

## Refugees served by IOM Central Asia and Europe

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### Background

IOM Moscow provides Cultural Orientation to U.S.-bound refugees throughout various countries in Europe and Central Asia. Students are from a variety of ethnic backgrounds (most often Afghan, Somali, Eritrean, Iranian, Iraqi, Sudanese, Congolese and ex-USSR nationals) and are located in numerous countries in the region, requiring IOM trainers to travel widely to deliver CO courses.

### Groups served

The program serves two large groups of refugees (defined by category rather than by ethnicity or nationality). “Lautenberg refugees” have a refugee claim based on persecution for their religious beliefs or their Jewish ethnicity by the authorities in their home countries during the Soviet era. Lautenberg refugees have immediate relatives in the U.S. and, as a rule, they still reside in their countries of origin. Lautenberg refugees may receive 6-7 hours of CO in Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan.

The program also serves individually-referred refugees, displaced individuals whose claim could be based on any of a plethora of reasons and who were referred to the program by UNHCR, U.S. embassies, or non-governmental organizations. These refugees generally have no ties to the U.S. They are offered 3-day CO sessions of 15-18 hours in Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, Malta, Romania, Serbia, and Turkmenistan.

### Delivery

Delivery at these sites is triggered by the accumulation of approximately 20 refugees eligible for CO. In Ukraine, for example, the Lautenberg caseload is almost evenly spread between the four regions of the country, warranting CO delivery in each region approximately once every three months.

Under this “mobile mission” structure, CO is carried out for approximately 800 individuals at a location close to their home (with the remaining 500 or so members of IOM Central Asia and Europe’s caseload having received CO in Moscow). Mobile missions are planned on a quarterly basis, with five locations being served. This gives the Lautenberg caseload the opportunity to travel only a few hours, if at all, to reach the training venue (rather than a time-consuming and costly overnight trip to Moscow). Another advantage is that refugees can participate in CO at a date closer to departure, thereby increasing the effectiveness and retention of the information received. In addition, the attendance rate of these mobile missions is nearly 100%, and the response received from the refugees to this approach is extremely positive.

### Curriculum

The program's curriculum is based on the contents of *Welcome to the United States: A Guidebook for Refugees*, and its accompanying video, as well as on feedback from students, trainers, and resettlement colleagues. The courses are based on experiential and active learning, with the majority of training conducted through group activities, questions, discussions, debates, and dialogue with the students. Participants note that the *Welcome* film is very helpful to show them a window on life in the U.S.

## Characteristics and Concerns

Student concerns vary widely according to location as well as by status as Lautenberg refugees or those without U.S. ties.

At the first training in *Minsk, Belarus*, for example, the majority of the group of Lautenberg refugees had college or graduate degrees, and asked many questions about their prospects for employment in the U.S. Even those over the age of 65 were interested in the possibility of finding work. Indeed, among the Lautenberg refugees, it is not uncommon that they have already been to the U.S. Their questions can be very specific, such as:

- Do they need translation of school certificates?
- What kind of higher education documents will be recognized in the U.S.?
- Where is it better to start studying English: in Russia or in the U.S.?
- What will they have to do if they are 62 or 63 years old, with a few years left before retirement?
- Is it possible to retain Russian citizenship after naturalization?
- Concern about IOM loan for airfare

Some people admitted that a lot of what was discussed during the training was inconsistent with what relatives in the U.S. had told them. This is the most difficult part for a trainer in working with this group of refugees.

In contrast, three classes of *refugees from Afghanistan, trained in Krasnodar, Russia*, were far less familiar with the U.S., and shared many questions regarding family reunification issues (which the trainer instructed them to address to their resettlement agency upon arrival). Another group of individually-referred *Afghan refugees, trained in Moscow*, knew very little about the U.S., pre-departure procedures, and the progress of their case. Members of this group spoke neither Russian nor English as a native language, and they felt shy and uncertain about making telephone inquiries. Discussing the films *Welcome to the United States* and *Be Who You Are* were among this group's favorite activities, as was drafting a monthly budget.

The majority of CO participants in a recent training in *Valletta, Malta*, were nationals of *Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia, with some from Congo and Sudan*. These refugees have resided in Malta for quite some time (where many of them work as builders at construction sites) and have been exposed to Western culture. In addition, the majority of them have already started learning English. Almost all of them are living in open centers for refugees; only a few rent housing. Most are separated from their families and are very anxious about their loved ones in Africa. The applicants are also facing serious problems such as a shortage of money and food, high apartment costs, lack of legal protection, discrimination on the part of the local population, and xenophobia.

During the three-day trainings, these refugees asked many questions about employment, health insurance, education, the legal system and laws in the U.S., their rights and responsibilities, the possibility to bring their families to the U.S., and status adjustment procedures. They also claimed that although all of them were officially recognized by Maltese authorities as refugees and granted temporary humanitarian protection, their rights are often violated. As such, the participants were very much concerned with the protection of their rights and safety, wanting to know more about who would help them in case of problems with a

landlord, employer, or others. Other questions included the possibility of opening businesses (bakeries, ethnic restaurants, etc.) and whether they could become farmers in the US, breed cattle, and cultivate crops. Several groups of *refugees from the Darfuri region of Sudan* (some of whom had been living in Iraq for up to 14 years) recently received CO at the *Emergency Transit Center in Timisoara, Romania*. Since opportunities for entertainment and other activities in the center are limited, the refugees were glad for the change in routine, as well as eager to learn more about life in the U.S. Topics raised by the refugees included whether it was possible to wear Sudanese garments in the U.S. (to which it was explained that they were allowed to, although it could be improper at some jobs and in cool climate conditions) and many questions about cars (without much interest expressed in public transport). Also, many of the refugees wanted to resettle to Alaska, because to their knowledge it was a very rich state with much better salaries than in other regions of the US.

Classes were presented in English with translation into Arabic, although some of the refugees spoke English. In addition, many of the participants were happy to get the *Welcome* guide in Arabic and in English, using them as textbooks to upgrade their language skills. Using video was also very helpful. Showing film footage helped the female trainers greatly in explaining to the predominantly male caseload U.S. standards of personal hygiene as well as use of toilet paper. These topics can be embarrassing, and in such moments, films helped bridge cultural gaps successfully.

Recent USCO classes in *Chisinau, Moldova*, consisted of 25 or more *Evangelical Christians*. Many of the participants had visited the U.S. at least once, while others had steady contacts with their relatives in the U.S. Participants willingly shared their personal experiences with the group, and also contributed a broad range of valuable questions. Questions raised included where they will receive American visas, whether their education or professional qualifications will be recognized in the U.S., what medical services are available, whether there are benefits for large families, whether they will be allowed to take more than one ESL class a day, and travel-related issues, including how to transport personal items, such as coin collections, family Bibles, musical instruments, and the huge cast iron pots used to make the corn flour-based national meal of “mamalyga” (since stateside relatives fiercely urged the refugees to bring the pots along with them). Participants also asked whether the trainer is a U.S. citizen or had been to the U.S. before.

Other issues raised by the participants included concerns that their resettlement agency will not provide them with basic household items, worries that elderly refugees will be not be included in ESL classes, official barriers to their departure (the unpredictable and lengthy process of securing exit permits, during which refugees lose their rights to pensions and allowances for children), and whether they will be able to maintain dual citizenship between the U.S. and Moldova. In response to the first topic, participants were reassured of the role and responsibilities of their resettlement agency. At the same time, participants were extensively encouraged to become pro-active, resourceful, and inquisitive, rather than being passive and fully dependent on U.S.-based relatives and agency case-workers.

***If you would like to share your agency's experience of resettling clients that received CO from IOM Central Asia and Europe, please [click here](#).***