How language affects access to services and information

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Effective support for people fleeing the war in Ukraine requires an understanding of their language and communication needs and preferences.

Ukraine is multilingual. Ukrainian, the official language, is spoken alongside Russian and minority languages like Romani, Crimean Tatar, Hungarian and Gagauz. Effective support for people fleeing the war in Ukraine requires an understanding of their language, and communication needs and preferences. Yet Ukrainians affected by the war face multiple language challenges, and barriers to communicating their needs and accessing information and services.

Firstly, the war between Ukraine and Russia has heightened language sensitivities. Since February 2022, growing numbers of Russian speakers have begun speaking Ukrainian. But, others are unwilling or unable to make that change.

Secondly, although Ukraine is a multilingual country, not everyone is multilingual. Language and literacy barriers typically exclude marginalised groups. Older people, people with disabilities, people from rural areas and certain marginalised language speakers are less likely to be comfortable using more than one language. Providing information and communication in marginalised languages and in accessible formats is crucial

to reaching the most vulnerable and preventing further exclusion.

Thirdly, the lack of easily accessible information means that people fleeing Ukraine rely heavily on social media networks and personal contacts. Even when host nations and international organisations provide translation and interpretation support, the over-reliance on untrained informal translators and interpreters creates unnecessary risks of confusion and miscommunication. While information access is a challenge everywhere, communication barriers vary by host country. To improve access to information and services it is essential to understand the specific challenges Ukrainians face in each host country. In this article we discuss findings from CLEAR Global's research on language use and communication practices in the humanitarian response in Ukraine, Poland, Moldova and Romania.[1]

Sensitivities

There are sensitivities around whether an individual speaks Russian or Ukrainian. The 1996 Constitution of Ukraine recognises Ukrainian as the country's official language

and guarantees the free development, use and protection of Russian and other languages of national minorities. After the escalation of the war in 2022, the sense of a national identity is even more tied to the Ukrainian language. Many Russian-speaking Ukrainians have decided to switch to Ukrainian for patriotic reasons or because of traumatic experiences. As one Ukrainian told us, "The Russian language is now associated with intense suffering". Understanding the impact of these shifts can help service providers adapt their language strategies for service delivery.

A history of multilingualism, especially in the big cities, makes it possible for many in Ukraine to switch to Ukrainian, but this is not necessarily the case for Ukrainians in more rural areas, speakers of marginalised or minority languages, or ethnic Russians living in Ukraine. Some Ukrainians we talked to described having difficulties finding the right words or understanding legal, medical or other technical information, especially when under stress. This means people using services may need the option of switching to Russian, or another language, if their Ukrainian fails them.

Speakers of minority languages, such as Crimean Tatar, might face no issues at all to communicate in Ukrainian, whereas speakers of Azeri or Romani may use Russian as their second language and find it harder to switch to Ukrainian, though this also varies by region. Many ethnic Russians, educated during the Soviet era and living in predominantly Russian-speaking parts of the country, have used Russian their whole lives. While for younger Russian speakers, who were educated mainly in Ukrainian, the transition is easier.

With such sensitivities at stake, humanitarian organisations and host communities and authorities may struggle to know how best to communicate with people fleeing the war in Ukraine. They may find it helpful to learn from Ukrainian language policy, which states that the first exchange in any public setting such as a shop should be in Ukrainian, after which the speaker can use the language they are most comfortable with. In the current context, saying "Hello" or "Can I help you?" in Ukrainian sends a powerful signal that this

is a safe space, even if the conversation that follows is in Russian or a mix of Russian and Ukrainian.

Language and literacy barriers

Language and literacy barriers typically exclude marginalised groups. Ethnic minorities, people with lower levels of literacy and people with physical impairments more often face difficulties accessing information or communicating in a second language. In contexts of disaster and humanitarian crisis, where access to information is vital, these language and communication barriers further increase vulnerability and the risk of exclusion.

The Ukrainians we talked to had encountered numerous situations where language barriers made it hard or impossible to get information or access services. These ranged from getting health care to applying for cash assistance or registering a child at school – in finding out what is available, understanding the procedure, completing the paperwork and engaging with staff.

Romani speakers face particular difficulties. An estimated 400,000 Roma lived in Ukraine before the escalation of the war in February, and the vast majority speak Romani (or, more precisely, a variety of Romani dialects) as their main language. While many use a second language to some extent, not all do, and not all do so comfortably. To make safe, informed decisions about what to do, Roma people need support in Romani, which responders rarely provide.

Even for Roma who speak a second language like Russian or Romanian, access to information can be challenging. Due to educational exclusion, some Roma have low levels of literacy and struggle to engage with written information. This is especially the case for women, older people and people with disabilities. Difficulties engaging with written information leave them reliant on verbal communication and again reduce their options to verify information against available written sources. This makes them more vulnerable to misinformation and disinformation.

Moreover, Roma and people with lower levels of literacy in general are less likely to be familiar with different scripts. One Romani

speaker who had fled to Moldova, understood Romanian and was literate in Cyrillic, told us that he was still unable to access information made available in Latin script: "We understand the language but not the alphabet. I can't read a single letter."

Though responders are aware of communication needs and report a range of languages being spoken by service users, services rarely cater for marginalised languages such as Romani or Ukrainian Sign Language. Only one of 73 surveyed responders in Poland, Romania and Moldova said their organisation could communicate in Romani; none had any capacity in Ukrainian Sign Language.

Communication barriers in different host countries

People fleeing Ukraine need up-to-date information on a wide range of legal and administrative topics and on education and employment opportunities in their host countries. Yet the information resources provided by host countries and international organisations are often insufficient to their needs, hard to understand without an interpreter or further explanation, or are inconsistent, quickly outdated and not clearly signposted. Information is often not provided in the relevant languages, and includes terms relating to national systems and procedures that Ukrainians are not familiar with.

As a result, people rely heavily on social media networks and personal contacts. But finding relevant and reliable information for different host countries is a challenge. Older people who sometimes feel less confident with smartphones and internet browsing face even greater difficulties. While personal tips, online or in-person, from other people leaving Ukraine can be helpful, they may also be inaccurate or lack insight into the legal or cultural context of the host country. Ukrainians we spoke to voiced anxiety that a lack of understanding resulted in legal difficulties and missed opportunities relating to work, education and assistance.

Responders we surveyed in Poland, Romania, and Moldova were largely unequipped to address language barriers. In all three countries, providing information

even in Ukrainian was a great challenge, and many organisations reverted to communicating in Russian and English plus the national language of the host country.[2] Organisations also relied on staff, volunteers and affected people themselves to bridge the language divide – most with no training or guidance on humanitarian interpreting. This approach can create unnecessary risks and confusion for service users. Its effectiveness also varied depending on the linguistic context in each country.

In Poland, Russian language proficiency among an older generation of Poles and similarities between Slavic languages helped to bridge communication barriers, as did the sizable Ukrainian community that existed even before the war. Many service users have been able to hold simple conversations with Polish volunteers and aid workers without an interpreter. Research participants suggested this relative ease of communication had been a factor in the decision to come to Poland. But language and communication challenges still exist for marginalised language communities like Romani and Sign Language users, while government offices present some of the biggest communication challenges for many Ukrainians.

In Moldova, most people fleeing Ukraine are first or second-language Russian speakers, which makes it easier for them to access information materials in Russian. However, while Russian is spoken by older Moldovans, this is not necessarily the case for the younger generation, which created communication challenges with younger Moldovan humanitarian response volunteers.

In Romania, Ukrainians faced much greater communication difficulties than in Poland or Moldova. Romanian belongs to a different language family from Ukrainian, Russian and Polish. Few Romanians speak Russian, and even fewer speak Ukrainian. The Ukrainian community in Romania before February 2022 was also much smaller than in other countries neighbouring Ukraine. So for most of the roughly 1.5 million Ukrainians who have crossed into Romania, relying on speaking similar languages for partial understanding was not possible. For Ukrainians

with knowledge of English, using English was a viable option – but not everyone speaks English.

The importance of using the right language
Research participants highlighted how language was important not only for understanding and access to support in a new country but also for their sense of safety and well-being. Several Ukrainians described being heartened by signs of welcome and solidarity in Ukrainian at the border and even on the sides of buses. Some described their relief at hearing their own language spoken when they first crossed the border after a long and difficult journey.

To provide Ukrainians with the necessary information in the right languages, responders need data on language and format preferences, the specifics of communication in Ukraine and the sensitivities of using languages in wartime circumstances. They also need insights into the specific language challenges that Ukrainians face in each country, and the existing gaps in available language support. Providing basic training for staff and establishing links with professional language service providers can significantly improve communication and access to information.

The cooperation and involvement of Governments, NGOs and language service providers can all play a vital role in helping Ukrainian refugees to overcome language and communication obstacles, access the information and services they need, and start building their lives in new countries.

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