

ANNEX I. The “Khersonification” of Donetsk and Zaporizka Oblasts

The situation in Donetsk and Zaporizka oblasts has deteriorated to the extent that protection experts warned of ‘*the Khersonification*’ of these areas, driving life underground to survive lethal attacks. In September 2026, the Ukraine Protection Cluster, convened a discussion of expert organisations to reflect on the lived experience and operational response in Kherson. This note explores what the term ‘*Khersonification*’ of Donetsk and Zaporizka Oblasts means in reality. Despite the worsening security environment, communities have developed increasingly sophisticated coping and adaptation strategies to survive amid constant shelling, drone threats, service disruptions, displacement, and economic collapse. However, many of these coping mechanisms come at high physical, economic, and psychological costs.

A mirror of Kherson – the evolving situation in Donetsk and Zaporizka

The humanitarian situation of Donetsk, and Zaporizka oblasts increasingly mirrors the conditions long observed in Khersonska Oblast, reflecting what could be described as the “Khersonification” of the eastern and southern frontline. While each oblast retains distinct conflict dynamics, all three are experiencing a convergence of humanitarian and protection risks characterized by persistent attacks on civilians, extensive use of FPV drones, shrinking humanitarian access, progressive service collapse, and increasing restrictions on civilian movement and humanitarian operations. This trend has transformed daily life into a constant struggle for survival and has significantly heightened protection risks for civilians and frontline responders alike.

While Khersonska Oblast represents one of the clearest examples of a population living under *constant* threat, similar patterns are emerging across large parts of Donetsk and Zaporizka oblasts. Humanitarian assessments indicate that the security environment has deteriorated sharply, with civilians reporting that they feel continuously surveilled and targeted while carrying out routine activities such as collecting pensions, accessing markets, or moving between settlements. The use of FPV drones have become a defining characteristic of frontline warfare, extending the reach of attacks well beyond immediate frontline positions and creating a prevalent atmosphere of fear.

According to data collected by the UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine, the number of civilian casualties is rising, and at some points exceeding the number of casualties compared to all previous years since 2022. Frontline areas account for the majority of civilian harm. Donetsk, Kherson, and Kharkiv consistently record some of the highest civilian casualty rates, while Zaporizhzhia city has remained a frequent target of missile, drone, and glide bomb attacks. Short-range drones and FPV systems have become one of the leading causes of civilian casualties near the frontline, while long-range missiles and loitering munitions continue to generate mass casualty incidents in urban areas.

The evolving threat has exposed critical urban centres such as Kramatorsk, Sloviansk, Kostiantynivka, and Zaporizhzhia city to levels of insecurity previously associated with communities closer to the Dnipro River in Kherson. This reflects an expanding battlespace in which no civilian area can be considered fully safe.

Humanitarian Access: Operational Challenges to Severe Constraints

The principal constraint to humanitarian access is the ongoing hostilities. Humanitarian actors attempting to move in the area must navigate an environment with artillery shelling, missile attacks, aerial glide bombs, and FPV drone strikes. Humanitarian actors increasingly report that these access limitations are no longer confined to immediate frontline areas. Frontline shifts in Donetsk Oblast, and the deteriorating security conditions in parts of Zaporizka, have reduced humanitarian reach and increased the operational costs.

In Donetsk Oblast,, advancing frontlines and mandatory evacuations have reduced the number of accessible communities and disrupted established delivery routes. Humanitarian organizations report facing a shrinking access space, including in larger hromadas such as Kramatorsks and Slovianska in Donetsk region. There is an increasing reliance on armored vehicles, reduced operating windows, and heightened military restrictions have significantly affected humanitarian programming.

In Zaporizka Oblast, access remains possible in many government-controlled areas but continues to be undermined by shelling, mine contamination, periodic movement restrictions, and attacks against civilian infrastructure. As military activity intensifies in western and central parts of the Zaporizka Oblast, humanitarian access conditions increasingly resemble those observed in Kherson during earlier phases of the conflict.

In Donetsk region, and across the frontline areas, a particularly worrying feature of the emerging “Khersonification” trend is the increased targeting of humanitarian personnel, assets, and facilities. Humanitarian access monitoring has documented a

growing number of incidents involving aid convoys, warehouses, and vehicles struck by shelling or drones. FPV drones have emerged as a significant threat because they can deliberately pursue moving targets, including humanitarian vehicles.

The Protection Implications

From a protection perspective, the deteriorating conditions and evolving frontlines have profound implications. Older persons, persons with disabilities, single-headed households, and those unable or unwilling to evacuate face particularly acute risks. Many remain trapped in isolated communities where public transport, healthcare services, pharmacies, banks, and social services have either ceased functioning or operate only intermittently due to insecurity.

Repeated displacement, destruction of civilian infrastructure, and prolonged exposure to violence continue to worsen psychosocial distress. Households face growing difficulties accessing livelihoods, documentation services, pensions, and legal support. Protection actors increasingly report concerns related to social isolation, diminished access to information, family separation during evacuation, and heightened risks for older persons living alone in frontline settlements.

As in Kherson, the prolonged conflict has also devastated livelihoods and local economies in Donetsk and Zaporizka oblasts. Employment opportunities have largely disappeared in many frontline communities, resulting in increased dependence on pensions, social transfers, and humanitarian assistance. Market functionality continues to decline closer to the frontline, while prices rise and product availability diminishes. Damage to energy, water, transport, and telecommunications infrastructure has further undermined household resilience and service delivery. These conditions are particularly severe for older persons and vulnerable households who lack the resources to relocate.

How civilians are adapting – the human toll of “Khersonification”

Despite the worsening security environment, communities have developed increasingly sophisticated coping and adaptation strategies to survive amid constant shelling, drone threats, service disruptions, displacement, and economic collapse. However, many of these coping mechanisms come at high physical, economic, and psychological costs. People and their communities are taking measures such as:

- **Adapting daily movements/ routine to avoid FPV drones/risk.** One of the most visible adaptations is the change in civilian movement patterns. In frontline communities, residents increasingly organize their daily activities around perceived periods of lower risk. In Kramatorska and Slovianska towns in Donetsk, for instance, Protection partners report that remaining residents increasingly use the period between 7 AM- 9 AM to visit local shops, charge mobile phones, and make phone calls, as network disruptions and outages are more common in the evening.
- **Limiting time spent in open spaces,** coordinating journeys with neighbors, and reducing non-essential movement altogether due to the threat posed by FPV drones and aerial surveillance.
- **Relying on community networks,** for information such as provide real-time alerts regarding drone activity, shelling, or changing security conditions. This community-based information sharing has become an essential protection mechanism as observed across frontline hromadas in Donetsk, Kharkivska, and Zaporizka regions.
- **Strengthening community support systems.** Neighbors help older persons, people with disabilities, and chronically ill individuals access food, medicines, firewood, pensions, and transportation. National NGOs (where they have access), Volunteer groups, and Associations frequently assist with evacuation, home repairs, debris removal, and information dissemination. Local volunteers often function as a critical link between humanitarian organizations and vulnerable residents who are unable to reach aid distribution points independently and also during evacuations, Particularly in isolated rural settlements.
- **Reinforcing household-level resilience:** Protection partners observe people coming together to reinforce windows against blast damage, storing food and water in preparation for harsh winter conditions, coupled with increasing risks from shelling and the use of FPV drones. Families increasingly prioritize proximity to safe shelters when choosing accommodation, while local authorities and communities continue expanding safe shelters (mobile bomb shelters) where resources allow.

Despite prolonged exposure to violence, many residents continue to maintain community institutions, support neighbors, care for family members, cultivate gardens, and participate in local volunteer initiatives. However, humanitarian agencies also report growing levels of fatigue, chronic stress, anxiety, and burnout among civilians and frontline responders alike. Vulnerable groups, especially older people often remain because of attachment to their homes, social networks, livestock, or fear of losing their identity and dignity through evacuation/displacement.