



**2022**  
**ANNUAL REPORT**

# What is FECSKE?

FECSKE is an acronym in Hungarian for the Support Network for Detainees and their Families, which also means the bird swallow. Its members are people affected by incarceration: released prisoners, their family members, interested volunteers and prison experts. We work together to advocate for humane prison conditions and to ensure that prisoners and their families' rights are respected. We advocate for good practices where children and families of prisoners can maintain a good quality relationship.

FECSKE has expanded in 2022. In May, for the first time in a long time, FECSKE members met in person, people with lived experience and professionals as new members formally joined FECSKE, and together we discussed the main goals and tasks for the year. Then, during our Family Day in June, formerly detained people, people awaiting the start of their imprisonment and professionals discussed problems related to prison while the participants' children played games and participated in competitions.



**What did we  
achieve in 2022?**



# 1. We are here for you!

*“It was terribly difficult initially, but now it’s a bit easier. However, the money part is still difficult – I have to send my detained partner money so he can at least call us, but I don’t have a choice. I have to send him money because his 11-year-old daughter couldn’t bear it if she could not talk to him.”*

It’s not my crime, but it’s still my sentence. Prison is a punishment not only for the imprisoned people but also for their mothers, wives or children. FECSKE’s members with lived experience shared their stories in podcasts, letters and videos (available on the right, with English subtitles on YouTube).

The materials have been viewed and listened to 650,000 times, and we have received a lot of feedback. It is certain that more people now understand the situation of relatives of detainees and show more solidarity than a year ago.

**ANDREA’S STORY WITH  
ENGLISH SUBTITLES**

**ETELKA’S STORY WITH  
ENGLISH SUBTITLES**

**LUCA’S STORY WITH  
ENGLISH SUBTITLES**

**TÜNDE’S STORY WITH  
ENGLISH SUBTITLES**

**PODCAST**

Olivia, whose children's father is in prison:

*"When you know you're about to walk through hell, time starts to speed up. I was sure that soon, THE LETTER would arrive and take the father of my children, my other half, away from us. I was afraid of my own mailbox every time I opened it. Will it be there today? Or will we have some more time together? It didn't take too long... I took the children to kindergarten, and I went home before because of an important appointment. A notice was in our mailbox, so I ran to the post office. I ripped the letter open as I walked out the door. The first thing that caught my eye was that there were 4 full weeks left, and the other was the name of the prison. I was in shock as it was that one penitentiary I dreaded the most. I shakily got on the (wrong) bus and headed off somewhere..."*

*We tried to get some information in the following weeks but ran into walls. In the first instance, of course, I called the institution. They treated me in such a style as if I had at least dropped a nuclear bomb. It was terribly humiliating. Despite the tone, I tried to remain civilised and seek information, but I got no more than a scrap of information. I drove my husband practically blindly to where he was expected to spend 38 months.*

*That morning, he dressed the little ones and told them how much he loved them, and I watched them kiss and hug each other, unaware of how much time they would have to spend without him. I'll never forget it; it was horrible. They were 2 and 3 years old.*

*We took him by car, arriving well ahead of time. And he walked in... I was wondering on the way home how could I have left him in this place? Of course, it didn't make sense, but that's how I felt.*

*A few days passed, no news. We were home for the weekend; my daughter was lying on the couch. I heard her mumbling but couldn't understand her, so I sat beside her. "Dad, chocolate. Dad, chocolate," she whispered softly. I wanted to sob, but I pulled myself together and gave some to her. Dad was the one who always gave her a little chocolate, even before lunch. Our son didn't talk then, but he kept looking for him. He went through the rooms; he looked everywhere in the morning. But he couldn't find him..."*

Olívia

## 2. We launched FECSKE's Mental Health Support Group for the Families of Imprisoned People

In 2022, we launched a peer support group facilitated by mental health professionals who know the prison system well. The Mental Health Support Group consists of imprisoned people's loved ones who help each other find strength and motivation to cope with this challenging situation..

We want to continue the work based on the experience of the first group. We have, therefore, started a fundraising campaign so that more wives, girlfriends, and mothers can get free-of-charge mental health support from each other and professionals.



### 3. We supported families to stay in touch

- Prisons were under total lockdown for 2 years because of COVID-19, no visits were allowed. Some young children never saw their father in person. This is not fair, it is not proportionate, and it is a real barrier to reintegration after prison.
- That is why FECSKE supported a letter-sending campaign, to reintroduce visitation in a sensible way that did not endanger health. 633 people of concern wrote to the Prison Administration's National Commander asking for a visit where family members could touch each other.
- Visitations resumed in May 2022. Touching is still not allowed, so we continue to work to ensure that hugs and kisses are permitted as a general rule, as it is the right of children, mothers and wives. It should only be banned if it is a real security risk.
- We have received many complaints that the family cannot visit their relative because he is in such a faraway prison. We have prepared a model complaint form, that can be submitted to the Commissioner of Fundamental Rights (ombudsperson), asking him to investigate the situation and take action to ensure that the right to private and family life is respected.

Mothers have asked the prison service to allow their children to meet their father without plexiglass:

*“A child needs to be able to hug them and play together when seeing his or her mom or dad after a long time. You cannot explain to a small child why this is impossible in prison. Plexiglas walls separating visitors are a punishment for people in prison and their children, parents and spouse.”*



## 4. Allow 20 degrees in prisons as well

We wrote to the public about the reality of the winter prison: Cold, hunger, inactivity. These are the fellow inmates. Around 500 forints were spent on food per day in prisons this year.

At the end of the year, the daily ration was roughly doubled to about 900 forints. It's also hard to eat well on that, but the change is substantial!

It has been introduced that the temperature in the prison should be kept at a maximum of 18 degrees Celsius. According to FECSKE, such cold temperatures are inhumane and dangerous to health in case of a full-time stay. The number of complaints and worried family members is endless.

This is how a detainee has written to us:

*"I'm on the verge of starvation many times, and the food distributors don't even give me the proper ration. The diet is not varied enough; it's poor in nutritional value. We rarely get apples, we have a vitamin deficiency."*

One detainee's partner was concerned that

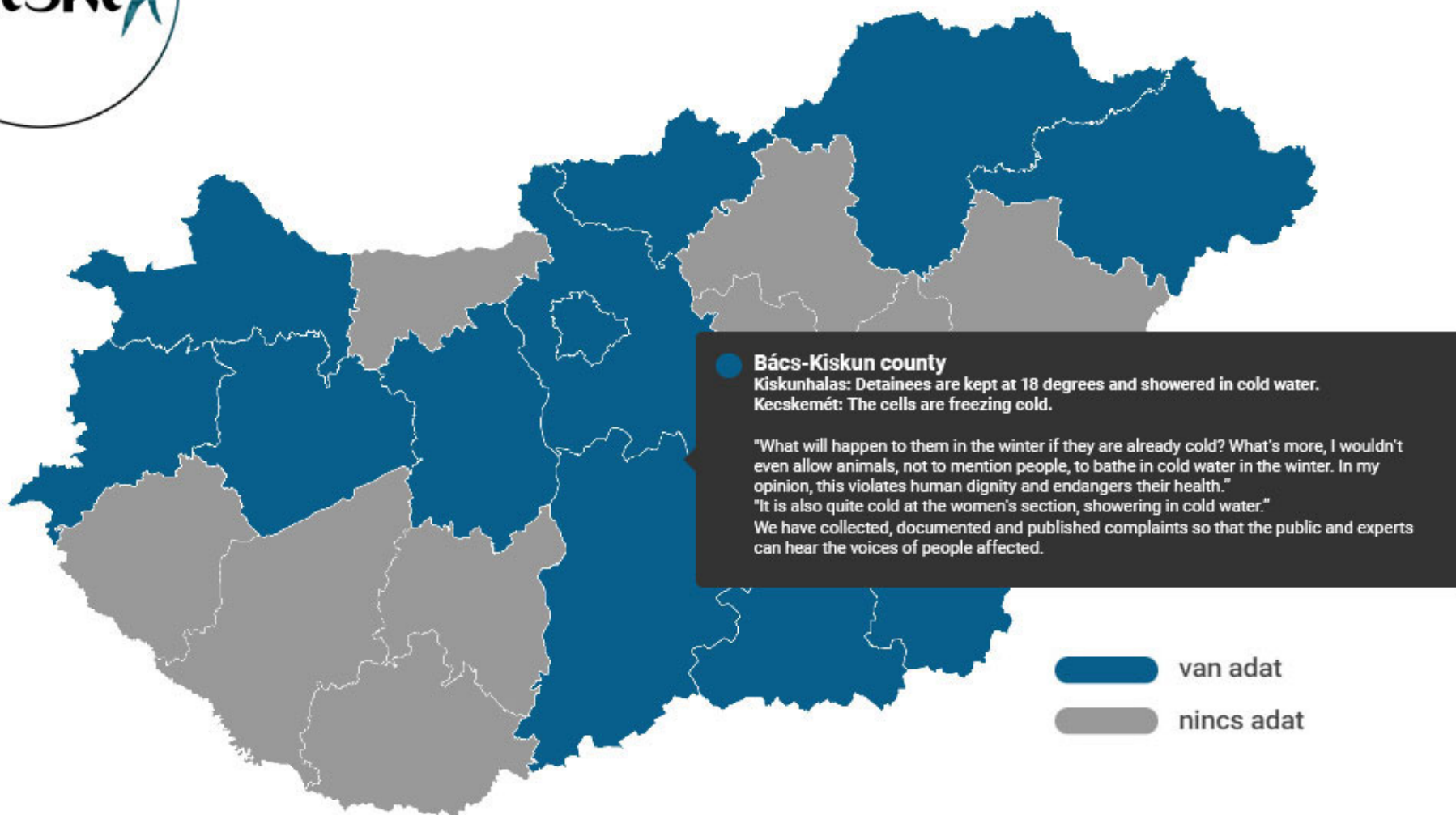
*"...they are in the cold, bathing in cold water..., the window insulation is bad, and the cold is coming in. They can't use their blankets during the day, and they can't break the bed order. The joints are already aching... We are not looking for financial compensation but for heating, hot water, medicine and insulated windows."*





# Prison experiences of the cold

November-December 2022



We have collected, documented and published complaints so that the public and experts can hear the voices of people affected.

# 5. We won a social innovation prize

The Sozial Marie Prize for Social Innovation annually awards 15 outstanding socially innovative projects. Out of 275 applicants, FECSKE became one of the top 15 and won a prize of €2,000.

According to the jury's assessment:

*“FECSKE raises attention to the hidden and forgotten community of prisoners and their families and reinforces social solidarity by standing up for detainees in public (...) FECSKE works closely with various actors to advocate for prisoners' rights and strengthen social solidarity through public advocacy.”*



# 6. Training the lawyers of tomorrow

We started a legal aid clinic for law students at the University of Szeged. Our aim was to show future judges, prosecutors and lawyers how detainees and their families can be affected by legal violations and how they can be best remedied.



We provided training on

- Ill-treatment by correctional officers
- The right of detainees to be released for the funeral of their loved ones
- Unlawful pre-trial detention

the legal remedies to be used in these cases, and the procedure before the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg.



## 7. People with lived experience spoke up for their cause publicly

*“Meanwhile, my children grew up, my grandchildren were born, I grew old...”*

– says Ildikó, who has served a prison sentence.

Ildikó and Bálint shared their experiences of incarceration at the international conference held in Budapest, where we discussed how to ensure that imprisonment is used as a last resort.



Luca, who experienced prison as a family member; and János, who has his own lived experience of incarceration, and psychologist Judit Hajdu talked on the "Helsinki Hangadó" podcast programme, about what it does to a person in prison when promised privileges are taken away.



*“His parents used to visit him all the time. Even when they raised the plexiglass partitioning separating prisoners and family members. Even though they could not touch each other and could hardly speak to each other without shouting, according to János. At least they could breathe the same air through the holes. But then came Covid and the new rules. How were the 70-year-old parents supposed to manage to drive there for half an hour of visitation per month so that only one of them could go inside to see their son? In return, they would have lost three Skype appointments per month... No, it wasn't worth it. “I'd rather they didn't come,” János made the painful decision.”*





*“[it’s] about human approach, where we welcome applicants.”*

– said Gabriella Tarján, president of the MÉCSES Hungarian Charity Service, whose members correspond with detainees voluntarily. In the programme, Andrea Telleszné talks about how she coped with the burden of her husband’s prison sentence. nehezedő terhekkal.

A journalist accompanied Bea and her daughters, Zsófi and Alíz, on their first visit after COVID-19.

Zsófi, the older daughter, says:

*“It’s tough to hear on the phone that allows you to communicate through the two sides of the plexiglass wall. I could see my stepfather for about five minutes.”*





# What are we planning to achieve in 2023?

We aim to give people with lived experience of incarceration a real chance to get a fresh start. This requires regular and meaningful contact between them and their families.

In 2023

- we will organise regular meetings for the members of FECSKE,
- we will provide space in the network and in the public for people with lived experience of incarceration
- we will continue training the lawyers of the future at Budapest in ELTE.
- we will continue to provide legal tools to prisoners who have not been released for the funeral of a relative and
- we will do our best to encourage more people to take part in the relatives support group

We welcome applications from people with lived experience and committed professionals to join FECSKE at [info@fogvatartas.hu](mailto:info@fogvatartas.hu).