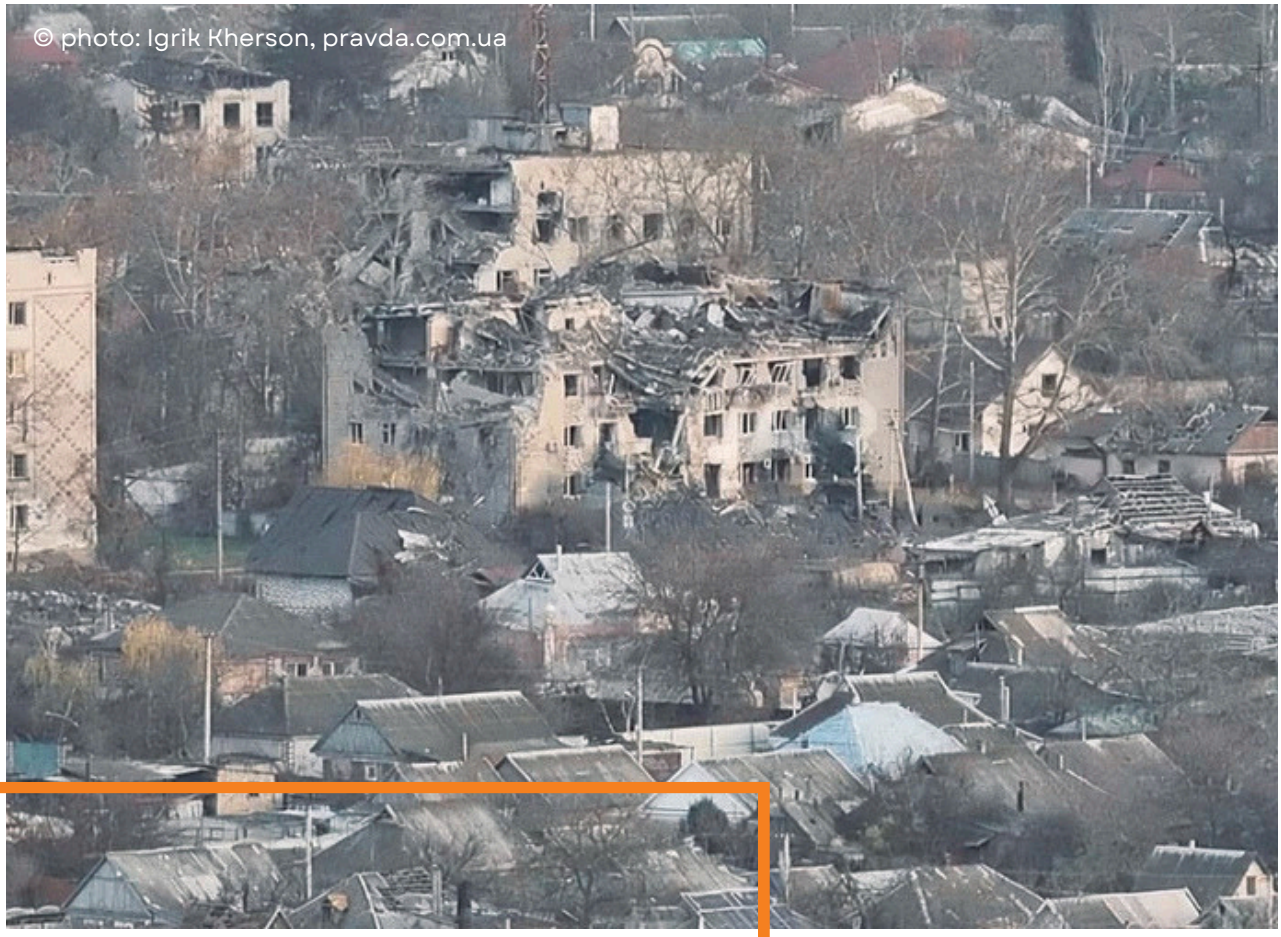


Protection of Civilians in Temporarily Occupied Oleshky, Kherson Region

Helping to Leave

KRYLA

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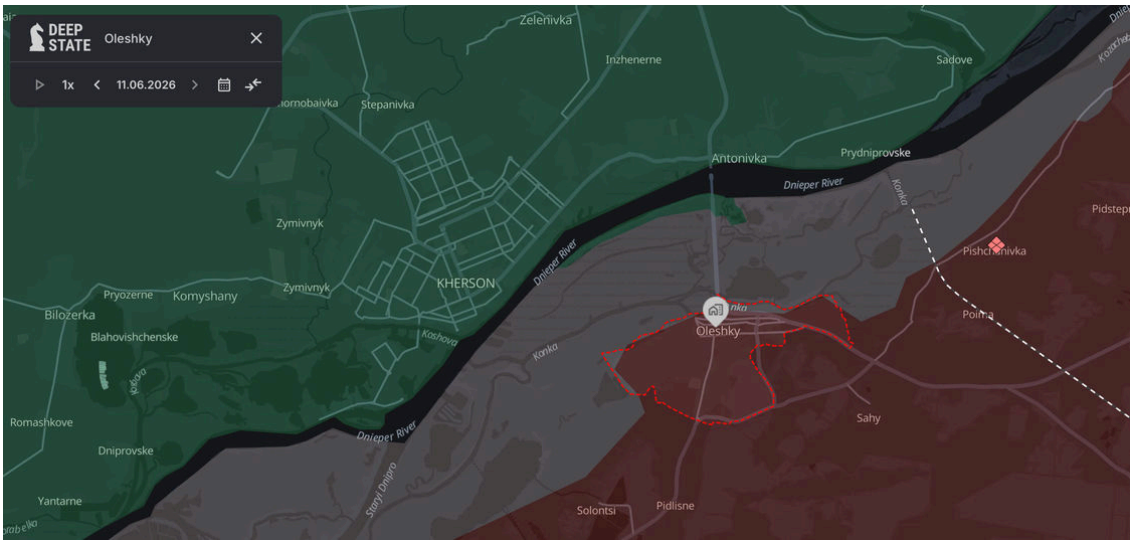
June, 2026

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This advocacy brief highlights a rapidly deteriorating humanitarian and protection crisis in the temporarily occupied settlements of Oleshky in the Kherson region. Thousands of civilians, including children, elderly people, and persons with disabilities, remain trapped amid ongoing shelling, drone attacks, landmine contamination, and severe shortages of food, water, healthcare, electricity, and other essential services. Evacuation opportunities are extremely limited due to insecurity, high costs, and administrative barriers, while those attempting to leave face significant threats to their safety and security, including harassment and abuse at Russian filtration camps. The brief calls for immediate humanitarian access, establishment of safe and dignified evacuation corridors, protection of civilians and humanitarian workers, and guarantees for the safe return of displaced residents once conditions allow.

METHODOLOGY

This advocacy brief was developed jointly by Nonviolent Peaceforce (NP), Helping to Leave, and Kryla. The findings and recommendations draw on reporting and testimonies collected by the three organisations through their ongoing contact with local volunteers providing humanitarian support to civilians in and around Oleshky as well as evacuees who have succeed in reaching government-controlled areas. For safety reasons, their identities are withheld.



BACKGROUND

An estimated 3 to 3.5 million civilians remain under Russian temporary occupation in Ukraine, though the exact number is uncertain as occupational authorities do not provide credible population data. In the temporarily occupied areas of the Kherson region, precise demographic data is similarly unavailable. Due to restricted access and limited communication, information on humanitarian needs remains fragmented. Humanitarian organisations, local volunteers, and Ukrainian authorities representing temporarily occupied territories report alarming shortages of food, clean water, healthcare and other basic supplies and services driven by widespread insecurity, exacerbating an already dire humanitarian situation.

As of May 2026, the humanitarian situation in the temporarily Russian-occupied settlements on the left bank of Kherson region remains critical and continues to deteriorate. The occupying authorities have neither provided for the population's basic needs nor allowed safe access for independent, non-partisan humanitarian relief response for civilians trapped in these areas.

The humanitarian crisis is particularly acute in the city of Oleshky, where the population has declined from approximately 24,000 residents before the Russian full-scale invasion to an estimated 2,000 residents, including dozens of children. Those who remain are primarily older persons and their caregivers, persons with limited mobility, and individuals facing heightened protection risks.

Currently, Oleshky is among the most dangerous areas for civilians across the occupied parts of the Kherson region. Civilians are forced to live in close proximity to occupying military forces exposing them to constant shelling, drone attacks, and indiscriminate strikes. Following the June 2023 flooding, triggered by the destruction of the Kakhovka dam by Russian forces, large parts of the city and surrounding settlements have been left without reliable access to electricity, water and gas. Caught in the crossfire and unable to leave safely, residents face a high risk of physical harm. Movement is severely restricted with landmines and other explosive objects blocking known exit routes while ongoing drone strikes prevent safe access to services or evacuation.

KEY PROTECTION RISKS AND CONCERNS

Access, safety, and security

Access roads to Oleshky remain heavily mined, with conditions further complicated by the constant shifting and activation of mines and continued placement of new explosive devices. The security situation is volatile. Residents reportedly leave their homes only in the morning to purchase food and avoid going outside later in the day due to intense drone activity, shelling, and fear of Russian soldiers. Streets are largely deserted, and civilians face persistent risks of violence, arbitrary detention, and disappearance.

Further, fear of detonating mines while digging graves, combined with the dangers associated with remaining outdoors long enough to conduct burials amid ongoing strikes, shelling and surveillance, have resulted in bodies being left in the streets and inside homes. As temperatures rise, the decomposition of remains is producing hazardous gases and creating severe public health risks. Residents also report a growing problem with stray dogs attacking people and feeding on human remains left unattended in public areas.

Protection and safeguarding of children

Children in Oleshky face a severe and systemic protection crisis. In addition to facing constant bombardments, children are exposed to the threat of forced resettlements. Families reportedly keep children hidden at home for extended periods due to the fear that they may be separated from their families by the occupying authorities or forcibly transferred to the Russian Federation or Russian-controlled institutions.

This further deepens children's isolation and exposes them to prolonged stress, lack of social interaction, and additional psychosocial harm. The feeling of isolation has been worsening since there are no functioning schools, kindergartens or other child and parent support services available- leaving children without access to education and socialisation. The stress of living under the constant threat of violence and the disruption of essential services risks children's lifelong health and learning.

Essential services and basic needs

Since summer 2023, residents of Oleshky have been living without electricity or running water, gas supply has also been unavailable since summer 2025. The only available water sources are private wells. Although several stores have reopened, the supply of goods is quite limited and prices are extremely high, making basic items unaffordable for most residents. Resupplying stores with essential items, including bread, is increasingly difficult due to insecurity and access constraints, with multiple reported incidents involving suppliers and volunteers being affected by drone strikes or mines while attempting to deliver goods.

Access to healthcare is constrained. The local hospitals reportedly accept only patients holding Russian passports. There are no medical specialists remaining in the area and healthcare services are limited to general practitioners. Due to lack of transportation and emergency medical services, residents are reportedly using wheelbarrows to transport sick and injured persons to the hospital. While a pharmacy operates at the hospital, the availability of essential medicines is limited, and prices are too high for civilians to afford.

Specialised services for persons with higher vulnerabilities including older persons and persons with limited mobility or disability are also not available. This has placed additional pressure on informal caregivers who are themselves coping with already precarious living conditions and limited access to basic services. Unavailability of mental health support services to address stress, trauma, and other psychosocial needs further exacerbates the cumulative impact of prolonged occupation and insecurity.

Financial services

Financial services are also limited. There are no ATMs in the area. The nearest location to withdraw cash is Skadovsk – approximately 80 km away from Oleshky – which is difficult to reach because of movement restrictions. Residents of Oleshky rely on financial support in UAH from relatives in Ukraine, despite being required to make daily payments in Russian rubles. To manage this, many people are forced to rely on informal money exchange networks often at high rates. Electronic payment services are also unavailable, further limiting people's ability to make purchases or pay for services such as transport. Employment opportunities are

practically nonexistent or inaccessible due to insecurity and movement restrictions, leaving most households dependent on financial support from relatives, which has been largely exhausted after four years of the full-scale war and occupation.

Civilian evacuations and other population movements

Physical barriers

Evacuation opportunities from Oleshky have significantly deteriorated due to the worsening security situation. While volunteer groups and humanitarian organisations previously assisted people in evacuations, these efforts have largely ceased. In recent months, two small groups of civilians, comprising older persons, persons with limited mobility and families with children, have successfully evacuated.

However, an attempted evacuation in mid-April was forced to turn back after the group of evacuees came under fire. It is estimated that around 200 civilians in Oleshky are willing to evacuate but unable to do so due to safety concerns and lack of financial resources - transportation costs to the border are reported to be approximately around 390 USD, creating a significant financial barrier for many residents - with many civilians waiting for the establishment of a formal and secure humanitarian corridor.

In the absence of formal safe evacuation routes, movement out of Oleshky has only been possible on foot, requiring individuals to be physically mobile and have enough cash to be able to afford evacuation. At present, some residents continue to leave Oleshky on foot under high-risk conditions, and via hazardous routes including areas contaminated by mines and other explosive objects.

Legal barriers

Beyond physical barriers to evacuation, documentation specifications have emerged as critical constraints affecting civilian movement and protection risks. Before people can meet the legal requirements for evacuation, many face an additional obstacle: they are unable to produce the necessary documents because these were lost or destroyed in aftermath of the Kakhovka Dam explosion and the subsequent flooding.

Previously, the Ministry of Reintegration of the Temporarily Occupied Territories in Ukraine had issued return certificates to people from said territories, including their relatives. The certificate could be later handed over in Ukrainian-controlled areas to facilitate travel. This mechanism has since been discontinued and the Ministry of Reintegration transformed into a different entity, the Ministry of National Unity.

Instead of a return certificate, individuals can currently obtain a certificate confirming Ukrainian citizenship issued by the State Migration Service of Ukraine. However, Russian and Belarusian border authorities do not recognise this document, meaning that holders of only this certificate are not permitted to cross the border (there is little evidence of such document being issued and presented at border crossing points either).

> **“The people of Oleshky do not need sympathy. They need protection, humanitarian access, and a real opportunity to leave safely. Every day of delay costs lives. The greatest tragedy of Oleshky today is not only the war itself. It is the fact that civilians have become trapped, with fewer and fewer opportunities to reach safety.”**
>
> - local volunteer who has been providing humanitarian aid to residents of Oleshky for over 3 years

Protection risks are further compounded during Russian so-called filtration procedures or a security and identification check. Evacuees holding Ukrainian passports and without Russian documentation appear particularly vulnerable to harassment and abuse. Reports include intrusive and degrading searches, including cases of older persons being forced to undress.

Civilians lacking any valid documentation – either Ukrainian or Russian – face increased vulnerabilities. After leaving Oleshky, they are often required to remain for extended and often unpredictable periods of time in occupied territories while attempting to secure their onward movements, prolonging their exposure to protection risks and imposing significant financial and psychological burdens during an already challenging evacuation process.

RECOMMENDATIONS

01 The **Russian occupying authorities must uphold their obligation to immediately guarantee safe and unimpeded access to temporarily occupied areas of the Kherson region**, in line with the international humanitarian law, particularly to the areas where civilians lack access to food, water, healthcare and other essential services. Humanitarian assistance must be delivered impartially and without discrimination in coordination with relevant international humanitarian actors.

02 All parties to the conflict must ensure that civilians seeking to temporarily evacuate Oleshky and other temporarily occupied settlements in the Kherson region are able to do so **voluntarily, safely, and without obstruction**. Civilians should be guaranteed safe and unhindered passage to areas under Ukrainian governmental control, including through agreed humanitarian routes, and where necessary through third countries.

03 Safe evacuation corridors and **minimum standards for dignified evacuation** must be established and maintained, including guarantees of physical safety, family unity, access to medical assistance, transportation, shelters, and protection along the entire displacement corridor. Attention should be given to the needs of older persons, persons with limited mobility, persons with dis-abilities, children, and other groups with heightened vulnerability.

04 Administrative barriers that impede civilian movements or access to humanitarian protection should be lifted. All parties to the conflict, with support of the International Committee of the Red Cross and the United Nations, should ensure that civilians can obtain the **necessary documentation required for safe movement** across checkpoints and international borders.

05 The **protection of civilians must be prioritised, guaranteed, and monitored** along the displacement corridor and upon return. Humanitarian responders delivering aid and facilitating civilian evacuations must always be protected under international humanitarian law. Intimidation, obstruction, and attacks against humanitarian workers, humanitarian and evacuation convoys are illegal; parties to the conflict must refrain from these violations and guarantee the safety of civilians and humanitarian responders. Conditions for voluntary, safe, and dignified return must be guaranteed once hostilities cease, and essential services are sufficiently restored in affected areas.