



# LESSONS LEARNED REPORT

## Emergency Appeal for Ukraine and Impacted Countries

### Bulgarian Red Cross

May, 2026



## Context

The international armed conflict between Russia and Ukraine resulted in a widespread displacement of people from Ukraine since February 2022, with some seeking refuge in Bulgaria. This led to a total 2.3 million people displaced from Ukraine entering the territory of Bulgaria over the period between 2022 and 2025. With more than 200,000 displaced people from Ukraine registering for temporary protection between 2022 and 2025, the regional branches of the Bulgarian Red Cross (BRC) were significantly affected by the sudden and large influx of people seeking assistance. This situation directly prompted the BRC to launch a nationwide fundraising campaign to mobilize resources and provide timely support to those in need. Despite the overwhelming support, the continued flow of newly arriving people meant that the BRC required additional support from the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) through the Emergency Appeal for Ukraine and Impacted Countries. This support enabled the BRC to deliver essential humanitarian assistance, including livelihoods support, hygiene items, health and mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) services.

The Council of the European Union (EU) activated the Temporary Protection Directive (2001/55/EC) on 4 March, 2022, granting immediate, harmonized rights (residence, work, housing, education and medical assistance) to millions displaced people from Ukraine.

In June 2025, the Council of the EU agreed to extend temporary protection status for displaced people from Ukraine until 4 March 2027. Initially, the majority of displaced people from Ukraine planned to remain for a short period in Bulgaria. However, with the continuation of the international armed conflict, these priorities shifted, creating operating challenges for BRC, with a need to design and develop programmes that could assist both the needs of people transiting through Bulgaria and those that planned to remain in country. The BRC's activities through the Emergency Appeal for Ukraine and Impacted Countries shifted gradually to focus on integrating displaced people from Ukraine into Bulgaria through language classes, education support, assistance in official procedures and other services aimed at facilitating social inclusion and self-reliance.

# Methodology

To create a structured and participatory space for reflection, analysis and shared learning from the implementation of the IFRC Emergency Appeal for Ukraine and Impacted Countries in Bulgaria, a lessons learned workshop was conducted in December 2025, bringing together all BRC staff involved in the Emergency Appeal, as well as IFRC staff. Objectives were as follows:

1

Provide an overview of the main activities implemented under the Emergency Appeal for Ukraine and Impacted Countries.

2

Identify and assess key achievements, milestones and successful practices, as well as challenges and activities that required further adjustment.

3

Assess the effectiveness of technical approaches and operational methodologies, including service delivery to people in vulnerable situations, targeting and identification of priority groups and capacity strengthening of National Society staff and volunteers.

4

Explore the replicability of the operation beyond the scope of the Emergency Appeal and identify pathways to ensure the long-term sustainability of implemented activities.

The lessons learned workshop identified and documented lessons learned across key thematic sectors and enabling areas, including health and care, MHPSS, housing and settlements, cash and voucher assistance (CVA), protection, gender and inclusion (PGI) and safeguarding, community engagement and accountability (CEA) and internal and external coordination.

The lessons learned workshop utilized a combination of presentation, group work and plenary discussions to facilitate an interactive and collaborative learning environment. Through this process, the workshop highlighted critical areas for improvement and generated practical recommendations to strengthen the quality, effectiveness and coherence of future emergency responses.

The findings and recommendations will guide future operations of the BRC and IFRC, while also contributing to the broader institutional learning of the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement, particularly by strengthening the capacity to respond to emergencies in ways that promote long-term impact and sustainability.

# Achievements



## Health and Care

### Enhanced access to health and care services

Healthcare was consistently prioritised throughout the Emergency Appeal by the BRC, as evidenced by multiple needs assessments conducted with the affected community. The Cash for Health Programme facilitated the access to healthcare services through insurance payments, reimbursements of medicine, medical equipment, services and transport, but also through referral to health institutions and accompaniment to healthcare providers.

In addition to this programme, the BRC's Greenline helpline provided information on available health services for people with temporary protection status. Building community resilience was another major focus of health activities. First aid courses, basic life support (BLS) and psychological first aid (PFA) courses were regularly organised throughout the programme's implementation. They allowed the affected community to learn essential skills and empowered them to support each-other.

### Comprehensive MHPSS response delivered

MHPSS activities represented a major part of the assistance provided under the Emergency Appeal. It was identified as a key priority by BRC and was implemented from the very beginning of the Emergency Appeal. BRC provided psychosocial support (PSS) to displaced people from Ukraine through PFA, community-based activities, internet cafés, trauma and stress support groups for adults and children, peer-to-peer support and face-to-face consultations with professional psychologists.

BRC also strengthened its capacity in MHPSS by training staff, volunteers and psychologists, systematising training programmes and providing regular supervision. A dedicated PSS Centre was established to deliver a range of services, while the existing national PSS helpline continued to ensure access to PFA and facilitate referrals to face-to-face consultations with professional psychologists.

## Strengthened community resilience through MHPSS

Based on the previous experience, the BRC identified the importance of engaging PSS providers from the affected community. Therefore, displaced people from Ukraine were trained in PFA and encouraged to provide support to their peers within the community. Many of the trained individuals initially joined BRC as volunteers, with some later becoming staff members in regional branches. Through these trainings and community-based activities such as art therapy classes, BRC has been able to provide sustainable and meaningful support, enabling people to connect with one another and share their experiences in a safe and supportive environment.



Art therapy classes. Source: BRC

*“The first few days, I was very confused because I had never traveled to another country before. We tried to manage it ourselves. A friend pointed me to the BRC in the city. During that time, my husband and I had not started working yet and it was hard to manage financially, but they supported us with food, hygiene packs, clothes and baby food. This support was very important for us.”*

*Displaced person from Ukraine*

*“We survived by a miracle, fleeing with only the clothes on our backs and our passports. We survived, but we were completely ruined. The stress worsened my old illnesses and created new ones. I do not know how I would receive my treatment without the support of the BRC’s medical programme. The staff were very sympathetic, they gave me advice and moral support and helped me manage both financially and psychologically.”*

*Displaced person from Ukraine*



## Livelihoods

### **Humanitarian Service Points as essential locations for relief**

Emergency relief through distributions of livelihoods, hygiene and shelter items was a persistent form of support throughout the whole implementation of the IFRC Emergency Appeal. Before the Emergency Appeal this was the main form of assistance provided by the BRC at strategic points near the entry borders and the capital city. At the outset of the Emergency Appeal, Humanitarian Service Points (HSPs) were established as effective and accessible entry points for displaced people from Ukraine, offering timely information, referrals and multi-sectoral assistance within a single, centralized location. These HSPs enabled coordinated service delivery and facilitated access to essential support for those in need. At the peak of the Emergency Appeal, a total of 15 Humanitarian Service Points (HSPs) were operational across the country, ensuring broad geographic coverage and facilitating access to support services for displaced people, including, health, MHPSS, CVA, providing information and legal or administrative guidance. Some of the HSP locations were managed in collaboration with partner non-governmental organisation (NGOs),

allowing a larger array of services. HSPs reduced barriers to access and served as safe and recognizable spaces, where people could not only receive support, but also socialize with peers from the community. They also strengthened trust in the BRC among displaced people from Ukraine, fostering greater engagement, openness in sharing needs and more effective delivery of assistance.

### **Adapting humanitarian assistance based on community feedback**

While distributions of food and hygiene items occurred regularly throughout the implementation of the Emergency Appeal, their contents, types and modalities were modified based on community feedback and evolving needs. The initial aid packages were subsequently adjusted by removing certain food items commonly consumed by the host community but not typically used by households from Ukraine. These items were replaced with staple foods more familiar and appropriate for displaced families from Ukraine, ensuring the assistance better met their dietary needs.

The initial 20 kg aid packages were later replaced with smaller, more manageable packages since the the original weight posed challenges for older people. As the Emergency Appeal progressed, the majority of the community transitioned to other forms of support related to integration, allowing emergency relief efforts to be scaled down and the focus redirected toward newly arriving displaced people from Ukraine.

### **Modernize support through the use of digital tools**

The use of the AccessRC tool for CVA activities was expanded to pilot a programme for food and hygiene packages. People could register and apply for the programme through the mobile application and if accepted, generate a QR code to be shown in the closest branch location to receive the items, reducing crowding in the branches.



*BRC providing support to displaced person from Ukraine. Source: BRC*



## Cash and Voucher Assistance

### **Dignified and flexible assistance provided through CVA**

The BRC strengthened its capacity to deliver CVA as an efficient and dignified assistance modality, enabling people to address their most urgent needs according to their own priorities. Its flexibility allowed BRC to regularly implement CVA programmes to respond to the needs of people in vulnerable situations, especially during winter. All CVA programming was integrated with CEA mechanisms, ensuring that assistance was better aligned with the needs and priorities of displaced people from Ukraine.

### **Institutionalising CVA into the BRC's framework of activities**

This new approach to CVA was achieved through BRC's efforts to train specialised staff and volunteers and to institutionalise CVA within its internal processes. The BRC conducted its first self-assessment of CVA preparedness and capacity, which helped establish a baseline for further development.

Following the assessment, a Cash Working Group was established and standard operating procedures (SOPs) for cash programmes implemented by BRC were

developed. Trainings were also provided to national and regional staff on the use of AccessRC, the self-registration platform for financial assistance. The AccessRC improved accessibility, efficiency and transparency, while reducing administrative workload and operational costs for staff and volunteers.

Additionally, a stress test was conducted to simulate a real disaster situation and test the developed SOPs in practice.



*BRC assisting with the use of AccessRC.  
Source: BRC*



## Protection, Gender and Inclusion

### **Integrating a PGI approach into BRC's activities**

BRC solidified PGI as a core approach through all activities. BRC worked to strengthen it further by training designated focal points and providing training for staff and volunteers. This initial effort introduced staff and volunteers to PGI principles and practices and supported the integration of PGI into BRC's internal processes. To advance this work, BRC revised, modified and adopted a new Child Protection Policy and developed new safeguarding guideline designed to operationalize PGI across its activities.

### **Social activities and integration**

PGI activities were integrated across BRC's various sectors and targeted different vulnerable groups. Four child-friendly spaces were established in the regions, providing safe environments for children's activities and allowing parents, particularly single mothers, to participate in community-based MHPSS activities such as art therapy and Bulgarian language classes. Additionally, community social events were organized for both children and adults to promote social integration, with host community members invited

to foster positive relationships between different groups.

### **Education and learning activities**

BRC supported access to education and learning opportunities for both children and adults, fostering integration, inclusion and overall wellbeing. For children, BRC assisted with school and kindergarten enrollment and provided education vouchers to cover the cost of school materials. For adults, a range of Bulgarian and English language classes were offered, alongside informational sessions on CV preparation, employment support and translation services for official documents. These initiatives helped strengthen practical skills, boost confidence and promote longer-term integration and resilience.

### **Enhancing Branch Accessibility**

As part of its PGI efforts, BRC ensured that regional branches were accessible to all, including people with reduced mobility. Four branches participated in an initiative to purchase and install equipment that facilitates access for people with reduced mobility, making BRC services more inclusive and welcoming.



# Community Engagement and Accountability

## Regular needs assessments

At the start of the Emergency Appeal, multiple needs assessments were conducted to identify priority areas for response. Regular needs assessments, combined with continuous community feedback through CEA mechanisms, ensured that interventions were relevant, responsive and effective throughout the project. Displaced people from Ukraine actively participated in every phase, from project design to implementation and evaluation, enhancing the overall impact of the response. This was further strengthened by engaging community members and representatives, enabling BRC to establish reliable two-way communication channels with the communities it served.

## Social media and messaging channels

BRC established messaging groups on social media platforms widely used by displaced people from Ukraine, enabling direct engagement and active participation in project activities. These communication channels ensured a consistent flow of information and demonstrated BRC's transparency, strengthening its credibility as a trusted and reliable provider of support.

## Community Feedback Mechanisms

BRC established a dedicated call centre, Greenline, to provide information, address concerns and support a beneficiary satisfaction system for monitoring and evaluation. This mechanism enhanced accountability, ensured responses were closely aligned with community needs and allowed services to be continuously improved based on feedback from beneficiaries.

The use of Greenline evolved alongside the project's activities. Initially, it provided information on ongoing CVA programmes and distributions, and later expanded to cover all BRC activities implemented across the country. The service was operated by trained community representatives from Ukraine, ensuring effective and responsive engagement with the people BRC serves.

## Active participation of displaced people from Ukraine as volunteers

The response actively engaged displaced people from Ukraine as volunteers, strengthening the overall humanitarian effort. Their involvement expanded outreach, enhanced service delivery

across educational, psychosocial and humanitarian activities and reinforced community engagement to ensure services remained relevant and responsive. Volunteers also helped overcome language barriers, facilitating clearer communication with affected communities. In addition, their participation fostered peer support between displaced and host communities and promoted the sustainability of services through local engagement and capacity building.

*“I was very stressed, sometimes I did not know what to do. I joined different support groups and went to individual sessions with psychologists. After some time, I managed to overcome the stress and anxiety I was feeling. Only afterwards I enrolled for Bulgarian language classes. It helped me feel more comfortable with the local community and lay the foundations for our life here.*

*People are calling about different issues, from lack of food and hygiene products to questions on local laws and institutions. The psychological trauma must be healed and the dignity of people preserved.”*

Displaced person from Ukraine now providing support through the BRC Greenline



Displaced people from Ukraine in HSP in Plovdiv. Source: BRC



Social activity for displaced people from Ukraine. Source: BRC



## National Society Development

### **Operational capacities strengthened**

The BRC significantly strengthened its operational capacities at all levels, including both human and material resources. Investments in staff and volunteer training across multiple areas, combined with improvements in their logistics and infrastructure, enhanced the BRC's preparedness and ability to respond effectively even in future emergencies. The central warehouse was significantly upgraded through additional stock for emergencies, upgraded equipment and the installation of a solar panel system, allowing the training center and warehouse to be energetically independent during summer months.

### **Auxiliary role and partnerships enhanced**

Through the implementation of the Emergency Appeal, BRC strengthened its cooperation with partners and introduced innovative approaches across its activities. The BRC focused on ensuring the sustainability of these lessons by providing regular training for staff and volunteers, helping to preserve institutional knowledge. Case studies on health and CEA were conducted to document experiences and highlight best practices.

Crosscutting approaches, such as the integration of MHPSS and CEA, were solidified within BRC's framework of activities. Legal and institutional frameworks were strengthened through collaboration with governmental stakeholders, partner national societies, and local NGOs. BRC actively participated in multiple commissions related to the crisis at all levels and partnered closely with local entities, establishing itself as a central actor in providing support to displaced people from Ukraine.

### **Legal and institutional frameworks improved**

SOPs for CVA were developed, adopted and tested, offering clear guidance for consistent and effective implementation and improved support to beneficiaries. The Child Protection Policy was updated to align with PGI principles and CEA was further mainstreamed within the organization through the translation of IFRC's guidelines into Bulgarian. These institutional processes were essential in integrating the lessons learned throughout the Emergency Appeal, ensuring that innovations and best practices are embedded in BRC's ongoing operations.

# Challenges

## Challenging political environment

The project was implemented within a challenging political environment, characterized by frequent changes in government, which led to delays in critical decision-making at higher levels. At the same time, some tension arose within the host community regarding the increased BRC's support provided to displaced people from Ukraine.

## Over-reliance on the BRC

Challenges within state institutions, including limited vertical communication, insufficient access to livelihoods, adequate accommodation and integration into the education system, affected the ability of displaced people from Ukraine to fully exercise their rights and access essential services. High expectations regarding BRC's role were also placed on both the organization and the government, despite BRC's defined mandate and the inherent limits of support it could provide.

## High staff burnout

High levels of stress among staff and volunteers created instances of burnout syndrome and some individual stopping their activity. The high influx of displaced people from Ukraine in 2022 placed significant pressure on staff, while the available human resources were not proportionally increased,

proportionally increased, limiting the capacity to respond efficiently to the growing needs of the affected population.

## Balancing Emergency Appeal and core BRC's activities

The BRC encountered challenges in the implementation of the Emergency Appeal alongside traditional activities. Difficulties emerged from regional branches overlapping new and old activities, initially without a set of rules for reporting them. Limitation of human resources also prevented to designate staff that would only cover the Emergency Appeal activities. With the evolving nature of the project, these challenges were never fully resolved.

## Limited access to healthcare services

Displaced people from Ukraine faced challenges in accessing healthcare due mostly to high costs of co-payment required, but also because of the language barrier, limited familiarity with the healthcare system in Bulgaria and administrative barriers. Differences in vaccination calendars prevented children from enrolling in schools and differences in education system prevented health specialists from practicing in the country. This increased the risk of unmet health needs and placed additional pressure on humanitarian actors to fill existing gaps.

## MHPSS stigma

Encouraging individuals to seek professional face-to-face psychological support and discuss their trauma proved challenging. The PSS helpline provided an accessible first step, helping people feel comfortable and supported while transitioning to in-person consultations or professional therapy. Community-based mental health activities further helped reduce stigma and encouraged greater participation in PSS services.

## Language barrier

In the initial phase of the response, language barrier represented a key challenge in communication and the provision of support. To address this, BRC engaged Ukrainian-speaking staff and interpreters, which helped to mitigate these obstacles. In addition, BRC provided Bulgarian language classes throughout the response, facilitating longer-term integration and ensuring independent access to services and employment opportunities.

## Sustainability of the activities

While the BRC implemented a large array of new activities and approaches through the Emergency Appeal there was no guarantee that successful activities and tools would continue after the end of the Appeal period.

The BRC made efforts in integrating new approaches to maintain them in the future and reached out to partner national societies to ensure continuation of activities.



*Support to a displaced person from Ukraine through the Cash for Health Programme. Source: BRC*

## Recommendations

Conduct continuous needs assessments across all sectors and integrate affected communities into the design of activities to ensure support remains relevant throughout the project.

Ensure an integrated feedback mechanism for activities (especially MHPSS) in order to adapt them to the needs of the affected community. By integrating CEA approach, projects become more responsive, transparent and accountable, enabling communities to express their needs, provide inputs and raise concerns effectively.

Define, as early as possible, what tools will be used for data collection, information management (IM) and reporting, including financial reporting. Ensure that these tools are standardized across all response locations and provide staff training where needed. The tools should also remain flexible so they can be adapted to changing needs and evolving operational contexts.

When introducing new thematics or approaches, ensure to include them in larger consultation processes across the BRC to identify effective ways to integrate them into existing operations and to ensure that staff and volunteers are familiar with them.

Expand human resource and volunteer capacity wherever possible. Increase volunteer recruitment and provide continuous training to reduce the amount of time individuals spend in the field and help prevent burnout. Implement psychological support and supervision mechanisms for both staff and volunteers.

Standardize and digitalize processes, create templates and develop SOPs, particularly for new activities and thematic areas.

Ensure logistical preparedness by allocating financial reserves for logistics costs and establishing cost-recovery mechanisms, while negotiating long-term agreements with potential suppliers and customs agents.

## Conclusion

The implementation of the Emergency Appeal for Ukraine and Impacted Countries presented a major challenge for the BRC right after the COVID-19 pandemic. This multi-sectoral large-scale operation required the mobilisation of most of the National Society's available resources. Nonetheless, the BRC managed to show its resilience and its capacity to serve, on one side, as a reliable partner to the state and on the other, as a recognizable and trustful source of support to the affected community. Even amidst a turbulent political situation, the BRC managed to deliver assistance across the whole country and up to the borders, acting as a leader and a rallying force for other partners.

Through the Emergency Appeal, the BRC experimented with new activities and approaches, providing efforts into integrating these innovations in the long-term framework of the organization. PGI and CEA were institutionalized and linked with traditional activities of the National Society. CVA is another sector of support which saw tremendous improvement. The BRC aimed to become a cash-ready National Society and built-up SOPs, which were tested in real conditions, created an internal Cash Working Group and has implemented various CVA programmes for displaced people from Ukraine, using and appropriating the self-registration platform AccessRC, that is now used to pilot innovative projects for humanitarian support. The BRC established itself as a reliable and trusted organization within the Ukrainian community by not only providing initial humanitarian assistance, such as food, hygiene, and health support, but also by supporting people throughout their entire integration process. This was achieved thanks to continuous feedback collection and exchange with the community as well as through regular MHPSS support and PGI (education, social activities, administrative support).

The lessons learned from the Emergency Appeal will enable the BRC to enhance its preparedness for future large-scale disasters and further apply best practices.

# THE FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES OF THE INTERNATIONAL RED CROSS AND RED CRESCENT MOVEMENT

## **HUMANITY**

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, born of a desire to bring assistance without discrimination to the wounded on the battlefield, endeavours, in its international and national capacity, to prevent and alleviate human suffering wherever it may be found. Its purpose is to protect life and health and to ensure respect for the human being. It promotes mutual understanding, friendship, cooperation and lasting peace amongst all peoples.

## **IMPARTIALITY**

It makes no discrimination as to nationality, race, religious beliefs, class or political opinions. It endeavours to relieve the suffering of individuals, being guided solely by their needs, and to give priority to the most urgent cases of distress.

## **NEUTRALITY**

In order to enjoy the confidence of all, the Movement may not take sides in hostilities or engage at any time in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature.

## **INDEPENDENCE**

The Movement is independent. The National Societies, while auxiliaries in the humanitarian services of their governments and subject to the laws of their respective countries, must always maintain their autonomy so that they may be able at all times to act in accordance with the principles of the Movement.

## **VOLUNTARY SERVICE**

It is a voluntary relief movement not prompted in any manner by desire for gain.

## **UNITY**

There can be only one Red Cross or Red Crescent Society in any one country. It must be open to all. It must carry on its humanitarian work throughout its territory.

## **UNIVERSALITY**

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, in which all societies have equal status and share equal responsibilities and duties in helping each other, is worldwide.