



# Spearfish Ukraine Spot Report

15<sup>TH</sup> APRIL 2024



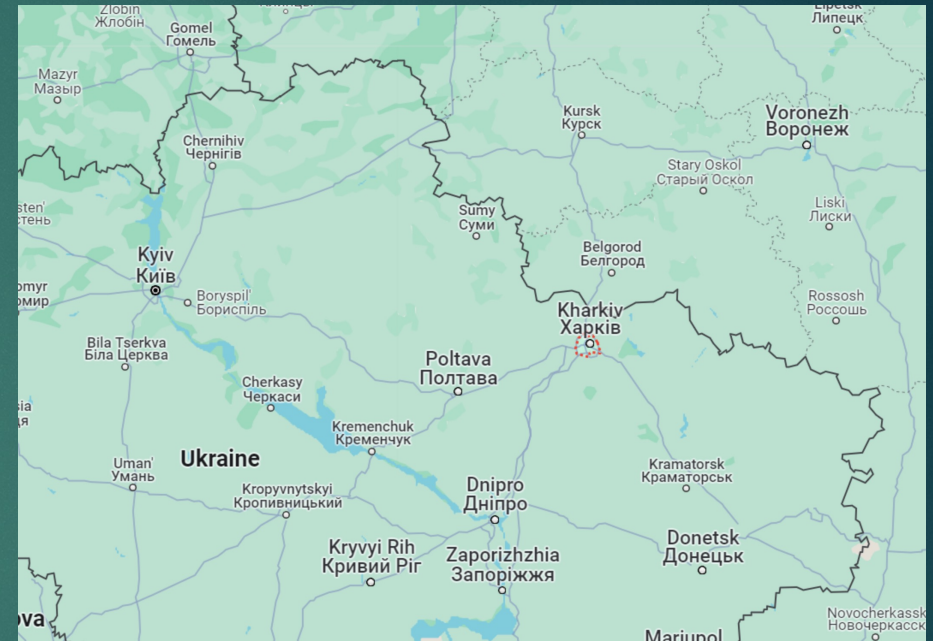
# Increased targeting of Kharkiv & Severe Disruptions to Utilities – March to April 2024

## The Overview

From the end of March 2024, we observe that Russian Federation Armed Forces (RFAF) have increased the number of aerial attacks on Kharkiv city and Oblast, focusing their strikes primarily on critical civilian infrastructure, such as power generation and distribution facilities. 12 aerial attacks on Kharkiv were reported over the course of February, 25 attacks reported in March and 23 attacks reported in the first 11 days of April alone. For comparison, in other central and eastern regions:

- Sumy region: one attack was reported in February, eight in March and three in April (up to 11th April);
- Dnipropetrovsk region: six attacks in February, five attacks in March, one attack in April (up to 11th April);
- Zaporizhzhia region: one attack in February, six attacks in March, two attacks in April (up to 11th April).

Attacks on Kharkiv are usually carried out using a variety of weapons, such as cruise missiles, long-range Shahed-type loitering munition drones, ballistic missiles, artillery, multiple-launch rocket systems (MLRS) and glide bombs.



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**Bomb crater: Photographer: Sergey Bobok/AFP/Getty Images**

In parallel, multiple sources report a sharp increase in the activity of Russian ISR (intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance) drones, that are capable of reaching deep into Ukrainian rear lines and are often used as forward observation for aerial attacks.

Currently, it appears that the Ukrainian Armed Forces (UAF) are unable to effectively counteract these attacks on Kharkiv, primarily due to a shortage of air defence and electronic warfare systems, which likely increases the boldness and frequency of RFAF attacks. Attacks are creating hardship for Kharkiv residents, who are struggling with rolling blackouts and limited access to critical utilities.

The attack on 11th April cut power for more than 200,000 households and businesses, disabling water supply and municipal transportation (i.e. trolleybuses and metro). While the Kharkiv authorities are putting great effort in recovering damaged critical infrastructure, as of 13th April there are more than 21,000 households in 61 settlements across Kharkiv Oblast that are still left consistently without electricity.

The damage to power generation and distribution has forced local authorities to re-introduce scheduled blackouts in Kharkiv, dividing the city in 6 sections that will have 3-hour blackouts between 0700 and 2300 hrs every day.

At this time, Kharkiv is the only large city in Ukraine that has had to introduce these measures. Moreover, there are further, unscheduled power cuts frequently, often leaving some districts without power and water for up to 22 hours per day. While all Ukrainian cities have faced disruptions so utilities recently, the situation appears to have deteriorated furthest in Kharkiv.



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## The Context

The centre of Kharkiv city is only 30km from the Russian border. In this sense, it is easier to target as Ukrainian air defences have less time to react to incoming threats such as missiles and rockets. Moreover, the dwindling of Ukrainian air defence stocks makes for a more permissive operational environment for the Russian Air Force. This coincides with Russia's recent, significantly increased use of glide bombs- traditional aviation bombs with payloads of up to 1.5T retrofitted with wings and navigation systems. Glide bombs have ranges reported to be around 60km, allowing Russian bombers to target Kharkiv from inside Russian territory. The last week of March saw the first glide bombs hit Kharkiv since the start of the 2022 invasion.

Since the previous Ukraine Spot Report on the 25th March, it has become increasingly clear that the Russian Federation has resumed its targeting of civilian energy infrastructure and has destroyed a number of important facilities. What is less clear is how the targeting of Kharkiv specifically falls into Russian military strategy..

There are a number of possibilities:

- Depopulating the city: if the attacks are designed to force citizens to leave the city, it could signal future RF intent for a renewed ground offensive. This is not currently supported by a buildup of troops and armour on the Russian side of the border.
- Weakening the city's defences: exhausting Kharkiv's defences, particularly ground based air defence, would make a renewed ground offensive more achievable.
- Psychological pressure: Kharkiv is Ukraine's second largest city. The attacks could be intended to demoralise both the local and broader Ukrainian population and weaken their resolve.
- Diverting Ukrainian resources: by forcing Ukraine to focus on defending Kharkiv, Russia could be trying to divert resources away from other parts of the battlefield, potentially weakening Ukrainian defences in the south or east.
- Negotiation leverage: in the context of Western, particularly US, materiel support becoming scarcer, threatening Ukraine's second city may give the Russian Federation an upper hand in any future negotiations, or could be designed to force negotiations in the first place.



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## The Effect

The recent surge in the attacks had not yet resulted in a persistent critical situation in Kharkiv. Unlike other high-risk areas in Ukraine (e.g. Donbas), **Kharkiv currently remains a permissive environment.**

However, the situation demonstrates the vulnerability of Ukraine's second city and the RFAF are likely to continue to exploit it. The severe shortage of air defence might also allow the RFAF to exploit new vulnerabilities in other border regions such as Sumy and Chernihiv. The attacks on critical infrastructure create immediate and significant impact on government, civilian and humanitarian operations, causing:

- scheduled and unscheduled blackouts
- disruption to water and heating supply
- disruption to fixed and mobile communications
- reduced access to healthcare and risk of disease outbreaks
- a deterioration of living conditions and social displacement

This can lead to increased demand for humanitarian services and local NGOs will be stretched to try to meet these needs. At the same time, NGOs may face their own additional logistical challenges, such as disrupted workforces, office spaces and distribution networks, and stricter security protocols. Safety and security assessments need to be continually reassessed and SOPs kept updated.

Attacks on power grids also put a strain on the fuel supply in the region. The demand for fuel in Kharkiv has shown significant growth over the past 3 weeks. However, there are no indications of a fuel deficit at this stage and prices currently remain stable. This could change and is important to consider for operations management and Hibernation, Relocation and Evacuation (HRE) planning



Kharkiv emergency workers: Photographer:



Yevhen Titov/Global Images Ukraine/Getty



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## Security Advice

The increase in kinetic threats to the northern half of Kharkiv region requires attention and calls for regular operational review.

### Basic Safety

- Take all air raid alerts seriously, especially in the areas that are close to the border with Russia and the active frontline. Move to the shelter immediately after the alert is launched.

- Ensure that places of business and residence in Ukraine have a suitable shelter in close proximity. Such shelters must be equipped with emergency communications, emergency lights, fire safety equipment, first aid kit, stockpiles of food and water and other items of comfort for a prolonged stay.

- Keep distance from potential targets of strategic, military or humanitarian significance. Make recurring reassessment of places of business and residence to detect potential threats.

- Street lighting in Kharkiv is often out of service, increasing the risk of accidents while driving at night. Pedestrians, cyclists and e-scooter riders are often virtually invisible to drivers. Abandoned checkpoints that use concrete blocks to create chicanes remain on the roads and are not easily visible.

- Maintain and review HRE plans frequently.

### Travel and logistics

- Traffic lights are also often out of service, creating added risk at junctions.

- Fuel shortages can appear in the areas affected by critical infrastructure attacks. Always keep vehicle tanks at least 3/4 full and use fuel canisters as an emergency supply. Prepare a reasonable stockpile of fuel for operational fleets, making sure that it is stored safely. Most of the passenger railway transport in Ukraine is electric so aerial attacks and blackouts may disrupt travel schedules. Plan travel accordingly.

- During blackouts the railway operators switch to diesel locomotives, balancing passenger and cargo transportation. This can negatively affect cargo logistics.



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## Security Advice

### Electricity and Communications

- GPS is very frequently jammed in and around Kharkiv, showing incorrect positioning that can lead to disorientation. Ensure that maps (both electronic and hard copy) are available, particularly if unfamiliar with the city. Keep traditional navigation skills up to speed.
- Traditional means of communication can quickly fail after a blackout. Make advance purchase of satellite data terminals (such as Starlink), satellite phones, backup prepaid SIM-cards from different mobile operators. Be sure to purchase all necessary subscription services in advance, test equipment and train staff on how to operate it.
- Disruption of electricity supply can severely impact work and safety. Be sure to procure diversified sources of power supply such as UPS devices, powerbanks and diesel generators. Prepare a reasonable stockpile of fuel for generators, making sure that it is stored safely. Generators that use diesel are preferred due to its lower flammability.

### Food, Water and Basic Healthcare

- Centralised water supply is often disrupted by attacks on critical infrastructure. Be sure to stockpile a sufficient amount of technical and potable bottled water in your places of residence and business.
- Be sure to stockpile sufficient amounts of shelf-stable/long-lasting food. Military-style MREs (“meal ready to eat”) and humanitarian rations could be used as an emergency option.
- While healthcare facilities in Kharkiv have backup generators, a deteriorated security situation can make accessing healthcare more challenging. Be sure to procure individual first aid kits, several large trauma kits, auxiliary medical supplies and create additional stockpiles of regular medications. Be sure to complete emergency first-aid training. Regularly monitor the expiration dates on the medical supplies and replace when necessary.



# Spearfish Security

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