



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 released prisoners, their family members, interested volunteers and prison experts. We believe that everybody has the right to serve their sentence in humane conditions and maintain sufficient contact with their loved ones. Humane conditions and social services provided during incarceration help find people's standing and integrate into society after release. Contact with family is part of the humane conditions.



We have established the community of FECSKE to discuss the imminent and systemic problems of the Hungarian prison system. We have put down the foundation of a self-organizing group to efficiently advocate for the interests of detainees and their family members.

What have we achieved in 2021?

1. FECSKE has taken off – we are building a community
2. We have taken steps toward promoting a closer connection between detainees and their relatives:
 - a. on the phone,
 - b. and in person.
3. We provided support to let the stakeholders' voices heard
4. What are we planning to achieve in 2022?

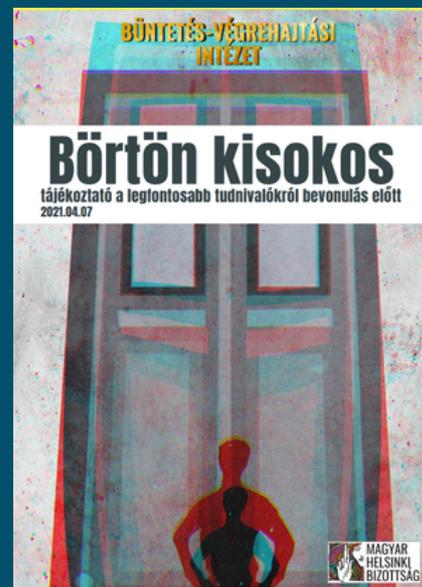
1. FECSKE has taken off – we are building a community

✈ FECSKE as a community has been established, its members are in regular contact with each other to achieve our goal, a humane and fair prison system.

✈ We set up the FECSKE webpage, fogvatartas.hu, which is a great channel to provide help and information, including a [guidebook](#) for people about to be detained.

✈ More and more people use the community to share their experiences and to help their peers. We are in conversation with released detainees to learn more about their experience. It helps building community as well as forming a more informed view on the systemic problems of incarceration.

✈ We are present in several Facebook groups for detainees' relatives to provide information. We can reach about 1,500 people this way.



✈ We have participated in summer festivals to familiarise the public with the world of incarceration through

- a prison slang vocabulary,
- debates,
- and [quizzes](#).

We emphasized that it is in everybody's interest to help released prisoners start life anew.

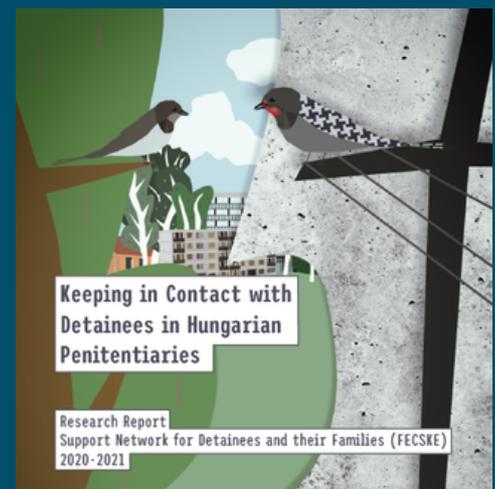
2. We have taken steps towards promoting a closer connection between detainees and their relatives

a)...on the phone I.

 In 2021, we concentrated on improving contact between detainees and their relatives and loved ones, as secure family ties are essential in establishing life anew after prison.

 We have conducted [research](#) on how contact was maintained during the pandemic in order to gain a thorough understanding on the practice and obstacles on keeping family contact and to build our recommendations on evidence. Our findings show that the following steps should be taken to improve maintaining contact and through that, to contribute to a more successful fresh start upon release:

- Detainees with the least financial support should be provided with a reasonable amount of free calls.
- The charges of prison calls per minute should be lowered from 69 HUF (circa €0.2) to 25 HUF (circa €0.06). That would still be the highest mobile charge on the outside.
- Registered relatives and friends should be able to call back their detained loved ones.
- The deposit of 35,000 HUF (circa €90-100) to receive a “prison mobile phone” should be abolished.
- Detainees still have to give back their “prison phones” 45 days prior to their release, the most crucial time to arrange the conditions of life after release. This practice should be abolished.
- The length and frequency of free video calls should be increased and an additional option to maintain email contact should be provided.



 We sent our [results](#) and [recommendations](#) to all official stakeholders.

 [Not long after](#), the time prior to release when phones should be returned was reduced to 10 days, so detainees and their family members can make arrangements for the time of release.

2. We have taken steps towards promoting a closer connection between detainees and their relatives

a)...on the phone II.

 An ombudsman [report](#) stated that the high call-per-minute charges and deposits violate the fundamental rights of the detainees and their family members and it is unfair to deprive of outside contact those in financial need.

 We are fighting for decreasing phone tariffs to a reasonable price, just as they are outside of prison walls. That is why we supported detainees' family members in writing a [petition](#) to fight for a reasonable call charge. In the petition, detainees' family members emphasized the importance of affordable telephone contact in the after release reintegration.



Címzett: Tisztelt Belügyminisztérium! Tisztelt Büntetés-végrehajtás Országos Parancsnoksága! Tisztelt Innovációs és Technológiai Minisztérium!

Legyen megfizethető a telefonálás a hazai börtönökben!

A kampány szervezője:
FECSKE- Fogvatartottakat és Családjukat Képviseelő Csoport 

2 059 of 3 000 signatures

Írd alá a petíciót!

Utónév *

Vezetéknév *

- The petition was signed by more than 2,000 people and might have influenced the decision to decrease the call charge from 75 to 69 HUF/minute (€0.7 to €0.6) in November.
- Together with the relatives we decided not to be complacent with this success as we consider the high charges an abuse of power over the vulnerable position of the detainees and their family members.

 Everybody deserves humane treatment! – this was our message whenever we publically raised our voices in protest against the [disproportionate and unfair](#) restrictions of keeping contact, implemented on the excuse of the pandemic or the [high telephone charges](#).

2. We have taken steps towards promoting a closer connection between detainees and their relatives

b)...in person

-  We were all aware that it was paramount to restrain the spread of the COVID pandemic in prisons. At the same time, restrictions must be proportionate to the goals and the rights of detainees and their family members cannot be unnecessarily violated. Since March 2020 – except for four months – people have not been able to visit their loved ones in prison. There are children who have not met their fathers; there are mothers that have not seen their children even on Skype for over 20 months due to illnesses. This is unfair and disproportionate. Therefore:
-  [We have approached the authorities](#) to extend the opportunities of contact with family members along the restrictions, as it is in the common interest of both the inmates and the officers. We have suggested that Hungary should follow the course of action of other countries and release temporarily those who do not pose threat to society, or delay prison sentences shorter than 3 years within the low security group. We provided concrete [international examples](#), such as Austria's, where the execution of prison sentences were postponed for the duration of the measures against the spread of COVID-19 in case the convicted person was not particularly dangerous and the prison sentence did not exceed three years.
-  Based on international good practice we drafted a detailed [list of recommendations](#) for decreasing the number of prisoners while considering security issues.
-  The ombudsman cannot forsake detainees and prison officers! – [we stated in our letter](#) to the ombudsman asking them to scrutinise the extent to which it is appropriate to infringe prisoners' rights. Asked them to examine whether detainees can leave their cells, were properly informed of the changes of rules, and can make enough phone calls at a time when in-person visitation is restricted.
-  [We spoke out](#) against the unnecessary restrictions implemented when visitations were reintroduced after a 16 months ban: the radical decrease of visitation time and the number of visitors at any one time from four to one, and a total ban on children's visit were all unacceptable for us.
-  We drafted a [list of recommendations on how to safely reintroduce visitation](#) in a step-by-step basis when the whole country – apart from the prisons – were free to go on holidays or football games without restrictions. We suggested to introduce the system of family visitations as the general rule that would only be restricted if it posed security risks.
-  Well-behaved detainees before their release used to have the right to go home each month for a few days, a practice that was abolished abruptly without any kind of compensation. We put together an [information leaflet](#) for them about the conditions and forms of possible legal actions against it.
-  We helped lawyers by drafting a [sample argument](#) to resist pre-trial detention orders. The document contains a section arguing that during the COVID-19 pandemic, incarcerated people are among the most vulnerable to the virus and for the protection of their health-related fundamental rights, it is imperative to not hold them detained, unless it is absolutely necessary.
-  We [spoke out](#) in the media to make the stigma of prison more perceivable. For example, we shared the story of someone, who used to be a locally well-known and popular owner of a village shop. This person got so alienated from the community during detention that they ended up being unable to go back to their place of home and work after serving the sentence for a neglectful traffic offence.

3. We provided support to let the stakeholders' voices heard



Members of FECSKE told their stories to let people understand how much effort it takes to keep the relationships alive between detainees and their loved ones against these inhumane conditions. First examples of detainees' family members standing up for themselves and their loved ones were the following:

- Erika spoke at [Radio Free Europe online](#) about the pains of the visitation ban: "I feel like a walking dead, that he is nothing more than a virtual reality for me, because that is how it is really."
- A Hungarian radio station, Klubrádió dedicated a [full programme](#) on the sufferings of family members in and out of prison not having information about whether the other one has contracted the virus or not and what condition they were in.
- [Released detainees told](#) the audience at our public conference that they spent as much as 40,000 HUF on telephone calls, which is the "real prison business." One of them pointed out that "I know I'm no angel, but I crave for love like anybody else. I need love and affection, a hug or at least to see the faces of my family and to talk to them." 45 thousand people read the [blogpost](#).

- Only contacts with family and friends can bring energy and hope during serving a prison sentence – said a recently released woman during a programme on women’s prisons by the YouTube channel, [Partizán](#). 36 thousand people watched this programme.
- In our [blogpost](#) on women’s prisons, we emphasized that separation from their mums always mean trauma for children which makes serving a sentence even more difficult for women. 11 thousand people read the post.



Around 70 people attended our [conference](#) on contacts with the outside world and reintegration. We organized it together with the Departments of [Criminology](#) and [Criminal Procedure and Correction](#) of Eötvös Loránd University Budapest.



At this [event](#) a wide range of stakeholders shared their thoughts on keeping contact and reintegration, which has been unprecedented in the past few years. Speakers and participants included released prisoners, NGOs, charities, members of state authorities and prison experts such as [MÉCSSES](#) Hungarian Charity Service, the [OPCAT](#) National Preventive Mechanism of Hungary, the Hungarian Charity Service of the Order of Malta's community [housing project](#) and the [Hungarian Helsinki Committee](#).

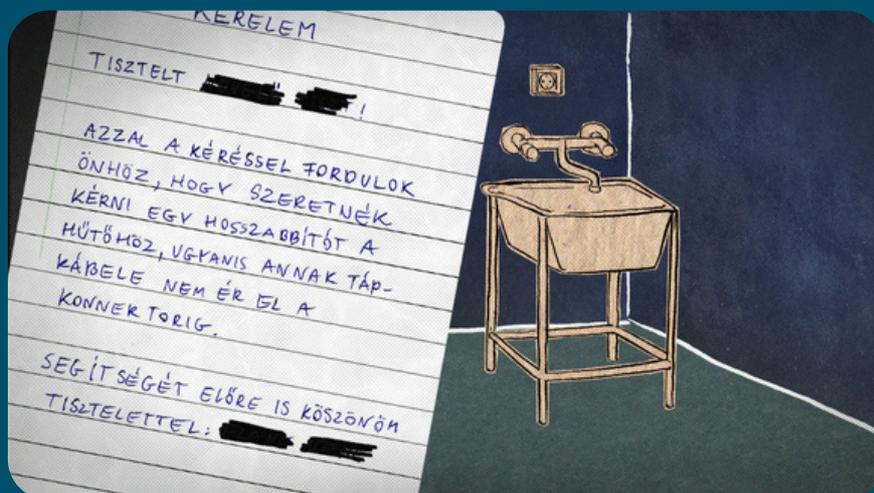
4. What are we planning to achieve in 2022?

 We continue to work for a humane prison system. As family connections play a significant role in reintegration:

- We carry on fighting for a decrease in telephone charges using the law and the power of the public.
- We work towards a new visitation system where family visits are the general rule, where family members can meet in circumstances resembling home. Restrictions should be based on individual assessment and introduced only if the family visitation setting poses a real security risk.
- We pay attention to the changes in restrictions over the pandemic and will speak out against all unnecessary and disproportionate restrictions. If needed, we will initiate legal proceedings.
- We launch the new campaign of FECSKE “We are here for you!” in which family members of detainees will speak about their experience.

 We are working for the right of every detainee to be released for the funeral of their loved ones, to be able to say their farewells in a humane way.

 We are launching a legal aid clinic for law students at the University of Szeged. We want to contribute to the training of law students, so that they become experienced in advocacy for detainees and willing to stand up for their rights as they are the judges, lawyers, prosecutors and prison officers of the future.



art: Zsanna Kili