

INVESTIGATION • UKRAINE'S ENERGY WAR • 14 OCTOBER 2026

Freezing a Nation

The weapon is cold. Not the missile, not the drone — the cold they leave behind. For four winters Russia has fought Ukraine not only at the front but through its radiators, aiming to make a civilian population survive January without heat, light or running water. This is a record of that campaign: what has been done, what the law says about it, and what still helps the people inside the cold.

The scale

Over the first four years of the full-scale war, Russia launched roughly **12,700 drones and 2,900 missiles** at Ukraine's energy infrastructure. That is not a side-effect of fighting elsewhere. It is a campaign with its own targets, its own timing, and a season: the strikes intensify as the temperature falls.

On **30 September 2026**, as the next heating season began, Russia launched what Ukrainian officials called its heaviest combined assault on the energy grid in months — close to 190 drones and ballistic missiles in a single night. Seven people were killed. Ukraine's grid operator, Ukrenergo, imposed emergency power cuts in Kyiv and three surrounding regions, the first such measure in the capital since spring. Prime Minister Koretskyi said an attack that large and that coordinated had not happened since the previous heating season ended. The pattern was starting again, on schedule.

The target is warmth

The grid is not just about light. The strikes deliberately reach the machinery that keeps people warm. During the winter of 2025–26, UN human rights monitors recorded **near-daily attacks** on Ukraine's energy infrastructure, including five large-scale assaults in January alone, damaging the grid across at least 17 regions and in Kyiv. Millions of people had electricity for only a few hours a day.

In Kyiv, missiles and drones struck two combined heat-and-power plants repeatedly. Each time, central heating was cut to **nearly 6,000 multi-storey residential buildings** at once — apartment blocks full of families, in a city where winter routinely falls well below freezing. Kyiv's government told residents who were able to leave for the countryside, where at least a wood stove could keep a room warm. The mayor said the city had about half the electricity it needed.

The targeting has also widened over time. Where early strikes hit large power plants and ultra-high-voltage substations, from 2025 they reached further down into the civilian system: gas-powered cogeneration plants inside cities, municipal boiler stations, mid-voltage substations in the distribution grid — the last links before the heat reaches a home. This is targeting that follows the warmth to the doorstep.

What the law says

Power infrastructure is not automatically protected in war, and honesty about that makes the rest of the case stronger. A grid that serves a genuine military objective can, in principle, be a lawful target. But international humanitarian law draws hard limits around that permission, and this campaign runs into all of them.

The International Committee of the Red Cross holds that the parts of an energy system providing essential services to civilians are, in principle, **civilian objects** — protected against direct attack, reprisals, and even incidental harm. Amnesty International points to **Article 54(2) of Additional Protocol I** to the Geneva Conventions, which bars attacks on objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population. In a Ukrainian winter, the district heating plant is exactly that: without it, people do not merely lose a

convenience, they lose the ability to stay alive indoors. And the law's proportionality rule forbids attacks expected to cause civilian harm excessive in relation to any military advantage. Freezing six thousand apartment blocks to degrade an electricity network is the kind of calculation that rule exists to forbid.

Russia rejects this. Moscow, which is not a member of the International Criminal Court, says Ukraine's energy infrastructure is a legitimate military target and denies attacking civilians. That is the defence on the table, and it is worth stating plainly so it can be weighed against the record.

The warrants already exist

This is not an untested accusation. The International Criminal Court has already found reasonable grounds and issued arrest warrants over this exact campaign — over strikes on the power grid, not any other part of the war.

- On **5 March 2024**, the ICC issued warrants for **Sergei Kobylash**, commander of Russia's long-range aviation, and **Viktor Sokolov**, then commander of the Black Sea Fleet, for the war crime of directing attacks at civilian objects and the crime against humanity of inhumane acts.
- On **25 June 2024**, the court issued warrants for **Sergei Shoigu**, Russia's defence minister during the relevant period, and **Valery Gerasimov**, chief of the General Staff — again for directing attacks against civilians and civilian objects, energy infrastructure included.

The judges' findings centre on missile strikes against Ukrainian electrical infrastructure. The court said it had reasonable grounds to believe these strikes may amount to directing attacks at civilian objects, and may have formed part of a widespread or systematic attack on a civilian population — the threshold for a crime against humanity. That is a court speaking, not an advocate.

Two honest caveats belong here. First, the ICC's scope so far is narrow — the Shoigu and Gerasimov warrants focus on strikes between October 2022 and March 2023, a window analysts noted is smaller than the generals' overall responsibility, likely because that is where the evidence was strongest. Second, Ukraine's own Security Service goes further, documenting 256 attacks on energy facilities in a single heating season and calling the campaign a deliberate policy amounting to crimes against humanity. That is Ukraine's legal assessment, not yet a court's finding, and it should be read as such. The warrants, though, are findings — and they are already outstanding.

Enforcement is the weak point, and it is worth being clear-eyed. The ICC has no police force; it relies on member states to make arrests, Russia does not surrender its nationals, and the court holds no trials in absentia. The warrants may never put anyone in a cell. But they do something that outlasts this winter: they place the cold, on the record, as a crime — and they narrow the world the people who ordered it can ever travel in freely.

What actually helps

Documenting the crime matters. It does not warm a single room. The thing that does is unglamorous and immediate — a generator in a hospital basement, a heater in a shelter, a transformer replacing one that was just destroyed. Three concrete ways to turn attention into warmth:

1. Put heat on the ground

- **UNITED24** (u24.gov.ua) — the Ukrainian government's official fundraising platform, with an energy-restoration track; its generator drives have powered hospitals through blackout after blackout.
- **Razom for Ukraine** (razomforukraine.org) — delivers generators to community "Points of Invincibility" where people charge devices, get warm, and wait out the dark.

- **UNICEF Ukraine** — since late 2025 has delivered more than 100 mid- and large-capacity generators to water utilities and district-heating companies, the infrastructure that keeps families' taps and radiators running.
- **Warm Up Ukraine** — funds complete kits: a diesel generator, a heater, lighting and fuel, the whole package a cold building needs at once.

Confirm the live appeal on each organisation's own site before giving — campaigns open and close with the season — but these are the routes that reach the radiator.

2. Push for air defence and energy support

The deepest fix is stopping the missiles before they land and rebuilding the grid faster than it can be broken. Both are political decisions made in capitals that are not Kyiv. Ask your representative — your MP, your member of Congress — for sustained air-defence supply and winter-energy assistance to Ukraine, specifically transformers, mobile substations and high-voltage equipment. A grid can be repaired between strikes if the parts are on hand. A letter that names the specific ask lands harder than one that asks for "support" in general.

3. Keep the crime visible

Accountability depends on the record staying loud. The ICC warrants for Kobylash, Sokolov, Shoigu and Gerasimov exist because investigators built a case and the world paid enough attention to act on it. Share what is documented. Name the targeting for what it is — a campaign to freeze civilians — and keep it from being filed away as weather. The cold is a choice someone made. It can be a choice someone answers for.



Sources: UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine; UN News; the International Criminal Court (warrants of 5 March and 25 June 2024); Human Rights Watch; the International Committee of the Red Cross; Amnesty International; FIDH; Ukrenergo and

Ukrainian government statements; and reporting by Al Jazeera, France 24, CNBC and **Bran Myers** the Christian Science Monitor, September 2026 – January 2026. Legal characterisations attributed to Ukraine's Security Service are that government's own assessment and are identified as such; the ICC warrants are judicial findings of reasonable grounds, not convictions.

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