

Kharkivska oblast: outlook and anticipated impacts

OVERVIEW

Since September 2024, the conflict has intensified and the humanitarian situation has worsened in Kharkivska oblast, with Russian troops continuing to advance towards Kupiansk, a critical transportation and logistics hub in eastern Ukraine. Active fighting also continues in northern Kharkivska oblast, mainly near Vovchansk and Hlyboke, where Russian forces began a new ground offensive in May, although they have been slower to advance since June with Ukrainian defences limiting Russian forces' success. Alongside the ground offensives, air attacks have also intensified in the oblast, particularly targeting Kharkiv city.

The intense fighting near Kupiansk and in northern Kharkivska oblast has led to deteriorating humanitarian conditions in these locations, particularly in frontline areas (settlements under direct shelling, within 30km of Russian positions, or in close proximity within 10km of active hostilities). Kharkiv city has been hosting most of those displaced amid the mandatory evacuation of more than 50 settlements in Kupianskyi raion and Borivska hromada in response to Russian advances. For the approximately 6,000 people remaining in these two areas – a large proportion of whom are older people (over 60 years old) or people with mobility issues or chronic health conditions – the lack of basic services, including electricity, gas, and water; housing damage; and the onset of cold weather conditions are compounding needs. Humanitarian responders also face constraints stemming from the conflict and related infrastructure damage.

The humanitarian situation in Kharkivska oblast is also likely to deteriorate in the coming three months, but the deterioration will likely be intense and localised to frontline areas, primarily around Kupiansk and Vovchansk. At the same time, recurring attacks on Kharkiv city will continue, leading to persistent risks for residents and humanitarian responders. Russian attacks on energy infrastructure are likely to continue as well. With weather conditions likely to get colder in January, civilians – especially those closest to intense fighting – are at risk of deepening humanitarian needs. Humanitarian responders will face additional constraints amid intensifying hostilities and security risks.

ABOUT THIS REPORT

Aim

This report aims to present the conflict and humanitarian developments in Kharkivska oblast given the Russian military's proximity to Kupiansk and overall developments in the oblast. To support humanitarian operations amid the intensification in Kharkivska oblast, the report also presents anticipated conflict and humanitarian developments and impacts through March 2025. The scope of the foresight analysis is limited to the next three months given uncertainty over the likely change in US foreign policy towards Ukraine.

Methodology

The report is based on a secondary data review of public information, complemented by ten key informant interviews held in November 2024 with representatives of Ukrainian NGOs, INGOs, and Ukrainian government institutions.

Limitations

This report is not exhaustive and does not describe all current and anticipated developments and impacts. The anticipatory analysis may not necessarily materialise if new and unpredictable factors alter the development of a situation. As the conflict continues to be the main driver of humanitarian needs in Kharkivska oblast, the outlook does not consider indirect drivers of the humanitarian situation, such as socioeconomic conditions, among others.

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CRISIS OVERVIEW

As of 18 December 2024, Russian forces remained within 2.5–3km of Kupiansk. This is amid an intensified push towards the city that began in September, likely to establish defensive positions east of the Oskil River (the left bank) before winter conditions set in. At the same time, the Russian military has intensified operations along the eastern front line in Ukraine to pressure the Ukrainian military following the start of its operations in Russia's Kursk oblast in August (Euraktiv 02/09/2024).

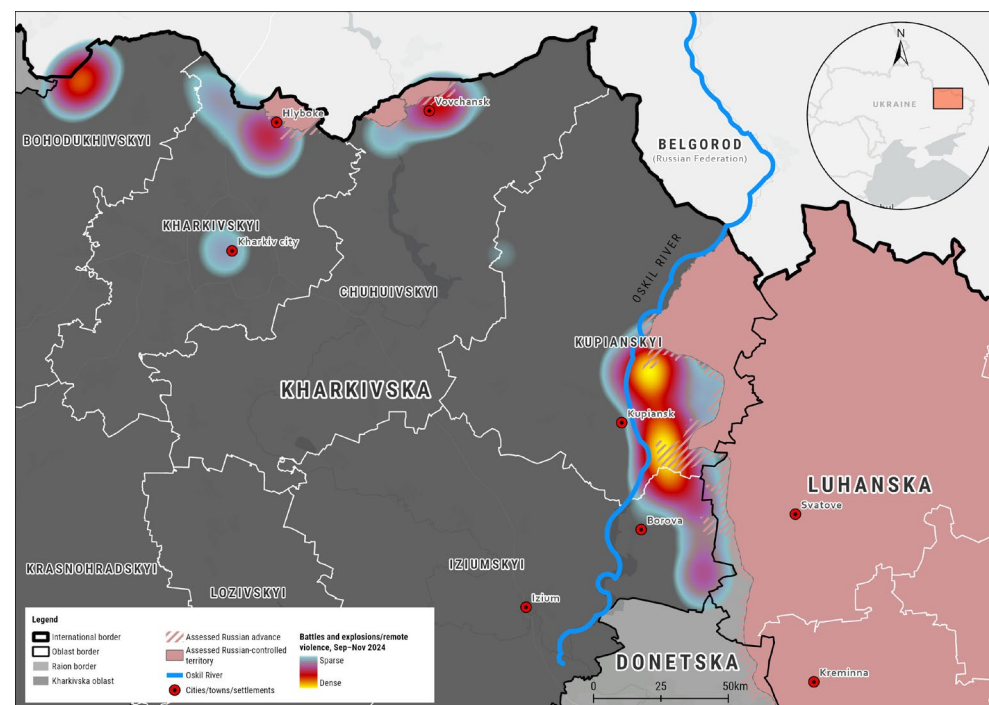
The Russian military has been pushing towards Kupiansk since late 2023 after Ukrainian forces retook the city in a September 2022 counteroffensive, and Russian military operations since September 2024 have put Russian forces within reach of capturing the city once again (ISW 12/12/2023; Kyiv Independent 26/11/2024). The recent advances towards Kupiansk occur amid a broader Russian offensive that began on 10 May involving intensified ground operations in northern Kharkivska oblast (ISW 10/05/2024). These ground operations have been accompanied by intensive air attacks in both urban and rural areas near Kupiansk and along the northern border areas, particularly Vovchansk (WP 14/05/2024; ACLED accessed 12/18/2024).

The offensive indicates a shift in the conflict dynamics in Kharkivska oblast since the Ukrainian counteroffensive in late 2022. Until May 2024, the Russian military had focused its efforts along the easternmost part of the Kupiansk–Svatove–Kreminna line towards Kupiansk and to reinforce its control of Luhanska oblast, mainly through shelling and drone attacks amid limited Russian successes in these areas (ISW 21/02/2024).

Until mid-December, Russian operations, including clashes with Ukrainian forces combined with shelling and air attacks, continued along two major front lines in Kharkivska oblast: one in the east near Kupiansk and the other in northern border areas around Vovchansk and Hlyboke (UNIAN 01/11/2024; Espresso 18/09/2024).

Intense fighting continues along the eastern front as Russian forces attempt to encircle the city of Kupiansk, where, by the end of November, fewer than 4,000 civilians remained despite the mandatory evacuation orders announced in October (TKI 26/11/2024; Novyny 15/11/2024; VOA 17/10/2024). Russian forces are also advancing south towards Borova, a village where approximately 2,000 people remained by 1 December. This would provide them with an opportunity to split Ukrainian defences around Kupiansk and secure the southern flank towards the city (TKI 24/10/2024; RBC-Ukraine 16/10/2024; Suspilne 01/12/2024). That said, the natural barrier of the Oskil River, as well as entrenched Ukrainian defences and fortifications to its west (the right bank), would make such an effort challenging. Despite continued Russian pressure on Kupiansk – both as Russian forces send small assault forces to penetrate Ukrainian defences and attempt to cross the river – Ukrainian forces have so far succeeded in defending the city, though its bombardment has led to significant destruction, including of water supply lines (Euromaidan Press 26/11/2024; Ukrinform 29/10/2024).

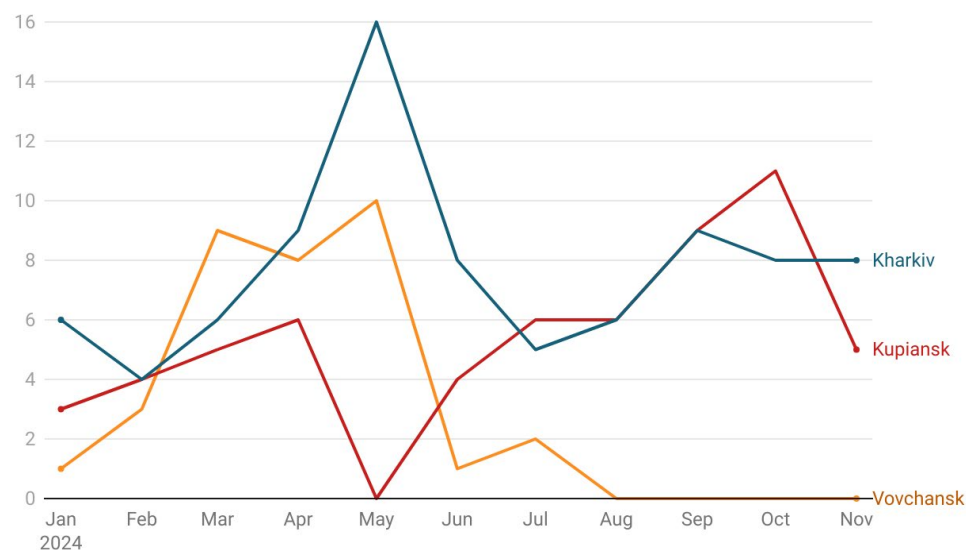
Map 1. Conflict activity intensity in Kharkivska oblast from September–November 2024



Sources: ACAPS based on ACLED (accessed 18/12/2024); ISW (18/12/2024)

Still, the Russian military has intensified operations towards Kupiansk since October, an indication of its commitment to recapturing the city. Kupiansk, with several highways and railway lines converging in the city, is a critical transportation and logistics hub in eastern Ukraine. After capturing Kupiansk in February 2022, Russian forces used the city as a logistics point to support operations towards Izium, which they later captured in March 2022. In the same year, Ukrainian counteroffensives in this area then threatened Russian supply lines and operations towards Donetsk oblast (ISW 11/09/2022). Capturing Kupiansk would not only allow the Russian military to disrupt Ukrainian supply and logistics lines in eastern Ukraine but also support its efforts towards Sloviansk and Kramatorsk in Donetsk oblast – making it a strategic priority for Russia's overall stated military objectives in Ukraine (ISW 17/11/2024; TKI 29/11/2024).

Figure 1. Civilian casualties in frontline cities/towns and Kharkiv city in 2024

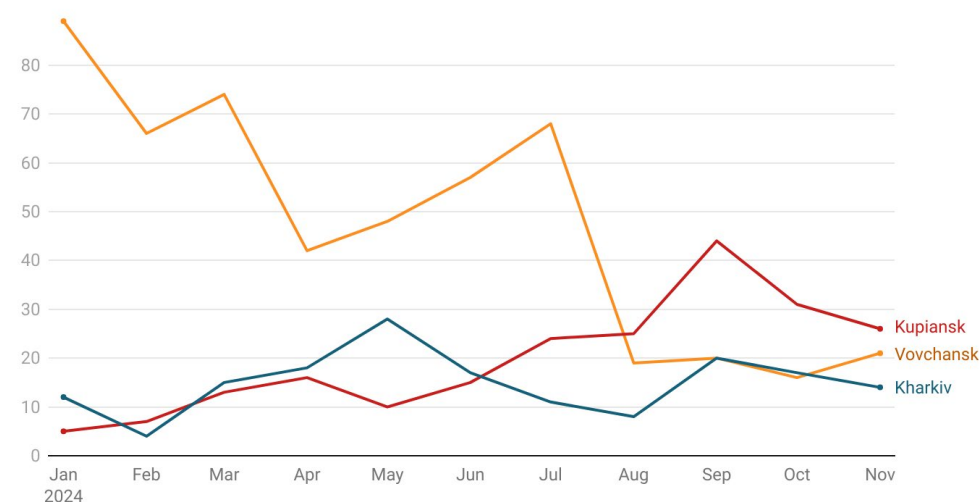


Source: ACAPS based on ACLED (accessed 12/18/2024)

Russian forces have also concentrated their offensives around Vovchansk and Hlyboke, located near the border with Belgorod oblast in Russia, likely to secure border areas (UNIAN 01/11/2024; Espresso 18/09/2024). The Ukrainian military has previously targeted Russian military sites in Belgorod, and cross-border incursions into Russian territory (whether by the Ukrainian military as in Kursk oblast or by other pro-Ukraine armed parties in Kharkivska oblast) remain a risk.

That said, Russian forces have been slower to advance around Vovchansk and Hlyboke in northern Kharkivska given strong Ukrainian military presence and defence lines since June (ISW accessed 20/12/2024). Limited road infrastructure (in part owing to conflict-related damage) also limits rapid Russian advances. The overall decline in hostilities since June has led to reduced casualties, likely also because of the increased focus on advancing towards Kupiansk.

Figure 2. Air/drone strikes and shelling/artillery/missile strikes in frontline cities/towns and Kharkiv city in 2024



Source: ACAPS based on ACLED (accessed 12/18/2024)

Overall, Russian forces have made incremental territorial gains in Kharkivska oblast – gaining approximately 225km² since 10 May 2024 (DeepState accessed 11/12/2024; TKI 13/06/2024). While they rapidly gained another 188km² from May–June, primarily in the north, these advances in Kharkivska oblast have been much slower than in Donetsk oblast, where Russian forces have taken approximately 2,000km² since May (ISW 26/11/2024; UA War Infographics Telegram 09/12/2024).

That said, the attritional and protracted nature of the conflict in Kharkivska oblast means that frontline areas are likely seeing deepening humanitarian impacts, described in further detail below. The increase in casualties in Kharkiv city since July, amid the increase in air attacks on the city, suggests that such strikes continue to raise persistent risks for residents and humanitarian responders, many of whom operate from Kharkiv city.

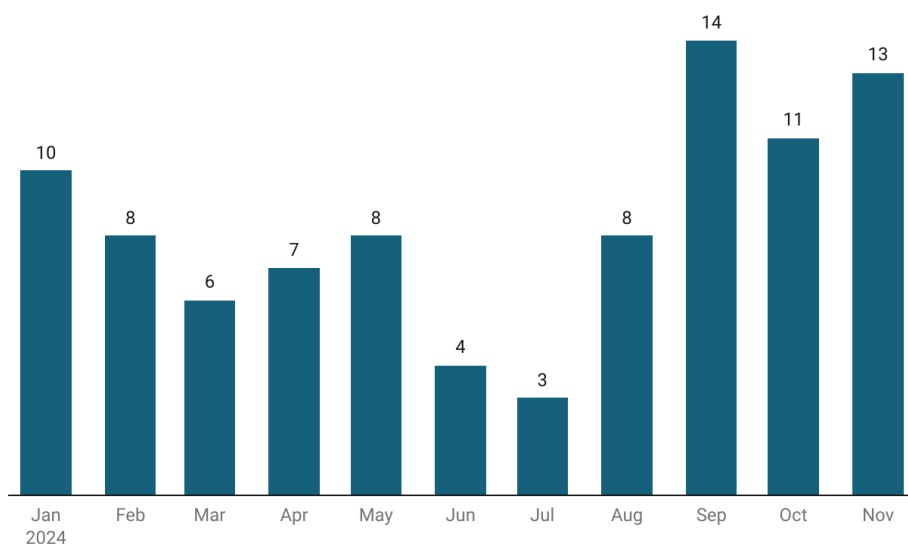
CRISIS IMPACTS

The slow, grinding advances and intensified fighting, as seen in Kharkivska oblast, mean daily and prolonged exposure to risk for civilians, including casualties, displacement, and the destruction of infrastructure, particularly in frontline areas. Continuous air attacks and shelling, concentrated in Kharkiv city, around Kupiansk, and in the northern border regions, have also led to increased damage to civilian infrastructure, including commercial,

educational, and health facilities, at the same time that the onset of winter conditions in recent weeks has likely aggravated humanitarian conditions. Since September, air attacks and shelling in Kharkivska oblast have also increased damage to transport infrastructure, such as roads, railways, bridges, and telecommunications (ACAPS accessed 12/12/2024).

Since the same month, Russian attacks have led to an increase in critical infrastructure damage across Kharkivska oblast and Kharkivskiyi raion in particular, including electricity, gas, and water supply systems, as well as heating and industrial facilities. This targeting is related to the broader trend that began in winter 2022–2023 of Russian targeting of critical infrastructure across Ukraine ahead of and during the cold season. Given the large-scale and continuous attacks on energy infrastructure, the increase in energy infrastructure damage in Kharkivska oblast since September, and persistent insecurity, the pace of repairs is unable to keep up with the compounding extent of the damage. In November, attacks on energy infrastructure in the oblast led to the reintroduction of rolling power outages lasting from three to nine hours daily (UNN 03/10/2024; Oblenergo 28/11/2024 and 13/12/2024).

Figure 3. Energy infrastructure damage in Kharkivska oblast in 2024



Source: ACAPS damages dataset accessed 18/12/2024.

Humanitarian situation in frontline areas

Approximately 6,000 people remained in frontline areas of eastern Kharkivska oblast by the end of November, primarily older people unable to leave their homes, people with disabilities who may not find proper accommodation for their needs elsewhere, and families unable or unwilling to travel without their male members who could be subject to mobilisation (KII 08/11/2024 a; KII 08/11/2024 b). One informant noted that people generally are unwilling to go far away from their homes and wait to evacuate until the last minute, meaning they evacuate when the safety risks from Russian operations have become relatively high (KII 05/11/2024 b). With insecurity compounding road access, these populations become more reliant on local government or NGOs and volunteers for evacuation. Last-minute evacuations also put these responders at risk (NPA 07/11/2024; KII 05/11/2024 a).

Those remaining in these areas face significant gaps in accessing basic services given the damage to critical infrastructure in the region (KII 05/11/2024 a; KII 05/11/2024 b). In Kupiansk and particularly on the left bank of the Oskil River, people have not had access to basic utilities such as water, electricity, and gas since at least early November amid Russian advances towards the city (Ukrainska Pravda 17/11/2024 and 09/11/2024; KII 05/11/2024 b; KII 01/11/2024 b). There is limited access to electricity in right bank areas, while insecurity has completely prevented the restoration of electricity on the left bank (Suspilne 05/11/2024).

Besides intensive infrastructure damage in Vovchansk, civilians also remain without access to water, gas, and electricity (Glavcom 04/10/2024; Dumka 10/11/2024). Housing damage in frontline areas, especially in Kupianska, Kurylivska, Lypetska, and Vovchanska hromadas, also leaves people exposed to cold weather conditions. For example, some households use boards to cover up damaged or destroyed windows, but these offer limited protection from cold weather conditions (Ukrainska Pravda 30/10/2024; KII 05/11/2024 a).

Given the severe damage to energy infrastructure in Kharkivska oblast, including to power and gas supply systems, eight conflict-affected hromadas (six in Kupianskyi raion, one in Chuhuivskiyi raion, and one in Kharkivskiyi raion) still have not had access to heating since early November – meaning they need heating appliances or other sources of heating. For example, an estimated 44,000 households need wood for heating (Kharkiv RMA 07/11/2024; Ukrinform 23/11/2024; KII 05/11/2024 a). In Chuhuivskiyi raion, the forest areas are heavily mined, leading to risks associated with unexploded ordnance for those searching for firewood (Suspilne 05/11/2024).

Another factor compounding needs in Kharkivska oblast, particularly in frontline areas, is the impact of hostilities on livelihoods. Given the shortage of employment opportunities in these areas, as well as a higher population of older people (roughly one-third to one-half of the total) who are less likely or able to go on the move despite conflict risks, many people

in frontline areas live below the poverty line. These people struggle to afford necessities, including food. Among the main humanitarian needs of those remaining in these areas are financial assistance, food products, household chemicals, medicine and pharmaceuticals, and personal hygiene items. Market disruptions related to insecurity also mean that these populations cannot access needs that include clothing, footwear, and household appliances, which can make them vulnerable during cold weather (NPA 07/11/2024; RBC-Ukraine 24/10/2024; Ukrainska Pravda 30/10/2024).

Kharkiv city

In Kharkiv city, humanitarian needs are driven not only by Russian air attacks targeting critical infrastructure, such as electricity, gas, and heating facilities, but also by growing risks to civilians amid intensifying attacks. Kharkiv city has a centralised district heating system, with 72% of people connected to centralised heating, making it uniquely vulnerable to targeted Russian attacks (MN accessed 19/12/2024). The city's electricity supply is also currently operating at only 30% of prewar levels, and winter conditions, along with power cuts, risk leaving people in the city unable to use alternative sources of heat, such as electrical heaters (UNDP 13/12/2024). Urban areas such as Kharkiv city are also less likely to have access to firewood or solid fuel for heating, unlike in more rural areas. IDP collective sites also risk losing access to heat and power, leaving displaced people vulnerable to cold weather conditions.

Out of a population of 1.3 million people, more than 15% (200,000 people) are IDPs, highlighting the large number of people potentially facing needs in Kharkiv city (Alight 27/11/2024; AOV 25/09/2024; REACH 03/10/2024). That there is a general preference for displaced people to stay in their oblast of origin speaks to the likelihood that many IDPs also face protracted needs given the nature of the conflict dynamics in Kharkivska oblast since the start of the full-scale invasion (IOM 04/09/2024). For example, many IDPs in Kharkiv city live in northern Saltivskiy district – which, despite experiencing severe damage during the 2022 Russian offensive, has experienced the highest population growth in Kharkiv city (Gwara Media 25/06/2024; REACH 01/09/2022 and 03/10/2024). Repairs to civilian infrastructure have been slow; with more than 33,000 houses damaged in 2022, many IDPs in this area live in houses that require fixes to roofing, windows, and doors, leaving them exposed to cold weather conditions during periods of energy deficits (SQ 06/09/2024; Alight 27/11/2024; UNOPS accessed 16/12/2024).

Evacuations

Most of the estimated 22,000 people displaced between 10 May and the end of November were displaced in the early weeks of the 2024 Russian offensive and likely went to Kharkiv

city. That said, displacement has continued amid the intensification of fighting since October, particularly near Kupiansk. For example, as Russian forces approached Kupiansk city in October, the Kharkivska Regional Military Administration ordered the mandatory evacuation of the approximately 10,000 people living in 29 settlements in and near Kupianskyi raion (Kharkiv RMA 18/10/2024). This was followed by additional mandatory evacuation orders for 2,400 people living in 28 settlements in Borivska hromada (Censor.NET 13/11/2024).

About half (around 6,200 people) of the population of these two evacuation areas left for safer areas, with the majority arriving in Kharkiv city using their own transport or evacuation transport organised by the local government, NGOs, and volunteers (SLK 25/11/2024). The transit site saw between 150–200 people arriving daily (KII 05/11/2024 c). Considering the long distance between Borivska hromada and Kharkiv city, the authorities opened an additional transit site in Izium in November (Health Cluster 26/11/2024). Regional authorities note that the evacuation rate dropped by the end of October, although winter conditions are likely to contribute to an increase in evacuations as people lack access to basic services in the cold weather (Suspihne 30/10/2024). Still, some people do not evacuate because they do not want to leave livestock or agricultural land behind or because mobility or health issues complicate evacuation efforts.

The most urgent need for new evacuees is accommodation, particularly for people with limited mobility. Collective sites are seeing higher levels of need given that it is typically older people, people with disabilities, and people with chronic health conditions arriving. These people often can remain in collective sites for more than a year owing to the lack of long-term housing solutions adapted to their needs (KII 05/11/2024 b).

Humanitarian operations

Intensified hostilities in frontline areas, as well as Russian air attacks, have led to additional impacts for humanitarian responders, including access limitations resulting from insecurity and logistical challenges in operations and delivery. There are several publicly reported cases of the Russian army using first-person view drones and air attacks to monitor access routes and target humanitarian facilities and staff in Kupiansk and Vovchansk (RBC-Ukraine 27/11/2024; Radio Svoboda 08/11/2024; ACAPS 28/10/2024; ACAPS accessed 12/12/2024). Kharkivskiyi (27), Chuhuivskiyi (21), and Kupianskyi (18) raions experienced the highest number of access events between May–November, which aligns with the intensity of conflict activity in these areas in that time (ACAPS accessed 12/12/2024).

In areas experiencing active hostilities, conflict-related damage to infrastructure, such as roads, can also hinder humanitarian operations, such as repairs of homes and energy infrastructure and evacuations. For example, road damage in Borivska hromada has impeded

the evacuation of civilians and rendered some communities inaccessible (Aqlity 04/12/2024). Damage to bridges in Kupiansk also complicates the evacuation of people remaining in left bank areas, as active shelling in these areas can put both civilians and humanitarians at risk (Ukrainska Pravda 30/10/2024; Gwara Media 13/12/2024; ACAPS 28/10/2024).

Military mobilisation has also affected humanitarian operations. Some humanitarian responders experience delays in delivering supplies and services in Kharkivska oblast as male staff fear being mobilised. This has delayed home repairs, causing civilians to move between houses to find undamaged shelter (KII 12/11/2024).

Even in Kharkiv city, where the majority of humanitarian responders in the oblast are based, increased insecurity is affecting operations. The number of organisations operating in the city has decreased, while many other organisations are operating at a reduced capacity, potentially affecting their activities in Kharkiv city and elsewhere in the oblast, particularly if they also respond in frontline areas (KII 08/11/2024 b).

OUTLOOK

In the coming three months, the situation in Kharkivska oblast is likely to deteriorate as Russian troops continue to concentrate their efforts on capturing Kupiansk and creating a larger buffer zone in the north of the oblast. Instead of attempting to advance rapidly as they did in 2022, Russian operations will likely follow current trends, meaning slower and more strategic advances during the next three months. This will also include the use of more deliberate tactics to disrupt Ukrainian logistics and defences while also using continuous air attacks to support ground operations, for example, by targeting Ukrainian supply lines. These tactics are likely to cause civilian casualties, particularly if responders conducting evacuations are using the targeted supply routes.

As such, hostilities in Kharkivska oblast will continue to be concentrated relatively narrowly in geographic terms, primarily around Kupiansk and Vovchansk, but at an increased intensity as Russian forces try to consolidate their gains. While people have evacuated from these areas, there are still some remaining despite the hostilities, leaving them exposed to the risk of not only injury or death but also being cut off from basic services or even coming under occupation by Russian forces.

Ukrainian defences, in general, have improved since the Ukrainian counteroffensive in 2022, so defensive fortifications and other defensive operations are also likely to limit the speed of Russian ground offensives, as could snow and above-zero weather conditions during winter. If temperatures are cold enough for the ground to remain frozen, Russian forces will be able to move equipment more easily than in warmer weather, where melting snow can create difficult and muddy conditions for ground operations. Fog and precipitation can also affect the successful operation of drones.

However, the Ukrainian military continues to face overall troop, resource, and ammunition shortages, which Russian forces are likely to continue exploiting in Kharkivska oblast. Slower ground movements will allow Russian forces to apply sustained pressure on Ukrainian defences. This will include the use of smaller assault groups, sometimes as little as two troops, to continually probe and try to penetrate and stretch Ukrainian defences, as has already been seen in Kupiansk (NV 21/11/2024). Persistent Russian air attacks will also continue to stretch Ukrainian air defences around the country, and air defence gaps are especially critical in Kharkivska oblast given its proximity to Russian territory, from where drones and missiles can reach the oblast relatively quickly. This also increases the risk of civilian casualties, as missiles and drones can reach their targets before people may have the chance to seek shelter or observe air alarms.

Kharkivska oblast, especially Kharkiv city, has continued to face persistent air attacks and shelling since September; given both its proximity to Russian territory as well as Russia's strategy to target Ukraine's critical infrastructure, such attacks will likely continue. Not only will this put residents at risk of harm, but it will also affect their ability to access critical energy services throughout the oblast, particularly in Kharkiv city. While two additional Patriot air defence systems arrived in Kharkiv city in June, the continued and intense targeting of the city and its critical infrastructure demonstrates the gaps in Ukraine's ability to intercept missiles and drones and safeguard critical infrastructure (Interfax-Ukraine 20/05/2024).

If Russian forces continue to push towards Kupiansk, it will increase the risk of an escalation in the interior eastern portion of Kharkivska oblast, for example towards Iziurm. This will continue to stretch Ukrainian defences and prevent them from being deployed to other active fronts in Donetsk oblast while also supporting Russian logistics and operations there. It will also potentially force the closure of the newly established transit site in Iziurm, disrupting evacuations from eastern Kharkivska oblast and requiring a new transit site further away.

The potential Russian occupation of Kupiansk and surrounding areas will compound the needs of the populations remaining there. After the Russian occupation in 2022, Ukrainian authorities faced challenges in the recovery process, including repairing destruction, assisting affected populations, and restoring state administration and governance bodies (Zmina 31/07/2024). Humanitarian responders will also likely lose access to these areas, not least because Russian forces would likely mine this territory to hinder potential future Ukrainian counteroffensives as they did in 2022, also raising safety risks for civilians living in these areas (AI 26/07/2024).

The potential fall of Kupiansk could also raise questions about Ukraine's defensive capabilities at a time when international support and assistance for the country are uncertain. The upcoming change in the US Government following the November 2024 presidential election introduces uncertainty about how the conflict in Ukraine will develop in the longer term, given the Ukrainian Government's dependence on international military and financial assistance,

particularly from the US. A critical loss amid changes within the US Government and other international stakeholders could cause them to reassess and possibly reduce future military and financial assistance to Ukraine. Despite its stated opposition to the November 2024 authorisation of the Ukrainian military's use of long-range missiles in Kursk oblast, the incoming US administration has also suggested that it is open to providing more weapons to Ukraine with fewer restrictions on their use as part of peace negotiations – demonstrating the ambiguity in long-term support (RBC-Ukraine 30/11/2024).

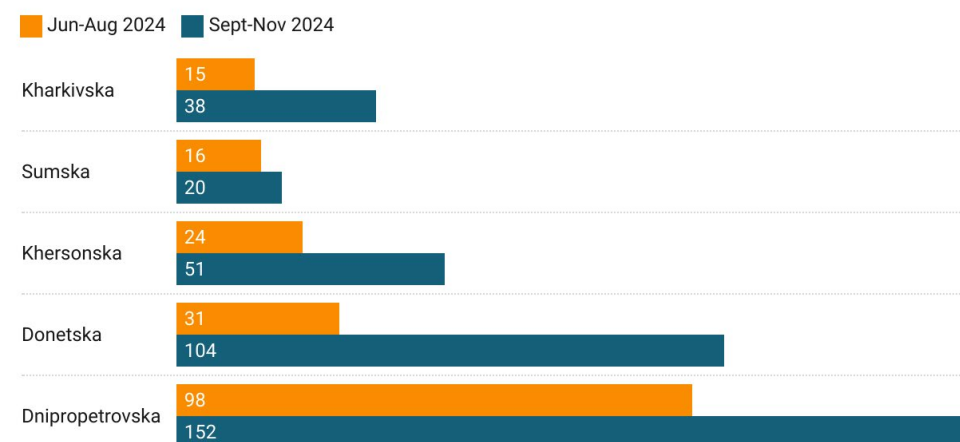
ANTICIPATED IMPACTS

Given the anticipated trajectory of the conflict in Kharkivska oblast, it is likely that humanitarian impacts will continue to be localised but intense, primarily in frontline areas. With nearly 50 settlements near Kupiansk coming under evacuation orders since October, intensifying hostilities could lead to more evacuations – slower in settlements already evacuated as only some people remain but also in new settlements that come under threat. Evacuees will continue to arrive in transit centres in Izium and Kharkiv city, particularly older people and people with mobility or chronic health issues, who are likely to have acute needs since Russian forces have been targeting Kupiansk for more than a year.

Kharkivska oblast is also one of the most damaged oblasts in terms of attacks on energy infrastructure. Russian forces will continue to target Ukraine's critical infrastructure throughout winter, including energy infrastructure. In turn, this will drive increased needs, particularly for people living in frontline areas, as temperatures are set to decrease in January, typically the coldest winter month in Ukraine. People's needs for alternative sources of heating, as well as home repairs and insulation, will increase, as will demand for energy supplies. People in areas facing active hostilities may also face safety risks in the form of unexploded ordnance when trying to collect firewood.

While cold weather conditions have been warmer than average for the past two winters, shorter cold spells are still possible and would still be difficult to manage without access to heating or power. Cold weather conditions will not only bring on new conditions like hypothermia, but they will also aggravate chronic health conditions such as heart disease and respiratory illness, leading to an increased risk of death (REACH 19/06/2024; DW 25/11/2022). The combined psychological impact of intense conflict and the negative impacts of energy disruptions during winter could also affect mental health.

Figure 4. Energy infrastructure damage (five most affected oblasts)



Source: ACAPS damages dataset accessed 18/12/2024.

In Kharkiv city, which relies on a centralised heating system, about half of the residential buildings had access to heat in March. With the intensification of Russian air strikes on energy infrastructure since September, more residential facilities are likely to face heating shortages going forward (Euromaidan Press 23/03/2024). With cold weather conditions persisting in the next three months, increased demands for energy supplies could potentially lead to higher energy prices compounded by hours- or days-long power cuts due to diminished energy provision capacity. The UN has warned that further damage to energy infrastructure in Ukraine could also trigger mass displacement (RBC-Ukraine 15/11/2024).

Needs will be acute for IDPs in Kharkivska oblast, which is among the regions hosting the most IDPs in Ukraine, many of whom are staying in Kharkiv city. By 15 October, Kharkivska oblast was hosting the second-highest number of IDPs in Ukraine at 441,000. The vast majority of these IDPs came from within the oblast, suggesting that people displaced in the future will likely remain in Kharkivska oblast (IOM 01/11/2024). Given that many IDPs remain in damaged homes and that repairs to homes and other critical infrastructure are slow, power cuts and demands for energy supplies among IDPs will also likely increase, including those in collective centres.

Besides affecting energy provision, attacks on critical infrastructure will also affect other services reliant on electricity to continue operations, such as water treatment and pumping stations. A lack of access to drinking water or inadequate sewage treatment can lead to health risks, including the spread of infectious diseases such as cholera. Health facilities

could face disruptions owing to power cuts, while in frontline areas, health services may need to be relocated. This will drive the need for mobile health services to reach populations remaining in frontline areas, many of whom are older or have mobility or chronic health issues. At the same time, mobile modalities of assistance will face challenges resulting from the risks related to active hostilities, as well as access limitations given damage to critical infrastructure such as roads. As people, particularly those unable or unwilling to leave conflict-affected areas, may not always evacuate from these areas, the combination of inadequate access to basic services and continued cold weather conditions will lead to increased healthcare needs.

Humanitarian responders will also face increased risks and access constraints amid intensifying conflict. Attacks on humanitarian responders are likely to continue, further hampering the ability of even community and government responders to conduct safe evacuations. Double-tap attacks – i.e. when an initial strike precedes a second strike that hits responders to the first attack – used primarily in frontline areas across Ukraine, including Kharkivska oblast, pose a particular risk for responders (NV 01/11/2024; Ukrainska Pravda 03/12/2024). Winter conditions, including snow and mud, will also likely complicate evacuation efforts by making it difficult for vehicles to operate.

Population movements in Kupiansk are already limited by a curfew from 17:00 to 9:00, which could also limit people's access to remaining services. Given the highly insecure situation, community and oblast authorities could introduce a permit system or completely restrict access to humanitarian responders in Kupiansk and neighbouring areas (as in the areas within 0–20km of the Russian border in Sumska oblast, which is also seeing intense conflict), limiting the services that can operate in these locations. Mobile phone and internet service disruptions resulting from power outages will hamper operational and coordination efforts, further complicating humanitarian operations.