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UKRAINE: “MINE IS HALF-TROUBLE ONLY... I CAN IGNITE THE GAS, HEAT A BRICK, AND WARM MYSELF UP.” DIRE HUMANITARIAN EFFECTS OF THE SYSTEMATIC RUSSIAN ATTACKS ON THE ENERGY SYSTEM

“SURVIVAL MODE” ONLY AS RUSSIAN AERIAL ATTACKS PERSIST DURING HARSH WINTER CONDITIONS

The winter season 2025/2026 has been described by many in Ukraine as the harshest they remember. Since Russia launched its war of aggression against Ukraine in February 2022, and particularly during the coldest months of the year, the pattern of its aerial attacks across the country has clearly indicated that it is seeking to damage Ukraine's energy infrastructure. In doing so, it has caused widespread disruption of essential services critical for the civilian population, and inflicted severe suffering on the Ukrainian people. As one interviewee, a Kyiv resident, put it: “At this point, we're in harsh survival mode.”¹

Since October 2025, day after day (mostly, night after night), Ukraine's energy system has been subjected to an intense campaign of aerial attacks, with at least 256 strikes documented by the Security Service of Ukraine against facilities responsible for electricity and heat supply, from 25 October 2025 to 15 January 2026.² Thermal power plants, substations, and critical transmission nodes have been among the primary targets, significantly undermining the country's capacity to maintain stable, minimal levels of energy and heating during the cold season. The country's energy and heating systems' capacity has been dramatically reduced, operating under severe strain after four years of the full-scale Russian invasion. To make things worse, the 2025/2026 winter has been particularly cold, against the backdrop of increasingly intense Russian attacks.

According to media reports, emergency power cuts affect 80% of Ukraine. As at 25 January, 15% of residential buildings in Kyiv alone had been without heating since approximately 9 January.³ For many, especially the residents of multistorey apartment blocks, the absence of electricity means no heating or running water; and when the electricity supply is reconnected the heating remains cut off due to severely damaged pipes and heating plants. Director of the Energy Research Centre, Oleksandr Kharchenko, explained in a media interview that the damage to Ukraine's energy infrastructure is so severe that even if the hostilities completely ended now, normal power supply would not be possible for another two to three years.⁴

Over 75% of Ukraine's population is urban,⁵ and most urban spaces are compact, dense residential areas consisting of multistorey blocks of flats. These are typically reliant on large thermal power plants, and combined heat and power plants, that centrally produce and supply electricity, heating and hot water to several hundred, sometimes thousands, of multi-storey apartment blocks each.

These thermal power stations are easy targets in a warfare which seeks to denigrate the living conditions for the general population. A single successful strike affects tens or hundreds of thousands of people at a time. Yet the Russian forces have also been relying on their vast firepower capacity to destroy or incapacitate smaller stations, substations and critical transmission nodes as well, resulting in both local and systemic damage.

¹ Olha Skorokhod, Kyiv, Pecherskyi district, interviewed on 14 January 2026.

² СБУ кваліфікує удари РФ по українській енергетиці як злочини проти людяності (відео), available at <https://ssu.gov.ua/novyny/sbu-kvalifikuie-udary-rf-po-ukrainskii-enerhetytsi-yak-zlochyny-proti-liudianosti-video> (accessed on 25 January 2026).

³ For instance, Ukraine war latest: 80% of Ukraine faces emergency power cuts, 15% of Kyiv residential buildings remain without heat after Russian attack, https://kyivindependent.com/ukraine-war-latest-jan-24-25-2026/?utm_source=chatgpt.com (accessed on 25 January 2026).

⁴ Телеграф, Графіки відключення світла - Олександр Харченко спрогнозував, коли покращаться та закінчатяться, available at <https://news.telegraf.com.ua/ukr/ukraina/2026-01-22/5931255-grafiki-vidklyuchen-tse-na-roki-ozvucheno-naygirshiy-stsenariy> (accessed on 25 January 2026).

⁵ WORLDOMETER, Ukraine population, Ukraine Population (2026) - Worldometer, (accessed 4 February 2026).

As a result, in combination with the severe freezing temperatures in Ukraine this winter, sometime as low as 16.4 degrees below zero, on 18 January at night in Kyiv, and even lower in February,⁶ the central heating pipes connecting residential buildings to the heating stations froze and burst, requiring replacement, while the single electricity grid has suffered not only disruptions but also electrical power surges, causing secondary damage. A chair of one of the homeowners' associations of a multi-apartment building in Kyiv's Holosiyivskyi district, explained: "The problems are screaming out. They relate to the fact that in some buildings, there are a lot of them, ... central heating systems have frozen, in other houses the switchboards have burned down."⁷

Yet, while the scale and the depth of hardship are unprecedented for civilians in Ukraine, the frequent aerial attacks and their petrifying aftermath are not. Many residents speak quite casually about their daily hardships and the realities of the war which steadily chip away at their livelihood:

The situation is, sure, complicated... We, well, like everyone, ... already faced significant problems in autumn. Well, it's like that, probably, all over Ukraine. And... of course, the cold snap began and shelling became more frequent. There were moments like this not every day, but often, when the [air raid] alarm was active almost all the time, because they [the Russians] were launching [missiles] one by one, two drones about every hour.

Euhenia, journalist, Odesa, 16 January 2026

Between 1 and 29 January 2026, Ukraine's energy system took heavy hits every single day (mostly at night), including six large-scale attacks involving hundreds of precision-guided munitions including strike drones, guided aerial bombs, and guided missiles. As a result, approximately 90% of Ukraine's domestic thermal electricity-producing capacity became non-operational, leaving the system dependent on the remaining nuclear energy plants and electricity imports from the European Union.⁸

The loss of power and heat has forced communities into prolonged blackouts and disrupted water supply, hindered their access to healthcare and education, and undermined in countless ways everyday life in cities and smaller towns.

SUSTAINING LIFE AMIDST BLACKOUTS AND FREEZING TEMPERATURES

Amnesty International has received reports from across Ukraine on the dire consequences of these attacks.

During blackouts, individual circumstances vary, particularly depending on where the particular building is located, whether it is connected to the gas grid or, as is the case with more modern high-rise blocks of flats, designed to be fully reliant on electricity, and so on.

In December we were without electricity, I think, three days. But the buildings that are nearer the substation, longer. I am not sure how long, maybe five-six-seven days... No electricity, and in places without water and heating. But again, mine is half-trouble only, because I have a gas stove. I can ignite the gas, heat a brick, and warm myself up. We have lots of electrical buildings, including right here, near me. I live in a nine-storey building... Here, next to me, for instance, there are many 12-stories. I honestly cannot imagine how they survived. It's scary. They have nothing. That is, they only have an electric cooker, no water, high ceilings. I have no idea how they lived.⁹

Euhenia, a journalist from Odesa, in an interview with Amnesty International.

The impact of this is much wider on every family, affecting not only the living conditions but also the ability to work and earn a living, provide education for children, or even have regular meals. Nadiia, the mother of a school-age boy from Kyiv, describes what this means for a family:

For the second week running, there are severe electricity interruptions. And when we have no electricity, we have no heating, no running water, nothing. The temperature in the flat is constantly declining. Today's it's 12.5 degrees. We live on the 14th floor. [...] My child goes to school, year three. The school is supposedly open, the teachers are asking the children to attend, but the temperature in

⁶ Lowest temperature recorded in Ukraine (in Kyiv) in January 2026, source: weatherandclimate.eu.

⁷ Anatoliy Bohdanov, the Chair of the homeowners' association of a multi-apartment building, Kyiv, interview on 16 January 2026.

⁸ ШТАБ.INFO, Зимовий період 2025–2026 став найбільш критичним за весь час війни - ШТАБ.INFO, available at <https://shtab.info/news/zymovij-period-2025-2026-stav-najbilsh-krytychnym-za-ves-chas-vijny/> (accessed 4 February 2026).

⁹ Euhenia, journalist, Odesa, interviewed on 19 January 2026.

the classroom is 11-12 degrees. So all the parents decided that no children will attend, and if the teacher has electricity then it's distance learning now. And when the teacher has no electricity, they just circulate the tasks and the children learn by themselves. [...] They say: you can bring children to school, but we are unable to provide them with meals. I work, and I ordinarily left the child in the afterschool club, but now I cannot leave him there hungry. [...] We have a [portable] gas stove where you attach a canister, with one ring where you can cook something. Yesterday, we boiled some sausages...

Svitlana, a pensioner from Kyiv, describes her days during the blackout:

How we warm ourselves up? I warm some water in a cup on a kerosene stove, fill up two bottles, one [goes] under my feet, the other in my hands, so as not to freeze. And we all sleep dressed, you see, dressed, you understand? Dressed under duvets, all that we have, we put on.

After prolonged blackouts and urgent repairs, the electricity comes back, intermittently. Svitlana continues:

As soon as the electricity is back, I rush back home, to cook something like some soup as soon as I can.... It's like, when the electricity is back [sometime at night], I cook at night so as to have anything at all to eat..¹⁰

Serhii from Dnipro shared that he did not have electricity in his house for almost seven days in early January:

I have a small camping stove, we heated water and put hot water in plastic bottles. They helped not to freeze at night. Soon after the repair works allowed for limited electricity supply, the city was heavily shelled again, and 18 thousand families were left with no electricity, no gas supply, no anything. At my daughter's school, the temperature in the classroom is 13 degrees, and even lower in the bomb shelter..¹¹

The situation is similar in Odesa, as Anna stated:

The most critical situation for us is with electricity, because if the heating is electric, like mine, then there is not only no electricity but also no heating. I can somehow manage without electricity, but without heating it's so cold. I work from home wearing four layers of clothes, in my hat and gloves.

The survival techniques and lifehacks have varied, and all the materials and equipment that they involve – gas canisters, portable stoves, firewood – have gone up in price and some have been in short supply. This extends to objects as unlikely as bricks, as Olha, from Kyiv, explained:

We are living with no heating for six days now, half that time we do not have electricity and running water. Luckily, we have a gas hob. My husband bought some bricks, we heat them up on the hob and use them to warm up the flat however we can. [...] You light up the gas rings, use bricks to build an arch over them, then put pots on top of them, and later you can place these warm pots in [other] rooms and they emit heat..¹²

Olha's daughter is two years old. Without the heating or running water, the child has not had a adequate wash all this time.

Unsurprisingly, those who live in flats with gas hobs leave the fire on for hours as it is the only source of warmth in freezing flats but this creates significant risk of serious incidents. The risks are even higher when bricks are involved. Some DIY stores have ran out of bricks as residents purchase them for their makeshift heating devices. Some locals in Kyiv have told Amnesty International that they set up camping tents right on top of their beds, and light up candles to warm up the smaller space inside them, taking dramatic risks.

The mass search for safer alternatives has been constrained by their scarcity and rising costs. Yuliia, a doctor from Kyiv told Amnesty International that her apartment block has a limited heating supply, but the capacity of the system is so low that the temperature in her flat remains very low. At work, she has been without heating for weeks now. She was considering relocating from Kyiv to a nearby village, to a cottage with a wood or coal stove, but due to the high demand rental prices for such places have skyrocketed, and so have the costs of wood and coal..¹³

¹⁰ Svitlana Prokopivna, Kyiv, Holosiivskyi districts, interviewed on 16 January 2026.

¹¹ Serhiy Barabash, Dnipro, interviewed on 19 January 2026.

¹² Olha Skorokhod, Kyiv, Pecherskyi district, interviewed on 14 January 2026.

¹³ Yuliia, Kyiv, interviewed on 20 January 2026.

To support the population, the government set up “resistance points” in city districts. They are basically big tents run by the National Emergency Services, heated by small generators and open around the clock. People can warm up in these, have hot drinks and a meal, and charge their phones. For many, a few hours spent in those installations are the only few hours of warmth they can get in sub-zero temperatures.

Another resident of Kyiv, also Olha, told Amnesty International how this has become her lifeline:

I come here every day, for about three hours I come and sit here. It is very warm, and very fine people around. It's good to have a place like this. I have never thought in my whole life that I would need to use a place like this.¹⁴

These big tents, “resistance points”, have become a familiar feature in many residential areas in Kyiv and across Ukraine. One of their key features is their relative safety, unlike the makeshift home-made heating solutions which often rely on open fire and dangerous fuels. Yet, for many people even these facilities are not available. Amnesty International spoke to some relatives of older people and disabled people who cannot leave their rooms on upper floors of apartment blocks and, without elevators, they cannot go up or down. They are effectively locked up in freezing flats.

SOME MAY NOT MAKE IT THROUGH THIS TIME

Most of the testimonies for this publication have been collected by the Kyiv-based staff of Amnesty International. While these testimonies portray other people's stories, the staff's own stories and experience, and those of their families, are very similar.

One key circumstance common to the organization's staff and those they have interviewed, is that they have been able to communicate with each other, they have not been completely isolated from others. But this is not the case for some Ukrainians. There are those, including older people and persons with disabilities, who are likely isolated and confined to their apartments or houses, and who cannot rely on means of communication such as mobile phones when the mobile networks have also been disrupted, and when mobile phones cannot be charged during blackouts. Their stories are still untold. Petrifying as it is to suggest this, there will likely be stories that will never be told, by those who had to live through gruelling circumstances but did not survive them.

The sheer scale and intensity of attacks targeting Ukraine's energy infrastructure by Russian forces appears to be part of a strategy intended to spread terror among the civilian population to undermine civilian resilience, disrupt critical services and prevent essential daily activities, and thus break the population's morale. By seeking to damage or destroy energy, heating and water supply systems, particularly in freezing temperatures, by severely disrupting the healthcare, education and other services, and undermining communication, they are directly creating dire humanitarian consequences that extend far beyond immediate physical damage. The civilian suffering places millions at risk and deepens existing vulnerabilities.

In direct violation of the laws of war, such actions suggest an intent to use deprivation of objects indispensable to civilian survival as a means of pressure on the civilian population, rather than achieving a concrete military advantage. International humanitarian law demands protection of objects indispensable to the survival of civilians. These actions directly deny it.

Amnesty International calls for a prompt, thorough, and impartial investigation of all suspected crimes under international law, and for all those responsible to be held accountable. It demands an immediate end to the Russian aggression against Ukraine, and truth, reparation and justice for all its victims.

¹⁴ Olha, Kyiv, Holosiivskyi district, interviewed 16 January 2026.