ANNUAL REPORT

2024

What is FECSKE?

The **Support Network for Detainees and Their Families—FECSKE—**is a network of formerly incarcerated individuals, their families, civilians, and professionals working in and around the field of criminal detention in Hungary.

Since the beginning of our collaboration six years ago, in 2019, we have stood united in advocating for the rights of detainees and their families, as well as for more humane detention conditions.

We campaign for a prison sentence only to be used as a last resort, and for people to be able to serve their sentences in humane conditions—because only then do they have a real chance of restarting their life without crime after release.

We also work to ensure that the children, parents, spouses, and other relatives of detainees face fewer hardships as a result of their loved one's incarceration, and that they are not disadvantaged by broader society.

Our annual report highlights the achievements we made in 2024, helping to bring our vision closer to reality. FECSKE's accomplishments were only possible through the collaboration and partnership of those directly affected by imprisonment and the experts involved.

What have we achieved in 2024?

1. Our community has grown stronger. We care for and support one another. We offer understanding, acceptance, and emotional support to each other—both to those directly affected and to professionals working in the field.
2. Our Mental Health Support Groups expanded, along with the number of participants. We provide mental health support to those with loved ones in prison. We run mother-child, women's, and open dialogue support groups, where participants can express and share their feelings and experiences. These groups help those affected process their situation and experience that they are not alone in facing their challenges.
3. Touching is now allowed during visits. We achieved a legislative change: from March 2025, as a general rule, people in prison and their visitors may hug and kiss each other at the beginning and end of their visit.
4. Detainees can now meet their children in a more informal setting. They can hug and hold their children on their laps; embrace other relatives and friends, and families can talk around a table.
5. The plexiglass barrier is now smaller. We successfully campaigned for the full-height plexiglass walls to be removed—now "only" a 50 cm barrier remains, making communication during visits easier.
6. International organisations sought our input and expertise on detention practices and the situation of prisoners' families.
7. Our member Petra Kovács was recognised as one of the bravest Hungarian women in 2024. Petra was a finalist in the "Community Builder" category of the WMN magazine's SuperWMN award. This achievement was made possible by the strength of our community and stands as a shared success.
8. We won the Dutch Embassy's Human Rights Tulip Award, in recognition of our unique and outstanding support for families of detainees and our fight for systemic change.
9. We shared our values and professional views on multiple platforms, including **Nők Lapja Online** (Women's Magazine) and in the **Tízes lista** (Top Ten List) video series.

Stay informed by subscribing to the **FECSKE Newsletter** (in Hungarian), where we share updates on our most important news and events.

Our Community

Our members are in daily contact with one another—they reach out, check in, and exchange practical information. They connect not only online but also through in-person meetings. FECSKE regularly shares news and updates about incarceration through its **social media** channels and newsletter. We hold at least four in-person meetings each year, in addition to our regular themed group sessions, where we discuss key topics face-to-face. On our website, **www.fogvatartas.hu**, you can also find various summaries, resources, and tools — including the **"Prison Guide"**, a helpful resource for those preparing to enter prison.

In 2024, FECSKE members and allies watched films together about **reintegration after release** and **restorative justice**. Group discussions followed these screenings. Here's how two participants described their experience:

> *"...We came from many different walks of life—professionals, caregivers, family members, and formerly incarcerated individuals—without labels or prejudice. We want to work together for those often overlooked by society, such as family members. As always, this meeting was energising and reaffirmed just how vital it is to keep moving forward with this work,"* **shared one FECSKE member after a gathering**.

> *"I'm so glad that in Hungary there are organisations like the Hungarian Helsinki Committee and FECSKE, who fight every day to make sure the voices on the other side are also heard."*

Mental Health Support Groups for Relatives of Incarcerated People

There is a real need for support that allows family members to **set down, even briefly, the heavy burden they carry**. The Mental Health Support Group for Relatives of Incarcerated People (MHSG) offers just that—a genuine community of shared experience. According to participants, it is both unique and deeply needed in Hungary. The group fills a significant gap by providing a safe, non-judgmental space where family members of detainees can openly share their emotions, challenges, and thoughts, and connect through mutual understanding.

The MHSGs also provide a sense of belonging and support for many former detainees and offer a space where they can help their relatives better understand the emotional and psychological challenges faced during imprisonment. The goal is to build mutual understanding between former detainees and their families—so that distance and hardship do not sever family bonds, and they receive the support they need from their relatives to start their life anew.

The strength of the MHSG community often endures beyond release: both relatives and former detainees frequently return to take part in the group sessions. One man, now a regular attendee after serving his sentence, shared his experience working with the group and its impact on those attending in an interview with ***Szemlélek*** magazine: *"We receive positive feedback. Many families say they couldn't have gotten through the tough times without us."*

In 2024, we held **mother-child** and **open dialogue support groups**. **Participant feedback** suggests that these groups are essential for maintaining the **mental well-being** of relatives:

> ***"Here I met people who not only walk the same path as me, but from whose perseverance and attitude I can draw strength."***

> ***"In the evenings, after the kids went to bed, I often felt completely alone, like no one understood me—and I really missed adult company. That's what this group means to me: connection and understanding."***

> ***"My brother said that ever since I started going to this 'club,' he can see that I'm doing better."***

> ***"When I'm really discouraged, just being here with all of you brings me peace and gives me strength to face the everyday struggles."***

More Freedom during Prison Visits

In cooperation with our allies, we **achieved** that people in prison and their visitors may hug and kiss each other at the beginning and end of their visit. For seven long years, no mother, child, or spouse had this opportunity. This year, over 5,000 families have experienced more personal and humane prison visits, strengthening family bonds and reducing psychological isolation.

The role of FECSKE was essential in removing the full-height plexiglass walls and allowing physical contact during visits:

- Relatives of detainees launched a **petition** and delivered it to prison authorities.
- Our members **publicly** shared the personal impact of this harsh restriction—including the deep emotional need to **touch their husbands** or the **fathers of their children** after years of separation.
- We submitted an **official opinion** to the ministry calling for changes in the regulations.

At the end of 2024, we celebrated this milestone with members and allies, and from March 2025, hugs and kisses will be allowed during prison visits. One affected family member shared their experience:

> ***"Unless you've lived through it, you can't understand what it's like to only be able to see your loved one through a scratched, torn, hole-ridden plexiglass sheet—unable to hug them, kiss them, shake their hand. Even with the plexiglass, you can only communicate through an ancient phone under poor conditions, surrounded by many others. Detainees don't deserve this—and it does nothing to support reintegration into society after prison. For this, we would need humane conditions—including the ability for personal contact during visits. You can't imagine what it's like if you haven't experienced it. These visits, once every two weeks, for just one hour, break your heart.***
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> ***Last Friday, I attended an uplifting event hosted by the Hungarian Helsinki Committee, where we celebrated FECSKE's tireless work that led to a monumental victory: the reinstatement of physical contact in prison visits. This right had been banned since 2017 — no one knows exactly why — and it took seven years to restore this basic human dignity in a way that meets European standards.***
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> ***This policy affects hundreds of thousands of people. The stories shared by former detainees, relatives, human rights workers, and me brought many of us to tears—they broke our hearts and stirred our souls. And of course, thanks go to the Helsinki team, who tirelessly fight for the rights of those abandoned by society, regardless of their perceived or real crimes. We cannot express our gratitude enough for their selfless and hard work. Bravo! It's been a long time since I attended an event that touched me so profoundly. My heart and soul were filled again—with light, hope, faith, and love."***

A blind inmate's sibling wrote about the importance of touch:

> *"As a sibling, I had to face the fact that someone I love—my brother—had to go to prison. On top of losing his freedom, he also faces additional hardships due to being blind. For me, as his sibling, this has meant not only constant worry but deep pain as well. How can I support him if we can barely touch each other? If even physical closeness is limited by strict rules and time constraints? For a blind person, touch is essential, as it becomes their most developed sense in the absence of sight. From the outside, it's hard to imagine the profound impact a simple touch can have on a blind person and their loved ones. But let me tell you: for us, those moments meant more than words can express. When I hold his hand, I don't just feel that he is there—I give him strength, and he gives it back to me. A touch holds all the unspoken love, hope, and encouragement we could never put into words. It's not just comfort for him—it helps me, too. It lets me feel that we're still connected. In that moment, I feel his heartbeat, like a child hearing its mother's heart in the womb. Touch is not just physical contact. Touch is the language of the soul, and when we touch each other, we say: 'I'm here with you. You're not alone.'"*

Let Goodbyes Be Dignified

Most people in prison are not allowed to say goodbye to their terminally ill family members. Around two-thirds of people in prison are denied permission to attend the funerals of loved ones, or even to visit their graves. Even though existing regulations would allow such visits, prison commanders routinely deny these request preventing families from grieving together, even for a few hours. Many relatives have shared their pain publicly in the hope that this inhumane practice might finally change.

- **Ibi was not allowed to say goodbye to her partner, Pál Csurár**:

> *"... when we found out that my husband had cancer ... and was dying, we submitted a request ... asking that he be allowed to die at home, surrounded by his family. (...) Because he was guilty, yes, but he was still a human being and a very loving father. He could have had one last wish—what he wanted to eat or drink, what he would have liked to do one more time. We wanted to accompany him into death with love. That's the only way a person should be let go into that great nothingness. It still hurts to this day."*

- **Brigitta lost her child**, yet was told, "Don't play the grieving mother here!", and was not allowed to attend her son's funeral.
- **Péter first lost his mother**, then his sibling. Despite having committed a minor property-related offence, earning twenty-three commendations and being only two months away from release, he was still denied the chance to say goodbye to his loved ones together with his family.
- In its **2025 ruling against Hungary** the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg reaffirmed that detainees do have the right to attend the funeral of a close relative. This right may only be restricted in exceptional cases, and only with serious, individualised justification.

A Rabok Életének Sötét Titkai / Tízes Lista

More and more people are sharing their stories

A growing number of former detainees and their family members are stepping into the public eye, sharing their stories—along with their names and faces. These testimonies help society see beyond the label of "inmate" or "prisoner's relative" and recognise them as human beings with emotions, aspirations, struggles, and joys—just like anyone else.

- **Sanyi served over ten years in prison** and was released in the summer of 2024. By April 2025, over 366,000 people had watched his video, in which he discusses how he survived prison and his current efforts to rebuild his life. Most comments are supportive, showing that authentic personal stories help the public connect with the human side of imprisonment.
- **Leon spent several years in prison**. After his release, he pursued a new beginning and succeeded: today, he is a thriving entrepreneur and an emerging music artist whose lyrics often reflect his experiences behind bars. He now travels the country, giving motivational talks that encourage young people from similar backgrounds to learn from his journey and avoid his past mistakes.
- The European Court of Human Rights' so-called "plexiglass ruling" affirmed that physical contact between incarcerated individuals and their loved ones should be the norm, not the exception. This ruling holds special significance for people like Luca, who travelled 400 kilometres every month for five years to visit her husband in prison. In an **interview with Nők Lapja**, she recalled:

> ***"In five years, we were allowed just one open visit where we could hug. I prepared for it like a first date! (...) It meant so much more than the usual plexiglass visit."***

- **Zoltán Herczeg, a former detainee**, regularly speaks publicly about the realities of prison life. "You can't use breaking a person's spirit as a tool," he says. "Because if you do, those people will come back very soon."

We Are Brave

Petra Kovács, one of FECSKE's founding members, was named one of the top three finalists in the WMN SuperWMN Awards, in the Kriszta Hadas Community Builder category. At the **award ceremony** held on International Women's Day in 2025, Petra pointed to the audience and said, "This is the power of community. This means so much to those who are invisible and stigmatised. This is where strength lies: in knowing we can count on each other." We are proud that through Petra and FECSKE, the public has come to recognise those heroically facing the unjust burdens of imprisonment. We've helped build trust in their cause.

We Received the Human Rights Tulip Award

The Dutch Embassy **honoured FECSKE with the Human Rights Tulip Award** for our dedication to defending human rights. In the words of the ambassador, FECSKE is a remarkable initiative that not only transforms individual lives but also addresses systemic issues within the Hungarian prison system.

International organisations sought our input

In 2023, a former detainee member and a FECSKE expert met with the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture (CPT). We shared **firsthand accounts of abuse by prison staff**, the absence of legal consequences, and the harsh realities of overcrowded and inhumane conditions in the Hungarian prison system.

The **CPT's 2024 report** urged Hungary to take immediate action in several key areas.

In 2024, during their visit to Hungary, the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion and Belief met FECSKE members, including a former detainee. We discussed how prison conditions restrict religious practice and what changes are needed. A report based on this visit is forthcoming.

FECSKE members also met with delegates of OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR). In connection with the 2024 European Parliamentary and municipal elections, we discussed the legal framework regarding the voting rights of detainees and related concerns—specifically, the frequency and duration of disqualification from public affairs.

What are our plans for 2025?

We are continuing our work. Specifically:

- We're launching **more Support Groups**: the ongoing women's group and open dialogue group will continue, and we're launching an **online mental health group** and a **release-preparation training**.
- **We've launched a training in community organising** in early 2025. Family members and professionals are learning advocacy, strategy, campaign planning, and awareness-raising techniques from Civil College Foundation (CKA) trainers — and will soon put them into practice through petitions, signature drives, and communication campaigns.
- We continue **training ourselves** to carry out this broad work more effectively.
- We keep **supporting one another** through in-person and online group meetings, and help self-organising, peer-support groups to find their voices.
- We continue to share our stories in public—through the media and in person—to explain why humane imprisonment is essential.
- **We're launching a newsletter** (in Hungarian) to keep people informed about changes in the prison system and FECSKE's programs. Subscribe **here**.

To do this work, we need financial support and human resources. We can only provide **free services** if we get help.

- If you'd like to be involved in **FECSKE's work** — helping detainees and their families gain knowledge and mental strength,
- If you'd like to **donate**,
- If you have **questions**,
- Or would you like to **share your experiences** with us?
- Please **write to us** at: **info@fogvatartas.hu**

You can find more information about us on **fogvatartas.hu** and on our **Facebook page**.