

Refugees protested for help from the European Union

Approximately fifty refugees protested at the European Union building on Lövőház street for three hours. The refugees, who mostly live in the Bicske camp, feel neglected and most of them have no idea what they are going to do when they are kicked out from the camp. They have sent a letter of complaint to the European Commission and they hope to receive some help.

The residents of the Bicske camp are those refugees whose application for asylum was accepted by the Hungarian State. Currently there are approximately 250 of them. Single refugees usually can stay in the camp for six months, while refugee families can remain there for a year. In some rare cases they are allowed an 18-month stay but generally they are supposed to find their place in Hungarian reality sooner. The Bicske period is actually designed to facilitate this, but according to what was said on Tuesday afternoon, the system does not work.

Even Somalia is better

According to the law, people whose application for asylum has been accepted, from that date on they have almost the same rights and obligations as an average Hungarian citizen. However, this is not really apparent for the refugees living in Hungary who protested at the European Union building on Lövőház street for three hours on Tuesday afternoon. There were about fifty of them, many came with their families. They think they are trapped in Hungary and this is why they gave voice to their complaints to the Budapest Representative of the European Commission.

In April 2012 the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) issued a report that also found the integration of refugees living in Hungary as problematic. According to the report even the adequate transfer of information and appropriate support is missing, therefore many refugees after leaving the camp do not know what to do in Hungary. Many leave for other EU member countries, from where according to current EU law, they must be returned to Hungary because they first applied for asylum here. After their return, however, they have to face a situation that is even worse as they become excluded from any support system and many become homeless.

Most of them who appeared at the protest on Tuesday felt that perplexity, too. They are unable to find either housing or employment and yet they have nowhere to go. The UNHCR report quotes a case where refugees from Somalia even chose to return to their country, willingly facing the possibility of persecution and torture because 'their living circumstances are not sufficient and their

life and human dignity are in direct danger in Hungary'.

The Hungarian State could support the refugees even for another 3 years after they left the camp. However, very often the conditions that are set cannot be fulfilled, this is what we were told by the organizers of the protest. The financial allowance is available only for those who are in need according to a 'means test': in case of a single person the monthly income cannot be more than 42,750 HUF, in case of families it cannot be more than 28,500 HUF per person.¹ If they earn more they already fall out of the group of supported people. The family benefit² and the maternity benefit are available for families with children but these are regarded as income, thus many families do not even fall into the needy category.

Regular allowance for living expenses can be given to the residents of the camp and the amount is a maximum of 28,500 HUF but typically they get between 9,000 HUF and 15,000 HUF. In order to receive it refugees must take part in at least 70% of the Hungarian language classes organized for them. But this period for Hungarian language education is the same period during which refugees are supposed to look for a job and a home, as well. Furthermore, many of them arrived in the country after having suffered traumatic experiences and after leaving their families behind. This also makes the learning of the language harder and the system does not take these into consideration, at all.

Lilla Zentai, a social worker from Menedék Association for Migrants, thinks that one of the main problems is the lack of information flow. In the Bicske Reception Center very often they provide jobs for the refugees, which is a good thing in itself, but at the same time they do not inform them that if they miss too many Hungarian classes because of these jobs they will also not receive the monthly supports later. The report by the UNHCR also mentions that the quality of the Hungarian classes is very uneven, and many refugees leave the camp without a basic knowledge of the Hungarian language.

It is very difficult for the refugees to receive housing support, as well. To receive this state support (the amount is a maximum of 28,500 HUF per person) it is necessary to find a flat where the owner provides a receipt. This is a big challenge even for a Hungarian citizen in the housing-market, not to mention a foreigner who had fled his country. What makes the situation even more difficult is that

¹ The general salary was almost 220 000 HUF with gross (nett 142 772 HUF) in 2012, http://index.hu/gazdasag/magyar/2012/03/20/219_100_forint_az_atlagkereset/ [http://www.hrportal.hu/index.phtml?page=berkalkulator_2012&edt_brutto=219100&edt_gyerekek=0&edt_egyedulnevel=0&btn_submit="+Kisz%E1mol+%3E%3E+](http://www.hrportal.hu/index.phtml?page=berkalkulator_2012&edt_brutto=219100&edt_gyerekek=0&edt_egyedulnevel=0&btn_submit=)

² Family benefit was 12 200 Huf in case of one child and 26 600 HUF in case of two children in 2012. The maternity benefits was 28500 HUF in 2012.

in order to receive this support is it necessary to prove with official papers that he can pay the rest of the rent. This would be possible mainly with a work contract. However, if somebody has a work contract it would also mean that he earns more than the monthly 'means limit' so he is not entitled to the support. Zentai said that despite the fact that years have passed since this new legislation she has not met a single refugee who managed to receive this support.

They cannot go home

We also heard similar complaints from the refugees who attended the protest. Ali came from Afghanistan where he was a tailor but in Hungary he is not able to find a job. He and his family arrived in Bicske one year ago. Even though this one year has now passed because of the moratorium on winter evictions they have until the end of March to move out. He has no idea where to go. With a help of a translator he spoke about his situation, he has attended the Hungarian classes but according to him most of the teachers only cared about the students signing the attendance lists at the beginning of the classes. He has had good teachers as well, of course, but he could not really concentrate because he was so worried about his family. He says he regrets that he came to Europe but he cannot go home. He feels the he would be regarded as a slave even though he came here to work and not to beg for food.

After he arrived at the camp, he received medication from the doctors which he still takes regularly. (The UNHCR report also mentions that the employees of the Hungarian camps get lots of refugees addicted to tranquillizers) As he said, he couldn't sleep because he always thought about what would happen to his family after leaving the camp.

He picked up his Hungarian at Blaha Lujza square

Hammadi also came from Afghanistan. He has been living in Hungary since 2010 and he can speak Hungarian really well. He didn't learn the language at the camp either, he used to go to the Blaha Lujza square and talk with people, this is how he had acquired his knowledge of Hungarian. He can live in the camp for another month, but he does not receive any money because his support period has ended. He had tried to work in other European Union countries but he was sent back to Hungary. His reply to the question 'What are you going to do after leaving the camp?' was 'I am going to live on the street as a lot of Hungarians do.'

At the protest there was a man who fled to Europe from Sri Lanka with his family. They spent a year in Bicske and now they are living in Budapest. They have an apartment but they can't find a job. He said that in a few days gas will be turned off in their apartment because they are not able to pay the

bills. His family got trapped in the European Union's regulations: there are some active Sri Lankan communities in Norway, Sweden and France where they could easily find a job. But because he submitted his refugee application in Hungary he can take a job legally only here. But he cannot find a job in spite of the fact that he is a chef and he worked as a truck driver and as a businessman, too. If he left Hungary he would be sent back, and he would even lose those benefits that they are getting now.

At the end of the three-hour long demonstration, during which the refugees were also chanting slogans, the refugees' complaints were received by Dániel Ambrus, the representative of the European Commission's Hungarian office. As he said, he does not yet know the contents of the complaints, but the European Commission will apply their usual procedure to examine them.