Introduction to Ukraine

Ukraine is the second largest country in Europe after Russia, and is the eighth most populous country in Europe. It gained its independence in 1991 following the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

In the hundreds of years leading up to Western Ukraine being annexed by the USSR in 1939, Ukraine was divided and ruled by different peoples. In the late seventeenth century, Poland dominated Western Ukraine, Russia Eastern Ukraine. As Poland gradually declined, Russia and Austria claimed more of Western Ukraine. By the late nineteenth century, Ukraine was under Russian control. Ukraine briefly gained independence in 1918, but was forced to become part of the Soviet Union in 1922.

Under Stalin's rule, Ukraine suffered terribly, with a man-made famine killing an estimated 7 million Ukrainian peasants who were not willing to hand their land over to the State. Throughout the 1930s, Stalin continued to 'purge' Ukrainians, followed by invasion by Nazi Germany in WWII when millions of Ukrainians were murdered. After the war, Stalin continued to carry out reprisals against anyone suspected of collaborating with Germany.

As dissatisfaction with rule from Moscow increased, the Ukrainian People's Movement for Restructuring was formed in 1989, with independence gained in 1991. It declared itself a neutral state in 1994, whilst forming limited military partnerships with Russia, other Eastern European states, and NATO.

In 2013, the then president Viktor Yanukovych suspended its political and economic association with Europe in favour of closer ties with Russia. This resulted in mass protests, leading to the Revolution of Dignity, the overthrowing of the president and the establishment of a new government.

In March 2014, Russia invaded the Crimea Peninsula, subsequently annexing it from Ukraine. Pro-Russian separatists continued to fight for independence from Ukraine in the Donbas Region with Russian support, which led to Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

References: [Ukraine - Wikipedia](#) and [A Brief History of Ukraine](#)

Language

Ukrainian is the official language of Ukraine and is spoken by about 68% of the population. Russian is spoken as a first language by about 30% of the population (although is not an official language!) and is spoken as a second language by many Ukrainians. Romanian, Polish and Hungarian are also spoken in some areas, but on a very small scale. English is not widely spoken by Ukrainians. Many people aged 20 to 35 speak some English, but this will vary enormously depending on their profession, and whether they are

from an urban or rural area. Many teenagers learn some English at school, but it is not an essential part of the school curriculum.

Cultural differences

British culture is generally more task-orientated, whereas Ukrainian culture is more relationship or people-orientated. In the UK, efficiency and being on time are high priorities and these show respect for the other person. Hospitality is usually planned in advance with an invitation and perhaps questions about what you prefer to eat or not eat. An unexpected guest may *not* be welcomed in. And in speaking, a 'yes' is a 'yes' and a 'no' is a 'no.' There are no hidden meanings.

In contrast, in Ukraine, a person takes priority over efficiency and time. Hospitality is spontaneous, often without an advanced invitation. An unexpected guest will *always* be warmly welcomed. They may be given food by the host but they won't necessarily be asked what they would like to eat or drink. And a 'yes' may not be a definitive answer to your question. It may be the first step in beginning a conversation or discussion.

[Understanding Cultural Differences in Hospitality – THE SERVIETTE](#) .

Ukrainian cultural etiquette and manners

When meeting someone for the first time, a typical Ukrainian greeting is a warm handshake, with good eye-contact, whilst repeating the person's name they are greeting. When greeting a close friend, it's common for female friends to kiss each other on the cheek.

When visiting a home in Ukraine, you would always be expected to take off your shoes, even if your host told you not to. So expect your Ukrainian guests to remove their shoes on entering the house.

Elderly people are highly respected in Ukraine. It would be expected to yield your seat on a bus for an elderly person and to serve them first at the meal table.

Table manners are generally casual. Typically, guests do not begin eating until the host invites them to start, so if you are cooking meals for Ukrainian guests you may need to invite them to eat. Traditionally, the oldest or most honoured guest is served first. It is considered rude to refuse a dish, or to refuse second helpings - so you may need to be aware of this as you try to work out what your guests actually like to eat!

[Ukraine - Language, Culture, Customs and Etiquette](#)

Family

The average number of people in a Ukrainian household in 2020 was 2.58. Many couples have one child, some two, but more than two is unusual nowadays. Grandparents play a key role in helping to bring up children.

Food

Ukraine is a major food producer for Europe and eating habits are reflected in the food produced. Staple foods include: bread, oatmeal, rice, porridge, noodles, sunflower oil, seasonal vegetables, cheese, sausages and eggs.

Generally, Ukrainians eat a light breakfast e.g. bread and butter with tea. Some people prefer porridge made with either oats, buckwheat or corn. Lunch is the main meal of the day, eaten mid-afternoon, and might consist of soup, followed by a meat or fish dish. The evening meal is eaten at about 6 or 7pm, with all family members at the table. Tea, coffee, water, and inexpensive juices are all popular drinks.

For traditional foods and recipes see: Food by country - Ukraine

Hobbies and past-times

Watching TV, playing games online, and reading are all popular leisure activities, as are walking, cycling and swimming. Football is the most-played game in Ukraine, closely followed by Ukrainian basketball. Boxing and ice hockey are also widely enjoyed. If a Ukrainian family owns their home, they may use the land beside their house to grow produce for their kitchen, so gardening is also popular.

Dealing with trauma

Many Ukrainians may be dealing with the trauma of leaving their homes and family members as a result of war. You can access the *Wellbeing and Trauma Hub* if you are part of a Welcome Churches Network Church which will help you to understand what trauma is, some of the signs of it, and how to support someone who has experienced trauma. It will also help you to look after yourself and find support should you need it.

There are many resources available online including: Headington Institute and Renew Wellbeing

Other useful websites

UK Government Ukraine Welcome Guidance

Red Cross information leaflet for Ukrainians arriving in the UK

Red Cross information leaflet for Ukrainians arriving in the UK in Ukrainian

Red Cross information leaflet for Ukrainians arriving in the UK in Russian

Ukrainians bringing pets to the UK

Ukrainian driving licences in the UK.