

Language and information gaps for people fleeing the war in Ukraine: preliminary findings

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Summary: what you absolutely need to know

CLEAR Global conducted a brief initial study to understand communication needs among people directly affected by the war in Ukraine. We collected data on languages spoken, information access and barriers through an online survey, as well as social observation in social media groups.

We surveyed people directly affected by the war, as well as hosts, volunteers, and staff supporting them. We received responses from 139 survey participants in 30 countries. We supplemented survey data with an observation of discussions in social media groups focusing on language and information access. While the study results are not representative, they provide insights into language and information needs among people directly affected by the war in Ukraine and can help inform the work of organizations supporting them.

Here is what we found:

- Respondents affected by the war mainly use Ukrainian or Russian at home, with a considerable proportion having knowledge of both languages. Thirty percent spoke only Ukrainian or Russian, and some spoke other languages. This confirms the need to provide for **two-way communication in both Ukrainian and Russian**, and to consult on language preferences in order to **cater for other languages where needed**.
- A majority of respondents directly affected by war indicated that they have **some knowledge of English**, although the survey was not designed to evaluate proficiency in any given language.
- Many people fleeing Ukraine are currently in countries where they **don't have knowledge of the main language used**. For this reason language remains an important barrier, especially for those looking for work in the new country.
- Although there is a small overlap in the languages used by people directly affected by the war and those supporting them (among volunteers especially, with 27% using Ukrainian or Russian at work), there is a considerable **language gap**, especially among hosts, and the staff of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and municipalities.
- **Practical matters** (such as finding work, getting education, or language courses) were the highest-ranked information needs for people fleeing Ukraine and those supporting them.
- Respondents directly affected by the war say that the biggest barrier they experience is that **information is in a language they do not understand**. This barrier is also identified by hosts, volunteers, and staff. Not knowing where to find information, and information not containing the necessary details, were also commonly described.

The survey was not designed to explore sensitivities around the choice of language used to give or receive information: this requires a more in-depth and qualitative approach, and will be covered in forthcoming CLEAR Global research.

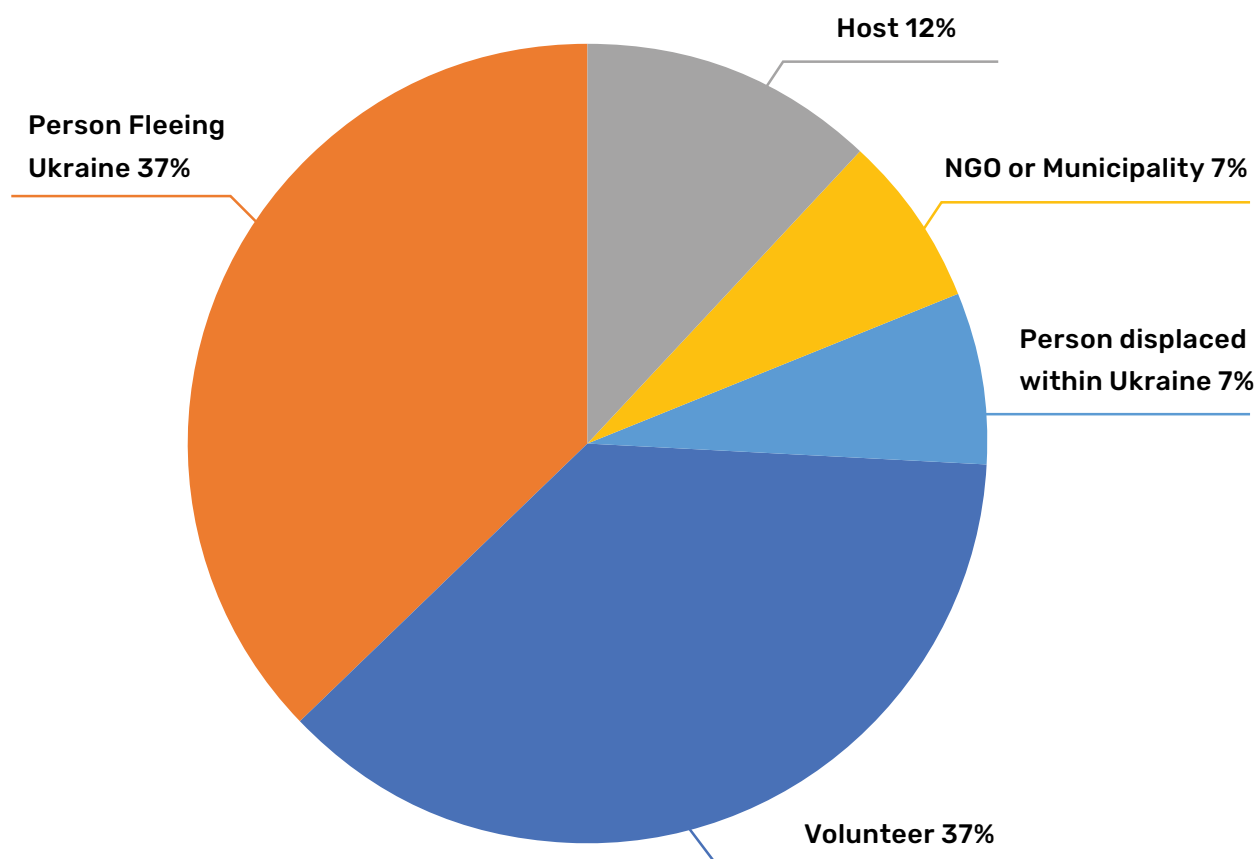
Findings

Survey participants

In total, we received 139 valid responses.

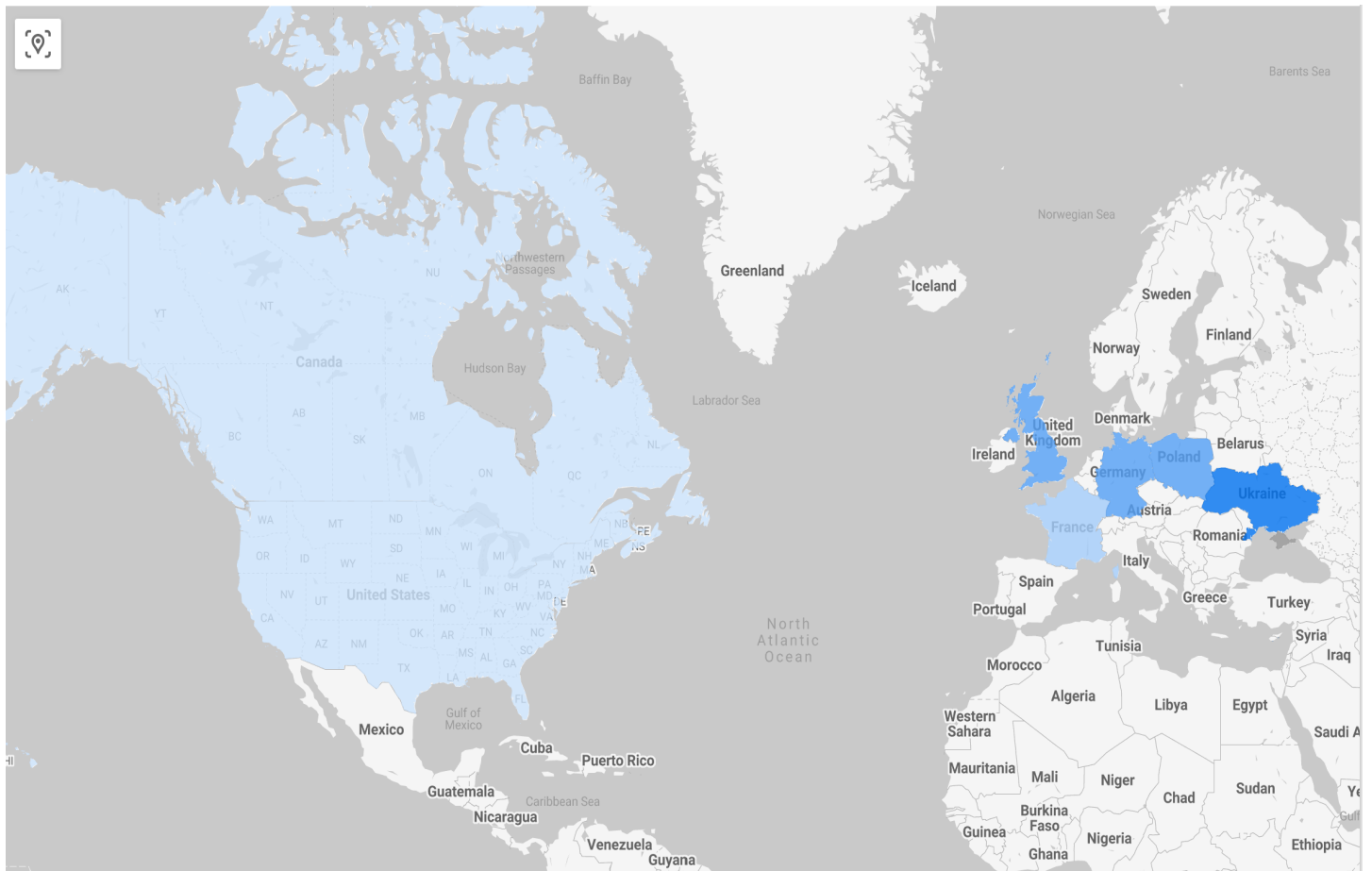
Participant category	Count	Percentage
Person fleeing Ukraine	51	36.69%
Person displaced within Ukraine	9	6.47%
Host	17	12.23%
Volunteer	52	37.41%
NGO or municipality staff	10	7.19%
Total	139	100.00%

Which of the following best describes you?



Survey participants were located in 30 countries, with most participants located in the following:

Country	Participant count	Percentage
Ukraine	18	12.95%
Germany	14	10.07%
Poland	14	10.07%
UK	14	10.07%
France	10	7.19%
Canada	8	5.76%
USA	8	5.76%



Language

Among **respondents directly affected by the war**, 45% mainly use Ukrainian at home and 48% Russian. A small percentage (3 individuals fleeing Ukraine, or 5%) said they used English at home.

Which of the following best describes you? 'Person fleeing Ukraine' or 'Person displaced within Ukraine'

Language	Count	Percentage
English	3	5%
Russian	29	48%
Ukrainian	27	45%
No answer	1	2%
Total	60	100%

Among people directly affected by the war, **70%** said that they have knowledge of both Ukrainian and Russian, although the survey did not ask respondents to indicate their proficiency in each language. This leaves 30% of respondents who speak just one of the two languages.

Use Russian at home and know Ukrainian 25 out of 29 (86%)

Use Ukrainian at home and know Russian 15 out of 27 (56%)

When asked about additional languages, 39 people directly affected by the war (or 65%) said they had knowledge of English.

Other languages included German (5 participants), French (4), Polish (4), and other languages including Armenian, Bulgarian, Italian, Portuguese, Romanian, Slovak, and Spanish. While some 20 languages were in use in Ukraine before the war, the situation of minority language speakers could not be adequately captured with the small sample size of this survey.

Learning the language of the new country is one potential barrier, as evidenced by this comment from a participant:

Everything is good. The problem is in having to learn the language, and that doesn't happen so fast. (Person fleeing Ukraine, France).

Language learning was also a key topic that we identified in social media group discussions. Group participants discussed language courses, learning methods, and government or NGO assistance with language learning. For example, under an advertisement for a free language course in a group for people fleeing Ukraine, a

commenter notes that language learning takes a lot of time and effort, casting doubt on whether a once-a-week course will help master a new language.

Among **hosts**, the languages most commonly used at home were English (4), Russian (3), and French (2). One described using machine translation to aid communication with those fleeing Ukraine, but finding it does not always meet the need:

A lot of translation in everyday life is done via Google Translate, which does the job, more or less, but sometimes leaves everyone clueless. (Host, France).

Among participant volunteers and staff, 27% (17 individuals) mainly use either Ukrainian or Russian at work. English was the most widely used language (18 participants), followed by Ukrainian (11), Russian (6), Polish (5), and French (5). This was the group that demonstrated the greatest language diversity: languages participants mainly use at work include Arabic, Azerbaijani, German, Italian, Romanian, Spanish, Swedish, Turkish, and Uzbek.

The greatest barrier I have in teaching is the fact that we do not have a language in common so I can explain things properly. (Volunteer, Germany).

Information needs

Across all participant categories, the top need identified was information about services and practical matters (for example, finding work, getting education, language courses).

Here is how top-ranked information needs were distributed among people directly affected by the war:

What kind of information do you need to access the most?	Person displaced within Ukraine	Person fleeing Ukraine	Total
Services and practical matters (for example, finding work, getting education, language courses)	5	42	47
Medical treatment	3	31	34
Legal advice	2	23	25
Situation in my home in Ukraine	4	19	23
Financial support	2	19	21
Finding a place to live	3	17	20
Psychological support	1	12	13
Returning to my home in Ukraine	1	9	10
Getting to my country of destination	0	4	4
Other	1	2	3
Reporting abuse or misconduct (by humanitarian staff/volunteers/hosts)	0	2	2

Among **hosts**, when asked about support for the people they were hosting, the top categories were:

1. services and practical matters
2. financial support
3. medical treatment
4. legal advice
5. psychological support

For **volunteers and staff**, the top categories were:

1. help with practical matters
2. finding a place to live
3. medical treatment
4. financial support
5. getting to their country of destination

The categories in bold indicate an overlap with those identified as the top five by people directly affected by the war. Observation in social media groups provided further insights into some of these information needs.

Help with practical matters is also a common topic in social media discussions, especially as it relates to language skills. In one discussion, a parent writes that they contacted schools and the Ministry of Education to apply for a school place for their child. With the new school year approaching, they were worried that they hadn't received a response. Several commenters share that they had the same experience. Others propose strategies to address the situation, including bringing a local person with them to the school to help resolve the issue. It appears that both language and the knowledge of local procedures are a challenge in this situation.

For people directly affected by the war, **finding work** in a new country can also come with difficulties related to language skills. Social media discussions describe some of these challenges, particularly for skilled workers in industries like healthcare or education. In one post, a healthcare worker from Ukraine was looking for a teacher to help them improve their English so that they can start looking for work in the UK, where they relocated. The poster received language learning tips and course recommendations, with some commenters volunteering to tutor them for free. The experience of another poster, a teacher by training, was less positive. Commenters observed that finding work as a teacher in an English-speaking country without English skills and local certifications would be unrealistic.

Information access

When it comes to accessing information, the top challenges for people directly affected by the war are as follows:

What difficulties do you experience when accessing the information you need?	Person displaced within Ukraine	Person fleeing Ukraine	Total
The information is in a language I don't fully understand	0	30	30
The information does not have the details I need	4	23	27
I don't know where to find information	3	22	25
The information is too complicated	0	15	15
The information is provided in a way that I can't easily access	2	8	10

Unsurprisingly, people displaced outside Ukraine experience more difficulties with finding information in a language they understand. Fifty-nine percent of respondents fleeing Ukraine ranked this as one of their main information challenges. Those displaced inside Ukraine said they had less difficulty with the language or complexity of the information. Other issues for both groups included not knowing where to find information or information not having the details they need. Finding information in an appropriate format is another potential challenge. This includes information in formats accessible for people with visual or hearing disabilities, low literacy skills or limited internet access.

Respondents in support roles (hosts, volunteers, and staff) recognize these problems, judging by their responses on the top challenges for information access:

1. People don't know where to find information (6 hosts, 32 volunteers, 1 staff)
2. The information is in a language they don't fully understand (10 hosts, 22 volunteers, 6 staff)
3. There are no interpreters or translators available (6 hosts, 14 volunteers, 4 staff)

My experience as a volunteer interpreter shows that there is little to no communication between different services (e.g. NGOs, hospitals, public services, etc). (Volunteer, France)

There is a gap between the process described in [...] various informative materials and the speed of the process happening in reality. (Staff member, Austria)

Difficulties with accessing official information or understanding procedures (such as visa applications) were also a topic discussed in social media groups.

Methodology

This study was conducted between July and August 2022. A short online survey was prepared in Ukrainian, Russian, Polish, Romanian, and English. The survey was distributed online through posts in social media groups that focus on supporting people affected by the war in Ukraine, as well as through individual social media accounts, personal and professional networks.

We received 152 responses to the survey. After excluding individuals who did not identify as one of the above (13 individuals), we obtained 139 responses.

The survey was supplemented by a social observation component on public social media channels over the study period. Social observation focused on discussions of language and access to information among people fleeing Ukraine in social media groups (in Ukrainian, Russian, and English).

Information from the survey was used in aggregate form, where individual responses cannot be used to identify survey participants. Data from the survey and observation was translated into English and summarized to ensure that posts and discussions are not easily identifiable.

Acknowledgments

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