Ukraine, country located in eastern Europe, the second largest on the continent after Russia. The capital is Kyiv, located on the Dnieper River in north-central Ukraine.

Ukraine

A fully independent Ukraine emerged only late in the 20th century, after long periods of successive domination by Poland-Lithuania, Russia, and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (U.S.S.R.). Ukraine had experienced a brief period of independence in 1918–20, but portions of western Ukraine were ruled by Poland, Romania, and Czechoslovakia in the period between the two World Wars, and Ukraine thereafter became part of the Soviet Union as the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic (S.S.R.). When the Soviet Union began to unravel in 1990–91, the legislature of the Ukrainian S.S.R. declared sovereignty (July 16, 1990) and then outright independence (August 24, 1991), a move that was confirmed by popular approval in a plebiscite (December 1, 1991). With the dissolution of the U.S.S.R. in December 1991, Ukraine gained full independence. The country changed its official name to Ukraine, and it helped to found the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), an association of countries that were formerly republics of the Soviet Union.

Land

Physical features of Ukraine

Ukraine is bordered by Belarus to the north, Russia to the east, the Sea of Azov and the Black Sea to the south, Moldova and Romania to the southwest, and Hungary, Slovakia, and Poland to the west. In the far southeast, Ukraine is separated from Russia by the Kerch Strait, which connects the Sea of Azov to the Black Sea.

Relief

Ukraine occupies the southwestern portion of the Russian Plain (East European Plain). The country consists almost entirely of level plains at an average elevation of 574 feet (175 metres) above sea level. Mountainous areas such as the Ukrainian Carpathians and Crimean Mountains occur only on the country’s borders and account for barely 5 percent of its area. The Ukrainian landscape nevertheless has some diversity: its plains are broken by highlands—running in a continuous belt from northwest to southeast—as well as by lowlands.

The rolling plain of the Dnieper Upland, which lies between the middle reaches of the Dnieper (Dnipro) and Southern Buh (Pivdennyy Buh, or the Boh) rivers in west-central Ukraine, is the largest highland area; it is dissected by many river valleys, ravines, and gorges, some more than 1,000 feet (300 metres) deep. On the west the Dnieper Upland is abutted by the rugged Volyn-Podilsk Upland, which rises to 1,545 feet (471 metres) at its highest point, Mount Kamula. West of the Volyn-Podilsk Upland, in extreme western Ukraine, the parallel ranges of the Carpathian Mountains—one of the most picturesque areas in the country—extend for more than 150 miles (240 km). The mountains range in height from about 2,000 feet (600 metres) to about 6,500 feet (2,000 metres), rising to 6,762 feet (2,061 metres) at Mount Hoverla, the highest point in the country. The northeastern and southeastern portions of Ukraine are occupied by low uplands rarely reaching an elevation of 1,000 feet (300 metres).

Among the country’s lowlands are the Pripet Marshes (Polissya), which lie in the northern part of Ukraine and are crossed by numerous river valleys. In east-central Ukraine is the Dnieper Lowland, which is flat in the west and gently rolling in the east. To the south, another lowland extends along the shores of the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov; its level surface, broken only by low rises and shallow depressions, slopes gradually toward the Black Sea. The shores of the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov are characterized by narrow, sandy spits of land that jut out into the water; one of these, the Arabat Spit, is about 70 miles (113 km) long but averages less than 5 miles (8 km) in width.

The southern lowland continues in the Crimean Peninsula as the North Crimean Lowland. The peninsula—a large protrusion into the Black Sea—is connected to the mainland by the Perekop Isthmus. The Crimean Mountains form the southern coast of the peninsula. Mount Roman-Kosh, at 5,069 feet (1,545 metres), is the mountains’ highest point.

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Drainage

Dnieper River

Dnieper River at Kyiv, Ukraine.

Almost all the major rivers in Ukraine flow northwest to southeast through the plains to empty into the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov. The Dnieper River, with its hydroelectric dams, huge reservoirs, and many tributaries, dominates the entire central part of Ukraine. Of the total course of the Dnieper, 609 miles (980 km) are in Ukraine, making it by far the longest river in the country, of which it drains more than half. Like the Dnieper, the Southern Buh, with its major tributary, the Inhul, flows into the Black Sea. To the west and southwest, partly draining Ukrainian territory, the Dniester (Dnistro) also flows into the Black Sea; among its numerous tributaries, the largest in Ukraine are the Stryy and the Zbruch. The middle course of the Donets River, a tributary of the Don, flows through southeastern Ukraine and is an important source of water for the Donets Basin (Donbas). The Danube River flows along the southwestern frontier of Ukraine. Marshland, covering almost 3 percent of Ukraine, is found primarily in the northern river valleys and in the lower reaches of the Dnieper, Danube, and other rivers.

The rivers are most important as a water supply, and for this purpose a series of canals has been built, such as the Donets–Donets Basin, the Dnieper–Kryvyy Rih, and the North Crimea. Several of the larger rivers are navigable, including the Dnieper, Danube, Dniester, Pripet (Pryp’yat), Donets, and Southern Buh (in its lower course). Dams and hydroelectric plants are situated on all the larger rivers.

Ukraine has a few natural lakes, all of them small and most of them scattered over the river floodplains. One of the largest is Lake Svityaz, 11 square miles (28 square km) in area, in the northwest. Small saltwater lakes occur in the Black Sea Lowland and in Crimea. Larger saline lakes occur along the coast. Known as limans, these bodies of water form at the mouths of rivers or ephemeral streams and are blocked off by sandbars from the sea. Some artificial lakes have been formed, the largest of which are reservoirs at hydroelectric dams—e.g., the reservoir on the Dnieper upstream from Kremenchuk. The Kakhovka, Dnieper, Dniprodzerzhynsk, Kaniv, and Kyiv reservoirs make up the rest of the Dnieper cascade. Smaller reservoirs are located on the Dniester and Southern Buh rivers and on tributaries of the Donets River. Small reservoirs for water supply also are found near Kryvyy Rih, Kharkiv, and other industrial cities. Three large artesian basins—the Volyn-Podilsk, the Dnieper, and the Black Sea—are exceptionally important for municipal needs and agriculture as well.

Soils of Ukraine

From northwest to southeast the soils of Ukraine may be divided into three major aggregations: a zone of sandy podzolized soils; a central belt consisting of the black, extremely fertile Ukrainian chernozems; and a zone of chestnut and salinized soils.

The podzolized soils occupy about one-fifth of the country’s area, mostly in the north and northwest. These soils were formed by the extension of postglacial forests into regions of grassy steppe; most such soils may be farmed, although they require the addition of nutrients to obtain good harvests.

The chernozems of central Ukraine, among the most fertile soils in the world, occupy about two-thirds of the country’s area. These soils may be divided into three broad groups: in the north a belt of the so-called deep chernozems, about 5 feet (1.5 metres) thick and rich in humus; south and east of the former, a zone of prairie, or ordinary, chernozems, which are equally rich in humus but only about 3 feet (1 metre) thick; and the southernmost belt, which is even thinner and has still less humus. Interspersed in various uplands and along the northern and western perimeters of the deep chernozems are mixtures of gray forest soils and podzolized black-earth soils, which together occupy much of Ukraine’s remaining area. All these soils are very fertile when sufficient water is available. However, their intensive cultivation, especially on steep slopes, has led to widespread soil erosion and gullying.

The smallest proportion of the soil cover consists of the chestnut soils of the southern and eastern regions. They become increasingly salinized to the south as they approach the Black Sea.

Climate

Ukraine lies in a temperate climatic zone influenced by moderately warm, humid air from the Atlantic Ocean. Winters in the west are considerably milder than those in the east. In summer, on the other hand, the east often experiences higher temperatures than the west. Average annual temperatures range from about 42–45 °F (5.5–7 °C) in the north to about 52–55 °F (11–13 °C) in the south. The average temperature in January, the coldest month, is about 26 °F (−3 °C) in the southwest and about 18 °F (−8 °C) in the northeast. The average in July, the hottest month, is about 73 °F (23 °C) in the southeast and about 64 °F (18 °C) in the northwest.

Precipitation is uneven, with two to three times as much falling in the warmer seasons as in the cold. Maximum precipitation generally occurs in June and July, while the minimum falls in February. Snow falls mainly in late November and early December; accumulation varies in depth from a few inches in the steppe region (in the south) to several feet in the Carpathians. Western Ukraine, notably the Carpathian Mountains area, receives the highest annual precipitation—more than 47 inches (1,200 mm). The lowlands along the Black Sea and in Crimea, by contrast, receive less than 16 inches (400 mm) annually. The remaining areas of Ukraine receive 16 to 24 inches (400 to 600 mm) of precipitation.

In contrast to the rest of Ukraine, the southern shore of Crimea has a warm, gentle, Mediterranean-type climate. Winters are mild and rainy, with little snow, and the average January temperature is 39 °F (4 °C). Summers are dry and hot, with an average July temperature of 75 °F (24 °C).

Plant and animal life

Though much of Ukraine’s original plant cover has been cleared for cultivation, three main zones of natural vegetation are still distinguishable. From north to south, they are the Polissya (woodland and marsh), the forest-steppe, and the steppe.

The Polissya zone lies in the northwest and north. More than one-third of its area—about 44,000 square miles (114,000 square km)—is arable land. Nearly one-quarter of it is covered with mixed woodland, including oak, elm, birch, hornbeam, ash, maple, pine, linden, alder, poplar, willow, and beech. About 5 percent is peat bog, a substantial portion is marshland, and the river valleys are floodplains. The Polissya contains the southernmost portions of the Pripet Marshes, and Ukraine has undertaken major efforts to drain these swamplands and reclaim the land for agriculture.

The forest-steppe, which covers an area of about 78,000 square miles (202,000 square km), extends south from the Polissya. About two-thirds of this agricultural region is arable land; forests take up only about one-eighth of the area.

Farther south, near the Black Sea, Sea of Azov, and Crimean Mountains, the forest-steppe joins the steppe zone, which is about 89,000 square miles (231,000 square km) in area. Many of the flat, treeless plains in this region are under cultivation, although low annual precipitation and hot summers make supplemental irrigation necessary. Remnants of the natural vegetation of the steppe, including its characteristic fescue and feather grasses, are protected in nature reserves.

Other natural regions are found near the borders of the country. Most of the country’s rich forestlands are in the Carpathian region of western Ukraine. The lower mountain slopes are covered with mixed forests and the intermediate slopes with pine forests; these give way to Alpine meadows at higher altitudes. Along the southern coast of the Crimean Peninsula, a narrow strip of land, only about 6 miles (10 km) wide, constitutes a unique natural region where both deciduous and evergreen grasses and shrubs grow.

The animal life of Ukraine is diverse, with about 350 species of birds, more than 100 species of mammals, and more than 200 species of fish. The most common predators are wolves, foxes, wildcats, and martens, while hoofed animals include roe deer, wild pigs, and sometimes elk and mouflons (a species of wild sheep). The wide variety of rodents includes gophers, hamsters, jerboas, and field mice. The major bird species are black and hazel grouse, owls, gulls, and partridges, as well as many migrating birds, such as wild geese, ducks, and storks. Among the fish are pike, carp, bream, perch, sturgeons, and sterlets. Introduced and well-acclimatized wildlife includes muskrats, raccoons, beavers, nutrias, and silver foxes.

Numerous nature and game reserves reflect Ukraine’s commitment to the conservation of its biological heritage. The country’s first nature reserve, Askaniya-Nova, began as a private wildlife refuge in 1875; today it protects a portion of virgin steppe. Some 40 different mammals, including the onager and Przewalski’s horse, have been introduced there as part of a successful program of breeding endangered species; ostriches also have been successfully introduced. The separate sections of the Ukrainian Steppe Reserve also preserve various types of steppe. The Black Sea Nature Reserve shelters many species of waterfowl and is the only Ukrainian breeding ground of the Mediterranean gull (Larus melanocephalus). Also located on the Black Sea, the Danube Water Meadows Reserve protects the Danube River’s tidewater biota. Other reserves in Ukraine preserve segments of the forest-steppe woodland, the marshes and forests of the Polissya, and the mountains and rocky coast of Crimea.

Environmental concerns

During the Soviet period, rapid industrialization, intensive farming, and a lack of effective pollution controls combined to seriously degrade the environment in Ukraine. Some of the most polluted areas in the world are now found there.

The coal-burning industries of eastern Ukraine, which emit high levels of sulfur dioxide, hydrocarbons, and dust, have created severe air pollution throughout the region. Air quality is particularly poor in the cities of Dnipropetrovsk, Kryvyy Rih, and Zaporizhzhya. Lightly industrialized cities in the west, such as Uzhhorod and Khmelnytskyy, face air pollution caused by the prevalence of inefficient automobiles.

Chernobyl disaster

Scientists trawling the Pryp'yat River, near Chernobyl nuclear power plant.

Major rivers, including the Dnieper, Dniester, Inhul, and Donets, are seriously polluted with chemical fertilizers and pesticides from agricultural runoff and with poorly treated or untreated sewage. Coastal water pollution in the Sea of Azov and the Black Sea has necessitated the closing of beaches and has led to a dramatic reduction in fish catches. The freshwater flow into the Sea of Azov has been largely diverted for irrigation purposes, leading to a sharp increase in salinity.

Chernobyl disaster

The town of Pryp'yat, Ukraine, which was evacuated after the Chernobyl accident in 1986.(more)

Hear about the April 1986 disaster at the Chernobyl nuclear power station and the catastrophe caused due to the escaping radiation

Overview of the Chernobyl disaster.

See all videos for this article

The 1986 accident at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant created severe environmental problems in northwestern Ukraine. Vast areas of land are contaminated by dangerous short- and long-lived radioactive isotopes, notably strontium-90, which can replace calcium in foods and become concentrated in bones and teeth. Contaminated agricultural lands near Chernobyl will be unsafe for thousands of years, though some of these areas continue to be occupied and farmed. Several thousand premature deaths from cancer are expected over the long term.

People of Ukraine

Ethnic groups

When Ukraine was a part of the Soviet Union, a policy of Russian in-migration and Ukrainian out-migration was in effect, and ethnic Ukrainians’ share of the population in Ukraine declined from 77 percent in 1959 to 73 percent in 1991. But that trend reversed after the country gained independence, and, by the turn of the 21st century, ethnic Ukrainians made up more than three-fourths of the population. Russians continue to be the largest minority, though they now constitute less than one-fifth of the population. The remainder of the population includes Belarusians, Moldovans, Bulgarians, Poles, Hungarians, Romanians, Roma (Gypsies), and other groups. The Crimean Tatars, who were forcibly deported to Uzbekistan and other Central Asian republics in 1944, began returning to the Crimea in large numbers in 1989; by the early 21st century they constituted one of the largest non-Russian minority groups. In March 2014 Russia forcibly annexed Crimea, a move that was condemned by the international community, and human rights groups subsequently documented a series of repressive measures that had been taken against the Crimean Tatars by Russian authorities.

Historically, Ukraine had large Jewish and Polish populations, particularly in the Right Bank region (west of the Dnieper River). In fact, in the late 19th century slightly more than one-fourth of the world’s Jewish population (estimated at 10 million) lived in ethnic Ukrainian territory. This predominantly Yiddish-speaking population was greatly reduced by emigration in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and by the devastation of the Holocaust. In the late 1980s and early ’90s, large numbers of Ukraine’s remaining Jews emigrated, mainly to Israel. At the turn of the 21st century, the several hundred thousand Jews left in Ukraine made up less than 1 percent of the Ukrainian population. Most of Ukraine’s large Polish minority was resettled in Poland after World War II as part of a Soviet plan to have ethnic settlement match territorial boundaries. Fewer than 150,000 ethnic Poles remained in Ukraine at the turn of the 21st century.

Languages of Ukraine

The vast majority of people in Ukraine speak Ukrainian, which is written with a form of the Cyrillic alphabet. The language—belonging with Russian and Belarusian to the East Slavic branch of the Slavic language family—is closely related to Russian but also has distinct similarities to the Polish language. Significant numbers of people in the country speak Polish, Yiddish, Rusyn, Belarusian, Romanian or Moldovan, Bulgarian, Crimean Turkish, or Hungarian. Russian is the most important minority language.

During the rule of imperial Russia and under the Soviet Union, Russian was the common language of government administration and public life in Ukraine. Although Ukrainian had been afforded equal status with Russian in the decade following the revolution of 1917, by the 1930s a concerted attempt at Russification was well under way. In 1989 Ukrainian once again became the country’s official language, and its status as the sole official language was confirmed in the 1996 Ukrainian constitution.

In 2012 a law was passed that granted local authorities the power to confer official status upon minority languages. Although Ukrainian was reaffirmed as the country’s official language, regional administrators could elect to conduct official business in the prevailing language of the area. In Crimea, which has an autonomous status within Ukraine and where there is a Russian-speaking majority, Russian and Crimean Tatar are the official languages. In addition, primary and secondary schools using Russian as the language of instruction still prevail in the Donets Basin and other areas with large Russian minorities. The Ukrainian parliament moved to rescind the minority language law in February 2014, after the ouster of pro-Russian Pres. Viktor Yanukovych, but interim Pres. Oleksandr Turchynov declined to sign the bill into law.

Religion

The predominant religion in Ukraine, practiced by almost half the population, is Eastern Orthodoxy. Historically, most adherents belonged to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church–Kyiv Patriarchate, though the Ukrainian Orthodox Church–Moscow Patriarchate was important as well. A smaller number of Orthodox Christians belonged to the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church. In January 2019 the Kyiv Patriarchate and Autocephalous churches were merged into a single body as the Orthodox Church of Ukraine. In creating the new church, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I formalized the independence of Ukraine’s Orthodox community, which had been under the jurisdiction of the patriarchate of Moscow since 1686. In western Ukraine the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church prevails. Minority religions include Protestantism, Roman Catholicism, Islam (practiced primarily by the Crimean Tatars), and Judaism. More than two-fifths of Ukrainians are not religious.

Settlement patterns

population density of Ukraine

More than two-thirds of the population lives in urban areas. High population densities occur in southeastern and south-central Ukraine, in the highly industrialized regions of the Donets Basin and the Dnieper Bend, as well as in the coastal areas along the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov. Portions of western Ukraine and the Kyiv area are also densely populated. Besides the capital, major cities in Ukraine include Kharkiv, Dnipropetrovsk, Donetsk, Odessa, Zaporizhzhya, Lviv, and Kryvyy Rih.

Of the rural population, more than half is found in large villages (1,000 to 5,000 inhabitants), and most of these people are employed in a rural economy based on farming. The highest rural population densities are found in the wide belt of forest-steppe extending east-west across central Ukraine, where the extremely fertile soils and balanced climatic conditions are most favourable for agriculture.

Demographic trends

Ukraine’s population increased steadily throughout the Soviet era, peaking at over 50 million as the country transitioned to independence. However, a low birth rate, coupled with an aging population and low rates of migration into the country, contributed to a sharp population decline that extended into the 21st century. Millions of Ukrainians—especially those from the western part of the country—sought employment abroad, and by 2010 roughly one in seven Ukrainians was residing outside the country for work purposes. These labour migrants most often sought work in Russia and the EU, and they predominantly found employment in the fields of construction and domestic service. Aware of Ukraine’s net loss of workers to immigration and a fertility rate that was far below replacement level, Ukrainian policy makers recognized the burden that would be placed on the country’s old age pension system. In 2011 the retirement age for men was raised from 60 to 62 and women’s retirement age was raised from 55 to 60. By 2017 it was estimated that at least 1.5 million Ukrainians had been internally displaced by Russia’s forcible annexation of Crimea in 2014 and by ongoing fighting between Ukrainian forces and Russian-backed separatists in southeastern Ukraine.

Economy of Ukraine

Ukraine’s modern economy was developed as an integral part of the larger economy of the Soviet Union. While receiving a smaller share (16 percent in the 1980s) of the Soviet Union’s investment funds and producing a greater proportion of goods with a lower set price, Ukraine was able to produce a larger share of total output in the industrial (17 percent) and especially the agricultural (21 percent) sectors of the Soviet economy. In effect, a centrally directed transfer of wealth from Ukraine, amounting to one-fifth of its national income, helped to finance economic development in other parts of the Soviet Union, notably Russia and Kazakhstan.

By the late Soviet period, however, the Ukrainian economy was under severe strain, and it contracted sharply early in the independence era. A period of extreme currency inflation in the early 1990s brought great hardship to most of the population. Despite early hopes that Ukrainian economic independence—with the concomitant end to the transfer of funds and resources to other parts of the Soviet Union—would alleviate the declining economy and standard of living, Ukraine entered a period of severe economic decline. Daily life in Ukraine became a struggle, particularly for those living on fixed incomes, as prices rose sharply. Citizens compensated in a number of ways: more than half grew their own food, workers often held two or three jobs, and many acquired basic necessities through a flourishing barter economy. By 1996 Ukraine had achieved a measure of economic stability. Inflation dropped to manageable levels, and the economy’s decline slowed considerably.

At the turn of the 21st century the economy finally began to grow, at least partially as a result of increased ties with Russia. In the early 21st century many young Ukrainians, particularly residents of the country’s rural west, sought employment opportunities abroad. Although such migration sometimes led to localized labour shortages within Ukraine, remittances from the Ukrainian diaspora amounted to some 4 percent of the country’s gross domestic product (GDP).

The economy contracted sharply in 2014 as a result of the political crisis that toppled the government of pro-Russian Pres. Viktor Yanukovych. Russia responded to Yanukovych’s ouster by illegally annexing Crimea and fomenting an insurgency in southeastern Ukraine. A cease-fire between the Ukrainian government and Russian-backed forces in February 2015 created a state of frozen conflict, and the ongoing violence shattered daily life in what had been Ukraine’s most productive industrial region.