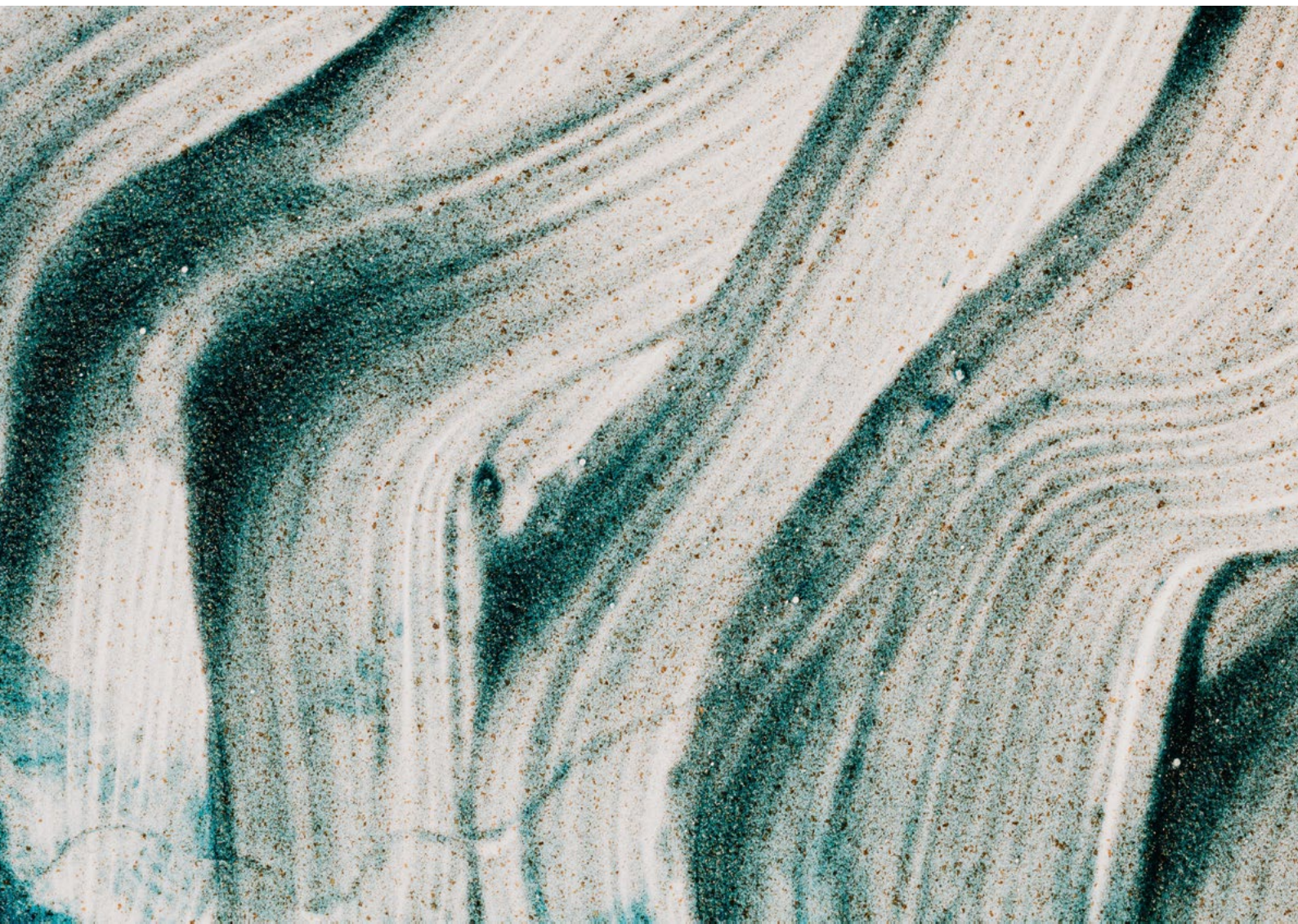


Struggling for Justice.

The Work of Human Rights Defenders in the North Caucasus



Imprint



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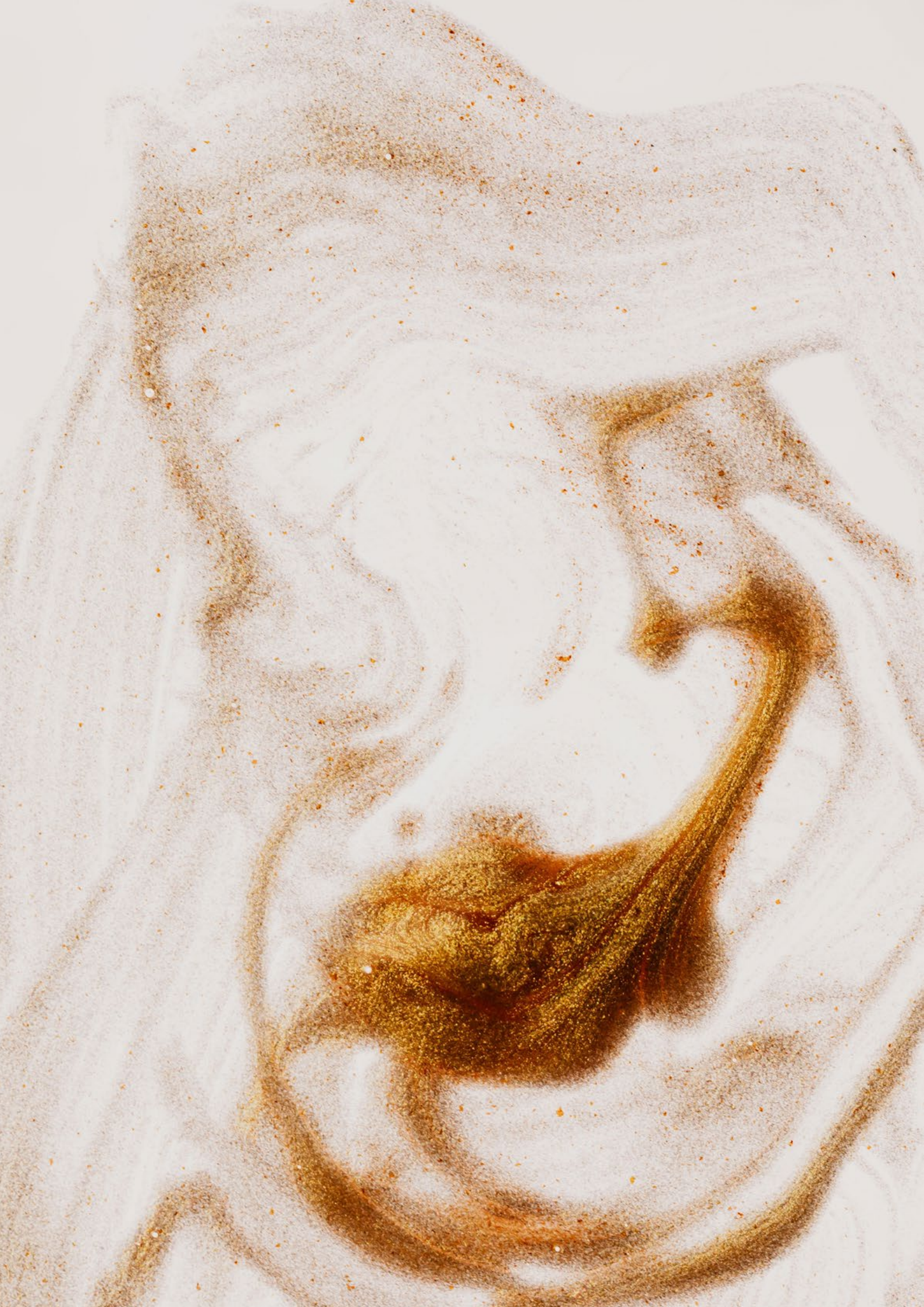


Federal Foreign Office



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Executive Summary

This brochure addresses the realities of professionals in the North Caucasus, who have been working with survivors of human rights violations, including psychologists, social workers, lawyers and activists, and illustrates the way they sustain themselves and their work despite the daunting challenges and threats they face.

Documenting human rights violations and supporting survivors of such violations involve working with individuals who have gone through traumatic events and experienced psychological, physical, social, economical or political harm. For the professionals working in this field, this entails dealing with extreme suffering on a daily basis and especially in the context of ongoing conflict and crisis, being affected by the same realities their clients are bringing to them. This in itself represents a major challenge and requires professionals to find a sensible balance between investing their energy in helping others, and finding the space to recharge and look after themselves.

Professionals who are identifying and advocating against human rights violations, face an extra layer of pressure. Their efforts challenge injustice in social and political practices, which in turn exposes them to conflicts with several stakeholders within the society. As a result, their work receives little recognition in the wider society and they have to deal with threats addressed to them or to their loved ones. Supporting others under such circumstances is a significantly complex and risky endeavour, and professionals often find themselves working endless hours, which can eventually affect not only their physical and psychological wellbeing, but also their relationships (Bittenbinder & Patel, 2017). This reality puts human rights defenders at risk and raises a question on how they can take care of themselves and support each other while working under such extreme circumstances.

In the North Caucasus region, the situation for human rights defenders has continuously deteriorated, according to an Amnesty International report published in 2019. The report outlined an increase in the acts of aggression, brutality and violence against human rights defenders and their entourage, impacting their personal reputation, physical integrity and freedom. This means that professionals are forced to work under unsafe circumstances, facing tremendous social pressure and threats, while being often isolated.

A joint German-Russian project entitled “Increasing NGO Capacity in Addressing Psychotrauma in the North Caucasus”, aimed at supporting professionals working in this field by creating a space for them to get to know each other, enhance their capacity to work with trauma and build a network with the purpose of fighting social isolation and fostering exchange and mutual support. The project

was funded by the German Foreign Ministry and was implemented collaboratively by the *German Association of Psychosocial Centres for Refugees and Victims of Torture (BAfF)*, the *European Network of Rehabilitation Centres for Victims of Torture (EURONET)* and the *Conflict Analysis and Prevention Centre (CAPC)* between June and December 2020.

Throughout the year 2020, a team of professionals from BAfF, EURONET and CAPC worked together with 45 professionals working on human rights in the North Caucasus region (including social workers, psychologists, lawyers and human rights activists). The project activities included (1) a training program on a holistic psychosocial approach to working with trauma, (2) establishing a Russian-speaking network of professionals working in the field of psychosocial support and human rights to foster exchange and peer support, and (3) activities to raise awareness within the wider society about the psychological consequences of human rights violations and other traumas in the context of armed conflict (i.e. by communicating project results, organizing public lectures and public relations activities, and producing and publishing an educational cartoon).

For this brochure, our partner organisation CAPC carried out interviews with ten human rights defenders who participated in the aforementioned project to learn about their working realities and the elements that motivate them to carry on, despite the enormous pressure they are facing.

The interviews showed that they all share a strong motivation to fight injustice, which in many cases results from cases of injustice and terror they have personally experienced or witnessed. On one hand, this is considered a powerful motivator to relentlessly fight for justice despite frustrations and hopeless situations. On the other hand, an interrelation like this between professional and personal experiences, represents a risk of blurring boundaries and crossing personal limits. In those cases where professionals are personally involved and willing to sacrifice a lot, taking care of their wellbeing is a challenge. All professionals mentioned the risk of accelerated burnout in this field, and seized the opportunity to repeatedly emphasize the importance of self-care and protection of personal boundaries. It was clear that such an emphasis stemmed from their experiences in overworking and understanding how risky it can be.

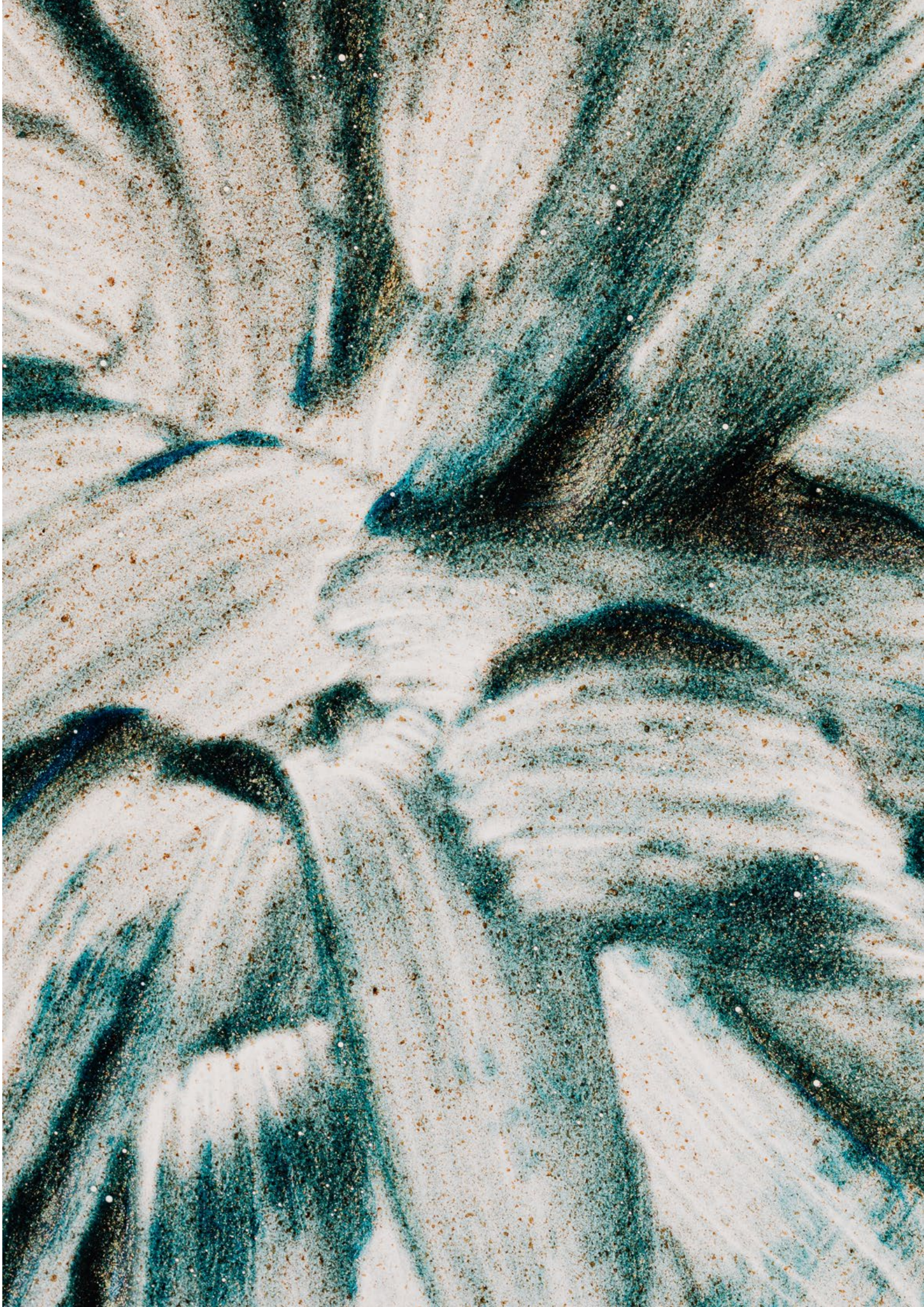
Another aspect which became very clear and which we aimed at supporting through this project, was the need for peer exchange among colleagues and professional networks. Professionals working in the North Caucasus region stressed on how isolated they are within their line of work, especially as their efforts are discarded by the wider society. In such situations, it is crucial to have both national and international like-minded communities that can provide a safe

space for mutual support. More conversations need to be held among professionals within the North Caucasus region to identify suitable ways to connect and find support.

Finally, in their feedback, project participants revealed that starting the conversation around self-care and staff support helped them acknowledge that they are in fact burnt-out themselves and require support. Participants have started to seek supervision and/or reached out to colleagues within the community in order to get the support that they need. This again highlights the importance of having conversations about self- and staff care as a starting point to establish better practices.

How to best support staff is an ongoing discussion that is happening worldwide among professionals in the helping professions, and even more so in contexts of crisis and conflict. For example, the recently published brochure “Responding to Staff Care Needs in Fragile Contexts” by GIZ (2020) emphasizes the importance of taking a proactive approach on staff care, and specifically asks organisations to take up their responsibility in ensuring staff support for their employees. It claims that self-care and staff support is often misunderstood as an individual task or focusses mainly on individual self-care techniques, such as relaxation exercises. However, the authors argue that organisational structures and practices, context factors and the needs of staff members and teams have to be considered when developing an effective staff support system. The first step to developing such support systems is having conversations within the organisations about existing staff support practices and needs.

The interviews in this brochure showed that the professionals do always find ways to sustain themselves and recharge. However, they also showed how staff members can work for many years on the verge of burnout, potentially harming themselves and others. This reality should be taken very seriously. One possible starting point would be to leave behind the image of “strong helper” who can work endlessly without being affected by work conditions. Instead, it would be crucial to acknowledge that helpers cannot but be impacted by the realities they are working with and that they need safe spaces to reflect on their experiences and feelings and find support from peers and colleagues. We hope that the conversations started within this project will lead to the creation of such spaces where professionals can reach out to each other and provide mutual support in their struggle for justice.



Foreword

Bearing Witness

by Elise Bittenbinder // President of BAfF

On the 28th of November 2019, I met Ekaterina Sokirianskaia from the Conflict Analysis and Prevention Centre in St. Petersburg (CAPC) in a café in Berlin. The only thing I knew was that she wanted to organize a training for professionals in the North Caucasus on methods to treat psychological trauma. I did not know her personally, did not have a clear idea of what to expect, and was not sure where this meeting would lead us. However, it did not take long for me to realize that we had a lot in common and that we spoke the same language – and I do not mean the English language we communicated in, and which was for neither of us a mother tongue.

What brought us together was the fact that we are both trusted with stories of violation and human suffering. We both understand that those who are caught up in devastating violence, whether victims or witnesses, need to have their damaged integrity restored, as every wound requires a subsequent healing process. For many people, this is achieved without professional help and their problems may be completely resolved within a safe or an accepting community; but others do not find safety and recognition, or a place to speak out, and they often find themselves burdened with lasting psychological difficulties.

I could easily relate to Ekaterina's experience: An experience based on the knowledge that working with people who have been uprooted and violated is a very demanding endeavour for social and health workers, that professionals working in conflict areas run the risk of burnout, and that they often work under social and moral pressures, including misconceptions about their work in the wider society.

Armed conflict and human rights violations in the context of wars destroy the basic infrastructure of society. They wreck the mechanisms that ensure the safety and welfare of individuals and communities, as well as those that impose accountability for injustice and violations. The societal fabric and social networks are thus disrupted, triggering intense panic, fear, mistrust and an overwhelming feeling of loss and grief.

For survivors of violations, there is a huge difference between them being considered “sick” or “mentally ill”, and being heard in such a way that their truth is understood and taken seriously, and that justice is done. Honouring the trust people put in us when seeking repair and healing does not only require us to use our knowledge and counselling skills. We have to also show them that they can have confidence in us as human rights actors who are not only working on individual cases, but also intervene within the surrounding social and legal environment. This invites us to share a common social responsibility and challenges us to set up holistic networks that include legal, social, medical and psychotherapeutic professionals. Those professionals must not only work together effectively, they must also support each other by creating safe spaces for reflection so that they can **bear witness**, even while facing social and moral pressure, and in many cases personal hardships.

Accordingly, the challenge for this joint project was not only to set up a training program, but also to launch a project which would open spaces where survivors can support each other and learn from one another, while also creating a professional and trustful peer-to-peer network.

Even though the pandemic forced us to modify our plans, and in spite of our doubts as to whether doing everything online would even allow for an atmosphere that could generate confidence remotely, over the internet, we were trusted to bear witness to the bravery and relentless engagement of colleagues working in the North Caucasus. I am honoured to have encountered such enormous courage, and I am very grateful to have been able to take part in this pioneering venture. Thank you all.

Elise Bittenbinder

President of BAfF

Solidarity Regardless of Differences and Dividing Lines

by Ekaterina Sokirianskaia // Director of CAPC

The North Caucasus has been since the 1990s the most tumultuous region of Russia, witnessing one of the deadliest and most protracted armed conflicts in Europe. It has also represented a source of insurgency and terrorism and is an area of systematic, grave and massive violations of human rights, including summary executions, enforced disappearance and widespread torture. In recent years, armed conflict has shrunk significantly, but it has not been resolved, and none of the root causes were addressed. Chechnya has become a totalitarian enclave, while other republics still suffer from lingering political conflicts and chronic problems with the rule of law, human security and quality of governance. Three decades of violence and conflict resulted in very high levels of traumatization in the communities. Survivors suffer from acute consequences of trauma, and in many situations their family members suffer the same. In most cases, they are left alone to cope with grief, loss, fear, panic attacks and other effects of trauma.

Human rights defenders work under immense pressure and risk their lives to offer legal and public support to victims of grave human rights violations and violence, but they hardly ever have time to properly manage their traumatic stress. Many of them suffer from severe burnout and secondary traumatization. Prior to this project, most of the NGO workers who help survivors of violence never had any systematic training related to assisting traumatized individuals. Local psychologists and counsellors are also in acute need of improved self-care, capacity building, supervision, and enhancement of their local and international networks. This six-month long pilot project was a response to such needs.

The core of the project was the unique in-depth training course delivered by BAfF colleagues to 45 North Caucasus human rights defenders, NGO leaders, social workers and psychologists. Psychologists received an on-the-job training: They offered free counselling to victims of violence, using the acquired knowledge with the additional much needed support of professional supervision.

Our project also aimed to improve “trauma literacy” in the society, by raising awareness of what trauma is, how it displays itself in symptoms and how to address it. We reached out to our audience with

a 3-minute cartoon that promoted this understanding and aimed to reduce the stigma and shame associated with seeking psychological help. We organized open online lectures for NGO workers and psychologists, inviting renowned Russian, German and international lecturers to share their knowledge of various aspects of trauma. Those were well received far beyond the North Caucasus with hundreds of professionals attending each online event. Finally, we established a network of North Caucasus NGO workers and psychologists and broadened the scope of our audience to nearly 5,000 specialists of supporting professions from the Russian-speaking world, including Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, and the frontline psychologists from Belarus, Armenia, Azerbaijan assisting survivors of recent violent crises.

One of the most precious learning outcomes of this project is the value of solidarity. Committed help workers, be they psychologists from warring sides of the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, be they Muslims, Christians or Buddhists, be they Germans, Russians or Chechens, understand and feel for each other regardless of differences or dividing lines. The right to psychological help in acute crisis is a human right and we will continue working together to help provide to survivors of violence and human rights violations the timely, professional support that they so much need. This will help create healthier, more harmonious and resilient societies.

Ekaterina Sokirianskaia

CAPC Director

1. Introduction

This brochure addresses the realities of professionals in the North Caucasus, who have been working with survivors of human rights violations, including psychologists, social workers, lawyers and activists, and illustrates the way they sustain themselves and their work despite the daunting challenges and threats they face.

Documenting human rights violations and supporting survivors of such violations involve working with individuals who have gone through traumatic events and experienced psychological, physical, social, economical or political harm. For the professionals working in this field, this entails dealing with extreme suffering on a daily basis and especially in the context of ongoing conflict and crisis, being affected by the same realities their clients are bringing to them. This in itself represents a major challenge and requires professionals to find a sensible balance between investing their energy in helping others, and finding the space to recharge and look after themselves.

Professionals who are identifying and advocating against human rights violations, face an extra layer of pressure. Their efforts challenge injustice in social and political practices, which in turn exposes them to conflicts with several stakeholders within the society. As a result, their work receives little recognition in the wider society and they have to deal with threats addressed to them or to their loved ones. Supporting others under such circumstances is a significantly complex and risky endeavour, and professionals often find themselves working endless hours, which can eventually affect not only their physical and psychological wellbeing, but also their relationships (Bittenbinder & Patel, 2017). This reality puts human rights defenders at risk and raises a question on how they can take care of themselves and support each other while working under such extreme circumstances.

In the North Caucasus region, the situation for human rights defenders has continuously deteriorated, according to an Amnesty International report published in 2019. The report outlined an increase in the acts of aggression, brutality and violence against human rights defenders and their entourage, impacting their personal reputation, physical integrity and freedom. This means that professionals are forced to work under unsafe circumstances, facing tremendous social pressure and threats, while being often isolated. A joint German-Russian project entitled “Increasing NGO Capacity in Addressing Psychotrauma in the North Caucasus”, aimed at supporting professionals working in this field by creating a space for them to get to know each other, enhance their capacity to work with trauma and build a network with the purpose of fighting social isolation and fostering exchange and mutual support. The project was funded by the German Foreign Ministry and was implemented collaboratively by the *German*

Association of Psychosocial Centres for Refugees and Victims of Torture (BAfF), the European Network of Rehabilitation Centres for Victims of Torture (EURONET) and the Conflict Analysis and Prevention Centre (CAPC) between June and December 2020.

For this brochure, our partner organisation CAPC carried out interviews with ten human rights defenders who participated in the aforementioned project. They discussed their working realities and the elements that motivate them to carry on, despite the enormous pressure they are facing. With the support of the CAPC field research, we were able to gain insight into personal stories of human right defenders and into the political context of a very dynamic region. We were humbled by the experiences of the persons we worked with throughout the year and would like to highlight their perspectives in this brochure.

We will first provide an overview of the historical and political context in the North Caucasus region (chapter 2), before describing the perspectives human rights defenders from the North Caucasus have on their work, and what helps them cope with the difficult realities (chapter 3). Finally, we will share our thoughts and input on the interviews, in addition to the learning outcomes from this joint project (chapter 4).



Project Outline

“Increasing NGO Capacity in Addressing Psychotrauma in the North Caucasus”

PROJECT GOALS AND ACTIVITIES

The goal of this project was to enhance the psychosocial care provided to survivors of torture and other human rights violations in the North Caucasus by:

1. Building the capacity of professionals in the field of human rights (including social workers, psychologists, lawyers, human rights activists) to work with trauma using a holistic psychosocial approach.
2. Establishing a Russian-speaking network of professionals working in the field of psychosocial support and human rights to foster exchange and peer support among professionals, by creating safe spaces for joint reflection, discussion and learning.
3. Raising awareness about psychological consequences of human rights violations and other traumas in the context of armed conflict, by communicating project results, organizing public lectures and public relations activities and producing an educational cartoon.

PARTICIPANTS

Several health and social care professionals took part in the intense training course. They came from various regions of the North Caucasus, including Ingushetia (13), Chechnya (10), Dagestan (4), North Ossetia (3), Kabardino-Balkaria (2), Moscow (3), and Karachay-Cherkessia (1).

IMPLEMENTING ORGANISATIONS

The **German Association of Psychosocial Centres for Refugees and Victims of Torture (BAfF)**: BAfF serves as the umbrella organization for over 42 treatment centres providing holistic rehabilitation services to asylum seekers, refugees and victims of torture in Germany. It is dedicated to building national and international networks of health professionals working in the fields of health care, human rights and trauma.

The **European Network of Rehabilitation Centres for Victims of Torture (EURONET)**: It was founded in 2003, BAfF being one of its founding members. It is a non-financed and largely self-sustaining professional network of health care, social care and legal professionals from over 120 organizations and rehabilitation centres in Europe. The goal of EURONET is to support the provision of rehabilitation services to victims of torture and other human rights violations, who lack access to resources. It includes centres in Russia's North Caucasus that are considered active members, namely the Rehabilitation Centre for Victims of Torture "Empathy" (RCT/Empathy) and the Georgian Centre for Psychosocial and Medical Rehabilitation of Torture Victims (GCRT). Both centres offer a rich and renowned expertise to victims of torture, including asylum seekers, refugees and other individuals who have been subjected to human rights violations during armed conflicts.

The **Conflict Analysis and Prevention Centre (CAPC)**: This centre is an international think-and-do tank that was established at the end of 2017. CAPC's mission is to provide a nuanced, accurate and field-based analysis of violent conflicts, to propose tailored conflict resolution strategies, policies and tools, and to implement interventions that will minimise the likelihood of deadly violence and facilitate conflict resolution, post-conflict rehabilitation and development. CAPC collaborates with civil society stakeholders, community leaders and government officials in order to implement proposed strategies and projects. It engages in raising early warning awareness, advocating for the rule of law, supporting prevention of violent extremism and post-conflict reconciliation. CAPC is part of the Russian-Syrian Monitoring Group, which documents human rights violations in Syria and presents its findings to the Russian civil society as part of the Syrian-Russian dialogue process.

2. The North Caucasus - Historical and Political Realities

This chapter aims to provide a brief historical and socio-political perspective within a regional context, to analyse the driving factors behind today's violent conflicts, and to contextualize the challenges of professionals working in the field of human rights in Russia's North Caucasus region in particular, which was for many years home to one of Europe's deadliest conflicts.

The North Caucasus is part of the North Caucasus Federal District (NCFD) and consists of seven republics (see map below): Chechnya, Ingushetia, Dagestan, Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachay-Cherkessia, North Ossetia and Stavropol Krai (International Crisis Report (2012), Report 220, p.3). Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the region is tumultuous and insufficiently integrated into the Russian Federation, to the extent that many Russian citizens living in other parts of the country, consider the North Caucasus as an “inner abroad”. The wide array of ethnicities, historical experiences, competing narratives and political aspirations frequently causes local tensions (International Crisis Report (2012), Report 220, p.3). Many of these disputes and tensions stem from protracted armed and unresolved territorial conflicts, and from losses and grievances that have been transferred across generations.



Map of the North Caucasus region.

Source: International Crisis Report (2012), Report 221. Available at: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/caucasus/russianorth-caucasus/north-caucasus-challenges-integration-ii-islam-insurgency-and-counter-insurgency>, p.34.

Historical Background

The integration of the North Caucasus into the Russian state has represented a great challenge for Russia (International Crisis Report (2012), Report 220, p.5). Since the 16th century, the region has been an area of competition between great powers, namely the Ottoman Empire, Persia and Russia (Slugett, 2014). In the 18th and 19th century, Russia fought fierce colonial wars to conquer the region, which resulted in multiple waves of mass displacement, destruction of settlements and a very high death toll in the local populations. After the end of the Caucasus war in 1864, several ethnic groups (mainly in the West North Caucasus) were subjected to mass deportation to the Ottoman Empire.

While the Soviet state brought about modernization, industrialization, literacy and a greater integration of women into social life, it still kept on repressing intellectuals, religious leaders, and wealthy individuals who were eventually exiled or killed in the process of Soviet rule enforcement. In Soviet times, borders between ethnic groups were repeatedly drawn and redrawn. As such, during the Stalin era between 1943-1956, several ethnic groups were deported to Central Asia and many were killed. This amounted to a genocidal event, with the death of up to 25% of the populations, and remains until today a massive collective trauma. These historical realities have shaped the North Caucasus people's notion of nationhood, identity and relations with neighbours, as well as the historical narratives they formed around their homeland.

After the collapse of the USSR, a powerful ethnic mobilization based on accumulated grievances, political activity and demands for autonomy emerged from the federal center. Most prominently, in Chechnya, a separatist movement that emerged in the late 1980s eventually led to the first Russian-Chechen war. In December 1994, three years after the Chechen declaration of independence, Russian troops entered Chechnya in a bid to restore Russia's territorial integrity, but were defeated despite their overwhelming military strength (Emil Pain). The first Chechen war lasted from December 1994 to August 1996.

Locally, the de-facto independent Chechen entity failed to establish an effective rule of law within a functioning state. The initially secular and separatist nationalist movement did not demobilize, but split into small increasingly radical Islamist paramilitary groups, some of which resorted to terrorism and kidnapping for ransom. The second Chechen war broke out in August 1999 and ended officially in April 2009. It proved to be much deadlier than the first, as the Chechen insurgency's radical wing committed dozens of terrorist acts, and the Russian security services carried out serious, widespread and systematic human rights violations. This war fuelled the spread of radical Islamism across the North Caucasus region: The Chechen

insurgency eventually dropped the nationalist aspirations, and since 2007 aimed to regionally establish an Islamic state on the basis of a strict interpretation of the Sharia law. The armed conflict that consequently spread to all North Caucasus republics caused thousands of deaths inside and outside the region.

Unresolved Tensions Fuelling Conflict and Instability

The North Caucasus region is home to numerous unresolved disputes over territory, land and resources, and has experienced religious and ethnically-driven tensions. Many of its residents feel alienated from the rest of the Russian Federation, where they face in some cases discrimination or ethnic profiling. Several factors including major deficits in democracy and rule of law, a lack of accountability, an ineffective and corrupt government, an underdeveloped economy, high unemployment rates and insufficient security measures, all aggravate the general feeling of vulnerability and instability of the region (Zhemukhov, 2018). The combination of these factors continues to fuel low-intensity conflicts and leads to traumas within the population. It also widens the already deep rift between state authorities and local residents, leading to a general strong mistrust of state institutions, with traumatized individuals left to cope with their struggles on their own. This reflects a political atmosphere of fear and amplifies feelings of insecurity and intimidation.

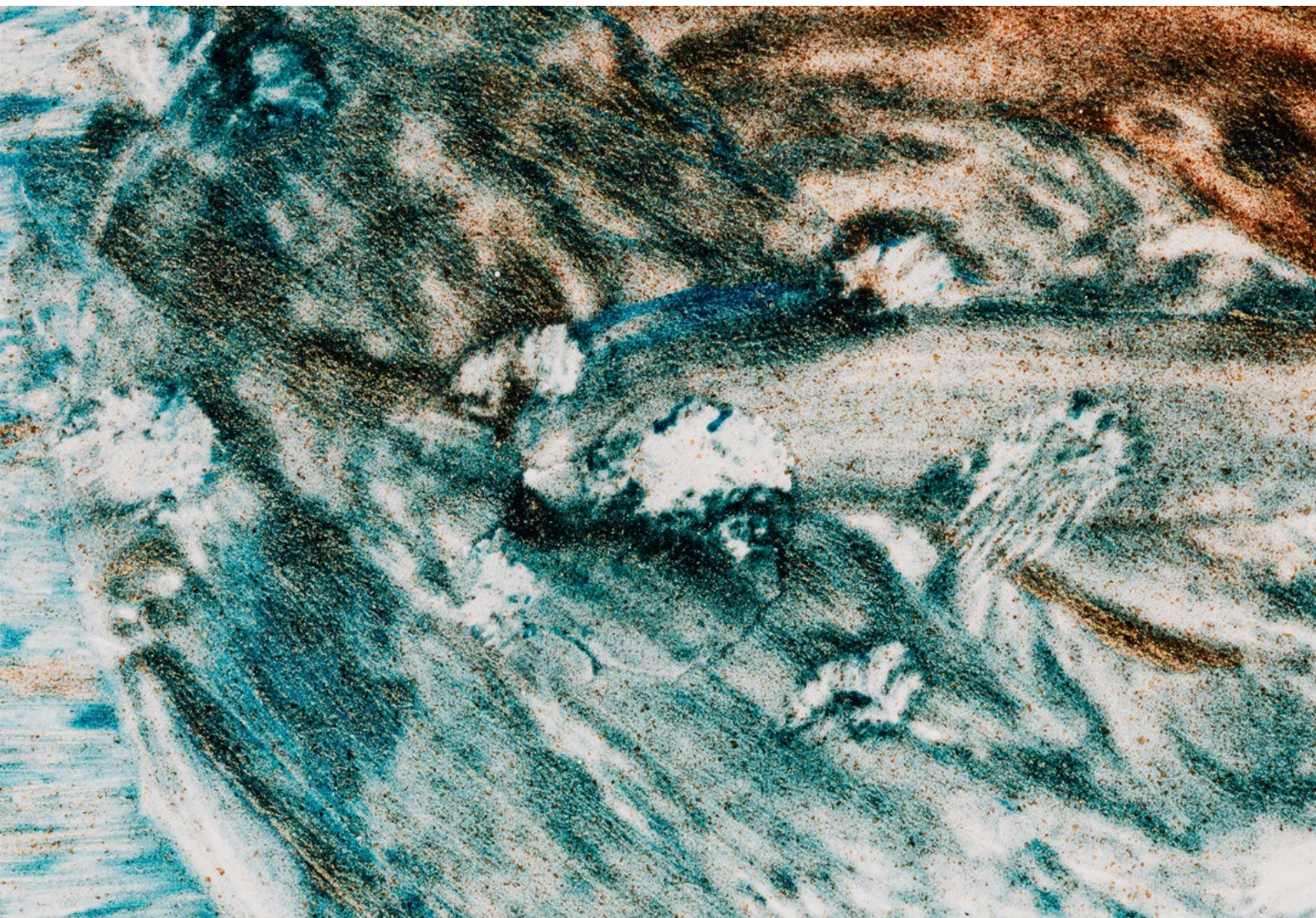
The numerous unresolved problems leave a vacuum that can easily be filled by violent jihadist ideologies which in turn lead to deadly terrorist attacks (International Crisis Report (2012), Report 220, p.6; International Crisis Report (2012), Report 221, p.5). In this context, between 2014 and 2016, the appeal of ultra-radical ideologists represented a strong motivator for several thousands of North Caucasian men and women to join ISIS in Syria and Iraq, together with their minors. The logic adopted by Islamists dictates the instrumentalization of social injustice and hopelessness. For example, young people are offered future solutions in the context of a state model governed by the Sharia law, and are persuaded to join the Jihad against the secular state.

Ethnicity and Identity

The North Caucasus is a region of high ethnic diversity. The republics marked by ethnic homogeneity are Chechnya and Ingushetia, whereas Dagestan is considered as being the most diverse, with 30 distinct ethnic groups.

Each Caucasian ethnic group is characterized by its own notion of homeland, a set of ethno-cultural values and traditions, a record of collective grievances and traumas, disputes with neighbours over land and resources, in addition to specific political aspirations when it comes to regional identity politics (Tishkov, 1997). Most of the ethnic groups have their own written vernaculars. Ethnicity is also inextricably intertwined with religious awareness, practice, collective memory and identity. These elements shape the collective identity to a great extent which can bring individuals, families and communities together in times of crisis, but can also make them vulnerable and subject to manipulation and instrumentalization.

As described earlier, the notion of homeland is historically linked to ethnicity, and both are integral parts of the collective notion of identity. Thus, the issue of administrative borders remains sensitive (Zhemukhov, 2018), as diverse ethnic groups are often engaged



in territorial or land disputes, and face tensions over status and resources with their neighbours. These groups include the Chechen and Ingush people, the Ingush and the Ossetians, the Balkars and the Kabardines, the various peoples of Dagestan, and the Russians and the North Caucasians in the Stavropol Krai.

Another key element of the collective identity is religion. Islam constitutes the main religion in five of the region's republics, and is more prominent in the Northeast (Ingushetia, Chechnya, Dagestan) compared to the West (Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachay-Cherkessia (International Crisis Report (2012), Report 220, p.7). The Ossetians and Russians are in majority Orthodox Christians. The two decades of instability and war turned the republics that were most affected by insurgency (i.e. Chechnya, Ingushetia, Dagestan) and those that were previously known for their religious and ethnic diversity, into areas where notions of secularism have been steadily shrinking. As such, the lack of trust in the secular institutions reinforced ethnically and religiously-driven rules and practices (International Crisis Report (2012), Report 220, p.7).

Today, these republics function on the basis of legal pluralism, enforcing a mixture of Russian secular law, Sharia law and Adat (local customary law) (Comins-Richmond, 2004). In Chechnya and Ingushetia, blood feuds for intentional killings are still observed. The local customary law, Adat, makes the status of women particularly vulnerable, as they often do not get the protection that should normally be guaranteed under Russian law, namely in cases of honour killings, children custody after a divorce and excessive authority from male relatives. Additionally, collective punishments are being reported, such as punitive house burnings of alleged insurgents and actions to threaten family of critics or opponents of political leaders (Klocker, 2019).

Records of Human Rights Violations in the Region

Defending human rights under authoritarian regimes has always been a dangerous endeavour in any parts of the world. In Russia, the conditions of human rights defenders have significantly deteriorated during the past years. Based on an Amnesty International report published in 2019, there was an increased use of aggression, brutality and violence against the personal reputation, physical integrity and freedom of human rights defenders and their entourage. Additionally, a series of laws passed between 2011 and 2012 “impose severe restrictions on the rights to freedom of association, peaceful assembly and expression” (Amnesty International Report 2016). They also discredit and criminalize individuals working for NGOs or involved in human rights work, portraying them as “foreign paymasters to undermine the country’s security and traditional values” (Amnesty International Report 2019). This is a common tactic implemented using the law and the manipulation of society, against human rights defenders to stigmatize and discredit them as “people fouling their own nest”. Ultimately, such practices lead to criminalization, persecution and imprisonment (Amnesty International Report 2019).

The brutal and excessive violence against human rights organizations aims to silence the truth and stop investigations. In the North Caucasus, those acts of violence claimed the lives of many working in human rights and independent journalism. One of the numerous victims was the well-known human rights defender Natalia Estemirova, member of the Human Rights Centre Memorial’s Chechnya office, who was abducted from her house in Grozny and shot dead in the neighbouring Ingushetia on the 15th of July 2009. Across the region, human rights defenders have been attacked, beaten, killed, imprisoned, their offices raided, burnt, their families threatened. None of those crimes were effectively investigated or prosecuted in a court of law, a fact that fosters a climate of complete impunity (Amnesty International Report 2019).

Human rights organizations state that rule-of-law problems remain very acute and that human rights abuses are increasingly unreported due to a predominant climate of fear and intimidation, especially in Chechnya (Gerber & Mendelson, 2005), and to the widespread culture of impunity in political institutions. Under these circumstances, the last hope for redress is the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR), where Russia has the largest docket of pending cases (Abresch, 2005).

3. The Work of Human Rights Defenders in the North Caucasus

This chapter outlines the perspectives of ten experienced professionals who are providing social, psychological and legal support to survivors of human rights violations in the North Caucasus region. We will introduce the scope of their work and what motivates them to be part of these endeavours. We will also illustrate how they sustain themselves in this particular environment.

We have spoken to three psychologists/psychotherapists/emergency counsellors, three lawyers, and four social workers/sociologists working in human rights organizations. Together, they provide a wide range of holistic services to the communities in the North Caucasus, such as:

- First aid, emergency counselling and crisis intervention
- Awareness-raising activities, education and publications (e.g. brochure for burnout prevention)
- Investigation and documentation of attacks and human rights violations
- Social assistance
- Psychological counselling for individuals, families and groups
- Legal consultation, counselling and representation
- Coordination of referrals to other social and healthcare services
- Empowerment opportunities for girls and women
- Support for local NGOs, including monitoring and evaluation, management support and trainings
- Add-on activities: Consultations for international NGOs (often aimed at securing a salary to help with unpaid activist work)

This is what they say about their work:

“Our organization started to work after the terrorist attack in Beslan. Initially, we did not realize that we would be actively dealing with social issues. We wanted to provide our support to the objective investigation of the terrorist attack. However, people started asking us to help them and we tried to meet their needs.”

(Social Worker)

”

“I am a human rights activist and an attorney. I am member of a public organization, the Kabardino-Balkarian Regional Public Human Rights Centre, which provides legal services. I offer legal assistance to applicants, regardless of their gender and race. People are asked to draft a complaint, in order to file a lawsuit. I represent my clients in court.”

(Lawyer)

”

“I process and analyze reports on human rights violations in the North Caucasus, and I work closely on Chechnya. The cases involve torture, abductions, [enforced] disappearances and falsification of evidence in criminal cases. Executions and killings are significantly less frequent now. (...) I also monitor trials that involve victims from the North Caucasus and do trial observations.”

(Psychologist)

”

“I am a psychologist, but I am also engaged in social activities. I run a civil organization and our mission is to provide psychological and social assistance to people. We provide our services free of charge. I also have a private practice.”

(Psychologist)

”

“We were social workers and observers, and helped complainants with legal cases. We often acted as counselors for victims who were coping with stress and were simply overwhelmed. We were there to morally support them and give them hope.”

(Social worker/NGO worker)

”

“We can be considered social workers. I am also an activist. I help other activists, NGOs and social groups to grow stronger. We offer them psychological help. We implement projects to empower women and girls. It is important to raise awareness about the problems and violence they face.”

(Social worker/NGO worker)

”

“I provide personal consultations and facilitate women groups – which are now held online due to the pandemic. (...) I created the “Self-care course” for groups, and a third round of the course is currently being held. I teach women to take care of themselves. (...) We have a WhatsApp group for assignments and discussions, and another to provide support to participants”

(Psychologist)

”

“I help people by defending their rights. (...) They approach me when they are deprived of medical care, medicine, and medical equipment, or when they face issues with housing and communal services. (...) The main goal remains to change the whole situation in these areas. These are widespread issues across Russia, but they are more acute in the Caucasus: People with severe chronic diseases are denied vital medicine and medical devices. In terms of housing and communal services, people are provided with little to no essential services that are in certain cases of poor quality. People refuse then to pay for those and are sued by the State (...) This is another reason to defend their rights.”

(Lawyer)

”

Many of the persons we have interviewed chose to engage in this line of work after going through personal experiences of crisis, trauma, terror and injustice. Therefore, their professional motivation is deeply rooted in personal struggles. One activist shared her experience below:

“One of my daughters survived, while the other died as a result of the terrorist attack¹ on a school in Beslan. My daughter who survived the attack told me that I was physically there, but that I was not really by her side at that time. Yes, I was grieving. I was wrapped up in work, and she was probably affected by that. This also had an impact on my professional life. I went back to work three years after the terrorist attack. I worked for 3 years until I was no longer mentally and physically able to teach at the university, so I left. I did not write my PhD thesis. It was no longer important for me. At the moment, I write articles as a researcher. Going back to work and to a professional life was difficult, but social activism made it possible for me to socialize again.”
(Social worker/NGO worker)

Some started out as activists or journalists to fight for justice and human rights and ended up becoming psychologists and lawyers, with a goal to support people in a more dedicated and professional manner. Others followed specific professional paths before eventually dedicating their work to political activism. They have very different backgrounds and entry points into their career, but all share a common dedication and conviction that it is indeed worth fighting for what is better.

As part of their work, they intervene in very complex and sensitive situations, where their lives and that of their clients can be at risk. Their actions are closely monitored by authorities, which results in searches of their private homes and offices and often leaves them feeling unsafe and worried about their loved ones. In the testimonial below, one of the persons who was interviewed, describes how working in this field puts a heavy burden on families and loved ones, as their lives might also be at stake.

“My relatives know less than one-tenth of what my work consists of. I usually do not inform them of any risky situations. For example, when the Chechen war was raging, we went to Grozny and had to cross checkpoints. It was truly unsafe for me. There were many threatening situations that I never told them about. If I did, they would have surely asked me to quit working. I worry about the danger my relatives are exposed to. The fear is constant. When our office in Ingushetia was set

1 Terrorist attack on a school in Beslan, North Ossetia (Russia) in September 2004, which included hostage-taking, siege and storming of the school, and resulted in the death of over 330 civilians, including over 180 children, and injuries to over 750 persons (ECHR, 2014, p.1)

on fire, I feared for my family a lot. Sounds of cars and voices of strangers in the evenings haunted me. I was suspicious and tense all the time. I stopped walking around with my nephews, I stopped going to cafes and in general, I stopped going with any of my relatives to crowded places. I feared I might get killed at any moment.”

Within the society, the work of human rights defenders is underestimated to a large extent. They are in many cases criticized, as their role is labelled as unavailing. They are also often challenged by their families and entourage, who question their motivations to do the work that they do; and while some confirmed that they indeed benefit from their family and community’s support, many have stated that they rarely speak to others about their work for several reasons: It could be that they want to avoid them worrying, or save them from any harm that might result from them knowing sensitive information. This situation leaves them feeling quite isolated.

They explained that their personal wellbeing within this line of work is widely left to their own responsibility, in light of a clear lack of organizational structures to support staff members in this difficult environment. The psychologists we have interviewed appear to understand self-care as an integral part of their work and have described many techniques that they use to recharge both in personal and professional contexts, and to efficiently set boundaries between their professional role and their personal lives. Social workers and lawyers also brought up different ways they adopt to recharge their energy, but those seemed to be less of an integral part of their work practice. In summary, all professionals we have talked to and who have confirmed facing burnout at times with overwhelming signs of stress, admitted that little is being done on an organizational level to address the wellbeing of human rights defenders.

From another perspective, the professionals we interviewed described how they constantly do their utmost best to help people in very difficult situations, and how it is often simply impossible to find adequate support for them. Cases like these trigger in those professionals overwhelming feelings of frustration and guilt, while persistent thoughts about whether they have done enough haunt them both at work and in their personal lives. One of the interviewees illustrated the situation as follows:

“A detainee’s sister reached out to our organization, after the lawyer on his case turned out to be dishonest and unethical, visiting him only once. With every visit to the organization, the detainee’s sister cries and expresses how worried she is about her brother. After each of those visits, I have the impression that I did not meet her expectations, and this fills me with a sense of guilt. She cries all the time, she needs to be reassured and supported. I try to fumble for the right

words, words that seem to calm her down; but then I think to myself: what if I gave her false hopes? This makes me feel down, my brain spinning to try and find what else can be done for the family. Work is omnipresent in every aspect of my life – at home, in family reunions, in my thoughts. When it's morning time in Magadan, it is night time in my region. I could get a phone call at any time, and would need to be ready for it. So I come home in a bad mood, and feel the urge to share with my brother or daughter-in-law. Then come the regrets, and I ask myself: do they really need to know about all those issues? I want to feel supported, I want for someone to acknowledge that it's not my fault, that this is a system that simply cannot be changed... But what can my relatives say? These thoughts never leave me. When things are going well at work though, my mood improves, which positively impacts my relationships with relatives. My voice is different, I can breathe more easily and I feel motivated to continue the work I have been doing. I no longer feel the typical burden on my shoulders". (Social worker/NGO worker)

As part of our joint project, we have discussed the need for staff to get the support that they require, and for professionals working in the field to have spaces for reflection. It has become obvious that those are necessities that are widely lacking and that require more attention.



3.1 What Motivates Them and How They Sustain Themselves

The interviews that were conducted showed that a strong professional motivation represents a key element and driving factor for professionals in the field of human rights. All interviewees highlighted the reasons why they deeply believe this work is important, and why they stick with it despite the continuous backlashes and sources of frustration, holding onto the small successes and achievements. The quotes below are examples of the different approaches they adopt to keep their motivation up and sustain themselves:

Clear Goals, Willingness to Sacrifice, Perseverance and Determination

Perseverance, defined goal orientation and willingness to sacrifice, both on the professional and personal level, were described by professionals as key traits that empower them to stick with their work:

“Goal orientation is the most important element. I set a goal that I like and I work towards achieving it. This motivates me. I want to work in this field (...). Being a professional therapist and practicing in this field are important for me.”
(Psychologist)

“I have small goals in my life. They give me strength and empower me. This is a notion and principle I use in my personal and professional life. I would like to make changes and to improve things, but that is impossible without sacrifices. As such, as I am willing to sacrifice my time, my property, my family, and my health. In short, I am ready to sacrifice everything; any pressure from the system boosts my strength and energy. What does not kill us makes us stronger.” (Lawyer)

“My strength lies in my perseverance and determination. This is something I have had since my childhood.” (Social worker/ NGO worker)

Witnessing Improvement, Empowering Individuals to Defend Their Own Rights, Holding onto Small Success Stories and Hope

Another important aspect is the positive energy they get from witnessing developments in the lives of the people they are supporting, or experiencing success in defending clients' rights or ensuring their access to resources. Professionals explained how rewarding these successes and achievements are to them, as they help them boost their optimism and remain hopeful even when the burden is too heavy or the situation is too complex.

“Hope is everything in my opinion. You see the light at the end of the tunnel and realize that you will get there sooner or later. Managing to defend the rights of a client is empowering, even when the case is small. You are then filled with the hope that you can create change and that you can achieve greater success. Realizing that your efforts have led to a real victory gives you a lot of strength. It is also a realization that not all is lost in your life.” (Lawyer)

“With challenges, you grow stronger. The nicer part of the process is to see the impact on the lives of people you have helped, and to sense their happiness after changing and overcoming a tumultuous time of their lives. I am satisfied with my work and it motivates me a lot”. (Psychologist)

“I have many cases to talk about, but let me tell you about this particular one: I tried once to help a detainee who was not able to walk. I bought him a train ticket to go to Moscow for treatment, and helped him get to the train station. After some time, I went to Moscow and saw him: he was alive, using crutches and able to walk. When working on very difficult and hopeless cases, I remember this specific one, where everything worked out fine.” (Social worker/NGO worker)

Witnessing Extreme Powerlessness, Despair and Injustice: A Motivator for Resistance and Continuation

In addition to the above, professionals highlighted the fact that witnessing extreme powerlessness and injustice activates an inner drive in them to keep fighting. They have themselves been victims of injustices and understand the devastating effects of not having anyone to talk to or to rely on in cases of injustice. This interrelation and their roles as spokesperson for clients in need of help, appeared to be both healing and empowering.

“I lived difficult moments when my colleagues faced danger and irreversible damage. When injustice prevails, you feel powerless and disappointed because things have gone in the wrong direction without you being able to help. One example is about a young innocent man who was sent to jail. You know who is saying the truth and who is not, but there is nothing you can do about it. You look into the eyes of family members who expect you to act. That is when you feel helplessness mixed with despair and anger. Impunity in cases like these fuels violence and suffering. However, these difficult moments motivate me and somehow empower me to pursue my work. This is not a reason to give up.” (Lawyer)

“During the Chechnya war (I was one of its victims), I was convinced along with other people that it was essential for journalists and human rights defenders to come to Chechnya and to witness what was really going on there, in order to cover [the events], to tell the truth and to try to do something about it. I could not understand why the Russian society remained silent about that war, why people did not want to know the truth and even approved of what was going on there. The few human rights defenders who did not support [the war in Chechnya] and were with us during those wars — I was just a child back then — influenced my perspectives and led me to understand eventually that not everyone [in Russia] welcomed the war in Chechnya.” (Social worker/NGO worker)

Benefiting from Supportive International Institutions that Provide Legal Legitimation for Human Rights Work

The possibility to file complaints at the European Court of Human Rights is another key aspect that supports professionals in their mission. Many consider this opportunity an important source of support and motivation.

“What is most important to me I think is the possibility of filing complaints at the European Court of Human Rights. [The Court] is absolutely essential. If a person’s human rights have been violated and they were unable to find justice in their home country, they can find it at the European Court [of Human Rights] and receive compensation. This reinforces my determination to move forward.” (Lawyer)

Pursuing Meaningfulness, Spirituality and Trans-Generational Bounds to Gain Strength

Connecting to spirituality, higher purposes and meaning in life was named as an important resource to regain hope and motivation. Some found this in their religious beliefs, while others turned to their own values and beliefs or gained strength by interacting with inspirational people in their lives.

“I think a lot about it, about everything that happened during the terrorist attack and during the sixteen years that followed. It is a difficult and dramatic path of events that are unimaginable for the course of just one life. The source of strength is not within us, I believe it comes from the Lord. My ancestors also provide me with such energy. I think that right after the terrorist attack, the energy of pain prevailed and made it possible for me to move on, to keep going, and to help people. At first, there was despair, pain and disappointment in life, but all those emotions combined made way over time to a deep love for people and all living things. Besides that, I have a responsibility towards my child who still has a long way ahead of him.” (Social worker/NGO worker)

“In general, I do not have much strength or energy. However, I am very empathetic and can almost feel other people’s pain. A while back, I gained strength by praying. I felt loved and supported. I can still feel this now, but somewhat inconsistently (...). I do have some inner [source] too, but I cannot name it now. Something inside me gives me strength.” (Social worker/NGO worker)

“When I feel bad and in order to cope, I try to remember my successes. I remember how great they felt, and how I was able to handle the situation. Having an existential sense of meaning helps too. I believe that feeling bad, down or desperate, and having tough times are a key part of my life path. Life is not only about joy and love. Integrity and meaningfulness are the core elements in any person’s existence.” (Psychologist)

“[I feel stronger] doing the work that I do and believing that I serve a good cause. On this topic, I remember my ‘second father’ who lived in France. He was an intellectual who dedicated his entire life to fight for peace and defend rights in war-torn countries where people are subjected to violence. He tried to bring the truth to the European public. I respected him. He used to tell me, ‘even if you are sure that the good will not prevail, you should at least try to contain the evil’. This gives me strength.” (Human rights activist)

Believing in a Better World Scenario with an Inner Driving Force for Positive Change and Growth

All the persons we interviewed have one thing in common: They are convinced that doing something is better than nothing. They are aware that their work may not bring about significant changes overnight, but are certain that their efforts are contributing to societal changes which will happen sooner or later. This conviction is a powerful driving force to them.

“It is said that constant dropping wears away a stone: Persistence will help you achieve your objectives. I also think that while pressure and restrictions on our society keep building up at the moment, one day we will see it all spring back. They will predictably end sooner or later.” (Social worker/NGO worker)

“I want to do something to put an end to torture and human rights violations in my country, to stop this country from engaging in wars, unleashing new ones and killing civilians. I want to contribute and bring those responsible to justice.” (Social worker/NGO worker)

“After exhausting all possibilities and taking several actions to help a person in a seemingly hopeless case, I tell myself: ‘well, if I try this, maybe it will work out, maybe it will change something?’ In such cases, I feel like I am deceiving myself to go on with the job. But on the other hand, I have

other cases that end well, and this is where I tell myself 'how was it even possible for me to take this case, how was it possible to close it? How did I believe that I could?' Such a strange feeling of fear mixed with satisfaction". (Social worker/ NGO worker)

"I share my story as an example, I try to prove that not everything is bad, that you can always solve problems as long as you are alive. Sometimes I take on the role of a psychologist, someone who can bring hope." (Social worker/ NGO worker)

Actively Looking After One's Individual and Social Needs, Finding a Balance, Being Mindful and Able to Manage Personal Inner Resources

Finding balance was described as being a challenge. However, all interviewees described how they are taking time for themselves and spending moments with friends and relatives to recharge and relax.

"I always keep an eye on what I am feeling like fatigue for example. I try to take care of myself, to reject additional programs and projects, and to tell myself that I need more rest. When I dive into my work or studies, the main thing for me is to go back home and to ground myself there. Simple household chores, like cleaning or doing something that feels familiar, can reinvigorate me and remind me that I am here, I am alive, my family is around me. This is my life, and my life is real. Balance is also important. It can be boring for me to be at home, so I continue working, or read a book or listen to a lecture. I try to be mindful, to listen to myself and understand what I really want: to go home when I'm tired, to resume my work and studies when I feel bored at home." (Psychologist)

"Even a one-day vacation trip helps me boost my energy. I just go away and have some rest, like a fish gulping for oxygen, before coming back to work. Another source of pleasure and energy for me is early morning walks in nature; Without those habits, I would have felt exhausted... They give me the energy to keep working." (Lawyer)

"I can't say that I do sports on a regular basis, but my friends and I go cycling from time to time in the evening or go to the park with sport equipment and chinning bars. Those activities take my mind off my cases, and really constitute an energy booster. I also head sometimes to the countryside

with friends or family members. We spend a few hours there, talk about anything but work or politics, relax and just focus on having a good time.” (Lawyer)

Reaching Out and Seeking Professional Help in Times of Crisis

The interviews showed that there were situations which were difficult or threatening to an extent that professionals required professional support and consultations, in order to deal with their experiences. Seeking professional psychological, legal and social support was named by professionals themselves as one key aspect they need in difficult situations, which represent an integral part of their work.

“At the beginning of this year, five officers from one of the power structures have raided my flat. The search operation lasted half of the day. They stayed 7 hours in my apartment. They were smiling but the tension was palpable. They confiscated my laptop, then a prosecutor investigation of my NGO was initiated. The prosecutor’s office checked my organization’s papers. There was nothing that could have been illegal in those. As it became known, 7 other Dagestan NGOs were subjected to checks at the same time. All were given the same requirements, such as changing specific paragraphs of the NGO charter. The same pattern was observed repeatedly. This event gave me a hard time and forced me to spend a lot of money to authenticate the required amendments at the Ministry of Justice. It was stressful, so I had to work with a psychologist and get professional help from my peers.” (Psychologist)

Accepting the Limits and Limitations of One’s Own Capacities and Setting Boundaries in a Clear and Realistic Manner

Negotiating and actively setting boundaries was named as an important aspect to sustain energies. The persons we interviewed described how boundaries are easily swept away by the intensity and urgency of the issues they are working with, and how it is therefore even more important to set personal boundaries to protect themselves.

“Somehow I recover over time. I am not describing myself as a human rights activist now. I tried and wanted to save everyone in the past. However, I realized that no matter how hard we try, the system is stronger and that many things

will not change overnight. It is unfair and cruel to think that individual, personal efforts can create a massive radical change. In my case, I have in my mind reduced the scale of matters that I can influence. I accept my limitations and I work accordingly. I provide individual assistance, facilitate courses and cope with the general situation. (...) As for my clients, I know that no matter how hard I try, clients will make their own decisions, and they will be responsible for their own progress mostly. I can differentiate between what is on me, and what is on them, in terms of responsibilities. In this process, I adapt to the clients' speed. I do not impose anything, I do not rush them. They may take as much time as they need, and I will be there to support them as needed." (Psychologist)

"One of the key aspects of my work, is that it is time-consuming. That is why I set limits for myself. For instance, I do not work on weekends, unless it's a matter of life and death. I do not switch on my laptop, and do not make work calls. I try to spend time with children or I try to read. I wind down with my kids, we go into the fields to walk and talk. I enjoy seeing their feelings and emotions. The only negative impact of work on my life, is the lack of time to spend with them." (Social worker/NGO worker)

"I know how important it is not to combine the different spheres of life. It is important not to bring your work back home, because then there would be no family time. Similarly, it is equally important not to bring your personal issues into therapy with a client and to maintain your role as a psychotherapist." (Psychologist)

Benefiting from Supportive Relationships, Colleagues, Like-Minded Communities and Professional Networks

Supportive relationships were mentioned by professionals as a key source of support. They described different levels of social support in various types of relationships, including families and close social surroundings. Some explained that support within their families is non-existent and that they try not to discuss their activities in family settings. However, conversations have shown that family support, if available, can be a strengthening and boosting resource. In this particular environment, like-minded colleagues and peers can also provide a social support that can be equally boosting.

"My family knows that I am actively engaged in human rights protection. Their attitude is positive in general. My father

often says: ‘stop wasting your time. Go find yourself a normal job’. (...) My son helps me write complaints to authorities. I taught him how to do that and I hope he will continue to support me.” (Lawyer)

“My loved ones... they support me and understand how important my work is to me. My civil life goes hand in hand with my personal life. I was raised that way and I cannot imagine my life differently, this is a part of my personality. Naturally, my relatives share my feelings, beliefs, and lifestyle... They know that I am who I am. They know that when help is needed, I am ready to join and assist.” (Psychologist)

Another important source of support mentioned by interviewees was supportive exchange, open reflection and mutual support among colleagues who are working in the same field. In the context of our joint project, this kind of mutual exchange was fostered and the participants frequently gave feedback, stressing on the importance of them sharing experiences with each other, and gaining strength from those peer-to-peer exchange.

“I have a friend and colleague whom I have known for more than twenty years and who lives outside the country. She knows everything about my work and current situation. When we met, we talked at length about everything. She actively listened to me. I talked about my feelings calmly and openly, and this filled me with relief. She supported me and shared her experiences and perspectives with me. Talking to her, and her understanding me helped a lot.” (Social worker/ NGO worker)

“My current source of inspiration is the meetings and conversations I have with like-minded associates. My concerns are less overwhelming, and I feel supported.” (Social worker/NGO worker)

Overcoming Feelings of Social Isolation through Professional Networks and Like-Minded Communities

Professionals frequently highlighted how important it is for them to feel that “they are not alone” and that there are others who share the same views and believe in the work they do within the society, whether in their countries or abroad. They also emphasized the importance of like-minded professional networks which help ensure collaboration, provide support and peer-to-peer exchange and learning.

“I feel supported when people come to us and say, ‘I am so grateful that you exist! I support your cause and share your views!’ I realize then that there are more than just two or three of us. This brings me reassurance.” (Social worker/NGO worker)

“Thank God that there are communities that can respond to certain issues that I am unable to deal with. We have a solid regional community of psychologists, lawyers, and social workers. We act together to resolve issues when they occur. I remember the case of a pregnant girl living in a village, who was kicked out of her house during summer. She had nowhere to go and no means of subsistence. I asked our group for help, took the girl to the hospital, then to a halfway house. Of course, it was tough due to the pandemic, and no institution was willing to admit her. We helped her obtain the necessary papers. Everything went well. She gave birth to a boy, we helped her with baby stuff. They now live together in a halfway house, and we call the baby ‘the son of our regiment.’” (Psychologist)



3.2 The Changes They Would Like to See

There are many changes the persons we interviewed would like to see, as part of their role as change makers. They have formulated a few specific elements that they feel are important, to work towards a more just and less violent society. Professionals would also like to see a change in the circumstances that enable violation of basic human rights, namely a culture of accepting violence, poor rule of law, lack of accountability and transparency.

Promotion of the Concept of Non-Violence and Gender Equality

“The most important elements are the culture of non-violence, disclosure, and laws. The law on domestic violence has not been adopted by the state yet. All possible resources, as well as state authorities, should be involved. They should initiate this. Until a direct message is conveyed by authorities, the society will never fully embrace the concept of non-violence. We still live in a violent state and violence is everywhere, even in small events and in all areas governed by hierarchy and by a patriarchal culture. In general, patriarchal culture is an incubator for violence. Patriarchy provides men with the right to punish their wife and children. Moving towards equality and fairness could save our country.” (Psychologist)

Establishing Rule of Law

“We need our country to be free from corruption, torture and [enforced] disappearances. We need people to stop supporting the dictator. Our country should become a rule-of-law state.” (Social worker/NGO worker)

Advocating for External Support and International Sanctions to Bring about Political Change and End Human Rights Violations

“There is a need for more international sanctions against those who are the most complicit in human rights violations in Russia. Sanctions have an important impact, although innocent ordinary people suffer from them, too.” (Lawyer)

“Other countries should be bolder. They should withdraw their support to the leader of the state where human rights are being violated, and take a principled stand on specific issues.” (Social worker/NGO worker)

“We need to gain more trust from foreign foundations that are willing to work with us. I know how difficult it can be to secure grant funding for a project.” (Lawyer)

Getting Support from Impartial Media and Other Forms of Independent PR Activities, Including Social Media

“I would like the media to be more independent and neutral and to show courage, and I expect human rights defenders to do their job diligently.” (Social worker/NGO worker)

“I would like to see less provocative media reporting, which does not motivate people in Russia to turn against the residents of the North Caucasus, portraying the latter as savages and boors.” (Social worker/NGO worker)

“The media should not refuse to cover the cases we work on. Our local regional media are pro-government, they do not cover serious social issues, like corruption or problems in the public health service. Their priority is to highlight the apparent achievements of the authorities. That is why social networks are used to cover all the real problems. There are groups of mutual assistance for quick response, and bloggers who often act independently.” (Lawyer)

Raising Awareness about NGO Work and its Benefits for Individuals, Communities and the Wider Society through Storytelling and PR Activities

“Members of our NGO are contemplating how to boost the resilience of our activists. Thus, we put them in touch with various communities. You have to understand that not every activity or mission will be accepted by the community. Our society is very responsive when it comes to fundraising and helping sick children, but when it comes to changing people’s views, you hit the wall. I wish our community can better understand us, and we have a role to play in that. However, the government has to guarantee equal rights to all citizens, this is not our job only.” (Social worker/NGO worker)

“I have never applied to work with the media officially, but there are journalists we collaborate with, and they help highlight our requests and cases. If there is a community, then there is support, and that is how meaningful goals can be achieved.” (Psychologist)

Overcoming Social Isolation by Creating a Safe Space for Mutual Exchange and Support with Other Professional Networks

“In recent years, we, the NGOs working in the Caucasus, have been feeling increasingly isolated. We long for networking with other groups and activists and being a part of a global movement. Networking cannot always be achieved remotely though. In-person meetings are always necessary.” (Social worker/NGO worker)

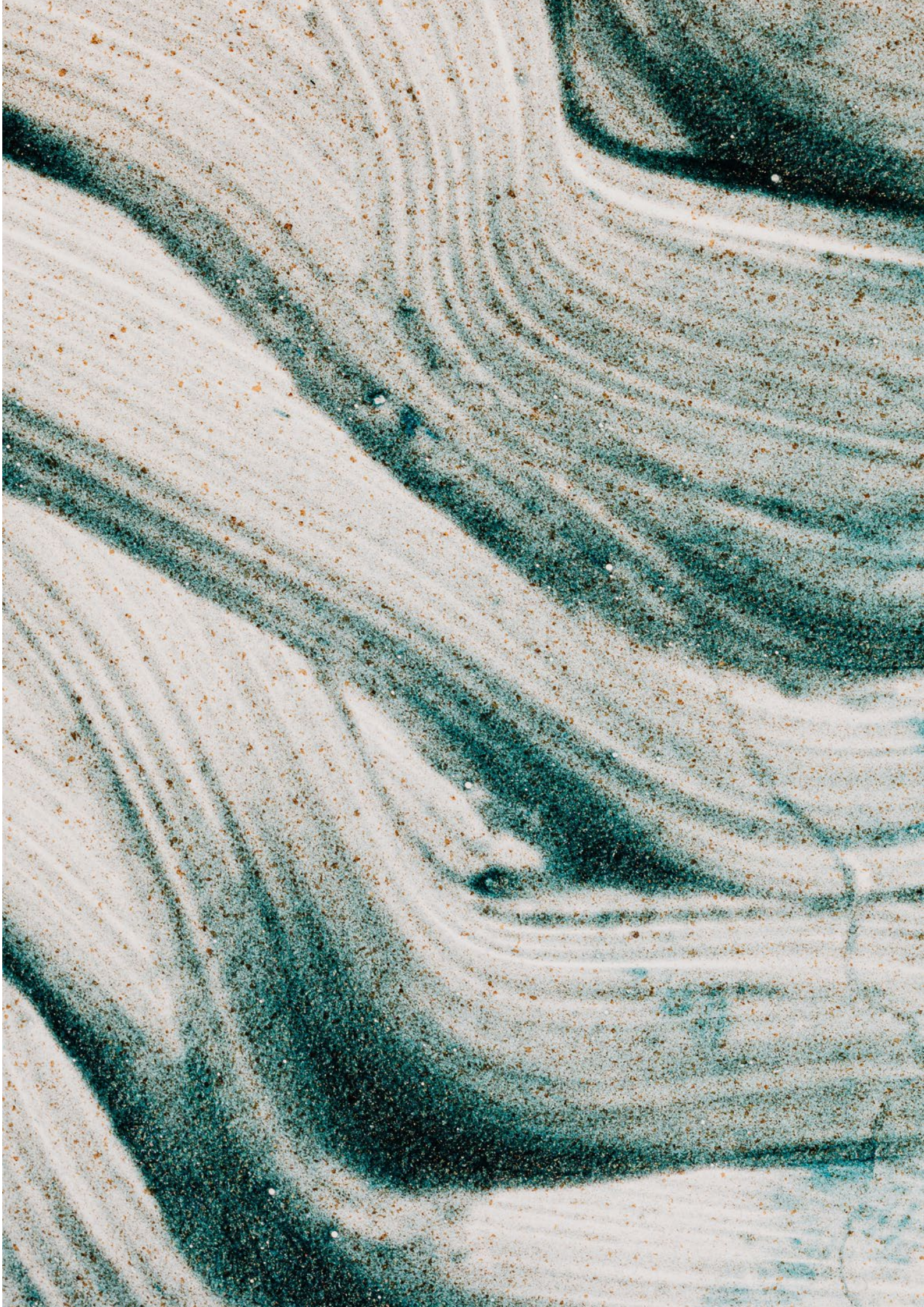
“Our psychological community meets every now and then to discuss and analyse specific difficult cases, and to share insights. This feeling of fellowship and support is very valuable and essential.” (Psychologist)

“I would like to communicate with those who have more experience, to learn from them, rely on them and get their support.” (Social worker/NGO worker)

“I believe the attention is important, as well as feeling that I am not alone. The war in Chechnya has attracted a lot of attention, colleagues were coming in and I did not feel alone. I had people around with whom I could share my problems. This is a huge source of support.” (Social worker/NGO worker)

Being Backed by Institutional and Organizational Support

“There will always be problems around us, always. The question is how to relate to those problems, and how to perceive them. I try to adjust my attitude here, to control myself and my feelings, but it can be very stressful sometimes. For me, organizational and informational support is important to help motivate people.” (Lawyer)



4. Our Reflections

The joint project implemented by BAfF, the EURONET and CAPC, along with the interviews conducted in this context, made the experiences and challenges of human rights professionals in the North Caucasus region very tangible. Those professionals are doing their best to support survivors of human rights violations, while being stigmatized, criminalized and threatened within their societies. By working on this project, we were both impressed and humbled by the work these professionals are doing and by the experiences they have shared with us. After listening to those insights into their lives, one colleague from the North Caucasus described our shared astonishment in the best way possible, wondering: “They put everything they have into their work, and then you see them giving even more, and you wonder: where do they find that energy?”

The interviews showed that they all share a strong motivation to fight injustice, which in many cases results from cases of injustice and terror they have personally experienced or witnessed. On one hand, this is considered a powerful motivator to relentlessly fight for justice despite frustrations and hopeless situations. On the other hand, an interrelation like this between professional and personal experiences, represents a risk of blurring boundaries and crossing personal limits. In those cases where professionals are personally involved and willing to sacrifice a lot, taking care of their wellbeing is a challenge. The interviews also showed that staff support is currently left to a large extent to the individuals themselves. Integrated organizational structures and practices, which support professionals in their complex endeavours are lacking, and if available, they often consist of a one-off intervention that is not properly integrated into the professionals’ working routines.

All professionals mentioned the risk of accelerated burnout in this field, and seized the opportunity to repeatedly emphasize the importance of self-care and protection of personal boundaries. It was clear that such an emphasis stemmed from their experiences in overworking and understanding how risky it can be. The conversations also showed that small things can make a big difference. Those include observing personal behaviours and remaining attentive to signs of stress while adopting healthy and nurturing habits in one’s daily life. Another aspect which became very clear and which we aimed at supporting through this project, was the need for peer exchange among colleagues and professional networks. Professionals working in the North Caucasus region stressed on how isolated they are within their line of work, especially as their efforts are discarded by the wider society. In such situations, it is crucial to have both national and international like-minded communities that can provide a safe space for mutual support. More conversations need to be held among professionals within the North Caucasus region to identify suitable

ways to connect and find support. One approach which proved to be productive in the context of this project, was for example coming together in “micro-groups” of two to three people to exchange insights and support each other. Such group meetings could be organized in practical set-ups over the phone or the internet, given that the professionals are often widely spread across different regions.

In addition to that, spaces of shared trainings and especially multidisciplinary trainings which bring together professionals from different fields within the human rights work (i.e. health, law, social work, and activism), were considered a valuable approach to mutually share and learn, and to strengthen networks. Multidisciplinary trainings can help foster a common language and understanding across professional backgrounds, which can in turn help support persons in need in a more holistic and integrated manner.

Finally, in their feedback, project participants revealed that starting the conversation around self-care and staff support helped them acknowledge that they are in fact burnt-out themselves and require support. Participants have started to seek supervision and/or reached out to colleagues within the community in order to get the support that they need. This again highlights the importance of having conversations about self- and staff care as a starting point to establish better practices.



How to best support staff is an ongoing discussion that is happening worldwide among professionals in the helping professions, and even more so in contexts of crisis and conflict. For example, the recently published brochure “Responding to Staff Care Needs in Fragile Contexts” by GIZ (2020) emphasizes the importance of taking a proactive approach on staff care, and specifically asks organisations to take up their responsibility in ensuring staff support for their employees. It claims that self-care and staff support is often misunderstood as an individual task or focusses mainly on individual self-care techniques, such as relaxation exercises. However, the authors argue that organisational structures and practices, context factors and the needs of staff members and teams need to be considered when developing an effective staff support system. The first step to developing such support systems is having conversations within the organisations about existing staff support practices and needs.

The interviews in this brochure showed that the professionals do always find ways to sustain themselves and recharge. However, they also showed how staff members can work for many years on the verge of burnout, potentially harming themselves and others. This reality should be taken very seriously. One possible starting point would be to leave behind the image of “strong helper” who can work endlessly without being affected by work conditions. Instead, it would be crucial to acknowledge that helpers cannot but be impacted by the realities they are working with and that they need safe spaces to reflect on their experiences and feelings and find support from peers and colleagues. We hope that the conversations started within this project will lead to the creation of such spaces where professionals can reach out to each other and provide mutual support in their struggle for justice.

5. Epilogue

How is this Relevant to Human Rights Work in Germany?

by Barbara Esser // Member of the Advisory Board of BAfF

The reports of human rights defenders who are working in the North Caucasus region, have been for many years an important resource to support refugees in claiming their rights in asylum procedures in Germany. After several trips to the North Caucasus between 2007 and 2011, I have become more aware of the fact that my commitment to the rights of refugees in Germany does not involve any personal risk, whereas fighting for human rights and against violence when the perpetrators are in power requires much more strength and courage.

In Germany, refugees fail very often in the asylum procedure, although they have experienced severe violence and their psychological suffering is obvious. The reports by asylum seekers are treated with skepticism in the proceedings. In many cases, the claims for asylum are denied because accounts of violence are perceived as exaggerated or made up. Decision-makers in the asylum process are often unaware of how difficult it is to speak about extreme pain in a detailed and consistent manner. Contradictions or inconsistencies in what refugees say are not further looked into, and one contradiction or inconsistency can be enough to declare the account of an asylum seeker as untrue. In our work at the psychosocial centres for refugees and torture survivors, one of our major challenges are situations in which our clients face deportation, even though we consider them as vulnerable and know that they have been severely wounded. In such cases, the reports of human rights defenders can support our work and can sometimes help avoid deportation of vulnerable refugees, as these accounts are considered objective, and are treated with less suspicion by German authorities. They are not perceived as exaggerated, given that they do not carry any personal interests, as opposed to how asylum seekers' testimonials may be perceived.

The exchange initiated in the context of this project about experiences and methods of working with people who have suffered extreme violence and impunity contributes to a better understanding of the consequences of violence. It strengthens the sense of solidarity which is crucial for our work, and helps us build networks and alliances across borders. I very much hope that this will be the starting point for further cooperation in the human rights field.

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8. About the Authors

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