

Ukraine threatened with total blackout

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All of Ukraine could be plunged into a total blackout in the coming weeks, experts say, as Russian air assaults targeting energy infrastructure continue. Already, 50 percent of the country's power system has been damaged or destroyed. This number does not take into account the impact of missile strikes this past Monday which Moscow ordered in response to Ukrainian drone attacks inside Russian territory.

Should the speed of the bombing intensify, the entire country "would be without electricity, water, and heating" for a period of about three to 10 days, said Olexander Kharchenko, director of the Energy Industry Research Centre, in a recent interview with Human Rights Watch. A representative from Ukraine's Mercy Corps echoed his warning, telling *Newsweek* that Ukraine's "entire national grid could collapse within weeks" if there is no let-up to the violence.

Currently, large parts of Kiev, which has already been experiencing rolling blackouts for well over a month, as well as Zaporizhzhia, Odessa, Sumy, Zhytomyr and Kryvyi Rih, are reporting total outages due to Monday's missile strikes. In many cases, residents have also lost water, because plumbing and waste treatment systems cannot operate without electricity. The neighboring country of Moldova, whose energy infrastructure is connected to Ukraine's, is likewise experiencing power losses.

As of just mid-November, 10.7 million people, about half of the population that has remained in the country, have gone without one or more essential utility for at least some period of time, if not permanently. The danger of widespread and life-threatening hypothermia is growing, as temperatures plunge during the winter months. A total blackout that lasts even just a few days could result in the deaths of hundreds, if not thousands. As if the weather was a thing totally unpredictable to the most powerful governments and agencies on earth, the US, its allies and the UN are reportedly now "scrambling" in order "to get blankets, insulation, generators, medical supplies," reports ABC News.

Ukraine's health care system, which has been gutted by right-wing reforms implemented at the behest of the EU and foreign lenders, is buckling under the weight of the energy crisis. Surgeons are working with the aid of flashlights, headlamps and cellphone illumination. Workers are struggling to keep x-ray, breathing, ultrasound and dialysis machines functioning. Vaccines are spoiling in refrigerators that are no longer cool.

This week the health ministry recently declared a halt to all surgeries deemed "non-essential," in order to alleviate the burden on medical facilities with limited, temporary power-generating capacity. One of the country's largest hospitals was recently on the verge of having to evacuate patients because its water supply failed.

Even though medical workers are laboring under desperate conditions, some report not being paid for months. Despite the war, the Ukrainian government has refused to fully suspend changes to health care spending that were implemented in 2018 as part of a series of EU, IMF and World Bank deals. According to the new policies, hospitals are paid in proportion to the number of patients they treat, regardless of the expenses associated with keeping their doors open. The impact of this prior to the war was the widespread closure of medical facilities, particularly those outside of major population centers, where there are, in essence, fewer "customers."

In July, Kiev officials declared that state financing for any hospital not in the "conflict zone" would still be based on per-patient remuneration, thereby providing these facilities no relief. Currently, financially strapped institutions are treating patients but unable to pay their nurses and doctors.

At the Ivano-Frankivsk Regional Infectious Diseases Clinical Hospital in western Ukraine, 80 staff staged a protest in early November because, apart from a one-time \$5 payment, they had not received their salaries since August. They told the press that the conditions they face now are no better than they were during the height of the COVID-19 crisis. Another 36 employees from the clinic have no wages and will never be receiving any, as they

were laid off over the course of year due to “budget optimization.”

Despite much public handwringing over the terrible conditions facing ordinary Ukrainians, Western governments’ response can be described, at best, as pathetic. The United States announced last week that it is sending Ukraine just \$53 million in additional energy-related aid, bringing its total spending on the support of life-sustaining power infrastructure and supplies to about \$106 million. In contrast, Washington has allocated nearly \$24.2 billion in one or another form of military aid to Ukraine, including \$19.5 billion in weaponry and equipment, according to the Kiel Institute’s Ukraine Support Tracker (UST).

With humanitarian aid from Washington standing at about \$10.4 billion, the US has spent about 2.3 times more on facilitating the killing of Ukrainians than it has on saving them. The EU is only slightly better, with a death-to-life spending ratio of about 2:1.

In terms of its support for Ukrainian refugees, as a percentage of its GDP, the US has spent so little that you cannot even see it on the visual graphic of per-country refugee support published by the UST.

While the US and the EU have committed respectively about \$15.9 and \$31.8 billion in financial aid, most of that has yet to be disbursed. Large amounts are coming in the form of loans not grants, and many have various strings attached that require Ukraine to implement one or another pro-market “reform,” i.e., privatization, spending cuts or other measures that will make the rich of the world even richer.

In addition, a portion of the money foreign states and institutions are providing the country is simply being used to pay off debt it owes to these very lenders. A December 5 comment published by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace noted that the IMF has refused to defer Ukraine’s debt repayments, such that Kiev was “on track to pay back more than it was receiving from the IMF in 2022.”

With a small change made in October as part of the IMF’s emergency financing program known as the Food Shock Window, the situation shifted slightly. By the end of 2022, Ukraine will have received \$2.7 billion in aid from the IMF and paid it \$2.4 billion, accumulating in the process another \$300 million in debt. In comparison to the IMF, other creditors did Ukraine a kindness and granted the country in August—five months after the war began and its treasury was bled white—a two-year freeze on its Eurobond payments.

Europe’s welcome mat for Ukraine’s 7.9 million refugees is now also being rolled up. The UK’s Homes for Ukraine program is in total crisis, and 14,000 Ukrainians are facing homelessness by Christmas because the government has refused to provide either public housing or adequate aid to British host families. Already, nearly 3,000 refugees, overwhelmingly women and children, are without shelter.

Local officials across Germany are telling the federal government that they no longer have either the facilities or the financial resources to sustain current refugees, much less take more. In Berlin, a tent city near the airport was erected for 3,600 refugees, with little prospect of any sort of permanent housing being provided.

Belgian officials are turning away Ukrainian refugees seeking help with housing. Poland is now charging those staying in government-sponsored facilities for more than four months a daily housing rate. Estonia, uniquely distinguished for its anti-Russian, war-crazed government, declared Tuesday it will not accept any more Ukrainian refugees.

Latvia is imposing a language requirement on those arriving in the country, which as one immigrant advocate pointed out, will simply be used as a means to discriminate against Ukrainians who, despite their desire, cannot learn Latvian because language courses are nowhere to be found.

Hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians are expected to seek entry into Europe during the winter. In addition to telling those currently outside the country not to return, authorities in Ukraine are encouraging those still in the country to leave due to the energy crisis. “If they can find an alternative place to stay for another three or four months, it will be very helpful to the system,” said the chief executive of Ukraine’s largest power supplier, Maxim Timchenko in November.



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