Ukraine

GEOGRAPHY

Second only to Russia in population among Eurasian states, Ukraine has over 45 million inhabitants. Its territory covers 233,100 square miles, an area about the size of Texas, and is bordered by Russia and Belarus to the north and east; by the Black Sea to the south; and by Moldova, Romania, Hungary, Slovakia, and Poland to the west. Ukraine's immense plains have few natural boundaries other than the Black Sea and the mountainous Crimean peninsula in the south, and the Carpathian Mountains in the southwest. Although it is often called the breadbasket of the former Soviet Union and is almost completely self-sufficient in produce and livestock, agriculture makes up only nine percent of the Ukrainian gross domestic product (GDP). Industry contributes 32 percent, as Ukraine is an important producer of steel and coal, and services make up the remaining 59 percent of GDP.

The population of Ukraine is 78 percent Ukrainian and 17 percent ethnic Russian; the balance of the population is minority groups reflective of the Ukrainian borderlands: Hungarians, Romanians, Poles, Greeks, etc. Seventy-two percent of all inhabitants live in urban areas. To the north, the capital city of Kyiv is home to three million people. Chernobyl, where a nuclear reactor explosion devastated an extensive area in 1986, is approximately 80 miles north of Kyiv and near the border with Belarus. Other large cities include Kharkiv in the northeast, with a population of 1.5 million, and Odesa, the famous vacation spot on the Black Sea, with 1.1 million residents. Lviv, a western Ukrainian city of 800,000 residents is nicknamed "Little Paris."

HISTORY

The Eastern Slavs settled in Ukraine several centuries before the waves of invading Goths and Huns swept through and conquered the territory in 200 AD, followed in the mid-sixth century by the Avars and Khazars. Such invasions kept Slavic tribes disunited until the ninth century, when Viking raiders—referred to in medieval chronicles as "Varangians"—arrived and, according to Chronicle accounts, were invited to rule over Ukraine by the native Slavs. The Viking leader Rurik conquered the principality of Novgorod in northwest Russia and then moved south, through Ukraine. By 860, he had reached the shores of the Black Sea and had mounted a military expedition against Constantinople.

It was Rurik's successor, Oleg, who established the great city, Kyiv, as his capital in 880 AD. Ruled by Rurik's descendants for two centuries, Kievan Rus' was one the great kingdoms of the Middle Ages. Its borders stretched from Poland in the west, to the Volga River and the shores of the Caspian Sea in the east, and north to south from the Baltic to the Black Sea. Kievan merchants traded with Scandinavia, Samarkand, China, Constantinople, Baghdad, North Africa, Italy, the Balkans, and Britain.

A crucial historical event occurred during the reign of Volodymyr, when in 988 AD, Rus' adopted Orthodox Christianity from Byzantium. This decision marked the Rus' entrance into the cultural world of Eastern Christianity, rather than Islam, and secured its ties to Europe and the West. Belarus, Ukraine, and Russia all trace their roots to Kievan Rus', and all three remain primarily Orthodox.

The kingdom declined after the death of Kievan Rus' last great ruler, Yaroslav, in 1054. Divided among his sons into small principalities, their princes engaged in constant feuds that weakened the state. When the Mongol invaders arrived in 1238, they found the once-powerful kingdom open to attack, and ruled it until the 14th century, when Poles and Lithuanians conquered the western Ukrainian principalities.

Years of Polish dominance had a profound effect on Ukrainian society. The nobility adopted Polish culture, habits, dress, and language; many converted to Roman Catholicism. As these landlords struggled to pay heavy state taxes, the exploitation of peasant labor and the deprivation of their rights increased dramatically, and many tried to escape. Some fled to the borderlands of the empire, joining up with bands of Cossacks—military adventurers who established virtually free societies along distant borders and in areas where control or jurisdiction was uncertain. Cossacks lived in garrison-like compounds called *sich*, led by *hetman*s.

Polish policies toward the enserfed Ukrainian peasantry, especially suppression of the Orthodox Church, led to a series of peasant rebellions in the 16th and 17th centuries. The most notable of these rebellions was led by *hetman* Bohdan Khmelnytskyy, which ended in 1648 with the establishment of the Ukrainian Cossack State, or *hetmanate*. The popular liberty enjoyed under the *hetmanate*, which grew to include most of present day Ukraine, threatened the monarchs of Europe at the time. They sought to prevent peasants from fleeing the landowning classes, thereby protecting their ability to pay taxes to the monarchs. Such pressure, combined with repeated attacks from the Poles, forced Khmelnytskyy to seek protection. Common religious beliefs and geographic proximity made Muscovy the logical choice, and, in 1654, with the Treaty of Pereyaslav, the Ukrainian Cossack State recognized the Muscovite tsar as its monarch.

Muscovy soon went to war against Poland over Ukraine, and in 1667, a treaty between the two states gave Poland the Ukrainian territory on the west bank of the Dnepr River, while Muscovy kept the lands to the east. Both halves were to be granted autonomy inside their respective kingdoms, but both the Poles and the Muscovite Russians found excuses to interfere with the two Ukraines and eventually end this self-rule.

During the reign of Catherine the Great, Poland was partitioned out of existence. Most of the Ukrainian lands still held by the Poles went to Russia, although Austria received a slice of western Ukraine. Catherine moved to quell Ukrainian resistance to her rule by enserfing any peasants who remained free and by disbanding the Zaporizhian *sich*, scattering its members across the Russian

empire. During the 19th century, the Russian tsars continued to suppress Ukrainian nationalism by forbidding public use of the Ukrainian language or display of its culture and by arresting and exiling Ukrainian intellectuals. The Russian government did not succeed in this endeavor largely because the Ukrainian lands under the control of the Austro-Hungarian Empire enjoyed greater freedom, permitting the language and culture to thrive.

During World War I, Ukraine was occupied by Austro-German troops. When the Bolsheviks overthrew the Russian government in 1917, Ukrainian nationalists negotiated with the German High Command in an attempt to create an independent Ukrainian state. The Germans, who needed the foodstuffs that Ukraine could provide and who were angry with the Bolshevik government's delaying tactics during the armistice discussions at Brest-Litovsk, agreed to support the nationalists. The Austro-Hungarian Empire's collapse in 1918 allowed its Ukrainians to form their own independent republic, and these two Ukrainian states joined in 1919. This independence, however, was short-lived. Ukraine soon plummeted into turmoil when the Soviet-Polish War spilled onto its territory. By the end of the war in autumn 1920, Soviet Russia was defeated, and Ukraine was repartitioned: Poland received the western portion of the state; the remainder became the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic and was absorbed into the Soviet Union in 1922. These two territories would not be reunited until 1939, when Hitler and Stalin divided much of Eastern Europe between Germany and the Soviet Union.

Ukraine was forcibly collectivized under Stalin, and all privately owned land was confiscated by the government and consolidated to form large, state-run agricultural enterprises. This process resulted in the horrific famine (*holodomor*) of 1932-1933, in which several million Ukrainians perished. Millions more suffered during the arrests and deportations of the Great Purges in 1936-1938. Ukraine resisted both the German armies that invaded the USSR in 1941, and the Red Army that liberated it from the Germans toward the end of the war. Incidents of armed Ukrainian resistance against the Soviets continued into the 1950s in western Ukraine.

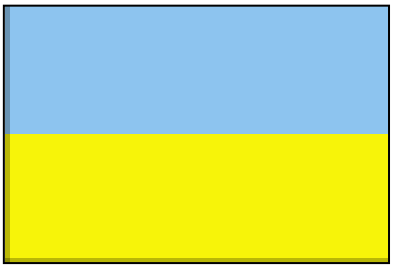
The battles that raged across Ukraine during World War II ravaged the countryside. The scorched-earth policy of the retreating Red Army, the destruction of the German occupation, and the Wehrmacht's final retreat left many cities, towns, and villages in ruins, and an estimated 19 million homeless.

After the war, the Soviet Union slowly moved to rebuild the shattered towns and cities of Ukraine. The blow suffered by agriculture was harder to repair: by 1955, grain output still had not reached pre-1940 levels. Western Ukrainian lands, re-annexed by the Soviet Union after the end of the war (lands the Soviets had only briefly held from 1939 to 1941) posed a special problem, because western Ukraine had never been under communist rule, having been lost to Poland in 1919-1920. It was the Western Ukrainian Insurgent Army that resisted the Red Army until 1948, when its survivors fled to the allied zones of Germany. While isolated acts of terrorism continued for several years afterwards, the resistance was broken. Massive deportations of ethnic Ukrainians from the western regions of Ukraine continued throughout the late 1940s, as Stalin moved to wipe out both real and supposed opposition to his rule.

In 1956, Khrushchev's de-Stalinization campaign lifted some of the cultural restraints that had been placed on Ukraine and also resulted in cession of Crimea, a Russian possession, to Ukraine. Following the dissolution of the USSR, this has been the source of serious disagreement, and both nations laid claim to the Soviet Black Sea Fleet, based at Sevastopol in the Crimea. After several

years of discussion, Russia and Ukraine found a solution that was generally agreeable to both, but Crimea and the Black Sea Fleet remain controversial topics for both Russia and Ukraine.

POLITICS



The Ukrainian flag

Ukraine has devoted itself to forming a self-identity as not just a "former Soviet republic," but a sovereign nation with global economic and political potential. Ukraine gained accession to the World Trade Organization in 2009. Although relations with the European Union concerning official partnership status for Ukraine are currently strained, the Ukrainian government continues to see full membership in the EU as a goal. At the same time, Ukraine continues to build strong relationships with its neighbors including the creation of free trade zones to stimulate economic growth. More and more often in parliament and among the population, the accent is on looking toward the future and on identifying those strengths that can make Ukraine, if not yet a major, then at least a universally recognized player in the world arena. However, both Ukraine's international relations and its internal political development continue to be heavily influenced by its relations with Russia, and by Russia's relationship with Europe.

From independence in 1991 until 2004, Ukraine was ruled by two presidents, Leonid Kravchuk (1991-1994) and Leonid Kuchma (1994-2004). As president of a newly-independent country with strong nationalist traditions but sitting on the Russian border, Kravchuk took many difficult decisions and withstood a great deal of pressure in order to position Ukraine as an independent nation. He refused the plan for a common currency and united armed forces for the Commonwealth of Independent States, effectively scuttling the idea, and refused the housing of Soviet-era nuclear weapons on Ukrainian territory. Kravchuk devoted much energy to negotiations with Russia over joint command of the formerly Soviet Black Sea fleet, but never reached a definitive agreement during his term in office. All of these decisions were strongly supported by Ukrainian nationalist politicians in the *Verkhovna Rada*, or Ukrainian parliament. Such parliamentarians were Kravchuk's main political supporters.

While Kravchuk's foreign policy was essentially popular in the country, his handling of the economy was disastrous. Inflation in 1992-1994 reached thousands of percentage points each year. While Ukraine, especially the Russian-speaking east of the country, had been an industrial center during Soviet times, the new nation did not have the financial resources to immediately develop its own distribution networks or maintain industrial production. Many large Ukrainian businesses were sold by the government for what turned out to be fake debt issued by foreign companies in order to bolster Ukrainian currency reserves. The symbol of the Kravchuk years may well have been the selling off of the global merchant fleet, the largest in the world. Many of the new owners of these ships immediately went bankrupt, stranding hundreds of Ukrainian sailors on their boats around the world.

Kravchuk's inability to deal with post-independence economic collapse, coupled with a reputation for corruption (his son was one of the benefactors of the sale of the merchant fleet), led to his defeat in the presidential elections of 1994. Leonid Kuchma came to power promising to fight corruption, restore the economy, and, significantly, to forge closer relations with Russia. This was

controversial, since the previous president had relied so much on Ukrainian nationalists who wanted to distance their country from Russia. Kuchma was, however, much more successful at economic development than his predecessor. His first term in office saw more foreign investment in Ukraine, and the establishment of a new national currency, the *hryvnya*, which was pegged to the U.S. dollar. He was re-elected president in 1999, in an election that foreign observers claimed was not entirely free of electoral fraud, but whose overall result was not challenged.

Kuchma also had to deal with the increasingly polarizing question of whether Ukraine should be integrated into Europe or be more closely allied to Russia. The incorporation of Ukraine into NATO only increased the division over these questions in the Ukrainian parliament and in society at large. Throughout this period, Kuchma appointed a series of prime ministers (since 2006, the prime ministers have been appointed by the parliament) who varied from Westernizers to those who supported stronger ties with Russia. During Kuchma's two terms, Ukraine signed both a "treaty of friendship and cooperation" with Russia and a "special partnership agreement" with NATO.

This question became the defining political question of the 2004 presidential election, pitting former Prime Minister Viktor Yushchenko, who favored closer ties with Europe, against sitting Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovych, who supported a closer relationship with Russia. In many ways, these two men epitomized the cultural differences that had split the country figuratively in two. Yanukovych was from the predominately Russian-speaking industrial capital of Donetsk, while Yushchenko hailed from the Ukrainian-speaking western part of the country and had a foreign-born, Ukrainian diaspora-bred wife. Kuchma nominally supported Yanukovych before the election and its dramatic aftermath.

The November 21, 2004 presidential elections were a defining moment in the history of post-Soviet states. Yanukovych initially was announced the winner of the second round against Yushchenko, but these results were widely considered to be fraudulent. There were several extenuating factors. The Russian government rushed to congratulate Yanukovych and clearly supported his candidacy, leading some to believe that Russia was complicit in his victory. In addition, during the campaign, Yushchenko disappeared for a short period of hospitalization. When he returned to the campaign, he claimed that he had been poisoned (later determined to be dioxin poisoning), which nearly killed him and disfigured his face.

Suddenly Kyiv became the center of the world's media attention. What started as a disputed election soon turned into a popular movement, as various opposition parties rallied behind Yushchenko and Yulia Tymoshenko, another opposition politician. Their supporters set up a huge tent-city on Kyiv's main square demanding the election results be invalidated. These demonstrations led to "the Orange Revolution," named for Yushchenko's official campaign color. Many local city and regional councils also declared the election results invalid, even though the Central Election Committee nominally certified the results. Yanukovych, on the other hand, began to take on the trappings of the presidential office, held large rallies in the Russian-speaking east, and began to openly talk of the country splitting in two if his election was not certified. The impasse continued for weeks, during which Kuchma reportedly refused a request from the Russian government to certify Yanukovych's victory. The Ukrainian Supreme Court officially annulled the election results on December 26, after proof of massive fraud became incontrovertible. In a second run-off election that was intensely monitored by Ukrainian and foreign observers, Yushchenko won by a clear margin. Yushchenko's

official inauguration occurred on January 23, 2005, and he appointed as Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, a popular opposition politician and the head of her own political bloc that had supported Yushchenko during the campaign.

Yushchenko's term in office was not smooth. He immediately faced criticism from his opponents that his campaign had been financed by foreign citizens (a crime in Ukraine), notably the exiled Russian oligarch Boris Berezovsky, and that his entire campaign may have been directed by foreign non-profit organizations. The "Orange Coalition" members of his cabinet came under criticism for corruption, and in general, the government's inability to come to a rapprochement with Russia or to make noticeable economic gains doomed it to gridlock with a vocal opposition. In addition, Yushchenko and Tymoshenko were at odds with each other on many issues, further weakening the Coalition. Yushchenko dismissed Tymoshenko in September 2005 and entered into an unsteady partnership with his former rival, Yanukovych, as prime minister.

Near constant governmental wrangling marked this period. Ukraine really did seem a country divided almost equally in half, between president and prime minister, eastern and western, Russia-leaning and Europe-leaning. For reasons not agreed to by all, Yushchenko dissolved parliament twice, in April 2007 and again in October 2008. After the first dissolution of parliament, Tymoshenko returned as Prime Minister, a seat she held until almost the end of Yushchenko's term. Unfortunately, Yushchenko and Tymoshenko—formerly political allies—also became competitors and were unable to rule together constructively. The Orange Revolution will probably be remembered first for its aspirations, but ultimately its inability to create a working government that could improve life for Ukrainians. Ukraine under the Orange Revolution government made significant headway in the area of democratic process and free media.

Presidential elections scheduled in fall 2009 yielded even more political confusion. Yushchenko was discredited early on and re-election was highly unlikely. The race was between two seasoned politicians: Tymoshenko, a charismatic figure made famous by the Orange Revolution, and Yanukovych, a politician associated with pre-Orange Revolution times and the conservatism of the past. Yanukovych was elected, in part due to voter fatigue with the endless controversies of the Yushchenko and Tymoshenko period.

From the moment of his inauguration in February 2010, Yanukovych quickly took steps to roll back some of the freedoms gained under the "Orange Powers." Media began to complain of censorship, and civil society organizations were the first to speak out against infringements by the police and tax agency. In October 2010, the Constitutional Court of Ukraine negated the constitutional reforms of December 2004, which had given more power to the Government and Parliament. Power was once again centralized in the Executive branch. Many of the reforms introduced by the President and Government have been ill received by society, sparking mass demonstrations by small and medium business, students, pensioners, Chernobyl victims, and veterans of the Afghan-Soviet war. Yanukovych initiated legal action against Tymoshenko for her dealings in the oil and gas sector when she was Prime Minister. Other opposition politicians were also targeted for prosecution on various charges. In 2011, Tymoshenko was found guilty of improperly signing contracts with Russia to provide Ukraine with oil and gas, and is now serving a seven-year prison sentence She is viewed widely in United States and European foreign policy circles to be a victim of political intrigue. Both the U.S. and the European Union have called for her release, or at least a fair trial.

ECONOMY

Ukraine's economy has been fairly unstable since independence. During the Soviet period, it was a major agricultural producer, as well as a center of mining, steel production, and the manufacturing of large heavy machine parts for industries elsewhere in the USSR. By 2000, industrial production had dropped over 40 percent from its level in 1991, and Ukraine was having difficulty attracting foreign investment due to widespread corruption and a lack of structural reforms. A very strong black market developed in the 1990s, as many Ukrainians simply could neither find nor afford goods sold in the real economy as inflation reached levels over 1,000 percent per year.

Over the past decade, the economic situation in Ukraine has stabilized to a certain extent. Foreign investment is increasing, and the government has taken serious measures to increase the supply of goods both produced and sold, and to suppress the black market. Kuchma took a major step in this direction in 2004 when he drastically lowered taxes on businesses and the value-added tax, thereby encouraging more people to do business legitimately. The Ukrainian government also took out a large amount of foreign debt. By 2007, the GDP was increasing at a rate of seven percent annually, fueled primarily by the ever-increasing price of steel, Ukraine's largest export, and money borrowed from abroad.

Ukraine's economy, however, is unusually subject to disruption by external shocks. Ukraine has to import almost 75 percent of its fuel, most of it from Russia. Ukraine had paid a price well below standard market value for Russian gas, and a dispute over pricing led to a gas shut-off in 2006. A new contract increased the price Ukraine has to pay for Russian gas, but that price is still lower than the international market price. Early in 2009, a similar stoppage occurred due to arrears Ukraine owed to Russia for previously purchased gas.

Ukraine was severely affected by the worldwide financial crisis of 2008-2009. Ukraine owed large amounts of foreign debt, and the country neared defaulted on its loans as the international price of steel plummeted. Alone among post-Soviet nations, Ukraine was forced to take out an International Monetary Fund (IMF) loan of $16.5 billion to stabilize its financial situation, after the value of the *hryvnya* fell by almost half. Ukraine's unsettled political future; its tense relationship with Russia, its primary supplier of energy; and its overexposure to international debt point to a continued period of difficulty in the Ukrainian economy.

FOREIGN RELATIONS

Ukraine sits precariously balanced between Europe and Russia, both geographically and politically. As the country that receives almost 24 percent of Ukraine's exports, and supplies almost 75 percent of its energy, Ukraine is dependent on keeping its relationship with Russia functional. The facts that Russia's economy also depends on gas pipelines crossing Ukrainian territory to Europe, and that Ukraine is the second largest country in Europe and possessed of good relationships with the EU and with NATO, means that it is highly unlikely that any energy dispute between the two countries would escalate.

Having good relations with the EU and with NATO does not necessarily mean that Ukraine will become a member of either. President Yushchenko stated that he wants to see Ukraine enter both organizations. He was backed quite vocally by then-U.S. President George W. Bush, but much more

lukewarmly by EU leaders. The EU signed an agreement with Ukraine acknowledging Ukraine's desire for entry into the EU, but at present, there is no start date for negotiations that would lead to accession. The financial crisis of 2008-2009 proved the economic vulnerability of many of the recent Eastern European entrants into the EU, and EU leaders are thus wary of taking on the additional risk of Ukraine.

Closer ties with the EU and NATO are the subject of heated debate within Ukraine. For the reasons mentioned above, and because of the Russian cultural affiliation of a large section of the Ukrainian population, there is a significant movement in Ukraine to create the best ties possible with Russia and to halt further European integration. As with so many other facets of Ukrainian life and politics, this often seems to divide the country, and is destined to be one of the central issues of Ukrainian politics, both international and domestic, for years to come.

RELIGION

According to *The Primary Chronicle*, Grand Prince Volodymyr decided late in the tenth century that the Kievan state, as a civilized nation, would benefit from a centralized and established religion, and he sent his emissaries on a fact-finding tour to explore and evaluate various faiths. Upon their return, they convinced Volodymyr that Greek Orthodox Christianity best suited his needs. He adopted the Byzantine model for the Kievan state, which included parts of what are now Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus. Ever since the conversion, Ukrainian culture has been heavily influenced by Eastern Orthodoxy. Before 1922, the most important events centered around religious holidays, especially in rural areas, and planting and harvesting were planned around various saints' days. The festival of Easter was the most important religious holiday and marked the coming of spring.

Icons, small paintings of religious figures and events, are among the most distinctive art forms of Orthodox Christianity. The colors used for painting Ukrainian icons are usually red, yellow, green, ochre, and brown, and the images are flat and painted with an elegant simplicity. Many of the faces of sacred figures, particularly those of Christ, the Madonna, and the saints, are bordered by elaborate silver or gold casings. Ukrainian churches feature the onion-shaped domes, or *cupola*s, that are characteristic of Byzantine churches. Orthodox churches have no pews, and church-goers remain standing throughout services, including the all-night vigils of Easter and Christmas. Although religious practices were largely suppressed under the Soviet system, some believers continued to worship in secret.

Ukraine also has a large population of Catholics, many of whom live in the western part of the country. Catholic Ukrainians, called Uniates, or Byzantine-rite Catholics, conduct Greek Orthodox rites, but profess allegiance to the pope in Rome. The Ukrainian Catholic Church was severely repressed during Stalin's years, and shortly after World War II was forced to disband and merge with the Orthodox Church. Church property that had not already been confiscated during earlier Soviet times was turned over to the Orthodox Church. Many Ukrainian Catholics remained faithful by

practicing their religion underground. With *perestroika* and *glasnost*, the Ukrainian Catholic church was legalized and once again allowed to operate in public. Many questions and problems persist, as Orthodox and Catholic Ukrainians attempt to reconcile their past. The many divisions within the Orthodox Church hinder the rebirth of traditional Orthodox religious life in Ukraine.

Ukraine is also home to a significant Jewish population—about one percent of all its inhabitants. Under Polish-Lithuanian rule, Jewish settlement was encouraged in Belarus and Ukraine. When Russian rule began, however, Jews were restricted to specific areas in the Pale of Settlement, as it was known, and their rights and freedom of movement were curtailed. Within the pale, Jews enjoyed some degree of religious freedom, but suffered raids and massacres, called *pogrom*s. The pale was abolished under the Soviets, but all religious practices were repressed and houses of worship—churches, mosques, and synagogues alike—closed. Furthermore, Jewish culture became subject to russification, and the teaching of Hebrew and the Jewish religion was forbidden. Despite the closing of large numbers of synagogues in the 1970s and 1980s, Judaism has experienced a certain degree of revival.

CULTURE

Ukrainian is the official language of the Ukrainian government. Most of the population (78 percent) categorizes themselves as Ukrainians and 17 percent as Russians. The balance is made up of 130 separate nationalities and ethnic minorities. In terms of language, 67.5 percent considered Ukrainian their mother tongue, and 30 percent, Russian. Crimea and the most eastern regions (oblasts) remain predominantly Russian-speaking. Ukrainian is either the language of instruction or taught as a subject in almost every secondary school and university in the country. However, the number of students studying at Russian language schools is the same as the number who categorize themselves as Russian, 17 percent. Among the more unusual manifestations of the bilingual nature of Ukraine that can be regularly witnessed—on television, radio, and in the street—are conversations in which one party speaks entirely in Russian and the other only in Ukrainian, without either encountering problems comprehending the other. In fact, most of the population can operate functionally in either language. Government initiatives to promote the teaching of and use of Ukrainian have been quite successful in spheres from advertising to trade, and slowly but surely even in primarily Russian-speaking areas, the Ukrainian language is becoming more and more necessary.

All over the country, but particularly in the western regions, interest is strong in traditional Ukrainian culture. Ukrainian folk dances, folk art, and traditional architecture are highly valued. A popular handicraft is the embroidery of shirts, towels, and doilies. Red- and black-colored thread distinguishes Ukrainian work, although other colors are also used. Traditional embroidered clothing is worn by performers and folk dance troupes, but more and more, young people are including embroidered shirts in their everyday fashion. In popular culture, many television productions in Ukraine are done in Ukrainian and much of the pop and rock music, as well.

As all the other former Soviet republics, Ukraine still struggles with a legacy of repression and control. At long last, however, adherence to concepts that are the fundamentals of civil society—freedom of the press and media, human rights, a responsive judicial system, and private ownership—are being vigorously demanded by emerging non-governmental organizations as well as government committees and other structures including professional and business associations. These rights, in fact, are reflected in Ukraine's Constitution. Ukraine has a very active political scene,

and supporters of a wide variety of factions have their own systems of spreading information and garnering support.

Many Ukrainian cities, especially the capital of Kyiv, are dynamic urban centers. Over half a million vehicles, many of them late-model luxury cars and SUVs, choke Kyiv's streets. For the past decade, Kyiv and the major cities of the regions have been undergoing restoration. As the capital, Kyiv has access to the power brokers in government and a mayor determined to make it a world-class city. The example set in the "center" of the country has had a ripple effect throughout Ukraine. Tired of living in run-down, dirty, and unsafe apartment blocks and sending their children to poorly maintained and under-equipped schools, communities have been forming coalitions, finding sponsors, and creating initiatives to improve the quality of life around them. This empowerment is a new sensation and it will be some time before every citizen experiences it. Where it has been felt, however, it has brought a renewed confidence in the ability of Ukrainians to build a true and respected democratic country.

Although western ideas and products are pouring into Ukraine, old cultural customs are still prevalent. Ukrainians often live in multi-generation households, with the grandmother often raising the grandchildren. It is not unusual for younger twenty-somethings and even some teenagers to marry and start their families, although university students are not as likely to marry young.

As an Eastern Orthodox nation, the most celebrated holiday in Ukraine is Easter. Traditionally, the night before Easter, all the food that is to be eaten the following day is taken to the church to be blessed, although nowadays, it may also be taken on Easter morning. Over hundreds of years, Ukrainians have raised the custom of decorating Easter eggs, or *pysanka*, to an art form, and it is possible to buy wooden eggs painted with complex geometric designs throughout the year. A traditional sweet cake with raisins, called *paska,* is made, and the painted or dyed eggs are placed around the cake as a centerpiece.

Winter holidays are also important. On New Year's Eve, Grandfather Frost arrives and brings gifts to family members. It is also customary to exchange gifts with friends on New Year's Day. Christmas, or *rizdvo*, is celebrated on January 7. (Religious holidays are still observed according to the Julian calendar.) January 6, Christmas Eve, is a family occasion, and the meal is composed of 12 dishes, all free of meat and dairy products. *Kutia*, a mixture of wheat, honey, and poppy seeds, is the most important dish and symbolizes prosperity.

Other national holidays are International Woman's Day, celebrated on March 8; International Workers Day, on May 1; Victory Day, which celebrates the end of World War II, on May 9; Constitution Day, on June 28; Independence Day, on August 24; Easter Monday; and Trinity Sunday.

The old proverb, "*Borsch* is the center of everything," holds true, since soups and stews are the mainstays of Ukrainian cuisine, and the *borsch* pot is often placed in the center of the table during meals. *Borsch* is a type of beet soup believed to have originated in Ukraine in the 14th century. It

contains as many as 20 ingredients and is often thick enough for a spoon to stand in it. Heavily seasoned sausages with lots of garlic and stuffed-cabbage *holubtsi* (little doves) are also popular. Stuffed dumplings (*varenyky)* and baked savory pies (*pyrohy)* are a mainstay in Ukrainian homes. Ukrainians might wash down their meals with a fermented drink made from bread and other grains, called *kvas*.

Many Ukrainians, both living and deceased, are recognized for their contributions to the world of culture, sports, and technology. Already famous for being the country of gold-medal figure skaters Victor Petrenko and Oksana Baiul, Ukraine also boasts world-class boxers, the brothers Vitaly and Volodymyr Klitchko. A Ukrainian cosmonaut, Col. Leonid Kadenyuk, was a crew member on the American space shuttle Columbia's 1997 mission. Other internationally known figures include poet laureate Taras Shevchenko, who authored *Kobzar* in 1840 and Nikolai Gogol, the 19th-century author of *The Inspector General* and *Dead Souls*.

June 2012