



UKRAINIAN BACKGROUND

OCTOBER 2022



A young woman with dark hair, wearing a dark hooded jacket, is looking down at a small, fluffy white dog she is holding in her arms. The background is a soft, out-of-focus outdoor setting. The entire image has a blue tint.

The purpose of this backgrounder

This backgrounder contains historical, political, and cultural information intended to cultivate a general understanding of refugees from Ukraine who are resettling in the United States.

The [Cultural Orientation Resource Exchange](#) (CORE) produced this backgrounder to aid U.S. Resettlement Agencies (RAs), their local affiliates, and other partners in providing culturally appropriate Cultural Orientation (CO) and other services to newly arrived Ukrainian refugees. The information provided is intended as guidance and does not represent the needs and challenges of all Ukrainian refugees. As such, resettlement staff are encouraged to adapt their services as appropriate.

Information in this document is based on a variety of trusted resources, including, but not limited to, articles and reports from the United Nations agencies and research organizations. For a complete list of resources used, see the [Bibliography](#) section of this document.

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Introduction: Ukraine's History and Presence in the United States

The lands that make up modern-day Ukraine and its people represent a history that spans centuries, with a continuous thread of conflict and influence from both Russian and European powers.

At the beginning of the 19th century, about 90% of present-day Ukraine was a part of the Russian Empire, while western Ukraine was under the rule of the Austrian Empire. During this time and into the early 20th century, Ukrainians migrated to the U.S. to work in east coast coal mines and the agricultural sector.

Following the first World War, Ukraine established itself as an independent republic, but shortly after was absorbed into the Soviet Union as the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. During this time, western sections of Ukraine were under the rule of Poland, Romania, and Czechoslovakia. In 1932 and 1933, Ukraine experienced what was known as the Holodomor, or the Great Famine, in which millions of Ukrainians died as a result of the Soviet Union's policies.

During World War II, control of Ukraine shifted once more, with the decision to unify western Ukrainian territories with Soviet-controlled Ukraine in 1940 and the liberation of Ukraine from Germany in 1944. From post-World War II to 1991, Ukraine remained one of 15 republics in the Soviet Union and underwent reconstruction. During this time, Ukraine also experienced the process of Russification and repression against those who supported the Ukrainian national idea. Following both world wars, more Ukrainians migrated to the United States, with a fourth wave starting in 1988 as a part of the Lautenberg program.

On August 24, 1991, Ukraine adopted the Act of Proclamation of Independence of Ukraine. In December 1991, several countries, including the United States and Canada, recognized Ukraine as an independent state and established diplomatic relations. Today, the Ukrainian diaspora in the United States numbers more than one million people and contributes to enhancing national identity and heritage.



Overview of Current Crisis

February 2022, Russia launched a military invasion in Ukraine. The current conflict reflects a history of Russia's geopolitical ambitions and tensions among complex competing identities in the region, also manifested in the 2014 annexation of the Crimea region.

Initially, most Ukrainian refugees fled to neighboring countries. While some Ukrainian refugees have sought resettlement in a third country, others have decided to stay close to home, waiting to return to Ukraine.

As Ukrainian refugees seek safety, there have been widespread reports of human trafficking and exploitation, including sex and labor trafficking. To address these risks, international and local organizations have implemented information campaigns and safeguarding measures to protect the human rights of displaced persons from Ukraine.



Conditions in First-Asylum Countries

As of fall 2022, there are more than seven million refugees from Ukraine dispersed across Europe, with Poland hosting the largest share. Initially, many European countries adjusted their visa and entry requirements to facilitate border crossing. For example, in March 2022, the EU adopted a temporary protection program to offer expedited stay, residence, and work status for eligible Ukrainian nationals.

However, the ongoing conflict creates pressure on host countries to provide long-term humanitarian assistance. As Ukrainians integrate into first-asylum countries, they have encountered overwhelmed housing and labor markets as well as limited capacities for education and social services. Consequently, some families have returned to Ukraine.



Andrew Oberstadt/IRC

Pathways to Resettlement

Uniting for Ukraine

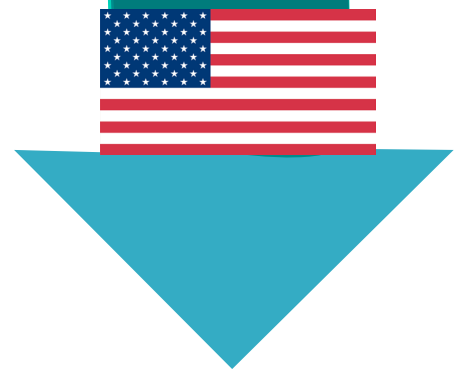
[Uniting for Ukraine](#) provides a pathway for Ukrainian citizens and their immediate family members outside the United States to come and stay temporarily for a two-year period of parole. Ukrainians participating in Uniting for Ukraine must have a supporter in the United States who agrees to provide them with financial support for the duration of their stay.

Lautenberg Program

The [Lautenberg Program](#) is a family reunification program that allows certain individuals legally residing in the United States to bring over their family members through the [U.S. Refugee Admissions Program](#). The Lautenberg Amendment was first enacted in 1990 to facilitate the resettlement of Jews from the former Soviet Union. Today, the Lautenberg Program includes other persecuted religious minorities, including Evangelical Christians, Jehovah's Witnesses, Ukrainian Greek Catholics, and Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church members. To access this program, individuals must apply through a [local resettlement agency](#).



Francesco Pistilli/IRC



Caseload Composition

Almost 90% of displaced Ukrainian cases are women, children, and people over the age of 60. Men between 18 and 60 are generally not allowed to leave Ukraine due to martial law, with some exceptions. Immediate resettlement concerns of Ukrainian clients may include questions about family reunification and navigating changes in family dynamics. For example, women that need to seek immediate employment may face challenges with child-care and care for elderly relatives. English

proficiency may represent another immediate challenge for clients. Cases arriving through the Lautenberg program may seek support from U.S. ties – family members residing in the U.S. U.S. ties could play a significant role in facilitating initial resettlement and supporting the adjustment of Ukrainian clients. This support may include accommodation, transportation orientation, cultural awareness, and even initial employment.

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Languages and Identity Considerations

Ukraine is a bilingual country where both Ukrainian and Russian are commonly spoken and widely understood. Ukrainian is the official language and considered the first language by 67% of the population, while 30% of Ukrainians speak Russian as a first language. The use of Ukrainian is most prevalent in western and central Ukraine, while Russian is dominant in eastern and southern Ukraine. There are many other languages spoken in Ukraine, including but not limited to Romanian, Polish, and Hungarian.

After Ukraine gained independence in 1991, there was an effort to make Ukrainian the national language. In 2019, the State Language Law established Ukrainian as the country's official language in businesses, schools, and media. For many, the Ukrainian language symbolizes Ukraine's national identity and cultural heritage. Russia's military invasion has triggered further politicization of the language. It is important to confirm the language needs of the case and ensure appropriate interpretation while working with Ukrainian refugees coming from different regions.



Cultural Orientation Considerations

The following sections contain detailed and contextualized information about working with Ukrainian refugees while navigating different Cultural Orientation topics. For each topic, guidance and tips have been identified, drawing on expertise gleaned from interviews and observations from resettlement staff. As noted previously, those providing services and assistance to newcomers should adapt this information based on specific cases and needs.

Cultural Adjustment

Ukrainians come from a society with deep-rooted traditional views on identity roles, family dynamics, and religious and social norms. Ukrainian refugees may have difficulties interacting with people from different ethnic or racial backgrounds. For instance, homophobic or transphobic perceptions still exist, particularly in rural areas. Individuals may not know how to engage in a culturally sensitive manner or be resistant to collaboration with a representative of the LGBTQIA+ community. They also may not want to participate in certain events or holidays unfamiliar to them, like a Halloween party. However, with guidance and support, individuals can adapt and be more flexible.

Elderly clients may seek complete dependency on their relatives or the local Ukrainian community upon arrival, especially if they lack English language skills. This could hinder their integration and day-to-day interactions. Conversely, children may adapt to their new environment more quickly.

Tips

- Provide a general orientation of the new community, including transportation, nearby facilities, public services, etc. If applicable, engage members of the Ukrainian community to help.
- Dedicate time to explaining basic U.S. laws and norms, including but not limited to, inclusion and diversity and communications styles.
- Encourage the clients to share their concerns and expectations related to differences in social and cultural norms in the U.S. Try to involve every family member in the conversation and conduct an open discussion.
- Urge individuals to learn English and build relationships with Ukrainian community members and those outside the community.
- Promote the resettlement agency as a trusted partner to address and cope with possible challenges that may arise during the initial stages of resettlement.



Digital Literacy

Much of the Ukrainian population uses the internet due to widespread mobile and internet coverage across the country. Ukrainians often use social media and messengers, like Viber, WhatsApp, and Telegram, to disseminate news and information. However, the overall digital competence among the population remains below the basic level, and individuals may face challenges with cyber security and online fraud.

Tips

- Consider utilizing the messenger apps as an additional tool for day-to-day communication with clients.
- Show clients how to explore relevant apps to facilitate their integration. For instance: Google maps for transportation orientation, Google translate for communication, or English learning apps such as Duolingo, Mondly, and Cake.
- Spend time showing individuals how to set up and leave voicemail messages and how to use Zoom or other conferencing systems they may need to use.
- Focus on the importance of digital security, including protecting personal data, being aware of misinformation, and recognizing the most common digital scams in the U.S.

Education

Primary education in Ukraine is free-of-charge and compulsory through grade 12, though access and quality vary significantly between urban and rural areas. Once students complete primary education, they can continue to vocational or higher education programs. According to UNESCO, Ukraine has one of the highest literacy rates in the world.

Since 2017 the Ukrainian Ministry of Education and Science has been implementing an ambitious education reform plan that aims to align Ukrainian education standards with European standards and best practices. The COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian military invasion have impacted education in Ukraine, forcing educational institutions to transition to online learning. This transition has been difficult, especially in areas with limited digital literacy and financial support for virtual programs.

English is included in the Ukrainian curriculum. Many school-aged children have at least a basic understanding of English. However, newcomers may struggle with the way English is spoken and taught in U.S. schools.

Tips

- Explain to parents the value of actively participating in their kids' education, including school activities and parent-teacher interactions. Remember: Some parents might resist participating in specific school events or holidays due to religious or social beliefs.
- Manage expectations regarding access and availability of pre-school for families with small kids, including possibilities with public assistance programs such as TANF.
- Be prepared to answer questions about higher education, including costs and language requirements, and evaluation of diplomas or vocational certificates obtained in Ukraine.





Employment

The largest share of the employed Ukrainian population works in the service sector (civil service, transportation, communications, retail trade), followed by the industry sector (construction, mining, manufacturing) and agriculture sector (farming, fishing, and forestry). The local labor market is also characterized by a high percentage of informal employment and occupational inequality for youth and women. Moreover, the Russian invasion has caused massive employment losses in Ukraine, with almost 5 million jobs lost.

Given the general case composition of women with minor children, employing Ukrainian clients will present opportunities and challenges. Many individuals coming to the U.S. will have attended tertiary education and have previous work experience. Others may have childcare and language barriers, little to no work experience, or unrecognized qualifications.

Tips

- Provide realistic information about employment, including when they will receive employment authorization documentation, find work, the need to pay taxes, and the possibility that the first job will not be in their chosen occupation.
- Explain the characteristics of the U.S. labor market and its hiring processes to enhance the client's ability to seek jobs.
- Underline the importance and benefits of early formal employment in relation to temporary assistance and future financial self-sufficiency.
- Highlight that learning English is crucial for future job growth and overall integration.
- Encourage clients to ask questions about their workplace rights and responsibilities in the U.S. and share employment expectations and objectives.





Francesco Pistilli/IRC

Health

The Ukrainian healthcare system continues to be underfunded, resulting in a lack of equipment, medicine, and qualified personnel in healthcare facilities. Ukrainian healthcare has undergone several changes, with the latest reforms aimed at improving primary care and drug availability. However, many elderly and lower-income families still struggle to access preventative care.

Many Ukrainians do not schedule regular medical check-ups, preferring self-treatment or traditional remedies. They are likely to visit the doctor only if their health condition worsens. Similarly, when it comes to mental health, Ukrainians prefer to utilize peer and family support and are not likely to seek professional care. It is not generally acceptable to discuss mental health or receive care for mental health.

Ukrainians will not be familiar with the medical insurance system, the need for a referral to see a specialist, or the requirements for prescriptions from a doctor when going to the pharmacy. Additionally, vaccination might be a sensitive topic to discuss. Some cases might push back on vaccinations due to religious or social beliefs.

Tips

- Explain what is included in the initial health services provided to refugees upon arrival. Ensure that elderly family members understand their medical coverage, including dental care.
- Manage expectations and review the process and timeline for receiving medical care and referrals in the United States. Highlight that same-day care is not always possible for non-urgent cases.
- Reinforce the importance of having medical insurance once the initial free medical care expires.
- Clarify the vaccination rules related to immigration status and the required vaccines for childcare and in schools in your state.
- Build trust and carefully discuss the value of addressing mental health. As possible, tie the topic of mental health to overall self-care and well-being.

Housing

Almost 70% of the Ukrainian population lives in cities in one- or two-bedroom apartments. Most of the housing in the country is privately owned. Renting initial housing in the United States might be a challenge for Ukrainian refugees. Individuals may not understand the complex leasing process, including background checks, lease requirements, and tenant rights and responsibilities. It is also possible that they will have higher expectations for their living conditions than what is available upon arrival. Ukrainian refugees may also prefer to live closer to their relatives or community.

Tips

- Dedicate time to explain leasing agreements in detail. Specifically, explain conditions related to repair and maintenance responsibilities, as Ukrainians tend to make minor repairs themselves. Additionally, thoroughly explain the concept of security deposits and lease duration. If possible or necessary, consider translating the agreement.
- Review different expenses and the importance of timely payments, as terms of rental and utility payments in Ukraine may vary based on a verbal agreement, not a written lease.
- Review the general use of appliances and utilities and explore differences that may exist, like with plumbing (toilets and showers).
- Explain the consequences and penalties of terminating leases early, as families might consider looking for cheaper renting options after initial housing is provided.



Immigration Status

It is important for Ukrainians resettling in the United States to understand the complexities of the immigration system. In particular, it's critical to ensure individuals follow their status requirements, whether they are paroled into the United States or enter through the United States Refugee Admissions Program.

Tips

- Explain the importance of obtaining all vaccinations, which are required as a part of parole status or for those that may be eligible to apply for permanent residency or Green Card.
- Ensure cases know how to change their address with USCIS by filling out the AR-11 form for each family member.
- Connect, as possible, individuals to qualified legal advisors since immigration law is complicated. Avoid fraudulent individuals who may charge money but not provide appropriate legal services.

Public Assistance

Ukraine has a complex public assistance system marred by insufficient coverage and lack of transparency. Many Ukrainians tend to rely on social support benefits, including birth and maternity installments, disability payments, or subsidized utilities. The Ukrainian government is trying to optimize the public assistance system by introducing unified electronic services and e-government applications.

Tips

- Invest time to explain the complexity of the public assistance system in the United States, including differences between benefits and the timeline to receive them.
- Be prepared to answer questions on exact amounts and duration of public assistance, including information about Supplemental Security Income.
- Practice with cases how to contact and receive information about public assistance independently, including how to request interpretation.

Conclusion

With support from local RAs and communities, Ukrainians can mobilize their inherent strengths and attitudes to help them resettle in the U.S successfully. As with other populations, Ukrainian clients will require RAs to incorporate a variety of teaching methods and approaches into CO and throughout the R&P service period to ensure maximum retention of CO topics. RAs can visit [CORE's website](#) to learn more about successful approaches to delivering CO to Ukrainian clients.



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