



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

BACKGROUND

Land and Climate

Ukraine, located in southeastern Europe, covers 233,032 square miles (603,550 square kilometers) and is slightly smaller than Texas. Forests cover some 18 percent of Ukraine's territory, chiefly in the Carpathian Mountains and in the northern regions. Southern Ukraine is dominated by steppes with fertile soil. Ukraine's dark-colored soil (called *chernozem*, from the Russian term for "black earth") gives it great potential as a food producer. The Crimean Peninsula extends into the Black Sea, with its northeastern coast on the Sea of Azov and its southern coast marked by the Crimean Mountains. One of Europe's largest wetlands (Pripjat Marshes) is located in a forested northern basin of the Dnipro and Pripjat rivers. Ukraine has cold winters and warm summers, although a Mediterranean climate prevails in Crimea.

History

Ukraine has been inhabited since about 1500 BC, but the Slavic ancestors of today's Ukrainians did not begin to settle the region until the seventh century AD. In the eighth and ninth centuries, seven Slavic tribes merged under the leadership of a Norse tribe (Varangians) to form the state of Kievan Rus'. A prominent early leader, Volodymyr I (ruled 980–1015), converted to Christianity and established close ties with the Byzantine (Eastern Orthodox) church. Kievan Rus' weakened in the 12th and 13th centuries to the point that Mongol invasions in 1220 and 1240 destroyed the state.

Despite some independent principalities, the Ukrainians were without unity and autonomy for many centuries. The Mongols held the east even as expansionist Poland and Lithuania controlled the west. The Mongols were eventually forced out, and by the mid-1500s, Poland and Lithuania (which had merged) controlled most Ukrainian lands. The Poles introduced Western Christianity, which clashed with Eastern Christianity and embittered the people against their rulers.

Rebellion soon followed, the most notable being carried out by a self-governing group called *Kozaks* (Zaporozhian Cossacks). The military strength of the Kozaks allowed them autonomy and reduced the influence of Poland and the Roman Catholic Church in the area. The Kozaks waged a national liberation war (1648–54) under the leadership of Kozak *hetman* (military chieftain) Bohdan Khmelnytsky. In 1654, he signed an alliance with Russia against the Polish-Lithuanian Kingdom. A Kozak state was carved out of the east (the west remained with Poland), and it prospered for a century. During the reign of Russia's Catherine the Great, Russia defeated the Kozaks (1775) and took control of the east. Later that year, Russia gained dominion over the west by partitioning Poland. Ukraine became a Russian province and so remained until the monarchy fell in 1917.

Ukraine declared independence but was occupied by Germany in World War I and was then forcibly incorporated into the Soviet Union in 1922. Western Ukraine, which identified with Europe, greatly resented the imposed Russification of its culture. Communist repression was greatest under Stalin, who collectivized farms and thereby caused the 1933 famine (*holodomor*) that took seven million

lives. Dissidents were imprisoned or executed, and use of the Ukrainian language was limited.

Language restrictions and repression eased after Stalin's death. Disaster struck the republic in 1986 with the meltdown of a nuclear reactor at Chornobyl (north of Kyiv). Radioactive contamination caused by the explosion killed many people, ruined the surrounding land, and affected much of eastern Europe. In June 2000, the government announced that the Chornobyl nuclear power plant would be closed down.

Hopes for independence strengthened as the Soviet empire weakened. Local elections in 1990 paved the way for official independence in August 1991. Leonid Kravchuk became the first president. Ukraine's possession of nuclear weapons and its poor relations with Russia hindered progress on some economic and social fronts. In 1993, however, Ukraine ratified the first Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START), agreeing to destroy the bulk of its nuclear warheads. Elections in 1994 brought Leonid Kuchma to office as president. In June 1996, the country adopted a new democratic constitution.

The Kuchma regime suffered from inefficiency and corruption, giving way to the election of Kuchma's prime minister, Viktor Yanukovich, as president in November 2004. However, the election was marred by voting irregularities and scandals, including the near-fatal poisoning of the opposition candidate, Viktor Yushchenko. Yushchenko and his supporters began a massive campaign of civil protests, dubbed the "Orange Revolution," that led to Yushchenko's victory in a second round of elections called by the Supreme Court. Yushchenko's government took a pro-Western course and moved toward integration with the European Union. His term was characterized by political turmoil and deadlock, much of it a result of tensions between him and Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko.

Elections in 2010 brought Viktor Yanukovich to the presidency. Considered more pro-Russian than the previous president, Yanukovich has strengthened ties with Moscow, extending a lease on the controversial Russian military base in Sevastopol and forging deals for favorable gas prices from Russia. Ukraine faces a variety of problems, including corruption, political scandal, crime, and economic difficulty. It continues working to balance relationships with Russia and the West.

THE PEOPLE

Population

Ukraine's population of nearly 45.4 million is decreasing annually by about 0.6 percent. Ethnic Ukrainians comprise 78 percent of the population. Ethnic Russians (17 percent) live mainly in the east and in Crimea, where they comprise two-thirds of the population. Despite arrangements giving limited autonomy to Crimea and agreements between Russia and Ukraine, ethnic Russians are expected to continue pressing for autonomy in Crimea. Smaller groups include Belarusians, Moldovans, Bulgarians, Jews, Tatars, Poles, Hungarians, Romanians, and Greeks. Tatars live in Crimea but lack citizenship rights. They were expelled by the Soviets

in 1944 but have returned in small groups since 1989. Large numbers of ethnic Ukrainians reside in western Europe, North America, and other areas. In Ukraine, two-thirds of the people live in urban areas. The capital, Kyiv (Kiev) is the largest and oldest city.

Language

The official language is Ukrainian, a Slavic language written in the Cyrillic alphabet of 33 letters. During the Soviet period, Russian was also an official language. Russian is no longer as prominent, but it is still widely spoken and is the primary language of ethnic Russians and other ethnic groups. Many Ukrainians in Kiev and cities east of the Dnipro also speak Russian. In western Ukraine, feelings of nationalism are especially strong, and Ukrainian is the preferred language. People in this area may ignore or correct other Ukrainians who address them in Russian. More than half of the population is bilingual, and many people use Surzhik (a combination of Russian and Ukrainian). In eastern Ukraine, many Polish words are part of the vocabulary. In addition to Ukrainian or Russian, minority groups usually also speak their respective languages, including Polish, Hungarian, and Romanian.

Religion

Christianity is the dominant religion, represented by the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (84 percent of the population), Greek Catholic (Uniate) Church (which combines Orthodox rituals with recognition of the Catholic pope, 8 percent), and the Roman Catholic Church (2 percent). The Ukrainian Orthodox Church split from its parent Orthodox Church in Russia in 1992; it has no official status. Catholicism is found mostly in the west. Communism encouraged people to abandon their religious beliefs, but many Ukrainians maintained their devout heritage. So once religious freedom was restored in the late 1980s, Christianity began to revive. The trend intensified with independence, and today Christians also include small but growing groups of Protestants (2 percent) and other denominations. Jews now represent less than 1 percent of the population, but their numbers were much higher prior to World War II. Ukraine is home to many sacred Jewish sites.

General Attitudes

Ukrainians consider themselves a merry people, prone to singing and dancing. They appreciate openness and wit, as well as humor. Individualism is also valued, although it was somewhat muted during the Soviet era. Friendships play an important role for most Ukrainians, and neighbors are generally supportive of each other. While Ukrainians are warm in their interactions with people they know, they are often more aloof when dealing with strangers, whether it be on the street or in a customer service situation.

The nationalism and euphoria of independence have waned in recent years. Many Ukrainians are nostalgic for the poor but stable way of life they had under the Soviet regime. Ukrainian society is experiencing great transition. Those accustomed to Soviet work patterns are learning the meaning and value of private enterprise, individual labor, and personal

initiative. At the same time, Ukrainians have been faced with economic hardships and other problems that have led to cynicism toward the ruling elite and disenchantment with reform and democracy.

Personal Appearance

Most Ukrainian fashions are similar to those in other European countries. Professional men wear suits, ties, and hats. Women wear pantsuits, dresses, or skirts. Stylish clothing is important to urban women. Clothing is often imported and is quite expensive. Outside of urban centers, many women have sewing machines and make clothes for their families. They may also knit sweaters, hats, and scarves for the winter. Taste and tidiness are important; it is improper to wear wrinkled or soiled clothes.

The older generation dresses more conservatively; elderly women in rural areas usually wear dresses and cover their heads with scarves. On special occasions (e.g., weddings, festivals, and holidays), Ukrainians often wear the national outfit. The most traditional item, called a *vyshyvanka*, is a shirt or blouse embroidered in one of several regional patterns, which have not changed for centuries.

CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

Greetings

When meeting informally, men and women usually wave the hand and give a verbal greeting like *Pryvit* (Hi) or *Dobryj den'* (Good day). *Dobryj den'* is also appropriate in formal situations, in which case people often shake hands. Men wait for women to extend their hand first. In official situations, Ukrainians use titles, including professional titles and *Pan* (Mr.), *Panove* ("Sirs" or "Gentlemen"), and *Pani* ("Mrs." or "Miss," both singular and plural). Relatives and close friends often kiss on the cheek and hug when greeting. They address each other by first name. A respectful form of address includes the first name followed by the patronymic, which is the father's given name and a gender-specific (for son or daughter) suffix. For example, if a man named Ivan had a father named Mykola, Ivan's patronymic name would be Mykolayovich. In eastern Ukraine, strangers may address one another using generic titles such as *molodoy chelovek* (young man), *mujshina* (man), *devuskha* (girl), or *jenshina* (woman).

Traditionally, honored guests would be met with gifts of bread and salt, symbolizing prosperity. While this custom is no longer observed widely, it may be practiced ceremonially when important visitors arrive in the country.

Gestures

Hand and body gestures are used only moderately in daily conversation. It is important to establish eye contact a few times (but not constantly) during a conversation. Facial expressions are reserved. Smiling at strangers is rare and can be viewed as flirtatious or strange. Approval is expressed by nodding the head. Pointing with the index finger is considered uncultured but is not uncommon. To speak to a superior (such as a teacher, boss, official, or senior) with one's hands in the pockets or arms folded across the chest is viewed as

disrespectful. Chewing gum while talking is also improper. It is considered bad luck to pass an object from one person to another while standing in a doorway.

Women expect some chivalry from men. It is rude for a man to not open a door for a woman. Men commonly help women carry heavy items or at least offer to do so. When on public transportation, men may offer their seats to women, though more often youth do so for elders. When exiting public transportation, men usually get off first and then offer their hands to women with whom they are traveling.

Visiting

Because of the Ukrainian tradition of hospitality, people welcome both expected and unexpected guests. Still, visits arranged in advance are preferred whenever possible. Friends, neighbors, and relatives often visit just to socialize. In these cases, guests are always offered tea or coffee and some refreshments. Guests invited for dinner are offered a more abundant meal with numerous different dishes and are expected to stay for a while afterward. They commonly present their hosts with flowers (only in odd numbers), cake, a bottle of liquor, or candy or toys for the children. Guests do not sit on the floor or put their feet on furniture. It is polite to stand when a woman enters the room.

Eating

A traditional Ukrainian proverb says, "Breakfast you eat by yourself, lunch you share with a friend, and dinner you give to an enemy," reflecting the belief that one should eat a big breakfast, a smaller lunch, and an even smaller dinner. Today many Ukrainians eat a light *snidanok* (breakfast) in the morning before leaving for school or work. The main meal, eaten in midafternoon, is called *obid*. It consists of two main courses, the first being some kind of soup and the second containing meat or fish, usually paired with a starch such as pasta, porridge, or potatoes. Working people usually bring food from home or go to canteens (*cafés*) for *obid*. The third meal, *vecheria*, is eaten at 6 or 7 p.m., and family members usually eat it together. There is no difference between foods eaten for *obid* and for *vecheria*.

When eating, Ukrainians keep hands (not elbows) on the table. It is improper to leave the hands in the lap. People eat with the fork in the left hand and the knife in the right. Leaving food on one's plate is considered wasteful. Guests honor the hosts when they ask for second helpings; refusing additional servings is seen as a gesture of modesty, so hosts often serve their guests more food whether they ask for it or not. Because of economic difficulties and the unavailability of restaurants during the communist era, most people dine out only for special occasions. Bread is generally purchased daily or every few days. Throwing away bread is offensive to older people, who remember times when food was very scarce in Ukraine.

Most women take great pride in their cooking. In recent years, a growing number of processed foods have appeared in stores but are not widely used. Most meals are made from scratch, using few pre-prepared ingredients. Many people make even basic ingredients, like sour cream and mayonnaise, themselves. Cookbooks are often seen as only for

inexperienced cooks or people who are exploring different types of foods, because many people have the recipes for their favorite dishes memorized. Women usually get up early to prepare breakfast for the family and assemble meals to take to work or school.

LIFESTYLE

Family

The family unit is important in Ukraine, and extended family ties are valued. The average family has one or two children. Couples generally make most family decisions together. In urban families, both parents usually work outside the home. In rural areas, it is more common for women not to work outside the home. Women are generally responsible for household chores, whether they work outside the home or not. In recent years, more women have held important posts in business and government (most notably former prime minister Yulia Tymoshenko). However, most of the highest positions are still held by men, and the average woman may find it difficult to break into higher levels of employment.

Because of the high cost of housing, most young people live with their parents. Children usually do not move out until they get married, although some young couples continue to live with one set of parents even after marriage until they can afford a place of their own. Young people who attend universities away from their hometown usually live in dormitories. After graduation, most move back in with their parents until they can afford to move out.

The elderly are treated with love and respect. Many elderly parents live with their adult children, and grandparents often assume responsibility for daily child care. It is a common practice for parents to support children until they reach adulthood and even after they are married. In turn, children care for aging parents when it becomes necessary. When grandparents live in the country and adult children live in the city, the grandchildren may be sent to live with the grandparents for several weeks during the summer. In some cases, adult children living in urban areas may also return to rural areas during the spring and fall to help their parents plant and harvest crops.

Housing

Most urban Ukrainians live in multi-storey apartment buildings erected when Ukraine was part of the Soviet Union. Only in Kiev, Odessa, and one or two of the other larger cities are there many houses that predate the Soviet era. The Soviet apartments tend to be quite small, usually containing one or two bedrooms. Many apartments have a sofa in the living area that converts to a bed (or is simply used as a bed) at night. People may also live in *obshejitie* (arrangements in which each family has their own room but shares a bathroom and kitchen with other families). Apartment buildings have central heating systems, but many have fallen into disrepair and are unreliable. The exterior of these apartments is usually concrete painted in drab colors. While such apartments used to be allocated by the government, during the economic reforms of the early 1990s, inhabitants were allowed to buy

them for a nominal fee. People buying homes since then have generally had to pay cash, as mortgages remain rare. This lack of financing options, combined with the high price of land, makes home ownership unattainable for many Ukrainians. Some affordable apartments are still leased from the government, as renting from a private owner is expensive. Because of the high price of housing, young people often rent apartments with roommates, and it's common for people to rent out bedrooms in their homes to earn extra money.

In rural areas, the size of homes can vary significantly. Most are either one or two storeys, with a tiled roof, a porch (usually with a table and chairs), and often a wood- or coal-burning stove, which is used for both heating the home and cooking. Homes are usually constructed of brick, and properties are surrounded by tall fences. Rural homes nearly always have a well-tended garden. In western and northern Ukraine, homes are often painted according to traditional styles (white with colorful window frames and painted floral accents). In other areas, homes are usually painted in a single color. It is not uncommon, even in small houses, for several generations of the same family to live together.

For the most part, Ukrainians decorate their homes very colorfully. A lot of homes boast flowery wallpaper, cabinets displaying crystal, and bright carpets that both cover the floor and hang from the walls. In recent years, decorating trends have aligned more with those of Western Europe, with light-colored walls and minimalist furniture. Suburban families have most modern conveniences (electricity, gas, and water), while rural people don't always have these conveniences.

Dating and Marriage

Ukrainians start dating in their early teens. Young Ukrainians meet at discos and concerts, in school, at work, and through friends. When dating, they usually visit friends, go to bars or movies, or dance at discos. Couples usually marry in their twenties. Couples may date for an extended period of time without getting married, and a sexual relationship does not necessarily lead to marriage. A growing number of couples choose to live together before or instead of marrying. People in rural areas are generally more conservative, and sexual relationships outside of marriage, while not uncommon, are cause for gossip.

In order for a couple to become engaged, the man is expected to ask the woman's parents for permission to marry her. Traditionally, he would not ask himself. Instead, he would bring a close friend or relative with him to speak with her parents. This person would present the man in a positive light and attempt to persuade the woman's parents about the quality of the match. Today, most men speak to the woman's parents themselves. If the parents agree to the engagement, the man is free to propose to the woman. While most men seek permission from the woman's parents, today this ritual is generally seen as ceremonial. The decision is generally viewed as the couple's to make, and family approval is not considered as important as in past generations. Engagements generally last from three months to a year.

A marriage is legal only if performed in a city hall or in a "wedding palace" (an elegant building with several rooms

that can be rented for events) by someone authorized by the government. When all guests are seated, the person conducting gives a small speech and asks the couple to state that they wish to marry. The couple then exchanges rings and is presented with their marriage certificate. The best man and maid of honor then lay out a *rushnik* (a long, white embroidered towel) in front of the couple. Legend has it that whoever steps on the *rushnik* first will be the head of the household.

Most couples today also have a religious ceremony the day after the civil ceremony. A Christian Orthodox wedding takes place at a church and is presided over by a priest. The couple stands at the front of the church, and the best man and the maid of honor hold ornate golden crowns over the couple's heads. Three times, the couple gives their rings to the priest, who blesses them and then returns them to the couple to put on. The priest then leads the couple around an altar.

Urban wedding parties are fancy but may not involve much tradition. On the other hand, rural weddings are big events that usually last for three days. Such weddings resemble a combination of a grand party and a performance, as people participate in traditional wedding rituals. For example, at some point the bride must be “stolen.” The successful thieves “demand” a ransom for her return. The couple's parents greet them at the wedding party with bread and salt. Today, couples throughout the country are choosing to incorporate more Ukrainian traditions in their weddings.

Life Cycle

There are many traditional superstitions associated with pregnancy, and pregnant women are treated with care. While people today may not believe in the superstitions, they often comply out of custom. Pregnant women may avoid going to a cemetery because the sadness associated with the place could be passed on to the baby. Sewing with long threads is avoided because it is believed to lead to the baby becoming tangled in the umbilical cord. It is also considered bad luck to take money from a pregnant woman, to refuse her requests, or to buy things for the baby before the birth. Parents are often hesitant to reveal the baby's name or gender to people outside the family until after the birth.

During the first month of a baby's life, few people come to the house. Grandmothers are usually heavily involved in helping with their grandchildren. A baby's christening is an important family event. The ritual begins with the naming of the child. The baby is taken to the church by the godparents, who announce the name. After the baby is christened into the Orthodox Church, a big party is held. Many believe that complimenting a new baby can bring misfortune. If someone compliments a baby, the mother may respond by disagreeing in order to prevent bad luck.

Children are considered adults at age 18. Families may throw a party to celebrate this milestone, but few other traditions are associated with adulthood.

When someone dies, the family covers the mirrors in the home with linen. Most people choose to be buried, but cremation is not uncommon, especially among families who cannot afford the cost of burial. If a person is to be buried, the family places in the coffin small items that the deceased

valued in life. Traditionally, this was done to encourage the person's soul not to remain on earth. Mourners bring flowers to the funeral. This is one of the only occasions on which people get an even number of flowers. Relatives, friends, and a brass band follow the coffin to the cemetery. After the funeral procession and ceremony, mourners return to the family home for a wake, where refreshments are served. A small glass of vodka with a piece of bread on top is traditionally put out for the deceased. The glass remains in place until the liquid has evaporated. Small wakes are also held nine days and forty days after a death.

Diet

Vegetables, breads, dairy products, and starchy foods are basic staples of the Ukrainian diet. Pork and beef are popular meats. Poultry, sausages, and preserved meats are also widely available. *Salo* (pork fat) is eaten either raw or fried and usually accompanies bread or potatoes. The most popular Ukrainian dishes are made of cereal grains and flour pastes (for foods such as dumplings and breads). Common grains include buckwheat, oats, and millet. Rice is imported. Popular dishes include *varenyky* (stuffed dumplings), *holubtsi* (cabbage leaves stuffed with ground meat and rice), and *kasha* (cooked or baked cereal). *Kasha* is served with either meat or poultry. Chicken Kyiv (Kiev) is known worldwide. Ukraine is one of the few areas in Europe where corn-on-the-cob is eaten. Soup is essential; *borsch* is the most popular. *Borsch* usually contains cabbage, beets, potatoes, carrots, and meat, which is optional. It can be served hot or cold, with or without sour cream, and there are several varieties according to locality and season. Crepes and pancakes are also popular. Dairy products generally use whole milk. Traditional Ukrainian food uses few spices, because in the past, spices were largely unavailable.

Ukrainians enjoy seasonal fruits such as apples, pears, plums, berries, and melons. Fresh produce is available but very expensive in the winter, so in summer and autumn, people make numerous preserves for the winter months.

Recreation

On weekends, young people enjoy leaving the city and camping on a riverbank or in the woods. Hiking and skiing are also popular activities. In the summer, people enjoy being outside, often swimming, playing sports, visiting parks, hiking, going on picnics, and taking camping trips. In the colder months, people find ways to enjoy themselves inside. They may visit friends, play board games, watch television, or read. Literature is important to Ukrainians, and most are avid readers. Young people enjoy socializing at cafés and parks and going out dancing.

Sports are popular year-round, with the most common being soccer, basketball, volleyball, and hockey. Soccer is by far the most popular sport, with youth, university, and regional teams playing throughout the country. People often gather at sports bars to watch televised games. People of all ages play informally whenever possible. Fishing is especially popular with men. It's common for small groups of men to gather to go fishing, leaving early in the morning. Girls and women enjoy dancing, especially ballroom dancing and folk

dancing. Many people enjoy playing cards. One popular game is *duroka* (idiot). This four-person game has no winner, only a loser (called the *duroka*).

Urban Ukrainians with *dachas* (country houses) spend much time there tending a garden, making preserves, and relaxing. People without *dachas* often have a small garden plot near the city. Theaters and musical concerts are available in cities.

Most families save the entire year in order to take a summer trip. The most common destinations are the coasts (usually Crimea or Odessa), mountain areas, and nearby rivers. Guided tours are also popular, often to destinations like the Carpathian Mountains. Most Ukrainians like to be active on their vacations, so activities often include outdoor sports.

The Arts

During the Soviet era, the government often used the fine arts as propaganda, but Ukrainian culture was preserved through folk songs and legends. Folk songs are sung a cappella or are accompanied by instruments such as the *sopilka* (flute), *volynka* (hornpipe), and stringed *bandura* (similar to a many-stringed guitar or lute), which is Ukraine's national instrument. The *hopak* is a showy Ukrainian folk dance in which men jump, swirl, and kick, and women perform simpler movements. Ukrainian folk dance groups are very popular and perform all over the world. Ukraine is known worldwide for the delicate art of Easter-egg painting (*pysanka*), which is still practiced with great skill today. Embroidered clothing and tapestries are also well appreciated. Ukraine's independence has meant greater artistic freedom. Government funding for the arts has been drastically reduced, though most entrance fees and tickets are still affordable for the majority of the population, and many Ukrainians frequent museums and theaters.

Holidays

National holidays include New Year's Day (1 Jan.), Christmas (7 Jan.), International Women's Day (8 Mar.), Solidarity Day (1 May), Victory Day (9 May), Constitution Day (28 June), and Independence Day (24 Aug.). An old holiday, Soviet Army Day (23 Feb.) is unofficially celebrated as a sort of Men's Day.

On New Year's, Ukraine's most popular holiday, people decorate fir trees and have parties that often last through the night. Families often watch the president's welcome of the new year on television. On Women's Day, women receive flowers and gifts, household help from husbands, and a day off from work. Special attention is paid to mothers, and girls are congratulated as future women. Victory Day marks the end of World War II and is extremely important to most families. It starts in Kiev with a parade made up of veterans and military artillery. Aircraft exhibitions are also common on this day. Government leaders and citizens bring flowers to the World War II monument. In rural areas, people may gather to cook and distribute porridge to commemorate wartime conditions, when people would gather to receive food rations.

Religious holidays are regaining prominence after being

suppressed under the Soviet Union. Christmas, celebrated on 25 December by Catholics and on 7 January by Orthodox Christians, is particularly popular in western Ukraine and rural areas. During the Christmas season, children go door-to-door to receive candies and cookies in exchange for *kolyadki* (Christmas carols) and jokes. On Christmas Eve, the whole family gathers for a special dinner. Twelve different dishes are served, including *kutya* (a wheat or rice porridge with raisins, nuts, and honey) and *uzvar* (a compote made of dried fruits, sometimes mixed with honey). A tall and thin but otherwise Santa Claus-like figure called *Dyd Moroz* (Grandpa Frost) brings gifts. Easter is observed throughout the country. The Thursday before Easter is set aside for bathing (to symbolize the washing away of sins) and housecleaning. The day before Easter, Orthodox Christians attend all-night church services. Families bring baskets of food and wine for the priest to bless. The next morning, the family gathers for breakfast and eats the food from the basket. Family and friends gather to visit and prepare painted eggs and special cakes called *paskha*. People greet one another by saying *Khristos voskres* (Christ is risen), to which they respond *Voistinu voskres* (Yes, indeed).

Ivana Kupala dates back to pagan times (before Christianity was introduced) and marks the end of summer. On the night of 7 June, Ukrainians gather herbs and flowers, which they weave into garlands. Girls place candles in the center of the garlands and set them afloat in a river. It is said that the faster the garland reaches the opposite bank of the river, the sooner the girl will be married. If the garland sinks, it means she will either be a widow or will never marry. People also build bonfires on this night, which young couples jump over to bring good luck in becoming engaged in the coming year. Other traditions include water fights, fortune telling, and pretending to hunt for witches.

SOCIETY

Government

Ukraine is a parliamentary democracy led by a strong executive president (currently Viktor Yanukovich), who is directly elected for a five-year term. Parliament (*Verkhovna Rada*) has 450 members. Seats are divided proportionately among all political parties that win 3 percent or more of the vote. A large number of political parties are represented. The prime minister (currently Mykola Azarov) is the head of government. All citizens may vote at age 18.

Economy

During Soviet times, Ukraine was referred to as the "breadbasket" because it produced more than one-fourth of the USSR's agriculture. The potential for an agriculturally based economy exists, but it cannot be tapped without significant reform. Farms must be modernized, and laborers must adjust to wage work; however, government privatization has been slow.

During the Soviet era, large coal and iron deposits contributed to the development of a sizable industrial base that produced goods for many other republics. In fact,

Ukraine was the second most productive Soviet republic (behind Russia). But industry also requires materials from outside Ukraine, and these can now be purchased only with hard (convertible) currencies, which are in short supply. The country also has a large defense industry that must begin creating consumer-oriented products before it can become profitable.

Corruption, political opposition, and continued state subsidies to unprofitable industries and collective farms have hindered growth and foreign investment in recent years. Reforms and improvements in infrastructure are needed to stabilize the cash-strapped economy and overcome large public debts. The 2008 global financial crisis hit Ukraine hard, in part by lowering demand for steel, one of the country's main exports. In October 2008, the International Monetary Fund gave Ukraine a loan of US\$16.5 billion to help the economy recover. Many goods and services are bartered or traded informally; in fact, the size of Ukraine's unofficial economy rivals the official economy. High inflation and underemployment are ongoing problems. Ukraine's currency is the *hryvnia* (UAH).

Transportation and Communications

Urban public transportation is efficient. Streetcars, buses, and trolleys are the main means of transport, but major cities also have subways. Most families do not own cars. Roads are extensive but often in poor repair. Fuel is expensive, making taxis expensive and sometimes hard to find. Unofficial "taxis" often pick up people who ask for a ride. Rural people often travel on bicycles; buses or trains take them to nearby towns. The railroad network is developed, though trains are in need of modernization. Air Ukraine is the domestic airline.

Telephone and postal services have improved but remain inadequate. The press is active, but newspapers and television are tightly controlled by different political groups, both the government and the opposition. Many local radio and television stations are private. Internet access is widely available in cities, both through home internet connections and internet cafés that charge an hourly fee. In rural areas, internet connections are less common but are slowly becoming more widely available. Cellular phones are ubiquitous in urban areas, though slightly less common in rural areas.

Education

Education is highly valued in Ukraine. There are three levels of schooling. Students attend primary school (*pochatkova shkola*) from ages 6 to 9. Secondary school is divided into two levels: lower secondary school (*seredn'a shkola*) runs from ages 10 to 14, and higher secondary school (*starsha shkola*) lasts from ages 15 to 17 or 18. Because of a strained government budget, recent educational reforms aim to change the length of education from 12 years back to 11 years, which was the case in Soviet times. Many decry this move as a step backward for the education system and for Ukraine's efforts to join the European Union. Schooling is compulsory through age 14. About 99 percent of students complete primary school, and about 85 percent of students attend secondary school.

Most children attend public schools. Although these schools do not charge tuition, students are required to buy their own uniforms and some of their books and supplies. In rural areas, the school system struggles to accommodate all of the students. A single school may serve more than one village, so students may have to walk long distances to get to school. Rural schools often lack sufficient numbers of teachers, so teachers may be responsible for many different age levels and subjects, reducing the quality of instruction. Most urban schools have computers available for students to use. Computers are less common in rural schools, which may not have any or may have only a few to be used by all of the students.

Ukrainian is the language of instruction in public schools. Some private schools may use Russian. The teaching style in most classrooms is fairly authoritarian, with material usually coming directly from textbooks. Much emphasis is placed on testing. Students who wish to attend a university are required to take exams (called *Zovnishn'e Nezalezhne Otsin'uvannya*) in a variety of subject areas, some of which are required and some of which the students choose. The results of these exams determine which universities they will be accepted to.

After completing mandatory schooling, most teenagers prefer to go to higher secondary school for two more years and prepare to enter a university. Others choose to work during the day and attend school in the evening, train at schools specializing in certain careers, or enter job-training programs. Universities are located in major cities.

Health

Medical care is free, but service is poor. Although medical advice is available, treatment is often inadequate because facilities frequently lack basic supplies and modern equipment. Pollution levels are high and tap water is not safe to drink. Cancer and other problems stemming from the Chernobyl nuclear accident continue to afflict a large portion of the population.

AT A GLANCE

Contact Information

Embassy of Ukraine, 3350 M Street NW, Washington, DC 20007; phone (202) 333-0606; web site www.mfa.gov.ua/usa/en.

POPULATION & AREA

Population	45,415,596 (rank=28)
Area, sq. mi.	233,032 (rank=45)
Area, sq. km.	603,550

DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index* rank	69 of 182 countries
Gender inequality rank	44 of 155 countries
Real GDP per capita	\$6,300
Adult literacy rate	100% (male); 99% (female)
Infant mortality rate	9 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy	63 (male); 75 (female)

*UN Development Programme, Human Development Report 2010 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

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