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A photograph of a Red Cross volunteer, wearing a red jacket with a Swiss Red Cross patch, hugging an elderly woman from behind. The woman is wearing a dark red hooded jacket and a patterned scarf. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with a green fence.

# RED CROSS

# MENTAL HEALTH

# RESPONSE

to the international  
armed conflict in  
Ukraine (2022–2025)

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# Executive Summary

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The international armed conflict in Ukraine has caused a major humanitarian crisis, displacing millions of people within Ukraine and forcing millions more to flee to countries across Europe and beyond. Experiencing loss, the destruction of homes and livelihoods, exposure to violence, the disruption of family and community ties and the hardships of internal and cross-border displacement can have serious and lasting consequences for people's mental health.<sup>1</sup> From the outset of the conflict, the Ukrainian Red Cross Society and National Red Cross Societies (National Societies) across Europe have been at the forefront of providing crucial humanitarian assistance, including mental health and psychosocial<sup>2</sup> support (MHPSS)<sup>3</sup>, to people affected by the conflict. In June 2022, with the support of the EU4Health programme, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) launched the project [Provision of quality and timely psychological first aid to people affected by the Ukraine crisis in impacted countries](#). This historic partnership between the European Commission's and the IFRC, implemented on the ground by 28 National Societies with the support of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement MHPSS Hub (MHPSS Hub, formerly the IFRC Reference Centre for Psychosocial Support), stands as one of the largest responses to mental health challenges ever implemented by the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (the Movement).

Under the project, National Societies have been delivering various levels of MHPSS, ranging from providing basic psychosocial support to facilitating access to specialized mental health care. They have been supporting the recovery and psychosocial wellbeing of people in Ukraine and those who have been displaced across Europe through a variety of channels and platforms. These include helplines, in-person individual and group counselling, psychoeducational workshops, mobile clinics and community-based MHPSS (CB MHPSS) activities. In the course of the project, National Societies adapted their activities to meet the evolving mental health needs of affected communities as the conflict unfolded.

The introduction of CB MHPSS activities into the project has played a particularly crucial role in strengthening long-term resilience and coping mechanisms among affected communities, fostering sustainable support systems and ensuring lasting impact beyond the immediate response. In addition, tailored activities have been developed for individuals in vulnerable situations, including women, children, older people and people with disabilities. Actively engaging people displaced from Ukraine in the design and implementation of project activities promoted their agency at the community level and ensured that the activities were relevant and responsive to their needs.

Innovative, technology-based approaches used digital tools and platforms to connect people with professionals and peers in a flexible, discreet and accessible way. As such, these tools have contributed to overcoming pervasive stigma against mental health conditions, which has been recognized as a key barrier to accessing timely mental health support. Additionally, through mobile clinics and outreach, access to MHPSS services has been expanded to include hard-to-reach population groups, especially older people with limited familiarity with or access to digital tools.

Close collaboration with local partners, such as municipalities, civil society organizations and health and migration authorities, has been essential in delivering complementary and impactful MHPSS services, ensuring that the needs of diverse groups are met while reaching as many people in need of support as possible. Furthermore, National Societies have engaged local partners in extensive training efforts supported by the project, helping to build the MHPSS capacities of key local stakeholders. This approach has promoted local ownership and ensured broader outreach. It has also deepened understanding of the importance of integrating MHPSS into community-level health, social and educational services, thereby reinforcing local commitment to inclusive mental health care.

Due to the growing impact of the conflict on children's mental health and the vital role of educators, health professionals and social workers in supporting them, a dedicated component to strengthen these professionals' skills in psychological first aid (PFA) was introduced to the project.



Photo: MHPSS training for volunteers and staff from Ukraine at the Lodz branch of the Polish Red Cross. Source: IFRC, 2022.

In addition to providing support to people directly affected by the armed conflict in Ukraine, the project has placed emphasis on the wellbeing of responders both within and outside the Red Cross, by developing and strengthening initiatives aimed at caring for staff and volunteers. These initiatives have sought to mitigate the potential impact on the wellbeing of responders, many of whom are from Ukraine. The project has also been instrumental in establishing sustainable frameworks for integrating MHPSS into the core operations of the Red Cross across Europe.

This publication aims to provide an overview of the project's efforts in delivering PFA and MHPSS services to those affected by the conflict in Ukraine. It outlines the project's key approaches and achievements and provides recommendations for future initiatives. By presenting a detailed account of the methodologies employed and examples of activities carried out, it seeks to inform and inspire policy-makers, practitioners and stakeholders. It illustrates how the project evolved over time – continuously adapting and refining its methods – to deliver effective, impactful and sustainable support that has significantly improved the mental health and wellbeing of people affected by the conflict in Ukraine.

# Foreword

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As Regional Director for Europe of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), I am proud to introduce this publication, which captures the tangible impact of our collective work through the project *Provision of quality and timely psychological first aid to people affected by the Ukraine crisis in impacted countries*, aimed at supporting those affected by the Ukraine crisis with timely and compassionate mental health and psychosocial care.

The escalation of the conflict in Ukraine has had profound and far-reaching consequences for millions. The displacement, loss and trauma experienced by individuals and communities have underscored the urgent need for comprehensive MHPSS. In response, the project *Provision of quality and timely psychological first aid to people affected by the Ukraine crisis in impacted countries* has played a vital role in delivering coordinated, evidence-based interventions, ensuring that people in crisis receive the care they need and deserve.

This publication stands as a testament to the dedication and resilience of our teams, partners and donors. It showcases the innovative approaches and collaborative action that have been instrumental in addressing the mental health needs of those affected. From community-based support to more specialized and person-centred services, our efforts have been tailored to meet diverse needs, foster resilience and promote wellbeing.

In alignment with our [Movement policy on addressing mental health and psychosocial needs](#) and the resolution [Addressing mental health and psychosocial needs of people affected by armed conflicts, natural disasters and other emergencies](#) – endorsed by the signatories of the Geneva Conventions – we have made MHPSS a cornerstone of our humanitarian strategy. This reflects our belief that mental health care is as essential as food, shelter and medical aid.

We are especially grateful for the support of the European Commission and the partnerships that have made this work possible. The combined efforts of the IFRC, National Societies, government representatives, international organizations and community members have allowed us to reach and support thousands of people across Europe – and to do so with an emphasis on humanity, dignity and professionalism.

As we continue to respond to the ongoing challenges of this crisis, our focus on mental health remains steadfast. Recovery takes time, and sustained support will be critical. But together – with your continued trust and partnership – we can help rebuild lives and strengthen communities for the future.

To our donors, volunteers and teams on the ground – thank you. Your commitment is making a real and lasting difference.

**Birgitte Bischoff Ebbesen,**  
IFRC Regional Director for Europe

After more than three years of devastating armed conflict in Ukraine, there are millions of internally displaced persons within the country, and millions more have fled to neighbouring countries in search of safety. Displaced persons, far from home, face not only grief and loss but also financial strain and social isolation. Circumstances like these have a long-lasting and profound impact on their mental health.

The European Union (EU) and its member states are committed to standing with Ukraine. Since February 2022, the EU has made available more than €100 billion in financial, humanitarian, and military assistance to Ukraine and to support the needs of people displaced from Ukraine within the EU. This includes support for one of the areas immediately identified as crucial: mental health and psychosocial support.

The European Commission is building a strong European Health Union, including by stepping up our efforts in prevention, ensuring affordable and equal access to most treatments, and safeguarding the security of our health-care systems. Mental health is an important part of this endeavour. Specifically relevant for this project, we recognise that refugees and displaced persons need mental health support and early interventions to reduce distress. This project with the IFRC began in May 2022 in five countries. The Red Cross's highly successful work with underserved, displaced, and mobile populations during the COVID-19 pandemic – combined with the efforts of their National Societies on the ground – made the IFRC a natural partner for this difficult challenge.

In July 2022, the Commission signed an agreement granting Ukraine access to EU health funding via the EU4Health Programme. The project was immediately extended to include Ukraine and, over the following months, expanded to involve 22 countries – and eventually 28.

What was initially perceived as temporary displacement has now lasted more than three years. Children who started off attending distance schooling of their home country are



now integrating into local schools. Health services that were once used primarily for emergencies – due to a preference for consulting with national healthcare providers – are now accessed routinely. At the same time, uncertainty about if and when people can return to Ukraine makes maintaining both mental and physical health an ongoing challenge. The IFRC has proven its value by quickly adapting to the specific needs of displaced populations, the countries receiving them, and the evolving situation and needs.

The success of this project is thanks to the professionalism of the Red Cross. Particular appreciation goes to the National Societies, their staff and the volunteers.

**Isabel de la Mata, Principal Adviser for  
Health and Crisis Management, European Commission**

# List of Abbreviations

<b>CB MHPSS</b>	Community-based mental health and psychosocial support
<b>CEA</b>	Community engagement and accountability
<b>EU</b>	European Union
<b>ICRC</b>	International Committee of the Red Cross
<b>IFRC</b>	International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
<b>LGBTIQ</b>	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer
<b>MHPSS</b>	Mental health and psychosocial support
<b>MHPSS Hub</b>	International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement MHPSS Hub
<b>PFA</b>	Psychological first aid
<b>TPD</b>	Temporary Protection Directive
<b>WHO</b>	World Health Organization

# Introduction

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The escalation of the international armed conflict in Ukraine has wrought devastation on the lives of millions of people. The Ukrainian Red Cross Society and National Societies across Europe have been at the forefront of providing crucial humanitarian aid in response to the consequences of the conflict, mobilizing volunteers in a large-scale emergency response and establishing Humanitarian Service Points<sup>4</sup> at border crossings, train stations, city centres and airports. In Ukraine, the Ukrainian Red Cross Society has been working closely with public authorities and Movement partners to provide a comprehensive response. In countries neighbouring or nearby Ukraine, including Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, the Republic of Moldova, Romania and Slovakia, where large-scale movements of people from Ukraine have taken place, and across Europe, National Societies have been providing vital support to children, families and individuals from the outset of the conflict.

In 2025, as the conflict enters its fourth year, an estimated 3.6 million people are internally displaced, and a staggering 12.7 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance in Ukraine<sup>5</sup>. A further 6.3 million people from Ukraine have found refuge across Europe<sup>6</sup>, with approximately 4.2 million under temporary protection status<sup>7</sup> in European Union (EU) countries as of 31 March 2024,<sup>w</sup> constituting the largest population displacement in Europe since the Second World War.

The human toll of the Ukraine conflict, however, extends far beyond physical displacement. Millions of people have experienced profound losses, including the death of loved ones and the destruction of their homes, which have inflicted deep psychological wounds. Many have been subjected to violence, witnessed traumatic events and endured extremely stressful situations, including the collapse of their livelihood, separation from family members and financial insecurity in their new environment. Furthermore, the protracted nature of the conflict and uncertainty about the future are expected to have a significant and lasting impact on the mental health of the Ukrainian population both in and outside Ukraine.

Early and adequate MHPSS for people affected by crises or emergencies is critical for several reasons. It can prevent distress from escalating into more severe mental health conditions that become harder and costlier to manage later, requiring resource-intensive specialized services. Reducing distress also strengthens the ability of displaced people to cope more effectively with the challenges posed by conflict and displacement, including integration into a new culture and society. It ultimately helps restore a sense of hope, self-efficacy and resilience that is essential for long-term health outcomes.

However, access to quality and timely mental health services for conflict-affected and displaced people is challenging due to multiple barriers, such as language, the stigma of mental health conditions, limited access to public health-care systems, lack of information on available services and the limited number of qualified professionals, often resulting in long waiting times for much needed support. To counter these barriers, just months after the escalation of hostilities in Ukraine in 2022, the IFRC, the MHPSS Hub and the National Societies in Ukraine, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania and Slovakia, in close partnership with the European Commission, launched the project *Provision of quality and timely psychological first aid to people affected by the Ukraine crisis in impacted countries*. Recognizing the immense need for MHPSS services for people displaced due to the conflict, by 2024 the project had expanded to involve 28 National Societies across Europe. Their coordinated effort stands as one of the largest responses to mental health needs in emergencies ever implemented by the Red Cross and Red Crescent family.

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The following National Societies participate in the project: Belgian Red Cross, Bulgarian Red Cross, Croatian Red Cross, Czech Red Cross, Danish Red Cross, Estonian Red Cross, Finnish Red Cross, French Red Cross, German Red Cross, Hellenic Red Cross, Hungarian Red Cross, Icelandic Red Cross, Irish Red Cross, Italian Red Cross, Latvian Red Cross, Lithuanian Red Cross, Luxembourg Red Cross, Red Cross Society of the Republic of Moldova, Red Cross of Montenegro, Norwegian Red Cross, Polish Red Cross, Portuguese Red Cross, Romanian Red Cross, Slovak Red Cross, Slovenian Red Cross, Spanish Red Cross, Swedish Red Cross and Ukrainian Red Cross Society.

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Adopted in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the European Commission's EU4Health programme seeks to boost pandemic preparedness and build stronger, more resilient and more accessible health systems. A key part of the EU4Health programme is a historic and ambitious partnership between the European Commission and the IFRC to provide PFA and mental health services to people throughout

Europe who have been impacted by the conflict in Ukraine. The project was highlighted in the Communication from the European Commission on a comprehensive approach to mental health as a flagship initiative and one of the largest ever implemented under the EU4Health programme. It is also the most extensive initiative providing mental health support for people affected by the conflict in Ukraine.

### The project aims to:

- ensure that sufficient PFA and MHPSS is provided to people affected by the conflict both in and outside Ukraine
- support National Societies in their efforts to meet the mental health and psychosocial needs of staff, volunteers and front-line responders in order to ensure effective response before, during and after a crisis
- strengthen cooperation and collaboration with all relevant partners, including governmental, non-governmental, and international actors, and the coordination of MHPSS activities in the field and at country level.

### By March 2025, the project had:

- trained 36,000+ health professionals, volunteers, first aid responders and other professionals to provide PFA and MHPSS, including 8,000+ teachers, teaching assistants, social workers and health professionals and 2,000+ Ukrainian/Russian-speaking health professionals
- provided MHPSS services to 546,000+ people affected by the conflict
- established or expanded 89 helplines and other service platforms to provide MHPSS services
- provided support to 26,000+ Red Cross staff and volunteers and front-line responders
- facilitated 1,600+ meetings with relevant partners.

The intention of this publication is to inform and inspire policy-makers, practitioners and stakeholders by presenting an overview of the approaches developed and implemented under the project *Provision of quality and timely psychological first aid to people affected by the Ukraine crisis in impacted countries*. It illustrates how the project evolved over time, continuously adapting and refining its methods and approaches to deliver effective, impactful and sustainable support to address the psychosocial and mental health needs of people affected by the conflict in Ukraine. It details the key approaches, including needs-based approaches, CB MHPSS and innovative digital tools, that have been employed by the project to address the specific mental health challenges faced by affected people. The presentation of key approaches is complemented with examples of activities, tools and evidence-based practices implemented on the ground by National Societies participating in the project and their partners, demonstrating their practical application. These examples are illustrative and do not represent the full range of activities carried out under the project. The publication concludes with a set of key recommendations to guide future initiatives and policy development in the field of mental health support to communities affected by crises and emergencies.

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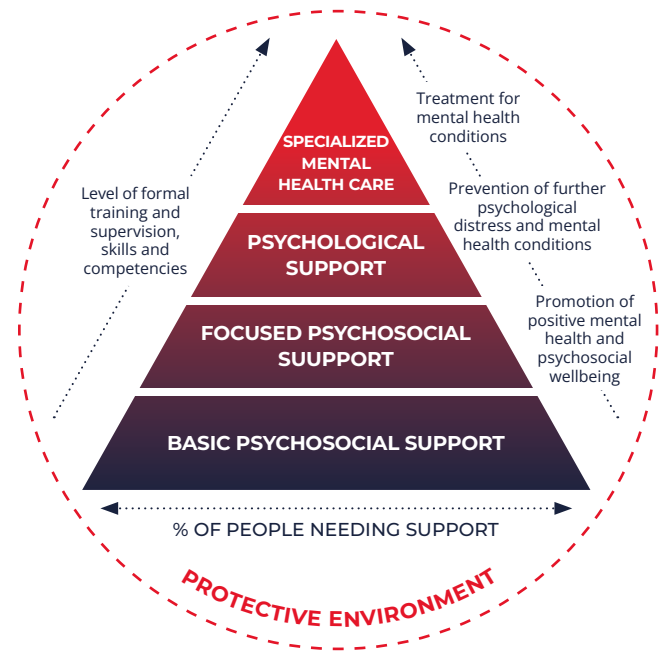
Learn more about the project by consulting [this webpage](#).

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# Key Approaches

## NEEDS-BASED APPROACH

Following the escalation of the Russia–Ukraine international armed conflict in 2022, the extensive Red Cross network spanning Ukraine and countries across Europe enabled the organization of an immediate large-scale humanitarian response. The project *Provision of quality and timely psychological first aid to people affected by the Ukraine crisis in impacted countries* began as an emergency-focused response to the mental health needs of people in Ukraine and in countries hosting those who have been displaced. To identify the mental health challenges experienced by affected communities and tailor project activities effectively, thorough needs assessments were conducted. They found that mental health and psychosocial needs were widespread, with many reporting symptoms of anxiety and depression, sleep problems and psychosomatic symptoms. However, access to mental health-care services was limited, and vulnerable groups, including female-headed households, adolescents, children, people with disabilities and older people, in particular, faced significant barriers to accessing much needed support.



Movement's MHPSS Framework<sup>9</sup>



Photo: Red Cross staff member blows bubbles for children in the service center of the Red Cross in Uzhhorod, Ukraine. Source: Ukrainian Red Cross Society, 2022.

The assessments highlighted strong coping capacities of people affected by the crisis, despite the challenges, demonstrating self-organization, resourcefulness and mutual support. They also showed a strong preference for face-to-face support services and group activities that combined skill building or engaging exercises with spaces for sharing concerns. Those involved in the assessments expressed a clear preference for regular psychological support, ideally through ongoing phone sessions, rather than one-off calls, and for services provided by Ukrainian mental health professionals, with language being a key factor in building trust.

In line with these findings, tailored activities were designed, leveraging and adapting existing resources, such as helplines and web-based platforms. In addition, extensive in-person PFA and MHPSS was provided through local Red Cross branches, Humanitarian Service Points and other channels. In this way, National Societies have been delivering varied and complementary MHPSS, ranging from providing basic psychosocial support to facilitating access to specialized mental health care, in accordance with the Movement's MHPSS Framework. The Framework recognizes that individuals, families and communities in different contexts have different needs and require various types of support provided as part of a multi-layered approach.



Photo: Christina, a member of the team of operators, answering a call to the Polish Red Cross Infoline in Warsaw. Source: Nora Peter, IFRC, 2023.

*“ Sometimes, people who call are so stressed that they cannot stop crying. We’ve been trained to talk to them in a way that helps reduce their stress. When they receive the information they need, they can finally relax. I’m also far from home, so I feel the same way as the people who are calling us. I can absolutely understand their problems, and I’m glad to be able to help. ”*

Christina from Kyiv, member of the team of operators at the Polish Red Cross Infoline



The **Polish Red Cross** has been providing MHPSS to people displaced from Ukraine through three service platforms. A general information line is staffed by specialists from Poland and Ukraine, who speak Polish, Ukrainian, Russian and English. Calls to the Infoline are answered by an experienced operator who, after a short conversation aimed at establishing what the caller needs, provides relevant information or connects the caller to a psychologist. The number of calls and requests for assistance is not limited, ensuring that people in distress are accompanied and supported for as long as needed. The second service platform is the “Friend in Touch” programme, which involves connecting people in need of support with professional Polish Red Cross staff. The psychosocial support provided during regular calls reduces feelings of loneliness and helps build a sense of belonging and social connection. In addition, through the Telegram channel *Infolinia PCK*, the National Society provides accessible MHPSS materials, shares information about relevant events and offers support to affected people.

PFA is a widely recognized method that provides immediate emotional and practical support to people in distress. It is a simple yet powerful way of helping that involves paying attention to a person’s reactions, engaging in active listening and, if relevant, providing practical assistance to help address immediate problems and basic needs.<sup>10</sup> For the **Ukrainian Red Cross Society**, PFA has been a vital response mechanism during the ongoing conflict, providing both immediate care and mental health support to those affected, including internally displaced people and volunteers. Through the project, the Ukrainian Red Cross Society has supported a national contact centre in Lviv (Information Centre) and two regional helplines in Mykolaiv and Kharkiv, with MHPSS operators who provide appropriate support to affected people. The Information Centre operators, who engage with people experiencing emotional distress, underwent PFA training as part of the project. The training equipped operators with essential skills to actively listen to callers, understand their emotional state and provide appropriate referrals when necessary.

## Addressing the Mental Health Needs of People in Situations of Vulnerability

Responding to the needs of the most vulnerable has been at the heart of the project, with the delivery of tailored support for those most affected by the crisis. More than 90% of the people who have fled Ukraine are women, children, older people, people with disabilities and others facing different vulnerabilities and risks.<sup>11</sup> The loss of loved ones, exposure to violence and traumatic events, the disruption of daily life and routines, material deprivation and uncertainty about the future are some of the key stressors impacting the mental health of women, children and young people affected by the conflict. Furthermore, the conflict has severely weakened the protective environment around children in Ukraine, making them even more vulnerable to potential violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation.<sup>12</sup> For those who have been displaced, the erosion of family structures, challenges in adapting to a new environment and the lack of social networks are factors that have further heightened mental health vulnerabilities. In addition, children and young people face severe challenges linked to prolonged periods out of school, leading to learning losses, and the lack of in-person learning as a result of online schooling.

Women make up nearly half of all beneficiaries of temporary protection in the EU, while children account for a third,<sup>13</sup> making this one of the most gendered displacement crises of our time, marked by widespread family

separation. Women displaced from Ukraine have borne a disproportionate burden of the conflict, taking on increased caregiving responsibilities for family members and helping children navigate their distress. The gender aspect of the crisis has also raised concerns related to increased risks of gender-based violence, including domestic violence and human trafficking, for both women and children.

In Ukraine, 24% of the population (8.9 million people) is over 60, making this humanitarian crisis the oldest in the world.<sup>14</sup> Older people – in and outside Ukraine – are often isolated and strongly dependent on humanitarian aid. Those who have been displaced face significant language barriers in their host community, which makes it difficult for them to access essential services, such as health care, and navigate daily life. This isolation not only hinders their ability to integrate into their host community but also contributes to increased loneliness and heightened mental health risks.<sup>15</sup>

For people who already had a mental health condition or physical disability, LGBTIQ people and other groups at risk of exclusion, such as the Roma community, pre-existing inequalities and protection risks have been exacerbated. Recognizing the conflict's disproportionate impact on the most vulnerable, National Societies have developed targeted MHPSS activities to address the needs of those who have borne the heaviest mental health toll.



Photo: Red Cross staff member provides comfort in the Slovak Red Cross Community Centre in Humenné. Source: Jesper Guhle, MHPSS Hub, 2025.



The **German Red Cross** supports people displaced from Ukraine through a variety of social groups and activities run by a regional branch and a local chapter, many of which are specifically designed to meet the needs of women and children. These initiatives include psychologist-led group meetings to address the specific support needs of children displaced from Ukraine, open café gatherings, weekly courses and activities such as workshops on self-care and resilience as well as women's gatherings and singing groups. A dedicated day

allowed families displaced from Ukraine to discuss parenting challenges, fears and adjustment difficulties, with psychologist-supported parent groups addressing children's issues by age. Furthermore, support is provided at the Red Cross meeting centre, and a Telegram support group and a telephone helpline have been established. The helpline is operated by a Ukrainian-speaking psychological specialist who addresses psychological, educational and therapeutic inquiries and provides initial support over the phone.



Photo: Women from Ukraine participating in a women's singing group organized by the German Red Cross. Source: Jesper Guhle, MHPSS Hub, 2024.



As part of the project, the **Icelandic Red Cross** launched the Wellbeing4U programme, aimed at fostering the long-term resilience and mental wellbeing of people displaced from Ukraine in Iceland and supporting their integration into host communities. The programme is centred around psychoeducational sessions delivered by Red Cross volunteers on a peer-to-peer basis in their native language, which actively engages the community in the delivery of services and strengthens community efficacy. A women's support group brings together women of different ages who meet

weekly for psychosocial activities, including MHPSS workshops, where they exchange coping strategies and self-care practices. The group participates in cultural events and trips, creating a strong support network where members can share their experiences in a safe and understanding environment. In the youth group, teenagers engage in play-based activities that encourage self-expression and skill building. Wellbeing activities include yoga classes for older women, sound meditation, activities for older people at risk of social isolation and sports activities for adults.

*“ I had hopes and plans, but the conflict in Ukraine destroyed them. In Iceland, I decided to do my best to support other people who had to flee Ukraine and joined the Red Cross. ”*

Nataliia, EU4Health Project Manager, Icelandic Red Cross



Photo: Women displaced from Ukraine participating in a knitting class organized by the Icelandic Red Cross. Source: Jesper Guhle, MHPSS Hub, 2024.



In Sweden, the project is implemented in collaboration with the **Swedish Red Cross** and **Swedish Red Cross Youth**, which empowers young people displaced from Ukraine through youth clubs that meet in host communities and support them in leading their own initiatives. This is an innovative way for young people to engage with the organization, particularly in areas without a local Red Cross branch. The clubs build on existing youth engagement and foster connections, reducing isolation, building a sense of community within the group

and strengthening a feeling of belonging in the host community. Red Cross Youth staff provide support when needed, ensuring a balance between promoting independence and providing guidance. Currently being piloted nationwide, this approach prioritizes community engagement and accountability (CEA) to promote the creation of meaningful programmes for young people by young people. By offering a space for leadership and self-organization, the initiative helps build resilience and confidence – opportunities young people are often denied.



The **Italian Red Cross** conducted three evacuations of people with pre-existing vulnerabilities, including people with chronic mental health conditions and neurological and physical disabilities, from Ukraine in March and April 2022. The evacuations took place in response to requests for support from the Ukrainian Red Cross Society. A total of 245 people were evacuated to Italy and accommodated in three Italian Red Cross centres located in Settimo Torinese, Marina di Massa and Levico. There, they have been provided with comprehensive assistance, including tailored health and social care services, by Italian Red Cross volunteers and practitioners. With the support of the project, psychologists, aided by health mediators, provide psychosocial support to the residents of the centres. MHPSS activities organized in these facilities include art classes, movement workshops and recreational activities.



Photo: Psychologists and a health mediator holding a movement workshop in the Red Cross centre in Levico, Italy. Source: IFRC, 2024.



The **Irish Red Cross** has been providing vital support for LGBTIQ people displaced from Ukraine through “Friendly Meetings” held in Dublin. Many LGBTIQ people in temporary accommodation experienced bullying and social exclusion, which exacerbated their sense of isolation and vulnerability. Additionally, unfamiliarity with Ireland’s medical system left them feeling lost and unsure of how to access the health-care services they needed. These meetings provide a safe space for sharing crucial information about navigating the health-care system and other essential services in Ireland. They take different formats, including information sessions, art-based wellbeing sessions, coaching, coffee meetings and even hikes. By addressing both their practical and emotional needs, these gatherings have significantly improved the mental health and wellbeing of LGBTIQ people displaced from Ukraine, helping them feel more secure and integrated in their new environment.



As part of the **Hungarian Red Cross's** MHPSS activities, the Komárom-Esztergom branch provided a safe place for people displaced from Ukraine through group and individual sessions called “Armchair of soul”. These regular sessions aimed to strengthen the mental health of participants, by teaching prevention strategies, equipping them with problem-solving skills and fostering self-reflection through supportive conversations and engaging activities led by a mental health professional. Topics covered by the sessions included crisis and conflict management, healthy relationships, addiction, parenting and child wellbeing, and the mental health and psychosocial impacts of discrimination, unemployment and domestic violence. In addition, participants explored goal setting. The sessions also actively involved Roma participants from the Subcarpathian region, with language support provided to facilitate communication. The sessions proved highly valuable, with participants reporting increased emotional wellbeing and expressing appreciation for the dedicated support they received.

## Community-based MHPSS

As the project progressed, prolonged displacement required continuous adjustments to its activities. National Societies carried out needs assessments with the aim of identifying key mental health challenges faced by affected people, gaps in services and potential synergies with other stakeholders in order to ensure that project activities remained relevant, effective and impactful.

The introduction of CB MHPSS activities into the project has been particularly instrumental in supporting the long-term resilience and coping mechanisms of affected people. Unlike PFA, which is short-term and focuses on addressing immediate problems and basic needs, CB MHPSS is a longer-term approach aimed at building sustainable support systems within communities. It includes social and recreational activities, such as art-based wellbeing sessions and mindfulness sessions, along with psychoeducational activities designed to address the stigma of seeking traditional psychological support. These community-based approaches help break down widespread barriers to access to timely MHPSS by those in need of such services.



As part of the project, the **Slovak Red Cross** established six community centres nationwide to provide CB MHPSS and support the integration of people displaced from Ukraine into host communities. Staff and volunteers, including members of the Ukrainian community, are trained in basic and child PFA and CB MHPSS. The centres offer a range of psychosocial support services, recreational activities, awareness raising, mobile outreach and livelihood and skills development. They cater for all age groups, fostering intergenerational bonding and social connection with the host community. Children and adults alike enjoy art classes and music, while activities such as fitness classes and memory training are particularly popular among adults, who also find support through peer groups, psychoeducational sessions and counselling. Children benefit from cooperation between centre staff and speech therapists. Regular exercise provides both physical wellbeing and mental relief, and celebrations of milestone events strengthen community ties. Many people displaced from Ukraine propose and lead activities, becoming volunteers who shape the centres into vibrant spaces that reflect the needs of their community.

Recognizing that communities can drive their own care and change, CB MHPSS fosters the active and meaningful participation of community members in all stages of a MHPSS response. This approach is based on the idea that if people are empowered to take care of themselves and each other, their individual and community self-efficacy and resources will improve.<sup>16</sup> CB MHPSS thus works towards sustainability by focusing on strengthening the community's ability to support itself through the formation of protective social networks. It also helps build positive relationships with host communities, and this, in turn, supports the integration of displaced people into their new environments and strengthens their sense of belonging. Given the significant positive impact of social networks and connectedness on mental health, the project actively fosters strong community partnerships and involves host communities in the delivery of CB MHPSS activities.

*“When people hear a song in their native language, from their homeland, it makes them feel better.”*

Svitlana, a Ukrainian volunteer for the Bulgarian Red Cross who offers music and art-based wellbeing sessions for people from Ukraine



Photo: Art-based wellbeing session for people displaced from Ukraine in a Red Cross community centre in Kosice, Slovakia. Source: Jesper Guhle, MHPSS Hub, 2024.



“Good Mood Cards” developed by the **Finnish Red Cross**, in close cooperation with Ukrainian volunteers, are a CB MHPSS activity set, designed to support group wellbeing and provide volunteers with ideas for engaging exercises and content for group meetings. Available in English, Finnish, Russian, Swedish and Ukrainian, they foster cooperation, strengthen group interaction and help resolve conflicts, making them valuable for both newly formed and long-standing groups. Most importantly, the exercises bring joy to participants while offering accessible psychosocial support that brings communities together. The exercises can be used anytime, anywhere. Team-building activities lay the foundation for collaboration, while exercises focused on interaction, emotional skills and personal strengths enhance group dynamics. Mindfulness and nature-based activities provide moments for recovery when a pause is needed. These exercises are ideal for group meetings, workplace teams and volunteer settings, and professionals can also benefit from their content. The Good Mood Cards therefore serve as a valuable resource for fostering a positive and supportive group environment.



Photo: Slovak Red Cross nurses at the Slovak-Ukrainian border. Source: IFRC, 2022.



The **Spanish Red Cross** implements a range of CB MHPSS activities that support the integration of people displaced from Ukraine into the community and enhance their emotional wellbeing. Activities in nature, such as hiking and forest bathing, promote a connection with the natural environment, help reduce stress, improve mood and foster a sense of belonging. Similarly, art-based wellbeing sessions facilitate emotional expression, promote creativity and help people process traumatic experiences through art. Intergenerational activities encourage the exchange of experiences between different age groups, strengthening community ties and promoting mutual learning. Likewise, support

groups offer a safe space to share experiences, generating empathy and strengthening social networks. Mindfulness workshops reduce stress and improve emotional regulation, and animal-assisted activities offer a variety of benefits for people who have experienced especially stressful situations. These activities help reduce stress and anxiety, improve mood, promote empathy and responsibility, increase confidence, facilitate the therapeutic process and reduce social isolation. They are organized with the active involvement of communities, including by engaging volunteers from Ukraine as facilitators, which strengthens the sustainability of MHPSS activities.

## Community Engagement

Thanks to the project, strong partnerships have been established with the communities of people displaced from Ukraine. Actively engaging them in the design, development and implementation of project activities has been essential for fostering trust and building bridges with affected people. Effective ways in which the project has engaged community members include hiring people displaced from Ukraine as health mediators and helpline

operators and linking with trusted and established Ukrainian-led organizations. By building local capacities, this approach promotes lasting benefits and enables local communities to continue supporting mental health initiatives independently, which contributes to sustainability. Importantly, it also empowers people displaced from Ukraine as agents of change and active participants in their own future and recovery.



The **Bulgarian Red Cross** implements a range of CB MHPSS activities for adults and children, provided by psychologists and volunteers trained in PFA and psychosocial support, many of whom are from Ukraine. Activities include art-based wellbeing sessions, support groups and group activities for children, adults and older people. Peer-to-peer support has become an especially vital aspect of strengthening the resilience and recovery of people displaced from Ukraine. Volunteers from the Ukrainian community trained in PFA possess

the knowledge and skills to provide support to their communities, drawing on their own feelings and shared experiences. Through a mentoring programme, members of the Ukrainian community, trained in PFA and familiar with the health and social system in Bulgaria, became mentors to displaced people from Ukraine experiencing mental health or other health issues. Mentors provide assistance in communicating with the local authorities and social and health institutions and offer guidance and support to help people cope with daily life.

“ When facing challenges, the best thing you can do is help others. By doing so, you keep moving forward rather than being trapped in your problems and fears. ”

Tetiana, volunteer from the Estonian Red Cross



Photo: Children participating in an art-based wellbeing session at the Bulgarian Red Cross branch in Plovdiv.  
Source: Nora Peter, IFRC, 2024.



Community engagement and accountability (CEA) is a way of working that recognizes and values community members as equal partners. It ensures that their opinions are heard and used to design and guide the activities that are implemented. To support CEA in the provision of MHPSS services, the **Hellenic Red Cross** implemented a survey which explored the needs of people displaced from Ukraine and their perceptions on psychological support. The survey examined changes in their behaviour and emotional

state since the beginning of the crisis, identified activities that positively impacted their daily life and assessed their awareness about available psychosocial services. The survey was conducted through focus group discussions with people displaced from Ukraine, a participatory methodology that established two-way communication mechanisms to gather feedback from those receiving support. Their input was used to inform and improve the services provided.

## Innovative Approaches to MHPSS

The project has pioneered a range of innovative approaches to delivering MHPSS services, aimed at improving accessibility, broadening outreach and addressing the specific barriers encountered by people accessing MHPSS services. Recognizing the high level of digital literacy of the affected people, National Societies have been integrating technology into the design and provision of their MHPSS services. Innovations include the development of digital MHPSS tools and platforms which offer a flexible and familiar format for connecting with trained professionals and peers. The anonymity of virtual channels encourages people to seek help without fear of stigma or judgment. In addition, mobile clinics and MHPSS outreach services have made support more accessible for hard-to-reach individuals, such as older people who have limited familiarity with or access to digital platforms.



Photo: A psychologist providing assistance in the mobile caravan of the Red Cross of Montenegro. Source: Red Cross of Montenegro, 2024.



As part of its ongoing commitment to supporting people displaced from Ukraine, the **Red Cross of Montenegro** launched the Telegram chatbot service “Buddy Bot”. The platform offers practical guidance and techniques aimed at strengthening inner resilience and managing distress, anxiety and other challenges associated with crises and displacement. Buddy Bot also serves as a key informational resource providing advice on where to seek additional support, including psychosocial, legal and health-care services. Furthermore, it connects users with a case management focal point within the Red Cross, ensuring individual assistance and referral to support services. To further expand its outreach,

on World Mental Health Day 2024, the **Red Cross of Montenegro** organized a Mental Health Caravan to raise awareness and provide support to people displaced from Ukraine and local communities across the country. The mobile caravan travelled to four major cities, setting up temporary service points in public parks, community centres and other accessible locations. It offered a wide range of activities, including PFA, individual consultations with mental health professionals, access to psychoeducational materials in Ukrainian, self-assessment tools for different aspects of psychosocial functioning and informative sessions on the services available at local Red Cross branches.



In February 2024, the **Danish Red Cross** launched a digital wellbeing site, available in Ukrainian, English and Danish. It offers short animation videos with tools and techniques for managing crises, stress, sleep problems, family life in a new setting and self-care. Relevant referrals to social activities at local Red Cross branches are provided on the site. By combining face-to-face, community-based activities with innovative digital tools, the National Society is expanding the reach of its MHPSS services and offering them

in diverse formats, helping to overcome the stigma associated with mental health conditions and enhance accessibility. In addition, the Danish Red Cross is leveraging digital tools to care for its volunteers, including through an online course which supports their wellbeing and encourages the sharing of experiences. The National Society has also developed videos on topics such as reactions to crises, which serve as teaching aids for psychosocial support courses and PFA courses.

## STRENGTHENING MHPSS CAPACITIES

Recognizing that many Red Cross and Red Crescent staff and volunteers, service providers and professionals had limited prior experience in supporting the mental health and wellbeing of people displaced by conflict, the project was designed to build their capacities and equip them with the tools needed to navigate complex situations with confidence and sensitivity, ensuring the delivery of effective and high-quality MHPSS.

In partnership with the MHPSS Hub, the project significantly strengthened the capacity of National Societies to deliver quality MHPSS services by providing training, technical expertise, guidance and resources tailored to their needs. Training events, organized both at country and regional level, equipped Red Cross staff, volunteers and front-line responders with the skills and tools needed to address the mental health needs of people affected by conflict and emergencies. Tailored in-country training events equipped over 500 National Societies' staff in critical aspects of MHPSS. In addition, the implementation of a series of regional training events brought together participating National Societies to learn from one another, exchange experiences and develop a shared understanding of effective MHPSS interventions, enhancing the collective impact of the project. These regional training events involved over 200 Red Cross staff members and covered the following topics: caring for staff and volunteers, CB MHPSS, MHPSS in emergencies, monitoring and evaluation for MHPSS programmes, PFA for children, PFA for young peers, train-the-trainers PFA course in English and Ukrainian, QualityRights

training and supportive supervision. To ensure ongoing training follow-up, competency development and experience exchange among trainers, a *Community of Trainers* was established in both English and Ukrainian.

Beyond training, the project facilitated a structured approach to MHPSS by developing technical guidance and hosting regular thematic webinars that explored various themes based on identified needs. A strong emphasis on quality assurance and supportive supervision ensured that trainers and MHPSS focal points had the necessary skills and ongoing support to deliver effective services.

Through bilateral meetings and on-site visits by the MHPSS Hub, National Societies received tailored technical assistance that addressed emerging challenges. Furthermore, the MHPSS Hub worked closely with National Societies to adapt existing training tools to local cultural and contextual needs and developed new resources to fill critical gaps identified by the National Societies. The translation of key materials into local languages ensured accessibility and relevance for front-line responders.

Crucially, the strengthened capacity of National Societies translated into better support for displaced people and host communities. With improved skills in MHPSS needs assessments and monitoring and evaluation tools and the creation of a CB MHPSS framework, National Societies were better equipped to respond to the complex psychosocial needs of those affected by the conflict in Ukraine.

The impact of the project's capacity-building efforts extended well beyond the Red Cross. Front-line responders, reception centre and migration authority staff, health professionals, educators and social workers were actively involved in training, which significantly strengthened the MHPSS capacities of external stakeholders. The professionals trained were then able to apply the newly acquired knowledge and skills within their own organizations and the communities they serve.

A key aspect of the project's capacity-building efforts was the inclusion of Ukrainian- and Russian-speaking health professionals in MHPSS training. The fact that they share a language and cultural background with the affected people has been instrumental in making MHPSS services more accessible and inclusive. Additionally, the project trained health mediators in PFA, which helped bridge gaps between people displaced from Ukraine and health-care services by overcoming linguistic and cultural barriers and facilitating access to essential care.

The IFRC's Psychosocial Support Programme began in the early 1990s when National Societies recognized that disasters caused not only physical hardships but also significant mental health challenges. Traditional relief efforts – focused on shelter, food and medical care – proved insufficient. In response, the IFRC established the Reference Centre for Psychosocial Support (PS Centre) in 1993 as a centre of excellence. Hosted by the Danish Red Cross, the PS Centre's core mission was to support the Movement in strengthening National Societies' capacity to implement mental health and psychosocial programmes, ensuring essential support for

communities and for staff and volunteers. Thirty years later, on 1 January 2025, the PS Centre transitioned into the **International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement MHPSS Hub**, further strengthening the Movement's commitment to improving global mental health, building resilience and alleviating suffering. The MHPSS Hub now collaborates with all Movement partners, including National Societies, the IFRC and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) as well as external MHPSS actors, UN agencies, academic institutions, donors and international humanitarian organizations to promote mental health and enhance psychosocial wellbeing.



Photo: "Et toi, comment tu vas?" cards. Source: Sarah Lenoir, Knock Knock Prod, 2023.



The **Belgian Red Cross** provides MHPSS training to build the capacity of front-line responders, enabling them to effectively integrate psychosocial support into their actions. The one-day Integrating Psychosocial Support into Action (ISPSA) training equips volunteers and staff with skills to recognize and respond to stress reactions, apply PFA using the Look, Listen and Link<sup>17</sup> approach and support people in distress. The training also focuses on self-care and the boundaries of the helping relationship, ensuring responders can safeguard their own wellbeing. A key component is the "Et toi, comment tu vas?" (And how are you doing?) tool, an interactive card game that facilitates discussions around emotions, needs, actions and resources, strengthening communication and support networks. By integrating MHPSS into humanitarian responses, this initiative contributes to sustainable capacity building and enhances cross-sector collaboration, ensuring that psychosocial support is a fundamental aspect of crisis response.



Photo: Trainees engaging in a group exercise during the caring for staff and volunteers training in Budapest. Source: Jesper Guhle, MHPSS Hub, 2022.



The **Estonian Red Cross** has placed emphasis on engaging with schools and youth. Complementing the PFA training for school staff, the PFA for Young Peers programme has played a particularly significant role in the National Society's work with young people displaced from Ukraine. This initiative focuses on teenagers – an often overlooked group in psychosocial support, as younger children tend to receive more attention. During one-day workshops implemented in schools in Estonian, Ukrainian and Russian, teens are empowered to recognize distress in their peers and provide support through the core PFA Look, Listen and Link principles, using interactive and engaging methods that promote active listening, practical help and self-care. To ensure long-term impact, trainers are trained to deliver both PFA and Young Peers programmes independently.

“ I've always felt that *I wanted to be useful to others. Thanks to the PFA training, I became more organized, more sensitive to the needs of others, and learned how to maintain emotional balance in difficult situations.* ”

Snizhana, a MHPSS volunteer at the Chernivtsi regional branch of the Ukrainian Red Cross Society

## Building Capacities in PFA for Children

Recognizing the vital role of educators, social workers, and health professionals in supporting the wellbeing of children affected by the conflict in Ukraine, the project sought to strengthen their capacities in providing PFA to children in distress. These training efforts have ensured that children affected by the conflict in Ukraine receive the necessary support and build their resilience amidst ongoing challenges. Additionally, they improve coping capacities of professionals, helping them to identify children's needs better, provide support more effectively, and refer children for further assistance when needed.

To make training in PFA for children widely accessible, the project partnered with The Geneva Learning Foundation and Terre des hommes to develop remote learning solutions, including self-paced e-learning and interactive peer learning programmes, which are offered in English and Ukrainian as well as in other European languages. Designed for educators, social workers and health professionals, the PFA for children e-learning module offers basic knowledge and skills to provide effective assistance to children in distress. Accessible on the [ChildHub website](#), the module leverages real-life stories and cases of Red Cross staff and volunteers across Europe assisting children impacted by the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine, enabling trainees to learn from their experiences and explore effective strategies in diverse contexts. In addition, the online *Certificate peer learning programme on Psychological First Aid (PFA) in support of children affected by the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine*, led by The Geneva Learning Foundation, aims to strengthen the capacities of professionals across Europe by enhancing their knowledge and expertise in supporting children's wellbeing through collaborative and interactive learning, weaving regional networks of knowledge and peer support.

**The Geneva Learning Foundation** has provided online peer learning opportunities to teachers, social workers and health professionals in contact with Ukrainian displaced children across Europe. By March 2025, the activities, offering a variety of peer learning exercises to foster collaborative learning and problem solving, had reached more than 4,000 professionals.



The **Croatian Red Cross** has conducted PFA for children training in cooperation with the national Teacher Training Agency, involving over 1,600 teachers and kindergarten- and school-based professionals, including school psychologists and pedagogists by March 2025. Through both in-person and online training sessions, participants learned what PFA is, how to provide it to children who have experienced stressful or traumatic situations and how to care for their own mental health. Due to highly positive feedback, PFA for children will be integrated into other Red Cross teacher training programmes, including those focused on first aid, migration and emergency response. The PFA for children training served as a foundation for developing guidelines on PFA for schools and kindergartens, which provide concrete examples of how to strengthen the resilience of children. Given the vital role of these institutions in children's lives, the guidelines support recovery through the structure and natural support that kindergartens and schools provide.

*“ By hearing and learning from real stories, I discovered new ways of connecting with children and creating a safe place, such as grounding, breathing and other techniques. ”*

Andreea-Elena Andras, a Red Cross health professional in Romania



Photo: Children participating in an art-based wellbeing session at the Bulgarian Red Cross branch in Plovdiv. Source: Nora Peter, IFRC, 2024.

*“It is encouraging and inspiring to connect with people across Europe with the same goal and similar experiences. This shows that culture, gender and age are no barrier to mutual understanding and learning about supporting children.”*

A Croatian education professional

*“I used to focus on traditional approaches, but now I see that even small actions – like creating a safe space or just being present – can have an enormous impact on a child’s emotional state.”*

A social worker from Ivano-Frankivsk, Ukraine



The **Ukrainian Red Cross Society** has a structured system in place to support the wellbeing of its staff and volunteers. MHPSS teams in each region of the country conduct support sessions on a regular basis. Regular supervision sessions are held for all Information Centre personnel, with a view to equipping them with the necessary skills and support to implement a trauma-informed care approach in their work. Additionally, all staff and volunteers have the opportunity to receive free psychological consultations from an external service provider.



## Caring for Staff and Volunteers

Volunteers and staff are often at the forefront of crisis response, exposed to devastating situations and stories of loss and working in stressful or challenging conditions, all of which can take a significant toll on their mental health and psychosocial wellbeing. Recognizing these risks, the project prioritized caring for Red Cross staff and volunteers and front-line responders, providing them with the support, resources and tools they need to safeguard their own wellbeing as they continue to assist others. This has been especially vital for staff and volunteers who are themselves part of the community affected by the conflict in Ukraine and in need of support, just like those they help.

Caring for staff and volunteers includes face-to-face counselling, supportive supervision, group sessions and recreational and psychoeducational activities aimed at reducing stress and mitigating burnout among first responders. By protecting and promoting the mental health and psychosocial wellbeing of staff and volunteers and equipping them with tools that support them in their day-to-day activities, the project ensures sustained capacity and resilience among those on the front lines of crisis response. As a result, the quality of the services they provide has been enhanced, ensuring better support for affected communities.

Following regional caring for staff and volunteers training conducted as part of the project, the **Lithuanian Red Cross** established a supportive supervision system across departments and programmes for its staff and volunteers, making sure that emotional support is integrated into the supervision of programme activities. Thirteen staff members have been trained to provide group or individual supportive supervision to colleagues and volunteers working in other departments. This system not only enhances the overall wellbeing of staff and volunteers but also helps to prevent burnout, reduce stress and improve job satisfaction. Regular supervision sessions create a safe space for people to reflect on their experiences, share challenges and receive professional guidance, ultimately strengthening their resilience and emotional wellbeing. Additionally, these sessions foster professional growth, enhance teamwork and ensure that employees and volunteers feel valued and supported in their roles, leading to higher motivation and improved service delivery.

*“Professionals working with refugees face unique challenges and often overlook their own needs. Balancing commitment and self-care is crucial to prevent burnout, making stress management vital for both full-time and volunteer staff.”*

Natascha, Head of Migration and EU4Health Project Management, Regional Branch, German Red Cross



The **Luxembourg Red Cross** offers its staff an emotional intelligence programme with two main objectives: first, to strike a healthy balance between self-care and caring for others and, second, to enhance collective resilience within teams by fostering a culture of mutual support and staying true to oneself. The programme places a strong emphasis on the wellbeing and mental health of both affected people and the staff in direct contact with them. It consists of six two-hour sessions in the form of discussion groups, focused on reconnecting with

the body, embracing emotions, learning open communication and committing to personal integrity. It draws on tools from behavioural psychology, body-oriented psychotherapy, mindfulness-based stress reduction, and acceptance and commitment therapy and was developed by the French NGO Karuna Shechen. To ensure sustainability, the trainers provide continuous supervision for teams. The goal is to equip staff with the skills to maintain and improve their wellbeing, ultimately enhancing the quality of services provided to affected people.



In response to the ongoing needs of communities of people displaced from Ukraine in their respective countries, the **Hellenic Red Cross** and the **Portuguese Red Cross** have been collaborating to provide essential support to community-based mental health mediators. Recognizing their critical role in facilitating communication and support within the community, this support group connects Ukrainian community-based mental health mediators across Greece and Portugal, fostering mutual support and collaboration in their native language. The platform provides a space for the sharing of experiences and challenges that health mediators face in similar situations that may be emotionally overwhelming. The support group, which meets online monthly, is accompanied by a mental health professional, who ensures a safe environment and provides guidance throughout the discussion. In this way, the project strengthens the psychological and emotional resilience and coping strategies of community-based mental health mediators.

## Integrating MHPSS into Core Operations

PFA and other MHPSS services can be a stand-alone intervention in a crisis or they can be included in other activities as a cross-cutting component. The project has played a pivotal role in creating sustainable frameworks for incorporating MHPSS into the daily operations of National Societies. By embedding MHPSS practices into regular workflows, the project ensures that mental health support is not treated as a stand-alone service but as an integral part of organizational activities, which enhances outreach and sustainability and helps reduce stigma. This has been further underpinned by the institutionalization of an effective caring for staff and volunteers infrastructure within National Societies and the training of coordinators and team leaders in supportive supervision and PFA.



Photo: Ukrainian refugee children having fun in the Humanity Multicultural Centre in Bucharest, Romania. Source: Romanian Red Cross, 2024.



The MHPSS component has become integral to the operations of the **Romanian Red Cross** and is embedded across all services provided to people displaced from Ukraine. The helpline operated by the National Society is staffed by six Ukrainian operators and three volunteers trained in PFA, CB MHPSS and Problem Management Plus (PM+).<sup>18</sup> In addition to the call centre, platforms for the face-to-face delivery of PFA have been established, including Humanitarian Concept Stores in Bucharest and Constanta which offer essential supplies, information and referrals. Throughout six regions

of Romania, Red Cross health promotion centres provide CB MHPSS, carrying out a range of activities to achieve key MHPSS outcomes. These include recreational activities for children and adolescents, support groups, psychoeducational sessions and initiatives that foster social integration and cultural exchange. Additionally, the centres facilitate access to specialized MHPSS and health services through referrals and/or accompaniment. PFA is also provided through mobile health clinics, and a multicultural centre in Bucharest offers daily psychosocial support activities for people of all ages.



Photo: Art-based wellbeing session by the Slovenian Red Cross. Source: Slovenian Red Cross, 2025.



The **Slovenian Red Cross** has adopted a holistic approach to MHPSS by integrating it as a component of all its programmes. In the context of migration, MHPSS is part of the services provided in the areas of reception, integration, access to medical assistance and restoring family links. By incorporating psychological and/or psychosocial support into the services provided, the National Society ensures a unified and comprehensive response to the needs of displaced people. This approach has also been embraced by other stakeholders, who recognize the Slovenian Red Cross as a key partner for PFA and psychosocial support in general, including during emergency situations, such as the floods that affected Slovenia in 2023.

## PARTNERSHIPS

Collaboration lies at the heart of the project. The number of National Societies participating in the project grew from five at the start of 2022 to 28 in 2024, a testament to the project's impact and a reflection of the growing recognition of the importance of addressing the mental health toll of the conflict in Ukraine. The extensive involvement of National Societies across Europe has enabled the sharing of expertise, mutual learning and exchanges of lessons learned among staff and volunteers implementing the project in diverse local contexts.

In addition, close cooperation with local partners has been essential in delivering impactful and sustainable MHPSS services. Strong collaboration with governmental and non-governmental organizations, civil society and international organizations has allowed MHPSS to be integrated into existing tools and services, such as municipal child-friendly spaces, enabled the scaling up of helplines and enhanced outreach and impact. This collaborative approach has helped bridge gaps and create networks of care.



The **Norwegian Red Cross** has played a key role in sharing its experience in duty-of-care procedures and measures to support staff and volunteers. As part of the National Society's volunteer enrolment process, PFA principles have been integrated into the induction and training package, alongside Red Cross and Red Crescent values, international humanitarian law, and migration and asylum systems. This approach promotes PFA and prioritizes the wellbeing of staff, volunteers and first responders, setting a strong example for other National Societies involved in the project.



The project has catalysed new partnerships and collaborations for the **French Red Cross** both within and beyond the Movement. The National Society has actively advocated for strengthening mental health initiatives, including by joining the MHPSS European Network and the Humanitarian Diplomacy Task Force. Close collaboration with the MHPSS Hub and National Societies participating in the project has enabled the exchange of best practices and innovative tools. Cooperation with the National Societies in Luxembourg and Belgium has led to shared strategies on caring for staff and volunteers. Meanwhile, partnerships with the Portuguese and Croatian National Societies have strengthened CB MHPSS approaches and improved youth and children's mental health through capacity-building initiatives. These efforts include PFA training events, such as workshops for young peers, and the Certificate Peer Learning Programme.



Under the project, the **Czech Red Cross** significantly deepened its long-term collaboration with the Fire Rescue Service of the Czech Republic, a component of the Integrated Rescue System that coordinates the provision of psychosocial support in emergencies. As part of its response to the needs of people displaced from Ukraine, the Czech Red Cross established a system of regional psychosocial support coordinators, who cooperate closely with regional Fire Rescue Service psychologists. This partnership included joint exercises and training events on topics such as peer support and PFA. The project also contributed to the development of the first *Strategic Vision for Mental Health Care and Psychosocial Support*, setting the direction of the Czech Red Cross in this field until 2030. The strategy helped establish an organizational structure for MHPSS, including collaboration with ministries, international organizations and key partners working on psychosocial support and mental health care in the country.



The **Latvian Red Cross** collaborates closely with local municipalities to ensure effective support for people displaced from Ukraine, addressing their mental health needs whilst caring for staff and volunteers through support groups and supervision. A three-day seminar for Ukrainian regional coordinators provided training in PFA to enhance crisis response and plan future activities.

Strong municipal partnerships have been key to the project's success. Additionally, the Latvian Red Cross actively promotes PFA for children among teachers, medical staff and social workers. To strengthen educational support networks, a two-day workshop on child suicide prevention was held in January 2025 for teachers from Latvia and Ukraine working in Latvian schools.



Photo: Municipal coordinators attending a workshop in Cēsis, Latvia. Source: Latvian Red Cross, 2024.

# Conclusions

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Photo: Creative workshop with children in Montenegro. Source: Red Cross of Montenegro, 2023.

Addressing the mental health needs of affected people both during and after crises and emergencies is essential to fostering resilience and recovery. The IFRC recognizes MHPSS as a crucial cross-cutting area of life-saving emergency response. From the onset of the conflict in Ukraine, Red Cross and Red Crescent staff and volunteers have been on the ground addressing the immense need for MHPSS for people in Ukraine and those displaced across Europe.

Thanks to support from the EU4Health programme, National Societies have been providing tailored and layered MHPSS services. They continuously refined their activities based on findings from needs assessments and through direct engagement and consultation with the communities of people from Ukraine, ensuring a responsive and effective approach that prioritizes the participation, local ownership and agency of affected people. The strengths-based approach implemented through CB MHPSS focused on building community resilience by enhancing daily functioning, subjective wellbeing, coping mechanisms and social connectedness. By providing tailored and adaptable support through the approaches presented in this publication, the project has significantly contributed to improving the mental health and wellbeing of those affected by the Ukraine crisis.

Through systematic training and mutual learning, the project's collaborative partnership has significantly strengthened the institutional capacities of National Societies across Europe in delivering high-quality and effective MHPSS. These efforts, combined with the approaches outlined in this publication, enabled National Societies to transition from short-term emergency responses to sustainable, adaptable MHPSS frameworks. By enhancing internal capacities, fostering partnerships and leveraging extensive field experience, the project has empowered National Societies to effectively address growing and complex mental health and psychosocial needs in fragile contexts, emergencies and displacement, leaving a lasting impact on future initiatives.

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Learn more about the activities implemented under the project by consulting the [Successful MHPSS Services Catalogue](#).

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## KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RESPONDING TO CRISES AND EMERGENCIES THROUGH A MHPSS LENS

### — Prioritize MHPSS as a fundamental component of crisis response

MHPSS should be recognized as an essential element of emergency and crisis responses, on par with basic needs such as food, shelter and medical care. Timely MHPSS can prevent the deterioration of mental health and wellbeing, reducing the risk of more severe mental health conditions developing over time. Including MHPSS from the outset of the response enhances resilience and promotes faster recovery among affected communities.

### — Equip front-line workers with MHPSS skills

Front-line responders, including Red Cross staff and volunteers, teachers, social workers and health-care professionals, are critical assets in delivering MHPSS. Equipping them with the necessary skills and knowledge in MHPSS ensures they can provide immediate and effective support to those in need. Comprehensive training programmes should be prioritized to enhance their capacity to recognize, manage and refer mental health concerns appropriately.



Photo: Volunteers conduct psychosocial support session for children at a shelter in Uzhhorod, Ukraine. Source: IFRC, 2022.



Photo: Kateryina from the Hungarian Red Cross plays with a child at a Red Cross shelter in Szeged, Hungary. Source: Brad Zerivitz, American Red Cross, 2022.

### — Protect the mental health and psychosocial wellbeing of staff and volunteers

Duty of care helps protect the safety, health and wellbeing of staff and volunteers and is vital to providing quality MHPSS services. Staff and volunteers need to be equipped with core MHPSS competencies, including skills to support others and themselves, and must have access to ongoing psychological support. Managers and leaders should be equipped and supported to recognize and reduce work-related stressors. All MHPSS personnel and facilities must be protected at all times – including during conflicts and emergencies – and those exposed to distressing events must receive specific and additional MHPSS.

### — Ensure the care continuum and MHPSS integration from acute response to long-term recovery

The mental health impacts of crises and emergencies have longer-term effects that extend well beyond the duration of humanitarian action. MHPSS must be planned as a continuum, spanning from the acute phase of a crisis or emergency to longer-term recovery efforts. Proactive and preventative measures save lives and reduce long-term health-care costs. Integrating MHPSS with other sectors in crisis response enhances the overall impact of interventions and ensures the provision of high-quality, sustained support. All layers of the MHPSS intervention pyramid – from basic services and community support to specialized care – must be accessible, and barriers to these services should be systematically addressed.



Photo: Volunteers providing support to children through play-based activities in Dnipro, Ukraine. Source: IFRC, 2023.

### — Involve and center community members in MHPSS services

Engaging community members in the planning and implementation of MHPSS activities fosters stronger connections between organizations and the communities they serve. People with lived experience bring unique knowledge, strengths and understanding that guide the design and implementation of effective and relevant MHPSS services. Such a participatory approach ensures that interventions are tailored to people's real needs. Peer-to-peer support initiatives, in particular, play a vital role in promoting recovery, wellbeing and social cohesion, especially among displaced people. These activities also facilitate smoother integration and adaptation within host communities.

### — Integrate MHPSS into broader policy frameworks and funding and coordination mechanisms

MHPSS should be embedded within national and EU-level policy frameworks and funding structures to ensure its sustainability and scalability. Dedicated resources must be allocated to building MHPSS capacities and integrating it in emergency preparedness, response, and recovery budgets. Policy-makers should also promote cross-sector collaboration to mainstream MHPSS across health, education, social services and other relevant sectors, reinforcing its critical role in comprehensive crisis management. By aligning efforts, pooling resources and avoiding duplication and gaps, intersectoral coordination enhances the effectiveness and reach of MHPSS interventions, strengthening the overall quality, sustainability and accountability of crisis and emergency response.

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**RED CROSS MENTAL HEALTH RESPONSE**

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**TO THE INTERNATIONAL ARMED CONFLICT**

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**IN UKRAINE** (2022-2025)

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