

RFI WINTER EVACUATION

NO. 12



Odesa railway station.
Credit: Kostiantyn & Vlada Liberovs

Temperatures across Ukraine continue to **drop** during a winter that the WHO **deems** “life-threatening for millions of people” in the country. Damaged communal infrastructure and regular **Russian strikes** on the energy grid have left millions navigating unpredictable power outages, or in some cases **extended blackouts**. Should the situation worsen, it could **lead** to **mass migration within Ukraine or to neighboring countries**. A recent **IOM report**, however, claims that only 7% of Ukrainians are considering evacuation. Moreover, upwards of five million Ukrainians who were displaced (within Ukraine or abroad) have **returned home**. This RFI notes preparations inside the country to support residents who decide to stay or leave, but it also highlights why many Ukrainians insist on staying home. While Ukrainian officials, aid actors and local volunteers should prepare for large-scale migration this season, they should also prepare to aid those who choose to stay home in sub-optimal conditions.

OFFICIAL STATEMENTS, POLICIES AND SUPPORT

As a rule, Ukrainian officials tend to recommend evacuation from areas that are experiencing ongoing shelling, and/or where combat-related damage to energy infrastructure is so severe that short-order repairs are impossible. To date, Kyiv has asked residents of Donetsk and Kherson to leave their homes, but officials have **speculated** that organized evacuation may be necessary from other areas too, including Kyiv. Those who have already fled have been **asked** not to return in order to avoid further straining the power grid.

The Ministry of Reintegration has organized evacuation routes from **unoccupied Donetsk** and deoccupied parts of **Mykolaiv and Kherson oblasts**. “Obligatory evacuation” from Donetsk region started in **August** (see **RFI #10: Frontline Evacuation**), while Reintegration Minister, Iryna Vereshchuk, **asked** residents of Kherson oblast to evacuate following liberation in November. In Chernihiv oblast, regional authorities have **asked** residents of vulnerable border areas to relocate within the oblast. About **87,000** people have reportedly been evacuated from especially dangerous regions in the past months. Ukrainians in occupied territories are usually able to leave to government-controlled areas through Zaporizhzhia oblast’s **Vasylivka checkpoint**, though **passage** has been limited or stopped entirely as of mid-December. Passage over the Dnipro river in Kherson oblast, usually forbidden, was **permitted** for a few days in early December to allow residents of occupied left bank areas to evacuate.

Regional and local authorities in western regions continue to prepare for new migrants (e.g. **housing, field kitchens**). Key informants note that local organizations and volunteers are also preparing for migration spikes. **Price caps** are in place for certain utilities to relieve financial pressure from households. International partners continue to **promise** winter-related aid, particularly **warm clothes, power infrastructure**, and **especially, new generators**, but also are preparing **border countries** and **host nations** for potential new waves of migrants.

LOCAL RESPONSES TO OFFICIAL STATEMENTS

Local sources in deoccupied Kherson oblast report hearing constant messages to evacuate the region, while respondents in Mykolaiv, Donetsk and Chernihiv oblasts report similar directives in frontline, deoccupied or heavily-shelled districts. In other frontline regions in the country’s east, key informants say that **“the authorities’ main rhetoric is to prepare people for the worst: the winter will be extremely difficult... and if there is very serious damage [they] won’t be able to restore things quickly, and generators won’t be enough for everyone.”** However, such reports contrast with claims from informants in eastern regions like Zaporizhzhia or Dnipro, or even in heavily-damaged cities like Mykolaiv, who hear that the energy situation is under control. Respondents say this **creates confusion** among locals, leading some to believe the authorities do not know what they are doing, and that **its directives do not need to be taken seriously**.

Research participants say that this skepticism is strongest where there is a visible lack of coordination between local authorities and energy providers, like in Zakarpattia where misunderstandings between

the military administration and Zakarpattyaobenergo led to a highly-publicized **meeting** aimed at bringing both bodies into sync. Multiple research participants in Ukraine's eastern regions say that "locals don't talk about [energy and evacuation] issues like a problem the government can solve...people solve problems independently." While the **local proclivity for self-organization** may be auspicious, it **could lead residents to disregard key government recommendations**. In extreme cases, this distrust in the government may even lead to the spread of conspiracy theories, like in Donetsk oblast where one respondent said some residents believe that "local authorities deliberately cut the gas supply to encourage people to leave." On the other hand, local sources in Mykolaiv oblast say that the steady, if slow, restoration of key services and utilities has restored trust in authorities to some degree.

A key informant in Chernihiv reports that many locals believe that, in addition to winter- and energy-related considerations, residents of northern districts are being asked to evacuate due to fears of a **ground incursion** from the north. In such a case, Chernihiv governor Vyacheslav Chaus has **stated** that they would immediately evacuate 300,000 people to other regions, and are actively preparing bus and train lines, though trains are particularly vulnerable to service interruptions due to **cold weather** or **power outages**. While the regional government is working to restore the oblast's heavily-damaged road network (see **Chernihiv Location Profile**), one key informant expressed doubts about the undertaking:

Our broken, two-lane road to Kyiv becomes paralyzed at the slightest accident and is not ready for heavy traffic. Basically, part of the region is simply cut off from the rest. All other roads lead to Russia and Belarus.

Improved communication concerning ongoing transportation infrastructure repairs may be necessary to assuage fears.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS EVACUATING OR REMAINING

While a vast number of residents suffer from outages, local sources report that many community members have adapted to the situation and that initial waves of panic have subsided. Respondents most concerned about the blackouts were those whose **livelihoods were interrupted by power and internet shortages**. Conversely, others report increased confidence in Ukraine's ability to deal with outages and obviate the need for evacuations – an attitude that contrasts strongly with **international predictions**. As noted above, some have in fact already **returned** to their homes in the east, even in **heavily-damaged** districts. People interviewed for this piece disagreed as to the probability of a total blackout. As for how their communities would respond should one occur, some respondents in heavily-damaged regions mention an optimism fuelled by local authorities' ability to quickly restore grid stability even amidst regular strikes. In southern regions like Odesa and Kherson, this confidence has been bolstered by warmer weather, which could provide a false sense of security that the winter will be mild even after the New Year. Anger and frustration are most frequently voiced by parents of children whose education has been interrupted by outages, and by those who believe in "blackout injustice" – that certain neighborhoods are disconnected from the grid in order to power others.

Current estimates note that **60%** of Ukrainians have yet to leave their cities. Across the country, key informants report that some stay home due to confidence in their own strength and resourcefulness, and in their local and/or regional authorities. Many people feel reassured by their access to firewood, power banks, water filters, generators, and Invincibility Points. However, others hesitate to leave out of fears of the difficulties of life as an IDP or refugee, particularly concerns related to **housing and employment**. A recent **report** says that residents of Kyiv and the country's north are most likely to evacuate. In Kherson, where residents face regular shelling, locals say that evacuees do not plan on going far: Odesa and Mykolaiv oblasts are common destinations, though **evacuation trains** bring people to Khmelnytskyi oblast. Others declare their readiness to move to rural homes that prove easier to heat. Factors that respondents say may change their minds include the potential failure of **new air defense systems**, intensified shelling patterns or a land incursion from Belarus. Key informants also note an irony in how **the more Ukrainian officials work to provide relief to heavily-affected areas of the country, the less likely locals are to prepare to evacuate**.

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