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Iasmina is a Master's student at Utrecht University specializing in International Security and Conflict Law. Building on a bachelor in Public International Law, she has developed expertise in conflict, humanitarian and human rights law, diplomacy, and international security, while remaining curious about other complementary domains. Wherever her career takes her, she aims to embody her core scout values and "leave the world better than she found it."

About the publication:



3 Main Points:

1. Do Russian strikes on Ukrainian energy infrastructure violate international humanitarian law?
2. The attacks systematically targeted civilian infrastructure during extreme winter conditions, causing disproportionate civilian harm with no identifiable military necessity, in breach of the Geneva Conventions and Additional Protocol I.
3. The law is clear. What is missing is the political will to enforce it.

Highlight Sentence:

“The scale of civilian suffering consequently after the January attacks exceeded any concrete military advantage, making the attacks a violation of the proportionality principle under humanitarian law.”

Definition:

Proportionality principle = IHL principle prohibiting attacks where expected civilian harm is excessive relative to the anticipated direct military advantage of the operation.

War in the Dark: How Russian military strikes on Ukrainian power plants affected lives of hundreds of civilians

A cold welcome to 2026

For some, the year 2026 came with hope, yet for some, it came with chaos and uncertainty. While many were just starting the new year, the US was already [launching attacks in Venezuela](#), peace negotiations were emerging between [Cambodia and Thailand](#), and Ukrainian-Russian war still ongoing. January 2026 marked one of the coldest winters in recent years in Ukraine, yet this did not leave the Russian troops to cease or slow down their military operations. In Kyiv, two combined heat and power plants were targeted, not once, but repeatedly within the same month, by the Russian missiles, leaving more than 1000 tower blocks with disrupted heat and electricity, and with authorities unable to cover the casualties before spring. At least 161 civilians died because of the attack and over 700 were injured [during this month](#) . Not only were civilians home affected, but also schools, hospitals, and other facilities were also disrupted, on days in which temperature



would reach even minus 20 degrees. "When power, heating, and water are repeatedly knocked out in the dead of winter," [the head of United Nations Monitoring Mission in Ukraine \(HRMMU\) noted](#), "basic survival becomes a daily struggle."

A deliberate strategic campaign

Russia's targeting campaign did not only aim at Ukrainian military objectives, but to deliberately undermine Ukraine's citizens ability to conduct a normal life, using cold and darkness as political pressure weapons in Ukraine. While Dimitry Peskov [stated](#) that the military strikes aimed the targets that are associated with the military troops of Kyiv regime, the evidence on destruction showed that the attacks in fact affected purely residential areas, and protected facilities (hospitals and schools). Thus, the operational objective shifted from destructing individual precise targets to [degrading the functionality of an entire infrastructure](#), that is also essential for the lives of all Ukraine's population, not only the military forces. Disruptions to electricity and power facilities also affects heating, communications, medical services, effectively disabling life-support services. And all of this unfolded during one of the coldest winters in Ukraine. While the attacks from Russian forces on Ukrainian energy infrastructures is not a new topic, but rather a recurrent scenario since the war [started in 2022](#), this is the latest and most drastic one. Whether this constitutes a carefully calculated military and strategic operation, or an accumulation of deliberate choices and circumstance, is a question that law helps answer, in the following section.

(maybe also include the security issue for nuclear use of power, if word counts allows)

What international (humanitarian) law says

Under international humanitarian law (IHL), and more specifically Additional Protocol I (AP I) and the Geneva Conventions (GC I-IV) – both ratified by Ukraine and Russia – the rules from these instruments [are particularly relevant](#) when unravelling this incident. As a general principle in IHL, parties to an armed conflict must at all times distinguish between military objectives and civilian objects, as well as between combatants and civilians. As such, under [Art. 52 of AP I](#), attacks may be only directed at objects which, by their nature, location, purpose, or use, make an



effective contribution to the military action. The balancing factor in this equation would be the military necessity. Under the principle of proportionality, equally important in humanitarian law, the military advantage anticipated from an operation must be weighed against the expected civilian harm. Attacks that cause excessive civilian harm in relation to the anticipated direct military advantage are strictly prohibited. Further, under [Art. 54 of AP I](#), attacks against objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population are also prohibited.

However, in some circumstances, objects such as power grids may qualify as dual-use, serving both civilian and military purposes. Then, the debate and analysis is more complicated, as there needs to be a proof whether the objects are used exclusively for the aid of the military forces, or for the civilian population. Nonetheless, the Ukrainian scenario proves very hard the Russian narrative that the power grids were a [military objective](#). Given that the attacks have not been proven to directly target supply facilities serving the Ukrainian military, but have instead cut electricity, water, and heat to residential areas, leaving hundreds of people at the mercy of a severe and cold winter, it is impossible to prove the military necessity. The scale of civilian suffering did exceed any concrete identified military advantage, making the attack in violation of the proportionality principle explained before. The [UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission \(UNHRMM\) has concluded](#) there are reasonable grounds to believe that multiple aspects of Russia's recent energy campaign have violated foundational principles of IHL. But even then, the question remains: who should enforce the IHL, when the warring party is not willing to comply?

Conclusions

Yet, why does it matter IHL so much in this case? While IHL does not concern itself with the causes of a conflict, nor with *who started* it, its focus is on *who is protected* during a conflict, and what limits binds those who wage it. So, what happened in January 2026 is not only a military operation that exceeded proportionality, disguised as a 'legitimate' military aim, but was also the start of a longer-term consequences and disruptions in the civilian lives. Bottom line - power grids, heating plants, and



water systems are not military targets, when used for the civilian population. But when they are destroyed in winter, they function as weapons against this very civilian population they were built to serve.

So, while we may have many legal instruments governing what happens during wars, in this concrete case, what sits between the law and what is happening on the field depends on the political will. A lock only works if a hand is willing to turn the key. Therefore, uncertainty does not come from what the law says, but whether it will be enforced.