



P R E S S R E L E A S E

EBCO Annual Report 2020 on Conscientious Objection to Military Service: Europe not a safe place for many conscientious objectors in several countries

Brussels, 15 February 2021

"The European Bureau for Conscientious Objection publishes today its **Annual Report on Conscientious Objection to Military Service in Europe 2020**, in honour of **Jean Van Lierde** (1926-2006) who was born on 15th February, the most famous Belgian conscientious objector and first EBCO President", EBCO's Vice-President Sam Biesemans stated today. One of the famous quotes of Jean Van Lierde was the following: «**It takes a maximum of political culture to be a non-violent and anti-militarist activist**».

EBCO's annual report, covering the region of Council of Europe (CoE), concludes that **Europe was not a safe place in 2020** for many conscientious objectors in several countries. "**Conscientious objectors faced prosecution, arrests, trials by military courts, imprisonments, fines, intimidation, attacks, death threats, and discrimination**. These countries include **Turkey** (the only CoE member state who has not yet recognised the right to conscientious objection), and consequently the Turkish-occupied **northern part of Cyprus** (the self-styled "Turkish Republic of North Cyprus"), **Azerbaijan** (where there is still no law on alternative service), **Armenia, Russia, Ukraine, and Greece**", EBCO's President Alexia Tsouni stated today.

The **Human Right to conscientious objection to military service** was not high in the European agenda in 2020, although conscription is still enforced in 18 Council of Europe (CoE) Member States. They are: **Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belarus** (candidate), **Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Georgia** (reintroduced in 2017), **Greece, Lithuania** (reintroduced in 2015), **Moldova, Norway, Russia, Sweden** (reintroduced in 2018), **Switzerland, Turkey and Ukraine** (reintroduced in 2014).

At the same time **refugees** are not granted international protection as they should. For example, a refugee from Azerbaijan who applied for asylum in **Belgium** on grounds of conscientious objection to military service had his application rejected, including his appeal.

As for the minimum conscription age, although the **Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict** encourages states to end all recruitment of persons below the age of 18, a disturbing number of European states continue to do this. Worse, some breach the absolute prohibitions in the Optional Protocol by placing servicemen aged under 18 at risk of active deployment, or by allowing conscripts to enlist before their 18th birthday.

Last but not least, in October 2020, having previously launched a project entitled "**Caucasus Talks**" in May, **a group of young people from Azerbaijan and Armenia in the South Caucasus** co-signed and published the **Peace Statement**, making a call for peace amid escalating conflicts between neighboring countries Armenia and Azerbaijan in the Nagorno-Karabakh region. Hundreds of people from Armenia, Azerbaijan, and throughout the world have signed the Peace Statement so far, which is indeed a **source of hope and inspiration**:

As you read this message people are dying in and around Nagorno-Karabakh. Young boys and men are killing one another with no solution in sight.

The main victim of this war is not objective truth. Rather it destroys the lives of real people, real children.

It is becoming a losing battle for the entire South Caucasus region.

If it does not affect you now, the war or the consequences of it will get to you tomorrow.

War will never resolve the conflict. It will only leave us in a darker, more vicious circle of enduring wars and unresolved grievances.

Defending peace is not a neutral position. We reject the militarist positions conditioned by narratives of war and instead seek pathways to build peace.

This war recalls the tragedies and the wounds of the past. It does nothing to heal them, but only creates new ones.

This war has no winners. It brings misery, death, poverty and loss of independence to the whole Caucasus region.

We urge external powers not to incite further clashes and not to partake in war-making.

We are advocating an immediate ceasefire and inclusive negotiations encompassing all of the Armenian and Azerbaijani parties to the conflict.

NOTE: You can find more information in EBCO's Annual Report on Conscientious Objection to Military Service in Europe 2020, including maps and tables, at <https://ebco-beoc.org/node/491>

FOR MORE INFORMATION AND INTERVIEWS please contact:

ENGLISH: Alexia Tsouni, EBCO President (+30 6974461210; tsounialexia@gmail.com)

FRENCH, DUTCH, ITALIAN, ENGLISH: Sam Biesemans, EBCO Vice-President
(+32 477268893; sambiesemans@skynet.be)

EBCO was founded in Brussels in 1979 as an umbrella structure for national associations of conscientious objectors in the European countries to promote the right to conscientious objection to preparations for, and participation in, war and any other type of military activity as a fundamental human right. It enjoys participatory status with the Council of Europe since 1998 and is a member of its Conference of International Non-Governmental Organisations since 2005. It provides expertise and legal opinions on behalf of the Directorate General of Human Rights and Legal Affairs of the Council of Europe. It is involved in drawing up the annual report of the Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs of the European Parliament on the application by the Member States of its resolutions on conscientious objection and civilian service, as determined in the "Bandrés Molet & Bindi Resolution" of 1994. It is a full member of the European Youth Forum since 1995.