



**SOCIAL STUDY RESULTS
ON BURNOUT**
IN POLISH, CROATIAN AND SLOVENIAN NGOs
2020



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Burnout Aid

an Erasmus+ project

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Culture Shock Foundation, Poland

Common Zone, Croatia

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INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

We have decided to address the topic of burnout due to our personal experience of going through the syndrome while working in the third sector. We wanted to learn about burnout specificity in the NGO environment. We were also curious if the situation is similarly alarming in three countries – Poland, Croatia and Slovenia.

Since 2019, we have been implementing the international “Burnout Aid” project devoted to burnout in the third sector, with participants from three countries: Culture Shock Foundation from Poland (which uses new technologies and new media in non-formal education, breaking down access barriers to the world of digital culture), Common Zone from Croatia (which works mostly with women and LGBTQ+ community in the field of gender equality, culture, workers’ rights and runs the independent news portal VoxFeminae.net) and Mesto Žensk / City of Women from Slovenia (an independent organization focusing on feminism and gender equality in the arts and culture).

At the turn of 2019 and 2020, we conducted Desk Research (the report, in four language versions, is available at: <http://burnout-aid.eu/en/6>), which showed that in Poland, Croatia and Slovenia burnout studies have been progressing for around 30 years and focus mainly on the psychological and individual aspects of the syndrome. There is little research into the effects of burnout on entire organizations, and on NGOs in particular.

We wanted to understand the nature of burnout in the NGO environment, among activists, educators and enthusiasts – people who often do not set up boundaries between their work and other areas of life. Our international cooperation resulted in the qualitative study, carried out in 2020, on burnout awareness in non-governmental organizations, the specificity of the problem, the impact of burnout on the organization and the remedial measures.

In each country, we carried out 5 case studies involving NGOs working with: seniors, people with disabilities, women, migrants or refugees and LGBTQ+ people. We conducted 3 interviews in every organization – with a leader, an employee and/or a volunteer. In total, 15 case studies in three

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countries and 45 individual in-depth interviews (IDI) were conducted. The surveyed non-governmental organizations are of various seniority (5-74 years of operating), and are of different sizes in terms of the number of employees (2-160). All of them benefit from voluntary work. They operate mainly locally, less often regionally or – even less frequently – in the scale of a country. They are either foundations and associations. The sample included only municipal organizations (in Poland – only from Warsaw). Additionally, we conducted 5 IDIs with experts in each of the three countries, in total 15 expert interviews. The conclusions of these interviews are presented in a separate report at <http://burnout-aid.eu/en/6>

The conducted research is the starting point for our next activities – we will create the Burnout Aid online platform, containing: a tool assessing the factors favoring and preventing burnout for the individuals and the organization as a whole, scenarios of burnout prevention workshops for NGOs, as well as video materials, recommendations and good practices. All these tools will be available on our website: <http://burnout-aid.eu/> in four language versions – Polish, Croatian, Slovenian and English.



***RESEARCH SCOPE
AND METHODOLOGY***

We set out to find the similarities and differences between NGOs in three countries (Poland, Croatia, Slovenia) and between organizations working with different types of recipients: migrants or refugees, LGBTQ+ people, seniors, women and people with disabilities. For this purpose, we have prepared study hypotheses and research interview scenarios. The interviews covered the following topics:

1. Work in an NGO: history of the organization, specificity of its activities, successes, crises, organization and workflow management, working conditions, team work, relations with colleagues, specificity of work with a particular target group.
2. Challenges and problems: external and internal challenges for the organization, problems and solutions.
3. Burnout in non-governmental organizations: symptoms, consequences for individuals and the organization, causes of burnout, factors contributing to burnout development and these preventing the syndrome.
4. Current countermeasures: burnout prevention, coping with existing burnout, the role of leaders and colleagues, support within the organization (policies, procedures and programs) and external support.
5. Expected support for counteracting and coping with burnout: internal support within the organization and external support.

Initially, the qualitative research was planned to primarily map and identify the practices of non-governmental organizations related to preventing and dealing with existing burnout and the needs of organizations in this regard. However, having conducted the Desk Research, we decided to extend this scope and include the aspects of organizational culture and working conditions in order to better capture the organizational and social context of burnout. Our subject matter created an opportunity to talk about working conditions in NGOs, as well as individual experiences, including the difficult ones - over-working, stress, team conflicts, depression, chronic fatigue.

RESEARCH SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and then summaries from the individual case studies were prepared. This report gathers conclusions from these studies. The research was qualitative and exploratory, therefore the conclusions cannot be generalized – they should be verified in a quantitative study. Perhaps in the future we will also manage to carry out quantitative research on the situation of NGOs in the context of occupational and activist burnout risk.



**THE MEANING
OF "BURNOUT"
FOR THIRD SECTOR
ACTIVISTS**

Conducting the qualitative research, we did not present our respondents with any specific definition of burnout. We asked how they subjectively understood the phenomenon. Analyzing their statements, it can be noticed that **people who experienced burnout or came into contact with the syndrome at their workplace provide more features and elements of burnout** (over 40 unique terms in total) than people who did not have such experiences (about 20 terms). Only representatives of the first group (with burnout experience) indicated:

- / **inability to rest**, to break away from professional duties,
- / **depression or other disorders** as consequences of burnout (although everyone talked about sadness),
- / **the double nature of burnout**, which on the one hand can manifest itself in reluctance to work and loss of motivation, enthusiasm and commitment, and on the other hand – in too much commitment and a feeling of being irreplaceable.

Apart from the above, there are more similarities than differences in both groups. The most common characteristics of burnout are: **fatigue (physical and mental), stress, losing the meaning of work.**

We are doing this work being highly energetic, willing, totally committed, and with this sense that we like what we do, that it is something meaningful. Burnout for me comes, when some of these elements stop working – there is no commitment for some reason, no faith, no sense of joy and no sense of meaning.

[leader of an organization working with people with disabilities, Poland]

Stress is viewed mostly as a cause of burnout, although it also appears on the list of symptoms. Some respondents pointed out that stress also helps mobilize and motivates – it is not a negative phenomenon in itself, our reaction to it is the key. Long-term, severe stress is, however, unfavorable and leads to burnout.

Stress is short-lived, it comes and goes, and is like a momentary rush of adrenaline, while burnout is not only a daily condition, but it's a permanent state.

[employee of an organization working LGBTQ+ people, Slovenia]

In the definitions of the syndrome provided by the respondents, less frequently mentioned aspects included: lack of professional satisfaction (lack of fulfillment), lack of energy, lack of joy, malaise, work overload, decreased concentration, anxiety, frustration, irritability, as well as lower efficiency and slower work pace. Individuals with personal experience of burnout added the following elements to its description: social isolation, loss of security, stronger emotional reactions, passive aggression, fast speaking, inconsistency (incoherence), guilt, loss of body awareness, aversion, discomfort. While people who did not go through the syndrome, also indicated unproductivity or resistance to new tasks and projects.

Subjective definitions of burnout relate to both the symptoms and the consequences of the phenomenon. Although it is sometimes difficult to clearly distinguish symptoms from causes or consequences (f.e. to determine whether fatigue is a cause, symptom or a consequence of burnout), the respondents undoubtedly notice **a negative change in their attitude towards work**, which now becomes "a strenuous duty", "an effort", "it is no longer a challenge, rather a burden". On the other hand – somewhat paradoxically – "you cannot break away from your duties", nor allow yourself to rest. One of the presented definitions refers to the **vicious circle mechanism**.

I think burnout is a situation, when a person simply has too many obligations to perform and sinks into this state, where not everything can be done on time and they feel guilty about that – not operating and fulfilling obligations at the pace, at which they used to; and at the same time, they can't do it because they feel really bad.

It is some kind of a vicious circle. [employee of an organization working with refugees and migrants, Croatia]

In some definitions, the emphasis is put on the **long-term and even chronic nature of burnout**. This is a very important trait that distinguishes burnout from fatigue, as the symptoms persist even if one has rested. In addition, the sense of meaninglessness grows and motivation lowers.

Burnout is a long-term phenomenon. It happens, when I no longer see a possibility for change, I do not believe that anything will change. I know that even if I go to the Caribbean for 2 months to rest, I will not want to return to this job afterwards, because I am so physically and mentally exhausted, that even a two-month vacation will not help me. Nothing can be done about it. Fatigue, which I often feel, even extreme tiredness, is something else, because I still have this commitment: "Let's do this, because it is important". When I recover from it [fatigue], I know that I will be able to keep going and I will want to keep doing it, seeing the sense of it. But the burned-out person has this feeling that it all doesn't make sense anymore and has no intrinsic motivation to keep doing the job. [employee of an organization working with seniors, Poland]

It is also important to consider **burnout as a process**, not just a singular event.

I don't see burnout as a one-off thing, but more like something that lasts for some time, when you're under so much stress. (...) That amount of stress causes you to have no more capacity to go further. Then, in my opinion, it's over. Burnout is not just a moment, when this happens, but a whole process beforehand, when you may not know what is going on with you. And then, when you can't go any further and it manifests itself physically or mentally - I think that's the end. [leader of an organisation working with LGBTQ+ people, Croatia]

In the course of Desk Research, we referred to the basic definitions of burnout. In the Pines concept, the key is exhaustion – physical, mental and emotional, as well as the loss of meaning in life – and these aspects are clearly present in the respondents' definitions, as are the elements of learned help-

lessness that lie at the heart of Cherniss' concept. According to Maslach's idea, the crucial elements are: exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy. Exhaustion and inefficacy were mentioned in the syndrome's definitions given by the studied persons. Although no one spoke directly about cynicism, they did talk about apathy, inability to express feelings, lack of willingness to work, loss of motivation, sense of futility, helplessness or powerlessness. Disturbingly, according to one of the definitions, the third sector as a whole has been identified with the culture of burnout.

Burnout for me happens, when you do so much work you love, that you start hating it. It's about being overloaded at work and with everything related to it, and there's no way out of it - a loop you can't escape. And

I also think that NGOs nurture that burnout culture a lot, as it seems pretty cool to be in a state of burnout and to compete who's deeper into it, who worked until midnight yesterday, who worked until three in the morning, who didn't sleep at all and things like that.

[employee of an organization working with refugees and migrants, Croatia]



**WHAT DOES
OUR STUDY SHOW?**

1:

Working in NGOs is conducive to burnout - more due to the organizational and socio-political context of the organizations' functioning, than directly resulting from the type of NGOs recipients

The first of our hypotheses was three-parted.

a. Firstly, we assumed that "People working in NGOs are at risk of burnout due to the specificity of the organizations' activities and the nature of their work, f.e. with migrants or refugees, LGBTQ+ people, seniors, women and people with disabilities."

This can be called our "null hypothesis", because it was also the assumption of the study - we recruited the organizations by the type of their recipients, and indicated that the subject of the study was burnout. It was not under the condition of having previously experienced burnout in the organization, that a person could participate in the study, but **in almost half of the 15 surveyed organizations our interlocutors knew about burnout - they were either burned out in the past (this applies to both leaders and employees) or others in the organization have experienced the syndrome. Thus, it confirms the relationship between the specificity of the organization activities and the nature of its work and burnout.**

I've seen a lot of people in the organization go through burnout, but they're like kamikazes. They will work until they fall, until they physically fall off their feet. I'm not sure to what extent they are aware that the message they are sending is "I'm burned out and I'm still working, so you should be doing the same, at all times."

[employee of an organization working with refugees and migrants, Croatia]

Undoubtedly, the type of recipients is an important element of the organization's characteristics and determines its specificity – it is different to work with migrants unfamiliar with the country's language, people with Asperger's syndrome or women experiencing violence. Although the respondents described working with the recipients of their activities (f.e. seniors, people with disabilities) as difficult and sometimes tiring, generally speaking, **working with a specific target group is a source of satisfaction for them rather than a burning out factor**. At the same time, the following aspects constitute risk factors for burnout, and certainly sources of stress:

- / working with people who have suffered from traumatic experiences (in all three countries this was indicated by representatives of organizations helping women who have experienced violence, and in Croatia – also by people working with refugees), which may result in developing vicarious trauma,
- / encountering homophobia, racism, intolerance,
- / minority stress experienced on a daily basis by LGBTQ+ people working in NGOs, who work directly on their identities, and perceive the professional situation also on a personal level,
- / misunderstanding of the problem and the scale of needs of the minority group (which was pointed out by an organization working with autistic adults in Slovenia).

The fact is that most people who work with victims of severe traumatic experiences meet the diagnostic criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder themselves. That is the main problem. You know, burnout to me sounds merely like a song or a recitation in comparison to secondary traumatic stress.

[leader of an organization working with women, Croatia]

Some respondents did not consider working with their target group as a burnout-conductive factor, and instead indicated other target recipients as more exposing to burnout, f.e. people working with seniors pointed to a much greater risk related to work with the homeless, and respondents working with

people with disabilities gave an example of more burnout-prone work with victims of violence.

What contributes to burnout is the specificity of work in the third sector, which is similar in the three countries. It consists of such dimensions as: too much work, too few people working, the feeling that the results are unsatisfactory compared to the actions undertaken, and high bureaucracy (most often associated with the need to meet the requirements set by funders and donors). All this leads to overwork, stress, fatigue of the third sector employees, leaders and volunteers, which, combined with insufficient prevention and intervention in relation to burnout, creates a high risk of developing the syndrome.

The biggest challenge for us is to do this amount of work with the number of people we have here. We carry out an average of 16 projects a year, with 9 employees, 2 of whom are in charge of finances, so they do not participate in the implementation of activities. [employee of an organization working with women, Croatia]

b. The second part of the hypothesis was: "Socio-political circumstances are not favorable to the NGO sector". This statement can be interpreted in various ways - depending on the adopted perspective.

One can focus on the general instability of the third sector - an aspect that has not changed for years - related to the way NGOs are financed. The problem of financing, or rather underfunding, of NGOs has a significant impact on how these organizations operate: they cannot hire a sufficient number of employees, and sometimes they continue to work despite the lack of funding - the vicious circle is closing.

We are under a lot of stress, not knowing what will happen next year - whether we'll have the money or not. At the end of the year, there are always problems, we take big loans, although last year was more stable in this respect, but of course somewhere in the back of the mind there is this thought that we don't know how it will be next year and in the year after that, because it is not entirely dependent on us. We

can make various efforts to raise money, but we can't be sure what the effect will be. Only when we have longer projects, we can sit down and say "phew, it's a moment to take a breath now, because we have a two-year project" and at least we have the basic activities covered.

[leader and employee of an organization working with women, Poland]

Another aspect is the **socio-political climate the NGOs operate in**. Again, it did not come as a surprise that – regardless of the country – some types of activities or recipients, especially minority groups, are ignored or – to put it mildly – unwelcome by the governments (f.e. LGBTQ+ people, migrants and refugees), while others are more accepted (f.e. seniors, people with disabilities); it does not mean, however, that the activities for these recipients are sufficiently supported.

Above all, it is necessary to talk about it, to address [by decision-makers] the need for a larger number of staff in NGOs. Wherever they ask us how many recipients we have, they are only interested in this isolated number, but they do not see that there are siblings, parents, grandparents, school environment and the leisure activities they attend. Our point is precisely that we are creating a network, but they [the decision-makers] are not really interested in it.

[leader of an organization working with people with disabilities, Slovenia]

The socio-political situation generally restricts the functioning of the non-governmental organizations we studied. The consequence of this negative impact is often, inter alia, burnout. In Poland, the current political climate is not favorable to working with refugees and migrants, LGBTQ+ people, and women experiencing violence.

We live in a world of violence, a painful world, a world that does not understand, but instead secondarily victimizes, injures; in a system that does not work. We are constantly subjected to it, bombarded with negative information; plus, our government is of course a conservative one and we are a feminist organization, so...

[leader of an organization working with women, Poland]

The Croatian organization fears that their activities will be suspended, that the work of volunteers helping refugees will be punishable, and that lawsuits will be brought. They also point to examples of violations and reluctance on the part of the police, f.e. the use of violence by the police against refugees. The Slovenian government is also unfavorable to NGOs, and part of the society negatively perceives working with minorities, f.e. migrants or LGBTQ+ people (although there are also circles that support such work and appreciate the importance of the entities providing it).

It's really disturbing that a lot of work, which is supposed to be done by some state institutions, falls on our shoulders, but at the same time it is not appreciated and we are not supported. This is really the biggest problem. [employee of an organization working with LGBTQ+ people, Slovenia]

Moreover, a change of government at the central or local level usually affects the situation of NGOs – this is the case of LGBTQ+ organizations in all surveyed countries. In Poland, also physical attacks on organizations happen, “espionage” of public television, which causes great tension in the team and leads to further misunderstandings.

We have a difficult, complicated social and political situation in Poland. We observe the hostility of the central government, but also local authorities adopting “anti-LGBT” resolutions. The social atmosphere significantly affects the the commitment within the team, motivation and willingness to act. Maintaining this motivation is now a big challenge. [leader of the organization working with LGBTQ+ people, Poland]

In addition, there are external crises, concerning: the climate, refugees, and threats to democracy. In short, the situation is not favorable.

c. The last sentence of the hypothesis stated: “What poses an additional difficulty is the common perception of people not related to the third sector, according to whom working in an NGO is not a professional activity, but merely a hobby”.

The attitude expressed by people from outside the NGO environment, that employment in the third sector is not a “real job”, is present in Poland (it was experienced by the organization working with seniors) and in Croatia – representatives of the organization working with LGBTQ+ people encountered the preconception that those who work in the third sector have not been able to find another job.

When I say that I work in a foundation and we deal with this and that, I hear: “Ah, so this is volunteering. But do you have a job?”. It is [working in the foundation] perceived as some kind of voluntary activity, which actually does not bring any greater social and causative force, these activities are underestimated. In my view, I am doing important things, but all time someone questions it, saying that it is irrelevant, because they, for example, work as an IT manager in a corporation and do mega-important things, and I am in this little foundation here, doing something for the old people.
[employee of an organization working with seniors, Poland]

Respondents complained that **their work was undervalued** – this applies to all types of organizations surveyed in the three countries. As an example, representatives of the Slovenian organization working with people with disabilities complain about the misunderstanding on the part of the society, the system, the donors, but also coming from the parents of their clients who expect the employees to be available at all times.

What’s problematic here, is the general attitude of the public towards associations. It’s hard for me to talk to people about my work because they usually have a negative attitude towards such organizations. We can read about it in the media, especially those of us, who have the will and determination to go through the comments below the articles about any association. I think that this also affects the perception, the motivation, especially among the young, to get involved in the work of NGOs.
[employee of an organization working with seniors, Croatia]

What gives hope is the belief expressed by a representative of the Polish organization working with LGBTQ+ people that NGO teams are not doomed

to constantly experience burnout, and thanks to the appropriate support system in the organization and the applied remedial measures, burnout may be a temporary process, which can lead to developing a new sense of satisfaction in professional and activist work. Our project team also shares this belief.

2:

Working in an NGO provides less security compared to the private and public sector

Second hypothesis read: "Working in the third sector provides less security compared to working in the public or private sector due to: low or no remuneration, lack of continuity of employment, working in projects, short-term, »junk« contracts dominance, no paid leave, no sick leave". **In the three analyzed countries, the situation of NGOs is similar and consistent with what was described in the hypothesis** - mainly due to insufficient financing of the third sector, regardless of the type of activity. This does not mean that the situation is ideal in the public sector or in private businesses, but some aspects are specific to the third sector, the most important of which are:

- / lack of permanent sources of financing and the uncertain situation of the organization,
- / lack of continuity of employment and lack of continuity of undertaken activities (which is related to the specificity of work on grant-financed projects), as well as the inability to plan long-term activities,
- / low salaries, instability of employment (civil law or voluntary contracts), team instability (high employee turnover),
- / dependence on political situation, central and local government and administration, or on funders, donors, and sponsors,
- / burdensome administrative procedures related to grant settlements,
- / insufficient workflow and team management, lack of internal standards and procedures, limited opportunities for development or promotion,

WHAT DOES OUR STUDY SHOW?

- / difficulty separating private and professional life,
- / lack of tangible results, frustration with the failure of certain activities.

We spend 70% of our energy on what is happening in our team – on tensions, conflicts. There is no strategy to deal with the threats and challenges effectively in such situations. Even so, we base heavily on procedures, compared to other NGOs. Staff fluctuation has increased. People go, new people come. New employees learn on the job, observing, and a lot of time is wasted.

[employee of an organization working with LGBTQ+ people, Poland]

Permanent job contracts are not a standard solution (especially in small organizations). Employment depends on the possibility of obtaining successive financing, which does not ensure work comfort. However fairly common a problem the uncertain financial situation is, there are organizations (f.e. in Poland working with people with disabilities or LGBTQ+, and in Croatia with migrants) for which this aspect is not a key problem, because they use foreign and not domestic subsidies. The representatives of these organizations are aware, however, that in this respect they are unique compared to other NGOs in respective countries.

In certain organisations, if – due to the type of contract – an employee is not entitled to paid vacation or sick leave, such issues might be subject to informal regulations. In case of a necessity for someone to take time off, the organization provides such opportunity. Despite good intentions, it is not always possible to arrange replacements, because there is too much work to be done and too few employees available, specifically in smaller organizations. Moreover – especially in Poland – people associated with NGOs feel that they should not use such unofficial solutions too often. Lack of formal security on the labor market (consequent to not having an employment contract) is one thing, but the uncertainty related to the near or distant future of the organization is another problem: Will we get funding? Will the rules change? What will the government's position towards NGOs be? – these are typical dilemmas within non-governmental organizations.

Donors should be aware that there is a burnout problem in the NGO sector and that the organization must plan, also financially, a response to burnout – you cannot go on, just blindly implementing successive projects. Donors should consider greater openness and flexibility of funding, provide the ability for the organization to change plans depending on the situation in which the organization is at the moment. The sustainability of financing is also crucial. Doing an annual project where you can't change things that don't work, adds to burnout.

[leader of an organization working with LGBTQ+ people, Poland]

Sometimes the problems are of a more basic nature – the Slovenian LGBTQ+ organization does not have an office of its own, work is done from home, which adds to the general instability. In Poland and Croatia, the lack of a sense of security in non-governmental organizations is also due to the attitude of donors, f.e. long waiting times for the results of grant competitions, lack of care for the working conditions of grant recipients (f.e. underfunded and underestimated role of project coordinator or administration).

3:

Burnout is seen as a complex problem and its origins are primarily recognized on organizational and social levels

Third hypothesis read: “In the common understanding of burnout, it is the individual and their predispositions that are responsible for the development of the burnout syndrome, not the organization where they work. Sociological and organizational factors are underestimated and psychological ones are overestimated”. **We suspected that the belief that a burned out person would be held solely accountable for their condition would be a common one, but it is not. Our interlocutors are aware that burnout is caused largely or primarily by socio-political factors or those related to organizational culture.** Only in two organizations – Polish and Croatian ones working with women – leaders, otherwise aware of the seriousness of the burnout problem and providing supervision for their teams, believe that the responsibility for counteracting the

problem and identifying its symptoms lies mainly with the employee, not the employer. Usually, however, the accents are placed differently. What organizational factors were mentioned? First of all, the systemic problems of the third sector, outlined earlier (unstable and uncertain financing, too few staff, low wages, too much work, lack of organizational procedures or their insufficient formalization, negative social perception of the organization's activities), but also bad relationships with colleagues, ineffective communication, inefficient hierarchical decision-making processes in the organization or lack of access to supervision.

Interlocutors were generally aware of burnout and perceived it as a result of combined factors and processes, not only coming from the requirements of the employer and the work itself, but also consequent to personal expectations and personality traits of the individual. They emphasize that burnout is a long-term, chronic exposure to stressful circumstances, influenced by many factors, both in the workplace and in private life. **Individual factors are therefore present in the discourse on burnout, but they are not overestimated.**

Some respondents indicated individual traits conducive to burnout. In general, their statements did not refer to specific persons, but represented a general reflection on the mechanism of burnout. However, sometimes these observations resulted from witnessing someone in the environment, or – interestingly – from analyzing themselves. Additionally underlined on the list below are these features that the respondents recognized as symptoms or factors contributing to their own burnout, such as:

- / high sensitivity, unresolved personal problems or traumatic experiences,
- / lack of developed coping mechanisms in terms of dealing with stress, inability to rest,
- / too much involvement and commitment to work, neglecting the work-life balance,
- / mental problems (non-related to burnout),
- / taking on too much responsibility combined with perfectionism and critical assessment of one's work, high motivation and

WHAT DOES OUR STUDY SHOW?

- engagement, working compulsively (which may also result from patterns passed on in the family or at school),
- / excessive need for control, focusing on individual achievement, not teamwork, inability to delegate tasks or work within a team,
- / inability to set and enforce boundaries,
- / lack of openness and not sharing problems with others,
- / critical approach to oneself, inability to reward oneself for a job well done.

There are already some patterns derived from the family – when your parents are encouraging you to do as much as possible, and get involved in a lot of things, rather than to rest and take care of yourself. This will also affect your patterns later in life.

[employee of an organization working LGBTQ+ people, Slovenia]

I put a lot of pressure on myself all the time, because I always have this feeling that things aren't going to be done fast enough, good enough.

[employee of an organization working LGBTQ+ people, Slovenia]

When I work I feel much better mentally than when I don't work, but of course this is not a healthy habit.

[employee of an organization working LGBTQ+ people, Slovenia]

I think that somehow, since our childhood, from kindergarten through the primary and secondary school system, everyone teaches you about it – you have to be obedient, a good worker, operative. And no one teaches you to take care of yourself.

[employee of an organization working LGBTQ+ people, Croatia]

4:

Leaders who have experienced burnout have greater understanding of the syndrome and how to prevent it

In 4th hypothesis, we assumed that “Organizations’ leaders have low awareness of how they can effectively counteract burnout”. Unexpectedly, we found out that the majority of NGO leaders, who we spoke to, experienced burnout personally or had to deal with burnout in their organization. This was the case for leaders of all types of surveyed organizations, although not in all surveyed countries.

When I answer your questions now, I wonder if they [the employees of the organization] are already burned out or not yet. I did not think about it before.

[leader of an organization working with refugees and migrants, Poland]

Awareness of burnout is primarily reflected in recognizing the phenomenon as an important problem and knowing its symptoms. It is, however, quite low when it comes to specific knowledge or skills in the field of preventing or coping with burnout. In general, this knowledge is modest and is based on intuition rather than professional sources, f.e. it leads to creating opportunities to talk and share problems, which is certainly a valuable practice (present in many surveyed organizations). It is important to have an open attitude as a leader, listening to employees, reacting to current difficulties, caring for people with whom you work, appreciating their work and celebrating successes together.

It is important that at some point everyone gets this energetic kick, f.e. when we succeed, there’s a need to emphasize that this is a joint success, not just of one person. It is important for me to stress that each person contributes to the operating of our organization. The success is made possible not only by the team that worked directly on the project, but is also due to people who made this work possible, f.e. doing paper-work and dealing with administrative matters.

[leader of an organization working with refugees and migrants, Poland]

These types of actions are important and necessary, but sometimes insufficient. For example, in one of the organizations working with people with disabilities, the leader believes that regular meetings constitute supervision, but in the team's opinion they do not fulfill such a function.

5:

Lack of opportunities for leaders and the motivation to effectively prevent burnout is a bigger problem than their lack of knowledge about how to do it

Fifth hypothesis read: "Even the more informed people in charge of an organization do not know how they can prevent or manage burnout." Here, too, we expected the situation to be worse than it actually is, but the conclusions are far from optimistic. **First, even the more conscious and aware leaders (i.e. with their own burnout experience), who have ideas on how to prevent burnout and put them into practice, are not always effective and efficient in doing so.** The examples mentioned in the interviews included: meetings, creating good relationships in the team, supervisions. However, despite taking these measures, burnout does happen, so something is still missing for the prevention to be effective.

*Relationships are the most important thing at work - if they are not good, there is also a higher probability of burnout.
If relationships are bad and distrust develops - you don't know who will do what, everyone is only "guarding their garden" - frictions arise.
As a leader, you have to pay attention to that all the time.
[leader of an organization working with women, Slovenia]*

Secondly, **even if leaders know what preventive or intervention measures could be introduced into the organization's practice, only a few managed to change something effectively.** Few surveyed entities use preventive measures, f.e. organizations working with migrants in Slovenia and Croatia

and organizations working with women in Poland, Croatia and Slovenia offer supervision to the employees, and additionally in Slovenia a team supporting the workers' well-being was established (healthcare, proper diet, physical exercises), and in Croatia and Slovenia access to free psychological assistance was made possible. People from Polish and Croatian organizations working with women participated in workshops on burnout.

In many surveyed organizations supervision (for individuals or teams) is deemed the right measure to prevent burnout, but only a few of them introduced this procedure into their practice on a permanent basis. **The general barrier to introducing various types of remedial measures on a permanent basis is, however, the lack of time (on part of both: employees and managers), too small team and insufficient financial resources.**

The association does not have the luxury of, say, a large private company, to have a manager who takes care of the whole team of 20 people, so that person knows if someone is overloaded or not. I trust my team to tell me when it's too much for them. I believe that they are aware of the circumstances in which they find themselves, that they are responsible and will not accept a task they know they cannot do, that they will not bring themselves to the state of burnout.

[leader of an organization working with people with disabilities, Croatia]

It is also worrying that even if leaders consider burnout a problem, it is not the most urgent issue to deal with in the organization – they usually put it off, or they just have to fight for the organisation's survival. Sometimes there is no systematisation of activities or a long-term strategy in this area (which would involve including the employee support in the organization's management policy) or the competences of the management staff are limited. In some instances, preventive actions have been taken in the past and are now suspended or performed rarely. Working hours are another example – in some organizations it is customary not to work overtime or to take days off in exchange, while sometimes such solutions only exist in theory.

We work a lot overtime, the whole team in general, so we introduced this rule that we will take a day off in exchange for the overtime hours. This is great in theory, but you don't have time to make use of that day off because you have so much to do, so we rarely use it. [employee of an organization working with women, Croatia]

6:

Burnout is a process - it takes time to develop; longer seniority, however, does not necessarily mean that burnout is more likely to appear

Addressing 6th hypothesis ("The process or level of burnout in NGOs depends on seniority") also depends to a large extent on the situation of each organization or the specific person we interviewed. For some NGOs, this hypothesis was true - **for people working with LGBTQ+ persons in Poland and Croatia, longer work experience is associated with a higher risk of burnout, as is the case with a Croatian organization working with seniors or a Polish organization working with women.** In other surveyed organizations, the hypothesis was not confirmed or it was difficult to verify, f.e. when all interviewees have had the same seniority and none of them experienced burnout, or all of them have experienced burnout and their seniority varies. Some respondents drew attention to other aspects that, in their opinion, are more related to burnout than seniority: older age of an employee, nonoptimal scope of duties, performing repetitive activities (too much routine, no challenges) or performing tasks that no one else wanted to undertake - often mismatching qualifications or skills (tasks below qualifications or inconsistent with qualifications). The seniority of the organization itself or the stage of its development may also be such a factor.

We just produced too much endorphins at some point and got tired of it all. At the same time, we believed in this ethos, that in order to do something, to make it cool, to make the organization

move forward, to make us feel satisfied with what we do, there must be blood, sweat and tears - that's how you do it.

[leader of an organization working with seniors, Poland]

Interestingly, **a longer seniority can work in both ways** – if an organization has had unhealthy solutions implemented for years, sooner or later it will lead to burnout. However, if an organization has experienced burnout or other team problems before, and its leaders have had the opportunity to react and implement corrective measures, the organization is less at risk of burnout now. An example comes in the Croatian organization working with seniors and its well-thought workflow and a transparent structure, where rules on working hours and availability are respected, although this was not always the case.

7:

The burning pressure to achieve goals is not only external, but also internal – it is internalized by leaders and employees of the third sector

Seventh hypothesis (“The process or level of burnout in an NGO depends on the pressure to achieve the fundamental goals of the organization”) has been confirmed, but requires nuancing. **On the one hand, this pressure may result from the goals set by the donor or the leader of the organization, or the necessity to account for the project indicators.** The respondents mentioned many examples of such pressure, which they consider unnecessary, excessive, and sometimes inadequate to the goals (sic!) and values of the organization. This may be due to the aforementioned excessive bureaucratization of activities (especially with regard to grants settlement and reporting), in a situation where there is usually not enough time for administrative activities anyway, therefore they are done after hours or at the expense of substantive actions, which is always a source of stress. Respondents also cite disappointment, as for the donors it is more important to formally settle the project (f.e. to collect lists of participants) than to implement it well, providing high quality of activities. Representatives of the organizations do not usually receive positive feedback – donors mainly focus on the formal side of things.

Usually, we have at least 2 project reports to prepare every month. Some reports are the size of two huge cardboard boxes. For example, reports for EU projects are the size of 15 large folders in 2 cardboard boxes because we run a network of 11 organizations. [leader of an organization working with women, Croatia]

The pressure related to providing financing for the organization results in taking up too many activities, having small teams of employees, outsourcing additional tasks to volunteers to relieve the permanent team (when there is not enough funds for planned activities), but also carrying out too many projects at once or writing grant applications and implementing projects not directly related to the mission of the organization – when there are no other opportunities to raise funds. **The so-called grantosis is not only a Polish problem – it is also experienced by Croatian and Slovenian organizations.** In a Croatian LGBTQ+ organization, activities which started as part of the projects (f.e. workshops in schools) are being continued without funding, while other projects are launched only to ensure the continuity of the organization's operations.

Our problem is that we always bite off more than we can chew. (...) Every year, we say that we have to change that, but it never happens, so I don't know, if we are even capable of it at all. [leader of an organization working with LGBTQ+ people, Croatia]

External pressure may also be drawn from **expectations of the social environment or public opinion**, f.e. that representatives of a women's organization will always intervene in urgent, current matters or that they will be active in social media or participate in various events, such as protests or conferences. Similarly, the parents of children with disabilities expect more comprehensive help, than the Slovenian organization can provide.

On the other hand, **pressure may be internal and related to the motivation of an employee or a leader, and more broadly – to the internalized mission of the organization**, the need to help, a great sense of responsibility. All respondents emphasized how much commitment and energy they put into

work for the recipients they care about, often at the expense of their private lives. For example, a Slovenian organization working with migrants would like to offer them comprehensive support, not only within the activities planned in the project, which creates additional pressure and stress. Achieving these goals is a source of satisfaction and meaning for the surveyed people, but the pressure (which they do not name directly – they rather talk about “responsibility”) can be so great that they forget about their own needs – the needs of recipients become overriding.

I received this interesting feedback once: what we do to ourselves all the time within our organization, with our activism, being on the verge of burnout all the time – this is violent, it has an element of violence to it. So we laughed at the fact that we, being experts on violence ourselves, use this violence against ourselves, that the shoemaker’s children are ill-shod. [leader of an organization working with women, Poland]

This applies to these types of organizations surveyed organizations whose goals are consistent with the personal beliefs of employees, but especially LGBTQ+ organizations, where people usually also fight for their own rights. Such work is based on a sense of mission, emotional engagement, often on one’s own identity, eliminating barriers separating work from private life and increasing the perceived stress.

The dominant approach is: we work on a mission, we cannot stop. We inherit the work culture after a neoliberal approach that emphasizes efficiency, effectiveness, individualism. We are permeated with standards from the outside, because we do not have an alternative narrative as an organization. [employee of an organization working with LGBTQ+ people, Poland]

WHAT DOES OUR STUDY SHOW?

Excessive commitment to an organization's mission and strong identification with its values often lead to the loss of motivation and sense of purpose in activism when experiencing a failure to achieve the planned goals. On the one hand, identifying with an organisation's mission is needed to reach fulfillment in the third sector activism, but an excessive focus put on it can lead to burnout.

A large, stylized number '52' is centered on the page. The '5' is a light cream color and the '2' is a dark black color. The number is slightly tilted to the right. The background is a solid green color.

**EXPECTED SUPPORT FOR
NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS
IN COUNTERACTING BURNOUT**

Expectations for support, expressed by NGOs in relation to counteracting burnout, concern not only activities related directly to the syndrome, but above all those that will give a chance to improve the general situation and working conditions of non-governmental organizations, which is understandable in the context of the above described problems that the organizations face every day. Improving the overall condition of the third sector would be the most effective way to prevent burnout.

Support at the sector level should start with **providing organizations with permanent, long-term financing** (f.e. for 2-3 years instead of less than 1 year, as is often the case today) and **changing the attitude of funders or donors towards:** openness, flexibility of financing, accepting changes in projects, providing financing for: administration, evaluation, supervision, as well as some non-project activities (f.e. team-building, its development and integration or responding to employees' mental crises, including burnout prevention). This would help to create a regenerative system of work, conducive to better safety, physical and mental health of employees. Special **support funds** can also be introduced – for organizations, but also for individuals (f.e. people in crisis, needing a break or preparing to change their workplace or type of work).

The next step should involve introducing **standard policies and procedures regulating the work within the organization**, but established in the context of legal and systemic solutions for the third sector, constituting an important point of reference for employees, to which they can always appeal. It would be desirable to **promote good practices among NGOs** (examples of how the organizations deal effectively with burnout and specific proposals on solutions that can be used), as well as create a space for exchanging good practices and experiences between organizations, by initiating and moderating networking processes and creating collaboration platforms.

Support at the organizational level should include: creating and implementing procedures for managing crisis and conflict situations within the organization and procedures for preventing burnout, conducting introductory training for the third sector newcomers and mentoring for volunteers and new employees, launching support groups, providing supervision (for both: an individual and a team) and access to free psychological support.

Burnout education, broadly viewed and available in various forms, utilizing different instruments (f.e. online and offline devices), is of fundamental importance, enabling the recognition of burnout symptoms (also by self-assessment tools), offering preventive and remedial measures, including access to information on burnout and places where one can seek help.

Support for leaders – as a special type of support for NGOs – should be aimed at developing team management skills, strategic planning competencies, but also the leaders' ability to support the employees, specifically in the context of burnout. This type of support may include **workshops and trainings** leading to raising awareness of the burnout problem, as well as **more comprehensive programs**, f.e. long-term training combined with expert consultations, resulting in the implementation of recommendations and solutions to problems in the organization.

The key condition for providing effective support for NGOs is ensuring that the experts in training, supervision, team-development, education, coaching, consulting, psychological support, counseling or therapy **are involved and cooperate with the organizations.**

People participating in the study had different visions of who, at the institutional level, should offer such support – examples were given of existing public and non-governmental institutions or establishing new entities was suggested, f.e. a new department in an existing institution or a completely new organization. In Poland, NGO umbrella organizations such as BORIS and Klon/Jawor associations were mentioned, as well as grant organizations, such as the Batory Foundation. In Croatia, it was proposed to establish a new institution for non-governmental organizations to communicate and consult with and receive support from, which would define the standards and conditions of work in NGOs. In Poland and Croatia, it was also suggested that the local government units, which offer grants to the organizations, should pay more attention to the burnout syndrome and its prevention. In Slovenia, the example of the Medical Chamber and the Ministry of Health was given. Some of the support activities could be carried out by private entities (f.e. training, supervision, psychotherapy), and financed by public (national, European) or private funds, also in the form of grants, making the support available to all organizations in need. It has often been pointed out that burnout should be

dealt with simultaneously by different types of entities. Regardless of the adopted formula, such support should be given a systemic nature, so that it can be implemented on several levels: public administration (state, region, commune or other local government unit cooperating with NGOs), the third sector, funders and donors, down to the level of particular non-governmental organizations introducing healthy working conditions.

Workshops and DIY-activities scenarios, articles and other publications, psychotests, analysis, conferences, seminars, webinars, support groups, counseling, consultations, supervision and other good practices – these are all potential elements of the desired anti-burnout kit for NGOs, according to representatives of the organizations participating in the study. We plan to offer some of these solutions as part of the Burnout Aid project.

A stylized graphic of a hand holding a pen. The hand is a solid black shape, and the pen is a light cream color. The pen's tip is pointing upwards and to the left. The word "SUMMARY" is written in bold, black, italicized capital letters on the side of the pen's barrel. The entire graphic is set against a solid green background.

SUMMARY

SUMMARY

The respondents describe burnout mostly in terms of: fatigue (physical and mental), stress or losing the meaning of work. These interlocutors who had experienced burnout themselves add also: inability to rest, depressive disorders and the "insidious" nature of the syndrome, which can manifest itself in either a loss of motivation and commitment or in excessive commitment to work. Burnout is perceived as a complex problem, a process directly related to working in an organization. It is caused by both: individual and social aspects. Personal attitude to work as well as core values, but most of all the organizational culture and the socio-political context are a reservoir of both good and bad practices that can lead to burnout or counteract the syndrome. Some of the surveyed leaders are aware of the preventive solutions that can be introduced, but they are not always successful in implementing them in their organizations. The barriers are: lack of time or human and financial resources, but also lack of motivation and operational knowledge. Our project aims to support non-governmental organizations – their leaders, employees and volunteers in the effective prevention of professional and activist burnout and in dealing with the syndrome that already exists in organizations. The knowledge gained in the course of the presented research will be the basis for our further activities. Based on it, we will develop tools that will be available to Polish, Croatian and Slovenian organizations, as well as these from other countries that care about the well-being of their teams.

