

Humanitarian impact of increased hostilities in Donetska oblast

CRISIS IMPACT OVERVIEW

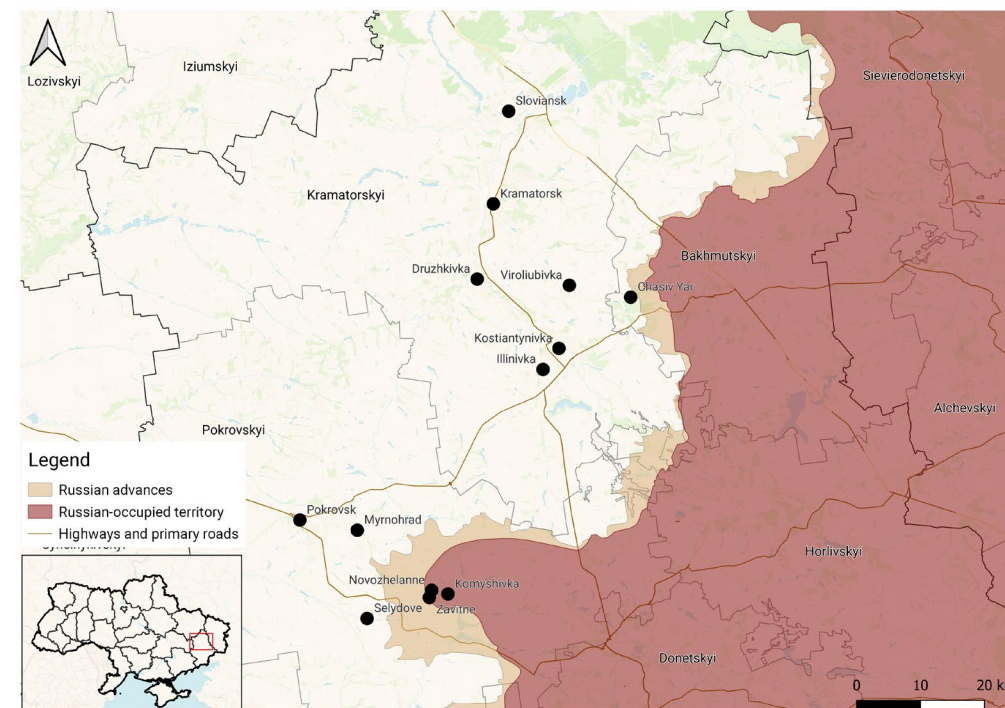
In August 2024, the Russian military made its biggest monthly territorial gains in Ukraine since October 2022, advancing 477 km² into Ukrainian territory amid intensified operations in Donetska oblast since July 2024 (TheDefensePost 03/09/2024). Russian troops captured several villages, including Komyshivka, Novozhelanne, and Zavitne. By 16 September, Russian troops were approximately 8km from the key town of Pokrovsk, a critical Ukrainian military and logistics hub in Donetska oblast (Suspilne 02/09/2024, ISW 16/09/2024; BBC 29/08/2024). The number of verified casualties (killed and injured) in Donetska oblast steadily increased from 125 in May to 224 in June, 269 in July, and 60 fatalities in August, highlighting the growing risks to civilians amid the escalation (OHCHR 09/08/2024, ACLED accessed 17/09/2024).

As the security and humanitarian situation deteriorates, displacement continues, with the Government of Ukraine conducting mandatory evacuations of civilians. Almost 50,000 people were evacuated from Donetska oblast in August, three and a half times more than in the previous month (Suspilne 29/08/2024). Still, many civilians – including families with children – have not evacuated; as of 31 August, 44,867 people remained in Pokrovskiy raion despite Russian advances (IOM Ukraine Frontline Flow Monitoring and Population Baseline, 14-31/08/2024). At least 26,000 people remained in Pokrovsk town as of 1 September (OCHA 12/09/2024). Those remaining, including people unable to evacuate, face disruptions to critical services, including shops, pharmacies, and banks, as well as significant security and protection risks from constant shelling. These impacts will be particularly acute for those who cannot go on the move – including older people and those with health or mobility issues. With some hospitals damaged or out of operation because of the conflict and other hospitals moved outside Donetska oblast, available healthcare in the region is limited, mostly to mobile and emergency services.

With hostilities near Pokrovsk and other areas of the front line in Donetska oblast, including Chasiv Yar, Myrnohrad, and Selydove, likely to continue in the coming weeks and humanitarian needs likely to grow as a result, humanitarian responders will struggle to meet rising needs. Humanitarian access has already been disrupted, both as hostilities reduce the ability of humanitarian responders to deliver services and civilians to access those services. For example, the shifting front line has cut off access to the critical road connecting Kostiantynivka

and Pokrovsk, which was serving as an aid delivery route to many communities across Donetska oblast. This has not only made humanitarian operations in the area riskier given its location within the artillery range of the Russian military but has also limited the ability of aid organizations to reach people both near the front lines, whose needs are likely to rise amid the growing insecurity, and who are displaced or have been evacuated (OCHA 31/08/2024; ACAPS 29/07/2024).

Map 1. Front lines in Donetska oblast until 15 September 2024



Source: ACAPS using data from ISW (accessed 16/09/2024)

ANTICIPATED SCOPE AND SCALE

The security situation continues to deteriorate in Donetsk oblast as hostilities intensify near Chasiv Yar, Kurakhove, and Pokrovsk. While Russian forces had been pushing towards Pokrovsk throughout summer 2024, they were able to accelerate operations there after Ukrainian forces launched an August offensive in Russia's Kurska oblast, on the border with Sumska oblast in northern Ukraine. Ukrainian forces were rapidly able to advance to control 1,300km² and 100 settlements in August, but Russian forces have overcome their initially slow response to begin to reclaim some territory in the region, regaining at least 10 settlements as of 12 September, amid a counteroffensive in Kurska oblast in the middle of that month (Kyiv Independent 12/09/2024). Ukraine's Kurska offensive, an attempt to redirect Russian forces away from frontline areas in eastern Ukraine, including Pokrovsk, failed to reach its intended objectives, though by 16 September, the situation near Pokrovsk had stabilised after Ukrainian reserves were sent to reinforce defences there (The Economist 18/08/2024; ISW 10/09/2024).

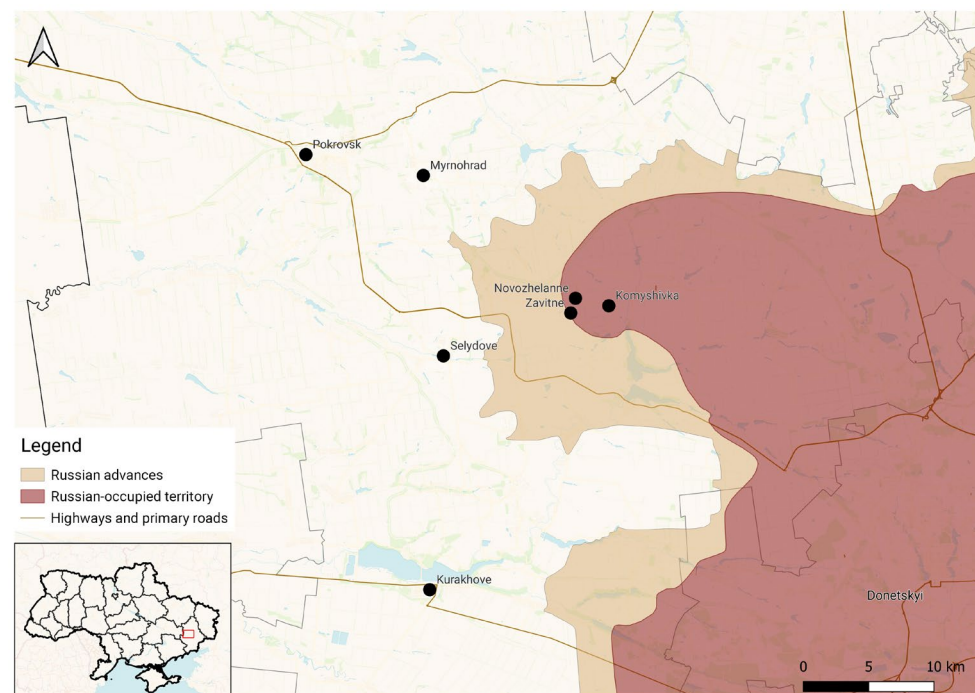
Given that capturing eastern Ukraine, primarily Donetsk oblast, remains one of Russia's main frontline and strategic objectives, however, its military is likely to continue and intensify offensive efforts in the oblast in the coming weeks and at least until wet autumn conditions stymie ground operations (ISW 14/09/2024). By 12 September, Russian forces were also advancing towards Kurakhove, about 35kmsouth of Pokrovsk, where Ukrainian forces are already experiencing difficulties with weapons and fuel resupply, as well as reduced access to hospitals for wounded troops (Radio Svoboda 12/09/2024; BBC 14/09/2024). This appears to be an attempt by Russian forces to control roads leading to Pokrovsk, since troops and supplies move along roads linking Kurakhove and Pokrovsk, and advancing from Kurakhove would allow Russian forces to cut off Ukrainian forces and civilians in Pokrovsk (The Economist 08/09/2024).

Any attempt to encircle Ukrainian forces in Pokrovsk and cut off their supply and logistic lines would also introduce siege-like conditions for people remaining in the area, driving further humanitarian impacts, including shortages of food and critical supplies in the coming weeks. If Russian forces capture Pokrovsk, a critical logistical, military, and transportation hub for the Ukrainian military, it would allow them to cut off the main supply and logistics lines to Ukrainian troops operating on the front lines in Donetsk oblast more generally (Kyiv Independent 05/09/2024; BBC 29/08/2024).

The approaching change in weather is also likely to significantly affect ground offensives, as Russian forces will try to achieve as many gains as they can. Rainy conditions starting in mid-October will likely create conditions too muddy for effective ground operations, while cloudy weather could disrupt Ukrainian aerial reconnaissance and drone activity against Russian forces (ISW 07/09/2024). This means that while Russian ground operations are likely to slow

down in wet autumn conditions, so too will Ukrainian forces' ability to conduct defensive operations at the same rate. This could lead Russian forces to amplify their targeting of energy infrastructure as winter approaches and as they have previously done, which could cut civilians, particularly those in areas near the front lines, off from heat and electricity during colder temperatures (ACAPS 13/09/2024).

Map 2. Front lines near Pokrovsk until 15 September 2024



Source: ACAPS using data from ISW (accessed 16/09/2024)

HUMANITARIAN CONSTRAINTS

Humanitarian access has been impeded in some locations in Donetska oblast given the proximity of active hostilities (OCHA 31/08/2024 and 06/09/2024). For instance, in Illinivska hromada – about 24 km from Chasiv Yar, where Russian forces are advancing – nearly half of the 25 towns and villages already experience limited humanitarian access (OCHA 31/08/2024). At the same time, the critical road connecting Kostiantynivka and Pokrovsk, which has served as a route for aid delivery to many communities across Donetska oblast, has become inaccessible since July because of its proximity to the shifting front line, further impeding humanitarian access (OCHA 31/08/2024; ACAPS 29/07/2024).

Attacks on humanitarian responders. The escalation in conflict in Donetska oblast has brought about increased security risks for humanitarian responders, particularly in frontline areas. Between 20–27 August, during mandatory evacuation measures from Pokrovsk, a vehicle of the Phoenix humanitarian evacuation group, part of the State Emergency Services of Ukraine, was attacked by a first-person view drone. The incident did not cause any known casualties (Ukrinform 25/08/2024; Censor 27/08/2024). On 12 September, three staff members of the International Committee of the Red Cross were killed and two others injured as a planned aid distribution point in Kostantynivska hromada came under shelling – highlighting the risks not only for humanitarian delivery but also for civilians to safely access aid (ICRC 12/09/2024; Reuters 12/09/2024).

Movement restrictions. Since 12 August, Ukrainian authorities have imposed movement and business activity restrictions in Donetska oblast, affecting the ability of civilians to access services and humanitarians to deliver aid. This includes new restrictions in settlements in a 10-km zone close to the front line (Donetsk Regional State Administration 09/08/2024; Real Gazeta 12/08/2024). Among the restrictions is the temporary suspension of shopping centers, shops, and other social facility activities, limiting the ability of civilians to access food and other critical supplies (LB 19/08/2024). At the same time, with shelling in and near frontline areas, both active hostilities and the risk of unexploded ordnance further constrain movements and introduce major projection risks for those who do attempt to move in search of or to deliver critical services.

CRISIS IMPACTS

Health

From July, attacks, including shelling and air strikes, damaged or destroyed at least five medical facilities in Donetska oblast (OCHA 08/08/2024; Suspilne 30/04/2023). An infectious diseases hospital was destroyed on 27 July, while shelling heavily damaged another medical centre on August 31. Both were in Pokrovsk raion (Suspilne 27/07/2024; Suspilne 31/08/2024). The Health Cluster has reported that, because of security concerns, local authorities have relocated seven health facilities in Donetska oblast to other oblasts, while two have moved within the oblast, affecting access to health facilities for those remaining near the front lines (OCHA 12/09/2024; Censor 23/08/2024; Health Cluster 06/09/2024).

For instance in Pokrovsk, hospitals (including intensive care hospitals) and equipment were transferred to Dnipropetrovska oblast, limiting access to health care only to basic primary care services offered through mobile health units – which cannot treat conflict-related injuries or other major trauma – in Donetska oblast (Suspilne 02/09/2024; MSF 06/09/2024). On 6 September, the last civilian hospital in Pokrovsk relocated its patients, staff, equipment, and supplies, leaving only Médecins Sans Frontières ambulances for emergency medical evacuations in Pokrovsk and surrounding areas (MSF 06/09/2024). This limits access to health services for especially vulnerable people, including pregnant women, older people, and those with mobility and other major and chronic health conditions, as well as access to routine medication, vaccines, health screenings, and other specialised services (MSF 06/09/2024). The remaining health services will also struggle with the provision of services given disruptions to electricity and water.

Education

Since July, fighting has damaged or destroyed at least 19 educational facilities (schools and universities) out of 460 operating ones in Donetska oblast (OCHA 08/08/2024). In September 2024, only 254 schools started the new school year compared to 275 schools in 2023, and nearly 80,000 of children will start or continue their studies in 2024 compared to 92,000 in 2023 (Suspilne 02/09/2024). Nearly 8,000 teachers will work compared to more than 14,000 before the February 2022 invasion, highlighting not only the ability of children to access education but also of remaining schools to be able to provide educational services (Suspilne 02/09/2024). All schools in the oblast are required to use online learning, but given Russian attacks on critical infrastructure and issues with access to electricity and safe spaces to learn, this is unlikely to be a suitable alternative to disrupted schooling (Suspilne 25/08/2024; Slovo i Dilo 08/08/2024; General Prosecutor's Office 30/08/2024).

Shelter

Since July, affected frontline communities in Donetsk oblast have suffered significant damage to houses and disruptions to essential services, such as electricity and water, given an increase in shelling and drone and air strikes (USAID 15/08/2024; OCHA 08/08/2024). The combination of warm temperatures and active shelling resulted in forest fires in early and mid-September in Yarova and near Lyman, burning and damaging dozens of houses (Suspilne 04/09/2024; Ukrainska Pravda 16/09/2024). In Donetsk oblast, there is a shortage of shelters where people can be accommodated. This is particularly the case for individuals with limited mobility, as the local state institutions in the oblast that can accommodate them and provide them with the necessary mobility and living assistance are overcrowded (Pokrovsk24News 21/08/2024).

Protection

Since August, intensified Russian shelling, air, and rocket attacks have contributed to a substantial growth in casualties among civilians, including at least 60 deaths in August alone, highlighting the significant protection concerns in Donetsk oblast as fighting escalates (ACLEDA accessed 16/09/2024). Many evacuees arriving at transit centres have required protection services, particularly legal aid, such as supporting access to documentation and social assistance, as well as psychosocial support (OCHA accessed 12/09/2024).

Evacuations

Despite the mandatory evacuation of people from frontline areas organised by the Ukrainian military, many people have chosen to remain in their homes even in the face of active insecurity. Among people remaining in their homes, the most commonly cited needs were accommodation, household items, hygiene products, and food (IOM Ukraine Frontline Flow Monitoring and Population Baseline, 14-31/08/2024). The 5 September cancellation of the evacuation trains from Pokrovsk to other destinations in Ukraine has also further impeded evacuations, though a new evacuation hub opened by authorities in Kramatorsk and a transit site at Pavlograd station in Dnipropetrovska oblast will support further evacuations of people in Donetsk oblast (OCHA 06/09/2024). Still, there are challenges in ensuring safe evacuations for civilians, for example those with limited mobility, given a lack of accessible means of transport and overcrowding in the public facilities where they can be accommodated in Donetsk oblast (Suspilne 20/08/2024).

Since 7 August, there have been mandatory evacuations of children with their caregivers from Myrnohrad, Pokrovsk, and Selydove, and 40 other settlements in Donetsk oblast (SCR 09/09/2024; RadioSvoboda 21/08/2024; Donetsk Regional State Administration 26/08/2024). Until 6 September, there were still approximately 3,500 children remaining in areas within 10km from the front line despite the announcement of the mandatory forced evacuation of children together with their parents or other legal guardians, with families instead choosing to remain in their homes (Suspilne 06/09/2024). Changes to the legislation on forced evacuations in Ukraine are being developed (Ukrinform 13/08/2024). Currently, forced evacuation applies only to children and their caregivers, who can be held criminally liable if they refuse to leave (Ukrinform 07/08/2024; Espresso 07/08/2024). In light of the difficulties of evacuating civilians, however, the Ukrainian military is pushing for the legislation to be applied to all civilians in areas where there is active fighting (Ukrinform 05/08/2024).

Access to commercial and transport services and livelihoods

Until 4 September, most basic public services, such as public transport, markets, and administrative services in Pokrovsk remained closed, with only some shops and pharmacies functional (Ukrinform 04/09/2024). Banks have also ceased operations in the town, with only a few automatic teller machines remaining open (Suspilne 08/09/2024; OCHA 06/09/2024). With private business also affected by closures and movement restrictions in place, continued fighting and people's inability to generate income will also affect their livelihoods.

Disrupted access to electricity and water

Intensive Russian targeting of critical infrastructure prompted Ukrenergo, a grid operator, to order emergency power outages in August, with many residential consumers experiencing issues with electricity and water delivery (HelpAge 21/08/2024; Ekonomichna Pravda 10/08/2024; RBC 02/08/2024; Interfax 30/08/2024). By 10 September, fighting had damaged a gas distribution station serving Pokrovsk and surrounding villages, leaving residents without gas for cooking and heating. Hostilities damaged a water treatment and filtration plant on 12 September, causing the only reserve water sources for Pokrovska and Myrnohradska hromadas to be shut down without a timeline for restoration (Suspilne 11/09/2024). Those remaining in Pokrovsk have become dependent on more than 300 water wells as their only remaining source of drinking water, though these sources are unlikely to be sufficient (UNN 12/09/2024). This increases the risk of people being exposed to untreated drinking water or disrupted sewage systems, resulting in health risks such as waterborne illnesses, particularly if critical services are further damaged.

AGGRAVATING FACTORS

The upcoming 2024–2025 winter is expected to be the toughest for Ukrainians since February 2022 because of cold weather conditions from mid-October 2024 to mid-April 2025 and the likelihood of continued power cuts during that time. The combined result of the increased demand for energy during winter, the diminished capacity to meet that demand given the damage and destruction of energy facilities by fighting, and Ukraine's inability to quickly repair these facilities is likely to lead to longer and more frequent power cuts, particularly in areas where energy infrastructure is already significantly damaged or destroyed.

Decreased capacity of energy infrastructure

Russian shelling and drone and air strikes since February 2022 have caused substantial damage to electricity, gas, and heat supply facilities, with a large concentration of the damage in areas with lower air defence capacity, such as on the front line and in border areas, particularly in Donetsk oblast (REACH 19/06/2024; Glavcom 19/08/2024; Ukrainska Pravda 29/08/2024). By mid-2024, air strikes on Ukraine's energy infrastructure had resulted in a 50% reduction in power production capacity (UNSC 14/05/2024; OHCHR 03/07/2024; Ukrinform 07/06/2024). Throughout 2024, the Government of Ukraine has used planned power outages to facilitate repairs to electricity infrastructure, but the duration of the outages has varied and depended on the extent of the damage to the energy infrastructure (Yasno accessed 16/09/2024). That said, unplanned emergency shutdowns have also occurred as a result of the damage and destruction to infrastructure.

Given these conditions and the challenges that Ukraine faces in restoring energy facilities, as well as the likelihood of continued and increased targeting of Ukrainian energy infrastructure during the 2024–2025 winter, humanitarian needs are likely to deepen, including in Donetsk oblast (ACAPS 14/09/2024). With many services such as heating, clean water provision, and health care reliant on consistently available power, people in frontline areas – including those remaining in their homes instead of evacuating – will face the risk of growing WASH and health needs as hostilities and attacks on energy infrastructure continue. Power outages will also hamper economic activity not only by disrupting economic and business activity – leading to coping mechanisms with potentially negative outcomes, such as skipping meals because of the reduced access to functioning shops and markets for food – but also driving increased energy prices among those within the vicinity of the front lines, further straining their coping capacity (ACAPS 14/09/2024).

Weather conditions during the 2024–2025 cold season

Average cold season temperatures in Ukraine range from -4.8 – 2°C but regularly drop to -10°C (and sometimes even reach -20°C) (REACH 19/06/2024). People along the front lines – such as in Donetsk oblast, where shelter and other infrastructure have been damaged or destroyed – could experience an increased need for more insulated shelter, as well as essential supplies such as heating and clean water supply, as they are exposed to severe cold weather conditions without adequate and reliable access to these services (REACH 19/06/2024). Preliminary projections for the upcoming 2024–2025 cold season suggest harsh winter conditions throughout the country, which will aggravate humanitarian needs in these areas (OCHA 03/01/2024). This includes decreased food availability, higher utility costs for those already vulnerable to economic shock, and potential movement restrictions, including for evacuations, posed by winter weather and precipitation.