



European Bureau for Conscientious Objection

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

EBCO Annual Report 2022/23 on Conscientious Objection to Military Service in Europe: Focus on the courageous conscientious objectors and pacifists in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus

Brussels, 12 May 2023

The European Bureau for Conscientious Objection publishes today its **Annual Report on Conscientious Objection to Military Service in Europe 2022/23, covering the region of Council of Europe (CoE)** as well as **Russia** (former CoE member state) and **Belarus** (candidate CoE member state).

Overall, the **human right to conscientious objection to military service** was higher in the European agenda in 2022, as a result of the **ongoing Russian war of aggression against Ukraine** and the **courageous conscientious objectors and pacifists**.

"The continuation of the war itself constitutes a tragic failure of diplomacy and politicians, as well as a bloody victory of militarism and war profiteers. The military mobilisation and the prosecution of those who object the war constitutes a blatant violation of their fundamental human rights, as well as the indiscriminate European sanctions against all Russians, instead of granting Visas (type C and D) at least to those who object the war.", EBCO's President Alexia Tsouni stated today.

Hopefully, remarkable efforts have been made, and more and more inspiring voices are calling for peace ([voices for peace from civil society worldwide](#)), including in the framework of the international **#ObjectWarCampaign** ([Russia, Belarus, Ukraine: Protection and asylum for deserters and conscientious objectors to military service](#)), jointly launched by the European Bureau for Conscientious Objection ([EBCO](#)), the International Fellowship of Reconciliation ([IFOR](#)), War Resisters' International ([WRI](#)), and [Connection e.V.](#)

[In June 2022, 60 organisations from 20 countries sent an appeal to the European Parliament, detailing why protection and support for deserters and conscientious objectors on all sides of the Ukrainian war is necessary and right. On April 6, 2022, the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, had called on Russian soldiers to desert and promised them protection under refugee law.](#) So far, this promise has not been fulfilled. **[Within the scope of #ObjectWarCampaign, a petition has been prepared for everyone to sign in,](#)** and it is addressed to the President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen, the President of the European Council Charles Michel and the President of the European Parliament Roberta Metsola. **The petition emphasises the need to uphold the right to asylum to conscientious objectors and deserters from Russia, Belarus and Ukraine by hosting states.**

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. EBCO enjoys participatory status with the Council of Europe since 1998 and is a member of its Conference of International Non-Governmental Organisations since 2005. EBCO is entitled to lodge collective complaints concerning the European Social Charter of the Council of Europe since 2021. EBCO provides expertise and legal opinions on behalf of the Directorate General of Human Rights and Legal Affairs of the Council of Europe. EBCO 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. EBCO is a full member of the European Youth Forum since 1995.

EBCO strongly condemns the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and calls on all soldiers not to participate in hostilities and on all recruits to refuse military service. EBCO denounces all the cases of forced and even violent recruitment to the armies of both sides, as well as all the cases of persecution of conscientious objectors, deserters and non-violent anti-war protestors. **The right to conscientious objection to military service is inherent in the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion**, guaranteed under Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which is **non-derogable even in a time of public emergency**, as stated in Article 4(2) of ICCPR.

[EBCO calls Russia](#) to immediately and unconditionally release all those hundreds of soldiers and mobilised civilians who object to engage in the war and are illegally detained in a number of centres in Russian-controlled areas of Ukraine. Russian authorities are reportedly using threats, psychological abuse and torture to force those detained to return to the front.

[EBCO calls Ukraine](#) to immediately reverse the suspension of the human right to conscientious objection, release and honourably discharge Christian pacifist conscientious objectors Vitaly Alekseenko (imprisoned in the Kolomyiska Correctional Colony No. 41) and Andrii Vyshnevetsky (held at frontline unit of the Armed Forces of Ukraine), as well as acquit all conscientious objectors, including Christian pacifists Mykhailo Yavorsky and Hennadii Tomniuk. Ukraine should safeguard the right to conscientious objection to military service, including in wartime, fully complying with the European and international standards, amongst others the standards set by the European Court of Human Rights.

In Europe conscription is still enforced in 18 states, including 16 Council of Europe (CoE) Member States. They are: **Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Georgia** (reintroduced in 2017), **Greece, Lithuania** (reintroduced in 2015), **Moldova, Norway, Russia** (former CoE member state), **Sweden** (reintroduced in 2018), **Switzerland, Türkiye, Ukraine** (reintroduced in 2014), and **Belarus** (candidate CoE member state).

In 2022 Europe was not a safe place for many conscientious objectors in several countries who faced prosecution, arrests, trials by military courts, imprisonments, fines, intimidation, attacks, death threats, and discrimination. These countries include **Russia** (where hundreds of conscientious objectors are currently imprisoned because they refuse to participate in the war), **Ukraine** (where one conscientious objector is currently imprisoned, one is held at frontline military unit, and a few more are convicted and prosecuted), **Belarus, Türkiye** (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 civilian service), as well as **Armenia, Georgia, Greece, the Republic of Cyprus, Finland, Austria, Switzerland, Estonia and Lithuania** (in these countries the right to conscientious objection is recognised and there is a law on civilian service, but the law and/or practice is still not in line with the European and international human rights standards, leading to violations and discrimination against conscientious objectors).

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 continues 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.

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Last but not least, according to the recently published SIPRI Military Expenditure Report for 2022, **military expenditure in Europe saw its steepest year-on-year increase in at least 30 years**. Even worldwide, the sharpest rise in spending by far (+13 per cent) was seen in Europe and was **largely accounted for by Russian and Ukrainian spending**. Military expenditure by states in Central and Western Europe totalled \$345 billion in 2022. In real terms, spending by these states for the first time surpassed that in 1989, as the cold war was ending, and was 30 per cent higher than in 2013. Several states significantly increased their military spending following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, while others announced plans to raise spending levels over periods of up to a decade. Therefore, EBCO urges for the decrease of military expenditure and the increase of social spending, and for making available to citizens with conscientious objections means of specifying that no part of the taxes which they have personally paid is directed towards military expenditure.

NOTE: You can find more information in EBCO's Annual Report on Conscientious Objection to Military Service in Europe 2022/23, including maps and tables, at <https://ebco-beoc.org/node/565>

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Painting by Souzouhi, Union Pacifiste France

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