

UKRAINE'S WINTER WAR

Vulnerable civilians
brace for coming freeze



Introduction

As temperatures plummet in Ukraine, slowing the ground war, Russia resumes bombing the country's heating infrastructure.

They target Ukraine's cities, aiming to make life unbearably cold and dark for hundreds of thousands of people, and force another wave of mass movement out of Ukraine and into Poland and [other European countries](#).¹

Attacks on Ukraine's energy grid have begun. Ukrainian officials said that by early November 2023, Russia had struck Ukrainian infrastructure 60 times. [The British Ministry of Defence](#) and [others](#) have warned that Russia appears to be stockpiling its missiles for an intense winter offensive against Ukraine's infrastructure. The country's cities are [bracing](#) for an [onslaught](#).

The dangers in cities are different than in rural villages, but in all cases, civilians face continuing Russian shelling. In the city of Kharkiv, the power plants are targeted, and civilians are threatened by heavy bombardments aimed at the heating infrastructure. In Kupiansk, there is the prospect of a Russian assault; close-quarter fighting will make leaving home to find fuel very dangerous. In rural areas locals searching for firewood risk stepping on [mines](#).

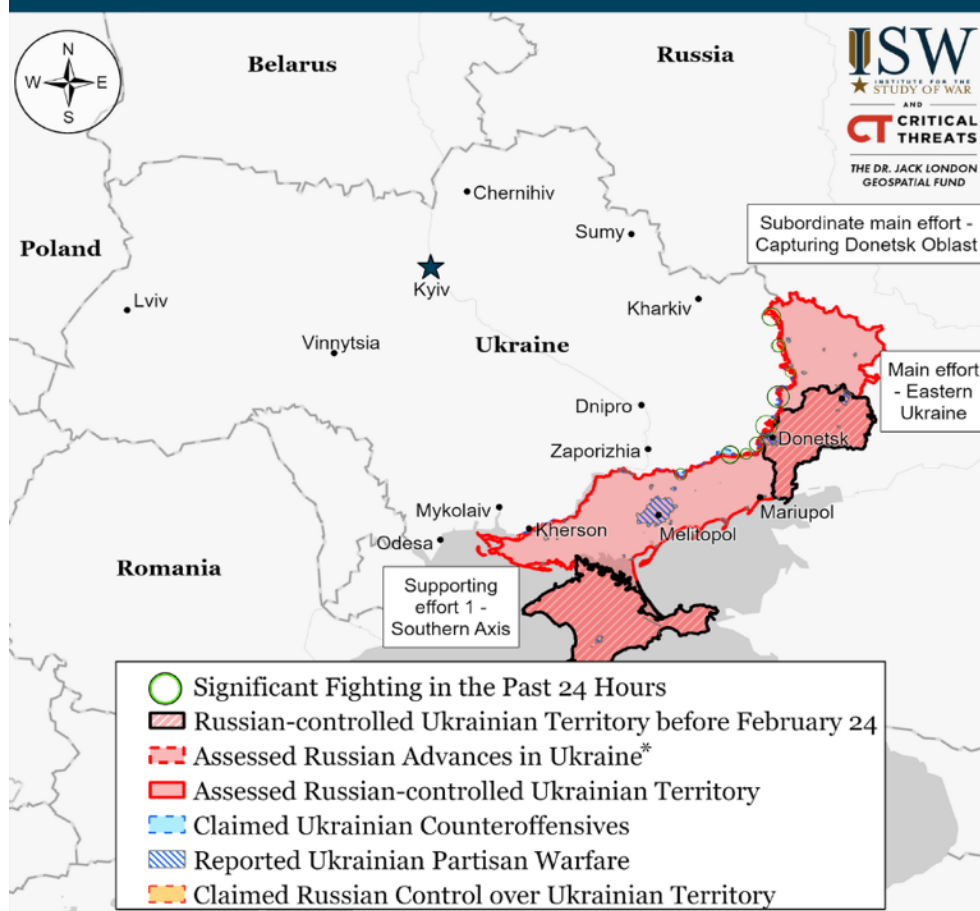
In November 2023, Human Rights First traveled to Kharkiv and Kupiansk, to smaller communities close to the front lines of the fighting, and to villages near the Russian border. This report focuses on those vulnerable communities in the Kharkiv Oblast, and human rights defenders (HRDs) helping them.

Locals discussed how they are preparing for attacks on heating and electricity supplies. Many said that Ukraine's ability to guarantee electricity in the coming months depends on its air defense systems, but not every rocket or drone can be intercepted.

¹ One Irish NGO has reported that older Ukrainians, including grandparents who up to now refused to leave their homes, are arriving in Ireland in larger numbers as the war in Ukraine enters its third winter.



Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of November 12, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



* Assessed Russian advances are areas where ISW assesses Russian forces have operated in or launched attacks against but do not control.

Human Rights First's history of working in Kharkiv

Human Rights First has reported from the city of Kharkiv and its surrounding area since 2017 when we [documented](#) attacks on local human rights defenders (HRDs) who had exposed corruption in the mayor's office.

Today, safety concerns keep most diplomats or foreign officials from visiting Kharkiv, as the city and region are regularly attacked. Local HRDs are frustrated at this lack of direct contact with internationally based actors; they say that Kharkiv's needs are often ignored as foreign governments and donors lack detailed firsthand information about the challenges they face.



Nonetheless, Human Rights First [reported](#) from Kharkiv in the first days of May 2022 when it was under almost constant bombardment and surrounding towns and suburbs were under Russian occupation. On nine subsequent research visits, we produced reports and articles from the battered city, [documenting](#) how local activists and the public have resisted Russian aggression and how they survived previous attacks on the region's heating infrastructure. In May 2023, Human Rights First released a [report](#) on how the village of Tsyrukun, north of Kharkiv, survived Russian occupation. We released [another](#) in June 2023 on the Russian occupation of the city of Izyum and surrounding villages, also in the Kharkiv Oblast.

In July 2023, we worked with local NGO the Kharkiv Anti-Corruption Center to produce a [report](#) on dubious contracts awarded by Kharkiv's authorities for the reconstruction of public buildings. In August 2023, we published a [report](#) from the frontline city of Kupiansk on how locals were holding out against the threat of a Russian reoccupation.

Rebuilding from last winter's onslaught

Last year, Russian missile and drone attacks on Ukraine's energy grid meant electricity rationing and blackouts across about half of Ukraine's energy system. A network of dozens of European countries and cities supplied Ukraine with emergency heating, light, and water.

The attacks damaged Ukraine's thermal and hydroelectric plants and Russia continues to occupy the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant in southeastern Ukraine. Relatively mild temperatures in the last year have alleviated some pressure on the infrastructure, and Kharkiv managed to get through last year's winter relatively well, as we reported from the city in [November 2022](#) and [January 2023](#).

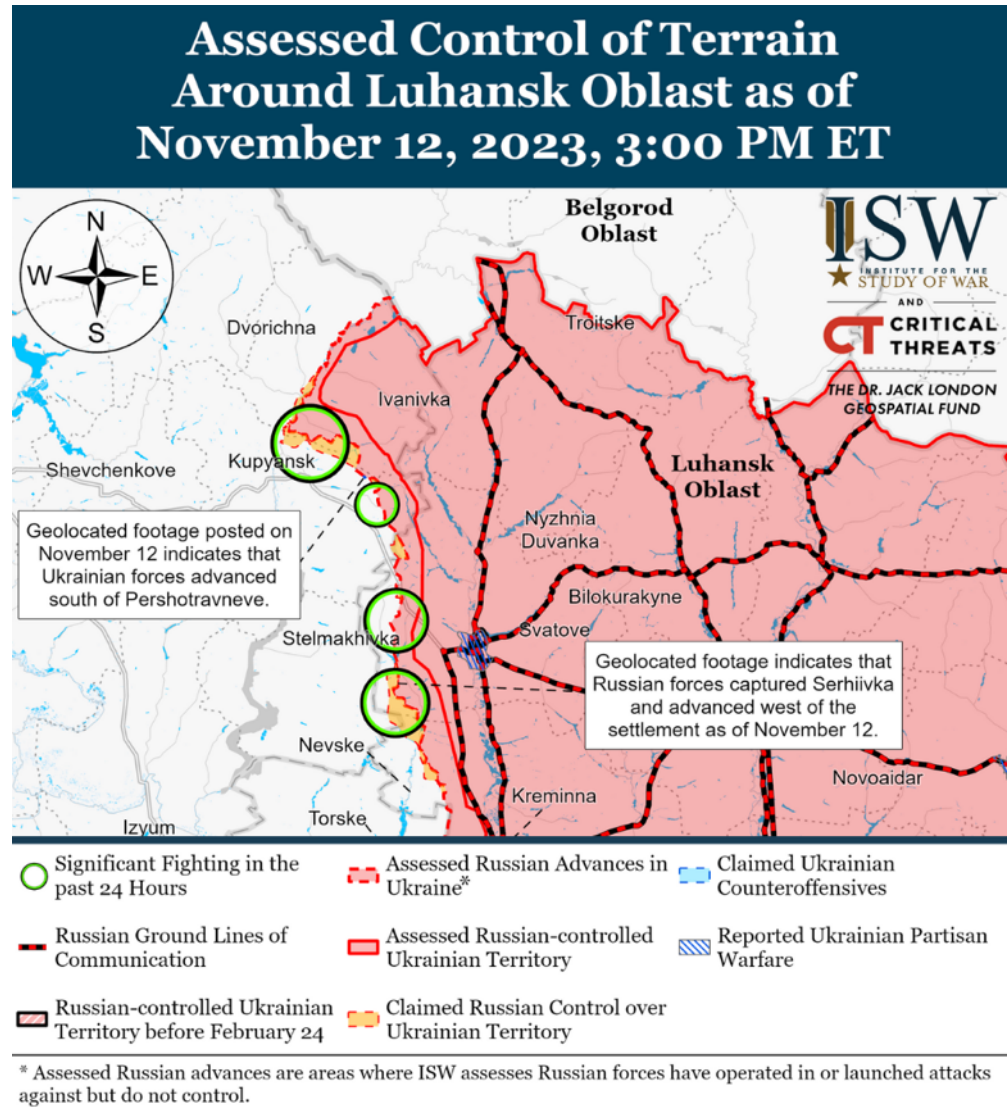
But winters in eastern Ukraine are typically brutal. [Average temperatures](#) for the Kharkiv region during December, January, and February are well below freezing, with January averaging 23 degrees Fahrenheit (minus 4.9 Celsius). Last winter, temperatures often dipped far below freezing, reaching lows of 12 degrees Fahrenheit (minus 11 Celsius) in December 2022, minus 0.4 degrees Fahrenheit (minus 18 Celsius) in January 2023, and 6.8 degrees Fahrenheit (minus 14 Celsius) in February 2023.

The United Nation's human rights office [said](#) that Russian attacks on Ukraine's energy grid last winter "may amount to crimes against humanity," and should be investigated further. In finding the attacks disproportionate, widespread, and systematic, they [said](#), "The disruption of energy-related infrastructure led to entire regions and millions of people being left for periods without electricity or heating, particularly during freezing temperatures."

When the winter ended, Ukraine started an intense period of repairing the damage, and concrete fortifications were built around some power plants to protect them from airstrikes. Authorities say that more than 80 percent of damaged energy facilities are repaired, and 9 million Ukrainian homes that lost electricity have it back again. Those running the energy system say they have stockpiled [one million tons of coal](#), enough for three to five months.



Additionally, hundreds of millions of dollars have been [pledged](#) by the U.S. and Europe to help Ukraine's energy sector this year.²



Preparing for the worst

Ukrainians are preparing for a long, hard winter. In an [interview](#) published in *The Economist* on November 1, 2023, Ukraine's Commander in Chief, General Valery Zaluzhny, likened the current state of the conflict to the First World War, suggesting things are at a stalemate and "There will most likely be no deep and beautiful breakthrough."

² The UK has [announced](#) it and other partners are launching a £127 million (~\$153 million) Winter Emergency Assistance Plan for Ukraine.



Zaluzhny's remark was swiftly [criticized](#) by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's office, but the ground war is being fought along a 600-mile front and both sides are stretched to defend their trenches. There is little hope for either military to smash through enemy lines. This stalemate makes the winter phase of the war when Ukraine must defend its cities from Russian missiles, critical.

In September, Ukraine's Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal [warned](#), "In the energy industry, the key focus [this winter] is protection. We understand that a new phase of terror against the energy system for this heating season has already started. We see that in [Russian] destruction of production, pumping, and fuel storages...."

On November 12, 2023, Zelensky [told the nation](#), "We are almost halfway through November and must be prepared for the fact that the enemy may increase the number of drone or missile strikes on our infrastructure. In Ukraine, all attention should be focused on defense... on everything that Ukraine can do to get through the winter." Russian attacks on energy installations across the country have begun. On November 1, a Russian drone attack set fire to the oil refinery in the central Ukrainian city of Kremenchuk. This refinery has been [repeatedly targeted](#) by the Russian military.

[Forecasts](#) for Kharkiv in the third week of November 2023 predicted below-freezing temperatures every day. Without adequate heat, such temperatures can be life-threatening. Like other major Ukrainian urban centers, across the city of Kharkiv, under banks, post offices, or private businesses, are emergency stations called Points of Invincibility. These are tents or rooms open 24 hours a day where people can get warm, get hot drinks and food, charge their phones, use the internet, or get first aid.

About 500 [Points of Invincibility](#) have been working full-time since last spring. In late September 2023, regional authorities predicted 922 of them would soon be operational in Kharkiv. Since these shelters opened last November, when Russia started to bomb the city's infrastructure, they have been visited by an estimated [173,000 people](#).

In the last year, many people in Kharkiv have prepared for electric outages by buying generators and powerful portable chargers for their phones and laptops. Big battery packs only need about an hour of electricity to keep most devices going for days. A generator to heat a small house costs around \$2,000.





Points of Invincibility have been set up across Kharkiv

Darkness falls early in [Kharkiv's](#) winter months. It's dusk before 4pm, and the streetlights are cut at 9pm, two hours before the city's 11pm curfew. People on the streets in the evening before 11pm navigate by pocket flashlights and the lights from their phones. Since October 2023, over a thousand people have signed a [petition](#) calling on the city council to extend the hours of street lighting.



Streetlights are out in Kharkiv before curfew



Vulnerable in the city

Some communities in Kharkiv's city and Oblast are particularly vulnerable. Since there is an absence of adequate help for the vulnerable from the city council, much of the help currently provided comes from private initiatives and international organizations.

Human Rights First visited a shelter in Kharkiv city set up after last year's invasion by architect Olga Kleitman. She converted the former workers' living quarters of a fabric factory into accommodation for about fifty elderly people. A French humanitarian organization donated a generator to the shelter, and locals give vegetables, cheese, milk, and other food they produce. It's an impressive private initiative.



Architect Olga Kleitman established a shelter in Kharkiv

Some residents of the shelter have nowhere else to go, some have no family, many have disabilities, and some were evacuated from the fighting.

Nelya Levadna is an 89-year-old who said she was driven out of Kupiansk under a hail of missiles in a bus driven by Polish humanitarian workers in September 2022. She said it was a terrifying ordeal, but that she has endured wars, occupations, and harsh winters before. As a six-year-old in 1940, she walked, exhausted and starving, hundreds of miles with her mother from Donbas to Kupiansk. She spent World War Two living in Kupiansk's forest with Soviet partisans, and her mother -- a railway worker -- passed the partisans information on German troop movements.





Nelya Levadna was evacuated from Kupiansk and now lives in the shelter

A trained accountant, Levadna worked across Ukraine and sometimes in Russia, but always returned to Kupiansk. Under Russian occupation in 2022, life there was extremely hard; she was forced to live mostly on stale crackers and water. She said that the secret to getting through a harsh winter is to do everything together – cooking, lighting fires, and sharing food. “I learn this as a small child,” she said. “Children grow up very fast in war.” She said living in the Kharkiv shelter feels luxurious compared to Kupiansk.

Kleitman anticipates more arrivals at the shelter as the winter begins to hit. “Many elderly people in the city will be left on their own, and more will arrive from conflict zones,” she said.

She has ambitious plans to extend the building into a complex that will include a garden, restaurant, and ceramics workshop, but the next step is to install an elevator because most of the residents have mobility issues. They can’t use stairs, so rooms on the upper floor are currently inaccessible to them.

Kleitman is constantly fundraising for the shelter, as her requests for help from the city council have not been answered. Others helping vulnerable communities in the city are also critical of the lack of assistance from local authorities.

Vasyl Malikov of the Kharkiv-based LGBTQI NGOs Alliance.Global and Spectrum Kharkiv has been distributing packages of hygiene goods, food, and vouchers for humanitarian aid



since last year. He helped to set up a new shelter for LGBTQI people and their relatives in the city.



Vasyl Malikov distributes humanitarian aid to the LGBTQI community and others

"There are government shelters, and the authorities say they don't discriminate against who uses them, but we know from lived experience that these official shelters aren't always welcoming places for LGBTQI people. They feel vulnerable and are harassed there," Malikov said. "We thought about setting up a shelter last year, but the situation seemed too uncertain, and it wasn't that easy to find premises, but we have gone ahead now and we can offer accommodation for up to 16 people to stay for up to three months."

Some of those in the shelter are fleeing areas of conflict on the front lines, others have fled domestic violence, and others have been driven away by families who refuse to accept them. Some people, in Kharkiv for medical appointments, stay for days, while others stay for weeks or months.

The shelter is a large apartment that has a kitchen and a large room where workshops and social events are held. It is on a block near a metro station which, Malikov says, is a useful place to run to in case of heavy bombardments.

Crucially, a new generator has arrived, which should heat the shelter during power outages. It's a dual-fuel model that can run on diesel or gas and costs around \$2,000.

"This is a safe place for LGBTQI people and their families," explains Malikov. "We shouldn't have to set up our own facilities, the authorities should be doing this work, but we have to because they don't."



Vulnerable on the front lines

The city of Kupiansk was occupied by the Russians in February 2022, and taken back by Ukrainian forces eight months later. Through much of 2023, Russia's military edged back toward Kupiansk and its surrounding villages. Despite several intense assaults, the Russians have yet to retake the city, but senior Ukrainian military officials [warn](#) that Russian troops are now regrouping for another major assault.

Human Rights First reported from the city in August 2023. In November 2023 we returned to Kupiansk and nearby communities with a team of medics from the humanitarian group The Way of Ukraine to find the streets largely [deserted](#) in part because Ukrainian authorities ordered mandatory evacuation for families with children.

The International Rescue Committee (IRC) is part of the effort to provide primary health care to families evacuated from Kupiansk to Kharkiv. [According to Igor Bodnia](#), a Field Manager for IRC in Ukraine, the situation in Kupiansk is "dire, and the impact on children is particularly devastating. Many of them have seen violence and displacement more than once, and they are in urgent need of protection and support."

"But some people just can't leave," says The Way of Ukraine's ambulance driver Nataliia Halunenko. "There are old people or infirm people staying in their homes, often with a family member to look after them. Some are just more afraid of leaving than staying."

The locals who remain in the area depend on the help of volunteers. In Kupiansk's high-rise apartment buildings, the medics change dressings for those who have stayed and promise to be back in a couple of days. Some locals in and around Kupiansk have serious medical conditions, including heart problems. In extreme cases, the medics evacuate people to Kharkiv.

The [medics](#) aim to visit a dozen or more people a day, but certain districts can be too dangerous to reach. Winter conditions will also pose problems. Many roads around [Kupiansk](#) are now waterlogged and clogged with mud, which will soon turn to ice, and providing medical help to the area will become much more [difficult](#).

According to [Ukraine's Ministry of Health](#), Russian attacks since February 24, 2022, have damaged at least 1,432 medical facilities in Ukraine, and completely destroyed 190. In Kharkiv Oblast, the Russian military has damaged or destroyed [345 medical facilities](#) since the beginning of the full-scale invasion.





The Way of Ukraine's medic team works with a patient in Kupiansk

"Just as temperatures plummet, communities in Ukraine will suffer from even more widespread destruction of the infrastructure they need to cope with the cold season. The combination of freezing weather, ongoing shelling, destroyed critical facilities and homes will make life even tougher..." [said the IRC's Bodnia.](#)

Ambulance driver Halunenko reported that last winter, people living in high-rise apartment blocks in and around Kupiansk moved into the basements for warmth and were forced to cook outside on open fires. Wood is already being stored inside the entrances of the apartment buildings, ready for the coming freeze.

"We have to come because all the local clinics have had to close down, and people rely on us for medical help," says Halunenko. "But winter is coming, and that just makes everything harder."





Ambulance driver Nataliia Halunenko
used to play violin professionally

Vulnerable on the front lines

The villages north of Kharkiv city, close to the border with Russia, are also preparing for the arrival of winter.

Among the first occupied during the February 2022 invasion, some overtaken within hours of the Russian incursion, these communities were taken back by Ukrainian forces in September 2022. Many are hit by regular missile attacks, and many locals fear another Russian invasion.

Lyptsi is a village only six miles from the border. Slabchenko Oleksii Mykolaiovych serves as its head of administration. He told Human Rights First "We are setting up Points of Invincibility in the border villages where people can charge their phones and get warm. The community is slowly preparing for winter in more or less the same way they do under normal conditions."

Things are far from normal. Many homes were destroyed in the fighting, and only around 3,500 people from a pre-invasion population of 14,000 are left in the area. Russian artillery shells still hit Lyptsi, and the streets are largely empty.

Human Rights First visited the village in November 2023, and found the local hospital, previously occupied by Russian troops, now largely destroyed by fires they set as they abandoned the building.





Lyptsi's hospital has been damaged by shelling

"They stole computers and other hospital equipment as they fled," said local doctor Maxim Ryzhkov. "And what they couldn't take they destroyed."

A few months ago, local medics including Ryzhkov and nurse Yyliia Pyvovar began repairing some of the least damaged rooms in the Lyptsi hospital. Ukraine's Ministry of Health, with support from the World Health Organization and the European Union, built a small new facility in the hospital's parking lot.





Russians set fire to the hospital as they fled

The new clinic, in a trailer, can see a few dozen patients a day. It's capacity and range of services are nowhere near what the old hospital offered -- dentists, cardiologists, and a range of other specialists who used to treat hundreds of people daily. But it will provide [vital medical services](#) to this battered community in the coming freeze.

Many of the current patients have heart conditions. "We're likely to see more respiratory problems as the cold weather sets in," says Pyvovar, "But we have eight medics based here now, and we will do what we can."





Head nurse Yyliia Pyvovar shows where Russians smashed holes to travel quickly between hospital floors

In the neighboring community of Slobozhanske, locals also fear the Russians as much as the coming freeze. Human Rights First met local resident Mykolaiv when he was clearing debris near the church. He said that when his village was invaded, Russian troops hooded, handcuffed, and interrogated him and several other men for several days.



He pointed to the shrapnel scars all over the walls of his house, the bullet holes in his metal gate, and estimated that his home was 70 percent damaged. Although the authorities gave him some money for repairs, he says it's nowhere near enough to fix what's destroyed. He restored the roof with corrugated iron, but it leaks. He is renting a room in Kharkiv for the winter to ensure he stays warm.



Mykolaiv shows a digital photo of his damaged home

All over these border communities, the narrow lanes are littered with burned-out military vehicles. There are regular sounds of war here too, the crack and boom of artillery shelling, and locals regularly remind visitors not to step off the road as mines are everywhere in the grass and mud.³

In the nearby hamlet of Borshchova, middle-aged couple Serhii and Galya live in one room of their big house because the rest of their home has been destroyed by shelling. Glass is all over the upper floors, and holes are blasted in the walls.

Serhii was seriously injured by the shelling when the Russians invaded and was taken to a hospital across the border in Russia. Galya eventually found him there, and the two returned to their home in Borshchova through Finland and western Europe. When they arrived in November 2022, they found the Russian soldiers had used their house as a base.

"We have high upper floors they used for snipers and observation posts," said Galya. "They looted the house, and our own soldiers said we still have to be very careful in case the Russians booby-trapped the house when they left."

³ According to local authorities, by November, 2023 49 people had been killed and 139 injured in the Kharkiv Oblast by mines and similar devices. The emergency services warn that they are found in fields, forests, between bushes and laying in water.





Serhii in front of his house
which was damaged by shelling

Electricity was restored to the community in June 2023 but there are outages a few times a week. The power was cut when we were in her house, and we were left talking in the dark at 3:30 pm. Serhii said they will forage for firewood to cook and stay warm again this winter, despite the risk posed by mines buried all over the nearby forests.

Russia is so close to these communities that the prospect of another invasion is a constant dread. "I'm worried it could happen again," said Galya. "But I won't be forced out by fear. If they come back again, I will stay."

The couple survived last winter without electricity. "It was very hard -- we relied on firewood and [made candles from potatoes](#)," said Galya. She is in charge of distributing humanitarian aid in Borshchova, whose population has dropped from over a thousand to 105. "The government says this year it will provide firewood, but I don't know," she said with a shrug.





Gayla heads the distribution of humanitarian aid in Borshchova

Conclusion

Ukrainian government officials are warning that the coming months will be very difficult, and that the public should prepare for a tough winter. Ukraine's Prime Minister Shmyhal [says](#) the country is "significantly more prepared and stronger than last year. I am sure we'll [pass] through this difficult winter together, too. It will be tough. Don't think this heating season – this winter – will be easier than the past one. It will definitely be tough; we are definitely prepared for it better because we know what the adversary is preparing for, what threats and challenges we all face."

Three other senior Ukrainian government officials quoted by [Time Magazine](#) said that blackouts would likely be more severe this winter, and the public reaction in Ukraine would not be as forgiving. "Last year people blamed the Russians. This time they'll blame us for not doing enough to prepare."

Whether there is blame, and who gets it, will depend on how damaging the coming months are for Ukraine.

Some factors, including the severity of temperatures, are outside the authorities' control, but at least in Kharkiv authorities should be more responsive to the needs of its most vulnerable



communities, including the elderly and LGBTQI people. They must do whatever they can to ensure that civilians living on the front lines and near the border get the fuel they need.

Recommendations

The Secretary of State has instructed all Ambassadors and mission leadership to engage directly with civil society and HRDs as part of a foreign policy grounded in our democratic principles. The U.S. embassy in Kyiv, in accordance with the Secretary's recommendation and the [2021 Guidelines for U.S. Diplomatic Mission Support to Civil Society and Human Rights Defenders](#), should regularly visit HRDs in Kharkiv.

Donors and other allies should visit Kharkiv city and other communities in the oblast to assess needs firsthand and to engage with local HRDs on the needs they see for their own communities.

Donors and other allies should be open to directly supporting local civil society initiatives, including relatively small projects.

Other foreign embassies in Kyiv should send representatives to Kharkiv to discuss with local HRDs how best to support their work to help vulnerable populations cope with the winter in wartime.

In the coming winter months, civic authorities in Kharkiv should prioritize protecting the most vulnerable from the cold.

Domestic and international prosecutors should investigate military strikes on Ukraine's civilian infrastructure as potential war crimes.



Mission Statement

Human Rights First works to create a just world in which every person's intrinsic human rights are respected and protected, to build societies that value and invest in all their people. To reach that goal demands assisting victims of injustice, bringing perpetrators of abuse to justice, and building institutions that ensure universal rights.

Human Rights First is a nonprofit, nonpartisan international human rights organization based in Los Angeles, New York, and Washington D.C.

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