

Refugees in Hungary at the beginning of the third millennium

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The Office of Immigration and Nationality (hereinafter OIN) has conducted a comprehensive research in order to increase the effectiveness of the steps taken to help their integration. The aim of the survey was to determine the number of refugees living in Hungary on a permanent basis and to analyze how successfully they have integrated so far. This study shall summarize the results and conclusions of the survey.

Refugees in Hungary

From the dawn of the regime change in 1989, until 2009 approximately 178.000 people were seeking asylum in our country and around 6500 people received refugee status.¹ The number of those, who received some other kind of protection, is much higher. They received mostly temporary protection and – after the “new” Act on Aliens Policing entered into force in 2002² – so called “authorized to stay” status. Unlike the refugee status these statuses are valid only for a specified period of time and are reviewed from periodically by the Hungarian authorities to determine whether the obstacles regarding the return are still prevailing or not.

From the second half of the '80s to the first half of the '90s mostly Hungarian asylum seekers (around 50,000 people) arrived from Transylvania.³ After that, from 1991 to 1995 people arrived mostly from the territory of the collapsing Yugoslavia. The approximately 80.000 people fleeing from the South-Slavic wars were mostly of Bosnian origin.⁴ According to a governmental decision those were eligible for temporary protection whose place of residence was in the war affected area, who denied the military service and their families.⁵ The Dayton negotiations, the London agreement and the peace agreement in Paris created the fundament of the peace. The development of the peace process was the reason, that after January 1996 Hungary – still providing reception conditions to the earlier arrived ones – did not provide temporary protection for the newly arrived ones. As long as the asylum seekers from Transylvania received Hungarian citizenship within a short period of time, the ones arriving from Yugoslavia – with non-Hungarian origin – returned after the war to their home country or departed to a third country (USA, Canada, Sweden, etc.).⁶

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The most asylum-seeker arrived in Hungary in 1991 (53.359 persons, 48.485 from the former Yugoslavia), least arrived in 1996 (1259 persons). After that, the number of asylum-seekers increased slowly and after the peak in 1999 (11.499 persons) began to decrease again. In the last years the number of asylum-seekers was the lowest in 2004 (1600 persons) and since then there is a slight increase, so in 2009 there were 4672 asylum-seekers.⁷

Naturalizations of refugees is easier than for other third country nationals because they can gain the citizenship after 3 years of legal stay in the country. For other third country nationals 8 years of legal stay is required.⁸ The rights and obligations of a refugee are quite the same as the ones of a Hungarian citizen: they do not need permission or special registration to work or to be employed; they have the same access to the social welfare system. There are only two restrictions: they shall have no suffrage except for elections of local municipality representatives and majors, local referenda and public initiative; and may not fulfil a job or responsibility and may not hold an office, the fulfilment or holding of which is tied by law to Hungarian nationality (e.g. commissioned officer, civil servant, high-ranking public officer).

The termination of the refugee status is possible by the law in two ways. Most frequently recognized refugees gain Hungarian citizenship after proving that he or she is fulfilling all the criteria. Two third of the 6500 refugees recognized from 1989 to 2009 gained Hungarian citizenship. The naturalizations of the refugees is quite disproportionate within this period. Considering that 70% of the recognitions (4183 persons) happened between 1990 and 1995, the number of naturalizations is clearly the highest in the period afterwards. In the '90s, when the number of recognitions was the highest (2561 persons) most of the asylum-seekers were of Hungarian origin from Romania, and after the recognition they tended to remain in Hungary and gained citizenship.

The other way to loose the refugee status is when the asylum authority withdraws it because of a reason laid down in the Asylum Act (e.g. committing of a serious crime, return to the country of origin, or the fact reveals that he or she received the refugee status by deception). Withdrawal is quite rare; it only happened in some dozen cases. (It can also happen on request, for example if the refugee wants to return to his or her country of origin.)

The refugees, of course, can leave the country and in these cases the status will be not withdrawn (if they are not returning to their country of origin) although it is hard to determine if the leaving is intended to be permanent or if after some month of employment in Western or Northern European countries the refugees are willing to return to Hungary. Latter happens quite often because asylum-seekers mostly intend to go to Western Europe and arrive in Hungary accidentally.

On integration

The integration is a process in which the foreigner accepts the culture of the receiving country, fits into the society existentially and socially while still holding his or her own national and cultural identity. If she or he loses his/her distinctive marks the refugee will be assimilated. If the integration is unsuccessful the person will be marginalized. The success of integration requires the openness of the receiving society and the efforts of the foreigners as well. It is challenging for the receiving country, the organizations and experts dealing with refugees to provide equal chances and fair treatment for refugees and aid their integration.⁹

From the receiving society's point of view it can be stated that Hungary had few experiences after the 2nd World War regarding the reception of foreigners from non-European culture. In addition the governmental institution system dealing with the integration of foreigners is still not established and the majority of the society has no personal experiences regarding the integration of foreigners and refugees. The reason is, that the number of foreigners living in Hungary is low (approximately 1.5% of the population) and most of them are of Hungarian origin from the surrounding countries and they are not perceived as "foreigners".

In the '90s refugee integration support was mostly based on charity with the help of churches and civil organizations and with the contribution of the UNHCR. Beside these the Hungarian government provided effective financial aid by creating the material basis of integration. It was done by providing the Settlement and Refugee Fund (later "home support") until the second half of the '90s and in some years following 1998 giving various support based on the national Asylum Act. From 2002 programs enhancing integration to the Hungarian society are typically carried out through pilot projects with the participation of governmental and civil society organizations.

Among the durable solutions beside integration it should be mentioned that returning to country of origin is not very typical for the refugees recognized by Hungarian authorities. Recently there are no organized programs supporting resettlement, so there aren't any third country nationals who already had refugee status upon arrival.

Survey among refugees living in Hungary

As the refugees have the same rights and obligations as Hungarian citizens, they do not have to present themselves before the OIN for prolonging their documents or concerning any other administrative issue, so we could only estimate the number of refugees living in our country.

The result of the survey shows that two thirds of the refugees recognized by the Hungarian authorities did not live in Hungary at the time of the data collection. The “time of the data collection” is needed to be emphasized because the colleagues of the OIN’s Refugee Directorate met a lot of cases, especially in the last period, when the recognized refugees after staying for some months in Western Europe and facing the difficulties there (first of all that the status received in Hungary does not provide them access to the local social-welfare system) were returning to Hungary and were trying to get along here. The recognized refugee, except the rare occasion of the withdrawal, can settle in Hungary. Hungary as a member of the European Union should be a target country for the people who are receiving international protection in our country.

The methodology of the survey

The survey was conducted in three years ago. The colleagues of the OIN visited every subject of the survey at their homes receiving personal experiences about the habitual place and circumstances, making it easier to learn the living conditions of the refugees. The database of the Central Data Processing, Registry and Election Office served as a basis for the survey. The total number of persons in the database marked as “refugee foreigner” was 1994, including those who were not in the active part of the database. The list after sorting the data contained 475 addresses where 1249 persons were registered. These persons were the target group of the survey; this was the number of addresses, where the personal contact seemed to be useful. The colleagues of the OIN contacted the refugees via letter, visited them after that and conducted a questionnaire in a 20–25 minutes long conversation. If they were not able to find the refugee, they made a short notice about their experiences and impressions in the area. (So the number of “refugees living at their registered addresses” includes the ones who were not accessible for the colleagues of the OIN – but were surely living at the available addresses.)

The colleagues of the OIN made 250 personal interviews and received 229 analyzable answered questionnaires. 87 questionnaires were answered by refugees of Hungarian origin and 142 were by non-Hungarians. The interviews were made exclusively with grown-up refugees who were willing to cooperate. There was only one interview and only one questionnaire for single refugees, for refugees living in defective families and for refugees living together with people without refugee status. Two interviews took place in families, where both parents were refugees. 45% of the refugees of non-Hungarian origin live in whole families, 39% are single, 9% live with his or her children and 7% live with his or her spouse.

The number of refugees living in Hungary

It was hard to determine the exact number of refugees living permanently in Hungary before conducting the survey. It is quite frequent that one does not register his or her address, so the colleagues of the OIN tried to use every kind of information to determine the real place of residence of the refugees. From the table below reveals that only around half of the refugees were found using the data of the Registry Office other sources. All the other refugees travelled most probably abroad to other EU countries. Only every fourth refugee was found at his or her registered address. The reason of the disproportionateness is the result of outdated registry data (which is the result of the reluctant statement of the change of address) and the fact, that among the refugees staying in Hungary there are more families living together in one address than single refugees living alone. The latter ones are the first to leave the country. It is probable because of the above mentioned facts, that around 10-15% of the refugees were left out of the survey, so the estimated number of refugees living in Hungary is 700–750 persons.

Number of refugees living in Hungary

County	Number of refugees according to the data of the registry (person)	Visited addresses	Factual number of refugees living there (person)	Rate of found refugees
Bács-Kiskun	53	26	41	77%
Baranya	34	18	20	59%
Békés	82	14	30	37%
Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén	15	7	7	47%
Csongrád	49	32	32	65%
Fejér	126	18	55	44%
Győr-Sopron-Moson	25	12	19	76%
Hajdú-Bihar	134	28	83	62%
Heves	1	1	0	0%
Jász-Nagykun-Szolnok	6	3	6	100%
Komárom-Esztergom	22	13	13	59%
Nógrád	1	1	0	0%
Somogy	13	7	6	46%
Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg	8	7	6	75%
Tolna	6	4	2	33%
Vas	9	4	9	100%
Veszprém	5	3	4	80%
Zala	9	6	5	55%
Pest megye	72	32	31	43%
Budapest	579	239	268	46%
Total	1249	475	637	51%

The significant difference between the data of the registry and the reality can be explained with the followings:

- The refugees living in the southern, south-eastern counties (Bács-Kiskun, Baranya, Csongrád) are living in their registered addresses, because most of them are Hungarians from Transylvania and Vojvodina.
- A lot of refugees are living in the counties where reception centres are (Békés, Hajdú-Bihar, Fejér). Most of the time this is temporary, and in other cases it revealed through the personal interview that the refugee, who could only imagine their lives only in the capital at the beginning, found a job locally (e.g. in Debrecen) and integrated successfully.
- Majority of refugees – if they are staying in Hungary – trying to get along in Budapest. Because of numerous reasons – first of all the better job opportunities – it is obvious that the capital offers better chances than other parts of the country, so the number of refugees is much higher than the number above. It is very likely that the refugees, who stayed in Hungary but were unreachable for the OIN, are living in Budapest. According to our experiences the lack of registry was the most frequent reason of the failed contacting.
- Those counties where only a few refugees are living (Nógrád, Heves, Veszprém, Vas, Tolna) are statistically not relevant concerning the survey.

It was interesting to see since when they are refugees, and since when they are staying in Hungary on a permanent basis. The difference seems to be insignificant because these periods should be quite the same not counting the relative short time of the procedure. Although it occurred that the refugees of non-Hungarian origin arrived to Hungary in average 14 month earlier than they were recognized as refugees. (The typical refugee received his or her refugee status 5 years ago and arrived in Hungary 6 years and 2 month ago.) The average of course covers huge differences. The majority of the refugees were seeking asylum soon or immediately after arriving to the country, while others are lodging an application for asylum after a relatively long period (in some cases after 5–6 years of stay).

It is important to see how many people who were recognized as a refugee in the past 15 years are still living in Hungary as a refugee. According to the survey the number (198 persons) and rate of the people of Hungarian origin is still determining. It is still so, despite of the fact that in the last decade only a few Hungarian asylum-seeker arrived to the country. After 1991 only a few asylum-seeker arrived from Romania which was the major country of origin for refugees of Hungarian origin. Among the wars in the former Yugoslavia only the war in Croatia affected also Hungarians in Vojvodina directly in the early '90s. There are a lot of Afghanis (173 persons), among

the refugees and also from the former Soviet Union (76 persons), especially from the Caucasian area. From the African continent a relatively big amount of refugees arrived, their country of origin is quite various. Most of the refugees are between 25 and 35 years old.

Experiences concerning integration of refugees

Recognized refugees receive financial support from the OIN after the recognition for few years, and they also seek help from NGOs in this first period. Because of this we have just minimal information about the foreigners who received recognition 3–4 years ago. The only exceptions are those Afghani families who are regular clients of the asylum authority because of the high birth rate.

Although the asylum authority experiences the difficult situation of the newcomers day by day and the information gathered from the NGOs working with refugees also emphasizes this, the picture is more colourful if we look at the entire refugee population.

Besides determining numbers of refugees the survey's aim was to identify the elements which can be useful for a future integration strategy. We can receive only superficial images about the success of integration and financial situation of individual refugees. At the personal interviews the colleagues of OIN tried to avoid the refugee's opposition, possible fear. By our experience almost everyone was helpful and cooperative. The questionnaire was compelled in the way, that we could receive information – beside the exact determination of personal data, place of residence and language skills – about the rate of integration and the difficulties of living in Hungary.

General attributes of refugees with Hungarian origin

Among the refugees there is still a big number of Hungarians especially from Transylvania and Vojvodina. They are living mostly in South and East Hungary. They live mostly in a small towns, villages or farms. Almost 10% is living in bigger cities. In the capital where most of the refugees are living we were not able to find any refugees of Hungarian origin. Their family status, age is not different from the Hungarian nationals. They are mostly low skilled. They integrated quite well to the society of their habitual place of residence in relation to the local labour market and the local possibilities. For most of them receiving of Hungarian citizenship is an ongoing process. Some of them did not initiate it because of administrative or practical obstacles. Refugee status and lack of citizenship does not hinder them in any ways, and friends or neighbours are most often not aware of lack of citizenship. Their everyday

life, the typical problems are the same in every aspect as in case of the local Hungarian nationals with similar existential situation.

The elements of social integration

Language

It is of common knowledge that the first and necessary step for and the most important element of integration is learning the language of the country of asylum. The level of language knowledge, the ability to obtain a job and the willingness to participate on vocational trainings are corresponding so it is reasonable to deal with them together.

The knowledge of Hungarian, the capability of understanding the orders of employers is required even in simple jobs where special skills are not needed. In those jobs where the communication with the co-workers is essential the exceptional knowledge in Hungarian has utmost importance.

The asylum-seekers in Hungary are rarely able to speak Hungarian, so the language knowledge of the recognized refugees is quite low. Those are the only exceptions who spent longer period of time in Hungary as asylum-seekers or in different status.

Regarding age – beside the fact that it is more and more hard to learn a language as someone is getting older – there is a sharp line between the ones under the age of 18, and the ones who are older than 18 years thus are not involved in the public education system. As the number of non-Hungarian foreigners living in Hungary is extremely low in comparison to the total population no school was established where the foreigners has the majority at least in one class. It is also well known, that primary schools and high schools are not prepared to receive children from foreign culture, especially when they are not able to speak Hungarian, although there is some practice of this kind in primary schools where refugee children are attending more often. The foreigner children are learning the Hungarian language quickly and integrating successfully after the initial difficulties. According to the experiences received by the personal interviews the schools are not trying to prevent or hinder the attendance of refugee children. Because of the lack of language skills and prior education the children are attending lower classes than they should attend according their age, which can also improve the possible tension. The problem is that the parents are not motivated and skilled enough to aid the children's development.

The difference in language knowledge which occurs between the two genders is because of the different roles within the family. Singles who are on their own – from the financial aspect as well – and the heads of families are regularly learning the language

necessary for employment more quickly than those who are not forced to do so. As a result of this after the same period of time spent in Hungary the language knowledge of men is generally higher than the women who are at home with the children. Dealing with the latter as a special group is a priority in the Western European countries which are receiving a lot of immigrants and there are a plenty of programs for them to help their integration.

In average a grown-up foreigner needs 2–3 years to learn the Hungarian language suitable for basic communication. Without this basic knowledge the possibility for employment is very thin, the refugee is not able to deal with the most ordinary daily issues. We experienced that an average refugee needs 4–5 years to learn the Hungarian language on a level suitable for everyday communication (able to understand and explain more or less everything). We can consider this the minimum level of language knowledge needed for a job which does not require complex communication. For a good or excellent Hungarian knowledge minimum 7–8 years of learning is needed. The “average number” covers of course a lot of differences. We experienced that the ones (especially from Black Africa) who are able to speak English are not motivated enough to learn the Hungarian language.

There are factors – other than age and gender – affecting the language learning:

- Whether the individual refugee received organized language training or not. According to the law the refugees are entitled within a year after recognition to participate in a free of charge 360 hours language training organized by the OIN. Beside this there is the possibility to attend to a language course organized by NGOs or voluntaries.
- A lot of single refugees are finding Hungarian mate or spouse which is the most effective way of language learning and integration. According to our experiences if the Hungarian partner is not able to talk in English and the language of the communication within the family will be the Hungarian, learning the language and integration can be done quite quickly in general.
- The most important is the open attitude, the initiative of the individual and how much he or she is forced to maintain contact with the majority. What possibility does he or she have in his or her job to practise the Hungarian language?
- Except the ones of Hungarian origin most refugees arrive to Hungary accidentally. Before arriving, the refugees are most of the times advised to go to a Western European country. Whether they find home in Hungary or not depends on what kind of perspective they can see for themselves and their families. This perspective among other things depends on whether they are able to speak a language which makes them easier to be employed in another country or not. This language is

mostly English, which is an official language and a primary common language (the language of education) in a lot of African countries, and French, which is in a smaller scale in the same situation as English. The third such language is the German which is occurring among the asylum-seekers from the Balkans who have guest worker background.

Employment

Those refugees who are planning to stay in Hungary have to have the necessary material and social resources and endurance which is needed for the successful beginning (and beside these are not able to speak English or French and do not have family members in Western Europe whom they could rely on). As the financial support is not so high, it has a motivating effect for employment and correspondently for language learning, because in Hungary there is no social-welfare system which could ensure proper living conditions. In addition there is no foreigner diaspora which could serve as a bridge between the refugees and the majority of the society.

In the time of the survey 32% of the refugees of non-Hungarian origin were unemployed, 30% had fulltime jobs, 12% had other regular jobs, 18% had seasonal jobs and 8% were students or young mothers at home with the babies. Majority of the refugees are not able to work in their original expertise because of language difficulties, the inability of obtaining necessary original certificates or because their qualification is useless in Hungary.

Housing

Settling of refugees of non-Hungarian origin has extraordinary obstacles. Neither the attitude of local inhabitants nor other elements of integration are helping this, so the refugees from non-European countries are moving to villages and small towns only in exceptional cases, e.g. very cheap real estate or Hungarian mate.

More than half of the refugees living in Hungary (the majority of the refugees of non-Hungarian origin) are settling in Budapest. They are renting (in 80% of the cases) or buying flats in the cheaper districts of the capitol (Csepel, Józsefváros, Kőbánya). According to our experiences the visited flats have almost the same quality and size as the regular Hungarian households in the area.

In lack of flats to rent of sufficient quantity and price it is difficult to find proper housing for everyone in Hungary without extended funds and relatively stable income. The situation is much more difficult for a refugee who does not have enough knowledge of the language and of the area and suffer the mistrust of the landlords. In general it is true that refugees have to face extreme difficulties in the first year after the recognition,

after they have to leave the reception centres and have to fare on their own. This is the time when the relatively low-level but entirely state-financed reception changes to existential uncertainty from one day to the other. After moving out from the reception centres the various supports received from the OIN are quite low and the disbursement has the requirement of moving out. Because of the later restriction these supports are not able to lighten the burden which is caused by renting a flat. The NGOs and churches dealing with refugees are often able to provide sufficient aid, but it is not enough to solve the problems at the beginning.

The refugees arriving to Hungary in the recent years are much poorer than the earlier ones. Very few of them have enough financial resources to buy a real estate in Hungary. Among those who arrived earlier there were some who were wealthy or middle-class. These refugees were conducting in their country of origin almost the same lifestyle as here. They are highly qualified or entrepreneurs (in their cases it is really an enterprise not a “forced” one-man enterprise). They lived never or only for a short period of time in a reception centre. This „elite” of the refugees were almost unknown to the colleagues of the OIN and the NGOs because they did not ask for help. These attributes are not present in the refugees arrived in the last 5–6 years, almost all of them are in defenceless situation also from a financial point of view. Nowadays the recognized refugees have the same attributes as economical migrants.

The Settlement Fund (later Refugee Aid Fund, now settlement support) established in 1989 had the aim to create the foundations of the financial basis of the settlement of Romanian refugees of Hungarian origin (mostly in the form of interest-free loans and in a lesser quantity of non-repayable support) but in practice it ceased to exist as a valid tool for settlement in the late '90s. At the beginning of the '90s almost all of the applicants (thousands of families) were able to receive the support of 200–300 thousand HUF which was almost enough to buy a real estate in the countryside, but the recent maximum of 1.5 million HUF (which is very few in comparison of the current real-estate prices) is only accessible for a few families.

Future intentions

The refugee's future intentions regarding final settlement is also influenced by – beside the experiences received in Hungary – the prior imaginations about his or her future, whether or not he or she sees more perspective for him- or herself in a different, richer country. This is affected naturally also by the fact if there are relatives, friends, and acquaintances in the particular country.

The majority of the refugees living in Hungary are willing to stay in spite the fact that most of them have relatives in Germany, France, the United Kingdom, Sweden and the Netherlands.

Requests, problems, contacts with NGOs and churches

The interviewed refugees considered the period after the recognition as the most problematic one, which has partially natural reasons but it is also influenced by the bureaucracy. They complained hard that after moving out of the reception centre they remained practically without help and support. If they are leaving the country temporary, the OIN does not provide them further accommodation. The period spent in reception centres was observed by the refugees as useless, meaningless time. The major difficulties in their life in Hungary are the language, the unemployment and their seclusion.

The role of NGOs in the field of asylum changed a lot from the beginning. In the early '90s especially churches and bigger semi-governmental organizations (Hungarian Red Cross, Hungarian Maltese Charity Service) and some smaller organizations dealing not exclusively with refugees were active mostly on charity basis. They provided support and reception conditions for the foreigners – mostly beneficiaries of temporary protection – in Hungary who were fleeing from the South Slavic wars. The refugees arriving from outside of Europe were handled by the UNHCR, including the conducting of the refugee status determination procedure. These organizations later, along with the decrease of the number of asylum-seekers, were mostly withdrawing from this field.

The nationality composition of refugees has changed in the late '90s (and in parallel, the civil sphere professionalized), the rate of asylum-seekers from outside Europe and from foreign culture increased. The focus went from the mass reception and support tasks to the integration support for individually recognized refugees. In the field of asylum the biggest and most active civil organization is the Menedék – Association Aiding Migrants, whose social workers are providing help for refugees living in reception centres and private accommodation, especially in everyday administration and looking for employment. Beside these activities they also conduct teaching and training courses on project basis.

Summary – experiences and general remarks

In general, we can say that the persons recognized in the last three years are more willing to stay in Hungary than the earlier arrived ones. Those able to learn the Hungarian language on a sufficient level for working and whose children are attending

to Hungarian kindergarten/school have the best chances to integrate. The first priority is to help refugees in creating the relative financial security and maintaining frequent and strong connections to the society of the country of asylum.

Differences regarding the willingness to stay and integrate in Hungary can be identified between national groups of refugees. The Afghans – who are the biggest group – are almost exclusively living in whole, big families within quite good circumstances. The strong family links, mutual support, and in some cases financial help received from relatives living in Western Europe has major role in this. After 2–3 years also the grown-ups are able to talk in Hungarian, the only exceptions are the mothers who are staying home with their little children. Their children are fitting well in the kindergarten/school. They have bigger colonies than their numbers among the asylum-seekers because many received other type of residence permit or have already Hungarian nationality. In many cases there are different statuses within a family too. Most of the time they are living from a family business and from the financial supports received after the children. This is also valid for the much fewer Turkish and Iranian, and some Armenian, Georgian and Azerbaijani families as well.

The integration of Black-Africans is much more difficult. They are almost exclusively single men, who found a Hungarian girlfriend or wife, but this is not helping them in the integration. They can not find a job for themselves because the lack of Hungarian knowledge. They have more or less English skills upon they can rely and they are not motivated to learn the Hungarian language. Typical they are able to speak the language only in a minimal level even after 6–8 years of stay.

Among the refugees of Arabic origin and from the former Yugoslavia and the former Soviet Union there are also singles and families, and their level of integration is also various.

According to the survey it can be stated that the refugees impression is not receiving sufficient help (and if they do, they do not remember from where). Almost all of them see the period after the recognition and the moving out of the reception centres as the hardest one. In the present system for the starting period there is a lack of sufficient support (financial support, aid for language-learning and administration, etc.) which would be able to ease the difficulties. Because of this non-existing support a lot of refugees is leaving our country and falling from time to time into desperate situation where the civil, state and municipality organizations are not able to provide durable help not even with greater financial resources.

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