

The Situation of Romani Refugees Fleeing Ukraine

Experiences gathered in the framework of the Ukraine refugee crisis response of the Hungarian Helsinki Committee



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The Hungarian Helsinki Committee (HHC) has been providing free-of-charge professional legal assistance to refugees, asylum-seekers and stateless persons for over two decades. When Russia invaded Ukraine on 24 February 2022, our experience and expertise were even more needed. Since then, the HHC has been providing legal information and direct legal assistance in protection-related matters to those having to flee Ukraine, in cooperation with and as the implementing partner of the UNHCR. In the framework of its Ukraine refugee crisis response, by 31 December 2022, the HHC provided legal assistance to 8 360 persons of concern, among which to 4 344 in person, 2 211 by email, 1 084 over the phone and 721 in messaging application. We also answered 115 legal queries by partner organisations. HHC teams have been constantly monitoring reception facilities where Ukrainian refugees are accommodated in the border area, in Budapest and elsewhere in Hungary since the very beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The information provided in this paper is based on this experience.

For further information (tailored multilingual information leaflets, legal updates, statistics, etc.), see the HHC's dedicated landing page at: <https://helsinki.hu/en/ukr/>.

The experiences gathered through the monitoring visits conducted by the HHC since the beginning of the war have shown the particular situation Romani refugees face in Hungary. While there is no statistical data as to exact number of Romani refugees who arrived to Hungary, it is worth noting that according to the latest census of Ukraine from 2010, 0.1% of the population (47 587 people) are of ethnic Roma origin.¹ More than one-fourth of them live in Transcarpathia, which is the closest region of Ukraine to Hungary. For historical reasons, some are dual, Hungarian-Ukrainian citizens. Those with Hungarian nationality are not eligible for temporary protection, which Ukrainian nationals are. At the same time, they may access those rights to which those Hungarian citizens are entitled, who had no registered residency in the country. Apart from this legal specificity, which may be more prevalent amongst the Roma, they also have had to face some challenges relating to accessing protection, accommodation, and other protection-related services. In some cases, there were complaints relating to discrimination, incidents of hate crime, and segregation.

The HHC monitors recorded the following occurrences concerning Roma refugees throughout their monitoring missions in 2022:

Availability of accessible information:

- ◆ **Lack of information** about the available protection scheme and subsistence allowance have also been widely recorded amongst the Roma. The immigration authority usually responsible for the provision of information has been absent at the border and at shelters. Therefore, this is not an issue exclusively affecting the Romani population. At the same time, a higher risk of illiteracy seems to be present amongst Romani refugees, thus accessing information has been harder for

¹ László Braun, István Cserniczkó, József Molnár: Magyar anyanyelvű cigányok/romák Kárpátalján. Ungvár, 2010. p. 12. (<http://www.mek.oszk.hu/09000/09003>)

them. In many shelters, they relied more heavily on verbally presented information than more broadly available written materials.

- ◆ In some cases, Romani families received **misinformation** from the authorities. They were told that after their 30-day temporary residence document expires, which is normally issued for those who do not have a biometric Ukrainian passport and are thereby lacking the possibility of a visa-free stay, they would no longer be eligible to stay in Hungary. However, as some of the Romani refugees are Ukrainian nationals, they would have been eligible for temporary protection, or, if dual citizens, they could naturally stay in the country without further procedural steps. This type of misinformation affected mainly the Roma and was not experienced by other refugees fleeing Ukraine.

Quality of accommodation:

- ◆ At the beginning of the war, there was a noticeable difference between the motives of Romani refugees and others fleeing Ukraine. While most people wanted to travel onwards, either to their relatives in other countries or to other parts of Hungary, most of the Romani refugees decided to stay close to the Hungarian-Ukrainian border, hoping that the war would end quickly and they would be able to return to Ukraine. Consequently, the temporary shelters, where they were staying, were **not suitable for long-term stay** because they were designed to host people who would move on or return only for a short period. In addition, even in case the Romani refugees were entitled to temporary protection, they showed **little interest in applying**, because they regarded their stay in Hungary only as temporary. When families decided to stay, many of them continued to be hosted in larger, community shelters.

Quality of assistance:

- ◆ Lack of food and hygiene products has also been an issue of concern at some of the accommodation sites hosting Romani refugees. While some facilities do not receive enough donations, others simply do not hand it out to the people staying there.

Access to education:

- ◆ Many Romani families complained that their children did not receive education and they did not have any opportunities to participate in any meaningful, age-appropriate activities. In some locations, the competent school was first reluctant to receive the Romani children claiming that their educational level does not match their age-appropriate grade/class. However, after the school was informed of their obligation to accept the children, they were ready to admit them. In some cases, despite the children's willingness to attend school, the parents decided not to enrol them. In other places, both the parents and the children expressed fear to attend school as the children lag behind due to the quality of education received in Ukraine.

Hostility, discrimination, incidents of hate crime and segregation:

- ◆ Romani refugees reported of **hostile attitude** at some of the helping points set up at the border-crossings for refugees to receive help from charity organizations. This can be reflective of the generally biased attitude towards the Roma in Hungary that affected the refugees as well. Volunteers and social workers at some of the helping points stated that the Romani refugees were not fleeing the war but they travel to Hungary for economic advances. They also claimed that they demanded free apartments and work, and when they realized that they could not get that, the refugees just took the free food and went back to Transcarpathia. Some Romani refugees also reported that they were more thoroughly questioned about their flight and intentions when they asked for help, which scared many of them away.

- ◆ In a town close to the Ukrainian-Hungarian border, the locals threatened Romani refugees with signs put on the windows saying “you will all die” and “you should go home!” This issue was reported to the local staff of the accommodation facility and as a result, the refugees were moved to a different facility.
- ◆ In some villages, locals were afraid of the Romani refugees, therefore, the hosts would not want to accommodate them there.
- ◆ At the beginning of the war, on some occasions in border-crossing towns, the Roma were told at the registration point after arriving from Ukraine that either they had to stay at the designated place or they had to return to Ukraine. They were not allowed to move further to Budapest unless they could already prove that they had an address to stay there, which is not the case with refugees in general.
- ◆ At one of the border-crossing points, a single Romani mother with her breastfed baby reported that she did not receive any information from the social workers and authorities present due to her ethnic origin.
- ◆ Romani refugees also had to suffer discriminatory verbal abuse and a violent incident during their travel in Hungary. According to one of the witnesses, the bus driver did not want to let them on the bus first, saying they were Ukrainians and they lacked hygiene. Finally, the driver let them board, but everyone – including a 7-month-old baby - had to buy tickets, though they presented their temporary protection card, which would have entitled them to a free-of-charge ride. The witness reported that the driver drove the bus in such a violent manner that when braking once, all the standing children fell on the floor.
- ◆ One case of **segregation** has been reported too. At one of the facilities, the social worker informed the HHC team about the deliberate separation of Romani-Hungarian children inside the camp.

Based on the above examples from the monitoring visits conducted by HHC in 2022, we may conclude that Romani refugees had to face additional difficulties and hardship during their reception in Hungary. A public opinion poll conducted in 2011, confirms that there are very strong anti-Roma sentiments in Hungary. In this research, 49% of the respondents claimed that they would not accept a Roma person as either a member of their family, or a neighbour, or a co-worker². This attitude affected the reception of Romani refugees fleeing the war in Ukraine. While the extent of social mobilization has been exemplary concerning refugees from Ukraine, people assisting refugees tend to be less helpful and even discriminative in some cases towards Romani refugees. Therefore, **the access of Romani refugees to protection, appropriate reception and services** that they would be entitled to by the temporary protection status or their refugee background **needs to be facilitated**. These areas will need to be continuously monitored by the HHC team and the necessary steps made so that all refugees fleeing the war in Ukraine have access to protection and can enjoy the rights and services associated with it.

² Bori Simonovits: Bevándorlók diszkriminációja – kisebbségi és többségi szemmel (Discrimination against Immigrants – from a Majority and Minority Perspective), In: Bevándorlás és integráció, Magyarországi adatok, európai indikátorok (Immigration and Integration. Hungarian Data, European Indicators), Kováts A. (ed), MTA Társadalomtudományi Kutatóközpont, Kisebbségkutató Intézet, Budapest, 2013, p. 162.