

Sumska oblast: anticipating developments and impacts through May 2025

SUMMARY

Sumska oblast, in the north of Ukraine, has been facing a growing humanitarian crisis since August 2024. Conflict has escalated following Ukrainian forces' crossborder incursion into the adjacent Kursk oblast in Russia, which began in the same month. Sustained high levels of Russian attacks have persisted since. Heightened insecurity has heavily constrained people's access to basic and essential services, such as healthcare, protection services, banking, communications, and transport, particularly in the most crisis-affected areas – i.e. those within 20km of the border. More communities have received evacuation orders (generally voluntary but mandatory for children), with more than 38,500 people leaving unsafe areas in Sumska oblast by the end of October, most of whom had evacuated since August. At the same time, NGOs have faced additional access and operational constraints while responding to the impacts of the crisis.

In the next six months, the situation in Sumska oblast is expected to deteriorate further as hostilities in Kursk oblast and attacks on Sumska oblast persist. The sustained intensity of Russian attacks in Sumska oblast (as elsewhere, in particular across frontline oblasts) – in part enabled by Russia's military production capabilities and supply rates of missiles and shells – will likely remain similar to current levels, but the impacts of such attacks will worsen with the gaps in Ukraine's defence. Sumskyi and Shostynskyi raions, already the most affected by air attacks, will likely continue to be at the most risk of continued attacks and damage.

Sustained Russian attacks, including on civilian infrastructure, will continue to drive converging humanitarian needs, such as shelter, health, livelihoods, and protection. Sumska oblast also faces heavy damage to its energy infrastructure, made worse by the escalation since August 2024. Continued attacks on the energy infrastructure during winter will likely result in unplanned power outages, compounding the impact of pre-existing energy deficits during the cold season and severely disrupting access to essential services, such as heating services that rely on uninterrupted power. The lack of authorities' capacity to respond in Sumska oblast will further contribute to widening persistent humanitarian gaps, particularly if winter conditions and insecurity disrupt responders' access to affected areas. Unable to meet their needs elsewhere, displaced people are at risk of moving back to their homes, often in unsafe areas subject to evacuation orders.

ABOUT THIS REPORT

Aim

The goal of this report is to explain the current and anticipated conflict and humanitarian developments in Sumska oblast. Following the onset of Ukrainian forces' crossborder incursion into Russia's Kursk oblast in August 2024, Russian attacks in Sumska oblast have increased, leading to a deterioration in the oblast's overall context. This report aims to highlight the support needed to respond to the crisis and reinforce preparedness plans to mitigate the impacts of an anticipated further deterioration in the security and humanitarian situation in the next six months.

Methodology

This report relies on a secondary data review, complemented by nine interviews with relevant representatives from two humanitarian clusters, three national NGOs (NNGOs), and four INGOs. It uses ACAPS' anticipatory analysis methodology to describe potential developments in Sumska oblast in the next six months. The anticipated humanitarian impacts are based on current data and contextual knowledge.

Limitations

This report is not exhaustive and does not describe all current and anticipated developments and impacts. The anticipatory analysis may not necessarily materialise because new and unpredictable factors may alter the development of a situation. Information on the impact of the crisis, particularly in the areas within 20km of the border, is limited. A lack of publicly available population and conflict data also limits triangulation and analysis. Nevertheless, the report has garnered sufficient information regarding the conflict's impacts on the affected communities from secondary sources and key informant interviews.

CRISIS OVERVIEW

Sumska oblast has experienced an overall increase in attacks through 2024, and the spike in August has been the highest level of conflict activity in the oblast since 2022 (KII 23/10/2024; KII 24/10/2024 a; KII 24/10/2024 c; KII 29/10/2024; KII 30/10/2024 b; KII 05/11/2024; Suspilne 02/11/2024; ACLED accessed 07/11/2024). The current escalation follows an incursion by Ukrainian forces into Russia's Kursk oblast on 6 August and follows earlier increases in air attacks in March and May 2024 (Live UA Map accessed 15/11/2024; ISW 15/08/2022; TKI 02/09/2024). In March, Russian air attacks on Sumska oblast increased following limited crossborder raids into Russia's Kursk and Belgorod oblasts allegedly by pro-Ukraine Russian groups operating from Sumska oblast (KII 29/10/2024; AJ 15/03/2024; Radio Svoboda 12/03/2024). Similar Russian air attacks on Sumska oblast followed further crossborder raids by these groups in late May (BBC 25/05/2023; KP 09/06/2023; ACLED accessed 22/10/2024).

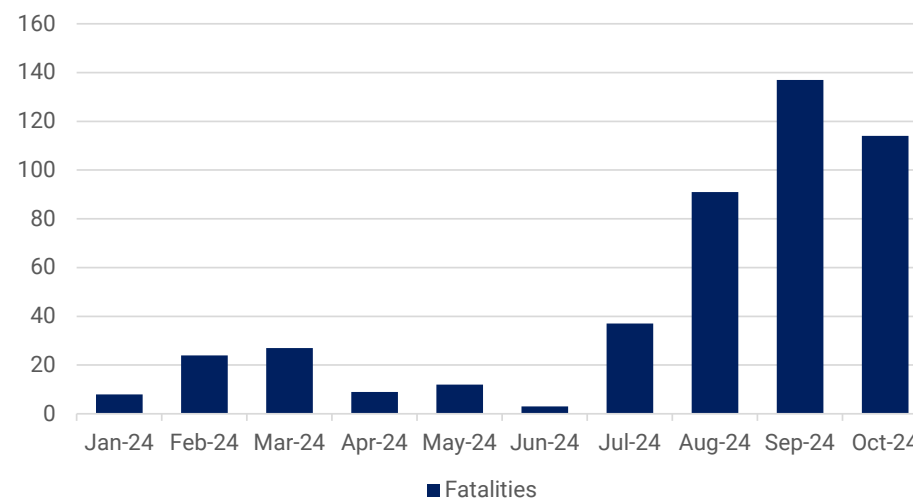
One of the objectives of the Ukrainian military in the August Kursk incursion was to draw Russian troops away from other frontline areas in Ukraine, such as Donetsk oblast, but this plan failed (The Telegraph 08/08/2024; ISW 15/08/2022; RBC 05/09/2024; Ukrainian Pravda 24/08/2024; RBC 19/11/2024 and 06/09/2024). In general, conflict in Kursk oblast has persisted through November into early December (LIGA 11/11/2024; ISW 15/08/2022; and 04/12/2024). Russian forces have primarily targeted both the Ukrainian military's lines of communication and overall civilian infrastructure in Sumska oblast, including energy infrastructure, causing significant damage and casualties (KII 29/10/2024).

Notably, the 137 civilian fatalities recorded in Sumska in September were the highest monthly toll in the oblast since the full-scale Russian invasion began in 2022. In the three months between August–October, fatalities also more than doubled compared to the first seven months of 2024. This includes the earlier increases in fatalities in the March and May escalations (ACLED accessed 07/11/2024; KP 09/06/2024; Radio Svoboda 12/03/2024; KII 29/10/2024; BBC 25/05/2023).

By the end of October, Russian air attacks on Sumska oblast were 65% higher compared to July, the month prior to the Kursk incursion. The areas most affected by air strikes since August are primarily in the 20km zone from the border with Russia, including Bilopiliska and Krasnopiliska hromadas in Sumskyi raion, Velykopysarivska hromada in Okhtyrskyi raion, and Esmanska hromada in Shostkynskyi raion (KII 29/10/2024; ACLED accessed 07/11/2024).

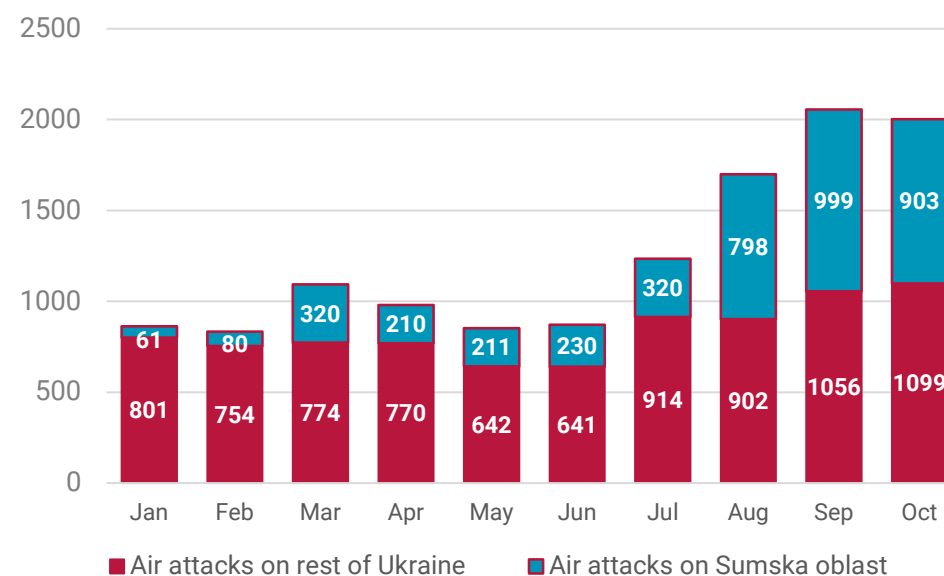
Figure 2 shows that not only have the attacks in Sumska oblast increased since August but, from that point onwards, Sumska oblast became one of the oblasts where close to the majority of Russian air attacks were being carried out nationwide (ACLED accessed 07/11/2024). Shelling in Sumska oblast has also intensified, particularly in the 20km zone from the border with Russia, with a notable concentration in areas 5km from the border (UNN 24/10/2024; TKI 02/09/2024; Health Cluster 08/10/2024; ACLED accessed 07/11/2024; KII 23/10/2024; KII 24/10/2024 a; KII 24/10/2024 c; KII 29/10/2024; KII 30/10/2024 b; KII 05/11/2024).

Figure 1. Fatalities in Sumska oblast between January–October 2024



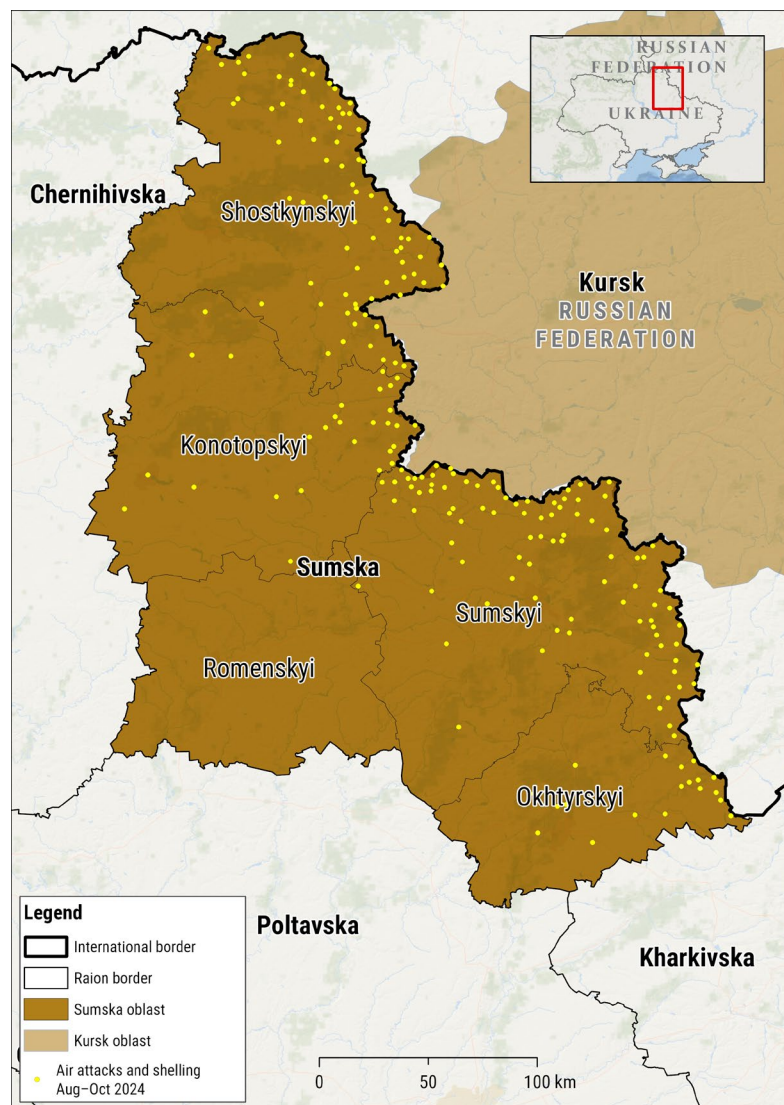
Source: ACAPS using ACLED (accessed 07/11/2024)

Figure 2. Air attacks on Sumska oblast and rest of Ukraine between January–October 2024



Source: ACAPS using data from ACLED (accessed 07/11/2024)

Map 1. Air and shelling attacks on Sumska oblast between August–October 2024



Source: ACAPS using data from ACLED (accessed 21/11/2024)

Note: each yellow dot represents an air attack or shelling event per location. For an interactive view, please see ACLED's live map.

CRISIS IMPACTS

While daily shelling of the entire Sumska border has been continuing since 2022, the overall increase in air attacks in 2024, particularly since August, has further eroded safety in the most affected communities, primarily in areas along the border with Russia (TKI 06/01/2024; ACLED accessed 07/11/2024; Radio Svoboda 16/12/2023). Air alerts, which are generally oblastwide, can last up to 20 hours a day in Sumska oblast, since air attacks place the entire oblast and not only the areas eventually targeted at risk (Village 06/09/2024; KII 24/10/2024 b; KII 30/10/2024 a). Long and frequent air alerts affect mental health, everyday life activities, and workflow. People across the oblast face two harmful alternatives: either risking their lives for the sake of their livelihood or heading to shelters but suffering indirect losses (KII 30/10/2024 a; KII 24/10/2024 b). For example, interruptions to dough mixing and oven heating disrupt the bread-making process for bakeries (KII 30/10/2024 a).

Impact on border areas (0–5km)

Insecurity and humanitarian access constraints across Sumska oblast are most severe in the 5km zone (the land between 0–5km from the border with Russia) because of shelling from the Russian territory along the 564km-long shared border since 2022 (Suspilne 03/01/2024; ACLED accessed 07/11/2024). Since the onset of the Kursk incursion in August 2024, Sumska oblast's military administration has blocked humanitarian access to the 5km zone (KII 23/10/2024). Prior to August, some humanitarian organisations, mainly international, avoided this zone following internal security protocols because of the shelling (KII 23/10/2024; KII 24/10/2024 a; KII 24/10/2024 b; KII 24/10/2024 c; KII 29/10/2024). But with humanitarians no longer allowed in the 5km zone, only the authorities can deliver in-kind assistance such as firewood. At the same time, the security conditions limit such deliveries to what is the most essential and life-saving (KII 23/10/2024; KII 24/10/2024 a; KII 24/10/2024 b; Hromadske Radio 21/10/2024). Insecurity in the 5km border has also, for example, prevented energy repairs in some areas, keeping people with no access to electricity. This includes such incidents as direct attacks on energy workers with drones, attacks by Russian sabotage groups, and shelling, resulting in fatalities and injuries (KII 30/10/2024 a; Hromadske Radio 21/10/2024; Suspilne 03/09/2024 and 02/02/2024; Radio Svoboda 04/10/2024).

The area has almost no remaining services (KII 05/11/2024). Because of insecurity-related fatalities, oblast authorities have banned civilian transportation in the 5km zone since February 2024 (Ukrinform 03/02/2024; Unian 20/07/2024). Few essential services (both private and governmental) remain operational because of high insecurity and because most personnel and inhabitants have left for safer areas (KII 05/11/2024; Hromadske Radio 21/10/2024).

The 5km zone is heavily depopulated, and the people remaining are scattered across the area (Hromadske Radio 21/10/2024). On 10 July 2023, increased shelling prompted the Ukrainian Government to issue an evacuation order for all people living within 5km of the international border with Russia, although people remain in these areas despite these orders (GOU 10/07/2023; Unian 20/07/2023). Please refer to the box below for more information.

Impact in border areas (0–20km)

Insecurity and humanitarian access constraints in these areas have increased after the Kursk incursion in August 2024, with areas further away from the 5km border zone becoming more insecure because of increased air strikes. Since then, humanitarian responders have had to apply for access authorisation from Sumska oblast authorities to reach people in need within 20km of the border with Russia. Still, for some organisations, internal security protocols limit them from operating in these areas (KII 23/10/2024; Sumska Oblast Military Administration 17/08/2024). Communications and internet connectivity are also extremely limited or unavailable in the highest-risk areas within the 0–20km zone because of insecurity (KII 23/10/2024; KII 24/10/2024 c; KII 05/11/2024). These constraints make humanitarian operations and risk management more challenging.

Some INGOs partner with NNGOs to indirectly reach the people in need in this zone (KII 23/10/2024). Not all NNGOs operating there, however, accept the risks either; for example, one NNGO mentioned that they did not enter the area within 15km of the border to avoid further risks (KII 29/10/2024). State responders mainly provide assistance with evacuations from insecure areas, with the support of some NNGOs and volunteers (Sumska Oblast Military Administration 14/10/2024; Suspilne 12/09/2024). Local NNGOs and state authorities mainly provide the delivery of humanitarian assistance and evacuations from affected hromadas, in particular Bilopiliska, Krasnopilska (Sumskyi raion), Esmanska, Hlukhivska, and Shostkynska (Shostkynskyi raion) hromadas (KII 26/09/2024).

The overall humanitarian needs of the people living in the 0–20km border areas include food, WASH, health, shelter, protection, NFIs, cash assistance, in-kind winterisation assistance, and livelihood support, such as agricultural inputs (OCHA 31/08/2024; TKI 31/05/2024; Hromadske Radio 21/10/2024; REACH 09/10/2024 a and 09/10/2024 b; KII 23/10/2024; KII 24/10/2024 a; KII 30/10/2024 b; KII 05/11/2024). Cash assistance remains the preferred modality of humanitarian aid by a majority of recipients, specifically in Velykopysarivska (Okhtyrskyi raion) and Bilopiliska (Sumskyi raion) hromadas bordering Russia. Cash assistance is needed to purchase goods not included in food and hygiene aid distributions, to pay bills, and to purchase medicine, clothes, repair materials, and firewood (REACH et al. 09/10/2024 a and 09/10/2024 b). Limited services, however, constrain cash access, as explained in the next paragraph, which further highlights the preference for cash assistance.

Services are available to some extent but constrained in general. While the impacts of the escalation in the 20km zone have increased, access to essential services has decreased. For example, the closure of post offices in areas within Bilopiliska hromada in Sumskyi raion has particularly affected older people, including those with mobility and disability issues, who usually receive their pensions in cash by post (KII 05/11/2024; TKI 31/05/2024). The lack of operational ATMs or banks in some areas further limits cash access (REACH et al. 09/10/2024 a and 09/10/2024 b). Villages in the 0–20km zone also have limited access to gas, electricity, and even running water in certain heavily affected communities in the highest-risk areas along the border (KII 23/10/2024; KII 30/10/2024 a). Insecurity in these areas limits access to services such as transportation, communications, and internet connectivity, disconnecting remote affected villages from raion and hromada centres where they can access other essential services (KII 23/10/2024; KII 24/10/2024 c; KII 05/11/2024). Some areas, such as Velykopysarivska hromada in Okhtyrskyi raion, were already facing severe access constraints to markets and basic supplies even prior to the deterioration since August 2024 because of insecurity (IOM 07/05/2024). The energy infrastructure is also heavily damaged in this zone (KII 23/10/2024).

High levels of sustained insecurity have led health authorities to relocate some health facilities to safer areas, leading to gaps in the availability of health services. As a result, there is a significant need for medicine and healthcare, including ambulances, and mobile social protection services are insufficient (KII 24/10/2024 a; KII 30/10/2024 b; KII 05/11/2024; OCHA 31/08/2024). The relocation of state social protection services from these high-risk areas has resulted in protection gaps, as transportation is costly and complicated by insecurity (KII 05/11/2024).

The total remaining population in the 0–20km zone is not available in this analysis. The most recent data available by the end of October 2024 indicates that 20,000 people remained in communities subject to evacuations scattered across the 20km zone (Interfax 28/10/2024). Evacuation orders in Sumska oblast have been issued to more communities since August, including mandatory evacuations of children from 153 communities in Shostkynskyi and Sumskyi raions and the recommended evacuation of children in other hromadas. Overall, 38,500 people (87% of all the people subject to evacuation orders) had evacuated from the 0–20km zone by the end of October (KII 05/11/2024; Sumska Oblast Military Administration 28/10/2024). Although this figure includes all the evacuees since the first evacuation orders in 2023 for the 5km zone, most of the evacuations took place beginning August 2024 (GOU 10/07/2023; Unian 20/07/2023; Babel 13/10/2024). For example, in late August, 21,000 people evacuated, compared to the barely 3,700 people who had evacuated by the end of 2023 (out of the 12,690 subject to evacuation orders that year) (ZN 21/08/2024; TSN 24/12/2023).

Information gap: people remaining in the 0–20km zone

There were 20,000 people in the 5km zone before the July 2023 evacuation order for the 5km zone (Unian 20/07/2024). Since then, and since the August 2024 evacuation orders, the lack of publicly available data and consolidated sources of information has kept the total number of people remaining in this zone unclear. Based on what information is publicly available, it is clear that some people have chosen to stay in the 5km zone despite the insecurity, blocked humanitarian access, and extremely limited services described in the analysis above. Public population data for the 5–20km zone is also scattered and not broken down according to evacuation orders. That said, for the purpose of this analysis, the report has garnered sufficient information regarding the conflict's impacts on the affected communities from secondary sources and key informant interviews.

Despite the ongoing insecurity, some people refuse to evacuate. Since 2023, some communities have become almost or completely empty as a result of insecurity (Suspilne 15/02/2024 and 15/10/2024). In line with similar trends in other oblasts, the main groups that tend to stay behind include older people, those taking care of older people, people with mobility issues, and people with disabilities (CARE 30/09/2024; HelpAge 05/09/2024; Hromadske Radio 21/10/2024; KII 23/10/2024; KII 24/10/2024 c; KII 30/10/2024 b; KII 30/10/2024 a; KII 05/11/2024). Those who remain tend to stay as long as their housing is not destroyed (Hromadske Radio 21/10/2024). With limited essential services, such as health, in these areas, staying behind puts this group at further risk than from attacks only.

Life-saving evacuations in Sumska oblast are also more complicated than timely evacuations, as older people, particularly those with mobility issues, require more resources and risk-taking to be rescued from high-risk zones after their housing has been too damaged or destroyed (Suspilne 04/10/2024). Evacuations from rural areas in Sumska oblast are also challenging, as people refuse to leave without their livestock (KII 24/10/2024 b; KII 30/10/2024 a; KII 30/10/2024 b; KII 29/10/2024; KII 05/11/2024; TKI 31/05/2024). For some people, the main reason for moving is not insecurity but the cold weather conditions that their damaged houses cannot protect them from (Suspilne 01/12/2024; KII 05/11/2024). Some children also remain in the highly insecure 5km zone subject to mandatory evacuation in Sumska oblast because their parents (or legal guardians) keep them. And even though not complying with mandatory evacuation of children is illegal, the authorities do not have the exact count of who remains, and it is too risky to visit each house to check (KII 24/10/2024 a; KII 24/10/2024 b). Children, including children with disabilities, who remain in unsafe areas subject to mandatory evacuations have unmet protection needs, as insecurity prevents state responders from reaching them, and there is limited information on where they are located (KII 24/10/2024 a; KII 24/10/2024 b).

Impact beyond the border areas

Humanitarian access constraints also exist in areas further from the 20km zone. Humanitarian organisations tend to set up main offices in Sumy city, the administrative centre of Sumska oblast, but the rural nature of the oblast and its large and elongated size (23,800km²) challenge access to certain areas with the extensive travel times required (KII 23/10/2024). This means reaching people in need across Sumska oblast cannot be done without setting up offices in the respective raion of the oblast and not only in Sumy city (Department of International Cooperation and Economic Development accessed 03/11/2024; KII 23/10/2024; KII 24/10/2024 c; Health Cluster 29/10/2024). Moreover, the negative impacts of the war since 2022, such as displacement and mobilisation, have worsened pre-existing depopulation in Sumska oblast, resulting in a lack of labour force, including in NGOs (KII 23/10/2024; KII 24/10/2024 c; KII 24/10/2024 d; KII 05/11/2024; IOM 04/09/2024; Kornus et al. 2022).

Services are less constrained but overstretched because of heightened insecurity and pre-existing issues compounded by conflict impacts, such as displacement and damage since 2022. The increased risk of attacks since August 2024 has resulted in the planned relocation of state social protection institutions in areas within 50km of the border to safer locations within Sumska oblast, with Romenskyi raion as a potential relocation destination (KII 24/10/2024 a; KII 30/10/2024 b). Depopulation in Sumska oblast is also a pre-existing issue (KII 24/10/2024 d; Kornus et al. 2022; IOM 04/09/2024). In remote rural areas, for example, some villages are not big enough to support the constant presence of essential service providers, and mobile services are thinly spread out or otherwise available only when and if the hromada authorities organise them (KII 24/10/2024 d).

A lack of livelihood assistance modalities, such as the relocation of farms, livestock evacuation, demining, and tax relief, has had a negative socioeconomic impact on farmers, especially with the agricultural nature of livelihoods in the oblast (KII 24/10/2024 a; KII 24/10/2024 b; KII 05/11/2024; Department of International Cooperation and Economic Development accessed 03/11/2024). In-kind assistance is needed for evacuating livestock, particularly from the 20km border area (KII 24/10/2024 a).

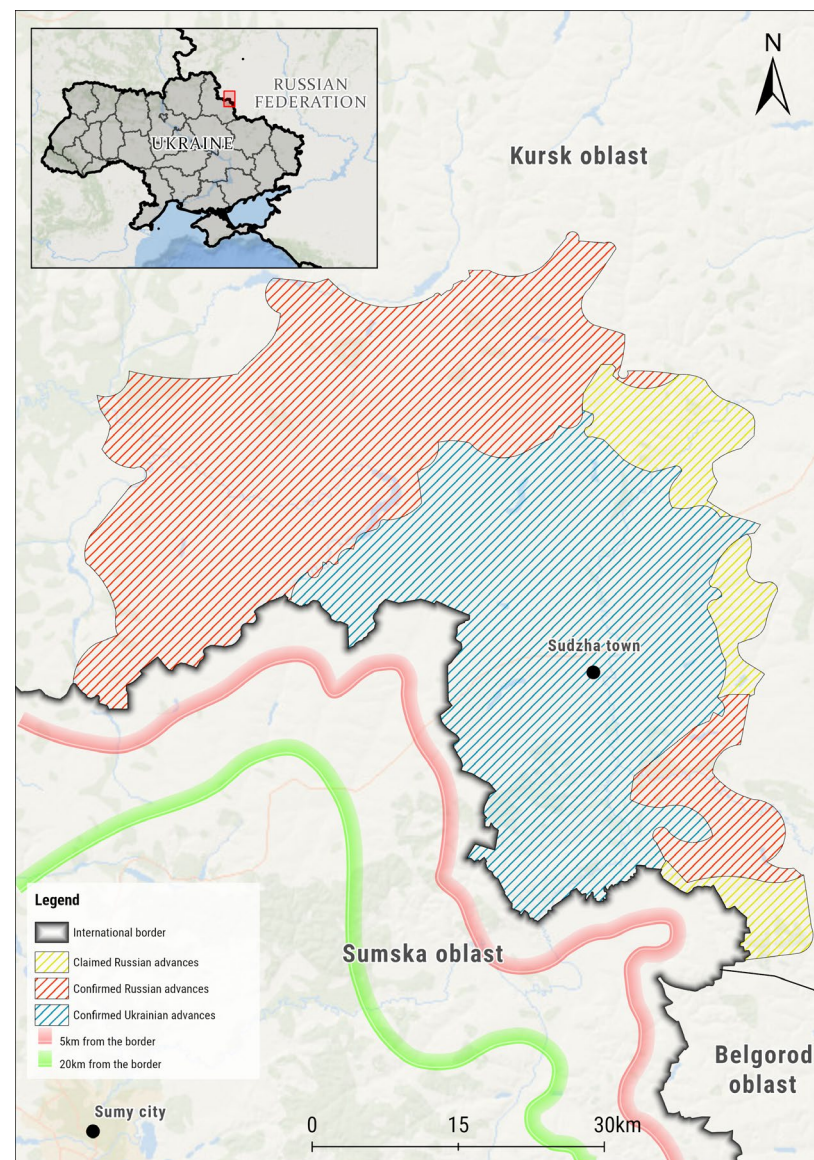
Youth in Sumska oblast are also among the groups particularly vulnerable to mental health issues considering their age and their insecurity-induced isolation (online education and displacement), alongside reduced psychological assistance and a lack of teenage-targeted psychosocial activities (KII 05/11/2024; Goto et al. 01/05/2024; UNICEF 08/04/2024). There have been family separation cases adding pressure on overstretched state child protection services, as some parents have refused the mandatory evacuation of children. These parents are issued court orders according to Article 166 of the Criminal Code of Ukraine, which holds parents legally accountable if they deliberately endanger their children (KII 24/10/2024 b; Ukrinform 07/08/2024; Espresso 07/08/2024; KMU 09/03/2023).

Oblast authorities and humanitarian organisations lead the response, but they have limited capacity to sufficiently cover all needs. Oblast authorities have opened three new transit centres for displaced people since August 2024, in Konotopskyyi, Shoskynskyyi, and Sumskyyi raions, where people can stay temporarily and receive services, including IDP registration, food, NFIs, medical assistance, psychological support, and case management provided by NGOs (Sumska Oblast Military Administration 14/10/2024; OCHA 20/09/2024; KII 30/10/2024 b). That said, capacity is often inadequate, and further needs include essential items such as more food, hygiene kits, furniture, bedding, kitchen equipment, winter clothing, heaters, and fuel (CCCM Cluster 18/09/2024; KII 30/10/2024 a). In late October, winterisation assessments found that 16,000 families in Sumska oblast remained in need of wood, briquettes, and gas compensation, accounting for 40% of unmet needs (KII 24/10/2024 a). Cash is the preferred modality of assistance for people in need looking for fuel and heating equipment (KII 24/10/2024 a; KII 23/10/2024; KII 24/10/2024 c). Micro, small, and medium businesses, particularly those relocated from border areas, also need economic recovery and tax relief support (KII 24/10/2024 c; KII 24/10/2024 b; KII 30/10/2024 a; KII 30/10/2024 b).

Displacement patterns in Sumska oblast

The majority of IDPs in Sumska oblast prefer staying in the oblast. By mid-October 2024, 60% of the 100,000 people displaced since 2022 in Sumska oblast were from within the same oblast (IOM 01/11/2024). The IDPs in Sumska oblast tend to move back and forth to check on their property and livestock within the 0–20km zone for reasons that include theft concerns (KII 23/10/2024; KII 24/10/2024 a; KII 30/10/2024 b; KII 05/11/2024; Suspilne 03/01/2024). A lack of available living spaces across the oblast and unaffordable rent affect those displaced, whether voluntarily or evacuated within the oblast (KII 23/10/2024; KII 24/10/2024 b; KII 24/10/2024 c; KII 05/11/2024; CCCM Cluster 01/11/2024). There are cases of people with disabilities living in buildings not suitable for habitation (USAID 15/08/2024; OCHA 08/08/2024; Suspilne 01/09/2024; Protection Cluster 23/10/2024). People displaced, whether voluntarily or after evacuation orders, who remain within Sumska oblast tend to concentrate mainly in urban centres in Sumskyyi and Romenskyi raions (KII 24/10/2024 b). Attacks on healthcare facilities and a shortage of medical staff as a result of displacement and economic issues will also continue to constrain access to healthcare, including home care support for people with low mobility and older people; specialised care; rehabilitation; and mental health support for different population groups (KII 05/11/2024; IOM 11/11/2024; ZN.UA 13/08/2024; Suspilne 09/08/2024; DIIA 14/08/2018; Health Cluster 08/10/2024).

Map 2. Sumska oblast access restrictions and control in Kursk oblast



Sources: ACAPS using data from ISW (21/11/2024)

ANTICIPATED SITUATION

In the next six months, crisis impacts and humanitarian needs in Sumska oblast will likely remain similar to the situation since August 2024. Attacks on Sumska oblast can be expected to continue to drive displacement and evacuation, particularly from the 20km zone. Attacks on energy infrastructure and cold weather conditions will aggravate the existing hardships of the most affected groups in the winter period, and some humanitarian needs will remain unmet given persistent response gaps and constraints.

Active ground hostilities in Kursk, which intensified in November, are expected to persist throughout the winter months, indicated by the reinforcement of Russian forces by North Korean troops (LIGA 11/11/2024; The Guardian 20/11/2024; ISW 12/11/2024). In November, Ukrainian forces were authorised by international partners to use long-range weapons supplied by them in Kursk oblast, which may enable the Ukrainian military to attempt destroying military targets in Kursk, including a Shahed drone launch site used in attacks on energy infrastructure. Elsewhere across Russia, however, the use of long-range weapons remains off-limits, and the Ukrainian forces will not be able to effectively target production, storage, and launch sites, including those used in attacks on Sumska oblast (ISW 15/08/2022; Ukrainska Pravda 28/05/2024;; RBC 18/11/2024; Defense Express 10/10/2024). NV 16/11/2024; RBC 18/11/2024; Defense Express 10/10/2024).

Irrespective of the evolution of the conflict in Kursk, the associated attacks on Sumska oblast will continue, making the 20km zone more insecure and isolated while further destabilising the humanitarian situation across the oblast. Russia will be able to maintain its current level of military capability well into 2025 (AJ 30/09/2024). And Russian forces have the capacity to at least sustain the current rate of air attacks on Sumska oblast, including targeted attacks on the energy infrastructure (NBC 26/06/2024; Ukrainska Pravda 28/05/2024; RBC 11/09/2024). Similarly, shelling from the Russian territory on Sumska border areas since 2022 will highly likely continue at a similar intensity (CNN 10/03/2024). Sumskyi and Shostkynskyi raions, having the longest shared border with Russia and sustained the highest level of damage from continuous attacks since 2022, will likely remain the most affected by shelling as per current trends (ACLEDA accessed 07/11/2024; ACAPS accessed 28/10/2024).

The attacks on energy infrastructure since 2022 are also expected to continue regardless of Kursk conflict developments. Attacks on the energy infrastructure across Sumska oblast spiked in late September 2024 and have caused damage-related unplanned power cuts. Sumska oblast is also one of the three most affected oblasts in terms of district heating facility damage after Kharkivska and Kyivska (KII 29/10/2024; RBC 28/10/2024; REACH 18/09/2024). Urban areas in Sumska oblast are more reliant on district heating than the national average, making them particularly vulnerable to Ukraine's damage-related energy deficit (ACAPS 13/09/2024).

A separate risk exists if Russian forces push the Ukrainian forces out of Kursk entirely, as they could use the momentum to invade the adjacent Sumskyi raion border areas of Sumska oblast across Sudzha town in Kursk, where the Ukrainian forces are concentrated (NYT 10/11/2024). Such a scenario is hypothetical, and its impact would be limited to some border areas in the 5km zone in Sumskyi raion, which are already heavily depopulated. Ukrainian authorities may issue additional evacuation orders in advance.

ANTICIPATED IMPACT

Continued air attacks and shelling over the coming winter will increase the scope and scale of humanitarian needs in Sumska oblast. Ongoing displacement, especially from the 20km zone, will continue to drive the need for shelter in safer areas within the oblast. The lack of accommodation spaces and affordable housing in the oblast will continue to be the main challenge in meeting those shelter needs and, alongside inadequate livelihood support, may push people to move back to their homes in unsafe areas subject to evacuation orders (KII 23/10/2024; KII 24/10/2024 b; KII 24/10/2024 c; KII 05/11/2024; CCCM Cluster 01/11/2024). Some people have also moved from rural areas because their damaged houses are not suitable for living during winter. In the coming months, once the weather is warmer, they may move back to insecure areas, where they can partially sustain themselves with agricultural activity (Suspilne 01/12/2024).

Russian air attacks will also lead to further casualties, driving physical and mental health needs, and overstretched services and a lack of available support will prevent people from accessing the assistance needed (KII 23/10/2024; KII 30/10/2024 b; KII 05/11/2024; Health Cluster 08/10/2024; TKI 16/04/2024; DW 28/09/2024; Babel 31/10/2024). The attacks will also result in increased safety risks from mine and unexploded ordnance contamination (URCS 12/10/2024; Sumy Information Portal 27/11/2024). Overstretched state social protection services, such as institutional care for older people in Sumska oblast, will likely lead to unmet basic needs, including food (KII 24/10/2024 c; KII 05/11/2024; RBC 19/09/2024; LB 19/09/2024). Similarly, children who need urgent care but are subject to mandatory evacuations and become separated from their legal guardians will be among the groups affected by social protection gaps in the oblast (KII 24/10/2024 b).

Attacks on the energy infrastructure will likely result in unplanned power cuts (emergency shutdowns) alongside any planned power cuts (rolling blackouts) during winter, severely disrupting access to essential needs and compounding winter-related needs across the oblast (KII 29/10/2024; KII 30/10/2024 b; ACAPS 13/09/2024; Suspilne 15/10/2024; REACH 19/06/2024; BBC 19/08/2024; Ukrainska Pravda 29/08/2024). Power outages will disrupt access to essential needs, such as heating that relies on power, water, and communications, leading to other indirect negative impacts on health, education, humanitarian operations, and overall access to services (ACAPS 13/09/2024; WHO 26/09/2024; RBC 12/11/2024). A lack of fuel is also likely to prevent some district heating facilities in Sumska oblast from meeting the heating demand (REACH 18/09/2024).

Apart from insecurity, prolonged power cuts in the cold season may also force some NGOs to relocate, widening existing gaps in overall humanitarian access and the response constraints mentioned across this analysis (KII 24/10/2024 a; KII 24/10/2024 b; KII 30/10/2024 b). Sumska oblast, and Sumskyi raion, in particular, will be one of the areas with the highest winter-related risks stemming from a combination of severe winter conditions (freezing temperatures, namely the lowest in the country, and snow precipitation during winter), high numbers of older people and IDPs, and energy infrastructure damage, alongside people's limited capacity to cope with winter-related challenges (WHO 26/09/2024; REACH 19/06/2024 and 31/10/2024; ACAPS 13/09/2024).