

Delivering principled local humanitarian action in Ukraine

The case of the Ukrainian Red Cross Society



A joint collaboration between:



On the cover: Emergency Response Unit in Ukraine. Evgen, the head of Emergency Response Team in Vyshgorod, showing a building bombed last November: *"We worked here for 7 hours to help wounded people and to get the bodies of the people that died. It happened two months ago, but you can still smell burning."*

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Published in October 2025.

The British Red Cross Society, incorporated by Royal Charter 1908, is a charity registered in England and Wales (220949), Scotland (SC037738), Isle of Man (0752) and Jersey (430).

Acknowledgments

This report is the result of a collaboration between the Ukrainian Red Cross Society (URCS) and the British Red Cross (BRC).

The research team would like to thank URCS Head of Strategic Partnerships and International Relations, Irina Boicheva, for her commitment to the research partnership and support throughout the process. We are grateful to colleagues from URCS management and leadership, staff and volunteers at the National Committee and in regional and local branches, for their warm welcome and participation in the interviews that informed this study.

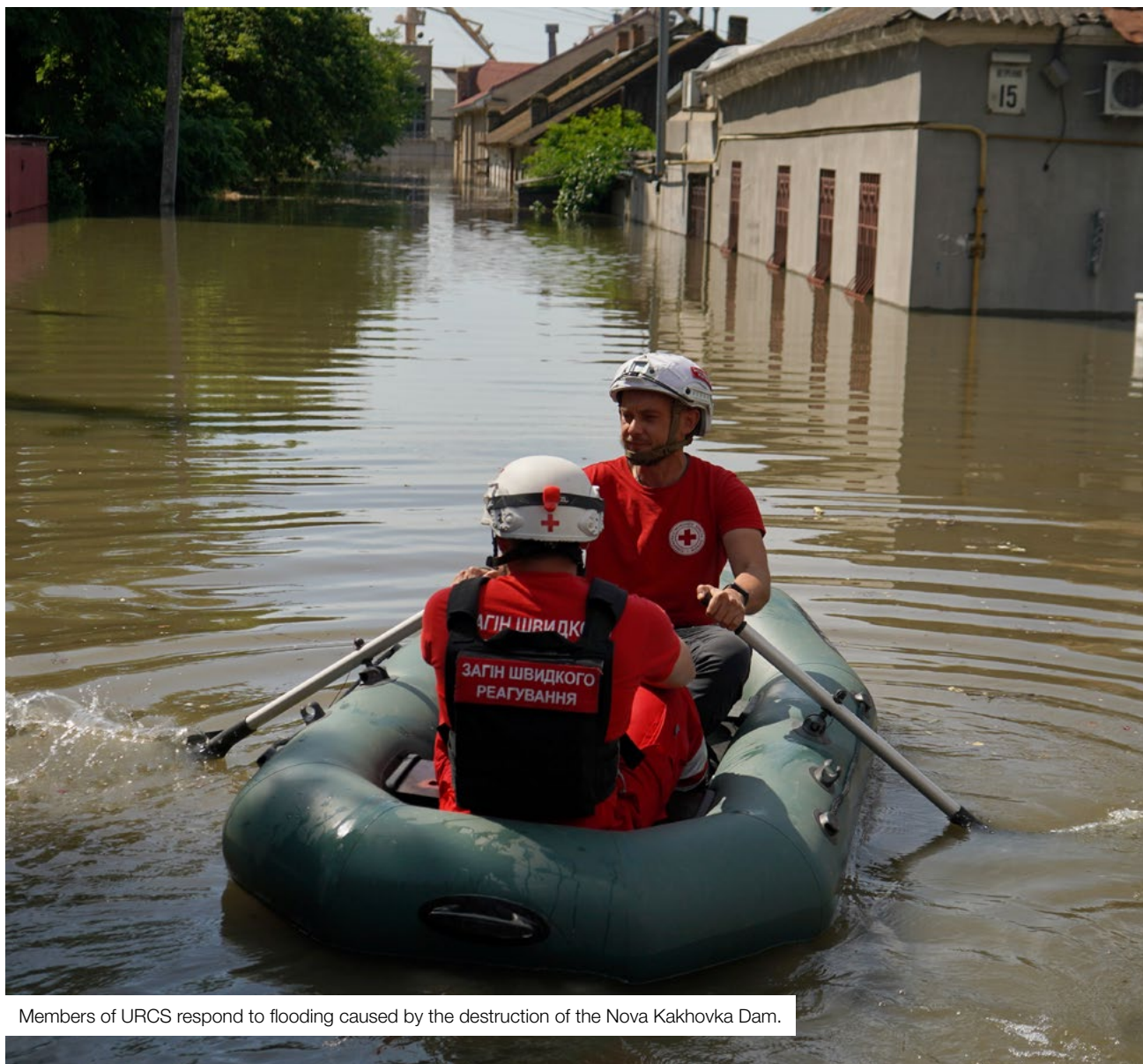
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Members of URCS respond to flooding caused by the destruction of the Nova Kakhovka Dam.

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Executive summary

The Ukrainian Red Cross Society (URCS) has navigated complex humanitarian challenges resulting from the protracted conflict in Ukraine, particularly following the escalation into full-scale international armed conflict in February 2022. Leveraging its extensive historical presence and decentralised structure, URCS has demonstrated the tangible benefits of local humanitarian action rooted in the Fundamental Principles of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. By maintaining embeddedness within communities, URCS has effectively delivered rapid, needs-based assistance across Ukraine, often serving as a crucial first responder in frontline, contested, and newly de-occupied territories.

The strength of URCS lies in its local presence, volunteer networks, and operational flexibility, which enable swift, contextually appropriate responses even in highly politicised and militarised environments. URCS's deep integration within communities has facilitated unparalleled humanitarian access, as exemplified by operations during the nine-month occupation of Kherson by the Russian armed forces, where URCS continued essential services despite significant risks and logistical constraints.

The auxiliary role of URCS to Ukrainian public authorities has significantly bolstered its operational capacities, enabling large-scale emergency responses through strategic collaboration with various ministries and regional authorities. Particularly strong cooperation has been seen in civil protection, formally recognised under recent national legislation, positioning URCS as an integral actor within Ukraine's disaster management infrastructure.

However, URCS has faced critical operational and institutional challenges arising from the conflict's politicisation, misconceptions around its neutrality, and uneven understanding of its mandate by authorities and the public. The widespread conflation of URCS with other Movement components, especially following public backlash and misinformation campaigns, has strained relationships with local communities and authorities, sometimes jeopardising volunteer safety and operational effectiveness.

The operational environment's security dynamics have dramatically impacted URCS personnel and infrastructure. Numerous incidents, including attacks on URCS offices and warehouses, detainment, and direct threats to volunteers, underline the profound risks associated with delivering humanitarian aid in frontline areas. Another key challenge has been the complexity of coordination within Ukraine's increasingly crowded humanitarian space. Although

URCS has actively engaged with coordination mechanisms and forged productive partnerships with international and local organisations, tensions persist, notably around role clarity, competition – for example, for funding – with larger international actors, and internal capacity constraints.

Despite these challenges, URCS has made substantial progress in humanitarian diplomacy and advocacy, promoting understanding of its auxiliary status and humanitarian principles, including significant achievements in emblem protection legislation and IHL dissemination. Sustaining and extending these gains require ongoing strategic investment in communication, community engagement, and advocacy capacities at national and branch levels.

URCS's funding landscape presents another nuanced issue. While international support since 2022 has bolstered operational autonomy, heavy reliance on short-term, project-based funding threatens long-term sustainability and risks undermining URCS's ability to consistently perform its auxiliary functions. Shifts towards predictable, service-oriented funding models are necessary to ensure URCS's sustained relevance and effectiveness.

In conclusion, URCS's experience underscores both the profound advantages and inherent challenges of delivering principled, localised humanitarian action in large-scale, politicised conflicts. Continued strengthening of its auxiliary relationship, clearer role definitions, enhanced operational security measures, and sustained advocacy for the respect of humanitarian principles and international law will be crucial for URCS to navigate ongoing and future crises effectively. These strategic investments will be essential to uphold the trust and acceptance that URCS has cultivated with communities and authorities alike, ensuring its continued pivotal role in Ukraine's humanitarian response and recovery efforts.

Background

2.1. The humanitarian situation in Ukraine¹

Ukraine faces a complex humanitarian crisis driven by a protracted conflict which began in 2014, when the Russian Federation annexed Crimea and supported pro-Russian separatists in the eastern oblasts of Luhansk and Donetsk. The period from 2014 to 2022 left thousands of civilians killed or wounded and 1.6 million displaced. The full-scale escalation of the international armed conflict (IAC) in February 2022 has resulted in a humanitarian crisis on a scale that Europe has not seen in decades. Widespread destruction and displacement has left more than 14.6 million people in need of humanitarian assistance. As of March 2025, 3.7 million people² are internally displaced inside Ukraine, and 6.8 million people have fled the country, amounting to about a quarter of its total population.

The conflict has profoundly impacted the eastern and southern regions of Ukraine, which are closest to the frontlines. In areas under the control of the Russian Federation, approximately 1 million civilians face devastating conditions and acute humanitarian needs. Nearly 39,000 verified civilian casualties, including more than 12,000 deaths, have been recorded since February 2022. The ongoing hostilities have disrupted access to essential services such as water, food, shelter, and healthcare, further exacerbating the suffering of the affected populations. Human rights violations, insecurity, and restrictions on movement compound the crisis, making it difficult for humanitarian assistance to reach those most in need. Essential civilian infrastructure, including power grids, water systems, and transportation networks, has been heavily targeted and damaged, severely restricting access to critical services such as healthcare, education, and heating, particularly in harsh winter conditions.

The complexity of the humanitarian response is heightened by the challenging access to frontline communities due to military blockages and damaged infrastructure. This has led to a significant shift towards a localised response, with local organisations, volunteers, and civil society initiatives playing a crucial role in delivering aid. However, these local actors often face difficulties in accessing international funding, and the political dynamics of the conflict further complicate the delivery of neutral, impartial and independent humanitarian action.

2.2. The Ukrainian Red Cross Society

The Ukrainian Red Cross Society (URCS), founded in 1918, was absorbed in 1922 into the Soviet Alliance of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and reconstituted in 1991 after Ukraine's independence³. URCS is the country's oldest and largest humanitarian actor, with a long track record of providing essential services, from medical care to disaster response. Up until 2014, URCS was best known for the state-funded Home Visiting Nurse programmes it ran throughout the country, a historical legacy for several National Societies in the region.

URCS's capabilities were put to the test with the onset of armed conflict in 2014, as branches in the Donbass were divided along the Line of Contact (LoC) into government controlled areas (GCAs) and non-government controlled areas (NGCAs), creating challenges to the National Society's unity and its capacity to access communities on both sides of the LoC. As a result, URCS developed extensive experience responding in a conflict setting, working closely with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and other Movement partners, including to reach those living in NGCAs⁴. A reform process initiated by URCS in 2016, following a financial scandal regarding the use of funds for its Home Visiting Nurse programme, further contributed to the National Society's modernisation. URCS's current structure of 200 local branches, based on Ukraine's decentralisation reform, allows the National Society to effectively address the diverse needs across the country, ensuring extensive reach even in the most challenging environments.

URCS's experience as a National Society in conflict proved invaluable during the escalation of the international armed conflict (IAC) in February 2022, as it fulfilled its role by undertaking civil defence activities such as rescue services and establishing shelters, restoring family links, providing healthcare services, and evacuating sick and wounded people from combat zones, amid many other activities. The politicisation of humanitarian aid that came with the escalation has made it more challenging for actors such as URCS to continue delivering neutral, impartial, and independent services in a safe manner, particularly in

¹ Unless otherwise specified, all of the figures quoted here come from *Ukraine Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan 2025* (April 2025), <https://reliefweb.int/report/ukraine/ukraine-humanitarian-needs-and-response-plan-2025-april-2025-enuk> | ² www.iom.int/crisis-ukraine, accessed 13 August 2025 | ³ "We are close to you": Long-term National Society Development investments that strengthened the positioning, sustainability and impact of the Ukrainian Red Cross Society in a fragile, complex, protracted conflict and violence-affected environment (2024), www.ifrc.org/sites/default/files/2024-10/Longitudinal%20Review%20Case%20study_Ukraine%20Red%20Cross.pdf | ⁴ The case for complementarity: Working together within the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement in armed conflict and other situations of violence (2019), www.redcross.org.uk/-/media/documents-indexed/the-case-for-complementarity.pdf

areas close to the frontline. URCS has had to limit its action to cover only the territory under control of the Ukrainian government. The scale of their response remains unparalleled however, with, for example, more than 13 million people receiving assistance from URCS, and 300,000 people supported to evacuate⁵. URCS continues to play an essential role in protecting civilians during armed conflicts, ensuring their safety, and advocating for the implementation of humanitarian principles. Its efforts are supported by a robust framework of laws and principles, enabling it to provide timely and effective humanitarian assistance in the face of ongoing challenges.

2.3. Fundamental Principles and the auxiliary role

The seven Fundamental Principles of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement – humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, voluntary service, unity, and universality – provide an ethical, operational, and institutional framework for the work of the Movement in support of people in need during armed conflict, natural disasters, and other emergencies. Their value has been repeatedly reaffirmed as key enablers of locally led action, promoting trust, influence, access, and clarity in decision-making⁶.

While the Fundamental Principles gave rise to the fewer, but more broadly interpreted set of humanitarian principles adopted throughout the humanitarian sector, they uniquely incorporate the auxiliary role within the principle of independence. This means that National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies have a special, officially recognised status and role as an auxiliary to the public authorities in the humanitarian field, which applies in times of peace and war. In practice, this provides an automatic relationship between a National Society and its government. Unlike other humanitarian organisations, National Societies have a standing invitation from their governments to provide humanitarian services.

The auxiliary status is a permanent, legal feature, embedded in domestic legislation. It is conferred when a National Society is recognised by its government as a voluntary aid society, supporting the public authorities in their humanitarian tasks according to

the needs of the people, on the basis of the 1949 Geneva Conventions and national legislation. The auxiliary role is the practical manifestation of the auxiliary status. It is flexible and refers to mutually agreed responsibilities and activities defined by the government and the National Society, bringing mutual benefits and responsibilities to both. The uniqueness of the auxiliary status means that National Societies are private organisations with recognised public functions, and they are neither part of government nor non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Effectively, National Societies are ‘autonomous’ but not fully independent like NGOs – a tension that is recognised in the principle of independence and that is explored in this research. Governments have recognised that the autonomy of National Societies and their neutrality and impartiality are the most effective means to gain the confidence of all parties⁷.

The auxiliary role of National Societies has faced increasing pressure in fragile and conflict-affected contexts in recent years. There are varying degrees of understanding of its parameters, and its dynamism, flexibility, and nuance are often underappreciated. It is crucial to promote a better understanding of the auxiliary role by documenting a spectrum of auxiliary practices that highlight the opportunities and privileges the auxiliary role brings to a National Society, but also the challenges and dilemmas it may be required to navigate. This is one of the aims of this research. The availability of such evidence can foster trust between the Movement, governments, and donors, facilitating stronger partnerships and supporting strong locally led action in contexts affected by crisis and conflict.

2.4. The red cross emblem

The red cross emblem – a red cross with arms of equal length on a white background – is a visible sign of neutrality and protection under the Geneva Conventions of 1949. It is used to safeguard wounded and sick people and those who care for them in a completely neutral and impartial way. The emblem also signifies a person or object’s connection to the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. As such, the emblem is perceived as representing the Movement’s Fundamental Principles.

⁵ <https://redcross.org.ua/en/> | ⁶ This emerged in the findings of research commissioned by the British Red Cross in 2020, ‘Is aid really changing’: www.redcross.org.uk/-/media/documents-indexed/report_is_aid_really_changing.pdf?sc_lang=en | ⁷ <https://www.ifrc.org/document/statutes-international-red-cross-and-red-crescent-movement>

The red cross emblem does not carry any intentional religious meaning. However, due to historical reasons and the existence of multiple emblems, there is a common misconception regarding its religious significance. During the nineteenth century, the symbol evoked associations with medieval crusaders among soldiers from the Ottoman Empire (modern-day Türkiye). As a result, beginning in 1876, certain countries adopted the red crescent emblem to serve a similar purpose as the red cross emblem in other countries. Both the red cross and red crescent emblems have exactly the same meaning

and status under international law. The Movement continually educates and informs the public and other stakeholders about the correct meaning and purpose of the emblems.

Unauthorised use of the emblem is prohibited under International and National Law, including in Ukraine. Many National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, including URCS, monitor unauthorised use or misuse (whether deliberate or accidental) of the emblem in support of their public authorities.



Volunteers with URCS emergency response teams help an elderly resident during flooding caused by the destruction of the Nova Kakhovka Dam.

Purpose of the study and methodology

3.1. Study purpose

This case study is a joint initiative of the Ukrainian Red Cross Society (URCS) and the British Red Cross (BRC). It is a collection of practical examples and insights on how URCS leverages its legal mandate and operationalises the Fundamental Principles to deliver effective assistance as a humanitarian auxiliary to its public authorities, with a particular focus on its experience doing so during an international armed conflict.

The ongoing international armed conflict (IAC) between the Russian Federation and Ukraine has triggered a significant humanitarian crisis, challenging the implementation of principled humanitarian action since February 2022. Partnering with URCS, BRC explored real-life, contextualised examples of how the Fundamental Principles are articulated in practices within emergency operations, programme development, partnership establishment, coordination forum engagement, and dialogue with government, authorities and other key stakeholders in conflict settings.

The study emphasises practical examples showcasing how URCS navigates its mandate, particularly its auxiliary role, and how they advance the Fundamental Principles through the localisation agenda, including with Ukrainian civil society, international actors, and the Movement. These examples illustrate URCS's engagement with its government, public and local authorities, and key stakeholders at national, regional and local levels, demonstrating their ability to address diverse challenges through established relationships, accountability mechanisms, and community acceptance. The research equips URCS in articulating their narrative on principled humanitarian action, and provides insights on capacity development challenges inherent to effective humanitarian diplomacy, especially at local levels.

This case study forms part of the British Red Cross project, 'Delivering principled, local humanitarian action in fragile and conflict settings', which aims to promote understanding among governments, donors and Movement actors of the ways in which National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies operate in highly complex contexts to deliver principled and effective humanitarian action. In particular, the project examines how National Societies navigate operational and political sensitivities while exercising their role as a humanitarian auxiliary to their public authorities.⁸

3.2. Methodology and limitations

The methodology for this case study was co-designed and co-developed jointly by the Ukrainian Red Cross Society (URCS) and British Red Cross (BRC), with support from an international researcher who has extensive experience working in the country context, with the Movement and URCS. This enabled a strong and productive peer-to-peer relationship to ensure ownership of the outcomes and findings. The research relied on a desk review of relevant documents provided by URCS and partners, and external information related to humanitarian principles, access and coordination matters in the context of the conflict in Ukraine.



Throughout the conflict emergency response staff and volunteers from the Ukrainian Red Cross (URCS) have been responding to damage to homes and civilian infrastructure.

⁸ The purpose of the case study is to improve the understanding and practices of URCS's 'special features' and is not intended to be critical of any individual or organisation. Rather, it is intended as a helpful and constructive analysis, to improve understanding of the Fundamental Principles and the auxiliary role, for the benefit of the population and the public authorities.

The research approach was mainly participatory, involving a diverse range of 25 stakeholders (13 female interviewees and 12 male interviewees), who were interviewed in May–June 2024. A total of 17 interviewees were from various levels of URCS, including 4 representatives of URCS's senior management, 4 representatives of URCS's national committee (head of unit level), and 9 representatives of URCS branch management. Media interviews of URCS staff have also been used. Interviews were conducted across URCS's national committee and interregional, regional, and local branches, to give a representative image of the impact of the conflict. Namely:

- Senior management and other members of URCS's national committee in Kyiv
- Poltava regional branch (central Ukraine)
- Vinnitsa interregional office (central Ukraine)
- Lviv regional branch and interregional office (western Ukraine)
- Dnipro interregional office (eastern Ukraine)
- Pavlohrad local branch (eastern Ukraine)
- Donetsk regional branch (eastern Ukraine, near the frontline)
- Mykolaiv regional branch (southern Ukraine, near the frontline)
- Kherson regional branch (southeastern Ukraine, formerly occupied territory and near the frontline).

The research also includes data from external stakeholders that URCS works or coordinates with, including 3 representatives from Movement partners, 1 representative from the Ukrainian government, 2 representatives from Ukrainian civil society, and 2 representatives from the international humanitarian sector (of which one was formerly a URCS volunteer).

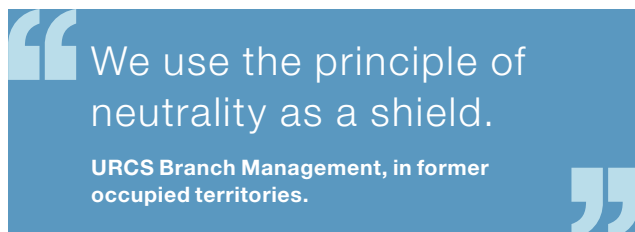
The limitations of this case study include a lack of quantitative data to support some of the findings, and logistical and security constraints for data collection in the field.



URCS rapid response teams arrive promptly at the scene to help with the aftermath of air-strikes in large urban areas.

4 RESEARCH FINDINGS

Principled local humanitarian action



Since the start of the conflict in 2014, URCS has endeavoured to implement the Fundamental Principles in ways both relevant to the National Society's operational and security realities, and meaningful to the communities they serve. For URCS this has required a politically astute understanding of how, during an international armed conflict (IAC), to position itself alongside authorities, preserve its independence and access, and continue delivering principled assistance.

As a result of its localised approach to principled humanitarian action, URCS has developed and maintained a unique level of trust and acceptance with communities throughout the country. It has built on decades of experience in civil protection and disaster management, and as a provider of health and social services, to maintain the independence, impartiality and neutrality of its activities during the conflict. However, this delicate balance has become especially complex for the National Society since the full-scale escalation of the conflict on 24 February 2022. URCS continues to navigate the tension between upholding the Fundamental Principles while maintaining trust and acceptance from its beneficiaries, public authorities, government, and national and international partners. As a result, URCS has invested in its own humanitarian diplomacy capacities, and in the dissemination of the Fundamental Principles externally as well as to its staff and volunteers.

This first section illustrates the barriers they have faced in doing so, and the strategies deployed nationally and locally to overcome them.

4.1. Barriers to principled local humanitarian action

4.1.1. The politicisation of humanitarian action during an IAC

Key finding: URCS encountered challenges in delivering principled humanitarian action during the conflict, as humanitarian aid was highly politicised in the external environment. Misinformation campaigns conflated URCS with ICRC at a time when ICRC was facing intense public and political criticism, resulting in reputational crises, strained relations with authorities, and threats to volunteers. The situation highlights a complex dilemma for URCS: upholding humanitarian principles like neutrality in a conflict where aid is seen as an inherently political and patriotic endeavour.

The politicisation of humanitarian action in the armed conflict in Ukraine has impacted international and local actors such as URCS; in particular regarding the ability to reach populations living in occupied territories. For instance, between 2014 and 2022, legislative and practical obstructions from authorities, trade blockades and constrained security regulations limited the ability to work on both sides of the line of contact (LoC)⁹. At the time however, URCS was able to work with Movement partners and leverage points of complementarity to find solutions and work in non-government-controlled areas (NGCAs) in the oblasts of Luhansk and Donetsk.



Since February 2022 has deepened tensions and polarisation in Ukraine's humanitarian and political environment, further narrowing the space for principled humanitarian action. For example, there are now few, if any, neutral channels available for delivering crossline humanitarian aid to occupied territories. From the outset, the Ukrainian government and its partners have framed both military and humanitarian efforts as part of a broader political stance against the Russian Federation. This solidarity-driven narrative – reflected in political discourse, media, and public sentiment – has often cast doubt on the relevance of core humanitarian principles, particularly neutrality. In a context where the conflict is widely seen as existential to Ukraine's statehood and national identity, neutrality is sometimes viewed

⁹ *Peace in Ukraine (III): The Costs of War in Donbas* (2020), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/ukraine/261-peace-ukraine-iii-costs-war-donbas>

as unrealistic or even inappropriate¹⁰. A member of URCS's National Committee highlighted the difficulties faced by the National Society in trying to communicate the Movement's Fundamental Principles, especially that of neutrality, in this context: *"Now we have a situation where it is a war with a strong national moment, not for territory but for a nation – so in this context it is not always realistic to be neutral, or to speak about it."*

For URCS, this debate has been especially impactful due to a series of reputational crises involving the Movement since the escalation began, with misinformation campaigns targeting the ICRC and drawing harsh criticism from the Ukrainian government¹¹. The public backlash revealed deeper tensions between the principled approach of the traditional humanitarian sector and the solidarity-driven framing that has dominated in Ukraine, highlighting divergent perspectives on the role and perceived limitations of neutrality in a highly polarised conflict.

Although a distinct organisation, URCS has often been conflated with the ICRC in the wake of these reputational crises. As a result, it has been significantly affected by the resulting public relations fallout, creating major obstacles to delivering principled humanitarian assistance. Some of these consequences have been particularly tangible at the branch level. For example, speaking to *The New Humanitarian* in May 2022¹², the Head of the Kyiv City Branch explained:

 We practically couldn't work for a week. People were so stressed and didn't have time to analyse or properly grasp the situation. They just heard the words Red Cross and that was it – we were all traitors, and our volunteers were getting guns pointed at them. 

National Committee members, senior management, and local branches all reported significant challenges in their interactions with government and public authorities as a result of the reputational fallout.

Despite efforts to distinguish URCS from the ICRC through diplomatic engagement and public messaging, these efforts have not fully mitigated the damage, leading to strained relationships with authorities, public confusion about the different components of the Movement, and a decline in domestic donor support.

4.1.2. The impact of politicisation on operations near the frontline

Key finding: The politicisation of humanitarian principles has impacted URCS operations, particularly near frontlines and in occupied territories. Despite a decade of adherence to neutrality, branches faced challenges in maintaining access and safety. National-level solidarity messaging often conflicted with the need to strictly adhere to the principle of neutrality at the local level, which was crucial for crossline access and volunteer safety. The Ukraine experience highlights the importance of localising the operationalisation of the Fundamental Principles so that they can adapt to distinct political and cultural realities on the ground – becoming enablers rather than hindrances for maintaining domestic and local legitimacy, reaching those most in need, and protecting staff and volunteers when territorial control shifts.

Beyond reputational challenges, the politicisation of humanitarian principles within the armed conflict has directly impacted URCS branches' ability to deliver principled humanitarian assistance, particularly in frontline and occupied territories. For these branches, strict adherence to the Fundamental Principles – especially neutrality – is essential not only to access affected populations but also to ensure the safety of staff and volunteers. Interviewees in Kyiv and in frontline areas, including formerly occupied territories, highlighted how differences between Ukraine's national and local contexts require adapted approaches to applying and communicating humanitarian principles. For example, solidarity-driven messaging on humanitarian aid emerging from the national political level has had immediate and adverse consequences for URCS operations at the frontline.

¹⁰ *Navigating narratives in Ukraine: humanitarian response amid solidarity and resistance* (2023), https://media.odi.org/documents/Narratives_in_Ukraine_WP_HPG_final1909_tNmSZR.pdf | ¹¹ *Why the Red Cross has to be neutral in the Ukraine conflict* (2022), <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-60921567> |

¹² *Evacuation challenges and bad optics: Why Ukrainians are losing faith in the ICRC* (2022), <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2022/05/03/the-icrc-and-the-pitfalls-of-neutrality-in-ukraine>

This dynamic was particularly evident at the local level. A former URCS volunteer recalled how, during the early months of the full-scale escalation, their branch – then operating close to the frontline – faced an unprecedented daily influx of spontaneous volunteers who had limited familiarity with the Fundamental Principles. In such a volatile setting, it was critical that URCS be perceived as neutral to retain trust and maintain the possibility of crossline access, should that become necessary if the frontline shifted. The volunteer described being surprised and unsettled by the tone of external messaging from humanitarian actors at the national and international levels regarding neutrality. A regional branch member near the frontline illustrated the dilemma posed by external messaging from humanitarian organisations in Ukraine: *“For any Ukrainian citizen, the photo with some representative from the presidential office is OK, some post in the media is OK, ‘Russia’ written with a small letter ‘r’ is OK. But maybe it is not OK for the representative of a humanitarian organisation.”* This underscores the tension between prevailing public sentiment and the standards required of humanitarian actors, particularly at the frontline, where perceptions of neutrality can determine access, credibility, and safety.

Several branches that have operated closest to the conflict for over a decade have developed a hard-earned, practical understanding of the importance of neutrality in their day-to-day work, and of how the politicisation of humanitarian action can adversely affect their ability to operate. In the occupied territories in particular, some regional branches have managed to remain active, albeit under a different legal or operational status¹³. In certain cases, branches have had to engage with local authorities under occupation in order to continue delivering essential services, and have done so on the basis of a strictly principled approach. For many of these branches, this experience precedes the full-scale escalation of the conflict, as recounted for example by a branch coordinator interviewed for a separate study led by the IFRC on national society development in the long term:

“During the Maidan revolution of 2014, as well as the escalation of the armed conflict in the east, people across the country became more partial and

patriotic. A wide range of organisational challenges arose to protect our auxiliary role and neutral, impartial and independent positioning. We had a lot of tension with ICRC who insisted that we should not use Ukrainian flags on or in our offices, and that we should take away all pro-Ukrainian material from our Facebook page. Although branches in the non-government controlled areas (NGCAs) of the east did not talk about politics, and concentrated on vulnerable people only, this neutral and impartial positioning enabled them to negotiate with armed combatants and have more access and acceptance than international stakeholders as a result.”¹⁴

Overall, URCS’s efforts to secure acceptance for its activities near the frontline and in occupied areas have been particularly challenging, especially in the years prior to the full-scale escalation, amid a broader national climate of strong patriotism. This context has sometimes fostered public narratives that frame communities living near the frontline or in occupied territories as less deserving of humanitarian assistance¹⁵, further complicating efforts to maintain a principled, needs-based approach.

URCS Senior Management has been acutely aware of the challenges posed by the politicisation of humanitarian principles and has made consistent efforts to ensure these principles are respected internally and understood externally. Leadership acknowledges that public opinion and political pressure have influenced the National Society, particularly around the principle of neutrality, and stressed that these dynamics are well understood. While URCS remains committed to neutrality, it recognises that its application cannot mirror that of an international humanitarian actor, given the different relationships, responsibilities, and pressures it faces as a national entity. As such, the interpretation and operationalisation of neutrality may differ across the organisation – from headquarters to branches operating near the frontline or in occupied territories – depending on context-specific issues such as perception, access, acceptance, and security. At the same time, URCS has sought to embody a principled humanitarianism that is rooted in and accepted by the communities it serves. A recurring theme in interviews with National Committee members was the importance of grounding the National Society’s

¹³ “We are close to you”: Long-term National Society Development investments that strengthened the positioning, sustainability and impact of the Ukrainian Red Cross Society in a fragile, complex, protracted conflict and violence-affected environment (2024), https://www.ifrc.org/sites/default/files/2024-10/Longitudinal%20Review%20Case%20study_Ukraine%20Red%20Cross.pdf | ¹⁴ Ibid. | ¹⁵ “Nobody Wants Us”: The Alienated Civilians of Eastern Ukraine (2018), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/ukraine-russia-internal/252-nobody-wants-us-alienated-civilians-eastern-ukraine>

response in Ukrainian society – ensuring assistance reaches those most affected and, in doing so, contributing to national resilience.

4.1.3. Lack of understanding of URCS's mandate and the Fundamental Principles

Key finding: URCS has faced significant limitations in effectively communicating the Movement mandate and principles to external actors during the conflict. The Movement's humanitarian diplomacy has been insufficient, with inadequate engagement at the international level to defend URCS's adherence to neutrality and its role as a National Society, underscoring the need for emphasised external communication about the local application of fundamental humanitarian principles in conflict settings.

The Ukrainian Red Cross Society (URCS) has faced persistent challenges in ensuring broad understanding of its mandate and the Fundamental Principles, particularly neutrality. Across all levels, there was a strong sense that the Movement's engagement in diplomatic and public communication around humanitarian principles and international humanitarian law (IHL) has been insufficient in the context of the ongoing armed conflict. In an environment where public discourse and social media are often shaped by misinformation and politicised narratives, many interviewees emphasised the need for more assertive and accessible communication about the role of National Societies, and their auxiliary status to public authorities, in upholding principled humanitarian action.

Diplomatic efforts have been made – both within Ukraine and across the international aid community – to secure space for principled humanitarian action. However, these efforts have had limited success. A key challenge has been the inconsistent communication of URCS's neutrality as a local actor. This has been especially critical for branches operating near the frontline. One regional branch manager reflected on this, noting that their team had *“experienced years of war, and worked hard to respect humanitarian principles”*, but now saw a need for *“stronger solidarity in the Movement to support Ukraine and the Ukrainian Red Cross.”* The manager stressed that, in such difficult circumstances, *“it is*

important to speak honestly and transparently about the challenges we have encountered, particularly regarding humanitarian principles and the difficulties from the politicisation of this war.” This perspective underscores how local actors navigating active conflict need clearer and more consistent backing to uphold humanitarian principles in practice.

A URCS National Committee member stressed that while there may be moments – particularly in individual communications – where the National Society does not appear fully neutral, the organisation places greater emphasis on demonstrating principled action through its work on the ground, especially near the frontlines. They noted that too much of the debate has focused on whether local humanitarian actors in Ukraine, such as URCS, fully understand or adhere to humanitarian principles *“as an abstract concept.”* In their view, the more relevant measure is how URCS's *“concrete actions”* consistently reflect these principles in practice. While URCS's external messaging or close operational ties with public authorities may raise questions about neutrality, the member argued that the National Society's commitment to principled humanitarianism is best judged by its actions and impact in complex and politically sensitive environments.

Similarly, members of URCS senior management noted that during the reputational crisis, the Red Cross Movement did not engage sufficiently in humanitarian diplomacy at the international level. The Movement missed opportunities to take a stronger stance with key governments that might have helped reinforce and defend its principles publicly. In addition, there was a lack of coordinated advocacy to promote the Movement's shared commitments, which may have helped mitigate some of the reputational damage experienced at the time.

In the context of a full-scale international armed conflict, effectively communicating neutrality is particularly sensitive. To prevent misinterpretation or the perception of taking sides, a more proactive and unified approach could have emphasised how neutrality and other Fundamental Principles are applied in practice by a local National Society operating in a politically and emotionally charged environment. This framing would have helped build understanding among both Ukrainian authorities and international partners.

4.1.4. Balancing principles with the personal impact of the conflict

Key finding: URCS staff and volunteers face challenges in upholding humanitarian principles amid the personal and emotional toll of the conflict. While their professionalism remains strong, personal views sometimes influence discourse. URCS recognises the need for support and improvement, particularly in maintaining neutrality, as these principles protect both personnel and operations.

URCS staff and volunteers consistently described the profound challenges of upholding humanitarian principles while personally experiencing the emotional and psychological toll of the conflict on themselves and their loved ones. Those consulted during the research emphasised the importance of recognising the human impact of war on frontline personnel, and the need to support them in navigating this tension. Across both national and local levels, the strain between personal experiences and the professional expectation to uphold neutrality and other principles has been – and remains – underappreciated, particularly by international actors and URCS's partners. One member of URCS senior management recalled instances in which individual staff faced personal and professional dilemmas, with visible impacts on mental health and motivation. They acknowledged that there had been moments where individuals struggled to maintain the appropriate attitude or discourse regarding neutrality. While URCS recognises this as an area for continued improvement, it does so with a strong awareness of the conflict's human toll on its workforce.

While the National Society has, in general, maintained a principled public posture, there have been isolated cases where personal or social media commentary by individuals has reflected the broader societal tensions facing Ukraine during the war. Still, many interviewees pointed to the professionalism and principled conduct of staff and volunteers, regardless of their personal or political views:



Everybody has the right to have their own opinion in the private sphere, but in the workplace, neutrality and impartiality are part of our principles and values, and we have to apply them. It is, of course, difficult to dissociate from your private life at work, but this is definitely an effort that needs to be made.

National committee, URCS



Similarly, the former volunteer referenced earlier described how, despite feeling intense pride in their Ukrainian identity – especially during the war – they understood the importance of remaining neutral during such highly emotional times to preserve humanitarian access. A regional branch manager in a partly occupied territory described how their team had upheld neutrality in the face of enormous challenges, including loss of life, detention, and strikes on URCS facilities. Although they held personal views about the conflict, the branch understood that adherence to the Fundamental Principles served as a vital source of protection for themselves and their colleagues, particularly those still living in occupied areas.

4.2. Enablers of principled local humanitarian action

4.2.1. Localisation and proximity to communities

Key finding: URCS's decentralised structure and strong local presence have enabled it to build deep trust with communities and authorities, allowing it to provide timely, needs-based humanitarian assistance. This proximity ensures that URCS can navigate politically charged situations more effectively, engaging in direct dialogue to clarify and uphold its humanitarian principles of neutrality, impartiality, and independence. By empowering local branches to find pragmatic solutions, URCS strengthens its auxiliary role while maintaining operational independence, especially in areas where international mandates may be met with scepticism or political challenges.



For local authorities, there is only one Red Cross. The proximity of relationships at the local level is more important than institutional mandates and identity. When there are political issues, having a decentralised approach works better as we can find local solutions, and dialogues to ensure principles and mandates are understood by both authorities and the population.

**URCS Branch Management,
Southern Ukraine**



URCS enjoys deep-rooted trust from communities across Ukraine, built through its longstanding presence and history of impartial emergency support in times of need. Long before 2022, URCS had already established itself on the frontlines – responding to the Chernobyl disaster, the onset of conflict in 2014, and the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. These experiences have reinforced public confidence in URCS's commitment to helping people of all backgrounds without taking sides.

At the local level, URCS understands that institutional mandates and international humanitarian identities often take second place to practical relationships and community needs. For many local authorities, URCS is viewed as a unified and reliable actor, with its effectiveness measured by how closely it engages with local issues and how swiftly it delivers solutions. In a conflict as politically charged as Ukraine's, this localised approach is especially critical. When tensions or misunderstandings about neutrality emerge, the decentralised nature of URCS's operations allows for agile, context-specific responses. Branches are able to engage directly with local authorities and communities to explain the principles of neutrality, impartiality, and independence in ways that reflect local realities. This ability to adapt enables URCS to uphold its humanitarian principles while ensuring that aid remains needs-based and shielded from political influence.

Decentralisation also allows URCS to identify and implement solutions to local challenges that may be difficult to resolve through a centralised structure. By empowering branches to negotiate and build

relationships with local authorities, URCS reinforces its auxiliary role while safeguarding its independence. This autonomy is particularly important when addressing politically sensitive issues, where local actors often seek immediate, pragmatic responses over strict alignment with international mandates. In such cases, URCS's local engagement serves as a bridge – helping to translate humanitarian principles into trusted and practical action on the ground.

Finally, URCS's proximity to affected communities helps cultivate deeper trust, making it easier to promote and reinforce humanitarian principles. This is especially important in areas where the conflict has heightened polarisation and where neutrality may be viewed with scepticism. By drawing on community trust and offering context-appropriate solutions, URCS is better positioned to explain and embody its principled approach in ways that resonate locally.

Key finding: URCS adopts a needs-based approach, prioritising the principle of humanity to address vulnerabilities across all communities, including those from occupied territories. This focus has allowed URCS to build trust and credibility, ensuring impartial aid delivery despite political tensions. By maintaining neutrality and treating all individuals equally, URCS has remained committed to serving the people left most vulnerable, providing not only emergency aid but also continuity of services throughout crises.

4.2.2. Being led by needs and humanity

Interviewees from across URCS – from national leadership to local branches – described how they navigated tensions around the Fundamental Principles by consistently prioritising the needs of vulnerable communities and grounding their communication in the principle of humanity. Many noted that following the escalation in February 2022, humanity was the principle most easily understood and accepted by both authorities and the broader public, whereas neutrality remained more contested or misunderstood. A Regional Branch Manager explained: *“URCS does not have a specific activity to enhance one humanitarian principle over another. We prioritise a needs-based approach to remain principled.”*

URCS has intentionally emphasised this needs-based approach, both as a practical response to humanitarian needs and as a way to reduce misunderstandings or controversy around other principles – particularly neutrality. This focus has enabled the National Society to continue delivering local humanitarian action in accordance with the Movement's principles, even under politically sensitive conditions. This orientation is not new: since 2014, volunteers and staff have operated in difficult and underfunded conditions, steadily reinforcing public recognition of URCS's association with humanity and impartiality. A member of senior management recalled how, during the Maidan revolution, the newly created Emergency Response Teams (ERTs) supported both injured protesters and security personnel, exemplifying principled humanitarian action in a polarised environment:

“ If we look back, the Ukrainian Red Cross has always been a National Society that is, overall, principled. When the Maidan events started in 2014, the Emergency Response Team that was just created supported both sides, meaning the police forces and the protesters.

URCS Senior Management

One area where the principle of humanity has been particularly tested is in responding to the needs of people from or living in occupied territories. Branches across central and western Ukraine, for instance, described the challenges they faced in supporting the mass influx of internally displaced persons (IDPs) at the start of the full-scale escalation. A Regional Branch Manager recalled how volunteers encountered criticism from some community members for distributing aid to displaced people from eastern or occupied areas. These critics argued that such people “*should not receive this aid, that it is their fault the war broke out.*” In response, the branch upheld its commitment to impartiality and explained their approach to those questioning it:

“ We have an obligation to provide aid to everyone in need, so using our principles we tried to explain this and resolved the issue [...] We understand Russian language well, and we communicated to those displaced people [from the east of Ukraine and occupied territories] what their rights were, what could be provided, where they could access help. Since then, we have had people from the occupied territories join as volunteers, or as staff.

URCS Regional Branch Manager

This emphasis on needs and humanity has been central to URCS's ability to build and maintain public trust – even in the face of reputational crises. Local services have demonstrated neutrality, impartiality, and independence not only in rhetoric, but in practice, precisely because they are grounded in the realities of human need. While political debates around neutrality have at times overshadowed URCS's principled work, the National Society has maintained a holistic, person-centred approach before and after the escalation. As one branch manager from central Ukraine put it: “*Whenever we are providing assistance, the first thing we do is assess needs. I don't associate the Red Cross with just humanitarian aid, but with complex services that ease the lives of people affected by conflict or other vulnerabilities.*”

This approach reflects URCS's commitment to providing continuity of care across all phases of humanitarian response – not just emergency relief, but also longer-term support that respects the dignity and well-being of affected individuals. In doing so, the National Society demonstrates the principle of humanity through a sustained effort to alleviate suffering in all its forms. It also embodies impartiality by ensuring that no one is excluded from assistance due to their background or political associations, reinforcing URCS's role as a neutral and needs-driven humanitarian actor.

4.2.3. Successfully balancing the auxiliary role, independence, and neutrality

Key finding: URCS's careful balance of neutrality and independence, underpinned by its auxiliary role and needs-based approach, has been essential for maintaining principled humanitarian action during the conflict. By refusing requests that compromise these principles and ensuring independent aid distribution, URCS has upheld them even in the face of occasional pressure from authorities, local civil society groups and public opinion. In occupied territories, neutrality has served as a shield, allowing URCS to continue operations and protect staff. This adherence to principles has enabled URCS to provide continuous, effective humanitarian services, even in highly sensitive and dangerous environments.

The Ukrainian Red Cross Society (URCS) has managed to balance its auxiliary role with a strong commitment to independence and neutrality, largely through a steadfast needs-based approach. This has proven especially challenging in the context of the ongoing international armed conflict, where political pressure and polarisation have intensified. As the conflict escalated, misunderstandings of URCS's mandate by authorities and armed forces occasionally resulted in demands that ran counter to the Fundamental Principles. Representatives from both the National Committee and regional branches reported having to navigate these situations carefully, consistently reinforcing the Society's operational independence from state actors. For example, one National Committee member described how certain branches had to decline requests to provide direct assistance to combatants – such as transporting personnel or delivering aid – because doing so would compromise the principles of neutrality and independence. While these decisions have at times been met with criticism from stakeholders, including some Ukrainian civil society organisations, they have not prevented URCS from continuing constructive cooperation with these groups. Throughout the research, Movement partners consistently recognised that, despite the polarisation present even at the highest political levels, URCS has maintained a delicate but effective balance between its role as an auxiliary to the public authorities, its affiliation with the Movement, and its principled independence.

A URCS branch management representative highlighted that local authorities occasionally request actions that are not aligned with the Fundamental Principles – for example, asking to distribute URCS aid themselves. Such requests require careful negotiation and clear communication about the importance of independent and impartial aid delivery. While responding to these situations can be time-consuming, the employee emphasised that it is essential to redirect these requests to the appropriate actors in order to uphold URCS's principles. *“We had hundreds of requests from military units and others, and it took time to explain our principles and refer them to the right actors,”* noted a Regional Branch Manager in western Ukraine.

These efforts are especially important in contexts where URCS supports military hospitals and veterans as part of its humanitarian mandate. This area of work illustrates how URCS maintains a careful balance between its independence, auxiliary role, and neutrality. For example, in collaboration with public authorities, URCS has developed a comprehensive system of support for veterans and their families. This includes psychosocial care, home rehabilitation services, provision of rehabilitation equipment, and guidance on adapting housing to meet specific needs. URCS also offers social adaptation programmes to help veterans and their families transition to civilian life.

In partnership with the Ministry of Veterans Affairs of Ukraine, URCS operates a national hotline that provides daily consultations on a range of issues – including psychosocial support, access to social benefits, housing assistance, and medical concerns. Through these activities, URCS demonstrates how principled humanitarian engagement can be sustained in politically sensitive areas by focusing on needs, maintaining neutrality, and preserving operational independence.

In occupied territories, maintaining operations has required strict and consistent adherence to the Fundamental Principles – particularly neutrality – which staff and volunteers have applied not only in their professional conduct but, at times, in their personal lives as well. This approach has been essential to ensure the safety of URCS personnel and the uninterrupted delivery of humanitarian services. A Regional Branch Manager in one of these territories described how neutrality served as a protection, allowing operations to continue before, during, and after occupation. They also highlighted the importance

of neutral and careful communication, particularly with colleagues working in highly sensitive areas, to avoid exposing them to risk.

By preserving its neutrality and operational independence, URCS has managed to provide one of the few examples of continuous humanitarian presence in some of the most complex and insecure parts of the country, including the occupied territories. Reflecting on this broader challenge, URCS's Head of International Humanitarian Law explained in a media interview: *"One example is the support provided to people close to the frontlines. Other international organisations don't have access to territories where there are hostilities, but the Ukrainian Red Cross has staff and volunteers from those areas, and they communicate with the authorities controlling that area. This is only possible because of the principles and reputation of the Red Cross as a neutral organisation – nobody questions the mission of the Red Cross, they don't view our mission as political."*¹⁶

4.2.4. Improvement of awareness raising on the Fundamental Principles

Key finding: Since 2014, the Ukrainian Red Cross Society (URCS) has successfully raised awareness of International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and the Fundamental Principles through extensive efforts in education and public outreach. Collaborating with government bodies, including integrating IHL into the national curriculum, and engaging with mass media, URCS has strengthened public understanding of its neutral, impartial, and independent role.

As described above, high-level efforts to raise awareness of the Fundamental Principles and the specific mandate of the Ukrainian Red Cross Society (URCS) have encountered several limitations, particularly within the highly politicised environment of the ongoing international armed conflict. Nevertheless, from an operational and strategic perspective, URCS – supported by Movement partners – has invested significantly in disseminating International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and promoting understanding of the Movement's principles across multiple levels of Ukrainian society since 2014.

This includes long-standing collaboration with state authorities such as the Ministry of Education to integrate IHL into the national curriculum, public communication through national media to clarify URCS's neutral and independent role, and internal alignment through ICRC's Safer Access Framework. URCS has also actively engaged government counterparts to reinforce the auxiliary nature of National Societies and to clarify that operational independence must be maintained in accordance with the Movement's principles.

Regional branch management near the frontline highlighted that URCS had undertaken many activities to ensure that authorities at all levels understand these principles. They noted that misunderstandings at the governmental level could negatively impact operations, but URCS continues to work hard to improve understanding. The same management also pointed out that authorities are generally aware of the Fundamental Principles but stressed the need for continuous education and dialogue. In formerly occupied territories, regional branch management observed that authorities have not adequately addressed issues related to the Fundamental Principles, indicating a lack of understanding and respect for IHL and the humanitarian work of URCS. However, in areas like Donetsk, where authorities have been dealing with conflict since 2014–2015, there was a generally good understanding of the principles and respect for the neutrality of humanitarian organisations, a testament to URCS's and the Movement's dissemination and awareness raising work in these areas.

Strategically, URCS has achieved significant milestones in the dissemination, implementation, and development of IHL. These efforts have ranged from initiating legislative reforms and supporting treaty ratification processes, to establishing IHL training programmes for civil and military institutions. Notably, with URCS's support, Ukraine's Ministry of Defence released its first-ever Voluntary Report on IHL implementation¹⁷ – an unprecedented initiative by a country engaged in international armed conflict. URCS has also supported the work of the Interagency Commission on IHL Implementation and partnered with international and domestic actors on education, training, and public awareness activities.

¹⁶ Neutrality isn't just a stance (2024), <https://web.archive.org/web/20241126223542/https://www.theguardian.com/we-are-here-for-humanity/2024/sep/20/neutralty-isnt-just-a-stance-red-cross-mission-provide-vital-aid-areas-conflict> | ¹⁷ Voluntary Report on Implementation of International Humanitarian Law (2024) <https://ukraine-eu.mfa.gov.ua/en/news/voluntary-report-implementation-international-humanitarian-law>

In 2024 alone, URCS reached hundreds of thousands of people through IHL campaigns and training events, published expert content across multiple platforms, and contributed to national and international dialogues on IHL compliance and humanitarian protection¹⁸. These efforts have reinforced the visibility of the Movement's principles and helped build public trust in the distinct, non-partisan role of URCS during a time of protracted crisis. While

challenges remain – particularly in regions where understanding of the Fundamental Principles is limited – URCS's continued investment in IHL dissemination and principled dialogue has played a vital role in strengthening respect for humanitarian norms, safeguarding humanitarian space, and ensuring more consistent recognition of its mandate across both state and non-state actors.



A URCS volunteer outside a building struck by a missile.

¹⁸ <https://redcross.org.ua/en/news/2025/01/103082/>

5 RESEARCH FINDINGS

Auxiliary role

Like all National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, a defining feature of the Ukrainian Red Cross Society (URCS) as a local humanitarian actor is its auxiliary role to Ukraine's public authorities. This status enables URCS to work closely with ministries, central and local administrations, and state services to reach populations in need – while retaining the independence necessary to uphold the principles of neutrality and impartiality. Historically, this relationship has been particularly strong in the health sector, exemplified by URCS's nationwide network of visiting nurses, funded by the Ministry of Health until 2016. Over the past decade, this status has also deepened in the fields of disaster management and civil protection, with a close operational relationship with the State Emergency Service of Ukraine (SESU) positioning URCS as a key actor in emergency response.

Following the escalation of the conflict on 24 February 2022, strong coordination between URCS and Ukrainian authorities at multiple levels enabled a rapid, large-scale humanitarian response across the country. Today, URCS continues to support the government in responding to both conflict-related needs and broader social vulnerabilities. Although the reputational crisis affecting the Movement strained some aspects of this relationship, the foundations built during this period remain robust and essential for ongoing and future collaboration. Navigating the principle of independence within this auxiliary relationship – and understanding how it interacts with neutrality and impartiality – remains a persistent challenge that requires continued reflection and open dialogue.

5.1. Enabling the auxiliary role nationally and regionally

Key finding: Through an operational presence and continuous dialogue, URCS has made significant strides in further defining its role as an auxiliary to public authorities, particularly in civil protection and health. However, substantial challenges remain regarding the decentralisation and formalisation of the auxiliary role, both within URCS and for regional and local authorities. The escalation of the conflict has increased the need for a more balanced approach between centralised management at the national level and the demand for local services, with URCS continuing to adapt its approach and capacities to maintain trust and the effectiveness of its humanitarian efforts.

The escalation of the conflict accelerated a process already underway for over a decade, in which URCS has been progressively refining its auxiliary role to public authorities – particularly in the context of active hostilities. This evolution has been shaped by broader questions about how the National Society's auxiliary status aligns with Ukraine's decentralisation reforms, which aim to establish a new 'social contract' between the state and its citizens. In 2014, the Ukrainian government formally recognised 24 oblasts (regions) and Kyiv city as distinct administrative units. URCS, in turn, has restructured its own organisation to reflect this decentralised model, moving away from its Soviet-era top-down legacy. The new structure of URCS inherently supports this approach to local services:



We have 24 regional organisations and about 200 district and local branches. This means we are currently present in all regions of Ukraine according to the administrative-territorial division, except for the occupied territories. Our strength lies in our ability to quickly access any point in Ukraine and respond swiftly. This means we don't need to resolve issues in Kyiv and then wait another week before we can help someone, for instance, in Kryvyi Rih.

URCS Director General, media interview with Interfax news agency.



¹⁹ The Prykhytost programme for example delivers cash assistance to households hosting internally displaced people (IDPs). Made possible by a partnership between the Government of Ukraine and URCS, it serves as a cost-effective solution that contributes to promoting hosting at a time when shelter remains a significant gap for IDPs, especially for those who cannot afford to pay for rent. Up to 110,000 hosts received cash assistance within this programme monthly.

Despite this structural transformation, the decentralisation of the auxiliary role itself – particularly in health and civil protection – remains uneven. The escalation of conflict has in some cases prompted a re-centralisation of service delivery by both authorities and URCS. Since February 2022, URCS has engaged in large-scale humanitarian programming through central agreements, such as memoranda of understanding (MoUs) with various ministries. These MoUs have enabled participation in state-led programmes, including social protection, cash assistance, and health services. However, while these agreements often refer explicitly to URCS's auxiliary role – such as with the Ministry of Social Policy or Ministry of Veterans – they tend to remain general in nature and, as noted by a member of URCS senior management, *“they are not sufficient; their implementation at the regional and local levels is inconsistent”*.

URCS's engagement since the conflict escalation has spanned a wide range of activities – civil defence, shelter and evacuation services, restoration of family links, and community health – which illustrates how its auxiliary role is being implemented across different sectors and administrative levels. For example, the research found that many branches are closely engaged with their authorities in concrete activities often without having a formalised auxiliary role. URCS's National Committee reflected on how the government's understanding of the auxiliary role has increased markedly since URCS's response to COVID-19, as reflected in the proliferation of national-level MoUs with entities such as the Ministries of Health, Social Policy, Reintegration, Veterans, Education, Defence, and the State Emergency Service, among others.

Nonetheless, the articulation of the auxiliary role from national to local levels remains a work in progress. The varying degrees of formality, operational clarity, and decentralised implementation present ongoing challenges to strengthening this role. The contrasting dynamics in civil protection and health – URCS's two core auxiliary areas – offer useful comparisons for understanding where the auxiliary role sits on the spectrum between centralisation and decentralisation.

5.1.1. Civil protection and disaster management

Key finding: The inclusion of URCS in the 2024 Civil Protection Act marks a critical evolution in formalising its auxiliary role, highlighting its increasing integration into state-led disaster management. This recognition stems from URCS's proven capacity to operate effectively in emergencies, reinforcing its position as a trusted partner to authorities. By securing a defined role alongside state actors like the State Emergency Service of Ukraine (SESU), URCS is not only enhancing its operational reach but also shaping the broader framework of civil protection in Ukraine. This development reflects the growing institutionalisation of URCS's auxiliary role.



Tetiana, Emergency Response volunteer, supports Civil Protection personnel in Mykolaiv.

Civil protection and disaster management have emerged as some of the most clearly defined and operationalised dimensions of URCS's auxiliary role, with a strong degree of coherence and continuity from the national to the local levels since the escalation of the conflict. In February 2024, URCS was formally recognised in an act on Civil Protection as a key actor in emergency response, alongside the State Emergency Service of Ukraine (SESU). This designation included five regions, across both eastern and western Ukraine, where a new model of civil protection coordination would be piloted. It was widely cited as a leading example of national policy translating into structured regional cooperation.

This recognition was further strengthened in 2025, when the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine amended the regulation on the Unified State Civil Protection System to authorise URCS's involvement in emergency prevention and response²⁰. The amendments provided a clear legal basis for URCS to operate on a voluntary or contractual basis and set out procedures for information exchange, coordination, and monitoring. These developments reflect not only deepening institutional trust, but also URCS's unique status as the only humanitarian organisation officially integrated into the national civil protection system.

URCS leadership attributed this evolution to the National Society's long-standing operational presence and demonstrated capacity in crisis response. Authorities at all levels had seen URCS train personnel, mobilise equipment, and respond rapidly during emergencies. As one branch manager in southern Ukraine noted, *"our emergency response units are a separate entity that has undergone the training by SESU. It is part of the forces and elements of civil defence of the region."* In several regions, URCS shares premises and resources with SESU, facilitating close coordination and daily cooperation.

While senior staff recognised the long-term value of embedding the auxiliary role in legislation – such as in the Civil Protection Code – they also stressed that in the context of war, formal recognition alone is insufficient. The ability to act swiftly, maintain

presence on the ground, and be trusted by authorities is what gives meaning to the auxiliary role. As one senior representative explained, concrete operational cooperation and being named in national frameworks are *"enough for the National Society"* at this time. In this view, the auxiliary role is not only a legal designation, but a lived, active function that must remain flexible and responsive under the conditions of armed conflict.

Regional examples underscore the impact of this cooperation. During missile strikes on civilian infrastructure, URCS emergency response teams were consistently cited by authorities and partners as among the first responders, working effectively alongside SESU and police – often arriving well before other actors. In the aftermath of the Kakhovka dam explosion in June 2023, the regional branch described how public authorities immediately turned to the local URCS branch for technical guidance and response capacity. Leveraging their existing relationship with SESU, the branch coordinated response operations both locally and across affected oblasts, supporting evacuations, relief distributions, and early recovery. This role is acknowledged and appreciated externally. A Movement partner in Kyiv noted that the combination of national-level resolutions and grounded cooperation at the regional level is helping pave the way to further define and strengthen the auxiliary role in civil protection. A UN agency in Odesa echoed this view, highlighting URCS's consistently fast and effective presence at the scene of emergencies as a key operational advantage over other humanitarian actors.

Taken together, the recent formal recognition in national frameworks, sustained cooperation on the ground, and acknowledgement from external actors suggest that civil protection is among the more clearly developed areas of URCS's auxiliary role. It offers useful insights into how practical, decentralised partnerships can reinforce institutional trust and enhance humanitarian effectiveness. These developments may also serve as a reference point for thinking about how other dimensions of the auxiliary role could be strengthened over time.

5.1.2. Health and social services

Key finding: URCS plays a vital auxiliary role in healthcare, addressing gaps left by government services through initiatives like mobile health units and home-based care. While collaboration with health authorities has been successful, formalizing URCS's health role remains a challenge – better decentralisation and clearer definitions of this role are needed for sustained impact.

Health is a vital yet comparatively less formalised dimension of URCS's auxiliary role. While historically central – most notably through its nationwide network of home-visiting nurses funded by the Ministry of Health until 2016 – URCS's role in the health sector has undergone significant transformation. Following the reputational crisis that led to the suspension of government funding, the National Society has worked to rebuild trust and re-establish cooperation, particularly where state capacity has been under strain.

Across Ukraine, tangible examples of health-related cooperation underscore URCS's contribution in this sector. In eastern regions, where public services have been severely disrupted since 2014, URCS branches have filled critical gaps through mobile health units, tuberculosis prevention programmes, first aid training, and home-based care services. These interventions became even more essential after the 2022 escalation. A branch manager from an eastern oblast noted the strategic value of partially integrating URCS community-based doctors into the public health system in frontline regions – enabling them to prescribe treatments and refer patients through national channels. In southern Ukraine, branch-level collaboration has taken the form of hospital management and the joint operation of mobile health clinics, rehabilitation services, and pharmacy units. These initiatives reflect both local innovation and effective coordination with authorities. However, some branch officials noted that cooperation occasionally veers into competition with local authorities, revealing persistent ambiguity about the boundaries and responsibilities of URCS's auxiliary role in health.

URCS senior management acknowledged this lack of clarity, noting that despite a high volume of projects and cooperation with both the Ministry of Health and

regional health authorities, URCS's formal role in the national health system remains loosely defined. *“In the health sector, our auxiliary role is less clear,”* one official observed, *“even though we have many ongoing collaborations at all levels, from the Ministry of Health to regional health authorities.”* This ambiguity reflects a broader challenge: maintaining a balance between independence in service delivery and complementarity with state health structures. This concern was echoed by a Movement partner, who stressed the need for greater decentralisation of the auxiliary role in health. Regional and local branches often lack the authority and capacity to shape programmes that reflect local needs. While national health strategies provide an essential framework and technical guidance, successful cooperation hinges on enabling local-level dialogue and programme design in close partnership with authorities.

At the same time, in frontline and hard-to-reach areas, URCS continues to play a critical role in maintaining access to essential services. In Donetsk and other conflict-affected regions, mobile health units led by URCS have often been the only viable healthcare providers. An inter-regional branch manager described how, in one area near the frontline, the Red Cross had become so embedded in daily life that *“the beneficiaries associated any organisation with red-and-white colours with the Red Cross,”* reflecting the depth of community trust and reliance on URCS for healthcare.

Despite ongoing challenges, the Ukrainian Red Cross has maintained a strong reputation in the health sector, supported by growing collaboration with authorities – particularly where public services are overstretched. However, the auxiliary role in health still requires greater decentralisation, with local branches better empowered to shape programmes based on community needs. While national strategies provide essential frameworks, effective delivery depends on strong cooperation at regional and local levels.

URCS continues to reinforce its health role through initiatives such as mobile health units in frontline regions like Donetsk and, in 2024, the development of national nurse training standards in partnership with the Ministry of Health. To build on this foundation, the National Society will need to define a clearer, more comprehensive strategy for its health-related auxiliary role – strengthening internal capacity while clarifying its contribution within the national system.

5.1.3. The diversity of the auxiliary role in international armed conflict

Key finding: URCS's auxiliary role has expanded significantly in response to the conflict, supporting authorities through diverse activities such as evacuations, shelters for displaced people, mental health services, and infrastructure restoration. Local branches effectively adapt to the specific needs of their regions, enhancing cooperation with authorities and demonstrating flexibility in fulfilling their auxiliary role.

The scale of needs and the demands placed on URCS by government authorities during the international armed conflict have led to a broad and evolving interpretation of its auxiliary role. From the evacuation of over 300,000 civilians to the construction of shelters for internally displaced persons (IDPs), the restoration of high-voltage power lines in Kyiv region, and support to critical rehabilitation programmes such as *Unbreakable Mothers and Unbroken*²¹ in Lviv, URCS has implemented a wide range of activities in close coordination with state and local authorities. These efforts also include support to water infrastructure in frontline areas. In many cases, the conditions of wartime mobilisation and emergency response created new forms of cooperation – particularly at local levels – that, while not always formally part of the auxiliary role, have effectively reinforced it in practice.

Regional and local branches, in particular, have demonstrated a capacity to shape and adapt the auxiliary role based on needs and the nature of their relationships with authorities. As one National Committee representative observed, the most effective cooperation often happens at branch level, where URCS entities have signed their own MoUs or working agreements with local administrations. For instance, in central Ukraine, one branch filled gaps left by authorities by providing shelter for IDPs and delivering mental health services. Another branch near the frontline, which regularly receives newly displaced people, has expanded its support to include humanitarian assistance, mine risk education, and psychosocial care – marking a major shift from its pre-escalation focus on volunteer coordination and home-based care.

In both cases, authorities provided reciprocal support through access to premises, transport, or cost-sharing. This mutual adaptation illustrates the flexibility of URCS and its ability to tailor its engagement to the needs and capacities of local authorities – one of its key strengths in fulfilling its auxiliary role at the local level.

5.2. Tensions between the auxiliary role and independence

Key finding: URCS's auxiliary role in Ukraine's humanitarian landscape requires balancing close cooperation with authorities while maintaining independence and neutrality. URCS navigates this tension by establishing clear boundaries and leveraging humanitarian diplomacy to influence policy. Through initiatives like community centres, URCS combines service delivery with advocacy, ensuring that vulnerable populations receive essential services while promoting systemic change. This approach allows URCS to protect its impartiality and independence while fostering collaboration with authorities to meet the growing needs of conflict-affected communities.



Overall, I always say that the Red Cross reflects the face of the state. The kind of Red Cross you have reflects the state. Or vice versa, the level of the state's development reflects the Red Cross.

Interview of URCS Director General with Interfax news agency



This remark from the Director General of URCS reflects a well-known tension inherent to the auxiliary role: the balance between close cooperation with the state and the imperative to preserve autonomy. As Max Huber, former ICRC president, once observed, “these societies cannot exist as foreign bodies within their nations.”²² The role of National Societies necessarily requires proximity to their public authorities – but such proximity must be carefully managed to avoid compromising the Fundamental Principles, particularly that of independence.

²¹ *Unbreakable Mothers* (also referred to as *Unbroken Mothers*) is a purpose-built shelter providing temporary housing and psychosocial support for displaced pregnant women and mothers with children. “Unbroken” is a broader rehabilitation ecosystem – also based in Lviv – that delivers medical treatment, prosthetics, physical and psychological rehabilitation, housing, and reintegration services to war affected civilians and military personnel nationwide. | ²² *Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross: Commentary* (1979), www.icrc.org/en/article/fundamental-principles-red-cross-commentary#text1768993.

Since the full-scale escalation, URCS's auxiliary role has become more visible and, in many respects, more vital than ever. In the face of strained government capacities and growing humanitarian needs, URCS has often served as a bridge between state institutions and affected communities. This expanded role, however, has made the balance between cooperation and independence more delicate. URCS has had to navigate expectations – from both civil and military authorities – that sometimes run counter to its principles.

National Committee members and branch leadership have acknowledged this complexity and described deliberate efforts to maintain clear boundaries. As one branch manager in southern Ukraine noted:

“We cooperate with three different types of authorities: the official civil administration, the military-civilian administration, or CIMIC²³, and humanitarian coordination bodies. As a local actor, our first priority is to coordinate with civil administration and CIMIC, as we are auxiliary to them. We always ask for respect and independent action from our side, but at the same time we build cooperation with them.”

This underscores the nuanced balancing act that URCS must manage: coordination with civil and military authorities is often essential for operational access, especially in frontline areas, yet constant vigilance is required to ensure these relationships do not compromise the National Society's independence. By clearly defining the boundaries of its role, URCS protects its ability to act based on humanitarian needs rather than political or military agendas. Ongoing dialogue with authorities is central to this approach, enabling URCS to foster cooperation while reinforcing understanding of its core principles: neutrality, impartiality, and independence. In practice, this localised engagement allows URCS to adapt its posture depending on the authority in question, tailoring its cooperation to ensure that its auxiliary role enhances, rather than constrains, its operational autonomy.

Nonetheless, URCS's close cooperation with public authorities has, at times, led to perceptions within civil society that it is overly aligned with government positions. Interviewees from two major national organisations noted that while this association brings clear operational advantages – such as access, scale, and influence – it can also create tensions when government decisions diverge from broader civil society concerns. URCS's auxiliary status often requires it to refrain from public advocacy or criticism in order to preserve trusted relationships with the state. However, what is less visible is URCS's strategic use of humanitarian diplomacy, including private high-level engagement with authorities to influence policy discreetly. Despite these complexities, URCS has largely managed to maintain its independence, thanks in part to the fact that it does not rely on significant state funding, instead drawing support from international donors and Movement partners.

URCS leadership is aware of this perception and is actively exploring ways to navigate it. One approach is the ongoing development of a community centre model for integrated service delivery. These centres provide a platform for offering services independently while engaging local authorities in a way that maintains humanitarian space. As one National Committee member explained: *“That would be a good mix of services while remaining independent. You advocate and challenge on what they [the authorities] have to deliver. It's a good mix, and a difficult one.”*

This model allows URCS to reinforce its role as both a service provider and an advocate, strengthening its capacity to speak to the needs of vulnerable communities based on evidence while upholding its auxiliary mandate. Though the scale of the humanitarian crisis has sometimes limited URCS's ability to engage in nationwide advocacy, the organisation's efforts to strengthen its regional branches and adopt the community centre model aim to enhance its capacity to influence policy. These initiatives not only promote fair access to services for displaced and vulnerable communities but also position URCS as a credible humanitarian partner capable of advocating for systemic change through evidence-based approaches.

By combining service delivery with advocacy, URCS reinforces its dual role as both a humanitarian actor and a key influencer, working quietly but effectively to ensure that the people left most vulnerable are not

²³ CIMIC stands for Civil-Military Cooperation and refers to the coordination mechanisms between military forces and civilian actors – including authorities and humanitarian organisations – designed to support the effective delivery of assistance and maintain civil order in conflict or emergency settings.

overlooked. This strategy allows URCS to maintain its independence and impartiality while leveraging its unique position to drive meaningful change at both local and national levels.

5.3. The factors of funding and their implication in the auxiliary role

Key finding: URCS's diverse funding sources have strengthened its independence and autonomy from the government, helping to balance its auxiliary role. However, reliance on project-based external funding poses risks to long-term sustainability. A shift toward sustainable, service-based funding is needed to ensure URCS can continue fulfilling its auxiliary role and delivering principled humanitarian action.

The current diversity of funding sources available to the Ukrainian Red Cross Society (URCS) has played a key role in sustaining its independence and enabling a more balanced execution of its auxiliary role. Since the full-scale escalation, the influx of international funding – particularly from Movement partners – has allowed URCS to maintain a significant degree of operational and decision-making autonomy from the state. Senior leadership has noted that this independence from government financing has made it easier to navigate tensions between the auxiliary role and the principle of neutrality.

However, this balance is fragile. URCS leadership cautioned that a return to substantial state funding – similar to the pre-2016 levels that were halted following a financial scandal – could risk undermining the organisation's ability to act impartially and independently. While independence has been preserved during this current phase of external financial support, the long-term sustainability of URCS's auxiliary role remains uncertain.

A key challenge lies in the reliance on project-based funding, which – while effective in scaling up short-term services – clashes with the permanent nature of the auxiliary role. As one URCS Branch Manager in Eastern Ukraine observed, international partners' focus on time-bound projects can hinder the long-term partnerships and continuity required for sustained engagement with local authorities. Interviewees widely agreed that transitioning from a project-based approach to one that supports long-term, service-

oriented programming will be critical if URCS is to strengthen its auxiliary function in areas like civil protection and humanitarian response.

Domestic fundraising, typically a vital pillar of National Society sustainability, has faced significant hurdles since the escalation. Public and corporate donations in Ukraine have declined, partly due to negative perceptions of neutrality, which some see as incompatible with wartime solidarity. The reputational crises that affected the wider Movement have further impacted donor confidence. In response, and where possible considering Movement regulations, URCS has pivoted toward international digital fundraising strategies to diversify its income base.

URCS's funding situation highlights the need for a strategic rethinking of how National Societies are resourced in protracted emergencies. To fulfil its auxiliary role consistently and credibly, URCS will require a more predictable and sustainable funding model, less reliant on fragmented projects and more aligned with its long-term responsibilities as a public-facing humanitarian actor. Ensuring that funding supports stable service delivery, particularly in areas of recurring need, will be essential to upholding both its humanitarian principles and its relevance to Ukrainian authorities and communities alike.



As part of a visit on the impact of the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, the Ukrainian Red Cross shows the Canadian Red Cross the extent of damages on buildings in Kyiv.

6 RESEARCH FINDINGS

Access

Securing access for the principled delivery of humanitarian services has been an area of key challenges and, often, remarkable success for URCS since the beginning and subsequent escalation of the conflict. It has required the National Society's astute navigation of political, security, and operational challenges. This section describes how URCS's adherence and application of the Fundamental Principles, and its auxiliary role – both described above – have influenced its access negotiations for delivering humanitarian aid in the current conflict, particularly in frontline and disputed territories.

6.1. Access enablers

Since the outbreak of the conflict, URCS has consistently demonstrated exceptional capacity to access areas across the country, often surpassing the reach of other national and international humanitarian organisations. Its operations have included large-scale evacuations from active combat zones, rapid responses to strikes on civilian infrastructure, and the swift delivery of aid to newly de-occupied settlements – sometimes within hours. This combination of efficiency, pragmatism, and reach has positioned URCS as a first responder in many regions and a key operational actor in Ukraine's humanitarian landscape.

URCS's ability to ensure access is rooted in its balance of local embeddedness, national-level collaboration, and principled humanitarian action. Its decentralised structure and deep community ties have enabled branches to act autonomously and swiftly, even in volatile or high-risk environments. At the same time, close cooperation with national authorities has allowed it to take on large-scale operational challenges – such as coordinating cash distribution – in ways that are both effective and locally grounded.

This comparative advantage in access has been widely recognised by both governmental and humanitarian partners. A government official noted that trust in URCS from national and local authorities had notably increased due to its consistent presence and operational performance during emergencies, including its coordination with armed forces in complex environments. Similarly, one major local NGO described URCS as having better humanitarian access than any other organisation in the country – domestic or international – throughout the course of the conflict. Another local actor highlighted the value of URCS's institutional history and recognition by authorities, suggesting it could play a valuable role in sharing access strategies and developing guidance for the wider humanitarian community.

Ultimately, URCS's ability to maintain access will depend on its continued commitment to the Fundamental Principles, and its ability to adapt to shifting operational realities and community needs. In doing so, it not only reinforces its position as a trusted actor but also contributes to a more effective and coordinated humanitarian response across Ukraine.

6.1.1. 2014-2022: strengthening the case for complementarity

Key finding: Prior to the full-scale escalation, URCS and Movement partners developed a flexible and context-specific model of complementarity that enabled access to conflict-affected populations on both sides of the Line of Contact. This experience shaped URCS's operational agility and reinforced its credibility in complex environments.

From 2014 until the full-scale escalation in 2022, URCS, in coordination with the ICRC, developed an adaptive model of access that reflected the complex territorial and political divisions of the conflict. Branches operating along the Line of Contact found themselves divided by frontlines, between government controlled areas (GCAs) and non-government controlled areas (NGCAs), and responding to rapidly evolving security and administrative conditions²⁴.

During this period, the complementarity between Movement components – where URCS and ICRC adapted roles based on acceptance, presence, and comparative advantage – was central to maintaining humanitarian access. In some parts of NGCAs, local URCS branches held a privileged position with strong community ties and were able to lead humanitarian response. In others, where access was more restricted, ICRC took the operational lead while maintaining a support role for URCS²⁵.

²⁴ "We are close to you": Long-term National Society Development investments that strengthened the positioning, sustainability and impact of the Ukrainian Red Cross Society in a fragile, complex, protracted conflict and violence-affected environment (2024), https://www.ifrc.org/sites/default/files/2024-10/Longitudinal%20Review%20Case%20study_Ukraine%20Red%20Cross.pdf | ²⁵ The case for complementarity: Working together within the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement in armed conflict and other situations of violence (2019), www.redcross.org.uk/-/media/documents-indexed/the-case-for-complementarity.pdf

Since the 2022 escalation, maintaining pre-existing arrangements in contested territories has become increasingly complex. In areas no longer under the control of the Government of Ukraine, the legal and operational status of some regional branches has grown more ambiguous. Drawing on their experience from earlier phases of the conflict, URCS and Movement partners have had to adapt their operational models. In some disputed areas, branches have continued functioning as Red Cross entities – where they are not part of any given National Society – while in others, some work with Russian authorities to provide humanitarian services²⁶. In these cases, the ICRC has played a critical role, providing direct support and engaging with local authorities to facilitate humanitarian activities in line with Movement principles. These approaches, though sensitive, reflect the Movement's commitment to ensuring that life-saving assistance can reach those most in need, regardless of shifting territorial control.

6.1.2. Trust and embeddedness

Key finding: URCS's deep integration within local communities has enabled unique access and trust, allowing for faster, more effective humanitarian responses, even in conflict zones or occupied areas. This embeddedness, supported by post-2014 capacity building, has made URCS a vital partner to authorities and ensured continued aid delivery in sensitive and high-risk areas.

One of the defining factors behind URCS's access is the deep-rooted presence of its staff and volunteers within the communities they serve. This embeddedness is not only logistical – it is social and relational. Volunteers are often drawn from the very areas where they operate, which fosters local trust and enables URCS to deliver aid rapidly and credibly, even in sensitive or high-risk environments. As URCS Senior Management observed, this community proximity allows for faster and more accepted responses, including in contexts where coordination with police, military, or emergency services is unavoidable.

This trust has proven particularly vital in frontline and temporarily occupied areas. Branches that found themselves on the frontlines at the start of the 2022 escalation described being among the few, and in some cases the only, humanitarian actors able

to maintain access. In such areas, URCS not only delivered its own relief activities but also stepped in to distribute assistance on behalf of international organisations and authorities, including in 'grey zones' or contested territories. This operational readiness was especially evident in newly de-occupied areas, where URCS was often the first actor to deliver humanitarian aid.

The experience of Kherson provides one of the clearest examples of this embeddedness in action. Occupied by the Russian Federation from March to November 2022, Kherson remains the only regional capital to have been held by Russian forces since the full-scale escalation. Despite the city being cut off from external access during occupation, the URCS regional branch – supported by the National Committee – continued functioning. One branch manager explained that staff and volunteers remained because the needs of the elderly population left behind were simply too great:

“ They stayed because those elderly people... won't be able to take care of themselves alone without their help. They would just die, so we are there to help them. ”

Despite being unable to enter or leave the city, the Kherson branch mobilised local resources to procure and distribute food, hygiene items, and medicine. As the URCS Director General later noted in an interview with Interfax, *“We worked there almost throughout the occupation. They did not create any obstacles for us... The local population helped us a lot. People brought many things, and we distributed them... Then, after the so-called referendum, we suspended the organisation's activities. But literally the day after de-occupation, we resumed them.”*

This episode illustrates the resilience and dedication of URCS staff and volunteers, whose commitment to their communities often extended beyond formal mandates. It also highlights how trust, local presence, and continuity of service – even in the most constrained settings – have made URCS an indispensable humanitarian partner for authorities and communities alike.

²⁶ “We are close to you”, Op. Cit.

6.1.3. Decentralisation as an access enabler

Key finding: The structure of URCS empowers its branches to act swiftly, enabling a rapid response in at-risk or occupied areas. This local autonomy, combined with close coordination with authorities and communities, allows URCS greater access and ability to operate seamlessly and effectively than organisations with centralised and bureaucratic structures.

Another critical enabler of URCS's reach across the country is its decentralised structure, which gives regional and local branches the autonomy to act rapidly in response to emerging needs. Unlike many international organisations, which often face delayed decision-making due to centralised procedures, URCS branches are embedded within their communities and empowered to make operational decisions on the ground. As one branch manager put it, this decentralisation enables the National Society to bypass administrative bottlenecks and respond where and when needed.

This structure has proven especially effective in formerly occupied territories, such as Kherson. Despite being cut off from the rest of the country for several months, the local branch remained operational, relying on community networks and local markets to procure and distribute essential items. Crucially, this same local autonomy allowed the branch to resume its activities the day after the city's de-occupation in November 2022, reinforcing URCS's position as the first responder in such contexts.

Similar dynamics have been observed elsewhere. A URCS staff member based in western Ukraine described how decentralisation, paired with close coordination with regional civil protection agencies, has enabled URCS to reach areas that other organisations might find logistically or administratively challenging. This flexible, locally driven model has ensured that URCS can respond quickly and effectively – even in highly regulated or rapidly evolving environments.

6.1.4. National collaboration and innovation

Key finding: Strategic collaboration between URCS and the Ukrainian Government has been essential in enabling access at scale. This partnership has allowed for rapid, adaptive responses to humanitarian needs, particularly in newly accessible areas, and reflects URCS's capacity to combine innovation with principled action.

While URCS's decentralised structure has been central to its reach at the local level, national-level collaboration has also played a critical role in enabling access and delivering assistance during large-scale crises. Coordination with central government institutions has allowed URCS to respond flexibly to the needs of newly de-occupied populations, often where conventional humanitarian modalities were not feasible.

A good example of this collaboration emerged during the response in the Kharkiv region following its de-occupation. The original plan to distribute financial assistance through bank cards proved impractical, as banking infrastructure in many communities had been destroyed or remained non-functional. In response, URCS – working closely with the Ministry for Reintegration of Temporarily Occupied Territories – developed an alternative distribution mechanism within a matter of days. As the URCS Director General recalled, *"We launched a mechanism within a week that allowed all individuals who had been in occupation to submit an application and receive payments through mobile distribution points."*

Implemented in partnership with Ukrposhta, Ukraine's national post, this mobile approach enabled the delivery of over 320 million hryvnias in direct cash assistance to affected populations, and was extended to communities in other areas that were retaken by the Ukrainian armed forces, such as Kherson and Donetsk. It demonstrated URCS's ability to adapt to the operational constraints on the ground, while continuing to uphold humanitarian principles such as impartiality and responsiveness to need. This case highlights the value of combining national-level coordination with operational flexibility. It also reinforces how URCS, through its auxiliary role and established relationships with government partners, can support large-scale interventions that complement its decentralised response model – offering a cohesive, nationwide approach to humanitarian access and delivery.

6.1.5. Auxiliary role, emblem, and other special features as an access enabler

Key finding: URCS's access is reinforced by the trust and recognition of the Red Cross emblem, symbolising neutrality and humanitarian aid. While misuse of the emblem has occurred, URCS's principled adherence to neutrality, collaboration with authorities and coordination with armed forces has allowed it to operate in high-risk areas, ensuring effective humanitarian response.

URCS's level of access can be attributed not only to its operational capacity and community presence but also to the recognition and protection of the Red Cross emblem, which in Ukraine remains widely recognised as a symbol of neutrality and humanitarian action. The emblem's visibility – particularly in high-risk and frontline areas – has often supported URCS's acceptance among communities, authorities, and the armed forces of Ukraine.

While this collaboration has been essential for gaining access in highly regulated or militarised areas, URCS has carefully maintained the balance required by the Fundamental Principles – particularly neutrality and independence. Nonetheless, the misuse of the emblem by other actors, especially in the early stages of the escalation, has posed reputational and security risks. Ensuring continued respect for the emblem is therefore critical to URCS's ability to operate safely and credibly. To address these risks, URCS significantly stepped up its emblem protection efforts, including through mass dissemination and education efforts and sustained legal advocacy that contributed to a new bylaw adopted by the Ministry of Health.

The emblem, alongside the organisation's principled stance, has played a crucial role in ensuring access even in areas where security concerns are high. A government representative highlighted the growing trust in URCS, noting that it was closely related to the National Society's consistent availability and operational capacity during emergencies, as well as its coordination with the Ukrainian armed forces and security services. This cooperation, while carefully maintaining the balance required by the principles of neutrality and independence, has allowed URCS to operate in areas where others could not. The trust URCS has built with authorities, the armed forces,

and local communities must be carefully maintained to ensure that its ability to operate and access those in need are not compromised.

6.2. Barriers to access

Key finding: Despite URCS's commitment to neutrality and impartiality, its access has been severely limited by security risks, politicisation, and the non-respect of International Humanitarian Law, including the misuse of the Red Cross emblem. Numerous security incidents, including attacks on offices, detainment, and threats against staff, have compromised URCS's operations. While URCS remains dedicated to providing aid in high-risk areas, its ability to ensure safe humanitarian access has been undermined, highlighting the unpredictable and dangerous conditions in which it operates.

While URCS has achieved exceptional access across Ukraine, this has come at significant operational and personal risk. The non-respect of humanitarian access and emblem protections under international humanitarian law (IHL), combined with intense security threats and political pressures, has made work in some areas not only difficult, but dangerous. In the most heavily militarised areas or combat zones, despite a neutral and independent approach, URCS does not have sufficient guarantees needed to deliver humanitarian aid safely to the most affected populations. Numerous security incidents have unfortunately marked the operations of URCS and the Movement since the beginning of the conflict escalation.

The scale of security incidents since the escalation in 2022 has been stark. More than 20 URCS offices and warehouses have been damaged or destroyed – especially in eastern regions such as Luhansk, Donetsk, and Mariupol – according to the URCS Director General²⁷. These attacks have compromised access and endangered the continuity of aid delivery. But the greatest burden has fallen on personnel. Several URCS and Movement staff and volunteers have lost their lives in the line of duty, and many more have faced direct threats to their safety.

Examples abound. In southern Ukraine, volunteers crossed active frontlines to evacuate civilians. A

²⁷ Maksym Dotsenko: Red Cross is reflection of country's image (2024), <https://en.interfax.com.ua/news/interview/981581.html>

URCS branch manager recounted a particularly risky evacuation of an elderly woman: *“Our volunteers crossed the line of hostilities back then and safely delivered the babushka. It was a risky endeavour, but it needed to be done.”* This willingness to operate under extreme conditions demonstrates the dedication of URCS in securing access, but it also underscores the dangers they regularly face.

Beyond physical attacks, URCS staff and volunteers have experienced detainment and violent confrontations. In some cases, volunteers have been temporarily deprived of their liberty or subjected to harsh interrogations while performing their duties. These incidents serve as stark reminders of the risks National Societies face in conflict zones, despite the protections afforded to them under IHL. One URCS branch manager described a particularly harrowing incident in a formerly occupied territory: *“Volunteers were providing humanitarian aid... and they were stopped at a checkpoint, taken and imprisoned... [we] reached out to police and military asking how to release them, and they said don’t worry, we are clarifying things, and you will get them in 72 hours.”* Although the volunteers were eventually released, the event reveals the precariousness of URCS operations in hostile environments.

Other incidents have been even more severe. In the same area, which was occupied at the time, URCS volunteers faced life-threatening situations while securing crossline access. A branch manager recounted how one volunteer, who had regularly crossed a checkpoint to deliver aid, was suddenly stopped, taken from his vehicle, and threatened with execution: *“They put a gun to his temple and kept asking for half an hour if they should kill him. His whole life flashed before his eyes – and then they released him. These were the same people who had allowed him to move back and forth for months.”*

The sudden change in access conditions, even after previous permissions from the forces controlling the checkpoints, highlights the unpredictability of operating in these high-risk areas. In some cases, sensitive and urgent requests, such as retrieving the bodies of civilians caught in the crossfire, have been denied. A branch manager said: *“There was huge fighting for one of the bridges... loved ones reached out to us to extract the bodies because they could see the cars and the bodies inside. Volunteers came, but they were told to leave after being searched.”*

Strikes on humanitarian offices and personnel can also have the adverse effect of undermining the trust between URCS and the local communities they serve. Attacks that affect humanitarian points can make civilians increasingly fearful of seeking aid, feeling that these locations could be targeted. As one branch manager recounted, *“Humanitarian points or offices have been hit a few times... On the 15th of January 2023, the URCS office was shelled, which is now unable to function.”* The fear generated by these incidents can compromise URCS’s trusted relationship with local populations, a relationship that had been essential, especially during periods of occupation. The same URCS staff member explained, *“Local people are very scared now when any humanitarian organisation locates themselves nearby, not just the Red Cross but any humanitarian organisation, because those are targets.”*

One of the most concerning aspects of these incidents is the erosion of the protective value of the Red Cross emblem. As the URCS Director General reflected, the protection afforded by the emblem under IHL has sometimes proven inadequate: *“We were confident that the Red Cross emblem would protect us. As it turned out, this wasn’t entirely true.”* This realization has profound implications for the safety of humanitarian personnel in Ukraine and challenges assumptions about the effectiveness of the emblem and IHL in ensuring access in the current conflict.

The emblem’s diminishing protective value was echoed by others within URCS. A branch manager from Southern Ukraine starkly concluded, *“In this war without respect of rules, the emblem doesn’t work.”* This underscores what was perceived as a broader erosion of respect of the rules of war in this conflict. While the emblem was intended to guarantee safe passage and signal non-combatant status, the continued targeting of sites and personnel bearing it has weakened its power as a safeguard. As a result, URCS’ IHL unit has prioritised activities to raise awareness on the red cross emblem and combat its misuse.

Despite its commitment to neutrality, impartiality, and independence, URCS has faced immense challenges in maintaining safe access to the populations that need it most. The risks faced by URCS staff and volunteers—from attacks on offices to detainment and death threats—highlight the broader challenges of operating in heavily militarized and contested areas.

7 RESEARCH FINDINGS

Partnerships and coordination

The Ukrainian Red Cross Society (URCS) has navigated a complex and crowded humanitarian landscape, particularly following the recent escalation of the conflict, which brought an unprecedented influx of funding and new actors. Despite the challenges, URCS has established itself as a key player, contributing or taking leading roles in humanitarian forums. However, the full scope of its role in the broader humanitarian ecosystem is still evolving.

URCS's effectiveness in coordinating with the humanitarian sector is largely attributed to its deep-rooted presence in communities, a committed volunteer network, the trust it has built over time, and its adherence to the Fundamental Principles. These factors have made URCS a preferred partner for international NGOs, UN agencies, and donors alike.

7.1. Best practices of coordinating with the humanitarian sector

Key finding: URCS has enhanced its national coordination and partnership capabilities, playing a leading role in Ukraine's humanitarian and civil society landscape. By closely collaborating with civil society, NGOs, and authorities, URCS has strengthened service delivery, particularly near frontline areas. Its leadership in initiatives like the 'CSO Alliance' and coordination with international organisations, while maintaining operational independence, has solidified its role. URCS's flexible and localised approach allows for more effective responses in times of crisis, positioning it as a pivotal actor in Ukraine's recovery and humanitarian efforts.

At the national level, URCS has significantly expanded its coordination and partnership efforts, establishing itself as a key actor within both the humanitarian system and Ukrainian civil society. As one senior manager put it, *"The Ukrainian Red Cross plays a leading role in localisation agendas and other key aspects. However, we recognise that we cannot address all issues and must focus on our specific role within Ukrainian civil society."*

URCS's success in coordination stems from its deliberate, pragmatic approach – working closely with local authorities, engaging selectively with coordination mechanisms, and building partnerships with a broad range of actors. Its commitment to independence has not precluded collaboration. Instead, URCS has prioritised relevance and

complementarity, especially in regions near the frontline where cooperation with NGOs, volunteer organisations, and local government has become increasingly operational. A regional branch manager explained: *"We coordinate with other civil society organisations. During the occupation, one association provided hot meals, and we offered other services."*

Since 2014, Ukraine's civil society has grown into one of the most vibrant and functional in the region, spanning watchdog activities, legal reform, and direct service provision. Following the full-scale invasion, the proliferation of local organisations responding to humanitarian needs often blurred the line between military and civilian support. URCS has successfully navigated this complex landscape, staying grounded in humanitarian principles while coordinating with other actors when appropriate. It played a founding role in establishing the CSO Alliance, a nationwide platform of 16 Ukrainian organisations promoting locally led humanitarian response and recovery processes.

URCS's coordination model is grounded in operational flexibility. One interregional branch manager described a partnership with the International Organization for Migration (IOM), in which they jointly supported displaced persons with non-food items worth approximately €300,000. *"We're always involved in all the clusters,"* they noted.



If there was a missile hit, our team would come first, use what was in our warehouse, and then share with others as needed.



While engaged in coordination forums such as the UN clusters, URCS often chooses to work first through its relationships with local or national authorities and then informs the broader humanitarian system. As one National Committee member explained, *"We do participate in different*

coordination forums, such as the United Nations clusters, but we remain quite independent, playing our part when relevant.” This approach was echoed by a UN worker:

“ They prefer to remain somewhat independent, first coordinating with authorities at the community level and then informing the broader humanitarian system. We respect this choice – and as long as they are delivering efficiently, this approach is probably the most important. ”

Within the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, URCS has taken on a leading role in strengthening coordination under the Seville 2.0 framework and the Strengthening Movement Coordination and Cooperation (SMCC) process²⁸. This reflects its commitment to a localised, National Society-led response. Through structured collaboration with IFRC, ICRC, and other National Societies, URCS has enhanced the impact of its activities while ensuring alignment with Movement principles and global standards.

URCS's coordination efforts have also been widely recognised by local partners. In formerly occupied areas, one branch manager noted improved collaboration with authorities and other civil society organisations since the escalation: *“When we lack resources, we can reach out to other organisations, and vice versa.”* Looking ahead, URCS has an opportunity to further localise coordination by equipping its branches to engage more actively in advocacy, capacity-building, and service delivery – positioning them as not just implementers, but conveners within their communities.

In a rapidly evolving humanitarian landscape, this independent-yet-cooperative model places URCS in a strong position to shape effective, locally owned responses in Ukraine's ongoing recovery.

7.2. Challenges of working with the humanitarian sector

Key finding: URCS faces challenges in coordinating with the broader humanitarian sector due to its need to balance its national role and international affiliations. Misunderstandings with grassroots organisations and competing with larger international actors can hinder its resource mobilisation and local coordination. Despite this, URCS's embedded presence, local knowledge, and auxiliary status enable it to provide vital services and maintain strong ties with local authorities. However, its capacity to fully engage with coordination mechanisms remains limited, requiring clearer communication of its unique role within the humanitarian landscape.

URCS faces a complex coordination landscape, particularly given the wide range of actors involved in Ukraine's humanitarian response. Its dual identity – as a Ukrainian national organisation with strong ties to the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement – can create confusion, especially among grassroots organisations and private sector actors who prioritise local ownership and national leadership. This has occasionally led to misunderstandings about URCS's mandate, especially when its principled neutrality or Movement affiliation is perceived as being out of step with the expectations of other Ukrainian civil society actors.

These identity tensions were noted by multiple interlocutors. Representatives from national organisations highlighted that while URCS operates with a deeply rooted local presence across the country, its affiliation with the broader Movement can complicate its positioning in the national civil society space. As one interviewee noted, *“It can sometimes be challenging for grassroots organisations to understand that the Ukrainian Red Cross prioritises its national and local roles over its international affiliation.”* Others noted that while the evolution of URCS since 2016–2017 has been widely respected, its unique identity requires ongoing explanation to avoid misunderstandings about its scope, principles, and independence.

²⁸ The Seville 2.0 Framework (2022) updates the Movement's 1997 Seville Agreement, clarifying the respective roles of the ICRC, IFRC, and National Societies in different operational contexts. The Strengthening Movement Coordination and Cooperation (SMCC) process, launched in 2013, is an ongoing initiative to improve strategic, operational, and resource coordination among Movement components in large-scale emergencies.

URCS's approach to coordination is often cautious, particularly when engagement risks compromising its principles or auxiliary relationship with public authorities. This has led to a preference for selective participation in UN clusters or sectoral platforms, particularly at regional level. While this approach ensures flexibility and reinforces its neutrality, some partners have observed that it may also reflect gaps in institutional capacity or a limited understanding of the added value of formal coordination mechanisms. In health, for instance, IFRC noted that URCS is not consistently present in sectoral coordination bodies, limiting its visibility and impact in the national health response.

Coordination challenges also extend to competition and role clarity. In formerly occupied territories, for example, regional branches of URCS have encountered situations where the influx of international actors has disrupted established local dynamics. One branch manager described how larger international organisations, while well-intentioned, sometimes overshadow local efforts due to greater visibility and resources. While URCS maintains close cooperation with local authorities, this dynamic has exposed logistical frictions and occasional tensions within the humanitarian ecosystem.

Stakeholders, including national NGO partners also raised concerns about broader systemic issues. They highlighted the need for clearer, government-led role

definition within the humanitarian space, stressing that lack of clarity *"is damaging the ecosystem of authorities."* While URCS's reach and reputation place it in a strong position to help coordinate local civil society efforts in some regions, partners cautioned against monopolisation of the civil society landscape. Dialogue, they argued, is critical to ensuring coordination is inclusive, especially given tensions that sometimes emerge between international actors and Ukrainian CSOs.

Internally, URCS staff also recognised the challenge of matching their breadth of operations with sustained coordination. One National Committee representative acknowledged that while URCS implements a wide range of services – from evacuation and basic aid to mental health support – its ability to engage consistently in formal coordination structures varies significantly across regions.

Despite these challenges, URCS remains uniquely positioned to contribute to a more structured and inclusive approach to coordination. Its nationwide reach, auxiliary role, and strong trust with authorities offer important opportunities. However, as several interlocutors noted, maintaining independence should not preclude institutional engagement with coordination systems. Strengthening staff capacity and clarifying roles – both internally and in dialogue with peers – will be key to enhancing URCS's coordination leadership without compromising its principles.



URCS rescue victims of flooding caused by the destruction of the Nova Kakhovka Dam.

Conclusion

Debates about principled humanitarian action in Ukraine have often questioned or tested the applicability – and even legitimacy – of neutrality and independence in a context framed by national survival and solidarity. URCS's experience shows that the Fundamental Principles are not abstract ideals but practical safeguards that enable life-saving work amid polarisation, provided they are understood, communicated, and consistently operationalised. Where neutrality is explained as a means to protect people and maintain access – rather than as a moral equivalence – authorities and communities are more likely to accept it as the condition for aid to reach those most at risk.

At the same time, the conflation of Movement components and the politicisation of aid since the full-scale escalation of the conflict in February 2022 have demonstrated how quickly misunderstanding can close humanitarian space. Reputational crises affecting the wider Movement reverberated across URCS, at times straining relations with authorities and exposing volunteers to risk. The lesson is twofold: principled action must be matched by clear, plain-language communication of what those principles mean locally; and Movement solidarity in humanitarian diplomacy matters for the protection of National Societies when public narratives harden.

URCS's comparative advantage remains its proximity to communities and authorities across the country. Decentralised structures, mature volunteer networks, and long-standing branch relationships translate principles into acceptance and access, including in newly de-occupied and frontline areas. In these settings, neutrality is not a slogan but a protective posture which can be applied in day-to-day decisions about who speaks, how services are delivered, and how sensitive negotiations are handled. This proximity also allows URCS to tailor explanations of its mandate to local realities, reducing the distance between legal frameworks and lived practice.

Conflict conditions amplify both the promise and the pressure of auxiliary status. In highly polarised environments, association with the state can be misread as political alignment; conversely, visible distance from authorities during large-scale conflict can be damaging. URCS's practice shows that this tension is best managed by anchoring decisions in needs, maintaining transparent criteria for aid, and using quiet humanitarian diplomacy to address policy concerns. Where lines are drawn – e.g., declining tasks that would compromise independence – relationships have generally been preserved through patient explanation and referral to the appropriate actors.

Access has been enabled by a combination of trust, embeddedness, and adaptive problem-solving, often in partnership with public institutions. From rapid first response after strikes to tailored cash delivery solutions in de-occupied areas, URCS has repeatedly shown that local presence and national coordination can be complementary rather than competing logics. Yet barriers remain acute: volatile security conditions and misuse of the emblem have produced real harm to personnel and infrastructure. Protecting humanitarian space therefore requires sustained emblem dissemination, frank dialogue with security actors, and consistent third-party reinforcement of the distinct, non-political role of the National Society.

Partnerships with civil society, international actors, and Movement components work best when they recognise URCS's dual identity as a national institution with international affiliations. Selective engagement in formal coordination – paired with strong operational links to local authorities and CSOs – has allowed URCS to remain principled and effective. But the volume and diversity of actors in Ukraine also demand continued role clarification and investment in branch-level coordination capacity, so that decentralised problem-solving is matched by coherent representation in national forums.

Internally, URCS's staff and volunteers carry the human weight of the war even as they uphold professional standards. Occasional lapses in tone or messaging should be understood – and addressed – through support, training, and management attention, not as evidence against the organisation's principled character. Regular, practical dialogues on the principles; safer access practices; and peer exchange between branches with long conflict experience can help sustain a shared culture of principled decision-making under pressure.

URCS's trajectory since 2014 – and especially since 2022 – confirms the distinctive value a National Society can bring in a protracted international armed conflict: proximity that builds trust, a principled posture that protects people and personnel, and an auxiliary relationship that, when carefully managed, expands what is operationally possible. Documenting these practices, sharing them across the Movement and with partners, and investing in the systems that sustain them will be essential to safeguard humanitarian space and ensure that those hardest to reach are not left behind.



URCS emergency response teams were deployed in Kyiv, Dnipro, Kryvyi Rih and Sloviansk following a wave of explosions which struck on Monday 8 July 2024. In Kyiv URCS supported Okhmatdyt Children's hospital, the largest paediatrics facility in Ukraine, which was partially destroyed. URCS volunteers and staff helped evacuate injured children and adults, clear rubble, provide first aid and psychological support as well providing food and water for victims and other emergency services responding to the explosions.

