offer social work students the same sort of hands-on environment in which to apply their theoretical knowledge.

In the area of training, a new trend is emerging to create processes of on-the-job training that include



Czech Republic: Children / asylum-seekers from various countries in a primary school. *UNHCR / L. Taylor*

self-evaluation and needs assessment, undertaken by all stakeholders in a given asylum system. This approach leads to genuine team building and enhances ownership of refugee protection. In Bulgaria, contingency planning for a possible influx from The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia provided an opportunity for precisely this type of team building amongst governmental and non-governmental actors, as did a NATO peacekeeping exercise in which a refugee influx into Bulgaria was simulated.

UNHCR also deliberately encouraged resource persons from within the region to act as trainers for their peers, be they government officials, refugees, NGO staff, magistrates or university professors.

Public Information and Awareness

In Poland, ceremonies were organised to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the country's accession to the 1951 Convention, while throughout the region public awareness of refugee issues was heightened during events marking the 50th Anniversary of the Convention, as well as the first ever World Refugee Day. In Romania, university students volunteered to travel throughout the country to disseminate information on refugees. UNHCR also disseminated information through its web-sites in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic and Poland, all in the national language.

Diverse and creative ways of spreading the message of tolerance are continually being developed. The positive contributions that refugees can make to their host communities were highlighted through various events, ranging from sports competitions to “open houses”, artistic and educational activities. UNHCR stepped up its use of opinion polls in the various countries of the region to sound out public perceptions of refugees, and to gauge the impact of public awareness activities.

Funding

UNHCR offices in Central Europe are concerned that NGO partners are heavily dependent on UNHCR for funding. Clearly, the increase in asylum claims needs to be matched by well-resourced asylum systems, and an increased commitment on the part of governments to shoulder the financial burden, but this is not the case yet in all countries. In order to assist NGOs, ECRE has prepared a fund raising toolkit and fielded consultants with specific fund raising expertise. This assistance will increase in 2002, without further financial input from UNHCR.

Voluntary Contributions – Restricted (USD)			
		Annual Programme Budget	
Donor	Earmarking ¹	Income	Contribution
Czech Republic	Czech Republic	7,530	7,530
Japan	Turkey	300,000	300,000
Sweden	Central Europe and the Baltic States	312,500	312,500
United States of America	Central Europe and the Baltic States	1,000,000	1,000,000
	Turkey	587,000	587,000
TOTAL²		2,207,030	2,207,030

¹ For more information on the various earmarkings, please refer to the Donor Profiles.

² Total funds available for obligation in the region also included unrestricted voluntary contributions, lightly restricted contributions, opening balances and adjustments.

Budget and Expenditure (USD)		
	Revised Budget	Expenditure
Country	Annual Programme Budget	
Baltic States	254,883	249,553
Bulgaria	1,011,543	993,876
Cyprus	463,019	461,650
Czech Republic	849,378	779,854
Hungary	1,431,516	1,400,501
Latvia	277,591	268,878
Poland	831,935	789,310
Romania	1,110,306	1,100,783
Slovakia	585,762	529,546
Slovenia	797,748	722,319
Turkey	5,303,786	4,880,096
Regional Projects ¹	788,196	474,000
TOTAL	13,705,663	12,650,336

¹ Includes activities related to promotion of refugee law and emergency preparedness.