



Central Europe and the Baltic States

Recent developments

During the first six months of 2003, some 14,193 persons applied for asylum in Central Europe and the Baltic States. This represented a three per cent increase on the same period in 2002. However, the figures for 2003 confirm the fall in the overall number of persons applying for asylum, which began in 2002, when asylum applications decreased by nearly half of the 2001 level. Only, the Czech Republic, Romania and Slovakia saw a substantial increase in asylum applications, while Bulgaria registered a significant decrease in numbers.

The EU candidate countries, which in the recent past were predominantly countries of transit, are increasingly becoming final destinations for asylum-seekers. Nonetheless, a substantial proportion of asylum-seekers chose not to remain in these countries to see through the adjudication of their asylum claims. Low recognition rates and poor integration prospects in Central Europe caused large numbers of refugees and persons already enjoying subsidiary forms of protection to move on again westwards to EU Member States, where they reapplied for asylum.

In April 2003, the EU Accession Treaty was signed by leaders of the 15 existing EU Member States and the ten countries scheduled to join in 2004. The transfer of

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



the European Union *acquis* on asylum has been on the agenda throughout the accession negotiations. This has given welcome impetus to UNHCR in its continuing role of providing assistance to candidate States in the development of their asylum systems.

The overall shortage of funds has had serious effects on the process of building the capacity of an organised civil society to maintain quality asylum systems and implement sustainable integration policies. As one of the main channels of funds for asylum systems in this region, UNHCR is acutely aware of the potential damage that a decrease in funding for this purpose could cause to the quality of protection.

Strategic objectives

The Office's strategy in Central Europe and the Baltic States is based on the document 'Strategic Directions

2000-2004', which guides UNHCR's Bureau for Europe. Its principal aims are that: 1) asylum-seekers and persons in need of international protection have access, within the territories of European States, to fair, efficient and effective asylum procedures; 2) refugees are treated in accordance with international protection standards and that effective durable solutions, including integration, become a real possibility; 3) countries developing new asylum systems achieve international standards in legislation and practice; and 4) public opinion comes to reflect a greater compassion for the plight and needs of refugees for immediate protection, followed by lasting solutions.

The year 2004 will usher in historic changes for Central Europe and the Baltic States, with ten more countries entering the European Union by mid-year. When new Member States with less mature asylum systems begin to shoulder their responsibilities, the system of burden-sharing in the European Union as a whole will have to accommodate new challenges. Many of the entry points into the Union will now fall within the territories of new Member States. Access to the European Union territory and to asylum procedures will therefore remain of immediate concern to UNHCR. The Office will continue to play a lead role in fostering a protection-oriented dialogue on both sides of the new external border of the EU. UNHCR will also monitor the incidence of statelessness, with a view to reducing its impact, and encouraging States to implement the 1954 Convention on Statelessness.

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Operations

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Access to asylum systems and procedures

The enlargement of the EU is of great significance for UNHCR and for refugee protection in Europe. One of the consequences of this will be the shift eastwards and south-eastwards of a very long stretch of the EU's

external border. As a result, the EU will expand as an 'asylum space', with many of the major entry points controlled by new Member States.

In this context, UNHCR will integrate its asylum capacity-building work into the broader migration management framework. The Office will assist the relevant Central European States to strengthen their external borders in such a manner that the burden is not merely forced on to neighbouring countries to the east. UNHCR will also continue to assist in the development of asylum systems attuned to the realities on both sides of the new border, and will promote understanding of its role by all stakeholders of the Office's role in overseeing responsibility-sharing and coherent asylum management within and beyond the EU.

UNHCR will redouble its efforts to address the problems facing refugee and asylum-seeking women and children. More emphasis will be placed on gender and age analysis, and on refugee participation in the design and implementation of legal or social programmes. Great care will be taken to promote gender-sensitive asylum policies and practices, including giving due attention to gender-based persecution as a refugee eligibility criterion. In order to rigorously address sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) against refugees, UNHCR will develop and implement projects designed to prevent SGBV, and to provide early warning and viable response mechanisms. UNHCR will also address specific problems affecting refugee children, such as access to procedures, guardianship and fostering and the creation of reception environments conducive to effective child protection, free from the risk of sexual exploitation and human trafficking.



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Czech Republic: A Congolese refugee taking Czech lessons. UNHCR / L. Taylor

Strengthening asylum systems

UNHCR continues to respond to common asylum and related protection challenges in and around the enlarged European Union. The progress already made in strengthening the quality and capacity of the newly emerging Central European asylum systems has been encouraging. In this respect, UNHCR will build on the synergy achieved across the region by replicating best protection practices, so that asylum systems are standardised at the highest possible level. UNHCR acknowledges that NGOs in the region enjoy limited political support and are themselves usually unable to raise more than a small proportion of the funds they need. UNHCR will therefore continue to support its NGO partners, to ensure their survival and shore up their accomplishments.

To this end, UNHCR has reinforced the Regional Support Unit, based in Budapest, and has expanded the Unit's coverage to include some countries in neighbouring regions (Eastern and South-Eastern Europe). The enlarged team will enhance cross-regional co-operation under the overarching theme of strengthening asylum systems. The team will include multi-functional expertise in the fields of legal support, refugee law training, and comprehensive NGO capacity building as well as programming and managerial support.

Public information, advocacy and partnerships

UNHCR will continue to mobilise support for protection and integration policies through public awareness campaigns and specific media events designed to help the public understand the plight of refugees and acknowledge the contribution they make to their host communities. The advocacy strategy will include regular meetings with decision-makers, thematic workshops and round table seminars, the production and distribution of reference, training and public information materials, and close co-operation with the broadcast and print media. UNHCR will ensure that gender policies, and the needs of separated refugee and asylum seeking children are covered during agenda for protection' meetings with governmental institutions, NGOs and other co-operating agencies.

In most of Central Europe and the Baltic States, refugee integration projects are implemented by NGOs with little or no government funding; unfortunately, they have as yet had little impact. When refugees and persons in need of international protection move west, their main motivation is the perception that they are unlikely to achieve economic self-reliance in Central Europe, let alone genuine social integration. UNHCR will continue to work with governments and NGOs to improve and implement national integration programmes, and to promote the participation of refugees in the design and implementation of these programmes.

Resource mobilisation

An increasing number of Central European States are making donations to UNHCR's programmes. The Office greatly appreciates that the funding from these States is predictable, as it is announced at the annual Pledging Conference in December, and flexible (often in the form of un-earmarked contributions). New efforts will focus on further developing the relationships and mechanisms needed to broaden political and donor support for the refugee cause. UNHCR offices will continue to approach governments, regional organisations, private individuals and corporations for funding for its operations worldwide.

Budget (USD)	
Country	Annual Programme
Baltic States	92,000
Bulgaria	940,319
Cyprus	659,458
Czech Republic	843,374
Hungary	2,243,799
Poland	724,894
Romania	963,183
Slovakia	690,293
Slovenia	611,520
Turkey	5,377,132
Regional Activities ¹	150,000
Total	13,295,972

¹ Includes promotion of refugee law in Central Europe.