

# LANGUAGE FACTSHEET

## Romani language in the Ukraine response

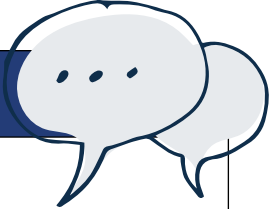
Organizations estimate around **400,000** Roma were living in Ukraine in early 2022, and Romani is the first language for about **85%**. An estimated **100,000** Roma have been forced to flee to other European countries since February 2022, and many others have fled to other parts of Ukraine.

Terminology in Romani often differs between locations, especially on newer topics and technical or medical vocabulary, because users borrow words from the dominant languages of the area.

Many dialects use the alphabets of dominant languages in the area, especially the Latin and Cyrillic alphabets. Though a standard Romani alphabet was adopted in 1990, it is not universally used.

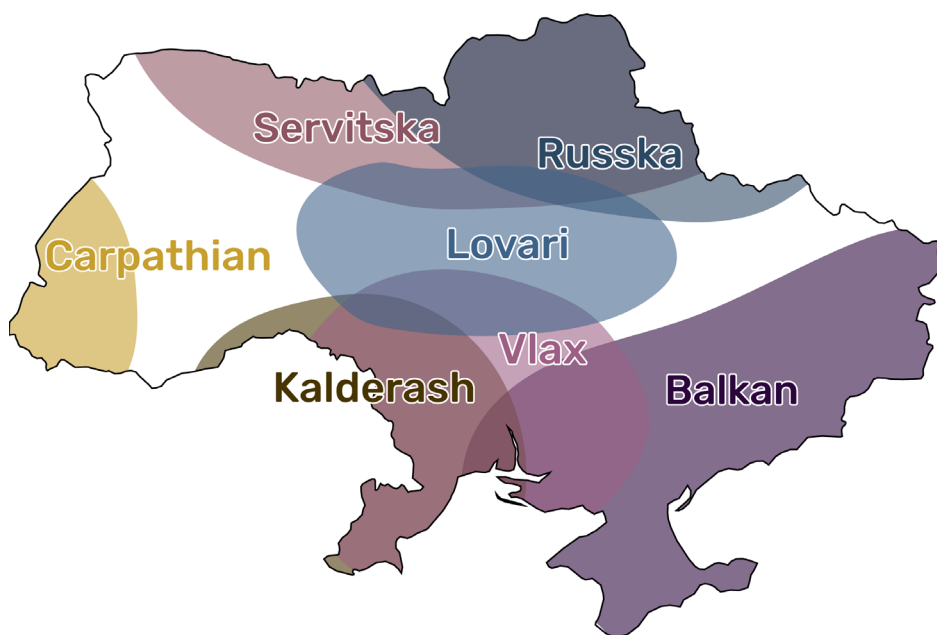
Due to contact with dominant languages of their local area, some native Romani users have some proficiency in a second language, but this varies greatly across Ukraine. Romani is generally the preferred language of native Romani users.

### Tips

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- To communicate effectively, use a person's first language where possible.
  - Don't assume that the Roma community can fully express themselves in Ukrainian or Russian, especially about sensitive topics related to health or protection.
  - Make sure you know which Romani dialect your audience uses, and identify a translator or interpreter on that basis.
  - If you are unsure of the dialect or unable to cater for it, ask your Romani translator or interpreter to use words that will be widely understood by speakers of different Romani dialects where possible.
  - Consider making information and feedback mechanisms accessible in visual, spoken and audio formats to reach as many Romani speakers as possible.
  - Be aware that Romani-speaking women and older people may be less able to read or speak Ukrainian or Russian; they may also not be comfortable speaking with responders.
  - Respect gender norms in communication with Roma communities. If a Roma man is present in the group you are supporting, involve him in decision-making. If several men are present, involve the oldest, who is likely to be the leader.
  - Ask people, especially women and girls, whether they prefer to speak with you alone or with family or community members present.
  - Communicate with Roma women and girls on sensitive topics through female staff and interpreters.

# Digging deeper into Romani use in Ukraine

## Romani dialects in Ukraine



Though Romani is considered one language, the geographic spread of Roma communities means that many dialects exist. Roma in Ukraine and neighboring countries use a range of dialects, which might make it hard for some Romani speakers to fully understand each other.

**Figure 1: Approximate distribution of main Romani dialects in Ukraine.** Classifications of Romani dialects and data on where they are used vary. This composite visualization of data from multiple published and unpublished sources is indicative only.

Before February 2022, the largest Roma communities in Ukraine were living in Zakarpattia, Odessa and Kharkiv [regions](#). The largest dialect groups in Ukraine are Servitska (Ukrainian or Left Bank) Romani in the north and Vlax Romani, including Kalderash, in the south. Other significant dialect groups and dialects include Balkan Romani in the east and south, Carpathian (Central) Romani in the west, Russka Romani in the north, and communities of Lovari Romani speakers throughout Ukraine.

Distinct dialects exist within each group; many, but not all, are [mutually intelligible](#) to some degree. Consultations are ongoing to understand the status of Romani sign language and whether a standard form exists. Some Romani interpreters can interpret for speakers of different dialects. The Kalderash dialect is likely to be understood widely, though not fully, by many Romani speakers from Ukraine.

## Second language use among Romani speakers

Roma communities from central and eastern Ukraine often use Russian and Ukrainian but some may not be able to use those languages for complex or sensitive discussions, or know languages of host countries such as Romanian or Polish. Roma communities from western Ukraine are more likely to use Hungarian or Slovak, but may struggle to understand Russian or Ukrainian. Those from southern Ukraine are more likely to use Romanian as a second language. Discriminatory policies have prevented some Roma from learning Romani; for example, a large number of [Roma in Zakarpattia](#) use Hungarian as their first language and do not speak Ukrainian, Russian, or Romani.

## Literacy and exclusion

Many Roma people face educational exclusion, leading to low literacy levels. Women, older people, and people living with disabilities are more likely not to read and write, or to do so with difficulty. Social exclusion also limits opportunities for Roma to become fully proficient and comfortable using a dominant language of their local area. Many Roma from rural communities in Ukraine also lack internet or smartphone access and are unfamiliar with digital channels. As a result, information in written and digital formats is likely to be inaccessible for many Roma. Initiatives enabling access to information for Roma, such as this [radio station](#) providing audio content in

Romani in Moldova, are rare. Even if information is accessible, the experience of stigmatization, discrimination and exclusion may cause Roma audiences to distrust many information channels. Organizations should factor [cultural and community practices](#) into planning communication with Roma families and individuals.

Many Roma lack identity documentation, and an estimated [10-20%](#) of Ukraine's Roma population, around 35,000 people, are stateless or at risk of statelessness. This increases the risk of human trafficking as people flee from their local area or across borders. It also means people struggle to access international protection. Information in the right format, interpretation and cultural mediation can increase access to information and reduce risk for Romani speakers.

### How CLEAR Global can help

- Open-access and customized [training](#) and [guidance](#) to support translators, interpreters, cultural mediators and others supporting Roma communities.
- [Interactive map](#) of first and other languages used in Ukraine.
- Plain language editing and training on plain language principles.
- Language technology to open multilingual 2-way communication channels designed to support affected communities.
- Translation support in Romani - we are building our capacity in Romani but this is very limited at present. Romani speakers interested in joining our community of linguists can do so [here](#).

## References

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*This factsheet was compiled with valuable input from members of the Roma community and Roma civil society organizations in Ukraine and neighboring countries. If you would like to provide feedback or suggest changes, please contact us at [info@clearglobal.org](mailto:info@clearglobal.org).*