

# Annual report 2025



**RED CROSS**  
**EU OFFICE**

# Message from the Red Cross EU Office

2025 opened with a difficult reality for humanitarian action. At the global level, the year began with major funding cuts across the humanitarian sector, forcing organisations everywhere to do more with less and placing additional strain on communities already living through crisis and hardship. These pressures were compounded by the increasing impacts of the climate crisis, which continued to trigger more frequent disruptions and intensify the demands on local services. At the same time, humanitarian space continued to shrink, marked by rising politicisation, harmful information, restrictive policies and increased risks for frontline responders. For our members, these developments were anything but abstract: they shaped the safety of staff and volunteers, the continuity of essential support, and challenged our ability to accompany people with dignity and impartiality.

Meanwhile, the EU continued to sharpen its focus on competitiveness and security. These priorities are understandable. But if we imagine the EU as a three-legged chair, the social pillar is the leg that keeps the whole structure steady. Without it, the chair – and the people relying on it – risk falling. The experience of our members shows that resilience starts with people. It depends on their ability to access support, exercise their agency and remain connected to one another.

Throughout 2025, we worked with National Red Cross Societies in the EU, the Norwegian Red Cross, the Icelandic Red Cross and the IFRC to bring this message to EU discussions. Their frontline experience – from supporting people on the move, to strengthening preparedness, to standing alongside those who are marginalised or excluded – provides essential insights into how EU policies take shape on the ground.

Our collective efforts focused on safeguarding humanitarian space, promoting humane migration policies, influencing the EU's preparedness agenda, and ensuring that EU funding and policies reinforce the capacities of local actors. Across all these areas, our goal has been to keep people at the centre of EU action, both at home and abroad.

The examples in this report show how, even in a challenging environment, our members continue to build thriving communities and demonstrate what principled, needs-based support looks like in action. Their work is a reminder that the social pillar is not a “nice-to-have”, but the foundation upon which resilience and social cohesion is built.

We hope you enjoy the read.

Cover photo:

Polish Red Cross trained 400 rescuers and humanitarian aid specialists during large-scale field exercises in Hel and Koczalin. © Polish Red Cross

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## In focus: 60 years of the Fundamental Principles – renewing our compass in a changing world

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In 2025, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement marked 60 years of our seven Fundamental Principles, a milestone that offered an important moment to reflect on how these principles guide our work today. Across Europe and around the world, Red Cross/Red Crescent societies continue to deliver assistance in increasingly complex environments marked by political polarisation, shrinking humanitarian space and rising pressures on communities. This anniversary provided a renewed opportunity to highlight why the Fundamental Principles remain essential to principled, trusted and effective humanitarian action:

- » Humanity drives us to respond to suffering wherever we find it.
- » Impartiality ensures assistance goes to those most in need, regardless of who they are or where they come from.
- » Neutrality allows us to work on all sides, keeping doors open and dialogue possible so assistance and protection can be delivered safely.
- » Independence preserves trust, so people know we act on needs alone, not political agendas.
- » Voluntary service reflects the millions of volunteers around the world that make it possible to provide localised support in some of the most remote communities that may not otherwise be reached.
- » Unity ensures one National Society serves all people in a country, bringing communities together.
- » Universality binds the entire Movement together, with National Societies supporting each other across borders so no one is left behind.

Together, these Principles make it possible to deliver life-saving aid where others cannot, while upholding dignity and respect for all people affected by crisis, hardship and exclusion.

Throughout the year, we worked closely with our members to showcase to EU decision makers how they translate the Principles into action at the domestic, regional and global levels – from responding to disasters and adapting to a changing climate, to supporting people on the move, older people and those without stable housing. The Principles are

not abstract concepts. They are the compass that guides our staff and our 16 million volunteers around the world, helping them to make ethical and operational decisions in the most complex crises.

The anniversary came at a time when humanitarian space is under mounting pressure. Increasing polarisation, politicisation of access, targeted disinformation and record numbers of attacks on aid workers all threaten our ability to operate safely and impartially. For European Red Cross societies, these trends are not distant: they affect how they deliver services to people in migration, how volunteers engage in local communities, and how authorities interpret and protect humanitarian space.

In this context, we worked with our members to bring shared messages to EU interlocutors. We underlined the need for political commitment to safeguarding principled humanitarian action, including in the upcoming Communication on EU humanitarian aid. We also drew attention to the importance of protecting the ability of humanitarian organisations to assist people regardless of their legal status, emphasising that no volunteer or staff member should fear prosecution for providing help.

In an event at the European Parliament that we co-organised with the Standing Rapporteur for Humanitarian Aid, Member of the European Parliament (MEP) Leire Pajín and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Anne Peters, Deputy Secretary General of the Belgian Red Cross highlighted the value of Voluntary Service. Volunteers are the beating heart of our Movement. They are the ones who show up, who stay, and who serve, and use the Fundamental Principles to guide their work.

Looking ahead, we will continue working with our members to ensure that the Fundamental Principles remain a living foundation of how we act and how we engage with EU institutions. In a political landscape that is changing quickly, the Principles are an anchor that enable us to act with purpose, uphold dignity and humanity, and stand alongside people who navigate crises. As we celebrate 60 years of our Fundamental Principles, we must not only honour them but actively apply them across the EU and beyond to lay the foundations for more resilient societies.

## Heightening Red Cross influence

### Fostering a people-centred approach to preparedness

In 2025, we worked with our members to strengthen our collective influence on the EU's expanding preparedness agenda by developing a Humanitarian Diplomacy strategy on societal preparedness. The strategy aligns with the Preparedness Union Strategy (PUS) published in March, providing a shared baseline for Red Cross engagement in relevant EU policy discussions on disaster management and civil protection, health emergencies, climate resilience and social inclusion. Covering 2025–2028, it will help us to influence preparedness measures, so they prioritise people facing vulnerability and leave no one behind.

With decades of operational experience and a unique auxiliary role to public authorities, Red Cross societies help bridge EU preparedness policies with the realities of people affected by both sudden crises and long-term social pressures. To ensure this perspective was considered from the outset, we intensified our high-level engagement throughout the year.

Shortly after the PUS' release, our Director and the Secretary General of the Finnish Red Cross, Eero Rämö met with European Commissioner for Preparedness, Crisis Management and Equality, Hadja Lahbib to discuss implementation. This early outreach ensured that EU officials recognised Red Cross societies as key partners whose practical insight should inform future measures across the Commission's societal preparedness workstreams.

Our engagement also extended to the Council, where the Danish Red Cross facilitated our joint intervention with the Ukrainian Red Cross Society (URCS) under the Danish

Presidency. Speaking at the Ad Hoc Council Working Party on preparedness, response capability and resilience to future crises, URCS Director General, Maksym Dotsenko, shared lessons from the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Ukraine, complemented by our contribution on the value of building on existing structures and working with trusted local actors to ensure inclusive and effective preparedness approaches.

We further reinforced this message at the European Parliament, engaging with the Intergroup on Resilience, Disaster Management and Civil Protection alongside the French Red Cross in Strasbourg. Complementary exchanges with the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) and the Committee of the Regions (CoR) amplified our recommendations across EU advisory bodies, including on the EU Stockpiling Strategy.

### Securing a Humanitarian Exemption in the EU Facilitation Directive

A central priority of our influencing work in 2025 was shaping the revision of the EU's Facilitation Directive, which defines migrant smuggling under EU law and aims to harmonise counter-smuggling practices across Member States. More than two decades since its adoption, practical applications of the Directive have led to harmful consequences for people in migration and for people acting out of humanity to support them. The ongoing revision offers a critical opportunity to address over-criminalisation by including effective safeguards for humanitarian assistance, as well as for people facilitating their own journeys, or those of their family members.



IFRC protection team leader, Camille Coletta, speaks with a woman who was rescued from a boat lost at sea in the Mediterranean. © Camille Martin Juan /SOS MEDITERRANEE

Grounded in the principle of impartiality, Red Cross societies provide support to anyone experiencing vulnerability, regardless of where they are or where they come from. Across Europe, they run health clinics, shelters, food aid programmes and humanitarian service points along migratory routes – all of which play a critical role in protecting life and dignity. Yet the legal uncertainty surrounding facilitation provisions exposes humanitarian actors and volunteers to potential investigation or prosecution simply for delivering essential help. Ensuring legal clarity is therefore essential to enabling principled humanitarian action.

Throughout 2025, we worked to ensure that the revised Directive reflects this reality. We engaged widely with Members of the European Parliament, European Commission officials and representatives of Member States to broaden their perspective and share evidence of how the current framework has harmed people on the move and undermined humanitarian work. The revised Directive must include a clear and binding humanitarian exemption to protect principled assistance and uphold fundamental rights.

To discuss alternative, human rights-based approaches to EU anti-smuggling policies and national and EU-level responses more broadly, we partnered with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) for a [Chatham House dialogue](#) bringing together experts from the UN, civil society, academia, the legal community and humanitarian organisations. Officials from several Member States' Permanent Representations heard firsthand

testimonies from our colleagues at the Belgian Red Cross and the French Red Cross. They described the consequences of criminalisation and showed how it affects the safety and wellbeing of migrants, as well as the people and organisations providing assistance.

Our behind-the-scenes engagement was complemented by targeted public advocacy to build broader awareness. Activities included an [opinion piece](#) in [The Parliament Magazine](#), a feature article on [our website](#), and a social media campaign centred on the message that helping one another is fundamental to our shared humanity.

## **Increasing access to EU resources**

### **Strengthening capacities to access EU funding**

During the 2021–2027 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), and in an increasingly constrained funding environment, our members have intensified efforts to access EU resources to strengthen the resilience of the people they work with. Throughout 2025, we worked together to map EU-funded Red Cross projects in Europe, exchanged good practices, and developed tools to help colleagues develop and implement proposals.

Across Europe, many Red Cross societies secured funding through shared management instruments, particularly the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) and the Asylum Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) – reflecting both the breadth of their expertise and their sustained engagement with

Under the EU4Health programme, 'Provision of quality and timely psychological first aid to people affected by Ukraine crisis in impacted countries', Slovak Red Cross Psychological Support Community Centre in Košice offered a range of community-based mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) activities. © Red Cross Red Crescent Movement MHPSS Hub



national authorities. Under ESF+, at least nine Red Cross societies implemented projects, while AMIF funding supported integration and reception-related activities in twelve Member States.

ESF+ resources mainly supported measures to improve access to employment and job-seeker activation, including programmes for young people through the Youth Guarantee, as well as initiatives to strengthen opportunities for long-term unemployed people and disadvantaged groups. Funding also contributed to helping workers and enterprises adapt to change, promoting active ageing and safe and healthy working environments, and enabling inclusive access to essential services such as housing, healthcare and social protection. At least ten Red Cross societies received funding for material and food assistance.

Beyond shared-management funds, Red Cross societies made extensive use of the European Solidarity Corps for volunteer-driven activities, while Horizon Europe and the Union Civil Protection Mechanism (UCPM) supported research, innovation and crisis-response capacities. At European level, funds managed directly by the European Commission also played a key role, including the SAFE HOMES project on private hosting across nine countries, and the provision of psychological first aid under the EU4Health programme to people affected by the Ukraine-Russia international armed conflict – initiatives highlighting the added value of transnational cooperation in terms of reach, scale and capacity-development.

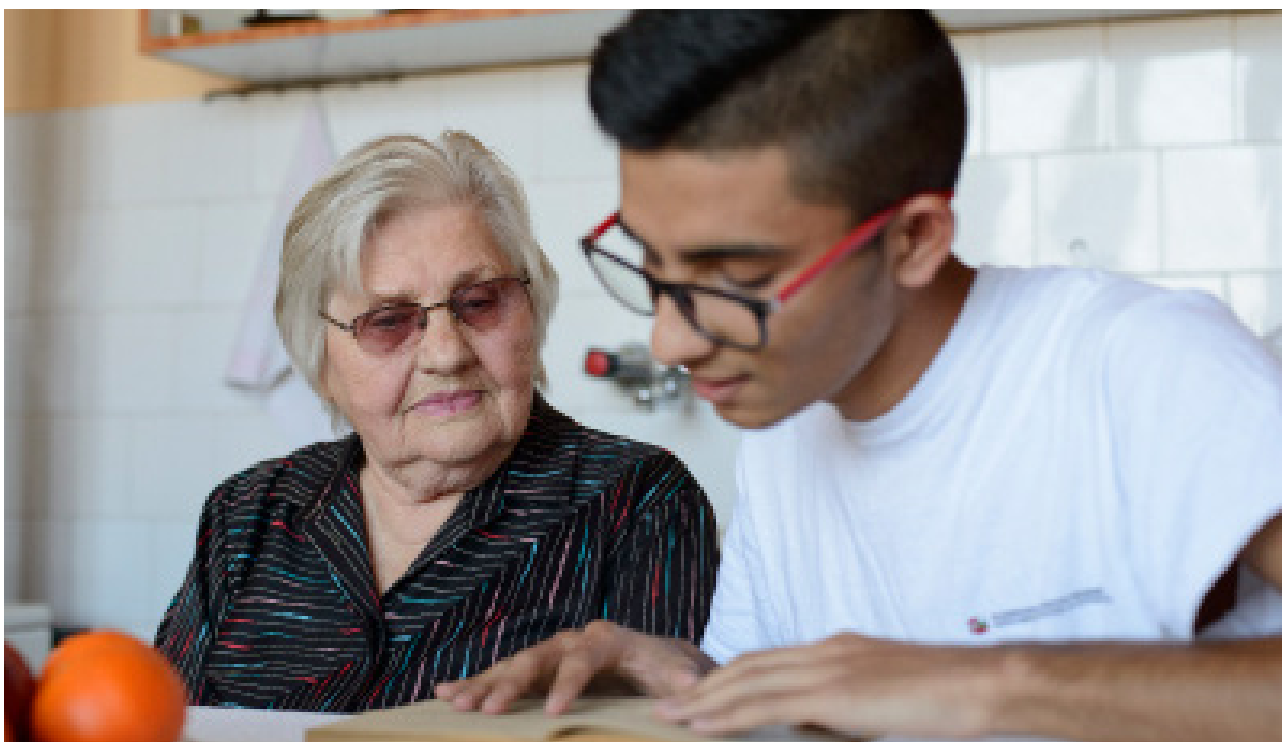
This mapping reflects both the diversity of the Red Cross' engagement across domestic EU funding instruments and the persistent disparities in access shaped by national priorities and administrative constraints. It has strengthened Red Cross societies' understanding of the EU funding landscape, helping them identify stakeholders, build partnerships and better navigate regulatory challenges. These insights are also critical as preparations begin for the post-2027 MFF, highlighting the need for a flexible future EU budget that supports trusted local actors like the Red Cross and embeds meaningful consultation with civil society to ensure funding aligns with real needs.

### Partnering with the EU on mental health

In 2025, we concluded a large-scale project with the European Commission aimed at supporting the mental health and psychosocial wellbeing of people displaced from Ukraine. Over three years, the project evolved significantly in geographical coverage and ambition, expanding to a total of 28 countries and diversifying its activities to address the scale and complexity of needs over time.

The project's final year provided an opportunity to take stock of its impact and of the extensive capacities developed across European Red Cross societies. In total, more than 730,000 people displaced from Ukraine received support from the Red Cross, over 54,000 health professionals, volunteers and first aiders were trained in Psychological First Aid (PFA) and Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS), and almost 40,000 frontline responders received MHPSS care. The programme piloted initiatives tailored to

A Bulgarian Red Cross volunteer reads a book aloud to an older person. © Bulgarian Red Cross



different groups and settings, grounded in a people-centred and community-based approach. These ranged from a women's support group dedicated to psychosocial activities in Iceland, to "Friendly meetings" spaces in Dublin where LGBTIQ+ people could address both their practical and emotional needs, to workshops with teenagers in Estonian schools to empower them to recognise distress in their peers and offer PFA.

This important MHPSS project funded under the EU4Health programme created a unique platform for Red Cross societies to exchange tools, harmonise effective approaches, and strengthen collective learning. Throughout the year, project partners actively disseminated results, challenges and lessons learned at both national and European levels to inform future policy and practice. For example, the French Red Cross held a one-day event in Paris gathering key national stakeholders to discuss vulnerabilities linked to mental health, while the Romanian Red Cross held a [conference in Bucharest](#) dedicated to emergency MHPSS and PFA. Alongside our colleagues from the IFRC secretariat, we hosted the project's [closing event](#) in Brussels, with active participation from several European Commission Directorates General, the Polish EU Presidency, Red Cross societies and their implementing partners.

To further capitalise on the expertise developed through the project, several resources were developed: [Red Cross mental health response to the international armed conflict in Ukraine](#) captures the project's key approaches and achievements, and the [Successful MHPSS Services Catalogue](#) compiles promising practices for addressing the MHPSS needs of displaced people and host communities.

The project leaves a strong legacy for future EU action, offering concrete lessons to strengthen preparedness for health emergencies more broadly.

## Serving members on EU issues

### Bringing local experience to EU and global humanitarian debates

The European Humanitarian Forum (EHF) held in Brussels in May brought together more than 3,000 participants, including

major donors and senior decision-makers from across the humanitarian system. Over sixty Red Cross/Red Crescent representatives took part, among them senior leadership from the IFRC secretariat, the Kenya Red Cross, the Ukrainian Red Cross, the Lebanese Red Cross and the Palestinian Red Crescent Society. Their presence showed the strength and reach of a coordinated global network and ensured that the experience of our members was reflected in discussions at the highest level.

This year's forum took place at a moment of significant change, marked by shifts in global humanitarian funding and growing expectations from the EU to lead as a principled humanitarian donor. For our members, the forum was an important opportunity to position themselves strategically, influence collective priorities, and engage with key partners on emerging operational and policy challenges. Through multiple speaking engagements and interventions, our colleagues contributed substantively to the forum's two core themes: fragility and humanitarian diplomacy.

In a panel on protecting humanitarian workers, IFRC Secretary General, Jagan Chapagain, underlined the importance of International Humanitarian Law and noted that 2024 was the deadliest year on record for humanitarian actors. He emphasised the value of the IFRC-DG ECHO strategic partnership under the Protect Aid Workers initiative in strengthening safety and enabling principled action.

Lebanese Red Cross Secretary General, Georges Kettaneh, contributed to discussions on how localised humanitarian interventions can build resilience in fragile contexts; with local organisations supporting each other, reinforcing capacities and building community trust. He emphasised the deep roots of local actors within their communities, which give them a unique understanding of the needs and capacities.

In a panel focused on Ukraine, Maksym Dotsenko, Director General of the Ukrainian Red Cross Society, stressed the need for long-term planning in the response to the Russia-Ukraine international armed conflict. He highlighted that empowering local actors and ensuring flexible funding are essential to ensure timely and effective responses in evolving conditions.



Over sixty Red Cross/Red Crescent representatives participated in the European Humanitarian Forum 2025 where they met with Hadja Lahbib, European Commissioner for Preparedness, Crisis Management, and Equality. © European Commission

Beyond formal plenary sessions, representatives from National Societies, the IFRC secretariat and Red Cross and Red Crescent Reference Centres contributed to several Humanitarian Talks, sharing practical expertise across a wide range of topics. The forum also offered valuable opportunities for bilateral meetings with EU Member State representatives and other stakeholders, supporting ongoing dialogue on shared challenges and strengthening cooperation across the humanitarian sector.

### **Talking Humanity through inclusive, principled and hope-based communication**

The political environment in Europe has undergone significant change in recent years, with increased polarisation and shifting political priorities. A greater focus on competitiveness, security and the EU's own interests has reduced the space for issues central to our work, including social support, migrant inclusion, disaster protection and global solidarity. In this context, humanitarian organisations like the Red Cross face a more challenging landscape in which common ground is narrowing and engagement with a wider range of actors is becoming more complex.

As a needs-based organisation guided by humanity, impartiality and respect for human dignity, we remain committed to communicating in a way that is principled, constructive and consistent with our values. This means being intentional about how we frame our messages and making sure that our communication always reflects our solidarity with marginalised and underserved people, who are at the heart of everything we do.

To navigate this evolving landscape, in 2025 we worked to strengthen a clear, values-driven approach to language and framing. Our aim is to support meaningful dialogue with EU

actors across the political spectrum, while safeguarding the integrity of our humanitarian mission. Following a review of our previous communication and advocacy outputs, we held reflections on our language practices and blind spots, as well as how we can bring the narratives we craft closer to the futures that we want to help build. Drawing on these discussions, we developed the 'Talking Humanity' guidelines to provide a compass for how we communicate about our work and affected communities, regardless of who sits in front of us.

The guidance focuses on positive framing, shifting from problem-only narratives to emphasizing solutions, agency and achievable change, so that our messages inspire collaboration rather than fatigue or division. It also proposes practical reframes that balance needs-based arguments with rights-based reasoning, ensuring our advocacy recognises immediate needs while addressing systemic barriers that create or exacerbate vulnerability. Finally, it encourages more precise, people-first terminology and attention to intersectionality, so that our language does not over-simplify people's lives or contribute to perpetuating harm.

To facilitate implementation, we disseminated the guidelines across our network and integrated them into our Humanitarian Diplomacy training, as well as providing tailored support and equipping members with a concise checklist, terminology swaps and examples for use in position papers, meetings and public communications. Going forward, we will continue to question and seek to improve our communication and humanitarian diplomacy practices, remaining adaptable to the changing realities we face and evolutions in language shaped by debates and new understandings.



**Representing National Societies in the EU, Norway and Iceland,  
and the IFRC**

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The International Red Cross Red Crescent Movement is committed to, and bound by its seven fundamental principles

**HUMANITY | IMPARTIALITY | NEUTRALITY | INDEPENDENCE | VOLUNTARY SERVICE | UNITY | UNIVERSALITY**