



# Support for Displaced Ukrainians in the UK

The Role of History and  
Stereotypes

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## Summary

One year on from the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees reports more than 8.1 million Ukrainian refugees across Europe.<sup>1</sup> Approximately 163,500 displaced Ukrainians are in the UK, most travelling via the specially designated visa routes: the Ukraine Family Scheme and the Ukraine Sponsorship Scheme (“Homes for Ukraine”).<sup>2</sup>

Our research shows that a lack of understanding of historical context and stereotyping of “Eastern Europeans” in the UK impacts on the experiences of displaced Ukrainians in four key areas: housing, jobs and benefits, health, and language. Improving knowledge and addressing these stereotypes would substantially improve host/visa holder relations, transition to skilled work, and access to benefits and healthcare. It would also support those working with displaced Ukrainians to avoid re-traumatisation of this vulnerable group.

## Introduction

There has been considerable reflection on the successes and challenges of the UK’s support for those displaced by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The special visa routes for Ukrainians introduced by the UK government in March 2022 have received particular attention. What is often missing from these analyses is consideration of the cultural dynamics that underpin the experiences of Ukrainians fleeing the war. Two aspects are of particular importance: 1) Ukrainian historical memory and the history of Russian/Ukrainian relations; 2) “xenoracism” and discrimination

towards those stereotyped as “Eastern Europeans” in the UK.

These are aspects that we have been exploring in the research project *Post-Socialist Britain? Memory, Representation and Political Identity amongst German, Polish and Ukrainian Immigrants in the UK*, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council.<sup>3</sup> Our research shows the importance of historical memory for political identity among these groups. For Ukrainians, memory of Russian and Soviet imperialism, historical attempts to “Russify” Ukraine, and national independence since 1991 are key to how they view the current conflict.

The Cold War is less publicly remembered in the UK. However, there is considerable evidence that the “three worlds ideology” that dominated that period continues to influence how movers from the east of Europe are viewed and treated. This ideology divided the world rhetorically into First (Capitalist West), Second (Communist East), and Third (Non-Aligned South) worlds. The “Second World” was seen to occupy a space in-between the developed and developing world.<sup>4</sup> After the collapse of communism and the transition to liberal democracies, countries once on the Eastern side of the divide are still seen by many in the same way. They are considered on the way to “catching up” with the West, but not to have achieved full equality.<sup>5</sup>

This “in-between” status of Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries manifests itself in a form of discrimination that has been termed “xenoracism”, “racism that is not colour-coded”,<sup>6</sup> “ambiguous racialisation”,<sup>7</sup> or “Eastern Europeanism”.<sup>8</sup> The

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<sup>1</sup> We use the term “refugee” to describe those who have left Ukraine and/or are unable to return because of the Russian invasion. It is important to note that most Ukrainians in the UK are visa holders and have not been granted formal refugee status under the Geneva convention.

<sup>2</sup> UNHCR Operational Data Portal (2023). Data on visas issued to Ukrainians by the UK government can be found at Gov.uk

(2023), *Ukraine Family Scheme, Ukraine Sponsorship Scheme (Homes for Ukraine) and Ukraine Extension Scheme Visa Data*.

<sup>3</sup> <https://postsocialistbritain.bham.ac.uk/>.

<sup>4</sup> Chari and Verdery (2009); Mayblin and Turner (2020).

<sup>5</sup> Kalmar (2022).

<sup>6</sup> Fekete (2001); Sivanandan (2008).

<sup>7</sup> Lewicki (2023).

<sup>8</sup> Kalmar (2022).

populations of CEE countries are predominantly white and benefit from many of the privileges of whiteness. But in the UK and many other Western countries they are also perceived as “not quite white enough” and experience discrimination as a result.<sup>9</sup> This affects multiple dimensions of their lives: playground bullying, lack of recognition of qualifications and experience, underrepresentation, micro-aggressions and even hate crime.<sup>10</sup>

To date, we have conducted 18 in-depth 1:1 interviews with Ukrainians in the UK. In this report, we draw on these rich and detailed accounts to complement and interpret existing research and quantitative data on the experiences of (Ukrainian) refugees. Our emphasis is on the importance of history, culture, and the racialisation of “Eastern Europeans” as a group.

## Recommendations

Based on our detailed findings outlined below, we recommend that national and local government, service providers, and organisations working with displaced Ukrainians implement the following:

1. Collation and expansion of existing support schemes for Ukrainians to re-transition into skilled employment. Mentoring schemes are currently offered by several charities (e.g., RefuAid, Refugee Council, Refugee Action)<sup>11</sup> but should be expanded nationwide and more proactively promoted, e.g. by Jobcentres.
2. Guidance for Jobcentres and other employment agencies on the equivalence of Ukrainian qualifications, and on reasons diplomas or job references may not be readily available, so that they can support Ukrainians in applying for appropriate positions.

3. Guidance to Ukrainians (in English, Ukrainian and Russian) on accessing benefits, in particular childcare benefits. For instance, the charity Turn2us provides a useful calculator, which could be translated into other languages and referred to by Councils and Jobcentres.<sup>12</sup>
4. Clarity from the UK government on routes to extending stays in the UK to enable long-term planning for Ukrainians and employers.
5. Guidance for “Homes for Ukraine” hosts, developed by Ukrainians and experts on Ukraine, that provides more in-depth understanding of Ukrainian identity, culture, and history. This could be in the form of an information booklet, online video and/or a live training session.
6. Training for hosts on recognising and challenging racism, xenophobia and negative stereotypes associated with Central and Eastern Europe, including their role in shaping hosts’ own perceptions of Ukraine and Ukrainians.
7. Guidance for Ukrainians (in English, Ukrainian and Russian) on navigating the NHS, including information on average waiting times, level of service, and advice on getting essential care. This should include guidance on asserting yourself in medical situations and a directory of medical professionals with a cultural background in a CEE country.
8. Guidance for British doctors on using prior medical histories provided by patients, including test results, prescriptions, and diagnoses, recognising that Ukraine has an advanced medical system.
9. Guidance for service providers on the provision of interpreters for Ukrainians. The guidance should make clear that not all Ukrainians are equally (or at all) competent in Russian and Ukrainian, and that

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<sup>9</sup> Narkowicz (2020).

<sup>10</sup> For example: Johnston, Khattab and Manley (2015); Narkowicz (2020); Rzepnikowska (2019); Samaluk (2016); Tereshchenko, Bradbury and Archer (2019).

<sup>11</sup> RefuAid (n.d.), Refugee Council (n.d.), Refugee Action (n.d.).

<sup>12</sup> Turn2us (n.d.)

Ukrainian is not a dialect of Russian. Many Ukrainians do not speak and understand the other language sufficiently to cope in complex and/or traumatic situations.

10. Limit the use of Russian-speaking interpreters to occasions when service users indicate this as a preferred language. Ensure in all cases that interpreters are briefed on appropriate ways to communicate on topics relating to the war. This should be recognised as part of the requirement to consider safeguarding responsibilities.<sup>13</sup>

Further reasons for down-skilling among displaced Ukrainians include insufficient language skills and difficulties with diploma recognition, as well as the inability to provide proof of education and references (job references are not commonly requested in Ukraine, and many former employers would now be fighting in the army or displaced themselves). One interviewee said:

*I don't even have my diploma here, it somehow stayed there, in the occupied territory, I don't know how to take it from there.*

Most displaced Ukrainians in the UK are women with children whose fathers have stayed in Ukraine.<sup>16</sup> The lack of childcare is another significant barrier to employment. One of our interviewees expressed her frustration about the lack of wrap-around care:

*There are no after-school clubs in the school [my son] goes to now, so I cannot even pay to leave him there.*

Finally, the UK government's humanitarian schemes only grant Ukrainians three years to stay in the UK, making it difficult to make long-term plans including re-training, and this is likely to deter employers as well.

Our interviewees perceive living on benefits and down-skilling as unsatisfactory not only because of the financial limitations, but also because of the status loss and the meaning of work for their identity. As one interviewee describes:

*The biggest shock after being separated from your family is the change in your social status.*

This status loss is two-fold – the socio-economic downgrade is intertwined with an ethno-cultural status loss, as Ukrainians and others described as

## Detailed Findings

### 1. Work and benefits

Many interviewees in our study state that they cannot find jobs commensurate with their education and experience. Indeed, Ukrainians arriving in the UK via the new visa routes often work in hospitality or agriculture in the UK, whereas in Ukraine many were employed in finance or education.<sup>14</sup> That is, many have taken on lower-skilled and lower-paid jobs since moving to the UK. This is a significant and persistent issue among migrants from Central and Eastern Europe in the UK, partially driven by stereotypes of the “Polish cleaner” and “Romanian fruit picker”, which seem to play out in the Ukrainian case as well.<sup>15</sup> As one of our interviewees put it:

*[Most] Ukrainians who came to England are educated, they have several diplomas, but currently they only offer cleaning.... we're cheap labour for the English at the moment.*

<sup>13</sup> NHS England (2019); Gov.UK (2017).

<sup>14</sup> Office for National Statistics (2022), *Visa Holders Entering the UK*.

<sup>15</sup> Bulat (2019); Narkowicz (2023).

<sup>16</sup> Office for National Statistics (2022), *Visa Holders Entering the UK*.

“Eastern Europeans” in the UK are discriminated against as “not quite white” and are less likely to work in highly-skilled jobs than other groups with similar levels of education.<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, the strong desire to work may be driven by the experience of the Ukrainian welfare system, in particular the lack of social security in post-socialism. One interviewee explained:

*In Ukraine, if you don't work, you don't eat.... I want to be useful, because we all have experiences that will definitely be useful for Britain.*

The emphasis on doing work useful for Britain can also be seen as a response to public discourse portraying migrants as benefit-seekers. These stereotypes were particularly dominant during Brexit debates of “Eastern Europeans” as “benefit tourists” or “scroungers”.<sup>18</sup> The focus on a desire to work by several of our interviewees can be seen as an attempt to counter this stereotype and justify their presence in the country.<sup>19</sup>

## 2. Housing and Relationships with Hosts

Data on experiences with the “Homes for Ukraine” scheme by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) found that former sponsors experienced challenges including, amongst other things, friction with guests (40%).<sup>20</sup>

Beyond practical issues relating to space in the home and conflicts surrounding bills and length of stay, the main issue that our interviewees raised was encountering negative stereotypes about Ukrainians and a lack of knowledge about Ukraine from hosts. Reflecting stereotypes of CEE countries as an “in-between space”, participants reported being viewed by hosts as ignorant or uneducated. For example,

one participant describes her host explaining that she should not eat fish after the expiry date:

*They might have expected that some ignorant poor woman would come who doesn't know anything...I lived in a European country, I'm sorry, we are a developed country and to treat me like a girl who didn't even finish school is very bad.*

Participants feel like their hosts, and British people they meet in their day-to-day lives, consider Ukraine to be a country with limited modern conveniences and a poor education system. As one participant described it, British people:

*think that Ukraine is a third world country, that is, we don't know what a microwave is, what a refrigerator is, a TV, what medicine is.*

These attitudes reflect underlying perceptions of CEE countries as still “catching up” with the West, as a post-communist space “suffering from the ills of underdevelopment with which the West associates the ex-Soviet Union”.<sup>21</sup>

Participants also reported that hosts were uninterested in learning about Ukraine and that there was a lack of understanding of the difference between Ukraine and Russia. One participant, who had been in the UK for some years, recounted a longstanding conflation of Ukraine with Russia:

*We all have our own identification and at that time we had nothing to do with Russia, but I am Ukrainian and I did not want to be called something else.*

Such findings are reflective of a wider absence of history in representations of migration,<sup>22</sup> and demonstrate the

<sup>17</sup> Bulat (2019); Drinkwater, Eade and Garapich (2009).

<sup>18</sup> Burrell and Schweyher (2019).

<sup>19</sup> Previous research on movers from CEE countries in the UK has found that they often emphasise that they do not rely on the welfare state, in order to justify their presence in the country (Burrell and Schweyher, 2019); and portray themselves

as hard-working and British society as meritocratic in order to escape discrimination (Fox, Moroşanu, and Szilassy, 2015.)

<sup>20</sup> Office for National Statistics (2022), *Experiences of Homes for Ukraine Scheme Sponsors*.

<sup>21</sup> Williams and Piazza (2012).

<sup>22</sup> Połońska-Kimunguyi (2022).

impact on interpersonal relations between Ukrainians, their hosts, and British people more widely.

The ONS found that only 4% of former sponsors had received training, with support primarily focused on how to do practical things such as accessing - healthcare, financial or visa support, and matching. Former hosts also said they would have found it useful to have more information on Ukraine and Ukrainian culture (42%).<sup>23</sup>

The Government provides links to a range of toolkits for hosts that provide guidance;<sup>24</sup> however, most of this is focused on helping Ukrainians understand the UK system and adjusting to life in the UK rather than on what hosts need to know about Ukraine and how Brits need to adjust. For example, the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities' "checklist" of things to consider before becoming a host contains little about culture other than to consider how you feel about living with people with different habits and language.

More detailed resources sometimes even risk reproducing ideas of Eastern European under-development; for example, a government-linked resource on cultural differences states that "life continues to be a struggle for many Ukrainians" with religion a dominant force in society.<sup>25</sup> More substantive information about Ukrainian history and society for hosts may therefore improve relationships and mutual understanding between hosts and refugees.

### 3. Access to Healthcare

The problems facing the NHS are widely known with senior doctors stating recently that waiting times in A&E are costing the lives of up to 500 people per week.<sup>26</sup> Difficulty in accessing quality

healthcare is an issue that runs throughout our interviews, often combined with a sense of shock at the standard of care in a country which is assumed (also by our participants) to be more developed. In one particularly dramatic case an interviewee waited for nine hours for treatment when she – at that point six months pregnant – began to bleed heavily:

*the only thing they helped me with was painkillers and only then after 9 hours of waiting they provided medical assistance. In this sense, if compared with Ukrainian medicine, then of course Ukrainian medicine wins many times over.*

The woman sadly lost the pregnancy and after further complications returned to Ukraine to receive the care she needed.

The crisis facing the NHS is a threat to the health and wellbeing of anyone reliant on public healthcare. However, previous research shows that some NHS services are especially difficult to navigate and negotiate for refugees.<sup>27</sup> A systematic review of refugee experiences indicated that for refugees: "being 'outside their country of nationality' can contribute to difficulties related to language and cultural differences, limited health system literacy, and socioeconomic disadvantage".<sup>28</sup>

This is confirmed by our interviewees. They indicate that some doctors do not take seriously the accounts Ukrainians provide about their own health, pain, prior care, and contraindications. Our interviewees perceive that this situation is made worse by their limited fluency in English and attitudes to them as migrants. That is, it may be attributed in

<sup>23</sup> Office for National Statistics (2022), *Experiences of Homes for Ukraine Scheme Sponsors*.

<sup>24</sup> Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (2023).

<sup>25</sup> Country Navigator (2022).

<sup>26</sup> Vinter (2022).

<sup>27</sup> Tomkow, Kang, Farrington, Wiggans, Wilson, Pushkar, Tickell-Painter and Lee (2020).

<sup>28</sup> Cheng, Drillich and Schattner (2015).

part to “Eastern Europeanism”. One participant explained:

*Sometimes, it seemed to me that, as far as medicine is concerned, I am served somehow [differently], well, I attributed it to the fact that I am a migrant.*

Given that the majority of Ukrainian refugees are women, the gendered dimension of access to healthcare should also be taken into account. Previous research shows that women often struggle to be taken seriously by healthcare professionals and have their pain and symptoms dismissed.<sup>29</sup>

Moreover, culturally specific understandings of health – or the “cultural acceptability of medical care” and “differing conceptual models of health” feed into expectations about what a public health service should provide.<sup>30</sup> This should be taken into account in the guidance provided to displaced Ukrainians on accessing healthcare in the UK.

#### 4. Language

Interviewees raised issues of language in two ways. Firstly, they emphasised the importance of English-language acquisition in the process of settling in the UK. Of particular importance was the need for English proficiency to access skilled work. This reflects the findings of ONS survey research: 56% of visa holders cite insufficient English-language skills as a barrier to taking up paid employment in the UK.<sup>31</sup> Given the time it takes to learn a language to working proficiency, the government, NGOs and others working with Ukrainians in the UK should continue to prioritise English-language provision as a mechanism of support.

<sup>29</sup> Dusenbery (2018)

<sup>30</sup> Public Health England (2020); Napier, Ancarno, Butler, Calabrese, Chater, Chatterjee (2014); Cheng, Drillich and Schattner (2015).

<sup>31</sup> Office for National Statistics (2022), *Visa Holders Entering the UK*.

The second area of importance to the interviewees was their relationship to the Russian and Ukrainian languages in the context of the Russian war in Ukraine. Based on the most recent census (in 2001), it is estimated that at least 29% of Ukrainians speak Russian as their primary language.<sup>32</sup>

The presence of Russian speakers in Ukraine is linked to historical relations between Ukraine and Russia, which includes population transfers and historical efforts to “Russify” Ukraine (and conversely more recent efforts towards Ukrainianisation). The complex – and shifting – position of Russian language within Ukraine is also little understood outside of Ukraine and is closely bound up with different kinds of identity (ethnic, national, linguistic, civic). As Andreas Kappeler notes: “many Russians and numerous Europeans and Americans [falsely] regard Ukrainian as a dialect of the Russian language”.<sup>33</sup>

Previous research argues that when the focus is on language use, rather than national/native language, there are three main linguistic groups in Ukraine: Ukrainian speakers, Russian speakers, and those who feel (more or less) equally comfortable in both languages (including use of the hybrid language, known as *Surzhyk*).<sup>34</sup> Survey research conducted since 2014 (but before 2022) indicates that especially Russian speakers are moving towards an understanding of nationality based on civic identity (i.e. identifying with the structures, laws etc. of a country), rather than one based on ethnic or linguistic identity. That is, as Russian speakers, they nonetheless identify very much as Ukrainian.<sup>35</sup> Some of our interviewees confirm this position:

<sup>32</sup> Ivanova (2022).

<sup>33</sup> Kappeler (2014).

<sup>34</sup> Barrington (2022).

<sup>35</sup> Kulyk (2019).



*the Russian language is in my veins, because I'm from Kharkov, and my grandmother spoke Russian, and my great-grandmother spoke Russian, but I feel like a Ukrainian.*

This does not necessarily mean that Russian-speakers who identify strongly as Ukrainian feel the need to use Ukrainian language. However, some of our interviewees suggest that the most recent Russian aggression may have instigated a shift in their relationship to the two languages. There is some ambivalence, but many participants suggest that being Ukrainian now means speaking Ukrainian:

*This is our language, we don't need Russian at all now, I think, it is the language of the aggressor.*

Another interviewee indicates that this perception of Russian as the “language of the aggressor” exists also amongst those who previously spoke Russian on an everyday basis:

*In Kharkov, before the war, many people spoke Russian, now people who spoke Russian are switching to Ukrainian en masse, because they believe that Russian is the language of the enemy.*

Even for those who do not view Russian as the “language of the enemy”, there is a risk of retraumatisation if Russian-speaking interpreters are not vetted carefully. One interviewee described how she was provided with a Russian-speaking interpreter in a medical situation:

*I was very badly affected, she was silent at first, and then she started asking me about us, about our situation, about our war and said that the Americans are to blame for the war. She said that the Americans are to blame, not Russia.*

## Conclusion

Overall, our interviews demonstrate the important role that cultural differences, shaped by historical memory and stereotypes linked to the “three worlds” ideology, play in displaced Ukrainians’ experiences in the UK. Particularly in the crucial areas of employment, housing, healthcare and language, Ukrainians are confronted with a lack of knowledge of Ukrainian history, perceptions of Ukraine or eastern Europe as an “in-between” space, and stereotypes of Ukrainians as low skilled or uneducated, that compound the wider problems in the British welfare and healthcare system. As described above, we recommend a series of measures that would improve the experiences of displaced Ukrainians by taking seriously the impact of historical memory and xenoracism on relations between Ukrainians and Brits.

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