



EASTERN EUROPEANS

Though there are major cultural and traditional differences between the peoples of the different countries of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, one commonality they all share is having lived under communist rule. The dissolution of the Soviet Union led to the creation, or re-creation, of a number of Eastern European or Balkan states, including Bosnia, Croatia, and Macedonia. Borders and populations changed, in some cases leading to renewed conflicts between various ethnic and religious groups. The conflict was most severe between Serbia and Bosnia, both formerly part of Yugoslavia.

Conflict began in Bosnia in 1991, and in 1992 the Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina declared independence from Yugoslavia. The conflict included “ethnic cleansing” of Muslims in Bosnia by Serb military and police. This genocide was characterized by concentration camps, mass murders (especially of men), and a Serb policy of raping Muslim women. The vast majority of casualties (approximately 250,000 killed) were civilian. An outflow of refugees resulted in approximately 800,000 Bosnians displaced to other countries, and more than 200,000 coming to the United States. Refugees from all three of the primary ethnic/religious population groups (Muslims, Serbs, and Croats) have been resettled in Guilford County. No single group comprises a majority population.

• DID YOU KNOW?

- Most Eastern European immigrants are racially categorized as White or Caucasian. This is a benefit because they are less likely to be discriminated against than other immigrants of color.
- Most Eastern Europeans grew up in industrially advanced societies, so they are more quick to adapt to Western technology than are immigrants from developing countries.
- Bosnia’s three major ethnic/religious groups are Muslims, Serbs, and Croats. Refugees from all three groups have been resettled in Guilford County. In addition, many refugees are from “mixed families” which were not accepted by any of the power groups involved in the political struggles.

- Information included here is provided to help you become more aware of the culture and traditions of your clients, students and co-workers. Please use this only as a guide, keeping in mind that all people within a culture are not the same. Be sure to ask your clients and their families about their specific beliefs, practices and customs. Showing respect and openness toward their traditions will help you build better relationships and provide more effective services.

The resettlement of refugees from Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union dates back to the 1980s. However, most refugees from Eastern Europe who settled in Guilford County came in the 1990s. Though the Triad did not emerge as a major resettlement area for Eastern Europeans, the Bosnian refugee community that was resettled in Greensboro has grown to a couple of thousand people. In addition, Jewish Family Services has assisted in resettling roughly 250 Jewish refugees from Russia and the Ukraine in Greensboro. There are also approximately 100 Albanian Kosovars recently resettled in Greater Greensboro.

Many Bosnians, especially members of the older generation, hope to return to their country someday. Those Bosnians who owned property, but were forced to flee for their lives because of the war, still retain legal ownership of the property that they left behind.

For most Eastern Europeans the age for retirement is 55. Many older Eastern Europeans worked hard their whole lives and were planning for retirement when political situations in their native countries forced them to leave. People express frustration and sadness that once they immigrate to the United States they may

lose their retirement savings due to unexpected economic hardship. Men and women at age 55 must continue to work well beyond the age at which they expected to retire.

• | CULTURE

LANGUAGE The language of Bosnia has traditionally been categorized as Serbo-Croatian. However, with nationalist feelings being strong, many are claiming that their language is unique and different, and insist that they speak Serb, Croat, Bosnian, or Yugoslavian. Many people also speak German, English, or another second language. In most respects, Serbo-Croatian is similar enough to English that Bosnians are able to learn English without exceptional difficulty. Russians speak Russian and many also learn some English in school.

RELIGIOUS PRACTICES & BELIEFS Much of Europe has become very secularized, and formal religion is not as strong as in the United States. However, religion is often a big factor for Eastern European refugees.

The Bosnian population is more religiously diverse than other Balkan countries: 40% are

Eastern Orthodox (primarily Serbs); 38% are Muslim; and 22% are Catholic (most Croatian). Albanians are largely Muslim although there are also some Albanians who are orthodox, Roman Catholics, and evangelical Christians.

Most Russians who are members of a faith community are orthodox Christians and belong to the Russian Orthodox Church. However, most refugees resettled in North Carolina are not orthodox. Most Russians in Greensboro are Jewish, resettled through Jewish Family Services. Russian Jewish refugees were forbidden to practice their religion in their native country and many have only recently come to learn and understand more about their own religion. Asheville has become a desirable site for Russian and Ukrainian evangelical Christians, with a population of several thousand and a network of ethnic churches.

While the Islam practiced in Eastern Europe is usually not as strict as Islam in other parts of the world, the Islamic religion has an impact on health beliefs and practices. The laws of Islam dictates meticulous hygiene practices. Muslim women are often modest and hence less likely to report gynecological problems. Muslims should be

seen by doctors of the same sex whenever possible. Bosnian women who are Muslim are reported to be less intent on maintaining extreme modesty and are more willing to report gynecological problems.

SOCIAL CLASS Some believe that Eastern Europeans have less class discrimination than Western Europeans. This may be a concept that was internalized during the period of Soviet rule. Everyone has an equal opportunity to access a good education and employment. A person's class status appears to be of less importance than their level of education.

Russian immigrants appear to subscribe to the Western concept of social class, with society members considered to be upper, middle, and lower class based on income levels. There are also designations for the *nouveau riche* (people with more recently acquired wealth than good taste or manners), and for a bohemian class of people who, though not financially well off, are well respected for their creativity and artistic talents. In Russia, people with middle and upper class status lived in larger cities while the majority of the poor lived in more rural areas. However, those individuals from less privileged

classes will also be those least likely to have formal educations.

EDUCATION Education is a source of pride and of special importance to both Russians and Bosnians. In their home countries education was free and many people received advanced degrees and technical training. In fact, Russians are thought to have one of the highest educational levels in the world. It is a great source of frustration to many Russian refugees and immigrants that their certifications and educational degrees do not transfer to fulfill requirements for colleges and universities or employment in the United States. Both Bosnian and Russian immigrants and refugees often work hard and use large portions of their financial resources to achieve diplomas for degrees that they already hold in their native countries. Many people work in jobs for which they are over qualified and they experience job dissatisfaction in the United States.

• FAMILY & RELATIONSHIPS

In the United States, Russians typically live in nuclear families, although it is not uncommon for extended family members to live

in the same household. Married couples have between two and four children. Russians, in their native country, have been very dependent on a close knit family for survival. In Russia it was common for two or three generations of family members to live together. Married children with spouses often remained living with one of the couple's parents.

GENDER ROLES Due to financial stresses, men and women are often both working jobs. Women take responsibility for managing the home. Men provide financial support for the family and act as the head of the household.

Traditional dating and marriage practices vary according to country of origin, though it is reported that most Bosnian and Russian youth begin dating in high school and make their own choices about marital partners. In Russia, people typically married between the ages of 18 and 23. It is undesirable for a woman to be over 25 and still single. Marriage gives a Russian woman social status and a woman's career is considered less important.

Bosnians more often live in nuclear families. Relationships between men and women are more egalitarian. Women have careers but still act as the primary caretaker of household affairs.

• HEALTH & WELLNESS

HEALTH BELIEFS Except for the notable fact that the health care system in Russia and Bosnia is socialized, basic health care in the United States is not unfamiliar to Eastern Europeans. In their native countries more emphasis may have been placed on primary care, although some tests and procedures were not available. Nearly all Bosnians and Russians are familiar with western concepts of health and disease. Some Eastern Europeans express a disappointment with the poor quality and inaccessibility of medical care in the United States. Though there is some distrust of medical professionals reported by Eastern Europeans, patients typically comply with doctors' recommendations and treatment regimens.

MENTAL HEALTH Mental health issues to consider when working with refugees from Eastern Europe include post-traumatic stress disorder and depression. These issues are generally treated

through informal means, and mental health services are rarely accessed.

ALCOHOL USE Russians have a reputation for being heavy drinkers. It is unusual for a social function to take place without the presence of alcohol. Alcoholism is a social problem aggravated by social tradition and the culture shock and post-traumatic stress that is common with refugees.

OBSTACLES TO ACCESSING CARE The language barrier is the largest obstacle for older Eastern Europeans. Financial limitations and transportation may also pose problems.

Generally, Eastern Europeans express some of the same complaints that most Americans do in regard to accessing health care services, including long waits, the short time actually spent with the physician, and the high cost of treatment.



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