

Ukraine

# Winterization in Protracted Crisis

February 2026



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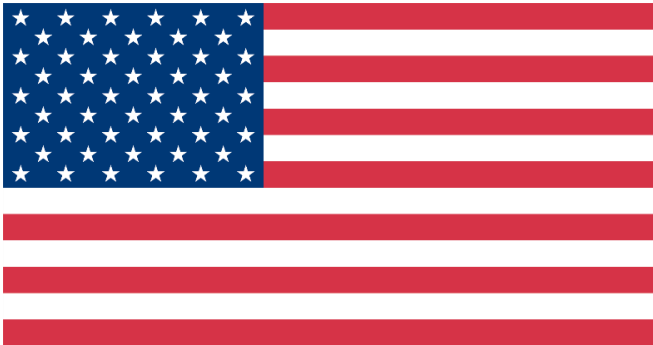


**REACH** Informing  
more effective  
humanitarian action

Photo: A snowy street in central Kyiv during a power outage, February 2026



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*"In principle, nothing changes. Winter is as it was last year, and this year, and the preparation is the same, and the support of people in need of help is the same."*

**A local government worker, reflecting on how needs have changed from year to year**

*"The only change here is that I expect that people will have the finances to buy heating and cover their heating needs for the winter-autumn period. There can be no long-term goals here, it's an emergency."*

**An NGO worker, reflecting on the tension between long-term change and immediate relief**

*"If the winter is cold, then heating and water [are the main challenge], because a person cannot do without water. Let there be no light, no electricity. Well, you know how; you can manage during the day. In the evening, of course, it's bad [...] But we will survive. That is, we will shine a flashlight, light a candle. But I think that without water and without heating, it would probably be more of a problem for me."*

**A resident of Kharkivska oblast, reflecting on the challenges of winter**

*"People affected by conflict are not passive "data subjects" or categories of people. The first step to enhancing protection is understanding that people hold multiple, overlapping identities that affect their own risk exposure, needs and protection capacities, and that their humanitarian needs are not strictly determined by time in displacement, geography or quantitative vulnerability criteria."*

**Protection Cluster, describing a "people centered approach to assistance", 2025 Analysis Update<sup>1</sup>**

**About REACH**

REACH facilitates the development of information tools and products that enhance the capacity of aid actors to make evidence-based decisions in emergency, recovery and development contexts. The methodologies used by REACH include primary data collection and in-depth analysis, and all activities are conducted through inter-agency aid coordination mechanisms. REACH is a joint initiative of IMPACT Initiatives, ACTED and the United Nations Institute for Training and Research - Operational Satellite Applications Programme (UNITAR-UNOSAT). For more information please visit [our website](#). You can contact us directly at: [geneva@reach-initiative.org](mailto:geneva@reach-initiative.org) and follow us on Twitter @REACH\_info.

<sup>1</sup> Protection Cluster, "[Protection Analysis Update: No Quick End. The impact of the war on civilian protection in Ukraine](#)", September 2025, p. 6

## SUMMARY

### Key findings

- Winter vulnerability is driven by damaged infrastructure, constrained household finances, and uneven coping capacity. Cold weather exacerbates vulnerabilities. The conflict is the backdrop to this vulnerability and need
- Winter Response Plan activities appear to be well understood and generally appropriate, though there are opportunities to review eligibility, timeliness, and roles of government and humanitarian actors.
- Fundamental drivers of need, including conflict, household finances, and extreme weather, continue to affect people in Ukraine, while the funding required to meet identified winter response needs exceeds available funding.

Ukraine is going through the fourth winter since Russia launched its full-scale invasion in February 2022. Though this marked a major escalation in the conflict, there has been a humanitarian winter response of some kind every year since 2014.

REACH conducted this research to contribute to longer-term learning on winter responses in Ukraine, in support of strategic planning beyond individual winter seasons. By situating current findings within a multi-year perspective, the study aims to inform future winter response planning by identifying persistent drivers of need, evolving coping strategies, and recurring design challenges, thereby supporting more informed prioritization and adaptation of winterization approaches over time.

REACH found that there are persistent drivers of need, namely the conflict and freezing conditions. At the same time, stretched household finances and disrupted social networks limit people's ability to cope with stressors. Humanitarian aid appears to be relevant and to meet people's needs, though there are still gaps in terms of the design of systems and the selection of modalities. Local government is stretched by limited finances and staffing challenges.

The 2025-26 winter has been very challenging for Ukraine. There have been rolling power outages provoked by Russian airstrikes, and an unusually deep cold spell in January 2026. Since winter responses have been central to humanitarian activities between 2014 and 2021, winter responses will likely be needed in the coming years, whatever the change in the conflict.

As Ukraine continues to adapt to the reality of life during wartime, the capacities of individuals and the state are developing. Income and social networks appear to be important factors affecting people's ability to meet their own needs.

The needs that people have during winter are not always winter-specific, though coping capacities can be strained more heavily during the cold season. As such, steps to bolster or support household finances, housing quality, and social capital can be valuable. Though beyond the scope of this assessment, systems-level support is also valuable.

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## List of Acronyms

<b>CSO:</b>	Civil Society Organization
<b>DRC:</b>	Danish Refugee Council
<b>FSL:</b>	Food Security and Livelihoods Cluster
<b>GDP:</b>	Gross Domestic Product
<b>HNRP:</b>	Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan
<b>IAHE:</b>	Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation steering group
<b>MSNA:</b>	Multi-Sectoral Needs Assessment
<b>NFI:</b>	Non-Food Items
<b>NGO:</b>	Non Governmental Organization
<b>ODI:</b>	Overseas Development Institute
<b>SNFI:</b>	Shelter and Non-Food Items Cluster
<b>UN:</b>	United Nations
<b>UNHCR:</b>	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
<b>WASH:</b>	Water, Sanitation and Hygiene
<b>WRP:</b>	Winter Response Plan

## Geographical Classifications

<b>Oblast:</b>	The largest administrative unit, admin-1
<b>Raion:</b>	Admin-2
<b>Hromada:</b>	Admin-3

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## INTRODUCTION

Ukraine is going through the fourth winter since Russia launched its full-scale invasion in February 2022. Though this marked a major escalation in the conflict, there has been a humanitarian winter response of some kind every year since 2014.

The winter response needs to continuously adapt to conditions on the ground. The conflict develops, and so do the capacities of organisations, government agencies and the general public themselves. Sometimes, there are positive developments, as partnerships are strengthened and resilience is bolstered. At other times, capacities are weakened or overwhelmed. And, as the tempo of the conflict rises and falls, some things remain relatively unchanged from year to year.

As of February 2026, prospects for the end of the conflict are unclear. Whatever the change in the conflict, there will be vulnerable people in Ukraine next winter due to long-term challenges such as displacement, returns and damaged infrastructure.

This research is intended to provide qualitative evidence to support planning and operational actors in development and review of Winter Responses. It has three objectives:

- to assess how winter-related humanitarian needs and vulnerabilities evolve over multiple years, with a focus on vulnerabilities addressed by household-level interventions in the Winter Response Plan, such as winter heating, shelter insulation, and personal insulation.
- to examine how institutional actors (local authorities, CSOs) perceive and support winterisation efforts, and under what conditions these interventions are perceived to contribute to sustained community resilience.
- to contribute to collective situational awareness and to support humanitarian partners in shaping context-appropriate responses.

The project begins with the information gaps identified in the 2025/2026 Winter Response Plan.<sup>2</sup> The Plan called for more understanding of household coping strategies for heating, “particularly on coping strategies and the use of unsafe or inadequate heating methods, which pose direct public health risks.” It noted a need for “more detailed understanding [...] of the capacity of local authorities and utility providers to support winterization efforts in the most affected communities.”

Taking the Plan as a starting point, REACH interviewed residents, public sector workers and NGO workers, on issues connected to living in Ukraine during the winter. The information from these primary interviews is brought into dialogue with secondary research and news reporting to offer a human-centered picture of the situation.

REACH found that there are persistent drivers of need, namely the conflict and freezing conditions. At the same time, constrained household finances and disrupted social networks limit people’s ability to cope with stressors. Humanitarian aid appears to be relevant and to meet people’s needs, though there are still gaps in terms of the design of systems and the selection of modalities.

The winter has been very challenging for Ukraine. There have been rolling power outages provoked by Russian airstrikes, and an unusually long and deep cold spell in January.<sup>3 4</sup> Though this was only beginning to play out at the time of data collection, events are reflected in the use of secondary sources.

<sup>2</sup> UN OCHA, “[Ukraine Winter Response Plan \(October 2025 – March 2026\)](#)”, July 2025

<sup>3</sup> UN News, “[Children still bearing the brunt of Russian attacks on Ukraine](#)”, February 2026

<sup>4</sup> Kyiv Independent, “[Ukraine sees its coldest January in 16 years](#)”, February 2026

## METHODOLOGY

### Overview

This research is based on qualitative interviews with people living or working in Sumska and Kharkivska oblasts. The geographic focus was on the oblast centers (Sumy and Kharkiv cities) and two hromadas (Konotopska in Sumska and Bohodukhivska in Kharkivska).

The primary data are thirty-nine interviews with residents, fourteen interviews with public sector workers, and nine interviews with NGO workers. These were conducted by REACH between 28<sup>th</sup> November and 15<sup>th</sup> December 2025, towards the beginning of the Winter Response.



Alongside the primary interviews, REACH reviewed relevant secondary literature. REACH also participates actively in coordination and analysis of the humanitarian situation in Ukraine.

### Data collection methods

The questionnaires were designed as qualitative, semi-structured interviews. People were invited to reflect on the situation as they saw it on the day of the interview, how they believed the situation had changed year by year, and their own priorities or challenges.

### Challenges and Limitations

The primary data collected for this project is qualitative, and not intended to produce statistical information. Any participant's viewpoints are partial, and likewise the analyst's viewpoint can color the interpretation. Findings are indicative only.

Participants were recruited purposively. The hromadas provided assistance in identifying research participants. This means that the range of viewpoints may not fully reflect public opinion. Although participants did freely express their viewpoints, the sample was not designed to be statistically representative. This report focuses on the areas of Ukraine that are under control of the Government of Ukraine. News reporting indicates that there are needs driven by winter in the occupied territories. However, REACH is unable to verify or assess these within the scope of this research.

### Concept of resilience

The United Nations' Officer for Disaster Risk Reduction defines resilience as: "the ability of a system, community or society exposed to hazards to resist, absorb, accommodate, adapt to, transform and recover from the effects of a hazard in a timely and efficient manner, including through the preservation and restoration of its essential basic structures and functions through risk management."<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, "[Resilience](#)"

## FINDINGS

### Overview of Winter Responses since 2014

#### (a) Context

In order to assess how winter-related humanitarian needs and vulnerabilities have evolved over the years, it is necessary to situate the current response in a twelve-year context.

There has been a targeted winter response of some kind in Ukraine every year since 2014.<sup>6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15</sup> The overall objectives have largely stayed the same, though the scale has changed, ramping up hugely after 2022. From the earliest period, the winter response was described as a central, strategic priority, involving year-round work.

This has been in a context where conflict has been coupled with persistent economic hardship. Together, conflict and poverty drive vulnerability and limit people's ability to cover living costs, make home improvements or absorb shocks.<sup>16 17</sup> At the same time, the war has seen the destruction of critical infrastructure, the reconfiguration of local government, and the disruption of social networks, which have further reduced societal resilience to winter risks.<sup>18 19 20</sup>

There have generally been two dimensions of programming: helping to keep people warm enough to survive in the immediate winter, and developing infrastructure to reduce exposure in subsequent winters. Additional activities have targeted wider issues, such as bolstering healthcare or protecting livestock.

In the first year of the conflict, there was not a formal Winter Response Plan. However, in October 2014, UNHCR announced plans to support internally displaced people, with an emphasis placed on the upcoming winter. This consisted of the distribution of winter clothes and blankets, provision of tarpaulin for roof repairs, and refurbishment of collective sites.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Global Shelter Cluster Shelter Projects, "[Overview: Ukraine 2014 – 2016 / Conflict](#)", April 2017

<sup>7</sup> Global Shelter Cluster, "[Winterization 2017 – 2018 Recommendations](#)", August 2017

<sup>8</sup> Global Shelter Cluster, "[Winterization Recommendations 2018 – 2019](#)", August 2018

<sup>9</sup> Global Shelter Cluster, "[Winterization Recommendations 2019 – 2020](#)", July 2019

<sup>10</sup> International Organisation for Migration, "[Ukraine Crisis Response Plan 2020](#)"

<sup>11</sup> International Organisation for Migration, "[Ukraine Crisis Response Plan 2021](#)"

<sup>12</sup> OCHA, "[Winterization Plan – Winter Priority Procurement & Repair Plan 2022 – 2023](#)", July 2022

<sup>13</sup> OCHA, "[Winter Response Plan, October 2023 – March 2024](#)", August 2023

<sup>14</sup> UN OCHA, "[Winter Response Plan, October 2024 – March 2025](#)", July 2024

<sup>15</sup> UN OCHA, "[Ukraine Winter Response Plan \(October 2025 – March 2026\)](#)", July 2025

<sup>16</sup> REACH, "[Analysis of Humanitarian Trends: Government Controlled Areas of Donetsk and Luhansk, 5km Zone](#)", September 2017

<sup>17</sup> N. Mezentseva, S. Batychenko & K. Mezentsev, "ЗАХВОРЮВАНІСТЬ І ЗДОРОВ'Я НАСЕЛЕННЯ В УКРАЇНІ: СУСПІЛЬНО-ГЕОГРАФІЧНИЙ ВИМІР", trans. "Illness and health in the population of Ukraine: Socio-geographical dimension", 2018

<sup>18</sup> Vox Ukraine, "[Територіальні громади 2025: ключові зміни та їхні наслідки](#)", trans. "Territorial communities 2025: key changes and their consequences", January 2026. N.b there have been positive as well as negative changes.

<sup>19</sup> CEDOS, "[Housing in Rural Hromadas Near the Frontline](#)", March 2025

<sup>20</sup> Centre for Economic Strategy, "[Ukrainian Refugees After Three Years Abroad](#)", March 2025

<sup>21</sup> UNHCR, "[Ukraine displacement worsening as winter looms](#)", October 2014

Before 2015, the SNFI response was based on unconditional cash grants to support displaced people. By September 2015, the Shelter Cluster had issued “Winterization Guidelines”.<sup>22</sup> These Guidelines introduced a focus on “preparedness activities [...] particularly in dealing with the extreme winter”. From 2015, “preparing for and mitigating the effects of low temperatures” was a “major focus of shelter and NFI activities”. Household repairs were said to serve the higher objective of winterization.

Many aspects of the situation appear persistent, though they have become more aggravated especially since 2022. Infrastructure problems have existed from the start. From 2015, Ukraine suffered attacks on national energy infrastructure during winter.<sup>23</sup> Civilians were affected by localized utilities outages connected to fighting.<sup>24</sup> By winter 2017/2018, the SNFI response focused on “personal insulation”, fuel and heaters, housing repairs, and household insulation. This resembles the response focus today.<sup>25</sup> Household finances have always been recognized as a key factor in vulnerability. It was already observed by 2017 that “access to items, fuel and heating became increasingly restricted by dwindling household resources”.<sup>26</sup>

The development of winterization after 2022 needs to be understood in the context of Russia’s full-scale invasion. In their review of the initial response to the full-scale invasion, the Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation (IAHE) steering group remarked that the humanitarian response was characterized by a “no regrets strategy”, with wide-spread coverage quickly meeting needs in a heightened context.<sup>27</sup> Reminiscent of the unconditional cash programming ahead of winter 2014, UN agencies deployed “a blanket approach to supply distributions and humanitarian cash transfers to support displaced populations.”<sup>28</sup>

In general, the IAHE gave a positive evaluation of the early response after 2022. Still, they acknowledged that humanitarians had a tendency to set up “parallel systems” with the potential for cash programming unrealized due to a “lack of shared vision for integration into social protection systems”.<sup>29</sup>

Reflecting on winterization specifically, the IAHE commented that “some sectors [...] continued to rely heavily on in-kind modalities, even where market conditions allowed for greater use of cash”.<sup>30</sup> More broadly, they commented on “inconsistent” delivery of livelihoods programming, where opportunities to support self-reliance were “limited” by a “persistent siloing of emergency assistance [and] continued reliance on short-term, in-kind support”.<sup>31</sup>

Coming forward to the winter period from 2025 to 2026, Ukraine is in the fifth year of Russia’s full-scale invasion. The format and strategy of winterization responses continued to develop. By August 2025, the government had brought into legislation a policy framework for coordinating solid-fuel

<sup>22</sup> Global Shelter Cluster Shelter Projects, “[Overview: Ukraine 2014 – 2016 / Conflict](#)”, April 2017

<sup>23</sup> BBC, “[Hackers caused power cut in western Ukraine](#)”, January 2016

<sup>24</sup> Al Jazeera, “[Ukraine: Fighting flares up in eastern town of Avdiivka](#)”, January 2017

<sup>25</sup> Shelter Cluster Ukraine, “[Winterization 2017-18 New Year Update](#)”, 2018

<sup>26</sup> Global Shelter Cluster Shelter Projects, “[Overview: Ukraine 2014 – 2016 / Conflict](#)”, April 2017

<sup>27</sup> Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation steering group, “[Synthesis of evaluative evidence on the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine](#)”, October 2025, p. vi

<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 6

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. vi

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 16

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., “Synthesis of evaluative evidence on the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine”, October 2025, p. 15

assistance with humanitarians.<sup>32</sup> Cash remains a highly desirable form of programming amongst affected people, and in-kind fuel assistance is a major focus of the winterization efforts, alongside systemic interventions to support healthcare, district heating and agriculture.

At the same time that humanitarian and government planning developed, the conflict has deepened. The intensity increased again in 2025, having already been at a high level since 2022.<sup>33</sup> Meanwhile, the infrastructure has been under severe strain. The 2025-2026 winter has seen the return of rolling blackouts nationwide, with emergency electricity, water and heating outages provoked by air strikes, including in major cities such as Dnipro, Kherson, Kyiv, Lviv, and Odesa. The damage to housing and critical infrastructure like electricity, water, gas and district heating is long-term and growing in scale.<sup>34</sup>

## (b) Humanitarian Planning Today

The 2025-2026 Winter Response Plan is intended to “operationalize winter-specific activities outlined in the reprioritized 2025 Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan (HNRP)”.<sup>35</sup> The current humanitarian planning framework understands the Plan as “a tool for advocacy, resource mobilization and coordination with government”.<sup>36</sup>

Activities or clusters not included in the Winter Response Plan are year-round and not specific to winter. Although the 2017/2018 winter response document ran from April to March, more recent Plans have run from October to March. This reflects a shifting conceptualization of winterization over the years.

The HNRP for 2025 was revised in early 2025.<sup>37</sup> Humanitarian and aid funding has been declining in Ukraine every year since a spike in 2022.<sup>38</sup> In the context of reprioritization initiated in early 2025 due to cuts in humanitarian funding, the Winter Response Plan for 2025/2026 has had somewhat narrower objectives than previous years, though the number of people targeted has held steady.

As funding has reduced, so has the breadth of winter response planning. The 2024/2025 Plan targeted 1.8 million people across 18 activities, delivered by five clusters with a requirement of \$492.1 million.<sup>39</sup> In the 2025/2026 plan, the number of people targeted still stood at 1.7 million but the number of activities fell to ten, delivered across four clusters with a requirement of \$277.7 million.<sup>40</sup>

ACAPS analysis finds that “winterization activities have not been consistently prioritized within available donor funding and are significantly reduced”.<sup>41</sup> They point to reductions of support to district heating and invincibility points.

<sup>32</sup> Cabinet of Ministers, “[Деякі питання надання допомоги населенню на придбання твердого пального побутового палива протягом опалювального сезону](#)”, trans. “Issues related to the provision of assistance to the population for the purchase of solid household heating fuel during the heating season”, August 2025

<sup>33</sup> ACLED, “[Exhausted Ukraine faces military and diplomatic pressure to cede the Donbas](#)”, December 2025

<sup>34</sup> The “Fifth Rapid Damage and Needs Assessment” is [forthcoming](#)

<sup>35</sup> UN OCHA, “[Ukraine Winter Response Plan \(October 2025 – March 2026\)](#)”, July 2025

<sup>36</sup> *ibid*

<sup>37</sup> UN OCHA, “[Ukraine Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan 2025](#)”, published January 2025 and revised April 2025.

<sup>38</sup> UN OCHA, [Financial Tracking System Ukraine Country Summary](#), accessed 4<sup>th</sup> February 2026

<sup>39</sup> UN OCHA, “[Winter Response Plan, October 2024 – March 2025](#)”, July 2024

<sup>40</sup> UN OCHA, “[Ukraine Winter Response Plan \(October 2025 – March 2026\)](#)”, July 2025

<sup>41</sup> ACAPS, “[One Year On: The Implications of US Foreign Aid Cuts on Humanitarian Development, and Government-led Programmes](#)”, December 2025, p. 20

In both years, SNFI and WASH activities made up the bulk, both in dollar terms and numbers of people targeted.

	\$ Requirements 2024/2025 (proportion of total)	\$ Requirements 2025/2026 (proportion of total)	Change
SNFI	75%	82%	Increased
WASH	15%	13%	Decreased
Other	10%	5%	Decreased

**Table 1. Proportion of “requirements” for Clusters, according to REACH calculation from Winter Response Plans.**

The Shelter activities for 2025/2026 focus on “personal insulation” (i.e. warm clothing and heating appliances), shelter insulation, and “winter heating” (i.e. solid fuel or utilities costs). The Water Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) cluster activity targets district heating companies.

The other clusters included in the 2025/2026 Winter Response Plan are Camp Coordination/Camp Management (in coordination with Shelter), Health, and Food Security & Livelihoods. Together, these make up the remaining 5% of required funding.

The continued centrality of SNFI activities is reflected in the growing proportion of funding which the activities require.

Amongst the NGO workers that REACH spoke with for this research, there were some different perspectives on how the planning changed. Some saw increases in funding, and others decreases. One described how they sought to expand their own organization, taking advantage of opportunities for localization of aid budgets. Others observed that processes for delivering aid changed from year to year, but that the basic objectives remained the same.

The NGO workers also observed that the design of their activities is strongly influenced by government legislation (particularly Resolution 985), Cluster recommendations and donor priorities.<sup>42</sup> This nexus was also recognized by local government workers.

For their part, local government workers REACH spoke with referred to a range of needs that are not strictly “winter response”, and yet they saw as important. These included road repairs, additional vehicles for healthcare or educational purposes, pre-positioned emergency repair materials, and development of water systems.

Some local government workers emphasized their leading role, coordinating humanitarian actors and identifying needs locally. Alongside the work of NGOs, they described their own efforts to provide

<sup>42</sup> Cabinet of Ministers, “[Деякі питання надання допомоги населенню на придбання твердого пічного побутового палива протягом опалювального сезону](#)”, trans. “Issues related to the provision of assistance to the population for the purchase of solid household heating fuel during the heating season”, August 2025

shelter repairs, insulation, access to solid fuel, and social work to meet the needs of the most vulnerable.

The overall humanitarian requirements for 2025 set out in the Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan were seriously underfunded, at 52% by year's end.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> OCHA, "[Humanitarian Situation, Response, and Funding Snapshot \(January – December 2025\)](#)", January 2026

## Operational context

*"[T]here are also a lot of people in need, the external situation has not improved, that is, it is just as difficult."*

- NGO interview

The design of humanitarian activities cannot be understood in a vacuum. Instead, changes in planning need to be understood against the backdrop of conflict and social geography. There are fundamental drivers of need in Ukraine. Low incomes, extreme weather, and the conflict itself, mean that need can remain relatively unchanged from year to year, despite governmental or non-governmental activities. In this context, needs and vulnerabilities do not change in a simple, linear way, but rather, dynamically.

The war touches every aspect of life, from interpersonal relations, to economics, to municipal infrastructure. These affect people's ability to manage stressors, whilst also affecting morale. The Protection Cluster's Annual Update for 2025 noted: "With no resolution on the horizon, Ukrainians continue to grapple with the enduring nature of the war. After years of exposure to conflict, violence and displacement, the capacity of ordinary Ukrainians to cope is showing noticeable signs of strain, as people continue to feel the physical, mental health, economic and social burden of the war".<sup>44</sup>

In this context, needs and vulnerabilities evolve not only because of positive changes like successful humanitarian interventions or effective policy reform, but also because of negative changes like rates of displacement or damage to infrastructure.

This is reflected in the viewpoints of NGO workers, some of whom argued strongly that their main objectives were to help people to survive during the winter, rather than to change the fundamental circumstances that drive need. Such changes are largely beyond the scope of the Winter Response programming.

Amongst the NGO workers that REACH spoke with, there was often a sense that needs were either staying the same or becoming more prevalent. There was also concern that the drive towards more targeted programming (after the earlier 'no regrets' strategy) meant that people who were judged "less vulnerable" were being missed.

Still, the viewpoints shared during the interviews suggest that there have been changes in people's coping strategies and calculus. One local government worker said they saw fewer requests for help compared to previous years, but they ambiguously suggested this was because people were relying on themselves. More often, local government workers described their perception that the public had become more prepared, as a result of the previous years' experiences. Two of these respondents pointed out that each household's level of readiness will differ. Income was often pointed to as a determinant of preparedness.

<sup>44</sup> Protection Cluster, "[Protection Analysis Update: No Quick End. The impact of the war on civilian protection in Ukraine](#)", September 2025, p. 3

### (a) The war persistently drives need whilst reducing coping capacity

*“Well, you know, no one makes plans now. Now there is one plan: work, earn a salary, and we will somehow cope. We are already accustomed to knowing how to save, to survive in these conditions. Somehow, we aren’t making plans now. It’s martial law, no one’s making any plans. We live one day at a time.”*

- Household interview

Across the interviews with residents, people often shared their perspective that they had already experienced very difficult times during the preceding years of war. This colored their attitudes towards the upcoming winter. Although it is beyond the scope of this assessment to explore in detail, people referred to harrowing, direct experiences of war, similar examples of which are documented elsewhere.<sup>45</sup>

The quotation at the beginning of this section typifies the ambivalent feelings that these experiences were causing. This ambivalence can be useful for thinking through the question of how winter needs and vulnerabilities have evolved over time.

On the one hand, people commented that they would be able to manage challenging circumstances during the winter, as they had already shown themselves able to “survive”. On the other hand, it meant that they felt that their lives were out of control. Rather than being able to make plans, they would rather take things one day at a time.

It is important to recognize that whilst “surviving” can have a positive sense, reflecting people’s ability to meet their own needs despite adversity, it only makes sense in the context of deprivation. The most fundamental driver of deprivation, and consequent need, is the war itself. As it enters its fifth year since the full-scale invasion, there is a sense that it is difficult to make long-term plans or changes.

One resident commented “[a]t the moment, there are no plans. Let the war end as soon as possible”.

Another observed:

*“[t]he biggest problem [I face] is that there is no improvement! Well, in principle, I understand why it got so bad! And that there is no point, saying, ‘there is an omega [i.e. an end point] that we will reach’, and after that, there will be an improvement!”*

- Household interview

This ambivalence may also be an important factor when it comes to understanding people’s propensity to become displaced in response to winter strains, as the decision to leave involves weighing the costs and benefits of waiting in place.

<sup>45</sup> For example, see the reports of the [United Nations Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine](#)

## (b) Dangerous conditions and difficult access

*“Humanitarian problems - well, let's put it this way, [...] there are a number of settlements that are closer to the border, they are constantly attacked by FPV drones and, accordingly, since this significantly complicates the possibility of access there for both NGOs themselves and in general any pharmacies, post offices, ambulances, respectively, these are settlements in which there is practically a large humanitarian crisis.”*

– NGO interview

Living and working conditions in Ukraine are difficult, especially closer to the frontline. NGO workers REACH spoke to brought this up as a specific constraint on their ability to meet the public’s winter-related needs.

This is long-term. Humanitarian access has been “deteriorating”, according to ACAPS. Their monitoring for April to August 2025 attributed this to “shifts in the front line, continued attacks on humanitarian responders, and disruptions to basic services”.<sup>46</sup> ACAPS found that “access in frontline oblasts remained challenging” by September to December 2025.<sup>47</sup> The United Nations Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine has reported that 2025 was the “deadliest year for civilians in Ukraine since 2022”.<sup>48</sup> They also describe the situation as deteriorating.

In this context, it becomes harder for humanitarians or government to support people in need. The dangerous conditions also restructure the workforce, with noticeable gaps in roles across sectors like healthcare, social services, manual work and technical work. This further affects society’s capacity to manage difficult conditions during winter.<sup>49</sup>

## (c) Freezing weather

Ukraine experiences consistently cold winter temperatures, with year-to-year variability, creating recurring winter-related needs.<sup>50</sup> Even in peacetime, households differ in their ability to meet these needs.

Globally, climate change means that average temperatures are rising and weather is becoming more unpredictable.<sup>51</sup> <sup>52</sup> This is also the case in Ukraine, where winter weather has been relatively mild since 2022. There has been heavy snow and ice, but not to the depths of previous years. Still, as analysis of satellite data indicates, there is cyclicity.<sup>53</sup> Some years are considerably colder than the previous ones.

The current winter is an example. In January 2026, Ukraine faced weeks of temperatures below zero degrees Celsius, and lows close to -20 degrees Celsius. The damage to the electricity grid and district

<sup>46</sup> ACAPS, “[Ukraine: May–August 2025 humanitarian access update](#)”, September 2025

<sup>47</sup> ACAPS, “[Ukraine: September–December 2025 humanitarian access update](#)”, February 2026

<sup>48</sup> UNHRMMU, “[2025 deadliest year for civilians in Ukraine since 2022. UN human rights monitors find](#)”, January 2026

<sup>49</sup> REACH, “[Emergency Livelihoods Profiling In Frontline Areas](#)”, January 2026, p. 13

<sup>50</sup> REACH, “[Cold Spot Risk Assessment 2025/2026](#)”, May 2025

<sup>51</sup> United Nations, “What is climate Change?”, accessed 26<sup>th</sup> January 2026

<sup>52</sup> S. G. Boychenko and N. M. Maidanovych, “[Unraveling seasonal air temperature trends in Ukraine \(1990 – 2021\)](#)”, June 2025

<sup>53</sup> Texty, “[Як в Україні зникає сніг?](#)”, trans. “Where has Ukraine’s snow gone?”, April 2025

heating systems across Ukraine meant that people were exposed to these temperatures, with the need for emergency support.<sup>54</sup> Conditions were comparable to the “worst-case scenario” outlined by the industrial think tank, DiXi Group.<sup>55</sup>

The weather in a given winter will contribute to the overall crisis pressures that are brought to bear on society. For example, the relatively mild winter in 2024/2025 was considered to be a mitigating factor that helped to stave off the projected risk of power outages.<sup>56</sup> By contrast, a colder than average winter would see energy use spike to potentially unmanageable levels, as well as causing logistical problems such as snapped electricity cables and transport disruptions. The state’s capacity to respond is strained by the mounting and cumulative damage and limited financial capacity.

Even without war, Ukrainian society needs to be resilient to cold weather. However, the war introduces serious additional strains. For example, utilities workers need to factor in the risk of coming under fire whilst conducting repair work.<sup>57</sup> <sup>58</sup> Attacks amidst the harsh conditions during the winter of 2025-2026 have prompted aid organisations to issue public statements which link the war and the weather.<sup>59</sup> <sup>60</sup> <sup>61</sup>

#### (d) Chronic power outages

*“Well, you see, everything in our country is tied to electricity, everything. Water, sewerage, heat, everything we have is electrical. And if the enemy hits the energy infrastructure, we feel it, and we can have four, six, eight hours without electricity and sit like that”*

– Local government interview

Power outages are both an acute driver of need, and a long-term drag on resilience.

Effects can quickly cascade, immediately affecting heating and access to water. In the event of prolonged or repeated outages, such as Ukraine has experienced already from October 2025 to January 2026, there is a serious strain on infrastructure.

Generators mitigate emergency outages in hospitals, water pumping stations, telecommunications base stations and schools, but are subject to wear and costly to run.<sup>62</sup> At the same time, hundreds or even hundreds of thousands of people can become affected without warning. In this case, people may become vulnerable even though they would normally not be considered amongst a “people in need” calculation. People who are already vulnerable are put into an even more dangerous situation.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>54</sup> Kyiv Independent, [“The situation now is the worst’ – Kyiv’s energy crisis deepens after Russia pounds power grid”](#), January 2026

<sup>55</sup> DiXi Group, [“Winter Outlook 2025. Electricity”](#), December 2025

<sup>56</sup> REACH, [Cold Spot Risk Assessment 2025/2026](#), May 2025

<sup>57</sup> Ukrinform, [“Russian drone attacks car belonging to energy workers in Sumy region”](#), October 2025

<sup>58</sup> Kyiv Independent, [“‘They don’t consider their work heroic’ — 4 energy workers die amid Kyiv repairs following Russian attacks”](#), January 2026

<sup>59</sup> UNICEF, [“Under fire and freezing, children in Ukraine endure the harshest winter of war”](#), January 2026

<sup>60</sup> World Vision, [“Ukraine Energy Emergency: Civilians Shiver in -20 ° Without Heat or Power”](#), January 2026

<sup>61</sup> Oxfam, [“Turning winter into a weapon: Oxfam warns of deadly impact of attacks on Ukraine’s energy system”](#), January 2026

<sup>62</sup> REACH, [“Winter Power Outages: The consequences of power outages, and factors contributing to societal resilience”](#), November 2025

<sup>63</sup> Medecins Sans Frontieres, [“Surviving the cold without electricity in Ukraine”](#), January 2026

The people REACH spoke to were already very familiar with the consequences of power outages, after experiences from the autumn of 2022, summer of 2024, and ongoing localized disconnections after air strikes affected distribution networks. People do not respond uniformly to power outages. Some of the residents said they would consider leaving if there was a particularly difficult power outage. However, just as many said they had not made any plan. A few even stated that they would prefer to stay in their homes.

### (e) Low incomes

REACH has produced detailed analysis of economic conditions and the labour market. In data spanning from February 2022 to February 2025, REACH found that “despite some improvements since 2022—including signs of industrial recovery, positive macroeconomic trends (lower inflation, GDP growth), and increases in the subsistence minimum and average salary—significant challenges remain”.<sup>64</sup>

Job seekers reported lower incomes, greater dependence on unstable income sources, and increased barriers to employment. Closer to the frontline, the situation can be even more challenging, with less industrial recovery.<sup>65</sup> Nationwide surveying indicates widespread livelihoods challenges.<sup>66</sup> Inflation persisted at a high-level throughout 2025, eroding household purchasing power.

As of January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2026, the minimum wage is 52 UAH per hour, and 8,647 per month – equivalent to \$1.20 and \$200.<sup>67</sup> The State Statistical Service of Ukraine reported that the average income in October 2025 was 26,913 UAH, around \$624.<sup>68</sup>

In general, the people that REACH spoke to for the present assessment said that they were spending all of their income each month, without the ability to save. The level of precarity people experienced varied. Some people were able to manage, whilst others appeared to be put in a vulnerable situation by their household budget. Several participants said they were relying on a credit card, including still paying off purchases or utilities bills from the previous year.

REACH’s 2025 Multi Sector Needs Assessment found that 47% of households had ‘livelihoods’ need across Ukraine.<sup>69</sup> The assessment highlighted that it was common for SNFI, WASH and Health needs to co-occur with livelihoods needs, with “livelihoods challenges show[ing] clear spillover effects across multiple sectors, shaping the combined needs households experienced”. This means that people may need to make trade-offs to at least partially meet their needs.

More acutely, the MSNA found that “almost one quarter (24%) of households were classified as in need due to earning monthly per capita incomes below the average cost of the food basket as defined by the [Ministry of Social Policy]”.

<sup>64</sup> REACH, “[Impact of the War on Socioeconomic Dynamics and Labour Market in Ukraine: The case of Southern regions \(Mykolaivka and Odeska oblasts\)](#)”, April 2025

<sup>65</sup> REACH, “[Emergency Livelihoods Programming In Frontline Areas](#)”, January 2026, pp. 23 - 29

<sup>66</sup> REACH, “[2025 Multi-Sector Needs Assessment \(MSNA\): Overview of humanitarian needs in Ukraine](#)”, December 2025

<sup>67</sup> Law of Ukraine, “Про Державний бюджет України на 2026 рік”, trans. “[On the State Budget of Ukraine for 2026](#)”, Article 8

<sup>68</sup> State Statistical Service of Ukraine, [facebook post](#), December 2025, accessed 23 January 2026

<sup>69</sup> REACH, “[2025 Multi-Sector Needs Assessment \(MSNA\): Overview of humanitarian needs in Ukraine](#)”, December 2025

In their post-distribution monitoring for the previous winter, the DRC reported that “cash assistance was quickly spent”. This further supports the idea that people receiving assistance are living on very marginal levels of income relative to expenses. The DRC highlighted that some participants were deliberating between spending cash on medicines, food, gas or electricity, rather than on the intended solid-fuel purchase.<sup>70</sup>

This points to a prevalent experience of financial hardship, which affects people’s ability to meet their needs. Although this will affect all aspects of a household’s decision making, a few issues stand out as particularly relevant when considering winter needs, discussed in the following section. Further information about household income can be found in other qualitative research REACH has produced, documenting limited opportunities for earning income in frontline communities.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Danish Refugee Council, “[Ukraine Winterisation Needs Assessment Winter 2025 – 2026](#)”, July 2025, pp. 13 & 28

<sup>71</sup> REACH, “[Emergency Livelihoods Programming In Frontline Areas](#)”, January 2026, pp. 23 - 29

## Lived experience of winter during wartime

### (f) Household preparations for the winter

Although residents REACH spoke to referred to feeling unable to make plans or predictions about the future, they nevertheless also reported various preparations that they had made for the winter.

Some of these preparations were regular seasonal activities, some were made for the first time, and others were long-lasting preparations made in previous years. For different households, the same preparation could fit into any of those categories. People have continued to report lacking essentials, whether they are displaced, returnees, or have remained in place.<sup>72</sup>

As will be seen throughout the discussion, the issue of affordability and cost came up repeatedly. Discussions with residents, aid workers and government suggest that people struggle to meet their needs because of insufficient incomes. As well as problems with balancing different financial pressures, people's social networks also appear to be an important factor when it comes to managing the stressors of winter. These factors are aggravated by the conflict itself.

#### (i) Household insulation

People's differing steps to insulate their home give an example of the interaction between financial and social factors. Typically, insulation involves work like mounting insulating foam, sealing gaps, or replacing windows and doors.

However, as will be discussed further, the ability to make these preparations was limited by people's household finances. For example, one participant commented that whilst they had made changes to their windows, they weren't able to do anything for the walls. When asked about this, they said, "I explained to you why. Because of financial issues."

Apparently because of affordability issues, some of the participants described housing insulation as a work in progress. One resident said that they had "started but not yet completed" window and door replacement whilst another said that the cost of replacing the windows meant they couldn't afford to do the same for doors. Others mentioned work that they had started before 2022 but not been able to complete.

Still, others did refer to insulation work that had been finished in previous years. As a long-term structural change to the property, this was still conferring a benefit now.

There was also an apparent difference between apartments and stand-alone houses. Some of the people who were relatively satisfied by their home's energy efficiency explained that they were living in an apartment block. They said that they benefited from the heat in other apartments, especially if they were in the middle of the block. By contrast, one person living in a private house explained, "the house is large, not insulated. While we are heating, it is warm. It stops heating, the house cools down".

<sup>72</sup> IOM, "Winterization in Ukraine: Housing, Utilities, Mobility and Needs", December 2024

Still, apartment blocks can also pose problems of their own. One problem is building damage. At least one respondent was living in an apartment block that had been hit in an air strike. Whilst their own apartment was habitable, there was damage to the building. This would seriously compromise the insulation.

Another more quotidian problem is to do with the overall management of the building. One participant explained that whilst they had insulated their own apartment, they would need permission to make changes to the rest of the building. There are documented “housing, land and property” problems with the repair and improvement of multi-story buildings.<sup>73</sup> In general, it can be unclear who is responsible for common areas, which becomes an impediment to action.

Aside from the type of building, the basis of occupancy can be important. Renting your home can be an obstacle to making repairs or improvements. People REACH spoke to variously explained that they either could not get permission to make changes, or were not willing to invest in a property they didn’t own. Renting is becoming increasingly common in Ukraine, particularly amongst displaced people, but the responsibilities of landlords can be unclear.<sup>74</sup>

## (ii) Stockpiling solid fuel

*“We needed, for example, we buy, not one truckload, but two truckloads of firewood. Then we collect one, for example, in the summer, and for the second, we take - for example - a loan, and then we pay it off.”*

– Household interview

Apart from insulating the house, people referred to having solid fuel in store. Of course, this is only relevant for households where it is possible to burn wood. Ordinarily, this would not be a choice for most people living in apartments or other types of accommodation that are not fitted with solid fuel burners.

In general, people referred to buying well ahead of time, so that they had the fuel in store before the start of the cold weather. However, as with housing insulation, there were some cases where people referred to buying in stages or being constrained by their finances.

Aside from buying wood from a vendor, there are various less-formal ways to obtain solid fuel. Humanitarian guidelines and post-distribution assessments acknowledge that the informal wood economy can have negative ecological impacts.<sup>75</sup> This is certainly a risk, and it is important to recognize the long-term consequences of irresponsible exploitation of natural resources.

However, the people REACH spoke to described benefiting from obtaining wood informally. Some participants described proactively going around to neighbors to collect pruned branches from orchards, or scavenging waste wood such as from old fencing. At least one participant said that they collected branches from a nearby forest. No participant directly talked about the provenance of the wood they bought, so it is not possible to make any observations about how vendors were sourcing.

<sup>73</sup> REACH, “[Enablers and barriers in access to repair and compensation for housing damaged by war](#)”, May 2025, p. 15

<sup>74</sup> CEDOS, “[Rental Housing in Ukraine: Current State and Challenges](#)”, October 2025

<sup>75</sup> Shelter Cluster, “[Winterization 2024 – 2025 lessons learned](#)”, June 2025, pp. 16 - 17

Although some participants said they were collecting wood informally, it was described warily. Others said they did not do this at all, and only bought wood. Some participants reasoned that it could be illegal or dangerous to collect wood in this way. Displacement can also be a factor which affects the social capital needed to collect wood informally. One participant explained that because they were displaced, they didn't own tools or know where they could go locally to collect wood.

These methods are informal and difficult to capture in structured humanitarian activities. Still, it is important to recognize that informally sourcing firewood can be a part of rural life which allows people to at least partially meet their needs. In some cases, it is dangerous or harmful to the environment, but it is also a normal aspect of arboriculture and cooperation.

### (g) Strategies for heating the home

*"The type of heating is both gas and wood. We try to heat with wood, because gas is expensive."*

- Household interview

*"When there was no [district] heating, the heating was not turned on, we used heaters – electric heaters."*

- Household interview

In Ukraine, it is common for households – especially in urban areas – to be heated passively by a municipal district heating system. In this case, the household does not decide when the heating comes on or off.

However, whether or not they use district heating, a household may also have more active heating. For example, using a boiler or electric radiators. Households may also use a combination of active heating methods, such as balancing use of a wood burning stove and a gas-fired boiler. They may use small space heaters as a backup, or to heat only one room.

Source	Proportion of households, nationally
District heating	47%
Gas	29%
Wood, coal or briquettes	18%
Electricity	5%
Do not know	1%
No heating	0%
Prefer not to answer	0%

**Table 2. Data from REACH's MSNA 2025, "Households by main heating source in 2024-2025 winter season" (95% confidence level, +/- 9% margin of error)**

A household can decide on which heating methods to use based on a range of practical considerations.

One issue that came up often in REACH’s interviews was the relative cost of different fuels. It appeared that where people were able to make the choice, solid fuel was seen as more affordable. In contrast, both gas and electricity were described as expensive.

It is important to remark that, although consumers perceive prices to be high, the Ukrainian consumer energy market is regulated, with households paying subsidized prices.<sup>76</sup> These are currently set until April 2026, with preferential electricity tariffs for household consumers who only have electric heating. However, Ukraine’s wider reform program indicates that this approach will not continue indefinitely. This raises questions for affordability in the next winter.

Another consideration can be how a heating system works during a power outage. A gas boiler may not be effective during a power cut, if the hot water needs to be pumped through the radiators. By contrast, a wood burning stove does not rely on electricity so offers considerable advantages.

### (h) Affordability and poverty

*“On heating, so that you understand, we sleep clothed, and we try to use less gas to buy groceries. Well, I save a lot, and we go dressed in the apartment, and sleep dressed under two blankets, because our gas bill is huge, we pay a lot. [...] And what would I use if I had money and funds? Of course, I would use everything. I would insulate, make repairs and everything. [...] I am constantly worried that I will not be able to pay for this gas, and if you do not pay for the gas in full, it may be turned off, or...”*

- Household interview

The relative costs of different heating methods and fuels is a useful entry point into the wider issue of affordability. The people REACH interviewed gave various examples of living with tight household budgets. A household’s financial breathing room is an important factor in their ability to manage their needs or withstand crises.

### (i) Household heating

As already mentioned above, the people REACH spoke with described having to make budgeting decisions on household basics and essentials. Participants did refer to making decisions to leave off the heating in order to save money.

By the time of the interviews in early December 2025, people were still saying that they were putting off turning on their heating, and rather were wearing heavy layers of clothing in the house. To a degree, this was seen as normal behavior. Participants made ironic references to other people who were wealthy enough not to need to dress warmly in the home.

<sup>76</sup> Razumkov Centre, “[огляд Роботи Енергетичного Сектору В Листопаді 2025 р.](#)”, trans. “Review of the energy sector in November 2025”, December 2025, pp. 6 - 7

However, in practice, people also acknowledged there were limits to their willingness to withstand cold temperatures. One participant explained that they would reflect “that according to the forecast, tomorrow should get warmer. So you think, okay, one day at a time, we can somehow endure it.” But, the same person also said that from as early as September or October the weather could be cold enough for this to be impractical.

Some people made estimates for the outside temperatures that would cause them to consider putting the heating on. Though this qualitative information cannot be generalized, respondents mentioned temperatures in a range between around 5 and 15 degrees Celsius. This is similar to the trigger for the start of Ukraine’s “official” heating season at 8 degrees, although it was clear that people’s judgements were quite subjective. In any case, it is well above the temperatures that Ukraine experienced in January 2026, which were below 0 degrees Celsius and falling to -20 degrees Celsius.

In reality, then, it is very difficult for people to economise on heating costs, as temperatures can be intolerable from the autumn through to the spring. This can mean having to make other trade-offs.

## (ii) Medicine

Another household cost which was discussed rather prominently was medicine. Although medicines are not necessarily a winter need in themselves, when people brought up healthcare costs they usually suggested that they could not be avoided. This suggests that one of the pressures being brought to bear on household resilience is the tension between different essentials.

Some of the respondents who brought up unavoidable medical costs said that they had chronic illnesses or disabilities which required treatment. In particular, people referred to being cancer patients, managing diabetes, or otherwise living with a disability.

In principle, there should be support for people to manage the costs of medicines.<sup>77</sup> However, there are indications that this is not the case in practice. REACH’s 2025 MSNA found that “the most commonly adopted crisis strategy was reducing essential health expenditures, reported by roughly a third of households nationwide”.

Another multi-sectoral needs assessment, produced by the International Rescue Committee from September to October 2025, also found prevalent stresses on access to medicines.<sup>78</sup> Amongst their non-representative survey of households, 53% reported not being able to “afford prescribed medications”. This was “despite 73% being aware of the government ‘affordable medicines’ program”.

The IRC research points to “inadequate coverage of essential medicines” and “absence of participating pharmacies in rural and hard to reach settlements” as barriers.

This is an example of a need which exists year-round, but exacerbates other stresses during the winter, when different costs come into tension with each other.

<sup>77</sup> Ministry of Health of Ukraine, “[All pharmacies to join the Affordable Medicines program in 2025: Government’s decision](#)”, December 2024

<sup>78</sup> International Rescue Committee, “[Multisectoral Needs Assessment Report 2025](#)”, December 2025

**(iii) Other trade-offs**

*"If I'm honest - I haven't seen products that are getting cheaper every day! [...] It's the same with firewood."*

- Household interview

*"I don't have the money to buy it. And I, you understand what the situation is, I won't buy a generator for my salary."*

- Household interview

People's ability to cover their essential costs during winter needs to be understood in the round.

Ukraine has been facing high inflation, with the Consumer Price Index above 10% throughout much of 2025, though slowing towards the end of the year.<sup>79 80 81</sup> In this context, participants said that their incomes were not keeping pace with prices. They judged this to include the price of solid fuel, which several participants estimated had increased from the previous year.

The cost of food was also referred to. Whilst this is not something which humanitarians target directly in the Winter Response Plan, the cost of basics like food is another example of a pressure on people's overall resilience and need in the midst of winter.

**(i) Inadequate insulation**

*"If the electricity cuts out, the cold in our apartment is immediately terrible. [...] probably due to the fact that it is not very warm in the house, the mold is blooming on the walls and the wallpaper has blackened."*

- Household interview

*"Yes, depending on what the weather is outside, if it is very cold, then I think that [the temperature in the house] will cool very quickly. If it is not too cold, then it can still be preserved for two hours!"*

- Household interview

A rounded view also needs to be taken when considering the likelihood that someone's house is well-insulated. A well-insulated house is important, because it is cheaper and easier to heat to a safe level. A cold house can become dangerous to live in, both because people suffer from exposure and because it causes mold.

<sup>79</sup> National Bank of Ukraine, "[October 2025 Inflation Update](#)"

<sup>80</sup> National Bank of Ukraine, "[November 2025 Inflation Update](#)"

<sup>81</sup> National Bank of Ukraine, "[December 2025 Inflation Update](#)"

The people REACH spoke to described living in energy-inefficient houses, though the degree varied. As described above, some said that they had insulated their houses to a satisfactory level in the past and were benefiting from it. Some had been able to make some changes, but saw the work as incomplete. Others were not able to make changes at all.

Unsurprisingly, there appeared to be a pattern where people who said their house retained the heat satisfactorily also said that their house was insulated. Affordability appeared to be an important factor.

As an example, one of the people who seemed to be relatively satisfied by their house's insulation also reported that they "can afford most things without too much trouble" in a multiple choice question about their household budgeting. By contrast, people who said they couldn't improve the insulation of their home often mentioned lacking the money to do so.

Aside from affordability, another issue may be for people whose homes have been damaged. Whilst there are a range of pathways for arranging repairs, the specific activities may be limited. For example, the windows may be replaced, but without the final stage of adding a slope. One resident REACH spoke to said that this had happened to them. The costs and logistics of housing repairs mean that people may go into the winter without the full repair work completed.

It should also be observed that, no matter how well insulated a house is, it will become cold if the heating has cut out. This was the case for many people this winter.

## Resilience and coping

### (j) Aid

#### (i) Perceptions of aid delivery

Interviewer: *And when [did you receive the aid]? This year?*

Respondent: *This year, probably, somewhere in July, in August, there were mattresses, there were blankets! And at the beginning of the year, I think, they gave us a sleeping bag from the social department!*

Interviewer: *I got it! Do you think that all this help was appropriate?*

Respondent: *I think so – of course! It helps, especially - the latest hygiene kits, just right, it is very... That is, I no longer spend these funds on household products, I can spend these funds on the children, on their food, on their clothes. Therefore, of course, this is a great support for such families!*

- Household interview

Interviewer: *I understand what you mean. That is, the assistance consisted of the fact that you were simply transferred funds to pay for utilities.*

Respondent: *Yes. For heating.*

Interviewer: *I got it. Do you think this help was appropriate for you?*

Respondent: *It was – very appropriate.*

- Household interview

The people REACH spoke with had a range of experiences with receipt of humanitarian aid. Some had very positive experiences which they said addressed their immediate problems. Others were frustrated by what they received, and others still said they had not been the recipient of any kind of aid despite apparently being in need.

Even amongst people who had received aid, the details of what was given, when, and by whom could often be rather imprecise. In some cases, people referred to a specific organization by name, and in others they used more general terms. It also appeared to be the case that there was little differentiation in people's minds between UN and grassroots aid, winter and non-winter aid, or governmental and non-governmental support.

Similarly, whilst people REACH spoke to appeared to be familiar with the provision of assistance at the household level, there appeared to be limited awareness of more structural activities like those of the WASH, Health or FSL clusters. This means that it is not possible to draw precise conclusions about specific activities. It also reflects that, for the household, living through winter isn't a distinct process so much as a continuous part of life.

In general, it appeared that aid was seen as part of the bigger picture of a household budget – whether it was provided as cash assistance or in-kind. This recalls longstanding observations about the appropriateness of cash assistance.<sup>82 83</sup>

Both cash and in-kind assistance appeared to be satisfactory to the people who received them. This is in line with findings from the Shelter Cluster, and from other “post-distribution monitoring” reports which REACH has seen from previous winters.<sup>84</sup>

For example, the Danish Refugee Council reported that 99% of households in their post-distribution monitoring for 2024/2025 reported that the assistance they were provided helped to improve thermal and heating comfort for their household during the winter season.<sup>85</sup> 93% of the households reported a preference for cash, though the DRC also found that in-kind assistance can be appropriate.

Concerns have been documented about the relevance of cash where the local market is not working, and in general it seems to be agreed that there will always need to be a mix of cash and in-kind programming.<sup>86 87</sup>

## (ii) Differing experiences of applying for and receiving support

*“Yes, because all the money that was there was invested in firewood, but we need to add a little more. I hope that this is enough for us to survive the winter, that is, we hoped for exactly that money.”*

- Household interview

*“My husband applied but has not yet received it! For now we have it confirmed - we do not know whether they will give it or not!? We left an application for solid fuel, so that, well, - they would allocate funds, but so far nothing has been confirmed to us, we have not been allocated!”*

- Household interview

In general, people who said they had received aid also said that they were happy with what they had received. Similarly, the local government workers REACH spoke with generally made positive comments about their partnerships with, or support from, NGOs and donors. This was both for household- and systems-level activities.

Whilst there appeared to be satisfaction with the aid that people did receive, not everyone REACH spoke with had received what they had hoped for. Amongst these people, there were various viewpoints about why they had not received aid. Some said they had not been found eligible, whilst others said they believed they were still on a waiting list. Monitoring from previous winter responses

<sup>82</sup> Overseas Development Institute, [“Doing cash differently: How cash transfers can transform humanitarian aid”](#), September 2015

<sup>83</sup> Overseas Development Institute, [“Make aid go further – give cash first in crises”](#), September 2025

<sup>84</sup> UNHCR, [“Winter Response 2024-2025 Post Distribution Monitoring Key Findings”](#), August 2025

<sup>85</sup> Danish Refugee Council, [“Ukraine Winterisation Needs Assessment Winter 2025 – 2026”](#), July 2025

<sup>86</sup> Shelter Cluster, [“Krasnokutsk, Derhachi, Chuhuiv Winterization Monitoring Mission”](#), January 2025

<sup>87</sup> Norwegian Refugee Council, [“Winterization Market and Needs Assessment: September 2024 Open Application”](#), March 2025

indicates that there can be consequential miscommunications about what can be expected, leading to people either waiting too long, or deciding to spend money despite eventually also receiving aid.<sup>88</sup>

Amongst local government workers, NGO workers and residents, participants were often clear that they saw the local authority as a key coordinator of aid. People described a process where a “charitable organisation” notifies the local authority that there is a plan to distribute some aid, after which the local authority then sends a message to the community. As one resident put it, “something was issued, but also by a certain period – whoever saw the message, he had time!”. Some residents said that they were on a waiting list for aid, or that they had completed some kind of paperwork that they believed was still being assessed.

One resident explained their experience like this:

*“We filled out questionnaires, first in the city executive committee, and then in the department of social protection of the population. They came to us, took pictures, looked at what we have, what conditions we have, how we live. At first, they were from Terekhov [i.e. the mayor of Kharkiv’s office], then from the district executive committee, this year the district executive committee did not deal with it, the department of social protection of the population was involved, and they said that some international fund [i.e. an NGO] would give you assistance. We agree, of course, we agree, to any of this help.”*

- Household interview

### (iii) Formal structure of the humanitarian-governmental partnership

For the 2025/2026 “heating season”, the solid-fuel assistance provided through governmental/non-governmental partnership was stipulated in Resolution 985.<sup>89</sup> The legislation defines “one-time financial assistance for the purchase of solid domestic heating fuel [...] at the expense of the Office for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in Ukraine and other humanitarian organizations”.

The legislation defines a geographic scope, and specifies both “vulnerable categories” and an order of priority in which they should be targeted. This is done on a three-tier system. The first tier consists of households with people who have multiple vulnerable characteristics, whilst the second tier is for people with one vulnerable characteristic. The third tier is specified for households who have a self-declared vulnerable characteristic or do not have such characteristics.

There were some concerns about the design and implementation of the legislation. NGOs have mentioned finding that they have differing approaches to the assessment of need, in comparison to government. This question appeared to be unresolved during the operational period.

The timeframes for registration were also rather tight. The law was passed on the 13th August 2025, and specified that the public should apply by the 24th August. There is a provision for appeal against

<sup>88</sup> Shelter Cluster, “[Donetska Oblast Shelter Cluster Solid Fuel Monitoring Visits Report](#)”, March 2025

<sup>89</sup> Cabinet of Ministers, “[Деякі питання надання допомоги населенню на придбання твердого пального побутового палива протягом опалювального сезону](#)”, trans. “Issues related to the provision of assistance to the population for the purchase of solid household heating fuel during the heating season”, August 2025

the decision, but with the same deadline of the 24th August. After this, it was mandated that the local authority would communicate with the oblast authority between the 25th August and 28th October.

Aside from the assistance stipulated in Resolution 985, there are a wide range of activities being implemented across Ukraine, by a diverse set of actors.

From the perspective of an individual, this can be complicated to navigate. There were people who said that they had received one kind of aid (for example, some warm clothing), but not another kind of aid like cash for utilities. Implicitly, people may perceive their interactions with government and humanitarian organisations as part of a larger process, when in fact each organisation can be agnostic of the support an individual has previously received for different activities across sectors and paradigms.

Other REACH research has noted that the use of “lists” can create social tension, when it is perceived that selection criteria were too narrow.<sup>90</sup> A similar idea is discussed in the DRC’s post-distribution monitoring for 2024/2025, suggesting this requires further attention.<sup>91</sup>

During the final analysis of the winter response, it would be valuable to obtain an official summary of the reach across the tiers. This could be compared with humanitarian assessments and post-distribution data. This approach has already been modelled in intra-cluster analyses.<sup>92</sup>

#### (iv) Other modalities

REACH’s interviews suggest that solid-fuel, cash for utilities, household insulation and personal insulation are recognised by the public as the primary activities in winter, provided through a partnership between governmental and non-governmental organisations.

However, people’s reflections and anecdotes indicate that they also recognise a range of other formal and informal assistance modalities which support them during the winter.

For example, one person described how they stayed at a neighbour’s house to keep warm, and benefited from freely distributed food from a school canteen.

There were also a few references to the “winter thousand”, a one-off, quasi-unconditional payment of 1000 UAH (approximately \$23) provided without means testing.<sup>93</sup> Although it is a relatively small payment, one participant described how he used it in a pharmacy to buy some medicine and first aid equipment, which he estimated at 815 UAH. This has reportedly been distributed to more than 17 million people.<sup>94</sup>

<sup>90</sup> REACH, “[Emergency Livelihoods Profiling In Frontline Areas](#)”, January 2026, p. 20

<sup>91</sup> Danish Refugee Council, “[Ukraine Winterisation Needs Assessment Winter 2025 – 2026](#)”, July 2025

<sup>92</sup> Shelter Cluster, “[Zaporizka Cluster Meeting Presentation](#)”, December 2025, slide 6

<sup>93</sup> Ministry of Social Policy, “[‘Winter thousand’ payments continue — almost 14 million Ukrainians received assistance](#)”, December 2025

<sup>94</sup> *Economichna Pravda*, “[‘Тисяча’ Зимової допомоги: українці вже витратили понад 11 мільярдів отриманих коштів](#)”, trans. “The ‘Thousand’ Winter Aid: Ukrainians have already spent more than 11 billion received funds”, January 2026

It was also observed that people’s knowledge of different services affects their access, and consequently their resilience. One local government worker explained:

*“Over these four years, people have become even more resilient. And what helps them to be like this? [...]*

*The work is arranged in such a way that there are a lot of information resources where people draw information and see what is being done and how it is done [...] Then, various activities are carried out to support certain segments of the population that need state and other support.*

*What am I talking about? If a person is of a certain category, then he may not have time to apply to social security or another structure and check his right to either a benefit, a subsidy, or an allowance. And we find a lot of such people.*

*This is also a certain support for them. If a person receives a benefit or subsidy, it means that he saves a bit of money, with this money he can improve his life for himself.”*

- Local government interview

### (k) Social networks

*“Honestly, I don't even know. Probably, to go somewhere. And where to go? I have no relatives anywhere. I can't even imagine what I would do. Living in a cold apartment is impossible. There are probably no shelters now, so that people can go and live somehow. Well, I can't imagine. I don't know what I would do, honestly.”*

- Household interview

*“I have friends, yes. Of course. Since 2022, I never knew so many people before, as now. We met both at humanitarian aid points, and around. In short, we met. So: I have a lot of friends in my area. We support each other, talk.”*

- Household interview

Aside from household income, people’s social and familial networks are likely an important determinant of their overall resilience and need. Although all the residents REACH spoke with described having difficult experiences, the ways in which they described these challenges appeared to vary with their sense of connection to a wider community.

Millions of people have been displaced since 2022.<sup>95</sup> This has inevitably broken up social networks. In some cases, people have been able to develop new connections. In others, old relationships have been strained and there is a sense that it is not possible to turn to them for help. The quotations at the top

<sup>95</sup> International Organisation for Migration, [“Internal Displacement Report – General Population Survey Round 22”](#), January 2026

of this section reflect these different experiences. People’s relationship with the state has also been colored by their diverse experiences.<sup>96</sup>

Some of the people REACH spoke with stated very clearly that they felt they were alone. These people often had pessimistic outlooks on the winter. For example, they said they did not have anywhere else they could go, or that they did not believe they would receive help from the state. They also suggested that they could not ask for help from relatives, because those people were also under strain.

Not all of the participants described these feelings of being alone. Rather, others talked about a wide range of people or institutions that they would turn to for different kinds of support. Even some of the people that felt unsupported did refer to the local government as a source of support in general. For those who had a social network to rely on, they often referred to a combination of family, friends and local government.

The help that could be expected from the local government of course depends on whether a person is living in a city or rurally.

For people who live in rural areas, the Starostat is often a very important figure. Both in this project and previous REACH research, people often spontaneously referred to these local government representatives as sources of support who can proactively find solutions or offer leadership.<sup>97</sup> The Starostat offers a highly personalized connection between the individual and the state for people who live rurally.

For people living in cities, telephone hotlines offer a similar link to local government. In Kharkiv in particular, people referred spontaneously to the ‘1562’ hotline. Similarly, this was brought up in previous REACH research, suggesting it is well-regarded as a source of information and support.<sup>98</sup>

As will be discussed below, people also regard a wide range of both official and unofficial Telegram or Viber channels as useful sources of information about their local area.

## (I) Communication with the public

*“The phone is always in your hands. The phone is charged. In our country, even if there are any air strikes, I have an invincibility point nearby. There you can go and charge the phone. The phone is always in your hands, in touch with administrative groups, in touch with everyone. You can ask if there is no water, then when will there be water. If there is no electricity...”*

- Household interview

Communication is an important part of the public’s experience of assistance. Clear communication enables people to know what is going on, make informed decisions, and find assistance which is appropriate to their needs. Unclear or incomplete information risks exacerbating inequality.

<sup>96</sup> Centre for Sustainable Peace and Democratic Development, [“State-Citizen Unity in Ukraine”](#), 2025

<sup>97</sup> REACH, [“The consequences of power outages, and factors contributing to social resilience”](#), October 2025, p. 5

<sup>98</sup> REACH, [“Addressing Infrastructure Damage and Services Disruptions Ahead of the Winter 2024/25”](#), October 2024, pp 13, 15 & 17

The people that REACH spoke with made spontaneous references to information from a range of sources, but the Telegram and Viber smartphone apps were particularly prominent.

On these apps, there are a variety of official and unofficial public “channels”, where information is broadcast. It’s important to note that unofficial channels can be just as important. Some participants referred to hyper-local channels, such as “Konotop’s voice”.

Such channels can have a very strong sense of local identity, which makes their messaging more powerful. This can be a strength when valuable information is being accurately disseminated, though there is also a risk of misinformation being spread. Whilst these channels are useful for the people who are in them, anyone who is not a member will be at risk of missing out on information.

As well as Telegram and Viber channels, people appear to turn to their local government websites. These have the potential to reach a wider audience, more equitably. There are minimum expectations for the information which should be provided. However, research indicates that in practice, this can vary quite considerably, with information on humanitarian aid not published consistently.<sup>99 100</sup>

### (m) Local government budgets and support offering

*“A lot of enterprises have left, a lot of them have closed. And taxes, taxes, are not received to the same extent as before the full-scale invasion, and therefore the city budget is already distributed a little differently. But everything, anyway, is directed to a safe, dignified life for our citizens. And the contributions of funds [i.e. donors and NGOs] are important [...] We would not have survived, I think, without this help.”*

- Local government interview

Local government budgets are an important factor in their capacity to support vulnerable people. Analysis indicates that only 34% of hromadas have a “high level of financial capacity”, mostly in Kyivska.<sup>101</sup>

This viewpoint is reflected in the comments made by the local government workers that REACH spoke with. In other research, REACH has found that hromada revenues have struggled to keep pace with rising expenses, exacerbated by outmigration and economic downturn.<sup>102</sup> The range of services and systems available locally can be fragmented.<sup>103</sup> For hromadas close to the frontline, REACH has found

<sup>99</sup> Transparency International, [“Openness and Public Engagement: How Cities Perform in the EU-Style Transparency Test”](#), November 2025

<sup>100</sup> Right to Protection, [“Національний Компенсаційний Механізм За Пошкодження Та Знищення Об’єктів Нерухомого Майна: Досвід, Виклики Та Перспективи Вдосконалення”](#), trans. “National Compensation Mechanism For Damage And Destruction Of Real Estate: Experience, Challenges And Prospects For Improvement”, pp. 101 - 103

<sup>101</sup> Institute of Analytics and Advocacy, “Recovery and development of de-occupied hromadas: funding, governance, human resources”, October 2025

<sup>102</sup> REACH, [“Exploring transitions away from humanitarian assistance in Western Ukraine: Case study of Volodymyrska and Chortkivska hromadas”](#), February 2025, p. 10

<sup>103</sup> REACH, [“Veteran’s Reintegration in Frontline Areas: What’s next?”](#), March 2025, p. 2

that “the combination of insecurity, infrastructure damage, and economic decline has led to reduced revenues for local budgets while simultaneously increasing expenditure demands”.<sup>104</sup>

In general, research indicates that “one of the biggest challenges faced by local government bodies is the shortage of personnel”.<sup>105</sup> CEDOS point to low pay, which may be the driver of an identified mismatch between applicants’ skills and job requirements. Indeed, REACH found that even local government workers reported struggling to meet their own needs during the winter.

Still, analysis indicates that the situation does appear to be relatively improved compared to previous years. Comparing the first ten months of 2024 and 2025, Vox Ukraine found a 16.5% increase in local budget revenues.<sup>106</sup> They observe that this is greater than the rate of inflation, implying a real terms increase in revenue. However, this tendency skews westward, far from the frontline.

The ongoing reform of local government will be an important topic for humanitarians to watch.<sup>107</sup> Whilst one local government worker said that they were accustomed to working with a relatively low level of funding relative to need, others made references to economic circumstances and the changing tax base as important factors. The Vox Ukraine analysis indicates that revenue growth was greater in oblasts to the west of Ukraine, far from the frontline where Winter Response Plan activities are largely targeted.

The importance of local economic activity is reflected in one local government worker’s comments. Referring to the successful industrial base in the hromada, they commented “we have someone to fill the budget, our farmers work, everything works [...] if it weren’t for this damn war, we would feel pretty good”.

<sup>104</sup> REACH, “[Emergency Livelihoods Profiling In Frontline Areas](#)”, January 2026, p. 2

<sup>105</sup> CEDOS, “[Housing in Rural Hromadas Near the Frontline](#)”, March 2025, p. 12

Article I. <sup>106</sup> Vox Ukraine, “Територіальні громади 2025: ключові зміни та їхні наслідки”, trans. “Territorial hromadas 2025: key changes and their consequences”, January 2026

<sup>107</sup> Decentralizatsia, “[Державний бюджет-2026 підписано: нові правила та фінансові орієнтири для місцевого самоврядування](#)”, trans. “State Budget-2026 Signed: New Rules and Financial Guidelines for Local Self-Government”, December 2025

## CONCLUSION

This report had three objectives:

- to assess how winter-related humanitarian needs and vulnerabilities evolve over multiple years.
- to examine how institutional actors (local authorities, CSOs) perceive and support winterisation efforts.
- to contribute to collective situational awareness to support humanitarian partners in shaping context-appropriate responses.

The research indicates that, as the war enters its fifth year since the full-invasion, there are fundamental drivers of need. The conflict, stretched household budgets, and the cold weather, combine to put people in a vulnerable situation. People’s ability to meet their needs is affected by not only the capacity of local government or NGOs, but also their own household income and social network.

It is unknown how the war will develop in the coming months. Past experience indicates that, regardless of how the conflict evolves, another winter response will be needed in 2026/27, as people will remain vulnerable due to long-term challenges like displacement and return, or infrastructure damage. This is already factored into government thinking.<sup>108</sup>

If the conflict scales down, there will be a wealth of humanitarian experience from before 2022 that will remain relevant. Unfortunately, the trend has been for conflict to intensify over the past two years. If it remains at an elevated level, or intensifies further, people’s ability to cope will be stretched even more.

To understand winter need, it is important to understand need year-round. People begin to get ready for winter well ahead of time. They buy-in fuel, store food, insulate their homes, and seek assistance in the spring, summer and autumn. The determinants of their resilience may not be winter-specific at all. For example, people’s social network, housing quality, and financial capacities. Similarly, people referred to needs which were not winter specific.

Still, the winter brings extra strain to bear. Assistance that helps people to manage in the warmer months can also help in the winter; for example, by making it more manageable to cover the cost of essential expenditures or providing the moral support that enables people to manage in times of crisis.

The general consensus from post-distribution monitoring, personal experience and qualitative research appears to be that the overall objectives of winter response plans are relevant. However, it is also generally acknowledged that the delivery and operationalization of the objectives can be made more efficient.

The new Unified Cash Transfer approach should be monitored closely as it is applied in 2026.<sup>109</sup> There are always cases where in-kind assistance or services will be more appropriate, but unconditional cash has the potential to be highly relevant for people who struggle to manage during the winter.

<sup>108</sup> Ministry for Communities and Territories Development of Ukraine, [“Given the experience of this winter, each community should start preparing for the upcoming season right now, says Oleksii Kuleba”](#), February 2026

<sup>109</sup> Cash Working Group, [“Unified Cash Transfers – Methodology Overview”](#), December 2025

As the ODI has argued: “If populations affected by crisis are to build their resilience, they need to be able to address both their immediate needs and their vulnerabilities, while also thinking about the longer term. Cash is the one aid modality that allows this [...] to be effective the transfer must be large enough to cover basic needs with money left over”.<sup>110</sup>

It will be important to assess whether cash transfers as currently envisioned are ambitious enough to enable people to meet their needs in the long-term.

Apart from interventions at the household level, the resilience of critical systems like energy, WASH and health need to be assured. Again, these are not necessarily winter-specific problems, though winter exacerbates already difficult conditions. The local government are the primary actors supporting the public. Their capacities are constrained by funding and staffing. Similarly, this is a structural issue which makes it harder to manage winter stress.

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<sup>110</sup> Overseas Development Institute, “[Doing cash differently: How cash transfers can transform humanitarian aid](#)”, September 2015, p. 11

